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WOUNDED

By

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ABSTRACT

WOUNDED

By

Raymond Joseph Thibeault

Wounded is a collection of ten short stories about individuals who suffer loss--loss of dignity ("Killings"), loss of place ("Snow Farm"), loss of self-respect ("In the Harmattan"), of autonomy ("Winter Rain"), of youth and adventure ("Aborigine"), of hope ("Connie and Daryl" and ""War Zone"), of relationship ("Building Roads in Africa and Elsewhere," "Rock Salt Shotgun" and "Wounded"). But these stories are about other things as well--guilt, anger at God, sexual repression, escape--because each person's struggle with loss has its own unfolding.

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Thanks also to my daughter, Shelly, who doesn't seem concerned that her father, pushing fifty, is still bouncing from job to job and place to place, and who reads my stories and tells me they're good.

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Killings

I heard my mother say something to my father, and when I looked up from my book, I could see him shifting about on the front seat.

"We'll be going right past his house, for god sake," my mother continued. "You might as well get it over with."

My father's hands tightened on the steering wheel; his eyes peered into the rear view mirror.

"Sit back, son," he said when he saw me looking up at him. "Just read your book, okay?"

I nodded and lowered my head, but kept my eyes angled upward. My father turned from the mirror and stared out the front window. The road twisted and doubled back on itself like a tangle of rope, and under the cold November drizzle, the tar was dark black and glistening.

"Well," my mother asked again, "are you going to or not?" For a long time my father didn't say anything, but I could see him working his jaw back and forth as if trying to get it unlocked.

"No," he finally said. "There's no need to take care of that now. You know that." He turned his head to look

at my mother when he spoke, but she didn't turn to listen. After a moment, she began to fuss with her hair, moving bobbie pins from one place to another, fluffing it delicately as if it were something fine and rare. Then she touched her blonde hair the way Jean Harlow did in the old movies, the way models did in the magazines that were always lying open on the kitchen table next to tall glasses red with lipstick rims and sweet with the smell of whiskey.

"Why waste gas on another trip," she finally said. "We go right by his house. Why not do it now? Unless, of course--"

"Oh, Jesus, why don't you let me alone?" my father stopped her. "Why do you have to--" Then he paused and his eyes moved to the mirror again; I looked down quickly. "Hey, is that a good book?" he asked. I nodded but didn't look up. "Well, you just keep reading, because I want to know what it's all about. You can tell me while your mother's doing the shopping, okay?" I nodded again and flipped the page.

As soon as he turned back, my mother started in again. She glanced back at me and tried to keep her voice low at first, but that didn't last.

"Well it's true, isn't it? You're just afraid he's going to hurt--"

"Oh, Jesus, shut up, will you!" My father shouted, his fists opening and closing around the steering wheel,

pumping hard like twin hearts starved for oxygen. "Jesus...you don't give a man any room, do you?"

My mother just stared ahead at the road, drawing deeply on her cigarette as I'd seen her do so many times. Afternoons when I came home from school, she would pat the sofa and make me come and sit down beside her. "Is this how she does it?" she'd ask, motioning toward whomever the star of the four o'clock movie happened to be, and she'd inhale and angle her face upward at the ceiling light as if it were a camera, then blow a thin stream of blue smoke through the air. "Am I doing it right? Do I have it?" she'd ask again and again until finally I would jump from the sofa and run out into the woods behind our house to wait for my father to come home for supper.

The rasp of my mother's lighter from the front seat made me angle my eyes sideways toward her. We were close to the Three Mile bridge now, and Frank Bouchert's house was an easy sprint beyond that. My mother opened her mouth to speak, but my father cut her off by yanking down the turn signal.

"I hope you're happy," he said through lips that barely moved.

He pulled only halfway into the driveway before stopping the car, the shack that Frank and Marie Bouchert and their nine children lived in standing a good thirty yards away. Besides the shack, a longish box whose roof had been tar-papered but never shingled, there was little else

visible in the muddy yard: a dying, barkless tree with a scattering of dog bones and broken toys underneath, an old crank-start truck that Frank Bouchert, the neighbors said, had given up trying to make a living with five years earlier.

My father blew the horn and rolled down his window halfway. A moment later, the door cracked open and a small, dirty face, a face I knew, peered out. In the lunch line at school, all the kids behind this face would peel away one by one and go to the end until I was the one behind him. They knew I would smile and endure his filthy clothes and odor, and they snickered and laughed because they thought I was a sucker. But I did it because my father asked me to; it wasn't the kid's fault, he said, but Frank Bouchert's.

The boy stared uneasily at our car for a moment and then began to shut the door.

"Say, your dad home?" my father finally shouted, and the dirty face nodded weakly and pulled back into the darkness. My father rested his arm on the door ledge below the window, and I saw him press his elbow slowly but steadily against the lock button; then he began coughing to muffle the sound of the click. I looked at my mother. She had noticed nothing; her eyes were straining toward the door of the shack.

A few moments later, Frank Bouchert, whose wife Marie worked in my father's bar, stepped out onto the small,

slanting porch. For a while he just stood there, glaring at our car but making no move to come near it. I could see the metal knob of the hunting knife strapped to his belt. He made what living he did now by trapping muskrat, mink, snapping turtle and whatever else he could make the southern shore of Lake Superior yield. The story was he had fled to Michigan from Quebec after he'd killed a man while arguing over a single beaver pelt. People said even the Mounties were afraid of him; that he'd driven his knife, front to back, right through the man's spine.

Bouchert finally stepped down from the porch and ambled toward the car, hands stuck deep in his pockets, a cigarette perched at the corner of his mouth. He was a handsome man, lean, tan and leathery from his trampings through the marshes, and he carried his good looks with an ease that veiled his meanness. He stopped twenty feet from our car and stared at my father. My mother leaned over, careful not to touch my father, smiled and waved. "Hello, Frank." He nodded toward her, then focused again on my father.

"Say, listen, Frank, about this mix-up," my father began, his voice an echo summoned from some chamber deep within.

"Mix-up?" Bouchert interrupted. "No mix-up. You owe Marie a hundred dollars. You been holding back, goddamn it."

"Look, it's all down on the books, Frank. You can see for yourself."

"Books? Shit on your books. I can make books. Goddamn, make 'em say anything I want." Bouchert yanked his hands from his pockets and advanced toward the car. My father, who had kept the car running and in reverse, jerked his foot off the brake. The car shot backward.

"Come back here, goddamn," Bouchert yelled, his fists tight and hanging at the end of his arms like rocks, but my father was already backing onto the road.

"Oh, Jesus, you were just great," my mother said, shaking her head and then smiling and blowing a thin stream of blue smoke toward Frank Bouchert. My father yanked the gearshift into first and headed down the road.

"You still reading that book, son? I want to hear all about it. You just keep reading now, you hear."

As soon as he stopped, my mother began.

"You want me to take care of it? Give me the keys tonight, and I'll bet I can handle Frank. I'll bet I can take care of everything." She leaned toward my father and pulled a lock of blond hair across her eyes.

"Shut up," my father said, shoving her away, his voice a whisper tight as wire, and he pushed down hard on the gas.

"Slow down, for god sake!" my mother yelled. "You'll kill us all. Stop it!"

My father ignored her, and when he rounded the next curve and saw a mink slinking across the road, he sped up again and aimed the car directly at it. The mink stopped,

crouched, then turned and dashed back. My father veered and ran the car onto the gravel shoulder, the mink darting into the weeds just in time, the car shaking and starting to swerve. My mother screamed; I buried my head between my knees.

It seemed a long time passed, and then the car began to slow, the shaking stopped, and I could feel my father regaining control and guiding the car back onto the road. Above the noise of the engine, I heard him breathing heavily.

"Jesus, I'm sorry," he said. "Forget about this; it's all wrong." I lifted my head from my knees and listened.

"It's just that sometimes you have to wonder why God makes such fierce creatures. Creatures that destroy whatever they want--just tear things apart, bone from soul. Jesus." He was breathing deep, shuddering breaths and looking at me so intently in the mirror I was afraid we would run off the road again. "But you can't just kill them, no matter how fierce they are." Then he turned and looked directly at me. "Sometimes you need to run, though. Sometimes it's okay, I'm sure of it. It's the only thing you can do." Then he turned back, and I again saw his hands opening and closing around the steering wheel, but this time more easily, more quietly.

My mother remained silent, pushing herself up against the door. Once I saw her glance at my father, her lips trembling as if she were trying to say something, but

nothing came out. Instead she turned and drew deeply on her cigarette, let the smoke curl over her lip, and stared at her reflection in the window.

Snow Farm

Even then I hated the city and the wide highway leading from it, the first leg of our winter journey back to my grandmother's farm. The highway that was always thick with cars and buses and trucks; that was either wet and noisy with dark, watery slush that thumped against the underside of the car, or dry and gray with the dust of salt-melted snow that swirled in pale eddies behind us. Even then I hated the wires and lights, the antennas and signs that clung to the store fronts and roof tops like wind-driven litter.

So I would remain quiet during this leg of our winter journey. I would sit in the back seat of our car and read, refusing to look outside except to be polite when my mother or father would point out something unusual. I would remain quiet until I heard the soft clicking of the turn signal and felt our car move west off the highway onto the country road leading back to the farm miles beyond. Quiet until I felt the cushion of undisturbed snow beneath the tires. Only then would I close my book, sit up and let my excitement lift and hold me the way wind sweeping through

a willow tree will lift and hold the thin, fragile branches. Only then would I look outside the car to see the open fields covered with smooth, crusted snow. Snow that was still white and clean and glistening with the light of the winter sun. Snow I would stare at for as long as my eyes could endure its bright whiteness.

But not that day. That day was different. My parents were talking in hushed voices I wasn't meant to hear, so I edged forward on the cushion to listen.

"It's inevitable," my father said, and then he talked about property taxes and three hundred acres and the cost of the water line that had gone through that summer--words I didn't understand, but words I could see were making my mother turn and stare out the side window. Words that made her answer in short, clipped sentences like pieces broken off of something inside her.

When they stopped talking, I slid back on the seat and tried to read but couldn't. I kept losing my place, skipping lines, turning the page before I was finished--the threat, the danger, whatever it was, hanging in the air like some heavy, obscuring smoke.

For a long time I sat brooding until, after the car rounded a bend where the old road swooped away from the creek, I spotted the farm standing atop the rise, a castle in its own kingdom. Drawing nearer, I could see my aunts' and uncles' cars already crowding the driveway, so my father found a spot just off the road under the sycamore trees

in front of the house. Arms loaded with gifts and food--rye bread my mother had baked the night before, a ham scored into rectangles garnished with cloves--we walked through the snow along the side of the house, past the well shaft, now unused, past the cellar doors, bolted shut, weathered and leaning at an angle against the stone foundation as if sleeping, around to the back where the kitchen jutted out like a chapel.

From under my grandmother's back door, the sweet fragrances of baking fruit pies wafted like fingers curling to beckon us, enticing us to continue as we climbed the porch steps--as if we might change our minds! When we opened the door, a bank of warm, steamy air surrounded us, grandma still baking in her black, wood-burning stove, her chrome and porcelain electric range, a gift from her children, standing isolated in a corner like a misbehaved child. Her back to us, the ends of her red and green Christmas apron, tied at the small of her back, swaying and fluttering with her movements in front of the oven, grandma spoke to us while poking vents in the pie crusts with a fork.

"Juiciest apples I ever pared and sliced," she exclaimed. "Puffing steam like the old 10:15 used to pass by and scare the milk out of the cows like it did." Then she whirled, bent and embraced me, the fork carefully tucked backwards under her palm, and I felt as if I had been wrapped in a goose-down quilt. No words--she knew the pain of my

shyness--just the embrace. "You and I," she'd once whispered to me, firmly pressing my hands between hers, "we don't need words." Grandma rose to hug my parents, and I spun away and skated leisurely across the kitchen, across an expanse of arms that pulled me in, patted me on the head, squeezed my shoulders, tickled my chin--aunts and uncles who had inherited or learned grandma's ways--and finally landed in the living room at the foot of the Christmas tree, a land already populated with tiny cousins dressed in bow ties and new shirts still smelling of flannel or crinolines snapping and rustling with each turn, twist or bow.

I stared up at the tree, decorated as it was every year, with strings of cranberries and popcorn dating back to my mother's childhood on the farm, and the wooden angel grandpa had carved just before he died. My eyes fell to the presents, gifts in shining bows and bright paper circling the tree like a ridge of frosting on the edge of a cake. Dozens and dozens of presents that our parents had bought for the dozens and dozens of us. But no more than three for each child: that was grandma's rule about store gifts. And behind me, I knew, squeezed onto the old, cherry-wood table and sloping up into a cone, would be grandma's presents for us: something baked or sewed or stitched. On these, there was no limit.

I turned to look at them, my eyes moving slowly up and down the small mountain: honeyed popcorn balls she'd made

just the day before, wrapped and twisted shut in red, blue and gold cellophane; ribboned jars brimming with walnuts she'd gathered from the trees behind the barn, then cracked, cleaned and smoked; knitted scarves, mittens and hats boasting rainbows and sunflowers, purring cats and kites floating tails of silk. And these were the presents that pleased me the most, for these were the presents that smelled of her kitchen, her hands, that were heavy with her work, that spoke of her and this, her snow farm, for days and weeks and years after that single day was done.

"Hey, look!" one of my older cousins shouted suddenly, and I turned to see him staring out the window, my other cousins running to gather around him, their eyes following his pointing finger to something far in the distance. "See," he kept repeating. "See them way over there past the fence line." I joined them, weaving my way to the front of the crowd, resting my elbows on the sill and pressing my nose against the cold glass. And there, far across the east field that had been so tall with dark green corn the summer before, beyond it in a field belonging to the next farm, so far away I could barely see them, were two swiftly-moving, black specks.

"What are they?" someone asked, and by then aunts and uncles had joined us at the window. "Jeez, look at them go--what are they?"

An uncle finally answered. "Must be those new machines just out on the market--what do they call them? Some catchy

name. 'Ski-Do,' that's it. Go like the devil, I guess. Go anywhere you want in snow. Up and down hills, across fields, through forests. They run on tracks like tanks. Nothing can stop them."

I watched the machines as he spoke. Watched them zooming over the snow as smoothly as marbles rolling across glass, now hugging the fence line and searching for a break in the line, now finding a break and swerving through it into grandmother's field, making a wide, sweeping turn toward the farm house, bearing down on it--on us--like wasps skimming the ground, coming closer, closer, so close the heavy drone of their engines rattled loose window panes--then abruptly and sharply turning, heading back, retreating across grandma's field, back through the break in the fence, finally disappearing into the field beyond.

For a long time after they had gone and the murmuring crowd around the window dispersed, I stood there looking out at the snow in the wide, empty field, seeing where the machines had sliced through the white crust and left great, curving tracks like long coils of rope, seeing trails of black exhaust on the snow where they'd abruptly turned back. Then I whirled and bolted, pushing my way through my cousins standing around the cherrywood table chattering about grandma's presents, the machines forgotten, and ran into the kitchen.

She was standing alone by the window, detached from the small eddies of family swirling about in the kitchen,

waving glasses of her home-made wine as they talked. A froth of laughter bubbled up from the mix of sentences. A foolish uncle talked about how he might get one of those machines come next winter. Grandma was staring out the window at the field. I ran to her, clutched her leg with my arms, turned my face down into the soft folds of her dress.

At first, she didn't respond. Then she turned from the window, leaned over and cupped my face, her hands smelling like sweet cider from the apple pies she was baking. For a long time she stood there and looked at me. Looked and said nothing.

In the Harmattan

Just after a sharp bend in the road, the driver of the Red Cross truck saw the African leap out of the darkness, frantically waving his arms. The truck dipped into a hollow, and the man disappeared from the yellow cones thrown by the headlights.

"God Almighty, let him be gone when we come up," the driver, an Englishman, said to himself. But the man was still there, standing squarely in the middle of the truck's path, still frantically waving his arms. The Englishman looked over at the woman in the passenger seat. She was leaning against the door, apparently sleeping. An instant later, she sat up.

"We'll stop, of course," she said.

"Of course," he answered, then flicked his cigarette out the window, the wind spreading the ash in a thin, red line along the side of the truck.

The Englishman slowly braked to a stop and the woman, an Italian, leaned through the window to talk to the man. At the side of the road an African woman sat on the ground awkwardly holding a child, the child's head arched back

to the breaking point. "Meningitis," the Englishman muttered to himself. "Drought, famine, now, Christ Almighty, all this meningitis," and he leaned forward to rest his head against the steering wheel.

