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PLUMB MISERABLE:
A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES

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JACKIE A. CARLSON

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Major professor

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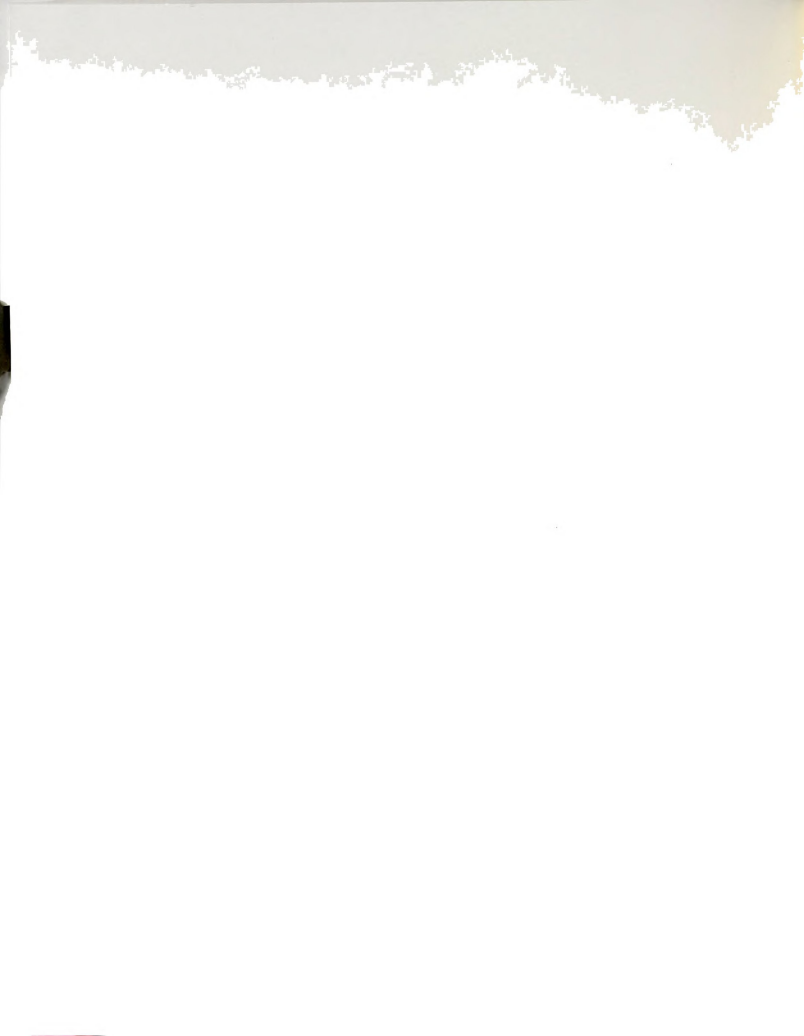
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PLUMB MISERABLE: A Collection of Short Stories

By

Jackie A. Carlson

A THESIS

Submitted to
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ABSTRACT

PLUMB MISERABLE: A Collection of Short Stories

By

Jackie A. Carlson

This collection of short stories involves places and people from the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, with the exception of Old Friends, Pearly Whites and The Mother. Paulie is a story about a handicapped child who visits his cousins living in a small peninsula community and how his lack of experience becomes a primary interest for the little boys.

In Pearly Whites, a twelve year old girl cannot face her peers after they learn about what took place when she had one of the boys over for Sunday dinner, with an angry mother who hid the main course.

The End of a Private Road focuses on an older woman, who after moving from one clinging relationship to another, leaves a husband who has threatened her with his suicide, for the last time.

A mother who is concerned more with her company than her children and their statement about her lack of



attention for them is described in The Mother.

Plumb Miserable, with the same two boys presented in Paulie, is an account of their trying to cope with an environment that has been altered drastically by a failing economy.

Sad Sack describes a child's perception of a friend who was said to be mentally deficient and who hanged himself.

The Unveiling focuses on a woman, who with the help of her friends, rebels against the plastic surgery performed on her nose, which was what her husband had decided was needed for her improvement.

Old Friends describes the strange development of a friendship between two women when one locks herself in the toilet and the other is visited by old school chums.

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I wish to thank Sheila McGuire for her assistance, patience, and insight during the compiling of this short story collection; but mostly I wish to thank her for her friendship and support while I have attended Michigan State University. I would not have come this far without her because I could not have reached it alone.

I thank Maria Holley for my beginning. She, too, with her constant prodding of encouragement and her wonderful humor, moved me ahead.

I thank Diane Wakoski for her unwavering faith in me. And to my father, who, when I called and said, "Dad, Dad, I won my first fiction contest.", replied, "That's great! I didn't know you liked fishing.", it will be nice to send you a book which I have written myself.

To Colin and Eric, my sons, there's too many things to thank you for.

J.C.



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Paulie

The road runs along Wilsey Bay adjacent to Lake Michigan. Each year the bay rises and the road becomes narrower. It winds around lighthouse point and past a few remaining camps set off the road and hidden by pines. 513 ends at the driveway that leads to the red house, approximately a quarter mile from Stu Potter's and Oliver Wickler's trailers, twenty-two miles from the nearest town. The road is never really traveled much: only by the few families that live at its end and by determined hunters and fishermen who park along its edge and either head for the woods to hunt or tackle the lake. It's 'everyday' to see coyotes on the road, bear in the apple orchards, and deer in the fields or coming down to the lake to drink.

The logging road was hard from the November temperatures, and there were deep ruts filled with water and mud that became deeper each day the logging trucks rolled in and out again.

Billy was off the main road, into the woods about fifty feet, working in a clearing where Hjalmar had been stacking his cuttings. Judd found Billy peeling logs in his chook, choppers, and snowmobile boots and sweating



inspite of the snow falling. "Billy, what's ya doin'?"

"Peelin' posts."

"What for?"

"For money."

"Who's gonna pay ya?" Judd wiped his nose on his
choppers.

"Hjalmar."

"How much?" Judd wiped his chopper on a log.

"A dollar a post."

Judd sat down on the log pile that had been stacked
and was waiting to be peeled, then sent to Anderson's
Lumber Co. to be sold for fencing and do-it-yourself log
cabin kits.

He watched Billy anchor the blade and draw the knife
toward him stripping a section of bark that curled around
into a coil and fell to the ground.

"Can I try?"

"Aw, Judd, it ain't so easy." Billy pulled the knife
with short quick pulls trying to remove the bark from a
knot. "See what I mean. These knots are hard to get over.
It's hard to cut through them."

"Like toenails?"

"Yea, like toenails."

"Like Fred Bjerman's toenails. I'd seen them in his
ashtray."

"Come on, Judd, is that what he really does with
them?"

"Honest. He keeps them in his ashtray piled up on one side. I saw them when I was over there helping him clean smelt...Billy, let me try to do it just once."

"All right." Billy stepped aside and handed the blade to Judd. "Judd, don't stand right in back of the blade...stand off to the side of the log a bit. That blade can come down on ya quick as the screamers do with the flu and cut ya in half like a hunk of side-pork."

Judd was unable to get the blade of the draw-knife beneath the bark. He yanked on the knife, and it slid across the top of the log and out of his hands onto the ground. "I don't wanta do it no more. It ain't no fun... I wish I had a snowmobile and could go bombin' around the woods."

Billy picked up the knife and began stripping the post. Judd sat on the stump and drank from Billy's thermos. "Don't you wish you had a snowmobile?"

"Nope."

"I want one. I want to fly through the woods...all over the trails...and beat the pants off Ronnie Olsen. How come you wanta make money?"

"Cause."

"What's ya gonna do with all the money ya make?"

"Buy somethin'."

"What? A Snowmobile?"

"Judd, ya know we can't afford one of them machines, and I wouldn't want one anyhow. I don't like 'em, and they



make the woods stink."

"Well, what are ya gonna buy?"

"It's a surprise."

"For who?"

"For both of us...to use this winter."

"When are we gonna get it?"

"As soon as I get enough money, but if I don't quit talking to you I ain't never gonna get done." Billy put another log on the draw-post.

"How much is enough money?"

"Judd, just wait and see. Why don't you pile up them posts that I already got done and get rid of them shavings. Throw them out into the woods."

Judd picked up the peelings and puttered around the clearing.

When the snow begins to fall in the woods it can be as silent and as calm as the bottom of a pond. You can hear the waves of the Great Lakes washing up on the shore, then slipping away trickling the pebbles and beer cans along the limestone shore. The chainsaws can be heard and the trees tearing the branches of other trees with their fall.

Judd stopped what he had been doing and stilled himself trying to catch a sound which he had heard off in the distance. "Billy."

"What?"

"Shhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh."

"What's the matter with you?"

"Shhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh."

Billy stopped to listen.

"Did ya hear it?"

"Yea, I do now. It sounds like ol' Tanner is onto somethin'."

"What do ya think he's runnin'?"

"I don't know. I can tell he's pretty far off. That's why it sounds like it does. It's just carryin'...kinda driftin' to us."

They both listened to the hound in the woods 'yao, yao, yao'. That was the only thing that could be heard. The chainsaws had stopped and the logging trucks were idling. Everyone working out in the woods was a hunter and had stopped to listen, wondering what the hound might be tracking.

"What do ya think he's runnin'?"

"I don't know...coon, maybe. All the bear is up by now. I s'pose it could be a bear. Some old dump bear maybe that ain't up yet. I know that whatever he's onto he'll get no matter what. I know that ma said he'd dragged home a hindquarter of a deer last week, but it could have been from one that had been shot and nobody had bothered to track. He'll be back on home later, and we'll see what he drags home with him. We best go and check to see how he got loose and if Annie and Ripple are around." Billy piled the posts that were peeled. "It's almost supper anyway. Let's go. I'll finish peeling tomorrow."

They left the clearing with Billy pulling Judd on the sled up highway 513. It was that time of day when daylight and twilight mingle. The wind dies down and the deer begin to yard up.

Judd and Billy saw a young buck step from the woods daring to go out in the field and feed on any corn it could find beneath the snow.

Before going into the house they checked the dogs. Annie was in the shed sleeping. Ripple was hanging half in and half out, lifting up his head every now and then as if he had become faintly alerted to a familiar, but fleeting scent.

Billy and Judd scrubbed in the sink in the basement trying to get the sap from the logs off their hands.

"Billy, I can't get this stuff off. Is this good enough?"

"No, it ain't near good enough. Ya gotta get it all off, or ma will just send ya back down here again."

"It don't wanta come off, and I can't keep my sleeves rolled up. How 'bout if I just wear my choppers to supper?"

"Judd, take this little brush here and put lots of soap on it and then scrub it off. Pretend you've been hit by a nasty ol' skunk."

Judd scrubbed, and when he finished they went up to dinner.

"Ma, you've been baking. I can smell it. What are

you bakin' for?"

Their mother placed their supper on the table in front of them.

"How come you're baking all this stuff? Is somethin' special comin'?"

"Yes."

"What? What's special...turds."

"Judd." His mother rapped the top of his head.

"Aw, Ma, everytime there's somethin' special I got to put myself into all them clothes that are in the back of my closet and be dragged off to someone's house where we don't have no fun and everybody will talk about how fat my face is and how I don't do up my zipper...I ain't goin'."

"We aren't going anywhere...I'm just doing this for your Aunt Mary Jane."

"What she need it for?"

"Your cousin Tina is getting married."

"Tina...Tina getting married, that heifer. Aw, God, Tina is getting married, Billy." Judd rolled his eyes and pulled down the corners of his mouth. "Who's gonna marry fat Tina?" Billy couldn't help laughing at Judd filling up his cheeks and batting his eyes.

"Judd, your cousin is not fat. She's just a big girl."

"Everyone always says that when they don't wanta call someone fat. They say that about Wilbert, and he's as big as a barn. Ma, Tina...we always have Tina be the first one

out on the bay when it freezes over. We have her test it. If she don't fall in the water then we know that the whole grade school can go out and skate."

"Judd, you'd better pipe down, or you can go out and clean the barn where nobody has to listen to you."

"When I went to the beach with Tina she sat right down in front of me, and honest to God, I couldn't see the ore boats comin' in. She blocked them right out."

"Ma, who is Tina gonna marry?" asked Billy.

"One of the Thorsen boys."

Judd swallowed quickly. "Ha, she could marry two of them, and if she kept one in front of her and one back all the time they'd never even see each other."

"Judd, stop it now," said his mother as she poured more milk.

"When is she getting married?" asked Billy.

"Next week."

"Are we gonna go to the wedding?"

"No. I don't think we'll go. They're getting married up near Houghton. We're going to take care of Paulie."

"How come we gotta take care of Paulie?"

"Judd, you ask too many questions."

"Well, how come we got to take care of Paulie?"

"Your Aunt is going to have a lot of our relatives staying with her for the wedding and for sometime after. It's going to be like a family reunion."

"They don't want him around," added Billy.

"Paulie will have fun here." Judd grabbed another roll. "I'm gonna take him to Moonshine."

"Judd," said his mother, "you can't do that."

"Why? I'm gonna show him a good time."

"Paulie can't go outside and do the things you do. He's sick a lot."

"How come?" Judd asked between mouthfuls of stew.

"Judd, finish eating," said Billy. "Ma, Tanner was runnin' something. We heard him in the woods when I was peelin'."

"You better try to see what he drags in, and find out how he got loose."

"I'll check and see."

"Ma, I'll help ya take care of Paulie," offered Judd. "Paulie can sleep in with me."

"Finish your supper, Judd."

The boys finished and went outside to check on the dogs. Tanner wasn't back yet, and the woods were quiet, quiet like an empty gym over Christmas break.

Tanner was in his house in the morning when the boys went out to clean the barn. Judd went to get the sled and Billy dragged the leg of a deer away from Tanner.

The boys took off with Judd on the sled being pulled by Billy, holding onto the thermos and lunch they had packed for the day ahead of them, to finish peeling posts.

"Billy, what was that, that Tanner had?"

"Part of some poor ol' deer."

"How come ya took it away when it's dead already?"

"I didn't want Annie and Ripple gettin' into it, too. They was about going crazy. We don't need a whole pack of dogs runnin' down deer...and don't you tell Ma."

"Billy, I don't remember Paulie. I was thinkin' on it last night. I can't remember him...do you?"

"Yea, a little. He don't come around much, and nobody likes to bother with him."

"How come...and how come he's sick?"

"Judd, why don't you get off and walk. It's hard to pull you on the sled. The snow is getting deeper and it ain't been packed down enough yet."

"I will in a minute. My legs are cold."

"Did ya remember to do up your zipper?"

Judd reached inside his snowmobile suit and checked.
"Yep, it's up. Now tell me about Paulie. What's he like?"

"Paulie just don't do all the things that we do."

"Why?"

"He's different." Billy slipped the rope over his head, so that it crossed his waist, and leaned forward to keep the sled moving.

"What do ya mean different?"

"I don't know what ya call it, but I guess he ain't got all he needs."

"What's he missin'?"

"Gears, a couple of gears. All he's got is slow, like our old tractor that runs, but ya can't do nothin' with

it."

"What are we gonna do with him?"

"I don't know. He can't do much. He needs someone to look after him all the time."

"Well, I'm gonna help him...he's gonna have fun."

"Come on, now, get off the sled and help me get this peelin' done."

"Are ya gonna get the surprise."

"Yea, if Hjalmar will give me a ride into Gladstone."

"Where are ya gonna go in Gladstone...Buckman's Store?"

"Never mind. Why don't ya find somethin' to do."

Billy finished peeling the posts and hitched a ride into Gladstone with Hjalmar and sent Judd home dragging the sled.

The dusk to dawn light was on when Billy finally got home. He unloaded the surprise in the front yard and went into the house.

Judd had been waiting for him. "Where is it?"

"Outside."

"Outside. What are ya doin' keepin' it outside?"

"It's too big to bring into the house."

Judd slipped his snowmobile boots on without any socks and started to run out the front door.

"Judd, get a coat on it's cold outside."

Judd tore his snowmobile jacket off the hook and had one arm in a sleeve heading out the door.



"Judd, ya better do up your zipper."

Judd looked down and yanked up his zipper. "These things never stay up."

Judd was out the door. "Oh, Jesus. Aw, Jesus, God...it's great."

Judd ran around it and stopped at the front to stroke it, then ran around to the back and stopped there to stroke it by running his hand over the back of the seat and sliding it down to the rails to the runners.

"Do ya really like it?"

"Jesus, God, it's the best...does it work?"

"Well, yea...I think so. I guess we won't know until we hook up the dogs."

"What do ya mean hook up the dogs? How do we hook up the dogs? What dogs are we gonna hook up to it? What are the dogs gonna do?"

"Pull it."

"Pull it?"

"Yea."

"What dogs are gonna pull it?"

"Tanner, Annie and Ripple."

"Jesus, Billy, by God, they ain't no huskies. They're hounds. They can't pull no sled. They ain't no sled dogs."

"They can do anything a sled dog can do. They're big dogs, and they're smart."

"When are we gonna do it?"

"Tomorrow. I'm gonna go down to Stu's and borrow his leads and harness and start working with the dogs tomorrow. I might even ask him if he'll let me use that old female Siberian of his. He says she knows her leads."

"We can go anywhere with this sled. We can go all over...yep, we can go to the store for Ma and anywhere else she wants. I can't wait. I CAN'T WAIT. Let's get ready. Let's go. I'll wax the runners...ya got wax for the runners? Oh, Billy, how am I gonna sleep tonight?"

"No more of me pullin' your fat self around."

Judd sat down on the sled looking up at the northern lights with his arms stretched out. "Billy, I can just see it." He placed his hands behind his head. "I can just see me in this sled with all the dogs hooked up goin' down the road like forty goin' north and you standing on the runners behind me hollerin' your orders, whipping and yelling and us flying...us flying...and passin' all them stupid snowmobiles."

Billy worked with the dogs every chance he had. He was out in the back field when they brought Paulie to stay. He put the dogs up and went into the house for lunch. Judd was waiting for him at the door.

"Can I help after lunch?"

"Yea, you can help me. It's hard to get the harness on. They jump around and get so tangled."

"Paulie is here."

"I know. I saw them bring him up in the car."

"He's at the table with ma...he is different. He don't talk or smile. I was telling him about our sled, and then I showed him some of my things and he didn't do nothin' but sit there."

"That's the way he always is."

"Yea...I wish he'd say somethin'. He just watches things...and he slobbers...and he's got cotton in both his ears with stuff leakin' out and his hair is stickin' up all over. He's got one of them bowl haircuts like Arnold used to give us."

Judd and Billy went in for lunch. Judd sat next to Paulie and Billy sat down opposite him.

"Hey, Paulie." Paulie turned to Judd. Judd had his thumbs in the corner of his mouth pulling them down while his index fingers drew down his cheeks with his eyes rolled up into the lids.

"Judd, what are you doin'?" asked Billy.

Judd stuck out his tongue and bobbed his head back and forth.

"Judd, what are ya doin' actin' so crazy?"

"I'm trying to make Paulie laugh. I'm gettin' him to warm up to me."

