This is to certify that the

thesis entitled

SALANGADOU, SALANGADOU

presented by

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has been accepted towards fulfillment
of the requirements for

MASTERS degree in ENGLISH

Douglas Lawler
Major professor

Date Nov. 6

O-7639

SALANGADOU, SALANGADOU

By

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A THESIS

Submitted to
Michigan State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of English

ABSTRACT

SALANGADOU, SALANGADOU

By

Andrew Joseph Scheiber

Works of fiction whose narrators are "unreliable" create special problems for the modern literary critic. The text of such a work cannot be taken at face value, and the credibility of the narrator's representation of the facts of the story must be assessed before a meaningful interpretation can be achieved. It is the task of the writer to insure that such an assessment is possible. This thesis is a novel which, through the unreliability of its narrator, explores some of the technical problems of composing such a work. Its immediate purpose is that of telling a good story; but closely allied with that intention is the concern for developing means by which the author can alert the reader to the nature and extent of the narrator's unreliability, and to the significance that unreliability represents within the work.

PART ONE: THE ROAD

Salangadou, salangadou,
Where has my baby gone?

(Creole Lullabye)

CHAPTER I

atlanta she said
ain't big enough for the both of us

("Oh damn!" Milly said, coiling suddenly away from me. She plunged her face down into the white softness of the pillow, as if to bury her anger. The phone rang again, piercing the lazy stillness of the bedroom, and she sat up, shaking her long brown hair back across her shoulders. "You know who it is, don't you?" she asked, without amusement. She let the phone ring again for emphasis, then reached across to the bedstand and uncradled the receiver. Her eyebrows cocked archly as she answered. "Yes Beau," she said, with a cross exhalation. "He's right here."

I covered the mouthpiece with the palm of my hand as she handed it to me. "Would you stop that now," I whispered at her. "It's my brother for Christ sakes."

"You needn't remind me," she said coolly.

"Hello," I said. "No, we're still in bed...What? Yeah, we get the Constitution--"

Milly had lain back down, her bare brown shoulder blades turned towards me, and begun drawing the sheets tight across the lower part of her body. I softly ran my hand back and forth along the gentle contour of her waist and hips as I listened to my brother talk.

"What? You're kidding! How much are they asking for it? Why sure I'm interested--today? Hell yes, come on by. We can drive up

there this afternoon, if you want. Sure. I'll tell Milly. Right." The receiver clicked, and as I reached to put it back Milly rolled over and grabbed it away from me.

"So much for our Sunday together," she said. "What's the Leader of the Band got going now?"

"We're driving up home this afternoon," I said. "Up to Drayton. There's this place we used to know--the owner had a heart attack and they're trying to sell it off--"

She dropped the receiver onto the cradle. It bounced and fell off the night-stand. "What kind of place?" she said. The receiver was hanging suspended by its cord and emitting a harsh, continuous dial-tone.

"You'd like it," I answered, with overdrawn eagerness. "It's just like we've been looking for--a big country place, where we all could stay, away from the city and everything--"

"We all?" she said. "You don't mean just me-all and you-all now, do you?"

"Well," I said, "us Jaegers would own it, but there'd be room for the band there too--"

"You're insane, Tommy Joe," she said, heaving a kind of fluttery, half-outraged laugh as her gaze shot up to the ceiling. I could see her neck and cheeks reddening in anger. "It's not enough he calls us on the telephone any minute of the day or night--a place like that would be so cozy, all he'd have to do is rap on the wall--or better still, just break down our bedroom door--"

"Milly," I said, "you haven't even seen the place yet. It won't be like that, believe me--Beau and I grew up there, practically--I

know there'd be plenty of room for everyone--"

"Not enough for me," she said, her head shaking in hopeless laughter. "The city of Atlanta isn't big enough for me and your brother. I'm sure he feels as strongly about it as I do--what's he expect us to do with each other on some silly little farm?"

"It isn't a farm," I said. "It's an equestrian estate. It's got stables and the whole bit. It's beautiful," I added, trying to stem the tide of her anger, "twice as big as your daddy's place--and there's even riding trails. You could even bring your hunter up there if you wanted, you know--"

She turned away and bent down to pick up the squalling receiver, her spine a delicate white arch down the center of her back. I gently traced its curvature with the palm of my hand.

She recradled the phone, stilling its petulant monotone, and rolled back to me as my arm slowly closed around her waist and drew her up against me. "I don't care about my damn horse," she said, and I could sense her anger and indignation slowly ebbing away. "It's just this whole stupid situation--with you on the road half the time, and the other half either getting ready to go or at least planning for it--I'd think it would wear on you--like it does on me--on us--" She pressed her cheek against my shoulder, solicitous of my response. My hand slid along the smoothness of her back.

"I just want some privacy--for us--after all, that's why we got married--"

"Let me keep at it another year," I said, softly planting my fingers on her lips, "and I'll buy us a desert island."

"Promises, promises." The breath of her laugh sent a shiver of warmth across my chest, and her voice seemed almost free of the bitterness and indignation with which it had been laced only moments earlier. "Oh well," she sighed, planting a kiss on my breastbone. "If only I'd known when I married you--"

"What?" I said. "That I was going to be a rock and roll star?"

"No," she answered, with a dark, ironic smile. "That you had a brother.")

Pa always told us that a true Georgian could see more in a bank of soft red clay or a trunk of knotty scrub pine than he could see in his own soul, and nothing, not the well-manicured lawns of the college up in Nashville where Milly and I had met nor the luxury apartment we rented in Atlanta, had been able to weaken my taste for the North Georgia backwoods were my brother and I had been raised. Our family had lived in the hills above Drayton since before the Civil War, and Jaeger lore has it that one of our great-uncles, a certain Cuthbert Jaeger died, as did the brothers who gave the town its name, in a desperate heroic act during the last days of the Confederacy.

Dried blood, Pa said, always leaves a strain of sorts, even after the wound is healed--and so the events of the past were laid open to us everywhere, not just on the plaques and monuments that dotted the landscape, but in the stories that lived on through retelling and reenacting, and in the implicit understanding of everyone who shared the land and the common past that was tied to it. For those keen enough to see all this for what it is, these remembrances bind together in a kind of ordering principle that, after a century-plus of operation,

still exerts its centrifugal power, drawing people and events ever downward into the spinning, changeless past. My brother and I were caught in its pull before we even knew what it was; as children, we had plotted and replotted those century-old skirmishes until we knew the events as well as the land itself. History and geography, time and space, flowed together as we played those battles out, wind-fallen scrub pine becoming flintlocks as we careened through the woods and briars until the brush had scratched us bloody and we finally stumbled down the hill from the trees to stop short at the asphalt anachronism of Highway 41 spilling across our vision.

A simple glance at a map will show you something, but not all. U. S. 41, from the Florida line to Chattanooga in the north, is the backbone of the state of Georgia, the crooked axis that the whole state seems to turn on. In the south it is straight and flat as a yardstick, shooting across an eternity of broad, treeless fields; but above Atlanta it curls northward into the humpbacked, piney hills, paralelling the old Western and Atlantic Railroad that was that city's lifeline until the closing months of the war. Drayton, Georgia, is on 41, about two miles south of where the Great Locomotive Chase of 1862 ended with the capture of a Kentuckian named Andrews and a half-dozen other Union spies. In those days the town had no name, and had been nothing but a water stop on the Western and Atlantic. Now it is really not much more: a few hundred houses, a tiny rail depot, and a downtown cluster of gas stations, bars, and hardware stores. The only really significant feature is the town square, where 41 splits off to either side of a perpetually green mound of grassy earth, and there stands a stone fountain and adorning bronze statue of two Confederate soldiers. The

monument itself bears no identification or explanation, but even without words it dominates without apology the huddled clapboard buildings of the business district. The houses, modest for the most part, seem in passing to shrink back from the highway beneath a deciduous awning of trees, as if wary of that asphalt symbol of progress.

To the north of town, 41 curls along a jagged crop of ridge and through the narrow quarter-mile tunnel that carried Andrews' stolen locomotive along the old Western and Atlantic right-of-way to Chickamauga Creek. The tunnel walls are smoky black from diesel fumes, and at the northern mouth the highway veers to the east, making a sudden Y with the old railbed, now a mossy table of rock and gravel that straddles the ridge and fades slowly into the trees. That path, abandoned by the railroad long ago, leads to Drayton's Knob, the site of Colonel Jacob Tufts' mansion and stables. The Colonel, one of the last true cavalry officers of the South (though in fact he rode with Theodore Roosevelt rather than Robert E. Lee), was also our father's employer, and from our earliest childhood my brother and I were acquainted with the history and geography of the place. The old Drayton homestead had once stood on the very site of the present mansion; likely it had been nothing more than a ridge-runner's shack, but the real story of the Draytons--the story alluded to by the statue in the town square--has less to do with the Knob itself than the cut below it, to the east, where the highway now runs.

From its split with the old right-of-way, 41 follows a plunging creekbed; crystal water splatters its way down steplike rocks to the left of the highway grade, levelling out at the floor of the chasm and winding smoothly along the road until a mile or so later, when its

waters finally empty in a ten-foot fall to the Chickamauga. Along the way, the cut's steep south wall is broken by a series of natural springs; some of them are free-flowing, and their waters make shimmering strips of light and shadow where they pour across the road into the creek itself.

A few grottoes crouch underneath the angling slabs of rock where the diamond water bubbles up, as if pushed by the rocks themselves, and then is swallowed and gone. One of these is called Drayton's Spring, and here a nickel-plated plaque tells the story so jealously withheld by the monument in town--the tale of how two brothers, Levi and Jebuel Drayton, burned the railroad bridge over Chickamauga Creek to keep the bluecoats from running supply trains on the captured Western and Atlantic. Always there are cars, with license plates from Michigan and Ohio, clustered around the Draytons' grotto, disgorging Kodak-carrying tourists who stop there for a breather and a little touch of local color on their way to Miami or St. Petersburg. My brother and I spent hours watching them from the ridge line on the Knob above. We had to laugh at the reverence and curiosity they lavished on that nickel-plate marker, which in a single paragraph pretends to tell a story that has taken years to play itself out.

The truth is, the statue in the Drayton town square tells it better, without any words at all: the figure of the two brothers, not more than twenty years of age in their tattered greys, one lying wounded, bathing his shattered leg in the cool, bubbling fountain, the other, Levi, with his hand on the wounded Jeb's shoulder, looking up, past the rocky walls, past the hundred Union rifles poking out of the

ridge line on either side--looking, it seems, beyond nature and men, to the sky itself, with defiant anger and victory, as if the eastern sky he faced was about to admit the crossed stars of Dixie as a new constellation, to vex the destiny those rifles commanded.

They died, of course, in that grotto below the Knob, where the spring water only surfaces for a moment and then is lost, and the chalky rocks are streaked with a rich vein of magenta. But the real truth is still not there, but two miles to the south, on that grassy rise in the center of town where the bronzed statue of the two brothers stands smack between the north and southbound lanes of U. S. 41. It seems as if everything radiates outward from the bubbling fountain and steely, defiant figures, and the whole event is right there for anyone with an eye in his head to see, not shoved off to the side of the road in some little rocky nave as if it was something to be ashamed of.

("They really ought to clean that statue," Milly said, glancing back as the Mercedes whipped around the jog past the town square. "It's so ugly--" She shuddered, as if just looking at all that moss and lime stain had made her feel unclean.

"Maybe folks like it a little funky," Beau said, winking across the front seat to our cousin Coon. The rear-view mirror reflected my brother's handsome, sardonic smile. "Remember," he said to Coon, "how we'd play in that fountain when Pa brought us to town--and he'd never say a thing, but your mother would give us such hell for getting wet?"

Coon turned to Beau, his dark features contorted in a crooked grin.

"I can hear her now," my brother laughed, "cussing in that half-English, half-French of hers, and whatever Indian swear-words she could think of thrown in. It was all like between her teeth, like she was afraid she'd be damned to hell if she opened her mouth to say them." His head bobbed laughingly over the steering-wheel, shaking strands of long blond hair across the plush back of the seat. He sped up as the town dissipated and the highway began climbing up a gentle, tree-lined grade.

"I thought you said this place was in Drayton," Milly said, to no one in particular. "Wasn't that Drayton back there?"

Beau shot a fleeting, irritated glance into the rear-view mirror. "Just keep your pants on," he said. "It's a little ways out yet. You got to use the commode or something?"

Milly blushed deeply, her neck reddening down to where her throat was framed by her shirt's open collar. "I'm surprised," she snapped, "that you've got such a thing up here."

Beau and Coon glanced at each other, as if there was some inside joke that Milly had unknowingly alluded to. I placed my hand palm down on hers. The slender fingers were hot and knotted tight, the skin rising to damp red points across the whitened knuckles.

The highway was breaking up through the trees to the ridge-line, and below us to the right was a thinly wooded valley with scruffy pines clinging to the rock-faced incline. A tentative dirt trail crept away from the highway down into the trees and ended at a small grey-boarded shack. On the shanty's front porch stood a rusting refrigerator, and off to the side there was an ancient pickup truck,

minus wheels, resting on cinder blocks. The hood panels were folded back, brown rust and shadows filling the space where the engine had been. As we passed there was a woman hanging out laundry along a rope stretched between two tall, spindly pines. The grey clothes stirred dully in our distant wake.

Milly stared back at the shack, her brown eyes growing chill and distant. "I don't know how people can live like that," she said, bitterly.

"It ain't like they got a choice otherwise," Beau said. "One thing I'll say though--you can trust poor folks a hell of a lot more than some others I know. They don't need money to keep them true. Good country people, you know."

"No," said Milly, with a shiver. "I don't know."

"Oh well," Beau said, "I should have figured you wouldn't." He turned and nudged Coon with his elbow. Our cousin smiled silently, crookedly ahead, profoundly uninvolved. Beau was firing the car up a gentle, curving grade, his body becoming stiff and eager with anticipation as, beyond the bend, there appeared the quarter-mile of straightaway that ended at the concrete buttress of the tunnel entrance. Beau let fly with a discreet little yahoo, mashing down on the gas pedal and hurtling us towards the dark crescent of the bore. Milly stirred uneasily beside me as the tunnel came rushing up and enveloped us; Beau braked into the burst of light at the other end, wheeling the car across the oncoming southbound lane and onto the old track bed. The Mercedes lurched across the rutted gravel and skidded as Beau swore and the car jerked to a stop. Twenty feet ahead of us, just before

the tree line, a freshly cut pine log lay across the narrow lane.

"Shit," Beau said, with an ironic grin. "I should have reckoned the Colonel would make it hard for us." He yanked the ignition key away, and abruptly the humming motor fell silent. "I reckon we'll have to walk." He threw the door open, and a breathless rush of summer heat poured into the air-conditioned car.

"Walk?" said Milly, in consternation.

"Aw come on sis," Beau laughed, cavalierly opening the door for her. "It won't kill you. It's only a half a mile or so." He took her arm to help her out, but she shook off his grip. "Anyhow, it'll give you a chance to appreciate the scenery."

The four of us followed the lane to where it veered off the old right-of-way and twisted off into the trees. From the edge of the curve we could see the mansion. It glimmered from the distant clearing like a cotton-ball opened in the sun. A mystic, crystalline silence filled the scene; it had rained the night before, and all along the untended lane there were chuckholes filled with shimmering water, dark with the mottled reflections of the foliage above. The woods seemed cool, though it was a warm day, but beyond the trees the open space of the mansion grounds was a white and yellow pool of unshielded brilliance.

Beau stepped lightly ahead of us, his blue eyes darting back with an almost boyish eagerness. His pace quickened as we neared the clearing, where the sun was perpetrating a dizzying white glare on the tall, smooth pillars of the verandah, and Milly and I finally had to drop back altogether to keep from breaking into a dead run. Coon

stopped at the edge of the woods, drawing his arms akimbo, and nodded towards the house with a vague, indecipherable grin.

"My God," Milly said, her grip on my arm tightening. As we crossed the clearing the palatial dimensions of the place seemed to loom even larger. Milly and I clambered up the steps to the long bannistered verandah, and Milly tossed her head back to stare up into the tall shadows of the porch roof. A lamp, its glass yellowed with age, hung on a chain suspended from the corrugation of unpainted roofboards. Milly's eyes tracked down from the ceiling and along the naked, gleaming white expanse of the verandah, her face registering a wonderment and fascination that surprised even me.

"Shit," said Beau. He was wrestling with the latch on the front door; apparently the key the realtor had given him wasn't working. "Goddamn dime-store copies." He bent the key as he pulled it out of the lock and threw it to the floor, snapping it underfoot. Milly leaned back against one of the pillars and chuckled into her discreetly cupped palm as my brother began fishing through his pockets.

"What are you looking for now?" she taunted, as I waved my hand to try and hush her. "Your Boy Scout knife?"

Coon drifted over to the porch and glanced blankly up at Beau from the stone foot-path. "You brought it didn't you?" he said.

"Course I did," Beau answered curtly. He extracted a handful of objects, mostly coins and guitar picks, from one of his pants pockets. "Here it is," he said. He held up a key, grey and soiled with age, and he and Coon flashed oblique, secretive smiles. Beau twisted it in the lock, and the tall doors swung open, light spreading like

water across the shimmering tile of the front hallway.

"Where in God's name did you get that?" Milly asked. Her brown eyes were as wide and bright as a pair of plugged silver dollars.

"Family secret," Beau grinned, and slipped the key back into his pocket. His hands spread apart in a mock welcome. "Y'all come on in," he said, "have a look at the digs." He reached behind the jamb and flicked the light-switch. The musty shadows shrank away as the chandelier came on, highlighting the shiny black-and-white checkerboard tiling. The walls were white, though the upper corners were cleaved by filmy grey banks of cobwebs. Directly in front of us were the tall double doors that led to the dining-room; they were made of pine, as was most of the house, but their glossy ebony stain and burnished brass fixtures gave them the appearance and texture of some darker, more exotic wood. To the right, at the far end of the wall, stretched the elegantly bannistered staircase. There was a window where it turned at the landing, and eddies of sunlight swirled and spilled down the lower span of marbled steps; the upper span rose to a balustrade that ran the width of the entrance hall, and at the center of the balcony, poised in perfect alignment with the dining-room doors below, was the opening for the corridor that led to the bed-chambers and the study.

"Take your time looking," Beau said, stepping back towards the front door. "Me and Coon got some other work to do. But you go on and enjoy yourself."

Milly and I went on into the dining-room and flicked on the switch. The old glass-topped table seemed to tremble in the sudden

wash of light. On the wall to the left, thick, plush, tassel-bottomed drapery covered the expansive windows; the remaining three walls were each adorned by flatteringly idealized paintings of Tufts' father and grandfathers. Flanking the portraits were tiny brass candelabrae, slightly grey with tarnish and apparently long-unused. The china cabinet and serving-tables still retained most of their luster, and stood out like ebony jewels against the whiteness of walls and ceiling.

Milly opened the silver drawer. Inside were complete settings for twelve, wrapped in linen as neatly as if they had just been washed and put away. "My God," she said with a shiver, "this is so odd--I feel as if we're burglars or something--"

"Forget it," I said. "It'll be all ours before long anyhow. The realtor said he'd throw in the contents if we can close by the end of the month."

Milly shook her head. "You're really going to do it aren't you?"

"Do what?" I said.

"You know," she answered, leaning forward as if to push the words at me. "Buy this place. You and Beau."

"I thought you liked it," I said.

"It's impressive," she nodded. She ran a finger along a shelf on the china cabinet and stepped away, rubbing the dust between fingertip and thumb. "But I just can't picture living in this museum."

"Museum?" I said. "What the hell you think your folks' place is--a log cabin? Besides, it ain't as if it's been empty for centuries you know--the Colonel just had that stroke only last month--"

Milly shuddered as if in a draft. She was standing with her arms clasped and staring at the portrait of the Colonel that hung on

the wall opposite the window. The man in the painting was ruddy-faced, a set of closely cropped perfect white teeth crowding his tight-lipped smile. A stiff cavalry collar framed his chin, and strands of blond hair were pasted wisp-like across his forehead, bright as corn-silk against the red, unfurrowed skin. His riding-hat was pushed back, the leather choker trailing freely to one side, as if tossed by the wind, and the leeward brim pinned jauntily up against the felt-form crown.

"How long ago was that?" Milly asked.

"That was never," I answered, "unless you count fifty years of idealized hindsight. He didn't have that one done until he was almost seventy. By then I reckon he thought no one would care if the painting flattered him or not." I pointed to the other portraits, whose subjects were dressed, as the purported image of Tufts was, in cavalry uniforms. "Those aren't exactly what you'd call truthful either," I said. "The Colonel's daddy was a horse-trader, and his daddy before him was a sharecropper up in Missouri country, before the War. Seems he didn't believe in having slaves, so he worked like one all his life. The Colonel was a little uneasy about his past, I guess you could say--so he rewrote it."

"He lived here--by himself?"

"He never had a woman, if that's what you mean. But this was quite the place, once. There was company here all the time--you know, war buddies and Senators and the like. But that was before I can remember. He got old, I reckon. He sold off the horses awhile back, and let most of the help go. The realtor said no one came up here at all these last few years, except the woman cooked for him. He might

have died and nobody known if it wasn't for her."

"I don't like it," Milly said. "It feels funny--the thought of him living here, all alone, that long a time--"

I laughed. "The Colonel always was one for having a lot of elbow room." Milly stared at me, her eyes blinking expectantly, as if that was not nearly enough of an explanation for her. "Come on," I said, "let's look upstairs."

"No," she answered, grabbing my wrist as I turned to leave. "Let's get out of here. I'm in the mood for some air."

We walked back out across the verandah and down to the stables. Beau was standing just inside the open doorway, gesticulating and shouting directions as Coon paced off distances from point to point. "How about that?" Beau yelled, seemingly unconscious of our presence. "Can we put it there?"

"Put what?" I said, as Coon signalled Beau with a circle of thumb and forefinger.

"The bandstand," he answered, turning to us with a smile that was all straight teeth and enthusiasm. "We'll put it right up there against the back wall, with the speakers to both sides and monitors coming down from the loft. A little rustic I know--but hell, it'll sure beat practicing in some rented hall in Atlanta--"

"Looks good to me," I nodded deferentially, as Milly glanced down towards the empty horse stalls with a vague, uneasy look. Beau's smile cooled as he noted her agitation, and he wheeled sharply about, his arms flinging a dark gesture to the furthest corners of the empty, windy stables.

"Who would have thought it?" he said, letting his arm slowly descend. He turned back to us; his eyes darted about the vast, shadowy innards of the building. "Us Jaegers living on Drayton's Knob," he said softly, as if it were a prayer. "After all this time."

"We ain't bought it yet," Coon reminded him, laconically.

"It's as good as ours," he answered. "The way I figure, it was meant to be anyhow, the Colonel never marrying and all--besides, who else would want it? This ain't exactly saddle-club country you know."

"You told Daddy Julius about this yet?" I asked.

Beau chuckled. "Oh, he'll shit bricks I know, but I'm sure he'll appreciate it. A manager's supposed to watch the money, not spend it. If he can afford all them diamond stick-pins, I reckon we can spring for a little country retreat. After all, we make the music. Ain't that right Coon?"

Cousin Coon nodded, smiling archly. Beau turned and took a deep breath, surveying the spacious darkness that deepened inwards from the open doorway. "You know," he said, with a sudden flicker of inspiration, "we ought to go and see the Colonel. I hear tell he's well enough for company--at least as well as he'll ever get now--"

"Beau," I protested, "he doesn't want to see us--he never has, ever since Pa and him fell out--"

"Aw hell, time heals all wounds," my brother answered, with an ironic grin. "Didn't you know that Tommy Joe?" He paced off a few steps and stopped, motioning to us from the dazzling, sunlit brilliance that gathered at the doorway. "Besides, he don't have any family to speak of except for us. Don't you reckon we ought to be charitable?"

Charitable, I thought, ain't rubbing his nose in it, but there was nothing to do for now except go along. I sighed deeply and followed him out towards the clearing, ignoring the helpless, troubled gaze that Milly flashed upwards as she trailed beside me.)

CHAPTER II

what you want with some honkey mansion

said the lord of metropolis

("Five hundred thousand?" Daddy Julius had said, his brown face sagging in a feigned stricken look. "What you trying to do, kill a sick old nigger? Besides, you don't have five hundred thousand."

"We better have it," Beau answered, undaunted. "If we don't, you really will be one sick old nigger. Now write me up that check, will you?"

"I give up," Daddy said. He took the checkbook from the top drawer of his desk and scribbled hastily, with mock irritation. The glossy dark marble of the desk-top reflected his bared forearm, black on black, as it wiggled back and forth with the motion. "What you want with some honkey mansion anyhow?"

"What you want with an Atlanta penthouse?" Beau answered, grinning fox-like.

Daddy laughed now too, his brown face furrowing, as he cast a glance over his shoulder to the sheen of window that framed him at his desk. Through the shimmering glass the city skyline basked white in the midday sun, the recessed windows like dark hollows of fluorescent eyes peering out across the horizon. Beyond the taller buildings, or between them rather, lay the hazy, mottled green of the city's northward sprawl. Daddy smiled out at the panorama appreciatively, proudly almost, a collector admiring his own newly-acquired painting.

This old black man with the city of Atlanta at his feet looked to me like the Lord of Metropolis.

He turned back to his desk and carelessly tore the check off, handing it to Beau. "You sure you know what you're doing," he said, flashing an aggrieved smile that was devoid of any real pain or loss.

"Daddy," my brother laughed, "us white folks can look out for ourselves."

"Sometimes," Daddy Julius added quickly.

Beau read the check and pocketed it. "I thought you said we didn't have five hundred thousand."

"You won't if you keep on like this," Daddy said.

Beau smiled, turning to go. "I know where you're coming from," he said. "You just don't like to spend money--don't deny it, I've seen you fret over a five spot like it was five million--but I know why too. You're just afraid there won't be any left for you."

"Somebody's got to worry," Daddy scolded. "Some of us got to work for our money you know--not just bang on some honkey guitar. Get on out of here now." He waved us off with a flick of his skinny, ring-laden hand. "Buy the whole damn state if you want. But I still don't see what you want with that honkey mansion.")

Colonel Jake Tufts did not inherit the Drayton's Knob estate, or even purchase it in the sense that we did; rather, he built it himself--not with his own two hands of course, but certainly out of his own resources, particularly his will and tenacity. He had run away from his father, a poor white horse trader, and as a boy of sixteen had joined the U. S. Cavalry. It was the Spanish-American War that

proved his greatest opportunity; he served in Teddy Roosevelt's Rough Riders and stuck it out in the military until the Twenties, when he retired with a healthy pension and the rank of full Colonel. His Army career also put him in the proximity of a number of powerful and influential men whose friendship he turned to additional advantage; by the time he left the service he had acquired besides his rank a modest stock portfolio which included interests in railroads, insurance, and certain Montana oil reserves. He was in a position to have practically anything he wanted, and his first purchase after mustering out was a piece of his native Georgia soil--the land above Drayton Spring, where he eventually built his mansion and stables. The second was another parcel, two miles west, that lay lengthwise along the Southern Railway's newly constructed mainline. Here Tufts erected a sawmill, having secured through friends in the Interior Department exclusive logging rights in the forested hills to the west. It was lumber from that mill that eventually built the mansion on Drayton's Knob and kept Tufts himself from going broke; the aftermath of Teapot Dome had wiped out his supposed oil holdings, his insurance stock went bust in 1930, and only the wood from that parcel above the Chickamauga and his small railroad interests kept the remains of his fortune stable through the Depression. Even the mill went by the boards eventually, for the Colonel secured his second and permanent retirement by selling that out in the Forties to a Northern corporation. From then on it was his home and horses, and not much else.

Our father, Marsh Jaeger, first worked for Jake Tufts at that sawmill above the Chickamauga, driving the mule-teams that pulled the

felled pine through the narrow cuts to the flumes by the river. He and his brother, our Uncle Billy Jaeger, had come back from the war in '45 to find their father on his deathbed, a franchise five-and-dime in place of the family dry-goods store, and their mother and two sisters struggling to keep up the second mortgage they had been forced to take out on the house. Billy, who had been in the tank corps, went to work for a trucking firm up in Knoxville. Marsh, being the older of the two, kept close to the old man's bedside until the end, supporting the rest of the family with his job at the sawmill and occasional money his younger brother sent home. The sisters married shortly after their father died, and before long Marsh was married and a father himself. I was two when my mother died from complications after the Caesarean that delivered Beau. By that time Jake Tufts had sold his sawmill, hiring Pa up to the mansion to train and care for the horses, and Uncle Billy had himself a wife and boy child as well.

That child of Billy's was Cousin Coon. His real name, of course, was not Coon Dog at all, but Lafollette Jaeger, although the darkness of his complexion raised a discussion in the family over whether he should be considered a Jaeger at all. Uncle Billy had defied the entire clan by wedding this brown woman from Jeanerette, Louisiana after about a year of keeping house with her; he had claimed all along that the woman was Cajun and not Creole, but even the appearance of Negro blood was a frightful thing to families like our own, who lacked the excuse of having once upon a time owned slaves. The birth of his boy, the entry of that dark, mysterious blood into the Jaeger lineage, was

seen by our grandmother as an abomination and an affront to her sense of decency, and she forbade the presence of Uncle Billy's family beneath our roof. But she was by this time a tottering, broken (though still imperious) old woman, and Pa simply shrugged her prohibition off, observing that it was his mortgage now and therefore his house, and that as far as he was concerned Billy and his family ought to be as welcome as any Jaegers under his roof.

That was the final straw for Grandmother Jaeger. She went up to Chattanooga to live with one of her daughters' family, swearing that she had been driven from her own home by ungrateful children and that her exile augured evil for us all. Whether it was a curse or a premonition Pa could never decide, but it was less than two weeks after her leaving that Uncle Billy killed himself by driving his diesel rig into the side of a hill up in the Great Smokies. Pa sent the widow such money as he could for awhile, but after a few years he brought her and the boy down to Drayton. He and the widow were two of a kind, grown folks with no family but their own children, and Pa's basic sympathy for the woman spilled over into an extraordinary habit of giving which nearly carried his own family into bankruptcy.

Finally he talked Colonel Tufts into taking Billy's widow on as a cook up at the mansion; it was there Beau and I got to know Lafollette and his mother. We helped Pa with the stable work then, and after the morning chores he would take us up to the big white house where Lafollette's mother fed us hot gumbo and mushroom stew. She had an old guitar which she played afternoons as she sat on the little stoop out back of the kitchen. It was the first music I could remember hearing, firsthand at least, and to me it seemed something

awesome and mystical. Her brown fingers glided almost thoughtlessly across the strings, her eyes piercing deep into the woods as if she were looking in a mirror. She rarely spoke or sang, and it seemed to me sometimes that the woods itself was drawing those languid notes from beneath her fingertips; occasionally I would glance at my brother Beau and find him staring, his smile registering his obvious pleasure but his eyes tracking the movement of her hands, her fingers, with cool, unblinking attention, as if he was unwilling to let a single facet of the performance escape his watchful eye. Sometimes Pa would listen too, pausing by the stoop on his way up to the house, and after a moment he would silently raise his hand, tipping the bill of his hat, and move on. The brown woman would smile, glancing down across the body of the guitar, and continue playing, once in a while singing one of the few songs she had words to; and it was her voice, that rarely heard, lilting resonance, that drew me deepest into the reflection, the meditation, that swam in her warm, earth-colored eyes, my brother beside me lost in his unself-conscious mental note-taking and Lafollette staring up at her with a curious mingling of rapture and indifference as her voice trembled with the hushed, airy syllables which were not so much words as pure thoughts and feelings:

"Salangadou, salangadou,
Where has my baby gone?"

("I don't see the point," Milly said irritably, "of bothering some poor old man you haven't even seen for twelve years. He probably won't even know you." She walked stiffly, her heels clicking on the linoleum tile of the hallway. "I don't know what your brother--"

"That's enough now," Beau snapped. "We ain't going to do him any good going in there arguing. It pains him enough to have to let that place go, let alone see the new owners squabbling amongst themselves. So act nice now, will you? All that fancy upbringing ought to be good for that much at least."

"I still don't see," Milly said.

"You don't have to," Beau answered. "It ain't your affair anyhow. It's a courtesy us Jaegers have owed for a long time, that's all. Here it is. Now don't everybody talk at once."

We entered the room, which, like the rest of the place, had about it the acrid smell of amonia, vinegar, and urine. The Colonel was sitting in a wheelchair by the bed, his back to the window as he stared down at his blanketed lap. "Hi there old man," Beau said, a dark smile curling the corners of his mouth. "Remember us?"

It was hard for me to believe that the shrunken figure in the chair was the same man who at sixteen had ridden cavalry charges with Teddy Roosevelt and who a scant dozen years earlier, at seventy-nine, had still had use for almost a full stable horses. The stroke and intervening years had thinned him out, especially in the limbs, and the chest that had once seemed so full was now shallow, a concavity in which the afternoon breeze seemed to stir restlessly against the loose cloth of the hospital gown. Milly balked at the sight of him, ripples of shock and sympathy disturbing her labored composure. His good hand was absently toying with the arm that lay across his swollen belly, the dead fingers wiggling and bouncing like distended rubber worms. He looked up at Beau's greeting, eyes narrowing into the brown corrugations of his brow.

"I know him!" the Colonel said suddenly, pointing past me and Beau to Coon, who stood with Milly a few feet behind us. "Nurse!" he shouted. "Nurse! Get him out of here!" The crooked finger trembled imperiously. "That blackguard bastard--"

Milly shrank back towards the doorway, and Coon turned to follow her, showing just the good half of his face to the man in the chair. Our cousin's sideways glance was cold and mistrustful. "Maybe we shouldn't of come," he said.

