

January 2008

In With the Old

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IN WITH THE OLD

A Thesis Presented

by

RYAN M. WILSON

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

May 2008

MFA Program for Poets and Writers

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CHAPTER 1

ANTIQUÉ

What births an antique?

The answer informs most of what I know, most of myself.

I know, for example, that it involves the history and condition of an item, those qualifiers of appraisal. Yet the qualifiers also bow to greater forces: those that shape history, that significant place from which a thing survives, including what, or rather who, handles the concern. The final answer, I suspect, is what power makes history, what power handles the handler.

Just some thoughts you might ponder while running an antique store on a slow day in the middle of Ohio. There are worse ways to think, worse places surely to ask questions of fate or God or why. But when you are alone among the relics of other people's lives, which you then try to vend into the lives of strangers, you might conjure such thoughts.

And the thoughts, like the relics, get inherited before they go public. Both my parents were pensive people, curious singular influences who made me curious and singular. Not that I didn't fight it. Mostly we fight what we inherit, understanding finally we can either bear ourselves or abandon that person for someone new. As with a family crest or creed, antiques trickle down a line until someone abandons them.

I know the fury of that attempt, to rid the self of ancestry, toss it to the curb or to a place like this because the thing carries memories no longer bearable in inheritance.

A woman feeling this way once visited my store holding a pair of ivory bookends carved the shape of swans. They'd belonged to her mother's mother's mother.

I told her they were lovely.

She said they were the most hideous things she'd ever seen. But she knew they were worth something, just not to her.

“They creep me out,” she said. “Like they've watched me all my life.”

She didn't need to say her mother was dead. The swans told me everything. After I bought them from her, after I displayed the swans on a shelf, I too could feel her burden each time I passed through their room. But of course it wasn't my burden, which makes them safe for anyone but her.

A quality antique store holds the weight of a hundred haunted houses, their spirits attached to whatever survived the people they once haunted. Hope being that some other patron will find them so that they may continue haunting new people.

The best antiques cheat death.

And yet they are death, or very near it, having nearly no practical uses left. Is this why the elderly appreciate them most?

My mother, having operated our store nearly her whole adult life, in one of our final conversations said she felt closer to others after handling what they'd left behind, as if they'd placed each item in her safe keeping during its interim journey.

We all take that interim journey. But I wander again; downright Buddhist, friends would say. I'm not particularly Buddhist, but I like to think like one: what, for instance, is the soul but an antique shifting hands through the Universe? And then reincarnation God's own antique store, moving us from home to home, shifting us from time to time until we appreciate in value.

Memories themselves turn to antiques, their value rising as the event goes

dimmer. And so my mother has become one in my mind, her image fading like an old photograph, so that I only see her through my own nostalgia.

The business, of course, runs on nostalgia, which I don't mind indulging, although my father cautions me against this, calling it dangerous, a threat against profiting upon another's nostalgia.

His role here has always been one of restoration, working against the past, fighting, in his way, fate or God or why. It's a losing cause, and I think he knows this, embraces it like some general ennobled by a hopeless battle.

My own struggle through the years has been partly against him, partly against much of my own history. And now I am back to what we try to throw out, its own losing battle, as I could tell the Ivory Swan Woman. I could tell her, for example, my story of leaving here as a young man, dedicating myself to all things modern, pursuing technology, striving and succeeding with that in some distant city, but then realizing bitterly, years later, that despite my efforts to stay prevalent I had fallen off, into that place where younger versions of myself made me obsolete, an antique.

So I arrived back here, in the care of my pensive parents, who were more than prepared to help an item such as me find use again. Parents are good that way: to them, you can never be an antique.

A woman and her boy walk in, interrupting my musing. She looks late-thirties, with straight stylish auburn hair cut straight above a clever face. She walks like a person who has walked into a store like this before: confident, quick, discerning. She is a collector, I can tell, as she goes straight to our better merchandise, shaking her head at our price tags.

I anticipate we'll barter a little.

Her boy, a pudgy blond of about five, looks to want to suck his thumb out of boredom. What can interest him here? An interesting question. At five what shouldn't interest you?

He is me nearly forty years ago, being dragged to shops like this with my own mother, who was also confident, quick, and discerning, although never quick enough. Even at five, I was already bored with the stale smells and drabness of an antique store. I lived in one, so visiting another ought to have felt like home, but no, it was agony, with no room to play without breaking something, with no interest in anything, especially in the antique toys made in a time when, you guessed, children weren't even children but your grandparents made smaller. I had about a twenty-minute timer inside of me before I started whining.

Already he is fidgeting beside his mother. Soon he will begin tugging at her blouse, asking how long. And of course, she will assure him not too long, that she'll only be a minute. It will be more than a minute. Her eyes are fixed on a brass knocker she is considering, her face a trance of contemplation: *how would this look on our door?* She is gone to Christmastime where a wreath hangs above the knocker, all a reflection of herself, and now she is considering herself in relation to all the knockers on my table; the louder the knock the better she can answer it.

Meanwhile, the boy has drifted away from her, has found himself in similar contemplation over a set of daggers kept in a locked case beside my register. Sometimes someone would have something accidentally interesting. The boy has pressed his face to the glass, visualizing how one of these would feel in his hand, imagining showing his

friends at school, playing with it out in the woods. He turns and walks back to his mother, tugging again at her blouse, pulling her over to the case.

“Absolutely not,” she says, far too firmly. Crushing. She returns to the knockers, back to her own dream.

The boy keeps his face pressed up against the glass. He sighs. He is still imagining himself using that knife, only now perhaps he is envisioning himself using the knife on her (at least this is what his scowl tells me).

Eventually he slumps to the floor where he sits cross-legged, staring up at the case. Now he wants one of the knives more than ever. When his mother approaches to speak to me about a knocker she’s decided on, he begs her, “*Pleeease*...I’ll be careful with it!” His mother just shakes her head, smiling to me, as if to say, “Absurd, isn’t it?”

Only it isn’t. The boy’s pouting on my floor is his logical reaction to hopes squashed in a world that won’t understand what could be. I might see a similar expression on the mother’s face if I choose not to reduce my price for her knocker. But I do reduce the price, noting as I do that the boy has resorted to whimpering now, also understandable as a logical reaction to his being dragged here, tempted, and now realizing the cruelty of that.

He is, after all, five.

“Now,” his mother scoops him up. “You’ve been so good all day.”

He nods sadly, still longing for that knife.

“And I said,” she continues, “if you were, we’d go get you that action figure.”

How can a toy threatening violence compare to the real thing?

It can’t. Not yet. Not until that toy gets lost or broken during pretend violence, not

until years later, after the boy has become a man, a husband, father, grandfather, then finds himself again dragged to an antique store with his wife and sees the very same toy then appreciated as an antique will he understand the value of his life today.

Assuming of course that the toy esteems itself in time, that fate or God or why align in its favor. Same with the boy's own life, same with mine.

What delivers an antique?

Everything and nothing, God and the Devil, malice, compassion, choices, survival.

After the boy leaves with his mother, I'm left with the rest of the afternoon, interrupted each hour by the Presbyterian church bell, itself an antique, tolling time fading under new vibrations.

I remember my mother and think of my father. I'm trying to preserve them. Because I'm not just running their store. I am their store, esteeming their value, dusting off their lives, offering them to others. As a son, I get to possess them and pass them on.

It's never fair, their appraisal. My own view of their history shapes them now, as does my own condition, which I'm hardly able to judge.

In the end all a dealer really has is the story of the thing. Every enthusiast wants that.

CHAPTER 2

COLLECTORS

The story of Longmier Antiques and Restoration, though named after my mother's family, begins with my father.

It begins in 1954, with my father floating off the coast of Okinawa, just before a typhoon hit. The waves were precipitous as he and two brothers climbed each surge with their inflatable tubes. Their mother, Rachel Harris, my grandmother, watched thrilled at the fun they were having, never questioning how dangerous the sea was until her husband, Seth Harris, my grandfather, sprinted to the beach and roared for the boys to come to shore.

They pretended they couldn't hear him.

Which was a first because Gunnery Sergeant Seth Harris was accustomed to being heard. His job on the base entailed keeping the men safe around guns. A sharpshooter, he had won medals in Germany and recently in Korea for his sniper skills, and now ran the rifle range. As most of the men enjoyed their time at the range, he was used to being obeyed, even by his sons, who liked shooting. He was also used to shouting over fire, so his booming voice carried across the breakers.

When the boys didn't respond, he turned to Rachel.

"Are you crazy?!"

She told him to stop shouting; she could hear him.

"Storm's two hours out!"

"Exactly." She nodded.

It was the beginning, my father always remarked, of a major change in her, or at

least his seeing her. He claimed he could sense this even out in the surf of the South China Sea, that the two figures waving their arms at him weren't waving together, that the larger figure was waving him back to shore while the other smaller figure was simply waving.

He also understood in that moment that he could do anything, that whatever his father advised, chances were equally fair that his mother would say to do otherwise. And it scared him, riding the tide before the storm, to see them so useless, so oppositional. Until he heard his brothers, Alan and Mark, cackle out beside him on the water. Being older, they'd known that their parents couldn't control much. And they'd confronted this truth by testing its limits.

When the brothers finally decided to make shore, Seth barked at them for endangering themselves, for not listening. In a winded display of cowardice, Alan and Mark claimed their mother had let them go. This struck my father immediately false; she couldn't have stopped them, not even if they'd wanted to die, which my grandfather now wondered aloud:

“And Grant's not even a strong swimmer!”

He pointed to my father, the youngest at ten.

“You're responsible for your brother!”

Alan and Mark nodded in unison, complying to pretend that my father had drowned.

“A miracle you're not all dead!” Seth gestured out to the waves. “No one's good enough for that chop!”

My father, taking these words as a dare, turned suddenly and raced back toward

the surf, only to have Seth catch and yank him home.

In their apartment back at the base, he heard from his room his parents arguing over what had happened. Seth was still angry, not for any lapse in judgment but because his wife's general idea of responsibility differed from his own. To Seth Harris responsibility meant keeping his sons orderly and safe. To Rachel Harris it meant giving them some relief from order and safety.

"Let us live a little," she advised.

"And how am I keeping you from that?" Seth asked.

And she told him.

Like many military wives, my grandmother lived bored. When she'd first decided to marry an army man, she envisioned, romantically, a life around the globe, but once it arrived she found base life much the same everywhere, the same gray green walls, the same motherly duties to suffer as if her husband worked in an office. Worse, she saw her sons growing up dull, their educations molded by the mostly witless teachers the army provided. So far the family had lived in France, Norway, Germany, Hawaii, and now Okinawa, and none of her sons seemed to reflect any of those places. Nor did she.

"Well what in hell you expect from me?" Seth asked her.

"I don't know!" she screamed.

And my father realized that she truly didn't know, that she'd become lost along the family's travels somewhere, that she was, despite them, an unhappy woman.

All she had to herself was an assembly of plates, collected from wherever they'd been stationed. The plates were decorative, often kitsch, always the best she could find, confirming in writing or design wherever they'd lived. When they'd first married and

she'd visualized her life overseas, she'd told Seth of the collection she'd desired: a plate for each place. She'd promised to hang them on the walls so that when they were old together their plates would tell their story.

“Our flying saucers,” she called the collection.

The plates had become something of a joke to her sons, who enjoyed this mawkish wont of their mother, her sole hobby. They were one of the two consistencies in their nomadic childhood: more plates and fights.

The plates would rattle on the wall during their rows. My father remembered plates rattling everywhere the family moved, later on walls in the states: Florida, Texas, Idaho, Missouri, North Carolina, and countless other temporary destinations until he moved away to start college in 1962. The rattling, he said, grew louder as the collection grew. But never did the plates rattle as during that night in Okinawa, the night he learned how alone everyone was, despite the responsibilities of others.

As the typhoon hit, he listened for a plate to fall, something to break, but it didn't happen. The next day was clear, and Rachel took the boys back to the beach.

My father told me this story when he thought I was old enough to understand it: that I could do anything, as could he, that no one controlled much of anything, including him, that we were all rather useless and alone, despite family. He told it the summer I turned eleven, on our way to Rachel's funeral in northern Michigan.

I'd never met her, didn't know anything about her until the story. I'd been sheltered from my father's parents because of “ideological differences,” my father said.

“What's that?” I asked him.

“There was a war,” he answered. “I wouldn’t go.”

My father and I traveled alone on this trip, leaving my mother back in Ohio to run our store. She didn’t even want to meet my grandfather.

“Take Jeb,” she’d advised. “He’ll make some peace. Seth will want to meet his grandson.”

“*Peace.*” Dad made the word sound violent and unlikely. “Why start on that now?”

On the drive north, he indirectly attempted to answer this question, only to return with each new attempt to how wrong his childhood had gone. He viewed the car trip our opportunity to talk, father to son, mostly about the hard truths he’d discovered while living so many places.

“You’re lucky,” he told me. “We have a real home. We don’t move every year, so you can have friends, have some roots.”

No matter what he said, his childhood overseas sounded better than my hometown experiences. I wanted to swim in a typhoon, to listen to my parents fight (because mine never did), to discover something true about myself and them. I knew a few secrets they’d kept from the world and each other, but I hadn’t any proof yet of the equivocal yearnings I felt vibrating through our rooms at home. Although Dad mocked my grandmother’s plate wall, I imagined it a fine record of where she’d been. I wanted to see it, what was left of her.

“It’s a joke,” my father said. “The plates, the moves, their marriage. A joke.”

It would have been easier to divorce, but neither Seth nor Rachel Harris ever considered that. Both were strict Catholics. Both believed despite their separate desires

that they loved each other. Both were too nice.

“A sad sense of duty,” he said.

He was traveling to the funeral for similar reasons, his own sad sense of duty. Uncle Alan had called with the news, insisting he come. Dad had never been up there either. He'd been long gone by the time Seth retired from the service and bought the northern property. Seth had opened his own rifle range there. He also took city people out hunting. I was secretly hoping he'd teach me how to shoot a rifle upon meeting and, hopefully, liking me.

But Marquette in late June was rainy, a warm kind of wet that tasted like leaves. It drizzled the whole visit, keeping us inside.

Rachel's plate wall had become a plate house. They covered the entire downstairs, trailing into the kitchen and the bathroom, scattered down the hallways like billboards crowding the highway. They seemed to advertise obsolete vacation packages; who, I wondered, would ever want to go to Holland given the glum watery-brown depiction of the windmills on Rachel's plate? And who would want to remember that?

If you considered them long enough, the plates were eerie. Stare at them and they would stare back, as if the saucers were eyes on the wall, viewing you from wherever they'd originated. It didn't take long for me to begin to feel watched. No wonder my father had hated them. I imagined Grandma Rachel's spirit now inhabiting the plates, haunting them with the steady rage she'd carried while acquiring them.

And yet they were the only remarkable presence in the house's otherwise lank design. A ranch home, the building could have been a barrack, the way it faced the road and stretched through a thicket of pines toward the rifle range that Seth had built behind

the house. Inside, the decor was dramatically utilitarian, resembling the bare furnishings of any north woods cabin. A torn recliner sat adjacent a tacky flower-print couch, as if competing for some prize that would read “Saddest.” The dining room table was cluttered with papers no doubt concerning Rachel's death, but even without these one could tell that it didn't receive many diners. And hovering above all were the plates, if not watching the decay then battling the furniture for a futile dominance through the rooms. They suggested some better somewhere, say Arizona maybe, but hanging as they did, in no particular order but to Rachel perhaps, they only advertised the desire to be elsewhere.

Rachel's older sons, having grown up under these, had gone toward and even into the plates. They'd mailed back new plates from wherever they'd landed, places like New York City and Baltimore for Uncle Alan, Seattle and San Diego for Uncle Mark. They kept moving, in the tradition of their father, while my father had settled in southern Ohio. From there my mother had mailed Rachel plates reading Cincinnati, Marietta, and one with OHIO spelled in all buckeyes. During our stay, I counted them all, nearly two hundred plates total.

“So you're the boy I'm not to meet.”

These were my grandfather's first words to me. He was trying to be cute, I could tell, but instead he sounded tough. A big man with a gray crew cut and a thin white mustache, he didn't look in mourning; he looked disappointed.

“He's Jeb.” My father dumped our luggage in the front hallway. “Dad, I'm sorry about Mom.”

“Uh-huh,” Seth mumbled.

Inspecting him closer, my grandfather could have been my father in thirty years, if

my father gave more neatness to his appearance. Both were evenly lean. Both could cut through you with their hazel eyes, as if they saw your mistakes before you made them, seer-like.

“Where'd you park?” Seth demonstrated this.

“Where'd I *park*?”

“It's a simple question, Grant.”

Dad sighed. “In the driveway. Where'm I supposed to park? The woods?”

“I don't want you blocking me in.” Seth moved to the window, raised the curtain, and pointed outside. “I can't be blocked that way.”

Dad didn't budge. “Why? You going somewhere?”

Seth grunted. “Her arrangements aren't finished. I'll need to get out.”

“Well, what if *I* need to get out?” Dad asked, flickering a half-smile.

“You come all this way just to want to leave again?” Seth made this sound like a statement, not a question.

“Tell me to move it and I will,” Dad said.

“Move it.”

“I mean when you *need* me to move it. I'm tired now. It's been a long trip.”

“Jesus, you two...”

This was Uncle Alan, the oldest son, entering the room. He was thicker all over than the other brothers, the jolly, affable uncle, the peacemaker, though he could have crushed any brother in a fight. We'd met before, and I went to hug him for shelter.

“Let's just do this...” He positioned himself between them. “Mark's coming in later. Save the argument for when he gets here.”

“Mark wouldn't fight about it,” Seth said.

“Who's fighting?” Dad sat and stretched out on the ugly couch. “I'm just saying...”

“You're saying *nothing*,” Seth snapped, quieting the room. In the brief silence rain could be heard whipping the windows.

“Look,” Alan said. “You *both* deserve to be here, so you can just *tolerate* each other.”

Dad stood and walked toward the door.

“I'll move it,” he said. “It's just a shitty homecoming, that's all.”

“Your mother's dead,” Seth said. “What did you expect?”

In a moment, after moving our van so that it was parked directly on Seth's front yard, Dad was back, soaked and sitting on the homely couch.

Somewhat satisfied, Seth turned to me.

“Your grandmother would have enjoyed meeting you.” He glared at Dad. “I'm sorry that never happened.”

“Me too,” I said, appropriately sorry.

“And why was that, Grant? You told the boy yet?”

“In fact I did.”

“Uh-huh. Bullshit.”

“*Enough*, okay?” Alan slammed his hand on the dinner table. The death papers flew. The plates rattled on the walls.

“Maybe we should stay out at the hotel.” Dad rose and moved toward our luggage.

“Why not?” Seth growled.

“No.” Alan blocked the door. “Everyone stays. There’s room enough, even with Mark coming in tonight.”

“I suppose you think she’d like that.” Dad shook his head.

“Your mother would have liked to have seen you,” Seth said, lighting a cigarette. “She forgave you a long time ago. I’m still wondering why.”

It’s taken years to piece together my father’s life.

To me he is still out in that typhoon, has never really come back from it. Watching Rachel and Seth fight through his youth made him cynical, wary of any sort of duty, even to himself, turning him into one of those who never acts the way others need. He was not a good son, nor a particularly great father, not even an attentive husband or a dedicated citizen. He was a private person, adrift in his own mind ~~兹~~ that amoral space ~~兹~~ where he separated from people.

Yet he began like anyone gifted, had been something of a brain in his younger days. He could have gone to college anywhere and attended Beloit College on a full scholarship where he finished in three years, making, to my knowledge, no lasting friendships. At Ohio State he began a doctorate in history, never finished, and there met my mother, an undergraduate in a class he was assistant-teaching.

He’d been a terrible teacher, she said, hated the academic world, the politics, the language. “All shell men,” he claimed, meaning the professors. He was looking for a way out when he met her. More specifically, he was half-heartedly finishing his dissertation on *Transformed Communities: Border State Discourse During the Civil War*, or rather pretending to, the day she came knocking on his office door.

“Yeah?” he asked, not even turning.

“I heard about your research,” she said, stepping in, “about the Ohio Abolitionists.”

“Okay.”

“Well, I’m from them...I mean, my family, downstate in Highland....They were Stationmasters. We were Quakers. We even own this building my ancestors used as a Station to help the people escape.”

I like to think he immediately saw her (when he saw her) as his own escape. I’ve seen the pictures: my mother was cute in college, a looker, especially in a knit skirt with a neat ponytail.

He told her to sit.

The building she described was an old stone tannery (the oldest in Ohio, he later discovered) with a secret room in its basement for the runaway slaves to hide as part of the Underground Railroad. Her family had kept the property but didn’t use it anymore.

“How old are you?” he asked her.

She was twenty, a junior, but behaved older. Said she was thinking of pursuing history herself. Thought helping him would be good experience, as she was also interested in his project. In fact, she admitted, she wanted to write his very thesis, on populations changed by their resistance to inequity.

“I think I hate you a little for beating me to it,” she told him.

“Can you take me down there?”

“Of course. When would you like?”

“Let’s go tomorrow.”

This was in the spring, late May 1968. My father had already told the department he was leaving to finish his research, though he hadn't any plans yet, certainly none toward work. Taking a road trip with the pretty girl he'd been watching all semester in his seminar seemed a good start.

His future began the next day, the moment he arrived in Highland. He wasn't so impressed with the town, a typically small place where a typically nice girl like her would come from, although he was intrigued with its history. Founded in 1799, the town's posture in the Appalachian foothills had sheltered it from war, flood, and disease, all while preserving its largish brick houses, its intact courthouse downtown, its clandestine past.

"It's fucking quaint," was his infamous first response, not so much a compliment as his backward attempt at charm.

He had that, the ability to win select people with a dirty bluntness. He won me with it at first. Growing up, I thought he sounded like some classic Hollywood anti-hero, a noir detective or outlaw, only bookish. My mother had been similarly won by his curtness in her class; Grant Harris, her classmates said, just didn't care about the living, evident in the way he spoke to them about their papers ("This is shit"), also in the way he looked, never completely put together, always unbuttoned, unshaven. To my mother he resembled a "smart beatnik," a type she'd never experienced growing up in Highland. After hearing of his thesis, she'd sought him out, just as interested in sleeping with him as in offering herself as research assistant.

Hence, they were only half lying that day; really they were researching each other.

"You're fucking quaint too," she replied.

They pulled toward the tannery.

At that moment he could have cared less about the building before him, although he'll now say he was struck immediately by the structure, its worn stones beaming yellow in the noonday sunlight.

“Impressive,” he nodded.

She gave him the tour:

“The family lived upstairs while running the tannery on the first floor,” she said.

He found her a decent docent, but really he watched her ass the whole time.

Occasionally she would catch him, reveling in her power, her authority through the rooms. She saved the basement for last, handing him her flashlight, revealing the secret cellar behind a board, big enough for perhaps eight people to stay at a time.

“Better than reading about it,” he mumbled, stepping inside the chamber.

“Isn't everything. Think you can use it?”

“Not sure. Probably, if I were going to write the thing. But I've come just this far not to really care anymore.”

“Why's that?”

He shrugged. “Why do you? Shouldn't you be out shouting at the president, maybe marching down South somewhere? Or in Europe. Europe's nice.”

“I like my family's history. Their past makes more sense.”

“Yeah,” he nodded. “Must be nice.”

She leaned forward, finding his eyes.

“Why'd you come if you're not interested?”

He grinned in the dark.

“Maybe I am.”

And this, I’m told, was their first kiss, in that dusty room where so many others had hidden.

Uncle Mark arrived in his uniform. Seth’s older boys had become mildly successful by other people’s standards: Alan did well in sales, and Mark was career military like his dad, a First Lieutenant. They all considered my father a victim of the counterculture, which he wasn’t, the typically rebellious third child, although he was the only son with a wife and child.

“Been awhile.” Mark shook Dad’s hand.

“You look fine.” Dad smiled.

They stood there awkwardly assessing each other, friendly but a little wary, as if they couldn’t let go some long-held but trivial grudge: a girlfriend stolen, a favorite shirt torn, a car door scratched. Really it was the time and the distance, multiplied by point of view. Mark was clearly Seth’s boy, though he looked the most unlike his father and resembled best, in his features, the pictures of Rachel.

We ate a takeout dinner together, fried chicken, discussing sports and the rain. Seth asked me questions about my school and my friends back home, curious about what sort of life his son had given me.

I liked him once we got talking away from Dad, and he liked that I asked him about his shooting skills. He pulled out some of his medals for me to see.

“If the rain clears tomorrow, after the funeral, I can teach you a few things,” he said.

“Okay.”

I was excited. Before this I’d only fired a gun once, away one hot afternoon at a church day camp of all places, and I’d missed the target entirely with my two tries. Seth laughed at this story, the sort of generous grandfatherly laugh you should hear before you get too old to listen for it.

After he went to bed, around midnight, the brothers stayed up drinking and telling stories about their mother. I pretended to sleep on the pullout couch I was sharing with my father in the same room, but really I was hungry to hear them speak of their lives in so many places. Their disembodied, often discordant, voices drifted over to me:

“You ’member that typhoon?”

“Best time I ever had.”

“Crazy.”

“She was, yes.”

“I always worried she’d kill herself.”

“Did she tell you that?”

“Yes.”

“Me too.”

Hearing them reminded me of Dad’s story, of his listening to his parents reveal something dark, something actual. I couldn’t get this on my mother’s side of the family where everyone was too polite with each other’s memories. They were too normal, those Ohio Abolitionists, too staid in their Quaker love for each other. But here, listening to the brothers tell of their mother’s desperation, I felt closer to what I thought was real life, where it was supposed to be hard because if it wasn’t what good was a funeral.

“Well how’s the junk business?” Alan eventually asked Dad.

“Alright,” he said. “Quiet.”

“You like that? The quiet?”

“I like having someplace that’s mine. That’s all she really wanted.”

“She had that,” Mark said. “She had us.”

“Not enough. Not near enough.”

“Fuck, Grant, how would you know?”

“I wouldn’t. I’m guessing. I’m also guessing she didn’t know what she wanted, anymore than anyone. We shouldn’t try to figure her out. We’ll get her wrong.”

“She had a real peace up here,” Mark said. “You wouldn’t know, Grant, but she had that place for herself. She mellowed up here. Maybe because we were gone.”

Alan agreed. He said Rachel had enjoyed her later years, even with Seth, who had also softened his outlook in retirement.

“They learned to be together,” he said, “even if they ignored each other.”

“She still collected those plates though,” Dad noted.

“Course,” Mark laughed. “Anyone she could find bring her one. So what?”

Dad shook his head. “So maybe she needed more, something more than keepsakes.”

Mark chuckled coldly.

“Well, you should know, Junk Man.”

It’s no small irony that my mother took my father antiques early in their courtship, that she had her own collection of decorative items: dolls, figurines, ballet shoes. He must

have felt something akin to Rachel here, some Oedipal pull, if you believe in that. Maybe he wanted someone who valued the novelty of things. Maybe he needed collecting himself.

They were living together in a Columbus apartment crammed with some of these, she finishing her degree, he trying to convince her he was still working on his dissertation, though she knew better. Later she would discover he spent a few of his days out refinishing woodwork in an artist friend's loft, thinking he might become a carpenter now that he'd abandoned his academic career. In time he began to examine some of her collectables, wondering how much they were worth. I honestly believe he was planning to hock these as soon as their funds dipped, but my mother claimed he was genuinely taken with her antiques.

He began going to the library to research just how valuable her items were, and once involved in this, like any good academic, his inquiries branched to include so much more. Soon he was the one dragging her to the flea markets, showing off how much he'd learned, oftentimes more than the dealer, who, he'd point out with relish, had either under- or over-priced an item.

If under-priced, he would insist they buy it, be it a broken clock, an unhinged rocking chair, a creaky cabinet.

“But why?” she asked him.

“For the future,” he said.

He was more his mother's son than he ever realized, feverishly gathering what he'd never use in any traditional sense, appreciating the journey toward each object, filling whatever hole he had. I've heard psychologists speak of people who acquire as a

type of therapy or manic syndrome, releasing endorphins and such, but this wasn't that.

Already, I believe he knew his purpose.

He went after the broken pieces because at first, Mom said, they were all he could afford. But it was more. He wanted the challenge of fixing something, to make it worth more than the price guides read.

"I want to beat it," he told my mother.

"Beat what?" she asked

"Time."

Once she left him working on an old music box, for her morning class followed by her shift at Long's Bookstore, only to find him, when she returned, still squatted on the floor, pulling apart every gear to see how it worked. He was blessed with an academic, mechanical, and artistic mind, probably making him terrible at anything but this.

And my mother, to her credit, recognized that, was even proud of it. This "smart beatnik" she'd found wasn't the restless sort lusting for the road. He was restless to sit still and play, like a boy with a new toy. Some maternal instinct in her must have steadied her doubts. He was so *serious* about it. He sought out other local experts, people who worked in wood and upholstery and paint. People, he told her, made a living at this, a good living:

"Because some rich lady somewhere will pay to have classic things around her."

He was amazed himself, had even discovered grants and apprenticeships for those seeking out the life. Museums hired appraisal people.

By the time my mother graduated with her BA in history, my father had reinvented himself. He was going to dedicate his life, he told her, to preservation, to

conservation, to “physical history.”

Then he got drafted.

At the funeral the casket was open, so I got to see Rachel, pale, of course, and prim. I’d never seen a dead person before, was unnerved that she looked so pleased with things. That subtle smile, it took me years to realize, was embalmers’ work rather than death’s natural appearance.

My father stood next to me, peering down at her.

“She was a beautiful, unhappy woman,” he said, as if her beauty came from her displeasure.

He didn’t cry. I never saw my father cry. I watched him carefully.

“Must be strange for you,” he told me. “Try to look sad. If it helps, think of your mother. Someday this will be her.”

“Are you sad?” I asked him.

“For her, not for me.”

“Why her?”

“Well, other than dead, she didn’t get much in life. Not when I knew her.”

“Is that why you stayed away?”

“No.”

“Did she ever see me in pictures?”

“Yes.”

“Ever say she wanted to meet me?”

“Christ, Jeb, she’s gone. Does it matter now?”

“I guess not.”

He sat there stone-faced, as Seth, Alan, and Mark recounted some of their funnier, warmer memories. He didn't laugh or sigh with the small audience in attendance, and I wondered what he'd feel if Mom did die, or me.

We were both pallbearers. The coffin felt surprisingly light, but then five grown men held it besides me. At the graveyard we stood in the rain as the priest gave his last words. My father took his turn with the shovel.

“Why'd you do that?” I asked him afterwards, at the small reception back at Seth's.

“Do what?”

“The thing with the shovel.”

He shrugged.

“Stop fidgeting,” he told me.

I wasn't used to wearing a jacket and tie. Both were too big for me, the jacket a thrift store find from my mother for the occasion, the tie one of his. I'd never seen him dressed up either. He looked so unlike his usual flannelled self. He looked handsome, like James Bond or something.

“Thank God your grandfather always teeters near alcoholic,” he said, fixing a whiskey, pouring me a beer in a plastic cup.

“Don't tell your mother.” He handed it to me. “Hard day.”

He'd given me sips from his beers before, but this was different. I'd been initiated into something: his family, his past, his silent refusal to chatter with the people of upper Michigan, those who'd known my grandmother better than he did.

We stood in the corner, both getting drunk. It was my first time, which made me amused and sad at everything, especially the plates, which in my state seemed more fascinating than ever.

I remember stumbling around the room inspecting them individually, climbing on chairs to see them up close. When I got to Liechtenstein in the kitchen, I plucked it off the wall but dropped it just as quickly, shattering it on the linoleum.

A few women who must have known what the plates meant to Rachel turned to Seth, who turned to my father, still in the corner, giggling at me. Seth grabbed my arm. He led me over to Dad.

“Normally let your kid drink, do you?”

“It’s a special occasion.” He took another sip.

“Looks like he’s well on his way, Grant.”

Dad smirked. “Well, as long as he’s somewhere better than this.”

Seth looked down at me then back to my father.

“If there’s any justice in the world,” he said, “yours will leave you the way you left us.”

“Probably not the same way.” Dad shrugged.

“No, but he’ll remember today, Grant. And how you acted. At your mother’s funeral.”

My father shrugged again. “How’d she really die, Dad?”

Seth looked briefly shaken by the question. Then his face hardened.

“If you cared, you’d know.”

Alan rushed over, cradling the broken pieces of the plate in his arms.

“It was a harmless mistake,” he told Seth. “It's not so bad. We might be able to glue it back together.”

In my inebriated state, I imagined a collective sigh of relief from the people of Liechtenstein, that their plate could be saved and continue as representative on Rachel's immemorial wall. I felt sick with beer and guilt.

Seth reached for the plate pieces and held them close to his chest.

“No. It's gone.” He glowered at the remains. “You were her favorite, you know.”

He could have been addressing the plate, or the nation of Liechtenstein, but he meant my father.

“You mean because I listened to her and not you?” Dad asked.

“You never really listened, Grant. You just left.”

“Maybe I did what she couldn't. Maybe I was just a little smarter.”

Seth's spine stiffened.

“Is that what you call *smart*? Hiding out from your own *family*? Hiding out from your *country*?”

“Have a drink, Dad. You'll feel better about it. You'll remember it's just a plate.”

“You left her,” Seth repeated.

“Get a new tune, Pop. You know as well as I do. Mom told me to go. She told me to stay gone.”

“She might have said that, but that's not what she meant.” He gently placed broken Liechtenstein on the dining room table as if it were a jigsaw puzzle to solve. “It killed her when you quit school and disappeared. You want to know what she died of? *Heartbreak.*”

When he said *Heartbreak*, I vomited, mostly on my jacket. This was enough to break them apart. Dad took me to the bathroom, while Seth took my jacket to his laundry sink. I got it back clean but bleached out from his hard scrubbing.

He didn't run from the war, didn't really *hide* the way Seth thought. He would have fought, I think. Grant Harris was never a pacifist, more an oddball, especially for his generation. He'd respected his childhood on military bases too much to join the protesters on campus. But he also saw through things, saw through his father's culture as he'd seen past university life and his mother's plates. He didn't believe in the cause, yet had nothing against it either, a position he held with nearly every cause.

But my mother cared. She wouldn't let him go.

"Well, I'm not going to Canada," he originally protested.

"Who said that?" she said. "Besides, I'm pregnant."

He'd already guessed this.

"I suppose you want me to marry you."

"God no. Then they'd find you, probably ship you to Germany."

"Well, what then?"

Well she had a plan, a unique plan looking back on it, one that made sense to her (maybe only her) given her family, their own stance on the war, their history with war.

Grant Harris would disappear. Only he would disappear in plain sight, when sighted, not often. She'd made a good study of his nature, knew he didn't need or want much human contact. She also knew the character of her town.

That year Highland's population hovered around 5,000, an important number.

Any less and the place would be considered a village instead of a city and not get the state funding for streets, sewers, parks, and schools. The town was locally known to have lied about its population to the census takers, cramming its country cousins into homes during the canvassing. But then it had always acted rather inordinately for the public good.

My mother felt the community could stand one man uncoun­ted, unnoticed, this both repairing a small percentage of the census lie and continuing the tradition of furtive dealings for noble causes. Never mind that the cause was mostly her own. If Rachel Harris never controlled her fate, surely my mother, Hannah Longmier, forthright like all those Longmiers before her, had no one to blame but herself. Yes, she was mostly against Vietnam, but mostly she wanted to live in the tannery, had always wanted that. So consumed was she with her family's history, wanting herself similarly mythologized, that she'd been seeking her chance. And now, to her thinking, came an opportunity to continue history with a man she loved, a man no less who could repair the place, make it livable, a man with a talent, a passion for restoring antiquities.

What, she argued, was the tannery but one big antique?

He must have thought her crazy. And he must have been crazed himself to agree, sentencing himself for the next eight years to anonymity. He would receive no mail, pay no taxes, take no phone calls. Even early on he would barely go outside. Never would he speak to people, never would he give his name. He would cut himself off from all friends, all family. This would be his new life, the tannery, and here he would work, privately learning to fix what was old and broken.

She would provide for him, or rather her family would. The Longmiers liked him, or at least tolerated him. Her parents, though never pure Quakers, still carried pacifism in

their beliefs and blood. They understood the situation enough to want to shelter him from harm, or to shelter Hannah's child's father as best they could. They would even help pay for the renovations, and later provide money for the antique store to begin.

There is the notable story of my father and my other grandfather, Sinclair Longmier, meeting to discuss my mother's scheme. At her request, both, early on skeptical of the proposition, were to meet to help convince each other of the plan. They met at the tannery, upstairs in the kitchen with my mother listening to this, their first and last in-depth conversation, from the bedroom she would share with my father.

"You superstitious?" my grandfather asked him. "Any belief in restless spirits?"

"Not me," Dad said.

"Souls get connected," Grandpa continued, mostly ignoring him. "You might change your mind living here. As kids we always thought this house haunted. Maybe, we thought, that's why no family wanted to move in."

"I'll let you know." Dad smiled. "'What might I look for? Ghosts?'"

Grandpa shrugged. "Seems a good setting for them. Hannah knows. It was a kind of hell for the living coming through here, the slaves I mean. While here they were caught somewhere between two worlds, in the dark, underground. Sometimes for weeks until it was safe to move ahead. A soul can go mad like that. If I were a ghost, caught between worlds, angry, I might like it here." He paused. "Do you?"

"Do I what?"

"Like it here?"

"I like your daughter."

Which satisfied Sinclair Longmier. It would pass, he reasoned. The war was

already ending, or unpopular enough to end. As in slave times, it would all pass to put them in the right.

And now I suppose it has, depending on who mentions Vietnam. Politicians still get caught in that web of where they were and why, but mostly both sides of men, the soldiers and dissenters, have learned to believe wherever they were right.

To know my father is to know that he never gave it much consideration, so afloat was he for those years in his own head, learning how to restore a building and whatever else he could find. He raised the old home, becoming expert plumber, carpenter, electrician, whatever we needed. All while my mother raised me. He didn't even witness my birth.

Couldn't. At first he was something of a ghost himself, Hannah Longmier's mystery man skulking about the place. Her *husband*? No one was even sure he lived there. *The poor girl*. Maybe, they thought, he only came around so often, because that's only how long he was visible through the windows or in the yard.

Small towns get a reputation. Mostly we think them nosey, backwater places where judgment gets placed inconsequently. But judgment only matters if you mind it. You have to want to be judged. You have to attempt to be a part of the place to hear it whisper your name.

And who knew his? None. Not even when they saw Miss Hannah Longmier walking down the street with her belly full of me did they ask her. And when they asked her parents, as their neighbors did out of concern, both dutifully answered, "Friend of Hannah's. Helping each other during a rough time."

And that was enough, enough to assume him charitable instead of sinister,

although all agreed he was probably no good. Rumors started he was some hippie professor of hers who'd gotten her in trouble or maybe a Vet come home from the jungle in a bad way. He was either too strange or too crazy (both somewhat true), and they appreciated the scandal more than they could have ever enjoyed the truth.

And the government? The draft board? Of course they had his numbers. They went to speak to his father, ashamed of course at his son's vanishing. Once they even came to town, asking to talk with my mother, having linked together their mutual address in Columbus.

"This is all he left me." Mom pointed toward me in her stomach, playing victim.

She even fixed the men coffee, telling them about the antique business she was planning to open, "a dream really." She skillfully bored them with the family history of the place, playing docent again, only this time withholding the glory of what had happened, what was happening, beneath.

The terrible thrill she must have felt, knowing her own escapee sat silently in that room. This would be the moment they'd speak of when they mentioned her life. This would be the great parallel to it all, the continued glory of those Longmiers, their continued passive resistance.

And downstairs, my father sitting in the dark, breathing in the moldy, damp air of another's escape, of exile. It might have shaken him, listening to the floorboards creak above him, knowing he was a fugitive now, him, Grant Harris, son of Rachel and Seth Harris, those warring army lovers. What he must have wondered as the room released its dust and buried truth to him. Sinclair Longmier was right: a soul might crumble down there among the dead mice and worms. A mind might crack and scatter to pieces,

listening to men above you, wearing your father's uniform, discussing your specific cowardice.