Paulie stared at Judd. Judd ate his food and watched Paulie watching him.

"Judd, if ya want to come and help me then hurry up and finish."

Judd concentrated on eating and only took occasional

peeks at Paulie. "Aw, Jesus, Ma. Aw, Jesus, Ma...look at him. The food is fallin' right outta his mouth. I can't stand this. Why is the food fallin' out of his mouth like a baby?"

Billy looked at Judd, rested his arms on the table, leaned over, and said, "Judd, just eat."

"I can't eat now. I ain't used to it. The food is hanging on his bottom lip half chewed. Ain't ya gonna do somethin' Ma?"

"Judd," his mother answered, "Paulie is gonna stay with us for awhile, so you're going to have to find a way to get used to things about him."

"He will, Ma. We're gonna go out and work with the dogs."

"You be careful. I don't like you boys fidling with those crazy dogs in a harness. They don't know any thing but running down some poor old coon or bear. I don't like this idea, and you remember not to take off out of that field where I can see you."

"Ma, the dogs are doin' great. It's all right...ain't nothin' gonna happen."

Judd and Billy got their heavy coats on, and, with the dogs hooked to the lines, they went to the front field to work. Judd dragged the sled, and Billy kept the dogs apart at the end of their leads. "Billy, it made me sick. I can't help it. I don't know how I'm gonna get used to that."

Billy pulled Judd's hat over his eyes. "Judd, it'll be all right."

"Why do ya s'pose he does that?"

"Maybe he got sick of you looking at him and making all them faces. Now, you got to hold onto each one of these dogs as I get them hooked up, so they don't get all tangled. When I tell them to hee ya got to guide them to the left, and when I tell them to haw ya got to guide them to the right." Billy hooked the main line to each line that ran from the harness around the dog, then attached it to the eye-loop at the end of the sled.

"Ain't they s'pose to know which way to go without me up here with 'em? I want to ride in the sled. I ain't gonna run around at the front of them and pull them to turn."

"You won't have to, once they get used to it."

"How long does it take them to get used to it? We've been working with them for a long time, and it 'pears to me that by the time we get these hounds hee-ing and haw-ing the snow will be thawing."

Judd stood in the front of the dogs, holding Tanner out in front and Annie and Ripple behind. "Where are ya gonna hook up Stu's dog?"

"I'm gonna put her in the front, so she can lead the others."

"Billy."

"What?"



"Billy, look up at the window."

Billy looked up at the house and saw Paulie standing in the large bay window.

"He's watching us."

"Yea. Judd, I said hee is to the left. Turn around, so you're facing the same way the dogs are."

"What do ya think he's thinkin' about us being out here?"

"He probably wonders where I got such a fat little lead dog that don't know his left from his right...now turn around and pay attention."

Judd faced the same direction as the dogs and held onto Tanner while Billy got the other two ready. "Ya know, he don't ever have to go to school."

"I guess he don't."

"I wouldn't mind staying home all day. He don't have to do nothin'."

"Yea, but I feel sorry for him."

"Why?"

"He don't ever have no fun. He never gets to do nothin'. He's got to stay in the house all the time. Mary Jane don't never take him any where to do nothin'. She says he's sick and that he don't know what doin' anything is...like if ya don't do nothin' then ya don't miss nothin', but I don't believe that."

"Yea. I wonder if he ever laughs. He don't seem to do nothin' but sit... hold on a minute Billy. I'm gonna do

somethin'."

Judd climbed up on the well, about three feet off the ground, and did a flip into a snowbank. He stood on his head with his feet kicking around in the air as if he was stuck. He jumped up and brushed himself off. "Was Paulie watching?" He looked up to the window and hollered, "Did ya like that Paulie?"

Judd stayed out with Billy for little over an hour, then went into the house and left Billy working with the dogs. Billy remained outside, even when it became dark, by staying under the dusk to dawn light.

He put the sled away and fed the dogs. When he came into the house Paulie was sitting on the sofa and Judd was doing cartwheels. Judd's feet really didn't get too far above his head. He could barely get them off the ground. With his belly hanging out from under his shirt, he would flop down and flip around like a bluegill out of water. He stood on his head, then tried to tuck his head under his legs and rollover. The finale was when he walked into the wall and pretended that he hurt his nose and fell back. Each time he did a trick he would look at Paulie. Paulie just stayed on the sofa and watched him emotionless.

"Why don't you quit all this stuff?"

"I don't know." Judd sat down on the sofa. "I want to see him have fun."

"He's gonna have fun."

"He ain't. He don't even know what it is. I just



would like to see him laugh or something, but I guess I just don't know what he'd like. He just sits there all the time, and that ain't good. Billy pulled Judd down to the floor and pulled his shirt over his head, then waited for him to get it straightened out before he began to arm wrestle with him. They pulled and tugged and sucker punched one another.

"I think he likes the dogs," Billy said.

"I think he would like to go outside."

"He watches us all the time when we're out there."

"He watches us all the time when we're out there."

"Judd, ya can't use two hands."

"Judd, ya can't use two hands."

"Ya better quit repeatin' after me," Billy said, and they wrestled. "I ain't gonna leave the bathroom light on if ya don't stop."

"Let's watch TV." Judd rolled over and pulled out the knob with his toes.

The boys worked with the dogs by walking with the sled until they could make a complete circle around the field without missing a lead. Judd would sit in the sled wrapped up in an old army blanket, and Billy walked behind with a face mask on. They had the dogs following Stu's female with the skill of any novice who had a dog-team composed of two Redtick hounds, a hound crossed with a Greyhound and a Siberian crossed with a coyote. The Siberian picked up her leads quickly and was easy enough for Billy to handle. The



dogs couldn't pull a great weight, but they could make good time with just the two small boys. If they kept to the packed snowmobile trails, they made even better time; they took to those trails every chance they had. Paulie continued to watch them every moment they were out with the sled. He sat by the window on the hide-a-bed and remained there until the boys had finished and brought the dogs right up to the window beneath where he stood.

The boys were on the floor watching the television when their mother came in. Paulie was on the sofa watching them.

"You boys have to stay in for a while and watch Paulie while I go into town."

"We'll be all right. How long are ya gonna be? We want to take the dogs out."

"I'm not sure and you just forget about them dogs until I get back."

They watched cartoons: Bugs Bunny, Road Runner and then the Munsters. Judd sat and ate cereal from the box. He offered some to Paulie. "He can't have none," said Billy.

"Why?"

"Ma said he can't have all that sugar. He takes medicine and it don't mix too good."

Judd looked at Paulie, shrugged, then turned back to watch cartoons. He rested his head on his hands and stretched out on his side looking at Billy then at Paulie.

He rolled over on the floor face down and rolled back again.

"Let's take Paulie outside." He waited for Billy to answer. When Billy didn't reply he went to the closet and dragged out Arnold's snowmobile suit. "He can wear this."

"We can't take him out."

"Ma will never know."

"That ain't it Judd. If he gets sick easy, it ain't gonna do him no good to take him out. It's about the coldest day we had all year. Put that stuff back."

Judd dropped it on the floor in the hallway and returned to his spot in front of the television. "Wouldn't you want to go out if you was Paulie?"

"Yea, but it ain't the same."

"Why? How do we know? He ain't been out to play in so long."

Billy thought this over, looked at Paulie, at Judd, then grabbed the suit and started to dress Paulie. They put Arnold's suit on him and rolled up the sleeves, so they could put the choppers on his hands. They put a chook and face mask on him and made sure his ears were covered well, then they wrapped a large scarf around his neck. They slipped their mother's sorrels on his feet and got dressed themselves.

They took him around to the barn to see old Sal. Paulie petted her and fed her some grain from the palm of his hand. They took him to see the dogs and let Tanner

loose, so Paulie could play with him. They walked in the apple orchard and down to the pond. They threw snowballs gently at Paulie and made some for him to throw, which he clutched in his hand. They walked to the shoreline and showed Paulie all the ice shacks on the bay. They took him into the barn, and Judd climbed up into the loft and threw down handfuls of hay. Paulie watched it come down lifting and dropping with the drafts.

Paulie saw the sled next to the barn, went over to it and sat down. Billy and Judd pushed him around a little and were ready to take him into the house, but Paulie would not get out of the sled. So, they sat there and waited while he stayed in the sled.

"He wants a ride, Billy."

"Yea, he looks like it, but no way. There's just no way."

"Ma ain't gonna be back for a while. It takes at least two hours to get back from town."

"Aw, Judd, it'd just be our miserable luck that she'd come back when we'd have him out on the sled. And you know what happens everytime we do somethin' we ain't suppose to do...ya remember what happened to Sal?"

"We can see her coming and be able to get him in the house."

"Naw, Judd, she'd kill us if she found out. We'd have to kiss that sled good-bye."

Paulie remained seated in the sled. Judd and Billy

we're sitting on a bale of hay leaning back on the barn. Billy tried to get him up again. Paulie stayed seated. Billy sat down, again, on the bale of hay next to Judd. They both watched Paulie. While they were sitting there, a hawk circled above the field and dropped quickly to get something on the ground. Billy tried to get Paulie up again, but Paulie stayed. Billy looked at Judd watching Paulie and then at Paulie waiting in the sled. He looked back at Judd. "Get the lines," he said.

"All right." Judd ran in the barn for the lines.

"I guess I figure that he ain't never felt nothin' like a sled ride and he's gotta at least do somethin' once. Ain't nobody bothered with him, and if he wants a sled ride so bad then we'll help him out," Billy said to himself out loud.

Judd came out with the lines and they both hooked up the dogs. Billy got an extra blanket from the barn and ran to get Paulie another scarf. They made sure Paulie was bundled well and then led the dogs hooked to the sled out to the back field. Judd squeezed in beside Paulie. Billy gave the commands and started the dogs off by pushing the sled and running along behind.

The temperature was colder than it had been, and Billy's feet were breaking through the surface snow. The snow in the field was getting too deep. The dogs were having trouble keeping the sled moving. "Judd, there's too much snow and too much weight on the sled. I'm trying to

help these ol' hounds, but it ain't any easier for them. I'm gonna cut down this logging road and turn around in the clearing by Lewis' camp." Billy guided the dogs around and onto the logging road. The pulling became easier for the dogs. Billy watched ahead for stumps and ruts, but it was hard to determine what was beneath the deep snow. The stillness of the woods and being out of the wind left only the sound of the dogs panting and the runners gliding across the top of the snow. Billy ran along the back hopping onto the runners occasionally for a rest. Judd and Paulie sat looking like two heads on one body, holding the blanket up to their necks watching the dogs in front of them and looking to the sides watching the trees passing and ducking every so often to avoid a low branch. Judd yanked Paulie down each time he saw a low one ahead. They both would reach out trying to grab a branch letting it spring back throwing snow into Billy's face.

Billy was off the runners holding onto the sled with one hand. He was trying to tighten the scarf that he had wrapped around his mouth with the other hand when Tanner must have caught the scent. The sled jerked ahead as the dogs lunged, and Billy fell losing his grip on the sled. He tried to catch the sled by reaching out for the runner, but it was out of reach and heading down the trail. He was up on his feet yelling, "Whoa, hee, stop."

Tanner was yelping and the others were barking. They all were excited and had caught the deer's scent just

before the young buck lunged onto the logging road in front of them. Billy was running after the sled shouting commands. Judd was squealing with his arm stretched across Paulie to brace him. The deer stayed on the logging road, darting back and forth looking for a break to get into the woods. Billy kept coming up behind screaming at the top of his lungs, "Whoa...stop...Tanner...oh, ya fool hounds...whoa, ya goddamn fool hounds...no good dogs...Tanner get back here."

Billy couldn't be heard over the four dogs howling through the woods. From the back he saw that the sled would raise on one side and looked as if it would tip when a runner passed over a stump, like a broken buggy down a bumpy road. Judd and Paulie scooted down as far as they could get to avoid the branches. They could feel the sled hitting the bottom of a deep rut, when the back runners would slam at the bottom and the sled would be jerked forward. "Oh, Jesus..." Billy yelled. "Aw, Jesus, miserable luck...stop you damn dogs...hee...stop...hold onto Paulie, Judd!"

He kept on running, yelling, "Aw, Jesus, miserable luck."

Tanner kept right on the deer, slowing only slightly when the sled was pulled over windfall. They went through the woods, like a runaway tractor zig-zagging along the trail, turning every way the deer did.

The deer found an opening into the woods and cut

through a group of pines. The dog-team followed. Billy followed. The break between the trees was large enough for the sled to make it through and they stayed right on the deer, until the sled bottomed out on a large tree and pile of windfall across the path. The dogs made it over, but the front runners of the sled slipped beneath the log. The sudden stop jerked the dogs off their feet and threw Judd and Paulie forward and out of the sled. Billy caught up.

The dogs kept lunging, jumping and began snapping at one another. The lines had become tangled around the branches and stumps of the windfall. Ripple had jumped back over the logs hoping to get loose and was caught in the sled.

"Aw, Jesus, miserable luck." Billy ran to help Paulie to a spot away from the dogs and the wreck, then ran back to get Judd.

Judd was covered by the blankets and wasn't moving. Ripple was stepping on him and Annie was trying to get over the log where Judd was lying. Billy took out his pocket knife and cut the lines to turn the dogs loose, so he would be able to get to Judd.

Judd remained motionless beneath the blanket. "Judd," Billy said, "Judd." There wasn't any response. Paulie came up beside Billy. With the dogs gone the silence returned, like the silence of a still photograph. Billy pulled the blanket off of Judd's head. Judd still didn't move. His head looked as if it might have hit the log that it rested



against. Billy picked him up. Judd's eyes rolled open and then rolled back up and under his lids. Billy started to walk away carrying Judd while trying to hold onto Paulie.

"Please be all right, Judd. God, please let him be all right. Jesus, miserable luck. Ma is gonna be mad this time." Billy looked at Paulie. "Aw, Paulie, right now you're lucky. Right now you're lucky, real lucky."

Judd's eyes opened. He looked at Billy and grinned. "That was the best ride I ever had." Billy dumped him in the snow and moaned, "Jesus, Judd, you scared the hell out of me. Don't ever do that again." They started to pull Paulie home in the sled.

"Look at Paulie."

Billy turned around to look.

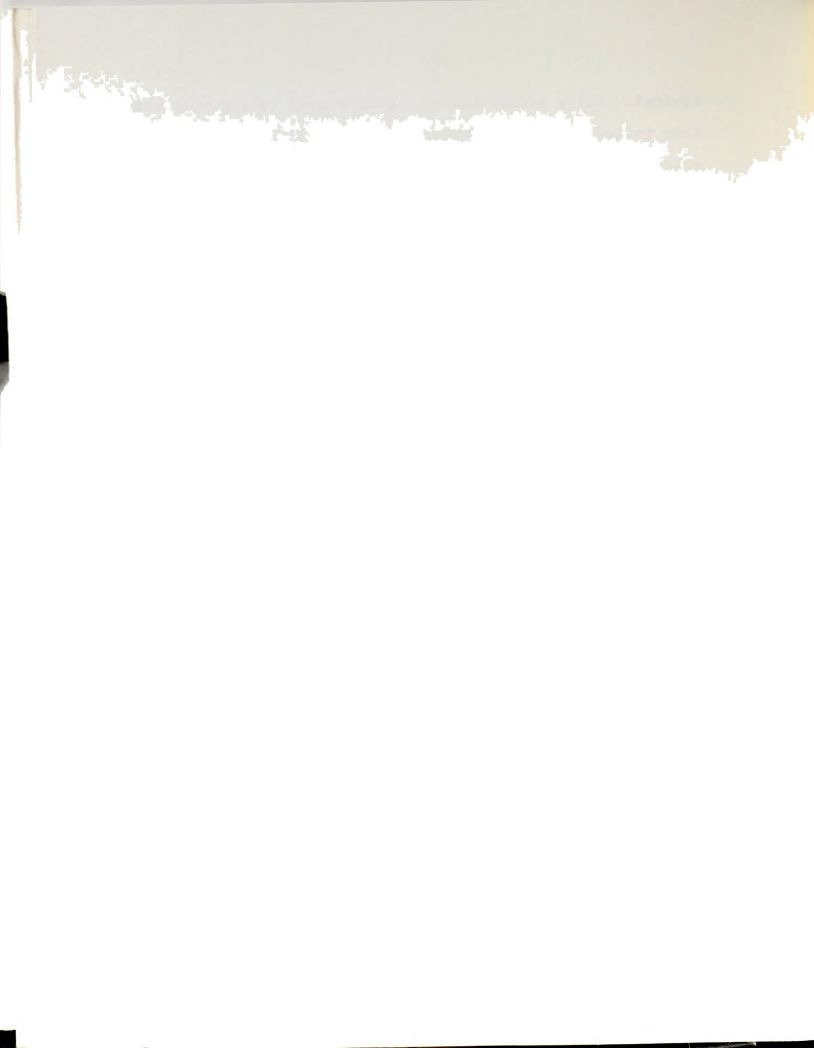
"Well, Billy," Judd looked proudly at Paulie and said, "what do you think? Is Paulie a new man, since his big 'sperience."

"He ain't missin' much now. And he don't look like it either. Once you cover up that haircut and cotton in his ears with a chook he don't look no different."

"Think Mary Jane will see that he's a new man?"

"Naw, ain't nobody gonna notice. They'll stick him back in his room and that'll be it."

Judd raised his eyebrows. "Until he comes back here again."



The Unveiling

Sookie was sitting on the hide-a-bed staring at her reflection in the fish tank when the girls started arriving. She watched the pirannha swim through her head and seaweed float out her ear, drifting toward a half-eaten tadpole bobbing at the top of the tank.

Pam and Brunie let themselves in and found her in the living room. Pam peaked over her shoulder and greeted her image in the tank. "I thought you'd have those off by now." Pam moved closer. "When are you going to take those bandages off your face?" Looking still closer, she said, "You're not black and blue any more."

"I'm never taking them off." Sookie watched the pirannha attack the air hose, then go for the rest of the tadpole.

Brunie screwed up her face. "They're unraveling. You have tiny strings dangling all over your face," she pointed out. "You could change them...I haven't seen you without those for four weeks."

"I don't care to see it." She jiggled the tank.

"Why?" Denise asked entering the room. "It cost you a

bundle."

Sookie remained staring into the tank, responding as if to herself. "It's not mine....and I don't want to see it.

"Why did you do it then?"

Sookie shrugged and said, "Maybe I've become too domestic." She trailed a finger over her nose, down the bridge and around both nostrils. "He didn't like it. He kept on and kept on and kept on about it...and I listened to him," she admitted, and with a small net cornered the fish, and with a sponge on the end of a stick in the other hand, poked the pirannha repeatedly. In a tone that sounded both reluctant and bitter she addressed her image in the tank. "It's his now; like everything in this place, it's what he likes. There's nothing of me in here, and now he even has this." She pointed at the reflection of her bandages in the tank. "That is his. He picked it out. It's not mine. I didn't pick it out. They had a whole portfolio to choose from and told me what I'd look best in. Then they had a consultation when I was already under." She turned to face the girls. "He held sketches up to me. I couldn't see them. He was leaning over me, holding up some drawings, asking which one I wanted. I couldn't make anything out. I vaguely remember seeing one that I didn't want."