"Yes?" the woman, Maria, said to him. The man, Albert, shook his head.

"Nothing," he said, looking out the window at the dirt road, staring at the ruts, the deep holes, the sharp rocks that were constantly working their way to the surface.

Maria stepped down from the truck and walked over to examine the child, a girl, who moaned when Maria gently probed her. Albert could hear Maria talking fluent Hausa to the girl's mother. For a moment, he strained to understand the words, then shrugged, lit a new cigarette from the old, and tossed the butt into the night. Maria returned to the truck and poked her head through the window.

"Don't worry. We won't have to go all the way back to the capital. There's serum now at our infirmary--I packed it off myself two days ago."

The Englishman stopped himself from sighing and nodded instead. A moment later, the African family was sitting jammed into the cab, the child moaning softly, her body rigid and her head still arched back as far as it could go, the mother holding her with difficulty.

"I broke a bow once when I was a lad," Albert said, glancing over at the girl, then turning and glimpsing the darkened image of his own face in the mirror. "Strung

it too tightly, it snapped."

"She'll be all right," Maria said. "If she gets the serum tonight, she'll recover."

"Ah, but the question is why, isn't it? What for? Perhaps you should have bloody well packed off vials full of meningitis instead of medicine," he said, his voice rising, lips pulled back against his teeth. "Some sort of national euthanasia--not an irrational policy here, am I right?"

Maria stared ahead. A long silence passed between them, the only sounds the grumbling of the tires against the washboard road, the complaint of the wheels bouncing in and out of potholes.

"Sorry," the Englishman finally said. "You know I hate my bloody self when I say things like that. You know that, don't you?"

She looked at him before answering. "Yes, I know," she said. Then she turned and stared out at the side of the road.

An hour later, as the truck came over the top of a hill, the scattered, feeble lights of Gidan Abir came into view. Ten minutes later, the Englishman turned onto the town and drove quickly toward the infirmary. Along the street, fires glowed; next to them, the bodies of African beggars, wound in thin, ragged blankets against the cold of the winter night, lay at odd angles, strewn about like pieces of wood. The Englishman tried not to look at them; when

the truck passed the auto gare where the incident had occurred, he turned and stared at the adobe buildings on the other side of the street.

"Did you hear about it?" he finally asked Maria, clearing this throat at the end of the question, then coughing into his fist.

"Sorry? Hear about what?"

He waited for a moment. "You will. I'm bloody well sure of that."

Maria opened her mouth to inquire, but didn't.

The truck turned down the track leading to the infirmary, slowing as it did, bogging down in the fine, deep sand and nearly stopping, the Englishman cursing and engaging the four-wheel drive just in time. Moments later, the truck pulled up in front of the dark brown building and halted by the entrance to the night clinic. Maria reached over to open the door for the African family; then followed them out of the truck. Albert stayed in the driver's seat smoking, his slouch hat pulled low on his forehead to shut out the glare from the single, bare light bulb jerry-rigged above the doorway.

For a moment, Maria stood on the veranda peering into the empty office of the duty nurse; then she called out. Down the open hall, bodies had cautiously appeared in doorways, skinny, decimated bodies, some with dirty bandages taped over an eye or an ear, some propping themselves with branches broken off the trees in the courtyard, most showing

the grey, dusty patches of disease and malnutrition, as if their skin had been sanded down in spots and the grit left behind.

Several minutes passed before an African in a white lab coat emerged from the darkness behind the truck and walked toward the infirmary, a wide smile on his face, a curious little side step occasionally faulting his gait. When he passed by the truck, he belched suddenly, and the sweet smell of millet beer was overwhelming. He smiled again.

"Madame," he said, looking at Maria, "a votre service," and then he stumbled forward several steps, arms fluttering, before finally righting himself. Maria turned to Albert.

"Won't you say something to him?" she asked in English. "You know how they feel about women criticizing them." Albert said nothing for a moment; then responded from beneath his slouch hat.

"Me? You want me to say something to him--the pot to scold the kettle?"

"But at least you don't--" Maria blurted the words then stopped abruptly.

"...drink on the job? That's what you were going to say, isn't it? Ah, but you've been in the capital for a week, my love. Things change here, you know."

Maria turned and walked into the duty nurse's office, found the vials of serum in the refrigerator, filled a syringe and returned to inject the girl. The nurse sat

on the edge of the veranda spitting thick, grey phlegm into the sand, saying nothing, finally beginning to vomit. In the truck, Albert turned away and looked at the broken, dying trees at the edge of the courtyard.

"I'll be back in the morning," Maria told the girl's mother, her one hand resting lightly on the mother's arm, the other stroking the girl's forehead.

The path back to Red Cross headquarters ran south, then west, but Albert drove the truck diagonally across a wide, sloping hill, a short-cut that skirted the town cemetery. It was an open area of unmarked graves indistinguishable --except for the sunken ovals that were the freshest graves, those not yet filled in with blown sand--from the surrounding terrain. Ahead, at the bottom of the hill, was their compound, and they could hear the drone of the generator, the town's meager electrical system too faulty to trust.

"Oh, no," Maria groaned weakly.

Three large trucks were parked in front of the compound, all with Togolese license plates--a grain shipment from Lome. It would have to be counted, verified, the manifests signed and stamped yet that night.

"Ah, what did I hear?" Albert said. "What's that? A chink in the armor? St. Joan complaining of battle fatique? What's this?"

"Please don't," Maria said. "Please don't be sarcastic. Not now."

Albert drove the truck, silent for a moment, then--

"It's the weapon of the weak, you know. Sarcasm, I mean. I read that once . . . and I owe you another apology. For Christ's sake, that's all I ever have to offer you, isn't it. Apologies."

"You owe me nothing, Albert. You're tired, that's all. We're both tired."

The watchman, Issafou, glum-faced as a sinner, pushed open the doors. Albert blinked the headlights in greeting and eased the truck over the sand hump at the foot of the driveway.

"I'd offer to do the count," he said, flicking his head back toward the grain trucks, "but we know how that bloody well goes, don't we? Still, I was only off by a ton, three the last time I counted, wasn't I? An astounding improvement over the eight tons, five--that is my record, isn't it?" and he tried to laugh, but the laughter sputtered out in a fit of coughing.

"In April, you'll have your month holiday, Albert. Things will be so much better after that," Maria said, her face lovely in the pale glow of the instrument lights. "I'm sure of it."

Albert's gaze lingered for a moment before he turned away. "Too little, too late, I'm afraid, love," he mumbled, opening the door and stepping down.

Issafou had already climbed into the back of the truck and was unlashing Maria's baggage from her week's stay

in the capital. Albert walked around to give him the bright red and blue pagne he had bought for Issafou to give to his wife. His sad face brightened when he saw the cloth, and they exchanged smiles. For a few moments, Albert stood there, taking Maria's baggage from Issafou and setting it gently on the ground. Finally he stopped and leaned over the tail-gate.

"Please tell her what happened, Issafou," he said in a quiet voice. Issafou turned away. "I'd rather it come from you than someone else," Albert continued. "It would be a favor." Issafou slowly turned back and nodded, his eyes down-turned, his hands busy with the lashings.

At the far end of the compound, Maria was already at work counting the sacks of sorghum and millet, her flashlight tracing precise lines on the burlap. Albert watched her for a moment, then turned and walked into the bungalow they shared, half of it painted white, the other half still the dark brown of the raw adobe brick.

Inside, Albert walked straight to his bedroom. A moment later he exited holding a fresh bottle of gin. He blew dust from a tumbler he found atop the refrigerator, filled it a quarter full, tossed back half, then, dangling the bottle by the neck, walked to the north window where he could look out over the refugee camp.

The small, tattered huts the people had built out of poles and covered with scraps of cloth and paper, burlap sacks cut along the seam and flattened tins were quiet

and colored silver by moonlight now, at peace until morning. "Ah, night, thou merciful blanket," Albert said quietly, raising his glass to the moon. Then he stood there for a long time, staring out at the sleeping huts, not turning or moving until he heard the scrape of Maria's sandals against the cement floor. He waited until she had slumped in a chair to begin.

"Please don't think Issafou's a gossip-monger. I asked him to tell you." He sat down on the floor facing the wall, his legs crossed, the bottle of gin clinking against the cement as he carefully set it next to him.

"This won't be an apology, mind you," he said. "One can't really apologize for something like that, can one. One can only explain, I suppose--though that's worth shit as well, isn't it?" Albert set his tumbler of gin on the floor next to the bottle and folded his hands on his lap.

"I had no intention, of course, of striking him. I'd just gone to buy a pack of cigarettes at the auto gare. It was stupid of me to go. I should have sent Issafou. But . . . I had to get out of the house, away from the camp for just a few moments. The harmattan winds were blowing their sand and grit so hard that day, the refugees making so much bloody noise--someone had died, so all the women were moaning and wailing and beating on pots and pans--and their noon meal had been completely spoiled by a batch of rancid oil I'd neglected to have the cooks check--I simply had to get away. As soon as I stepped

down from the truck the beggars surrounded me, of course--twenty of them, more perhaps, all stinking to high heaven, all thrusting their dirty tin bowls in my face, screaming 'alms for the poor, boss, alms for the poor,' and the cripples had scuttled between the legs of the others and were yanking on my trousers and knocking on my boots--'alms for the poor, boss. In the name of Allah, alms for the poor.' I was backed against the truck; couldn't move--that's when I struck him--just struck out blindly, actually, and happened to hit the one chap." Albert fell silent for a moment. "There's nothing more to it, really. Except to say I'm paying to have his jaw fixed, of course, and handing over a thick pile of bills beyond that as well."

After he'd finished, Albert heard Maria get up and walk to the refrigerator, heard the door open, heard cold water splashing into a glass.

"You despise me, don't you? . . . I don't blame you. Not after this." He poured himself another quarter tumbler of gin, then swore sharply--a wind had suddenly sprung up, gusted and blown a ridge of sand from the window sill, spoiling his drink.

"Bloody harmattan winds starting to flog us again. Two days of calm, never more, then thirty days of that god-forsaken wind out of North Africa. Christ Almighty."

Albert got up, shuttered the windows, then walked to a chair opposite Maria.

"You'll have to tell them, of course. You'll have to tell the inspection team coming next week. They'll ask, 'How's it with Albert?' won't they?

Maria nodded her head. "Yes, I'll have to tell them."

"And it's true isn't it?" he asked.

"What? What's true?"

"You do hate me--no, despise me now, don't you? What I did is bloody inexcusable, isn't it. Unforgivable."

"Stop," Maria said. "Please, don't do that to yourself. What good does it do?" She got up from her chair. "I'm going for a walk."

"In the harmattan?"

"In the harmattan," she said, wrapping a scarf around her head and face and pulling a sweater over her shoulders.

After she left, Albert got up, grabbbed the bottle of gin from the floor and walked into his bedroom.

He was lying on the bed, an arm resting across his forehead, a cigarette burning in a tin lid on the floor a half-hour later when Maria returned. She knocked, waited, then quietly opened the door when she heard no response. She walked to the bed, sat gently on the edge of the mattress, and put her hand on Albert's shoulder.

"I'll suggest a desk assignment in Geneva, that's what I'll do," she said. "A year in Geneva before you come back to the field--and they'll agree, I'm sure. They don't just toss people off, you know. And things will be so

much better after you've rested a year in Geneva."

For a moment, Albert didn't move. Then he slowly turned toward the wall, Maria's hand falling from his shoulder as he did.

"To have struck a beggar," he whispered. "A beggar! Oh, Lord, Jesus."

Winter Rain

I push over to the side and press my purse against my lap and myself against the window, and I wish my heart wouldn't pound like it is. Here I am, oh God, going to be trapped on the inside. And how long has my mother been telling me always to take the outside seat. Thirty years now? From the time I first started to ride the bus--when I was eleven, maybe twelve? Her point is that if their hands start to--you know--wander, you can always just get up and leave if you're on the outside. And Esther would always nod and say, yes, otherwise you got to crawl across them, which is maybe what they want, or maybe slap them or scream and who wants to make such a fuss right there in front of all those strange eyes? But here I am about to be trapped, and if I get up to leave now, it would be so--you know--so obvious, and I don't want to make no fuss.

So I turn and stare at the winter rain outside. This rain has been falling now for, oh, God, how long? Days? But it seems like weeks, even months. There's no wind with it--just heavy drops that fall and drum into everything. Windows, streets--the roof of the bus. I'm

just so tired of it. I guess that's why I didn't notice the empty seat next to me. Didn't notice the woman leave, and so didn't jump up and grab the strap until it was too late. Until the man with the newspaper rolled under his arm and the umbrella in his hand was already heading for it like a dog after a bone.

He sits down, and I hear the swish of his raincoat and feel the bottom flap brush lightly against my leg, the cushion yield and sigh under his weight. I'm not looking at him directly. I'm staring into the window. It's so black outside with the winter rain and overcast that the window's become a mirror, and I can see his reflection in the glass just as plain as day. Oh, God, he's swarthy. Swarthy with dark black, wavy hair. A Mediterranean, for sure. Spanish? Italian? No, Greek. His nose has that hook to it like they all have, and I catch the smell of olive oil. Oh, God, a Mediterranean and the worst kind. There is this long time argument at our house--and I suppose I might as well say it's Esther's house too because she's always there; she doesn't like her present husband any better than the others. My mother will say, "Marry a Polock, and you'll end up barefoot and pregnant all your life." But then Esther will say--she'd be cracking her gum real loud and flicking ashes into the big, orange ashtray waiting for my mother to finish--"No, no, the Greeks are worse. God, don't I know," and she'd be waving her cigarette all around leaving trails of smoke in the air

and drumming the table with the fingers of her other hand. "I had two of them for husbands, for god sake." And she did--the first and third, I think--and so she should know, shouldn't she? My mother never married a Greek. Only Irish for her, and most of them drunks, so why would she know anything about Polocks or Greeks? No, I sided with Esther on that one.

"Lucky I saw this empty seat, huh?"

His voice startles me, and I jump like a Mexican bean. God, I'm so jumpy lately. Even mother and Esther are worried about me. Don't drink so much coffee, they say, but they are as bad as me. We all drink too much coffee and smoke way too much. Pots of Folger's thick enough to tar your roof and packs and packs of Camel and Lucky Strike and Pall Mall. The ashtrays no sooner emptied then they're over-flowing again with cigarette butts and burned matches.

I don't turn to look at him, but I nod enough that he can tell. Tell that I'm acknowledging him, I mean. "You can always be civil," my mother would say, fluffing her hair the way she does when she pronounces something. "To a point," Ester would add, cracking her gum. "Oh, yes, to a point. That's what I meant, Esther, you know that's what I mean," and my mother's voice would have this tightness to it because she hated to have Esther correct her. And vice-versa for Esther. They have this competition, you see. I guess it's because they both know

so much. Experience teaches, they both say, so really it should just be a question of whose experience is the best regarding the matter at hand. Like with the Greek and Polock argument--Esther should know. They really don't need to always compete like that.

In the glass, I see the man looking around the bus, craning his neck like a bird, and I can tell he's going to talk again. I get myself ready so I won't jump this time.

"They should have more buses, you know. All these people having to stand," and when he sweeps his arm toward the crowd, a gold cuff link flashes from beneath his sleeve. Real gold. And I can see his raincoat is London Fog and his shirt and suit have never seen a blue-light special at K-Mart.

"Myself, you know, I don't depend on buses, but my Lincoln's in the garage, and you ever try to get a taxi when it's raining like this?"

Oh, so he wants to put on airs, does he? Impress me? Well, he won't get his foot in the door that way. Does he think I'm a fool? Not know what he's after? I know Greeks too. Esther's not the only one. This one's no different than that Greek friend my Joe had--back when we was still going together. Not rich, but swarthy like this one, and always wearing tight black pants and those undershirts with straps. We'd go over there for dinner, my Joe and me, and there was always bowls of those oily,

black olives around. He'd serve them with the cocktails, the meal, the after-dinner drinks. And the Greek always calling them "love food" and "aphrodisiacs" and saying to me "have a bite of love food, babe." And he'd hold one of those little, oily olives up to my mouth and try to push it through my lips. "Come on, babe, open up," he'd say, and he wouldn't stop till I turned and walked away.

Then he always told some dirty little joke, and my Joe and the Greek and his wife would laugh and poke each other. At first, they used to turn to me, waiting for me to laugh, but I never would. So after awhile they just acted like I wasn't even there. Finally I told my Joe I'd had it. No more, I said. I had my standards. And Joe said, "Ah, he's not so bad. Just relax and laugh a little. Don't make no fuss." "No," I'd answered, and mother and Esther said I was right. "One thing leads to another," they'd said, and they should know. And Joe said, "Okay, if that's how you feel", but I saw his lips were thin and tight when he answered, and he was jingling the change in his pocket real loud and fast. After that, Joe stopped calling and coming around so much, and then one day I just never heard from him again. And, God, that has been how many years ago now?