Not my father. He was examining where he was, measuring the area and making plans. Repairs. Because he *was* a restless spirit, just not the tortured variety my mother's father had envisioned. He'd grown up between two worlds: his parents. He didn't fear being adrift, for however long the war would last. He was already adrift. He had been since Okinawa.

How fitting then that when the military men left, after warning my mother of any contact with my father, that he refused to leave that chamber. If spotted again, word would travel to the local sheriff, who would now watch the place for his comings and goings. Immediately he set to the restoration of the basement, of the room that was to become his own personal Underground Railroad. Only it didn't go anywhere, at least not as it had for others.

He could have run. If frightened, I think he would have. But he wasn't running. What he'd found beneath time, his own and his nation's, was a home.

No one besides my mother and me saw him again until 1977.

I woke around midnight to a distant ringing. At first I thought it my first hangover, but in a few minutes I was to find the noise well away from me, echoing in my ears. I opened my eyes to see my father removing Rachel's plates from the walls, stacking and carrying them out the back door. When he returned, I was sitting upright, rubbing my eyes.

"Feeling better?" he asked.

"What're you doing?"

“Put your pants on and help.”

I did, stacking and carrying the plates with him, outside, where I realized the ringing I heard came from the plates sitting in the rain. Looking closer I could see the plates weren't just discarded but arranged carefully in rows, planted like a crop.

“That's enough for a good first round,” Uncle Mark's voice came behind us.

Turning I could see that my father and I were out on Seth's rifle range. In an open shed about fifty yards away stood my uncles and grandfather, all with rifles in their hands.

From a distance, they looked almost otherworldly, like figures from some post-apocalyptic film. They could have been the last men on the planet, armed for civilization's last stand. As we walked closer toward them, I noticed each wore a grim, terse expression that said there was a sad business to attend.

“Get in here before the boy catches something,” Seth ordered, “fore I start shooting *you*.”

Again, he was trying to sound cute, but there was menace in his tone, temptation maybe. We hiked over to the shed, really just a shell of a building with a platform and a railing. Seth pulled a switch and two floodlights on the roof illuminated the targets, making the plates shine like new dimes.

“How you feel, partner?” Uncle Alan asked me.

“What's going on?” I asked.

“Funeral,” Dad answered. “The real one.”

I looked to Seth, who lowered his head like he couldn't disagree. A wall of rain came blowing into the shed, whipping into his open jacket and through his shirt, but he didn't seem to notice it. He handed my father a rifle.

“You ’member how to use this?” he asked.

By way of answer my father opened the chamber bolt and loaded his piece. Water was dripping from the barrel, making it look alive somehow, like an elephant's trunk. I shifted my weight and heard my shoes squeak on the wet planking.

“Your mother always hated guns,” Seth said. He spoke into the rain, at the rain. “She’ll be rolling tonight, seeing this.”

“Seems a shame,” Alan said absently.

“You want ’em, take ’em,” Seth said. “I can’t stand them with her gone.”

“What about when she was here?” Dad asked.

I was worried for a second that Seth might shoot my father for what sounded like his continued insubordination. Dad had been pushing him the whole visit, and now seemed the appropriate time to end their dispute permanently.

Instead he smiled, barely.

“You were always too smart.”

Dad also smiled, looking proud suddenly, proving, maybe, you’re never too old to take something from a parent. In the distance a dog, or maybe even a wolf, howled, perhaps sensing the inevitable.

“Gentleman,” Seth barked. “Raise arms.”

Seth’s three sons took their orders well, falling into what must have been an ordinary practice growing up. Each looked the same holding his rifle. They looked like soldiers, well trained, perfectly coordinated with their weapons as in a drill routine.

“Fire!”

My ears hurt, first with all three shots, followed by the sound of china and plaster

erupting crisply about fifty yards away. A wide silence followed. I couldn't even hear the rain anymore. It felt like a gap had formed in the world's fabric, like they'd blown away sound altogether. Then, out of that void, came Seth's barking:

“Again!”

He fired a round with them this time, scowling at the rain.

“Reload!” he called.

The shooting continued until the field lay covered with plate chips. And now the yard did look like a mild apocalypse had hit it, or maybe like something some abstract artist might consider, some modern comment on the futility of nations and cities, on destinations and commonwealths. What was a plate but the very device of civilization? We might just eat from the dirt.

When they finished, we went back into the house for more, a lifetime's worth of dinnerware awaiting its demise. As we planted them in the ground this time, I made a note of what went where: California to the left, Madrid to the right of the field, South Dakota right in the middle. While doing this, I glanced at my father once and didn't want to again. On his face was a mournful deliberation I'd never seen. He looked pained. All the brothers did, but his was a measured, raw passion, the sort of inchoate pang a child uncovers.

I didn't dwell on it. Toward the end of the next round, Seth handed me his rifle and guided me as I blew away Tennessee and Belgium.

We stayed up until dawn, planting and shooting Rachel's plates, bonding, as men will, over the carnage they spread, carnage that brings them closer in ways that simple grieving won't.

And then we cleaned it up, putting on rubber dish gloves to pick up the pieces in the breaking light. The world, in plate pieces, sat scattered at our feet, proving how much time or travels matter. I looked all over for Okinawa's remains, as I'd seen it on the wall the day before. But it was gone, blown to nothing so much earlier you'd never know it had existed.

CHAPTER 3

JACKETS AND COATS

Next door, when I was growing up, there lived a single mother and her boy. His name was Brendan O'Dell, about ten months older than me, close enough to be counted my first official friend.

They moved in one day when I was playing catch with myself in the backyard. What I would do, I would throw the ball against our back wall until my mother would come tell me to quit because I was damaging not just my own home but a historic monument. She always had designs on calling the state to inspect the property for landmark status, and in the interim she'd gone ahead and ruled our house priceless herself. I always forgot this, and besides, any stone building that lasted so long could survive my weak arm.

"How many times I need to come out here, Jeb?" She yanked my ball away, juggling it in her nail-painted hands. "Don't turn me into the bad guy, Mister."

I'd been Mister for some time already. Growing up in the presence of old valuables, I'd broken enough in my play to warrant the name and its tone, just as she'd long been turned into the Bad Guy with her concern over what Mister would break next. My father, meanwhile, we termed Him, as if, living mostly in our basement, he'd reached deity status, which was close considering how careful I'd been told to be concerning His existence. At age seven, I was just starting at the public school, and had finally been judged old enough to keep His secret. It had been an aberrant childhood so far, but like many raised away from both, I'd come to think of my God and my father as much the same being; both were distant, disinterested powers, setting or influencing others to set

rules that made no sense but to the devout. And my mother certainly believed.

“Besides,” she whispered, “he can hear you. He says you’re distracting him.”

“Why? Why can’t he come tell me himself?”

Of course I’d long been told my father couldn’t come outside, but I’d not yet been given a good reason. You don’t tell a boy his father is a fugitive hiding from America’s warmongers in his own basement. That just sounds as cowardly as many think it should. Mom simply said he was working below us and shouldn’t ever be disturbed, to the point that I was never to tell anyone at my new school I even had a father. It was dangerous, she always stressed: *It could get him sent away.*

“You know why.” She looked around cautiously. “And we don’t talk about it out here.”

At that moment the O’Dells and their moving van arrived next door. We both moved to the worn wooden fence separating our two properties.

“Here.” Mom handed my ball back. “I should say hello.”

I followed her down the sidewalk, noticing her worry. No one had ever lived next door. Ours was the older part of town, the homes not really homes anymore but hollowed-out ruins of more prosperous times, too run-down for the wealthy, still too expensive to renovate for the poor. We’d come to think of our block as *our* block, so seeing others with their furniture made the world suddenly smaller, cramped. Not that I commented. By then I was a placid child, also a shy child. In school that first year teachers told my mother I didn’t talk enough, that I didn’t play enough with others. They were right. Watching my parents had made me cautious of people.

Reading my mother’s anxiety didn’t help. I cowered behind her leg as she began

talking to Ms. O'Dell, "Tanya" she introduced herself. As they spoke I could feel Brendan eyeing me, deciding, he said later, if I was worth his time.

"Just you and your boy?" Tanya asked.

Mom nodded. "That's right."

"Bet there's a story there."

Mom employed her wooden face, divulging nothing.

"Sorry..." Tanya retreated. "Don't mean to pry."

"That's alright," Mom said. "Can I help?"

They went inside, leaving Brendan and me alone on the porch.

"You like baseball?" he asked.

"What?"

"You got a glove and a ball."

"Oh, yeah."

"My Dad's catcher for the minor league team in Chillicothe," he said. "The Paints. He gets me free tickets to the games all the time. I go on weekends when I'm visiting him."

It wasn't the first blatant lie I ever heard. I lived a lie, after all, had come to detect how they sounded, and therefore had a bred sympathy toward the liar. It was truth that always puzzled me. I had no proper idea what divorce, or even marriage, was yet. But I was already expert at accommodating dishonesty.

"Wow," I said.

"What's your dad do?" he asked.

"I don't have a father." I uttered the well-rehearsed line like reading a vocabulary

flash-card. “He left before I was born.”

“Wait here,” Brendan said. “Let me get my glove.”

He ran inside, shouted something to his mother, and ran back.

“Your yard or mine?” he asked.

“Yours,” I said.

Our game of catch in Brendan’s yard changed me. The world looked different from next door: silly in its way, but also larger and more vibrant than it had in my own yard. Traffic moved on the street with a different purpose. Where at my house the cars and trucks menaced us when passing, at the O’Dells’ the rumbles from the tires felt like approaching company, as if the world were coming to join us. I could smell the leather from my glove, and each time the ball hit its pocket my hand stung underneath in the sweet pain of recognition. The sky hummed with the drone of a distant airplane, the ground thumped under our baseball adjustments. So this was childhood. I could have been trying out for the Indians or Reds, I was so pleased.

I spoke more during that first game of catch than I ever had. Brendan was easy to talk to. He inspired talk, asking me about school and the people I knew. I didn’t know much, had been homeschooled into modesty, but, being new to town, he had to believe me. Without knowing why I painted the town and myself in brighter colors than existed. I lied, because I wanted him to like me. I wanted the rest of my life to be as easy as getting to know him.

Not that I got to know him. Everything he told was also a lie, the places he’d lived (Africa), the people he’d met (Reggie Jackson), even the food he’d eaten (wild boar).

My mother emerged from the O’Dell house about an hour later. She paused on the

porch and stared warily at me playing catch.

“Come on, Jeb,” she called.

“Aw, can’t I stay?”

“No,” she said. “We have to let the O’Dells unpack. Brendan’s mom said he has a lot of work to do fixing up his room.”

“I can stay and help.”

“No, Jeb. Come home now.”

“Alright.” I trudged to her, tasting a disappointment I’d never known.

“Come back later,” Brendan called. “We’ll do stuff.”

“This is trouble,” my mother said that night fixing dinner.

My father and I sat at the kitchen table, each trying to understand what she meant.

“The pasta?” Dad asked.

“The neighbors. She thinks I’m like her, jilted. She’ll want to come over and talk for hours, I can just tell.”

“It wouldn’t kill you to have a friend,” Dad said, glancing through the town paper, his only interaction with the outside world. We didn’t have a TV or even a radio.

“She’s a snoop,” Mom said, shaking the colander. “She was on top of me from the beginning. Thinks she’s found someone like her. I’m *nothing* like her.”

“Okay.” Dad’s attention drifted away, or maybe he knew he couldn’t allay the fear my mother had, of turning into Tanya O’Dell, that if he was discovered she’d become her.

“She’s a real danger, Grant. I want you to acknowledge that.”

“I acknowledge that. What’s not a danger?”

As always my father acted cool. Funny, looking back, how brave he was about hiding, how he simply didn't need a life beyond what occupied him here. Of course, he was pale, though never sickly looking. Mom brought him vitamins for sunlight, and he lifted some ancient barbells in his basement. At dawn each day he'd wake and run up and down the cellar steps about fifty times like a madman. In the evening, after she shut the blinds, he'd come up to us, and we'd be a normal family. But every morning, usually by the time I got up and my mother opened the store, he was gone, like a magician disappearing into his box. People, of course, came into Mom's store, opened for four years by now. They'd browse or buy and leave again. What dangers we'd felt had become constant enough to accept as normal.

"And you, Mister." She turned to me with pressing eyes. "We need to speak about that boy next door."

To my mother Brendan O'Dell would initially be That Boy, friend to Mister, foe to Him, anxiety to the Bad Guy. She preferred I didn't go over there, but more pressing, I was never, NEVER, to bring That Boy into our house. If he asked, I was to say that I couldn't play inside because of all the collectables I'd already broken, that two boys would break twice as much.

"When you're older you'll see friendships are just trouble," she said definitively.

But I couldn't wait to get back out there, to see him again.

The next day was Sunday, and I stood in my yard all day, baseball in mitt, waiting for Brendan. He didn't appear. I walked inside at dusk. Dad was ascending his stairs as I passed.

"Why so glum, chum?"

“Why don’t you ever come and play with me?” I nearly choked the words out.

“Why don’t you come play with *me*?” he answered.

I’d never thought of that.

“What would we play?”“

“Carpenter, painter, you name it. We can make stuff, fix stuff for your mom.”

“Like what?”

“Like anything.”

“Really?”

“Sure. Come on down tomorrow after school. We’ll get started.”

So I did, forgetting Brendan completely the next day. I ran home from school ready to start working with my father. I’d previously been forbidden from visiting him in the basement. Too many sharp objects, knives and saws, my mother explained. *And that nail gun!* She had offered her own terror as a deterrent. Her restrictions and gruesome imaginings had only heightened my wonder over Dad’s workplace. When I was very little, I’d even believed my father was Santa Claus in disguise; he fixed old toy rocking horses and wooden puppets for me to play with. This explained his hiding out down there.

What visions I had: me hammering, drilling, sawing as he proudly watched over me: *Honey!* he yelled up the stairs in my mind, *Get down here and see your son!* And down Mom would come, bringing us all together for once during the afternoon.

“Here,” he said instead. “Hold this.”

I quickly learned his idea of play meant me standing still, handing him tools and parts of tables, rockers, sleds. I didn’t do much but watch him.

Dad did his actual restoring in the “slave room,” he called it, the secret room, a 5’

by 8' space he kept relatively bare between repairs. The rest of the basement was mostly a dumping ground for his tools. His workshop smelled like cedar, clay, Old Spice. It was close and hot under the bare bulbs he had hanging, revealing everything, a pile of "projects" he had in the corner, books scattered on any number of repair topics. Mom was always finding him pieces to restore, an arrangement that kept him from going completely mad and kept her in supply of new items to sell.

"Having fun yet?" he asked about two hours in.

I shrugged. I clearly wasn't, but I didn't know him enough to be so honest yet. I didn't want to disappoint him. I was tired of doing nothing by now and was leaning against the oil furnace, imagining what the weather was outside.

"Here. Why don't you use the hammer on this."

He moved to reveal what had been, and would again be, an old wooden birdhouse. It must have been nearly a hundred years old, Reconstruction Era. He'd been sanding down its sides for the last half-hour and fitting its pieces together. After we nailed it together, he said, we'd begin touching it with red paint.

"Yeah." I grabbed the hammer, anxious for action.

"This nail." He pointed. "Hard."

I had no idea how to properly hammer, and he wasn't the sort to break from his work to teach me. In my mind, with one gigantic whack I would be done. I raised the hammer as high as I could and let it fall with as much force as possible, missing the nail completely. Instead I hit his metal table, which bounced the hammer back up at me, scraping my forehead with its peen.

I wailed, more shocked than hurt, so loudly my mother came rushing downstairs

in a panic. She cradled me, glared at Dad.

“I told you this wouldn’t work,” she said. “He’s too young for you.”

Dad kneeled and examined my face.

“Well, you said you didn’t want him out with the neighbors. I was trying something.”

“Tried and failed.” She pressed a tissue to my face. “Honestly, it’s not safe down here. I’ve seen you work. You won’t even watch him. He’ll just get hurt.”

“Fine,” Dad said, nonchalantly, turning his attention back to the birdhouse. My mother took me up to the kitchen where she tended my cheek and gave me some iced tea, a drink I hated but she assumed everyone liked. When a few customers walked in, she said, “Why don’t you go outside, Mister. It’s nice out.”

The day was cooling by now, the early September sun dimming yellow on the trees, making everything yearn a little, easy crying weather if you’re in the mood, and I was, though I didn’t know why.

“What happened to your face?”

I turned to see Brendan standing across the fence in his yard, a toy tractor in his hand running along the railing.

“I got attacked,” I said.

“By what?”

“This big dog. On the way home from school.”

“I once had to kill a dog,” he said. “It came after me cause I had this meat. My dad and me were cooking steaks, out camping, and this wild dog came into our camp.”

“How’d you kill it?”

“Axe. My dad lets me chop wood when I go see him. Mom didn’t know.”

I nodded. That all made sense.

The next day Brendan started school, and though we were separated by one grade, we made the habit of walking there together, Tanya O’Dell escorting us.

“You might as well let me walk the boys,” she said, meeting Mom and me outside. “Bank doesn’t open till nine anyway, and I guess you want to open your business.”

“Sounds fine,” Mom said, but I could tell she didn’t like this. In many ways she, like Dad, was a prisoner of our home, and I know she appreciated our walks to school, feeling the need to remind me along the way each day to be careful what I said.

“It’s just I know Brendan would like to go with Jeb,” Tanya said, “and I’d like to do the favor. We should look out for each other, you know.”

“I do.” Mom strained to smile.

After school, Tanya walked us home. I didn’t mind as Brendan had the notion of building a fort in his back yard, which we planned the whole way. As he began collecting materials, Tanya accompanied me to get permission.

“Of course,” Mom said, resigned it seemed that this change had come. “But have a snack first, Jeb.”

I went up to the kitchen and came back down with an apple, sitting on the stairs to eat it. I saw Tanya wandering around our store, picking up items, old wire baskets, hat boxes, a few rug beaters. She placed them down again, bored with everything. Mom was ignoring her, calculating receipts at her register. Eventually Tanya approached her with an

old washboard.

“Thank God we don’t have to use these anymore, right?”

Mom nodded absently.

“I mean, looking at a lot of this stuff, it just makes you feel so shackled down. I mean how women used to be such slaves.”

“I suppose I never thought of it like that,” Mom said, knowing what was coming: the full history of tyranny attributed to Tanya’s ex-husband, of what he’d wanted her to do around the home.

His name was Ron, Tanya said, and he “just didn’t understand that times had changed.”

The times. Tanya O’Dell celebrated hers. It was the right era for her newfound independence, with women asserting new freedoms. Only she was clearly in the wrong place. Small-town Ohio just wasn’t where what she read about or saw on the news happened. This reality, mixed with the angry rhetoric she channeled out of the angry life she’d left, made her eager to express herself. My mother looked the perfect compatriot, another single mother still in her twenties, also abandoned by the complicit patriarchy. Only my mother lived outside the times. What she handled each day defined her, much as the money Tanya handled as bank teller defined her. Tanya wanted mobility, achieved by power with funds, whereas my mother wanted stasis, to hold on to the power she’d already found. This would be the challenge of her adulthood.

“Think about that, Hannah,” Tanya continued. “I mean what sort of man do you want Jeb here to grow up to be? You should educate him on the wrongs done to us.”

Mom looked to me, munching my apple, and back to her.

“How would you like to come on over tonight?” Tanya asked. “I’ll fix us all supper. I’m a good cook, something Ron’s surely missing now.”

“I don’t know.” Mom waved at her receipts, implying a whole evening’s work.

“Come on. When was the last time you were out?”

The answer was never, not in Highland. She’d had a nightlife in Columbus with my father, but she probably hadn’t eaten out of our house since I was born.

“I’ll just keep Jeb with me,” Tanya said, “and you come over when you’re finished. You like stir fry?”

Mom nodded. By now I’d finished my apple.

“Come on, Jeb.” Tanya took my hand. “I know Brendan’s wanting to start on your fort.”

The fort we built, chiefly out of imagination, took the rest of the afternoon. Pretending, I found, came easier with a partner, one willing to believe falsehoods. Cement blocks, for example, could be thirty foot walls, firewood strips could be buttressing cannons, and a can of Mountain Dew poured around our work made an acid moat simply by having another also frightened of touching it. By dinnertime we were so involved in what we believed that we fought the reality of hunger, grudgingly moving inside to wash our hands.

It was my first time inside another family’s home, and the smells of the place affected me. Tanya burned incense, smoked clove cigarettes, and cooked spicy foods; the combined effects put me in an almost altered state. It was warm and welcoming. Though they were still living out of boxes, the O’Dells seemed more at home than my family, mainly because of their decor. Their furniture was modern, comfortable, while our

everything was antique, elemental. A TV newscast rattled on in the background, jarring me as Brendan talked above it, and the beaded partitions hanging from each doorframe made me feel like I was walking room to room in some sultan's palace.

By the time my mother knocked on the door, I'd mentally moved in.

"Oh don't knock, Hannah!" Tanya called from the kitchen. "Don't ever feel the need to knock."

And the horror on my mother's face, that this rule might apply to her own house.

"I'd just prefer to," Mom said. "Never know what you might walk in on."

"That I were so lucky!" Tanya laughed loudly.

She dominated the discussion throughout dinner, talking mostly to Brendan and me about school and our fort. She opened a bottle of red wine and kept pouring it into Mom's glass. I spent most of the meal watching the adults eat with chopsticks, amazed, especially at my mother, who surprised me with her competence.

"It's very good," Mom said, impressed, I could tell.

"I'm into cooking all kinds of new things," Tanya said. "New things, new things, great new things." She raised her glass. "A toast to new things. To new friends, always such a blessing."

I believed her toast, raised my water glass with an earnestness I'd not known before. This might have been the best meal of my life.

Brendan, I noticed, didn't like his food. He hadn't eaten much.

"Not hungry tonight, Brenny?" Tanya asked him.

He shrugged. "Can I take Jeb upstairs?"

Finished eating, I followed willingly. His room brimmed with toys I'd never seen,

all sorts of modern plastic marvels I'd never known. I dove in, eventually gravitating toward Brendan's army men and tanks. We decided to play war with these, which meant the night would mostly be spent aligning our troops. The war itself would be accomplished two minutes before leaving.

"My father was in the army," he said, placing a bazooka-man in the window-sill. "He's been to war."

"I thought he played baseball," I said, immediately sorry.

"He is." Brendan looked down at his mine-detectors. "He went to war first, shot about fifty men. Got so many medals they sent him home."

"Wow," I said.

Below I could hear Tanya's voice, sharing, no doubt, certain truths Brendan didn't know or didn't want to share. I didn't wonder about these either, no more than I really wondered about why my own father hid from the world in our basement. The truth wasn't so much uncomfortable as irrelevant. It wouldn't have mattered any more than the toy soldiers we killed that night.

We lost time playing. When we went back downstairs, we found our mothers sitting together on the couch, their shoes off, their legs tucked under them. Another bottle of wine had been opened and nearly emptied. Mom looked relaxed, even merry, a look I'd not seen often at home. The wine made her flush as she stood. She even wobbled a bit as we walked home.

I knew I needed to ask before we reached our door, before she became her restrictive self again:

"Can I go over tomorrow?"

She stopped and found her balance on my shoulder. I could see the cautious sobriety flooding back into her eyes, wrangling with the mental portion of her that had loosened.

She sighed heavily.

“They're just regular people, you know. They're nothing special.”

“You didn't have a good time?”

“I did,” she admitted, sounding as if she were convincing herself.

“So can I?”

Another sigh.

“If you're invited.”

“I already was. So were you. Remember? Tanya said anytime.”

I had her, and she was just addled enough with wine to accept it. She looked down at me, full of loving remorse. I knew the expression. She wore it sometimes when watching me, not knowing that I noticed.

“Fine,” she said. “We'll be regular. As long as we're invited.”

When autumn arrived that year I'd come to think of My Home not as a building but as a territory cut in two. I had the quiet antique home where I slept, where secrets were kept for Him, that present-but-absent-power living beneath me, hovering over all things, versus the new reckless home next door with That Boy, the one who in his fibs kept me entranced with the possibilities of what else fathers might be. In his way Brendan made a deity of his father as well.

Our devout mothers still worshipped, either the present-absent or the absent-

present. Tanya needed her rage against the latter to keep living, her reason for being. She became something of a zealot on the topic of womanhood, attempting, as would a traveling preacher, to convert my mother, who, in her curiosity toward this anger, became her impromptu congregation.

Mom was, like me, more drawn to the ornamentation of these people than their actual message. But drawn nevertheless, spending more time with me over at the O'Dell's. Her visits often resulted in her leaving different, no longer the stern Bad Guy she'd arrived as.

Mostly Tanya would get her drunk or high, finding her (as I learned to) more agreeable, more suggestible when under the influence.

The first time I saw my mother stoned I'd been upstairs with Brendan playing a game, Connect Four. We'd grown bored and descended for Kool-aid to find Tanya and Mom dancing to some record of Tanya's, something fast and churning. They didn't see us at first, spinning around each other like kites flirting in the wind. By now they'd gone shopping together, over at the outlet mall, conspiring to purchase glittering, flowing "costume wear." Mom's blouse was a golden yellow, transforming her arms to wings. When she saw me standing, watching her, she literally flapped over to me and took my arms in hers so that we were both grooving to the disco beat. I'd never seen her so at peace with herself or her surroundings, lost in the song, her eyes mostly closed. Wafting from her came that earthy sour scent of pot.

Not that I knew she was on pot. I simply knew this wasn't her, that something had filled her up, had released her anxieties, and I was grateful.

Brendan wasn't so grateful for his own mother's artificial nirvana.

“No,” he said when she glided over to him. “Mom! God!”

We didn’t notice mother and son bickering, having one of those moments, until the record stopped and we heard Brendan’s shouting:

“I hate this! I want to go to Dad’s!”

Tanya, in her state, began to bluster:

“Don’t you be like that!” she said. “Don’t you be like *him*, Brenny!”

What followed was one of those great family melodramas outsiders need to see, if only to confirm that their own family isn’t so bad. Brendan began throwing books and pillows, Tanya chasing, grabbing at him, either to spank or to embrace. I don’t know how it ended. Mom told me to get my jacket and wait for her on the porch.

Seconds later she closed the door behind her, giggling.

“Looks like your friend’s gonna get it,” she said.

“What happened?”

Mom shrugged, as if explaining it would take too much out of her. She looked down at me, glassy-eyed. Then she knelt and began, for no reason at all, to button my jacket up.

“Hey,” she said dreamily. “Why are some jackets and others coats?”

“Let’s ask Dad.”

“No. Let’s not yet. Let’s go get some ice cream. I’ll take you to the playground.”

This wasn’t my mother, but I wasn’t going to question her. We walked silently to the Dairy Barn, then licked our way to the playground, where we sat in the swings.

“I’m sorry about your life,” Mom said, crunching her cone. “I’m sorry you don’t have a real father.”

This was odd to hear. I'd always thought of Dad as real. He wasn't unreal.

"But hey," she continued. "At least you're better off than *Brenny*, right *Jebby*?"

Jebby. She laughed at herself, shaking her head. She let me play a little while on the jungle gym, even climbing up herself before we left.

Dad was waiting for us upstairs on the couch when we got home. Rare. These days he usually stayed late in the basement working.

"I got worried," he said to Mom. "Your *friend* came over, was knocking on the door."

This would have normally alarmed my mother, but tonight she slumped into his arms, looking bird-like again.

"Jackets or coats." She kissed him hard on the mouth. "Tell me the difference. Tell me why."

He looked at me, as if I could explain the woman on his lap, who she was, what she meant. I couldn't.

"Well," he said, squeezing her. "Depends how cold you are."

It's no use denying I was a mamma's boy. Even if my father had gone to war as he was supposed to this would have been so. Even if my father hadn't been hiding, had been a Regular Joe out in the sunshine, I don't think it would have mattered.

She had a warmth even in coldness, my mother, someone people wanted to be around. I might have called her the Bad Guy, but deep down I knew how good she was, how she made life for us manageable, her household and business acumen. I didn't even know I was lonely until I met Brendan. Mom was our glue. Like Dad and his talent with

antiques, she put us together, found ways to keep us together.

So I don't blame her.

She was only twenty-eight, had lost both her parents to Florida and retirement in the last three years. She had a younger brother, who knew of Dad but disapproved, away now at law school, no longer a worry but not a support. She wasn't even married, just living like it. If not for me, many more local men would have come knocking. Those who did she had turned away, claiming herself too busy with the business or too concerned with me to start something.

Had my father not been so myopic, so accepting of his fate, he might have cared enough to notice her change. But he'd become the prisoner who loves his cell, had good work and a good warden. He wouldn't even take President Ford's amnesty offer in '74, claiming that signing any "oath to America" demeaned not just himself but the entire nation. Mom understood. She didn't even argue how much easier life would have been for us.

Though the architect of his peace, she couldn't share in it. Her job was to maintain it, a pressure she probably didn't acknowledge until she met the O'Dells.

I remember once, a year earlier, she'd taken me grocery shopping, had trusted me with a part of her list. Since I could now read, she'd given me the obvious items I knew: Coca-Cola, Raisin Bran, Twinkies. On the list was Quaker Oatmeal, a breakfast staple I disliked but that my father loved. In my passionate loathing for oatmeal, I forgot the rules:

"Why's Dad like this so much?" I asked in front of the checkout girl.

She wasn't even listening, but my mother was. She yanked me by the arm out of the store, leaving our groceries melting in the cart.

Mom was furious.

“Don't you *ever* mention him!” She shook me in the car so I wouldn't forget. She shook me so hard I began crying.

Which began her crying, face down on the steering wheel. Even after she'd finished she stayed hunched over the wheel, inert for the longest time. By then I wasn't upset but terrified, not of her wrath, but of her woe.

When she recovered, she rose her head and looked across the car at me with her long hair in her face.

“It's not fair, I know,” she said, straightening herself in the seat. “But Mister, listen to me....”

I listened.

“You don't have a father.”

This, to me, explains her initial fear and later complicity regarding Tanya. A deader woman might have never said hello, never gone to dinner, never, eventually, gone out to the bars with someone so different. She wasn't hiding herself.

So came my nights with the babysitter, a waste of money I see now, considering my father just next door. Her name was Becky, and Brendan and I loved her, wanted to marry her, though she was dim, often believed herself locked in the bathroom when the bolt operated from the opposite door side. Still, she was pretty enough to distract us from our mothers out on what became their ritual Friday nights.

They started at the better country bars in neighboring towns but soon expanded to hipper locales, driving as far as Dayton and Cincinnati, often not getting home until two or three. Mom never spoke of these adventures, even when I asked why she went.

“Tanya’s hunting a new husband,” was all she said. “Even if she says she’s happier alone.”

“I think Brendan wants his father back,” I said.

“Fat chance of that.”

Dad never commented on her wild nights. Most Saturday mornings when we got home, he was already awake and running up and down his steps, greeting us with his subterranean thunder. He wasn’t stupid. He must have viewed it all as Mom’s reward for such an otherwise bland existence.

The only time he spoke of it was when I descended his steps one day to complain of having to spend another Friday night at the O’Dells, this after an argument with Brendan over who’d shot whom first that afternoon while playing.

“Not my problem, Jeb,” he said, fiddling with an old Philco radio.

“But I don’t want to!” I whined.

“Oh why don’t you just shut up.” He said it calmly, not even looking at me. “You think I wouldn’t like to go out once in a while? You should be happy about it. Christ.”

Becky took us to a movie that night, making me forget anything but cartoon troubles.

Then one Friday, about two weeks later, they decided not to go out. Becky wouldn’t be needed. We’d all have dinner together. “Like old times,” Tanya claimed.

Only when we arrived we discovered she’d also invited two men she’d met at the bank. They were sitting in Tanya’s armchairs, looking sheepish and polite, as would Mormons or Bible salesmen awaiting their cue.

Tanya spoke for them:

“These two boys hadn't any plans tonight.” She paused to take a sip of white wine from a long-stemmed glass. “So I thought, *I can feed two more.*”

The men chuckled insecurely, maybe because the comment relegated them to children, *boys*, like me and Brendan.

“What's for dinner?” Mom asked, retreating perhaps in the practical.

“Something easy,” Tanya answered. “Thought I'd bust out my new fondue set.” She turned toward the men. “We'll do all the courses, cheese, meat, chocolate.”

And here her spontaneity became transparent. The menu alone must have taken a week.

“I'm hungry now,” Brendan interjected.

“Well then Brenny, let's get this show started.”

And it was a show, complete with different caliber actors. The men played, no doubt, better versions of themselves, affable gentlemen callers. I remember being struck by how different they were from my father. They were social creatures, charming, stylish, jokey, wanting to be liked. Brian, some type of office manager, played lead, telling us stories of his own family and all the trouble he'd gotten in at our age. We didn't care. Jay, more reserved, won us over better; he coached at the middle school, basketball. It wasn't hard to imagine him patiently pacing up and down the hardwood, examining play.

Tanya, giving the worst performance, assigned our seats at the table, assigning suitors. Hers was Brian, my mother's Jay, with us boys nestled between each couple at the table.

“We'll go boy, girl, boy, girl with the kids between us,” she beamed. “That sound good to you, Hannah?”

She was trying to invite my mother into her fray, but Mom wasn't listening. She was setting the table, as she often did during our conjoined family dinners. Only now she accomplished the task with a grim determination, her eyes fixed on the napkins and the placemats. When she finished, she looked lost; her eyes darted around the room for some other chore, as if in indefinite preparation for the meal, she wouldn't have to experience or ingest it.

At the table, she sat rigid, quiet, polite, eating her salad the way you would with hawkish parents examining every bite. This made Tanya tense.

“How’s business, Hannah?” she asked lamely.

“You know,” Mom said. “Steady.”

“Steady!” Tonya gushed. “That’s you, Hannah! So steady. So *solid*.”

That was my mother’s act, alright. She was the best actor at the table that night, the best I’ve ever met.

“GHAAAAA!!” Brendan screamed suddenly. He'd rashly tasted the hot cheese, burning his mouth.

Brian was quick to force water down his throat, but Brendan fought this, making it look briefly like Brian was attacking him.

“Get *off* me!” Brendan was weeping now.

Tanya rushed to embrace him.

“You need to wait till it *cools*. You have to wait until it *cools*, Honey.”

She laughed nervously and thanked Brian for his quick thinking.

“I’m surely glad I invited you *now*,” she added.

The whole ordeal made Brendan more miserable than I’d ever seen him. He

glowered at Brian, rubbing pieces of ice on his tongue, making it appear as if he was sticking out his tongue at the man.

Only when Tanya brought forth her fondue meats did the communal nature of the meal loosen everyone. In the acts of forking, cooking, waiting, and eating in such small doses we traded awkward, abstract conversation for the delights found in the momentary meal. Both O'Dells were clever that way; they could lure you with what they provided, toys or food, nullifying anything but present joys.

At the end of the challenging meal, we felt like a family: laughing, grinning, sharing in our success. Mom, now well sated with wine by Tanya, had mellowed into her relaxed persona. She took compliments from both Jay and Brian on how well everyone in town knew she managed her business.

“If anyone wants antiques,” Brian told her, “you’re the lady to see.”

“Why don’t you boys go play upstairs,” Tanya suggested.

“Oh hey,” Brian said, walking to his coat, reaching inside, “I brought you guys these.”

He handed us a stack of comic books, new ones, ranging from *Superman* to *Sgt. Rock*.

“Brenny, what do you say?” Tanya said.

“Thank you,” Brendan muttered.

“Enjoy them,” Brian smiled.

Upstairs in Brendan’s room I did, even if Brendan wouldn’t. Every time he started one book, he’d break from it, proclaim it “weak” or “one I’ve seen” and throw it across the room.

“My Dad knows the best ones to get,” he said. “He gets a special deal at his drug store because of his special degree in medicine.”

“Uh-huh.” I was too engrossed in *Iron Man* to listen.

“What you think they’re doing down there?”

I shrugged.

“Hey,” he said, attempting levity, “let’s spy on them.”

“Why?”

He shrugged. “Just ’cause. It’s my house.”

He let me bring the comics, hard to read on the dark landing where we watched and listened behind the stairway railing, but eventually what we heard and saw interested me more anyway.

It was an election year, approaching Election Day, and they were speaking of whom they wanted for president, Carter or Ford, giving reasons as they passed a joint around the room.

“Carter jams with the Allman Brothers,” Jay said, “so you know he’s down with it.”

“I’d know him,” Tanya nodded. “I’d actually *know* him.”

“Ford’s not a bad one though,” Brian offered. “I mean he finally got us out of all the shit. He’s already made me forget some nasty things.”

“He’s a dud,” Tanya said. “You’ve seen Chevy Chase right?”

Everyone had but Mom, shifting the focus to her.

“That’s Hannah,” Tanya teased, “living back in the 40s. I mean the 1840s.”

Everyone, including Mom, laughed.

“Need to update her, Jay,” Tanya said. “I’m handing you that job.”

They went on like that, general topics turning toward personal innuendo. It was the first time I’d heard a group of adults speak to each other in such an informal manner. I noticed my mother was by far the quietest of the group, but in many ways its center. So much of the discussion gravitated toward her, either in an attempt to include her or to satisfy the speaker, as if her reservation increased an attention unable to ignore her.

I took a break and went to the bathroom. Only for a minute. When I returned, the downstairs had gone mute. In the dark I saw Brendan holding his head in his hands, muffling sobs. At first I didn’t understand. Then I looked and saw his mother with Brian on the sofa. Across from them, I saw my mother and Jay holding hands and kissing as well.

I don’t believe I would have cried if Brendan hadn’t started it. His sadness was infectious, making me think, not of my parents, but of myself on this dark landing, hiding, watching what adults did. I felt sorry for myself in such an inexplicable way I’m still wondering about it. I couldn’t move.

Not Brendan. He barreled down the stairs into the scene, rolling over the lovemakers like a bowling ball, literally jumping on his mother and Brian’s laps.

“Get out! Get out!” he wailed. And turning to his mother: “*Jesus! I hate you!*”

I retreated to his bedroom, where I reached for one of the comic books, hoping to compose myself, to lose myself in its boxed, bright art.

My mother came up a few minutes later. She told me we were leaving.

Downstairs, Brian and Jay had gone, leaving only the oaky smell of their aftershave mixed in the pot fumes. Brendan was seated at the table hyperventilating,

Tanya trying to calm him.

Knowing the drill, I put on my coat and went outside, into cold air that smelled like snow.

Carter, of course, won.

And this alone changed everything. Within a year my father would be pardoned (no loyalty oath necessary) and would change from Him to him, a usual daylight person. My mother married him in a small courthouse ceremony a week after his release from the basement.

I was their only witness, a word my mother used:

“You're our *witness*, Jebidiah,” she said. “That means you'll always be able to remember today and how much I love your father.”

I knew she was sincere about this because she used my name, my real full name.

She wore a plain green dress that matched her eyes. I thought her stunning. She was so luminous, so happy, that she eclipsed the event's anticlimax. Her joy made me forget that we were alone in the bleak courthouse with its noisy offices down the hallway and its brown water stains on the ceiling.

News traveled quietly in town that my father had “returned.” Most were happy for us, although many still judge his actions (or rather lack of action). Whatever controversy didn't harm our store. In fact, the business improved as we could now advertise his talents, his sideline renovations. True collectors rarely let politics deter them.

The O'Dells were invited to the informal reception at our store, though they didn't attend. Tanya, Mom told me years later, felt betrayed by all that had been kept from her.

One sister down, she might have thought, her outrage battling envy. I know my mother attempted to continue their friendship, but it was all over, the exotic dinners, the Friday nights, Becky. Our own invitations were rejected, politely, with the tone of avoiding imposition rather than our company.

Still, we knew. We were liars.

Brendan and I also parted. Having learned the route and rules of walking to school, we no longer needed our mothers along the way, and didn't need each other either. There were other friends, other playmates in our own classes. Our novelty, our stigma as "new kids" had faded. We were like everyone.

Yet being like everyone made me, in many ways, limited. Brendan recreated himself every time he recreated his father, and I'm not sure he was wrong. It's taken me years to realize that my father's hiding made him a possible anything in my mind. In refashioning him as man from myth I opened him to my criticism, closing the mystery that tolerated him.