Pam looked at Brunie, rolled her eyes. "You must have been looking at his face." Sookie turned away.

"So, what was the menu of choices?" Denise asked, watching Sookie from behind.

Sookie swung around, crossed her legs and looking up to the right corner of the ceiling replied, "There was the Bob Hope, with the little dip at the end..."

"Yuk, that old fart, his is too wrinkled from the sun...looks like a golf tee." They all held their thumbs down.

"... the Barbra Streisand..."

"Much, much too big and ugly." They held their thumbs down again, wrinkled their noses and shook their heads.

"He and the doctor and the nurse discussed the possibilities," Sookie said, "they had a vision for me." Sookie turned back to the fish tank. Pam began stroking her nose. Brunie leaned forward to examine hers in the window, smiled and leaned back comfortably.

Pam sat forward. "Look, Sookie, you have to take them off. Just rip those suckers off, and it'll be over."

Denise added, "I agree. It can't be that bad...I mean, you know, it can't be that bad. Just get it over with. Take them off."

"No." She watched the bubbles coming from the top of her head. "No damn way."

"You'll feel better." Pam stood up. "Let's get them off."

"No. That won't make me feel better...having mine will make me feel better."

Pam flopped down on the couch. Brunie shifted on the coffee table. Denise rolled over onto her back on the floor near Sookie. In silence, they all stared at the fish tank. The pirannha began swimming from one side of the tank to another, banging into the glass, thrashing and spilling water over the top, then attacked the already disfigured plastic mermaid stuck upside down in the gravel at the bottom of the tank.

"What the hell is with that fish?" Brunie asked.
"He's disgusting."

"I'll torture him." Sookie reached into the tank and slapped him with the net.

"What the hell do you feed him."

"Redneck fingers, excess from nose and bust reductions and tadpoles. Just about any part of the anatomy that's bite size."

"What do you do when the pond is frozen?" Pam wondered out loud.

"He buys gold fish...a community. Drops them in all at once. Some get eaten immediately, and the rest live with it."

"I'm getting depressed...let's get started," Brunie said, feeling slightly annoyed. "I come here to have fun with the girls, and you're all so damn morbid and cynical."

"It's because we've all been married and you haven't," Pam added.

Brunie led the way into the kitchen, the rest followed



strutting exactly as she did.

"Assholes," Brunie muttered, then pulled the table cloth off the formica table. Pam put the beer in the vegetable bin of the refrigerator, keeping four, popping the tops and passing them out.

Denise began dealing the cards. "Brunie get an ashtray."

Brunie grabbed a saucer and passed it over. "Sookie, is it all right if we use this?" she asked.

"I don't care. It's from his first wedding."

The windows were opened and change was laid on the table. Denise included a joint. "How much will this be worth?" she asked looking around the table.

"Nothing if it's home grown," Pam said.

Brunie wiped and dried the table in front of her. She neatly folded the dish-cloth and placed it to the side and said, "With your hair pulled back and that white bandage over your face you look like a damn light bulb. Take that dirty thing off and quit feeling sorry for yourself."

Sookie, ignoring Brunie, climbed up and sat on the countertop.

Enjoying herself, Brunie persisted, "Doesn't he say anything about those bandages being on still?"

"He doesn't care as long as they're not on her crotch." Pam slugged one-half of her beer down and winked at Sookie.

Sookie leaned back and answered, "Of course...he says

something about everything. He thinks I'm being melodramatic and that it will look much better." Dangling her leg over the counter, she kicked the dishwasher. With her hands resting on her knees, she began, "Judge for yourselves. Look at this kitchen. Does it look good? It looks like it was decorated in early Halloween. Flesh colored walls. Flesh walls! I wanted to paint it yellow, and I had to call his dad to ask him. Nothing is me in here...the china is from his first wife, the silver is his step-mother's, the table is his sister's, the bed is his Uncle's, and he dropped friggin' dead in it, the sheets are from his second wife, and his clothes are left over from the army. He won't let me replace anything. I'm nothing more than a lamp that someone gave him."

Pam looked at her and said, "Did you say lump?"

Sookie sneered, jumped down, rummaged around the cabinet below the sink and found a bottle of Tequilla. She put the bottle and a salt shaker on the table, sliced a lemon and poured a shot for herself. She licked her hand, sprinkled salt, raised the glass into the air, and said, "Lights out."

"All right, where did you get this? It's good." Pam inspected the bottle. "Where's the worm?"

Denise replied, "At work." Sookie smiled.

"It's his father's...drink up." She smiled, again.

Pam poured shots for everyone. "Here's to his father and possessions."

"Well, be grateful that he didn't have more changed while you were under," Brunie said and bit into her lemon.

Sookie poured another shot of Tequilla. "No, shit." She sprinkled salt onto her hand. "I'm surprised that I don't have tits down to my knees, around my back and up to my chin." She licked her hand, tossed down the shot and bit into her lemon." Why is it that everything has always got to be bigger or better...everyone wants a bigger car or bigger house or..."

"Bigger bank account."

"Bigger tits..."

"Bigger dick...."

Sookie threw the shot-glass on the floor. "His second wife's." She grinned, wrinkling the bandages, and continued, "My mother did the same thing. Always altering me. She had me joining every damn thing: ballet, baton, Girl Scouts, Brownies, Bible school, taking piano lessons, and dressing me in my cousins' clothes...and always made me sit on Ivor Rake's knee."

"Kink!" Denised raised her glass.

Pam toasted, adding, "We all have an Ivor Rake in the past. I think that's what we look for when we marry... something weirdly familiar."

Brunie looked at Pam, and said, "You're crude. Can't you leave men alone," and, as if she was tossing the rest over her shoulder to Sookie, continued, "We've all had hand-me-downs."



"My cousins are four years younger than me...I had hand-me-ups. I was in high school and dressed like fuckin' Heidi."

"How many cards do you want?" Brunie questioned with a hint of boredom.

"I fold." Sookie threw her cards down.

"You can't fold. We haven't even started yet. Will you play the damn game." Brunie glared at her.

"All right, Broomhilda. Give me four cards."

Brunie dealt the cards. Pam poured everyone another shot. They toasted, nodded to one another, and tossed the shot-glasses on the floor. By now the tile, with its spattered, pink flowers, full of haphazard brown lines, was littered with broken glass.

Reaching for more glasses Sookie chanted while snapping her fingers. "Niecy Dawn does the dishes, why don't you; Marilyn is a cheerleader, why aren't you; Marty Shadel gets straight A's, you drop out, your nose is too big, and you're as skinny as a rail, tell me, oh, tell me, where have I failed? But Mother never mentioned that Donna got pregnant and Julie got the crabs, or that..."

"Debbie got high," Pam added.

"Kathy got laid," Denise snickered.

"Jennifer married a banker and got financial AIDS."
Pam laughed.

In unison they agreed, "We all got fucked," clinked their glasses, stood up and bowed.



"Speech! Speech!" Pam pounded on the table. Brunie rolled her eyes and kept her cards in her hand.

Sookie stood up on the counter and speaking into a wooden spoon said, "Welcome ladies and whores, sleazes and sluts and everyone else who's been fucked to our afternoon poker game and possible unveiling of my new face. Why a new face? you say. Well, why not? Don't we all want to be someone else or have someone else be someone else. I mean why should we be happy with ourselves. Don't we have to give. Don't things go better when you give. Let me tell you about the time he was sitting on the sofa wrinkling the pages of a new Playboy and asked me why I didn't look like the playmates instead of Ruth Buzzi." She threw her glass on the floor. "What did I think? What did I say?" Holding out her hand as if halting a response, she delivered, "Well, I thought, why not try to please? It's no skin off my nose! But it was skin off my nose and perhaps more. I lost my sense. Why shouldn't my nose be on the wall along with the deerhead or bear skin or thirty seven fish and one owl."

Brunie stood up. "This is ridiculous. Take the damn bandages off, so we can get on with it," she said and threw her cards on the table.

Pam passed Sookie another shot. "Drink this."

Sookie tossed it down without the salt or lemon. "All right...I'm ready. I'm prepared for change. I move the family furniture around, I change sheets, underwear and

positions. I'm ready...I'm ready. How bad can it be? Now, let's see what they did. Just watch where you walk ladies. After all, there's glass everywhere."

They followed Sookie into the bathroom. Sookie peeled the bandages off her face with her eyes closed. Opening them, she stared into the mirror and pointed to the nose in the mirror, grimaced then dropped down onto the toilet seat, stood up again and looked at herself in the mirror again. She climbed on the sink and looked closely. "Whose is it?"

They all shrugged.

Shaking her head, "It's not mine. It's not me anymore is it?" she said, looking for a response from their faces in the mirror.

"Sure it is." Brunie patted her shoulder.

"No, it's not mine. It's not anywhere near mine. I had my dad's nose. This isn't his."

"Jesus loves you," Pam added matter-of-factly.

"Sookie, it doesn't look that different," Denise consoled her.

"Is it me. Tell me...look at me. IS IT ME?"

"It's a little different," Denise agreed.

Jumping down from the sink, raising her voice, pointing to her nose, she appealed vehemently, "This growth is not me. They didn't alter it, they remodeled it. I can't live with a fuckin' mistake on my face." She left the bathroom. They followed.

"You sleep with one every night," Pam added.

"Well, Sook, you can't have it back. The old is gone. You just can't go back." Brunie assured her maternally, "You can't do anything about it now."

"I'll do something about it." Sookie dropped onto the sofa, with the deer head on the wall behind her, then got up and paced the room talking out loud. "What have I done? What the fuck is me anymore. What have I really done? This whole place..this lamp...I hate this goddamn lamp." She contemplated for only a moment before she lifted it into the air, a tiny spark coming from the socket making her jump back. After hesitating for a second, she then hurled it to the floor and with a minor sense of satisfaction she sauntered into the kitchen, the broken glass crunching beneath her feet. She halted, looked around the room, opened the cupboard. "And these dishes," she said, and one by one she dropped them.

"All right, Sook. That's an eight!"

Pam and Denise followed screaming out scores and prompts. "What about that vase over there?" Pam pointed to the vase on the fridge.

"Go for it," Denise encouraged. Pam grabbed the Tequilla and held onto it.

"This is insane. Sookie, you're breaking all his things," Brunie said nervously to Sookie, and hushing herself turned to Pam and Denise. "Quit feeding the fire," she demanded.



Sookie muttered, "Good choice." She reached up and knocked the vase off. "I hate it." It crashed onto the drain-board taking the plant on the window-sill with it.

"Nine!" Denise shouted.

Sookie grinned proudly and thrust her arms up.

"And what about that fish in the living room?" Pam raised her eyebrows and rolled her eyes in the direction of the living room.

Sookie mumbled, returned to the living room, reached behind the fish tank and unplugged the air-hose.

Next, she flung the owl to the carpet.

"Six. Only six. It didn't break. You're losing momentum," Pam said.

Sookie returned to the kitchen, climbed onto the counter, reached into the far corner of the top cupboard and withdrew four new goblets. Holding them up for view, revolving them, displaying the stems and delicately cut rose petals, she raised one eyebrow and announced, "Crystal...the finest. His prize!"

"Sookie. Don't do it. This is destructive!" Brunie exclaimed. "Don't break all his things. They mean something to him."

"So did my nose, Brunie." Sookie slammed them to the floor with pleasure.

Pam and Denise raised their hands above their heads and bowed. Speaking with pride, Pam said, "Perfect score, Sook," and passed her the bottle. "10's in three

categories! Total score is 30 for Lip-sync, 30 for Appearance and 30 for Originality. How do you feel now? Is there anything you'd like to say to the audience?"

Sookie spoke into the bottle. "Much better, I feel much better...just like a new person. Thank you all for coming. I feel this has been the highlight of my career...my best performance. I found it very challenging. Thank you all, for shopping at K-Mart."

Brunie shook her head, and said with disgust, "You're all destructive. You've surprised me...this time you've really surprised me. Pam you always amaze me. You sleep with anybody you want. Denise you smoke pot all the time. None of you has a career. You can't keep a husband." Brunie grabbed her change from the table. "I'm not staying here. You've gone too far." Brunie hesitated, waiting for an explanation, waiting for something more.

Pam shrugged, took a shot of Tequilla and passed the bottle to Sookie. Sookie slugged it down and said, "Don't you understand? My nose, Brunie. My nose. I haven't gone far enough." Sookie tipped the table over.

The Mother

Pushing her bangs down, flattening them as far as they would go Sam left the safety of her bedroom and approached the living room.

Mother was there performing her weekly cleaning, which always only included dusting: the floors, wash, daily meals were left to others. Dusting gave Mother a feeling of aristocracy. She could move around and, with a simple flick of the feather duster, eliminate the dust without any effort at all. That morning Mother was constantly walking by her dining room table which had already been set for the company to come. When backing away from her table, she stumbled over Peewee sitting near the coffee table on the floor. "What are you doing just sitting here meek as a mouse?" she asked and flicked the feather duster at her. Peewee scrambled to her room.

Mother heard Sam dragging down the hallway. "Pick up your feet when you walk," she hollered, not caring to know who it was she was addressing. Sam picked up her feet and came into the living room. Mother turned briefly, looked at her, shook her head in disgust, and turned away saying,

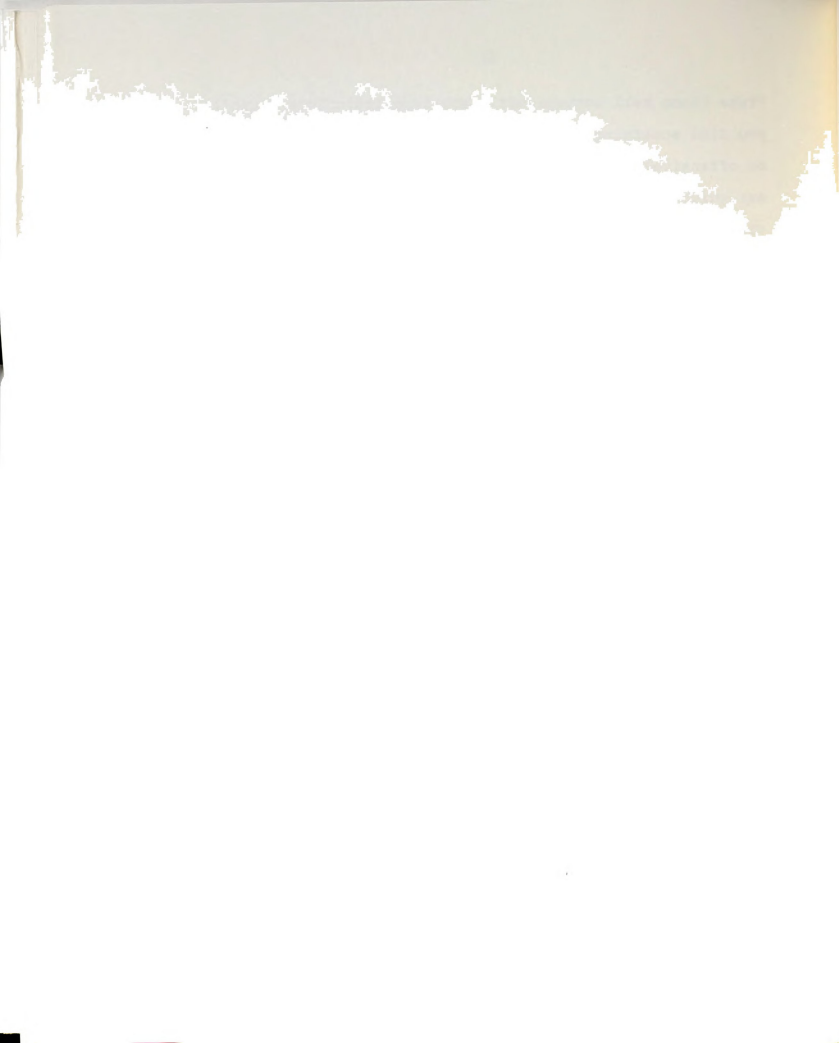
"Take those bell bottoms off. You look ridiculous. Can't you find something better to wear? Do you have to try to be offensive? Are you deliberately doing this to me?" Sam sat quietly on the sofa, brushing the carpet with the toe of her tennis shoe, trying to answer, while Mother continued her ranting. "We're having company. If you can't find something better to wear, then don't even plan on being around. Help your sister get moving, put her hair in pigtails, and then vacuum the living room," Mother reeled off, then turning her attention to the father continued, "Dave, get those newspapers off the table. You sit around with newspapers all over my nice table just smoking and drinking coffee. Do something. Go and rake up the yard. We have company coming. I don't want the Ackerlands to see this place like this. It's hard enough that I have to work all week long, but to do all this by myself is abuse. I can't believe I've come to all this. You've dragged me down. You've all just dragged me down."

Sam skulked into her bedroom and closed the door.

Unaware, Kevin waddled out of his bedroom to the kitchen. Mother ran into him. "Excuse yourself," she demanded.

"Excuse me," he replied.

"Look at you, look at you. LOOK AT YOU! You're a disgrace. You are the worst. You can't even do up your pants. DO UP YOUR ZIPPER. You don't want your sisters to see you with your zipper down, or IS that what you want?"



she glared at him suspiciously.

Kevin looked down, fumbled for his zipper. "It's broken," he answered timidly.

"Change them. Were you going to wear those pants in front of the Ackerlands?" She rapped his head. "Get back in there, and don't come out until you're presentable."

Mother turned her attention to the table. Pleased, she admired it, then stroked her neck and chest.

Turning on her heels she headed for the bedrooms. Opening the first door, she caught Kevin in his underwear.

"Get your pants on," she said, and barged in and dragged his bedspread over the tangled sheets. "We don't want unmade beds," she added, and left heading down the hallway toward the next room.

She opened the door, walked over to the bed and tugged the bedspread over the bed, covering up everything, then marched over to the drapes and yanked them open, turned on her heels and left.

Sam was on her bed, covered with the bedspread. "She didn't even see me here," she thought, "she didn't even notice me. I'm a rumpled sheet, a stained pillow, a wet-pad."

Peewee sat on the floor near the dresser. She waited for Sam to move.

"Sam," Peewee whispered. Sam didn't answer. Peewee sat motionless while she concentrated on detecting some movement from under the bedspread.

"Sam," Peewee whispered and stared at the bed.

With alarm in her voice, she whispered louder,

"Please, Sam, you're scaring me!"

Sam tore the spread off, sat up on the bed, then heaved herself up and went to the kitchen, taking Peewee with her.

Kevin was in the kitchen pouring himself a glass of Coke. "Do you two want a glass?" he asked, filling his to the top.

"Sure, thanks." Sam got two glasses down from the cupboard.

Kevin began filling hers.

Mother entered.

She slammed the door of the refrigerator. "What are you doing?" she asked, grabbing the bottle of Coke from Kevin.