"For God's sake," cried Milly, her features taut and anxious, "can't you see he's confused--"

"He ain't anything of the sort," Beau snapped. He sat himself down on the bed, and the Colonel glanced suspiciously sideways at him. "He knows Cousin Coon all right. You know me too don't you Colonel?"

The old man stared at my brother now. The pink, sunken eyes were cold with determination. "I know him--that's Marsh Jaeger's nigger nephew--"

Coon made a twitching motion, as if he was going to come after the Colonel, but Beau waved him off. "Now watch who you call a nigger old man," Beau said, with strained evenness. "But that's our cousin Lafollette all right, and this here's Tommy Joe and his wife--"

"That one," the Colonel said, pointing again at Coon Dog. "I want him out. Nurse! Nurse!"

"Now settle down," Beau said, coaxing the Colonel's arm back into his lap. "That ain't no way to speak to the new owner of Drayton's Knob is it?"

The Colonel's eyes froze on Coon Dog, his good hand clutching to his chest and his whole face bulging greyish-purple, so that I was

afraid he was going to have another stroke all over again right then and there. "Damn your soul," he said to my brother, his pinkish eyes narrowing to crescent-shaped, bloody hollows, "telling me a lie like that."

"It ain't a lie," Beau said. "Now you be polite. He come with us, all the way from Atlanta. Just to see you--"

"To see me dead, you mean," the Colonel squealed, lunging forward in his chair. "I want him out of here. Oh God--oh God! Get that black buzzard away from me--"

"Stop it!" Milly cried. "Would you leave him alone--"

"Is that the new nurse?" the Colonel hollered, squinting across the room at her. "I want that black bastard out of here--"

"She ain't the nurse," Beau sneered, glancing back at Milly. "She ain't nothing."

Milly wheeled, her eyes flashing with moist refractions, and paced off down the hall. Her footsteps rang smartly on the tile outside. Coon stood in the doorway, his usually languid form drawn erect and tense. "Nurse! Nurse! Nurse!" the Colonel cried, heedless of my brother's protestations.

"Would you calm down," Beau said, between grit teeth. "You'll wake the fucking dead." He clenched the shriveled grey wrist in mid-air and forced it down against the chair's arm-rest. "I told you that ain't the nurse--"

"I want the nurse!" the Colonel demanded, shaking his arm loose of my brother's grip. "And don't you never lay your hand on me again--your Pa done that once, and you know what came of him--"

"I know," my brother said, the muscles in his face rippling like chain-lightning, "I ain't got even for that yet either--"

The Colonel started yelling, and Beau yanked the wheelchair sideways, pinning the good arm between it and the hard metal cross-bar of the bedstead. "My arm! Nurse! Nurse!" the Colonel howled, squirming in the chair so that his dead hand jounced rubberlike against his swollen belly. "You nigger bastard!" he cried. "Nurse! Nurse!'

"Come on," Beau said, catching my arm as I moved to release the old man, "we done paid our courtesy." He closed the door behind us as we left, but even as we got to the front lobby, where Milly was tearfully waiting, we could still hear the Colonel's muffled cries, audible above the ragged chatter of senile voices and indifferent shuffling of nurses and orderlies, that distant but stubbornly assertive voice no longer even pleading, but simply repeating a single word which must to him have seemed an expianation as much as a curse:

"Nigger! Nigger! Nigger! Nigger!")

It was late winter, six months after the ownership of Drayton's Knob passed from Colonel Tufts' hands to my brother's and mine, that the Sons began preparing for their next road trip. Daddy had spent the better part of a year putting it together, carefully selecting and arranging the dates, as if this tour in particular was being designed to conform to a certain pre-ordained architecture. He spoke of it enthusiastically as "his Southern tour" even though only seven of the thirty-five dates were to be played in the Deep South. The popularity of the Sons had long since precluded a regional tour and the smaller halls and paychecks it would involve, but we all knew

from the beginning that this trip's itinerary had been determined by something more than the usual economic and logistic considerations.

It was true we had outgrown the small Dixie circuit clubs, but we had hardly forgotten them; in earlier times we had been a struggling regional band, barnstorming our way through as many as twenty-five one-nighters a month, living out of an Econoline van in what seemed an endless cycle of highways and bars, barbituates and amphetamines. Now only the largest halls would hold a Sons of the South audience, most of them selling to capacity at that, and no doubt we could have filled them south of the Mason-Dixon as easily as anywhere else; but in two years as a front-line concert attraction we had not performed within two hundred miles of Atlanta, our old home base.

I had always been content to think of it as Daddy's way of getting even for the lean years, though he insisted it was simply part of his commercial strategy; success had come hard, for in spite of the following we had gained along the backbreaking Southern roadhouse route, the local promoters and P. D.'s had seemed content enough to leave us to those little bars and clubs. Our first album went largely ignored until Daddy, by some miracle of palm-greasing, broke it onto playlists in New York and Los Angeles; none of us could figure where he got the money to engineer that little piece of bribery, but it was something that had been impossible at any price in Atlanta or New Orleans, and Daddy was not about to let them forget it.

The "Southern" tour Daddy had been planning looked to be a triumphant and ludicrously profitable reminder of those earlier days. It was not so much a road trip as a mission of conquest; the last leg of the tour, when seen outlined on a map, called to mind nothing so

much as a sweeping victory march across the Southland, roaring out of the west and through Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and Georgia, a full week of closely spaced dates that ended with our first Atlanta performance in over two years. I for my part didn't care much what cities we worked, but I could see the appropriateness, the efficacy of the thing, and Beau and Daddy Julius took a particular pleasure in its architecture, as it gave them a way of expressing some peculiar poetic sense, long since dead in myself, of the way things ought to be.

We were moved into the mansion by October. The news that we--not just the Jaegers, but the Sons of the South themselves--had set up musical shop little more than an hour's drive from Atlanta was pure cockbait to the local promoters; the city had always been our business headquarters, and in fact both Daddy Julius and Milly and I had kept apartments there, but as individuals our presence had been considerably less suggestive and tantalizing than the presence of the entire band would have been. Our purchase of the Knob sent the shudder of rumors snaking down 41 into the heart of the city, and from that time onward it was inevitable that we would play Atlanta--on our own--Beau's and Daddy's--terms.

"This time," Daddy Julius had laughed, "we don't come till it hurts--they're just thirsting for a good slice of Southern ass--just like fucking, you know? The longer they wait, the more they'll pay--and the more they'll like it."

We were up in Nashville then; the new album we'd been working on was almost finished, but Daddy had told the trade papers that it

wouldn't be ready for release till well into the tour. "What?" Beau cried, when Daddy told him of his announcement. "You mean we hauled ass to get this thing done, and now you ain't even going to let it out? I ain't going to kill myself out on the road without even having a record to push--"

"The hell you ain't," Daddy snapped. "I don't care about the fucking album. We can make a fucking album any time. I worked on this tour for a year--how long did this record take--six weeks? I ain't going to throw away a year's worth of work on something you white boys can do rolling off a log." He smiled fleetingly, his teeth a gleaming fluorescence against his licorice-colored skin. He glanced absently about the sound-booth, which was suddenly silent except for the static hum of raw, unmixed tape winding slowly around its spool. "Well I reckon I'll split," he said finally, his ringed fingers winking with metallic reflections as his hand flashed a swift goodbye. "Sounds like you white folks got some work to finish up."

"I'd fire his ass," the engineer said, when Daddy had gone. His hands darted across the maze of the control-board. The needles jumped and quivered as he slowly inched the volume switches forward. "I don't know why you stand for that shit from him."

Beau chuckled, glancing out at the empty studio. Silhouettes of mike-stands and high-hats jutted darkly upwards into the thin red light beyond the control-booth's window panel. "He is one crazy old nigger, I'll admit that," he said. "But you know, he's right. You know how many units of this we got on order retail? Two hundred thousand. We've sold a million bucks worth of this thing, and it ain't even finished yet. Shit," he said, the sound of his own playing

catching his ear. "Run that back, will you? I want to try it over."

"Sounds great to me" the engineer shrugged, stopping the tape. "But it's your money."

"Yeah, well I reckon we can afford it," Beau said. "We got a million bucks presale on this. It might as well be right."

The tape chattered and beeped as it rewound. The engineer reached up and flipped a toggle switch on the panel above the booth's plexiglass window. Along the ceiling and walls of the studio baffled panels slowly opened; the soft red light shifted in crisscrossing angles over the studio's interior, transforming the dark protrusion of microphones and instruments into a dreamy, flowing landscape of illumination and shadow.

"Spare me the atmospherics," Beau said, as he picked up his guitar and headed for the studio door.

"Just showing off," the engineer said, flashing a labored grin. He punched the spinning tape to a stop. "We're ready here." His hands danced across the console, clearing the channels for the overdub.

Beau closed the heavy soundproofed door behind him and stepped into the eye of the plexiglass window, his coiled guitar cord wriggling tail-like behind him. He turned his back to us as he bent over and plugged it in, his body a dark silhouette against the red suffusion of light. His index finger traced a circle in the air as he stood back up and the engineer punched the console. The tape spool heaved quietly into motion.

The song played from the beginning. Beau stood with his back to us, his bobbing head shaped into a surreal shadow by the protrusion

of earphones; in the control booth, the music's unmixed strands flowed together as they emerged from the speakers along the wall above the console, the song slowly building in intensity, each supporting part locking into place, as it rose towards its unfinished climax. Beau stood poised now, his head nodding downward into the dark huddle of his body as the spool slowly unwound, unfolding inward towards the slender track of virgin tape that was reserved for him and him alone.

"Here goes," the engineer said, as he gently pushed the volume switch forward on the empty channel, and there was, in the red wash of the studio beyond, the sudden flash of the bottleneck, tracers reflecting from it like sunburst across a ridge-line, as it swooped towards the thin, shadowy neck of the guitar. The report of its contact shrieked through the booth, sending the tingle of a swift, invisible finger down my spine; the sinuous, flowing procession of notes that followed was broken only occasionally by the leap and plunge of the slide-bar, each gap a gasping breath of silence which was inevitably followed by the renewed assault of the bottleneck on the shivering strings. My brother's dark form seemed motionless now except for the forearm which raced along the neck of the guitar, the glass sheath of the bar drawing red lightning from the baffled lamps as it raked across the unseen frets. Then it was over, the moment collapsing into a final silence as the engineer slowly pulled back the master volume and let the song die into the studio fade. Beau whipped his earphones,off flashing a thumbs-up sign, and unplugged his guitar.

The engineer slowly shook his head. "That pastes me up against the wall," he ejaculated. "I didn't think he could improve on that last one--but he did it all right."

"Course I did," said Beau, bursting through the doorway with his guitar in an eager, boyish clutch. "It gets better every time. Let's run that one back and have a listen."

"Damn," said the engineer, shaking his head. "It's good, no doubt about that. I still don't see why you take all that shit off that crazy old nigger."

"Builds character," Beau answered, winking across at me as if he expected I would understand.

Later that night, back at the motel room, Milly and I lay on the still-made bed, absently talking over the drone of the television. "So it's done now?" she said, dully. "The album, I mean." She sighed with disapproval at the joint I had taken out to light. Deferentially, I laid it back down on the bedstand.

"This afternoon," I said. "I watched Beau do the last overdub. He's at the studio now listening to the rough mix."

"My God," she said, rubbing her temple with the palm of her hand. "He's been in that studio for two solid weeks now." Her fingers halted as they descended her cheek, as if they might have detected a blemish. "Doesn't he think of anything else, like any normal human being?"

"Like what?" I asked.

"Oh, I don't know," Milly said, oddly flustered. "Like books--or politics--"

"Or women?" I said.

She laughed nervously. "Oh, that too, I suppose. You would think that once in a while--he's not exactly ugly, you know--"

"Good looks run in the family," I said, reaching across to stroke the fingers that had paused unconsciously on her smooth, unblemished cheek.

She pulled her hand away, letting it descend limply to the mattress. "I wish that was all," she said, with conscious weariness.

I let that last remark die into my own silence, and stared up at the blank wall above the television set. There was a kind of comfort in doing nothing more than that, in letting everything inside me drain away into a placid emptiness. But Milly would not let it go.

"So what now?" she asked.

"You mean tonight?" I said.

"No," she answered, with a gentle, irritated insistence of her body against mine. "I mean now that the record's finished. Wouldn't it be nice to go away for a while--just the two of us--maybe down to my folks' place in Tampa--"

"I can't," I said. "Not now. Not with the tour coming up and all."

"That's not for another six weeks," she said, with a distressed, pouting glance.

"We got to practice," I said. "It's got to be really kick-ass this time--"

"Why?" demanded Milly. "For who? For Beau and Daddy? Or are you finally as crazy over this thing as they are?"

"I don't call a hundred grand a night crazy," I said.

"It isn't the money that's crazy. It's the idea of the thing."

"The idea of what thing?" I asked irritably, even though I knew without having to ask, exactly what she was talking about.

"Oh never mind," she said. Milly turned her head sideways on the pillow, her features set in a frown that seemed as delicately arranged as a new coiffure. "What would you say," she asked, "if I went back home to Memphis while you're away--you know, just to visit my folks?"

"I reckon that's fine," I said, glad to have a change of subject.

"You're sure?" she said. In the question there was an odd solicitousness which I felt too tired to try and decode.

"I told you it was fine. Maybe they could even come and see us when we play Memphis."

"I don't know Tommy Joe." Her eyes cooled, burying their attention in the rise of pillow that spread between us. "I doubt they'd come."

"Well, you come yourself if they don't."

"Of course," she said, with gentle sarcasm. "I wouldn't miss it for anything."

"Don't be that way," I chided. "I wouldn't be in that madhouse myself, if it wasn't for the money."

"You know it's not the money," she insisted, with a grim, half-humorous allusion to our earlier exchange. "It's the idea of the thing--whatever that means."

"O.K., the idea of the thing then. Just bear with me for awhile longer--till I figure it out myself."

We laughed together briefly, our amusement spending itself and then collapsing into silence. Milly lifted her head so I could slip my arm underneath it, and lay back down with her cheek against my shoulder. I drew her tighter against me, and she undid the top

buttons on my shirt. Her hand teased my chest hair with a random, unconscious detachment as the greying figures on the TV screen spoke and gesticulated, their phrases short and indistinct, like bursts of static. It never occurred to me to try and understand what they were saying, or to ask Milly if she had heard, because whether I could hear or understand was irrelevant to me in these moments when the rest of the world receded into a grey, humming nothingness and the cold, dead space between us had been displaced by the closeness, the warmth--and the silence--of our two bodies pressing against each other.

This was when we were best together, when there were no words, no thoughts even, to shatter the brittle, speechless moments that, when shared, formed the basis of the bond between us. We fell asleep fully dressed, oblivious to the grey sputtering of the television above the foot of the bed; I woke in the middle of the night, and let Milly's head slip gently off my shoulder onto the neat, unturned blanket. She stirred briefly, a few vague, wordless mutterings escaping her dreams before she settled back into a silent sleep. The room was dark, save for the eerie light cast by the imageless eye at my feet. I got up to turn it off, but the sizzling static held me transfixed for a moment, filling the darkened room with a subliminal vibration, like the stirring of a long-buried memory struggling to make itself felt.

In the weeks that followed, the ordinary passer-by who stopped at the Drayton brothers' spring might well have imagined he heard gunfire coming from beyond that towering north ridge, rhythmic and rumbling, like syncopated cannonades. At first, he might have thought

of those distant drums as nothing more than the music of the hills themselves, owing to the way those chasm walls confute the rumbling with the drone of semi-trucks and the gurgling rush of spring and creek waters; but if anyone had ever gotten the inclination to climb to the top of that wall, he would have seen, far back in the trees, the fading white mansion itself, sitting like a forgotten monument in the distant clearing. And if from the top of that ridge the thunder seemed stronger and more distinct, he might have come in a little further; sooner or later, one of the grooved, well-packed trails that crisscross the woods might have led him to the stables, a hundred yards down from the house, with its peeling white paint and freshly weatherproofed roof gleaming silver in the sunlight. He might too have seen the motorbikes, clustered like sucklings around the stables' yawning doorway.

And there would have been the source of his distant thunder: not the bikes, but inside the stables: the battery of speakers, piled by the scores on the steel bracework and framing the platform where five men stood, just as an old-time family band might once have been found calling snap-outs, reels, and back-steps. But then would have come the roar of that battery, the decibel force stirring dust from the stable doorway and filling his ears with a painful, toneless hum, like the sound of a streaking missile. Yet even above that blur of sound he would have heard something distinct from the rest--a sinuous, droning thing, strangely lyrical amidst the blast surrounding it. That would have come from my brother Beau, his head bent outwards over his guitar and bobbing up and down with the looping succession of notes, eyes tracking the fluid motions of his left hand over the

strings. Possibly, just for the benefit of that poor, bewildered passer-by, he might catch a high note and strangle it, teasing the string until the whole bank of speakers shook in sympathy; and as that fundamental vibration shattered into a flurry of descending melodic fragments, he might look up and smile at the rest of the band, his cheeks flushing with waves of raw pleasure.

I often thought of that imaginary passer-by as we prepared for the upcoming Southern tour. In those final weeks the music became an obsession with Beau, and a constant for the rest of us; he marshaled the band through exhausting marathon practice sessions, often driving us from dawn until well past midnight, breaking only to let us eat or gulp the occasional No-Doz that would enable us to keep up with him. Beau's enthusiasm and energy seemed to be renewed rather than expended by the activity; no detail of the preparations escaped his attention, and few moments were wasted on sleep or other such prosaic concerns. He stayed to help Coon with the equipment at the end of every evening, and would wake us in the early light of dawn with shrieking guitar cadenzas that roared up from the stables with all the force and surprise of a daylight bombing. Daddy Julius was there too, with his black suitcase of hallucinogens and various other chemicals; but it was my brother's playing that provided the most spectacular colors. With each new tune he caught fresh fire, his guitar becoming steadily and incredibly better as he shook the grainy dust from the newly waterproofed stable loft. Some days he played continuously for hours, the long solos fluid and effortless, his fingers a deft blur of motion as he stared distantly out at the stable doors where, more often than

not, Daddy Julius stood, his thin black body hunched in the chill and his eyes and ears riveted on Beau, as if every golden note that fell from beneath my brother's fingers was the ring of coin in the old man's coffer.

Milly had come down with me from Nashville. She had hoped to spend a lot of time riding, and had had her hunter brought up from the stables in Atlanta; but she had to send him back down after a week, as the constant blast of the music mad him jittery and hard to manage. She seemed somewhat bitter about having to give him up, but as was our habit we talked little about it. It was, in fact, becoming increasingly difficult for us to talk at all--not because of anger or indifference on either of our parts, but largely because of the time I spent down at the stables and the swimming incoherence I was suffering at the hands of Daddy's psilocybin. It was the band's favorite hallucinogen, and by the end of most practices the crumpled mushroom cups littered the perimeters of the bandstand. Often I would come stumbling up from the stables at three in the morning, waking Milly or interrupting her solitary reading with my insane visionary ramblings, only to collapse beside her and awaken the next morning to find her sleeping with her back turned emphatically towards my side of the bed. As the opening date for the tour got closer, the mushroom cups were used in lieu of meals and even sleep, and the last morning there I lay in bed, sleepless still, with the last effects of the hallucinogen dancing before my eyes, and heard, like a voice from our of the clouds, the familiar shriek of Beau's guitar echoing up from the stables.

"How does he do it?" Milly said, as I sat up in bed and tried to focus my eyes. "He was up all night."

"What the hell," I groaned, "so was I." On the far wall, next to the closet door, hung a huge vanity mirror which seemed to be exploding with the dazzling redness of the reflected sunrise. The perimeters of my vision were thick and fuzzy; I was able momentarily to focus on the image of me and Milly in the big double bed, but gradually the coherence of the scene dissolved, our reflection shrinking dizzily away into a glorious patchwork of red and orange.

"Jesus," I said, screwing my eyes shut, "I believe I've O.D.'d." I forced the lids open again and tried to look at the ceiling, but the leafy patterns of shadow began to spin giddily away from me.

"He rode his motorcycle last night too," Milly said, tiredly. She was sitting erect in the bed, with her hands clasped across her kneecaps. She looked as if she too had been up all night. "Didn't you hear him? He was whooping through the woods until all hours."

"Was that him?" I said, half-joking. "I thought it was my head."

"It isn't funny Tommy Joe," Milly said stiffly.

"Aw, he's just blowing off steam. He's got to do something. He hasn't got a wife, or an old lady even--"

"I'd think it would be easier that way," she said, the words measured with a careful, even emphasis. These things always brought out the hardness in her, the impulse she had to hide her hurt, to cover each deepening bruise with a calm and dainty hand, as if it was the most natural place in the world to rest that dangling palm. Occasionally, as this morning, there would be a tiny catch in her voice,

signalling that things were coming a little too fast or too heavy for her to keep up her normal lines of defense; but still the composure was there. Even the tears, I thought ruefully, seemed warmed by a kind of self-righteous dignity.

"You have to get up Tommy Joe," she said. "You promised to drive me down to the airport."

"Oh Christ," I said. "I forgot. I told Beau and Coon--"

"You told them nothing," she snapped, with a stern desperation. "You're driving me to the airport." There was a pause, and then: "Please Tommy Joe."

"All right," I said, blinking up at the red and orange eddies that seemed to be pulsating about the room. "I'll drive you to the fucking airport if it means so much to you."

She got up suddenly, throwing the sheets back and walking to the mirror. I was caught shivering in the sudden cold. "Hey," I called out, "I told you I'd drive you."

"You wouldn't have," she sniffed, "if I hadn't pleaded with you."

"What?" I said, with forced indignance.

"Is that what I have to do for you?" she said, talking into the wall. I'll bet Beau doesn't have to plead with you like that."

"For Christ sakes," I said, and the room started to swim as I sat up again. I dropped back down into the dizzying, chilly sheets, her bare shoulders seeming to melt into the corners of my vision, bending away from me, the head bowing at the neck and hair bobbing, the distorted but unmistakable form of a woman crying.

CHAPTER III

this ain't one of your fuckin'
operas this is
the sons of the south

The limo was moving slower now. The hall was a few blocks ahead, and already the long lines of traffic and people on foot were closing ranks with each other, snarling together ass to bumper so that the distant center towards which we were inching seemed to be increasing in density, like a knot of unravelled string pulling tighter and tighter. Couples strolled carelessly through the creeping pools of the headlights, and occasionally they would even stop, glancing sideways at what must have appeared to them the opaque, imageless windows of the limousine.

For what seemed like hours we had been passing blocks just like this one, and I was trying to imagine why Daddy had booked a hall here, in the dark, rotting heart of the city, and not one of the newer ones at the edge of town. I couldn't imagine Milly coming down here, let alone her folks. There was no grass, no foliage anywhere, nothing but the cracked sidewalks sloping down into the worn gutter depressions, and the grey storefronts and warehouses, their windows covered with chain-link screens that obscured our passing reflection like a veil. Wedged between these were brick apartment buildings; here black faces peered out the windows, silhouetted by yellow lamplight, and on the stoops were small gatherings of Negro boys who noted

with sullen, nonchalant glances the people hurrying by their doorways.

"Memphis, Tennessee," Beau mused. "Birthplace of honkey blues." He stared out through the one-way glass, his eyes tracking up the sooty face of one of the apartment-houses. From its dark cornice rose a sprouting of television antennae, standing out like dark, spiky nettles against the purpling sky. "Elvis cut his first record in one of these dumps. The equipment was so shitty they had to hang a mike out in the stairwell to get a decent vocal sound." Beau paused, his bottleneck glimmering in the hollow of his palm. "They sold a million copies of that fucking record--and poor old Big Boy Crudup, the man actually wrote it, never seen a penny of it. Spent most of his life on some lousy sharecrop acre down in Mississippi."

"Ain't that the way," Daddy Julius chuckled, turning around in his seat. "You white boys always ripping off us poor old niggers."

"You got some room to talk," Beau answered. "You and your twenty per cent off the top."

"Us old niggers got to look out for ourselves," Daddy said. "White folks raise ungrateful children. And I'm getting too old to pick cotton."

"From what I hear picking cherries was always more your style," Beau teased.

Daddy grinned, his gold tooth sparkling. "I never done any such thing," he snapped, "and I loved every minute of it. But don't you be thinking about that yet. You got a gig to play you know."

"Don't worry Daddy," Beau said, his eyes absently following the figures on the sidewalk as they pressed forward past the creeping limo

towards the crowd's rapidly condensing center. Black faces the color of ash stared outward into the flickering blue fluorescence of the street lights. "Don't you worry your wrinkled old ass. Tonight's in the bag."

"Somebody's got to worry," Daddy shot back. "Might as well be us poor old black folks. We're used to it."

As much as Daddy may have felt obliged, there wasn't any need for concern. The band fell into synch quickly, as it had on the earlier stops of the tour. Each performance seemed to gain in momentum from the one that preceded it, and by the time we hit Memphis the pattern was already set. Beau was, as always, the center of attraction, singing and playing better than any of us had ever heard him before; but the rest of the group was catching a fire of its own. The rhythm section, which usually needed a few gigs to work out the stiffness, had been performing at white heat from the opening night: White Willie, his face hidden beneath the drooping brim of his felt-form hat, black hands scurrying phantom-like across the neck of his bass, and Jeff the drummer who, invisible to the audience behind his towering drum-kit, pumped away furiously, red-faced with narrow eyes and chin bulging like some maniacal Sidney Greenstreet--the two of them clicked together like mad clockwork, with an intense precision that at times distracted me even from my brother's performance. Above this thundering synchrony rose the piano--Burke tossing his long hair back across his skinny shoulders, rattling bluesy arpeggios and solid, chordal chunks of rhythm from his Steinway grand. As second guitar, I played foil to Beau, shooting the gap between his fiery flights of

fancy and the support of the rest of the band.

But the music was only the centerpiece, the essential expression, of the spectacle that Beau and Daddy Julius had taken so much care to engineer. There was the matter of our onstage dress--the sartorial white cotton suits (not unlike the type Colonel Jake Tufts had been in the habit of wearing) and open-necked chiarascuro silk shirts--which had always seemed to me an unholy (if fitting) matrimony of Southern aristocrat and ghetto street-pimp threads. White Willie in particular relished wearing the outfit, and one could almost imagine him seated in a wicker chair, his skin like onyx against the pearl of his suit, with a properly deferential white woman serving him a mint julep.

The costumes, though, were only part of the elaborate dramatic posturing Beau and Daddy had created for this particular tour. The show's opening also reflected their peculiar sense of the symbolic, and that night in Memphis began no different from the rest: the applause had started up as soon as the five of us appeared at the edge of the stage, and Beau, wandering out to the microphone, stemmed the increased fervor of the commotion with a wave of his hand. He slowly picked his guitar up and strapped it on, the silvery strings zipping with tracers of light as they rose into the field of the stage-lamps; and then, as the rest of us dashed for our instruments, he leaped into the air, a giant Stars and Bars unfurling across the backdrop as he landed to the crash of the opening chord. For me the show had nothing else quite like that moment, because everything else that followed, even the music itself, seemed to flow from, or be invested with, the memory of that initial gesture, that incredible split-second in

which my brother was framed in midair by the unfurling colors of the South's dearest and most powerful icon.

From then on, it was all in the music, the Sons' bastard mixture of old Deltoid blues and Beau's own tunes flowing together into one seamless, nearly constant current of sizzling, crackling energy. The Memphis crowd demanded and received three encores; with each return more of them poured forward, gathering in a hand-clapping, foot-stomping mass beneath the raised lip of the stage. Beau answered their cheers by leaning forward across the monitors and challenging the crowd, daring them it seemed, to make their roar heard above the band's, then silencing them with rearing, shrieking slices of the bottleneck across the strings. It was a game he played, drawing them forward and repulsing them only to renew the cycle with another crouching, leering invitation. His smile was radiant and triumphant as they beat in waves about the base of the stage, and it was as if each frenzied reiteration of the pattern was testing the barrier between himself and them, testing his absolute control not only of his art, but of his audience as well. I was relieved when, the cycle completed for the last time, we unplugged our instruments and escaped the stage, the last strains of a taped chorus of "Dixie" dying away into the crowd noise.

"That's it! That's it!" Daddy Julius shouted backstage, clapping Beau on the back. "You boys are really hitting the note now--I bet they could hear you honkeys in Atlanta tonight!"

"Not hardly, Daddy." Beau shrugged with barely-concealed elation. "Not hardly. But you just wait."

Daddy wrapped one arm around Beau's neck, raising the other to take a swig from his bottle of milky-colored ulcer tonic. Flash-bulbs popped in the baffled darkness of the wings, and when my eyes had cleared I could see the blue-shirted security guards reining in a small press of photographers. There were some women too, or rather girls, hovering distantly behind the flashing cameras, their sullen posturings betraying an undisguisable earnestness. I thought of Milly.

"One more," one of the photographers said, and Daddy adamantly released his grip on Beau's neck.

"Forget it," he said. "Enough of this shit anyhow. It ain't my job to sell your magazine. We got business of our own to take care of. You want to talk, you talk to me. But no more pictures. These boys got to rest up. They got to travel tomorrow." He nodded to the guards, and, pushing past the press people, he took one of the girls on either arm and led the procession of players and groupies away through the narrow corridors of the wings. Beau and I hung back, watching as the cops pushed the press people along behind Daddy's crowd and the whole ensemble finally disappeared through the distant, shadow-steeped stage exit.

"Daddy's groupies," Beau said, chuckling softly to himself. "Never seen nothing like it. White ass too, every one. He must have been some gigolo in his day."

"Yup," I said, thinking of Milly and then not thinking of her at all, my mind fixing instead on the thought of one of the girls that had left with Daddy.

"Did you catch that one," Beau was saying, "the blond one with that Stars and Bars halter top? Jesus!"

I had noticed her--not really the girl herself, but the shape her body had made of that scarlet field of cloth, and the way those two blue stripes had angled down from her shoulders across the swell of her breasts, an embroidered star poised like a nipple at the tip of either one. "Yup," I said. "Maybe we should get us a backup chorus like that--you know, some little Jaegerettes." I laughed, but Beau wandered off, his enthusiasm waning into only dim amusement. I sensed that my suggestion had been inappropriate.

"Hey Beau," I said. He had walked back out onstage, and was watching the concert marshals as they urged the last tricklings of the crowd towards the exit. The house lights had come up, diffusing the shadows that fell on the stage, and as my brother stood there arms akimbo, the crisscrossing slants of light cast a hazy relief on the backdrop, a figure grey and indefinite at the edges, but thickening towards the center until there was a dark, slender form, near-human like a ghost, etched against the scarlet field of the flag.

"Hey Beau," I said again, and he turned to me, that ghostly figure shifting above the shadows of the blinking amplifiers. "You coming back to the hotel?"

"You go on back," he said. "I don't feel like coming just yet."

"All right," I said, reluctantly. "Later, then."

I turned to leave, but at the edge of the wings glanced back towards the stage, my eyes catching my brother in an unconscious and (to me) unsettling moment as he stood, arms still akimbo, and stared out at the vast, empty hall with a smile that was cool, serene, and darkly triumphant.

When I got back to the hotel, there was a telegram from Milly waiting for me at the message desk. She had, it said, gone down to Tampa with her folks and would not be able to meet me as planned. Sorry to miss the concert stop love Milly. I crumpled the telegram and stuffed it into my pants pocket, my thoughts fastening with a strange vengeance on the girl I had noticed backstage at the hall.

Daddy Julius and his women were in the hotel bar, with Burke and White Willie in tow. There were five or six girls gathered around the table, but the Stars and Bars halter top was nowhere in sight. They were seated to the right of a tiny bandstand, where a jazz trio was straining to be heard above the noisy abuse rising from Daddy's table. The booth was already littered with shot-glasses and various half-drunk whiskey and rum bottles. Acrid smoke was wafting from their corner of the room, and sure enough, there was White Willie, exactly as I had always imagined him in that white suit--with a subservient white woman on his knee and a cigar clenched between his wide, pearly teeth. The girl was wearing what appeared to be a sort of barmaid's outfit, with a skirt that stopped halfway down her buttocks, and black fishnet stockings that outlined the long, slender curvature of her thighs and calves. I imagined for a moment that she might be Milly, and felt a kind of erotic hit in the idea; but I quickly shook it off and turned my attention to the rest of the table. Burke was slumping back in his chair already, his head pressed against the wall behind him and his jaw just tight enough to support a weak, loose-lipped smile. There were a couple of other men I didn't recognize, each lounging half-consciously in the embrace of one of the women; Daddy just sat and swigged his ulcer tonic amidst the stench

of tobacco and undrunk liquor, directing and orchestrating the entire debauchery as he offered drinks and women around the table.

"Tommy Joe!" he called, when he saw me. His bejeweled hand flapped above the cluster of bobbing heads. "Tommy Joe Jaeger!"

I sat down with them, the crumpled telegram bulging like an erection in my pants pocket. I felt conspicuous about it and went to cover it with my hand, but not before one of the girls had noticed it and turned away, smiling demurely across at Daddy. "How's everyone tonight?" I asked, and Daddy laughed, his gold tooth sparkling in the smoky light.

"We are all just fine," he answered. "Ain't that right all?"

"Yes my man," white Willie said, flicking his cigar ash on the floor. The rest of the table, including poor drunk Burke, giggled in assent. "Where's the old lady? I thought she was supposed to meet you here--"

"She was," I said, "but she ain't now."

"Oh," said White Willie. He stared at the ceiling and blew a perfect smoke ring. The girl on his knee watched it dissipate, her lips curving into a moist, sympathetic O.