Authenticity, I've learned from the antique business, as often as not strips the wonder from any relic, making the piece common, robbing it of inquiry, the best part.

I recall my last real conversation with Brendan about two years later. He was outside in his yard, weeding for his mother. She was trying to sell the house by now. It wouldn't take long. The homes in our neighborhood were going again. Middle-class families were moving back, evading city gas prices, wanting to "slow down" their existence and raise kids. Our whole town was growing with a few new nuclear plants along the river. But it still wasn't enough for Tanya, who'd decided to transfer to a bigger bank in Toledo, where she had some family, where her dating pool would improve.

I approached and asked about their move:

“You know anyone around there?”

“My dad,” Brendan said curtly. “He works up there.”

“Really? With a Toledo team now?”

He stopped and stared at me.

“Jesus, you’re stupid.”

I’d long understood his lies, but it never occurred to me that they would end, that he would stop needing to lie. Somehow he’d outgrown my support of his need.

Mom said it best after closing the door behind her the night Brendan disrupted her infidelity:

“That kid’s got it bad.”

She’d smiled down at me, but by the time we reached the sidewalk her face was a frown. For the first time she looked confused, and I noticed that in exiting the O’Dells’ she’d forgotten her own coat, was bare-armed out in the night.

“I told you this was trouble.” She looked near tears.

“I know,” I said, still picturing her kissing Jay Wisecup, a man I wasn’t done with, not nearly. I would call him Coach Wisecup in seventh grade, when he’d blow his whistle and order me to run around the gym. He would put me on his team, on his bench more precisely, though I would easily be the worst player during tryouts. I know he only included me as a personal favor, for Mom. She wasn’t done with him either.

“Please...Mister...Jebidiah.” She stopped me at our door, was shaking now, from either the cold or the truth. “Don’t tell Him.”

CHAPTER 4

ROAD ORPHANS

I once asked my mother: “Why don’t I have a little brother or sister?”

“We’re not that good of parents,” she said.

“Why not?” I asked.

“You know.”

“I don’t.”

“Where’s your father?”

I shrugged. It was summer. July, hot and dusty in our store. We hadn’t seen my father in four days.

“He didn’t tell me either,” she said.

Upon receiving his amnesty from the American government after Vietnam, my father transformed from stationary creature of minimal needs to the most acquisitive drifter I ever met. It was as if he required compensation in the form of endless travel and damaged procurements to remedy what he’d suffered, as if restoring what the world discarded might restore him.

Having been limited to whatever antique my mother could find around our county, he quickly extended his quest, eventually leaving for days at a time, searching for better fodder. Often he would bring home items not for resale at our store but for himself, as if the restoration of the obsolete might answer some riddle of his own making.

Even later he would become a phantom to us, one who arrived home arms loaded, stayed to restore his haul in the basement, then departed again with the same items, back

to wherever he'd found them in the first place, the only record of his existence sometimes the personal checks he would mail to us from people who lived in Wisconsin, New York, Missouri. These were his "clients," people he used to build his reputation.

You might say he was making up for his lost time, something I'm sure my mother reasoned and allowed as understandable, at least at first. Her husband, she must have known, despite his antipathy toward many everyday matters, was an ambitious man. He wanted, in his discipline, to be great. And he was. He'd had eight years to read, to research, to think about how he would succeed in the world kept from him. He knew it would take years still to become one of the great talents in the field, and he wasted no time when emancipated in introducing himself to the proper people in the proper places.

He began small, at statewide flea markets and trade shows. This, at first, included all of us, as a family. We purchased a Ford Econoline van and on the weekends loaded it full of the antiques he selected. At the shows Mom and I would attend to our rented booth while he "rounded up interest," strolling the aisles, looking for vendors to impress with his knowledge of their own merchandise.

When Mom complained that Dad was cluttering her store with his other, more impractical items, he convinced her to prepare a catalog, listing all the antiques we had but didn't carry to the shows. On his jaunts around the fairgrounds, convention centers, airplane hangars he'd pass these to everyone, or sometimes I would, resulting inevitably in more phone business during regular store hours.

A note about the antique business: most sellers are buyers. Hence, we always made more money over a single weekend away than we did in a month at home. All because of Dad. Within a year, my father had revolutionized our business. We no longer

thought of ourselves as just a store. Although Longmier Antiques remained open, we came to think of it as a base of operations for Harris Renovation, a storage space where merchandise remained until the weekends, when Dad would take what he'd fixed to another venue, outdoors in the summer, indoors in the winter.

All of this, of course, meant more work. Mom's organization of the business became more complicated, more time-consuming, and I was robbed of my weekends, of any free time at all. But I didn't resent it. Those first few years, both Mom and I were tired but happy. Our weekends became our family time, the only time we truly spent together.

Those pieces my father chose not to sell Mom termed "Road Orphans." These items never made the shows or the catalogue, were simply not quality enough to display, no matter what skill improved them, and many of these stayed with us permanently.

The most notable Road Orphan, what came to be my father's Holy Grail of projects, was a weather-beaten 1937 Indian Motorcycle, called the "Chief," kept eternally in our garage. Dad had discovered and bought this only four months after his pardon, spending a large amount of our savings on it. But he wasn't a mechanic, and parts were expensive and rare. As the years passed, he simply wasn't present enough to invest in it, being always out on the road. An irony really: the bike was for him, his own gift, or as he first called it, "my new liberty."

I can recall only one day when the Chief ran. It was in early September, possibly Labor Day because I was at home, lamenting my not owning a new pair of high-top sneakers.

School had started a week before, and all the boys had been parading around the playground in their sparkling white Adidas and Converse, new and complicated basketball shoes. I'd come home and asked for some, but my father only inspected my last year's running shoes and had deemed them, "Fine. For now." When I complained they weren't white enough, he handed me a can of white paint and a tiny brush he used to detail old figurines.

I was carefully restoring my Keds when Dad knocked on my room door. He was dirtier than I'd ever seen him, an oily stain soaking through his T-shirt.

"Want to go for a ride?" he asked.

"On the Chief?"

He grinned. "I got it started."

I pulled on my sneakers, and he changed his shirt. It wasn't long before I was holding to his back, the wind cutting into us as we roared over the town's bridge into the country. Neither of us wore helmets. People weren't so safety-conscious then, and my father never was.

I'd already spent most of my childhood envying the modernism other kids took for granted. This was the first time I ever felt privileged to live among the otherwise obsolete, the first time the past had paid off for me. During the ride I formed the words to convey this experience at school. I hoped we'd ride past the country home of Mrs. Gossett, the music teacher, so that she might see us to later confirm my boasting.

But about five miles out of town, on some nowhere back road, I heard a loud *plink* from under me. The Chief coughed up its black smoke signal, and we pulled off the road.

"Huh," Dad said, inspecting the bike. "Thought this might happen."

“What's wrong?” I asked.

He gave some explanation I couldn't follow, then began walking away, as if he were finished with both the motorcycle and me.

“Where you going?” I hollered.

“Find a phone.” He didn't turn to answer.

“What about me?”

“Come on or stay put.” Still he wouldn't stop or turn to me. “Your choice.”

“What about the bike?”

“It's fine.”

I barely heard this. He was well down the road by now.

I chose to follow him, though I couldn't keep up. His legs were longer and strode with their natural, nomadic purpose. I lost ground, fighting the dragonflies buzzing through my hair, drawn to the sun on my neck. It was all I could do to keep sight of my father, who soon became an indistinct figure between the tall cornfields, a scarecrow freed from his stakes and on the move.

When I couldn't see him anymore on the road, I began to panic. I ran forward in the sort of frustrated, frightened stumble that only increases hysteria. I was near tears when I finally saw a house to the right of the road, down a gravel lane. From the road I thought I could see my father on the porch, waving to me.

When I reached the house, I found him sitting on the porch swing, sipping what looked like pink lemonade from a tall glass with flowers stenciled on it. He nodded as I lumbered up the steps.

“Have some.” He poured from a pitcher sitting on the sill. “It's okay. This is the

Coffeys' farm.”

He pointed to the front door.

“See the glass there. I fixed the stained windows for them last year. Came from a church in Gallipolis. Built in 1789. I called your mother.”

I took the lemonade and gulped it, the sour sweetness tart on my tongue. I inspected the stained windows. They were small, but made the house look elaborate in some austere way. We didn't attend any sort of church, but my father was always admiring religious architecture.

“Whydn't you *wait up*?” I blurted, catching my breath.

“What?” He looked puzzled.

“You left me out there!” I shouted. “I didn't know where you were *going*! Or where you *went*!”

Again, he looked puzzled. But only for a second. Then his expression changed, and he appeared genuinely sorry. He placed his hand on my shoulder.

“Calm down, okay. I forgot.”

“*Forgot?*”

“That you were behind me.”

The way he said it sounded perfectly reasonable, as if my presence had been lost in his speed to get us rescued. Only later would I reinterpret his words to mean that he forgot me.

“But you're okay now, right?” he asked.

I nodded.

“Wait here. Let me say goodbye, and we'll go back to the Chief.”

He carried the pitcher of lemonade back into the Coffeys' house. But it was a long fifteen minutes before he returned. I could hear his voice, faint behind the stained glass on the door, almost a whisper from the porch. I didn't feel like intruding. No doubt he was talking shop, some other fix he was arranging, a church pew maybe for a bench, a pulpit for a coffee table. In my mind he wouldn't stop until he'd turned the Coffey home into an actual church, one that worshipped, like him, what time renounced.

When he finally returned to the porch, the same sorry expression sank his eyes; he'd forgotten me again.

"Okay," he said. "Let's move out."

He walked in stride with me on the way back to the Chief, but I could sense it an irregular pace for him. Halfway there, he offered to put me on his shoulders, but I wouldn't let him.

"I'm too old for that," I said. "I can walk just fine."

"I know." He nodded and looked at me with care. We didn't speak for a few moments.

"So." He pointed down to my feet. "Those your school shoes?"

"Yeah." I looked down at them. The white paint hadn't dried yet when I'd put them on for the ride. Sticking to them now was gravel, brown grass bits, and dead bugs. They looked mangled.

"We'll get you some new ones," he said.

This was enough to placate me. My mood brightened the rest of the way. I even described to him what style shoes I wanted and where we could get them. I knew my father wasn't really listening to me. His eyes were fixed somewhere on the horizon, his

mind planning his next piece of refurbishment. Maybe it would be a Bakelite cabinet or a Singer sewing machine, but it wouldn't be the Chief. By then it didn't matter that he wasn't listening. He wouldn't take me shopping; Mom would.

She picked us up within the hour in the van. She wore an unusually mirthful smile, finding us abandoned beside the Chief, appreciating our predicament.

“Look at these couple of Road Orphans,” she joked.

She's been practicing that line her whole way, she admitted.

I once asked my mother: “Why's he leave so often? Is it me?”

“That's a stupid question,” she answered. “It's just him and his work.”

“Meaning what?”

“He's obsessed. Some would call it a problem.”

“Is it?”

She looked past me into the dark rooms of our store, her store, what she'd built and he'd left.

“Not for him.”

I always loved the summer shows (indoors in the winter felt dead, as if the original craftsmen had risen to mutely conduct the affairs of their former labors). The fairgrounds sprawled into small cities of vendors on grass or gravel, trace smells of gasoline and fried dough everywhere. When old enough, I would strike out on my own, hunting down comic books, baseball cards, old toys or sports memorabilia. I was always handed twenty dollars for each weekend, “For your own investments,” my father said, completely serious about

it. I acquired a decent card collection, though later as a teenager, while practicing my anger, I would hock the entire thing for beer money (also a weekend's fun).

Do the antique circuit long enough, as we did, and you meet people. I met other children, also rummaging around the caravan like Dickensian urchins. These kids, like me, carried the air of bored exhaustion, that mixture of tedium and frustration that comes from accompanying parents, and were always anxious for peers.

There was Ian, who collected coins, mainly Indianhead pennies and buffalo nickels; Matt, who collected old pennants, said his room walls were covered in these; and there was Beverly (we called her Bev), who collected old Nancy Drew and Cherry Ames books, hardcovers mostly, though she would always ask if we'd found anything about girl detectives. There were others, but these three had parents who went nearly everywhere we did, were regulars. We came to see ourselves as a gang.

And like any gang we had jobs to do, heists to plan, from our parents, from other booths, from each other. As mini-investors, we'd learned the value of money, of how it went fast but not far through our space of want. By pooling resources we could spread out, case the place for each other or for later amusements. We always met, in the summer, on the horse track bleachers. There we would talk up what we wanted, how much money it would take, and what was new. Inevitably, after our money got spent, we would try to fight boredom.

Bev, who was the most inventive, always saved us. She'd create for us some mystery to solve, some day's errand:

"I want you guys to walk down Row E, " she would say. "There, at the end, you will see a woman who looks like Lucille Ball, only fatter, running a booth that sells tacky

glass ornaments. Your job, if you choose to accept it, is to confirm that this is not Lucille Ball. Also, I think you should break one of her ornaments. They're repellent."

"Who's Lucille Ball?" we three would ask her. "What's that mean, *repellent*?"

Matt, Ian, and I would have done most anything for Bev. She was a tall, curly brunette, the first girl we'd known whose temperament didn't test us the wrong way. Already at age ten or eleven (I forget how old she was) she knew how to wear her clothing sensibly girlish while conveying a sexual mystique. Though we weren't old enough to admit our crushes, we each knew that she would grow into someone we couldn't know, not as we did on these weekends, and so we were fortunate to please her now. Bev could illuminate any long afternoon:

"Gentlemen, I present the Case of the Man with Too Many Bottles. Row H, down by where they laid the sawdust after that little kid puked. The man at the booth is clearly hiding something in one of his old bottles, a map on a napkin to somewhere on the grounds where he's buried a key that goes to door in the Main Building that contains something so valuable he's willing to kill his own wife for it. I heard him say so when I walked by. He didn't see me because I was pretending to trip."

It wasn't that we believed Bev; we just liked her so well we played along. We knew that she had already put a napkin/map in one of the bottles, had already buried a skeleton key she'd found, and had discovered an already open room in the building in which to place something she'd invented to continue the game, a confession with more clues, or possibly sometimes a snack her mom had bought us all.

Bev supposed the worst. Grifters conned our parents, murderers hatched their plots amid the market's bustle, dead bodies lay just beyond ordinary sight, behind the

charade that was each showcase. We just needed be ingenious enough to find these, to start the search for them. Her games became so extensive at times that she had some of the adults play along, acting roles as villains or dupes, fighting boredom themselves. Everyone enjoyed Bev that much; everyone could believe for her.

Even my father, most serious, most solemn during these weekends, noticed her (as she had him; Dad carried a “dark secret” Bev couldn’t help but imagine). He saw how I trailed after her, how I took her orders.

“Aren't you getting too old for make-believe?” he asked one night while we were loading our merchandise.

“I don't know,” I said.

“Oh leave him alone,” Mom said. She was packing a banana box. She always arranged, while we carried. “He won't be a child forever, Grant. And besides, Jeb only does it for Bev.” She winked at me.

Dad nodded approvingly toward me.

“Don't get me wrong. I like your little girlfriend. She's got spunk. But she'll never respect you if you just do whatever she tells you.”

“Some women *like* having control,” Mom added.

“But not *complete* control.” Dad waved his finger at her and then me. “She's bored, Jeb. That's why she makes you run around all day for nothing.”

“So what?” I said. “I'm bored too. I'm not stupid.”

“You're not stupid,” Mom repeated, reinforced.

“All I'm saying is find your own way,” Dad said. “Have her play one of *your* games for once. Invent a mystery for her, then she'll really see you.”

Mom frowned at him.

“And now *you're* telling him what to do, Grant.”

“Just some useful male advice.”

He loaded his dolly and walked away toward the van.

“Not that useful,” Mom said when he was out of earshot.

But it must have been; she was preparing Dad's next load.

I once asked my mother: “Does Dad miss us, do you think, when he's gone?”

“I doubt it,” she answered. “I don't even ask him that.”

“Do you miss him?”

“Sometimes.”

“When?”

She looked down at her dinner, some vegetable soup that had been a full roast a few days ago. I never liked her roast. But I did like the soup its stock became. In its reduction as meal it gained something.

“When he gets home again,” she said. “I remember that I missed him.”

As Dad progressed as expert, as his reputation spread, the antique shows became less necessary. By the time I was driving we didn't even attend them. My father had become a name, the way he always intended. People sought him out, willing to pay high fees for his skills. He could be selective. Eventually the caliber of antique he chose to work on couldn't even be found at flea markets. Mostly he chose what he wanted, what he hadn't done before.

What made him special was that he wasn't special; he didn't work with only furniture or stained glass or stoneware. He could restore anything, given enough time and money. Mom always said, with part pride, part annoyance, that he never charged as much as those who made a specialty out of their medium.

His dealings ultimately turned toward the individual, requiring travel. Here he became almost obsessively professional. With each potential client he liked to conduct what he called "the interview," not with the man or woman but with the artifact itself. Each interview alone cost something, reflecting, he felt, a collector's commitment. Nothing angered him more than wasting his time, running down pieces "as worthless as their owners."

He could also get furious when he liked a project but despised the people for what he viewed as their longtime neglect. "So many of these folks fail their merchandise," I often heard him complain to Mom, implying them unworthy of him. But he would work regardless, his duty, that strange ethic toward the object, always besting any interpersonal conflicts.

With his name sprouting among Midwest and Mid-Atlantic collectors, Dad's ego also blossomed. In achieving his modest success, he let, as so many adults do, his specific knowledge toward how he lived his life invade his notion of how all life should be lived, and why. This was complicated, deepened, by his knowledge of history, his former scholarship mixing with updated readings on anything that intrigued him.

"Hey Jeb," he would begin, "You know about X?"

When I obviously didn't, he would launch into X's origins, tying them back to whatever gripe he had over how the world had run itself into the ground.

At times I was glad he was away; his presence could be insufferable.

“Really there’s just one story,” he liked to repeat. “People ruining themselves over improving themselves, thinking they’re progressing when actually they’re rotting from the inside out. Corruption. It’s where past meets present.”

Worst was when I studied history myself in school. Here he would examine my textbooks, decrying them generalizations, falsifications, or outright lies. Then he would proceed to tell me in detail *how it really went*, adding in all the rot and corruption selectively omitted. His lectures could spring from anywhere; a drive around town could remind him of the roots of civilization (and how that was failing here), a swimming pool could start him on famous naval annals, eating spaghetti at dinner could begin him on the Medici. His speeches were directed at my ignorance, which he tolerated due to my age and education. What he truly despised were the local people who knew nothing of their own history, and therefore, according to him, knew nothing of their own lives, on what those were based upon.

To prevent me from such an unlearned subsistence, he would speak at length on the Ulster Presbyterian Irish (largely of Scots ancestry) from the 18th century who’d founded the Southern Atlantic Colonies and later moved west through the Appalachian Mountains. They’d mixed with my mother’s Quaker ancestors, those “Society of Friends” who believed in the Inner Light, that little piece of God tucked into every individual. He wanted me to know (if not believe in) all of this culture, represented in its music, storytelling, and folklore. This would sometimes alternate with a history of the indigenous tribes, the Shawnee, the Ute, the Wyandots, the Miamis, of their Ohio Valley leaders like Tecumseh and Chief Cornstalk, who put his curse on the Ohio river towns.

Most of this impressed me only in how dull our geography had turned since history had come to us.

As a teenager, I came to resent not just these lessons but also the region in which they'd occurred: the hill culture, the towns, the entire Midwest, fly-over country they call it now. By then I wanted out, to where art and irony made fun of people like us, of antiques and the people who never left their pasts. By then I had heard it all too many times, the story behind the place, behind Mom's family, behind each broken antique he would haul home. What good did it do, knowing? Who cared?

"So what?" I asked him openly.

"Don't be an ignoramus," he answered, the worst name he could think to call me.

"We live in the middle of nowhere!" I bemoaned.

"Here's as good as there."

"You can't stand it yourself! You don't even stay here anymore, not like me and Mom! We're stuck, while you just visit."

"Everywhere is somewhere, Jeb. You're only as good as how you take to it. You don't like it, fine, but it's not the place's fault."

"No," I agreed bitterly. "It's the people."

"Those are no better anywhere."

He liked this type of talk, he said, liked that I questioned what he believed he'd given me. But I thought him a bully, who, for all his wisdom, never saw that my complaints were cumulatively about him, that I envied his freedom. While I suffered through the landscape, its people, and their school system, he could escape.

"Ignore it," became his mantra whenever I complained of my specifics.

So I did, until I finally omitted his own influence, shaping myself around the contemporary: rock posters and television shows, those movies that everyone else could agree were good, anything that transported me away from my town and kin, willfully forgetting that what had once made them special was that, unlike most everyone everywhere else, they'd rarely tried to be.

I once asked my mother: "Do you miss the shows?"

"I do," she answered. "I miss the bustle."

"Do you remember Bev?"

"How could I forget?"

"She was the first person I ever met who had her own reality."

"What about your father?"

I looked down at my shoes, somewhat ashamed to admit it:

"But I loved Bev."

Bev's last case she called, "Case of the Bermuda Brothers."

It was far from her best work, in part due to the sultry August day, the usual dust devils too tired even to rise behind us in the festival heat. We were collapsed like snakes in the sun at the horse track, our bare limbs dangling from the railing. Bev's imagination that day was also sluggish.

"You boys know if you're queer yet?" she asked us sleepily.

An uncomfortable question. None of us really knew what "queer" meant yet, only that it was punishable by disgrace at school. I doubt Bev fully knew either. But it was hot,

and she was rolling now without our response:

“You know what a queer looks like?”

We did. Homosexual men regularly attended these shows, were always associating with our parents and sometimes even us if they vended what we collected. Despite this we’d never considered them beyond their frequent presence. We didn’t want to.

“They’re a cult, you know,” Bev said. “A cult that kidnaps children, then raises them in a different way, a gay way, so that you like your own kind, especially boys.”

“What about girls?” we asked her.

“That’s even worse,” she said. “They have to take girls so that someone can teach the boys how to *like* boys. So they take more girls. We’re forced to train the boys to be girls. That’s what GAY stand for: Girls Are You.”

We chuckled, insecurely

“How do you train them?”

“Brainwashing. We make you play with dolls, have tea, walk around in dresses.”

We laughed.

“How do they get the girls to agree to that?”

“They hypnotize us to think you’re our children, our girls. It’s just like when we used to play with dolls.” She stood and began walking the bleachers as if in a trance, chanting: “Wear...pink...princess...good...girl.”

We laughed louder.

“Okay.” Bev stopped and turned serious. “So here’s the case: two gays I saw today are obviously looking for new recruits. We have to find them, tail them without

being seen, make sure no children leave with them. They're pretending to be antiquing, but that's just their cover."

"What do they look like?"

Bev smiled. "Matching Bermuda shorts. All high ranking members of the cult wear them. Extra points here if you guys want to run up and pull those suckers down."

No way was that going to happen, although we did agree to each take a section of the grounds in search for (as Bev termed them) "The Bermuda Brothers." We would meet back at the bleachers at four o'clock, an hour before we usually helped our parents pack up, to discuss how they'd acted: suspicious, sinister, covetous? Whoever found the Bermuda Brothers had to chronicle five "acts of gayness" without being noticed. This could be their holding hands, speaking with a lisp, eating a hotdog funny, maybe fussing with their hair. This, Bev said, would later protect us against ever being labeled gay ourselves. "Because knowledge is power," she finished.

I spotted the Bermuda Brothers after about an hour wandering around the horse stables, my area. As for acts of gayness, I came up empty aside from their general appearance. Both were immaculately groomed with good haircuts, tanned legs, and looked to be in great physical shape with their chests jutting confidently from their matching black T-shirts. Each wore expensive sunglasses, even within the shaded stalls, and I admit for a minute I found this too cool, making me wonder if part of Bev's fantasy about a cult were true. They were just so controlled in their movements, so neat.

I'd never really examined a gay man before, was struck by how these two juxtaposed with the mostly crusty dealers dangling cigarettes from their mouths. The Bermuda Brothers simply looked healthier, happier. I suppose they were in love.

As I said, this wasn't one of Bev's best cases. After about five minutes following them I got bored and gave up the game. Let them take whatever kid they wanted, I thought.

Turning to leave them, I caught sight of my father a few rows over, walking as he usually did down the aisles, doing business and inspecting merchandise. He didn't see me, so focused was he on his work. Instead of following the Bermuda Brothers, I decided, without even thinking, to spy on him.

Unlike the Bermuda Brothers, who carried in their gait an identical ease, my father radiated pure tension. Sweat soaked through his navy T-shirt, trickling from his shaggy hair down his neck. He'd been walking around like this all day, caring more for what he saw than his own comfort, evident in his sunburned face, which I noticed as he stopped to examine a Victor phonograph machine.

I wasn't close enough to hear what he said to the woman selling it. But she shot him a look of pure spite that lingered on her face well after he moved along. What, I wondered, had he needed to say?

As I passed the woman, I could hear her speaking to her husband:

"I don't care *what* he thinks he knows," she said. "That man ruins business for everyone, showing off like he does!"

"Be better if we all banned him." Her husband nodded. "Problem is he likes product more than people."

"*Jackass*," she hissed, leering at Dad's back.

I stayed with him for another hour, witnessing several more of these exchanges. He attracted more scowls. They followed him down the line. He didn't seem to notice it.

At the end of that hour I too was glowering at him. By then I loathed his sweaty back, disliked him in general. Following him around the fairgrounds brought back the emotions I'd buried the day we'd ridden and wrecked the Chief. In the festival heat I felt just as frustrated, just as exhausted keeping up with him. Funny, but I was angry now because I *could* keep up; he kept stopping so often at the booths. He'd been good as his word about the new sneakers; I was wearing them now. But my time and activity had been hard on them, and, looking down, the shoes were just as tarnished and frayed as last year's. The new school year would begin soon. In a rage I wondered what sort of neglect I would need to suffer for another new pair.

It was the first time I despised someone for purely his own sake. My father was innocent today, at least to me, but I hated everything about him, his posture, the swinging arms at his sides, his blatant insouciance toward anything outside his own ruling. What he left in his wake, including me, felt inferior, as if our uses couldn't merit his investment or time. Bev had imagined the Bermuda Brothers sinister and covetous, but my father, striding through the market so intent, so deadened toward anything but himself, seemed to embody these qualities. It didn't take much to re-imagine him stalking children, taking and reshaping them instead of old objects sold cheap.

I broke away from him at four o'clock, to meet the gang back at the horse track. Matt and Ian met me there. Both had spotted the Bermuda Brothers. Only Bev hadn't shown up yet. Without her to lead us, we three weren't so enthused or comfortable sharing our found "acts of gayness." We split apart early, back to our parents' booths.

My father returned just as I did, though from the opposite direction. Mom said we looked soaked and sticky, like we'd both gone "swimming through the sun."

“Well,” Dad said, winking at me. “We had to see everything.”

“You have fun with Bev today?” Mom asked.

“I guess.” I felt wary to admit anything.

Dad handed me our jug of ice water.

“So what was today's mystery?”

I shrugged, chugging the water.

“It's not over yet.”

“Must be a cliffhanger.” Mom smiled. “It's almost time to go.”

“Or maybe, for once, the crime didn't get solved,” Dad teased. “Maybe the great child detectives just couldn't crack the case.”

“Maybe,” I mumbled, thinking, *How would you know, Jackass!*

I once asked my mother: “Will he ever ride the Chief again, do you think?”

“No,” she answered. She sounded definitive about it.

“Why not?”

“Because he doesn't really want to.”

“Why not?”

“He didn't buy it for riding, Jeb.”

“Why not?”

The way she looked at me then, sick of all my questions, her blank face my rejoinder: she looked depleted.

“It's just too much,” she said. “You remember, Jeb. It wouldn't go far, anyway.”

*

A flea market ending, with all its selling ceased, with all the rubes departed and the rubbish packed, pushed into trailers and trucks, resembles nothing so much as some snapshot from the Great Depression, some Steinbeckian scene. The people are tired, beaten by their heavings and hoistings, ready to move on, to a real home where their actual furniture prevails. Yet, like tenant farmers evicted, we move grudgingly, slow to give up our space, that temporary home.

Packing I always found the worst part. Not only was I used as pack-mule by my parents, but my father was meticulously slow in loading the van. He had to be; often we left with more than we brought.

Not so the day of the Bermuda Brothers.

As I'd witnessed, my father had walked past everything, snubbing it all, the entire show. This day would be the beginning of his change from a general dealer to a selective artist. Though we would attend shows for a few years more, there was really nothing left here among the masses to interest him.

"We're good with what we have," he told Mom, who was surprised but also relieved; it was common custom for Dad to gather a number of Road Orphans each show.

"Good," she sighed. "It's too hot anyway. Let's just go home."

A flea market ending is also a busy place, with its brethren crisscrossing, juggling items large and small, its circus pulling up stakes in a rush. Today it especially resembled some Dust Bowl ballad to me, with everyone drenched and miserable, scrambling for air conditioning, some cool hopeful destination.

Dad and I had just finished loading our larger items, the dressers, bureaus, and tables. We were panting together, dripping wet together, when Mrs. Scott, Bev's mom,

approached our van.

“Jeb, have you seen Bev?”

“Not for a few hours,” I said.

She nodded weakly and walked away.

“You kiss her yet?” Dad teased.

“Yes,” I said. “I kissed her all day long.”

He looked at me closely.

He said, “I saw you following me all afternoon.”

“So what?”

“So where’s your girlfriend?”

I told him I didn’t know. But he didn’t believe me.

“Go find her,” he ordered. “Tell her she’s missing.”

He might have been half-kidding, but in another hour Bev would be missing. I would go back to the horse track. I would even gather Matt and Ian to join the search. As the dealers departed, as the grounds cleared, it became official: she was gone.

Bev’s parents pressed us: What had been today’s mystery, Bev’s case?

So we had to tell them, and had to see the abhorrent, perplexed looks on our parents’ faces: that their own could come up with such a thing, that we could play in such a way! The only thing that saved us was that Bev was still missing, that our shame could be stalled with concern.

By then the grounds had turned ghostly, with only a few vendors left, poking along. Without the people the area sprawled, making our fear also expand.

“She’s probably just hiding,” Ian whispered to me. “You know Bev. She wants it

always to be real.”

“Maybe she *was* taken,” Matt said.

“By the Bermuda Brothers?” I asked.

“By anyone.”

Today I don’t see kids running around the shows the way we did. Such public venues themselves are sinister and suspicious, attracting, we suppose in our nightmares, child abductors preying on any such opportunity. Every dark scenario Bev ever imagined is a possibility now, at least on the news and in our heads.

The Scotts decided to call the police. Our parents were soon huddled around a few squad cars, listening to the Scotts describe Bev.

All but my father. He cornered Matt, Ian, and me.

“You three. Come with me.”

We followed him over to the Scotts' booth, which looked so forlornly intact amongst the desolation. Dad began handing us some of their merchandise.

“We’re going to load up for them,” he said.

At the time I found this gesture incredibly cold. How, I wondered, could we worry about this with Bev gone? Following him, arms loaded, from their booth to their trailer and back about twenty times, I was again struck by what seemed his blatant indifference toward people, only now it was people in crisis, which was worse. Watching his sweaty back wrestle each item into the Scotts' trailer made me want to plunge a knife in it.

He spoke to us during the loading only to tell us where to place what. Aside from that he was all tense silence, as if to remind us in terse body movements of how bad we were. Ian and Matt worked as if sentenced, but I was indignant, ready to scream at him if

he dared make reference to anything beyond our job.

He didn't. And by the time we finished, they'd found Bev.

She'd been walking about four miles south along the highway, down by the Dutch Pantry Restaurant near the freeway, the only item on her a worn copy of a Nancy Drew classic: *The Secret of the Wooden Lady*.

It was shocking to see her in the backseat of the squad car. She didn't look like Bev anymore. Her eyes hollow and cried-out, she stared straight ahead at nothing, almost as if she'd been brainwashed or hypnotized as she'd pretended earlier. She didn't want to look at us, to know us, and we couldn't bear to acknowledge her.

Like any good mystery, her disappearance was later solved in pieces we never saw coming.

For example:

Her father had abused her, physically, sexually. This had been happening for years, and she'd been working up the courage to run away for just as long. She'd made up the Bermuda Brothers case to give her some time, to confuse her parents, so that she might flee. To where? She didn't know, couldn't say. She only needed to go. She was getting older. It would just get worse.

Or maybe:

She'd fought with her mother, had been denied a book she'd wanted, *Secret of the Wooden Lady*, discovered accidentally while trailing the Bermuda Brothers. The book was easy enough to pickpocket from the senile man selling it, only once the act was done she knew she couldn't account for it. And she was too old to be punished, she who was smarter than both her parents; everyone was always saying how bright she was. Nancy

Drew wouldn't ever get punished. Nancy Drew was independent, had her own life, the way it should be. So why not run away from a family so unworthy of her? She only needed to go.

Or maybe:

She needed broader horizons. What to do when you know all the answers, when you've solved all the local mysteries, the largest one: who your parents are. Having followed her father around town on her bike a week ago, she'd seen him meet another man at a restaurant, had followed them both to a nearby hotel. Two hours later he emerged and embraced the man, a long goodbye, in the parking lot. That night at dinner he was happy, chatty. When she asked why, he told her he'd had a good day, that was all. Her mother was distant all evening. In discovering the fraud of her parents' marriage, she'd felt ready, like she'd graduated from something and was ready for the big time, for River Heights. Where was that? Nancy Drew never said. But she'd find it. She'd find that place where real crimes happened, where people like the Bermuda Brothers really hid things, the way her mother and father hid their love. Part outrage, part inspiration had set her down the road, to some somewhere better. She only needed to go.

Or maybe:

In a few weeks her parents were sending her to a private school, one with uniforms and nuns. This in response to her antics at the public school where she'd disrupted her own and everyone's learning with her games, her rumors and lies that alienated her from her peers. She had no friends anymore. The ones she once had now all shunned her, called her crazy. This after she'd accused a classmate of poisoning her milk at lunch, then, for protection, had smuggled her mother's butcher knife to school in her

backpack, used the next day to cut her suspect's finger off, expelling Bev forever. She was seeing a child psychologist, who'd prescribed pills, though she somehow hadn't taken them in three days, making her reality shift again. She actually believed the Bermuda Brothers were after her, thought they were agents from her new school, sent to take her away early. They'd caught her following them, so she needed to flee. To where? She didn't know, couldn't say. She only needed to go.

One of these is the truth behind that day, or perhaps some truth resides in each. In honor of Bev, who always lamented tidy explanations, I won't reveal it.

I will say that we never saw her again, that her family stopped attending the shows, that another dealer took their spot, leaving Matt, Ian, and me to play normal boy games, separating rather than uniting us. As a gang, we never discussed what had happened. Those obvious questions we reserved for our parents:

Why?

But why?

How?

How come?

I cornered my mother with these, as I did every mystery I couldn't solve on my own, though I knew better than to quiz her that day. It was enough that Bev was safe, that she'd been found and wasn't out on the road, exposed to the very dangers she conceived.

Hot and exhausted, we drove home without speaking, all too stoned from the sun, the day, the crisis, all of us staring blankly into the coming night. My father was distant behind the wheel, but I wasn't angry at him anymore. It had been kind, I saw, for us to load the Scotts' trailer. Mr. Scott even thanked us, but mostly Dad. He'd been ahead of

everyone, it turns out: cool-headed, while the rest of us had espied the worst in our panic
maybe because my father could never admit to anything being lost, ruined, or broken.
This would have been admirable if he ever attended to those who couldn't keep up, to
those who reacted naturally to life's frequent fissures. But he forgot them, left them
stranded on the road to wonder where he was going, where he went.

As with our day out with the Chief, my aversion toward him faded with the rest of
day's drama, abandoned in the act of living through it. I would find it again some other
day. And begin work on it.

CHAPTER 5

TREES

Then came the Christmas my family nearly broke, the Christmas of the murder. People were always dying around Highland, but that holiday someone was killed.

It happened at Willy's Tavern, our rowdiest bar, located near the center of town, just a half-block from where Troop 192 was selling Christmas trees on the front lawn of the courthouse.

I was twelve, only a Tenderfoot, but wasn't working the night it happened. That luck belonged to Second Class Scouts Brian Detwieller and Travis Carlyle, who spared no details the next day at school.

"No way!" we said, because both Brian and Travis were braggarts and often cheats.

"Yuh-huh!" they said and alternately told us everything.

They'd both heard the shot, though it was from inside the bar and muffled, like a distant car exhaust backfiring. Then a pause, they said, followed by a fat woman stumbling out from Willy's doorway without her coat, screaming.

"So this fat bitch comes all jiggling down ta us!" Brian was in tears, near hysterics. "*He done shot Jesse!* she's screamin', all unawares how her boobs are fallin' out her shirt, like eight sizes too small."

Travis nodded. "Saw her tits."

The woman, both agreed, acted as if the two scouts might know what to do, like merit badges were awarded for Bar Shooting Reaction.

"Y'all go tell the police!" she implored them, though the station, in the

courthouse, was only ten feet away.

“We can’t leave the trees, Ma’am,” Brian said he explained to her.

“*What?*”

“Someone might steal the trees if we leave.”

“Then one of you goes, while the other stays here!”

“We’re supposed to stay together.”

Which was true. Scoutmaster Carlyle, Travis’ father, had told us to look out for each other and not to separate under any circumstance. A circumstance, each supposed, like this.

“Jesse’s *dying*, you boys!”

“Why don’t *you* go?” Travis asked her. “You made it this far.”

But the lady, they said, just stood there like she didn’t understand the question. She shook her head, wrapped her arms around her fat frame, eventually sinking to her knees to moan.

“So what happened?”

This was my question, an unwelcome one since Travis and Brian didn’t like me much, had always found my sense of purpose in most things to get in the way of their otherwise good time.

“Jesus, Harris, we’re telling it,” Brian scolded. “Hold your dick for Christ’s sake.”

Someone must have called from the bar, because just as the fat woman went into her coma in the snow, the station door burst open and out charged two cops, Officers Burgess and Calhoun, wielding .45s. They swished past the trees and down the street. No one else had come out of Willy’s.

As if mirroring our Boy Scout buddy system, Officers Calhoun and Burgess went through the bar door together.

“They were in there a long time,” Travis said. “Then *everybody* came out. About twenty people.”

He paused and turned to me.

“Swore your old man was one of 'em, Harris.”

“Bullshit,” I said, because I had to say something. In truth, I never knew where my father was.

“Get on with it,” someone urged.

“Right.” Brian nodded.

They had the killer in cuffs. He'd given himself up, willingly. He walked toward the courthouse with the police, his head hung.

“But then he gets to us,” Brian smiled. “He just looks at us and that fat cow on the ground.”

“Yeah,” Travis nodded. “And he changes. He panicked.”

Broke free, they said. Though handcuffed, he made a pitiful attempt at escape, skipping through our lot, snaking through our trees, tripping just as quickly on one of our scotch pines, still bundled up on the ground. Officer Burgess caught and held him.

“Which is when we just about *shit* ourselves laughing!” Travis said, laughing now.

“Boys,” Officer Calhoun had turned. “It ain't funny.”

But it was. It was the funniest, best thing we'd ever heard.

After school that day Troop 192 met at the tree lot for our weekly meeting. We were supposed to get our schedules for between now and winter break. Everyone wanted more shifts. The job, which had been simple, cold drudgery just a day ago, had now ripened into work of great dramatic potential. Who knew what would happen there, what could happen on any given night? Overnight our post had turned from watching the trees to watching our fellow man, as in a movie, defeat and defend himself. We felt like guards. The killer, we assumed, sat inside, in the courthouse jail, only walls away from us, awaiting his fate, and just being near him and his wreckage made us feel more alive.

“I guess we should talk about last night,” Scoutmaster Carlyle began, sounding unsure of what to say. “Brian and Travis did a good job staying out of the police’s way.”

He didn’t sound sure of that either.

“You should all know you’re safe here. This is a good town with good people, so you’re all safe to work here.”