He shook the spilled pop off his hand. "We want a glass of pop," he explained.

Peewee wiped her face with her arm.

"That's for our company. I brought it for them, and we're going to save it for them. Little Charlene likes pop."

"We only want a glass. We're going to share just one bottle," Kevin pleaded.

"You didn't even ask. You just came in here and helped yourself."

"May we please have a glass?" he asked and tried

to sip from the glass he had poured.

She pulled it away. "No. It's for company. The Ackerlands are coming today."

"I hate the Ackerlands."

She rapped his head.

"Why is all the good stuff for the company and not for us? Why are we having them? Charlene is a dog, a puker."

"Little Charlene is a nice girl." With a tight grin on her face, she added, "And she doesn't like dirty little boys -- ones that like to keep their zipper down."

"When she's here I'd like to drag her off her mother's lap and rap her on her head."

Mother retorted, "You are a disgusting boy."

She pushed them from the kitchen.

They scurried off.

Sam, Kevin and Peewee gathered in Kevin's bedroom.

"I don't see why we can't have some pop?" He yanked at the bedspread.

"She made my bed while I was still in it. She pulled the covers right over me," Sam said and thought for a moment before she continued, "she didn't even notice that I was on the bed."

"She plowed right over me," Kevin added.

"She tripped over me," Peewee added.

"She don't care about nothing but her rotten company." Kevin threw his pillow on the floor.

"She's different to them. She seems to be falling all

over them in a different way. When they leave it seems like she leaves with them."

"I hate company. I wish they wouldn't come," Peewee cried.

"But then we wouldn't have pop, but what's the difference, we can't have any anyway. I'm leaving my zipper down. We can't even have one bottle of pop. It makes me mad. We should take one anyway."

"No. She'll only holler and bring it up in front of Ackerlands or something. That's not good enough."

They sat silent. Sam stood up and said decidedly, "I'm going to do something more."

"What?"

"Come on."

He unzipped his zipper and followed Sam. They quietly tiptoed to the kitchen, Peewee dragging after them.

Sam checked the hallway and living room. "She must be in her bedroom fixin' herself up for the company." She peaked around the corner and whispered, "Dad must be outside."

They crept into the kitchen.

Sam opened a bottle of pop and dumped it down the drain. Kevin's lower jaw plummeted. "Aw...aw, Sam." He clenched his fists and hit the top of his head. "This is deep shit."

"Give me another."

Kevin eagerly handed her the next bottle.

She poured it down the drain and reached out for the next.

"Wait, stop."

Sam hesitated for a minute. Kevin held out two glasses, and Sam filled them both. He drank one down, then asked, "What will she do?"

"Gimme some, gimme some," Peewee urged. Kevin took two sips and gave her the remainder.

Sam filled the glass again, then dumped all the remaining bottles, watching the liquid disappear.

"Something...she'll do something now," she answered.

Plumb Miserable

I've seen it dark.

I know the dark...like when we go to bed.

I know the dark that's still around in early morning, but I ain't never seen the dark like it is now. I ain't never seen nothin' so black as it is now. I guess it could be past midnight, or it could even be closer to morning. It's hard to tell when it's so black. Black like the tar roof of Nelson's shed. Black like the soil Ma puts down in the garden every year. And here me and Judd are sittin' soaking wet, all full of mud, and scared.

I expect we're in the worst fix we've ever been in. We both figure Arnold is gonna kill us. We might even lose Sal. It's hard to tell.

We've been sitting here with her for hours and hours, at least half of a day, and it ain't gettin' no better. She's sunk down all the way up to her neck. Letting her rest up might help: maybe she'll be able to pull her ol' self outta that mud. I don't know.

I don't know what to do, but just sit with her holding onto her reins. Judd is dozing and his breathing calms me; Sal's makes me nervous. It's quicker and coming harder. It brings me back to how dark it is and what Arnold will do

to us when he finds out. Judd's gets me noticing the stars and forgetting Arnold.

Sooner or later something will happen. Someone will find us, or we'll be out of this mess, but we won't be clear of it neither way. It ain't gonna be no better if Arnold comes when he's sober, or if he comes when he's drunk.

I guess it don't do no good at all to think about how we got into this mess now. It just happened, and here we sit on the edge of Lake Michigan with it as quiet as an empty church, and the only noises are the kind that make you scare yourself.

I suppose we're kind of to blame in a way. Me and Judd did take off, but, hell, we never would have taken off and not told anybody where we were going if Arnold wasn't home so much now and getting gnarly so often. He's always cuffin' us 'bout the head and tellin' us we act like them crazy Indians up on the Hannaville reservation. I'd rather be caught by all the Indians there ever were, or stay here forever, than have Arnold get us. Lord Jesus, he's gonna kill us.

Arnold only used to come home for a few months out of the year. He'd always be in around the end of November, when the lakes get too wicked for the ore boats to keep runnin'. The captains of the boats are cautious, now, ever since the Edmund Fitzgerald went down. They ain't pushing their luck no more. As soon as the boats quit running all

the men come home for a few months.

It was good times to be home then.

Hunting season starts the middle of November. Arnold would usually get in in time to go to camp with old Oliver Wickler and the Thorsen brothers, until December. Then the holidays would come up and Arnold would be celebrating with Oliver and the rest of the boys from the boats. And when January rolled around Arnold and Oliver would set up a trap line, and they'd both be off most of the time, or in the woods cuttin'.

But now it's different.

The boats ain't running no more, not because it's the end of the season. They just ain't running. I guess 'cause of the economy. The iron mines are shut down, and the men are laid off. So, the boats ain't running and everyone is laid off. And no one is cuttin' much in the woods 'cause no one is buying 'cause everyone is laid off everywhere. And Arnold is home all the time.

When Arnold was gone for seven or eight months and, maybe, only got in for a weekend here or there, it was nice to have him home. He was usually all right, but it ain't the same. I don't think me, Judd, Ma or Arnold can get used to him around all the time. Nobody is too happy, and Arnold is the worst. He don't try to hide it in front of nobody. He's always telling us to get outta his hair and go and do something, no matter where we're at.

Everyday he and Oliver are either putting away as much

Four Roses as they got, or they're at Oliver's trailer drinking whatever he has around and eating pickled smelt with their fingers right out of the canning jar. They try to make me eat that stuff. Even when I tell them, No, thank you, they still make me eat it, but I don't chew it. I just hold it in my mouth until I get the chance to slip it in my pocket. Sometimes I've left them there and ma has found them, but she don't say nothin'.

When Arnold and Oliver ain't at our place drinkin' and ain't at Oliver's, they're driving around in Oliver's old red pickup with a tool box in the back, a gun-rack in the rear window and a twelve pack on the front seat.

The other night Arnold and Oliver came in from visiting all day and Arnold wanted Judd to go get something for him in the pickup. When Judd put on his shoes, Arnold got up hollerin' and started cuffin' him. Judd didn't know what was going on. I didn't know what was going on, and Oliver he didn't care. He ain't had no kids, so I don't expect he even knows nothin' 'bout kids at all. Judd is smaller than me, but he's kinda rolly, like the fattest puppy of the litter, and so he don't move too quick. He don't move quick enough to get out of Arnold's way, so he always gets the worst blows. He just covers his head until Arnold quits. "Stupid goddamn kid," Arnold said, then clobbered Judd. "Shittin' kids don't know how to take care of nothin'. Don't you know?" He batted him again. "Don't you know that if you slip on your shoes without untying

them you'll break down the goddamn backs?"

Judd didn't say nothin'. It didn't matter if they was just an old pair of mine and that the backs were the only parts not broken down already. Arnold just kept on hollerin', Judd was hollerin' and ma got in on it, trying to get Arnold to quit.

Those things happen almost everyday now.

I'll tell ya, Arnold is beginning to worry me, and I know he's been scaring Judd for a long time. We just never know what's happening, or what will happen and it makes us both squeamish. Things just seem to go haywire and everything gets crazy.

A few months ago our dogs took off and trotted along the bay, like two tourists. They went over to Potter's and killed a couple of chickens. Stanley Potter came over having a fit, and I guess I don't blame him for that. He said they weren't no good. "If them dogs kill chickens," he declared, "then they'll start running down deer."

Ma finally calmed him down. All it took was half a bottle of Blackberry brandy and tellin' him that we'd keep the dogs tied up. That was gonna be up to me and Judd to do.

It wasn't too long after, when Arnold was home, that he heard about Stanley's chickens while he was down at the little store having coffee. As soon as he heard, he came home hollering saying he wasn't going to pay for the dogs to eat chicken and that if it happened again he was gonna

kill 'em.

Well, with deer shit for luck, a month or so ago me and Judd let the dogs loose to clean up around their pen, and they took off on us. We looked all over for them and called them 'til we was hoarse, but they was long gone. So, Arnold, with Oliver, got us in the back of his pickup and we went looking for them and found them trotting along the shoreline having a good ol' time. Arnold called to Poost, our black lab and he came over. When he got up to Arnold, Arnold got a hold of him and beat him bad and then threw him in the back of the truck. That dog just sailed right through the air and crashed into the truck. Then Arnold called Kade, but Kade wouldn't come over to him. Poost was kinda like Judd -- he just took his punishment --, but Kade, hell, that old dog knew what was gonna happen, and I guess he figured he'd just steer clear of Arnold for awhile. Arnold was getting crazy calling and calling that dog. He didn't like it when you didn't listen to him, or when you caused him some trouble. But Kade just kept his distance. So, Arnold told me to call him over. He knew Kade would come over for me, but I knew what was gonna happen if I did.

Arnold got going. "You shittin' dog. You no good piece of shit. You goddamn mutt. You goddamn dog, come the hell here," he hollered, then he started on me. "You shittin' kid. You no good piece of shit. Stupid punk, call your sonofabitchin' dog over here. I just want to get

the hell home."

That dog was bigger than me, and I just counted on him takin' it all for both of us. When Arnold started knocking me around, I called him over. Arnold got him by the collar and started wrestling with him. He wrestled down there on the ground with the dog. Me and Judd were dumb struck and just stood there and watched. Kade was a big blonde lab that went close to 110 pounds, but Arnold is a big man. He's tall and heavy and has the biggest hands you'd ever want to see. He said he got those hands from milkin' a lot of cows. Arnold got his milkin' hands around Kade's neck and started to choke him. You could see the veins sticking out of Arnold's hands, and he was sweatin' and gruntin'. Kade was lookin' like he didn't know what he was up against and probably would have rather tangled with a wounded bear than with Arnold.

It was a God-awful fight. Judd was crying. Oliver was dancing around and probably would have put money on it if anyone would have been there to take his bet. Here Arnold and the dog were kicking up a storm of dust from rolling around in the dirt along the side of the road, and we knew that Arnold was going to win. You could see it, but when Kade got the chance he bit him, then Arnold just heaved him up by the skin around his neck and hurled him into the truck. That was the end of that. Kade was gone the next day. All Arnold ever said was, "We couldn't keep no dog around that bites. Someone could get hurt from that

sonofabitchin' no good piece of shit." Then, he sunk down into his chair with a bottle of Four Roses and watched TV, until ma pulled him up and put him to bed.

We got into this mess we're in now 'cause Arnold was getting nuts again. Me and Judd were sitting around the house this morning watching cartoons, or would it be yesterday morning now. It's hard to tell in this kind of dark. Anyway, we weren't doin' nothin'. Arnold and Oliver were already drinkin', only they hid it in coffee cups 'til after lunch. They were talking about the lakes and the Joe Block. They both used to make runs to Chicago and back every few days on the Joe Block. They loved to be on the boats, but were always ready to get off around November when the weather turned bad. "Those sonofabitchin' lakes," Arnold would say, "ain't they rotten Oliver, just like the teeth of the old whore Holzencarp."

"Yep, yep, by God, you betcha," Oliver agreed.

"The shoreline is just as wicked," added Arnold. Then they both got to talking about all the tourists and hunters and fishermen, who they've had to help out when they've been stuck from trying to drive around the shore. "I'd like to leave them there. They got no goddamn business being back there anyway, no good sonofabitches," Around would say.

Our house is at the end of the road right at the tip of the point. People only come up here to turn around or to look for a way to get behind our house and hunt. We are

always having to help somebody out because once you leave our driveway you had better know the ground but good. You have to drive out in the water a bit, 'cause there are some tricky spots where whole trucks have gone down right on the edge of the woods. The safest way is to stay a few feet from the edge. Sometimes you have to go out a little farther and other times you have to get in a little closer. You have to know what you're doing and keep your eyes on where you're going, or you'll end up stuck pretty bad. Some guys have even come close to losing their truck, then we'd have to go and get Wilbert Tillman's bulldozer to try and pull them up. If we couldn't get close to them we'd just watch them go down, and both Arnold and Oliver would be drinking beer and grinning.

Well, Arnold and Oliver were drinking this morning and talking. Arnold wanted us to turn off the TV and go do something. Me and Judd were hoping to be able to hang around in front of the set for a while, so at first we just didn't make no move hoping he'd just drop it and go onto something else. He started poking at Judd with his foot, like he was some turtle he was trying to turn over. We didn't budge. We just tried to act kinda sleepy, so maybe he'd leave us alone. He didn't. Instead, he started in and said he was gonna break the goddamn TV over our heads.

So, me and Judd took off knowing we'd best steer clear of Arnold today. If Arnold was getting nasty early, then he was gonna be on us hard later on.

We decided to do something by taking Sal out. She's dependable. She's like an old relative, an old Aunt that comes for a visit and never leaves and you don't really mind. I can't ever remember not having Sal. Judd and me figured her to be about sixty years old in our years and about twenty in a horse's. She was missing a few teeth and looked just like the old woman we see at Steinman's department store, who can hardly move around and can't see nothin', but yet they let her stay until she dies.

Sal has big, big wet sloppy lips. She can't eat apples or carrots no more because she can't chew them. She's always coming up to you and placing those big lips of hers on you, and you can feel the whiskers.

When we were really little and tried to trot around on Sal, we'd usually end up falling, and she'd just stand there and wait for us, real patiently, just like Ma would when we was having trouble doing something like tying our shoes. Sal would just stand and look at us and wait for us to get back on. She was careful of us. I do believe she was always watching the ground more than we were while we were on her back.

We didn't never have no saddle, and we never did need one. Now that Sal was sloping a bit more from her withers we would have to throw a blanket over her 'cause there was no way you could ride too comfortably -- especially being a boy.

We just slipped a hackamore on her. She didn't need

no bit in her mouth. We knew we'd be able to stop her. We were more doubtful about gettin' her moving than anything else.

We should have known that Sal would tire out. She don't eat like she used to. We used to be able to give her a mixture of corn, molasses, soybean and grain, and she always got the second cutting of alfalfa. Now, with Arnold laid off, she gets whatever. Usually, we try to give her some plain oats, but mostly she gets hay from the first cutting, even if it's gotten musty from dampness, so she's wheezing and tires easy.

Me and Judd took off on Sal to get away from Arnold. We took the fire trails that would take us to the logging roads. As soon as we hit the trails we smacked Sal to get her moving, and we started whopping like a couple of Indians.

We were cowboys, Indian scouts, cavalry, hunters going after grizzly, explorers and everything else you could be out here where you knew there wasn't anyone around. Every time Judd got shot, he would hang over the side of Sal on his belly. Sometimes he would fall off of her while she was walking along. Then, we'd be robbers escaping or bounty hunters. It didn't matter what we were, whatever side we were on we were the best. And Sal just kept going along with it all.

It seems like you can go forever when you go along the shoreline. There's the lake on one side and Hiawatha

National Forest on the other. You don't pass by no houses or people, just big old fat pine snakes stretched out on the sand. We could see the tip of Washington Island and almost make out the cliffs near Fayette. The farther we got away from near our place the more deer tracks we'd see. You could see where they'd been herding up or coming down to drink. We spotted a few and they just watched us ride by. It took us awhile, but we got tired of making noise. So, we just got to riding. Judd was holding on behind me when he started with his stories.

"Billy."

"Ya?"

"Billy, do you remember the Olsen brothers?"

"Nope."

"Don't you remember hearing about them a couple years back?"

"I don't remember nothin' about them."

"They used to go around dynamiting stumps for anyone that needed it. They never charged nothin', they just liked to do it."

"Oh, yea. I remember them. We got hay from them sometimes."

Sal side-stepped a little, and Judd almost went off.

"Billy, you know what they did one day?"

"What?"

"They tied themselves together to some old stump and then took some blasting caps and blew themselves up."

"Come on, Judd!"

"No, Billy, I ain't kiddin'. They really did. It happened out here near Moonshine camp. There was pieces of them all over. Bud Hall found them when he came out to do some cuttin'."

"Shit, Judd, that's crazy. What did they do that for?"

"I don't know. Don't guess that anybody knew. Everyone around here thought they was doing fine. I think they must have been just plumb miserable."

"I guess both of them would have to have been plumb miserable at the same time."

We rode for a while letting Sal take her time and go about it her own way. We came up on the logging road that led to Moonshine camp. That camp was about the only one left that far back, and it was a ways into the woods. When you get back that deep into the woods everything looks the same and it's easy to get lost. Judd wanted to go back there.

"Come on Billy, let's go back there. I ain't never been back to Moonshine. I'm probably the only one that's never been back to old Moonshine. Please."

"Judd, it ain't nothin' but an old camp."

"I know, but I want to see it."

"I think we should just stick to the shoreline. Sal is pretty tired, and it's getting late. We got to be headin' back pretty soon."

"Come on, Billy. I just want to see it. That's the place where that girl got killed."

"What girl?"

"Turn down that way and I'll tell ya as we go. Come on Billy, it ain't that far. We'll just take it easy. I just want to see it really bad."

"You can't be tellin' Arnold we went back there."

"I ain't tellin' him nothin'...I promise."

I turned Sal down the trail to Moonshine and Judd got on with his story.

"This guy took his daughter out to Moonshine camp with him. She was only about ten years old. He was gonna cut some wood and fix up the camp to get it ready for hunting season. He took the girl out there with him just to spend the day. He wanted her to see nature and all those changing leaves and pretty stuff, like Ma likes. Anyway, while he was out in the woods the little girl was playing on the front porch of the camp. It wasn't a big porch, just large enough to pile up some wood and put a chair on the other side. While she was on the porch a big old sow bear come up and got her. That sow dragged her off the porch and away from the camp then killed her."

"Judd, bears don't come in and do that."

"Not often they don't, but I guess they tracked this bear to get her before she did it again, and, since a bear circles back to the same spot every three days, they knew she'd come back for the rest of the girl. When she did,

they got her easy and found that she was real sick and figured that's probably why she went after that little girl."

Just then we came up on Moonshine camp sitting all by itself in a little clearing, so a little bit of sun could get to it through the pines. We jumped off Sal and tried the cabin door, but it was padlocked, so we climbed around and peeked in the windows. We could barely see anything. There was some antlers on the wall above an old cot and what looked like a little stove back in the corner. We hung out there for awhile knocking around and both thinking it wouldn't be so bad living there all the time.

