



The
Venus
Tree

MICHAEL
PRITCHETT

The John Simmons
Short Fiction Award

The Venus Tree

By Michael Pritchett

1988 John Simmons Short

Fiction Award Winner

Selected by Robert Stone

“Michael Pritchett’s haunting and austere stories linger a long time in the mind. His characters seem to be exploring their way through a world of clues and secrets and his writing has such persuasive force that the reader shares in their explorations, coming to understanding as they do. His style is strong and unpretentious, often capable of real unforced poetry. His images seem compounded naturally out of the weather of his people’s lives.”—Robert Stone

In *The Venus Tree* Michael Pritchett powerfully explores the themes of lost innocence—innocence abandoned, stolen, and occasionally regained or revisited. As his characters encounter many emotionally charged and sometimes profoundly unsettling situations, Pritchett’s sympathetic writing renders their struggles with deft, compassionate, and lyrical strokes.

In “People,” the owner of a souvenir shop on the interstate highway befriends a young woman who he believes can help him overcome the poverty of his own background. A widower in “Time Lines” must come to grips with the death of his wife before he loses the woman who tries to help him through his grief. And in “Flying Lessons,” a young man dramatically tries to flee his mother and her strong, damaging influence.

Set in Wyoming, Colorado, Nebraska, Iowa, and other midwestern and western states, these stories have a grit and an authenticity that set them apart from other current fiction. Against the backdrop of the Rocky Mountains, of open plains and fertile farmland, of skeet shooting and hunting, Pritchett’s characters confront lives that reverberate with truth.

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MICHAEL PRITCHETT



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*With gratitude to my family, my wife, Angela,
my good friend Donn Irving Blevins, the fine
people at the University of Iowa, and also to
a few who will always be remembered—
Thalia Selz, Connie Belcher, and Margaret Jackson*

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Peach Seed



On the first morning after Trent's departure, Jesse watched the sun come up on Sam's soft, clean belly. It shone across it like a searchlight across a field of sprouting wheat. The small, delicate blonde hairs on her stomach were the new stalks. While she still slept, Jesse stared across that small, spare field and saw not only a sign of change, a gentle foreshadowing in the pucker of her navel, but also a new Sam and a new life for himself.

When they first met, while he was driving deliveries back and forth between Fayette and the university several miles east, he never could have imagined Sam with a baby. She was pretty—thin and freckled with wiry red hair. But she moved quick and firm like a man. She kept her hair cut close to her head. She spoke in short, tight sentences.

But she was different now. A few years had made a difference, and so had Trent. Trent had had a bigger hand in it than Jesse cared to believe.

It began with a delivery of dead baby pigs—small, pale aqua and pink fetuses, frozen in plastic pouches filled with formaldehyde. A scientific supply company in Chicago shipped them to Fayette and Jesse took them the last seventeen miles to the campus. He had to take them in a refrigerated truck. On the drive, he sometimes thought about them floating in that cold chemical sea. He always preferred to think that they probably had a soul and that it was gone to someplace else.

At the college biology building, Sam signed for them. She was the teacher's assistant in the course. That first day, Sam wore jeans and a blue tube-top and handmade Mexican sandals. She had a cigarette pinched between her lips; when she signed the invoice, she squinted and Jesse got a glimpse of her as an old woman. Then with her own handcart she moved the white plastic crates, sloshing heavily with the preserved dead, inside the building.

"Nice to think they're in pig heaven," Jesse said, taking back the clipboard.

Sam smiled and shrugged. "I guess."

"I could never touch 'em," he said. "I guess I'd flunk your class."

"Yes, you would," she said.

She had watched him get back in the truck and drive away. After they were married the following spring, he remembered to ask her what she had been thinking watching him drive away.

"I don't recall," she said. "I know it was something, but I can't remember what."

He moved them into a narrow two-story with a peaked roof just outside of downtown Fayette. It was a pink house—a dirty, watery pink with white shutters and a mud lot for a yard. The house was encircled by wild rose bushes that exploded into color for two months out of the year and then died back almost to the roots.

He had a little money in the bank and with it they picked out a couch and a few chairs, a dining room table for the downstairs, and a bed and dresser for upstairs. Jesse had to pick out the color and style of the pieces. Sam seemed to have no feeling one way or another. She was satisfied with what little they could afford, even though the rooms were still so empty that voices carried a faint echo.