This, of course, wasn’t what we wanted to hear. And false. Behind him we could see the evidence against it; Willy’s had yellow police tape across its door. Before the meeting a few boys claimed they could see the blood still frozen in the snow, the victim’s blood, from when the killer had tripped, but as we looked closer this looked more like sap, cola, or a coffee stain.

“Just stay together,” Scoutmaster Carlyle reminded us. “And look out for each other.”

He was a good man, Scoutmaster Carlyle, evidence, I think, that good men rarely raise good sons. Their very kindness intrudes, nullifies like a double negative. I say this because Travis Carlyle was not very good, and I thought I was. My own father, I had

decided by now, was not so genial, which meant that it also worked in reverse, that the low must raise the right, as if to compensate.

This logic was confirmed that night at home, as my mother and father discussed the killing in the newspaper.

“His poor parents,” my mother said, though she didn’t indicate which parents she meant.

“Why? *They* raised him,” my father, understanding her, said coldly.

The killer, the paper said, was one Rodney Cross, only twenty-five years old, a college dropout who’d been working part-time at the candle factory two towns over. He’d still been living at home, and the gun had been his father’s. The victim, one Jesse Cowley, had once been his classmate at the high school. They’d even been Boy Scouts together, the paper said, a point my father found relevant.

“That what you learning there?” he asked me. “Violence?”

Me? I wanted to say. *Weren't you the one spotted at the crime scene?*

I hadn't seen Dad upstairs last night. Still, I'd rather assume he'd just been downstairs. This was easier than believing Travis.

“You know that has nothing to do with it,” Mom answered for me. “If poor Jeb here kills someone someday, it’s more our fault than anyone’s.”

“Poor *Jeb?*” Dad mocked her. “His poor parents.”

Ever critical, my father disliked my joining the scouts because of his own upbringing. Once an army brat, he hated any sort of uniform because it conveyed to him a duty imposed rather than services volunteered. I liked the order of the Boy Scouts, liked the simple philosophy of helping others. I wanted the companionship, the fraternity of

boys all come together around any shared event: a campfire, a tree sale, a shooting. But mainly by now I wanted away from him.

“You look like Hitler-youth,” Dad told me the first time I wore my uniform to a jamboree.

“He looks handsome,” Mom had said, adjusting my ascot.

Dad shook his head. “Just add the swastika and he’ll be honest.”

My joining the scouts that year had been my first willful act of defiance. Seeing men like Scoutmaster Carlyle and the other fathers who would join us each week in the Methodist church basement formed another pole of manhood. These men sang with us, ate with us, played with us. They taught an ethic I was certain transcended whatever my father knew.

But here was this killer, also once a scout. I couldn’t forget that each time I sold a tree, that once Rodney Cross had sold trees too, that he’d had parents probably better than mine.

Willy’s reopened three days after the shooting, the carpet cleansed of blood, Jesse Cowley’s funeral observed. To Troop 192 it now held landmark status. We couldn’t keep our eyes off it from our tree lot. We monitored its patrons coming and going like cops on a stakeout, our judgments already made about each drinker: all potential assassins, all the sort of persons we loved to loathe, their existence reaffirming our own. Also, we wanted to go inside, maybe investigate a bit, see what we weren’t, what we shouldn’t become.

But we had trees to sell, customers to help, twine to tie atop mounted cars. We made a system of taking turns, breaking apart our buddy system, because someone *had* to

watch Willy's.

I shared my first shift after the tragedy with Dale Walsh, a country boy, the son of a farmer who didn't make much from his land. This made Dale unremarkable by vocation. He was always talking about working with his dad, of birthing animals and riding tractors. This might have interested us if Dale hadn't tried sounding so adult about it all, if what he'd learned at home hadn't given him a dignity so dull all of life's agrarian wonders turned to ash on his tongue. He was an odd scout. We were always wondering why he'd joined.

"Why aren't you in 4-H?" I asked during our shift together. Because he was so boring and business was slow.

"Oh, they say I should be in town a little," his answer full of resentment. "It was either this or basketball, and here we sometimes go camping."

As with most things Dale said, this was so complete that it dwindled any further discussion. *They* clearly were his parents, critical of their own lives, wanting more for him. *They* saw how backwards Dale was, how he needed a program like this, with kids who might open him up. We weren't those kind of kids, none of us, but we were the best Highland had; by local standards we were sons of the town elite, if for no other reason than the uniform (not to mention the camping gear, badges, and knives) cost something extra.

"You watch the trees, okay?" I told him. "I'm just gonna watch the bar for a while."

Really I was watching for my father, hoping he would and wouldn't appear. If he showed, I could deepen my indignation and widen my growing distance from him. If he

didn't, I could continue my bad temper while still suspecting him from afar.

Dale nodded, but then he began as he usually did:

“Ninety-eight percent of Christmas trees are grown on farms,” he said. “Dewya know that?”

“I did not, Dale.”

He wouldn't, couldn't catch my sarcasm.

“They bale them like hay to protect the branches. You know, trees take seven to ten years to mature, meanwhile they remove all the dust and pollen from the air. Two thousand per acre, and one acre gives enough oxygen daily for eighteen people...”

I tried to tune him out, but I eventually turned angry and had to challenge him:

“You know, Dale, that's not really interesting. I mean, who cares?”

“Whataya mean?”

“I mean, Dale, you might actually say something that matters, something that gets people thinking more. Something like, for example, the first Christmas tree was in 1510 in Latvia or that evergreen was used as decoration before Christ was even born.”

Of course, my factoids weren't any more interesting than his. I only thought they were. My father couldn't live without spouting the history of everything, usually to dismiss most of what he didn't want to do, like go to church or vote. Every Christmas he would celebrate after a litany of falsifications he'd found with the holiday itself, making us understand that he did it for us, not for any tradition. By way of aggravating Dale, I recited the best of these. I wanted to ruin his Christmas.

“Wow,” he said. “You're pretty messed up about things.”

I would have unleashed on him, I think, but down the street I thought I saw the red

checkered shirt jacket my father always wore in winter. I thought I saw it go into Willy's.

"Hold on." I literally raised my hand to stop Dale from telling me how his family did Christmas proper on the farm. "I think I just saw my dad go into Willy's."

"Really?" Dreary as he was, even Dale had taken an interest in the place. "Why?"

"Maybe...maybe I was wrong."

"Does he drink a lot?"

"I don't...*no!*"

But I didn't know. It hadn't ever occurred to me to know before. He wasn't a drunk; I'd have known that.

"Maybe he's a regular there."

"Shut up."

"*Maybe*, I said."

"Shut up, I have to watch now!"

Dale helped me, though he, like most people in town, had never seen my father. After hiding from the war all those years Dad didn't socialize much outside of the people who sent him something to fix. Or at least I didn't think so. When he was home, I'd just assumed him down in his workshop.

Dale took all seven of our customers that night so I wouldn't miss my father, but by closing I hadn't seen anyone looking like him come out. I was too scared to go over and peer inside. In truth, I didn't want to see him in there, if he was, sitting on a bar stool, confirming in that choice how poor a person I thought he was.

Instead I went home and asked Mom if she knew if Dad sometimes went to Willy's.

“I’m not his guard, you know. He can do what he wants.”

She sat at our kitchen table, stooped over a magazine. She looked exhausted and slightly wounded. She was always defensive about Dad being her captive, as if her decision to bring him home and hide him had somehow turned her into the sort of power she said she hated. But she was more irritable tonight about it, something I wouldn’t consider until later.

“Does he drink much?” I asked her. I wouldn’t have asked him.

“Everyone drinks,” she said. “Your father isn’t as awful as you like to think.”

“I think I saw him down as Willy’s tonight.”

“Well I was.”

I turned to see Dad standing in the doorway, his red shirt jacket unbuttoned. He was smiling, perhaps drunk, that peppery smile I’d learned to despise since joining the scouts. He paused, looking to Mom. Between them, in that second of implicit glances, must have passed a lifetime’s worth of communication, but I was too embroiled in my own brooding to notice, although I did feel their tension. I thought it was over me.

“I was coming to buy our tree from you,” Dad said. “But when I got there you were already gone.”

“We close at nine,” I said. “We’re not on bar hours.”

“Shame.” He shrugged and grinned again, a false grin this time. He went down to the basement, where he’d stay late working or, as I now suspected, drinking.

“We’ll get the tree tomorrow,” Mom told me.

“Forget it,” I said and went upstairs to bed.

*

Mom did go get the tree the next day, but I wasn't working. She came back and told me how nice the two scouts were who helped her, that I should be proud of the job I was doing. I helped her move the tree inside, up the stairs to our apartment. I helped set it in its stand and water it. But when my father came in the room I stiffened. So, I noticed, did Mom.

By now I knew how things really were in my family. I was used to Dad being absent most of the time, either on the road or in his basement. I was also used to Mom seeing other men around town, Jay Wisecup and a few others I suspected who came to the store "browsing" whenever Dad was away.

They usually arrived late in the afternoon, ten minutes or so before our closing. That these men portrayed themselves as customers, often feigning admiration for the wares my father restored, gave them a stealth that revealed their every intention. Mostly they disregarded me entirely as they chatted up Mom at the register. A few would hand me a sucker or a gumball toy, expecting such cheap gestures to excuse all. The wiser sort thought to do something useful like feed me.

Jay Wisecup was of that stripe. He brought dinner, especially once he became Mom's favorite. Because of him I will forever associate the bland-burnt aroma of supermarket-cooked fried chicken with adultery. Mom must have told him I liked this because he would appear weekly with a bucket of legs and breasts, saving her the trouble of cooking.

"How go the lay-ups?" he would ask.

And I would nod, though I was forever mangling those three ballet-like steps he'd once shown me as Mom locked the doors downstairs. We didn't have a hoop out back, so

Wisecup simply marked a space of my room wall with a rectangle of duct tape. He bought me a rubber ball to practice with, his idea being that I would make more noise in my exertions than he would on the other side of the wall.

“How about free-throws?”

I shrugged, causing him to begin a lesson on the importance of form, demonstrating with his own arms, making him look momentarily like a mime.

“See this? Where my hand hooks under, sort of limp-wristed at the end. That's where you want your wrist at the end of the shot: in the cookie jar. Keep your hand in the cookie jar.”

Cookie jar. I understood alright, that his empty hands would soon be caressing my mother. She was his cookie jar, where he would finish, where he would score. So I wasn't exactly motivated to practice my basketball skills, not when he was visiting. I was more appreciative of the fried chicken.

The bucket was for all of us, but I would usually be the only one at our upstairs kitchen table, choosing my pieces as their voices hushed in my parents' bedroom. I didn't know it, but I was uncomfortable. I began taking my meal to my room, but even this was too close, and I would always grease my bed clothes with the chicken.

Ultimately, I took my food to the basement, examining my father's works-in-progress between bites. I always associated these with the half-finished monstrosities lurking in the mad scientist's lair in old horror films. In my imagination the broken pickle barrels and snow shoes, or whatever he had going, would spring to life and attack my mother and her lover, followed by their rampaging through town, killing everyone I hated at school during the night. The local police would be baffled--who could explain Travis

Carlyle being impaled by an rusty old weathervane? And when my father returned from wherever he'd been, all of his killer antiques would be awaiting him. In the typical monster/creator scene, they would torture him, ask him why he'd left them so unfinished, why he'd neglected some and abandoned others. Then they would rip him apart, with his own instruments, because, of course, he'd have no satisfactory answer. There was none, save the truth, that they were better off not tampered with, not raised from the dead. They'd found peace.

If these were sad or angry fantasies I had eating chicken in the basement, I don't recall feeling sad or angry. I might have been upset, or even have confronted them if my parents hadn't seemed so content with their separate lives. In fact I felt mostly grateful for the space their attentions gave me. For hours I could go uninterrupted in our Book Room, leafing through the collection, peering into the Stereoscopic Lens, a wondrous old instrument that turned any photograph three-dimensional.

Until the year of the shooting, I never questioned how we lived. But that Christmas I was a scout. And being a scout meant being physically strong, mentally aware, and morally straight. This was a new lens from which to view my parents. I could no longer ignore what others wouldn't approve. I wanted to be good, had discovered, I felt, what goodness was. And we weren't it.

I might have even continued the act if I hadn't seen Dad walk into Willy's. But his frequenting where others had killed each other just seemed too much an admission of how bad we were as people. If he was going to make our poor character public, I wasn't going to pretend any more either.

“Oh good,” Mom said. “We're all here. Let's decorate the tree together.”

Dad grabbed the lights and began untangling them, absorbing himself in the knots.

“This is impossible,” he said, a few quiet minutes into it.

“You *say* that,” Mom said. “You who knows the gears to clocks and motors.

You're saying you can't undo our lights from last year?”

Dad stared across the room at her. I couldn't recognize what was in his eyes.

Anger? Sadness? He was anything but an emotional man, so this was different, some inner struggle. Jarring to witness.

“Last year it was better,” he croaked, continuing to de-knot the wires. He clearly wasn't his usual task-oriented self. I wondered if he was drunk right now, the way he looked over at me unloading our ornaments from a cardboard.

“And how are you?” he asked me. “In the holiday spirit?”

I shrugged, scowling at his even asking.

“You know, Jeb, they don't even know when Christmas actually is?” he started.

“They do so,” I said.

“No, I mean when Christ was actually born. It could have been as far away as March.”

“Fine,” I said. “I'll give you your gift in March. Why don't you just spend Christmas over at Willy's?”

“Maybe that's a good idea.” He glanced at Mom, then continued unstringing the lights.

“I suppose you're too old for it all anyway,” he said. “I forget. When did you stop believing in Santa?”

“He was nine.” Mom answered for me. “You wanted him to know the truth about

Saint Christopher. Remember, you said the truth was better for him.”

Dad looked surprised for a moment. He gave me his quick apologetic smile.

“But I was right,” he said, shaking his head. “It might hurt, but it’s always better to know the truth.”

“Better than what?” I asked.

Again he glanced to my mother, and again there passed a meaning through the silence. But this time my father wasn’t content to let it pass. His emotions, whatever they were, returned, and he reared them at me:

“Better than believing in the myths others would hand you. Better than the figments people create to use you. Better than Santa Claus, Jesus Christ, or the *Boy Scouts*! Come on, Jeb, wake up. You’re old enough to see through all that.”

I saw. He didn’t know what I could see.

I shook my head and stood to leave.

“I’ve got homework,” I said.

“You really don’t want to decorate, Jeb?” Mom’s eyes pleaded with me to stay.

“I’m fucking sick of trees,” I said.

In my room I waited for one of them to come yank me out, to scold me for swearing, but I knew they wouldn’t. Ours was a house where people could do whatever the hell they wanted.

The next two weeks I sold trees and avoided my parents as best I could. I didn’t even bother looking at them during our meals together. They didn’t speak to me (or to each other for that matter), didn’t ask, as they had in the past, how my day was or what I

wanted for Christmas.

Due to major snowstorms that December, my father was home more than he'd been since his underground days. Usually he would have been delivering, like Santa, his renovated merchandise to all his clients. But we'd been snowed in continuously since Thanksgiving, and he'd already told them that he wouldn't be making runs until the new year.

This gave him more time to frequent Willy's. He somehow knew whenever I'd be working. Every shift I'd see him walk into the bar. He even made a point to wave to me from down the block each time before going in.

More information arrived about the shooting, or rather the reasons behind it. The newspaper told of an argument Rodney and Jesse had the previous night. They were playing pool, playing for something big, people said, a car or stereo or something. Both had, reportedly, been gambling quite a bit with a circle of friends for the last few weeks, laying items on cards, football games, even on what color blouse the girls down at Cardinal Grocery might wear on a given night. Rodney had been losing, took it sourly, but wouldn't stop. He wanted to win, so he leveraged something big and lost it in that pool game. The gun? He had it with him, holstered under his back belt. Experts conjectured he was going to shoot Jesse regardless; he'd just reached that point. Desperate people (or people who feel desperate), those experts noted in the article, always unleash upon their close family and friends. Rodney's trial, when more of this would get reviewed ad nauseum, wouldn't be until January, and bail was way too high for his family. He was going to spend Christmas in the courthouse jail.

The temperatures turned frigid the week before Christmas, keeping Troop 192

stuck inside as well, camped in the narrow Water Department hallway with its small window view of the trees. Whenever customers arrived we always bickered about who had to go out to help them. We'd rather stay warm and bang Morse Code on the water heaters; we all were convinced Rodney Cross sent us hourly messages on the pipes in his cell, from one scout to another. We even brought our guidebooks to decode what we found later was just the building adjusting itself to the new season.

We empathized with Rodney, wanted him to tell us why he did it through the pipes. By now we felt like prisoners too, held four to six hours after school in that stuffy hallway, detesting it, also detesting the outside world where the trees could stand against a wind-chill that made us feel like girls. We hated ourselves by now, hated how we hated this easy, easy job.

I had the last shift that year, on December 23, the last day of school. I'd signed up for that day because I didn't feel like being at home, didn't feel like pretending to enjoy my family for the holidays. No one else wanted to work anymore. What excitement they'd once taken in Willy's and in Rodney Cross they now took home toward presents under the tree, toward church services, toward all that bland tradition everyone pretends they hate.

Travis Carlyle was my sulking partner this last day, made to work by his father because no one else would volunteer. His company I found as bare and spindly as the handful of trees we had left to sell. It was obvious no one was coming for these rejects, and Travis was angry we were made to pretend otherwise.

“You're nowhere as fun as Brian,” he told me.

“Sorry.”

“Brian told rad jokes and brought Skoal.”

We were sitting on the floor, facing each other in our hallway. Travis had already banged on the heater, but it hadn't answered him.

“I've got some cards,” I offered. “We could play Go Fish.”

Travis scowled. I knew I was his Dale, just as dull, just as offensive in my lame company as Dale had appeared to me

“That shit's for babies,” he said. “Hey, I've *seen* your daddy go into Willy's every night.”

“So what?”

He laughed at me.

“They says he's a coward. Hid from the war. That so?”

I shrugged. “We don't talk about it.”

“Probably a pussy. Like you, right Harris?”

I didn't bother responding. We settled into an uncomfortable silence, watching the snow begin to fall out the little window, listening to the faint carols pumped from a storefront down the street. We might have fallen asleep if not for the discord between us.

After an hour, Travis' dad stopped by with a pizza.

“Figured you guys deserved something special for taking last shift.” He smiled so benevolently that I would have stayed through New Year's if he'd needed someone.

As I stood and thanked him, Travis grabbed the pizza box and opened it.

“Just cheese?” He frowned.

“Well, I didn't know what Jeb liked.”

Travis glared at me, his eyes saying this wouldn't have been an issue with Brian.

“You guys enjoy that,” his father said, turning to leave. “Then when you’re done, you can go ahead and load the rest of the trees into the truck. Doesn’t look like we’ll have any more business this year. Storm’s coming too. I’ll be back in about an hour.”

“This totally blows,” Travis said as soon as his dad was gone.

He took the five best pieces of the square cut slices, stacked them atop each other, then squished them tightly together like a sandwich. He ate ferociously, the sauce running down his chin. I’d never seen anyone eat pizza like that before. He repeated this about four times so that his rate of consumption accounted for most of the pie. I ate mostly crust.

Our meal finished, we bundled ourselves and went outside. The snowfall had thickened, covering most of our trees. It was dark now, and the streets were empty, making the world feel abandoned and empty, beautiful and fragile. I had the momentary sensation of being trapped inside a snow globe.

Then I saw him. Down the street in the snow, waving to me from Willy’s, wearing that red shirt jacket, bright in the streetlight behind the white flakes. In my poor company, my father’s passing gesture seemed welcome, even festive, and I waved back.

“What the hell you doing?”

This was Travis, hauling a tree behind me.

“Nothing.”

“Who you waving at?”

He looked down the street, but my father had slipped inside Willy’s.

“Your father, I bet. Getting himself pissed before Christmas. Only way to live with himself.”

I nodded. Travis might be right, I thought, but it didn't bother me so much, not as much as I thought it did. I began carrying some of the smaller trees to the truck.

After a while Travis and I had to work together to carry the larger trees. Though these were mostly without full branches, they were too big for us to carry individually. I took the top end and Travis the bottom. But he kept jerking the tree, stopping completely, speeding up, poking me with its point and laughing.

"Stop it," I said.

"*Stop it,*" he mimicked back.

I slipped in the snow, making him laugh even more. When I recovered, he began running with his end of the tree. I had to keep up or I'd fall again. When we reached the truck, I climbed onto its bed, and Travis tried to ram the tree into my crotch, hysterical now with his torment.

"Why?" I asked, seriously wanting to know.

He didn't answer. He'd already moved on:

"Sold your mom her tree," he said. "She's foxy. Stupid but kind of foxy."

I remembered what she'd said, about the nice scouts who had helped her, about how proud I should be.

"Stupid," Travis repeated. "She even gave me a tip. I mean, who *tips* for a fucking Christmas tree?"

I glared down at his mean grin through the snowflakes.

"Everyone knows she fucks Coach Wisecup," he added.

That's when I grabbed one of the smaller trees I'd carried, raised and shoved it with as much force as I could toward his head. The needles and branches enveloped him,

sending him to the ground wailing. I followed the tree, jumping from the truck on top of him.

With the tree I had him pinned. The branches held his arms down. I cleared the needles from his face and dug into my jacket for my pocket knife. We all carried these, needing them for the twine, but mostly wanting them to feel armed, in case Rodney Cross broke out of jail, in case trouble came again from Willy's.

I remember, I didn't open the knife (and this had to be an unconscious decision because I might have killed Travis given the proper weapon). Instead I opened the can opener on the outer knife's edge. I still have this knife, and the opener, to me now, looks far more menacing: a short jagged hook ready to tear a thing apart.

I caressed Travis' face with this, patient, wanting him to see it. He didn't say anything, except with his eyes. They told me that he'd never bother me again, that he would stop if only I pulled back.

I might have. I might have done many things differently, as I knew even then right from wrong, knew fairness versus what I felt beneath fairness, that place where rage won't see what we're taught and told. I disagree with those experts, those who say we hurt our friends and family first by way of our own destruction. Because friends and family change. They, quite simply, fall out of our graces, making them, by the time we hurt them, less than what they once were or might have been to us. And of course, it also works in reverse, that those outside our graces may finally find our mercy, our forgiveness, as if to compensate.

My last act as Boy Scout was to tear Travis Carlyle's cheek open with my can opener. His father arrived horrified seconds after I did it. He literally threw me off his

son, and after inspecting my damage, looked at me as if I were some savage thing.

I suppose I was, though in the years to come I wouldn't ever fight again, not even when bullied by men who would remind me, in their childish ownership of the world, of us scouts amongst our trees. I am my father's son that way, steady in my refusal to fight yet obliging in its condition.

In the snow I walked over to Willy's and went inside.

The room in memory has a red tint, but I question if this was its natural lighting or some Christmas illumination. Maybe it was just my father's shirt jacket beckoning me from the corner of the bar where he nursed his drink, a malty looking liquid, perhaps eggnog.

Beside him sat a heavyweight woman in a tight yellow T-shirt. I knew immediately she was the snow-coma woman from the night of the shooting. She was clearly away somewhere now. Still, she saw me first.

"Hey, whose kid?" she asked nobody.

Dad saw me and nodded to the bartender, the sort of gesture only a regular could make.

"Done working?" he asked me.

I nodded, shaking. He didn't notice.

"Ready for Christmas?" he asked.

"Were you here," I asked, "when he got shot?"

"Does it matter?"

"I did something bad," I blurted.

"That so?" He didn't seem too concerned.

I told him, everything, what Travis had said about Mom, what I'd done about it.

"Well," Dad said, taking a sip. "Your mother *is* cheating on me. Even you knew that, right?"

I nodded, looking to the floor.

"I didn't," he continued. "Seems everyone knew before me. She had to tell me, a few weeks ago."

"She told you?"

"Wanted me to care, she said. As if I wouldn't."

"Can we go home? See her?" I felt ready to cry now.

"Let's sit awhile," he said. "That way we can leave it here."

"Leave what?"

He didn't answer, letting me come to that myself, though I couldn't come to anything.

Instead I studied the fat woman next to us, wondering why, if this was her, why she'd made it to the trees but not to the station? What stopped her from taking those extra few steps herself? And if so traumatized, why come back here to drink?

Incapable of reasoning it, I took a napkin from the bar and absorbed myself in wiping Travis Carlyle's blood from my gloves and jacket.

CHAPTER 6

PUNDITS

I didn't know much upon entering high school, but I knew I wanted a separate life, one away from my parents. Some newer, cleaner, easier space where I could plan my future. Anywhere away from antiques would do. It was the right era for new beginnings. Even the president called it “Morning in America.”

Highland's own Reaganites arrived in my early teens, in the figures of my Uncle Ray and his wife Leslie. They offered me sanctuary in their contemporary lifestyle. He was a lawyer, cut from the new economy of conservative populism, while she played his devotee, modeling her behavior from the heroines on *Dynasty*.

Both of my parents enjoyed mocking them privately, although the decade's optimism trickled into their own attitudes. Even if they scorned “Morning in America,” that political sentiment filtered into their marriage; each had decided to give traditional matrimony a new beginning by simply ignoring problems that would not go away. My father would still travel, my mother still flirt (sometimes more), but, as went the country, they learned to put image before substance, and therefore became blindly content.

In my efforts to avoid them, I usually spent my weekend nights watching my cousin Drew, Ray and Leslie's boy, as his parents jet-setted (by Highland standards) out to country clubs and Elks lodges, spreading their reputations in the new era.

In '84 I was fifteen and spent a great amount of time at their home. That year Ray decided to run for township judge. He was up against eighteen-year incumbent Mitchem Chambers. Chambers, people said, had never even been properly challenged. But as Uncle Ray liked to point out in editorials, speeches, and debates, things had gotten

“seedy” around Highland. More kids my age and older were falling into “dangerous habits,” and the people who supported those habits weren’t being “held accountable.” Namely Mitchem Chambers’ own son, Jeremy, who at twenty-three hadn’t done much with his life other than supposedly deal drugs around town. Jeremy had never been arrested, supposedly because his father worked the police force to stay away from him. It was even rumored that Mitchem Chambers fueled his son’s “cartel” by letting Jeremy’s friends walk after their own arrests. Of course, all of this supposing made for a good story, told as often as possible by Uncle Ray and Aunt Leslie at various gatherings.

“Bad pool,” my father warned of these tactics to my mother.

“Of course,” Mom agreed. “But what if it’s true?”

“You really want your brother to win on talk like that?” Dad posited.

“I want him to win,” I added. I liked Uncle Ray.

To me he was a man of the times. While we lived in what I now viewed as a tomb, Ray had built his family a brand-new home. It had a separate room with a billiards table and a pinball machine and a belowground pool in back. Their fridge was always stocked with fudgsicles and those mini-pizzas you could microwave. Their satellite dish received about fifty cable channels, including MTV and Playboy. As an attorney, Ray could afford a new car every other year (his last one even talked when you locked the doors like on *Knight Rider*, which I watched at Ray’s). He wore a crisp blue suit every day to court. But he wasn’t selfish, wasn’t one of those yuppies we’d heard about from the cities. Ray had the community in mind.

A true Reaganite, he had a completely unreasonable vision for his town and neighborhood. He told us on the day we helped move him into his house that he wanted

the whole town to have a home like his, that he believed it would happen too. Mom smirked but called him “sweet for wishing it.” Dad just walked back to the van and shouted for me to help him with the armoire we’d given Ray as a house-warming gift.

I never turned down a chance to watch Drew. Ray called it “Jeb’s part for the campaign.” I believed him.

“Say no,” my father advised one October day, after Ray’s call came.

“Why no?” I asked. “What am I doing tomorrow?”

“Nothing particular,” he said. “But you shouldn’t be his little political tool.”

Ever since August, Dad had been playing pundit against Ray. The campaign, for him, came down to a choice between the future and the past. Where Ray wanted progress, my father favored the preserved infrastructure. He saw no better, no hope for better. And I resented this, more than I can say. In fact I blamed him for my own misery. I, after all, had to truck around everywhere in our eyesore of a van. People called me “Junk Boy” at school because my weekends were taken up moving furniture into their houses or polishing pewter in the back yard. But that life, like my school clothes from last year, was “good enough,” according to my father.

“Well, I’m going,” I told him. “I was just telling you to tell you.”

“Fine,” he said, going back to his tinkering. He’d just bought a set of 1850 dueling pistols, two Philadelphia derringers he found at an estate sale. “But you can walk over. Your mother and I have to run to an auction in Athens.”

“Buying more junk?” I said as meanly as possible.

He pointed one of the derringers toward me.

“Buying Ray a consolation gift for after the election. A dresser. Tell him it’ll go

great with the armoire.”

I was up early the next day. Since we lived in the older, historic section of town, it was a long walk to where they’d built the new houses in tracts behind the athletic fields. A frost had covered the fallen leaves, also clinging to the spectrum of campaign signs littering the yards. Local, state, national: all were represented. After a while they bled together, into a collage of red, white, and blue names, a desperately patriotic invasion of self.

Drew was awake, eating cinnamon rolls and watching *The Smurfs* on his couch. Only eight, he already had everything a kid could ever want. Still, he was no snot. He knew how lucky he was. I also admit I liked him because he admired my age, thought it made my life somehow more exciting than his. Although he was dead wrong about this, I didn’t want to correct that notion. I enjoyed having a fan.

I waved to him as Aunt Leslie led me into the kitchen, running through specifics with me: the time they’d be gone, where they’d be, what time they’d be back, pretty standard. I didn’t even listen because she’d written it all down. Also, she was wearing a red evening dress that cut toward her chest. In her presence I was usually aroused and appalled at how aroused I felt. She was easily the best-looking woman in town, a tall, slender redhead, and she knew it. Uncle Ray had met her while he was in law school, had somehow convinced her to follow him home. She was better than this place, and she knew that too. In her dress she seemed ready to make other people know it.

“Oh and one *last* thing,” she whispered. “Drew’s getting picked on at school. I was wondering if you might talk to him.”

“Talk to him?”

“About being different.” She sighed. “We’ve always admired how you’ve carried yourself, Jeb. You know, with all the adversity.”

I nodded, dumbfounded. Did she mean with my lack of friends? With my father hiding? With my mother’s affairs? I really hadn’t done much but tolerate those things.

“You’re a nice young man.” She leaned forward to pat my shoulder. I could see down her front. “Drew *likes* you. He needs a good role model to show him how to rise above a situation.”

Typical Reaganite: always enlisting role models to magically raise their kids. If not me it would be television or Jesus.

“He worships you,” she said. “Don’t let him down.”

Uncle Ray came through then, wearing a neatly cut suit with pinstripes shooting down it.

“Hey there, Jeb!” He clasped my hand like an adult, like he was asking for my vote. Only inside his hand was a twenty-dollar bill that stayed with me. He winked. “So glad you could do this! Thanks for helping us today.”

Nothing is probably so hectic as people leaving their own house. The next five minutes suggested anarchy as both Aunt Leslie and Uncle Ray grabbed coats, keys, then double-checked for her lipstick and his wallet. They kissed Drew goodbye and slammed the door.

“C’mon.” I turned to Drew. “Let’s go.”

Drew owned Atari, but we were always abandoning it for the Ms. Pac-Man in the lobby of Cardinal Grocery. Something about its size and access to the public made it better.

Every weekend we checked to see who had the high score. This, for the last month, had belonged to a kid named Tagert Brown, who would guard the machine on the weekends, defending his one great accomplishment.

Tagert liked to taunt anyone who came to challenge him, so vocally he was finally banned from Cardinal by the manager. Now he clung to the store's window, hissing at anyone who might go near Ms. Pac-Man. When Drew and I arrived, he was yelling through the glass at a little girl who'd dared:

“Go left! Ahhh, dammit! Yer after too many ghosts! Ha! Too slow! Face on you!”

He turned and nodded to us.

“Little chick's getting better, dammit,” he muttered. “Hey! How many quarters you *got* anyway?!”

There must be a Tagert in everyone's school history. He's the kid who smiles whenever the teacher accidentally reveals her underwear while sitting cross-legged in the reading circle, the one who smiles when he's sent to the office for noticing it aloud, the one who smiles when he returns to tell how hard he got paddled for using the word “twat” again as a rendering to the principal. Tag, as we called him, was my age but couldn't find his way out of eighth grade, where he'd made his presence known so distinctly that the faculty renamed it “Tagert Country.” Not what you would necessarily call a bad kid, certainly not a mean kid, although he'd often associate with mean people. Tag just carried a capacity for trouble, sometimes of his own aptitude, sometimes not. He'd liked me ever since I'd sliced up Travis Carlyle's face. While everyone else had labeled the act crazy or cruel, Tag called it “fucking sweet.” Though I often tried avoiding him, he might have been my best friend.

“Hey there, Junk Boy.” He smiled. “Come to lose some more?”

“I think Drew’s up for it,” I said.

Since meeting him, Drew had been transfixed by the whole Tag package. As I said, Drew held me in high account, and if that was possible, imagine what he saw in Tag, who, through the eyes of a eight-year-old, must have come across a more kick-ass model of maturity. Tag, after all, knew how to swear and smoke and not clean his nails and shoplift and was just better at living.

“I’ve been practicing at home.” Drew nodded.

“Fuck your *home!*” Tag scoffed. “This here’s the real world.” He paused as the girl ended her game and exited the store. “Sorry, honey,” he called to her. “Next time grow a pair.”

The girl looked quizzically back at us, then wisely skipped away.

Drew couldn’t beat Tag’s record, though he spent the morning attempting it. As he played inside, I told Tag of Drew’s problem at school, thinking he might know some remedy. I was certain talking Drew through it wouldn’t work. What he needed was some plan for immediate action, some revenge to get the bully off his back. No one knew revenge better than Tag.

“Yeah, I can see why.” Tag pondered it. “Drewer’s got it all. Shit, I’d hate him too if he was my age.”

“It might be because his dad’s running for judge,” I said. “That just makes him a bigger target.”

“Hell, *yeah.*” Tag nodded. “Hope his old man wins too.”

He might have been looking ahead. Four years later, while drunk, Tag would lead the police on a chase around town in a “borrowed” truck, removing mailboxes and parking meters, culminating downtown, where he would crash the truck through the window of Essence Beauty Salon, forever earning the wrath of most women in town. He would see our township judge...repeatedly. This might have been his premonition toward which candidate would go easier.

“What he needs is to fuck with who’s fuckin’ with him. Who’s that?”

“Give me a second with him.”

I walked inside and leaned against Ms. Pac-Man. Drew was pounding the joystick, trying desperately to stay alive.

“Your Mom says you’ve got a problem at school.”

Drew looked up at me. A ghost got him.

“She said that?”

“All I want is his name,” I said.

“Ronny Howland.” He didn’t even hesitate.

“Okay.” I handed him a few dollars for more quarters. “Meet me at my house in about an hour. Here’s the key.”

He nodded, completely grateful.

I walked back outside to Tag.

“Ronny Howland,” I said.

“*That* little shit? Figures. He lives on my block.”

We turned and started walking across the parking lot.

“No one’s beatin’ that score anyways,” Tag said.

*

“I just want to scare him,” I reminded Tag as we walked into the poorer section of town, where the homes looked crummy and needed paint.

“Sure, sure,” Tag nodded. He jumped suddenly into a yard, pointing to a Mondale/Ferraro '84 sign.

“Ferraro,” he laughed. “Christ, what a fucking *dyke!*”

He finished the thought by kicking his foot through the sign, ending any rebuttal the sign might make.

He stopped again when we reached another sign, this time one of Uncle Ray's.

“Well,” I asked, “what is it?”

“Course *you* wouldn't see it, Junk Boy,” he said. “You got to *think* about who lives in that house.” He gestured to the home in front of us, a rinky-dink place with a squat porch and a torn screen door. “That there's *Bonna-Dean's* house,” he said, as if this alone explained the trouble.

In a way it did; Bonna-Dean Walker was the town pariah for kids of all ages. Her fame existed in riding around town on her bicycle like the pre-witch from the *Wizard of Oz*, yelling at her fellow townspeople for no apparent reason while smelling strongly of urine. Whole generations had already grown up on her. Like Tag, there must be one of her in everyone's childhood as well.

“So what?”

Tag frowned. “*So* she's costin' Drew's pa the whole *thing*. People see Bonna-Dean's on his side, they'll begin ta think what kind of man lets woman like that vote for him. It ain't *fair!*”

His yanking the sign from her yard, I think now, confirms certain sad truths about our democracy. That a woman like Bonna-Dean would vote for a man like Ray, so clearly removed from her own experience, shows how often we misunderstand our leaders. Yet in attacking her choice Tag also attacked leaders like Ray who would seek to claim her. He knew it didn't fit; he just didn't know why.

Tag carried Ray's sign all the way to Ronny Howland's house, where a heavysset boy, looking about Drew's age, stood raking leaves in the front yard.

"Hello, Ronald," Tag said.

"Tag." Ronny looked up. "What's up?"

"Come here. Junk Boy and me want to show you something."

Ronny dropped his rake next to a large pile of leaves and followed us into the alley.

"What is it?"

Tag pointed to the sign.

"You know a kid named this?"

"Longmier?" Ronny looked over at me. "Yeah, Drew Longmier."

Tag whacked him across the face with the sign, sending Ronny to the ground.

"I know," he said. "He sent us."

"Jesus, Tag," I said when it was finished. "I only wanted to *scare* him."

"Trust me." Tag said. "He's scared now."

For twenty minutes Tag had alternated between hitting Ronny with the campaign sign and warning him to stay away from Drew: *You hear me!* he barked. *You can read,*

right? And he pointed to the sign. *Longmier's got friends! Don't fuck with him!* When Ronny's nose started bleeding, Tag handed me the stained poster and dragged him back to his yard, throwing him in his piled leaves.

"It was too much," I said.

"Why? He'll leave him alone now. You got to send a strong message, like you did with Carlyle."

I winced. I couldn't even look at Travis anymore. He was still popular, even scarred, and I was alone, except for Tag.

"He won't bother you anymore," I told Drew when we reached my house. Drew was downstairs in the store, examining the derringers Dad had cleaned and displayed.

"Why?" Drew asked. "What'd you say?"

"Didn't *say* nothin'," Tag grinned, fingering a derringer himself, pointing it at Drew. "We did some better."

"Thanks," Drew said, more to Tag than to me. "Where'd you get Dad's sign?"

"Along the way," I said. "Tag thought it was in the wrong yard."

"Damn straight," Tag chuckled. "Now alls we got to do is find the right yard for it."

"Let's just throw it away," I suggested. I wanted any evidence against us to vanish.

"Naw, naw." Tag shook his head. "We got to keep going."

"Keep going?" I asked.

"Yeah." He nodded. "Phase two."

Phase two, according to Tag, involved taking the sign and planting it firmly onto the yard of Jeremy Chambers, who lived in a big Victorian house his father owned near the classy side of town. As Tag explained it, if people saw that Chambers' own son was against him, it would be hysterical.

“What we'll do is call the newspaper,” Tag said. “They'll snap a picture of it, and then the whole town'll see.”

“What if he just moves the sign before they get there?” I asked.

“We'll superglue it in the ground. Your father have any superglue?”

Of course, my father, working as he did to repair antiques and such, did have some strong adhesives. But even so I didn't think this would keep a sign in the ground. I said this.

“*What?*” Tag wouldn't believe me. “You scared now? You pussy?”

I didn't have the energy to argue with him. He'd only win, I knew. If anything, Tag should have gone into politics himself. He had that power; he could make you believe in his schemes even if you didn't. And besides, Jeremy Chambers' house was only about three blocks from Drew's street. It would be on our way back.

I went down to the basement to find some of my father's glue. When I returned upstairs, Tag and Drew were gone. I heard their voices in the back yard. Outside I found them standing back-to-back, each holding a derringer.

“Ready?” Tag asked.

“Ready.” Drew nodded.

They began their paces then, Tag counting back from ten. When he reached one, they both turned and pulled their triggers, which, not surprisingly, did nothing. But Tag

pretended he'd been shot.

“Ahh! You *got* me!” He fell to his knees and clutched his chest. “You got me, Drew! Tell my ma I loved 'er. Tell Junk Boy I says g'bye.” He gasped and spit for another minute before sprawling out on the leaves we'd not yet raked. Dead.