We must have spent more time there than we thought. 'Cause pretty soon the sun was going down and the woods was getting dark fast. I knew it was getting pretty late and that we would have to really get on old Sal to get home before it was too dark. I didn't want to be out in these woods when the sun went down. It's like it's a whole different place at night. It changes, and, as well as you may know it in the day, it's strange to you at night.

Judd and me both wanted to get moving, so we swung up on Sal and took off. We broke off a small branch from a dead pine and smacked Sal to get her moving.

She was moving pretty good. I think she had enough of us and wanted to get back. We rode her pretty hard that day.

The best way to get out of the woods is to listen for

the waves. You can always hear them washing onto shore, so you just head in that direction. Once we got to the shoreline getting back home was easy.

We hit the shoreline soon enough, but by that time it was getting really dark. We knew we were gonna be late and that Arnold was gonna be mad and go nuts on us, so we started pushing Sal on. We were really whacking her with that stick. We were excited and anxious to get home, and I think Sal must have been, too. We were pushing it hard when she went down.

I can't even remember what the hell happened. She went down so fast with us on her back.

We felt her going down.

Judd started yelling, "Get her on, get her outta here." I tried. I started kicking her hard and beating her with the stick, but she couldn't do nothin'.

"Come on Sal," I was saying, "Come on, Sal...please."

But she went down fast, and we stayed with her until the mud was up past her shoulders and our knees. There's about six inches of water covering this muck, and there's swamp grass growing out of it. It's the kind of spot where anything can be crawling or swimming around. We had to get off. Judd had to get off first. He slid his legs off one side and hung onto me while he tried to feel out some footing. He got to dry ground without much trouble. I slipped off and kept the reins in my hand, then I crawled next to Judd. We both got soaked and full of mud, and it

started cooling off fast. We sat down on a dry spot and looked at the fix we got into.

This mud, that Sal is in, was covered up so well by that little bit of water and grass that we walked right into it. Sal must have made it through a bit, but it just got a little too deep for her, and she went down and wasn't strong enough to keep going to get out. She's tired. She's having a hard time keeping her muzzle up and out of the water. I'm trying to hold the reins up to help her a little. I don't know if it's been doing her any good at all, but I can't think of nothin' else.

It didn't take no time at all for Judd to come to and start going crazy. He was jumping around, running back and forth looking for something.

"Do something, Billy. Do something," Judd cried.

"Judd, I don't know what to do but hold the reins."

"Can't we get a log and put it under her belly and pry her out?"

"No, she's too deep and we might hurt her more. And we can't get close enough, and we can't get no leverage."

"Can't we fill up the hole? Can't we gather up some sand and logs and stuff and fill the hole?"

"I don't see how we can do that. There ain't much space between Sal and the ground we're on. She has to be able to move her legs forward, and we can't pack her in or she'll never get out."

"Then what are we gonna do?"

Judd is crying. We're both getting colder. It's dark and we can't see much of anything. We're a long way from home and nobody knows where we are. And Sal is still going down slowly. She's getting deeper.

All we can do is sit and wait. I can't see a way for us to do nothin' else. Judd doesn't want to take off by himself, and he's too scared to sit here by himself. So we're sitting together taking turns holding onto Sal by the reins. It's still; full of that quiet that doesn't make you comfortable. It's the kind of quiet that makes you jump at every sound you hear. You can't tell where it's coming from. It can travel across the lake like a swarm of black flies that buzz about your ears and then travel on.

The only thing that is keeping me steady is that constant wash of the waves as they amble onto the shoreline then off again.

Judd's stirring.

"How long are we gonna be here, Billy?"

"I don't know. Probably 'til someone comes out this way lookin' for us, or 'til Sal can gather enough strength to take a lunge and get out."

It's hard to tell what time it is when night comes heavy and so thick that you think you can just reach out and tear a hunk off and squeeze it in your hand. Judd and I have both been dozing. Part of us is resting and the other part is leaning on listening to Sal's breathing. Something brought us about, we both heard it. I swear by

God that it sounded like some woman's scream off in the woods somewhere.

"Billy, did ya hear that?"

"Yea."

"What was it?"

"Nothin'. Some old coyote I suppose."

We sat for awhile trying hard to hear more, listening to get a feel for what was out there.

"Billy, you know those stories I told ya?"

"Yea."

"Billy, do you reckon that the Olsen brothers and that little girl wander 'bout in the woods?"

"No, they're gone. That's all."

"I mean like ghosts or somethin'?"

"There ain't no ghosts, and if there was I don't expect they'd be hanging out here. It's plumb miserable."

"Billy, what do you think is gonna happen to us?"

"I don't know."

My arm is getting tired. I want to just quit. Sal hasn't gone any deeper, but she ain't any closer to getting out. I don't know how she could hold her head up for so long. Judd took the reins to give me a break, but he dropped them once, so I keep onto them. He's all busy wrapping himself up with stories and scaring himself.

"Billy, what do you think Arnold is gonna do to us?"

"He's gonna be mad for sure. I guess it all depends of if Sal goes down all the way."

"Billy, he's gonna kill us."

"He ain't gonna kill us."

"I'd rather go out in them woods and face a hundred ghosts and fifty wounded bears than to have to face Arnold."

"Ma ain't gonna let him hurt us. She'll be glad we're safe."

"But Arnold, Billy, he ain't gonna be so glad."

We've sat here quiet for some time. Judd has been sleeping a bit with his head on my leg. Sal is watching me, I'm watching her. She seems to be breathing easier now, like she's good and rested.

I know we pushed her too hard and that if she hadn't been so tired out she would have made it through. I wish Arnold would get back on the boats and Sal would get out. "Damn, I wish that Arnold would get back on the boats and Sal would get out. Come on, Sal."

She's listening to me.

"Come on, Sal."

Sal shifted her weight.

"Come on, Sal. You can do it."

Judd has jumped up and is running around, slapping his leg and calling to her, like you do to a puppy that doesn't know his name. "Come on, Sal," he's calling, "come on, Sal. You can do it."

I've tightened my grip on the reins and have taken up all the slack. Sal's getting ready. With light tugs on

the reins, I'm calling to her, too. "Come on, Sal. We've been here long enough. Come on, Sal. It's plumb miserable out here."

Giving her one good yank on the reins caused her to try.

She lunged.

Sad Sack

I saw smoke coming from the woodstove at the milkman's boathouse this morning.

It's fall again.

The windows in the living room are closed for the first time this year. The old metal box that used to hold the milkman's delivery is rusting by the front stairs.

The milkman isn't the milkman anymore. He quit. He just up and left one day. He built a boathouse, and now he rents rowboats out to fishermen. His place is at the edge of town past the taverns and pool hall. A narrow dirt road takes you to his boathouse with rowboats stacked seven high and a single pier in the water.

He always took Stevie and me fishin'.

Now, watching other fishermen go out is what he does. He's been at the boathouse, since Stevie...

since, his son, Stevie...

Dogface.

That's what everybody called Stevie.

Dogface.

He's been at that boathouse, since Stevie hung himself last year.

Everyone always told Stevie, "Aw, go hang yourself, Dogface."



And one afternoon he did, with his mother's clothesline in the basement of her house in between reading The Catcher in the Rye and doing some math homework.

Stevie's dad was our milkman. He was all right: if we didn't have money for milk he'd leave milk anyway. He always tried to be sure that we had milk. For two weeks sometimes we'd get milk without paying. He'd just keep sticking those little yellow bills, with the blue ink, in the milk box, and the numbers would just keep adding up.

Sometimes, I walked to town to the milk machine on the corner of Main and Elm because there had been too much charged and not enough paid.

I remember when my mom sent me to the Robin Hood food store for a half of gallon of milk. I was a kid, and it was my first time going. I'd guess that store was three quarters of a mile away from our house. I had to go at night, so I dragged Stevie with me. He was always so willing anyway. We didn't know what a half-gallon was. We saw Half and Half and got that, walked all the way home, got scared by witch Sedin's police dog, and then were lectured all night and part of the next day for not listening. We should have gotten a half of gallon not Half and Half. We didn't know what the difference was and never did find out because Stevie's dad was leaving milk again, and Stevie was riding along with him. Delivering milk with his dad was one of Stevie's favorite things. They both liked to be out in the morning before anyone else, doing

their thing without any attention.

Stevie's older brother hated the milk truck. I heard that Stevie's brother was pretty smart. Their mother said it all the time. He always seemed to do things right, never got in trouble, never fought with anybody, never got hollered at in school and everyone seemed to like him because he got along so well. "Night and day," Stevie's mother would say about her two boys. "They're as different as night and day. Bill fits right in the middle, just like everyone else, but Stevie," she said, "is different. There's something odd about him."

She felt that she had to help Stevie manage himself. She was trying to help him do things right because he was slow, but the potential was there she would say, like Jimmy Gleason. Jimmy Gleason spoke very slowly. Some people said he talked slow because he was slow; others said he talked slow because he thought so fast and his mouth couldn't keep up with his brain, and so he was a genius. "Albert Einstein didn't speak until he was seven," Stevie's mother would say, "and lots of smart people did poorly in school."

Stevie never really did anything wrong. He just had different ways of doing things that didn't work out. He tried to make friends and would even laugh at himself when the kids called him Dogface. His face would get really red, just as red as when he blew his coronet; his eyes shifted around, he'd look at everybody else; he'd nod his

head real fast and scratch the inside of his thumb with his index finger and laugh at himself.

Stevie and I grew up together. We went to the same church and school, since second grade.

Stevie could never sit still. In second grade Mrs. Badders said he was always squirming around. She said, "Stevie you can't sit in the chair right. You should sit still. Do you have ants in your pants?" The class laughed. Stevie laughed. But Stevie kept squirming, so Mrs. Badders got a rope and tied Stevie up to the chair. She wrapped it all around him, with his arms to his sides, underneath the chair, across his legs, and tied it in a knot. The class really laughed. Harry Johnson fell out of his seat from laughing so hard. Stevie really laughed and nodded his head spasmodically. I think even Mrs. Badders thought it was funny. She left him there for a long time. The kids teased him. They threw pencil erasers and spit balls at him. Harry Johnson tickled him and everyone had fun and couldn't wait until lunch to tell the other second grade.

I had to stay in that day for recess, too. I hated to eat the breadcrust on my sandwiches. I hated them. Mrs. Badders knew that I hated them, and she knew that I threw them away. So, she would check my lunch bag before I threw it in the garbage can. I'd try to throw it away when she wasn't watching, but Mrs. Badders was always watching. We ate in our classroom, and I couldn't leave my desk until she checked my lunch bag. So what I did was hide them in



this little blue coin-purse shaped like a canoe that my cousin Gordon got for me in Canada. It had a zipper, where you would sit if it was real, and little red and white beads sewn on the outside. I put the crusts of my bread in there. I'd empty it out on my way home and bring it back the next day to fill it up again. Well, Kathy Vassle told on me. Mrs. Badders came over and opened my desk. She found the canoe loaded up with bread crusts, then she wanted me to eat them, after they'd been all crammed in there. I told her I'd eat them tomorrow when they were still attached to my sandwich. I'd even do it in front the class, I bargained. She said, "No, eat them now." I wouldn't. I had to stay in until I ate my crusts. So, I stayed in with the crusts on my desk top and Stevie harnessed to his chair.

As soon as Mrs. Badders took the class down the hall and around the corner to go outside and play, I untied Stevie. He helped me climb up on top of the shelves, where the paints were kept, and we pulled the window open and threw the bread crusts out, hoping the birds came before Mrs. Badders returned.

I was peeking out the door when she came marching down the hall with the class behind her, like an army of ants. When she turned the corner by the fourth grade room, I ran and tied Stevie up again -- a lot looser.

Stevie was always in trouble for doing something wrong. I was always in trouble for doing something wrong.



I always knew that I was doing something bad; Stevie never did. It was like mine was on purpose and his was on accident. He was just trying to get along, or do what he should. Not me. I was always fighting, and someone was always grinding my face in the dirt. My fourth grade teacher Mrs. Hook said that it was as if I was campaigning during an election year because I was always flapping my jaws.

My mother said that I was a "hell-yon". My grandmother said I took after my dad and that I was a "bloody" something or other. She always told me that either the police were gonna' get me, the nuns were gonna' get me or the boggieman was gonna' get me. She told me once that if I ran around the house three times and turned around a ghost would be there, a boogieman. Stevie eagerly said that he would try it, that the boogieman could have him. I said no, my little brother would do it. I dragged Danny around the house, but no ghost. Danny probably scared him off with all his yelling.

Danny, Stevie and I hung out. Part of the reason was because Stevie's dad was our milkman and my mom knew him and Stevie's mother; the other part was that Stevie didn't have any one else to hang out with, and since we never called him Dogface we were his friends. We liked being friends with Stevie. When there was nobody else around, no other kids, or Stevie's mom, we had lots of fun and things went right for him. The only time Stevie seemed slow to me

was when he was running bases.

My mom and Stevie's mom were always enrolling Danny and Stevie in clubs or lessons of some kind. Danny and Stevie were enrolled in the Drum and Bugle Corp. They started off on bugles, but soon after they were promoted to drums. Neither one of them wanted to be in it, but Stevie's mom said Stevie should join things and my mom said Danny would join with him. So they were signed up and given bugles. A week later they were given drums. "Try Stevie try." I can remember his mother saying, while she'd tap her foot. Stevie would hit the drum at the wrong time and not hit it when he should have, and she would make him practice over and over and over again.

They had to wear short pants. Short shorts we'd call them. I have a picture of them in those outfits. Neither one of them was smiling. Danny was sticking his tongue out, Stevie wouldn't dare -- he pulled his hat over his head.

They would both cry when they had to go to practice. My mom and Stevie's mom would haul them to the car. Their hats would get knocked off and their drums got knocked around, but they'd finally be in the back seat with the door locked, looking at me out the back window. When they came home from practice it would be worse. Danny was usually pouting and throwing his drums down, but Stevie wouldn't say anything. His mom would say, "Stevie you have to lift your knees higher when you march. You should watch



the other boys and hit the drum when they do." Stevie wouldn't answer. "Stevie is so talented," she said. "So gifted." She'd smile at Stevie. "He just needs to apply himself. He needs someone to bring it out, encourage it to blossom. He needs to find his little niche." So she stuck him in every niche. He and Danny would run to change their clothes and get the hat off. "Do you like it, Stevie?" I asked. He shook his head no, and my chivalry took charge. I poked a hole in each of their drums with a pencil, and they didn't have to go any more.

Kids are expected to grow out of things. We're suppose to go through stages and develop. Everyone seemed to stay the same to me. Stevie never changed. And the kids kept on calling him Dogface. Things stick with you, if they call you slow in grade school then you're slow all the way through high school. And teachers know it before you have their class. I was the trouble maker, Stevie was pegged as slow, the poor little sad sack. Jimmy Gleason was a genius, Crazy Larry had a leak and Johnny Neckerbeckie was retarded, after his dad ran over his head with a tractor.

Stevie's mom never gave up. It was important to her for him to be a part of everything and be accepted by the whole town. She was always saying, "Stevie go and play with all the kids. Why don't you go and play?" Stevie wouldn't say anything. Then she'd continue, "Stevie you should go and play with the kids. It would be so nice to

see you playing with them."

Stevie would finally tell her that they didn't want to play with him. She would shake her head and say, "Stevie, if you go over there and ask them, they will."

So Stevie would.

When he'd get near them, they would all start running away from him and say, "Get outta' here Dogface. We don't want your fleas." Then they would run around like they had fleas and scratch and roll on the ground. Stevie would laugh and just go off by himself, nodding his head and scratching his finger.

Stevie was always last. Last in races, last to finish his homework, and last to be picked on a team. The only time Stevie was first was in a Spelling Bee. He was always the first to sit down. Most of the time Stevie never got picked at all. The teams would just walk off and leave him standing there. Nobody wanted him on their team. When we played games in school, at recess, or just games with the neighborhood kids, Stevie never got picked first. He never got picked third or fourth and sometimes not at all.

I was lucky because I was good in sports. Lois, my friend, and Danny were, too. We were usually on the same team. If one of us was captain then we'd pick Stevie third. If one of us wasn't a captain and our captains didn't pick Stevie then we wouldn't play. So Stevie got picked. Sometimes he would be standing there by himself in the middle of everybody, where you had to stand and wait

for someone to choose you. When your name was called your friends would holler, "Yeh, all right," and pat you on the back when you joined the team. Standing in the middle you could hear them telling the captain who to pick next, "Get Karl. Pick Bonnie. Don't get Dogface, he's no good." And there Stevie would be standing all alone. Sometimes the teams would start to walk off and get in their spots to start playing and Stevie would still be standing there. Stevie always ended up on our team. Sometimes it just meant us quitting and leaving, until the kids would come and get us later. Sometimes they never came. But if we played, then Stevie played. Sometimes a fight would start. It always began when someone started telling Stevie to go home. "Why don't ya just go home Dogface. Yea, get out of here Dogface you're just causing trouble. You shouldn't even come. Go home ya puppy. You stink." Then the battle would start. Everyone would fight everyone, until it was settled that Stevie could play and they would shut up. If we didn't get it settled that way, then we just took off and went to our fort and planned how to get them back, that was my favorite thing.

When Stevie got to play he batted last and was usually stuck way out in the outfield. The only thing they really ever let him do was chase the ball, then they'd holler at him, "Fetch the ball." And then holler again when he couldn't throw it in all the way.

When he got up to bat it was always, "Come on Dogface



quit scratching and hit the ball, mutt."

Stevie never hit the ball. Either the ball hit him or he struck out. When the kids told Stevie to swing harder he'd swing so hard that he'd spin around. Sometimes he'd tip right over.

It seemed like Stevie never ducked from the ball when it was thrown at him. He would let the pitcher hit him just so he could get on base. Sometimes he got hurt. He wouldn't do nothing, just take his base. We'd tell him, "Stevie you don't have to do that. We don't care if you strike out. Don't let him get you like that. He's trying to do it." Stevie would say, "It's OK."

Stevie always took care to place the bat down. He never threw it except for one time. He got excited when he hit the ball. He let the bat fly. It went through Kapelke's window.

Mr. Kapelke was a big man with long arms and big hands. I've never seen anybody as tall as Mr. Kapelke. His legs were as long as our sofa. All I can remember is that he was tall and never came out of his house unless he planned on clobbering someone, or everybody. He clobbered his kids all the time. He had a big strap, like the kind the barber uses to sharpen the razors.

As soon as Danny saw him in the doorway he screamed, "Run, Stevie, run," and took off. I took off, Stevie took off, but the Kapelke kids got Stevie -- six of them pounced on Stevie. I can see why. If they couldn't produce Stevie,

then they had to take the blame themselves.

Danny and I hit Rhoton's fence and pulled ourselves over. We stood behind the fence to see what was going to happen. Mr. Kapelke was just getting a hold on Stevie, when Danny took off for home to get our dad. I waited. The other six Kapelkes came out to see Stevie get mauled. "Dogface is gonna get it now, and not with no newspaper," they sang, relieved that it wasn't going to be them.