Jesse went on with the delivery business, and Sam went on studying biology. He dug a garden in the rear half of the backyard and planted perennial flowers to hold the soil down. Then he seeded the rest with buffalo grass. Sam kept taking her birth control pills and told him it was nice knowing when it would happen each month. She always referred to her period as "it," as if it were something apart from her.

At night, with her in bed beside him, sleeping flat on her back with the sheet pushed off, he thought about the attic room above their heads. About how it could be converted into a child's bedroom so easily. A little bright paint is all it would

take. A girl would like a bright color like a sky blue. He would think and he would look at Sam. With her arms thrown back over her head, her breasts flattened out until only the large, soft brown nipples proved she was a woman. She had the hard skinny body of a boy. And no hips. That was one thing that worried him. The narrowness of her pelvis. How would she carry? Probably large and far forward and high like his sisters had.

In their second year together, Trent appeared. It seemed to Jesse as if one moment Trent wasn't there and the next he was, but there was more to it that he hadn't seen until it was already upon him. It was partly the way the light blue pill case was always there every morning when he opened the cabinet for the toothpaste. And it was also the way Sam was taking more and more classes, sleeping less, and starting to chew her fingernails. Their silences lengthened and Jesse took it for growing comfortable with each other. But he realized afterward that wasn't the way Sam was taking it. She wasn't really listening when he mentioned the attic and how he had picked a good paint, the perfect wallpaper.

Jesse had warnings, but he didn't see them. He was on his knees too much, stripping and polishing and sanding the attic floors, to see anything. Thinking back on it, Jesse remembered Sam must have mentioned Trent the first day she met him. Then, over the passing weeks, she had mentioned the name more and more, attaching another scrap of information to it each time. Jesse didn't think about the reasons for all the information until the night Sam didn't lie silent when he mentioned progress on the attic.

"It sounds like it's almost finished," she said.

"Very close," Jesse said. "Very."

"Could I see it tomorrow?"

Jesse hesitated for a moment and then rolled up out of bed.

"We could see it now," he said. Sam followed him up the

folding stairway. He showed it all to her—the white-trimmed double-paned windows, the polished floors, the new Summer Peach wallpaper.

“It’s nicer than the downstairs,” she said.

“It is,” Jesse agreed.

She walked around and around the room, looking and touching. Then she stopped and seemed to hold her breath. She folded her arms over her boy’s chest.

“There’s something I have to ask,” she began.

Trent was quiet about his arrival. He seemed to be aware of the alien sound his voice made, echoing in the entryway of the house.

“My pleasure,” he said, quickly releasing Jesse’s hard, callused hand. He had a tired teenager’s face on his thirty-year-old body. His hair was wavy and brownish-red. His eyes were bored and gray. They said nothing about the story Sam had told him—how he was losing his house because of hospital bills; the money spent on a wife with bad nerves. And how he was turning to Sam as his last resort, desperate. Jesse wanted something about him to seem desperate.

Sam stood in the doorway behind them watching. When Jesse turned to help Trent with his suitcase and trashbags of clothes and looked up at her, she wouldn’t meet his look.

Later, he said to her: “I didn’t like the way he shook my hand. He was smug.”

“About what?”

“I didn’t ask.”

“He’s complicated,” she said. “Give him a chance.”

The work on the attic went on around Trent. Jesse noticed how conscious Trent was of keeping his bed tucked away in one corner of the attic like an animal with a burrowing instinct. He seemed to like the low end of the attic, where the ceiling angled down to meet the top of the wall. But he wasn’t careful about how he spread his things. Perhaps at first, but not

for long. The attic was soon filled with unfired pottery and boxes of sculpting wires and spatulas. Jesse's working space was reduced to the area around the stairway.

For the first weeks, he was ghostly and distant toward Jesse. He and Sam carpooled to the university each day; when they came home, Trent would immediately head upstairs. Sam wouldn't have much to say until Trent came back down later for dinner. Jesse would have to sit and listen to the language they spoke to each other—a language full of abstract ideas and arts and cultures that he could understand but could not join in.

Exactly when the clay appeared Jesse couldn't say. But one night it was there in the attic by Trent's bed. Six neat, plump bags, fifty pounds to a bag.

"It's a good sign," Sam said about it. "He's comfortable. He's going to work."