“If only it was that easy,” I said, laughing along with Drew.

It was mid-afternoon when we finally left, the sun lost behind the clouds, creating one of those sad autumn days that makes you wish you were sitting beside a bonfire with a girl or at least eating chili, not walking with Tag through the empty streets. But our spirits were high. We all recognized we were part of something that wasn't quite right. Its very wrongness, its mischief, tied us together.

Our trek took even longer because Tag made us stop at every campaign sign for Mitchem Chambers. With a thick black marker he'd found near the register at my house, used for labeling boxes, he scratched out the words *For Township Judge* and wrote, beneath that, IS A DICK!

Tag was convinced this would help Drew's father.

“How's that?” I asked him.

“Makes you stop and think,” he answered proudly. “Folks might wonder, *Maybe the sign's right. Maybe that guy is a dick.*”

When we reached Jeremy Chambers' yard, I was immediately struck that his lawn, unlike those surrounding him, lacked a single campaign sign, not even one for his father. This was eerie considering who he was.

It didn't faze Tag, who wet our signpost with the glue. I wanted him to just stick

the thing in and be done with it, but he took his time, as if considering just the right spot.

“You hear about this fucker, Junk Boy?” he asked me. “About the drugs?”

“Just plant it,” I said.

“It’s all true,” he said. “What Drewer’s daddy says...all true.”

“How do you know?” I asked, knowing as I spoke that Tag would know better than Uncle Ray ever would. Of course he would know.

“You want *proof*?” Tag smiled. “Fine.”

He rammed the sign into the yard like he was staking a vampire. Then he ran up to the porch and began pounding on the door.

“Open up!” he yelled. “Open up, it’s the *po-lice*!”

Drew and I both sprinted to the porch. We tried to pry him away, but Tag was bigger than both of us. He wouldn’t budge. When the door opened, we were all tangled together.

“We want some drugs.” Tag opened his hand, like he was trick-or-treating. “We heard this was the place!”

The man who answered the door peered down at us. He looked highly amused. He was lanky, wearing a rock T-shirt of some band I’d never heard of under an open oxford shirt. His jeans were torn and frayed atop some scuffed combat boots. His face had about four days’ worth of stubble. This was Jeremy Chambers, I knew, though I’d never seen him before. I just knew. He looked like no one else I’d seen in town. He looked content.

Ignoring us, he glanced to the sign we’d just planted.

“You put that sign in my yard,” he noted.

“You can’t prove it was us,” Tag said.

“I just sat here watching you do it.”

“That ain’t *proof!*”

“We’re sorry,” I said. “It was only a joke. We’ll move it.”

“Like hell we will,” Tag protested.

“No,” Chambers said. “Leave it. What do I care?”

Even Tag looked surprised by this, so accustomed was he to outrage as every adult’s reaction to him. He and I looked to each other then back to Chambers, as if he would tell us what came next. He did:

“You guys were saying something about drugs?”

“Sure.” Tag conjured confidence now. “We want some.”

“Come inside then.” Chambers waved us in.

At first I thought, *There’s no way I’m going in there, no way I’m taking Drew inside there*, but before I knew it Tag was inside, with Drew trailing right behind him.

Chambers led us through his house, the first floor decorated with punk posters akin to his T-shirt. Yet there was no mess around the place. It was no den of thieves, as had been painted in my mind by Ray, no opium parlor with people sprawled about doped out of their wits. Chambers even had a fireplace, which was lit. He told us to sit down next to it on his sofa.

“What sort of drugs did you want?” he asked, stoking the fire.

“What kind you got?” Tag asked.

“Apparently everything.” Chambers laughed. “You’d think I had all of Colombia in here with the way people talk.”

“We’ll just take what you got,” Tag said.

“First things first.” Chambers sat. He considered us carefully. “Who are you three?”

“We’d rather not say,” I blurted. So far I’d been stunned into silence, but I was recovering. I didn’t want any of this. Tag had gone too far, and I needed to find a way to get out. “We’re leav...”

“Don’t mind him,” Tag interrupted. “Junk Boy’s just shy. This here’s Drew Longmier. I’m Tagert Brown.”

“*Longmier?*” Chambers’ eyes darted to Drew, who looked immediately away, toward the fire. “As in Ray Longmier?”

Drew nodded. He looked terrified, as if admitting this inside Chambers’ home would get him thrashed or something.

“That explains the sign.” Chambers grinned. He leaned toward Drew. “How old are you?”

“He’s eight,” Tag answered. “He’s just a kid.”

“Eight.” Chambers shook his head. “Rough. Shit, though, I was four when my own father first ran.” He placed his hand on Drew’s knee. “Good luck kid.”

He glanced at me then.

“Why they call you Junk Boy?”

I shrugged.

“You collect junk?”

“My parents do.”

He nodded, as if he knew this all too well, as if his parents also collected junk and

made him suffer for it as well.

“And you, Tagert Brown. What’s your story?”

“I ain’t got one.” Tag blushed. I doubt he’d ever been asked this before. “I just wanta see if you got drugs, like they say.”

“Well, I won’t disappoint.” Chambers grinned. “Sure I do. Just not for you.”

“Why’s that?” Tag asked.

“Well for one thing, you’re too young.”

“I *ain*’t!”

“For another,” he ignored Tag, “I doubt you could afford what I sell.”

“How much?”

“Too much.”

“We could swap,” Tag suggested.

“A barter?” Chambers paused. “Interesting. What?”

Tag pulled out one of Dad’s derringers. He had it hooked inside his jeans. He must have taken it again when I wasn’t looking. He handed the gun to Chambers, who admired it, surprised.

“Hey,” Chambers said. “This is nice.”

“It ain’t *junk*,” Tag grinned.

“No!” I yelled. “He can’t! That’s not his!”

“I *like* this.” Chambers stood and aimed the pistol around the room. “I really do.”

“It’s not for trade!” I cried.

“A little late.” Chambers grinned. He turned to Tag. “This little prize earns you a quarter bag, Tagert Brown. Marijuana’s more your speed, I’d say. At least it was when I

was your age.”

“That’d be fine.” Tag nodded.

“Be right back.”

When Chambers left the room, I turned to Tag.

“Jesus, Tag! He can’t take that! What are you *doing*?!”

“Relax,” Tag whispered. “We’re gettin’ proof here. We take it to your daddy he’ll call the cops on this dude for giving us dope. May-be we even get him for *stealing* the gun. Then the election’s good as ours.”

I was about to object again when Chambers strolled back in, a baggie of weed in one hand, the pistol still in his other.

“Just one favor,” he said.

“Sure.” Tag smiled. “Shoot.”

“Don’t give any to the kid here.” He pointed to Drew with the derringer. “He’s got enough on his plate...for now.”

“Deal.”

Tag grabbed the baggie, and we were ushered out just as pleasantly as we were in. But Chambers stopped us on the porch. He turned stern.

“Tell anybody about this, any of it, and I’ll know. I have people who could hurt you. You boys don’t want that. Understand?”

Tag nodded.

“Tell your father I said good luck, Drew Longmier. Tell him I said thanks for the sign.”

He slammed the door on us then, leaving us stranded on his porch.

*

As soon as we shuffled off the porch, as soon as we walked beyond Chambers' yard, I started swinging at Tag, swearing at him for what he'd done.

"What's wrong?" He swatted my arms away. "Dontcha like the plan?"

"Jesus, Tag! You know how much *trouble* I'm going to be in?!"

"Trouble's nothin'," he said. "It's a dirty business we're into. We got to keep at the big picture."

"Jesus *Christ!*" I screamed at him. "You're *insane!*"

"No, I'm *right*," Tag said. "You're just too pussy to see it."

"Fuck you, Tag! There's no big *picture!* You don't know how these things work. We're all screwed!"

I could tell he didn't comprehend, that he didn't want to. And maybe that was his philosophy: to shun all significance. Not a bad way to go through life. Cognizance typically hurt Tag. I'd seen it literally hurt his brain in classrooms we'd once shared at school, as he'd grunted and groaned over many a book at his desk. He looked that way now at me, as if I were some textbook he'd been handed but clearly couldn't attempt to learn. I wasn't like him: I still cared.

In desperation, I sprinted back to Chambers' porch and banged repeatedly on his door. Never in my life had I worried about the safety of an antique the way I worried over that derringer. Drew and Tag watched from the sidewalk as I screamed:

"*Please!* We don't want this! Give it back! *Please!*"

Chambers was in there, but he wasn't coming back. Ours had been a one-time tour of his purgatory. The door wouldn't open again.

After a few minutes I gave up and walked back to the sidewalk. I sat on the curb, next to a big pile of leaves waiting to be swept off the street. I buried my head in my hands. I wondered how this had happened, how I'd gone from good role model to drug dealer in one afternoon.

“Well,” Tag said. “I gotta go anyway.”

He sounded as if he suddenly had better things to do, another appointment.

“Here.” He handed me the baggie. “You should give it up. You don’t have to tell ’em I got it. You should get some credit yourself. Bye, Drew.”

Drew waved, speechless as Tag walked away.

Years later Drew told me he wanted to follow Tagert, that he felt safe with him, that within the chaos that was Tag there seemed a peace, even a tranquility, that others actively resisted. Drew said he knew he also had to resist it. He knew he had to go with me, back to a different type of consequence.

“Come on.” I stood and composed myself when Tag was out of sight. “Let’s go home.”

Ray and Leslie had beaten us home, and were therefore already nervous and upset that we’d left without leaving a note (Leslie was a mother whose belief in “notes” rivaled her belief in the Constitution). Imagine their reaction when I pulled out that baggie of weed: pure horror. The scandal!

As I told our tale, however, their emotions changed. Shock and outrage (directed at me entirely) shifted to sympathy and opportunity. And finally victory. Tag, it turns out, was correct all along: this was good politics.

Ray phoned the police, then my parents, who were back from their auction. My parents arrived first, looking out of place in their jeans and sweaters standing next to Ray and Leslie in their formalwear. Seconds later Officer Burgess knocked and was let inside.

“Where’s the pistol, Jeb?” Dad asked me, ignoring Ray’s bluster.

“Pistol?” the officer asked, alarmed.

Ray answered for me, retelling the whole embarrassing story with his own spin.

“Officer,” he concluded. “Clive. This is *exactly* what I’ve been saying. I want Jeremy Chambers arrested for selling junk like this to children, *my* children!”

Officer Burgess, *Clive*, grabbed the baggie.

“Well now, let’s just examine.”

He opened it, even inhaled. Then he smiled widely.

“Good stuff alright. Good *for* a pot, but that ain’t pot, Ray.”

“What?” Ray asked.

“I’d say oregano, basil, thyme. Maybe some dill weed, but not real weed.”

My father, at this, began laughing so loudly, so uncontrollably, we all paused to watch until he could restrain himself.

“In that case,” Ray said, “Chambers at least stole an antique from these boys.”

“Seems the other kid stole it first,” Officer Burgess observed. He turned to Dad.

“That seem right to you?”

Dad nodded, still chuckling.

Mom went to console her brother. To change the subject, she said they’d just found him a matching dresser at the auction that day, one to go with his armoire.

My father visited Chambers later that night to retrieve his pistol. I wanted to go with him, even if I didn't know why or what I would say, but he wouldn't let me.

“Haven't you had enough for one day? What?” He laughed. “You want to give him the whole store for some red pepper?”

What I really wanted was to share in the joke instead of be the joke. This must have been how Tag felt. He must have known the weed wasn't real, which explains why he'd left us as soon as he did, turning himself from dupe to fellow prankster.

The next morning, back at Ms. Pac-Man, he confirmed this, laughing at me.

“But that don't mean shit,” he told me. “Chambers deals, just like I said.”

“Bullshit,” I said.

“Why you think he threatened us, warned us like he did? He knows we're on to him!”

“Jesus, Tag. You're so full of shit.”

“Where's Drew?” he asked.

I shrugged. Part of me already knew I'd never watch Drew again. I wasn't the role model his parents intended, even if I'd helped solve his problem. Reaganites were always quick to discard you for their own better version of tomorrow. They'd used me just as Dad said they would.

Not that it mattered.

Uncle Ray would win his election without me. The people were ready for a change, even if change meant no change at all, at least none that we could see.

What would affect us more would be the removal a month later of Ms. Pac-Man for Spy Hunter, an altogether better game that let you gun down motorists to the Peter

Gunn theme. Being banned from the store and unable even to play the new game, Tag viewed the switch as a mandate against him. In protest one night he threw a brick through Cardinal's window, resulting in his first official arrest.

Jeremy Chambers was never arrested, dealer or not. Rumors would follow him for years to come, until the rumors defined him, not as anything so bad, but ultimately as another town character, one who had money and power enough to separate from the rules.

I was still young enough to believe at least a part of his lore. I even convinced myself that Chambers was extra-mad now that my father had taken back the pistol. He'd liked that pistol, after all, and he had threatened us.

So I was a little frightened when, about a week after the election, while I was dusting in the China Room, Chambers walked into our store.

"Junk Boy!" He smiled meanly at me. "I've come for the weapon."

"I thought..." But I didn't think, couldn't think of what to say.

"Met your father," he said. "Seems like a reasonable man. Of course, you shouldn't have run to him like that. We had a deal."

Then he laughed. Right at me.

"Tell Tagert Brown..." he started.

But he didn't get to finish. My father, as if sensing something wrong from his downstairs hole, appeared in the doorway.

"So you came," he said, rather firmly.

Chambers turned to him.

"I did," he nodded. "Damn thing seems to be *calling* to me."

My father, turning businesslike, told Chambers to follow him down to his

workshop, where he explained the history and workings behind the pistols. I could hear his voice but not his words carry through the floorboards. I went back to dusting.

When they emerged, Chambers was carrying both pistols in a case. He ignored me as my father led him to my mother at the cash register. The sour look on her face said everything, but she took his money anyway, even forced a “Thank you,” knowing, as I know now, that our business depended on people like Chambers, people with money and enough taste to want something useless and valuable.

But even that wasn't the end of it.

He became one of our regulars. Every time my father found an old firearm, Chambers would be by, adding it to his collection. Eventually, he began collecting muskets as well, along with old bullets and bayonets, as if preparing to fight a very old war.

CHAPTER 7
OPEN HOUSE

“I think my mother is dying.”

I was telling my wife, while also retelling myself, attempting to believe it.

“Then you should go home,” was Marsha's typically emphatic reply.

“I know.”

“*Do you?* You only have one mother.”

“Don't do that.”

“Do what?”

“Use what everyone would say for advice.”

“Maybe everyone else would be right.”

I should mention that we'd been separated, Marsha and I, for six months. It wasn't her fault. And it wasn't mine. As with much of my adult failures, it was easiest to blame my parents for my failure in marriage. They, after all, had been my primary example.

“Go home, Jeb.” She said it like a little girl wanting me out of her yard.

I just nodded blankly up at the ceiling fan.

I should also mention that we were lying in bed together. Marsha would return to the loft occasionally to spend the night, claiming she was lonely in her rented studio, though she could easily meet men.

“At least we didn't have children,” I said, full of pity for that lonely junk boy I'd tried to leave back in Ohio.

“I know,” Marsha agreed. “Thank *God*.”

Whenever she responded like this, with more strength behind her agreement than

was warranted, I'd wonder what exactly I'd seen in her to begin with. She wasn't a bad person, simply aggressive, an account executive, a bad match.

We'd met at some industry function. I was working in the firm's art department, and she was curious because I didn't act much like a designer. "Geeks," she called us. "Without us you wouldn't have any work at all."

I didn't believe her, or maybe I did and liked her knowing she controlled me. She was the professional version of the type of girl I'd always wanted, going back to Bev, even back to my mother: a woman who could provide a framework, the scaffolding for her man's construction.

"What would they be like?" I asked now. "Our children, you think?"

"Confused." She draped her leg over the sheet to tempt me anew. "Same as us."

We should have been divorced by now, but neither of us could muster it. Marsha said I was too "agreeable" to officially divorce. My charm, she said, was the very phlegmatic condition she hated in other men. I was a "comfortable void" next to the ambitious men she knew. It puzzled her, still attracted her. Also she didn't want to feel worse about herself. She didn't want to be a bitch.

"I didn't think you even spoke to your parents."

We'd finished our solace-making in the sheets and were moving to the next phase of our arrangement: the wondering why. Marsha stood and tied on the lavender robe she'd left behind, the only article of clothing she'd left. I pulled on a t-shirt and jeans and followed her into the kitchen for green tea, our constant beverage for the dissections that would remind us why.

"I don't," I said. Since leaving for college I'd trusted any communication with my

parents to the postal service. It was easier to mail a card occasionally that could pretend sentiment. Marsha knew this.

“Your mother wrote, then?”

I shook my head and sat on the counter stool to watch her prepare the tea. This was secretly my favorite part, watching Marsha, looking tousled post-coital in her old robe, back in our kitchen, filling my teapot.

“My father called.”

“Really?” She arched her eyebrow, removing the cups and saucers from the shelf. She knew my history, knew my father to be the shadowy influence he was on me. She's once even cursed him for ruining me as a more ardent husband.

I wasn't sure how he found my number. We were listed under Marsha's name, and I'd never given Mom the number. He'd called late one night.

“We need you to run the store,” were his first words, his voice gravely over the line.

“Who is this?” I'd asked, even as I knew it was him.

“Who you think?”

“Dad?”

“Yes. Him. We need you to run the store, Jeb. It's your legacy.”

He sounded drunk or tired, his words rushed and restive.

“*Legacy?* What are you talking about?”

“Your mother is sick,” he explained. “Seriously ill. Not in the head.”

“What's wrong?”

There came a pause.

“We're not speaking on it.”

“What's that mean? *You* called me.”

“Not on the phone!” Another pause. “Besides, I'm on about you, Jeb. We need you here. It would mean a bit more than whatever worthless thing you do in that city up there.”

“What's wrong with *Mom*?”

“Come see for yourself.”

And he hung up. He wouldn't answer the phone after that. I'd been trying for the last week, but I only reached the store's machine, my mother's voice, her healthy voice, the same message they'd used for fifteen years.

The whistle blew on the kettle. Marsha poured our cups.

“Go home,” she repeated. “Jeb, you have to go.”

I grimaced. Six months ago it had been, *Jeb, I have to go*. She'd wept as she said it, knowing she was being the decider, the harsh force she naturally was. I, meanwhile, was too tame in nature to find a reason for her to stay. I knew she was right to go; simply being agreeable to each other didn't make a marriage. My parents had known that.

She plopped in the tea bags and joined me at the counter.

“I mean, come on, Jeb. What's keeping you here?”

“Your contingent visits,” I wanted to say, but kept silent, focusing on bobbing my tea bag in and out of the cup. True, the life I'd planned for myself was shrinking. Marsha had been right about controlling my work. After 9/11 the well of advertising had dried, leaving us artist geeks the first to die of thirst. Marsha had no voice in my getting sacked, but she hadn't voiced much sympathy either.

“You're just disposable,” she had reasoned it, an opinion that soon extended beyond my profession.

I'd bottomed out freelancing for a firm that did direct mailers. On our worst day, while collecting our mail, Marsha discovered a flyer I'd done for mattresses. She'd said it was a sign.

“Of what?” I'd asked.

“The truth.”

“What's that?”

She was bored in bed, she said finally.

She'd been mean, she later explained, so her leaving would go quicker. Only she kept returning, kept making tea for us afterwards. I took this as my own sign: nothing is so disposable, another thing my parents, and especially my father, always knew.

I sipped my tea and finally answered her:

“I like the city. I can get lost in the people, the neighborhoods.”

Metropolitan life, even when one struggled empty-handed through it, offered anonymity and distraction, two postures that rarely looked back. What I wanted was to hide, from my parents, from myself, from every bit of my past. My lifestyle, what was left of it, was little more than an extended adolescence. After college I'd gone to California, attracted to the dot-coms. When that work faded, I took my savings and migrated to Chicago, living comfortably in our Bucktown loft, feeling hip and removed from anything antique. Even our decor had been carefully chosen--nothing used, all Pottery Barn-new, the type of furniture made to look aged.

“*Lost?*” Marsha sounded offended. “Your mother is sick and you want to get

lost?"

"I know it sounds bad," I said.

"It sounds like you don't care at *all!*"

She needed this, I could see: some final straw to inspire the lawyers, the paperwork, the leaving with her bathrobe. Her hands were on her hips, waiting for me to excuse her forever, to take the comfort from the void.

I was smarter than that. But my going home would also help her shake me. The distance alone would do what we couldn't.

"Relax," I said. "I'm going tomorrow. I just wanted to see if you'd care."

A long silence. The city hummed around us. An El train vibrated down the block on Milwaukee.

"What about your job?" she finally spoke.

"Disposable." I shrugged. Actually, I was pleased to leave all the cheap clip art to any kid who knew Quark, although in a way this felt like abandoning everything I'd ever set out to do.

Tears started in Marsha's eyes, but she toughened up to speak:

"You didn't need to get me so mad."

"Sure I did." I winked. "I always liked you mad. It's sexy."

She blushed. She never knew how to take a compliment.

"Take the loft," I said. "You miss it. It's what you really miss."

She might have been the decider, but I had always been the honest one.

"I miss everything," she said.

"You deserve everything."

Now she did cry, briefly.

“Jesus, Jeb, why'd you have to be so *fucking nice*.” She huffed. “I'll never get over that.”

I smiled, enjoying this notion, of her stranded here among less noble men, alone among millions and knowing she'd let me go. Back to nowhere. Such a waste of the one agreeable man.

“I'll call.” I stared down into my teacup, not wanting it to drain. If I could have, I'd have spent the remainder of my life drinking tea with her, my wife.

“Who knows what might happen,” I added.

But I had some idea, even then. When the cups went dry, we'd return to the bedroom together, clinging one last time to what we'd seen in each other, to what we couldn't keep. In the morning we'd wake and walk into a less comfortable void. My eight-hour drive through Indiana would be the most painful trip of my life.

If my mother truly was dying, I knew my father wasn't the proper person to care for her. She would need someone more agreeable to say goodbye to the world with.

I hadn't been home in five years. Highland had changed, evolved some would argue. A new interstate now poured traffic not six miles north, giving the town its own exit. Fast-food neon illuminated the night sky over the hilltops well before I saw buildings.

It was a January thaw, with dirty snow clumped between the lights on the strip. Last I'd lived here the strip had been an IGA and a liquor store. Now it had a Big Boy, a Pizza Hut, even a superstore knockoff called Panda Market. Two stoplights stopped me, where before teenagers used to hammer down their cars into the country. Downtown

looked mostly the same. Most disheartening, the Randall Movie Theater, where I'd escaped home on gloomy Saturday afternoons, had been demolished, making way for a Subway. I was hungry and didn't want to face home on an empty stomach, so I stopped for a turkey wrap.

I used the store entrance, never locked; it never occurred to either of my parents that anyone would want to steal antiques. The heavy wooden door creaked as always, better than a bell. I walked through the store, smelling the slow rot of wood and stale paper mixed in with the aroma of kerosene they used to heat several rooms. It was dark, but I could tell that the place lay in disarray. My father, always acquiring, had thrown pieces wherever he went, not where they fit. I tripped over what I found later to be a horse-collar mirror. Last time I'd been home, my mother still kept the place orderly, with separate rooms for the toys, the woodwork, the china and brass, the quilts, the books. Order was all over now.

At our wooden staircase, long painted blue, I reached for the railing and climbed. Upstairs felt musty. Mom had laid carpeting, a shag forest green before I was born for me to crawl on, but now the forest had withered, making the floor look sick and hairy. Not the carpet you'd want to die above.

I knocked on their bedroom door.

"Grant!" I heard her croak. "Told you! *Out!* I mean it!"

I opened the door. She sat upright in bed reading a bestseller Marsha and I had mocked once in the mega-bookstore, something about secret conspiracies. Most of our best last moments had involved some type of common angst. We both had too much angst at too old an age, an affliction my mother had also suffered.

She was clearly sick. The brown in her hair was fading to iron-gray, and her bones trembled as she adjusted her frail body in the bed sheets. She could read what she wanted.

“So he called you,” she said flatly.

“*You* should have called me.” I forced a smile. “Yeah. I’m here.”

She nodded and waved me toward the bed. There she stroked my hand and called me Jebidiah. The name sounded ancient.

“You bring your wife?” she asked.

Marsha and I had eloped. My idea. I hadn't wanted her to meet my parents, or them her. I'd somehow believed that together they would ruin each other. As time passed I shared whatever information would make each party look good, but I never wanted both sides to convene. Better that my past not mingle with my present. I hadn't told my parents about the separation, half-hoping Marsha and I might reconcile.

“We're through,” I said, believing it for the first time.

She placed her book on the nightstand.

“I'm sorry,” she said. “Not that I knew the girl. What happened?”

I shrugged. I hadn't figured it out yet, not on the long drive home. Discussing it with this fading woman seemed beyond moot.

“We were different people.”

She grimaced in what looked like physical pain. After a long moment she spoke:

“Everyone's different people. That's what makes it hard.”

“I guess it just got too hard then, being different.”

She nodded gravely. Our years apart cramped us. We'd too much catching up to do, and we'd become strangers, both of us wondering: would there be enough time to

know enough to say anything worth leaving? If so, we would begin with the obvious, the news.

“Why are you yelling for Dad to stay out?” I asked her.

“We're different people too,” she said. “Always were.”

“Meaning what?”

She shrugged and began her story, of what I'd missed in my long absence. It sounded somehow inevitable, yet still surprised me, an unlikely poetic justice. She saw this too, knew it to be her punishment, as if the shifting currents of marriage weren't punishment enough.

“We're through,” she said.

Predictably, I found him hovering over his desk in the cellar, his long gray bangs in his round glasses, repairing a pair of old ice skates, sneaking glances into a book outlining how they'd fit skates in the late nineteenth century. The usual clutter of errant tools and books surrounding him had been reduced to make room for a camping cot, a mini-fridge, and a microwave. Whereas Mom looked gaunt and infirm upstairs, my father appeared fit, even robust, below her, as if his subterranean livelihood had preserved him along with his findings.

As always, he ignored me in favor of the object in front of him.

I walked over and opened the fridge. Inside was a lone beer. I reached in and opened it.

“You're running low,” I said, sipping it.

“What?” He turned to me, clearly irritated. Then he smiled and nodded in

greeting.

“Of beer.” I shut the door.

“You see your mother?” His attention returned the skates.

“Yeah.”

He resumed work, silently. I sat on a stool and leafed through a copy of his favorite trade magazine, *Restoration Digest*. On the cover was a picture of Sonja Davis, the host of the local PBS show *In with the Old*, a knockoff of *Antiques Roadshow* where instead of people bringing in their valuables, a crew came to an estate and appraised a person’s whole collection then restored pieces for them. The show was three years old and ran out of Columbus.

When it first aired, my father had been asked to be the host, as his renown as antiquities expert throughout the state was now significant. At the first taping, however, he’d made members of the family cry:

“Oh, utter trash,” he called one desk.

He later deemed the mother’s favorite brooch, a family heirloom, “completely worthless.”

They’d replaced him with Sonja, a posturing brunette, keeping him on as “Consultant Restorer.” He still went on every monthly shoot, feeding Sonja, who knew nothing, his expertise.

According to my mother, he fed her more than that. After a few shows, Mom had told me upstairs, they’d begun sleeping together. To make it worse, Sonja was younger, about ten years older than me.

“Good press,” I said, after reading some of the inside feature.

He just nodded, handling a skate.

“Wish it were you?”

That made him turn again to me, frowning.

“Is that what you think of me?”

I shrugged. “No, but according to Mom, you're fucking the talent.”

“Language, Jeb. And I'm not seeing Sonja that way anymore.” He twisted back to work.

“Good. She's way too young for you,” I said. “What were you thinking?”

He didn't answer. He was sharpening the skate blades.

“You know anything about the Internet?” he asked, eyes still on the skates. “You know how to make a website and play on that eBay?”

I said sure. I'd done web ads for about three years, the good years around the millennium, back when Marsha still thought my design career clever. Not that he would have known.

“There.” He finished with the skates, holding them up for me to admire, looking as giddy as a kid. He always did after finishing one of his jobs. It was the only time he'd ever played with me, briefly, until midway through our game of cards or Battleship he'd remember his next project and a solemn expression spread over his features, making him cantankerous until we were done and he could get started.

“Well,” he continued, “Sonja was telling me about putting the store online. She says it's silly not to because people don't travel anymore to buy our merchandise. I thought of you right away.”

“You mean that work I do that isn't worth anything?”

He grinned, shaking his head.

“I mean your legacy. This thing with your mother’s got me thinking it’s time for you to join us here, the way you’re supposed to. I was thinking we’d use your talents.”

He’d never told me I had talent before. It was too late now.

“I’m here for Mom,” I told him. “Just Mom. She’s dying, right?”

He frowned.

“She is,” he said. “So are we.”

He placed the skates on the floor and reached for a table lamp with a thin crack in its porcelain base. He inspected it carefully before beginning to take it apart. I finished the beer and climbed the two flights of stairs without saying goodbye, goodnight.

My days drifted.

Each morning I’d rise, see to my mother and her breakfast, open the store, attempt to clean and organize it to the best of my memory, prepare her lunch, play a few games of hearts, read a magazine or a novel beside a window, then fix dinner and watch television with her until bed.

The monotony of it felt like *I* was dying. Sometimes I’d run errands or drive her to the hospital, but I was too much inside my thoughts. Coming home gave me time to judge my own failed marriage against my parents’.

The similarities were striking. As with Marsha and me, my mother and father had recognized each other's faults without entirely separating from or correcting them. Only they had done it for years, were still doing it. Like our refusing to sell our loft, neither of my parents had given up on the tannery. Even at the worst of their lives together, lately,

they'd simply divided it. My mother took the upstairs and kept mostly to her bed. My father converted his basement studio to a sleeping quarter. This left the middle of the place, the store, in neglect.

But still open. Neither had thought to close it. For a time my father had attempted to run it, but he was a poor retailer. He lacked my mother's propriety, her grace, and therefore few regular shoppers came in anymore. He knew it was him, so he'd called me.

The few customers that came my first few weeks in charge were out-of-towners, drawn most likely by the billboard my mother had rented on the then in-progress interstate five years ago. She'd let me design it, the only reason for the sign according to my father, who later had to admit that one, I hadn't entirely wasted my education, and two, the billboard was good for business.

He'd always been obtuse regarding practicalities. I wondered when he'd noticed Mom's cancer. He hadn't noticed her affairs years ago, was oblivious even when the entire town knew about it. When he began his own recent infidelity, he expected, I believe, the same courtesy. He couldn't understand hypocrisy, his own or anyone's, and therefore had trouble with any knotty ordeal.

As always, he went in and out of the house at his leisure, bringing back with him pieces from clients or personal finds he thought he could sell. Watching him reminded me how committed he was to his part of our business, how focused and absorbed he made himself. He also studied the scripts for *In with the Old*, for Sonja Davis, and was often out on location or in the television studio's workshop.

But I always knew when he was home; I'd hear a rumble from below, his jogging up and down the basement stairs. This old exercise, along with his pathological work

ethic, proved how little of him and of home had changed.

We barely spoke again until I'd situated myself, a full month at home. Then he came barreling up the basement stairs with the Sunday paper in his hands.

"Got a surprise for you," he beamed. He opened to the Social Section and pointed to a quarter-page advertisement:

Under New Management!
Harris Antiques and Restoration
Welcomes
Prodigal Son
Jeb Harris
Home
to Take Over Operations.
Open House
Sunday March 28
Refreshments!

"Jesus Christ, no!" I said.

"What? I thought you'd like it."

"I told you I'm here for Mom. Not you. Not this."

"Well, why not? People will want to see you."

In fact I couldn't think of anyone around Highland who wanted to see me, but that wasn't my immediate point. I explained how I didn't care about the store, how I was only getting myself together here, that it wasn't permanent, that I actually hated antiques, and most of the time I hated him.

“You don’t,” he said. “I know you don’t. Not really. You’re just upset.”

“*Everybody* hates you,” I said. “When they know you.”

“Some.” He nodded. “But not you. Tell you what. Go ask your mother. If she doesn’t agree with this idea, we’ll cancel.”

So I trudged up our blue stairs, angry and searching for a way out of his circumstance through my mother like so many times before. Often she’d sided with me, but sometimes not. She could be as baffling and austere as him in the way she’d always ruled. Above my father, or me, or even herself was always the good of the house, the store, the tannery.

“You should do it,” she told me. “But not for him.”

She uttered a few profanities at Dad.

“Then why?” I asked her.

“Because...” She coughed. “I’ve devoted my *life* to this place. And what he’s done with it, his typical nothing, since I’ve been ill kills me beyond dying. You could give me a bit of pride back, Jeb.”

She clutched her latest mystery like its thick plot could sustain her.

“But it’s not *my* store,” I said. “I never wanted this.”

“I know you want to leave.” She nodded. “After I’m done, you can.”

“It doesn’t matter. I have no place to go,” I reminded her.

“Then go back downstairs.”

Some weeks of inventory followed:

Oriental rugs, mission furniture, depression glass, stoneware, duck and bird

decoys, Mason jars, mandolins, china dolls, cathedral radios, a Victorian couch, Renaissance Revival chairs, a Dutch oven....

It made me angry to look up each in the guidebooks and journals, to set aside pieces already promised other dealers. I learned the business preparing for our Open House. I learned, for example, that most of the better antiques in the world merely shift from serious dealer to dealer waiting for the right buyer, as if that bureau or chest were never to be put in a real home until it hit the right store on the right day when the right person walked in at the right time to buy it. The whole process worked like cosmology: somewhere in Pennsylvania there's a wall space that needs filling with a cedar bookshelf traveling through time and Connecticut wall space. And always at mark-up.

My father saw poetry in this. He grew excited checking my notations and pricing. I'd seen more of him during this process than I ever had before.

"Good work," he said late one night. "This is the way it used to be with your mother, during our good days."

I couldn't remember any good days. I remembered him downstairs studying the conservator's art for long hours or out hunting up clients. I remembered Mom stuck with the store, buried, as I was now, under the pressure of selling whatever he brought home, worrying he'd overpaid for something he'd liked that was soft in the market. Antiquing, I saw, was a gamble every day, where even your best relationships could turn to poker games over the condition and history of an item. It explained much, why my mother would often snap at him, why she'd cheated; she'd been the one keeping the accounts while he had the fun part.

They'd chosen a hard life. Often a dishonest one.

During lean times, my father admitted, the job required lying to the novice collector. Worth and truth did not mingle when confronting ignorance. Knowledge itself was your only shield against an inauthentic history. My father described these instances as highly adventurous.

“I could tell you stories,” he chuckled. “Must be a couple thousand footstools used by the founding fathers.”

When he said this, I detected his old envy. His big dream had been to work for a museum, to restore pieces that actually held significance. He’d dropped his doctoral degree for the time to study “physical history,” but in evading the war he’d had to settle for this, for us. Ironically, now that he had some notoriety with the PBS show, he seemed suddenly intent to salvage our store.

“You start on our website yet?” he asked me one morning.

“I thought you were joking.”

“No, get going on it.”

This meant I had to call Marsha for my Mac, scanner, and digital camera. I’d need to convince her to ship these.

“Why?” she asked, sounding curious over the phone. “You getting work down there?”

“Something like that. I’ll pay you for it. Money’s in the mail.”

“Alright. Hey, you think it would have mattered if I’d met your parents? I mean that’s usually how it’s done with couples.”

“I don’t think so,” I said. “They were never the best example of wedded bliss. How’s the place?”

“I’m changing everything around. You know, redecorating. I’m trying to find a new theme.”

“How about some antiques?” I quoted her a few prices on some items, mostly joking.

“Actually that sounds sort of interesting.” She paused. “I still miss you, sometimes.”

Which meant that sometimes she didn't. I told her about the Open House, surprised at how earnest I sounded.

“Maybe you could come down for it,” I added. “You know, a road trip.”

“About two years too late,” she sighed. “But maybe. Email some directions.”

Upon receiving my equipment, I emailed Marsha directions and began the store's first website, melding past to present. The project brought forth a long-buried memory.

During my teen years, the only antiques I could stand were wood and metal signs, the kind that advertised everything from Coca-Cola and Ovaltine to pouch tobacco and feed supplies. My mother hung them like paintings on our walls above the store, and they always sold well (as other wives liked to decorate with them), so my father kept furnishing more of them. These were the only pieces he'd let me help restore, mostly because, if I was careful, they just involved retouching the stenciled lettering with paint or ink.

I credit my hours tracing these with my choice to study design. For one, the signs were always brighter than anything else in the store, their colors full of the optimism promised outside our old walls. Also, I saw how the signs themselves were no longer useful as product placements but as aesthetic choices. I eventually reasoned there were

more advertisements in the world than paintings, at least in common view, and if that was the case, they might as well be pleasing. These older signs I thought were. At seventeen, it wasn't unusual for me to stop and stare for minutes at bait shop or gas station signs around town. This infuriated my father, who saw me as this dreaming, stupid kid, when really I wanted to redesign the world.

I hadn't done much of what I'd wanted since that time, lost in the murk of bad commercial tastes that had redesigned me instead. For the website I decided to revisit my inspiration and go back to my roots. I spent the first few days studying some of the signs my father had lying around, deciding finally that our homepage would resemble a large vintage Farm Fresh Milk ad. Each consecutive page, I then planned, would recall other classic posters.

A week before the Open House, I showed my work to my father.

"Looks too fancy." He shook his head. "People'll get confused. Why can't you just keep it simple? Just put the merchandise up there with a price. Boom. Done."

His comments sounded too much like what I'd often been up against in Chicago, the pragmatic client resisting the art, resisting a better vision of the same tired product.

"No," I argued. "I'm showing Mom."

I trudged up the stairs again, seeking approval.

And she loved it. Or at least that's what she said. Really I think she just loved me doing it. I could tell because she called it beautiful, a work of art, the best website she'd ever seen (and probably the only one). I went back to him.

"Thumbs up," I said, feeling triumphant. "It stays the way it is."

“And why is her opinion better than mine?” he asked.

“I’m not answering that.”

“She’s being biased. Look, I know more about this business than you. Antique buyers are older. Old people can barely use the Net. They’ll get lost in all your frills.”

I felt hurt, mostly because he was right: my design, although a fitting homage, had forgotten its audience. I recalled Marsha laughing at my mattress ad, wondering aloud if I’d ever allow myself to succeed. I didn’t know what that meant. I couldn’t understand how I was stopping myself.

That night, tired and sullen, I watched that month’s edition of *In with the Old* with my mother. Sonja Davis was examining a set of golf clubs in Portsmouth, Ohio, smiling cautiously, as if she was the family’s daughter-in-law.

Mom frowned at the screen. “Your father only likes her because she says exactly what he tells her.”

“Why are we watching this?” I asked.

“Because it’s a good show. She’s not the reason I loathe him now. She’s just his puppet, no real threat to me. Your father still loves me.”

This, I thought, was her pain medication, which had upped in dosage recently, making her deliriously forgiving.

“He did some job showing it,” I said.

“He didn’t.” She shrugged. “So he forgot. Then so did I. And there you have it. Ah, my favorite part.”

The show cut away from Sonja to a montage of my father working with a three-wood in the TV studio workspace. His movements were sure and fluid, but he didn’t say

a word. A voiceover, more agreeable than my father ever sounded, described what he was doing.

Mom had mailed me an early tape of *In with the Old* before she knew about Sonja, before I knew about Marsha and me. One Friday night, movie night, between *Dracula 2000* (my choice) and *The Secret Garden* (hers), Marsha popped in the cassette.

“Come on,” she’d said when I objected. “I want to see my father-in-law.”

She waited, and when the camera cut to my father restoring a coffee table, she watched him work as if mesmerized.

“That’s really impressive,” she said. “I mean the skill, the craft, the knowing what to do. Can you do anything like that?”

Her question was innocent enough at the time, but, after we split, it magnified in my memory as the very moment she began questioning what I could do. What could I do? What didn’t I do?

As I contemplated my father’s affair with the younger, attractive woman on screen, I recalled how my wife had been transfixed over my father’s show. Was she, like Sonja, attracted to him?