My heart is till pounding, but it seems a little quieter now, and for awhile I just stare at his reflection in the glass. I can see streaks of silver shining and

glimmering in his black, wavy hair, and I wonder if the veins of silver the prospectors find in the ground out West look like that. And I bet they do. I guess he must be my own age. Or close to it. And he's full-looking, healthy. Not fat at all, but--well, fleshy. And eyes that move around all the time. Not anxious, but just--alive. Brown eyes full of life. Okay, handsome. Yes, he's very good-looking, and he reminds me of my Joe a little. Not that I'd tell him, of course. I mean, not that I'd even think of just turning to some stranger on the bus and telling him he's good-looking. I mean, if we happened to be--you know--dating or something then it would be okay to say something like that. But I probably wouldn't anyway. He looks too pumped up with himself. Like those puffing birds I saw at the zoo once. Joe was that way. He had money, and he wore gold and London Fog too. And he was even handsomer than this Greek.

OH GOD--there it is, and I jump. His hand. I can feel it. His hand lying right against my thigh. I can feel it clean and sharp--sharp as the blade of a knife. Feel the edge of his hand press right through my raincoat and skirt and cut into my flesh. Oh, God. I burn and ache where he's touching me, but what can I do? I don't want to make no fuss. I'm trapped, just like Esther and mother warned me. And now tears are filling my eyes, and I can feel them spill down the sides of my cheek. But what can I do? I don't want to yell or slap him or crawl over him

to escape. My eyes are closed, but I force them open and look at his reflection in the window. He's looking straight ahead like nothing is happening, like what he's doing to me doesn't matter at all. And he stays that way for a long time. Motionless. Staring ahead. Then he reaches down, and suddenly I feel the burning stop and I see him bring up the newspaper and shake it open. But no! God, no. That was his hand touching me. I know it was! No newspaper could burn and ache like that. Does he think I don't know? Does she think I'm such a fool I would fall for a trick like that?

Oh, if only my heart would stop beating like this. Stop pounding so hard. So hard I fear it's going to shake the bus off the road and make it crash into one of the street lights or one of the old homes we're passing. That's how hard my heart is pounding. And I think everybody in the bus can hear it. I know it's silly, but that's how I feel.

The bus slows for a stop, and I see him turn his back to me and face the aisle. When the bus brakes, and he starts to get up, I have this sudden, strong urge to say something to him. I don't know what I'd say--but I want so bad to say something. And I don't know why--it's crazy after what he just did to me--but there's this urge. But just as I turn toward him something hard and cold jabs me in the lip, and I feel a sharp and then a burning pain, and I let out a little yelp in spite of myself.

"Oh, lady, I'm sorry. Are you all right? You okay?" The man turns and bends over me to look at the wound. He's stabbed me with his umbrella. I taste the hot, salty sting of my own blood, and I can't remember the last time I've had that taste. Then the blood begins to trickle down my chin. He pulls a handkerchief from his coat pocket and holds it to my lip to stop the flow, but I twist away and face the window. I lift my hand and touch the wound, my fingers pressing into the warmth of the blood. In the window, I can see his reflection. He's standing there holding the stained handkerchief and looking confused. I see him turn toward the other passengers who shake their heads, shrug and motion towards the door.

"Look, lady, here's my card," and I see something small and white flash from inside his coat. "If there are any problems, doctor bills or anything, you call me, okay?" When he sees that I'm not going to turn and take the card, he lays it on the empty seat. "It's right here," he says. "Right next to you, okay?"

I close my eyes so I don't have to see him get off, and I keep them closed for a long time after I hear the doors hiss shut and feel the bus lurch forward. When I open them, there is nothing outside but the rain and the rain-covered street and the street lights showing how steady the rain is still falling. After awhile, I reach back and grope until I find his card on the empty seat. Without looking at it, I crumple it and throw it on the muddy floor.

Three more stops and I pull the cord, and the bus slows to a halt. The doors wheeze open, I step off, and the bus passes on. Across the street I see our brightly-lit house. Through the kitchen window, I can see mother and Esther sitting at the table drinking coffee. Esther fluffs her hair, and my mother inhales from her cigarette and blows a steady stream of smoke into the air. I'm late because of the rain, and I see my mother glance up at the clock and then say something to Esther. Esther leans back in her chair, pushes the curtain away from the window and peers out. When she sees me waiting next to the bus stop, she waves and motions for me to come over, and I can see my mother looking over her shoulder at me, and she starts motioning too.

I stand there a moment, looking at them and feeling my hair grow heavy with rain, and the rain running down my neck in rivulets. Then I see my mother reach for an umbrella and head for the door, so I step down from the curb and hurry across the street to my home.

Connie and Daryl

Connie carried the pitcher of ice water with one hand and wiped her forehead with the other. "Jesus, it's hot," she muttered. Between her breasts, beads of sweat gathered and began to trickle. She ignored them, as she tried to ignore everything about her meager breasts that had nourished the baby only three weeks before drying up like stones. "Jesus, it's hot," she muttered again as she sat down at the kitchen table, shoving aside her cigarettes and ashtray and carefully setting the earthenware pitcher near a stack of old magazines. Her hands, one grasping the handle of the pitcher, the other cupping the bottom, lingered for a moment against its cool, dewy surface. Then she turned to look at the baby, its stroller parked next to the table. The child was asleep but wheezing and restless in the August weather, its skin the color of brick-dust. Connie turned away.

She sat in a chair next to the open window, hoping for a breeze, but finding only flies buzzing leisurely in and out as if invited. Connie looked out on the dry, brown lawn, the grass so lifeless it looked like something cut

from paper. There, she saw Daryl, her husband, bending his long, skinny body over the front wheel of his rattling semi. Her face tightened, and she started to turn away; then, because his back was to her, she stopped and began to stare at him. He was shirtless in the heat, and she could see glistening beads of sweat sliding down the bumps of his spine, and blades of dead grass stuck to his skin from when he had shimmied under the truck to get as something broken. A thick, purplish coat of grease covered his hands and forearms; underneath his ribs, the skin was scraped raw from when he'd fallen against the truck's mangled bumper.

For a long time she watched him working in the hot sun; after a while, she began to chew on the corner of her lip. Finally she leaned forward and poked her head through the window.

"Daryl . . . jeez, you want any water, another beer--something?"

Daryl slowly straightened himself, standing finally as rigid and thin as a stick. He wiped the sweat from his face with the back of his hand; then brushed the hand against his groin, leaving a dark slash against the white of his faded jeans. "Sure, why not . . . a beer," he mumbled, looking at her for a moment before turning away.

Connie stood, taking care not to upset the pitcher, and hurried into the back entrance where a refrigerator whirred loudly. She tugged a coil of plastic clothes line

looped through a hole where the handle should have been and jerked open the door; then pulled a can of beer from one of the rusting shelves. Slamming the door to make sure it would stay shut, she walked back into the kitchen, scooted by the stroller, bending to give the baby and awkward pat as she did, and leaned through the window.

"Here," she said, tossing the can toward her husband.

"Damn it," he shouted, twisting up from the engine to catch it. "I've told you a hundred times not to do that. Makes it all foamy inside. Shit!" And he flung the beer back toward the house, Connie pulling her head inside, turning away from Daryl, seeing from the corner of her eye the baby jump when the can slammed against the siding and reaching down absentmindedly to pat the baby's head, all the while swallowing hard as if a flash of heat had suddenly scorched her throat. To distract herself she began to survey the kitchen: the ceiling fan sprung from its fixture, the dust-covered blades dangling like a spider from a single web and threatening to fall at any moment; the cupboard door hanging askew from one hinge--and she tried to count the number of times either she or Daryl had fixed the other hinge only to have it pull away again--the calendar that hadn't been turned over to August yet, and here it was almost September. But through these distractions she could hear Daryl stomp into the rear entrance, yank open the refrigerator, drag another can of beer off the shelf, then stomp outside again, the crunch

of his boots against the stones in the driveway sounding like the cracking of bones.

Several minutes passed before Connie stopped looking around the kitchen, before she noticed she was still patting the baby. She took her hand from the child's head and glanced down, noticing again how hot and red it looked, finally wondering if there was something she should be doing. The baby looked so uncomfortable in the stroller. She was curled in on herself like a scorched leaf, a white crust of dried spittle at each corner of her mouth, her limbs twitching fitfully. Feeling the dryness come back to her throat, Connie looked away from the baby, dipped her hand into the pitcher, and, without looking back at he child, sprinkled her with ice water, thinking as she did of how the priest used to sprinkle her, Connie, with blessed water when she was a child. The baby stirred, whimpered and then went back to sleep. Connie's eyes fixed on the pitcher for a moment, then moved to the house across the road where Mr. Swanson lived, the man who had given her the earthenware pitcher. The pottery was entirely his own creation: shaped and reshaped by his own hands until it was exactly as he wanted it, fired in his own kiln to make its shape hard and strong, then glazed to make it shine and glitter.

"You hot for the old bastard, Connie? That it? That why you're always lookin' over there?" Daryl's voice startled her; she pivoted toward her husband. His head

was tilted back, and he was gulping beer, his adam's apple jerking up and down each time he swallowed, his eyes peering down at her along the sides of the can.

"Don't you wish," Connie answered softly, her voice weighted like the hot, wet air that seemed to surround and hold the three of them like water thick with silt and weed. "You'd love to have a reason to get in that rig and keep driving, wouldn't you? One way to California." Daryl licked beer foam from his wispy mustache "What? . . . so you can feel sorry for yourself?--more 'an you already do. Shit, no." He took another gulp of beer. "Besides, it's yourself you're talkin' about now, ain't it, Connie? No, I'll play the hand I got dealt me. I've said that all along. Ain't that true, Connie darlin'? Ain't it?" He stared at her for a moment, then crumpled the beer can in his hand and hurled it toward the trash barrel inside the garage. Connie turned away.

Across the road, she could see Mr. Swanson sitting in the backyard in the gazebo he had build, sitting and reading a book. Everyday she would see him there. Sometimes he would just gaze at the clouds or the fields of wheat and corn that surrounded his house. Sometimes he would work on his pottery: sketching new designs on large white sheets of art paper, or, with a finetip brush, delicately painting lilies or clover or bluebirds on some vase or bowl he'd fired the day before. That was when she especially liked to look across the highway and watch him--when he was being

an artist and making something new. And she was happiest when Daryl was away on a run, because then sometimes Mr. Swanson would come over and show her the art paper with some new sketch for a vase, or a flower he was trying to paint for the first time--a juniper or marigold.

The baby suddenly began to cry, and Connie jumped up, overturning the ashtray she'd set too close to the edge. "Oh, shit," she said, brushing ashes off the faded, flower-print housecoat she was still wearing, though it was already late in the afternoon, then scurrying to the refrigerator and returning with a bottle filled with apple juice. She stuck the rubber nipple in the baby's mouth, and the child stopped crying. Connie slumped in her chair, then abruptly pulled a cigarette from a plastic case lying on the table. She lit it, blew a thin column of blue smoke out the window and brushed back clumps of sweaty, brown hair from her forehead. "God, it's hot," she muttered, her eyes wandering and coming to rest on the earthenware pitcher. Lifting her hand, she gently touched the cool, thick dew that coated its perfectly rounded middle, its thick curving handle, the deep "V" of its spout--then her eyes jumped up to check on Daryl. He was half-swallowed under the truck hood, invisible from the waist up. She looked back to the pitcher.

Daryl had said it was ugly: the handle too thick, the spout misshapen--but Connie knew he was lying. Once, when he thought she'd left, she'd seen Daryl pick up the pitcher

and hold it to the light by the window; she'd seen him turn it searchingly and admire it just as she did. But he would never admit it, and, even if he did, she wondered if he understood--if he could ever understand--what really mattered about the pitcher. Mr. Swanson had made it with his own hands. He'd taken clay--dirt, really, clay is nothing but dirt--and made something that had shape and gleam to it. That was what mattered.

The blast of a truck horn snapped Connie's head toward the road. Fifty yards down, she could see Billy Dean's truck--jacked up "halfway to heaven," as Daryl would say--braking sharply, blinkers flashing for the turn into their driveway. Daryl, already grinning, had pulled himself from under the hood of his semi and was wiping grease from his hands with an old, ratty tee-shirt.

"Hey, Billy," Daryl shouted as Billy shut off his engine and jumped down from the high cab, beer in hand and scowling.

"Jee-sus, you crazy, man? Working on a day like this." He turned and nodded toward Connie. "You tryin' to kill off your old man, Connie? You got a barrel full of insurance on him? That it?" He took a gulp of beer, holding it in his mouth for a moment before swallowing, then looked sideways at Daryl. "Forget this, man. Come on back to the Paradisio with me. Everybody's there--Sam, Tom, Randy--even Spiller came over from Haggerstown."

Daryl rubbed his chin. "No shit--even Spiller."

Billy nodded. "Come on. Shoot some pool, have a few beers"--then he turned his back to Connie and lowered his voice--"Some new broads there, too. Spiller brought 'em. Stacked, you hear." And he began to wriggle his fingers as if he were fondling a woman's breasts.

Daryl rubbed his chin for a long time; finally he turned and walked over to Billy's dark blue truck. He stood next to it for a moment, then began to run his hand gently over its polished, metallic finish. "She's a beaute, Billy. Best in the county, no shit there."

"Sure, okay . . . so you never should've sold yours, Daryl."

Daryl looked back at him sharply. "You sayin' I had a choice, Billy?" he said, his eyes flashing, and Billy understood and felt bad he had said anything. "You know how much one of those workhorses costs?" he continued, nodding back toward his semi. "Even one that's dyin' like that son of a bitch?"

Billy squatted and fished a twig from the grass. "So, no use having a heat stroke over it," he said quietly, his eyes fixed on the twig he was rolling between his fingers. "You comin' with me or not?" he asked in a feeble voice.

"Shit . . . you know I want to," Daryl said. "You know that." He paused for a moment. "But I can't. It's the wheel bearings this time, and the fuel injector--and I got a load of shingles to haul Tuesday morning. All the

way to Cleveland. Then he stared off into the field of wheat stubble next to the garage. Billy reached over, grabbed some stones from the driveway and started chucking them at the rear wheel of Daryl's semi. Finally he stood, his eyes wandering until they stopped at Mr. Swanson's.

"Hey, that pansy still live across the road," he asked.

"He's not!" Connie shouted through the window, her voice startling Billy. He looked over at Daryl.

Daryl shrugged "The old coot brings her things when I'm gone, I guess. Bread and shit. He's harmless." Then he reached over and grabbed Billy's beer. Billy turned toward Connie.

"Hey, Connie, I'm real sorry if I insulted your friend." He began scratching his head. "But, I mean--the man makes flower pots, don't he?"

"Vases. He makes vases," Connie shot back. "Beautiful vases and bowls and pitchers. And he gives them to people!"

"Oh . . . well, then, that's real nice. Yes, that's real nice," Billy said, turning and winking at Daryl. He grabbed back his beer. "Don't die on us out here, Daryl."

"Shit," Daryl answered quietly. A moment later, Billy's truck was squealing back toward the Paridisio

"I don't like him," Connie said from the window. "He's . . . he's stupid."

Daryl jerked his eyes from the road and looked at her like a preacher staring at Sin. "So? . . . we any

different, Connie?" he said, and Connie hated Daryl for saying that, for dragging out the thorn that pierced them both. She turned away quickly, took a long drag from her cigarette, then leaned over and pretended to fuss with the baby. When she finally glanced up, Daryl had disappeared again under the hood.

Connie began picking at a spot of dirt under one of her fingernails. After a moment, she began to skim through the heap of magazines she'd pushed to the side of the table: Reader's Digest, Redbook, Ladies Home Journal. Finally she came to the thin, green catalogue in its hiding place near the bottom of the stack. Mr. Swanson had brought it over one morning, along with some rye bread he'd baked, when Daryl was on a run to Memphis. He only stopped by when Daryl was gone--not that Connie had ever mentioned anything to him--he just seemed to know.

"Look on page twenty-seven," he'd said, his face gleaming like the glaze on his pottery, and he slipped the catalogue into her hands, pressing them between his own for a moment. Then he left, and Connie hurriedly leafed through the booklet until she came to page twenty-seven. There she saw a list of Adult Enrichment Classes, and among them was one he had circled twice with thick lines of green ink: "Beginning Pottery, Mondays, 7-9 pm." Next to it, in the margin, Mr. Swanson had written in the same dark green ink: "Free use of my materials and kiln!"