"What's he making? What if it's so big we can't get it out of the attic?"

Sam just looked at him.

"What if it falls through the damn floor and kills us in our sleep?"

"Jesse," she said. "What are you really afraid of?"

"I told you."

"I mean *really* afraid of?"

He looked up at the ceiling, feeling really afraid only of her question and its many possible meanings.

"There aren't as many rafters in that ceiling as I'd like. That's all I'm saying."

Jesse concentrated on the attic. A railing had to be put up around the mouth of the stairway so a small girl couldn't stumble and fall down. Girls were more careful than boys, but they could still trip on the raised head of a nail or a shoelace.

Trent dragged home a half sheet of plywood. He borrowed a jelly jar full of lacquer from Jesse and sealed the wood with

it. Then they started working the same space together, Trent with wood knives and spatulas and Jesse with his miter saw and hammer.

“So what are you making?” Jesse asked him.

“It’s a figure study,” Trent said. “Just practice. Trying to keep my eye.”

“What are you going to do with it after?”

“Do with it?”

“Like, will you sell it or keep it?”

“I don’t think about it,” he said.

Jesse shrugged. With two smooth, fast strokes he drove a nail.

“You’re quite a handyman,” Trent said.

“I like working with my hands.”

“What’s this going to be?”

Jesse lost his hold on a new nail and dropped it. He fumbled for it while looking up at Trent.

“This? It’s a finished attic. Improves the resale value.”

“I mean, is it a guest room? Or what?”

Jesse caught hold of the nail, placed it, and drove it with two clean strokes. “Guest room.”

“Really?” Trent said.

Jesse nodded and picked up a jar of wood putty. He forced himself not to look up at Trent again.

“With the colors, it sort of looks like a nursery,” Trent said.

Jesse shrugged. He could feel Trent’s sleepy eyes on him. With a putty knife, he dug out a quantity of the putty and scraped it across the heads of the new nails.

“It looks different in daylight,” he said, and he took up a new nail, placed it, and drove it with two strokes.

In bed that night, Sam brought up the trip to New York for the first time.

“He’s been given a three-week sabbatical to study with sculptors there. Obviously Marla can’t go.”

“Crazy people aren’t welcome in New York?”

"She's not crazy. It's a nervous thing. But she still can't go."

Jesse lay on his side in the dark. In his own mind, he finally named the fear that had been in the house since Trent's arrival. It was even in the wood when he was working, seeping up his arms.

"Jesse, I don't know when I'll get another chance to see New York."

"Me neither," Jesse said.

"Right."

"So when do you leave?"

"I don't have to leave at all if you don't want me to."

"You'd stay?" Jesse asked.

"If you want."

"Okay," he said. "Then go."

"He wants to go in a few weeks," she said quietly.

"That's fine." Sam turned over against him. She put her small, dry hands on his back and whispered against the back of his neck.

"Jess, it won't change anything, you know."

"I know," Jesse said.

"You don't mean it. I can hear it in your voice."

"I do. I really do."

She dug her hands in under him and between his arms and his body and hugged hard, gripping with her fingertips.

"Tell me it won't," she said.

"It won't change anything."

"I don't think you mean it," she said.

Within the week, Jesse pulled out of the attic. Tool by tool, he retreated to the dark, close basement of the house. He left the rail half-finished and unpainted. It looked naked and wrong amidst the perfect work he had done everywhere else, but he could not find caring in himself to finish it. He left Trent alone with it and the mass of clay that was gradually becoming the likeness of a figure. The basement was damp and no place

to be working alone, but it made Jesse feel like he had withdrawn to a safe, protected place. In the house above his head, the hard oak floors reported every move made by Trent, Sam, and the wind.

He had to make work for himself when he came home in the evenings, to fill the time until he went to bed with Sam. But that was easy enough. The tools needed sharpening, oiling, polishing, repairing. The tools would be needed, he was sure. A time would come, somehow, when things would always be getting broken and would be in need of repair. In that time, no movement escaped him. He listened and heard the first time that Sam's feet followed Trent's up the attic stairway. He heard her every step across the attic floor. And he waited for more sounds, but there were none. Just a long, odd silence while the house waited with held breath and then the retracing of those steps down the folding stairway.

And then a second time. A much longer silence and the house making only two small settling sounds under its own weight before Sam's feet resounded on the wood attic steps and he heard her go down the hall to their bedroom and close the door.