There seemed so much to repel a person, the way he spoke to people, the way he avoided the living. But with dead or dying things he could work miracles, as he was trying to do now for my mother with the Open House.

I was just his excuse. What he was really doing was throwing Mom a goodbye party.

On its eve we stayed up most of the night getting the store ready, rearranging, dusting, decorating. He surprised me by remembering exactly where certain pieces went

and why. When we finished, he revealed how he'd mailed or phoned all of Mom's old friends in the business, all their old clientele around town.

"Think she'll like it?" he asked me.

"How should I know?"

In his hand was a cigar box he wanted to display. He kept fingering its top, popping it open and shut.

"She's really planning on coming down, right?"

"That's what she said."

"Good. What's the doctor been saying? How's she doing?"

I shook my head.

He sighed. "But has she been strong lately? You know, talkative?"

"We watched your show the other night."

"Did she curse?" he asked, abandoning the cigar box.

"Of course."

"Good." He nodded. "That means she's among the living."

"Why'd you do it?" I asked him.

His facial features tightened. For the first time he looked genuinely old to me. He looked thoughtful, searching, as if he's once known the answer, to everything he did, but had lost it while moving forward toward what came next. He clearly wasn't accustomed to pausing to account for himself.

"I don't know. Why'd she do it to me?"

"You weren't around," I told him. "You never noticed her, or me. I'm amazed you both stayed."

He locked his eyes on mine, perhaps impressed with my honesty. Then he moved around the room, touching the merchandise, examining what he and I had prepared, a store ready for business, ready for tomorrow, however it would go. When he approached the cigar box, he stopped and opened it, as if expecting it to yield something, a cigar, an ancient scent still lingering inside. Never an excited or a nervous man, my father appeared apprehensive. For a moment he looked like he was going to deliver a much needed and out of character soliloquy. But just as quickly, this flickered out of him, and he shrugged in his standard noncommittal manner.

“Anything can be repaired. And this is my place, your legacy, her home. Who else would take us?”

By all outward accounts, our Open House was a success.

Around noon, I helped Mom down the stairs after the crowd had built enough for the rooms to grow warmer. I placed her in the china room, where with her white shawl and pale face she seemed to blend. Visitors approached her cautiously, as if she too would break if mishandled. They complimented her taste throughout the years. Some told stories of auctions and favorite gifts, others told her about their children, what they had become.

“But isn’t it special that your Jeb has come home to continue your work?”

She nodded. Mostly she nodded.

When not at the register (and people were buying, small items mostly), I was occupied with the caterer, and then some old teachers from high school cornered me with questions I didn’t want to answer.

My father kept out of sight, assuring everyone, especially Mom, a fair day. I

assumed he'd stayed down in the basement, but later he said he'd taken the opportunity to creep upstairs and sit at the foot of their bed.

"To feel like a person again," he told me.

He wasn't anywhere around when someone tapped my shoulder.

"Jeb?"

For the briefest second I let myself hope it was Marsha come down to redecorate our apartment, not with antiques but with me. Hadn't she missed me? Hadn't her tone mixed curiosity in with the usual regret?

But, once turned, I found Sonja Davis inspecting me.

She looked better in person, decked in suede and leather boots, city winter clothing. I could almost forgive my father just looking at her.

"I know I shouldn't be here," she whispered like I'd understand this, we kids of another generation. "But I couldn't resist welcoming you back. I was just so curious what Grant's son would be like, and I wouldn't dare come here without a crowd."

"Alright." I shook her hand, simultaneously wanting to stay and flee.

"I'm so sorry for what I...for what *we* did," she continued. "And such bad timing. I truly feel terrible."

"I'm sure."

"I can't imagine what it must have been like to grow up with Grant. I mean, I go crazy working with him."

I didn't know what she meant by *crazy*. The way I felt? The way a lover would?

"I want to buy something," she insisted. "Just something to remember my mistakes. I know it isn't much to do, but I want to help you in some small way. Here.

These.”

In her hands were two metal signs, one for Hershey’s Chocolate Syrup, the other for Sears Evening Wear. As soon as I saw them, I could visualize each hanging in some city loft like mine and Marsha’s, Chocolate Syrup on her brick kitchen walls, Evening Wear in the bedroom.

“These are excellent,” I told her.

And they were. I’d studied both intently while researching the website. But neither was valuable by any estimation. We’d priced each at about fifty dollars after learning that, because of their brand names, so many of these signs had been produced nationwide.

“And rare,” I lied. “They go for around two hundred each. I can sell them to you for three-fifty.”

She looked surprised, a look she’d often faked on television. I could tell she was reconsidering, so I leaned in and held her arm.

“It’s a warm gesture,” I whispered. “This really means so much...to me.”

She smiled and reached for her checkbook. Once she began a gesture, she finished it. She was that type of woman, like Marsha.

“Now,” I said, lifting the signs for her. “Let’s get you out of here before my mother sees you.”

I took her out the back door and walked with her to her silver SUV, where I packed the signs securely in the back. I could feel her watching me.

“You’re as oddly charming as your father, you know,” she said. “I can really tell you’re his son.”

I nodded, straining to grin.

“Well,” she said, squeezing my hand, “goodbye.”

I waved her farewell and stayed outside after she left.

I didn't want to go back inside yet, to the party and the people celebrating, it seemed to me, my mother's demise. I didn't want to talk to them about my life or have them look at me, thinking me the sad, strange son. I wanted to hide, to find a place where I could just get comfortable again. I wanted my wife back, but she was history now.

I pulled out Sonja's check and chuckled. I wondered if she'd ever know, if some expert like my father would ever tell her when she boasted at some inevitable cocktail party of how she'd gotten both signs reduced because she'd gone to the last days of an old store.

Then I noticed on the memo line a phone number. And under that the message,
Call me, Jeb. We can talk.

I stood there a bit longer, dazed, gazing up at our house, our store, estimating my legacy and the costs of pursuing what's already used.

CHAPTER 8

ARROWHEADS

To make peace with yesterday.

That was the goal while watching over the family business, for however long the family lasted. In the antique trade, however, yesterday is today, and the past gets priced.

I was always considering the price I paid, whether home, away, or back again. So my peace came late. I couldn't stop my blame, and was, therefore, unprepared when blame found me.

It came in the form of a bloody boy.

He arrived one afternoon in the spring, one season after my return, right when I'd finally settled into the static decline of everything: my mother, my marriage, my career, my own desire to move off the store stool. Most days I didn't even want to raise my head from the old pulp magazines I'd found in the back. These could take my mind away. I enjoyed reading how the science fiction writers had envisioned our progress, how wrong their once future imaginings had turned out

I didn't even see him at first. Simply heard the door creak open and then close. I raised my head from *Astounding Stories*, but couldn't see his head below our register. The boy was so small I thought him the Chinook blowing in from the plains, unhinging the door. It was a windy day, the kind spirits might take to reach their end.

He walked around the store for a few minutes without my knowledge.

“What're these?” he asked, startling me.

He was in a doorway, holding a tray of arrowheads.

At first I didn't notice the arrowheads. I was too busy examining his face, a

collection of bruises, including a black eye and a bloody lip. What looked like cuts ran up and down his right arm. His jeans were torn and bloodstained at the knees.

“Are you okay?” I asked him.

He didn't answer, just placed the tray on the floor to examine its contents.

“These rocks?” He knelt and began unloading the tray.

He didn't look any older than ten. I noted his backpack and the time: three-thirty in the afternoon. School was out.

“In a way,” I said. “What happened to you?”

“Nothin'.”

He dabbed his lip with a tissue, rose, and exited, just as quickly and quietly as he'd come, leaving the arrowheads scattered across the floor.

Cleaning up after him, I considered his condition, and the boy's code for living with it. You didn't admit it, you didn't talk about it. Not in a town like Highland. Where you got damaged was a private matter. You didn't speak on your bruises. It could have come from school, it could have come from home, but you lived through those places.

Order restored, I returned to the rocket ships and jet packs of a more innocent age.

He was back the next day, looking better.

I could focus on him now, his dark hair and freckles. He wore a black concert T-shirt for *Skid Row*, too big for him, maybe a hand-me-down or a mother's purchase from a used bin. He looked poor, white trash they would say, if not now then later.

He went straight for the arrowhead tray, probing them with dirty nails. He stood there silently for some time, examining each one. I pretended not to watch him.

Only when he turned to leave did I speak:

“Hold it.” I stayed calm. “Put them back.”

“What?” he asked.

“The arrowheads.”

“What's an *arrow* head?”

“In your pocket.”

“I didn't take it!”

The indignity. Not of the theft, but of this inevitable part of getting caught, my moralizing. He already knew it was wrong.

“Just put them back and I'll forget it,” I said.

He didn't argue, just nodded and went back to the tray.

He returned all but one, his favorite no doubt.

“You should at least know what you're stealing,” I said.

“Pointed rocks?”

“*Arrowheads*. Made by the Indians.”

“Ain't no Indians around here,” he said.

“Not anymore,” I agreed. I walked to the tray. “These were what they left.”

“Why'd they leave 'em?”

A question I couldn't answer. It seemed suddenly like losing your keys, like dropping your wallet in an alley.

“They were done,” I guessed. “Fighting, hunting. Vanished.”

He looked at me, interested I could tell, but he needed to move if he was to get away with one.

“Stupid.” He shook his head.

He flew out the door, leaving me to wonder if the word was reared at me or an entire civilization.

He returned the next day, at the same time.

This time his sweatshirt was torn and his face covered with mud.

“What keeps happening to you?” I asked, joining him at the arrowhead tray.

He ignored my question. “How much these worth anyways?”

“Depends,” I said. “On size, shape, lots of things.”

“How'd you get so many?”

“People find them in fields, in the woods, wherever they might have lived. People dig just looking for them.” It occurred to me he'd have no idea the significance of the history. He was simply impressed with the quantity, the weaponry.

“How much is this one worth?”

He pulled out the specimen I let him take yesterday.

“Don't know.” I'd never properly examined the arrowheads. Even as a child they'd somehow eluded my attention, never as colorful as the cards and comics of the modern age. They weren't even priced in the tray, somehow still evading me.

“Well, how much for all them?” the boy asked.

“Probably a lot.”

“You should know, right?”

His tone held the slightest hint of accusation. I wondered if this was what caused his troubles somewhere. He wasn't incorrect; as the man who ran this store, I should

know the worth of every item in it, and it wouldn't do to say that my parents would know, that they were the real experts. That would be against code, akin to having your mother do your homework or fight your battles.

I nodded.

“Why don't you come back tomorrow,” I said. “I'll look into the whole thing.”

“Alright.” He turned to leave.

“Hold on,” I said. “What's your name?”

“Stew,” he said. “For Stewart.”

Later that day my father returned from a job he had in Point Pleasant. He looked tired and sullen, irritated when I approached him on his way through the store.

“Hey,” I asked, “where do we get the arrowheads?”

“Why?” He'd never cared much about our arrowheads either; he couldn't repair them.

“A customer was asking. Wants to know more about them.”

He paused, surprised maybe. I'd never been this active regarding customers since I'd taken over. He'd been contented with this, with me as a warm body, but I knew he wanted me to care, as he did, as my mother still did upstairs. He brightened at my inquiry.

“Rock shop around Jackson, out of business now. Hannah always ordered from them. They never moved much for us.”

“So we couldn't get more?”

He considered this, my first foray into investment. I could almost read his thoughts: what harm could a few arrowheads do? It wouldn't break us. I might begin

learning on my own.

“We could. Look into it. That's your job now.” He paused a second. “Another thing. My truck's acting up. Needs an engine service or something. Take it into Eddie's Garage tomorrow.”

He'd overreached. I wasn't that committed, not to him. In fact, I was insulted.

“How's that my job?”

“Your job's to keep my job going,” he said. “I'm busy.”

“I'm busy too,” I lied. “We're all busy.”

“With arrowheads?” he scoffed. “That's not busy.”

Eddie's Garage didn't have an Eddie. He was long gone of a heart attack since 1988. As homage to him, infamous SOB that he was, the name was never changed. I hadn't been in there since high school when I would take our Econoline over. Since then Dad had traded in the van for a truck, but the system worked the same; when the vehicle broke down, it went to Eddie's.

I didn't know that Travis Carlyle owned the garage now.

The scar I'd left him had never entirely healed. A thin white line streaked down his cheek, looking like a line of chalk inerasable on some weathered school board.

Without the scar I probably wouldn't have recognized him, even with the name *Travis* patched to his shirt. It had been thirteen, fourteen years since I'd seen him. He'd beefed up in high school, a vigilant weightlifter, but now he simply looked lean, his face stretched and creased around the scar. He looked like a man now, a hard man, a working man. I didn't think I looked that old yet.

He couldn't place me. I hadn't been on his radar in years either. So he went straight to work, inspecting the truck with his team. I felt safely incognito sitting in his service area reading a magazine.

In an hour he returned to say that the truck would take some extra time. They needed to order the parts from out of town. It was an older truck. Its fuel tank was cracked, a major job. Typical of my father to run his vehicle into the ground. It could take a week, he said. "And it'll cost you."

"Fine," I said, unconcerned about the cost; it wasn't my money.

Travis nodded. "We just need a number with a name."

"Harris," I blurted, not thinking. "Jeb."

His pen stopped. He took a long look at me. For a moment we were both back at the Christmas tree lot, feeling our mutual loathing.

Travis' face twisted, from surprise to scowl to service. I saw him conjure every bit of customer relations he had.

"I'll call when it's ready," he spoke and strolled back into his garage.

Stew was there when I returned home, waiting on the steps for me to open the store.

"Yer late," he said.

"I know," I said. "Come on inside."

The night before I'd found some books to show him, some general texts we had on the ancient tribes, the Adena, the Hopewell, the Fort Ancient people.

"They were mound builders around here," I said, showing him the pictures. "Here. Look." I pointed. "That's Serpent Mound, not far from here."

The book showed the aerial view of the most famous of the effigy mounds, shaped as a snake, 1370 feet long, swallowing what various scholars thought was an egg, or the sun, or a frog. Nobody knew for sure.

“That's where they found some arrowheads,” I said. “Around there.”

“Cool,” Stew said. “What's it mean?”

Again, I didn't have the right answer for him. The historian was my father. He knew all about this region. I went downstairs for him.

“I need you a second,” I said.

“What for?” He was neck-deep into his Point Pleasant work, a rolltop desk that wouldn't roll. “How's the truck going?”

Bitterly, I wanted to say, but didn't. I couldn't expect my father to remember my personal history with Travis Carlyle. He was only useful with academic history.

“A week maybe,” I said. “Come upstairs for a minute. I want you to give a lesson to my customer.”

Stew was still examining the mound builder book upstairs. He turned to my father, who didn't seem fazed by my customer being a mere boy.

“What's this?” Dad glanced into the book. “You must be our arrowhead customer.”

He launched into the mysteries surrounding Serpent Mound. I recognized the lecture from my own childhood. Dad had taken me there, in fact, one of the few father-son outings we'd ever had. He'd had a client in Adams County and took me along because it was summer and I had nothing to do. I remember being hot and bored at the site. Serpent Mound wasn't at all as exciting from the ground. Where you couldn't appreciate

its grandeur from above, it was only a long winding mound of dirt. Also, whatever ancient or mystic beliefs had formed it seemed buried beneath my own impatience toward my father.

Stew didn't have these associations, so he sat on my stool enraptured at the possible tribes and the sheer age of the site. When Dad told him Serpent Mound was somewhere between 1070 and 2900 years old, depending on sources, Stew let out a wondrous, "Dang."

Dad smiled. "So your arrowheads here are probably just as old."

He moved to the tray and began picking them up, examining them as if for the first time.

"They worth a lot?" Stew asked him.

Dad shook his head.

"Not as much as they should be," he said.

He went on about how the quality of the points worked on a ten point scale, decreasing the value the duller the point.

"How about this'un?" Stew held up his own stolen specimen. He must have carried it everywhere he went.

Dad examined it.

"I'd give it an eight maybe on the scale. That's pretty good. But they're all good."

He became serious: "They're artifacts, and therefore priceless. Whatever money value we place on them, even the dull ones, is worthless compared to what they tell us."

"What's that?" Stew asked.

"What the people were, where they came from."

He told Stew about the how each arrowhead had a “type” based on location. Each could be identified by its stone (primarily flint, obsidian, cherts) and its shape. He described the different sort of “flint knapping” or chipping that gave different shapes. Most he said were Clovis Points, found only in North America, but even these varied according to where you where. Ours had Ohio Points or Adena Points because they'd been found locally.

“Science can even tell how they were used,” Dad said. “Blood traces can tell if these hit animals or men, if they were used for hunting or war.”

“Wow,” Stew said, reexamining his own, as if he could see the blood.

Dad turned to me.

“Jeb, go find us a stick outside. A straight one.”

I went out and scoured our back yard, giddy suddenly for no real reason. I found a birch branch recently knocked down by a strong spring storm and jogged back inside.

“Okay, here.” Dad took the limb and Stew's arrowhead. “This is how they placed them on the arrows, with tar sometimes or what was called an atlati.”

He pretended to attach the arrowhead but quickly became unhappy with mere imagining. He reached for a rubber band sitting on my register and began attaching the stone.

“There,” Dad said when he finished. “Now you'd be able to really do some damage.”

Stew laughed. He was a better pupil than I'd ever been.

“They should really teach you these sorts of things in school.” Dad strolled to his stairs, waving goodbye. “But now you can start your own collection.”

“I ain't got money for it.” Stew looked to me.

“We can work something out,” I said.

Travis never called. The week passed, and I had to go back to Eddie's Garage to check on Dad's truck.

“How long?” I asked Travis.

“Not ready yet.” He grinned. “We're finding all kinds of new problems.”

I felt this the typical mechanic's abuse, compounded for personal reasons. Getting the truck back seemed like getting a slice of pizza from him in sixth grade; he wouldn't offer it until he was done torturing me with the possibility. Only now we were adults and money was involved. He could fleece me.

“Look, it's not *my* truck,” I said, hoping this information would help. “It's my father's, and he needs it for his work.”

“Then he should take better care of it,” Travis said. “Check back next week.”

I went home and told my father. He was angry, but having gone to Eddie's for years, he couldn't imagine that they were cheating him. I was too embarrassed to tell him what I actually thought was happening. He borrowed my car for a few shorter trips, but he would need the truck soon to deliver the desk to Point Pleasant.

Meanwhile, I'd struck a deal with Stew: he would come a few days each week to do some errands for me around the store. In exchange, I would give him an arrowhead of his choice.

I didn't mind gradually giving him our whole collection. No one else was coming for them. Most had probably been here since I was his age. I told myself I was doing Stew

a public service. This was the type of story you always heard when somebody became famous, how they were isolated and poor until some third party intervened into their lives to give them an interest in the larger world. I had visions of Stew growing to be an archeologist or anthropologist because of me. Also, the arrangement meant I could give him chores I never wanted to do, the sweeping, the mopping, cleaning our restroom.

He was a sturdy worker, quiet in his duties. We never discussed the arrowhead that began his collection. That theft, like the mound builders, was ancient history and only mattered in how it had penetrated his interest.

I kept showing him history books that Dad had collected, updating his interest with lore on the more modern local tribes. The Shawnee were the most storied. Most enthralling to Stew was the tale of Blue Jacket, a white man who went to live with the natives, rising to chief and later leading the Shawnee into battle against the whites.

“Says here he went with Indians to *avoid* a fight,” Stew said. “He wuz only seventeen when they was gonna attack his brother.”

“Always best to avoid a fight,” I said, hoping to stress this. Stew came in looking roughed-up every other day. I knew better than to directly ask him about it by now.

He nodded, thinking.

“But later, as Indian, he got angry.” Stew pointed to the book. “In this here Battle of St. Clair he killed his own cousin. Didn't know it though.”

“That's the trouble with fighting,” I said. “You don't know who you'll hurt.”

I saw him contemplating this, so I pressed forward.

“Of course, you have to stand up for yourself, for what you think is right.”

“You ever get in a fight?” he asked me.

“Once,” I answered. “When I was your age.”

It was on my mind, seeing Travis again, our war ongoing. We'd been scouts, under the same code. That made me Blue Jacket, I suppose; I'd left by choice.

“Yeah? So what happened?”

“I was pushed,” I said. “Too far.”

“So what'd you do?”

“I scared him. So bad I scared myself.”

“How?”

Stew leaned forward, looking at me as if I were some old chief with a war story.

“I cut him,” I said. “In the face.”

Stew nodded, approvingly.

“But it was wrong.” I paused for emphasis. “I've regretted it every day since.”

A lie. It wasn't wrong. Or I didn't think it was. I could even picture Travis' face, his adult face, taunting me with the truck, and I wanted to reopen that scar.

“Why?” Stew saw through me.

“There just had to be a better way,” I said.

When the phone rang a week later, I expected Travis, offering the truck, as he had to eventually. He could only play with me for so long. We were adults now, and he had a business to run, a legal responsibility to me. But it didn't feel right. I didn't feel very adult waiting for his call. I began dreading our next exchange, imagining the worst of what could happen. I'd been reading too many of our old pulp fantasies, where every conflict ended in violence, even in a more civilized future.

Eventually, I confided in my mother what was happening. At first she was simply tickled that Dad's truck had been hi-jacked. But she remembered what I'd done, better than I did. She, after all, was the mother of the boy who'd done it, a worse position.

“You know,” she said, “the other parents thought you should be arrested and sent to some juvenile program. There was even talk of throwing you out of school unless I took you to counseling, to see a children's specialist.”

“Really?” I'd never heard that.

By now Mom was seeing her own specialist, a bone specialist. Her cancer had spread there, making her skeleton sag. If she'd been a fat woman, her flesh might have compensated, but as she was she appeared to be shrinking on the bed before my eyes. And whenever we reminisced like this, she looked even smaller and somehow farther away.

“But it was just kids not liking each other,” she continued. “That's what I told them. There's no solution for that.”

“I'm surprised they believed you.”

“They didn't,” she said. “They had a watch on you. If you did anything else we would have had some things to figure out. But you didn't. You were a good boy, Jeb.”

“He had it coming,” I said.

My mother gave me a searing glare. Out of context it might have frightened me. Coming as it did from her gaunt face, the gesture belonged to some crone from myth or literature, cursing the callous and callow.

“I don't think so,” she said. “Maybe a punch or a kick, but not what you did. I saw his father and mother. I had to see their faces and say how sorry I was. I'll never forget it

was Christmas Day, and their boy's face was mangled.”

I'd forgotten the fallout. To me the battle itself was the important part, as in a grade school history book. The before and after hadn't made the pages of my memory.

“Let the boy have the truck for a while,” she advised. “He's only hurting your father.”

So when the phone rang, I reached for it, ready to accept whatever unreasonable repair cost my childhood made due.

But it wasn't Travis. On the other end was Alan Griffin, vice-principal at the Highland Elementary School. He didn't want to get into it over the phone, he said, but could I come down?

“There's been an incident,” he explained. “With Stewart Price.”

The school day was done when I got there, the hallways empty, giving the building a haunted atmosphere. Perhaps an hour ago, screams had chased laughter here, but now the quiet of the corridors turned the place melancholy. The classroom doors were gaily decorated as if to disguise what dull learning I remembered came from inside. More than anything I felt large walking past them, big, as if I might break something delicate or fragile.

Entering the principal's office felt absurd, almost like I was in trouble. I'd never been in trouble as a child, aside from the time I gashed open Travis Carlyle's face.

Alan Griffin was in his office, hunched over his desk, speaking on the phone:

“Two boys, yes...No, I don't want to give out their names...Because they've been through enough...” He glanced up at me. “Yes, I'm dealing with that now...Call later and

I'll know more about it.”

He hung up.

“That was the newspaper.” He shook his head. “Have a seat.”

I did, examining Alan Griffin. He looked familiar in the way so many public servants do. That is, he looked miserable. Though he wasn't old, he gave the impression of age, of authority. His clothing, a short-sleeved collar, a bad tie, told me immediately he wasn't a contemplative man. He dressed for efficiency, probably the same way he worked, putting out fires. What but problems could a vice-principal's day include?

“You're Grant Harris, owner of that antique shop?”

“I'm his son,” I said. “I'm running the store.”

Griffin nodded slightly: good enough.

“I'm going to ask you a few questions.” He leaned forward with a pen and paper.

“Please tell me straight.”

“What's happened?” I asked.

He ignored my inquiry. He'd play detective here, not the news.

“You know a boy named Stewart Price?”

He already knew that. This must have been how he patronized students.

“I do,” I said. “I know Stew.”

“How long have you known him?”

“Only about two weeks.”

Griffin contemplated this information before proceeding.

“How, may I ask, do you know him?”

“He comes by and cleans a little for me. What's this about?”

“Anything strange to you about him?”

I nodded. “He's always a bit ragged. Like he'd fighting or getting beaten. Is that what's happened?”

Griffin leaned back and examined me.

“You ever ask him why?” he asked.

“Of course. But he's a reserved boy. I was hoping to get closer with him first.”

Griffin shook his head, at me it felt like.

“What's happened?” I asked.

“Has he ever taken anything from you, from your store?”

“No.”

Griffin's eyes went wider, as if he were surprised.

“Have you ever *given* him anything?”

“He's collecting arrowheads,” I said. “I hand him them for the work he does.”

Griffin buried his head in his hands. He looked like he had an enormous headache.

He must have.

“Mr. Harris. Today at school, Stewart Price stabbed two of his classmates.”

“*What?*”

“On the playground,” Griffin said. “Stewart found two sticks, tied two of his *arrowheads* to the tips of them with a rubber band, and jabbed them into two other boys, as they were lining up to return to class.”

“Are they okay?” I asked. “The kids?”

“Punctured the skin above the ribs for one. The other...” He shook his head. “The other's in the hospital. The arrow went all the way into his abdomen. We don't know yet

how bad it is.”

I sat breathless, unsure of how much of this was my doing, unsure of what else to say.

“What about Stew?” I asked.

“He might have gone after more,” Griffin said. “We don't know. A teacher grabbed him. He's been dismissed from school. We take these things seriously, Mr. Harris.”

“I'm sorry,” I said. “I had no idea.”

Another lie. I knew. Somehow I'd known.

“It's a simple matter of responsibility.” Griffin sounded like a principal now, reprimanding. “A boy like that comes into your establishment, you do *not* let him walk out of there with a potential weapon.”

“I didn't consider it a weapon,” I said, grimacing.

I recalled Dad showing Stew how it *could* be a weapon.

“He seemed interested in the history,” I blurted. “Of the Indians, the tribes and their stories.”

It sounded stupid coming out. Griffin confirmed how stupid it was. He glared at me, as if to say that no kid that ever went to his school would be interested in such things.

After a moment's pause he continued, “You're going to get hit with this. Or rather your father is.” A subtle insult. “The parents, once this passes, could have a case against you. Frankly, I wouldn't blame them. In the meantime, I'm going to tell the newspaper exactly what happened. You must understand that this school cannot control what kids bring in their pockets. But adults can control what they give them. This is the age we live

in.”

He didn't need to say that. I already knew what sort of age it was.

In a state I can't define, maybe rage, maybe remorse, I left the elementary school and walked to Eddie's Garage. It needed to end, I thought, not knowing what.

Along the way I blocked out what I'd just learned. One battle at a time. It would be waiting for me later, and I somehow knew I couldn't face it, couldn't look upon it with fair eyes until my own childish trouble was resolved.

Travis was in his garage, hunched over someone else's engine. He didn't look to be working but thinking about working, as if his labor was ninety-percent mental preparation.

“We need to stop this.” I interrupted his study.

He straightened and turned as if he'd been expecting me.

“Stop what?”

I didn't have a good answer. I couldn't even say. Around us motors churned, oil burned, greasy vapors rose and stung my nostrils. How could anyone work here without turning mean? And if they already were mean...

“I want the truck,” I blurted.

“Not ready.”

He said this like it was a very simple fact I couldn't grasp. Not me. I'd best go back to reading impossible stories all day and leave these things to hardened creatures like him.

“It is,” I said, losing the rest of my temper. “I know it is.”

“So you're the mechanic?” He smiled meanly.

“I know what you're doing,” I said.

He shrugged. “What am I doing?”

“Shut up!” I yelled. “You *know* what this is about.”

He sighed, took out a cigarette and walked from the garage into the sunlight. I followed him, awaiting acknowledgement. It didn't come immediately. We just stood there for a moment facing the street and the traffic, listening to the assorted tinkering from the garage behind us. Travis squinted in the sun, looking like a mole getting reacquainted with the surface. He tapped his cigarette on its cardboard casing.

“Want to fight for it?” he asked casually.

He held up the cigarette as if that was what I wanted.

“What?”

He shook his head and smiled.

“Bad joke.” He lit the cigarette and exhaled. “Look Harris, I *don't* like you. I never did, and you don't look much better to me now.”

His admitting this gave comfort. I wasn't crazy.

“But I'm not fucking you over here. That truck's a piece of shit, and it would be better to junk it.”

“So why didn't you say so?”

He grinned.

“Because I know your old man. He's been in here for years. And he's nuts. He'd rather do what we can for it. No matter what it takes.”

I nodded. That sounded accurate.

“Well, you don't have to be a dick about it,” I replied, the angry kid in me

retreating.

“Sure I do.”

His smug expression bore not just the malice but the sport he'd made of me. Playing me as he had was far better than simply cheating me because, in fact, he was doing right by my father's wishes (my father's very creed) as he'd tormented me. It wasn't revenge he'd enacted, but karma.

We shared another lull, staring at the world moving by, listening to it hum. Travis puffed away at his smoke. There was a calmness to him that hadn't existed when he'd been young. I envied that and wondered where or how he'd acquired it. In the afternoon light I could clearly see my old handiwork streaked down his face. Had it somehow made him a better man?

“I'm sorry,” I began, “for...” But I couldn't finish.

“What? This?” He pointed to the scar. “Shit, man. It's been a blessing. Girls always loved it. Course I tell 'em I got it from some bad-ass gangster, not some boy scout.”

He chuckled to himself.

“You know, I don't even remember what it was all about,” he added.

“You called my mother a slut,” I said.

That's how I remembered it, me being chivalrous, defending an honor she didn't have.

“Did I?” He paused. “Well then I deserved it. Shit though, I was a kid. What did I know 'bout anything like that?”

He'd known enough. So had I. Enough to wedge ourselves against each other.

Being enemies had defined us better than our friendships, and Travis and I were the lifelong variety, with no forgiveness, no absolution, no penance. There was nothing else to say about it, nothing now but the dull point of disdain we'd always keep for each other.

“So the truck?” I asked him.

“Next week.” He flicked his cigarette toward the sidewalk. “Maybe.”

I didn't go home after my meeting with Travis. Instead I returned to the elementary school and prowled its playground, finally sitting in a chain-rusted swing.

Since it was near supper, I had the space to myself. I started thinking about how many kids must fight, how common it was. Plenty of articles were written, whole books, on bullying in schools.

I didn't know if Stew had been the bully or the victim, if he'd started the trouble or responded to it, if he was Travis Carlyle or me.

I'd identified with Stew, with his lonely suffering. But that's not all there was to him, or to me. Somewhere inside we'd each wanted blood, needed it to take us somewhere else. I saw the playground suddenly a battlefield, hallowed ground where so many had made or ruined themselves on their way to someone else.

Through this haze of regret, my eyes registered on something in the distance. I stood and walked toward it, beside the teeter-totter. There, on the ground, I found one of Stew's arrowheads.

Reaching down for it felt like I was an archeologist, unearthing a relic from a vanished people. It felt like I'd suddenly uncovered some truth: what all kids had once carried in their pockets.

But the real truth had long been discovered. It was on the news and in the books. It was on the tongue of every boy in town, though boys never spoke of it. It was even in the dirt, as the ancients had seen it: the serpent devours the egg, the sun, the world.

I put the stone into my pocket and left the site.

CHAPTER 9

WHEN YOU RIDE ALONE

“Hey, I know you.”

Those dreaded words of community. They found me unprepared to be known. I heard them walking home one day from our lawyer's office, in a mood to remain anonymous.

I pretended not to hear, quickened my pace away from the man across the street calling to me:

“Yeah!” he insisted. “I know who you are!”

Of course he did. Everyone did now. I'd recently been made the face of my family for all our trouble.

This wasn't my idea but Fred Vanzant's, our attorney. Mom was too ill to bother and Dad, Vanzant said, had been painted as an “agitator” by the media, at first by the local papers, but within a week the story of Stewart Price's primeval schoolyard attack had spread, mostly to the cable news channels, who put their greatest minds, those talking heads, to work on it for one night's broadcast. They'd found some *In with The Old* footage of my father restoring an old cigar store Indian and dubbed him the “Highland Hiawatha” (never mind that this was a reference to the famous peacemaker from the Onondaga tribe of New York State). In the course of their critique they also demonized him for evading Vietnam.

“Actually he's just the opposite,” I clarified. “He's antisocial.”

“Doesn't matter.” Vanzant shook his head. “Your father's the easy target.”

In fact, my father had refused to stop his work on any level to acknowledge the

lawsuit of Patricia and George Washburn, the parents of the boy Stew had pierced through the gut with his arrowhead. Their son had survived, but his hospital stay, we were told, was going to be long and expensive.

“It's absurd,” Dad had dismissed the suit. He never watched television, not even his own show. He had no idea what was happening. “We didn't do this,” he said.

“No, we only made it possible.” I was learning to appreciate the plaintiff's argument.

“That's like blaming the gun store for murder.”

“The gun store wouldn't have *shown* a kid how to kill,” I said. “And they wouldn't have given the gun away.”

“Let's not beat ourselves up about it,” he said, his final word on the subject.

But I was, of course. I'd come home to help my mother, to restore the business' reputation, and now I'd nearly ruined it.

Mom was forgiving. She found the case just as perplexing as my father.

“It's just this culture.” She shrugged, mildly exasperated. “People need to blame someone. We'll win, I'm sure of it.”

The winning fell to me. I was the one to find an attorney and to follow his advice. At Vanzant's urging I “released a statement.” That is, I wrote a letter to the newspaper apologizing for the store's involvement. This put my name on our end of the affair. Dad would still need to testify, if it came to that, but I would be the one to labor over our defense and to smooth over the public. I attended a school board meeting and apologized again. I even visited the sensible second family harmed in the incident, awkwardly offering their injured son an arrowhead of his own. He accepted it, smiling. Every week I

visited Vanzant, who always had some new interpretation of his pretrial work for me to regret.

“We've a problem,” he'd said today. “Our motion to dismiss was denied.”

“Why?” I asked.

“They interviewed Stewart Price yesterday. He's saying you inspired him.”

They had been the Washburns, or rather, their attorney.

“I guess I did,” I said.

“Never say that,” Vanzant scolded. He sighed, as if I was somehow the worst client he'd ever had. “Tell me exactly what you said to him.”

Recounting what I'd said to Stew made for a long day. It had been one of those conversations anyone could interpret; we would say that I warned Stew away from violence, just as the other side would say that I was the voice in his head. Worst of all, my own tale of cutting Travis Carlyle would now be officially recorded in the process. I'd left Vanzant's office feeling hopelessly to blame, contemplating the option of settling out of court.

I'd had too many fingers pointing my way. I wasn't ready for another.

But here was this man, dressed preppy by Highland standards, wearing a navy sport jacket, matching sweater and black jeans. He was pointing directly at me.

“Yeah, I know you.”

He began crossing the traffic. I kept walking with my head lowered. When I turned the corner I ran. If I could have, I would have kept running.

He followed me back to the store, walking in an hour after I'd settled into the business of

ignoring my problems with Dad's problems accounting.

I tried ignoring him, tried to focus on our numbers, but something about this man's gait demanded attention. He didn't accost me immediately as he had on the street, but browsed our collection of old sport and military uniforms. His thick hair was salt and pepper gray, but there was something youthful, something mischievous about him.

After selecting an old army field jacket, he approached the register and leaned in.

"They used to call you Junk Boy. Am I right?"

"Yeah," I muttered, balking at the old nickname resurfacing in the wake of everything else.

He grinned. And with that waggish smile I immediately knew him:

Jeremy Chambers. He re-introduced himself.

"We met once," he said. "We were kids, I think."

I nodded. I didn't care to rehash that tale.

"I saw you come out of Vanzant's," he said, becoming comfortable in his conversation, wanting to chat me up. "He does some legal work for me...on occasion."

I nodded again. I didn't care.

"Jacket's fifty," I said.

Chambers removed his wallet and produced a crisp fifty-dollar bill.

"Heard about your trouble. Complete horseshit of course. The entire thing's a circus. I hope you know that."

"You *think*?" I wasn't fifteen anymore. I could spar with him as an equal now.

He nodded.

"Look, I know exactly what you're going through. I was the town pariah for years

and years. It's not always such a happy perch.”

“It's not.”

So far I'd been surrounded by those who'd not taken the case seriously (my parents) or those who'd taken it far too seriously (Vanzant, cable news). It felt good to have some empathy over the ordeal, even from him.

“You might remember, people were always saying I was ruining kids.”

“I do.”

I remembered. Some had been my own extended family.

“But you can't listen to them. You can't let those people get into your head. If you start to believe you're doing wrong, they win.”

He sounded like a mutinous teenager saying this, even though he must have been at least forty by now.

“What you need is some good company. Someone who knows the truth from what's being said.”

The ego in his advice: I hadn't met anyone like this since coming back home. No one in Highland acted so separate or so superior. But then Chambers had always been this way, at least by reputation.

“And where do you expect me to find that here?” I asked, anticipating his answer with misgiving.

“I don't.” He beamed. “That's why I found you.”

He invited me for drinks at his house, and since I needed someone to affirm how dull and agonizing my predicament, I accepted. Albeit with hesitation.

Chambers lived in the same Victorian house he'd occupied twenty years before. Climbing his steps, I had the sensation of being fifteen again and on his porch. I was still sort of afraid of him.

I recalled all the rumors, never confirmed, but never denied either. These were more than irrelevant in middle age, but they lingered with me on the porch. How, I wondered, could a man like him not move elsewhere in twenty years?

He answered the door wearing the field jacket he'd bought at the store, raising more suspicions: was he insane?

He didn't act it, but met me as if expecting doubts.

“Oh, the jacket?” He grinned. “Appropriate attire for life in the trenches. Come in.”

I stepped in.

“Didn't know you were at war,” I said

“Not me...presently. You. I'm just your military advisor through these matters, Secretary of Laughing It Off.”

“Maybe I should get a jacket too.”

“Not yet.” He wagged his finger. “Got to earn your stripes.”

“And how's that done?”

His eyes turned from impish to jaded so quickly.

“You'll know. Believe me. It's hard to miss.”

I wondered if this private wisdom came as a consequence of his former recklessness. If he were an animal, Jeremy Chambers would have been a fox in his youth, circling the henhouse that was Highland, mostly to shake it for his own amusement. He

still seemed to have that desire behind an acute vision, but to shake the foundation of anything these days might shake his own superstructure. He had matured, as only he could, into a grudging eccentric.

This became clear as we walked through his house. Where his walls had once been lined with angry punk rock posters, the decor had evolved into an armory or museum of past battles. I recalled how he'd begun collecting antique guns from us. He'd kept gathering these. All sorts of musketoons and side-arms hung from his walls, scattered between battle sabers and military swords. He'd also begun collecting propaganda posters from both world wars: pictures of Uncle Sam and girls in factories bullying war bonds and tight lips. Two, in particular, exhibited Chambers' own brand of humor: one a cartoon of a man driving with what appeared to be the ghost of Hitler reading, "When You Ride Alone, You Ride with Hitler," the second a photo of a farm girl loading a cannon with corn, reading, "Food is Ammunition, Ration Now!"

Chambers could have appreciated these ironically, only next to the firearms they connoted a certain respect for the violence.

"I bought all these from your store." He noted my attention. "Your father's been a great help."

"I'll bet." I nodded blankly. "They're...interesting."

"Always is, to see how they get people..." He paused to hand me a bottle of German beer he favored. "...riled. That's the easy part."

I took a quick swallow. The beer had a thick, bitter aftertaste.

"Oh yeah?" I asked. "What's the hard part?"

Chambers shrugged with superior nonchalance.

“Figuring what got them riled to begin with. The how.”