"Jeff's Emmylou come in for tonight," Daddy said. He set a glass in front of me and poured some whiskey. "Too bad about yours."

"I don't drink," I said. "You know that, Daddy."

Daddy Julius grinned. "Not like Burke here, eh?" he said, poking the drunken man in the ribs. Burke shuddered and giggled, his stringy blond hair falling forward and obscuring his face as he feebly pushed Daddy's hand away. "You'd maybe rather have something else?"

Daddy said. His eyebrow cocked archly. "A little--?" He flicked an imaginary ash against his thumb.

"Whatever," I said. "But it better be good. I ain't into waking up and feeling like Burke here."

"Only the best," Daddy answered, reaching into his pocket. He set a key down on the table beside my untouched glass. "Up in Beau's room. The suitcase under the bed."

"Right," I answered. "Much obliged Daddy."

"Don't mention it," he said. "It's my job, keeping you white folks wired." He laughed, nodding at White Willie, and White Willie began to laugh too, rancid cigar smoke billowing from between his pearly teeth.

"Sure," I said. I flattened the crumpled telegram beneath my hand as I stood up and walked away, the room key burning cool against my sweaty palm. Goddam it, goddamn it, I kept saying to myself, not knowing what I was cursing or why, because now it was not just Milly having gone with her parents to the winter house in Tampa that bothered me, or even the abruptness of the telegram itself. I was thinking of my brother Beau staring out at that empty hall, and of the diffused and ghostly shadow he had cast against the scarlet backdrop; I was thinking too of that other flag, of the gentle ridge those blue stripes had made as they rode over the soft swell of the girlish breasts, and of those embroidered stars standing out against the blue cloth like teased nipples--and all of it was too bad, too bad about that fucking telegram that had settled like an erection in my pants pocket, too bad that she (Milly or Miss Stars and Bars?--I didn't know) had not been there in the bar with Daddy, even though I had not expected to see her

and in fact had not even thought of it--any of it, shadows, Stars and Bars, or Milly even--since I had left my brother standing in that near-empty concert hall. Not until now, goddam it.

I unlocked the door to Beau's room, but couldn't get it open more than an inch or so. Someone inside had fastened the security chain.

"Daddy?" came a woman's--a girl's--voice, from behind the door.

"No," I said, "it's Tommy Joe Jaeger. Come on and open up, will you?"

"Oh, Jesus," the unseen voice said. "Just a minute."

There was a padding of feet across the carpet, and a rustle of clothing. A shadow approached the door along the wall inside, and the chain fell loose against the jamb. I didn't even see the girl at first, but found myself staring right past her--through her, it seemed--to the chair across the room where, neatly folded atop the rest of her clothes, lay the unmistakable colors of the Stars and Bars.

"Well?" she said. "Are you coming in or not?"

I stepped through the doorway, nodding with distraction. It occurred to me, as I finally looked at her to speak, that this was the first time I had really noticed her face. She was pretty enough for a painted-up teenager, with blond hair that looked thick and fine as cornsilk, but the effect of her presence was not at all what it had been earlier in the evening. She was something of a demystified object, dressed as she was in my brother's old brown bathrobe, and even her breasts (the fold of which was visible where her crossed arms held shut the robe's open front) now struck me with an odd indifference that I couldn't quite explain. "I just came up to get some--I came to get a suitcase," I said, glancing towards the unmade bed. The

pillows were piled up against the stead, as if someone had been lying there reading or watching T.V. "This is my brother's room--who let you in here?"

"Why, Daddy did," she said, moving back towards the bed as I shut the door behind me. "He told me to wait for Beau."

"You'll be awhile," I said. "He ain't coming right back."

"I know," she said, dropping down on the bed and staring up at the blank T.V. screen. Her palms made a smoothing motion along her legs, inching the robe up her long, untanned thighs. I bent down and reached under the bed, fumbling after the suitcase. "Does he always do this?" she said. Her eyes flickered sideways, as if to catch me in the act of staring. "Stay after, I mean?"

"I wouldn't take any offense if I was you," I said. "He's a crazy man, you know."

"How about you?" she asked, flashing a tentative smile that, despite her best efforts, could not help betraying her age.

"I reckon I am," I said, trying not to stare at the incongruous child that lay there in my brother's bathrobe, her hands drawing the cloth slightly back so that the smallest wisp of blond hair was visible beneath its edge, in the junction of her long white legs. I hoisted the suitcase and stood up to leave. As I turned to avoid her glance, my attention fastened again on the folded halter-top that lay on the chair, and suddenly it was meaningless to me, as if it had never assumed the form or shape of the body that had given it significance in the first place. "I reckon I am," I said again, absently, as I quickly crossed the room and shut the door behind me.

Back in my own room, I tried calling Milly's folks. Their black maid answered, irritated that I had roused her from her sleep, and said that the family was gone for the weekend. "You should have got a telegram, Mister Jaeger," she explained, crossly. I thanked her and slammed the phone down, staring across at the suitcase that lay open on the bed and the acrid reefer smoke that rose like an uncoiling snake from the bedside ashtray.

("Here it is." She was whispering, even though there was no one in the house. The carved double doors swung open, and she entered the darkened room, reaching along the wall until she found the light-switch. The room brightened; there was no overhead light, but on each wall were two small, candelabra-like fixtures from which a small bulb radiated a dim, suffused yellow light.

"Jesus," I said, "that's the biggest bed I've ever seen."

"I told you," she answered, running across the room and flopping down on the mattress. The contour of the bed sank gently, soundlessly beneath her. "Don't just stand there," she said, extending her hand, "come over here." A pause, and then: "You're not afraid are you?"

I crossed the maroon carpet, which was decorated with Oriental crescents and swirls, and sat down beside her on the bed. "How about you?" I asked.

"A little. But it'll be fine. I know it will. That's why I wanted to come here--so it would be right. It wouldn't have been, in some cheap motel--"

So this instead, I thought, glancing up to the distant ceiling. Milly was lying back on the bed, her arms outspread. "What is it?"

she said, after a moment. "You're afraid, aren't you."

"No," I said, "I'm not afraid."

"What is it then?"

"I don't know--this house, I reckon. This room."

"Tommy Joe," she said, with a slight scolding tone. She sat up on the bed and kissed my cheek, one warm hand cradling my clammy chin. "It's just a house--it's my home. Everybody has a home. This is mine."

"And your parents'," I said.

"But they're gone--the servants too."

"It's not that," I said. "But their house--their bed--" Suddenly the room seemed cavernous to me, suffused as it was with that thin, candle-like yellow light. No, I thought, this is not just a house. This place of her parents' felt more like a palace, like the grotesque thing we had passed on the way here, the pink mansion, all lit up with floodlights and visible for miles around, that Elvis Presley had built on that hill overlooking Memphis. I could not help recalling the tiny bedrooms that Beau and I had shared, first in Drayton, and later, with Cousin Coon, up in Knoxville. I found myself thinking of the close, intimate spaces of those rooms, those houses, tiny spaces in which the bond, the warmth of our shared breath which made us part of one another, could not be dissipated or lost; and even in spite of Milly, I began wishing that this were, after all, a tiny motel room, and not the master suite of her parents' mansion.

"Would you like me to get undressed?" Milly said. She kissed me again, this time on the mouth. My lips felt dry and scaly against hers.

"All right," I said.

She got up and went across to a door I had thought led to a closet, but which turned out to be the entrance to the master bathroom. It surprised me, even though I knew in the instant afterwards that it should not have, that the bedroom would have its own bath. There was a rheostat switch on the wall next to the jamb, and she turned the lights almost all the way down before leaving. I waited until the door had closed behind her, and lay back on the bed, as softly as I might have lain down on eggshells. I stared across the room at the tiny glowing filaments of the dimmed bulbs.

I knew I had lied to her when I said I was not afraid, but she would not have understood if I had told her the truth--that it was the incongruity of our love-making, in this place and these circumstances, that was the source of my anxiety, and not the anticipated act itself. It was this house, this room, which frightened me; I thought again of those tiny bedrooms I had shared with my brother and my cousin, feeling inexplicably betrayed by the memory of them. If I had been born rich like her, I thought, I would not be lying here wishing this were a cheap motel instead of a mansion, and this thing we are about to do would not be so hard. Nothing in my experience--neither the University up in Nashville nor Milly herself (with whom I had slept occasionally but never, until now, made love)--had prepared me for the terror and the betrayal I now found in my origins. How can she love me? I kept thinking, the orange filaments glowing dubiously across at me from the distant wall. What could I possibly offer her?

The bathroom door opened, her body appearing in momentary silhouette before she snapped out the light inside. It had never entered my mind that she would be naked; I had assumed she would wear a nightgown at least, as she always had before. But as she moved towards the bed, her body glowing brown in the soft yellow light, I found myself oddly comforted that she had chosen not to. Her arms were clasped together, like those of someone caught standing in a chill. She sat down softly on the bed, the swell of her small breasts heaving greatly with the motion.

"Tommy Joe," she said, turning and looking at me. "You're supposed to get undressed too, you know."

"All right," I said, "but you help."

Her lips curled into a brief, tremulous smile. "You're afraid, aren't you?"

No, I thought, it's not like you think, but this time I said nothing. She lay down against my side, her slender brown legs interlocking with mine, and began unbuttoning my shirt. Her breath felt like the passing of a warm hand over my chest.

"Milly," I said, but she hushed me, softly planting her fingers against my lips.

"No words," she said. "Not now."

I finished removing my shirt as she slid down and unbuttoned my pants. When we had them off too, she knelt up on the bed and stared down at me, her brown eyes large and lustrous. How can she love me? I thought again, reaching up to touch that brown, perfect body as it slowly, soundlessly bent over me. I closed my eyes, and felt her breath fluttering across my shoulders and chest, moving closer with

each pass. She surprised me at first, with that passionate clench of her teeth against my neck; my breath caught hard as I restrained a yell, but slowly, with repetition, that surprise turned to a kind of pleasurable acclimation, joining with the soft, insistent friction of her body atop mine, as I too began kissing her, touching her, until there was nothing but the two of us, the soft orange filaments blurring as I closed my eyes and the room spinning away into darkness so that we were, at last, equal in the only way we could be.)

CHAPTER IV

how about you

she said

are you crazy too

After Memphis it was St. Louis, Kansas City, and then Omaha, the snow thickening across the landscape below as we flew in eternal pursuit of the equipment trucks that had begun rolling hours before we woke from our giddy, drug-spangled dreams. The weather had been bad; blizzards had been hitting everywhere north of the Missouri-Arkansas line, and so the plane rides had been bad too, even the jetliners lurching into those dizzy pockets of air so that your stomach would leap inside you, as if the hangover itself was not enough punishment for the evil drugs ingested the night before. But somewhere over Iowa the weather broke, the ride smoothing out and the clouds parting to reveal the dark, muddy curl of the Missouri far, far below us, its course like a crooked, inky tracer against the snow-covered earth.

"Just look at it," Beau mused, staring down at the grey-white swell of the land. What moments ago had appeared so distant now seemed to hover, like a huge hallucinogenic cloud, just beyond the jetliner windows. "Looks like something out of Daddy's suitcase don't it? Mountains of it, just waiting to be cut."

"I don't cut my shit with nothing," Daddy answered, gently boxing Beau on the ear. "I give you boys good stuff."

"Sure Daddy," Beau answered.

"What are those anyhow?" Burke asked, lethargically exhaling cigarette smoke. His shot-glass sat motionless in his hand, only a slight inclination of the amber liquid betraying the banking motion of the plane. "The Ozarks?"

"Nah," I said. "The Ozarks were yesterday. We missed 'em, with all that cloud cover."

"Oh," Burke said, indifferently. "Aw hell, I could give a shit, you know?"

"We know all right," Daddy said, swigging his elixir. "Ain't that right boys?"

The rest laughed, except for Beau, whose attention seemed absorbed by the landscape below. White Willie turned around in his seat and stubbed his cigar out in Daddy's ashtray. "So where to tonight, old man?" Willie asked, his pearly, crescent-moon smile gleaming beneath an exhalation of tobacco smoke.

"Don't you read nothing?" Daddy answered, with feigned irritation. "Omaha. Then Lincoln."

"Whooey," White Willie said, clutching his hands to his shoulders. "What you want to make us play all these cold places for?"

"To cool your sweet asses," Daddy grinned, his gold tooth sparkling. "So you got something left for the sunny Southland, you fool nigger." He reached forward and pulled the leather brim of Willie's hat down over his eyes.

"You old honkey," White Willie said, rearranging his hat. Burke laughed loudly and unself-consciously at the trade of insults. Jeff

and I stared at each other with a slight discomfort as Beau, seemingly impervious to the exchange, sat with his forehead resting against the pane of the compartment window.

"Boy oh boy," my brother said, with sudden animation, "this cold weather sure does get to folks don't it?" He drew himself upright in his seat and turned around to face me. "Don't it make you wish you was back down south? Like Tampa maybe?"

A gentle swell of laughter rippled through the compartment. There seemed for me to be no choice but to laugh along. "Don't bother me," I said, knowing that would be what Beau wanted to hear. "I could give a shit."

"Damn right there big brother," he laughed, slapping me on the shoulder with a more than casual energy. My head started to spin, as it had done earlier that day with the plane dipping and climbing and the last traces of psilocybin scurrying like ants inside my brain. I tried to shake the dizziness off, my brother's face bobbing and swirling before my eyes, and finally the motion stopped. I leaned back, my forehead resting against the cool plexiglass, and closed my eyes as the taunting ripple of laughter died away. When I opened them again, I felt a sudden seizure of nausea as the plane dipped and banked, the distant, hazy curve of the horizon fading diagonally across my vision. Someone--some voice, rather, a soft, elegantly precise one which in that instant reminded me of Milly's--was requesting that we fasten our safety belts. As I fumbled for mine there was, below, a huge growing splotch encroaching on the muddy curl of the Missouri, a splotch with indistinct and far-flung edges that must have been Omaha,

rising like a giant grey-green mold from the white landscape that was mushrooming upwards and outwards across the vibrant boundaries of my vision.

"Cow town," Beau had winked, his grin red and brilliant in the wash of light that fell from the stage beyond, "nothing to it." There was no reason to question his confidence, for he had no sooner whipped into the opening bars of the first number than everyone, musicians and audience,were assured that the moment would be up to its billing. The crowd roared approval at each ensuing phase of the song's exposition--at first Beau playing, then singing, then playing again, allowing just enough space for me or Burke to supply some modest contrast before he came back in with the ear-splitting scream of his slide bar. It was a pattern that would be repeated over and over throughout the night, gathering intensity with each pass until it seemed at times that the hall itself was emptied of everything, voided save for the vibrant sensation of the bottleneck's searing, climbing sorties against the strings. Even when the sound had died away there would still be Beau himself, the glass bar on his finger as brilliant as a streaking missile where the stage-lights hit it, casting into the rafters the endless refractions of its motion as he waved the band forward into the next number. There would be, as tonight, the crowd too, pulsing with the flow of the music, outstretched arms and fingers reaching across the footlights as if to touch not him (not my brother Beau, my younger brother with his blond hair swirling and boyishly careless Jaeger smile) but the thing he created, the endless, sizzling roar of energy, almost corporeal in its presence

which at my brother's fingertips organized itself into those shuddering vibrations and became music. The rest of us felt it too, and even though we played along the thing that was created was not quite ours, or not quite mine at least, because I would feel my own arms, hands, fingers, reaching for that same flow, entering and locking into its rhythm, even being swept away by it so that there was no Beau and no me either, nothing but the huddled abstraction of his body glowing red in the footlights and exploding with yellow vectors of sound.

It was like that not just in Omaha, but afterwards too, in Lincoln, Denver, Cheyenne, and all the cities I lost track of after that, as Beau and Daddy really got down to business and the press people and even the wide-eyed young recruits began thinning in ranks and finally disappearing from the sloping shadows of the wings. The pace accelerated as we swung across the West and headed south again, nights getting shorter and days getting warmer, the band playing hotter and hotter every date, and me sinking down into a murky haze of psilocybin and reds, the only clear spots in my memory being those moments onstage, when the white heat of my brother's playing burned the fog away, the guitar lines crackling through my brain like racing tongues of lightning. Standing there beside him after the endless encores, my shoulder sore and numb from the dangling weight of the guitar, watching as Beau flung himself at the audience like Stonewall Jackson bristling for the charge, I felt myself becoming vaguely afraid, not of my brother, but for him almost: the yawning auditoriums, the stampeding crowds that eddied and swelled around him as

he held his guitar high, the hectic limousine rides--all seemed to be collapsing inwards, as if time were being crushed in some centrifugal wheel of events with Beau at its vertex.

There were too the times after the concerts, in the deep hours of the morning, when the motel heaters kicked on and the whole world seemed to buzz like a stand-by amp with a faulty ground switch--and I would wake up (or maybe not awaken, but simply become conscious), my head reeling from too many reds or too much psilocybin, and hear those shimmering cascades of melody as they tumbled and flowed to their shattering climaxes. There were times, in the innumerable unnamed cities of this tour, that the sound of his slide guitar seemed to transform the plush, humming motel darkness into a wilderness of raw inner feelings--homesickness, loneliness, sometimes even anger--and from behind the muffling wall, the music would conjure for me the image of the father of the blues himself, the shy, passionate Robert Johnson, who sang with his back to the tape recorder and pounded out his heart's rhythms on the cheap, tinny strings, his voice smothered and baffled, as if he was singing from the grave (and I swear, lying there in the dark with nothing to rely on but my sense of touch, I once or twice imagined a slow, creeping blackness coming over my skin, the way I did years earlier when the two of us would sit with Coon Dog in dusk-filled rooms and listen to those first recordings of Mississippi Fred McDowell and Blind Willie and Robert Johnson). Then I would be reminded, usually by the muffled sound of his or Daddy's laugh, of the element of conjure, the subtle, magical act of deception, that gave my brother's music its beauty, and its truth.

God damn you Tommy Joe, I would scold myself, you lying here like a piece of frayed wire while he sits next door playing like that, your own younger brother God damn you, and I would roll slowly out of bed, the room spinning down at me, and take out my banjo. Milly had bought it for me when we were still in college up in Nashville, and I would try to think of her as I played it, struggling through the intricate fingering patterns of the pieces I had learned by rote. Occasionally, even through the hallucinogens, I could bring to mind not only her face, but the shape of her body, the touch and the smell of it; but before long there would be, once again, nothing but the image of my brother, curly blond hair hanging to his shoulders, his imagined fingers fluttering crabwise across the neck of an invisible guitar--and I would play slowly, tentatively, trying to remember the new piece I had been working on before we left the Knob, thinking here's one he can't do on that damn guitar, remembering to play it softly so that he wouldn't hear it. I had learned by then there was nothing he couldn't do on his guitar, given the time to figure it out, and whatever I wanted for my own I would have to keep to myself; but even so it was difficult to remember anything at all with those rippling, supple waterfalls of sound answering from beyond the darkened wall, humbling me to silence so that more often than not I put the banjo back in its case and lay back down, assailed by visions of sleepless dreams, the blackness of the room stirring with vague, wordless murmurings that in the end proved to be my own voice, or my own thoughts at least, going God damn you God damn you Tommy Joe.

("I just love banjo" she had said. "Wherever did you learn to play?" Her hair had smelled like magnolia blossoms, or maybe it was just the breeze that seemed to murmur in the trees above as she knelt down beside me on the quadrangle grass. I had been surprised not only by her attention, but by the fact that she had come over alone, leaving the clutch of sorority women, books dutifully held to their breasts, lingering vaguely back at the lawn's perimeter.

"Taught myself mostly," I said. "From books, you know." I nodded down at the tablature manual that lay open beside me, its pages stirring upwards. Somewhere a bell was ringing, the sound of it echoing across the courtyard--a single note, mutating through repetition and refraction as the wind mused through the trees.

"Millicent," one of the other girls urged, "come on. That's the five-minute bell."

"You go ahead," she called, waving them away. "I'll be along in a minute." She sat back on her calves, her knees whitening against the hem of her dress. Her mouth was pursed in a gentle O, as if poised for a question, or perhaps in imitation of the hour-bell whose monotone was wavering in the breeze. "Do you know 'Soldier's Joy?" she asked. "That's my favorite."

"Sure," I said. I had been trying not to look at her too directly, but I could not help noticing the brightness, the warmth, of her almondine eyes; they seemed to radiate from the tanned, freckleless pigment of her skin. It was a face that in expression and color reminded me of Coon Dog's mother, although in this case there was no denying the whiteness or purity of its lineage. I had never seen

such striking brown features in a white woman before, let alone a rich one, and even as I played I couldn't help the distraction I felt at her presence. I fumbled one passage, recovered, and continued with renewed concentration. The banjo chimed softly, snatches of melody striking gentle dissonance with the reverberating bell. "That's it," I said, as I finished. "I don't know too many variations--"

"That's all right," she said, her brown eyes fastening on me. "I wouldn't know the difference. I just love 'Soldier's Joy'." In spite of the fixation of those dark irises, her voice was languid, laced with a cool reserve, as if she sensed the indecorousness of any greater show of enthusiasm. The sound of the voice itself was soft and oddly subtle, not quite Southern in its inflection--or more than Southern really, having all the familiar intonations but possessing as well a calculated grace and delicacy that, though unusual, stirred some faint response in the recesses of my memory.

I played another song, and she knelt there before me with the same implacable reserve, her slender hands dangling in the slack pleats of her dress; and when I was done she smiled softly, one hand reaching up to touch the dangling jewel that hung glistening against the brown base of her neck. She started to speak, but the bell that had been ringing had paused overlong. Her breath caught in anticipation. "Oh God," she said, gathering up her books, "that was my class bell. I've got to go."

"Hey," I said, "can I call you or something? My name's Tommy Joe--Tommy Joe Jaeger--"

"Millicent Bascom," she answered, tossing the name back over her shoulder. "It's in the phone book--"

She turned and ran, the pleats of her dress thrashing loosely against her legs as she crossed the quadrangle. In motion her body seemed as smooth and graceful as that voice of hers, as if even in running she was aware that class and breeding could show in more than just grammar and good table manners. Her hair shook back across her shoulders, unexpected golden highlights flashing through the dark, sunburnt brown as she crossed out of the shade and into the light, and as I noted the motion of her tanned calves, a smooth, effortless arc like that of a fine horse in stride, I couldn't help thinking of her knees, and how they had whitened beneath her nylons as she knelt there in front of me on the quadrangle grass. There was still the smell of magnolias, now stronger than ever with a new stirring of the spring breeze, a smell that could not have been her after all, even though in it something of her presence, her voice, seemed to linger. I repeated the name over and over to myself, staring absently down at the open tablature manual as its pages danced and trembled upwards in the gentle, teasing wind.)

"So how's Milly?" Beau said. He leaned back on the bed, idly brushing his hand across the strings of the banjo. "I hear you had some kind of hassle--"

"No hassle," I said. I stared dully down at my glass, the tiny black mushroom specks swimming like insects in the purple liquid. "Just some missed connections. I phoned her the other night--from Albuquerque I think it was--"

Beau shook his head and laughed. "Albuquerque's tomorrow, Tommy Joe. You sure you didn't hallucinate her or nothing?"

"Aw, come on," I said. "I got a wire too--right there on the bed."

The crumpled sheet lay beside Beau, in the round hollow of my open banjo case. He picked the telegram up and flattened it out, reading the two brief sentences aloud. "'Hear Memphis great will return home soon stop love Milly.'" He let the paper flutter to the floor. "Pure passion," he said. "Is that all she ever says--'stop'?"

"Pretty much," I answered. "These days at least." I gulped the rest of the grape juice, the mushroom bits tingling in my throat as I swallowed them.

"You really ought to cut down on that stuff," Beau said. "It'll make you sterile you know."

"Naw," I answered. "Not this. It's dope makes you sterile. Besides, who's to care?"

He laughed heartily, his voice taking on the fuzzy quality it always did when the psilocybin was doing its job. "True enough," he said, brushing the banjo strings again. The ring of the harmonics seemed to me to linger on and on. "So long as Milly don't care."

I looked up at him wordlessly, absorbed in the fading vibrations of the banjo.

"Well," he said, "I can see you won't be much good for conversation here ere long. Reckon I'll turn in." He rose and stretched, with a deep, soundless yawn that seemed somehow to have a voice. Or at least it seemed it ought to have, a long clear tenor note maybe. He moved to the door and opened it, the motion of his body dancing before me like a figure darting across the path of a flashing strobe.

Entering the room was the faint rumble of cars passing on the highway outside. The sound of their slipstreams faded off into the distance like the last sprinkling of a gentle wash of rain. "Have a safe trip now," he said, stepping out into the darkness. "See you in the morning."

Sure, I said, or at least thought I said, but I could not in the instant afterwards remember having sounded the word or felt the vibration of it in my larynx. The room was slowly beginning to turn, coming alive with colors and radiant spears of light, and I made my way over to the bed, uncradling the phone and dialing the operator.

"Yes," I said, my voice an unfamiliar and surprising thing, like a blast of static. "I want to place a long-distance call to Memphis Tennessee. The number is--"

I waited, listening to the dial-tones beep. The room was really doing it now, glistening with reds and greens that shimmered like highway mirages, its dimensions wavering, as if it were filled with dancing swirls of heat, and I felt a kind of comfort in it as time and space and color gradually lost their meaning and there was nothing but me sitting there with the room running riot, the receiver to my ear as it rang and rang and rang and rang.

CHAPTER V

fuck you

fuck you

fuck you

"Atlanta," Beau said, stretching comfortably in his seat. "My lord I can hardly believe it."

"You better believe it," Daddy Julius grinned. "You boys got to really kick ass tonight you know."

"Don't worry Daddy," Beau answered. "I ain't forgot." He turned away, glancing restlessly out the window. "Lordy lord," he said, "it's really looking like Georgia now ain't it?"

Below, the landscape seemed to melt into the recesses of my vision like the colors of some indelible pastel painting. It was spring now, and the red soil of the fields, turned for planting, was patched with bright green cloths of deciduous woods and pine. The sky was cloudless to ten thousand feet, and against its blue brilliance the earth shimmered with color, more radiant and alive than it had ever seemed through the dope or psilocybin. I remembered what the fields had looked like when we left; the soil that now seemed so red had been grey and frost-tipped, its color dulled by the encroachment of winter overgrowth, and even the rivers, which now glistened like rivulets of molten silver, had appeared dark and lifeless beneath the cold eye of the winter sun. I had not noticed until this moment the advancement

of the new season, and the earth below, for the first time in many mornings unaltered by the traces of any hallucinogen, appeared suddenly new and alien, as if affected by some instant and unnatural change.

Still there was something else I felt now, something which had nothing to do with the passage of time or distance. It was more like a tension than motion, a strange vertigo that seemed to make itself felt from the outside rather than within, as if the world was poised on the tail of some giant whip about to be cracked. It was the anticipation of release, of the final unhinging of that centrifugal wheel--the breaking of that force that for the last two months had been pulling me downwards through space and time and memory into its center, where stood my brother, his smiling face the only point of focus in a vast hallucinogenic blur. It was, I supposed, the glimpsing, however vaguely and restively, of the end of the road. We had covered thirty-five cities in forty-five days, but there were few I could remember with clarity, the snowy prairie towns already faceless and forgotten, the desert and mountain country too for the most part; but the tension had already been there, was already growing, even as I was oblivious to the motion and the passage of time. Fragments of the itinerary, involuntarily remembered through Beau's and Daddy's endless recitations, jogged my thoughts like a fractured litany, the words resounding with a kind of mystic force as the towns they named, faceless all, drew closer and closer to the long series' final entry--Albuquerque, Amarillo, Dallas, Austin--S.R.O. crowds every one I remembered, remembering nothing really except what Beau or one of

the others had told me the next day, and the music itself, the band playing hotter and hotter every night, Beau relishing the pace, pushing it even, as we hit the last stretch, that sweep across the Deep South itself which in retrospect looked like a work of pure geometric genius in the way it had unfolded, moving eastward with a giddy, night-by-night acceleration--Houston, Baton Rouge, New Orleans, Mobile, Montgomery, Birmingham, the whole tour uncoiling like a giant springing snake and striking across the Georgia line, at long last, towards Atlanta itself. And there would be the liberation, the cracking release of the poised whip, which I had at once longed for and dreaded, the climax which already seemed reduced, negated, by the circumstances that served its coming, but which in its moment would explode as always with beauty and significance, only to collapse back into memory afterwards, where it would again become restive, stirring slowly towards beginning the cycle anew.

"What did I tell you," Daddy Julius said triumphantly. The small group huddled in the wings leafed through the Xeroxed trade-paper clippings, squinting through the dim light at the fuzzy print. "Don't come till it hurts. They been so thirsty for that fucking album--and there it is, number one with a bullet after ten days. What did I tell you? And the single too--'Back to Atlanta' goes number one just like that--wham bam!" He clapped his hands together in sheer delight. "Not bad for a bunch of honkeys," he laughed, his gold incisor glimmering.

"Not bad for an old cherry vendor either," Beau said.

The girl on Daddy's arm chuckled into her pursed fist as he reached across and mussed Beau's hair. "I got out of that," he snapped with feigned indignance, "because I found something better to pimp. Don't go flattering your sweet white ass."

"Aw Daddy," Beau answered, "I know you. You just done it because the percentages looked better. I bet even Memphis peddlers don't clear no eighteen percent after expenses."

"Damn straight," Daddy said, that gold-tipped smile of his a more than grudging admission of my brother's accusation. "We don't have to fuck with the law or politicians none either." Daddy was rumored to have been run out of Atlanta in his younger days on a trumped-up charge of procuring, and the irony in that high, singalong voice of his was not lost on those present who knew enough to believe that bit of lore. "But look--music ain't any different. You got to belong to a good stable to turn good tricks. Better to be left with eighty percent of something than a hundred percent of nothing."

"I reckon so," Beau said. "There ain't any arguing with your arithmetic."

"Or my results neither," Daddy said, winking slyly. "We come a long way from them dives down in Mobile you know. Ain't that right sugar?" The girl on Daddy's arm stared back at him, nodding somewhat quizzically, and Daddy laughed, throwing his gaze up to the dark rafters. "Would you listen to them," he said, beckoning towards the low rumble that was rising beyond the wings. He took the trade paper he had been carrying and threw it to the floor, dancing a spastic little soft-shoe on it. The girl struggled against his grip, trying

to protect her toes. "Whooey," Daddy exclaimed. "This old town gonna rock and roll tonight!"

"Stop that now," the girl said, as Daddy nudged her euphorically with his medicine bottle. "You crazy old nigger."

"Old nigger am I?" Daddy whooped, toying with her long blond hair. "Niggers ain't rich sugar. Just you remember that."

Beau laughed boyishly at Daddy's antics, rolling the smooth, tapered bottleneck in his dangling right hand. "Now where did you find that little kitten?" he asked Daddy.

"None of your business," Daddy snapped. "She's part of my stable."

"I thought you got out of that business," Beau said.

"I had to keep something--for my private collection you know."

"Yeah, well she must have been some spring chicken then. How old are you anyhow honey?"

"Nineteen," the girl answered, with a nervous smile that seemed at least a couple years younger. She seemed to be leaning towards Beau, straining against Daddy's grip. "I'm from Waycross Georgia. You ever been to Waycross?"

"Not on purpose," Beau laughed, the bottleneck rolling giddily in his hand. He peered out through the baffled wings to the stage, where Coon Dog was crouched beside the drum-kit, making sure all the stray cords were secure. Coon glanced at the wings, his face a dark hollow of reddish light, and flung a furtive gesture at the crowd from the huddle of his body. Beau smiled, his jeweled rings sparkling beneath the stage lights as he mimicked Coon's obscene signal.

"Fuckin' crazy gig," my brother muttered, rubbing the knuckles of his closed fist against the spangled, silky colors of his shirt. "Maybe we shouldn't even try and play. Maybe we should just drop our drawers and let 'em kiss our ass. I bet they would too."

"They probably would at that," Daddy said. "But you boys go on and play. I got my reputation you know. Besides, you'll get your wallets kissed soon enough." He swigged his ulcer tonic and, shuddering as he swallowed, pinched the girl on the ass. She slapped his hand as he drew it away.

"You are one playful old boy," she said, a bit angrily.

"Uh-oh," Beau said, beckoning towards a man in a business suit who had just burst through the stage door. "Look who's here."

Daddy Julius, his ulcer bottle raised in a protestation of innocence, nonchalantly turned to face the man. "Well Mister Big Shot," he said. "What can I do for you?"

"You're forty-five minutes late," the man said testily. "When the hell are your boys going to get started?"

"Don't you promoters understand nothing?" Daddy snapped. He turned to us, his arms outstretched in a fatherly gesture. "Don't take no offense boys. He don't understand."

"Understand this," the man said, his complexion reddening, "I've got ten thousand people out there. They've been waiting almost an hour now--they're going to start breaking things if you take much longer back here--and I'm liable if there's any damage--"

"Now I don't know nothing about liability," Daddy said, in his best Stepin Fetchit posture. "I'm just a poor old nigger. But I can

tell you one thing--music is like fucking. The longer it takes to get there, the better it feels. So go cool your ass."

"Ten more minutes," the man said. He pulled back the sleeve of his coat to expose his watch. "Any more and I'll consider this breach of contract."

"Listen," Daddy snapped, with a sudden, animated anger, "we don't sell the fucking tickets--we just play the music. Maybe you want to go out and shut them up yourself so we can finish a sound check? This ain't one of your fucking operas, this is the Sons of the South Blues Band, and no one's gonna take a walk if we're a little late."