Connie saw Daryl's hand only as a blurr as it came down

and ripped the catalogue from her grip. Placing an oily thumb on the page Connie had been reading, he flipped over the cover and held it high against the white light of the sun to read. "Hanson County Community College, Fall Schedule." He pronounced the words slowly and deliberately, his lips twisting as if he had a mouthful of sour food. He flipped back to page twenty-seven and examined it silently, his lips tightening and blanching. "Shit," he said. "Pottery." Then he turned and hurled the catalogue toward the trash barrel in the garage, its pages fluttering and tearing like a hundred broken wings.

"Wait, you . . . you don't understand, Daryl," Connie said, her fingers twisting her housecoat into small, tight clumps.

"Understand? I understand everything I need to, Connie," he said, wheeling toward her. "I understand that we got a kid now--and who wanted that kid, Connie? Who was it begged and whined to have a kid? A kid you got to take care of now, and I got to feed," and his voice cut her like wire. "Ain't that enough to understand, Connie? Ain't it?" He stopped and stared at her, the long, thin fingers of his hands pumping open and shut as if helping him to breath. Finally, he reached down, yanked the pitcher off the table, holding it with both hands spread wide around its middle, and gulped down great mouthfuls of water. Connie looked up at him, raising one hand toward the pitcher, her lips moving as if trying to form words, but

no words coming out.

"Whatta you staring at, for Christ's sake," Daryl said, setting the pitcher down with a thump, wide smudges of grease dulling its gleam. "Never seen a man drink water before? Whatta you staring at, damn it?"

Connie said nothing for a moment; then she turned away, looking out the window at the dry, brown grass in the yard and the white stones in the driveway, and she began to shake her head slowly.

"Nothing," she said. "I'm not staring at anything."

Building Roads in Africa and Elsewhere

The father never knows the son's whereabouts. Nor does he know when the son will visit. If he does, usually it's springtime, but twice the year passed without his knock at the door, and once he came in winter.

Now the father sits across from the son on a late summer evening, and this is how it is:

The father who is very old, his skin white, almost translucent, as if he's preparing himself to become spirit, sits bent over in a wheelchair near the kitchen window. He drinks strong coffee from a cup he balances on the sill while he looks out at the good country road that passes by his house. The hum of tires rolling over smooth pavement floats through the screen. He takes it in as if it were song.

The son sits at the table on the far side of the kitchen. His brown hair is cut short; he wears boots, jeans, a blue corduroy jacket. The jeans are flecked with paint, and he calls himself an artist. He paints ears that bleed and eyes that are on fire, flames curling up over disconnected brows. He sits with one foot hitched

up on the edge of the chair, chain-smoking cigarettes. These he rolls himself on the table top with hands that tremble, his finger-nails click, click, clicking against the formica. His breath is sour, and his body reeks with the sickly sweet odor of yesterday's whiskey. He is staring at his father.

"Jesus Christ, you still do that?" he finally asks, swinging his foot down from the chair, the heel clapping hard against the floor. "Gaze out at that god damn road as if it were a naked woman? Doesn't mother dearest ever complain?"

The father doesn't answer. Instead he looks down at his cup for a long time. Then he begins to stir the coffee. The chink of the spoon against the porcelain is the only sound in the room.

Already he feels immensely weary. Not from the visit; his son has just arrived. The weariness comes from the memories that lie in his bones like marrow.

"Do you have to begin already?" the father says finally. "Can't you wait until I've recited the usual litany: who's gotten married, had babies, moved, divorced --" abruptly he stops speaking. For a moment, he seems to be gathering his strength the way he must before he wheels himself across the room--but he neither moves nor says anything more.

"Why should I wait?" the son finally asks. "You know I don't give a damn about all that."

The old man nods. "It gives us a moment of calm, that's

all. Quiets the air just a little. There's promise in that."

"Ha!" The son pauses to light another cigarette. A spike of fire flares from the tip. "Memory fails you, dear father--or you dream." His words seem to rise on the swirl of acrid smoke.

The father nods. "Oh, yes. I still do that. I dream, I wish, I hope."

The son nods. "So do I. I dream of rats. Wish for wealth. Hope for shit."

The father turns from the road to look at his son: eyes jaundiced, nose as red as a blood tick, teeth the grey of old string. Worse this time than last, the father concludes. The son's life is ditch water running fast toward the sea.

"You'll die soon, you know," he says. "Dead at forty, your liver good for a doorstop, nothing more. . . . forty-five, maybe, if God has poor eyesight and passes you by."

The son moans. "God jumped ship long ago." He looks directly at his father. "I am rudder-less, father. The waves toss me like seaweed." He makes his voice quiver with false sincerity.

The father picks up his cup and leans toward the counter to fill it. He holds the pot too high and the coffee splashes. Hot, black drops speckle his chest. He ignores them, turns back to the window, fixes his eyes on the road.

His son is right. He spends a lot of time looking out at the road. But it's a good road--and one reason he'd bought the house. It runs straight when it can; twists, rises and dips only when it must. There's no nonsense to it, no vain extravagance--and the old man knows roads. He'd spend much of his life building them all over the world: Borneo, Peru, China, Kenya--a dozen other places he can still quickly locate on the map that hangs in his bedroom. His company was the first to lay asphalt in the Yukon, he'll tell you. From Whitehorse to Dawson. "True and solid and useful to this day," and his finger will quickly trace a six inch line on the vast expanse of green that is Canada.

But all that was long ago before the years of surveying miles of swamp and riding bucking jeeps across desert and tundra had ruined his health and forced him to settle down. Long before he'd married and his wife given birth to a son, their only child.

When they'd married, he'd believed they were too old and ill to start a family. Children, especially boys, need vigorous parents, he'd said. Young, healthy parents, and I've already got a cane hanging from my bedpost and hips that grind like sand on glass, and you, he'd listen to his wife's asthmatic wheeze, have never been strong. His wife had nodded yes to all this at the time, but it worried him that when they talked, she would gaze out the window at the field of wheat on the one side their house,

or the peach orchard on the other.

After a couple of years, once her body began ticking hot and cold, her monthly cycle misfiring like a worn engine, she'd come to him one night desperate to give birth before it was too late. Falling to her knees in front of him, she'd swayed and wept and dropped tears against his bare feet until he'd lifted her and pressed her to his chest.

And for that weakness, he'd long ago assigned his wife and himself their portion of blame.

"So where is old mother dearest?" the son interrupts the father's thoughts. "Off to an ice cream social? The thrill of a quilting-bee?" He is holding his hands in front of his chest, finger-tips touching, separating, touching, separating. It was his mother's gesture. She would stand that way, silent except for her asthmatic wheezing, as he was punching holes in the kitchen wall with his baseball bat to make silhouettes--"There. That's Voltaire. Do you know who Voltaire is, Mother? Do you?"--or seeing how much of the living room furniture he could throw into one corner--"Volume, Mother, equals height times width times length. It's so simple."

"She's dead."

The son is lifting his cigarette to his lips when he hears the father's answer; his hand jerks to the left as if a whip has grabbed it.

"Dead," he finally mumbles. "Mother's dead." He

inhales, bows his head and blows blue smoke toward the tile floor. It's dull and cracked now. When he was little and it was smooth and polished, his mother would spread toys there to keep watch over him while baking bread or washing dishes. Years later, when he was desperate for drink, he would offer to wash and wax the floor for a couple dollars which, no, of course, he promised, he wouldn't spend on liquor. After several moments, he rubs the back of his neck. "Think I'll take a walk," he says, and he grabs matches and a handful of the stubby cigarettes he's rolled; several squirt through his fingers and fall to the floor. Half of these he sends skittering into the corner with a sudden, uneven swipe of his boot; then he turns and walks toward the door like he's moving in water, holds on to the door longer than necessary to keep it from slamming.

The father watches him through the window. The son follows the flagstone walk past the small pole-barn, then turns into the field next to the road. He still walks the way he used to when he was younger, before the father ordered him out of the house. He doesn't lift his feet all the way, and this shuffling gait crushes the grass and wild flowers and cuts a swathe as if some heavy, belly-swinging animal has passed.

In high school, after he'd started drinking, he'd retrieve the liquor he'd hidden in the culvert a half-mile

down, or in the hollow of the old hickory tree split by lightening or under a thicket of wood fern, and by the time he'd get to town, weeds sticking from his cuffs, burrs fastened to his pant legs and shirt like blood-suckers, he'd be ready to begin his ranting. When the women saw him coming, they would lay hands on their children's shoulders and gently turn them toward home; the men would lower their voices and drift behind gas pumps or into store fronts to carry on their business as best they could. It wasn't just that his ravings were painful and embarrassing, but that they also had sons and daughters.

He would stagger to the center of town, one hand stuck in his wallet pocket, the other clinging to a half-empty pint, a finger hooked into the neck of the bottle. He'd stop, stick a pheasant tail in his hair if he'd found one in the fields, then roll around in a lop-sided, stumbling circle that was supposed to be an Indian dance. Finally he'd throw back his head and begin. "My mother's a Flathead squaw," he'd yell. "Crazy from loco weed. Makes bread from burlap sacks, soup from gravel and rock. Do you hear? . . . Woo-woo-woo," he'd tap his fingers-tips against his mouth, whoop and again stumble-dance in a lop-sided circle. "My father--ah, my father. A failed shaman from the Stink-Fish Tribe of Oregon. Foretells good times and generosity, faith and forgiveness. . . . Woo-woo-woo. He's one-eyed. Sees the flower, never the weed. The robin, never the hawk. Save me, someone. Save

me. They pour water in my nose and siphon off my brain. Steal my memory and lock it in the cellar for the mice. Help me. Pleeeease help me!"

Eventually he'd try to smash the bottle against the front of some building--the church and bank were favorites--but often his release was ill-timed. He'd bounce it off his own shin or foot and piss his pants black from pain. Someone would have called the sheriff, and when he arrived he would snare him like a bad actor being pulled from the stage, dump him into the back seat of his cruiser and cart him back home. He'd half carry the boy to his bedroom--both his father's hips were ruined by this time, nests of fire and pain--then remove his sheriff's cap and hold it in one hand, hook a thumb in his belt and mumble how sorry he was, that maybe all this soon would pass.

But he could only do that for so long. Eventually he had to start taking him to jail.

Fifteen minutes later, the son returns from his walk. He lets the door slam, and takes his seat at the kitchen table. He has smoked all the cigarettes he'd taken outside, so he reaches down and grabs one off the floor. He taps it against the flat of his hand and lights it.

"It was peaceful," the father says. I'd just given her tea, and she'd watched the sunrise."

For a long time the son is silent. "I sold a painting,"

he finally says. "I called it 'Perdition.' All black with a tiny white spot bottom, center. Blood-red lightening strikes down at the spot."

The father drinks from his cup and then lowers it to his lap. The sun is setting, and the breeze has cooled. He wraps both hands around the cup to warm them.

He begins to talk about roads, for these are what he knows best. When he talks about them, he feels like he's offering a gift.

"Sometimes, when I was working in the Third World, we would put down a road right over a path the people had been using for centuries. There was no need to survey a new route: the path was well laid out to carry the people from where they were to where they wanted to be. It skirted boulders, found the valley that lead through the mountain range, fjorded the river at it lowest, calmest spot. Other times we'd find a path whose course was inexplicable--it would bump over rocky hills just to the side of a pleasant valley, raft across insect- and snake-infested mangrove swamps when dry land was within eyesight, swing wide of comforting shade trees and cross a sun-burned plain. It was almost biblical. As if the people were punishing themselves for past sins.

The father stops and there is silence for a moment before the son speaks, his words tumbling out hurriedly as if there is a deadline to be met or a contest won.

"I've expanded my horizons, father. I now sculpt.

I'm working on 'Atlas Defeated.' The globe is oversized, of course, and Atlas is already on one knee, the other right at the point of collapse. The trick is to capture the agony in the muscles; to show the pain and trembling, the immense strain in the tendons just a millisecond before they snap and Atlas falls."

"Once," the father continues, "after we'd built a road just below the Sahara Desert, I witnessed something very sad. There was an animal native to area, a kangaroo rat. It had huge back feet and could leap six feet to the right or left in a split second. It had many natural predators--jackals, wildcats, fennec--yet little trouble evading them. It would run ahead, leaping right to left, left to right over and over, and the fox or jackel or whatever it was couldn't change directions fast enough to catch it. Oh, they'd try, but all they'd do is stumble and dig their noses into sand.

"Once the road was finished, though, things were different. Caught in the middle of the road with a car or truck bearing down on them, they'd turn away from it, leaping right to left, left to right, right to left--but never leave the road. What they needed to do, of course, was learn to run in a straight line directly off the road--but they never did. Hundreds were crushed to death each day. Needlessly. Foolishly"--abruptly he stops speaking. The son has bolted from his chair and fled out the door.

The father peers out the window to follow the son, but the evening shadows make it difficult for him to see. He leans forward, straining, but can see nothing clearly. He has no idea where the son has gone, which direction he has taken. Is he in the field again on the path next to the road? Or on the road itself? He draws as close to the window screen as he can, his eyes searching the landscape, his head tilting from side to side. Finally, he slumps back in his wheelchair, breathing heavily because of his efforts, shivering because of the evening breeze. He rests for a moment, then, after slowly releasing a deep, deep breath, reaches up and pulls the window shut.

Rock-Salt Shotgun

A pan of Jean's lovely mulled wine, floating cinnamon sticks and orange, simmers on the stove. Jean, in quilted housecoat and slippers, ladles out two cups and passes one to me. Our children and grandchildren, even more attentive now that we both are widowed, are gone for the night, and we retreat down a long hall to the family room. A Christmas tree glows brightly near the windows; maple logs snap and hiss in the fireplace, filling the room with sweet, forest smells. The wind gusts and slaps at the windows as we take our first sip of hot wine, and I can hear icicles cracking off the eaves and thumping into the crusted snow beneath. Outside, it is bitterly cold, just as it was that night sixty years ago when Uncle Israel returned. We are alone with our memories of those distant years. The two of us--the only ones who escaped.

* * * *

It was late afternoon, the temperature just above freezing.

"Joe, did you milk them all?" I asked. Grinning beneath

a mat of black, wind-tied hair, Joe glanced back and nodded yes as he slid the barn door shut.

"Amelia?" I about-faced toward the chicken coop and watched as she struggled with her tiny, pink fingers to twist the block of wood that held the door tightly closed. Then I turned toward the far end of the barn where Nars, the two halves of his torn, soiled coat flapping like the wings of an injured crow, was tossing another bucket of silage at the sows rooting and grunting in the pig sty.

"That's enough," I shouted through cupped hands. "Bring the axe."

He was there like a shot, offering me with both hands that worn tool, the head pitted and rusty, the handle bleached bone white by the sun, as if it were something medieval encrusted with diamonds.

"All right," I said, holding the cutting edge at eye level, tilting it this way and that and pulling my thumb across it. "Needs sharpening plain as day. Can't cut a Christmas tree with a dull axe." They shouted yes, and off we marched to the tool shed, Joe, Amelia and Nars running circles around me, then laughing and pushing each other to see who could win the honor of cranking the ancient grindstone. The axe didn't need sharpening, but I knew the shower of sparks thrown by the spinning wheel would excite the younger ones. I knew it because Jean had thought of it the year before. "Fireworks," she had whispered to me, "if you imagine a little."

But where was she now? The stone was whirling. I pressed the blade against it and looked toward the house. No Jean--and I was worried. I couldn't remember a Christmas when our tree hunt hadn't been led by Jean--laughing prank-playing Jean--straight to the greenest and sweetest-smelling spruce in the Upper Peninsula. It was tradition. It was how things had always been--how they had to be, really, if we were going to survive: the bunch of us sticking together, no matter what Pa did, no matter what Ma didn't do. But when I'd asked her about it in the house, she only glowered and mumbled, and all I understood was something about letting her alone, letting her be.

Letting her be! This nonsense had been going on for six months now. This . . . this withdrawing--from me, Joe, Amelia, and Nars; from the babies, Rose and Joe. This becoming sullen and secretive and moody. This meanness. This meanness from a girl the nuns at St. Pascal's used to coo over, and dream of the day when she would enter their convent. Why did she hate us so? What had we done?

The back door suddenly swung open and Jean stormed out, slamming the door behind her so hard she loosened a bank of snow at the edge of the roof. It tumbled in a heap behind her.