Along the wall I spotted the pair of Philadelphia derringers I'd once unwittingly brought him, that basis for the rest. Their position on the wall hinted at the small pistols' import; placed directly in the center of the other weapons, the derringers seemed the nucleus for the atom of ammunition, multiplying and complicating away from the two guns, spreading across the world of Chambers' wall.

I stood before them, recalling how they'd arrived here, of how I'd come to be here at all: Tagert Brown. I hadn't considered him in years.

Chambers offered me a seat with a view of his weapons wall.

“You can't expect much from anyone here,” he said. “I used to look on everyone as players in a game only I knew.” He smiled.

“I know,” I said. “I was one of them.”

I reminded him of the time he conned me with the unexpected help of Tagert Brown.

“Whatever happened to Tag, anyway?” I asked him.

Chambers nodded to himself.

“Good story that. Tag disappeared.”

“Disappeared?”

“Long story actually. I'll give you the short version. He was mixed up for years with some meth dealers from Middletown. His own trailer got burnt out cooking it one night.”

“Sounds about right,” I admitted. “Sad but true.”

Chambers wagged his finger again.

“But wait. Apparently, he was giving information to the state marshals, as part of a deal for some former crime. He helped take down their whole operation.”

“Wow.” I gulped more beer, the taste settling.

“Yeah.” Chambers leaned in, excited by the tale. “And he took it even further. After getting immunity, he applied to be a cop. Passed the tests. Got his own squad car. He became a respectable guy around here. Even got his umpire license and started refereeing the little league games.”

“Jesus.” I stared up at the derringers on the wall. I flashed suddenly to Tag playing with one in my yard, pretending he'd been shot.

Chambers smiled. “But *then*, one day, he doesn't report in. They check his house, but nothing's missing, nothing looks gone. Even his wallet's on the dresser.”

“The meth dealers?” I asked.

“That's what everyone thought, that they had a hit out on him. The papers made a big deal about it. But wait, about a month later, the police department finds about half million in funds gone, *embezzled* is the word.”

“*Tag* did that?”

Chambers giggled in his seat. “Not just that. Turns out he was stealing identities for years before then. All total he'd stolen up to three million dollars from various organizations and people all over the country.” He shook his head. “And they thought I was trouble.”

“I don't believe it,” I said.

But I did. Tag had always worked both sides, in between all things, always the smartest, most controversial place to be. I remembered him stealing the derringer from

me and giving it to Chambers. That act had made him known to Chambers, who, back then, seemed worth knowing if you courted controversy. I glanced back up at the dueling pistols. They weren't antiques any more, but a means toward ruin or reward, chivalry or stupidity. Who knew exactly?

"I've all kinds of stories you wouldn't believe." Chambers finished his beer.

"People are fools."

With that he stood and grabbed my empty. He walked into his kitchen for two more, and I sat contemplating the weapons wall, wondering how much death it totaled.

"So you think Tag's alive and rich somewhere?" I called to him.

Chambers didn't answer. He returned smirking, handing me a new beer and walking to the wall. There he removed one of the derringers. German beer in one hand, gun in the other, he looked demented in his field jacket.

"Tagert Brown's dead," he said finally. "Just like the punk kid who brought me this." He twirled the pistol dramatically. "Died same as you when you left here." He carefully placed the derringer back, then turned, simpering.

"But you, Jeb. You came back. *Resurrected.*"

The rest of our visit that night passed discussing my plight with the Washburns, with the lawyers and their system of winning the truth. Chambers empathized. For such lawsuits he had no patience. This, he shared, was born of his father, the longtime judge, who in Chambers' youth had held laws above everything, so high that his son had gone out of his way more than once to challenge those laws. Chambers didn't elaborate or boast of these escapades, only repeated "I've been there" like some ex-criminal sage.

He couldn't have found a better Plato for his Socrates. Though wary of him personally, I'd been looking for this outlet, a place to vent and a fresh audience to voice the absurdity of my situation.

What pleased me most was when Chambers spoke of Vanzant. By now the lawyer, though my lawyer (and also Chambers'), had become the face of my problem. Chambers understood this.

“Vanzant's the biggest tool of them all,” he said

It didn't take long for me to agree with Chambers. In my frustration I judged Vanzant to be the regulator of idiocy. As an attorney he had to make sense of the nonsensical.

What I loathed most about him, I discovered, was his false authority in interpreting my actions, his speaking of my own circumstance as if I was a too dim to understand what I'd gotten myself into. He would use his legalese just as a bad teacher teaches vocabulary to children, with words weighted with fear of misuse rather than interpretation.

The word *responsible* was his favorite.

“The question is who is responsible,” he told me over lunch one day at the local Big Boy. “And how we prove you, in fact, are absolved from that.”

I couldn't understand him. He used *responsible* the way I would have used the word *blame*. It sounded heavier but was actually lighter. Responsibility was paper-thin and floated, like the ether, around us all. How could we ever determine who'd been responsible? Could we shift the term to Stew, to Stew's parents, to the victims themselves, to the victims' parents? My defense, through Vanzant, became the dirty

business of reassigning the term.

Character was another word he warped.

Did I have any? How could that be defined? What proof was there of it?

“Forget your father.” Vanzant waved his hand and bit into his Big Boy salad. “His character's shot. But you, Jeb, you're likable. Have you any friends who could vouch for your character?”

The question sent me searching my mind as to why I didn't. In my thirty-some years I'd not connected with many people, hadn't volunteered my time with individuals or groups to better the world. I was odd, I decided suddenly, an odd person.

For lack of anyone else I mentioned Chambers, the person I'd been spending the most time with, aside from Vanzant, away from the store.

“Oh *absolutely* not!” He almost choked on his Cherry Coke. “Jeremy can only do you harm.”

“Why's that?”

“Don't you know he's a degenerate?”

I laughed quickly. Who used the word *degenerate* anymore? It sounded like a lawyer's term for a number of misbehaviors.

Vanzant stiffened in his seat. “I'm serious, Jeb. He can't be called on for such a purpose as this.”

He changed the topic, on to some other piece of legal torture to consider in our case. We finished our lunches and walked to the parking lot.

“You know,” he said at his car. “Jeremy and I went to high school together, so I know him well. Don't think I'm just attacking him.”

“Okay,” I said.

I hated this last moment of our lunches together. Vanzant had suggested them because he knew I didn't like the formality of his office. He paid for the meal every week, which meant that I paid, in the form of his bills. This was always his parting shot, to say something personal or random to me each week as we left the Big Boy, to take my mind off the specifics we'd discussed inside.

“What I mean is, Jeremy has never cared for much. Aside from his own lifestyle.”

I nodded, so tired of him I wasn't really listening anymore.

“He wouldn't be the sort to help you in any sort of situation. He's always been extremely troubled himself. Trust me, I know what I'm talking about.”

“I'm not sure I know what you're talking about,” I said.

“Your interests.” He smiled, as if he were my friend. “I'm just looking out for you, Jeb. See you next week.”

That night, over at his house, Chambers was excited because he'd just acquired several old newsreels from World War II. These were the original film copies, and he'd purchased a 16mm projector to play them in his “screening room,” the spare bedroom on his second floor. The room included a large-screen television with a detailed satellite connection.

He hadn't worn his military jacket since my first visit, but he donned it tonight. Perhaps he'd bought it to wear whenever he screened the newsreels. That night, all three films were screened, whitewashing the carnage in Italy, Northern Africa, and the Philippines.

“My grandfather fought,” I said between reels.

Chamber nodded, preparing the next film.

“Would you?” he asked.

“Then or now?” I asked.

He shrugged. “Same thing.”

“How's that?”

“It's *all* evil.” He chuckled. “According to He Who Runs It.”

“You're saying it's not? It *wasn't*?”

He reached for his complicated remote control.

“Watch this.”

He turned on his big-screen television, preprogrammed to a news report on the current war. Bloody images enlarged by the screen flashed behind a voice narrating the details: bombs, soldiers, enemy.

“I *get* it,” I said. “Same thing.”

“Oh, no!”

He pushed a button, flicked a switch, and the black and white version began.

I compared the two, supposing that's what he wanted. Both showed snippets of the horror. Both were so brief they accepted their situations on the way elsewhere.

When the footage ended, I gave him my analysis.

“Okay. Not bad,” Chambers said. “But look how *different* they are. Hell, I want to kill somebody in this one.” He pointed to the projector. “It makes me angry still, and I know how it ends.”

“So you would have gone,” I said.

“Oh, never. But they *sold* it better, didn't they?”

I shrugged. "Color ruins the romance, I guess."

"Just the opposite actually." He chuckled. "Romance kills the color. I'd have gone back then just to kill another. No cause. Just to kill."

Here, I thought, Vanzant's degenerate.

"And not now?"

"Who's to kill?" He shrugged. "They kill themselves. That's all anyone does now. Destroys himself instead of running a smart, pure war."

"You really want to kill?" I asked him. "Why?"

He sighed.

"You're assuming the argument that all people are unique is, in fact, true. You're assuming that I could simply find such a person and they would in turn find something *special* in me, a soul."

He paused for a moment to open a new beer.

"The truth is I've searched for years to find people who met my expectations and was disappointed every time." He looked at me as if I were one of these, disappointing him now. "I shouldn't have lived this long."

I saw that he was drunk and stoned, so I let it go, changing the subject.

"You went to school with Vanzant?" I asked.

"Yeah," he said. "Jesus, he had such a *narrow* view of it all, even back then. He's aptly placed as our lawyer."

I told him about my lunch today, about my recent frustration with legalese.

"Who's *Responsible*?" He mocked Vanzant's language. "That's like you trying to find me someone who deserves their life. Not possible, not while everyone is a candidate

and everyone wastes his.”

He was ranting now, loaded and not making much sense.

“He told me to find a character witness. You, he said, wouldn't work.”

Chambers grinned. “Course not!”

“He called you a degenerate,” I said.

Chambers gave a thin proud smile. “He *would*. Vanzant has the imagination of a pea.”

I could tell he enjoyed keeping his own specific amorality a mystery, so I pressed him: “Why's he call you that?”

Chambers snorted. “Because he's the sort to dictate morality.” He turned the television on again, to some politician doing likewise. “Like him. And him. And him.” He kept flipping channels, blaming everyone, even the primetime characters.

“But what did you do?” I asked. “What was so bad?”

He shook his head. “Everything. Nothing. Ask someone *else*. I'm sure they'd know better.”

He was angry with me now; I'd ruined his big movie night. He spent the rest of the night flipping channels, finding vague points in the random flickers. His mind worked like that remote control: too fast, too dismissive.

I left feeling troubled. Something about Chambers' claim to kill went beyond mere philosophy. He'd not just dismissed war itself as an excuse to kill, as many might when asked to consider it. He'd made his argument against all of humanity.

His response sounded like one a mass murderer might make, or a despot of the worst order. I was pretty lit that night myself, and walking home the image of Chambers'

propaganda poster entered my mind: “When You Ride Alone, You Ride with Hitler.” Only in my head, it was Chambers driving alone in that car, with Hitler's ghost whispering atrocities into his ear.

I shuddered and began jogging down the street, wary all of a sudden of being seen leaving Chambers' home.

I couldn't stop thinking about Chambers the whole next week, using his secret sins to avoid my own impending crisis. I didn't want to become so alone, so forsaken in spirit, no matter what happened in the lawsuit. The more I looked at it, the more I failed to see Chambers as a fellow outcast but as a vision of what I could become.

We weren't so different. In fact the only things separating us were my parents, one of which would be gone soon and the other never there to begin with. Chambers' father had died almost five years ago, leaving Jeremy his inheritance. He didn't need to work, and if I stayed with the store, I wouldn't either. Not really. What would I be at forty but a man living in his childhood home who had warped a child into violence? *I know you*, the community would say without saying anything, *a degenerate*.

This was my state of mind when Vanzant called me down to his office one morning, before our scheduled lunch.

His secretary told me to wait in his office, as he was returning from the courthouse. While waiting, I examined the pictures on his desk. Vanzant had a wife and two teenagers, an older daughter who looked fussy in her graduation gown, and a son who looked bored in his soccer uniform, like he'd rather be running off somewhere. Vanzant's wife dressed blandly, the way so many women did in mom-jeans and sturdy footwear. But

really, I thought, who else did she have to impress? The family seemed as happy as they could be, collected separately on his desk, together and alone, the way everyone had to get through the days. I praised Vanzant for seeing each of them as different organisms. A family photo, the type forced in a studio somewhere, would have hinted a control, a projection of “family” that would never exist but on that day.

He came in smiling. Something was different. Vanzant was the sort to let his tasks direct him. If he was working, he was sour and stressed, but once he'd accomplished something, he eased his grip on everything. He worked hard, he played hard, the way you were supposed to.

“Jeb.” He took my hand and shook it up and down in excitement. “It's over, I'm glad to report.”

“What's over?”

“The case. The judge accepted our motion for summary judgment.”

“You'll need to explain that to me.” But I was already smiling, ignorant of everything but his attitude.

“Gladly.” He sat down. This, you could tell, was the best part of his job. Maybe his life.

The way Vanzant explained it to me, the judge had awarded us a summary judgment, effectively canceling the trial, because there was no material evidence beyond the testimony of Stewart Price. This would have been enough for a case, until the county psychiatrist had found Stewart to be far too troubled to be credible. Her report had just been delivered a day ago, and Vanzant had filed the motion immediately.

“Of course, we would have cleaned their clocks anyway,” he boasted. “Let me buy

you lunch to celebrate.”

So it was once more to the Big Boy, but I didn't mind. We might have been dining in Paris. I was so overjoyed at the news, I didn't even mind as Vanzant imagined how the case would have gone had we reached trial. He seemed faintly disappointed. The case was so strange he would have gained some publicity, he thought.

“And now I don't have to worry about my *character*,” I joked, but he didn't seem to get this.

Eventually we fell into a strange silence, having nothing else to discuss. I ended up asking him a personal question: “So why did you call Jeremy Chambers a degenerate?”

He looked surprised I was still wondering this, and a little offended at my tone. “First of all, that isn't my word. I was only giving you the public's perception.”

“Okay. But why?”

“It's okay.” He nodded, as if he were convincing himself to go on. “There's nothing I'll say that you wouldn't be able to read about or find in court records. Much of the thing is public knowledge now.”

“*What* is?” My old infuriation with him resurfaced.

“Jeremy received a large amount of money, twice in his life. Once when his older sister died in a car accident when he was in high school, and again when his father died. He spent the first amount in an unusual way.”

“How?”

Vanzant grunted at the memory.

“He was always making people do things for money. At first just the kids in

school. I remember he had them eat or drink things, dung, douches, real humiliating kids' stuff. He paid them to amuse him this way. But that was just the beginning of it all."

"Beginning of what?"

"Well, his control over the willing. The tasks became more extravagant after we graduated. Or at least I heard they did."

"Like what?"

Vanzant paused, retrieving in his lawyer's brain the perfect example.

"Well, once he had a boy swim across the Ohio, nearly drowning. He had another boy wreck up his sports car, only to pay him for a new one. He became a sort of kingpin of the insane action."

"I heard he dealt drugs when I was a kid," I said.

He nodded. "That too. Or at least he paid people to do certain things on drugs. His house was always a place for decadence. The dares became more explicit, sexually I mean. At first it was just rumors that he would pay people to do vile acts, sometimes with him watching, sometimes with him."

I felt a bit nauseated, the combined visual of Chambers mixing with my undercooked hamburger.

"He needed several attorneys, as you can imagine. Of course, his father was judge and often protected him."

"I heard that."

Vanzant took a quick bite of a fry. He was more enthused now, giving himself over to the details.

"Well, he quieted down when your uncle won the election. He grew up, some

said. Of course, I was away during those years, in school, learning the law, raising my kids. When I moved home and set up my practice, Jeremy was my first client. We'd always gotten along well enough.”

“What was the case?”

“The first was rape.” He sighed. “Utter nonsense. A girl accused him of dosing her, but she couldn't back up her story. She was simply after his money.”

“Who was she?” I asked. “Someone close to him?”

Vanzant shook his head.

“Not particularly. But after the suit was dropped, she continued to harass him. He even had to file a restraining order against her. But then one night, she snuck into his house when he'd been out. When he walked in she was lying naked on his sofa, bleeding to death from stabbing herself with his set of kitchen knives. There were twelve in the set, and each one was sticking in her somewhere.”

“God! Did she die?”

Vanzant wolfed another fry.

“No, Jeremy called an ambulance. She lived and sued him again, said he was paying her to do that, which made no sense because she was so close to death.”

“I was going to say...”

“Still, people remembered his dares, all his former actions. Many believed he'd motivated her, ordered her to do this thing. The girl had very little mind of her own. She was sent away to a private institution out of state. Jeremy even paid the bills for her treatment, which everyone found suspect.”

“It is.”

“But Jeremy, of course, doesn't see these things the way others do.” He smiled wanly. “He could even justify it, he said. I could never persuade him that it only made him look more guilty.”

“Did you ever think he *was* guilty?” I asked. “I mean, aside from being his lawyer.”

Vanzant leaned over the table to me. I could see the father rise in him as he looked me in the eye.

“Let me put it this way,” he said. “He's never been innocent.”

“You must be pleased,” Chambers told me during our next night together. “Vanzant told me the news.”

“I am.” I nodded, accepting the beer I no longer found bitter. “Thanks.”

“I wonder,” he said, sitting. “How you'd do with a lifetime of it. The ugly limelight, I mean.”

“Not as well as you,” I admitted.

I didn't want to ask him about the dares or the girl or any of his past. I didn't care anymore. It wasn't how I knew him. He'd been a help to me. That was enough.

“No,” he agreed. “Probably not.”

“I'm impressed you even stayed here,” I told him. “You could have moved. You had money. You still have money. Why not just get away from it all?”

He shook his head, at me I could tell.

“You'd say that, sure. But me, I'd be the same person everywhere I'd go. I'm not the sort to run, and I don't believe in redefinition. Not in one's nature.”

He paused and sighed into his beer.

“So,” he asked, “think you earned your stripes?”

“I don't know.” I tried brushing off the question: “Think I deserve a jacket?”

“Ha!” Chambers erupted, with little humor.

We sat in a lengthy silence. Before, we'd focused on my case and the discourse it inspired. Now that it was finished, we were adrift with our otherwise odd company. What were we, really? Friends? We weren't friendly enough to be friends, and I wasn't sure I wanted such a friend.

Once again, I glanced about his strange shrine, the wall. It reminded me of my grandmother Rachel and her plate wall. To kill the tension I told Chambers of her collection, and of my blowing it away with a rifle.

“How'd that feel?” he asked.

“Sad. Fun. Confusing, like a lot of things.”

He leaned in.

“How you think Stewart Price felt?”

I took a pause, though I didn't need it.

“He felt nothing,” I said, sure of it. “The feelings were over the moment he acted.”

Chambers stood and strolled over to the wall. As on our first night together, he grabbed one of the derringers, juggling it in his hand.

“Let me ask you a question, Junk Boy. You think Tagert Brown felt anything about what he did, before he did it?”

I noted my old nickname.

“Tag was always a thief,” I answered. “He never knew what he'd take before he

took it. He never knew what he wanted until he had it.”

Chambers twirled the derringer.

“He wanted this, as I recall. Then he wanted *me* to have it.”

He handed me the pistol.

“And now I want you to have it.”

“What for?” I felt the pistol's grip in my hand.

“A reminder.” Chambers removed its twin from the wall. “I doubt we see each other so much after this.”

He gave me a mean smile.

“Now that you're finished with your own trouble, you'll want to stick your mother in the ground and say fuck-off to your father. Am I right?”

He wasn't drunk yet. He wanted to provoke me. With the case over I might believe the lawyers and the papers. I might actually think I was innocent.

“Not exactly.” I scowled and lowered my head toward the derringer in my hand.

Chambers sat across from me again, his own derringer still in hand.

“It's okay. I mean, hey, I hated my own father. I was glad when he died. You shouldn't punish yourself for feeling a certain way just because they say you're not supposed to.”

“It's got nothing to do with what others think,” I said.

He sneered at me.

“Isn't it? Can you even say what's sitting in the pit of your stomach still? I know, it's guilt. And where does *that* come from, just someone else's idea of what you did or didn't do right.”

I tried changing the subject:

“I doubt Tagert Brown feels guilty.” I said.

“*Course* not! I knew the man. He sat with me a few nights, just like you. I saw him weighing the difference, the person he really was against the person everyone wanted him to be.”

“I suppose you'd praise him now?”

“A little. What difference does it make?”

“A lot to the people he pretended to be, to those he stole from.”

“Oh them?” Chambers smiled. “Why? They were just pretending to be someone else themselves.”

Walking home that night with my single derringer, I knew I'd lost a duel of sorts. Part of me knew I'd never be invited back, that Chambers' interest in me would fade with the lawsuit. I don't even remember our last words. Certainly they weren't goodbye.

Once in a while he would come into the store, not to visit, but to pick up another weapon or poster Dad found for him. His appetite for these persisted, along with whatever stubborn ideology they represented. To me, his armory was to remind him of the fight he had with the posters, with the propaganda he saw everywhere. His home wasn't a museum, so much as a bunker.

I know you, his eyes said when we'd meet, as if I were hiding myself from him and the public. I could have looked at him with a secret meaning as well, but I didn't. I tried to have mercy in my eyes, when I met him or anyone, hope being that someone might return the sentiment.

Few did, which only supports so many of Chambers' grievances. He deserved attention, and perhaps wasted his when he was younger. By the time I knew him he'd been alone for too long and had gotten used to life in the bunker.

He shot himself, a few years later.

When I read about it in the paper, I wasn't surprised, only regretful. Around Highland people recounted his odd life, labeling him a recluse who'd become more bitter as he aged.

Shortly after his passing, Vanzant called me, saying Chambers had left me something. I knew it was the other derringer, returning to our store at last. According to Vanzant, Chambers had willed many "unusual" objects to different people around town.

"Ever think of a will yourself?" Vanzant asked, possibly trying to drum up some extra work from me.

I shook my head.

"Well, you never know," he said. He stiffened and became professional. "Jeremy was always updating his own will."

I wondered briefly whom I would leave anything to, and the fear of becoming Highland's new recluse was suddenly upon me.

But this wasn't Vanzant's point.

"He was sick, you know. Terminal. A tumor in his brain. *That's* why he shot himself. Not because he was unhappy. Jeremy was never unhappy. Not with himself."

"Why are you telling me this?" I asked him.

Vanzant shrugged.

"He wanted a few people to know the truth. He told me not to inform the public."

“Why not?”

But I knew why.

Vanzant frowned.

“He said they didn't deserve to know.”

CHAPTER 10

LANDMARK STATUS

Before she died--even before the Open House--my mother told me her final request:

“Put us on the Register.”

She was referring to the National Register of Historic Places, where she wanted our home esteemed alongside the likes of Mount Vernon and Monticello. To her, the thought of joining the venerated ranks of the Washingtons and the Jeffersons would preserve not just our house but the Longmier name. To me, the prospect of joining those dignitaries on some bureaucrat’s listing seemed to diminish the list.

She was too proud, while I too discerning about what belonged immortalized. But I filled out the extensive forms for her, fulfilling her last wish.

It took longer than I would have liked. Nominating the tannery required detailing its history, and my mother was exacting concerning how that history be presented. Like a school teacher assigning a paper, she became meticulous over the little things, the grammar, the tone.

“You’re sloppy with annotations,” she scolded from her bed. Any omission from those crucial antebellum years she viewed especially inexcusable.

“It’s enough,” I said. “They won’t want a book.”

Here she pursed her dry lips, readying her points.

“It *could* be a book,” she said. “Maybe it should be.”

It wouldn’t have been a very exciting book. Jacob Longmier, my great-great-great-grandfather, had come to Highland in the late 18th century. He’d tanned hides, dirty work, then passed the trade on to his sons. Nothing much happened until abolition. After the

Civil War the status quo returned until my draft-evading, adulterous, antique-wielding parents arrived.

Mom challenged this assessment:

“You've heard of Daniel Boone, right?”

“The Disney character?”

A sour face. Regarding Longmier history there was no room for parody. She didn't have the time remaining to clown about.

“He bought some skins from us,” she said.

“Seems he'd do that work himself.”

“Maybe. But he also bought from us.”

“We have proof of that?”

Mom's eyes lowered. I played editor.

“Then it's not going in the application.”

She turned crestfallen. Lately she'd get this way, reminding me of stories I'd heard about the elderly or dying reverting to some puerile condition. During our meetings Mom's passion for her family history resembled a child's inertia for make-believe. Any discrediting its authenticity sent her pouting.

“Mom, it's fine. What we've got is enough.”

She gazed up at me.

“What do you even care?”

“I *care*,” I said.

“We're unique!” She coughed. The cough seemed to punctuate her point.

“It's time to rest.” I handed her water and her pills. “We can come back to it.”

A fierce glare.

“You'd *like* to forget the whole business.” She paused to swallow. “I know you, Mister.”

Mister. She hadn't called me that in years. She was trying to force me back in time with her. It worked. I was angry.

“I'd like to forget plenty!”

I was immediately sorry. Her face held the remark; her eyes went remote again, moved and removed by my honesty. For a horrible second I considered her dying on the spot, killed by the truth.

“It was the war that did it,” she said.

“What?”

“The Great War.” She shook her head, pointing again on our report. “The first world war. That's why they closed the tannery. It changed everything.”

So many of our late afternoons were spent bickering over how best to impress a group of faraway men with a history only she cared to preserve. Often I felt her prolonging our process, as if preparing the report indefinitely could prolong her time. Time had whittled away everything else for her. She clung to those pages.

She was satisfied with most of our answers to the prompts the National Register required. With its involvement in the Underground Railroad, our home was significant for its association within a broad pattern of history. The tannery also fit the architectural and archaeological requirements, yielding merit from its worn stones. What vexed my mother was our lack of significant persons connected to the building. Hence, her pushing Daniel

Boone.

“Celebrity isn't everything,” I told her.

“It's an obtuse requirement!” she complained. “It supposes history is only made by a select few. Very elite! Is *that* what we as a nation care about?”

“Not always,” I said. “What about the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier?”

She paused.

“That's your father.”

It had been so long since she'd told a joke, I was late to laugh. It was a private sort of joke. Only she and I would get it.

“But really, Jeb.” She sounded grave again. “I want to know. Why can't average, everyday people be cited for living extraordinary lives?”

This was followed by another of her recent coughing fits. Her oratory powers were fading, and I could see in her red eyes how this frustrated her.

“Because average and everyday contradict extraordinary,” I said.

“Well, they shouldn't.” Another hacking cough. “Honestly now, what do you think our chances are? For the register?”

I believed our chances slim, but couldn't say so.

“I wouldn't know.” I held up the paperwork. “I'm too close to it now.”

“*You?* Close to *it?*” She snorted, shaking her head. “My boy, you've wanted away from here ever since you could walk. So don't lie, Jebidiah.” She took a deep, wheezing breath. “I'd rather leave here with you honest and not caring at all.”

I stood and paced at her bedside.

“Believe it or not, Mom, I care. About you.”

“But not this place.” She waved her frail hand about the room. “Not your home.”

I chuckled and shook the pages in my hand.

“Maybe because it never *was* much of a home, Mom. It was a *monument*, just the way you want to leave it.”

She wrapped herself in her bed shawl and frowned into the pages spread about her.

“I know you blame me,” she whispered. “If I'd been like the other mothers...”

“Then you'd be average,” I finished for her. I didn't want to hear her regrets, if she had any. “Let's just finish.”

I wanted our application completed and in the mail. I wanted it done.

Two weeks later, a letter on some fancy letterhead arrived informing us that an Ohio Historic Preservation Officer would be coming to inspect the property. The officer, in turn, would nominate us for the National Register if he or she liked “our candidate.”

“When's it say?” Mom was bolstered by the news. “When are they coming?”

I'd read her most of the letter aloud, as I did all her mail now.

“It doesn't,” I said. “Just says some time within the next three months.”

“Okay.” She nodded.

It was a long wait for the Ohio Historic Preservation Officer, a title so grand it both imposed and sounded silly. While we waited, we discussed how we might sell him or her the tannery. Mom was expert at giving people a tour, but she wasn't capable of it now. This meant she needed to train me, turning what had once been her paper assignment into an oral presentation. She even made me rehearse for her.

Since nothing helps a presentation like visual aids, Mom suggested I visit the Highland Historical Society and ask its members to consult their “archives,” old newspaper clippings capturing the tannery and town at various times, to show the officer.

“For a context,” she said.

I was all in favor of passing along the project, as it had worn on me by then. Not the project itself, but its close proximity to my mother, who seemed to be an old clipping herself – a thinning edition that required special handling, one that still had intelligence to share, if only some thoughtful reader would attend to her. In committing myself as her reader, I’d discovered that the text was too difficult, too long and sad. She wasn’t the local rag but some Russian novel. The historical society I viewed as Cliff Notes.

The group met every third Monday in the Highland Library, a one-story building no larger than a double-wide trailer. This was an improvement from my boyhood, when the library had been one room in the back of the city courthouse. Some state funding had given the institution permission to grow, but only comparatively as far as the population would use it. Its stacks were limited to whatever bestsellers had been published within the last two years, along with popular magazines like *People* and *Time*, for those too cheap to subscribe. Others walking into such a collection might feel cheated out of options, but I always felt oddly content whenever visiting spaces lacking in depth, probably because I’d always been drowned in depth.

At first I was amused to watch the Highland Historical Society conduct its meeting. They were so official, so cute. The organization had officers: a president, my mother of all people, an acting-president without her, a treasurer, even a secretary, who took minutes that reminded me of some high school club, as if anyone anywhere would

care about what was discussed. With only five members present besides me, they sat in a circle, making the group look as if they were somewhere more sober, maybe Bible study or Alcoholics Anonymous.

I listened as they recounted their Old Business, a mixture of projects: one involving cleaning the oldest gravestones in the city cemetery, another a petition they were compiling for the city council, to keep an oak bench that was in danger of being removed in the township courtroom. I was considered New Business, and therefore sentenced to wait until they were finished discussing their salvaging the local history piece by piece.

“And now,” said acting-president Agnes Moorhead, a name that tickled the impatient juvenile in me, “Jebidiah Harris has an issue to raise on behalf on his mother...I'm told.”

“Yes ma'am.”

I rose dutifully and told the group about the National Register and our plan to impress the state official.

“Of course, we know all about it.” Agnes' smile begged an explanation: if they'd known all along, why had I even come here? Why tell them what we needed when they already knew? Was I only here to add to the minutes?

“For what you seek you'll need to contact our Archiver,” Agnes said. “He couldn't be with us tonight, due to an obligation at the school.”

“Okay,” I said. “Who's that?”

In my memory Agnes Moorhead pauses. She even begins to leer as she says the name:

“Jay Wisecup. Of course, you might remember him as *Coach* Wisecup.”

From the library I walked to the middle school. This took less time than driving home to confront my mother about her society's Archiver.

Nothing had changed. I might have been twelve again and suffering their liaison.

Stepping into the school, I refused to feel any certain way: cautious, confused, curious, any of the emotions I'd persevered when I'd gone to school here.

I wasn't ready for the people, for the crowds that gathered for their children's basketball games. It was tournament season, which explained the noise rising from the overheated gymnasium, the gnarled and abbreviated cheers echoing down the humid, hazy hallway. A woman sitting with what must have been her daughter, both wearing identical blue Highland Lion decals on their cheeks, took my three dollars and stamped my hand. She looked at me as if I were somewhere between a parent or a pedophile, the firm inspection a stranger gets around children. I was easily old enough to be a parent of some middle-school child, especially by Highland standards, where the breeding escalates after high school commencement ceremonies and often begins years prior. I was running a mild danger even attending; some former classmate might recognize me.

But I wanted this over with. The prospect of visiting Wisecup tomorrow at his house seemed worse. I didn't know anything about his life now, didn't know if he had a wife or kids of his own, didn't know what he meant to Mom anymore, or she to him. I didn't want to know. He was none of my business. He never had been.

My plan was to wait out the game, catch his eye, then meet him outside the gym briefly to tell him to mail me any clippings he could find.

I climbed the foldout bleachers and sat. It was already late in the third quarter and Highland was losing by ten. Wisecup, when I saw him, was squatted on the floor beside his bench, chewing his tie, an old habit when frustrated.

He'd filled out a bit, and his hair was thinner. Too many nice dinners, I thought, recalling our one meal together. This is what happens to men who find comfort. They ease into their decline like ice in a drink. Wisecup must have found some contentment in Highland, to coach at the same level at the same school for over twenty years. It couldn't have just been my mother.

His squad reminded me of me upon a time. Too many wore T-shirts under their jerseys, otherwise they'd be swimming without the extra layer between scrawny arms and their school-sized tops. I'd also forgotten that at this level fat boys are included, that they make the best inside men, but huff it down the court too late to be of much use. And of course the best talent always ball-hogs, making the game, in fact, a contest between one or two players who loathe everyone else, especially when losing.

That Wisecup had dedicated his profession to such a sad and silly display made him sympathetic, until I recalled how much he'd cared. Once, on a night like this one, when we'd lost by some embarrassing margin, he'd punched a locker after the game. We few who rarely played and couldn't understand his frustration found it funny. He noticed our held tongues, our twisted smirks. His face turned purple as he asked, "What the hell's so *funny?!?*" We couldn't say that it was him, that he was a grown man and he cared, that it was too funny he cared so much. "Maybe you *enjoy* losing," he scolded us. "Maybe some of you guys were rooting against your *own team!*" In fact, some of us were, the second string, a consequence of scrimmaging and losing to the first string every day in practice.

I glanced down at the bench. His second stringers looked nervous. Bad enough getting embarrassed every day in practice, by when the game goes too good or bad, there's the terror of flubbing up in front of an audience, in front of that girl you like, that cheerleader who's not watching anyway. Or the ironic humiliation of doing well. I remember getting into a late game once and getting fouled. At the free-throw line I made my first shot, causing such a stir among the kids and parents who knew how poor I really was that I air-balled my second shot in shame.

My mother attended every one of my games, even the away ones. It didn't matter to her if I played or not. She sat in the stands, like me now, neither cheering or caring about the result. She didn't come for me, but for Wisecup.

Their own game must have been harder on him. Again, unlike his players, he cared.

The parents sitting next to me cheered frantically for a boy named "Charlie." It took me a moment to realize that Charlie played center for the other team, that I was sitting on the visitors' side of the gym.

I relaxed a bit, seated among fellow strangers. We'd all traveled to be here; it had been out of our way, a special errand. Feeling this kinship, I began rooting for the away team as well, secretly reveling in Wisecup's defeat.

Charlie, turns out, was a Godzilla of a center, the type of player who makes teammates obsolete. He didn't look thirteen or fourteen, but had the build of a man, with the beginnings of a full mustache above his lip. When his teammates fed him the ball in the paint, he plowed through Highland like he was walking through mounds of leaves.

The crowd knew their advantage. Each time Charlie was fouled, they followed

their cheerleaders in a chant of *Char-lee! Char-lee!* This echoed obnoxiously through the gymnasium, making me sorry for the hometown boys, who played the rest of the game half-afraid of this giant come into their house who could inspire such a fever. They played scared--the squeaking of their sneakers on the wood likened to mice ready to be stomped.

For the remainder of the game I focused on Wisecup, eating his tie, sending in his bench--fresh meat for that monster. Wisecup clapped encouragement, but you could tell he was sorry for even that. He kept glancing up at the gym clock, as would a man imploring heaven to hurry the worst.

Char-lee! Char-lee!

Hearing the chant repeated on the popcorn and bubble-gum breath of those malignant fans, I soon felt embarrassed about where I was sitting, about the side I'd taken.

When the final buzzer sounded, I stood and walked down toward Wisecup, in the middle of the court now, congratulating the other coach. When he turned, he locked eyes with me, but he clearly couldn't place me. Not here, not with the twenty years since he saw me in this place, since he saw me at all.

"My mother..." I started, but couldn't think how to finish.

He paused, staring stupidly at me. A few parents passed by to shake his hand. This had been the last game of the year.

"Jeb?" He smiled finally. "I *heard* you came home."

"You got a minute? After you're done?"

He nodded.

"She sent you?"

"I'm not sure," I said. "I don't know."

“That sounds about right.” He sighed. “I never knew either. Not when it came to your mother.”

I didn't want to be alone with Wisecup, to discuss any of the topics we'd never discussed when he'd been my coach in seventh grade, but there seemed no avoiding an awkward reminiscence.

He waved for me to follow him upstairs to the locker room, that sweaty, half-lit cave of bruised boyhood. I waited in his tiny closet of an office and from there heard him say goodbye, good season to his team.

“You all have nothing to be ashamed of,” he told them. “You played hard. You tried hard.”

The life of Jay Wisecup exemplifies these condolences. He also tried hard. He also had nothing to be ashamed of. Anything he would have told any or all of his seventh grade players within the thirty years of his coaching career, could have equally applied to himself.

“We got some bad calls out there,” he continued.

And so did he. In any reasonable contest, Wisecup would have been Hannah Longmier's husband. He loved her more, or at least had always shown his love for her more. She'd needed loving, needed it shown. Over the years he'd plied harder at loving her, only to be sent constantly to the bench, her reserve.

“I'm proud of every one of you. I've seen you all grow and learn so much this year. What you've done, you'll take with you for the rest of your lives.”

I couldn't say what Wisecup took, couldn't say what he'd learned or if he'd grown

through the affair. It had taken years, was still going it looked like.

“We'll have the spring sports banquet, where many of you will receive some well deserved awards for your dedication and commitment.”

Speech over, he lumbered into his office and closed the door.

“Gets harder every year,” he said. “You'd think it would get easier, losing.” He looked at me. “You know how many winning teams we've had?”

I shrugged, noting that I'd been included in his defeat, maybe as an alumnus.

“Maybe ten. I blame the conference. Those other districts have wider nets.”

He unlocked a mini-fridge in the corner and handed me a can of beer, opening one for himself. I was pretty sure alcohol wasn't allowed on school grounds.

“I've actually been waiting for you.” He took a generous chug. “But I didn't think it would be here, tonight.” His voice had a some edge to it, either from his dwelling on the game or his finally confronting me.

“I guess so,” I said, feeling trapped. If I stood, I could have stretched out my arms and touched every wall of his “office.” It had seemed so much larger as a kid. This wasn't the meeting I'd planned.

“You're the local Archiver, I'm told.”

He nodded, eyeing me carefully.

“My curse,” he said, then chuckled. “Jesus Jeb, did you *see* that kid they had out there? I mean, how are my kids supposed to play up to that?”

I shrugged, but I couldn't help but smile.

“Start failing kids in gym class. They'll stick around and get bigger.”

I was joking, but Wisecup shook his head as if he'd already considered this.

“Eligibility,” he said. “Can't play without the grades.”

He loosened his tie and lifted it out of his collar and over his head. Its end was damp from his sucking on it.

“I ruin fifteen of these a year. One for each game.” He held it backwards like a noose. “I know what brought you here.”

“I'll bet you do,” I said.

“Hannah and her National Register.” He shook his head. “You know how many times she mentioned that to me?”

I was sick of these questions he'd only answer himself. I suddenly remembered this a tic he'd always had: *You know how many you guys are running extra line-touches?...All of you.*

“Just about every week,” he said. “She's been planning this so long, Jeb. She was saving it, always putting it off.”

“I know,” I said. “It means a lot to her. Everyone seems to know it.”

He shook his head.

“Just us in the historical society. I wonder if your father even knows or cares.”

There, finally, was his necessary jab. I didn't bother responding to it.

“You know,” he changed topics, “Hannah's updated me on you through the years. She's pretty proud of you.”

“What'd she say?” I chugged from my beer can.

“You know, career, moves, the usual. I always wondered what sort of man you'd grow up to be.”

Not the sort to dwell on those who wonder. The sort who roots against you, even

knowing who's more deserving. The sort who still can't change sides.

"I'm not sure myself," I said, wanting to leave, wishing I was Charlie the center and could easily plow past him.

Wisecup took a long swig of beer.

"It says something that you'd come here tonight to find me. Even Hannah didn't think you would. She thought you'd go back to her first, after you heard I had the archives."