The man shook his head, looking forlornly out beyond the stage to the far side of the hall. The people there had already spilled out of their seats and were pressing forward down the aisles, the marshals struggling to restrain them. Coon tapped Beau's mike, testing it for response. The rap boomed through the hall, drawing a tentative cheer from the crowd. Coon stared across at us and threw his hands up, his darkened face curling into a hopeless, anomalous grin. Beau waved him the go-ahead sign, and Coon cleared off, clambering down into the orchestra pit, below the surging press of the crowd.

"Fuck it," Beau said, turning to the rest of us. "Crank them lights down and let's get on with it."

The hall began to dim, bringing a thunder of approval from the crowd. Beau started for the stage, but Daddy caught him and held him back a moment. The hand-clapping and foot-stomping outside grew in frequency and intensity until the entire hall, floor to ceiling,

seemed alive with one shuddering vibration. By now the building was dark except for the pinpoint glow of the red amp lights and the mixing board in the orchestra pit, where Coon's hands were passing darkly across the dials, like shadowy palms before a campfire.

"O. K. boys," Daddy said, his gold tooth still casting reflections in the near-total darkness. Beau grabbed him and laid a kiss on the top of his forehead where the grey, wiry hair stood out like moonglow against the black skin. The girl stared blankly at the gesture for a moment, and then, stretching out of Daddy's grasp, she leaned forward and kissed Beau on the cheek.

"Well this is it Daddy," Beau said, suddenly breathless, as his hand absently rose to touch the spot where the girl had kissed him.

Daddy Julius opened his mouth to speak, but White Willie and Burke had already started out, so whatever it was Daddy had to say was drowned in the clamor of recognition that met their entrance. The rest of us charged to our places, Jeff anchoring himself in the middle, behind the battery of drums and hi-rise cymbals, Burke to the far left and White Willie to the right, and Beau and I, the last ones out, next to each other upstage center, strapping on our guitars just as the stage lights rose to full swell and the city of Atlanta greeted us with a deafening hooray. Beau whooped into his mike and announced the playing of the national anthem, whipping his guitar into a frenzied chorus of "Dixie." As the last shuddering note faded, the crowd gave rise to a roar of applause that seemed to rise beyond the clapping of hands that produced it, a deep, rumbling sound, like the thousand explosions of a giant engine revving. I glanced past White Willie to the wings, where Daddy Julius stood dabbing his cheek with

a handkerchief, the girl now leaning unconsciously into his embrace, and his face even from the shadows betraying the unmistakable crescent of a smile.

And then Beau, crouching forward as if to challenge the unabated applause, his guitar shrieking out the already-famous lead-in to "Back to Atlanta," throttled the entire chaos of forty thousand feet and hands, the band picking it up and splitting the thunder of the crowd into accompanying twos and fours. Before we knew it Beau was dropping back from the vocal mike and soloing, with an ear-shattering climb of the bottleneck up the strings, heads offstage and on bobbing towards each other in a kind of knowing awe--and when the song was done, applause ringing out and jumbling with voices, feet, and bodies, Beau muttering his words of thanks, unheard above the din, through that blonded and boyish toothy grin:

"Fuck you. Fuck you. Fuck you."

CHAPTER VI

she ain't the nurse

beau said

she ain't nothing

The Atlanta concert was, as Daddy had promised us, all our ball game. There had been no warm-up act either to blunt or whet the crowd's appetite, and so the dramatic edge of that first moment on-stage, with the giant Stars and Bars unfurling majestically behind us, was unspoiled by surrounding circumstance. For the better part of an hour the Sons managed to keep it going, the explosive energy of that first instant flowing forward through us into the music, to the crowd and back again, in a swirling, hypnotic impulse that seemed to generate itself anew at the end of every tune, when the deafening applause would come roaring up from the dark hall like the crash of a shattered atom. It was a strong set, as solid an hour as we had played on the long swing eastward, but the strain of almost seven weeks on the road was beginning to tell in ways that few besides those onstage could have noticed. Beau finished the set with one of his characteristic bursts of energy, carrying the last tune past the rehearsed ending and into a long improvised coda. He crouched out across the footlights as he played, his guitar neck extended towards the audience, teasing them forward up to the very lip of the pit that separated us from them, the notes coming in shrieking, insane flurries;

and then, as the cops and marshals gathered to push the people back, Beau retreated, his face glowing and radiantly triumphant, the music dropping down to a breathless hush as he began to build towards the next climax. He leaped forward again as the band swelled up behind him, and lunged past the slanted faces of the monitor speakers; the crowd fought its way to the front, to the edge of the dark chasm, arms stretching across the empty space. The tide seemed to swell with every turn of the cycle, like lapping waters building up behind a dam, and more than once I glanced down into the sound pit and saw Coon and the rest gazing nervously above them to the wall of bodies that pressed closer with every surge.

The song, already overlong, began to lose steam as climax after climax exploded with our spent energy and the howl of Beau's slide bar. The band was badly off the pace, but Beau pushed forward with almost cruel insistence, as if he refused to be robbed of this moment. Heedless of the flagging rhythm, he was charging the crowd again now, challenging them forward, and as the sea of faces roared up at us I felt as if the whole thing was collapsing inwards towards some final breaking-point. One of the cops, pressed back against the barrier, almost fell over the edge into the pit, and suddenly there was a flash of a night-stick held poised above the swarm of heads. I watched helplessly, my hands and fingers locked into a movement that had long ago become automatic, as the club descended, rose and descended, again and again. The crowd shrank back, opening a little circle in which stood the cop, one hand still brandishing the night-stick, as he clutched at the collar of the man who knelt dazed and bleeding before him. A woman in jeans and a halter-top was straining forward

from the edge of the circle, her mouth opened in a soundless scream, and reaching to touch the injured man. He was struggling to get away, the swift proliferation of blood matting his long blond hair; the cop grabbed him by his jacket sleeve and hurled him against the railing, as if to frisk him. The girl shrank back into the crowd, her fists clenched and eyes wide in amazement and terror.

"Beau!" I shouted, "stop it! Make them stop!" But there was no way he could hear me above the music, which was now roaring out of control. The sound onstage was almost unbearable, my head and stomach trembling with the vibration, the monitors shuddering and shrieking with feedback. Beau teetered forward with each clawing note, his face registering a strange, inexplicable satisfaction as he stared out across the footlights into the eye of the frenzy, where the cop stood with his bloodied victim. He wrestled notes from his squealing guitar with an incredible final fury, raking the slide-bar up and down the strings in a cacaphony of shrill, slicing screams that seemed to burn themselves into a memory, never really assuming the property of sound, but passing directly into the brain like an electric shock, as the song finally shattered to pieces and was supplanted by the insane, ungodly thunder of the audience's approving cheers. At Beau's beckoning the crowd burst forward again, enveloping the cop and bloody fan, and a score of people, propelled by the urging of the thousands behind them, finally broke past the marshals and up the stairs flanking the sound-pit. We turned tail, abandoning our instruments, and dashed for the wings. Daddy Julius and a half-dozen cops gave us a frantic shove in the direction of the backstage door, the

thunder of stomping feet growing heavy behind us. We stumbled down some narrow stairs, through a set of fire doors, and into a damp, chilly service tunnel. The muffled vibrations from above roared like depth-charge detonations down the concrete walls of the passageway.

"Is that it?" one of the cops asked.

"You said it," my brother answered. He shook his head, glancing vaguely upwards. The thunder of feet had split itself into three distinct downbeats, repeating over and over like the words of a chant. Beau laughed haltingly, in staccato bursts that sounded like someone gulping for air. "Can you believe them?" he said. "They still ain't satisfied," and sure enough, as I listened, above those shuddering beats there were voices swelling up, the words "We want more!" barely distinguishable from the explosions that accompanied them. "Fuck them," Beau said. "Let 'em go hungry. Maybe it'll give them something to remember us by."

"You all wait here then," the cop said, turning to leave. "We'll send someone back down when your cars are ready."

"Obliged," said Beau.

The cops headed back upstairs, the fire-doors hissing shut behind them, and Daddy Julius started jumping up and down and slapping Beau on the shoulder. "What did I tell you?" he laughed, his gold tooth shining. "Don't come till it hurts! You had them by the balls tonight--"

Beau hugged him, closing his eyes against the sweat that was streaming down his forehead. "That last tune was shit," he said, "but I don't reckon it mattered much to them. Listen to those assholes."

"You done it," Daddy grinned. "You kicked their ass--set the damn house on fire." Above us, the storm of feet and hands and voices raged on undiminished. Daddy started making the rounds, hugging and kissing each of us in turn, and just as he got to me, one of the cops came back with Coon Dog and the girl from Waycross. "You know her?" the cop asked Daddy. "She said she was with you."

"Of course he knows me," the girl blurted.

"It's all right brother," Daddy nodded, slapping the brown palm of the cop's outstretched hand. "She's with me all right." He yanked the girl away, his dark fingers closing around her wrist. "Not bad, is she brother?"

The black cop took a discomforted step back from Daddy, surveying the rest of the group. "One of you named Tommy Joe?" he said. He was waving a small envelope, a piece I recognized as being from Milly's stationery set. I raised my hand, and he handed it to me, explaining: "Someone left it for you at the message desk."

"Obliged," I said.

"Where the hell did you go?" Daddy asked the girl, as she squirmed in his embrace. "I thought for sure we lost you--"

"I went to the commode," the girl snapped. "I came out and there wasn't nothing but cops--" She nodded darkly at the officer. "I could of got killed."

"You ain't the only one," Coon said. There was an ugly bruise deepening across his high, crooked cheekbone. "I never seen so many crazy people. We barely got the guitars out of there. The rest'll have to wait." He shrugged dubiously. "We can't do nothing till they

clear them crazies away."

"Maybe I should give them a speech," Beau grinned, as Coon demonstratively rubbed his bruise. "Aw, fuck them anyhow. They got their money's worth. Those cars ready yet?"

The cop nodded. "This way," he said, pointing down the dimly lit tunnel. He walked slowly, his brown chin bulging forward across his sweat-soaked collar and night-stick jiggling innocently in its sheath. He paused below a vent in the ceiling and shook his head at the rumble that was echoing downwards through the air-shaft. "Damn craziness," he said to Beau, walking on. "You see this every night?"

"Not hardly," Beau laughed, burying his chin in the ruffles of his shirt. "Hometown crowd, that's all."

"Hometown, eh?" the cop said. "I heard you boys were from around here."

"Adopted sons, you could say," Beau offered. We done most of our dues-paying down here. But my brother and me are from Drayton."

The cop nodded vaguely. "I been by there on the interstate Seen the exit sign anyhow. Up by Chattanooga, isn't it?"

"Yeah," Beau said. We were passing another vent, and from the sound of things the crowd had not given up on us yet. The cop listened to the clamoring mass, whose entreaties had broken down into a droning, inarticulate roar, and laughed, glancing at Beau.

"You cause all that?" he said. "What the hell kind of music you play, anyhow?"

"Well--blues mostly," Beau offered. He seemed surprised at the question. "You know--Robert Johnson, Furry Lewis, Mississippi Fred McDowell--"

"Never heard of 'em," the cop said, his brown eyes narrowing in laughter. "But then I don't follow this music business much."

"It's hard to keep up," Beau said, with a weak, plastic smile. He had noticed a trickle of water running down the center of the tunnel pavement, and had to step to one side to keep his long embroidered pants cuffs from getting wet. "What the hell is that?" he said.

"Must be raining out," the cop answered. "Leaks down here sometimes." We had come to the end of the tunnel, and as the cop pushed open the tall, vaulted door the fresh, rain-scented air began pouring in. It felt to me as if I had come back from the underground after a long, long time. The lot outside was full of water; the wide shallows rippled with windy sheets of rain. It seemed that even the tar-and-exhaust smell of the city had been washed away, and in its place was a cool, spray-like odor. There were two limousines waiting for us just beyond the exit, and the cop followed us out, water beading on the bill of his cap. "You all take care now," he said, the rain mottling his uniform as he peered in at us through the open door of the limo.

"You bet," Beau said. He slammed the door shut and waved goodbye as the car revved and pulled away. The cop stood back in the doorway, his face almost invisible against his uniform, which was glowing blue in the rain-flecked fluorescent light, as he shrank away behind us.

"Boy oh boy," the girl from Waycross said, staring back at Beau and me from the forward seat, "you sure make funny friends. He almost hit me, upstairs there."

Daddy laughed, pulling her down beside him. "Everybody wants a piece of old Beau. Ain't that right boy?"

"Not him," Beau sighed. He sank down into the plush upholstery, his head resting against the rain-streaked windowpane. "He didn't even know who Robert Johnson was. What the hell is with your people anyhow Daddy?"

"They don't have enough money to spend on records," Daddy snapped, grinning. "They don't love your sweet ass enough either."

"Sure Daddy," Beau said, wearily. "Nobody loves it as much as you and your eighteen percent--"

"You bet your sweet ass," Daddy snorted. "But I ain't against spreading it around a little. The women loves it too you know." The girl stared back at Beau, her dark eyes dull and sleepy.

"Sure Daddy," Beau mumbled. "Another dose of that shitty speed of yours and I'll never get it up again."

Daddy whooped, swigging his ulcer tonic. "Only a white boy could worry about a thing like that. Ain't that right sugar?"

"Sure Daddy," the girl answered, gently mocking Beau's weary drawl.

The car was silent now. The neon jumble of downtown Atlanta whisked noiselessly by, the wet streets and glimmering headlights suddenly alien in the shimmery wash of the storm, the spatter of the rain now nothing but a drone, like the distant electric hum of some giant dynamo. For awhile, it was not Atlanta at all, but just another city, faceless and dreamlike as it slid past the window, even the most familiar buildings blurring, their lights garish and

ornamental against the cold, dark trance of rain.

"What's with your brother?" the girl asked, turning towards me. She nodded at Beau, who had fallen asleep, his fingers still fluttering as if across the neck of his guitar.

"Leave him be," I said. "He's all played out."

The girl shook her head. "I don't understand you two," she said, and turned back to Daddy, kissing his leathery old ear as he took a long swig from his ulcer bottle. "Come on Daddy," she said. "How about a little taste?"

"It ain't for children," Daddy laughed. "Ain't that right boys?"

"Sure Daddy," I answered, almost automatically.

"That's it white folks," Daddy said, turning around and winking at me as the girl slid down into the seat, out of my sight. "You'll learn yet to answer us old niggers."

I opened the envelope the cop had given me, feeling a strange resentment at the delicate, perfumed odor that rose from the unfolded note-page. Dear Tommy Joe missed you so much see you at the hotel love Milly. Letter-writing had never been her strong suit, and reading that one I realized how much I really preferred her telegrams. At least then she had the excuse of having to pay by the word. I put the note back in the envelope and shoved it in my pants pocket, trying to imagine what her first words were going to be, unable to even think of what I might say.

This was going to be one hell of an interesting night, I thought.

True to her word, she was waiting for me when I got back to the hotel room. She was dressed pretty much as I had expected, in some fancy boutique outfit she'd probably picked up in Florida, a creamy-colored pantsuit that accented the slenderness of her body, and thin silk neck kerchief that reminded me oddly of an aviator's scarf. But she had just let her hair down, which was the way I liked it best, and it fell across her stiff, square-shouldered jacket with an incongruously simple abandon. I lingered for a moment at the door, not knowing what else to do, and in the end it was she who came over to me, coaxing me across the room and into an easy chair. She sat down in the arm, kissing me lightly on my crown, and then slipped over to the bed. "Would you like a drink?" she asked, with uncharacteristic awkwardness. "I could call room service--"

"Naw," I said. "This is just fine." I leaned forward, cupping my hands across my face.

"I saw the concert," she said, sitting back on the bed. "I thought you played well."

"Just a cog in the machine," I answered, her face something less than a face to me, something less than an object even, framed as it was by the conscious stylishness of her clothing. I felt as if I was looking at one of the hallucinated images that had been peopling my rooms of late. "I missed you in Memphis."

"I'm sorry about that," she said, her gaze imperturbably steady. "Mother and Father were going down to the winter house--they wanted me along so, they just wouldn't take no for an answer--"

"No matter," I said. I rose and walked over to the bed. She bent her face upwards for me to kiss, and I did, drily, as I sat down. "It's all over now. For awhile anyhow." I sank back onto the slick coolness of the sheets and began unbuttoning my shirt.

"I turned the bed down," she said. "I thought you'd be tired--" She leaned over me, her cool breath sending nervous tracers up and down my chest, and I stared at her, trying to concentrate on her face and forget that damn pantsuit and neck kerchief. She was kissing me now, stiffly and tentatively, her long hair unconsciously brushing and teasing my nipples. I reached to pull her down beside me, but she sat back up, glancing distractedly away.

"Oh damn," she said, heaving a sigh.

"What?" I said.

"I'm sorry," she answered. "I can't. Not right now."

"You can't what?"

"You know."

"Oh, that," I said. And then, with calculated disappointment: "Well, it don't matter. We got plenty of time--"

She nodded, her expression cooly apologetic, and for an instant I wanted to tear at those fancy clothes till they were nothing but shreds, so that she could not put me off this way, using her taste and breeding like armor, so that there would be no veils between us, nothing but the two of us, free of the incongruous circumstance of our varied origins. "It's really O. K.," I said, deferentially. "I'm pretty beat anyhow. But let's get undressed."

She glanced back at me, as if unsettled by the idea, then nodded and walked slowly over to the closet. She placed her things on

hangers as she took them off, and while she was undressing I felt her becoming more beautiful, more real, as if some essential quality of hers, the thing for which I loved her, had been somehow masked by her clothing. She reached to put the last thing away, the soft arch of her spine curling inward, and there was now not a movement concealed--even the gentlest inclinations of her body appeared free and undisguised. I undressed too, and she came to bed, shutting out the light, the darkness and silence closing in sympathy around us so there was, at last, nothing but the warm island of our bodies floating in this space, this moment, touch an interface through which could now pass our thoughts, our feelings, our dreams.

CHAPTER VII

i think he's dead

she said

I slept badly most of the night, waking up time after time in a vague, inexplicable fright, unable to remember what I had just been dreaming. Once the terror came on so suddenly I awoke bolt upright in bed, a cold, wrenching hand gripping my insides, and I felt unable to scream, unable to move or do anything except stay exactly as I was, staring out at the swirling, faceless darkness of the room. Imagined sounds rang in my ears, faint and far-off like the distant chime of someone playing clawhammer banjo. Milly stirred vaguely beside me on the bed, surprising me with the motion, but that reminder of her presence came as an unexpected comfort. I gently ran my hand across the smooth flare of her upturned hip, and, somewhat relieved, dropped back down to the pillow, which suddenly felt like ice against my bare shoulders. My heart was still drumming like a jackrabbit's, the coldness of the bed gradually giving way to the hot, heavy silence that seemed suddenly to be falling inwards on me, pressing my breath into short, staccato rushes of air until everything began to swim and my eyes closed, thoughts spinning downwards through the pillow and expiring there as sleep came once again.

I finally got up about noon, feeling groggy and still restive after the long night of troubled dreams. Milly had risen ahead of me, drawing the curtains open on a drizzly spring rain. The cityscape

beyond our window waxed grey, the mottled images of downtown buildings dotted with fluorescence as they descended to the dark, buglike huddle of cars and people. "Tommy Joe?" Milly called from the bathroom. "Are you awake?"

"Barely," I said. I sat on the edge of the bed, trying to muster the energy to pull my pants on. "How'd you sleep?"

"Just fine," she answered. She emerged from the bathroom, her hair bound up in a bun that looked like it was pasted to the back of her head. She was wearing a robe made out of some shiny, satin-like cloth, and as my senses slowly came to me, I could smell the sweet, magnolia-like scent of her bath soap. There was only a trace of the odor, barely noticeable as it hovered about the room, and I smiled, taking a kind of grim, ironic pleasure in the pure discretion it exhibited. Milly glanced sideways at me, aware of my attention, as she walked across to her suitcase and got out some small whalebone combs.

"How's the folks?" I asked. Her robe was loosely fastened, and as she turned to answer I could see the bronze coloring of her Florida tan stretching down from her throat and into the soft, smooth valley between her breasts. "They enjoy Tampa all right?"

"Tampa was fine," she said, smiling wryly. "As if you really cared, Tommy Joe."

"Just trying to show some polite interest," I said. "So much for that. What else can we talk about?"

She was staring into the mirror above the dresser, cocking her head to one side and then another, as if she wasn't sure whether the knot in back was straight. I rose from the bed and stepped up behind

her, laughing at the look of alarm that came over her when she saw me in the mirror. "Don't you touch that," she said, half-smiling and trying to cover the knot with her hands as I began unravelling the braids.

"You ought to just let it hang down," I said, as strand by strand the hair started falling loose across her shoulders.

"Tommy Joe," she cried, the irritation finally creeping into her voice. "Leave it alone please would you--Tommy Joe!" She let out a little squeal as I grabbed her hands away from where they were cupped across the back of her head and bent down to kiss her neck. Her shoulder arched up, pushing my chin away, and I wrestled her about-face, now trying just to embrace her, but she broke away from me, tossing her head sideways with the undone braids falling forward across her face.

"For Christ sakes," I said, backing off. "Don't do this to me. Please. I missed you, that's all. I missed touching you--"

She stared down at the carpet, fingers gathering her robe at the collar. "I'm sorry," she said. "It's been so long--I guess I just don't feel ready yet--"

"Listen," I said, carefully modulating my voice's pleading tone, "I love you. I don't know about you, but I've been ready since the day we left."

Finally, her eyes rose slowly to meet mine. "I forget, I suppose," she said, softly. "It isn't easy for you either is it?"

"It ain't easy for anybody," I said. "I'm sorry too."

She came over and sat down before me on the bed, her brown eyes warm and moist. There rose from her the faint odor of soap and

fresh-smelling skin, the odor I liked, and not that of the expensive perfume she would have been delicately applying any moment now had I not interrupted her. She reached behind and let the last strands of her hair down, shaking them free across her shoulders. She blinked up at me expectantly. "Well?" she said, a fluttering, uneasy distraction in her voice, "don't you want to kiss me Tommy Joe?"

"If you're sure--" I said, without insistence.

She nodded weakly. "I'm sorry," she said. "Forget what I said before. Please, Tommy Joe. I love you."

I sat down next to her on the bed and undid the binding on her robe, slowly pushing the cloth away and running my hand over the smooth brown skin of her belly and hips. We kissed, her jaw slackening against the pressure, and I reached up to touch her breasts, but she pushed my hand away. "No," she said, "not yet." We lay back on the rumpled covers and I kissed her on the neck and up into her hair, which was still damp and sweet-smelling from her morning bath, and my hand, which had been stroking her belly and hips, passed gently across the soft, matted curls of her mons.

"Tommy Joe," she gasped. The words were like a contraction as her body stiffened against my touch. There was someone knocking--banging rather--at our door. I kept on kissing Milly, shaking my hand no, but she turned her head sideways, catching her breath, and whispered: "I think you'd better answer it." Whoever it was was now shouting my name.

"God damn it," I said. "I'm going." The pounding was getting louder. Milly fastened her robe up again as I rose from the bed and straightened my pants.

"Tommy Joe! Tommy Joe Jaeger!" the voice outside was screaming. It was the girl from Waycross.

"All right," I snapped. "Hold on." I unbolted the door and opened it. The girl was standing there wearing nothing but her panties and one of Daddy's garish silk shirts. Her eyes were wide and wildly excited, and above one cheek she had a long, shallow cut.

"You better come," she said. "I got your brother first, but--" She rubbed the cut absently with a damp hand. The wound looked fresh.

"What the hell are you talking about?" I said, shortly.

"I think he's dead," she answered, her voice quavering. "I didn't know he--I never thought--I just--"

"Dead?" I shouted. "Who's dead?"

"Daddy," she said. "Daddy Julius."

I grabbed her by the arm, slamming the door behind me, and we took the elevator up to Daddy's penthouse. The door to his suite was open. I ran in through the vestibule, and found Beau standing in the front room, holding Daddy's ulcer bottle and pounding it against his palm, the way he sometimes did with his bottleneck.

"Is he really dead?" I asked him.

"Of course he's dead," my brother screamed, the words triggering in him a convulsion of rage, his handsome features contorting into a soundless howl as he reared and threw the bottle. It crashed against the rain-spattered window behind Daddy's desk and fell to the floor, slivers of broken glass dropping like the sound of tinkling wind-chimes. "While you and your Memphis whore--"

I grabbed him by the shirt collar and began shaking him, but the girl started screaming for us to stop. I let go of the cloth, and he stepped back, his rage slowly ebbing away into a kind of shock and bewilderment. "I'm sorry," he said, shaking his head. "I didn't know what else to do--"

"Go on and sit down," I told him.

"O. K.," he said, but instead of sitting he walked over to the bathroom door and stood with his back to me, steadying himself against the jamb as he looked down at the crumpled figure on the floor. Daddy Julius was lying on the carpet beside the crapper as if he had just fallen off it, with his purple suede pants bunched up around his spindly brown calves and the bones of his hip jutting up. The whole place stank of blood, and as Beau fell back from the door I could see the dark brown stain that spotted the rug below Daddy Julius's groin. "I feel sick just leaving him lay here like that," Beau said, choking back a sob. "If only you'd of done something--" His gaze levelled darkly at the girl from Waycross.

"He was like that when I found him," the girl cried. "There wasn't nothing for me to do, except call an ambulance." She rubbed her eyes with the oversized sleeve of Daddy's shirt. "He said he didn't feel good--I never figured he was dying though. I didn't know--who'd think to bust in on someone when they're in the fucking commode?" She halted, a few brief sobs escaping before she got control of herself again. "You didn't have to hit me," she sniffed at Beau. "I didn't kill him or nothing." She rubbed her cut, looking dolefully at my brother. "We didn't even--" She shook her head, a sad, ironic frown creasing her forehead.

"That's enough," Beau said. He was swaying on the doorjamb, his head hung like a man retching. "I told you I was sorry. Oh God look at him Tommy Joe."

I shut the door and led him away from the bathroom. "Come on," I said, "sit down now. You look pale as a sheet."

"Oh Jesus," Beau was saying. "Oh Jesus what now?"

"Sit down," I insisted. "Did you say you called an ambulance?"

The girl nodded.

"Well," I said, "there ain't nothing more we can do." Beau was standing by Daddy's desk now, staring transfixed at the splintered windowpane. I turned back to the girl. "Why don't you go on back down to our room?" I said. "Milly ought to have something for that cut."

The girl nodded and started to leave, but stopped as she reached the vestibule. "Beau," she said, turning and looking across the room at my brother.

He glanced away from the window, his blue eyes damp and hollow-looking. His lips were set in a tight, even line, as if it might be too painful for him to even speak.

"I'm sorry," the girl continued, haltingly. "I loved him too--in my own way--"

"I bet you did," Beau managed, his voice a fiercely tempered whisper. "I just bet you did. Close the fucking door on your way out, will you? This ain't a morgue you know--at least not yet."

The ambulance people loaded Daddy into the stretcher without even pulling up his pants; they just tucked him in and threw a big

wool blanket over his body, face and all. White Willie, Burke, and the two women--Milly and the girl from Waycross--stood out in the vestibule, watching the men tighten the stretcher belts around Daddy's chest and thighs. Lying there with his face and clothing covered, he looked smaller and thinner than I ever would have guessed he might, insubstantial almost, the drape of green wool betraying only the most general contours of a laid-out body. "So who's going with him?" one of the ambulance men asked. No one answered at first; I felt a kind of helplessness, not knowing what to do or say, not even sure of how I was supposed to feel, and there was a long, painful silence before White Willie finally stepped forward, thumbs hitching in the pockets of his cream-toned slacks.

"I'll go," he said, his pink palm the color of an undercooked slice of meat as he brought it up and nervously pressed it against his smooth brown cheek. "If that's cool Beau."

"That's cool," my brother answered, without expression. He sat on the sofa, looking out through the broken window at the fractured, rain-spotted skyline. "Get him out of here will you?" One of the ambulance men grunted, and they wheeled the stretcher off down the hall, White Willie trailing soberly behind. The girl from Waycross, who had pulled some jeans on underneath that oversized shirt of Daddy's watched them for a moment, then turned to Beau and said: "You all mind if I go too?"

"I don't give a God damn what you do," Beau said, his voice struggling for control with every word. "Go on. Please. I don't care."

"I'm gone," the girl said, her hand flicking a hasty sign-off as she turned and headed toward the elevator. In her manner there was something that suggested an incongruous excitement or enthusiasm.

I glanced in at the bathroom, which was reeking now more than ever with the odor of Daddy's blood. "Whooey," I said. "I don't believe it. Can you imagine an ulcer killing him like that? I thought he took his medication and all."

Beau rose from the sofa and walked back to the window, running his hand along the jagged edge of the glass. "You ever get a taste of that elixir?" he said.

"No," I answered.

"It's a wonder we never smelt it," he said. "You'd think good old boys like us would know sour mash if it was around. Even if it was mixed up with all that milky chalk." He laughed to himself, not heartily, but with a dry sound in his throat like dead men's bones rattling. "It's a wonder the taste didn't kill him sooner." He smiled weakly across the room at me and Burke and Milly. He seemed more himself since they had taken Daddy away, his voice less strained and features settling into something more like his usual offhand, good-old-boy casualness. "That girl," he muttered, "there wasn't nothing she could have done. I was wrong to have hit her." The reflections seemed more matter-of-fact than apologetic. "To have hit her that hard, anyhow," he added, a wry grin creasing his downturned face.

"Burke," I said, "why don't you go on down and have a drink. We'll finish up here."

"I believe I lost my taste for it," Burke answered, his weak, pallid smile even more blanched than usual. He nodded vaguely towards the bathroom. "I reckon I could use a tranquilizer though."

"You go on back down," I said. "Try and relax--take a nap, maybe. We'll call you later--let you know what's happening."

Burke nodded, and stumbled weak-kneed across the hallway to the elevator doors. "Poor Burke," Beau said. "I wonder if facing death is any easier with a hangover."

Milly stood alone now in the vestibule, her hair hastily and imperfectly arranged. She was staring at me, her eyes heavy with a cold, hard expectation that I had long ago taught myself to ignore. I turned away from her to Beau, who was looking out through the shattered pane. Rain was blowing in through the silverlike crack and dotting his forehead like little beads of perspiration. "They found Daddy's case," he said. "The one with all the shit. The house dick asked me about it while you were gone. Anyone talk to you downstairs?"

"No," I said, glancing back at Milly, Beau shook his head, wiping the damp, ratted locks of hair out of his eyes, and turned to the giant mirror above the sofa. "I said I didn't know nothing about it. They'll probably write him up as O.D. now." He raised a fist as if to strike at the mirror, but caught himself and let his arm drop to his side. "He never used any of it himself. Just that fucking ulcer tonic. But we got to protect the living, I reckon." He glanced sharply at me, his expression deepening into a cold, bottomless stare, the kind that seemed to me sometimes to reflect my own self in its blue hollows--to draw in rather than look out, the way that spring water at high noon will let you glimpse the channel leading downward

to its source.

"Beau," I said, after a long silence, "let's forget it. Let's go home."

"What about Daddy?" he asked, staring helplessly into the mirror.

"For Christ sakes," I entreated, "the only thing left is to bury him, and we can't do that until the parlor's done with their part--it's only an hour's drive back up home--"

"Somebody's got to stay," he said, with an unwavering, almost blind insistence.

"Willie and the girl are at the hospital now. There's Burke and Coon and all the roadies--Christ Beau, he's got more family now than he ever had."

He stepped away from the mirror, staggering a little as if from exhaustion. "I'll get my guitar," he said dully, and Milly and I traded cold glances as he walked past us through the vestibule.

"Please," I said, as she opened her mouth to speak. "Don't say it. Not now. You know I can't go off and leave him--not now."

"I suppose not," she said, clasping her arms as if she was standing in a chill. "So we're going back to Drayton--this afternoon?"

"Not for long. I promise. Just till this thing blows over. It'll be all right, once we get him buried and all--"

"And then?"

"Aw come on," I said. "Don't give me the third degree. It ain't like I killed Daddy Julius myself you know."

Milly flashed a cool, grudging smile, every muscle of her face in perfect tether. "I'll go pack," she said, and left, her arms still

clasped and legs moving with cool, calculated grace as she crossed the lobby to the elevator.

I was supposed to stay and wait for the house dick to come and lock up. I stood for a long time just leaning up against the wall, idly letting my attention drift from the shattered window to its angular reflection in the mirror and then back again. Once I walked over and wetted my hand on the rain-soaked sill, holding the moist palm to my cheek. It was late afternoon, and still raining; the street below was jammed with traffic, and the sidewalks were teeming with black umbrellas. The grind of accelerating cars rose through the broken pane in waves like echoes, strangely dissociating itself from the objects below, and beyond that and the slow glaze of rain, there seemed to be no voice to the city, no body, though the air was fresh and cool as skin after a bath.

PART TWO: THE MANSION

Take me back to the place where I first saw the light
To my sweet sunny South take me home
Where the wild birds sing me to sleep every night
Oh why was I tempted to roam?

The path to our cabin they say has grown green
And the stones are quite mossy around
And I know that the faces and forms that I loved
Now lie in the cold mossy ground.

Take me back to the place where the tall trees grow
To my place in the evergreen shade
Where the flowers on the river's green margin do grow
And share their sweet scent with the glade.