"Put that axe back in the shed, Joe," she said, her eyes fixing him like nails. "No hunt today. No tree.

No nothing." Immediately Amelia and Nars burst into tears, but Joe was old enough to have learned to choke them back, though his face showed white from the strain. Stone-faced, Jean stomped right past us, ignoring us, stopping only when she noticed Amelia and Nars weeping. "Stop it, you hear! It won't do any good. Nothing can help. Nothing!" Then she turned back toward me. "He's whiskey-mean, Sam. You hear. Let it go."

The grinding wheel was coasting to a stop, turning slowly, wobbling and creaking on its uneven shaft. The axe hung at my side. For a long time we stood there watching Jean tromp through the north field, her head hanging down, not looking back or waving, not caring about any of us.

"What's wrong with her, Sam?" Joe finally asked, Amelia and Nars turning to hear my answer as well. "What's happened to her?"

"I don't know," I said. "I just don't know." Then I handed the axe to Nars. "Take it back," I said.

We waited until Nars returned and then headed into the house together. We opened the door quietly, slipped out of our boots, coats and gloves with barely a rustle; then walked like cats--Amelia and Nars arm-in-arm and tip-toeing--into the single, large, plank-floored room that was, other than for Ma and Pa's bedroom, the kitchen, and the straw loft where all of us slept, our house. We looked over into the open kitchen where our eyes joined

on Pa's whiskey jug sitting in the middle of the table. A bead of dark liquor was sliding down its hip, the corn cob plug lying next to it on the worn, brown oilcloth. Behind the table, Pa was stretching his wirey, bantam frame as high as he could, his cover-alls, dirty and a size too small, twisted between his buttocks. He was glaring out the north window.

"Goddam, if she ain't goin' there. Going over to that trash," he said, and we could see the cords in his neck were drawn as tight as fiddle strings. Ma, standing at the sink pumping water, her eyes bright with fear, turned to us and flicked her head toward the loft. Joe, Amelia and Nars bolted for the ladder. Rose and Emil, the babies, were already up there, crouching behind a thick, rough brace beam and staring down with wide, white eyes. I slid back into the little entrance hall where Pa couldn't see me, then peeked around the doorjamb.

"Goddam," he repeated and turned to take another swig of whiskey, his voice rasping like a knife point drawn against rust, that "whiskey-mean" voice we'd all learned to fear like Judgment Day. Then he strode over to the kitchen wall where two identical hammer-lock shotguns hung high on wooden pegs, the bottom one filled with rock salt--for his "loved ones" he'd sneer: it maims but doesn't kill--the top one with lethal buckshot--for his enemies. As he reached for the rock salt gun, I grabbed my coat and eased open the door.

Once outside, I ran to the creek behind the barn. Its banks were high, the water low and frozen, and it ran straight as a rake handle toward the Holtz farm a half-mile to the north. I slid down the bank and began running along the edge of the creek, leaping on clumps of dead saw grass and milk weed, patches of bottom rock--anything sticking through the ice that would keep me from slipping and falling.

The Holtzs were the trash Pa was talking about. Old man Holtz was a known thief and cheat, and Logan Holtz, his eighteen year old son, was worse. I hated Logan Holtz as much as I hated my father, and I couldn't figure out why Jean would chase after that misery to add to the misery we already had at home. Especially when the Guillaume farm lie just a mile to the south, and Martin Guillaume, who was as smart and handsome and gentle as Logan Holtz was not, had been in love with Jean for the past two years. Logan Holtz had done nothing but sneer at Jean before she suddenly started chasing after him one day about six months ago, and Logan Holtz was dirty, crude and vicious. Once, while I was hidden by a wild raspberry patch, I'd seen him tie a broken millstone around the neck of a whimpering dog and toss it into the creek like he was chucking a rock--all the while a smile showing every tooth in his mouth. But Jean didn't change the look on her face when I told her about it; then, when I'd hollered at her, she'd just turned and said, "What? You still believe in St.

Francis, Sam-boy? Do You? Well, he's dead. Dead and buried. Don't you understand that?" But I had no idea what she was talking about.

I'd gone and sat under a tree to think. I thought back to the time when Jean first took up with Logan Holtz. It was right after Pa had shoved her face into a plate of beans for no good reason--could that be it? Was she just trying to spite him? But he'd done that before, and it hurt a lot less than being hit or shot with rock salt. And what did that have to do with St. Francis being dead? I just couldn't figure it out.

Halfway down the creek to the Holtz farm, I stopped and peered over the rim of the bank. Pa, grasping the gun by the barrel, muzzle down, stock riding on his shoulder, was striding swiftly through the field separating the two farms, not more than a hundred yards behind. I studied him for a moment, studied the strange way he moved across the field, studied his loping, feral gait--the sight chilling me like ice put to my spine. I turned to run but hesitated. Maybe rock salt is what Jean needed. Maybe a back full of green and yellow welts draining pus for a week would knock her out of whatever tree she'd climbed up in so high, so remote from us, so cold and mean and silent. But the thought of such betrayal repulsed me. I crouched again and started to run.

Just beyond the Holtz's barn, I came up low out of the creek bed, sneaked along a fence line leading right up

to its north side and began to climb. Old man Holtz neglected his farm even more than my father did ours, and so the barn was full of knotholes, loose spikes, and missing boards, all of which made easy hand and toe-holds. I pulled up even to the open hay loft and peered in.

"Jean?" I whispered, though my father was still at least fifty yards away and approaching from the other end of the barn. "Jean, Pa's coming." After a moment's silence, the straw rustled and a head popped up in the pale, mote-filled, dusk light filtering through the holes and cracks in the barn wall. Then a second head, large and squarish, rolled up: Logan Holtz leering.

"He's got a gun, Jean. He's comin' for you." There was silence, then Logan Holtz started to snicker, then to laugh in a low, sick-sounding way.

"Which gun," he asked, "the rock salt gun for his loved ones or the buckshot for his enemies?" He laughed again. "Don't matter anyway does it?" Still leering at me, I could see him start to paw Jean, and Jean did nothing to stop him. Had I Pa's other shotgun I would have killed him--maybe Jean as well.

"Hurry, Jean," I said, hearing Pa begin a coughing fit on the other side of the barn. "Follow me." I scampered down, jumping the last five feet to the rough, frozen ground, and, hugging the fence like before, ran back to the creek. As I slid into it, I glanced back and could see Jean sprinting from the barn, so I turned and ran as

fast as I could back to our house.

I threw my coat on a peg in the entrance way and walked to the kitchen where Ma was washing turnips in a bucket. She looked up at me as I entered, her forehead a knit of furrows, water from the turnip she was holding dripping down her sleeve and spotting her dress with dark, over-lapping circles.

"She's right behind me," I said and went to sit on one of the hard, straight-backed chairs in front of the fire. Ma began scrubbing her turnips again--saying nothing as usual, retreating into her own silent world. A moment later Jean ran in breathing hard and came over and threw herself down on the chair next to me. For a long time, she stared at me as though she wanted to say something; finally she turned and stared at the fire. Shortly after, we heard Pa stomping snow off his boots outside the door. He must have caught sight of Jean, three years older and taller than I by two heads, running back in the creek bed.

When he stepped through the doorway, he stopped and glared at us over his long, crooked nose. It had been broken, word had it, at least four times back when his drinking and meanness had been more public than they were now. For several moments his red-veined eyes flickered between Jean and me. Then, without a word, he walked into the kitchen, hung the gun on the wall pegs and went over to the table where he unplugged the whiskey jug, twisted it up over his shoulder and sucked at the rye liquor he'd

brewed in the barn last summer. After swiping at his mouth with his sleeve and stopping the jug with the corn cob, he looked at me sideways.

"Where'd ya git that red nose, boy?" he asked in his raspy, whiskey-mean voice.

"Why I told him to move, Pa. Been sittin' there too close to the fire for too long now. It's a shine he's gittin'."

Ma's attempt was pathetic. It was the only way she ever tried to help us, and it was doomed from the beginning. Her voice always had a nervous edge to it when she talked to Pa; when she lied it outright quivered.

Pa came at me with his left hand raised like a scythe, but it was Jean he back-handed across the side of her head with the knuckles of his other hand, surprising her and knocking her off the chair. Then he struck me in the back of the head, but I was ready for him and didn't fall over. He stood there glowering at us for a long time before finally walking back to the table and dragging out a chair.

"I'm hungry," he said to Ma, sitting down without looking at her. She immediately set a plate in front of him and began piling apple butter on a slice of bread.

Once Pa was gone, I reached down to touch Jean's shoulder, but when I did she withdrew, snarling, like a dog I'd once tried to free from a muskrat trap.

"Damn it, Jean, what's wrong with you!" I kept my voice low, and neither Pa nor Ma looked over at us. We used

to comfort one another, Jean and I, and the younger ones as well. But that also had changed over the past months. That too along with everything else about Jean.

She pushed me away and climbed the ladder to the loft, crawling to a corner and turning her back to everyone. A few minutes later, I followed her; then Ma, her eyes avoiding mine, handed up tins of pork gravy and biscuits for all of us. But Jean wouldn't touch hers.

From the kitchen, we could hear the whiskey jug thumping against the table and soon Pa's voice singing out Old Testament verses in loud, wavering stanzas.

"Cursed be he who dishonors his father and mother. Cursed be he." Then he'd say, "Come on, Ma. Come on." And we'd hear Ma's feeble, sparrow voice respond, "Amen. Amen."

At sunrise the next morning, Christmas Eve morning, the mild weather was still with us: the sky still and clear and the temperature just low enough to put a lid of ice on the water bucket. By the time we finished our chores, though, a bitter wind was scudding a line of slate-colored clouds from over Lake Superior, and snow was already crunching under our boots.

When we come in from the barn, Pa was up and sitting at the kitchen table, and the big, blue and white-flecked porcelain coffee pot, puffing steam like a donkey engine, was perched atop the black, wood stove.

"He's coffee-sad," I whispered to Jean, smiling, but

her face hardened, and she turned away, unable to welcome the morose, sometimes maudlin mood my father would fall into for some length of time after each drunk. "Coffee-sad," we called his depression because he traded the whiskey jug for the coffee pot, and we were safe as long as it was warming on the stove.

I turned away from Jean and watched the babies, Rose and Emil, circling the kitchen table in little acts of courage and hope, each time walking closer and closer to Pa, each time slowing, wanting him to reach out and grab them, tousle their hair or sit them on his lap and fuss over them awkwardly and mawkishly as he sometimes would. For them, it was the only time he touched them with affection; for us, it was the only time he wouldn't handle us with cruelty: no black eyes and split lips, no festering, green and yellow, rock-salt welts on our backs. Even Ma was relaxed and humming as she kneaded bread for the day's baking.

As Christmas Eve morning was traditionally the time we would decorate our Christmas tree, without one, we all fell quiet and melancholy after our breakfast of warm milk and bread. The rest of us did, at least. I couldn't tell about Jean. She was keeping by herself, off near the corner of the fireplace, reading a battered copy of Treasure Island--or pretending to. I stared at her for several moments, disgusted by how filthy she was. Living on a hard-scrabble farm as we did, with chores to face twice

daily and water to pump, haul and heat if we did want to bathe, we had good reason to be dirty most of the time--but not on Christmas morning. Despite our disappointment about the Christmas tree, despite Pa being Pa and Ma being Ma, all of us had washed and changed clothes before breakfast. All of us except Jean. Her face was smudged; her hair hung in greasy clumps and tangles with bits of pale straw clinging to it like streaks of gray. The ragged dress and patched, baggy leggings she wore were the same she'd worn at sunrise when she'd curried the horses and shoveled out their stalls.

The scrape of a chair against the rough planking turned my head. My father had twisted in his chair, his red, watery eyes wandering around the house, skipping over the children, the sparse, hand-hewn furniture, then stopping at the corner where the Christmas tree usually stood.

"Where's the goddam tree?" he asked of no one and everyone. Then his eyes flickered with some dim recollection of what had happened the day before. "Go out and get a goddam tree," he said, and Amelia and Nars squealed and ran for the door, and the little ones, Rose and Emil, were holding hands and jumping in circles. I looked at Jean, but she was staring into the fire. I walked past her to get my coat, not bothering to beg, and walked outside with Joe, Amelia and Nars. As I closed the door, I could hear Ma coaxing her.

"Go with 'em, Jean. Why don't you go with 'em."

We walked to the barn to get the axe; then turned toward the woods on the far side of the east field. Half-way across, I glanced back over my shoulder, but Jean wasn't following us, and the snow now falling thickly was already covering our tracks.

An hour later we were back, Ma had taken down the box of home-made decorations, and we were winding long strings of popcorn and cranberries around a fat, sweet-smelling, spruce. Ma stood to the side giving directions, and even Pa twisted in his chair to watch for awhile, but Jean, still sitting in front of the fireplace, kept her back to us the whole time. Soon the only thing remaining was to place at the top of the tree the straw Star of Bethlehem we had all taken part in making two years earlier. It was Jean who'd had the idea; Jean who had gathered us in the wheat field right after threshing to search for the brightest yellow straw; Jean who had guided our fingers in the weaving, knotting and lacquering until the large, golden Star had finally emerged.

I dragged over one of the straight-backed chairs from the fireplace, stepped up, and stretched as far as I could, but the tree-top stayed a hand-length beyond my reach. A brief, awkward silence followed before everyone, Ma, Joe, Amelia and Nars, Rose, Emil and I, turned toward Jean. It was little Rose who finally took the Star from my hand, tip-toed over to her and tapped her on the shoulder. When

Jean finally turned, Rose held out to her our woven Star of Bethlehem.

"Please, Jean," she said. "You're the tallest."

Except for Pa, who had turned back to his coffee and sadness, we all were watching them. For a long time, Jean just looked at the Star as if it were something she didn't recognize; finally, she took it from Rose's hand and walked to the tree. All the younger ones cheered and clapped, but Ma and I could see how painful it was for her, so we said nothing. She wasn't smiling, and she seemed not even to be aware of the rest of us as she stepped onto the chair. I steadied it as she reached up, holding the Star of Bethlehem in both hands. But when she tried to tie it to the top of the spruce, her hands shook terribly, and she almost dropped it. We all saw this and fell silent, even little Rose and Emil, and Ma raised her hand in a halting, incomplete gesture to help her before letting her arm fall limp to her side. With much effort, Jean finally managed to steady her hands enough to make the knot; then she quickly stepped down and fled back to her chair, slumping into it, drawing herself into a ball, exhausted.

For a long time I watched her sitting there, small and curled in with such sadness, dry and shriveled like an apple left too long in the sun; then my eyes turned toward Pa sitting at the table. He too was curled in on himself--hunched over his coffee, morose, silent, distant;

dry and shriveled like Jean--there was little difference between the two of them. It was as if two bodies now shared the same soul--and finally I understood. I knew why Jean now allowed Logan Holtz to paw her, why she let her hair hang in greasy lumps on Christmas, why she was so mean to us and wouldn't be comforted. And I knew why, that one day months before, she'd told me St. Francis was dead. Dead and buried.

I also knew I could do nothing to help her--or myself or my brothers and sisters when our time came. And come it must, it seemed, from the looks of Jean, the oldest.

The rest of the morning dragged by slowly, uneventfully, and, for me, with my new understanding of Jean, of us, sadly and painfully. Joe, Amelia, Nars and the babies mostly played in front of the tree, and I joined in half-heartedly from time to time. Ma was busy in the kitchen; Pa sat hunched at the table drinking coffee, and Jean, I saw each time I turned to look at her, still stared into the fireplace. And nothing changed until noon when we heard the noises outside.

The snorting of the horse is what we heard first; then the quick, punching sounds, muffled by the morning's fresh snowfall, of its hooves breaking through the hard, icy crust beneath. We all swept toward the door at once, Pa at the head, and all dropped our mouths in chorus when he swung open the door on a tall Ojibway sitting atop a black, steaming gelding pawing the snow with its hoof.

The Indian looked down on us for several moments, neither smiling nor frowning nor uttering a word; then he pulled a letter from beneath the blankets he had wrapped around himself. After Pa had stepped forward cautiously to take it from his hand, the Indian wheeled the horse about and was gone.

Inside, Pa turned the envelope over suspiciously several times, eyeing it as if it were a rock under which something had just moved, before slitting the flap with a knife and removing the letter. He handed it to Jean.

"Dear Brother," she began reading. "After twenty years of absence, on this eve of our Savior's birth, I am returning to visit you, Jacob, my brother, and all my other brothers and their families. Would you kindly gather them at your house this evening? God forgive me, I have not yet found room in my heart for Ma, so I BEG you NOT to tell her of my return. -- Israel."