Perched on top of Rhoton's fence I smirked at the bunch and told them, "Your mother's a dog." I smiled. "Old lady Kapelke smells like a dog...a garbage dog. And you sleep with a dog." I laughed and pointed to Mr. Kapelke. I knew that would do it. Mr. Kapelke forgot about Stevie and twelve of the Kapelkes charged, but I was too slick. The Kapelke's lived to get me, but they never did succeed. I was on guard all the time.

My mother decided to do something about me, after Mr. Kapelke told her what I said. So, she enrolled me in baton. I don't know why baton, except that she worked diligently on making a lady out of me. I had to wear one of those uniforms that looked like a bathing suit full of glitter. I was to sparkle when I marched lifting my white boots with the tassels to a record.

Throwing the baton up in the air was all right, but that's all I could do with it. I never even attempted to catch it, I just let it land wherever. The baton was put to better use when we bent it in half in the vice-grips and



used it for tent stakes.

At the time I was in baton, Stevie and Danny were put in Cubscouts. Stevie used to march up our driveway to pick up Danny for their Cubscouts meeting, and every time my Grandmother saw him coming she would say, "Here comes poor old Stevie." She'd watch him meander up the driveway in his little blue Cubscout shirt and hat, with a gold scarf tied around his neck, and his rope, and say the same thing she said the last time he came up the driveway, "Poor, little sad sack. It's a shame, a rotten shame."

The Cubscouts were learning to tie knots. They spent three months tying knots and memorizing the names. And often, when Danny and I would go to Stevie's house, he and his mother would be at the kitchen table tying knots. "Apply yourself, practice. Use that brain of yours. You have it. I know it," his mother would be saying.

Stevie never got to be alone. I think that's why he liked our fort. He wanted to be there all the time because whenever his mother found him alone she started in again. "Get out and have some fun. Do some things with the kids. Stevie you have to associate with other people." And then she'd join him up in something. Then my mom would join up Danny, too. Danny used to get tired of Stevie's mom putting Stevie in everything possible because my mom would do the same, so Stevie would have company.

When things didn't work out Stevie's mom would get upset with Stevie. She would sit and talk to my mom when



we were all around to hear her. She would talk about Stevie right in front of Stevie and us. Stevie's mom would tell my mom how she wished things weren't so hard for Stevie, but she felt that if Stevie would try a little harder then things would get better.

We were all dragged to church almost every Sunday. The only time we didn't go was when we'd sneak into my mom's room and shut off the alarm, so we didn't have to go. In the morning we would lie in our beds and whisper. We wouldn't even go to the bathroom to keep from waking Mom up, until we knew it was good and past the time Sunday school began and not enough time for us to get ready, then we'd all rush to pee. The only other time we didn't go was when my mom went out on Saturday night and really had a good time. She wouldn't remember to set the alarm. We used to always tell her to go out. Every Saturday we'd ask her if she was going out. We'd say, "Go on, Mom, have a good time, we'll be all right." Then we'd have Stevie sleep over so he didn't have to go.

When Mom and Dad went out, Dad always bought home candy from Kerwin's Bar. He'd bring home chocolate stars, malted milk-balls and chocolate covered raisins. Usually he left them on the dining room table. We had to make sure that Danny never got to them first because he'd eat most of it. We'd sneak out and get the candy, then lie back in the bedroom and eat most of it before we got up. Sometimes, to our disappointment, mom would get up, and we knew when she



looked at the clock, she'd holler, "Oh, no, if we don't hurry up the kids will be late for Sunday school. Rise and shine. Shake a leg." And she'd come charging in the bedroom where we'd all be sleeping under the covers with the candy in our mouths.

I usually would come out in my pants, and she'd make me go put on my dress. Then I'd come out in my dress and have my pants underneath, and she'd make me go take them off. I did this every Sunday. Kevin would never comb his hair or tuck in his shirt. Stevie would always come out with his hair all slicked up and he'd have on a little blue suit and bow tie.

Kevin and I returned to Church only once after Stevie died, and we never went after that. There's something wrong with that Church. Something really wrong with that Church and lot of the people that go there. Everybody does some things wrong, but there's a difference in wrongs. Mom couldn't get us baptized without a bunch of wheeling and dealing. As far as I'm concerned the minister of our Church could be the devil himself, tricking us believe that he's minister, because of the way he treated Stevie.

The Church wouldn't give Stevie any services. They couldn't even say a prayer for him. The minister said that Stevie went straight to hell, straight to hell. He explained that when Jimmy Thompson was shot accidentally by the oil man's son, he got a service. Jimmy's was an accident, but Stevie's wasn't an accident. The way that he



did it proves that it wasn't an accident.

As long as Stevie's family had been going to Church and as much as his mom needed to have a service, they still wouldn't do it. "What a poor little sad sack. It's a shame," my grandmother muttered for a week.

Stevie made it into high school. Going to High School had really bothered Stevie. He tried to schedule his classes, so that they would be the same as mine. But there were some things I had to take that Stevie couldn't, and other things he had to take that I couldn't.

Entering High School was on his mind all summer. Things were changing. Stevie and Danny got ten-speeds, so they could ride to school. I got a permanent and a bra, and they stopped from letting me ride Danny's bike because it was a boys bike and not for young ladies.

I was riding Stevie's bike, he was walking, and Danny was pushing his bike one afternoon coming home from school. We were crossing the railroad tracks. We could see in the distance that a train was coming. Stevie stood on the tracks. He didn't move, or even try to move. Stevie just stood there, but just before the train reached him it had switched tracks. I don't know if Stevie knew it was going to switch tracks or not. And a few days after that Stevie did it.

Danny and I found Stevie hanging in the finished basement with Christmas lights blinking.

After the cops got Stevie down, they separated Danny

and me to ask us questions. They were sure that somebody had helped him. They said it took a lot to hang yourself and that Stephen didn't seem like the kind of kid that would would have it in him.

"Why would Stephen, when in the middle of reading, just get up and go hang himself with his mother's clothesline in the basement?" they asked. "Stephen could have picked an easier way," they said. "That knot was really hard to tie. A lot of men can't do that. Stephen could have done it a different way." Then they peered into my face, with the minister standing behind them. "Why did Stephen do it. He didn't leave a note. Why wouldn't he leave a note. That's odd that Stephen didn't leave a note. Everyone leaves a note."

They stepped back and talked softly to one another. The minister addressed Danny and me. "You mustn't feel too badly about this." He sneered affectionately. "We know what Stephen was like. It's hard for you to understand why someone would do this." He lifted his voice. "And it's wrong. It's shamefully wrong. It's a sin. And we don't accept what Stephen did. You mustn't either."

Danny looked at me, I could see that he was confused. I smiled at Danny and said, "His mother's a dog."

That seemed to clear things up for Danny, but Mother almost fainted. And from then on I was bombarded with and endless assortment of clubs, hair-do's and lessons to make a lady out of me.

The End of a Private Road

513 begins black-topped, ends mercilessly into gravel and pot-holes, and then at the turn off to the bay becomes a hideous dirt replica of what it had started out to be, terminating abruptly at the end of the rocky peninsula, one hundred feet - straight up the cliffs - above the bay. At the end of the private road, six miles along the bay with limestone shingling the shore and the deep breathes of the bay rhythmically raising and lowering the water line, trickling the broken rock across the limestone floor, slapping the make-shift wells scattered along the bay to draw water to be used for everything but drinking, sits a once vacation cottage that has been transformed into a permanent dwelling.

Susan, pressing her face against the screen, leaned against the front door. She wondered whether Naomi would be coming. Hindered by the metal squares, some filled with dust, some fly wings, her view of the field was obstructed; the dirt clogged in the metal squares blotted a portion of the sky, but she could see the heat evaporating the morning dew, and rising, quivering, shimmying upward the way a



lightly weighted gill net will sink to the bottom of a calm bay. The buzzing of the electric fence seemed to have an exclusive right to her ears. Pulled taut from one post to the next, a single strand of charged wire was all that was needed to keep the animals in.

She rotated her head, still pressed against the screen, and rolled her eyes to view the door at the end of the hallway behind her -- closed tight again.

In the quiet of the summer afternoon she pushed the screen door open, lit a Winston at the top of the stairs and stared past the grazing mares, some futilely stamping and swatting with their tails, and others running blindly from one end of the pasture to another, trying to free themselves of the late June horseflies. Dirt clung to the ineffective repellent; their sides and neck were welted with bites from the unceasing attack on a breezeless day. Getting to their knees a roan and an old bay mare in foal dropped to the ground and rolled from side to side with legs kicking and head rocking trying to gather release.

Taking the long route around the house, past the barn, carefully avoiding the manure pile moist and warm in the hot sun where pine snakes baking openly or concealed were always to be found, Susan reached the back of the house.

Before going into the barn for a bucket of oats and rope, she walked around the side to her garden. A section 15 x 20 feet had been staked out on the west side of the barn, and the garden had been religiously planted on the

1890-1891

1891-1892

1892-1893

most well-cared-for plot of soil found on the entire peninsula, but nothing grows in the rock and sand at the end of the road. Thirteen inches of soil is all there's said to be, and seventy percent of that is sand. In early June, young buds push easily through the sand, but never grow deep enough to find soil enough to root. Without anything to secure their roots, they blow away in the slightest wind or shrivel up because the water streams past too quickly to the layers of rock below: rain doesn't seep into the ground, it vanishes suddenly.

Susan stepped carefully between the rows. Kneeling, she very gently touched a new leaf in the lettuce row and crawled through the aisle to reach her tomato plant to admire the green beginnings the size of an acorn. She stepped carefully and reached for the garden hose. First turning down the pressure of the water to a trickle, she watered the garden plant by plant.

Unconsciously she turned and stared at the window directly behind her, the only window with its shade pulled, painted shut, appearing hideously isolated. Her thoughts went over the scene in the bedroom and the trouble concealed behind the closed blind and closed door. At the edge of the garden she stared at the dried up lawn, then walked to the barn.

With a bucket of oats and a rope hidden behind her back, she walked to the pasture to catch Muley. She grabbed the halter when Muley's head was in the bucket,

snapped the end of the rope onto the link and led her to the back field.

Susan started Muley in a clockwise circle with only ten feet of the nylon lunging rope out, prodding her with the snap of a short whip, effective only in startling the mare. Turning her body to follow the mare on her path, occasionally snapping the whip to keep her moving, with her jeans rolled up to her knees, a sweatshirt cut to a sleeveless shirt and visor on backward, Susan slowly rotated on the same spot watching Muley. She gazed across the bay at the cliffs along the horizon and the rusted tractors in the fields, boarded up hunting camps, deserted lighthouse and Stanley Parchman raking a lawn that didn't exist. And after following the straight descent from the tops of the pines, dropping to the waves peaking where the currents from all the Great Lakes met, her eyes settled on the waves rising, whipping one another.

Muley reluctantly stepped quickly enough to stay ahead of the whip. With Susan's persistent prodding, she moved in her circle, but after a few times around she halted and stubbornly refused to continue. Susan coaxed her, lightly calling to her, "Come on Muley, you onery, ugly, old thing, keep it going." Muley started trotting in her circle. Susan continued her rotation, consciously wrapping the lunge line around her wrists. She slipped the end-loop over her hand and wrapped it across her palm, then switched to the other hand and wrapped it with the rope. Several

times before Muley had bent her head down, stretched her neck forward and charged, usually snapping the rope from the trainer and wildly running off in any direction, over anything. When she'd escaped into the woods, Susan had patiently followed on foot with a bucket of oats in her hand and rope behind her back through swamps, down the logging roads, and onto the plains.

While rotating with the mare, her eyes following the horizon, Susan noticed Naomi coming up the road on her three-wheeler. She hollered and waved her to the back field.

Susan allowed the whip to drop. She relaxed her hold on the rope, and turned to the bay watching the hell-divers allowing themselves to be propelled by the currents, then suddenly diving straight down into the water.

Spooked by the noise from the three-wheeler Muley suddenly tucked her head down and charged off, taking Susan by surprise, toward the barn.

With fear, Naomi watched Muley dragging Susan, with Susan still up on her feet. Skiing past the picnic table, past the lawn chairs, through the badminton net, Susan held on, still on her feet. Naomi rode after, the noise increasing the mare's excitement. "Let go! Susan, let go!" she screamed.

Trying to avoid the John Deere, Susan went down and lay still for a minute before a sudden jerk on the rope started her dragging again face down through the manure



pile. Muley stopped when she reached the pasture fence separating her from the rest of the mares. Naomi reached the fence, jumped off her bike, quickly unhooked the lunge rope, and turned Muley loose inside the pasture.

Susan remained, with the lunge rope twisted around her hands, on the ground panting. Holding her arms up, Naomi gently unwrapped the rope from around Susan's wrists and hands. After brushing the hair away from Susan's face, stroking her back, she waited for some movement.

"Open your hands, Sus." Susan's finger uncurled. "You have some rope burns. Jesus, they look awful. Are you all right?"

Susan resting on her elbows pushed herself up to her knees. "I'm ok. Christ! look at me." She rolled over onto her back. "She dragged me right through the shit-pile, right through that huge shit pile."

"Damn it, Susan, why didn't you let go?" asked Naomi attempting to brush her off.

"I couldn't. She had me," Susan said and looked at Muley. "I used the old suicide hold." Lifting her hands into the air, looking at the top, the sides, then turning them over to inspect the palms, disheartened she lowered them gently to her sides.

Naomi helped Susan drag herself to her feet. Trying to pull the manure from her hair, Naomi started walking Susan toward the main house.

Susan stopping looked at the back of the house and



shook her head. "We had better not go in there."

Naomi looked at the house, puzzled. "Why not? You need to get cleaned up and put something on those scratches."

"He's in there...and he's not having a good day."

"He is?" Slipping her hands into her back pockets, then glancing at the house, she asked, "What's the matter with this one?"

"You know. You've seen it before." Susan hung her head and rubbed her forehead lightly to remove the dirt.

Thrusting her hands deeper into her pockets and standing with her feet slightly apart, Naomi questioned her, "Is he trashing the place again?"

Watching her hand while she brushed the dirt from her stomach, Susan answered, "Let's just go to the little house...I don't want to go in there."

Looking over the house, noticing the closed blind, Naomi continued, "He's doing his scene with the gun again, isn't he?"

"Please, I don't want to go in there. Just leave it." They walked to the little house, Naomi helping her along.

Covered with dirt, it embedded in some of the scratches on her hands, her fingers swollen, dried blood on her face, straw and manure everywhere, Susan found an old jug and a packet of Kool-Aid. While she was mixing Kool-Aid, Naomi went rummaging through clothes hidden beneath some blankets in the metal cupboards. She found a



pair old of jeans. "These look like they'll fit."

Susan looked at the jeans. "They're mine." She slowly stirred the Kool-Aid watching the funnel created by the brisk stirring with the wooden spoon. "I keep extra things in here."

Susan sat down at the table across from Naomi, lifted the window, stuck a wood block in the sill to hold it up, lit a Winston and seemed to relax watching the smoke curling out the window.

"How often does he do this?" Naomi poured two glasses of Kool-Aid.

Susan shrugged. "I lost count." She half heartedly dabbed her face with a damp wash cloth, folded the cloth and absently began dabbing again while staring out the window .

"He's going to do some damage...I can feel it. He's always doing this to you. Are you so numb to it that you don't see what's happening? What is it going to take?"

"He hasn't done damage yet." Susan turned away from the window, looked at Naomi and shrugged again. "I've gotten used to it." Raising her eyebrows, she continued, "I can't even remember why, maybe I served him Cheerios when he wanted oatmeal, or maybe I told him that I didn't have as many orgasms as I led him to believe, but the first time he did this I cried hard, told him I loved him, how good a person he was and blah, blah, blah. After a while I stopped crying. And after a few more times, I'd wish he



would do it. Now when the bedroom door is closed, I know that he's sitting there with a loaded shotgun cocked with the barrel in his mouth, and I just go about my business...I'm so used to it. I accept it...my karma. I expect it. The last time he did this I was in the middle of my weekly cleaning, and I dusted around him." Susan put her head in her hands. "Do you believe that? I just dusted around him." Tracing her finger on the table around and around the moisture left from the glass, "I've adjusted or maladjusted. I just leave it alone. I handle it," she said.

"This isn't one of those things you handle."

Susan slugged down her Kool-Aid. "I know."

"Then why do you stay? Why do you put up with it?"

"Because it's no different out there than here." Susan looked at Naomi. "Everything has a clause. I'm older. It's not easy to go out there with all this baggage. I've gotten used to it...just like I've gotten used to the well freezing up in the winter, being snowed in for days, or getting hit by the storms. You swap one thing for another."

"But he's not a damn frozen well. Is he? Bottom line is that he won't change. So, it's time to ditch the baggage and dump the bastard."

Susan rubbed the top of her lip with her cigarette between her fingers.

"Admit that he's an asshole."



Susan looked at her, inhaled a cigarette, blew out the smoke, and repeated, "He's an asshole."

"Say it with feeling...HE'S AN ASSHOLE."

"I can't."

"Get it out. Stand up on the table and scream it."

Naomi stood up on the table. "He's an asshole...a fool...a crazy bastard!" she yelled.

Amused, leaning back on the chair, Susan watched her.

"Get up here, Susan. Come on, get up here."

"I can't."

"Come on."

Naomi tried to pull her up. "Say it and put someumph into it."

With a little force Susan complied, "He's an asshole."

Coaxing her with her hands, "And?" Naomi asked, encouraging her.

"And I'm sick of him?"

"And? And?"

"And this is crap." She looked at Naomi. "We're all in the same way."

"What will it take?" Frustrated Naomi jumped off the table and flopped onto the chair.

"It'll take more."

"It's serious, Susan. Don't you see that? I mean it's not something you can work with. It's something you can leave...you have to leave."

"That's what I do best. I always leave. It doesn't

bother me to leave. It bothers me that I can't stay. Don't you understand that? I want to be able to stay somewhere. I've left before. I always leave. That's all I can do. I'm like a border. I take the landlord as long as I can because it's easier than leaving, but I always I go from one landlord to another. I adapt to a man the way I do to an apartment with leaking faucets and cockroaches. I fill it with meaningless things. How did I get here? Why do I continue to end up the same as before? I'm like a rat in a maze."

Susan fidgeted with her glass. Naomi watched her without speaking. They sat, smoked and drank Kool-Aid.

A gun was discharged.

Instantly Susan jumped up. "Christ," she said nervously and ran out the little house toward the main house with Naomi beside her. When Susan yanked the screen door, the top hinge gave way. She shoved it off to the side, stepped in the house, then halted. The bedroom door was closed.

Hesitantly, they approached the door, Naomi holding onto to Susan's shoulders, both gathering themselves. Susan turned the knob, the click seemed to be carried across the water and echoed throughout the peninsula.

She opened the door. Smoke escaped into the hallway. Confused they waited for the smoke to clear, then crowded in.

"Jesus...shit."



Naomi peeked over her shoulders. "For Christ sake."

He sat on the bed grinning.

The shells had shattered the TV.