(Traditional)

CHAPTER VIII

are there words

she said i don't

remember them

We hardly spoke to each other the whole trip up 41 to the Knob; Beau sat in the back seat, his eyes dull but restless as he coaxed languid notes from his acoustic guitar. It had stopped raining, and to the northwest the storm clouds had broken above a scintillating sunset of red and orange. Fiery tracers of refracted light rose into the grey underbellies of cumulus, and from the front seat of the speeding Mercedes it looked as if the far-off ridge lines of the horizon were exploding, flinging their dark debris to the sky in dissipating clouds. The rain had washed the soft clay from retaining banks all along the highway, the dark red soil lending its own color to the sleek blacktop and tar-jointed concrete roadbed. Pine and roadside brush stirred in our backwash, and in the purring, air-conditioned stillness of the car I imagined the rustling sound of their motion and the sweet rain-like odor of the April blossoms popping out all across the countryside. Our own motion I felt as something in a dream, no more substantial than the car's swift shadow which stretched, elongated, against the roadside behind us.

"Would you look at that sunset," I said once, but Beau had no eyes for it and no words for it either. His silence was taut and

ominous as a stretched wire. He was strumming his guitar with an uncharacteristic softness, the melodies slowing and diminishing to points of near-stasis, as if frozen in the contemplation of whether or not to continue. I could see him in the rear-view mirror as I drove, and his eyes would be like the music, their movement occasionally stilling until there was nothing of him left in them, their blue hollows reflecting nothing but the swell of muddy burms and damp, scrub-covered embankments. Milly caught me gazing at his reflection once or twice, and I ignored her pained, imploring gaze, pretending to fasten my attention on the road ahead. I knew what it was, what she wanted, but I somehow resented the fact that she should pick now of all times to ask for it. It would have been easy enough, I guess, to turn and smile, however incongruously, or to reach across that broad front seat and pat her brown, conspicuously dangling palm; and likely I would have, had it not been for her asking (which was really a kind of demanding), or for the presence of my brother, whose playing was gradually drifting off into stillness and his gaze fixing on the meaningless parade of billboards and sleazy roadside diners, as if he himself were receding inward, shrinking down to nothing right there in the back seat of our Mercedes.

It was no different that night, even after Beau had retired to his room and Milly and I lay in bed together, listening as those lilting mournful melodies began again, echoing from beyond the wall above our bed. Milly pressed close to me, her tanned forearm betraying even in the darkness the color of burnt almond where it lay across the pale skin of my chest. I hugged her thoughtlessly, my arms

responding to the pressure of her body against mine. It was a reflex whose original purpose seemed suddenly alien to me. The forlorn sounds from the room next door rose to mingle with the cool night breeze, making me shudder with an eerie feeling of deja vu.

"What is it," Milly said.

"Nothing," I answered. "Go on to sleep."

"How about you?" she said. "You seem restless--"

"I'll be fine," I said. "It's nothing."

She seemed satisfied with that for a moment. The guitar returned again, now filling the silence that had been left by our lapsed conversation, and Milly stirred restlessly against me. "Tommy Joe," she said. "Tommy Joe?"

Her cheek moved softly against my shoulder as she spoke. Her brown eyes were opened to the darkness, the pupils as black and wide as I had ever seen them, and as she glanced from point to unseen point in the unlit room there was a glimmer of brightness at their center, like a luminous orb catching the reflection of a distant sun. "What is it," I said. I raised my hand, pulling a long strand of smooth brown hair away from her upturned cheek.

"Did he--did your brother care that much for Daddy?" she said.

"Of course he did," I answered. "What the hell kind of a question is that?"

"Well--I don't know. I've never seen him like this before, that's all. I mean, at your father's funeral--"

"That was different," I said.

"Yes," she sighed, "I suppose it was."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

She glanced upwards, her eyebrows cocking thoughtfully. "I don't know," she said. "I didn't mean anything really. I just remember him at your father's--"

"He was just nineteen then. He didn't care about nothing--except his guitar." I remembered, though, that he had brought someone with him to the service up in Knoxville, a grizzled old black man who, with myself, Coon, and Milly, comprised the entire family of mourners. That was my first glimpse of Daddy Julius, and while his presence did not exactly swell our ranks, his muttered "amens" and "halleluias" gave the short, somber service a life it might otherwise have lacked. He had stood beside me in the chapel, his pin-stripe suit neatly pressed and brown felt derby clasped reverently against his chest, his asservations voiced in a rhythmic counterpoint to the minister's distracted monotone. My brother stood further down the pew, taking obvious pleasure in the reverend's--and Milly's--discomfort. The shiny bottleneck jiggled thoughtlessly in his palm.

"Tommy Joe," Milly said again, as those sad, gliding notes came drifting through the wall again. "What's that he's playing now?"

"It's an old Creole song," I said. "Coon Dog's mother taught it to us."

"Are there words?" she asked.

"I don't remember them," I said quickly.

"He's been playing it all day you know. Ever since we left Atlanta--I thought it might be something special--"

"It's just a lullaby," I said.

"My God, I've never seen him like this. Maybe you ought to go talk to him."

"I don't have anything to say."

"But he's your brother," she said, insistently.

"He's his own man," I answered.

There was a rustle of hair as Milly turned her face from mine, as if fixing her gaze upwards, into the blank darkness above us.

(She was up almost as soon as it was over, throwing back the sheets and making her way across the room to the rheostat switch. There was some awkwardness in her manner, and when the lights had come back up and she turned to face me, I realized she had been trying to keep her knees together as she moved. "Does it hurt?" I said, sitting up. There was a tiny bloodstain on the towel where she had been lying.

She nodded, the gesture less an answer than a subtle, unconscious inclination of her chin. "I'll be right back," she said. She closed the bathroom door behind her. A border of light outlined the jamb as water gurgled in the unseen sink. The odor of her perfume was rising from the bed, and with it a sweet, fleshy scent I had never really smelled before. The soft light of her parents' candelabrae was filling the room with yellow, melting the Oriental swirls and crescents like hazy pools into the maroon carpet. I got up and went over to the walk-in closet. Its paneled doors were made of a light, grainy wood which reminded me in color and texture of the balsa my brother and I had once used to build model airplanes. Inside were two wardrobes, a man's and a woman's, each hanger bearing a plastic

dust-cover which draped the clothing inside.

"Jesus," I said. "I've never seen so many suits in my life."

Milly came out of the bathroom and sat down on the bed, holding a huge bath towel against the front of her body. "He won't wear anything else," she said. "Except on the golf course. Those are just his fall and winter ones--the rest are in the beach house down at Tampa."

Some of the covers were transparent, and as I thumbed through the rack I came across a white plantation suit that reminded me of the ones Colonel Jake Tufts had worn. "What about this?" I asked. "He wears this in winter?"

"Oh that," she shrugged. "He got that a few years back--for a vacation we took in Rio--" I tried to imagine what her father would look like in it, that tall, distinguished man who reminded me, oddly enough, with his well-oiled Florida tan, of some Caribbean despot, but in my mind's eye I could see no one but the aged Colonel. "A lot of them are from Europe," Milly was saying. "He says the tailors over there are the best in the world." I glanced back to the bed where Milly sat with the towel clasped against her. She was rubbing between her legs with one hand, as if she was drying herself off. I felt a tightening in my chest as I watched her, my fingers absently stroking the suit's plastic coverlet. She was not even looking at me now, but down at herself, her motion seemingly unself-conscious.

The glaring white light spilling from the bathroom had dissipated the yellow suffusion of the candelabrae, and with the starker, brighter illumination there emerged in the patterned carpet intricate subtleties of color, blues and greens I had not even suspected before. The

candelabrae themselves, which before had gleamed like tawny yellow brass, were now shimmering with a silver-gold texture, even beneath the glow of their orange filaments. I gazed uncomfortably down at the pale skin of my body, my fingers jealously releasing their grip on the suit's plastic coverlet. I don't belong here, I thought suddenly, the idea gripping me like a seizure; I felt conspicuous in my nakedness, in the pale, almost hairless expanse of my chest and stomach. Milly was glancing across at me now, her tanned smile flashing tentatively. I stepped back into the bedroom, drawing the closet doors shut behind me.

"Are you all right?" I said, my glance inclining down past her, to the blood-spotted towel she had laid on the floor beside the bed. "I didn't mean for it to hurt--"

"That's the way it is," she answered, with a tentative, girlish laugh. She looked down at the fresh towel she was now pressing against herself. "The first time anyway. If you're to believe mothers and such--how about you?"

I laughed nervously and sat down on the edge of the bed. My bare legs felt damp and clammy. I leaned forward, that curious tightness in my chest making my breath tremble as I drew it. My clothes stood in an anomalous heap on the richly colored carpet, the cheap, square-toed shoes paired neatly off to the side of my rumpled jeans. "I'm fine," I said, thinking: why did you bring me here? why did you show me this? "You were right," I said, looking down at my shriveled cock where it curled between my pale, shivering thighs. "I'm glad we came here." She smiled, patting my shoulder, and I sat there

wishing to God that either I was rich or she was poor, wondering if it would have made any difference in us, whether I would have loved her or if she would have loved me if we had come to each other from the same, and not different, worlds.

She was lying back on the bed now, the towel still gathered between her legs. I stretched out beside her and stared down at the bed, away from the details of the illumined room, one finger tracing the contour of her waist and hips. "That tickles," she laughed, shivering, and the finger withdrew. She was not looking at me now; her eyes tracked slowly from wall to wall, and then across the ceiling, lowering and passing along my body without focusing on anything at all, as if they were not really searching out anything in particular, but taking in the entire room, the entire moment, in a series of swift, impulsive gulps. Her eyelids closed and her face became still, a moment of placid, effortless absorption. When she opened them again their focus had sharpened, and those dark eyes like gleaming obsidian mirrors as they turned towards me, the new object of their attention. "Tommy Joe," she said, "have you ever thought about getting married?"

"Married?" I said, my stomach coiling as if someone had punched it. "You mean us--me and you?"

"Of course," she said, laughing gently. "Who else?"

"Well sure, I guess--but I never figured you--"

"Never figured I'd what?" She sat up, smiling incredulously. "Why Tommy Joe, didn't you think I'd want to? That's ridiculous--especially now. I love you--don't you know that?"

"I--I'm sorry," I said. My chest and abdomen were now contracting into one huge knot. "I love you too. I'm just surprised, that's

all. I just never expected--"

"That I'd mention it first?" she said, smiling demurely. "I'm sorry--I know that's not the way it's done. But you know me. When I see something I want--" She bent over and kissed me, then sat back up, her entire manner assuming the aspect of a simple declarative expression. "I want to marry you," she said. "I don't want anything more in the world."

I sat up in the bed, turning my back to her and planting my feet on the carpet as if I was about to get up. "I don't understand," I said.

"You're angry." her voice was suddenly flat and expressionless. And then, with gathering regret: "I knew I shouldn't have said anything--I knew it."

"It isn't that," I said. "It's just--"

"Just what?"

"Aw hell, can't you see? I can't give you all this--I mean Christ, look at this place. This is where you come from. You've never seen where I come from--believe me, it ain't anything like this--"

"That doesn't matter," she said, the insistence in her voice masking a struggle for control of the tears that were gathering in the margins of her dark irises. "What matters is what we want, not what we've got. And I don't care where you come from--I know where you're going--"

"I'm not going anywhere," I said, "except into debt." It occurred to me, remembering her father's wardrobe, that I didn't even own a suit.

"That's not true," she snapped, suddenly stern. "You may have been born poor Tommy Joe, but you want more for yourself than that--and you'll get it, I know you will--why else would you come up here to Nashville, and work that horrid job in the library, trying to put yourself through school--why else would you be thinking about those Bar exams, and everything else you've done since you've been here? That's why I love you, Tommy Joe--I know I wouldn't be disappointed with you."

"What'll your father say?" I mumbled, burying my face in my white, clammy palms.

"It'll be fine," she said. "Once he sees what a fine person you are, and what you've done for yourself already. Besides," she added, taking my hand, "he's such a lovely doting father. He won't be able to say no--especially once he sees how happy I am with you--"

I turned around and kissed her, and she stared back at me, her eyes solicitous of approval. "I reckon we could do it," I said, drawing a long breath, "but I sure as hell don't have much to offer you, compared to what you're used to--" I glanced vaguely about the perimeters of the bedroom.

"You will in time," she smiled, her eyes blinking so that the obsidian of her gleaming irises flashed like dark semaphores. "I know you will." Her hand delicately traced the arch of my spine. "I'll help you too--and not with my father's money, I know you wouldn't want that--so what we have will be ours--yours and mine--something we made together, just between the two of us--Tommy Joe, I love you so much--" She finished breathlessly, her body arching forward towards mine as

she knelt up on the bed. She grabbed my hand and pulled me closer, pressing my palm against her belly and beginning to rotate it, slowly at first, until my muscles relaxed with the motion, the fingers splaying gently apart and moving on their own so that when she took her own hands away the tips had become acclimated to the warmth of the smooth brown skin and soft tendrils of hair; and as the rest of me settled into her clutching embrace I felt the unspoken promises popping to the surface of my thoughts as if in her passion she were squeezing them out of me, and this time the room did not go away, did not even spin, but grew harder and colder and sharper in every detail, so that even when I shut my eyes and there was nothing but the trembling and jerking of Milly's body beneath me I could still see the words, as clearly as if they had been emblazoned on the wall above the bed, the person for whom they were meant suddenly seeming not to be there at all as they screamed at me within me yes I'll make you happy I'll buy you a fucking mansion and everything you could ever want you'll never be poor so help me God and you'll never embarrass me like this again.)

CHAPTER IX

your boy is a jaeger

he said

and that's good enough for me

In northern Georgia, it is the time just before dawn that the last of winter stubbornly clings to; the spring nights themselves are warm, the lapping breezes heavy with the odor of pine and blooming dogwood, but by early morning the air changes. The wind touches you through the cool, damp sheets like a thousand icy fingers massaging your body; you feel for the heat of the one next to you even as you sleep, and awaken in a kind of sideways lovemaking position, your bodies curled together like parallel highways and your own backside cool and tingling along its windward exposure. Once the two of you come to, it's easy to follow that natural inclination towards putting the warmth of your bodies together, and those chilly mornings are among the finest times for making love, with the sunlight creeping through the open window and playing soft, leafy red shadows across the wall above the bed.

The first morning back was like that, more Indian Summer than early spring. I woke in the dawn, with that cool air washing over me like tap water and Milly's place in the bed empty but still warm at my side. The sun had just begun to break through the woods, and there was a breeze blowing in from the north, birds stirring restlessly

with the motion. The trees themselves chattered softly, their rustlings and the dark, windy murmur of the river forming a gentle counterpoint to the occasional roar of trucks laboring through the gorge to the east. I had expected Milly to be there, had expected that we would make love; I felt a slight irritation at her absence. But even so, the vigorous sensation of awakening to that brisk, breezy dawn was undiminished, as if my body, numbed by eight weeks of sensory overload, needed nothing more than the breathlike touch of this morning to get the circulation going again.

I eyed myself in the tall vanity mirror as I leaned over the foot of the bed and reached for my pants. The morning shadows were creeping down the walls, bobbing lightly in the breeze, and in the midst of them I seemed a shadow myself, my own reflection dark against the brightness at my back, my body a grey form surrounded by the leafy red mottlings of slanting light. I rose, shivering as I buckled my pants, and stumbled across to the door and out into the hallway. There too the daylight was slowly gathering, creeping at an angle down the long carpeted floor. The window at the head of the stairs was shimmering now, the bobbing trees flinging salients of light through its panes, the patterns shifting in the wind so that tiny luminous shapes came dancing down the hall, along the spread of red carpet.

I rapped on Beau's door, and it fell open at my touch, shadows retreating across the unused bed. A plush high-backed easy chair, a relic of Colonel Tufts', sat facing out the window, the neck of Beau's guitar protruding across the arm-rest like a spindly dislocated elbow. Yellowed lace curtains lapped inward at the window's languid

inhalation. "Beau," I said, walking over to the bathroom door, but there was no one in there either. I could hear voices downstairs though, low and somber, and as I stepped back into the hallway the tones, the cadences of their speech, became more distinct. Beau's voice was not among them. When I got to the long bannistered front staircase, I could tell there was just two--Coon's flat, toneless drawl and the carefully modulated rise and fall of Milly's delicate inflections.

The two of them were in the anteroom that opened just off the vestibule at the foot of the stairs, and as I entered Coon slowly turned, his lopsided face creasing into a quick, uneven grin. "Why howdy," he said, his hands burrowing deep into his jeans pockets. "I never reckoned on seeing you so early either."

"We never reckoned on being awake half the night," Milly answered curtly, her own pocketed hands drawing her housecoat tightly around her body. "Tommy Joe here was the only one who managed to sleep, it seems." Her eyes were sharp with accusation.

"Where's Beau?" I said.

"Riding," she replied, with an irritated exhalation of breath. I'm surprised he didn't wake you with that damn bike of his."

"I never heard a thing," I said. "Jesus, he must have been up before first light--and what the hell are you doing here?" I asked, turning to Coon. "I thought you were going to wait until the funeral stuff was done--"

"That's what I come about partly," he said, his hands fumbling uneasily in his pants pockets. "Beau ain't going to like it either."

"Like what?" I said.

Coon opened his mouth to answer, but held off as Milly whirled and started for the kitchen. "I suppose I'd best back out," she said. "It sounds like Jaeger business to me."

"For Christ sakes," I said, "come on now. You can stay--can't she Coon?"

"It don't matter," Coon said, his feet shifting nervously.

"Well," Milly said with forced brightness, "I imagine you all are hungry anyway. I'll go fix us some breakfast--if there's anything that hasn't already spoiled."

"Obliged," Coon said, and as she disappeared into the kitchen he pulled me through the anteroom doorway and into the front hall. The light from the window at the head of the stairs was spilling down into the corridor, striking the crystal chandelier that hung above us. Prismatic eddies rippled across the dusty, glimmering tile, and for a split-second it struck me how strange it was, to be standing in the cavernous, crystal-lit brilliance of that front hallway and staring at Cousin Coon, who with his rumpled denims and dark, strawlike shocks of hair looked for all the world like some Tobacco Road character lost at the entrance to the Pearly Gates. He was glancing upwards, no doubt to the sparkling chandelier, which hung motionless above us but whose dancing brilliance gave the illusion of a slow, trancelike movement. "How's Cousin Beau?" he asked.

I shook my head. "He wouldn't talk all the way back. Just played that damn guitar. He was up most all night too, just like Milly said. Now what about this trouble with Daddy?"

"The funeral," Coon said. "It can't be till Saturday."

"That's too long," I said. "I thought Beau wanted it real quick and hush-hush."

Coon shrugged. "Couldn't get it no sooner. Cops impounded the body. The coroner had some more questions."

"God damn it," I said. "I knew they'd play hell with him."

"Can't blame them," Coon said, matter-of-factly. "That suitcase with all the shit--it was in his room you know."

"Aw sure," I said, "but that's crazy. Whoever heard of someone bleeding to death from an O.D.?"

Coon shrugged again, his crooked grin savagely inexplicable.

"Saturday," I fumed. "Everybody and his fucking brother will be at the shindig now. No chance of keeping them away. At least he didn't have no relatives."

"He does now," Coon Dog said.

"How's that?"

He pulled a crumpled telegram out of his jeans pocket and handed it to me. "Who the hell is this?" I said, reading the sender's name.

"It come at the hotel last night," he said. "Some crazy woman, I reckon. Or a smart one maybe, who heard he died without a will. Claims Daddy married her ten years ago down in Wiregrass country. Says she has a paper to prove it."

"I can read what it says," I said. "Fuck her anyhow. Probably some ex-employee. Where was she before Daddy had any jack?"

Coon Dog shook his head, his mouth arching crookedly. "Well," he said, "that's the news. Thought I'd bring it on up. The equipment ought to be up by tomorrow." He sauntered, loose-limbed, over to the

tall, ornately carved front door. Its tinted glass sprayed rainbows across the greying, marble-streaked tile as it opened. "I reckon I'll have a little walk. Maybe I'll run across Cousin Beau." From the woods beyond the clearing of house and stables there came the sound of my brother's motorcycle roaring like a buzz-saw through the trees. "There he is now," Coon said, and with his spooky half-grin I felt a shiver run like dancing fingers up my naked spine. "I figured I better tell him personal-like. He don't take bad news all that well you know."

(I imagine for our Pa it must have been a disquieting thing at first, the sight of his two blond-haired boys tripping through the stables with that black-haired sprout of a nephew right beside; but deep down he must have known he had no one to blame but himself. It was Pa who brought the brown woman and her child down from Knoxville after his brother Billy's death, and it had been at Pa's urging that Colonel Tufts had hired her to cook for him up at the Knob, so whatever uneasiness he might have felt about our fast friendship with our cousin, it was a score he had to settle with himself. Beau and I hardly had time to make other friends, between school and duties at the stables, and we took to Lafollette so hard and so quickly that the only way for Pa to see to it that our chores got done was to give some to his nephew as well; and while our cousin accepted the jobs with a kind of fatality and indifference, he worked with a thoroughness that eventually settled Pa's misgivings and even brought a few uneasy nods of approval from the Colonel himself.

We worked with the horses, feeding and grooming as well as cleaning the stables, but were forbidden to ride them. It was inevitable, given the daily contact with the animals, that we each should have our favorites; but there was one, an Appaloosa stallion, which commanded Lafollette's attention with an intensity that went beyond any considerations of simple preference. The Colonel called him Reuben, and often we would find our cousin just standing at the Appaloosa's stall, his water bucket in hand, peering through the door at the horse as he stood with his slender neck bent downwards over his trough. Pa had trained him as a steeplechase runner, and although the Colonel rarely entered him in competition, he was a horse who had an instinct for speed, with rippling brown flanks and hind legs that had the smoothness and taper of a cocked rifle. He was in coloring a classic Appaloosa, brown except for the creamy, mottled blanket of his rump, and, as if the obvious beauty and strength of the animal were not enough, the Colonel was emphatic about the fact that the horse was directly descended from a mount once owned and ridden by Theodore Roosevelt himself.

Sometimes, when Pa and the Colonel had taken some stock down to a competition, we would let a few of the remaining animals run in the small enclosed yard behind the stables. The three of us sat on the rail fence watching them spring and play, and always our cousin's eyes would be tracking the big stallion with the white, mottled rump, his dark gaze absorbing every movement of the horse's supple, shimmering brown body.

"That one there," Lafollette said once, pointing across the corral to the prancing Appaloosa. "How'd he get like that?"

"What?" I said. "Oh, you mean his rump. They breed them that way."

"Indians," my brother chimed. "The Nez Perce bred them for the markings. They thought they were a sign of immortality or something."

Lafollette looked quizzical. His eyes narrowed at the gamboling horse, which was moving with a soft, brushlike sound through the uncut grass. "You mean someone gave him those spots on purpose?"

Beau let out such a whoop of laughter he nearly fell off the fence, and Lafollette grinned humorlessly at him, with a dark, sidelong glance. "It ain't like someone painted him that way," I said. "He come from others like himself. The Colonel and Pa, they just didn't leave nothing to accident--"

"Go on," snickered Beau, "tell Cousin Lafollette all about the birds and the bees--"

"Shut up," I snapped. I looked across at our cousin, whose eyes reflected the first glimmer of a dark understanding. "He's the way he is because that's how he was meant to be. Before he or even his ma and pa ever thought of being. It's like Pa says--horses just <u>are</u>, they never have to think about what they could have been or what they want to be. Pa says that's why there's so many good horses and so few good men--they don't have to worry about nothing but being what they are."

"Oh," Lafollette nodded, his attention drifting back to the horse. It was the look his mother had when she stared off into the trees, her eyes seeming to focus on a single fixed point, invisible in the distance, until the eyes were not looking out at all but had turned inward, drawing the brown, unseen infinity of distance with them.

"So they made him that way," he mused, his dark pupils wide and luminous, but if I had known what he might be thinking, if in fact I had understood what he saw in the horse in the first place, I would have denied it all, even above my brother's righteous protestations to the contrary--I would have told him that the horse, like everything else, was simply a cosmic accident, and that there was nothing special about it save the unique circumstance of its birth, a circumstance independent of the similar coincidences attending the creation of all other creatures including his (and our) parents. But it was too late to take it back, even had I known I would want to.

It was just past sunrise when we reached the Knob that morning, and even from the edge of the clearing we could see him lying there, sprawled across the stables doorway as casual as an afternoon napper, his face pushed in like a depressed lump of raw hamburger. Pa's jaw fell slack, a cry catching in his throat, as he gunned our old Willys across the clearing to where the bloody figure lay. "You boys run and get someone up to the house," he said, flinging the door open and sliding out of his seat. Beau and I jumped out our side and ran screaming up towards the verandah.

The Colonel came out first, in his palatial white breeches and bulging suspenders, the morning's first rancid cigar wiggling beeklike in his mouth as he stared out at the open stable doors. He descended the porch slowly, step by step, fists fitfully tugging at his galluses, oblivious to our frantic entreaties. The brown woman had come out to the verandah now too; she shrieked, bounding down from the porch and almost knocking the Colonel flat in his tracks as Pa rose from his

crouch, the limp form cradled in his arms like a newborn foal. The Colonel was shouting now, gesticulating towards the dark yawn of the stable doors, but Pa ignored him, ushering the woman into the car and gently maneuvering the unconscious boy into the back seat with her. "You boys," he waved, "get on back here!"

We ran past the Colonel, who was still hollering for somebody to see to the goddamned horses, and as we piled into the front seat Pa revved the car. It lurched forward, turning a dusty circle around the drive and past the Colonel, who stood waving his cigar like a sabre as the reddish-brown cloud of dirt rose behind us, across the clearing and into the woods. I had turned around in my seat to look back at the reeling roadway, and it wasn't until I glanced down at the bloody face cradled in the brown woman's lap that I fully realized it was our cousin Lafollette Jaeger. Her apron and dress were bloody too, and she held that shattered head to her breast as if she were nursing it. I sobbed once or twice; it was like a hand in my stomach jabbing up against my diaphragm, and with each terrified gasp of air it seemed to come again, so that all I could manage was a series of horrible choking noises, like hiccups: "Uh-uh-uh-is he d-uh-uh-Pa is he dead--"

"No he ain't dead," Pa snapped. "Now would you stop that blubbering." He pulled me back down into the seat so that I was staring forward into the wild horizontal rush of trees. His teeth were clenched beneath his curly blond mustache, and in his eyes was a steely glow, not of thought or feeling, but of pure determination and instinct, the way I had seen him with wild horses when they rared up and he had to scuttle back from the deadly flailing of their hooves.

He seemed not even to blink as he gunned the car down the long, curling lane and over the gravelly straightaway to the main road, his hands grasping the wheel with a stiff, mechanical vigor, the walls of Drayton's Gap rushing by, spring water flying like glistening tracers from beneath our tires, the motor whining and echoing across the Chickamauga bridge as we hurled northward, up the opposite slope and finally into Tennessee. It was not until what seemed like hours later, but had in reality been a drive of only thirteen miles to the hospital in Chattanooga, that the cold, fierce rush of energy that had come over him began to subside. As soon as they had taken Lafollette to the emergency room and up to surgery Pa fainted dead away, his ruddy face turning ghostly white as he crashed backwards against a metal supply cabinet, and even once he was revived it took a few hours of observation to satisfy the nurse that he himself had not suffered a coronary.

It was early evening by the time Pa brought the distraught woman back with us to our house in Drayton. They had finished the surgery on Lafollette that afternoon, but the doctor had told his mother, with a frankness that angered Pa, that her son's injuries had not been fatal, but would be cosmetically irreparable nevertheless. He would not discount the possibility of brain damage. Predictably, she had begun to cry at the news, but had choked it off, staring across the room at the agonized, somewhat paling face of our father. Everyone was stoically silent on the long drive back home, thirteen miles again seeming an eternity, but this time in a painfully uneventful way. Once in the house, Pa sent her upstairs to lie down, and closed the door to the narrow stairway behind her with an upward glance of profound

and angry sympathy. It seemed to me the nervousness of a long-time widower who suddenly and unexpectedly has a woman in his house, but as it turned out he had more reason for worry than just our cousin and the brown woman who, by now, no doubt lay stretched across his habitually unmade bed. He was just about to go out back when Colonel Tufts appeared outside the screen door.

"Marsh," he called. "Marsh Jaeger. Are you in there?"

Pa came around to the front room and opened the door. The Colonel looked a bit stricken himself as he entered, his face, which had always seemed ancient, having lost some of its rough, leathery look and collapsed into a pale, sagging patchwork of wrinkles. He was slightly hunched over, apparently from an attack of the arthritis he tried to keep such a guarded secret, and as he sat down his fingers curled nervously against the arm-rest, like a cat tucking in its claws. "You look like a man with something on his mind," Pa said, standing above him.

"I do," The Colonel answered dolefully. "Indeed I do." His head drooped as he spoke so that the bulge of his chin fell down across the ridge of his collar. He was wearing a freshly pressed white suit, with an ebony-colored string tie that seemed to be choking him, and he did in fact look considerably pale and a little short of breath. "We found the horse that kicked your nephew," he said, shoving one hand in his pocket and drawing out a rumpled white handkerchief. He tipped the brim of his Panama hat up, mopping his forehead and pretending to look out the window as he spoke. "He was down to the river, the horse was." He scowled and stuffed the handkerchief away, rubbing his fingers together as if he was rolling a cigar between them.

"He'd fell down the slope. Broke both his front legs."

Pa shook his head stiffly, turning away from the Colonel's withered presence.

"It was Reuben," said the Colonel. There was a garrulous, self-righteously matter-of-fact tone to the proclamation, but as the Colonel finished he drew a trembling, dubious breath that betrayed the true nature of his feelings. "I seen him," the Colonel went on, "lying there at the side of the river--down to the bottom of all them rocks, one leg broke and the other splayed out from underneath him like a bent splinter--" He spoke slowly now, wrestling for composure with every word, as Pa's gaze hardened. "He wouldn't let nobody near him, not even me, just rared up and beat his head against the ground--he was in awful pain, I could see that--" The Colonel stopped, lowering his head again so that the double chin bulged out above his collar like an old frog's croaking sac, and the fingers that had been making the rolling motion clenched together and descended in a futile, fluttering gesture against the air. Pa stood quiet for a long moment, his eyes growing smoky beneath his drawn yellow eyebrows, and the Colonel looked dubiously up from his chair. "Do you hear me Marsh? I've got to get someone to fell him--that nigger gardener wouldn't even touch the rifle, the maid neither. You hear me Marsh? Come on boy, what the hell's the matter?"

"My brother's son," Pa said, drawing those square shoulders of his straight so that it looked like his arms were dangling from an I-beam. "You didn't make no mention of him."

The Colonel's eyebrows arched, and that bitter, despondent righteousness began to creep back into his voice. "The boy," he said, "is

that it? Well I'll tell you about that boy--I misdoubted him from the start, that half-nigger child, and now he's gone and done it, single-handed spooked my most special horse, a gift to me from old Teddy himself, and now you have to come out and put a bullet in his head. Now what else about him?"

"Nothing," Pa said, turning away. "And that goes for your god-damn horse too."

The pale, sagging little man pulled himself up out of the easy chair, his aristocratic forebearance finally crumbling. My brother's hand flew up to cover his mouth, a quick, high-pitched nervous giggle escaping his lips. I elbowed him harshly, and bit the inside of my mouth to keep the churning, ticklish sensation in my chest from bubbling up into laughter. The Colonel shouted across the room at Pa, his trembling hand reaching up to flick away a budding tear. "God damn it all, I won't have this," he cried, shaking a limp hand at our father, "your children laughing at me like that. You'll do as I say now or you'll never touch another horse so long as you live! What do you all think I'm here for--to be held up to ridicule--to pay my respects to some scab half-nigger child who got his bastard face kicked in tormenting my finest stallion? Well boy, if you do you figure wrong! Now I mean for you to get your rifle and come out and fell him and boy I mean right this minute!" The Colonel staggered, ghost-white and out of breath, a trickle of grudging tears spreading across his pale, furrowed cheeks.

Pa wheeled around, his face dark and ominous, features taut, the raging, angry rush of blood betrayed only by the reddening trunk of his neck. "I don't give a God damn what he is," he said, his eyes

glowing like dry-ice, "don't you never call my nephew a nigger. And don't you never call me boy."

The Colonel was stunned. "That ain't what I meant," he cried, petulantly, trying to unbend himself from his stout, pathetic little crouch. Some of the color seemed to be coming back into his face. "You wouldn't rebuke me now would you sir?"

Pa grabbed him by his starchy, overstuffed white collar and jerked him forward. The Colonel's hand flew out of its pocket, fingers tightly clutching his metal key-chain, and struck Pa across the face. Pa, a row of tiny scars reddening across his cheek, grabbed the flailing hand and began crushing it in his own steely grip. The Colonel struggled against him, screaming as Pa shoved him backwards out the doorway, the screen door's snap-coil groaning as it lunged open. Beau and I knelt up on the davenport and watched through the living-room window as the Colonel finally wrestled free of Pa's grip. The key-chain snapped as the old man fell backwards, a shower of shiny metal keys tinkling across the gravel and into the lawn. The Colonel dropped to his knees, frantically gathering the keys together. Pa stood wordlessly over him, clenched fists dangling at his sides. The Colonel rose, keys piled in his cupped palms, and backed off a few steps. "Damn your soul," he hissed. His lips contracted and he hocked, flinging a rheumy gathering of spittle up across Pa's forehead. Pa never even flinched, but we could see his entire body stiffening with pent-up rage as the Colonel got into his Caddy and backed down the long driveway, the spittle of loose red gravel spraying out from beneath the sleek whitewalls. Silent as a statue, Pa watched the car roar off down the dusty street, a pale reddish cloud churning in its

wake. Finally he turned and walked back into the house, his shoulders sloping with an inclination of half-felt regret.