"Why didn't you just give her what we need?" I was angry now, didn't appreciate being a wager between them. "Why get me involved at all?"

"She wanted us to meet," Wisecup said. "She wanted you to understand us."

"I understand you fine."

"You don't. We were never wrong, Jeb," he said. "Whatever people say."

"I don't want to hear your rationale," I said.

"We were friends. *Best* friends."

There came a knock on the door. Wisecup opened it to a boy with wet hair. I recognized him as Highland's center, the one on Charlie. Wisecup smiled at him. He made no attempt to hide his beer.

"What's up, Wes?"

Wes lowered his head.

"Coach, I'm sorry I fouled out."

Wisecup nodded at him.

"Fuck'em, Wes," he said. "Put it away. Go kiss that girl you go with."

Wes raised his head and nodded like this was a basketball play he could execute.

He turned and sped away.

Wisecup closed the office door again and twisted back to me.

“You've been away a long time, Jeb. It changed. *We* changed.”

“Looks to me like you're still sneaking around.”

He shook his head.

“No need. We've only seen each other at the history meetings these last five years, I swear it. In the end, that's what your mother gave me, a respect for the past, for this place. I'm not even from here, you know.”

I knew. He hailed from some Pennsylvania coal town in the Alleghenies where he'd been a basketball star, a forward, all-state. He'd earned a scholarship to Kent State University. He was a sophomore there the day of the shootings in 1970. It had always been a mystery to his students where he'd been specifically during the killings, if he'd been in the crowd or if he'd known any of the victims. He never spoke of it, but every May 4th he cancelled the PE class he taught to return to campus, honoring the event.

“Why care what I think now?” I asked him. “You never cared what I thought before.”

“I didn't care,” he said. “You're right, I never considered you. But kids are sturdy. I saw that in you. You'd need to be sturdy in that house, whether I'd come or not.”

He finished his beer, crushed the can, and tossed it in the trash.

“But your mother cares. She's not got long, Jeb. She wants you to know this about her. She's a better woman than you think. You should know that. We were in love. You should know that too, that she wasn't cheap or easy.”

Outside the office there came the eruption of boys laughing, joking, the gloom of

losing already lifting. *How long before I get over tonight?* I thought.

“I think she enjoyed her loneliness,” I said. “She used it, like she used you.”

“Then you're not really seeing her,” he said. “And you're running out of time to.”

I chugged the last of my beer and, like Wisecup, shot it toward the trash, missing.

I stood.

“Bring the clippings tomorrow. Three o'clock, to the store.”

I shuffled past him. In the small office the maneuver felt like some basketball move, a pick-and-roll or some fancy footwork to get clear. Wisecup made to block me, but I was too fast out the door.

“She's a good woman,” he called behind me, then closed his door.

Losers always claim to have learned something worth sharing. I didn't need any more coaching from him.

Walking through the locker room, out past half-naked boys dressing in haste, I grabbed an errant ball that had rolled toward the locker room exit. I dribbled it all the way back to the library, put it in my car, then dribbled it into our house and up the stairs.

At my mother's door I picked it up and went inside. She was sleeping, so I gently placed the ball next to her on the pillow.

Mom didn't mention the basketball in her bed the next morning, and I didn't mention my evening with Wisecup. She went straight to business:

“The clippings?”

“On their way.”

I noticed the basketball appropriately peeping out from under her bed.

“Quite a society you've got,” I said. “They're all business. And very loyal to you.”

She eyed me, saying nothing.

“Dad's gone to Pittsburgh for a few days,” I said. “Some old clients.”

I couldn't help myself.

“We might have an old client of our own today.”

Her eyes widened. If she'd set me up, I could prove to do the same.

“He's not been up here in years,” she said quietly.

I nodded. What could I say?

“He was married,” she blurted. “For a few years. One of his former students, grown up of course. They were always in love with him.”

I said nothing, increasing her need to share.

“If you think we were a scandal, imagine what people said when he married that girl, twenty years younger. They had a baby, named her Cynthia. But then...I don't know...” She waved her hand, as if she could swat away some dark memory. “He was my second husband. That's what I called him, although I never tired of my first. That's my curse, Jebidiah. I love people and things too well to let them go.”

Tears formed in her eyes.

“He's a good man,” she finished.

I could only nod and leave the room. I had to open the store and wait for the good man to arrive.

As I waited that afternoon, I thought about why she'd waited so long to apply for the National Register of Historic Places. She could have done this years ago. The only reason to delay was the pain of possible rejection, of living the rest of her life in a house

not as grand in stature as she'd always seen it. A bitter pill, it would have been, to have what you valued as special be judged amalgamated by some expert, some cold observer of what always warmed you. Better to die and let that decision decide itself without you.

At three o'clock Wisecup came through the front door, right on time. Under his arm was a leather folder of clippings. He handed it me.

“Of course, your mom sorted out the ones she wanted years ago,” he said.

“Of course,” I said, understanding it all now, how I was trusted not only with the clippings, but with my mother, who needed my permission now that I'd come home, to say goodbye to her “second husband.” Somehow I was needed to consent to their bond.

I was their own Ohio Historic Preservation Officer, though my opinion really didn't matter. I was necessary to witness their strange devotion, to make them official as something other than a common infidelity.

“You'll remember where to find her,” I said. “I think she'd like to say a few things.”

“Okay,” he said, emotional already, though trying to mask it.

He climbed our stairs just as I'd watched him do so many times when my father was away, and, just as then, I went back to my own business, ignoring whatever it was I thought might be happening up there.

He descended an hour later, wiping tears from his eyes. He didn't acknowledge me, our time was done, but headed straight out the door. It would be his last trip to the store, as he retired and moved away, back to Pennsylvania, a year later.

I always remembered my last glimpse of him holding the basketball I'd taken the night before. Like any player after some impromptu afternoon game.

The Ohio Historic Preservation Officer arrived three weeks later in the form of a man named Edward Kissinger. He looked the part, gaunt and scholarly as he roamed from room to room. He met my mother briefly as we made our rounds into her bedroom.

She was unusually demure in greeting him, and I wondered if this was strategy or fear of the event passing before her. In the way she offered and Edward took her hand, they could have been gingerly courting in some meeker, more formal age. Apt, I thought. He was her last suitor, the one she'd been rehearsing for with every man who'd entered the store, going back to my father. Never mind that he wasn't her type, that Edward walked about the place clipboard in hand, looking impossible to charm.

Having memorized her tour, I did my part, reciting the well-rehearsed lines upon entering each new room. Near the end I presented the clippings, but Edward didn't seem much interested in context.

"My process relies on quality answers to the most basic questions," he explained, pointing to his clipboard.

Feeling intimidated, I didn't even ask to see his form.

"What now?" I asked when he'd finished with his scribbling.

"I'll let you know in a few days, after some last-minute fact-checking. If all goes well, I'll type and send this along to the federal office. They'll make a decision anytime between six months to a year."

I nodded, relieved that it was finally out of my hands.

After he left, I went up to see my mother, wide awake and anxious to know how it went.

“Fine, I guess,” I answered. “Hard to say actually.”

“We'll get it,” she said.

“How do you know?”

“We're special.”

In another month she'd be gone.

I could detail our heart-wrenching final conversation, but it's only what you'd expect: a lot of forgiveness, just as she'd planned. I could also imagine her final scene with my father, but that is probably too close in my mind to what she could have said to Jay Wisecup. She might have loved them differently, but they were both always too far away from her. So was I. Objects and property are easier to love, explaining why we devote so much more to them.

It took nearly a year until we were notified that the tannery was indeed fit to be placed on the National Register of Historic Places. Very little was done to mark the occasion. Edward Kissinger returned with some workmen to weld a plaque onto the front of our house. The Highland Historical Society showed up, what was left of them, to mark the occasion.

“Your mother would be so proud,” Agnes Moorhead, no longer acting as president but the real thing, told me. “She always understood the value of things.”

The small ceremony was harder than the funeral on me. In the time between her death and her final achievement, I'd come to appreciate my mother all the more, mourning her the way any antique dealer mourns a favorite piece sold: living entirely to fill its void.

CHAPTER 11

IN WITH THE OLD

At my mother's funeral, my father resembled the same man who'd once taken me to his own mother's funeral; he was sad, but his sorrow didn't move him to tears. As with his own mother, he felt more for what my mother would miss being dead than what he could have done or said while she was alive.

“If it helps, think of your mother,” he had advised me when I was eleven and confronting death for the first time. “Some day this will be her.”

It wasn't her in that open casket. Not really. So I couldn't form tears either, not over what I'd seen coming for so long. Her long diagnosis had been my sentence as well as hers, and its end was my emancipation. Instead of dwelling on my mother, I spent her funeral service considering what I'd do next for the first time in a year.

In the limousine ride to the cemetery my father guessed my mind:

“So what now?” he asked me. “Now that it's almost over?”

He looked so unfamiliar in his dark suit, probably the same jacket and slacks he'd worn to Rachel's funeral. He was such an anomaly slumped in the luxury car seat, it was difficult to take him seriously.

“Don't know.” I was curt, pretending his asking gave offense.

“Okay.” He nodded. “We'll talk about it when you're ready.”

I hadn't noticed or cared who'd attended the funeral until the reception back at the store. Then I recognized my extended family. Uncle Ray and Aunt Leslie were still trim and tailored. They looked like they might be cast in some investment commercial for senior citizens, the sort that smugly insists on maximizing your Golden Years. Beside

them, and striking a more roguish pose amid his brochure parents, stood my cousin Drew. He was harder to recognize given his shaved head and goatee, making him look more like Lenin than a Longmier.

We visited in that bland, dense way relatives talk when nothing holds them together. Since it was her funeral, my mother should have been the easiest topic, but remembering what best defined her conjured a woman Uncle Ray had never understood or approved. How to mention her resisting Vietnam to a man who wore an American flag pin in his lapel? How to speak of her spotty family judgment over the years to a former judge who still touted family values as a political philosophy? Ray chose to share a few childhood memories instead, but even with these he sounded unsure of the sister who'd always found more trouble than him.

“And what's next for you, Jeb?” Aunt Leslie asked me, then added, as if to credit my stalled life, “It was so good of you to be home at the end. Not every son would do that for a parent.”

Drew cast his eyes downward, avoiding his mother's implication.

“Don't know,” I said, honestly, then lied: “It sort of feels good to have no plans right now, nothing to worry about going back to.”

“I hear *that*.” Drew smiled, contradicting the prudent expression Leslie gave me; a man my age should have built commitments *somewhere*.

“Frankly, we worry about the store here,” Ray said. “Grant never had much use for the financial end of it. Hannah always handled things.”

I shrugged, though of late I had handled the business entirely.

“I guess so.”

“There are some legal, estate issues we should go over,” Ray said. “Not today. But stop by the house in a day or two. I’ll be in touch with Fred Vanzant for you, to iron out the details.”

“Appreciate it.” I nodded.

I did. The notion of hearing Vanzant pick through the bones of my mother's inheritance, with his typically heightened legalese felt daunting to say the least. Ray spoke that language. He could make it easy. Although he and Leslie now spent most of the year in Florida, they'd kept their house in town, mostly because Ray could never entirely disengage from his reputation and local dealings.

“Some opportunities might be coming your way,” he added.

After a little more small talk, they shuffled off to speak with someone else, leaving Drew standing alone with me.

“Want a smoke?” he asked.

“Sure.”

I didn't normally smoke, but something about Drew compelled me to follow him outside. We sat on the porch steps and lit up.

“So where are you now?” I asked him.

I hadn't seen him in ten years, not since he'd been in high school.

“Columbus. I work distribution for a small record label, an indie label.”

I noticed the pride in his voice. He wanted to impress me.

“Wow. What kind of music?”

“We try to find stuff with a vintage sound,” he said. “Jazz, bluegrass, soul. It's called Venerable Records. We specialize in still pressing vinyl.”

“Sounds unique.” I nodded.

“It is,” he said. “But we don't make much. Lately I've been trying to get investors together to open a club for the musicians. I know there's a market for that type of live music still.”

“In Columbus?”

He nodded. “Tons of grad students.”

“Your dad could probably help out. With the money.”

He shook his head, as if he were shaking away some long held anguish.

“He won't help. They just don't get it. He thinks I should be at some corporation or something I just won't stomach.”

I took a long drag, realizing what it was about Drew: he'd turned cool, cooler than I'd ever been. I remembered him once admiring my age and stature. Could I take credit for any of this? Was I, at all, once a role model who'd given him standards?

“That's what I liked most about Aunt Hannah,” he said. “She did things her own way, no matter what anyone said.”

“Do you play anything?” I didn't feel like listening to another version of Mom, not even Drew's. The day had been full of these, all wrong.

“Sure, I'm in a band. You should come up and see us play some night. You could stay at my place.”

“Sounds fun.”

In fact it did. And I could use a little fun. The word itself felt foreign in my mouth, especially at my mother's funeral. If I thought about it too long, I might have decided I was beyond fun, that I simply wasn't capable of it anymore. But looking at Drew finish

his smoke, the only thing I wanted to do was to lose myself in his offer. I wondered what his music would sound like.

“The house is yours, Jeb.”

This was Uncle Ray's announcement two days later, in his home office, a book lined room with leather furniture and a framed picture of Lincoln. There was no one else present to hear the news. He wanted to discuss this with me alone.

“How?” I asked.

“She left it to you years ago.”

I wasn't really surprised, but felt I should act curious for Ray.

“When?”

“When she first got it, after our parents died. You would have been ten maybe.”

“What about my father?”

Ray bit his lower lip before proceeding.

“He knows. Grant was typically indifferent about it at the time.”

“Why?” I asked.

I might have been asking why Dad was indifferent, an impossible question, but Ray understood my meaning.

“She wanted it to stay in the family line,” he said. “The question now is what you want to do with it.”

“Do what?”

Ray sighed, the small patronizing sigh of an adult breaking down information to a child.

“Well Jeb, you and I both know the store never made much on its own, and the local market's decent for real estate. You have options.”

“She wouldn't give it to me if she wanted me to sell it,” I said.

“I realize that.” Ray nodded. “But it's not exactly your life anymore, is it?”

The accuracy of his assessment surprised me. It felt like he knew my current exigency better than I did. Instead of answering, I retreated by explaining Mom's final efforts with the National Register, still in progress. Also, if I sold the property, someone could always tear it down, even if it made the register. And finally, I added, my father still lived and worked there.

Ray took the last part first:

“Your father can do his business anywhere. With his television deal it would be easier, in fact, for him to get a better space, probably in Columbus near his show. Also, after that incident with the Price boy, I'm sure it would be much easier for him personally.”

“You know he doesn't care about that. And we were innocent,” I added.

Ray did a half-sigh, half-grunt.

“Not everyone feels that way. No offense to you, Jeb, but your father has hurt our family's name from the very beginning.”

Ray spoke like a landlord, one who wanted Dad vacated as soon as possible now that Mom was gone. I wondered suddenly what he thought of me. He seemed to want me gone as well.

“The National Register will acknowledge the place despite its owner,” he continued. “And as far as possible destruction, simply find someone who loves the house

as much as Hannah did.”

I couldn't help but chuckle at that.

“And who'd *that* be?” I asked.

“How about me.”

Ray was smirking, acting cute back to me.

“Why would *you* want it?” I asked him.

“It's not the building I care about. It's the property. You're zoned commercial down there. I'd like to purchase the entire block. It's in good position for an investment I'm thinking about, something this town sorely needs.”

“What's that?”

He smiled widely, and I knew this was the part he'd been waiting to mention.

“A recreation center. One for the community. A place for families.”

“And the tannery?”

“Would stay,” he said. “Maybe as the daycare center.”

I could have cracked up at the thought of young children running around the place, remembering myself growing up lonely there. But the house had plenty of room, it was true. I couldn't imagine it empty of antiques.

“Your mother wanted the name to live on.” Ray went into full sales mode: “Why not give our name meaning? We should be working our good in the present, not just preserving the past.”

“I thought you retired,” I said, resisting the pitch.

“From *work*, yes. But this, Jeb, this is philanthropy.”

I told him I'd think about it, satisfying him for now. He must have trusted in my

desire to leave town.

“Don't do it, Jeb.”

This was my father's verdict when I told him, on our way up to Columbus that weekend. He was on his way to tape his monthly segment for *In with the Old*, while I was hitching a ride with him to spend my evening out with Drew.

“Why not?” I asked him. I'd already explained Ray's reasoning concerning his not needing the house anymore.

“It's got nothing to do with *me*,” Dad said. “You just can't trust a place like ours to a man like that.”

He went off about Ray over the years. The two had never gotten along, but with old age they'd become intractable concerning their separate ideals. Only Mom had been their common ground, and with her gone both now turned to me with their own interests. An odd position, as I didn't really care for either of their interests.

“Besides,” Dad said. “With him the whole thing's probably just some tax shelter or something. Got to be careful around people like him.”

“Like what?” I asked. “Family?”

“Of the ambitious,” he said. “Of successful pricks.”

“You're one of those, you know.”

Dad frowned into the windshield.

“Then I know what I'm talking about.”

“Could be worse,” I said. “Could be a Wal-Mart he's planning.”

“Don't put it past him. Town's bad enough as it is.”

His saying this made me wonder where Dad would go if he were to leave. He'd never been one for the fluctuating world around him. Frankly, I couldn't picture him anywhere else. Certainly not in the city, especially once we reached it. He couldn't be anywhere with billboards on buses, with people passing on outer belts. I could tell it taxed him just to drive through it all on the way to the studio.

I went inside with him, curious as to how the production of his show worked. The studio looked larger on television. Really it was just an open warehouse with fake walls accommodating better tools than he used at home.

“What's this month's fix?” I asked. I'd become increasingly interested in his work since running our store.

“Seth Thomas Mantle Clock,” he said. “It's a bitch.”

The way the show worked, my father would begin the clock at three and probably finish around midnight. The director would tape the entire “journey,” his word, and then edit the footage down to a ten minute segment, sometimes speeding up the film, which my father detested.

“Makes it look easy,” he said.

Watching him prepare for the shoot tickled me. They dabbed some powder make-up on his face. They made him change from his wrinkled, oily flannel shirt from home into a clean, pressed flannel shirt that made him look fuddy off camera, like a boy made to wear clothing for a school picture.

He was embarrassed, I could tell. He kept glancing over at me watching him.

“Aren't you *going*?” he asked.

“In a minute.”

I was too much enjoying his squirming. I'd never have guessed such a moment would befall my father, that he would tolerate such handling. This was the price of his ambition, his success. It always worked that way; you had to give up a certain dignity to get anything.

From behind us I could hear a familiar woman's voice: Sonja Davis, host of the show.

She was talking to one of the producers, about lighting or sound, something technical. When she was finished she approached me.

“You never called me.” She sounded denied her chance to prove something. “I'm sorry to hear of your mother.”

“It was a hard time,” I said, hoping to satisfy both her statements.

“Well. What brings you to our little show?”

“I'm actually just here to meet my cousin. We're hitting the town.”

“Really?” She arched an eyebrow. “You even know this town?”

I shook my head, examining her for the first time. She wore dark designer jeans and heels, her Saturday casual wear probably. The heels denoted a sophistication I'd always lacked. At her age and rank in the world she was dressing well at all times, while today I was wearing the same suit jacket, with faded jeans, that I'd worn last week to my mother's funeral. We were on different planes of adulthood.

She seemed to know this.

“I could show you some great places.”

She made this sound more like ego flaunting than flirting.

“I think we've got it covered.”

As I said this I saw Drew snaking through the studio to me. We shook hands in some hip fashion that he began.

“This place is tight.” He smiled. “Hey look, it's Uncle Grant getting miked-up.”

Dad grimaced at him, as Sonja inspected Drew's vintage wardrobe.

“I *know* you,” she said to him. “I've seen you somewhere.”

Drew nodded, unsurprised.

“I play bass for the Miserable Sharps. Usually at Carmichael's Coffee.”

“Oh yeah.” Sonja laughed. “I'm a regular there.”

“Here.” He handed her his record company card, very professional. “We're there tonight. I'm taking Jeb. You should come.”

Sonja glanced over at me.

“Maybe I will. Jeb here thinks I bite.”

“Be great if you did.” Drew clasped my shoulder. “My boy here needs a good night.”

I absently glanced over at my father, looking so sad and lonely on the set as they hung a light meter on him. All he wanted was to get on with it. I could suddenly relate.

“That woman, she's what they call a *cougar*,” Drew said at dinner, a fancy Asian-themed restaurant he'd found for us. “Still a hottie in her forties.”

“Sonja likes older men,” I noted, thinking of my father.

“That's the thing. A cougar can go both ways. Old, young, she's in charge.”

“Tell me about your club idea?”

“I know you lived in Chicago, so you probably know the Green Mill, right?”

I nodded. I'd once spent a late night there, the town's authentic jazz club, back when I'd been Drew's age, back when I'd cared more about making the scene than sleep. It seemed a lifetime ago.

“We'd like to have something with that flavor. Big stage, too loud to talk, generally a place people line up for at two o'clock.”

The very notion of attending such a venue made me tired. I was already tired. I felt old.

“What about the place you play in?” I asked. “Where we're heading tonight...”

“Carmichael's? Music's good, but that's it. Too small, too well-lit. It's really just a coffee bar that saw a niche.”

“You seem to know what you want,” I noted.

“You should come in with us as a partner. I swear, Jeb, what else you doing?”

I could tell he already knew about my getting the tannery, and of his father's offer to buy it from me. I wondered if Uncle Ray had planned this whole evening, to get Drew to sell me his investment, so he could pursue his own.

“I don't know,” I said.

Just being with Drew for such a brief time made he hesitate. Already I couldn't keep up with him. We'd been drinking since we left the studio, hopping from campus bar to campus bar, ordering martinis or some other gin-soaked concoction. We were both buzzed and ready to share.

“So what's with your dad these days?” I asked him. “The real estate thing?”

Drew sighed.

“I don't know. In a way, I think, *your* dad's to blame. You know how many times I

heard of what a bad father, what a bad guy your dad was growing up? It was Dad's constant complaint.”

I chuckled, finishing the last of my meal.

“I heard arguments against Ray too,” I said. “Today in fact.”

Drew gave that a hearty guffaw.

“Well, I think he was always jealous, in a way. I mean Uncle Grant got away with a lot, according to Dad. He always said that if it wasn't for Aunt Hannah he'd be in the gutter somewhere.”

“Probably true,” I said. Part of me enjoyed Ray's image.

Drew paused to slurp up some of his noodles.

“But then Uncle Grant goes ahead and wins on his own. I mean his show. You really can't argue with it. Your dad's kind of a celebrity, at least around that town.”

“So what?”

Drew grinned. “So, it sort of woke my father up, or at least out of retirement. I mean, Dad's used to being big stuff in Highland.”

“And so now the Rec Center?” I asked.

Drew shrugged, acting as if he couldn't comprehend the project, as if it was just too square for him.

“Sure. He wants his name on something, and if he can get Grant out of there at the same time, so be it.”

“What do you think?” I asked him.

“I think you *should* sell. I mean, Jesus Jeb, it's Highland, Ohio, who the fuck cares?”

I could have said, *It's Columbus, Ohio, who the fuck cares?* concerning his jazz club, but muffled that response. Drew was being candid, just as his own father had been. I had to respect it.

“How's your father affording such a big project?” I asked.

“You know.” He waved his hand. “Politics. He's in with some conservative church organization, some group who wants to build these centers in towns across the Midwest. I don't know all the details, and clearly I don't care. I don't live in Highland anymore. It was always very *red state*. You know that. Never the place for cats like us.”

I was both flattered and appalled. In stroking my ego as someone who had surpassed Highland, Drew sounded content to leave his hometown in the hands of those he didn't like, even if they were his own family. I remembered his mother's tension toward him at the funeral. Unlike me, Drew would never return to spend a year with his dying mother, and Leslie knew it. His family, like the rest of America, would prosper away from each other.

But I wondered if I could do that, abandon my origins to some church group I probably not only disagreed with but one that my mother would loathe. I imagined her horror at the local children being taught Christian values posing as daycare within the confines of our sacred walls. And yet, I knew it probably wouldn't be as bad as it was in my mind, that the town lacked a focal point for families, other than the schools, and that any church ideology might be secondary to the good a center like that might provide. Look at the YMCA.

“What denomination is the church group?” I asked.

Drew shrugged, finishing his noodles. In a moment he would be ready to

“bounce.”

“I don't know, man. Church is church.”

Carmichael's was already full when we arrived. A cozy little place in German Village, the coffee shop attracted an eclectic crowd, from graduate students to gray hairs who listen to NPR, a happening scene, one I hadn't thought possible in Ohio.

It was an odd state, perhaps the most telling in the union. As I sat down and ordered another drink I considered the territory, really just a microcosm of everything; Ohio had industry to the north, farming in the south, always divided it seemed on just where its loyalties were.

Drew's band seemed to be aware of this divide. The Miserable Sharps played a fast fusion of bluegrass and jazz, something Drew called “bluejazz.” Drew played the stand-up bass, alongside cornet, clarinet, banjo, and fiddle. To me his instrument was the common denominator, the decider. Its heavy thump set what style would conquer each song.

I enjoyed the music, but all the liquor had made me sad. Whenever I glanced around at the students in the crowd, I saw my mother, once an OSU girl herself. She'd been in my thoughts ever since I'd discovered I owned the tannery.

The Miserable Sharps finished their set and took a break. Each dressed close to the same as Drew, in vintage attire, making me wonder if Drew was in costume for the show or if he dressed so swell all the time.

He swung back toward me, his face flushed and sweaty, looking eager for my approval, like the eight-year-old I'd once watched play Ms. Pac-Man.

“So what d'you think?” he asked.

“You guys can play,” I said.

“You're the first family to come see me.”

“That so?” Of course I was.

“We haven't been playing so long. So how 'bout it?”

“What?”

“The *club*. Look around. You could be part of this geek scene.”

There was an energy in the room, undeniably, but I didn't know if it was my energy. I didn't even know what that was anymore.

“I wouldn't know the first...” I began, but he interrupted me.

“There's your cougar!”

He pointed toward the bar, where Sonja Davis sat chatting with a few people. She wore a velvet dress with fancy shoes.

“Let's go get her for ya,” said Drew, hopped-up on liquor and bluejazz.

“Just let her be...” I started, but he was already bounding through the crowd.

I had no choice but to follow.

“Just a block down,” Sonja answered Drew's first question, where she lived. She eyed me as if to convey this was the only reason she'd come, it wasn't inconvenient.

“So what do you think of my band?” Drew asked her.

“Too fast for me,” Sonja said. “I usually like something slow, something calming.”

“We're not your standard act,” Drew said. “You can get regular jazz anywhere.”

An awkward silence. Drew was in over his head. Sonja didn't care for innovation;

she valued class. But it made sense that she'd be here; the place screamed class, PBS class. She introduced a few of her friends to us, colleagues from the show. They were happy to meet me, the son of Grant Harris, but that was it. They had their own conversation going on.

Drew patted my back.

“I've gotta go on again.” He turned and sped toward the stage.

“Cute kid, your cousin,” Sonja said. “Were you anything like that?”

“Probably. Not a musician though.”

“Right, an artist, Grant says.”

“That's kind. I was a designer. Dad doesn't know what that is.”

“Was?” Sonja arched her eyebrow again, her constant gesture to me.

Her question sent me back to my current dilemma, to sell and scam with Drew, or to stay and feel older than I already did. But then I realized who I was talking to, a woman who straddled both antiques and trendy clubs, an actual adult. She seemed suddenly, unexpectedly, the wisest person to confide in.

During The Miserable Sharps' second set I told Sonja my options. Since I was drunk, I shared them while editorializing how I felt about my father, Uncle Ray, my dead mother's wishes, jazz clubs, the religious right, small towns, big towns, Ohio, anything I'd been feeling about any future. It was a relief, like therapy. I felt lighter just unloading it all.

Sonja noticed.

“You know,” she said, “If this were real jazz, it's not but if it were, its goal would be to put you in the moment.”

“The moment?”

“Come on,” she said. “Let's get out of here.”

I woke in her bed, hours later, with one thought:

I'm my father.

But for once the notion didn't provoke anxiety or anger. Only later would I consider that he'd been here first. I hadn't been with a woman in over a year, not since Marsha, and this alone kept me calm, even if it was Sonja Davis sleeping beside me.

I remembered Sonja in the kitchen, handling a bottle of wine, pouring our glasses, flipping on her stereo to some light yet tasteful jazz, and then sitting with me on the sofa.

I'd asked her about the signs I'd sold her, because they weren't on display the way they'd been arranged in my mind.

“Gifts,” she'd said. “I give everyone antiques now.” And she'd smiled. “Trying to support people like you.”

“Like *me*?” I laughed. “I don't think I'm *that* guy. Like I told you at the show, I'm thinking about getting out.”

“Were you ever in?”

I shrugged as my answer.

“But I know what you're going through,” she continued. “I spent years doing regional news in backwaters, wondering what the hell I was for.”

This began a lighthearted monologue on her younger days. She'd done weather and traffic, but mostly local features. She recapped this time of her life like a reporter doing a segment, a profile piece maybe, cheerfully shaking her head in disbelief, knowing

perhaps that she was patronizing her audience.

“I once had to cover the battle of the bands in Akron,” she said. “Sad little affair. Pathetic. The lead singers couldn't stop propositioning me. I was also a judge, a celebrity, I guess.”

“Did you?” I asked.

“Did I what?”

“Go home with anyone?”

Her eyebrow arched, along with her back. That had been the last of our conversation.

I stood now and walked naked into her kitchen, pouring myself a glass of water, gulping it down as fast as I could to help my head, heavy with the coming hangover.

I walked into her living room, examining her decor. Her apartment was neatly decorated with various collectables she'd found along her professional travels. Antique spools seemed her favorite. These were placed everywhere, bringing to mind some phallic theory I'd heard once in college. Along with the spools was a collection of old type and type trays, the makings of old media. Wherever possible, the type spelled her name, turning the room into a sort of collage of self-reference, typical of a star.

Spools without yarn. Type without ink. I laughed out loud, a sharp single crack in the spacious room. No wonder both my father and I had gone to bed with her; Sonja was one of us, one of the collectors needing to be collected.

Farther along her shelving I found a few old Coke bottles sprouting flowers, daisies. My mother had decorated our kitchen with these too, identical bottles with the same flowers.

“Your father brought me those.”

I turned to see Sonja breezing through the room toward the refrigerator for her own water. She threw me my jeans on her way.

“His flowers died,” she said. “But I keep replacing them.”

I tugged on my pants and found my shirt sprawled along her couch.

“Tea?” she asked.

This question staggered me more than the bottles on the wall. Suddenly I was back in my old life.

“Sure,” I played cool. “What's he like, my father?”

Now Sonja looked staggered.

“*In bed?* You want me to compare?”

“No, *God* no! I mean, what was he like bringing you flowers?”

I was savoring her tea preparations, just as I always had with Marsha. These quiet moments, that's what I needed, not the jazz clubs but where they led.

“Sweet. Rough.” Sonja shook her head. “He didn't know what he was doing, or how much his not knowing what to do mattered.”

“I don't follow.”

Sonja laughed at me. “I don't suppose you know, either.”

“Come on. Tell me.”

“Well, he wasn't expectant or sorry.” She handed me my tea. “That's stupid. Your father's not that way. He doesn't plan. He doesn't sit around thinking about how his choices are shit. Not like you, Jeb. He never did that, and he went through a time, I hear, when he could have.”

I was rightly offended; I didn't live up to the old man for her.

"I suppose that's why you went after him," I said.

"I did, if you really want to know." She leaned in. "I'm only sorry for your mother. But if what I know of her was true, even she would understand. *She* couldn't hold him. I didn't even try. I knew he's not the kind to keep."

I sipped my tea, though the moment's joy it had brought me had also drained.

"And me? Why go after me?"

Sonja grinned. "I was sort of hoping you'd be better, since you hate him."

I put down my cup.

"Did he say that?"

She nodded. "More than once, especially lately. He worries you'll leave him now."

"He *talks* about it?"

She shook her head.

"No, but I can read him. Your mother's sickness took something out of him. He walks around the studio, or sometimes out on location, like he's just woken up and doesn't know where he is. He never acted that way when we were...you know."

Sonja finished her tea.

"I'm hitting the shower," she said. "You can stay the night. That's something Grant *never* did."

I sat staring into my cup until I heard the water start from the shower. Then I began weeping, finally, thinking of my mother, who'd once lived in this city with antiques all about her own apartment. I couldn't separate her from Sonja now. Both had seen the best in my father, something I never could. Both, if given the choice, would always prefer

him to me.

I stood and walked back to the Coke bottles. I felt a powerful belonging to them.

Containers, that's all most things were, even people, containers containing containers. What the select few did, they filled those containers, with flowers, with anything, making them matter. We weren't collectors, I saw, but keepers. Both my parents had known this difference.

A sort of peace settled over me staring at those bottles. I could have looked through them until dawn. And I knew, picking one up, that I wouldn't sell the store, that I didn't want or need to improve myself anymore. I'd been charged with looking after my mother's container, and I would do that, because there was nothing more worthy than keeping it well.

I dressed quietly and phoned Drew to pick me up in front of Carmichael's. It was still dark, but it was morning. The sun would appear soon.

On my way out I handled some of Sonja's type blocks. On her table I organized them to read, simply:

Like Dad

“So, details...”

Drew was sitting across from me in an all-night diner he liked, one he “practically lived in,” he'd said. He was pounding ketchup onto his eggs.

“I'd rather not,” I said, chomping my waffles.

“That's cool.” He nodded. “You had a good time, though, last night?”

“I did. Thanks.”

“You should move up here. This town likes you, I can tell.”

I knew this was his lingo, but wondered if this language was also a logic for his generation, that a place could like you, that it could decide whether you stayed or left. It would make life easier, if less free.

“I don't think so, Drew. I'm not the right guy for a club.”

“Oh, come *on*.” He masked his disappointment with an earnest smile. “Everyone really liked you. They thought you were cool. Especially going home with the cougar.”

“Sonja,” I corrected him.

“Right. Well, I mean, I just thought you'd be open to the possibility, especially after seeing the crowd at the show last night. And we're *small* time. Not even as cooking as the bigger bands on the label.”

“I had fun,” I said. “But I think the fun would get ruined if it turned to work. I think you know that better than I do.”

Drew looked perturbed. He stopped eating his eggs.

“So what? You just want to sit on your ass, managing junk you don't even care about?”

“I do.” I nodded. “The sitting part sounds okay.”

“That's bullshit, Jeb.”

“It's really not.”

“I thought we'd have a *family* business.” He was grasping now.

“I have a family business.”

“A real one! One that succeeds!”

“Success is relative.”

“Ha! What, you the *Buddha* now? Gonna sit on the mountain and find inner peace?”

I shrugged.

“Maybe.”

“*Jesus*, man. Can't you see? This is just your mom's death biting your ass!”

“I know.”

“You know...”

“I don't care.”

The waitress came with our bill. It's my bad habit to wonder about her, people like her, what her life is like away from work. She was a stout woman, ageless in a setting like this. What I'd decided, in the space of her taking my order and delivering the check, was that I wanted the idyllic sort of life to consider the people and things that passed before me. But I couldn't say this to Drew, who needed movement, to keep running to and away from people and things. Maybe he always would need that.

He was thrumming the table with his bass-playing fingers. I thought he was impatient with me, but he smiled sadly.

“Well, I tried.” He shook his head. “Dad'll be sad, I guess.”

“You couldn't have done better,” I agreed.

“What's that mean?”

“I admire you,” I said. “You've got your own life. It seems good for you.”

“But not good enough for you.” He sounded bitter. “Or my father.”

“Fuck *us*. You do your own thing. Have confidence. Don't think of your choices as shit.”

I wondered if Sonja was back in bed, what she'd thought of my message, of me.

Drew, already punched in the gut by my refusal, took her advice better than I had.

He nodded, as if these were words to remember.

“I know that,” he said. “I just wish people could see things the way *I* do, you know?”

“I know it, Drew.”

Check paid, we rose and walked out of the diner. I noticed Drew's swagger as he went, regretting, momentarily, that I'd never mastered a walk of my own. It looked good, cocky and detached, the sort of motion that deflects so much disappointment and looks best traveling over short distances.

I found my father asleep on a couch in studio, a dirty quilt spread over him.

It occurred to me, watching him, that I'd never seen him sleeping before, not even when we'd once shared a bed at my grandmother's funeral in Michigan. Like Drew, he'd been a man of constant motion, never wasting a minute, up early, up late. But here he was, taking a rest, the same as anyone. What else hadn't I seen him do? I'd never cared to explore him, only avoid him.

Asleep, he looked like an old man. He looked tired, beyond tired. He could have been dead, he looked so completely away from any earthly worries. Sonja was correct; he wasn't a man to doubt or fret over the days passing. He'd once lived underground, away from even his own self-inspection, and now he lived on television, for everyone to scrutinize. But he wouldn't even know the difference.

That had been my mother's job. In giving him shelter, she'd known him, for a

time.

I remember, in the intermittent year between his life in the basement and his life on the road, my mother threw him a surprise birthday party. She had me blow up balloons to decorate around our upstairs apartment, and she baked him a chocolate cake that spelled his name in pink frosting. Of course, the only party-goers were us, but I don't remember thinking this depressing in any way. Nor did my mother, who dressed up for the evening in some polka-dot print dress that reminded me, on her slim frame, of a piece of wrapped taffy, the kind not sold anymore from drugstores. She hummed as she prepared the meal, lobsters she bought at the Kroger a few towns over.

I thought it the food and the surprise we'd prepared that put Dad in an almost artless state that evening. He sat next to me at the table, grinning tractably, looking torpid in his pleasure of it all. He let me cut the cake, as well as blow out his candles. He admired the balloons I'd arranged. What I'm saying is, it looked like he forgot himself.

I'd been wrong about that. Years later, when I reminded Mom about the only birthday party I can remember throwing for my father, she assured me that it wasn't his losing himself in our celebration. What made him giddy with wonderment, she said, was that he'd forgotten his own birthday, the way he always did.

What he was so overwhelmed by was his remembering himself, because we had.

By then my father had faded into a sort of nonexistence, the way all antiques will. The party, the dress, the lobster, all of it was my mother's attempt to resuscitate him. It only worked for one night; you can't have lobster every dinner, no matter what they say love is.

I used to enjoy thinking that my father was the most selfish man I knew, that he

hoarded his time and energies because he simply didn't care to share them with others.

But now, having spent time with him as an adult, I could see that he didn't know himself.

What harmed and saved him through the years was his ability to consciously *not* know himself, to lose himself completely in the small pieces, of his mind, of the world's making.

But occasionally, as at his birthday party, he will look to you as if you can tell him who he is. This is the face my mother must have seen on occasion, the face I saw as he woke that morning on the studio couch.

“You look like her,” he said, bleary-eyed with sleep. “Your mother.”

“Morning,” I said. I didn't want to speak to him about her, not yet.

“For a second I thought she was...” He shook his head, shaking away this specter.

“You're at the studio.”

“Okay.”

“I was out all night.”

He nodded.

“You finish the clock?”

He pointed to it, still on the set.

“What time is it anyway?” he asked. “I forgot to set the stupid thing.”

I smiled. This was typical of him, to speak derogatorily of the item only after he'd fixed it, as if he'd earned the right to call it names.

“Near six,” I said.

He rose and slid on his boots, then trudged over to the Seth Thomas Mantle Clock with the quilt over his shoulders.

“What time *exactly*?” he asked me.

With the quilt draped around him, he resembled some homeless person on the street asking for the time. Like a street person, he had a talent for forgetting his surroundings completely. Uncle Ray was right; he'd always been just a few generous people away from oblivion.

I was one of those now. The show wouldn't last forever. The old wouldn't always be in.

“Five fifty-three,” I said. “In the a.m.”

He locked eyes with me, long enough to convey his comic appreciation of me telling him it was morning. But it faded and his face turned sober with the question he'd been saving:

“You coming home now? With me?”

“I think so,” I said.

I could have said more about what I'd decided, but I was immediately struck by my father's setting the time. Something about the clock's hands moving backwards held me transfixed until they reached our present and I could move forward.