Susan stared at him in disbelief, Naomi gazed at the remains of the TV.

He scratched his head. "I'm hungry. Anybody want to order a pizza?" He watched Susan. "The horizontal hold was gone anyway. It was a piece of shit. I'll buy a new one."

Susan started to close the door. She stopped, pushed it open and stepped into the room, looked from the TV to him and from him to the TV. "What are you doing shooting the TV?" She held out her hand toward him. "Give me the gun."

"No." He held the gun tighter.

"Give me that fuckin' gun," she screamed. Running her hands through her hair and shaking her head, she told him, "It doesn't work. Can't you understand that it doesn't work. I don't feel sorry for you. I'm not begging and crying for you not to do it. That ended." With mounting frustration she continued, "What makes you believe that I care? Is it because I clean the barn, fix your meals and put up with your tantrums?" Tired, she leaned against the door. "I only do it so I can live here. I only do my job. I just earn my keep, but not to live with you, to live here. I don't care if I live with you or not. I only do what I have to do. Don't you know that I have to live with a man, so I can survive a little better."



"You need me," he said confidently.

She shook her head. "You're a fool."

"You're a bitch."

She looked at him and said calmly, "You haven't known that all this time I've been with you I've been buying clothes. Even though you'd tell me not to, I'd buy them. I'd hide them under the seat of the truck until I could sneak them into the house. And I smoke, I never quit. I kept my friends, and I have my own savings account. It's all been a lie."

"If you have a savings account, then it's my money that's in there."

"Yes, it was, but it's mine now."

She went into the room, grabbed her suitcase and started to packed.

He put the gun down. "You won't leave."

"I will. I wouldn't before, but I will leave now. I want to."

"You're not leaving." He stood up and blocked the doorway.

She zipped up the suitcase and sat down on the bed.

He came over to the bed and confidently sat down next to her.

She calmly picked up her suitcase and walked away.

She walked up to Naomi who was standing near the pasture. She dropped her suitcase, walked to the barn and unplugged the electric fence. With a bucket of oats, she



walked to the pasture. She grabbed Muley, picked up her suitcase and walked them both down the road with Naomi following behind, pushing the three-wheeler.

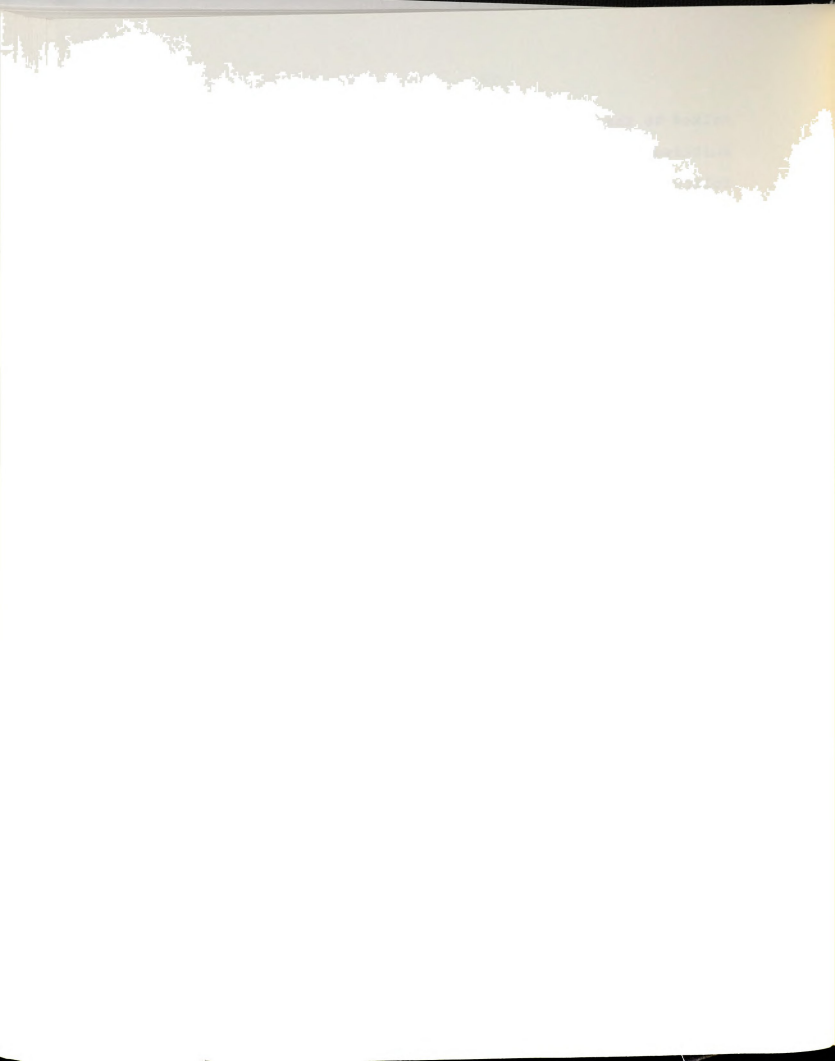
Standing in the doorway he yelled after them, "I'm going to kill myself."

They didn't look back.

"I'm going to this time." He fired the gun into the air.

They kept trotting down the road. "Will he do it?" Naomi asked, hearing the gun fired.

"No. He'll get remarried."



Pearly Whites

I'm staying under, I'm not coming up -- ever.

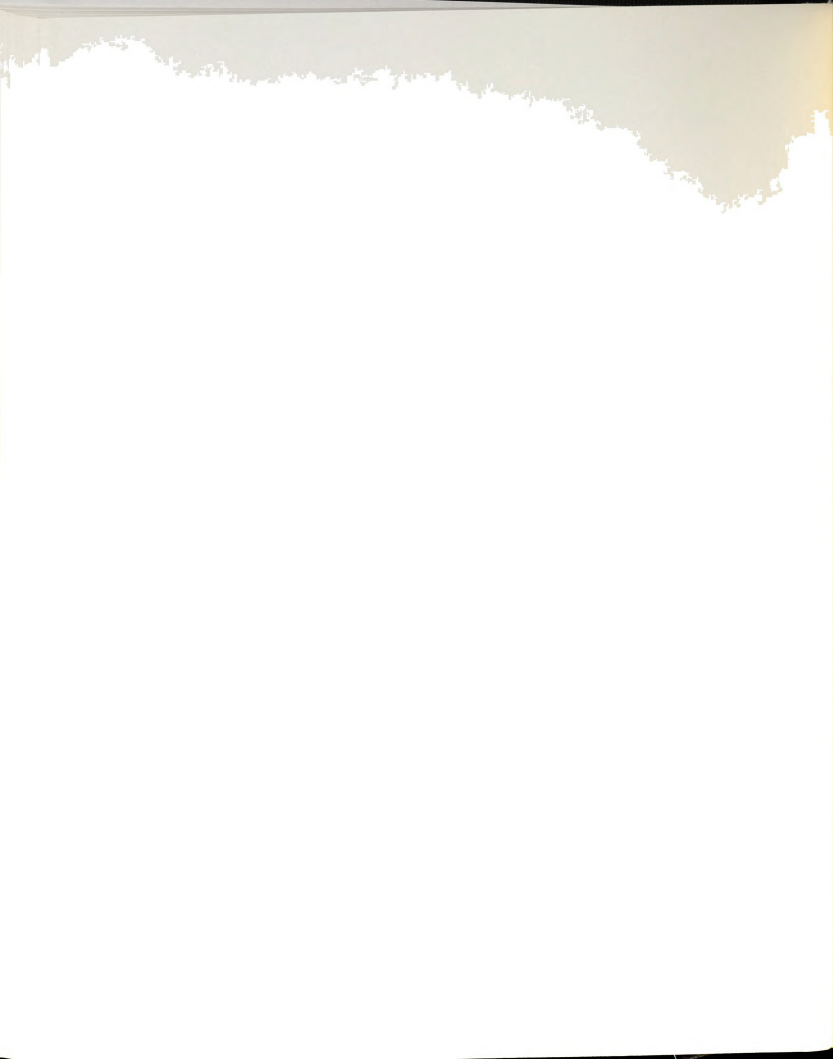
My eyes are hurting. They sting, so I'll just keep them closed. I can't see much down here anyway. Everything is so distorted. There's all sorts of particles floating around, drifting in their own directions. I can only see down as far as the sun reaches: below it's dark, I can't see anything. It's so quiet, so silent beneath the surface, except for the loose barrel that keeps banging against the other when a wave comes in.

The closer I get to the bottom the quieter it is. Nearer to the surface I can hear everyone, as if they're at a distance, jumping in and cannon-balling. I can see them plunging down in front of me and hear them yelling, until they hit and explode into nothing but bubbles with their eyes closed, some with fingers clamped over their nose and hair holding to the surface. I ought to jump out at him when he jumps down...make him scream and gulp water.

I don't think that they've noticed I've been gone. Maybe they think I'm on shore, or at home tracking down the roast.

I hate him...I hate them all. You can't trust anyone...not her...not him.

He told everyone as soon as we got here. He acted it



out on top of the raft, sniffing the air and asking if he was getting warm. "No," they said, "you're cold, cold...ice cold."

I can't go up now. I'm staying beneath the water and under this raft until they leave. (I need air.)

I'll just wait until I get cramps from all those potatoes and drown. I'll have to get cramps...that's the only way I can do it. I'll always give in and go up for air...no guts.

I can't surface. I can't face any of them. They know. They all KNOW. I'm just going to stay here and drown and float around with all the debris, until I bloat and float to the surface and get hooked by some old fisherman who will tow me in by the head. He can push me onto the shore with his paddle, so I can be raked up with the seaweed and burned in an old barrel, so the beaches are kept clean, and all unsightly things are hidden from the children. Wait until some poor little shmuck goes to the barrel to throw his popsicle wrapper away and he sees me.

No, no, no.

I'd rather drift in with the current right into the designated swimming area, marked by those bleach bottle buoys, at the Village Beach, with my tongue hanging out, my eyes bulging out, with leaches and slugs all over me, right up to Debbie Kelsey's feet.

(I need air.)

They don't know I'm under here...they can't hear me



coming up for air...whose feet are those dangling over the raft...I could yank them into the water, put seaweed over my head and scare the hell out of them, making them scream and gulp water.

I've got a twinge in my side. This is it. It must be happening. This is it...I'm going. I'll tense up and help it...it's gone already. It was only a twinge, a lousy twinge...false cramps.

I can see them through the spaces between the boards, lying next to one another. I hope they're all there when I float up. They've had a good one over the roast. I want a good one, too.

I want to come up with my back showing first, and when everyone has waded into the water to see what it is, when they're crowded around me, I'll roll over, "Ahhhhhhhhhhhh!" That'll send them all out of the water.

Dolly did it this time...I've never forgive her, and they'll never let me forget.

Every time I think I'm safe, Dolly does something to derail me. I'm used to Dolly dancing her way through the house with her arms up in the air snapping her fingers, with her slip hanging beneath her dress. And I'm used to her having those drapes open from the time she's up in the morning until the time she goes to bed. (I need air.) She likes the exposure. She wanted the house because the front of it is all window. From one side to the other and from the top to the bottom, it's all glass...like a damn

1891-92

1892-93

1893-94

fishbowl.

I'm used to her, yet she still gets me, just when I get relaxed. The family's used to her, but not the town. And I'm Dolly's daughter. Sometimes I do things like Dolly...it worries me. I have to watch myself. I have to drown myself.

I get up in the morning and say, "Hello, Dolly," and she starts singing, and, with her toe hitting the floor first and her heel coming down hard next, dancing through the house, singing, "It's so nice to have you back where you belong. You're looking swell, Dolly..." Then she dances off with those pink sponge rollers trying desperately to remain on the ends of her hair.

(I need air.)

I can't remember ever calling her Mom or Ma or Mother. We've always called her Dolly. My dad calls her Pat, her mother calls her Patricia, but for as long as I can remember her children and the neighbors have called her Dolly.

I think my younger sister muttered "Dolly" one day while she was waiting outside the door to use the bathroom when Dolly was in the shower singing. Dolly always sang in the shower. Her favorite songs are 'Hello, Dolly' and 'Mack the Knife'. Dolly must have heard my sister repeating what she had heard because Dolly waltzed through the door and responded to the name with unusual emotion. She squeezed, hugged, giggled and told her how cute she

was. We all picked up on that instantly; that's how Dolly came to be attached to my mother, and how we became attached to her -- like remora.

Dolly loves Sunday dinners because that's the only day that we eat in her dining room. And that's the only meal in which she ever assists with the preparation. She fusses, flutters, sets out her assorted bowls and dishes and turns the oven on.

I don't know what made me want to have him over to eat anyway. I've never had anyone over before, but since everybody started doing it, I wanted it, too. It's just like the time that I wanted to bleed because everyone did. I couldn't wait for the time to put my nickel in that machine in front of all the girls.

Now, I'm waiting to be waste stuck in the pipes of the treatment plant.

(I need air.)

This morning Dolly got up to her coffee and cigarettes, then shuffled back and forth through the house. She wasn't talking, she was muttering. I should have known. I should have known, but you can't always guess what Dolly might be up to. You can't anticipate what Dolly might do. She's unpredictable, but when she mutters it's definitely a signal.

She was dusting around my dad, while he was reading the funnies, and singing, "Oh, the shark has, such sharp teeth, yea. And he shows them pearly-y-y-y-y-y whites.



La, da, da-da."

She began fluffing the cushions on the sofa while we were sitting on them. She slapped the sofa and asked, "Why didn't you get up and go to church this morning?"

Timmy answered, "You didn't wake us up in time."

She yanked him up, patted the sofa, flipped the cushion over and said, "You're big enough to get yourselves up." She slammed him back down onto the sofa.

Timmy spoke again, "We don't have an alarm in our room."

"Have I got to do everything." She yanked the rest of us up. "I work eight hours a day to feed this family." She flipped over the remaining cushions, then slammed the rest of us back onto the sofa.

After she finished bustling around the house, under the guise of cleaning, she shimmied up to dad. "I'm going to put on a pork roast. It's a nice, nice roast. Joanie's little friend is coming to have dinner with us, then they're going to the beach to go swimming. (I need air.) It's a nice roast, Daddy-O. You'll like it. Let's talk about getting that boat," she cooed and squatted on his knee.

"No, Pat," he said, "I told you that last night. We can't afford a boat."

"Come on, Daddy-O, let's talk some more about it...then we'll have a nice dinner together and go for a walk."



She got up and danced into the kitchen, singing, "Oh, the shark has, such sharp teeth, yea. And he shows them pearly whites," and put on the roast.

I checked to make sure the oven was on; that was the last we saw of the roast.

She persisted in trying to convince dad to get the boat. All morning long she shuffled up to him at the table and started talking to him about that boat, and when he said no, she'd do a quick step out of the room. She wanted a boat. She told him that she had to have some pleasure out of life...he couldn't support us...she had to work to buy the food, well, he could just buy the food and she could save her money for a boat. He told her that they could plan on one in the future but, not right now. She moved across the linoleum singing, "You're looking swell, Dolly..." and put the potatoes on.

He came over about a half an hour before we expected to have dinner. Nobody was too thrilled about him being over, except me. It was my first time having a guest over for dinner. And I'll never do it again, never, ever.

(I need air...how did she do it...get it out of there pan and all?)

The table had been set with Dolly's finest dishes, a lace tablecloth was draped to cover most of the table and everything matched except the forks. Dolly was in her bedroom, angry at Dad. So, as usual, he mashed the potatoes and placed them on the table. Timmy put the peas



in a dish and Vicki poured the milk.

Nobody saw Dolly remove the roast from the oven. She did it right under our noses.

We sat down at the table and waited for Dolly to enter with the roast, but she never appeared.

Dad sent me to get her. I knocked on her bedroom door. "Dolly, it's me...it's time to eat. Are you coming out?" I asked.

"I'm not coming out."

"Dolly." I went in. "We're all in there waiting to eat...my friend is here. Please come out and eat."

"I'm not coming out."

"Why?"

"Nobody appreciates what I do. I don't have anything. Your father begrudges me what little pleasure I might have. My life is a vulgar mistake."

"Dolly, don't do this now. Come on out and talk to Dad after dinner."

"All you want is the food that I buy. You don't care about your mother. Nobody thinks about the sacrifices I make to keep food on the table."

"We want you to eat with us..don't do this. Not now, please."

"I'm not coming out."

I went back to the table and whispered to Dad, "She's not coming out."

"The hell with her, "he bellowed, "go and get the

roast."

I went into the kitchen and noticed that the oven had been turned off, but the roast was gone. I looked around and couldn't find it. I checked the oven again, then returned to the table and whispered into dad's ear, "I can't find it."

"What do you mean you can't find it? You must have overlooked it. Timmy go and get the roast so we can begin eating...we don't have to wait for your mother," he bellowed again and slammed his fork on the table.

I cringed and couldn't look at him. I couldn't turn his way.

While Timmy was in the kitchen, we began passing the mashed potatoes, rolls and peas. He returned, sat at the table and uttered, "I can't find it either."

"For Christ sake...how the hell can you both overlook a roast."

"It's not in there. We would have seen it, if it was there, but it's not there," replied Timmy.

Just as Dad was getting up to go and look, Dolly came in and sat at the table, pushed her plate out of her way to make room for her elbows, lit a cigarette and said, "It's not in the kitchen."

(I need air.)

"Well, where is it?" asked dad.

"I hid it."

(She hid it.) I knew he had heard her. She repeated

it, "I hid it."

I started to eat my potatoes.

Dolly went on. "It's my food...you're not getting it," she said and two-stepped back to her bedroom.

Dad mulled the situation over, trying to accurately determine the strategy needed to regain the roast. He sat quietly scanning the dining room then asked, "Have any of you seen the roast?"

"Nope," said Timmy.

Vicki shook her head.

He looked at Vicki, contemplated his next move, and deciding that she was his only means of obtaining the information he needed, he told her, "Go and talk to her and see if she'll tell you where she put it."

She left the room and returned in a few minutes.

"Did she tell you?"

"No," she answered defeatedly.

"Aw, Dolly is so stupid...I'm hungry," Timmy insisted and relinquished his hold on his fork.

"We won't get the roast that way!" hollered dad. "Did you smell anything in the room?"

"No. I didn't smell anything like a roast," answered Vicki.

"All right...we'll just have a look around. Check out any place you think a roast could be." They all got up and left me and him at the table eating potatoes and peas. They began the search in the living room. Timmy lifted the

cushions while Vicki peered under. Dad inspected the sideboard, and then Timmy decided to bring in the dog to sniff it out.

They followed the dog around on a lease. The dog found it in the linen closet under the dirty laundry. There was an awful scuffle. I'm sure the dog won, from the sounds of it.

I had to drag him out of there.

He wanted to stay.

As soon as we got to the beach, he kept telling them he had something good to tell them. "Tell us now," they said, "tell us now."

"No," he replied. "You have to wait...it's really good."