Each of these words, as Jean read them, was a stone piled on my father's shoulders; by the end, he was slumped in his chair staring at the floor. "Israel," he whispered just once, then all the sadness vanished from his face. With one thrust of his arm, he sent his coffee cup crashing against the wall and us running back to the fireplace.

"Israel," I also repeated the word softly to myself--a mystery for twenty years. To us, "Uncle Israel," my father's youngest brother who'd fled from my grandmother, his mother, in the middle of the night when he was thirteen-years old.

All of us had heard the rumors that something unspeakable had happened between them, rumors I didn't want to repeat to myself or anyone else. And we'd heard the other rumors as well: that he'd fled to Canada with the Ojibway and settled on a reservation near Thunder Bay on the north shore of Lake Superior, that he'd finished school at the Catholic mission there and then stayed to work with the priest. And both the Indian messenger and the Christian tone of his letter seemed to point to the truth of these rumors.

"Jean! Samuel!" Pa's voice jolted us from our thoughts--I could tell from Jean's face she'd also resurrected the mystery of Uncle Israel. "Harness the horse to the sleigh. I'm leaving in five minutes."

It was late in the afternoon when Pa returned, and darkness had already lowered its hand over the eastern horizon. The storm that had blown down from Lake Superior in the morning was hovering above us and rattling the north window with fiercely-driven pellets of snow. When Pa came in, not bothering to stamp his boots or knock the snow from his hat, he wasn't alone. His unmarried brother, Isaac, was with him, and within half an hour his other brothers, Shem, Seth, and Esau, all seed of the same seed, had arrived with their wives and children--the wives either as partial to jug whiskey and meanness as their husbands or as cowered and pliant as our own mother was.

The children all gathered in small groups around the Christmas tree or in front of the fireplace, but there was little play, and our talk was quiet and secretive and centered on the return of Uncle Israel. His mystery was as intriguing to us as it was to our parents, and wild tales became wilder as they will among children on dark, winter nights. Even Jean was up, hands stuffed in her pockets, whispering to our older cousins.

The adults stayed in the kitchen, either sitting around the table or stretching their hands over the wood stove, with Pa watching out the north window, while Shem and Isaac took turns pacing back and forth between the kitchen and the south window to peer out into the increasing darkness and snow. There was little talk among them, and what talk there was came in short, chewed-off sentences that were more grumbled then spoken, and it wasn't long before Pa had taken the whiskey jug down from the shelf.

The knock came as the jug was being handed around for the fourth time. The murmur of conversation ceased immediately; all eyes turned toward Pa.

"Put that jug away," he commanded, with a leering smile, a Logan Holtz smile, twisting his face. "We got us a Christian visitin'. A New Testament man." Then he turned, walked into the entrance way and pulled open the door.

"Brother Israel!" we could hear him shout, "God be praised!" and we heard the swish and rub of clothing as they embraced. A moment later, both emerged into view,

and all eyes were fixed on the man who had disappeared from family life twenty years before, a small man like my father and his brothers, with a tangle of glistening, snow-speckled hair as wild as John the Baptist's. Releasing my father's arm, he stepped over to his other brothers, embraced each of them and their wives, all the while murmuring words in a voice too quiet for me to understand, but words resonating with a softness and gentleness that filled and calmed the room like dawn. Finally, he turned toward us, the children of his brothers, and took us in, each of us, possessing us with eyes as solidly blue and deep as the August waters of Lake Superior.

"Jean," Pa finally said. As the oldest, it was for Jean to start, but for a long time she could do nothing but stare at Uncle Israel.

"My name is Jean, daughter of Jacob," she finally said, and then we all introduced ourselves, oldest to youngest, family to family, Uncle Israel saying nothing, just looking at each of us, and we at him. When we had finished, he turned toward his brothers and their wives and said, "You are blessed." But the silence which followed, when no one responded, quickly slipped into awkwardness, and my father broke it by turning to me.

"Tend to your Uncle's horse now, boy," he said.

And it was at that moment, just as I had started toward the door to walk Uncle Israel's horse to the shelter of the barn, that a rush of wind from the entrance way suddenly

filled the house, and swirls of snow, like tiny white dust devils, twisted crazily across the floor. Everyone turned and looked. There had been no shouted greeting, no knock, no warning. I turned back toward my father, but both he and his brothers were staring at Uncle Israel, who had reached down and gripped the top of the wooden chair he was standing next to, locked his eyes on the entrance way, and shifted his body downward the way a cat does before it leaps. From the corner of my eye, I caught sight of Ma slipping back behind everyone else, crouching in the corner by the wall with the guns.

"ISRAEL," a voice boomed from the entrance way. "ISRAEL," it cried out a second time just before my grandmother floated into view. Her body was a cloud of dark, heavy blankets, her head and face invisible, except for the glaring points of her eyes, beneath a ragged, black shawl whose loose ends were whipped about by the wind rushing through the open door. She took not more than three steps into the house before stopping and staring at Israel. My father, Shem, Seth, Isaac and Esau filed in behind her to form a wall in front of the entrance.

"After twenty years, Israel, you finally return to your mother," she hissed, and there was nothing but ice and fire glistening in the grey points of her eyes when she spoke.

At first, Israel said nothing. His hands gripped the chair tighly; then a low moan began deep inside his belly,

rolled upward to his lips and broke forth in a few whispered words: "Adders' eggs," he said, "Adders' eggs and spiders' webs. Whoever eats your eggs will die." Then he slowly raised the chair, held it above his head and stared at his mother who never removed her eyes from his, who retreated no an inch from her ground--then suddenly whirled and heaved the chair through the south window ten feet behind him.

The crashing glass and splintering wood had not yet settled in the snow outside when Uncle Israel hurtled himself through the opening, his left shoulder grazing the frame as he did, twisting his body around so that I had one last glimpse of his eyes before he disappeared into the darkness and snow. Not a moment later, Jean leaped through after him, leaving behind a cry that floated in the air long after she'd disappeared through the window.

The moment's shock passed, Rose and Emil burst into tears, and Ma ran to comfort them. Behind her in the kitchen, all I could see was a confusion of thumping boots as my uncles rushed for the door--my father behind them, a shotgun in his hand. I glanced up at the wall. The top pegs were empty.

"Run, Jean," I cried out as I turned, dashed to the broken window and leaped. "Run, oh, God, run!"

When I landed outside I fell, cutting my face on a shard of glass; at the same moment, I heard the pounding of Uncle Israel's horse, the roar of Pa's shotgun, and then, holding

my breath . . . silence, nothing but glorious silence except for the slowly fading pounding of hooves against snow.

"Traitors!" I heard Pa scream after them. "Traitors, the both of you!"

Winter spun itself out as it does in the Upper Peninsula, fiercely, with a false thaw in late February and then vengeful blasts of snow and wind and ice in March. The lasting thaw finally came in April, and with it the birthing of calves and, once the sun and wind had dried the pools of snow-melt, the plowing and planting of wheat and oats and corn in the hard, rock-strewn soil.

And, all this time, I mourned. I mourned our loss of Jean. I mourned our own frightful, unhappy future--but I felt as well the joy of knowing that Jean, at least, had escaped.

It was June, I remember clearly--the house was filled with the sweet, light fragrance of the wild lilac blossoming in front of our house--when Jean returned. She woke me just before sunrise, clasping her hand over my mouth and whispering, "Get your clothes and follow me."

"Jean!" I said too loudly, and she quickly shushed me, then backed away so I could get up.

I crept down the ladder first, Jean lingering at the top to stare at Nars, Amelia, Joe, and the babies in their sleep. Finally she followed me. We tip-toed across the

floor, slipped out the door, ran for the barn, the creek beyond the barn, then turned north to follow it past the Holtz farm all the way to the road that would take us to Sault Sainte Marie and the train to Detroit where Mr. Ford was paying workers five dollars a day to build his cars.

"We'll come back," Jean said as we handed the conductor the tickets Uncle Israel had bought for us. "We'll come back when we've got the money. We'll come and take them all away--Nars, Amelia and Joe, Rose and Emil. And Ma too. We'll save them all, Sam. Every one of them."

And we did go back, two years later, only to find the farm a tangle in weeds. They'd left, we were told, just a few weeks after Jean and I had escaped--and not just Ma and Pa and the little ones, but grandma and grandpa, Shem, Isaac and all the other brothers and their families.

We followed rumors that took us as far as Iron Mountain, then on to Copper Harbor. There, the trail ended, and we returned to Detroit never to see or hear of them again.

* * *

Headlights flash across the room, lifting us from our memories. Jean's neighbors, her best friends, are leaving for midnight Mass. I look across at her. She smiles but says nothing. After all these years of coming together on Christmas Eve, there is no need. We've done all our

talking; to remember is enough. She holds up her empty cup.

"Another?"

I shake my head no. It's late, and I know our children and grandchildren will be back early in the morning, Christmas morning. Back with arms piled high with presents wrapped in soft, white paper and tied with ribbons that curl, bows that sparkle and shine. Back with tins of mince and apple pie, bowls of fresh grape and melon, and loaves of bread still warm, soft and fragrant.

Aborigine

It was a bitter winter Sunday, and Charles sat in the den reading a book about aborigines. He wasn't too far from his wife, Ruth, who was in the kitchen, but he had fled as far as he could without having to march outside into the snow.

"Charles?" Ruth said.

No response.

Her long dark hair coiled neatly on top of her head, Ruth was kneeling on a chair and leaning over a newspaper spread across the kitchen table. Magnifying glass in hand, she was examining one of the ads as if it were a rare coin.

"Charles, we ought to go to Blakely's today. They're having a wonderful pre-spring cleaning sale. Sponges, soap, buckets--everything. She scanned the fine print at the bottom of the ad for disclaimers, her face darkened with mascara and eye-liner, her narrow lips given broader but false contours by a coat of thick lipstick. Satisfied, she put down the magnifying glass and picked up her cup.

"Did you hear, Charles?" she said again, sipping sugared

coffee and studying the color of the wall in front of her. For some time now she had been considering lavender.

Charles had heard. His only reaction was to shift slightly toward the patio door.

"Charles?" Ruth said again, turning and funneling her words down the narrow hallway that separated them.

This time Charles answered, but without taking his eyes off the book spread open on his lap like a butterfly with black-on-white wings.

"Don't want to. Sunday's a day of rest."

Ruth looked away from the wall and began to dig at something caught under a fingernail.

"Since when did you start keeping holy the Sabbath, Charles?"

Charles sighed and looked up, a finger pressed against the page marking the spot where he'd stopped reading.

"It has nothing to do with religion. It has to do with being tired. All week I sell real estate. All day Saturday I cart you around shopping because you refuse to get a license. Sunday is my day. Sunday I read."

Ruth took a knife to the spot under her nail.

"Don't ridicule the handicapped, Charles. You know I don't drive because of my eye problem."

Charles' finger slide to the bottom of the page. Ruth was in her script now; this would endure.

"Ruth, darling, all you need are glasses, but you refuse to wear them. Isn't that so, sweetest?" He heard Ruth

grumble something, then there was silence. He waited. More silence. He turned to his book again.

"So what about Blakely's? Spring is upon us, you know."

Charles placed a marker in the book, closed it, set it carefully on the light stand next to him, then began to massage little white circles into his forehead with his thumb and index finger. After a while, he stopped and turned toward the hallway.

"There are six inches of snow on the ground with a crust like sheet metal," he shouted. "The thermometer hasn't climbed to twenty in three weeks, and you say spring is upon us, for crying out loud!"

Ruth took her lighter from the pocket of her housecoat and lit a cigarette. In the silence of the kitchen, the wheel rasped loudly against the flint. She inhaled and blew a stream of blue smoke down the hallway.

"All I know, Charles, is that it has a way of coming and going before you know it."

In the den, Charles stood, walked over to the picture window and stared out at their snow-covered backyard. He wished Ruth were right. It had been a long, tiresome winter.

"And what about the 'Home Beautiful' contest in June," Ruth added. "They judge inside and outside both, remember, and we might want to paint the living room or do something else that takes a lot of time."

"Home Beau-ti-ful." Charles repeated the words slowly,

pulling the second word into syllables as if picking apart a machine to see how it worked. He thought for a moment. "How long have we been entering that silly contest anyway?" he asked Ruth..

"Silly?...and you're in real estate."

"How long?"

"Why . . . twenty years, I suppose."

Charles rubbed his whiskers--he'd begun to give his razor Sundays off--and considered the matter. "Twenty years of washing, painting, digging and planting," he muttered. "New curtains, new petunias and then a photo of our house and our faces with cheese smiles in the neighborhood paper--for twenty years now. Incredible!" He turned toward the hallway.

"I say we skip it this year, Ruth."

"Skip it?--and you're in real estate! Do you hear what you're saying, Charles?"

"Yes, clearly. I am saying we should skip the damn thing. Enough is enough." He waited for Ruth's response. Nothing. He cocked his ear toward the kitchen. All he could hear was the rapid clinking of the spoon against the cup as she stirred her coffee.

Ruth laid the spoon on the table. Another tangent, she thought. He's off on another kick of some sort. She hated it when he did that. If only they could stick with Blakely's and spring cleaning.

"Well, all I know is you used to say it was important

for someone in real estate to keep his own house beautiful," she said, hoping to draw him back to subject.

There was a long pause before Charles answered, and it was to himself that he softly spoke.

"Yes . . . I know . . . for twenty years.

In the kitchen, Ruth's knees had begun to ache. She got down from the chair and walked to the coffee pot to pour herself another cup. As she watched the flow of dark liquid, she thought about the many Sundays--going on two years now--Charles had spent sitting in the den reading. For awhile she had listened to him when he began to rattle on about something new he'd learned, something that fascinated him. She had even tried to ask the right questions, to make the right comments, to laugh when he laughed or let her face grow serious when she saw him do the same. But she knew she never really listened; she knew she was only acting--not that she hadn't made her share of resolutions. Just last summer she'd enrolled in a community college course--Cultures of the Pacific Rim, or something like that--hoping this would help her to talk with Charles--or to listen, to really listen, at least. But she'd soon dropped out. What did she care about Maori fertility rites, she'd asked herself, or food gathering among the Tagalog? The answer was nothing--not a penny's worth.

But sometimes she would remember last summer--though this remembering happened less and less frequently--remember

that Charles had left the den and spread his book on the kitchen table across from her as she studied, that he would get up and bring her fresh coffee and often lay his hand on her shoulder as he passed--and she would be moved to make a fresh resolution.

Ruth carried her cup back to the kitchen table and set it on the newspaper. A few drops splashed over the rim, and she quickly soaked them up with a napkin before they could spoil the ads. She smoothed her dress, fussed with her hair and turned toward the hallway.

"What are you reading about, Charles?"

"Aborigines," he answered, the tiredness in his voice escaping her. He glanced at his watch. It was a cruel little game he played, timing these flare-ups of Ruth's self-conscious interest.

"Oh," she said, beginning to fidget with a corner of the newspaper.

"Don't they wear bones through their noses?" she asked, struggling to keep the echo of disapproval from her voice and failing.

"Some do," he answered.

"And go naked?"

Charles began to dig at the leather armrests.

"Yes, darling, except on cold days. Then they wear little battery-heated g-strings. Part of our foreign aid, you know." Ruth ignored his ridicule.

"See, that's what I don't understand," she said,

abandoning all pretense of being one with her husband. "Why are you always reading about these bizarre, uncivilized people: the Zunis and Bantoes...."

"Bantus," he corrected her.

"Okay, Bantus, what difference does it make. They all run around naked, for god's sake. How stupid and disgust--"

"The Zunis don't, the Bantus do," Charles interrupted again. "It's hot as a griddle where they live. We put in central air to stay cool--for three thousand dollars--they just take their clothes off. So who's stupid?"

"Oh, stop it, Charles. You're making fun of me again."

"You were making fun of them again."

Ruth stubbed out one cigarette and lit another, preparing herself for second try. Her hands fluttered about her hair for a moment, tucking in stray wisps, slipping out bobby pins and re-anchoring the coil of dark hair on top of her head.

"All right, Charles, please tell me. Why are you reading an entire book about aborigines? What is it you find so fascinating about them?"

Charles, not bothering to look his watch anymore, had abandoned his chair and was standing in front of the world map he'd hug in the den. It was dotted with green, stick pins; one for each culture he'd studied.

"What do I find fascinating? I find it fascinating that none of them ever has--or ever will--enter his little

grass hut in a "Home Beautiful" contest, that's what I find fascinating."

"Stop being ridiculous," Ruth pouted.