He stood inside, staring at me and Beau as the screen door slammed shut behind him. "I shouldn't have done it. But he pushed me to it. He shouldn't have offended our blood like that." He stiffened, glancing towards the stairway door, which was now open and its space filled with the breathless form of Lafollette's mother, who, judging by the wide-eyed wonder with which she now regarded him, must have seen or at least heard everything. "Oh God," he said, his thick hand covering his yellow mustache. "I've gone and done it now ain't I? Ruined myself and you too." He turned away from her, his brow furrowing in confusion. "Good old Billy," he mused, glancing upwards. "Always leaving folks in a scrape." He looked back to the woman now, his wan smile gradually stiffening with resolve. He straightened and drew a gigantic breath. "I reckon that makes me responsible for the lot of you. I don't begrudge it none though, not now. Whatever else, your boy's a Jaeger, and that's good enough for me. And you--" He looked across the room at her quizzically, and suddenly she ran to him, her brown eyes wide and round as coat-buttons and her mouth opening in one giant inhalation, as if she was about to swallow him. She was clinging to him, crying softly into his shirt, and Pa, who hadn't felt the touch of female skin in the twelve years since Ma died, stood stone still against her, his arms thrust out as if he were handcuffed and a look of panic in his eyes. "Beauregard!" he hissed. "Tommy Joe! Git would you!"

We jumped up from the couch and ran outdoors, the screen door banging carelessly behind us. It was just getting dusk then; the

crickets had begun to whoop it up, their whining chatter echoing like a dark rumor from tree to tree, and across the ridge-line behind the house rose the pink explosion of the sunset. Through the trees to the north headlights flickered along the highway like summer's first fireflies, accelerating past the city limits and up the darkening grade towards Drayton's Knob. From our front yard I could see the evening's first star glowing mirage-like against the bluing eastern horizon.

Beau had stooped down at the edge of the gravel drive and begun fumbling through the grass with his fingers. I stared down at him in amazement. "What the hell are you doing?" I said. "You'll catch it if you tear up that sod. Pa just put that in this spring."

"I seen it fall somewhere," he answered, his concentration seemingly undisturbed.

"Seen what?"

He was ripping the grass away with both hands, roots and red soil flying. "A key," he said. "I seen the Colonel drop a key."

"He dropped them all," I asserted. "Don't you know nothing?"

"Course I do," he replied. "And then some. He didn't pick 'em all up. See? Here it is." It was brand-new, a shiny brass key-shop copy, and he held it up to me, snatching it away as I reached to take it. "Didn't believe me, did you? Thought you knew it all." He jealously shoved it into his pocket. "Wonder what it goes to don't you?"

"It don't matter to us. Not anymore." I walked indifferently away, kicking at some loose gravel. "Didn't you hear the Colonel? He fired Pa."

"I heard, I heard," Beau answered, settling gloomily on the front stoop. "Why don't he want us in there anyhow?" He nodded at

the doorway behind him. The wooden storm door was closed now too.

"Aw, I don't know," I said. "Maybe he just didn't want us to see her cry or something."

Up to that point it had never occurred to either of us that Pa could have or even want an intimate moment with anyone save ourselves. I was just two when our mother died, and Beau never saw her in the flesh unless it was in that first moment after the Caesarean when the doctor held his squalling form above the bloody table for her to see; and since then it had been just us and Pa and the Colonel's horses, a circle that had been widened, but hardly broken, by the arrival of Uncle Billy's wife and son in Drayton. Hardly broken, that is, until this. The thing with Lafollette's mother was new to us, even though as far as Pa was concerned it might have started as nothing more than a simple courtesy to her in her grief; the fact remained that he had shut us out, that the circle of kinship had been broken, and not by the entry of someone from the outside, but by the exclusion of someone within--namely us.

That night we sat awake in our room until well past midnight, the door shut and latched from the inside. Beau leaned back on the double bed we had shared since early childhood, noodling out the Creole lullaby Lafollette's mother had taught him on his cheap, tinny guitar. I sat by the window and listened absently to the sprinkle of wind through the trees. Beau laid the guitar aside for a moment and put a record on our small portable phonograph. He was playing along with them by then, laying swift, shimmering fills in between the vocal lines, and, as now, he did it almost thoughtlessly. But as the solo

came around his concentration seemed to harden, his face growing taut with intent as his fingers jumped crabwise across the strings, punching out a perfect copy of the recorded passage. The record died away to the clicking of the needle across the final groove, the turntable cruising to a squeaky halt as the tone arm swung away. Beau sighed as he hung his guitar up next to mine on the pegboard above the bed. "Well shit," he said. "What you think Gramma Jaeger's gonna say about this?"

"I don't think she's going to say a damn thing," I answered. "I don't think she's ever going to talk to us again."

"You remember what she said. It was a curse on us, letting Uncle Billy's wife under our roof in the first place."

"Aw come on," I said. "You don't believe that do you?"

His eyes were bright and adamant. "It sure enough killed Uncle Billy didn't it?"

"It was a diesel truck killed Uncle Billy," I said. "Gramma didn't have nothing to do with it. Now shut the light and let's go to sleep."

A moment later it was again my brother's voice, drifting up out of the darkness next to me. "Big Reuben," he said, "he almost killed Cousin Lafollette, didn't he?"

"That's right," I said. "It wasn't no curse. It was a freak. Now go to sleep, would you?"

Whether it was really a matter of a curse or not I still hadn't decided for myself, but I didn't see any point in getting Beau riled up on account of it. But after awhile I did see sort of a pattern taking shape with Pa. It was Uncle Billy's wife that had driven the

wedge between Pa and his mother, and now it was Billy's son that had come between him and the Colonel. I wondered at first if he really knew what he'd done, and whether he could have done it any differently, considering the circumstances. In either case, he didn't care, or the curse, if there was one, would not allow him the exercise of a discretion which could have kept everything from happening as it did. Stripped as he was of the entanglements of family and employer, his actions took on a kind of carelessness--or defiance--which insured the absolute, permanent severance of both relations. He had Lafollette's mother leave the small apartment she had kept in town and move in with us, fueling the suspicion of those who had all along seen something more than an in-law relationship between him and his brother's widow. The presence of the woman under our roof, which he had meant at least at first as an economic convenience, amounted in fact to an open flouting of town and family taboos--an act of defiance for which they would never forgive him, and from which he would never completely recover. He found that work was not as easy to come by as he had anticipated, either for him or for the brown woman, and after awhile he stopped looking for a job at all. The pair of them simply retreated to the confines of our house, spending long afternoons and evenings in alternately grim and giddily animated conversation as his credit dried up and our cousin's hospital bills piled higher and higher.

Beau and I watched too, with a distress more than equal to everyone else's, as the town's suspicions slowly became fact. More and more there were nights like that first one, a closed door or cold glance signalling his desire to be alone with the woman. At first it

was the pain and desperation of their connected misfortunes that had brought and kept them so close, but before long it seemed as if even the good luck was theirs and theirs alone to share. She had cried in his arms when the doctor informed that that her son had suffered no brain damage, and the two of them sat together on our living-room couch that whole evening through, staring absently into space, no doubt, as they always did, and sharing their complementary memories of Billy Jaeger while Beau and I sat on the front stoop and pretended to play our guitars.

But our consternation, deep as it was, turned to a fierce, insular devotion once Cousin Lafollette had come home from the hospital. I recall the long afternoon of waiting at the house while Pa and the woman drove up to Chattanooga to bring him back from the hospital, anticipating the horror I would experience at the first sight of our now-deformed relative. But the experience itself had not been at all as I expected. If anything, I felt a tugging of kinship, a new bond, connecting me and the gauze-masked figure that had emerged from the car that afternoon. Lurking at the corner of the bandages was the dark, lazy shimmering of one brown eye, the good one, glancing uncertainly forward and Pa and his mother led him up the porch steps. Pa had tugged him ahead gently, with patient insistence, a smile arching beneath his blond mustache in an eager expression of fatherly pride and possession. They moved the new bed into our room that afternoon, and we should have been jealous of him, with all the effort put forth in aiding his recovery, or jealous of his mother at least, for whose benefit I still believe the effort was actually made; but oddly enough we felt closer to them than ever before, as if the presence of the two

of them had somehow interlocked with the dead, empty spaces in our own household, and it seemed to me that the woman's brown skin and that swollen crater of a hoofprint beneath our cousin's gauzy bandages were the mark of some antithesis to the larger family from which we had been expelled and the basis for the one which, now together, we were about to form.

In fact, by the end of the summer the two families had effectively become the one; Pa had stopped sleeping on the davenport downstairs and begun keeping the company of Lafollette's mother in his own bed. But the old prejudice against dark and light skin under the same roof, let alone in the same bed, finally drove Pa into a factory job up in Knoxville, just as it had pushed Uncle Billy and his Jeanerette bride northward fifteen years earlier. It was there, at school, that Lafollette was first called Coon Dog, and he affixed the cruel nickname to himself with relish, a paradoxical pride infusing his acceptance of his new face, his new identity, just as Pa had converted his old loss into something of a gain, standing in the solitary hole he had dug for himself and proclaiming it as his, something no one could ever again give or take away. I think he had suspected from the beginning it would be like this, from that first day he stood up to Colonel Jake Tufts and told him in effect that a half-blood Jaeger was worth more to him than the best-bred horse in all of Georgia; I think he realized, as soon as he had spoken, that that single moment's passion had irremediably divorced him from the forms, the codes, that he had been brought up to live by. Maybe it was out of that severance that he finally found his new strength--his new family, his new world, growing into the void, like the floating stem of a fresh-cut

twig sinking its roots in water; or maybe it was the flowering of his instinct, the simple territorial imperative of his own house, the roof under which he had consummated one marriage and in effect begun another one, that enabled him to stand alone, prideful and resolute, in the tradition of the town's own namesakes, until he was ready to shape his new life, in grand and timeless defiance of the forces that would dare presume on the land, the domiciles, or the beings that defined the landscape of his consciousness. And maybe too it was pattern, and not circumstance, that eight years later, while I was studying law up in Nashville and Beau was woodshedding in Mobile with Coon Dog and Daddy Julius, there came the news that Marsh Jaeger and his newlywed brown-eyed bride had died in a car-truck collision on their way to Jeanerette, Louisiana; it seemed to me to be a final proof of Pa's indomitable severance from the Jaeger bloodlines, and I recall not crying, as if it were something that, like Uncle Billy's death, was out of my time or comprehension, and it wasn't until Beau called me about forming the Sons of the South that I began to feel the inexorable thirsting of those severed roots.)

CHAPTER X

i reckon you two
would like to be
alone he said

("What is it?" she had asked when I first put the receiver back down. My fingers were trembling.

I stared out at her across the cluttered desk. She had been reading while I studied, and as she set her book down the finger with the rings glimmered in the pale lamplight. "It was Beau," I told her blankly. "He asked if I'd come down to Mobile. Says he needs a second guitar for this new band of his."

She threw her head back against the sofa cushion, laughing carelessly. "How insane," she said. "I suppose he wants you to go to work for that old Negro too?"

"I suppose," I said, trying not to look at her now, staring down at the small, implacable print of the book before me, my shaking, sweaty fingers clumsily reaching to turn the page. "Shit," I said, "I'll never pass this fucking exam."

"Oh, of course you will," she answered, rising from the sofa and moving across the room in a soft rustle of clothing. "You'll be the best lawyer in the whole state of Tennessee."

"Better than your father even?" I said.

"Now Tommy Joe," she laughed, waving a scolding finger at me. "You know that's not fair." Her smile radiated a hopeless, unquestioning confidence, and as she left the room, her trailing hand still holding her paperback with one finger fastidiously keeping her place, I looked back down, my chin wedged between closed, trembling fists, and stared uncomprehending at the paragraphs before me with a desperate clutching feeling pushing my guts up into my throat thinking you've got to do it God damn it for her you've got to do this thing you've got to Tommy Joe.)

"What is he doing here?" Milly demanded, when Coon had left. "I thought he was supposed to stay in Atlanta." She shook the steaming pot, whipping the instant oatmeal with the spatula. The rank odor of spoiled milk and eggs wafted from the open refrigerator door.

"I thought you didn't care about family business," I said. "You could have stayed and listened you know."

"You know how I feel about him. He makes me uncomfortable."

"Well," I said, "you might as well just get used to him. He is my cousin--more like my brother really--"

"You've been telling me that for two years now," Milly pouted. She stopped talking for a moment and turned back to the stove.

"Listen," I said, "I know you're upset about the kitchen stuff--everything spoiling and all. We just forgot, getting ready to leave--"

"He could have called," she said suddenly, wheeling towards me. She seemed strangely upset. "It seems such a waste to drive all the way up here, just to tell you something he could have said just as easily over the phone--"

"Maybe he was homesick," I said. "How the hell do I know?" I walked across the kitchen and shut the refrigerator door.

"Homesick for this place? Come on now Tommy Joe." Milly shuddered as she stirred the oatmeal, and it seemed to me that she was trying hard not to cry.

"Why wouldn't he get homesick? It's our home ain't it?"

"It's not mine," Milly sniffed, assiduously working the spatula.

"Of course it is. It's ours. Yours and mine."

"You mean yours and Beau's," she said. "And Coon's. I left my playgrounds elsewhere."

"For Christ sakes," I said, "be fair would you? I suppose you'd rather have your Daddy's place in Memphis?"

"No," she said. She was in control of her voice now; it had turned cold and resolute, without the slightest hint of vulnerability, and I felt a twinge of regret at not having forced her to tears when I had the chance. "I don't want anyone's place. Not anyone's but ours."

"Come on now," I said. "Not back to this again--" But it was too late; she had kept control, she had already gained the upper hand. I heard footsteps padding up the back porch stairs to the pantry room behind the kitchen. Milly stopped stirring the cereal. She turned away from the stove just in time to greet Cousin Coon, who appeared now in the kitchen doorway, half out of breath from running and that half-cocked grin lighting his sunken face. Milly smiled, a sickly, cold flicker of a smile, and started dishing the oatmeal out into bowls.

"None for Cousin Beau," Coon said, the eye above his staved-in cheek half-closed in what looked like a leering wink. "He must have rode on up to town. But that sure smells good to me."

After breakfast Coon and Milly and I went out to the verandah. The early morning breezes had settled, and the air now hung cool with the odor of pine and flowering dogwood. The sun was rising full against a near-cloudless sky, and beyond the shadows of the porch the grass and trees shimmered green with evaporating dew. None of us had spoken much over breakfast, and now the shaded, windless verandah seemed an island of stillness, the only sounds being the rumbling undercurrent of the river and the drone of cars and semi-trucks echoing up from the gorge to the east. I had gotten my banjo out on the pretense of playing some clawhammer tunes for Milly, but before long the Knob's soft resonances had coaxed even that into silence.

Milly and I sat on the Colonel's wicker love seat, my arm across her shoulder and the banjo lying carelessly across both our laps. Coon had settled himself on the front steps; his thin neck bowed idly as he picked up random sprigs of pine and whittled them to splinters with his penknife. I found a sort of comfort in the quiet, in feeling Milly pressed against me, her dark hair falling softly across my shoulders, and I started getting drowsy, the tranquil hush of the woods lulling me until even the sensation of touch began fading away into a peaceful nothingness, so that all was still like a painting and the dark frame of my vision began to close into sleep.

"Beau's coming," Coon said suddenly, and I opened my eyes, the world in all its sensation snapping back into focus. I must have

started, because Milly raised her head and stared at me quizzically, as Coon stood up and brushed the shavings from his lap. The uncut grass of the clearing billowed almost violently green, the bright wash of sunlight spilling across the treetops and filling the spaces beyond the shadows of the verandah with silvery, mist-like glistenings of color. The rumblings of the river and highway, dreamily silent only a moment ago, now rang sharply in my ears, and I could hear as well my brother's approach, his bike revving wildly as he gunned it along the drive. Coon raised his hand and waved as Beau, blond hair streaming, broke into the open space of the clearing, sunlight glancing silvery tracers off the metal of his bike. He brought the machine to a skidding halt, straddling it ballet-like as it angled beneath him. Gravel flew as the engine finally groaned and died. Beau kicked the brace down and patted the bike casually, then turned and walked up towards the house.

His face was swollen and pink from the wind and sun, and he moved with a slow, conscious gait, his open shirt billowing away from his reddening chest. "Howdy Coon," he said, mounting the steps. He glanced quickly down the length of the verandah, then turned back to Coon. "I thought you was staying with Daddy."

"Wasn't no point," Coon answered, forcing a tight, pinch-lipped smile. "Can't camp in the city morgue I reckon."

Beau's squint narrowed in understanding. "Those bastards," he said. "I figured they'd play hell when they found that drug case. They probably got him cut open six ways from Sunday." He paused, staring once again down the verandah at Milly and me. "So when the hell are we going to get this thing over with?"

"Saturday," I offered.

Beau shook his head. "Can't do nothing about it now I reckon. I guess I'll have me a shower. I don't exactly feel dainty enough for present company." He winked sardonically at me and Milly, bowing in a brief flourish, and went on inside.

"He tossed that off easy enough," I said to Coon.

Our cousin stared down at the porch steps, absently flicking his knife open and shut. "You seen him. He don't care now. He talked himself into not caring, I reckon. He don't care about nothing."

"Nothing except that," I said, as from upstairs there came the rumble of Beau's stereo. He had put on the first Sons of the South record, the one Daddy had produced himself at some nickel-and-dime studio down in Mobile. Beau had it going full tilt, no doubt so that he could hear it in the shower, and it rang across the clearing, shattering the crystalline silence that had hovered over the house all morning.

Milly huddled closer to me in the love seat and put her hand down across my lap, sliding it up under the hollow back of the banjo. She stared at me for a long while as the music boomed overhead, and in her eyes there was a tremulous look, as if she was suddenly afraid. "What is it?" I said.

She glanced upwards, towards the source of the throbbing vibration. I stared back at her, not immediately comprehending, and she sighed in frustration. Her eyes rolled slowly down and settled on me again. "Let's go upstairs," she said, softly, so that Coon wouldn't hear. Her hand, hidden beneath the banjo's deerskin head, had begun

a little rubbing motion across my pants. Startled, I grabbed her forearm.

"Jesus," I said. "Would you cut that out?"

The hand retreated, her face and neck reddening in embarrassment and confusion. Coon Dog obtrusively cleared his throat and stepped towards the door. "I reckon you two would like to be alone awhile," he said, his face twisting into one of his incongruous grins.

"It don't matter to me," I said, glancing coolly at Milly. But the door was already swinging shut behind him.

Milly looked hurt and angry. "So it doesn't matter," she said, "whether we're alone or not."

"Of course it does," I said. "It's just--"

"Just what?"

"Aw, I don't know," I answered, with forced coldness. Overhead the sound of Beau's guitar was surging up from the studio mix, the first notes of the solo shrieking out across the clearing. I had heard the record a thousand times, but it never failed to give me pause, and after all this time it was as compelling a revelation as it had been the day we recorded it. I felt my attention slowly becoming absorbed in the uncoiling power of the solo, and it was not long before I had become oblivious even to the discomfited presence of Milly beside me.

"It's him isn't it?"

"What's him?" I said, distractedly. I turned and stared at her, her reddening features suddenly cold and unfamiliar to me. Her gaze was as fierce and resolute as I had ever seen it, but I could sense the moist reflection of tears beginning to form in her irises. "What

the hell are you talking about?"

"You know," she said, nodding upwards as the shrieking solo built to its climax.

"No I don't," I snapped. "I reckon you better tell me."

The whole band was into it now, drums and bass thundering cacophonous accompaniment to the final flailing frenzy of Beau's guitar, the tempo gradually dissipating into a series of pulsing swells which began slowly, increasing in frequency and intensity until the final cannonade roared and died away and the record fell silent, the needle clicking across the spiraling grooves. "Tommy Joe," Milly said imploringly.

"What, for Christ sakes?"

"You really love him don't you?"

"Who? Beau? For Christ sakes, he's my brother. Of course I love him--"

"What about me?"

"What about you?"

"Tommy Joe," she pleaded, "don't humiliate me like this--don't make me come right out and ask you--it's too much--"

"Ask me what? How the hell can I answer you if you won't tell me the question--"

"Don't do this," she cried, the tears finally rolling. "Don't let this happen to us--don't let him do this to you--"

"Nobody's doing nothing to anybody," I said. "I don't know what the hell you're talking about."

"No," she said, her breath catching a sob, "I don't reckon you do. I don't imagine you even want to." She rose, forgetting the banjo

on her lap, and it fell to the floor with a crash. The overtones rang painfully in my ears.

"God damn it," I said, bolting up. I bent over and picked up the banjo, holding it gingerly by the neck to see if anything was broken. I heard a sob as the door slammed shut behind me, and as I turned to look down the now-empty porch there came from inside the sound of hurried footfalls echoing up the long front stairway. "Milly," I shouted, setting the banjo back down and running to the door. I stepped into the front hallway and glanced up the stairs. Beau was leaning out across the balcony rail, his smile coolly expectant, as if he had been waiting there for me.

"Tommy Joe," he called. He drew himself erect and walked to the head of the stairs. He seemed near-angelic standing there barefoot, in his white bellbottoms and guru-like silk shirt. "How about a walk?"

"I figured you'd be napping," I said, "after that shower."

"Fuck it," he said, descending the stairs toward me. "Too much on my mind, you know? Come on."

"What is it?" I said. "Business already?"

"Naw," he answered, with a calculated toss of his damp blond curls. "Personal. Family, I guess you could say."

"Oh," I said.

We walked north from the mansion and into the woods, Beau carelessly whisking twigs and stones with the snowy cuffs of his bells. We had grown up here, played out every child's fantasy careening through the tall pines and stinging brush, and for me the place was, as always, alive with mysterious and voiceless memories. It was now

hard to tell whether my brother felt the same nostalgic echoes, but no doubt he was aware of them, else he would never have suggested that we come here.

"I'm worried," he said, when we had gotten a few hundred feet back into the trees. "You ain't yourself here lately. You and Milly got troubles?"

"Nothing we can't handle," I said, guardedly. "You're the one we been worrying about, what with Daddy and all--"

"He's dead," Beau said quickly. The words carried with them a tone of violent dismissal. He stared down at his feet, shaking his head slowly as we walked. "Can't do nothing about that now. Except to keep on going--like he would have wanted anyhow." He squinted up into the shafts of sunlight that were fanning down through the tree-tops. "We got to keep on going. The Sons, I mean. We just got to. More than ever, now."

"I reckon so," I said.

"How's Milly feel about it? Your sticking with us so long now?"

"We ain't talked much about it lately," I answered. "But I reckon she'll live."

He sniffed thoughtfully. "She ain't getting antsy?"

"Antsy?" I said, with a hollow laugh. "Antsy for what?"

"Why, for you to make something of yourself. A lawyer, maybe?"

"Don't you worry," I said, "I ain't going to be no lawyer."

"That ain't going to sit with her," Beau said. "She won't even be satisfied with your money till you start making it in a respectable line of work--hell, she even sniffs at this fucking mansion--"

"She doesn't sniff at it," I said.

"She don't like it here though does she?"

"She ain't gotten used to it yet," I answered, "what with all the coming and going--"

"She's the one that's always going," Beau snapped, "and on her own inclination too--going to Memphis, going to Florida--what the hell is it with her anyhow?"

"Aw, I don't know," I said. "Let's drop it."

We had come to where the old railroad right-of-way broke through the dogwood, its flanking tree-clusters nearly hiding its passage. The mound of the trackbed, once gravel and cinders, was now covered with grass and flowering brambles. It had been one of the landmarks in the imaginary battles Beau and I had fought in our boyhood, but it was to the north, where the mound stopped at the steep riverbanks, that the real heroics had taken place. It was there that the Drayton brothers Jebuel and Levi set fire to the old timber trestle, foiling the bluecoats who had hoped to run their own supplies on the captured Western and Atlantic. The soldiers, too late to save the bridge, had pursued the Draytons across the Knob, a chase whose tragic end was commemorated in the statue on the town square. The section of track across the Knob was never reopened, the rails having been rooted up for use on the new route the Southern Railway had built three miles to the west; but at the base of the steep riverbanks, almost swallowed in the effusion of soft river clay and naked, bony scrub roots, Beau and I had as children found more than a few chunks of warped, rusted rail from the trestle that had been destroyed a century earlier.

Beau fought his way through the clustered dogwood to the rise beyond, his bare feet and pants cuffs blackened by the rain-soaked

ground. I followed him up the swell of the embankment and paused at his side as he peered down the path towards the river. Except for the undergrowth the right-of-way was clear, all the way to where the trestle once had been; even the chalky rocks on the far side of the gorge were visible, glinting white and brilliant in the midday sun.

"Old Jeb and Levi," Beau said, "burning that trestle--kind of stirs the blood to think of it. And then them two, dying together like that--brothers no less. We had our times here too didn't we?" His smile was cool and severe as he noted the familiar details of the old trackbed. "But then I don't reckon they changed nothing either."

"We grew up didn't we?" I said.

"Yeah," he answered, walking on. "I reckon so." He nodded dubiously, making his way ahead of me through the clotted brambles that grew knee-high above the shade-stunted grass. Suddenly he stopped, turning back to face me, his face grave and perfectly composed. "Tommy Joe," he said, "why don't you quit her? Why don't you just tell her fuck-all and send her scuttling back to Memphis where she wants to be anyhow?"

"For what?" I said. "For you and the Sons of the South?"

"That's a possibility," he said, an ironic, Coon-like grin curling his lips. "Maybe me and her could arm-wrestle for you." He turned and began walking again.

"You don't understand," I said, marching after him. "It's not like that with her. She just wants us to have a life of our own."

"The trouble with that," Beau snapped, "is you've both got to live it. I doubt I'd trust her to choose for me. Can't you see me in

my brown tweed suit, stuffing my pipe as I sit content in my book-lined air-conditioned law study?"

"Naw," I said, stifling a laugh.

"Well," he said emphatically, "there you have it then."

We had reached the slope above the river, where the trees stretched tall and thin into the sun and roots knotted like fists groping at the soft clay between the rocks. The old trackbed trailed off here, and below it the trestle base was marked by a soft spill of rich black humus that reached to the water's edge and ended in a dark quagmire that had always reminded me of the patch of wet ashes I had once seen around a drowned campfire. The steep banks, especially the dark decay of the trestle base where Beau and I had found the scraps of splintered, twisted rail, held perfect burrowing-places for snakes, and the waters at the foot of the slopes shivered in the wake of swift river eels and an occasional copperhead. Beau and I stopped at the edge of the drop, where the ground softened into a greyish, gritty compost; across the river, a black stain on the chalky ledges marked the other endpoint of the old trestle, and Beau and I stood staring out at the far bank for some time before he finally heaved a sigh, and kicked at the ashen mud with one of his bare feet.

"Well Tommy Joe," he said, looking down to his blackened toes and muddy white bellbottoms, "I reckon you'll have to decide this thing on your own, in your own sweet time. I can see I ain't going to be able to force it."

"Decide what?" I said.

"Whether or not blood is thicker than come," he answered, flashing a labored grin with his boyish good teeth as he turned away from me. "Come on," he said, "let's get on back. I feel like picking awhile."

CHAPTER XI

brown fingers gliding across the strings

thoughtlessly

looking into a mirror

("All right," I said, shouldering the crooked stick of dogwood, "Beau, you be Jeb and I'll be Levi--"

My brother thrashed the bushes with his imaginary flintlock, snapping the rotten branch in two. "Aw come on," he wailed. "I'm tired of playing the cripple. Besides, it was the older one got his leg blowed up. Ain't that right Lafollette?"

Our cousin stared back at us, his dark hands thrust indifferently into the pockets of his bib overalls. "It don't matter none to me," he said. "You all know this one better than I do anyhow."

Beau paved about the tiny clearing, kicking at the groundfall of dead leaves and twigs. "Shit," he said. "I busted my rifle. Now I got to find another one." He tossed away the jagged butt end of the stick he had just broken. "Why not let Lafollette be one of the Draytons?" he said. "You always hog all the glory."

"I do not," I said. "Besides, what do you know? You're only eight years old."

"I know as much as you," he snapped. "Maybe more. You had two extra years to get dumb. Besides, it ain't fair, you getting to be Levi all the time. Why not let one of us do it?"

"O.K., O.K.," I said. "But don't you ever say I never done you no favors. You can be Levi. Let Lafollette be Jebuel. I'll be General Sherman."

"Sherman?" Beau cried, in outrage. "That's dumb. He wasn't even in this story."

"Well, I got to be somebody," I said. "I ain't going to be just any old Yankee."

"General Sherman," Beau sniffed, walking away. "Come on," he said to Lafollette, "before Tommy Joe decides to be U. S. Grant." He chuckled savagely, marching off into the brush as our cousin trailed distractedly behind. When they reached the swell of the abandoned trackbed they began running north towards the river, their damp footfalls fading softly into the distance.

I waited until they were gone and there was nothing but the soft stirring of the wind and the chatter of the birds that nested in the tops of the tall, spindly trees. It was a cool afternoon, and the woods were dank and wet-smelling after a gentle autumn rain. The green was starting to fade from the trees, except of course for the pines, but in the brush many things were decaying already. The bushes were clotted with the damp brown groundfall of dead leaves and evergreen needles, and the woods smelled rich and old, like newly plowed fallow. The sky above was racing with billows of long grey-tipped clouds, which in their speed seemed to be hurrying the change of season they had lately begun. School had started up a few weeks before, and in the intervening time we had seen very little of the woods which in summer had been our daily playground. We still helped Pa at

the stables every morning and night now, but only on Saturdays like this one was there any time for the adventures with which the forest had filled our time during the previous months.

I walked away from the clearing, my steps and heartbeat quickening as I neared the old embankment, and before I knew it I was running, my clutch of dogwood in hand, as I tried not to expect the sound of the explosion which I knew would surely come. I knew I was not supposed to hurry, just as the unexpectant enemy garrison had not hurried a century before, but ahead of me, peeking grayly through the bobbing, rain-heavy overhang of trees, was the chalky rockhead of the distant gorge, a weathered patch of black where the trestle once had been, beckoning me onward, urging me it seemed, so that before I knew it I had broken into a dead run, the wet branches singing and sighing behind me as my boots squeaked across the soggy ground.

I was nearing the river, almost to the edge of the trees, when I heard my brother and cousin shouting in unison. This was the explosion I had been expecting, and I could imagine with it the sight of that ancient trestle blazing, the fiery timbers toppling in a wild, steamy hiss into the waters of the river below. I drew up at the edge of the embankment, where by now the heat of the burning, tar-soaked wood must have been unbearable, and saw, off to my right, Beau and Lafollette scrambling up the rocky banks into the trees. "Halt!" I shouted, cocking my thumb against the scrap of dogwood. I fired twice, recording the futile shots with a bellowing sound deep in my throat, and took out after them. I ran stumbling across the high muddy ridge where the woods thinned out and faded down the rocky, scrub-covered slope to the river, and I stopped when I got to where I had seen them

going into the trees. I listened for their footfalls, but the wind had come up again, and there was nothing to hear but the high cackling of the birds and sprinkly, heaving sough of the rain-soaked trees. I could not have known which way to go, but I knew, even though I should have pretended not to, and started our across the woods, away from the river, keeping my head low and that rotten shank of dogwood pressed to my belly like I had seen in pictures of pursuing soldiers. The clouds were racing with me, streaking to the east, and a chevron of southbound geese angled across their path, black against the billowing grey. There were no trails on this side of the Knob, where the pines grew tall and sparse and the soft red clay was broken by jutting, scrub-covered elbows of rock, but I plunged headlong into the bobbing, spattering brush, making a beeline for the other side of the woods, where I knew they would be, even though I should not have suspected.

"Bang!" someone shouted, and I dove into the brush, my cheek coming to rest against the groundfall of damp, matted leaves and stinging pine needles. I knelt up, returning the fire, and caught a glimpse of Beau and Lafollette fleeing out of their blind. Their heads and shoulders were all that was visible above the tangle of brush, and as I called out another shot I saw Lafollette go down. Beau stopped, glancing backwards towards me, and swiftly ducked out of sight. When I saw them again they were moving, Beau apparently running and Lafollette trailing behind him, his upper torso bobbing in a sidelong motion as if he were limping and in pain.

I hurried after them, still keeping low, until the brush thinned away and there was just tall pines rising above the rocky earth.

I dashed from tree to tree, drawing up behind each one to listen for the sound of them running. Squirrels chittered and sprang in the branches above, the thick nests of needles stirring against the grey, wind-swept sky. Drayton's Gap was not far off now; above the soft, musing rustle of the forest I could hear the whirring downshift and watery tire-whine of trucks moving up 41 through the gorge, their echoes rising in distant, rumbling confusion through the trees. Breathlessly I lunged across the open spaces, cursing as my boots crunched against fallen pine cones. There were no leaves here, just the cones and needles and reddish-brown mud that filled the gaps and pools between the cropping rocks. The spaces between the trees were tall, perpendicular passages of greying light, the rain-blacked trunks towering like collonades above the forest floor. A hidden voice called out a shot, and as I ducked out from behind my sheltering trunk the shadow of a lunging body flickered across a grey reach of open area. I ran to my right, circling around towards the south, and broke out of the trees onto the jagged rockhead that rose above Drayton's Gap.

Here there was a bobwire fence, frayed and rusty, that ran along the tree-line, but I crawled under it, out onto the cliff-edge, so that I would be able to see, even though I should have pretended not to know what I was looking for, or where I would find it. Here the mountain walls were sheer except for the jagged, croplike teeth of stone that angled upwards from the vertical slabs of rock; but further north, along 41, there were shelves of rock that broke the plunge to the narrow, twisting creekbed. There was a path of sorts there along

which the Drayton brothers would have made good their escape, had it not been for Jebuel's shattered leg. Beau and I had used it many times before, so already I knew where he and Lafollette would emerge from the woods, and how they would make their descent to the fatal grotto. I could not help knowing, any more than Beau and Lafollette could, because it was history and without that knowledge it would have been impossible to keep it coming out right.