Then he told them. He reenacted it on top of the raft. He snuck around as if he was looking for the roast. He sniffed the air. "It's not here," he said. Then he played at looking some more. "Am I getting warm?" he asked. They all laughed and took turns yelling, "Cold, cold." And he moved to another spot on the raft and they yelled, "Medium, medium...you're getting warmer."

As soon as I dove off, he started. I could hear them when I came up under the raft.

I can't stay here.

I don't want to go home.

If I can only make it under water to the other side of that pier.

I can just try, shove off the barrels, rock the raft.

If I can find a way to detach the anchor, I'd feel better. Yes, I'd feel much better. I'll just follow it down to the bottom, just to see if I can detach it. If I can, I will. I'll let them float, float away, drift out to sea, burn in the sun and die of thirst. Maybe, they'll have to bargain with Dolly for water. "I hid it, she'll tell them, "I'm saving it for my boat."

Old Friends

The room was long, narrow, and shadowed, lighted only by a glaring bulb just above the mirror directly behind the sink. There was only a single stall. The walls were covered with a pale, pink paper with scattered velvet flowers appearing degradingly fleshy. In a gold frame, that had been screwed to the wall, hung a half-hearted water painting of diluted flowers with leaves that seemed to lose their freshness as dust and nicotine accumulated on the cracked glass.

Helen retied her apron, wiped the milk from the top of her shoe and tugged up her panty hose. She pounded on the stall again, waited for a response, and when no response came she left, passed quickly through the door and scooted down the hallway to the dining room.

Finding Nick, she pushed her hair back, ran her fingers through to the ends which, with both fists, she clutched into pigtails and holding them tightly pulled them forward to beneath her chin. Clenching her teeth she told him, "Nick, I can't get her out of there."

Absently he looked her way. "We're out of feta cheese and Greek chicken...tell your customers."

"Nick, I can't get that woman out of the bloody can."

"You talk to her, eh?" he said while waving her to go back, and at the same time hoisting up his trousers, with his free hand pulling up one side and then sliding it along his belt the way a mechanic replaces a tube on the rim of a tire.

"I tried, Nick...for twenty minutes I've been trying. How am I supposed to take care of my tables" Looking past him into the packed dining room, she waited for his reply and said in frustration, "She's not even listening to me...I don't know what's wrong with her." She looked at his long sideburns, which widened at the bottom, and at his hair which had been parted above his left ear and combed up and across the top of his head, ending in tapered streamers above his right ear.

"This place draws lunatics...'round the clock starving lunatics. Christ, Nick, all these people are stuck somewhere else. The kitchen and basement are packed with illegal immigrants. I'm out of silverware, and they're sharing a prostitute for break. They can't speak English. I tell them to get some spoons and I gotta go and get one, hold it up in the air, point to it, and say, "Spoon, spoon," and you mumble in Greek. I had a guy beat himself off under his booth inbetween his egg-lemon soup and porkchops, and now I can't get into the can." She hesitated. Nick smoothed his hair to the right and lightly patted the crown as if pampering a favorite waitress.

Helen advanced. "Why do you always put the Rights for Fathers group in my section. I hate to wait on them...they're cheap bastards." Raising her eyebrows, she continued, "I'm not doing it anymore. They treat me as though for a few minutes they have their wives back."

Nick stepped toward her. "You talk to her more," he said, smiled and nudged her toward the hallway.

Helen halted and looked ahead to the door marked Hers, sighed and asked disgustedly, "Why me?"

Nick paused. "You need to use it." He smiled and turned toward the couple coming in the front door. "How many?" he asked and led them into the dining room.

Helen charged back down the hallway, hit the swinging door head-on with both palms, banged on the stall and yelled, "Get the hell out of there now!" She paced the floor, then rested her head on the stall, waiting for a response. This is insane, she thought, what is wrong with this woman?

Leaning with her shoulder and temple against the door she questioned: "Are you all right?"

There still wasn't any response from inside. She listened with her ear to the crack between the partition wall and door. She turned and rested with her forehead and palms pressing against the stall.

"I can hear you breathing in there," she warned. "Would you please just let me go to the bathroom? I know something must have happened to you, or you wouldn't be

doing this. I understand. I've done some crazy things, too, but you've got to understand how I feel." Suddenly she did feel that this moment represented her life, the barriers, always the barriers and the pleading. "I have to pee," she begged, "I'm in pain."

Helen paused; she stepped back hopefully, expecting the door to open. Then feeling the need pressing with increased urgency, she pounded madly, deliberately, and, she hoped, frighteningly on the stall door. To her amazement and discouragement there wasn't any movement or sound from inside the stall.

"What the hell is your problem?" She reached up, grasped the top of the stall and shook the door violently. "What are you doing in there?" she demanded. "Are you with the living?" There was no answer. Helen felt her aggression drain away. She went to squat against the opposite wall, putting her hands under the lens of her glasses and rubbing her eyes. She found herself squeezing her legs together tightly, and she wanted to cry. "You are ruining my health," she wailed.

Near tears, she tried reasoning: "I'm trying to talk to you and you shut me out." This will be my hell, she thought, I'll die and go to hell and spend my afterlife locked out and needing terribly to pee.

Helen slid to the floor and sat with her back resting against the wall looking at the feet showing below the partition. She remained silent, occupied with her own



thoughts: I had thought that I've seen it all having been married to three crazies. Loudly, she said to the stranger, "I've done my time with crazies...I've been married." Staring blankly at the wall Helen retreated to her thoughts again: I want something called a normal life..void of crazies. One or two occasional crazies I can cope with, but not the whole damn parade. I want to be able to eat when I'm hungry, not when someone else is full. I want to sleep when I'm tired, not when someone else is done with me. I want to pee when I feel the need. Rising in anger, Helen spoke with uncontrollable frustration. "I'm tired of waiting on others. Do you hear me? I'm so tired of waiting on others. I'm so damn tired of waiting on others." She cleared her throat and said loudly, but calmly, while counting on her fingers, "I lived with someone who would lock himself in the hall closet next to the vacuum cleaner with a loaded gun to his head, someone who locked me out of the house almost every other day, any time of day. I'd go out to hang up the wash and I might not be able to get back in. And I put up with someone who locked himself in the garage for days." I spend more time trying to reason with someone who is on the other side of a locked door and talking through a panel of wood pleading the way believers will in a confessional, she thought with bitter awareness.

Helen stood up and confronted the stall. "I have to get back to my tables and I can hardly walk. I can't do my



job if I can't walk comfortably," she said and bent over to peek under the stall. "Since, I don't see your panties at your ankles I know you must be finished." She bent slightly at the waist and simultaneously rubbed both arms above the elbows anxiously. I should be done with this, she thought, this should be over. "Look this is the first chance I've had to go. I haven't gone since this morning. It'll only take me a minute. I only want a minute," she begged.

Helen heard a knock at the outside door. She poked her head out and found Nick standing on the other side facing the wall. When he saw the door open he said softly, while watching to see if anyone in the restaurant was watching him, "Is she out yet?"

She rolled her eyes and drew her finger across her throat as if it was a knife. "No."

"I can't have her sitting in there all afternoon."

"I can't either. I won't make it."

Cocking his head to one side, "What are you saying to her?" he asked and smoothed his hair, by running his hand gently across his head and patting it affectionately. "Be convincing. Be persuasive: the same as you are when you convince people to order dessert or another drink. Be the pleasant hostess. Don't get her upset. Say the right thing -- not what you think," Nick ordered.

"Aw, Jesus, Nick, I'm not hustling rice pudding. I'm trying to take a piss. That's all I've been trained to do, say the right thing, do the right thing, please the

customers."

Nick lightly fanned his neck and chest with the menus. "I don't want to be forced to call the cops. I don't want to have to call the cops, but I gotta full place and people are gonna have to get in there, and that dizzy mess has to go. Dealing with people, that's what this is all about. Learning how to deal with people. So pacify her. Discover what she wants." He walked off.

Helen let the door close. She rapped on the stall and heard the toilet paper roll unwinding and the woman inside blow her nose. "Why are you doing this?" Helen questioned.

There was a knock at the outside door again. Helen opened it wide. Nick was standing on the other side. She glared at him and asked challengingly, "What are we out of now?"

Nick stepped back. "You're orders are up. They're getting cold," he grumbled and left.

She tucked her hair back, straightened her uniform and tightened the bow to her apron. "I'll be back," she announced and walked out.

Feeling awkwardly uncomfortable, Helen served her orders and poured coffee refills while checking the door to see who might exit. When she sensed that her tables were content she returned, rubbed her hands over and around her face and knocked abruptly on the door of the stall. "I'm crawling under."

"I want my husband...", " the woman cried from within

the stall. "I only want my husband."

"What for?" Helen said brightening.

"Because I want him. I just want him."

"Where is he sitting?" she asked, feeling somewhat encouraged.

"He's not in the restaurant. He's somewhere else, with someone else. I thought I could talk to him, I called him. He was supposed to be here. Both of them were. He told me I was nothing, nothing to him. He told her I meant nothing. He pointed out everything I've done wrong. I thought I'd gotten better."

Helen interrupted, "Do you act like this at home?" She slumped to the floor and whined, "What the hell am I suppose to do, if he was here I'd drag him in here. I'd dump hot coffee in his lap. I'd do anything, but he's not here...don't take it out on me, let me in."

"Don't you understand. My husband's needs someone else."

Helen answered matter-of-factly. "I see it all the time. Is that what all this is over? I have to go so bad that it hurts, and that is the reason you're in here. Is that why you're doing this. Why sit in the toilet? For Christ sake, they're all with someone else, somewhere else."

"Please, just do what you have to do and leave me alone," the woman in the stall pleaded.

Helen stood up and moved closer to the door. "I can't



do what I have to do. Look, I caught my ex in bed with his cousin. I know a woman who knows that her husband is messing around with their young daughter. Ask anybody. What has sheltered you?"

"Just go away. Can't you understand, just go away. Leave me alone. I just want to be left alone!" she screamed.

"You can't be left alone!" Helen screamed back.

There was a knock on the outside door. Nick was standing on the other side. "What the hell is going on in here? What are you doing to her? Are you crazy, too? I can hear you all the way out in the dining room. I don't need two crazy broads in here. Haven't you gotten her out yet?" A long stiff strand of hair was pointing upward.

"Put in another stall. Leave us alone."

"You're just getting her upset. I don't want another scene. Can't you just get her out. Don't try to influence her with any of your ideas, just get her out. Get her behind out of there without causing a big scene," he ordered and pointed to the door. "She is a dizzy one. You should have seen her out in my dining room causing a big scene. She was on the phone in the lobby and started crying and hollering. She fell against the wall and slid to the floor when Swanson's were coming in. When one of the busboys tried to help her, she started hitting him, then she ran in here screaming to leave her alone flapping her arms and swinging at anything. The busboy started

hollering and the cook that speaks Spanish isn't here. She knocked over a bustub. Dirty dishes are all over the back section. My place is full. It's the best day I've had in a month. I don't want that looney broad running around. Get her out. I'll tell the other girls to cover for you." He started to walk away, and added without looking back, "I don't care what happens to her, just get her out."

Helen let the door close and turned to face the stall. She lit a crushed cigarette, inhaled and sighed. The woman in the stall began crying uncontrollably. Helen exhaled carefully and listened to her. Nick stuck his head in the door. "Keep her quiet. If you can't get her out at least keep her quiet"

Keep her quiet, get up your orders, push pudding, find my husband, she thought and sat smoking while the woman whimpered and moaned. "Don't let what he says bother you. Don't let anyone truly bother you. You'll get over this. You may even go through it a second time. You can't change the past. You'll forget, people forget."

Another waitress came in to retrieve Helen, so she could pick up a new down in her section. "What's going on in here," she asked screwing up her face, glancing toward the crying coming from within the stall.

"Some woman has locked herself in the can and won't come out," muttered Helen despondently.

The waitress snickered, "Anybody we know?"

Helen stood up, smoothed the wrinkles in her uniform,

"Could be anybody we know," she replied and emerged from the bathroom holding her bloated pelvis gingerly.

When Helen returned, twenty minutes later, she sat wearily on the floor, peaked to see if the same legs were still there, crossed her legs gently and tossed her head back to stare at the ceiling, able for a moment to forget her distended bladder. "Would you like to be amused?" she asked. "Do you want to hear something crazier than us?" She shook her head and rubbed the back of her neck, sat silent then continued, "Hmph, listen to this. I didn't recognize the two of them, but they knew who I was right away. They're in my section, and they're with a psychologist and his wife. I asked if I could take their orders, right. I served them their drinks: a strawberry daiquiri, two Millers and a Seven and Seven. And you won't believe what one of the women said when I asked them for their food order. It's so damn strange. She said, 'I'll take a bat's wing, lizard leg and the tail of a black cat simmered in the blood of an ox.' Then she started chanting and moving her arms around and around as if she was stirring a large kettle. They all watched me watch her and started laughing...at me. I didn't know what the hell was going on, or what the hell they were laughing at."

Helen rolled her head from one side to the other trying to crack her neck and said mimicking, 'You haven't changed,' they said. Then in unison, she and the man sitting next to her said, 'Don't you know who we are...heh,

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heh, heh. You really don't know who we are...heh, heh, heh.'" Helen chuckled bitterly.

Helen lit another cigarette, inhaled and continued, "Think back," they said, snickered and nudged one another. I didn't have any idea of what they were talking about and I didn't care. I just wanted to feed them and get 'em out, and come in here and find the stall open. They said, 'Don't you know? Think back about twenty-two years.' Do you believe that? Twenty-two years. I used to always dream about where I'd be in ten years. I don't even do that any longer, but who thinks back twenty-two years. I can't even remember who I was married to five years back. I've got ten full tables, you locked in the can, I haven't pissed since this morning, and we're out of feta cheese and Greek chicken; and they want me to remember twenty-two years back. I can't remember who ordered the spaghetti. I can't even remember what his cousin's name was...too many things happen. I don't care to have total recall." She opened the door reluctantly. "And, now, I've got to go out there again," she said soberly and skulked out.

Reentering the bathroom, Helen gave the door a strained kick, squeezed her legs together and began talking out loud in a sardonic tone. "Debbie Keller and David McClean. That's who they are, Debbie Keller and David McClean. Mr. and Mrs. McClean. I went to school with them, and I didn't like them then. 'What are are you doing in this place?' they asked me. 'Do you work here?' I poured

their water, quickly. 'Do you live around here?' They didn't wait for an answer, 'We moved to Barrington Hills.' I'm going to school I told them." Helen raised the pitch of her voice. "'It's so nice,' David said. 'That's really great,' Debbie added." She lowered it again, and continued: "Then Debbie looked over to the psychologist and said, 'She dropped out of high school.' 'Got into pot and peace,' David added. They just kept on and on bringing up my whole life. 'What are you going into?' David asked. I lied and told them electrical engineering and that I had a large grant to do it. 'Oh...wow...it's so nice to see you finally trying to do something with yourself. I would have thought you would have become an actress.' Debbie leaned closer to the doctor and said, 'She was always so different...kinda crazy, a loner.' Then she laughed and looked at me. 'Remember when you got a perm?...God, that was so funny.' Debbie looked at the others and elaborated. 'No one got perms, and Helen had this really long kinda stringy hair and she got a perm...when it dried it just mushroomed...it grew and grew. God, it was the worst mess I ever saw...no one would ever let her forget it.' Debbie laughed. 'She even drank cough syrup.' I told them I had an order up to get away. Can you imagine what her life's been like, if my perm is still memorable to her. And then, as I was walking away from the table Debbie called out after me, 'I don't remember...did you end up keeping the baby or giving it away?'"

Helen laughing weakly leaned against the sink. "She knew I kept the baby. She was the first one over to see. They did the same thing to me in school...all the time. We were evicted when my father lost his resort business. We lived in a small town, and so everyone knew it. The family was scattered for awhile: one of us went with one family, one of us went with another until we all had a place. I stayed at Debbie's. I always sat on the edge of the corner of the sofa. It's awkward to live with people that you don't know. Debbie had red underpants with little hearts, and she always liked running around in nothing but those panties. Maybe I should bring that up at the table. Why do people, friends, relatives drag up the past? They've never been concerned. They believe your mistakes are inevitable because they don't think much of you to begin with. They may act like they care, but usually they're relieved, because they found somebody who's dogged more than they are. And so what little bit they have done seems a lot better. They would ask 'Why have you and your dad been standing in that dumpy parking lot on the corner selling Christmas trees when it's so cold.' Shit, they knew. Their whole damn family knew. The school new, everyone in Randy's snack shop knew. My father went bankrupt. The good ol' days...for them maybe. And now they're reliving it."

Helen returned to the dining room, served their table and came back as quickly as she could. She ran cold water

in the sink. "They are nuts. While I was serving up their food," she said while patting her face and neck with a damp paper towel, "Debbie started staring into space and speaking in an eerie voice. She said, 'At night,' then she stretched out her arms and continued, 'she walks with a green mist glowing around her damp, limp hair hanging like the barren branches of a willow.' David acted agitated and said, 'I've seen her, too, by the swamp at night' I said, Who gets the spaghetti? The doctor pointed to David. Debbie howled, in the middle of a crowded restaurant. 'She comes for us...I've seen her,' she moaned, then groaned. They went on and on like this. People were watching and looking at me puzzled. I couldn't wait to get back in here."

Helen hoisted herself up to sit on the sink. Amazed, she said, "They were reciting scenes from a play we were all in twenty-two years ago. The Ghoul Friends, that was the name of it. She was Graveyard Gracie and he was Inspector Rodman. I was the maid, Daphne. They were calling me Daphne at the table and wanted me to recite my lines...they still know all of theirs. They kept on cueing me. It's as if they haven't changed. They repeated everything exactly as they did twenty-two years ago and talked about everyone I knew. I know, now, that Barbie married Fat Frank and that Sue is 'way out in left field' into religion. They want me to come to a reunion. All the ghoul friends are getting together. We can talk about the



good old times: evictions, divorces and bastard children. I used to envy what the other kids had. I suppose most of us do when we're young. I didn't even bring anyone home. I was embarrassed. It took me a long time to get rid of that feeling. The feeling of being ashamed."

The stall door opened slowly, but Helen didn't even notice. She was sitting on the sink leaning back looking at herself in the mirror. She was startled when she saw the other face in the mirror to the left in the background from hers. As if she had cried black symmetrical tears the streaks left on her cheeks from her mascara gave the woman's face a strange evenness, except for one hideous streak that drew the attention of Helen's eyes the same way an ugly scare attracts notice. The intensity and color of the eyes were diminished by the swollen lids.

"I didn't hear you come out." Helen watched sadly in the mirror.

"I didn't want to ever come out, but I can't stay in there. You need to use it."

"There's got to be a better way."

"Go on," the woman said and helped Helen off the sink. "Go relieve yourself."

Helen shuffled into the stall, moaned and let the urine fall freely. "A-a-a-a-h," she said, and again, "A-a-a-a-h." She sighed contentedly and then flushed.

"Do you feel better now?" She heard the woman say.

"Yes," Helen replied.



"I do, too."

"Wash up, come on out. I'll treat you to dinner and you can watch the ghoul friends recreating my past."





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