"Who says I am?" Charles replied calmly. "Let me try to explain. What I find fascinating is that their lives are . . . so basic, so elemental: building their simple shelters to survive the heat and cold, putting their noses to the ground to sniff for spoor, cocking an ear to the wind to listen for bird calls"--he had turned and was staring through the patio door at the great white expanse of snow outside--"digging in the earth with your hands to find water so you won't thirst to death, migrating with herds of wild animals because that's what fills your belly . . . . That's why, Ruth. That's why I read about them."

Ruth had taken up a kitchen knife and was busy scrapping off a spot of food that had crusted on the table's edge.

"Oh, come on, Charles, you sound like you're still in the boy scouts.

Charles wasn't listening. "They have this fascinating custom, for example--actually it's a rite of passage--called the 'Walk-About'. When an aborigine boy is fourteen or fifteen, he's given a walking stick and nothing else--absolutely nothing!--and told to go off into the wilderness by himself for a year, to walk through his land, to study and understand his world, to make your own weapons and shelter and clothes; to hunt and fish--to learn how

to live, in other words, to live in the most elemental sense. Then, if you survive the year, you're welcomed back into the tribe as an adult, a man. You've proven yourself, you see."

There was a long moment of silence when Charles stopped talking, for Ruth had gone back to the ads and didn't immediately realize he had finished.

"And you . . . find that interesting, do you?" she finally managed to say, picking up the magnifying glass again.

"Interesting? The word's too weak. Fascinating. Invigorating. Vital. All those wonderful adjectives and more."

"Yes . . . well, if you ask me, it's an awfully cruel thing to do to a young boy--to send him all like that all alone. At fourteen! Why that's only a few years younger than you were when we married, Charles. Just a few years. Now think about that a minute." Abruptly, Ruth stopped talking, leaned forward over the newspaper, and peered through the magnifying glass. "I can't believe it--why didn't I notice this before!" she scolded herself.

"Charles," she said loudly. "Charles, it's a ONE DAY ONLY SALE AT Blakely's. We've got to go today, don't you understand? It's now or never. We have no choice!"

Ruth picked up her coffee cup and walked to the sink. She rinsed it, set in on the drain-board, then looked at herself in the mirror hanging from the wall next to the

cupboards. "Oh, God, I'm a fright," she mumbled, then glanced at her watch. "But I'll have to go as I am. I've no choice." She walked back to the table to gather her cigarettes.

"Charles, please don't be difficult. I know you heard me--this is important." She waited a moment, but there was no answer. She sat down at the table. "Charles?" she said again loudly, but the only response was a sudden rush of cold air that swept down the hallway into the kitchen. Ruth sat there for a moment, blinking, frowning, pulling her collar tight around her throat, then--"Oh, no . . .oh, Lord, no," and she jumped up from the table and ran down the hallway toward the den, the coil of hair at the top of her head sliding loose, tipping over her ear in a bunch, then beginning to unravel.

"Charles!" she cried, flying though the doorway into the den. "Chaaaarles!"

War Zone

A strange haze as fine as bone dust hung in the air, and the African sun that shone dimly through it was as small and dark as a ferret's eye. Only the heat was familiar, pressing like an iron against the backs of the three men who jumped from the shelter of the bush taxi as it jerked to a stop.

"Snap, snap." The sound of the driver's fingers turned their heads, and one of them took a thick stack of pesitos from an inside pocket and laid it on the man's trembling hand. As the taxi sped off the way it had come, some of the bills were blown away and settled like dead leaves on the dusty pavement. The driver never glanced back.

The three men looked across the street at what used to be an elegant hotel during Portuguese rule. But that was a distant time, and now large chunks of its rose-colored stucco had been shattered by bullets, its shutters nailed to the window frames with rusting spikes, and a heavy wooden table--the door had been blown apart during a previous battle and never replaced--turned on its side to block off half the entrance.

The hotel, located near the northern edge of the provincial town--it was commonly known the attack would be launched from the cover of the hills and forests found there--was ideal. With its well-braced cellar and balcony ringing the perimeter of the third floor, it offered both safe haven from bombardment and vantage point from which to view the assault itself.

The three men had made all the arrangements to travel here from the government side. Words were whispered in the ear of a "friend of a friend," bottles of decent Portuguese wine passed around generously, necklaces slipped into shirt pockets for wives and mistresses--soon all was settled: transportation, laissez-passer documents to get them into rebel territory, and reserved seats in the third tier of a fortress-hotel.

As the men walked across the vacant street, they could feel frightened eyes watching them through cracks and peepholes in the surrounding buildings, and at the top of the street a rebel platoon fidgeted behind a barricade of over-turned donkey carts. Once across the street, one of men handed another thick stack of pesitos into the shadows behind the doorway. Immediately, the dark hands of the hotel keeper rolled the table aside and pulled them through the opening.

Inside the three men unshouldered their cameras and leather pouches bulging with film, beat dust from their veld hats, sighed and sat down heavily at a splintery wooden

table veined with knife carvings and mottled with cigarette burns and the dark stains of beer and wine. Once seated they looked across at one another and nodded.

They had been covering the war together for a year now and, as men often do in time of war, had come to love one another as brothers. Together they had marched with troops advancing and fled with those retreating, hidden from bombardments in ravines and under abandoned trucks, witnessed atrocities and assassinations and the rare shining deed in an unfathomable civil war that would untangle itself one week only to tie itself into a more complicated knot the next. Rebel troops would cross over to the government side, and government forces turn rebel during the course of a single night. One political faction would ally itself with another, only to have a third arrive, whisper truth and lies and destroy the alliance. And all the while the ex-colonial power sniffed about like an old dog prowling for dropped bones, and the super powers manipulated everyone as if scooting about pots and pans on a hot stove.

And throughout, of course, it was the innocents who suffered: the peasants who wanted only to plant and harvest, the shepherds to herd and milk, the mothers to bear and raise their children, and they only to play, laugh and grow older. And it was because of the innocents that the three men were in the war zone. The three men the other correspondents had come to call the Holy Trinity, though never to their faces, for they respected them too much,

and always with gentle affection the way parents, in the privacy of the night, will speak tenderly of their one child who is somehow endearingly different from the rest.

The eldest of the three, Stephano, was a devout Italian Catholic with a father and five brothers who bowed their heads to recite the Angelus each noon as they cultivated a small vineyard on the western slope of the Apennines, and a mother who would send him colorful tins filled with home-baked pastries and holy cards carefully folded in waxed paper. Stephano carried a rosary in his pocket and wore a St. Christopher medal, but he also read Liberation Theology and Kierkegaard and believed indeed that our soul is not handed to us whole at birth, like a loaf of bread on a plate, but is created and shaped by our choices and manner of living. To those who asked, Stephano would speak gently and movingly of the need to act in the Image of Christ and to see that Image in everyone. Among the other correspondents, hard-drinkers and women chasers many of them, he sparked a most unusual debate: some would insist he was certain to become a saint; others would argue he already had.

Raoul was a French Jew and an atheist, but in the way of some atheists, had embraced humanist principles with a fervor that touched wings with the mystical. He had as well the wisdom to recognize the purity and depth of Stephano's belief in God, and sometimes, when they would return to the capital after long, spirit-deadening journeys

through the war zone, Raoul would accompany Stephano through the salty, ocean fog of early morning to Mass at the war-damaged cathedral. Though he never told anyone else about this, to himself, Raoul had begun to admit that in Stephano he saw glimpses of the God he had long believed to be a mere ghost in a child's story.

The third man in the trio, Billy, was an American from a small Ohio town where his grandfather had helped build the first Pentecostal Church, and he, Billy, the second. Blue-suited, combed and with skin washed to a shine like a polished apple, he had been a regular Sunday attender and would sometimes happily think of God during the week as well. But here in Africa, things were different. Here, after the field artillery had stopped booming and the ack-ack of the automatic rifles fallen silent and were replaced by the low, steady moans of the dying--the way thunder and lighting wane and are replaced by heavy, droning rain--Billy found his Pentecostal beliefs to be soup with little meat. Of the three, he was the one who most often would bolt upright in the middle of the night and flail at the darkness around him to drive away images of children with half torsos and women with no eyes.

The hotel keeper, as a matter of courtesy, came to serve them cold water from a tray of green glasses that chimed against each other as he circled the table. The men thanked him and quickly emptied the glasses, the hotel-keeper standing by and fidgeting as they did. He

knew of the dust that coated their throats and how the bitter, local beer would cut through the chalky film in a way that water never could. This is what he would tell them, at least, for he was anxious to fatten the wad of pesitos already swelling his pocket.

"Cuveja?" he asked once they had finished their water. "Cuveja freia?" and then he began his little speech.

Raoul quickly waved him off. "No beer," he said, for the three never drank beer in a war zone. With the heat, fatigue and tension, just one bottle of the strong, thick beer could addle the brain more than one wanted when bullets were flying around. The hotel keeper frowned and shuffled off to plan a new strategy. One could never get enough pesitos, especially with the vagaries of war.

"So," Stephano began to speak, and Raoul and Billy turned to him. "Maybe it's here we'll find what we've been looking for. We can hope, no?"

"Do you think . . . do you still believe it's possible?" Billy asked, for he was losing heart quickly in the face of it all. And Raoul as well looked over at Stephano for his answer.

"Of course," Stephano said, and then, as he always did at times like this, he pulled the old news photo from his wallet, unfolded it and held it up to remind them. They saw again the naked, terrified girl fleeing the dark smoke of bomb blasts behind her, running weeping past a long line of dispirited American soldiers plodding toward

the war zone in Viet-Nam. "Do you know how many hearts this image changed?" he asked. "Do you know this was the beginning of the end of that war?" And they did, and it was that which they were after--that one image that would bring about a soulful crisis of conscience that would shock dead hearts back to life again, for they believed both in the power of images and of the heart to respond to them. And it was this that had drawn them together in the first place, that had woven their three lives together like strands in a single rope. It was this quest that had brought each of them to the war zone a year earlier and silently drawn them to the same breakfast table that one morning in the capitol. It was as if they had whispered their dreams to one other above the heads of the other correspondents noisily scraping plates clean of egg yolk, rattling cups against saucers, and talking of the war, the war and nothing but the war.

The hotel owner approached them again, this time carrying a tray with three bottles of beer so cold that condensation coursed down the green glass in streams. "Cuveja freia?" he entreated them in a whispery, child's voice. "Mucha freia!"

Raoul and Billy both said no, but Stephano, after a moment's hesitation, reached up and took one of the bottles from the tray.

"Stephano!" Raoul said, and Billy raised his hand in silent protest.

"I know," Stephano answered. "But the shelling hasn't even begun yet. We have hours to wait."

It was true, Raoul and Billy knew. There was always the shelling for three or four hours first, and only then the attack. It had been the method of the government ever since the war had began three years earlier . . . still. The two of them shifted in their seats and looked uneasily at one another. The hotel keeper circled the table and lowered the tray between Raoul and Billy. They shook their heads no, and he left muttering with only Stephano's money in hand.

For several minutes, the only sound was the click of Stephano's bottle against the wooden table each time he lowered it.

"What if we never do?" Billy, who had been tracing circles on the table with his finger, suddenly asked. It was the first time he had raised the question, but Stephano had been expecting it. "What if we never do find the young girl or the old man or the child soldier whose image of suffering will the change hearts of people? What if we shoot another ten thousand photos and people all over the world see them and just fold their papers and go back to their coffee and toast? Our chances are so remote--what if we never succeed?"

"It doesn't matter," Stephano answered immediately, looking up from his beer and staring for a moment, first at Billy, then at Raoul. "Not one bit."

"It doesn't matter?" Raoul asked.

"Of course it does," Stephano said, again without hesitating. "It matters more than anything in the world."

Raoul and Billy looked at one another for a moment; it was Raoul who finally turned and spoke.

"It doesn't matter--it matters. What kind of nonsense is this you're handing us? What are you trying to say? "

Stephano shrugged. "It can't be explained, only understood," he said, and he seemed to be apologizing.

After he had spoken, there was silence for a long time that was, to Stephano, like the silence that fills the hour before dawn when everything seems to make complete sense--or no sense at all. He looked at Billy, at Raoul, hoping they too might hear the silence, might finally understand.

It was then that shouts of the government soldiers and the noise of small arms fire came rolling up the street. For a moment, the three of them sat motionless, Raoul finally turning and cupping his ear to make certain of what he was hearing.

"Jesus, no artillery. For the first time no artillery," he said. Behind them, the hotel keeper was scurrying toward the cellar.

The three of them reached for their cameras and ran for the stairs leading to the balcony. Through the patch of light above the over-turned table in the doorway, they could see government troops running up the street, spraying

bullets into the surrounding buildings. A sudden, sharp cry rose above the din of the attack, and Stephano abruptly veered toward the doorway, raising his camera as he ran.

"Stop him," Raoul shouted, and Billy grabbed at Stephano, caught his shirt, tried to pull him back toward the stairs, but the shirt slipped thorough his fingers. Two steps later, an arc of bullets struck Stephano mid-chest and threw him back ten feet across the splintery, beer-stained table.

Hours after the fighting had finally ended, several other correspondents who had been trailing government troops as they advanced into the town, came to the hotel looking for the three of them. They found Billy and Raoul sitting in chairs next to the table, each holding one of Stephano's hands, each staring off into the distance refusing to look at him.

"It was the beer," was all Raoul would say when they asked what had happened. "The beer made him crazy".

The other correspondents looked at one another for a moment, said, yes, they understood, then pryed Raoul and Billy's hands from Stephano's so they could lead them outside before removing the body.

"But look at him just once, lads, before you leave," an Irish reporter said to them. "He's done his work. He's at rest. Just glance at him, lads. It's in his face

like blood's in the heart."

But neither would look.

* * *

Raoul continued his work as a war photographer, this time in Asia, but those who knew him said he never was the same. He became reckless, arrogant and cynical, and would laugh whenever someone laid a hand on his shoulder and urged him to be cautious. His own life ended in Cambodia two years after Stephano's, when an officer in one of the guerrilla factions was offended by a photo Raoul had sold to Le Monde and ordered a bamboo spear driven through his heart.

Billy went back to his small Ohio town where he quickly married a woman he'd known since grade school, and went to work for the local newspaper taking photographs of family reunions and county fairs. Sundays, when he went to the Pentecostal Church with his family, he would sit listlessly except during the hymns, when he would sing in such a loud, beseeching voice that the preacher would begin to fidget with his tie, and Billy's wife would have to touch his elbow gently, lean close and whisper calming words before he would quiet himself.

Wounded

Harry sat on knot of worn blankets in the attic and watched the city inspector drive back and forth looking for a parking space. He wanted one close to the house, Harry figured--for the quick getaway--but had to settle for one around the corner. He didn't look happy. "Well, I'm not either," Harry grumbled, then slid down a firemen's pole through a hole he'd sawed in the living room ceiling.

When the inspector opened Harry's front gate, it fell off. He tripped over small gorges in the sidewalk, tangled a rusty chain, hidden by the weeds, around his ankles, refused to advance farther than the bottom step of Harry's long front porch, which sloped to ruin at the far end. In his hands the inspector held a big red tag, a hammer, a bag of nails all bunched up the way an old woman holds a bundle of weeds. Here was a man, Harry snickered, who made his living rotating a swivel chair.

"Harry?" the inspector said peering up at the front door. "Can we be nice, Harry? Can everyone be happy?"

Harry stuck his shotgun through a splintery hole in the door he'd made with a sledgehammer.

"HARRY! PLEASE! Please put the gun down. It's the

law, Harry. PLEASE."

"Not mine," Harry said, turning the barrel back and forth against the frayed wood to make it groan.

"Harry, you put holes in the roof."

"I got buckets."

"The pipes leak."

"I got pans."

"Harry, for Christ sake, you have raw sewage running into the back yard."

"You ever seen my tomatoes? Five times the size of your balls, official city man."

"Oh, Harry, PLEASE. The neighbors. What about the neighbors."

KA-BOOM!

Before pulling the trigger, Harry had angled the barrel upward toward the dark, hovering clouds. As the city inspector fainted backwards, he glimpsed the leaves of the overhanging elm being shredded by Harry's double load of buckshot.

"Dumb-ass," Harry chuckled. "Shooting at God, not you. Would have nailed Him if the tree hadn't gotten in the way--hell, you're a peon. Not worth a double load. Ha!"

It took the inspector a long time to revive. Harry watched him crawl off toward the gate. He left the red tag, nails, hammer in the weeds where they'd fallen.