I could see everything from where I was, every step of the route from the treeline down the cliffs, across the sparkling creek to the grotto beyond the highway. The air up here was crisp and fresh, full of the spraylike odor that rose from the whitewater below; I breathed deeply, a cool, clear-headed feeling of exultation filling my body. I suddenly felt myself the victor, rather than the villain, in this elaborate game whose outcome had been fixed so many years ago, and there was a kind of comfort, a justification, in the realization that there was nothing that could be done to change it, nothing to do at all but go on with it. I watched the clear, glass-bead reflections of the creek as it curled beneath me, the stretches of whitewater churning and foaming at the calm, crystalline pools that flowed into them. Beside the creek ran U. S. 41, its prosaic concrete streaked with trickling fingers of spring water, trucks billowing dark wisps of diesel smoke as they rumbled past the dark grotto of Drayton Spring.

Then I saw them. My brother came first, bolting out of the trees and skidding down the rocky slope, dislodging a small shower of stones as he went. He crouched low on the narrow ledge where he had stopped, glancing upwards towards the cliff where he knew I would be waiting. Then it was Lafollette, the wounded Jebuel, not running

but crawling forward out of the treeline and gingerly descending the rocky path. This was what I had been waiting for, the signal that told me when to start so it would all come out the way it was supposed to. I got up and began running.

I skirted across the high flatrock ledges, my flintlock clasped close to my belly, and tried not to think of the chasm that yawned to my right. I could still see them clambering like small animals along the steep descent to the next cropping of stone, until I got to where the ridge line broke back from the cliffs and the gorge widened. The incline here was less sheer, and all along the steplike drop to the gorge bottom there were little pockets and hollows, invisible from the upper ridge line, that concealed parts of the downward trail. I had lost sight of them now, just as I should have; when I got to the spot where they had come out of the trees I fell to my stomach, inching up to the edge of the rock so that the barrel end of the dogwood poked out across the ridge. I should have been able to see them splashing across the creek and up the embankment to the highway, but they were nowhere in sight. I stared down the jagged folds of the slope, searching for some movement among the rocks, but everything was suddenly still and silent.

Something had gone wrong. They should have been there by now, scrambling from the cover of the rocks almost on a line with the jutting nose of my rifle. I stayed low, my thumb impatiently cocked in anticipation, trying to imagine what could have happened, why they were not where they were supposed to be. Clouds were fleeing overhead, spilling intermittent shadows across the gorge below, and a chill wind rustled the trees at my back and whistled softly down the

rocks. I waited.

"Help! Help!" Lafollette's voice echoed up the incline, refracting off the rocks in mirror-like variations. I stood up and scanned the jagged ledges. He was about halfway down the slope, his head and waving arm poking out above a narrow table of rock. I dropped my rifle and started down the steep path, my boots skidding against the sloping rock as I tried to control my descent. I had clear sight of him when I got to the first ledge; he was about twenty feet below, still waving with one hand and pointing with the other over the edge of the narrow ridge on which he was standing. "Down here!" he shouted, his frantic finger bobbing downwards. I clambered down the wall, clutching at the scrub roots to slow my fall, finally tumbling to a stop on the ledge of rock where Lafollette was waiting. I got down on my knees and peered down the face of the drop. Below, sprawled across a jutting, upturned crop of rock, was the inert form of my brother. He was lying stomach down with one arm pinned beneath his body, and a gnarled branch of dogwood at his head, just beyond the outstretched fingers of his other hand.

"Jesus Christ!" I said. "Why didn't you do nothing?" I lowered myself over the edge and let go, riding my ass down the mossy, wetbacked rocks. I landed hard on my rear when I hit bottom, but I jumped heedlessly to my feet and scrambled to where my brother lay, falling to my knees beside his prostrate body. His upturned cheek was flush, as if someone had just slapped him. I could see no heave of breath in his side or back. I crouched forward, reaching out to touch him, and he suddenly sprang up, his free hand snatching the branch of dogwood and ramming it against my chest.

"Bang!" he screamed, his face distorting with hysterical amusement. "How about that Jebuel? I done killed General Sherman!"

I stood up, my cheeks flushing in the face of the mocking laughter. "Don't you know nothing?" I wailed. "This ain't the way it goes. We never done it this way--" My breath was short from the frantic descent, and my exhalation caught hard in my throat. I felt like someone had shoved a stopper down my windpipe. Beau was still laughing, pointing the gnarled stick of dogwood at me as he looked up at our cousin. "G-god d-damn you," I cried, that plug in my throat splitting the words with abrupt, violent hiccups. "I thought you were d-dead!"

"I done it! I done it!" my brother howled, clutching his belly as he leaned back against the rocks. I fooled him all right!"

"It ain't fair," I bawled. "This ain't the way it goes." It was too late now; I had been trying not to cry, but the mortification of this defeat, especially in front of our cousin, was just too much. My eyes were like drains bursting under pressure, and as the shameful tears came welling up that knot in my throat let loose with a series of choking sobs. I jumped up, licking the salty liquid from where it had gathered on my upper lip, and grabbed the dogwood branch, flinging it out away from the ridge. It carried down to the creek, and was swallowed in the churning whitewater. I stood on the crop and stared at the place where it had disappeared, my moist, burning eyes hidden from Beau, whose throbbing, hysterical laughter echoed and echoed up and down the rocky walls.)

"Smoke?" Beau asked, lifting his guitar from its case. He slid his bottleneck out of its chamois carrying-pouch, and with it came a few thick, tightly rolled reefers. Their tart aroma rose faintly from his extended palm.

"Sure," I said. "But I don't have any matches." I settled back into the wicker love seat as Beau grinned, flicking his lighter demonstratively. "Naw," I said, as he offered me the first drag, "you go on ahead." I stared out across the porch into the murmuring trees as Beau closed his case, the lit reefer dangling in his mouth as casually as a cigarette. He sat down on the porch rail just opposite me, his guitar settling across his lap, and whipped the joint away from his mouth, speaking in breathlessly spaced syllables.

"You look a thousand miles away," he said, careful not to let the drawn reefer smoke escape too quickly. "You got something on your mind?"

"Naw," I said, accepting the joint. I drew on it quickly, absently, forgetting for the moment what it was I held in my hand, and exhaled before the smoke had a chance to settle. "Nothing you'd be interested in anyhow." I had been trying to think of what it had been like when Milly and I were first married, if it had been, as it was now, a dead space between us so that only in the touching of our bodies, the friction of the skin itself, was there any real oneness or warmth. There had been a time, I remembered, in the tiny apartment up in Nashville, that first winter we were married, before law school and all the rest, when we had nothing at all really but our dreams, the shared smallness of the tiny rooms like a warm cocoon in which we spun ourselves together, the narrow walls holding our thoughts and

feelings close so that not a single subtle fantastic strand could dangle or stray. I remembered not thinking much about my brother, not really thinking of family at all, until after our father's death, when I accepted Beau's collect call from Mobile and the delicate, dreamy shell that held Milly and me was forever ruptured. She had wanted me to study law, and I had wanted it too back then, not for its own sake, but because it was a way of keeping that slender shell inviolate, of keeping my dreams and my self at one with hers. I gave that up for the Sons of the South, not because I wanted that for its own sake either, but because of the blood that I shared with my brother--a loyalty from which I had believed myself liberated until my father's death, and which in that tragic circumstance came welling to the surface, in spite of Milly's presence at my side, like the final bursting forth of long-subdued tears. So I had joined the Sons, mollifying Milly's outrage with the assurance that it was only temporary, and since then the thoughts and feelings that had once been so close between us had spilled every which way, diverging and wandering and finally coming together again in a kind of closure which now resembled not one cocoon, but two.

I inhaled deeply this time, letting the acrid smoke billow my lungs, thinking maybe this was all it was, that feeling of oneness--a temporary staying of reality, euphoria and nothing else, just like any other high. It occurred to me that even in our best times there had been, deep down, my terror of existing in her world, of being seen and judged through her eyes, of entering the circle of the high-born and the beautiful, which I knew only by association and in which I, dispossessed and for all practical purposes an orphan, could be at best

a poor pretender. So maybe my brother had been right after all, and it was blood that ruled, destiny rather than desire, and the quivering I felt in my gut at the first sight of her parents' bedroom or the at the time implacable pages of those law books had simply been my nature rebelling against its engagement in an act which it was never meant to take part in. So maybe that's it, I thought, exhaling slowly. The idea was inexplicably comforting. Slender wisps of smoke floated up across my brother's face as I handed him the joint. "Whooey," I said, clearing my throat. "That's enough for me. For now anyhow."

Beau stubbed the number out on the porch railing and put it back in the chamois pouch. "Now how about some picking?" he said, nodding towards the banjo that lay beside me on the love seat.

"Sure," I said. Its contour felt unfamiliar to me as I lifted it into my lap, and it took a few moments of acclimation before I finally felt comfortable holding it. I fingered the strings slowly, tuning them to Beau's guitar, and started rippling through a chorus of "Darlin' Corey." Beau laughed, as he always did when he watched the awkward motions of my hand doing the clawhammer strumming.

"Christ sakes," he said, his hand drawing curly shocks of blond hair back over his ears, "you should see yourself play that thing. It looks just like some old wife tossing pig feed."

"You look pretty good too," I answered, "with that silly-ass hunk of glass on your finger."

He smiled and leaned back against the porch rail. "You got me there," he said, "but I'd forgot how puny that thing sounds." He began strumming his guitar softly, blending its accompaniment to the

clanging, antiquated rhythms of the banjo. "Oh well," he sighed, "I reckon I can restrain myself."

I sang, my voice cracking from the effects of the reefer, and Beau joined in tentative harmony, attacking the words with a slightly pronounced drawl:

"Wake up wake up Darlin'Corey
What makes you sleep so sound?
The revenue officers are comin',
Come to burn your still-house down."

We played a few more verses, and I finally ran out of words, improvising a final cadence that Beau followed as if we had rehearsed it that way. Both of us fell silent, and for a moment we stared across at each other, our laughter barely contained.

"Imagine that," he said, "my own brother tricking me into playing hillbilly music. Tommy Joe, you are a hopeless honkey." He smiled meditatively and looked down at his guitar, slowly raising the slide-bar up to the strings. He tossed off a few swift, shivering little licks, settling finally into a slow, bluesy rhythm, the bottleneck punching out accents as it slithered across the fretboard. "See if you remember this one," he said, his eyes closing and head slowly inclining upwards, as if in prayer. He began singing, his clear tenor rich with murky black inflections, the bent notes and swooping falsetto bringing to life not just the tune itself, but the memory of when I had first heard it, that autumn evening back at the house in Drayton, my brother and cousin huddling with me over the stereo as the spiraling grooves gave rise to the long-stilled voice of Robert Johnson:

"I got stones in my passway
And my road seems dark as night
I got stones in my passway
Lord my road seems dark as night
I have pains in my heart
They have taken my appetite."

"You remember the next part?" Beau said, as his fingers thoughtlessly plucked out a stinging, achingly mournful solo. I nodded, and as he finished the turnaround and swung back to the verse I began to sing:

"I got a bird to whistle
Lord I got a bird to sing
I got a bird to whistle
Lord I got a bird to sing
I got a woman that I'm lovin'
But she don't mean a thing."

"You sung that like you felt it," Beau chuckled sardonically, when I had finished.

"Don't draw no conclusions," I said. "It's just a song you know."

"A mighty convincing performance," my brother said, "especially for a honkey." His manner became abruptly serious. "That's the difference between you and me--to me there ain't no thing as just a song." His blue eyes bored at me, inexplicably distant. "You remember how this one ends?"

"Why sure," I said, confused by his sudden change in manner, "but what--"

The bottleneck fretted a quick intro, and Beau began to sing again, his voice instantly transforming itself into an instrument that was tender and supple and black as ebony:

"I got three lanes to truck on
Please don't block my road
I got three lanes to truck on
Please don't block my road
I'm feelin' shamed about my rider
I'm booked and I got to go."

"You trying to tell me something?" I asked edgily, as the song ended in a brief flurry of notes.

His smile tightened, and he turned away from me, staring off into the trees while his hands made little runs and frills across the neck of the guitar. "Sure is a fine little box ain't it?" he said, brushing his fingers gently across the strings. "Listen to them overtones." The harmonics rang out clearly, the soft woodsy tone mingling with the murmur of leaves stirring in the afternoon breeze. "Naw," he said, "I ain't trying to tell you nothing. Nothing new anyhow. I don't know what she ever seen in that banjo in the first place."

"She?" I said.

"Don't hand me that now Tommy Joe," he said, his fingers fluttering unconsciously across the guitar neck. "Now who else could I mean?"

"Beau," I said, "why don't you just come out with it? I ain't into playing games today. What is it with you and her anyhow?"

"Why don't you ask her?" he answered. "I ain't the one telling you what to do."

I stood up, slowly unshouldering the banjo. "Nobody's telling me what to do," I said, defensively. "I can take care of my own self. You don't have to worry none about me."

"You don't think she's telling you nothing?" he snapped. "What the hell was that all about, the time she skipped Memphis on you, or her going down to Florida--with her daddy, for Christ sakes? Or the

way she looked at me when I come back this morning?"

"It was nothing," I said.

"Oh, it was something all right," Beau countered. "And you know what it was? It was what rich folks always do when they can't get their way. They play hell with everyone around them--especially the poor folk they depend on for their step-and-fetch-it. They don't know what the fuck to do when one of those poor folks tells them no and they've got to take care of it themselves--like Colonel Tufts, when Pa wouldn't shoot that horse kicked Cousin Coon--"

"It ain't like that at all with us," I said. "For Christ sakes I'm her husband--"

"You're her poor-boy gigolo," Beau snapped, "and she'll never forgive you for doing something on your own, for becoming something other than what she wanted to make you into--"

"Beau," I said, "don't lay this on me. You don't have to. I done everything up to now because I wanted to. You don't have to force me none--"

"But what about her? She's got ways of forcing you I never could you know--"

"God damn it," I said, "that ain't fair and you know it."

"Of course it ain't," he said, his fingers clamping a chord dead in an abrupt choking motion. "I can't compete with her for Christ sakes. Not the way she works on you, with her fancy looks, and the way she slips that pretty hand of hers into your lap every time she feels she has to take a hold--"

"You don't know nothing about it," I said, reddening and clenching the banjo tighter in my grip.

"You don't think so. Ask Coon. Ask anybody. And from what I can tell she don't put out all that much either, for all that lap-handling."

"I ain't going to listen to this," I said, slamming the banjo down against the arm of the wicker love seat. I could still hear the throbbing overtones of the strings as the door banged shut behind me and I started up the stairs, a vague dizziness coming into my head and a strange heat, like a sudden rush of blood, rising from deep in my stomach. I entered our bedroom, closing the door behind me, and flopped down across the unmade bed, my head spinning in anger and confusion. Water was gurgling in the shower, and on the bedstand beside me I noticed Milly's combs and hairbrushes laid out neatly on the linen cloth. The bathroom door was closed, but the whole room had about it the odor of perfumed soap, the kind that she had to go periodically to Memphis to buy, and its tingling aroma filled my nostrils, that angry heat spreading up into my chest as my breath caught hard in my throat and choked out a single involuntary sob.

The water had stopped running, and after a moment Milly emerged from the bathroom, one hand holding her housecoat shut. She started when she saw me, but almost instantly regained her calm composure, leaning stiffly against the open doorjamb. She demonstratively knotted the robe's slender waistband, drawing it tight so that the shape of her hips and small breasts was more pronounced than usual. Her dark hair fell across her shoulders in damp disarray, and she stared

at me, coolly expectant, as I sat up on the edge of the bed.

"Well?" she said. "What did you and Beau decide?"

"Decide?" I said. "Decide about what?" My hands were trembling and my throat tight as a balled-up fist as the heat went spreading through my body and into my limbs.

"Oh, I don't know," she said, with mock diffidence. "Whatever it is you Jaegers decide when they take a walk in the woods together. Or were you just out there playing war all afternoon?"

"We took a walk," I said, drawing a deep, fluttering breath, "there wasn't any more to it than that."

"You told him yes, didn't you?"

"Told him yes to what? Doesn't anybody talk straight around here anymore?" I bounded up from the bed, fingers trembling uncontrollably at my sides.

"You know what," she answered, her eyes flashing with moist anger. "He won't let it stop, even now that Daddy's dead. He wants to go back out, doesn't he?"

"He didn't say nothing to me," I said. "But what the hell do you expect, for him to crawl in a hole and die now too?"

She stalked over to the bedside table, snatching up a hairbrush and yanking it through her damp, perfumed hair. "I don't understand," she said. "What is he to you anyway? Why is it nothing matters but him, not even me?"

My hands closed into spastic, tremulous fists. My arms felt like rubber as I raised them and slowly let them fall. "You do matter," I managed, my voice fluttering at the edge of hysteria. Something was happening to me, something I didn't understand; I fought back the

frantic impulse that seemed to be urging me forward towards her, my fists clenched and trembling to strike. "But he's my brother--"

"And I'm your wife," she said, wheeling and waving her hand in my face so that the crystal of her ring sparkled in the light from the bathroom. "Or doesn't this mean anything?"

"God damn it," I said, taking a step towards her, "I don't know what you want. I can't be everything all at once, I can't be in two places at the same time--but it's my living, it's bought us a home, for Christ sakes. And lots of folks got to live on the road. What if I was a truck driver or something?"

"If you were a truck driver I wouldn't have married you," she shot back, throwing her hairbrush past me onto the bed. "And I don't consider this--this Gothic fantasy of yours a home--"

"Well suppose I had been a goddamned lawyer then," I shouted, the blood pounding quick and hot in me like jets of boiling water, the pressure slowly forcing my fists up away from my sides. It seemed to fill me to the bursting-point, that strange heat like a withering blaze licking at my insides, and I felt the cold beads of sweat popping out, big and glassy as marbles, across my cheeks and forehead. "Just like your father. Just like you wanted me to be. Would that have made any difference?"

"In you, yes," she said, her voice fierce with wounded but indomitable pride. From the porch below came the sound of Beau blasting his way through some blues changes, and as I stepped towards her her face registered an innocent anger, an innocence that was somehow unforgivable to me in that moment, that circumstance. She did not

even know at first what was happening to me, she could not feel the pulsing of the white, trembling heat, but as I moved closer I could see that she finally understood, the way her hand clenched her robe shut at the collar as if to cover herself. She edged away from me and I grabbed her by the arm, catching her and pushing her up against the closed door. She made a little cry of protest deep down in her throat, but I kissed her hard on the mouth and forced her head back until I could feel her jaw opening to mine. She tried to kick me, but I stopped her with my knee and pushed upwards, forcing her legs apart.

"Tommy Joe," she pleaded, as I drew my mouth away from hers. She reached behind me with her free hand and began pulling at my hair, and I lunged forward, pinning her against the closet door. She made a gasping sound, as if all the wind was going out of her. I leaned back, my gaze meeting her frantic, tossing eyes head-on. "No," she choked, as I got one hand in between us and began feeling the shape of her breast inside the robe. I had eased off a little, and she caught me off balance, shoving me back with one hand, but I kept my grip on the other, and when I tried to wrestle her back around, I spun and crashed into the tall vanity mirror that hung beside the closet door. I felt the glass shatter against me as I hit it, and I fell to the floor, feeling suddenly very sleepy and very, very cool as I lay there, the blood trickling from the mirror's jagged edges; and in a moment, there was the image of Beau, his face unapparent where the glass was gone and the naked quicksilver glistened like the Milky Way against the ebony wood.

CHAPTER XII

falling from the mountain

into

an abyss

I woke up and rolled over on the bed, my eyes straining against the shadowy, evening half-light of the room. I blinked out at the violet ebb of sunset that was descending beyond the window into the trees, and in my ears there was a slow, insistent vibration, not yet heard but sensed, like eyes sensing the features of a darkened but long-familiar room. It was, I realized as the sound became more distinct, the thing that I had heard already in my sleep, the soft, steady rapping of knuckles against the bedroom door. I sat up, lifting the soggy ice-bag from the pillow and holding it to my scalp.

"Come on in," I said, and the latch clicked, the door inching open with a slow, infinitesimal movement.

"You all feeling better?" came Coon's voice. "We wondered when you'd be coming to." He pushed the door the rest of the way open, the dark jamb framing the silhouette of his loose, lazy slouch and misshapen cheekbone. The hall light was yellow and harsh, and I had to squint to make out the inner features of my cousin's face.

"Jesus," I said, drawing my hand away from the cold, damp washcloth. I vaguely remembered its hardness, its coolness, when it was first placed against my stinging scalp. There had been about the hands

an odor of perfumed soap. "What time is it anyhow?"

"Almost eight," Coon said, stepping in from the hall. How you all feeling?"

"All right, I reckon," I said, "except for this." I touched my hand to the back of my head, running my fingers along the smooth ridge of the cut. "Son of a bitch still hurts like hell." I paused, framing my thoughts cautiously. "Looks like I really done it to myself this time. What the hell happened anyhow?"

Coon shrugged, his dark features registering a flicker of surprise. "You mean you don't remember?" He reached and flicked on the tassel lamp that stood next to the door. "Milly said you was crazy, from smoking and all, and you lost your balance. Fell and hit your head on that mirror there." He nodded to the shattered pane, where the ebony wood glistened darkly in the yellow lamplight.

"Jesus," I said, with mock amazement, "i must have really been roaring. Oh, well. I reckon it had to catch up with me sooner or later, all them psychedelics."

Coon closed the door behind him, shadows arching up the walls against the diminutive cast of the lamp's single yellow bulb. He settled slowly into Milly's small wirebacked bureau chair and stared across at the broken mirror. "You try to beat up on her?" he said, his jutting eyebrow curling into a grotesque arch.

"Course not," I snapped. "Why the hell would I do that?" My head ached with the hot rush of blood to my face.

"I don't know," Coon said, staring into his lap. "Beau thought maybe--"

"Beau don't know nothing," I answered. "I know he wishes it was over between us--but wishing won't make it so, not if I can help it."

Coon looked across the room at me, the whites of his eyes growing wide and stupid-looking where they were set into his dark, mismatched cheeks. I couldn't help but hate hiding the truth from him, trying to conceal my own wounds when his were so painfully apparent. It was impossible for me to imagine bearing the mark of a misconceived act, as he did, for all to see; yet he had done it without apology, with pride even, accepting the fate of a face that was no longer one, but two, as well as the name that went along with it. Most people, just looking at him, had assumed he was the family idiot, but to me his face had always seemed more mysterious than stupid, like a classical player's mask with one side comic and the other one tragic; on the one hand, there was the smooth, high cheekbone and darkly handsome Cajun looks that had been his mother's, and on the other the ugly, sunken temple, where the crooked bone pressed forward above his eyes, the depressed cheek outlined with a crescent-shaped purple scar, as if it had been emblazoned there with a hot iron. It was not a face to be laughed at--or, I thought, as his lips curled to speak again, to be lied to. "I'm sorry Tommy Joe," he said, "maybe I shouldn't have spoke. But if us Jaegers can't be straight with each other who can?"

"Nobody I reckon." I sighed and lay back on the bed, hot swirls of pain rising from where my cut pressed into the damp pillow. The smarting gradually subsided, and I lay there numbly, suddenly not having any thoughts or feelings at all. The night outside was silent and

indistinct as Coon Dog spoke, his lips moving almost imperceptibly at the side of his mouth:

"You're lucky you didn't need no stitches."

"Yeah," I said, staring at his reflection in the windowpane. The bulb of the tassel lamp glowed dimly against the glass, throwing grey shadows outward from the pools of thin yellow light. Beyond the dulled image of the bedroom, out in the night itself, the sparse, leafy clutter of treetops mottled the waning moon's white crescent. I got up and opened the window. There was a breeze from the north, damp and achingly cool, and I stood for a moment facing into it as it danced breath-like across my naked chest.

"Smells like rain," Coon said, an odd tension in his voice.

I turned away from the window-screen, looking back into the room, and noticed for the first time how much it smelled of blood and sweat. And of dying, I thought, the memory of Daddy's hotel room the afternoon before gripping at my insides like a closing fist. Coon sat near-motionless in Milly's bureau chair, the reflections in the broken mirror still as hands on a shattered timepiece. I stiffened to the cool breeze wafting up my spine.

"Where's Milly?" I asked.

"Downstairs," he said, his voice again betraying a subtle, inexplicable strain. "She and Beau went into town for some groceries." He chuckled harshly, forcibly. "Said she'd be damned if she was gonna live on coffee and instant oatmeal. That was all that kept while we was gone you know."

"Beau drove her up to Drayton?" I said, and Coon nodded, slow and even as clockwork. "Now when did he get to be such a gentleman?"

"He's always had it in him, when he wanted to," Coon answered, with a stiff, deliberate smile.

"Yes," I said, "I reckon he has. But only when it served his purposes." I leaned back, my shoulders resting against the window-jamb. Coon's labored drawl had begun to sound lifeless to me, as if the tone and cadence of his voice were slowly flattening out and levelling down to nothing, like a tape winding to a standstill. I tried to think of something, anything, to say to him, to keep this moment from freezing into stillness, but the words, the thoughts, would not come. Coon sat silently before me, his squinted eyes cool and expectant. There was no sound in the room but the rustling of the trees, and now, a soft, distant crackling of thunder, as yet nearly indistinguishable from the hum of trucks along the highway. The breeze had turned clammy against my back, the grey, pallid shadows hardening stark and drab along the yellow walls as if they had been pasted there for years; and I was seized, as I had been in Nashville three years earlier, and in Knoxville four years before that, with the need to get away, to shake the numbing grip of time and circumstance that was dragging me down into the ossified bed of the cold, present moment.

"You reckon they're patching things up between them?" Coon finally said. He was looking at me full-face now, that hollow cheek reading like some crater beneath the ridge of his jutting eyebrow. In the dim light his skin seemed to wax leathery and rough, his dark features pale and serene as a moonscape. He rose slowly, shadows flowing into the horseshoe depression of his shattered cheekbone, and stepped towards the door, into the hazy perimeter of the pallid, arching light.

"Well," he said, "if you ain't up to talking I'll let it rest. I'll tell Milly you're up."

I glanced first to him, then to his reflection in the mirror, where the pepper of quicksilver shone lifelessly against the dark ebony frame. "Wait a minute," I said. "Where's Beau?"

"In his room," Coon said, opening the door. The white spill of light from the hallway was a revelation in its brightness; the shadows of the room shrank away, except from the wall by the window, where Coon's sidelong silhouette momentarily paused and then disappeared. I stared dumbly at the empty doorway, and listened as the slow, padding footfalls descended the staircase at the head of the hall. You've got to, I thought, my face growing hot with a sudden rush of blood, you've got to get away. Every heartbeat sent a shiver of pain throbbing across the tender cut, a pain which seemed to burst and settle, dissipating into my veins so that I shuddered a little with every pulse, thinking as I moved towards the door I've got to get away I can't stand this any longer but first I've got to talk to Beau.

"Shut the door, would you," he said, with a sidelong inclination of his head. The room was dark, but the light from the hallway fell across the back of the easy chair where he sat with his legs propped up on the windowsill. I closed the door behind me and stumbled through the unfamiliar darkness to the window. Beau sat there buck naked, his body greying in the clouded moonlight, as the cool breeze wafted inward over him.

"Good to see you," he said, looking up at me. "We thought for awhile there you had really flipped." His eyes moved alertly, but

their usual brilliant blue seemed glazed and lifeless in the moon.

"I never meant to worry nobody," I said, touching a hand to my scalp. The blood was still pounding across the wound, hot, shivery bursts of pain tingling through my body. "Psilocybin flashback, I reckon. Had to catch up with me sooner or later."

He stretched in the chair, his body straightening against the wind. The moonlight gave his skin a smooth, marbly appearance. "Me and Milly, we had us a nice long talk tonight," he said. "I think I've been under-estimating her all along."

"Coon told me you drove her to town," I said.

"You know," he said matter-of-factly, "she ain't going to give you up. She means to fight for you right down to the wire."

"I don't need no fighting for," I said. "I can handle my own life thank you."

"Aw hell, I know that." His fingers absently drummed against the cool-looking, marbly skin of his thigh. "I was wrong this afternoon, to bait you like that. So I won't say no more about it. But I'll tell you what--rich folks got some powerful persuasions on their side. And her with her looks to boot."

"There ain't no sides to it," I protested. "It ain't like I have to choose between having a wife or having a brother. It ain't between the two of you at all. It's something in me, some things I got to sort out. Why won't neither of you see that?"

"Rich folks have a way of sticking it to people," Beau went on. "They depend on poor folks to give them what they want, and when they're afraid of not getting it they make the poor folks a choice." He paused, listening as the thunder bellowed in the distance. "Like

the Colonel gave Pa. He had to either be true to the Colonel or be true to Marsh Jaeger. It was between betraying himself and screwing himself. And you know how that turned out." He turned to me, his expression boyishly earnest. "Don't let her put it to you like that. You got more money in the bank now than her Pa ever thought of having--she can't touch you, you could throw her over tomorrow, and she couldn't do a damn thing about it--"

"She could leave me," I said. "I don't reckon you thought of that, did you?"

"She won't do nothing of the kind," Beau said, "except as a move to get you back. You think the Colonel wanted to fire Pa? Hell no. But he had to save face. Pa just never came crawling back the way the Colonel expected him to. So he balled Pa up good, so he couldn't get work at all. But she can't do that to you. Not now. Not if us Jaegers hold together."

"She ain't going to do nothing," I said. "I told you it ain't like that."

Beau chuckled softly to himself, his amusement gently mocking me. "I reckon you think you know her well enough to judge that for yourself. But I wouldn't ever underestimate rich folks. Especially her." Lightning flared in the distance, close enough to penetrate the cool darkness of the bedroom. The wind rose like a sudden inhalation, the trees sighing in anticipation of the storm. Beau stared straight into the flash as it flickered and died, hardly batting an eye. A wry, weary smile curled his marbly lips. "You know," he said, letting out a long breath, "it seems like there's something dying inside all of us here lately. We just got to decide for ourselves how much of

that dead weight we can stand to carry."

I nodded silently, as thunder rolled through the hills to the northwest. The rain began falling before the storm was even close; it started gently, rustling the treetops like sifting sand, then building to a steady downpour. The moon was gone now; Beau and I sat wordlessly in the darkness, staring out at the trees and musing into the cold trance of rain as it shook the leaves. Beau shivered as the water blew in through the screen and trickled along his naked legs, but he never once moved; the smooth marble of his skin, having darkened at the going of the moon, grew luminous and brilliant again with each flash of lightning, his face made at once more handsome and more grotesque with the distortion of sudden shadows and marbly pools of white. Beyond the window there were no shadows at all, just the trees, traced in black and brilliant relief against the flashing sky, bobbing to the wind in endless pendulum variations against the gripping of the roots. And past the trees, along the high ridge lines to the north of the river, the infinity of sky met a vague, rain-washed horizon where a thousand more faraway ridges clustered into a single hazy line with the crowding distance, unfolding mountain by mountain, rock by rock, away to the northwest, into Tennessee and the foot of Lookout Mountain itself. You can see Drayton's Knob from the Lookout, just as you can see the northward sprawl of Chattanooga and corners of the six other states they advertise; but damned if that night Lookout Mountain wasn't just another crop of ridge, lost in the pouring rain and shuddering wash of the trees--its rocky face obliterated by its immersion in distance and perspective, its baptism in the fiery rain of time. From that window, looking northward to

the rain-blurred ridge line with the thick, watery droplets mottling the screen and a thousand distant mountains flashing as one in the incandescent lightning, I felt seized by a kind of historical vertigo, as if I was suddenly on the brink of the unknown, divorced from the mansion, the room, and my own time altogether, and about to fall from the mountain into an abyss, where pallid marbly hands froze at the neck of a guitar, and cannons roared like the thunder. My head ached with the assault of lightning, and I bowed away from the window, hands cupping across my weary eyes.

CHAPTER XIII

go to sleep

she said think

about Beau awhile

The storm passed quickly, and like the one in Atlanta two nights before, it left a slow, drizzling rain in its wake. Thunder rolled through the hills to the south, and in the periods of lightning that flickered as if from the past, the fingers of Beau's left hand made swift, unconscious fretting movements against the damp arm of the chair. I rose from the window, feeling suddenly dizzy again, and Beau's eyes tracked upwards through the darkness, gleaming dully beneath the shadow of his brow. He grinned, his teeth bluish-white as his damp hand rose and came to rest on my forearm.

"Nothing like a good rain to clear the air is there?" he said, his gaze fixing earnestly on me.

I inhaled deeply. "No," I said, "I reckon not." The room felt close and heavy with a clinging dampness as I shrugged off his touch and moved towards the door. "I reckon I'll turn in."

"You do that," he said, "but be sure and sleep on those things we talked about."

I nodded weakly, and as I opened the door to the blinding white light of the hallway he turned, curling down into his seat so there was nothing visible at the window but the silhouetted back of the

Colonel's easy chair. A soft blue of lightning flickered beyond the window, casting ghostly patches of white along the darkened walls of the room, and for a moment it was as if there was no one there at all, not even myself standing in the wedge of shadow that fanned inward from the open doorway. I muttered a good-night and left, letting the latch click shut behind me.

The door to my own room seemed to yawn open on the shattered mirror as I entered. I turned on the old tassel lamp and stumbled over to the bed, staring across at the glisten of quicksilver as my body sank into the cool, dank comfort of the sheets. I opened the drawer of the nightstand at my side, fingers fumbling for the pouch of marijuana I had forgotten was no longer there. The mirror mocked my futile efforts, and as I watched the reflection of my hand drawing slowly away from the drawer I remembered that all the dope had been with Daddy. Except for what Beau had had this afternoon, I thought, but I felt too tired, too tired of everything, to get back up and ask him for some now. I slammed the drawer shut, the open pulse of blood along my scalp throbbing down into the pillow. It hurt again at first, but as I lay there the pounding gradually ceased to be pain, becoming instead a kind of rhythmic sensation, disembodied, that with each beat receded further into the feathery comfort of the pillow, like the images of a fading dream, and after awhile it was not even a beat, but a silent, senseless pulse that marked not the passing of time, but the halting of it, as if I had fallen weightless through the bed itself into the vacuum of a single long moment which hung still and changeless about me.

"Tommy Joe? Tommy Joe?" Milly's voice floated down to me, dubious and distant. The feeling of weightlessness dissolved, and I sat up on the bed, the pain returning to my head as the room shrank back into focus and the latch clicked open.

"Come on in," I said. "It's your room too you know."

She slipped inside, her brown eyes wide and apprehensive as she shut the door quietly behind her. "Are you O.K.?" she said. Her voice seemed curiously drained of inflection.

"I'll live I reckon," I nodded slightly. "How about you?"

She crossed the room and sat down on the edge of the bed, her back turned towards me. "I don't know," she said. "I feel like such a whore."

"A whore?" I said. I was startled by her use of the word. "Why the hell should you feel like that? Because of this afternoon?"

She shook her head, her hair stirring where it fell across the inward curl of her shoulders. "Not just this afternoon," she said. She was speaking softly, her face hidden from me, and I had to strain to understand the words. "It's more than just that--"

"Well what is it then?"

"It's everything," she said, in a near-whisper. "This house. This room. This family--"

"For Christ sakes," I said, the pain pressing forward along my temples, "will you talk up so I can hear you?"

"I might as well," she blurted, the pitch of her voice rising as she flopped back on the bed. Her hair brushed softly across my arm as her head hit the pillow. "No point in trying to keep secrets from

good old Beau--" She glanced emphatically upwards, to the wall above the headboard. "He knows it all anyhow--"

"Knows what?" I demanded. "Did he say something to you?"

She let out a nervous, fluttery laugh. "You mean he didn't tell you? Doesn't your brother run and babble out every little detail of his life to you? How unfair of him, Tommy Joe! How really unfair!" She flashed an angry glance, and rolled away from me on the bed. He didn't say anything," she muttered into her pillow. "Nothing I didn't already know at least."

"Milly," I said, "what the hell are you talking about?"

She sat back up on the bed, sniffing back a budding tear. "My God," she said. "You really can't see it can you?"

"See what for Christ sakes?"

"Don't you understand? He can't let you have it both ways anymore--you can't love me and still love him too, he won't let you be compromised that way. Now he's lost Daddy, he can't afford to lose you too." Tears were beginning to streak across her high, tanned cheekbones, but in her eyes there was a cold defiance, as if even now she were doing her best to hold them back. "Well I won't have you compromised anymore either," she sniffed. "I want a life with you, not just a few weekends or one-night reunions. I won't be your whore any longer."

"So what do you want then?" I snapped. "You want me to be a goddamn lawyer?"

"I don't care," she cried. She choked on her trembling inhalation and the tears finally burst forth in a sputtering train of coughs

and sobs. "I--I don't care what you are, as long as I don't have to be your whore. But he won't let it be any other way--"

"You're not my whore," I said, softly. I felt a kind of erotic hit in seeing her reserves crumble like this, her composure coming apart like so much running makeup. I inched nearer to her on the bed, my manner gentle and vaguely apologetic.

"What am I then?" she was sobbing. "Your chattel--your lady of the castle? How am I supposed to feel-when you're gone for months at a time, and then, when you finally do come back, we have no place to go but this--this place that was your brother's idea to begin with? And what is he anyway? A father? A general? A god?" She stopped, suddenly appearing very shrunken in the pale shadows cast by the tassel lamp, and stared down at the blank expanse of mattress that lay between us. I gently stroked her chin, coaxing her gaze upwards. She choked back a sob, her head tossing back and forth in an expression of hopelessness. And then, in a tremulous, whispering voice: "Don't you understand? I love you--I love you too much to go on like we have been. I want things to change for us--so we can be happy together--" Her hair fluttered forward across her shoulders, light as if it had just been taken down.

"I understand," I said, my hand descending to rest on her forearm. She was wearing the wool button-up she often used for horseback riding, and the sleeve was damp and clammy, smelling of rain. "And I love you too." I raised my arm and touched it to her cheek, which was hot and wet with tears. I brushed the moistness away with my fingertips and leaned over to kiss her. Her lips were warm but

unresponsive. "I want things to change too. And they will. I promise." I drew back slowly, taking care to look her squarely in the eyes.

Her expression was at first quizzical and confused, her tongue slowly tracing the moist, tentative smile that her lips had formed; I kissed her again, this time on the cheek, and her eyes widened, reflections flickering in the brown irises as they darted from side to side. Her chest heaved, releasing a shuddering sigh, and she fell limp against me, as if all her resistance were spent. I lay back on the bed, letting her head settle against my shoulder. Her hair was damp and soft against my neck, like a gentle brush of rain-swept autumn leaves, and as I pressed her closer she began kissing me, the pressure of her lips firm and passionate as they traced a line down across my chin into the open front of my shirt.

I loosened the top few buttons of her sweater and pushed the damp wool away from her smooth brown shoulder. She gasped as I moved my hand inside and began slowly gliding the palm downwards, along the smooth inclination of her breast to the soft, spongy skin of the aureole; but her exhalation was slow, almost thoughtful, as I continued the motion, and she shifted against me to accommodate the sensation. I kissed her and her jaws opened without resistance, as did the rest of her body as we gradually undressed and settled into the soft, enveloping comfort of the bed. She surprised me now, as she had the first time, with the violence of her grip, her arms and legs clenching against me with a pressure that seemed almost unbearable, a feeling of dizziness rising along my body and into my head, forced upwards

by the closing vise of her grip. I sank deeper into the mattress, as if the bed itself were the chamber of some centrifuge; it felt to me as if my body had been pumped full of a blood more weighty and sublime than it could handle, that I had been hung with the weight of some invisible mass--and there in bed, with each heated thrust I felt it pressing on me in waves, the pure force of Milly's embrace not just surrounding but penetrating me as well, absorbing me so that the act itself was beyond sensation, beyond passion even, so that when it was done I felt somehow robbed by its conclusion, and there was nothing to do but lie back and let myself melt into the dead space of the room, where the faceless mirror and pale shadows of the lamp mocked the echoes of Milly's voice as she begged the answer to one more dreamy, incomprehensible question.

She finally got up and took her robe down out of the closet, fastening it around her. She stepped over to the window and heaved a deep breath.

"You're thinking about him again," she said dully.

"About who?" I said.

"About Beau," she answered, her voice straining as if it hurt her to say it.

"What the hell does it matter?" I asked, inclining my head towards the window.

She ran a finger along the dry spread of rain-specked glass. "You tricked me," she said.

"What?" I was genuinely confused now. "When?"

"Just now. You tricked me into making love."

"Now how the hell would I do that?"

"You lied to me. You said things would change. You said you wanted them to."

"I do," I snapped. My head had begun to hurt again. "But be reasonable for Christ sakes. It doesn't happen overnight--and I never meant to trick you. I love you--I thought we understood that."

"I thought we did too," she echoed, her voice laced with a hard, cold anger. "But apparently that's not enough."

"Not enough?" I wailed. "Not enough for what?"

She turned from the window, her eyes burning with an intensity I did not quite comprehend. "Enough to keep you, for one night, from thinking about your brother, and that damned band! Why I wouldn't be surprised if you were thinking about it even while we were--"

"Forget the band," I said. "The band's through."

"Your brother then. It's the same thing."

"The same thing as what?" I shouted, the effort sending hot tracers of pain along my throbbing cut. "What the hell are you talking about?"

She stared down at me, her brown eyes cold and despondent, as if all the tears were gone and the eyeballs themselves had turned to stone. "You're hopeless, Tommy Joe," she said, a dry flutter in her voice. "I doubt you ever will know what I'm talking about. You're afraid to know. You're even afraid of knowing yourself."

"That's easy enough for you to say," I said, scornfully. "Money can make folks pretty sure of themselves--especially when they grow up in it--"

"That's not fair," she said, her tanned features pale and stricken.

"But I reckon you might be right after all," I continued, my voice rising until it sounded like a shell-blast in my own ears, "if I'd have known my place five years ago, I might not be lying here now, with a three-inch cut in my scalp and a woman that fucks like some skittish hen--I reckon I could have saved the both of us a lot of trouble if I'd have known well enough to keep my hick fingers out of your aristocratic panties. Ain't that right?"

"Sure Tommy Joe," she said, oddly distracted. The final barrage which I had expected to bring the tears had fizzled. Maybe she hadn't even heard. She walked around the foot of the bed, pausing to look at herself in the cracked mirror, and turned her collar up, as if against the cold. Her movements seemed fluid and resolute, her fierce desire for an unruffled appearance sustaining her once again.

"Where are you going now?" I asked.

"For a walk," she said, opening the door.

"A walk? At three in the morning? Where the hell are you going to walk in all that rain?"

"Why Tommy Joe," she answered, her voice thick with a bitterly feigned innocence, "I didn't know you cared." She snapped out the tassel lamp. "You just go on back to sleep. Think about Beau awhile."

She closed the door quietly, a grudging courtesy to my throbbing head, and I lay watching the wall show of glimmering, rainy shadows as she padded off down the hallway. The rain was falling softly, rattling the trees and hitting the roof with the sound of someone discreetly rapping on a door. It wasn't until a few minutes later, when I heard

the sharp click of the latch in my brother's room, that I finally sat straight up in bed, cursing myself for not having thought of it before, a sudden feeling of release in the helplessness that came washing over me. So that's it, I thought. That's how it all comes out. Just so he doesn't treat her like a whore. That's all that matters to her right now. Or to me.

I got up and closed the heavy inner drapes so that the whole room was black as pitch, and for once the mirror, the window, even the Colonel's old tassel lamp, meant nothing, nothing at all. The bed was still warm when I lay back down, and now, with the lulling drum of rain against the mansion roof, it was easy to sleep. Dreamlessly.

CHAPTER XIV

he's dead

i said

That morning, just before the sun broke over the ridge lines to the east, came the greyish light of a false dawn; the trees, still black and heavy with rain, the stables and clearing, all waxed colorless, as if etched outside the window with a watery, unwashed brush. I had slept deeply, but not very long; the first dim light had awakened me, paling the dark hulk of the drapes where they covered the window and stirred with the damp, chilly inhalations of the morning breeze. At first the scene beyond the window had seemed lifeless, suffused with a grey pallor, but with the sun came the colors, the trees deepening into a soft, rain-swelled green, and the sky, which had been a starless shadow fleeing upwards from the misty ridge lines, dawning blue and clear above the smoky hills.

The front door slammed, the sound crisp and emphatic in the early-morning stillness, and I watched as my brother slowly made his way across the clearing to the stables, his blond hair still streaming grey in the dim wash of light. I did not feel the jealousy I had expected at the sight of him; in fact, I had almost forgotten about the night before--or had at least forgotten that it was not a dream. I turned away and sat down on the edge of the bed, my legs hanging numbly apart and my eyes focusing on nothing in particular, not even the

mirror. I finally managed to get dressed and make my way down the hall to Beau's room.

I opened the door without knocking, and found Milly sitting up in the disheveled bed, her knees slightly bent upwards beneath the covers like they were when she had been lying awake reading. She was holding a sheet against herself as if it was some kind of shield, that usually immaculate hair floating stray and untended across her shoulders and face. She stared back at me, her eyes flat and expressionless, as I walked over to her. I started to pull the cover away, but she snatched it back, her eyes flashing now with cold determination, and wrapped herself in it.

"I should never have let it come to this," I said, shaking my head, "I never should have let you leave."

"It wouldn't have mattered," she said. Her tone was cool and unrepentant. "You couldn't have stopped me anyway. It was too late for that. It was the only thing left for me to do--" She glanced down at her lap, her hands smoothing out the folds of the blanket. Her composure seemed shaken, and as she looked away from me the sternness in her manner dissipated, giving way to a blush that spread down her neck and deepened where she finally let the sheet fall away from her body. "He took me," she said, "but he didn't want me. Or he doesn't. He doesn't want anything except you."

"Go get dressed," I said. "Or at least get back to the room. Don't let Coon or anyone see you here."

"You can't pretend it never happened," she cried, with a strange desperation. "Because it did. And I don't care who knows. You've

got to face it Tommy Joe--"

"Hush that now," I hissed.

"You still can't see it can you?" she sniffed, her swollen eyes dark and tearful. "We're nothing but whores, the both of us--he did it to you and now you've done it to me--"

"Would you shut up!" I shouted, grabbing her by the hair and forcing her face up to mine. "He's my brother for Christ sakes--"

"So what?" she sobbed. "I'm your wife--I know you had to be a Jaeger, but you never had to be a whore--"

"And you never had to be a Jaeger," I blurted, twisting her hair at the nape of her neck and pushing her face down into the mattress. She groaned, muffled sobs choking into the sheets. Her cheeks streaked with tears that ran clear and steady as spring water.

"Please Tommy Joe," she cried, tossing sideways on the bed and hugging my waist as she struggled against my grip. I finally let go of her, and she coiled away from me, burying her sobs in a knot of disarranged bedsheets.

"I hope you're satisfied," I said, "now that you played hell with everything," and as I turned to leave there was Coon looming in the open doorway, his incongruous face ashen in the early morning light. I threw a sheet up to cover Milly, and she let it fall heedlessly over her. "Well," I said, glancing scornfully at him, "that must have been one hell of a joyride they took last night." I pushed him out into the hallway and closed the door behind us.

"It was her come to him," Coon said. His mismatched cheeks contorted into an indecipherable smile, perfectly cropped teeth fading up into the bare, jagged gums of the staved-in side. "I heard her

last night, knocking on his door--"

"I bet you did," I snapped. "I'm going down to the stables for a minute."

"What you figure to do?" Coon said. His crooked eyebrow cocked archly.

"I figure to talk to him," I answered shortly. "We got to try and straighten this thing out before it gets any worse."

Coon let out a long breath. It could have been a sigh or a yawn. "I don't reckon he'll feel like talking."

"He'll talk to me," I said emphatically.

Coon's lips formed a twisted, half-baked grin, and he shook his head, his crater-cheek bobbing in the shadows of the hallway. "Just like your daddy," he said. "Couldn't tell him nothing for his own good."

"It was your daddy set the example," I retorted, and left him standing at the head of the long front staircase, his good eye closed and squinted one peering stupidly across the head of the stairs at the winking crystal of the chandelier.

My body was trembling with numbness as I made my way across the clearing to the stables; my feet seemed to glide over the damp grass, and in my stomach and chest there was a ballooning of hollow anticipation, a horrible vacuum that seemed to be swallowing up my insides, so that even the throbbing swell of my cut felt to me like nothing more than the outward pulsing of the black, dizzy emptiness that was spreading through my body.

The morning itself was fresh with a briskness and clarity of detail, but the sensations it aroused in me--sight, sound, smell--seemed distant and strangely emptied of meaning. The sun had come up over the ridge line to the east, brilliant with crayon-like yellows and oranges where it was smeared against the hazy blue roof of the sky, and the air smelled of damp earth, the scent distinct and unmistakable in the hollow of my nostrils. The hum and grind of trucks and cars echoed dreamlike up from the gap to the east, like a rising tower of morning mist.

Beau had already opened the yawning stable doors, and I found him still inside. I stood for a moment and watched as he, still unaware of my presence, strutted slowly back and forth along the thrust of the bandstand. The building, which the Sons had stripped of its stables and lofts, seemed bleaker and more cavernous than ever with the equipment gone; I had forgotten how huge and dark the thing really was when it was emptied down to the bareness of its inner architecture. Beau paused at the center of the platform, his face obscured in the yawning shadows, and silently regarded the skeletal scaffolding that rose on either side of him into the dark rafters. He turned towards me, his eyes fixing distantly on the swell of shadows overhead, and for a moment he was not my brother at all, but a dark, shapeless form, a point of focus in the yawning emptiness which seemed to come and go, melting away into the grey, dead space around him and then returning again, the way one's own shadow does when swallowed by the passing of a cloud overhead. Still heedless of my presence, he glanced off into the rafters, and for a moment it was I who felt like a shadow shivering in the absorption of a grey-bellied cumulus.

"Beau," I said, approaching the platform, and he glanced down at me coldly, apprehensively.

"Tommy Joe," he said. He coughed up a dry, uneasy laugh. "I didn't reckon on seeing you up so early."

"We got to talk," I said.

He rested his arms akimbo, his eyes glinting downward at me like ice-blue crystals. "So you know then," He paused, squatting down on the platform and staring down at his fingers, which were interlocked as if in prayer, the knuckles whitening with pressure. "I got only one thing to say. I never encouraged her--hell, I didn't even want her, for that matter--"

"I know," I said.

"It wasn't fair of her," he said, in protestation. "Her coming to me like that, so soon after losing Daddy and all. But she done it--she threw the bait, and I bit. She finally found a way of coming between us, a way it would have taken a whore to figure--" He eased himself down off the platform and walked slowly away from me.

"It's my fault," I said, trailing after him. "I drove her to it, I know that--but it don't change anything between you and me--"

"Like hell," he snapped. He had gone over towards the corner where we kept the bikes, and he stopped now, his back turned towards me and his head bowed inwards towards the dark cluster of machines. "I told you," he said. His voice was thick with a tremulous effort at modulation. "I told you not to underestimate her. I told you to get shut of her, before it was too late. I knew she'd find a way to play hell with things--and now she's gone and done it."

"I know what she did," I entreated. "I know what both of you did. But I know how it happened too--and believe me, it don't matter--it don't change anything--"

"Maybe not for you," he said, wheeling around to face me, "but then you never admit to nothing anyhow, do you? Tommy Joe Jaeger, the man with a heart of steel--ain't that you all right?"

"Beau," I said, "it'll be O.K. You've got to believe that--"

"I don't believe nothing," he answered. "Not any more." He was astride his bike now, the fingers of his left hand fluttering against the clutch handle. His foot rose, poising on the ignition.

"Wait," I said, "let me come along."

He laughed hollowly, his bared teeth clenching as if to bite the sound off before it could escape. "Whatever you want," he said. "I can see how it's going to be now--you can't fix it, so you've got to go off feeling guilty about it being broke." His eyes glowed wetly, like melting blue-white crystals. "Well, you go on and feel guilty if you want, I ain't telling you what to do. You don't listen anyhow."

I opened my mouth to utter a reply, but my words were drowned in the roaring ignition of his bike. I ran to mine, an odd desperation seizing me as I jumped across the seat and my fingers closed uncertainly on the brake and clutch handles. The bike coughed and started, the engine's vibration more felt than heard as the revving thunder of my brother's circling machine rebounded like a crossfire from every corner of the dark, echoey building. I kicked back the parking brace, my hand flexing against the accelerator, and Beau sped away, glancing carelessly backwards as he burst into the shallow light

beyond the stable doors. A flourish of settling dust trailed outwards behind him like a giant exhalation.

He roared off across the clearing, the stable dust hovering incongruously above the rain-soaked drive. I followed him up the rise and into the dark curl of the tree-lined drive, and the red gravel flew beneath me as I clumsily shifted into the higher gears. Beau was already a hundred yards ahead, his blond hair streaming mane-like behind him, and I felt my hand inching the throttle forward, almost involuntarily, as the bike lurched and roared into top gear. The engine climbed to a deafening roar in my ears.

The leafy shadows reeled across my brother's back as he screamed along the lane, the flickering patterns giving his streaking figure the illusion of even greater speed. As I followed the onrush of cool morning air balled in my throat like a wad of dry cotton, and I gulped it in wide-mouthed, my eyes fixed on the bike ahead as it flew along the hilly, coiling snake of gravel. The distance between us had narrowed, but Beau was still running full tilt, the pools of water scattering beneath his tires and settling back into the chuckholes and depressions before I sent them splashing a second time. In the corner of one eye the sun hurtled through the trees, following each dizzying dip and turn of the road, but it was still Beau on whom my sight was fixed. It seemed I was no longer chasing him really, but training on him, being sucked along in his fleeting slipstream, as if he was a star or a magnet, somehow abstracted from the dark, droning hulk of his motorcycle, the pressure of my fingers on the accelerator no longer mine at all, but the simple response of one object to another's

force of attraction. I sensed only the physical fact of my motion, so that everything--the fleeting image of my brother, the dip and surge of the machine beneath me, even the kaleidescopic bursts of the sun above the flickering treetops--flowed together into single exuberant feeling of momentum. There was no sense of fear or danger, no thought at all really, though without thinking I felt a vague recognition of the thing; it was accelerating now, faster than I had ever felt it before, the pure centrifugal force drawing me downward into the very heart of the hurricane; and at the center, in the distended eye of the storm itself, it was as it had always been: my brother Beau, on stage, in the motel rooms, at the mansion, on his motorbike--anywhere, it seemed, in God's own creation, it was my brother Beau at the vortex, spilling the eddies and swirls that gathered everything inwards, towards him, even someone like Daddy Julius, who had simply been clever enough not to resist--and now the sun broke full on him and his streaming blond mane, as the lane curled out of its last turn and stretched along that flat crop of rock, the one that had carried the Western and Atlantic across the ridge above Spring Gap. It was the morning sun itself that rose as a signal for him and him alone, hovering high like a mystical bird, as he took the turn onto the highway, not to the south, through the old tunnel, but northeast, into the dawn.

His bike skidded beneath him as he wheeled it onto the wet pavement; water sputtered from beneath his tires like spraying gravel, but he kept his balance, rounding the curve and following the plunge of the highway. I spun as my wheels hit the water-shine concrete, my left leg going down to hold the bike steady, and as I finished the turn I spotted Beau at the foot of the curling hill, where 41 dipped

into the shadow of the flanking ridges. The splattering cascade of Spring Creek plunged by on my left, the cool, foamy-smelling air swelling my nostrils, and I felt a chill as the sun disappeared beneath the looming crest of the gorge. The road was even more slippery here, the spill from the springs above making glassy rivulets across the highway to the churning creek.

Beau was fifty yards ahead, almost to the historical markers and dark grotto of the Drayton brothers' monument, the cold spring water tossing from his tires. He came up quickly behind a slow pickup truck, wavering, chafing in hesitation at the curve ahead, and then swinging out to pass. Suddenly, even in the distance, I could see his fingers fluttering frantically against his handlebar brake, that curve opening up as we rounded it, and him trying to steer clear of the snubnose rig that had appeared in the southbound lane. He skidded sideways on the glassy pavement and hit the semi head-on with a loud crumpling noise, his bike spinning off to the right like a crushed top and Beau disappearing beneath the tractor as if it had devoured him.

I screamed his name, the wind smothering the word in my throat, and gunned my bike past the two trucks where they had pulled off to either side of the road. There was a smear of shimmering blood on the wet pavement a little ways past the grotto, and I braked wildly, the bike sputtering and nearly carrying me into the south wall before I finally got it stopped. The engine was still chugging as I left it, and I ran past the mangled frame of Beau's machine to the other side of the highway. There was a trickle of spring water washing the bloody smear into the creekbed.

Beau lay at the edge of the creek with one bloody sleeve dangling in the crystal water; the stream flowed through the cloth as if there was no arm or shoulder inside at all. His head was twisted sideways at an impossible angle, the upturned cheek unscarred, but there was a dark stream of blood coming from the hidden temple, beneath where his nose was pressed into the sunken shoulder. I knelt beside him, turning his head slowly in my hands until I saw the other side, where there was really no face at all, and I gingerly set it back into place, letting the mirror-like water lap at the dangling sleeve. I looked away from him, my eyes tracking up the rocky wall, where painted stones now marked the course of the Draytons' ancient, treacherous foot-path, reaching to the jagged crest of the ridge line, and it was from there the shadows were shrinking downwards, the uppermost table of rocks glinting as they poked into the descending halo of sunlight.

There were voices behind me, at the edge of the highway, and someone offered me a hand as I struggled up the slippery rocks to the burm. "He's dead," I said, and the faces, grave and dark, nodded, as if they already knew.

It was not much different from riding to a concert, really, the dark hulk of the car ahead slowing as it approached the gate and blue-shirted security cops struggling to clear people away from the gated entrance. Milly shuddered at the sight of the crowd, her brown throat rising and falling against the wispy black lace of her collar. Her manner was, as it had been all morning, one of deference and detachment, and I imagined that her presence today was as much for the sake of social appearance as it was the final courtesy she professed it to

be. She had put her hair up for the occasion, tucking it beneath the obligatory black wide-brimmed headpiece, and with her bare neck scrupulously understated makeup she looked colder and more severe than I had ever seen her. She sat stiffly erect beside me, her gaze fixed on the car ahead, as we entered the gates. Hands and faces lunged forward towards the windows, surging against the restraint of the guards, but she would not concede so much as a sideways glance, either to them or to myself.

"It would please him," I said, "knowing he caused all this commotion."

Milly's lips flickered in a grim, fleeting semblance of a smile. "It would at that," she said.

We followed the hearse up over a grassy knoll, the green rise littered with marbly stones glinting chalklike in the midday sun. The curtains in the limo's rear window had been drawn back, and above the coffin and flowers and all I could see the dark, misshapen shadow of Coon Dog's head as he, too, sat staring forward. Behind us the long procession of cars moved slowly through the wrought-iron archway, their purple funeral flags sagging limply as they huddled to the foot of the gentle grade.

"He would have wanted to be brought here," I said absently. "We'll bury Daddy here tomorrow--"

"Who knows what he would have wanted?" Milly said, icily.

In the car ahead Coon had half-turned, facing sideways as if he was talking to someone next to him. I could see the outline of his mother's high, smooth forehead and gently sloping nose, and from my

angle of vision it looked like there was nothing wrong with his face at all, like he might even be handsome were it not for a certain thinness and angularity of features that was evident even now. "I reckon you're right there," I said. "But hell, who would know if I didn't? After all, I'm his brother--"

"You needn't remind me," Milly said.

Ahead on the right was a small canvas tent, covering a kind of dais which was flanked by rows and rows of lily sprays. The hearse pulled off the narrow asphalted drive and stopped, disgorging an impatient-looking pair of liveried attendants. Coon got out too, glancing uneasily about him, and I drove on by, nodding to him across the front seat of the Mercedes. He stood beside the limo, an imitation scarecrow in his loose-fitting blue suit, as the attendants flung open the rear panels and rolled the casket out. Milly waved to Coon with a gentle inclination of her speckless black glove, and as we passed her attention lingered on him, a momentary lapsing of her crystalline determination.

I pulled the car off onto the grass and shut the motor off. "Milly," I said, "I'm sorry." I reached across the seat, placing my hand palm down on the bare skin of her wrist. It was not cold, as I had expected it to be, but feverishly hot, as her skin had always felt when we had been lying with our bodies pressed close together. She glanced down with a look of alarm at my touch, and drew her hand away, black velvety fingers interlocking in a stiff, prayerful clasp.

"Sorry about what?" she said, taking a breath to regain her composure.

"About everything," I answered. "About this whole damn mess--"

"You'd better get over there," she said. The suggestion was oblique, but her voice was somehow less cold than it had been since her announcement of intentions that morning. "Coon will be expecting you."

"Please," I said desperately, "don't do this. Not now. I'm trying to say I'm sorry--"

"You already did," she interrupted. She was no longer staring forward; she was looking away from me, out the window towards the knoll which rose to our right.

I sat silent for a moment, trying to read her reflection in the sun-streaked glass. I could tell from the delicate inclination of her shoulders that she was using some effort to restrain the tears. I turned and bowed my head over the steering wheel. "I don't reckon I can talk you into staying then," I said.

"You had that chance before," she sniffed, "but Beau wouldn't let you."

"But Beau's dead now," I said. I put my hand on her shoulder and tried to get her to turn back to me, but she shook it off, her head bobbing downward into the black huddle of her body.

"So are you, Tommy Joe," she said, crying softly. "Maybe even deader than he is, for all I know--"

My hands slowly closed around the steering wheel, their grip tightening until I felt I could snap it in two from the pressure, and I had to blink at the burning moistness that had come welling up in my eyes. God damn you God damn you Tommy Joe I thought, the pounding of my blood like hot flashes of rage that rose from my chest and

exploded themselves in my brain, and I felt like slamming my head down against the horn and letting it all out; but the sound of Milly's crying was somehow an appeasement, a comfort, and I wrestled myself back under control, winking back the gathering tears as I drew myself erect in the seat and opened the door. "Well," I said, drawing a deep breath, "I reckon I'd better get moving, if we're going to get you to that plane on time," and I got out of the car, not even looking back as I made my way across the lawn to the tent, where my cousin and White Willie and all the rest stood, their faces dark and expectant in the shadows that hung beneath the earth-colored canvas.

Daddy's funeral was Saturday, the day after Beau's and after the madness of the first service this one went calm as a whisper. There were a few mourners besides the Sons and their entourage, but most of the fans and industry people that had shown up for Beau's had gone back to New York and Los Angeles, and I felt an inexplicable regret over the fact that it had been my brother's death that robbed poor old Daddy of the ripping wake that he would have wanted. Milly had gone back to Memphis the afternoon before, so Coon and I rode together with Daddy in the hearse, the tiny procession winding its way out to the same Atlanta boneyard we had carried Beau to the previous morning. Someone brought a guitar, and we sang a few tunes together over the grave, but it was the last time the Sons of the South stood with each other in front of any kind of audience.

Jeff and Emmylou took their money from the band and moved to a farm in Tennessee, which Jeff leaves every so often to drum a studio gig in Nashville, and Burke and White Willie went into session work

for awhile before they got impatient with it and decided to hit the road with a band of their own. Coon and I went back to the Knob, but it wasn't long before he left too, to tote equipment for Burke and White Willie, and when he had gone I smashed my banjo against one of the pillars on the verandah and stood looking out at the windy, empty stables with the shattered neck in my clutch.

So I stayed, because you see none of it ever dies, really. It may get broken or lost or buried, but eventually it gets resurrected and used over. The people from the Highway Department came the next month and planted a little stone cross at the roadside, just opposite the Drayton brothers' grotto, and I remember thinking at first they could have done the same for him as they did for them, that they could have at least put his name there; but once I got to considering the placard they had put at the tourist stop by the spring, I realized that was not the kind of thing he would have wanted. The words there are under glass, etched into a shiny nickel plating that carries with it an illusion of permanence, and of truth--as if their deaths were an absolute end and not a beginning, as if that day in 1864 represented their eternal severance from the ongoing procession of time and circumstance. The truth is, they haven't died in the century since any more than the earth into which they passed has died; it's more like they're living inside all the Jebuels and Levis that came after them, and the only place they're really dead is in the people who don't understand, the people to whom the past is nothing but a bunch of words under glass. That's why the statue in the Drayton town square says it so well--because it's there, without apology, and it doesn't

give a God damn about anyone who has to read an explanation to understand what it's all about. That's why the past hasn't died in Drayton the way it has in Atlanta, where they've set up candy shops and booths in the old Underground, like money-tables in the Temple.

And still, I thought, there ought to be something for him, not a monument or a plaque or even a statue, but just something to hit the note he would have wanted to hear, to keep the vibration ringing; but it wasn't something I could give him, or Coon either, although my cousin and I talked about it a lot before he left. I wasn't even sure just what it should be, until one morning nearly a year after the accident I flipped open an Atlanta daily and saw it, clear as my own reflection in a mirror.

The newspaper saw it as a curiosity, but I saw right away the appropriateness and significance of the thing, and felt a kind of quiet satisfaction in knowing that, even in death, he would not be denied his due. You can see it if you drive north from Atlanta on U. S. 41, up to about eight miles south of Drayton, where the highway cuts across some skinny river with an Indian name; and there, to your right, you will be able to read the message where it's hacked into the high, rocky walls of the creekbed: REMEMBER BEAU JAEGER. The letters are five or six feet high, chopped right into the slablike grain of the stone; who put it there I'll never know, but somehow that says it, that just hits the note. When the sun is high, the shadows seem to flow along the rocky grain, like water trickling down an incline, and pool in the cool darkness of the letters, and they look so natural, so perfectly in place, it's almost as if they grew there, the land

itself yielding up this testament in place of the body it had taken.

I drive out 41 some days now just to look at it, pulling the car off to the red clay burm because there's no observation deck there, no more carnivals raising their tents around my dead brother's memory. There's just something of him in it that strikes deep into your chest, like Coon Dog's pinched-off grin or the sight of your own reflection deep in the gorge of Spring Creek a little further up 41; and as you stare across the bridge at that exhortation, reading like a commandment where it's hewn out of those rocky tables, you can't help but feel a twinge, if not of sorrow or loss, at least of remembrance, and an awe, as if the letters themselves were charged with his presence. You can't miss it, driving 41 north to Tennessee, and even if you don't stop to look too closely, there's something of it that will no doubt register inside you, and 41 the rest of the way to Chattanooga will seem different, as if you're driving along some lifeline of memory, the woods and hills thickening with the sweet scent of time, until finally it all becomes a part of you, past and present converging down that shimmering white line of highway--and then you'll understand, then you'll see.

And you'll remember him. My brother.

END