"He'll be back," Harry said. "And not alone." He was talking to Ezra Pound, his cat, who'd crawled from

underneath a battered car hood once the smoke and noise had drifted away. Until a couple of weeks ago, "Ezra Pound" had been "Blackie." Then the city inspector had paid his first visit. After he'd written down all the code violations Harry was guilty of--he'd run out of room on the official form and had to take loose-leaf from his notebook--Harry had decided these were serious times in need of serious names. He thought of his friends: Art Plano, Bill Peters, Joey McGrady. Not much there. He sifted memories--Ezra Pound popped up. From where? Some high school class forty years ago? History maybe? Of the man himself, Harry remembered only one thing: he'd had the good sense to go insane at some point in his life. This was the selling point: Blackie became Ezra Pound.

Harry needed to search his pockets for shells, so he leaned his shotgun against the jagged stub of a wrecked airplane wing he'd propped against the wall. "Found art," is what Harry told the city inspector when he'd eyed the wing. "Rockefeller's offered me a million. For you, I'll knock off a hundred grand." The city inspector kept writing on his clipboard.

Harry cracked open the shotgun and pushed two shells into the barrels.

"Where we going to go, Ezra Pound?" he said. "What are we going to do?"

The cat climbed up Harry and sat on his shoulder, his tail wrapped around Harry's neck. "Let's go," Harry said,

and he turned to walk toward the back of the house. His path twisted around rusty bird cages, broken windows, smashed hubcaps, a car door riddled with bullet holes, a three-legged picnic table, cross-cut saws with broken handles and bent teeth, chipped green and brown bottles, lamps with shades and without, a collection of torn hip boots and a bookshelf he'd nailed to the wall and loaded with spider plants and geraniums, all of which were now brown and dry as string. "Found art" is what Harry said to the city inspector when he saw him write "junk" on his clipboard. "Don't you understand?"

When Harry was a young man working in the factory, he lost the first inch of his left, little finger. A press cut it off like a bud. When he was a middle-aged man, a dropped wheel smashed three toes. Neither time had Harry allowed even a single tear to gather in his eye. When his wife Sophie died a couple of years after he retired, Harry wept for days. "Okay," he said, two months after the funeral, "I'll try to be reasonable about this. But what does a new widower, a retired factory man, do to fill the hours?" "Look around," a friend said. "See what other widowers do. Do the same thing." So Harry looked around. He saw widowers bowling, widowers fast walking in shopping malls, widowers chasing widows at dances in church basements, buying and selling stock in investment clubs, learning to paint water-colors of fruit bowls.

None of this interested Harry except the investment club. He thought it would be good to pick up a few extra bucks in his retirement. When he went to his first meeting, the other men asked him how much he'd like to invest. "About $30," Harry said. He wasn't invited back.

Then he saw a poster: "Senior Citizens' Travel Club: See Points of Interest." Points of interest, Harry thought. I'll bet I'd like to see those, so he signed up.

The first month, taking day trips on an old yellow school bus that smelled like a balogna sandwich, Harry saw: a winery, a tomato canning plant, an historic bridge, and a craft show. The first three "points of interest" interested Harry not at all, the last only slightly because he could buy hand-painted ties with trout leaping against backgrounds of blue and green water. As a young man, Harry used to fish. Three days before a pre-paid trip to the birthplace of the man who invented the zipper, Harry quit. He didn't even ask for a refund.

"Okay," Harry said to himself, buckling on as much courage as he could, "I'll try to remember what Sophie and I used to do together, and then I'll do that. I'll do my best." The problem was, he soon realized, deciding where to begin. Working in the garden thinning strawberries and hilling pumpkins? Strolling to the park with a bag full of bread heels for the ducks? Clipping the hedges, each starting at one end and racing toward the middle, the loser buying the quart of chocolate almond

ice cream they would eat from the box while sitting on the porch swing? Or with the books--she reading, he listening--about the frontier days or Abraham Lincoln or climbing Mr. Everest, Harry not always understanding but listening just to hear her voice? (You could be on television, he told her. You read like some people sing.) No, he decided. He would begin with cards, that would be easier. He and Sophie loved to play cards. Canasta, Michigan Rummy, Hearts and, their favorite, Euchre. So Harry asked Mrs. Tillenberry, his widow neighbor next door, across the lot, to be his partner.

From the start, this had gone badly, often ending in shouting matches and overturned drinks. Mrs. Tillenberry was not a good card player. She didn't know the right way to trump, for one thing. She didn't know, as Sophie did, how to bring the trump card from high overhead and slam it against the table with a snap of the fingers the way a big-spender snaps a hundred dollar bill off his roll. Besides, Mrs. Tillenberry had the hots for Harry and that bothered him. She was a good friend of Sophie's, and to Harry it seemed disrespectful--at least, to start chasing him so quickly.

A month after Sophie died, she started hanging her underwear on the line to dry, something she hadn't done since her children all chipped in to buy her a gas dryer ten years earlier. And the underwear she hung--Ha! Harry had to laugh. Tiny, black, lace panties she couldn't have

gotten her thumb through, let alone a leg. And little, wire, push-up bras that her nose would have fit into snugly, but not those saggy milk jugs she hefted around.

Harry gave up on playing cards with Mrs. Tillenberry one Sunday afternoon when she tore up his trump card and dumped the pieces into his beer. For two weeks Harry sat in his living room with all the shades pulled. He drank grape juice from water tumblers and munched potato chips. He ate green beans and pears in syrup straight from the can. When he was tired, he fell asleep in his clothes on the sofa. When he was awake, he read magazines and detective novels, some of them two or three times. One day he decided to watch television all afternoon. This was new to Harry. While Sophie was alive, he seldom watched t.v., other than for Walter Cronkite and Gunsmoke.

Some kind of dating game was on, Harry figured out after a few minutes. Three men and three girls were perched on plastic chairs with long legs; a tall divider separated the two groups so they couldn't see one another. All the girls had hair like small explosions. The men had faces like something bought from glass cabinets in expensive department stores. The host (Harry wondered if he had a piano stuck in his mouth, the man had so many wide, shiny teeth) asked one of the girls ("Pretzel?"--something like that) "Which side of Rob's (Bob's?) personality do you find the most SEXY?" The audience laughed. "Jesus," Harry muttered. He leaned forward in his chair, elbows on his

knees. "Don't answer it, Pretzel. Tell him to jump in the lake." Pretzel ignored Harry. "His . . . BACKSIDE," she said. Everyone roared. The two men next to Rob began slapping him on the shoulders. The host told Pretzel what they were doing. "Lower," Pretzel shreiked. "Much lower." The audience howled; the host made "woo-woo-woo" sounds into the microphone. Harry sat at the edge of his chair staring at the t.v. He reached down and pulled up his socks. He scratched his nose, took his belt in a notch, ran his hands through his hair. "Sophie," he finally said quietly. "Sophie, it's come to this."

Harry stood up, poured his grape juice into a potted plant, hurled the tumbler through the television screen. "CRASH, POOF." Acrid, blue smoke curled up from he debris, but Harry didn't stick around to watch. He was already on his way to the hardware store to buy a sledgehammer.

Harry began with the front porch, completely knocking out the pillars at one end, because that was what he saw first when he came back. Then he went into the house and started swinging randomly. A sledge goes through a wall real easy, Harry found out, unless you hit a stud, which he did a few dozen times. Kitchen cupboards, tables, the linoleum--the hammer dented that up real nice, made deep craters so that Harry had a moonscape when he was done. Later, when rain pouring through the holes he'd made in the ceiling and roof filled these with water, Harry stocked them with goldfish.

Harry had outbursts like that several times over the next few weeks. Mrs. Tillenberry called his daughter--"daughter," Ha!, a fiction, Harry concluded long ago--and she called Harry long distance, but he hung up. The police came out but only gave him the number to a mental health clinic. A man can destroy his own property if he wants, they told Mrs. Tillenberry, but, yes, the housing authorities would get involved if he didn't fix it up. There were codes, they said.

After about a month, Harry put the sledge hammer in the broom closet and sat at what was left of the kitchen table. For two days he drank coffee as thick as shoe polish and ate butter and onion sandwiches. It was accidental that Harry saw an article about found art in one of the old newspapers that had flown out of some cabinet or cupboard he had demolished. After he'd finished reading it, Harry looked around him. He saw shards of china, broken door casings, lumps of plaster, wads of furniture stuffing. "I've been creating found art," Harry mumbled. "I didn't even know it." He looked at two pieces of splintered cherrywood crossed in a vee and saw the beauty of the accidental symetry. This is it, Harry thought. He got his snow shovel out of the basement and pushed everything out the back door into the yard. Then he opened a beer, sat on the grass and admired the heap. When that got old, Harry began to search the city's junk yards, alleys, Salvation Army stores for new, found art. It got him out

of the house.

Harry and Ezra Pound were in the dining room now where the phone was hooked up. It still worked, but was buried under a collection of leaky gas cans Harry had bought for a quarter each at a junk yard. He'd closed his eyes and thrown them in a corner on top the phone (accidentally) to see what pattern would result, and then forgotten about them.

It took him a while to hear the ringing, a while longer to locate the receiver.

"Pa, is that you?"

"'Pa, is that you?' . . . I live alone, your mother's dead four months now. Do you think I let the meter reader answer my phone?"

"Pa, don't be grumpy. I'm worried--you're shooting at people now."

"Ah. Mrs. Grand Canyon mouth, she called you, huh?"

"Pa, you need help. You need to see a doctor."

"A doctor. What kind? A gynecologist?"

"Don't be cute."

"The answer's no. I won't help some shrink pay off his yacht. I'll go when I'm certifiably nuts so all he'll have to do is sign the paper for the looney bin. It'll save money."

"For crying out loud--you're shooting at people!"

"No. Not people. God. I'm after God. All I need

is a clear shot."

"Pa!"

"Don't worry. I'll tell them to keep your name out of the papers."

"Get a hold of yourself, Pa. Be rational."

"No. I tried that. All it got me was fish ties, Pretzel and Mrs. Tillenberry's underwear--besides, talk about 'being' something, how about you being a daughter for a change. Four months since the funeral, and the only time you call me is when Grand Canyon mouth calls you first."

"I get busy Pa. I got kids."

"And what about the ten years before you got kids? You'd call us--what?--three times a year, visit two days every other. Besides, if you hadn't moved to Tibet, we could've help you with the kids. I could now."

"California's not Tibet, Pa."

"Oh, yeah? You burn incense, don't you?"

"Pa, this is getting ridiculous.

"I agree. Good-bye. For thirty-five years I stamp out wheels at Chevrolet so you can run off to Tibet with Al Capone and ignore your parents."

"I ran off because you were a grump, Pa. Always a grump. You complained about everything, except Mother, all the time."

"I GOT grumpy SOMETIMES, I keep telling you," Harry yelled into the phone. I was not A GRUMP. I complained

SOMETIMES, not ALWAYS--besides, your mother was a saint. What excuse do you have for ignoring her?"

"She was living with you--and you have NO RIGHT to say my husband's a crook."

"OH. He spent THREE years in San Quentin because of the beach? The mountain view? Oh, I get it. He was VACATIONING."

"He's paid his debt, Pa. He's reformed."

"Good. Wonderful. I'm happy for society. Now you reform. Be a daughter. I am NOT a grump. Goodbye."

Ezra Pound was sleeping on Harry's lap, and Harry petted the cat for a long time, black fur sticking to his sweaty palms. Finally Harry calmed down, closed his eyes and napped. Ten minutes later he opened them with a start.

"Forty thousand dollars to bring it up to code, Ezra Pound. That's what official city man claims. Oh, why did I take the hammer to the pipes, Ezra Pound? What are we going to do?" Harry sighed, picked up his shotgun, pushed his way past a paper mache coat tree with one branch, a coop for racing pigeons with no door, a set of mallard decoys with no heads --found art. Ezra Pound pranced behind him into the kitchen.

"Let's get crazy," Harry said. He walked over to the sink and picked up the hose he'd shoved into the cut end of the spigot. (He'd taken a hack saw to things one night for a change of pace.) Harry opened the faucet, leaned over the sink, turned his head to the side. He aimed the

stream of water at his ear.

"What do you think Ezra Pound?" The cat was lapping water spilled on the drainboard inches from Harry's eyes. "Water-logged brain. Drowned cells. That should get me a bed with straps, don't you think?"

Harry let the water flow for several minutes, then turned it off and lifted his head. Water drained from his ear and darkened his collar. He looked out the window. Mrs. Grand Canyon Mouth was in her back yard, leaning on her rake, staring at his house. Harry threw open the window.

"Don't you ever call my daughter and squeal on me again, do you understand?" Harry yelled.

Mrs. Tillenberry dropped her rake and stood with a hand on her hip.

"A person's got responsibilities to others," she shouted across the open lot between them.

"Then go be responsible with somebody else. Go make bandages for the lepers or something."

"It's for Sophie that I do it. She was my friend."

"WHAT!" Harry climbed up on the drainboard and leaned into the window. SOPHIE? Don't you ever profane her name again by speaking it, you . . . harlot. Trying to seduce me with your skimpy underwear things on the clothes line not a month after Sophie's in the ground. Rabbits have more control."

"Ha! You nincompoop egotist. You idiot. Those were my granddaughter's things. She was staying with me."

"LIAR," Harry bellowed, picking up his shotgun. He broke out the screen with the barrel and shoved it through."

"AAAAAAAAAAAAA," Mrs. Tillenberry screamed, dropping to the ground, burying her head with grass she'd just raked.

"KA-BOOM."

A huge cloud of brick dust erupted where the buckshot stuck Mrs. Tillenberry's chimney. "Shit," said Harry. He leaned through the broken window. "Get up, you old hag. I was shooting at God, not you. Missed. Shit."

Mrs. Tillenberry raised her head. Blades of grass turned her hair green. "God?" she said. "You're shooting at God now?"

"Who else?" Harry said. "All I need is one clear shot." Mrs. Tillenberry blinked like a fish several times, then lifted herself onto her elbows and knees and scuttled toward her house. A high, thin wail trailed behind her like a ribbon.

"While you're in there, learn how to trump, will you?" Harry climbed down from the drainboard. "Granddaughter's underwear. Ha."

Harry lifted Ezra Pound to his shoulder and walked onto the back porch. He'd closed if off and filled it with shelves thirty years ago at Sophie's request. She needed the space for her canned goods: tomatoes, pears, peaches, strawberry preserves; her pickled beets, cucumbers, green onions, a mustard relish the neighbors begged for--and

got. Now Harry had filled the shelves with his smaller found art. Mashed ball bearings, broken combs, a torn dog collar, a green baseball glove with three fingers cut off. Behind a box of petrified dishwasher powder--Harry wondered if it looked like some kind of famous sculpture or monument--he found the box of shells. He cracked open the gun and put one in each barrel. "Missed. Shit." he muttered.

On the back porch steps, which leaned to the left because Harry had hammered out a bottom board, he stopped and shook his head. His brain didn't feel soaked, but his ear did. More water trickled down his neck.

"This is it, Ezra Pound," he said looking up at the big hole between the overhang of the oak and elder that stood on opposite sides of the yard. "A clear shot. No excuses." He stared at the low, dark covering of clouds. Everything was absolutely still. Nothing was moving in the heavens. Harry wondered if God had heard him coming and was trying to be quiet and hide. Harry knew it wouldn't work. A load of buckshot anywhere in those clouds would bring Him down. He wondered how it would be--he imagined God flopping at his feet like a shot goose.

Harry raised his shotgun and aimed at the sky.

KA-BOOM.

At the sound of the explosion, Ezra Pound darted off into the bushes. Harry waited for a moment, then rested the stock of the gun against his sneaker. He peered into

the sky and tried to calculate how long it would take God to fall. If He was just above those clouds, and He had to be, it shouldn't be long, Harry figured. The clouds were hovering not more than two hundred feet overhead.

Harry felt something against his skin. Something wet, cool. He felt it again. He looked down at his hands. Raindrops. He looked up. He could feel them against his face now. Cool. Like lemonade, maybe. Or the way cold beer felt against the back of his throat on a hot day. Fur brushed against his leg. Harry looked down. Ezra Pound had come out of the bushes and was sitting on his sneaker, his face turned to the rain. He licked the drops and washed his paws. He stretched out on the grass and purred. Harry watched him for a long time. "Don't be fooled by that gentle rains of mercy business, Ezra Pound," he said. "Don't buy into it."

Harry looked up. The rain was falling steadily now. Still cool and soft--suddenly, Harry slapped his leg.

"Ha! Wounded," he shouted. "That's it, Ezra Pound. Wounded. Any moment now He'll fall," he said, stretching out his arms against the rain.

And then, quite satisfied, Harry sat down to wait.