Jesse was putting the last few strokes on a chisel blade when he heard Sam on the attic stairs for the third time. He put down the work and waited, expecting a silence that could go on for as long as he would go on. He began making plans for ways to survive it, setting up new configurations to the house's rooms in his head, moving walls, ripping up dusty flooring. And then it was ended; ended by angry voices, Sam's hard bare feet on the attic stairs, and then the slam of a door in the hallway.

Jesse got up from the workbench and went upstairs. He hesitated at the bottom of the stairway leading to the upper floor and then he climbed it with firm, deliberate strides. When he reached the top, Trent was just coming down from the attic. Trent's bored expression never changed. He sat down on the third step from the bottom and looked right at Jesse. Jesse saw

the dried clay coating Trent's arms from the fingertips up to the elbow. He was wearing a T-shirt and white painter's pants covered with dry brownish smears and splatters. He put a cigarette to his lips and regarded Jesse calmly. Jesse turned past him and went down the hall to the bedroom.

Sam was sitting on the bed naked with her flat, bony back to the door when Jesse went in. Her yellow bathrobe was on the bed beside her.

"What's going on?" he asked.

"Just an argument," Sam said. She was looking straight ahead at the framed pictures of their last vacation, hanging on the wall beside the bed.

Jesse hesitated a moment. He still had his hand around the smooth brass doorknob behind him. He ran his fingers over it as if it was Sam's small fist.

"It's you, isn't it?" he said. "That he's sculpting. You're modeling for him."

"I was modeling," Sam said coldly. "But it's not me. I don't know who it is, but it isn't me."

He turned the doorknob loose and went over to her, sitting down on the opposite corner of their bed. They sat not looking at each other. Jesse listened to Sam breathe as though he were beside her in sleep.

"What's going to happen?" he asked finally.

"A lot," Sam said. "It looks like things are going to change."

Two days passed, and then Trent was leaving—making an early start on the sabbatical. Jesse had to help him out to his car with his luggage. Trent was silent, but quick and reckless about loading the car's small trunk. When he was finished, he shook Jesse's hand without meeting his eyes. He cast small side glances at the windows of the house and seemed to be waiting or hoping for something else to happen.

"Sorry about all the clay," he said. "I got rid of it."

"Why? It was your work."

Trent looked up at the windows and then down at the gravel driveway.

"I put it all in bags by the garbage cans. If that's alright."

"Sure it is," Jesse said.

Sam didn't come out to say good-bye. She waved from the window as the Carmen Ghia rattled down the rutted driveway. As soon as it reached the bottom of the drive, she let the drapes fall. Jesse stood in the driveway waving until the small car completely disappeared. Then he walked back along the side of the house to the metal drums that held the trash. Large brown bags surrounded them, bags with odd, blunt shapes and a strange weight. He bent and opened one of them, loosening the wire tie and spreading wide the mouth.

The woman was in pieces. Trent had used piano wire to slice the figure apart at every joint. The pieces were flattened where his palm had squeezed, looking for a firm hold for slicing. It was like looking at the aftermath of a bloodless murder. But Sam had been right. It wasn't her. The limbs were too rounded and full, the bottom too plump, the breast too deep. Jesse closed up the bags and walked back to the house.

Sam was in the kitchen cutting celery for lunch when he came in. She watched him pour a cup of coffee and sit down at the kitchen table.

"He doesn't have to come back," she said. "I can wire him that we want our home back."

"A person should come home to somewhere after a trip," Jesse said. "Let's wait until then."

In the time between, they learned again how the house sounded under the weight of just their two bodies. Sam went to the clinic. She said later, after the test came back positive, that she must have missed a few days a few months back. But Jesse knew and so had Trent. His knowing was in the heaviness of the figure he had sculpted.

"How far along?" Jesse asked.

"Six weeks."

Jesse knelt down on the floor in front of her and rolled back her T-shirt with his wide, heavy hands. He rubbed one dry, callused hand over her flat stomach.

“Is it there?” he asked.

“Yes,” Sam said. “No bigger than a peach seed.”

Jesse rubbed a little lighter and imagined that he could already see the changes in her belly. It was right there before him. He didn't have to try to feel the seeds of his salvation.



Trinity



Milse Straud talked to his wife on the phone about an hour before her death. She called him from a pay phone at an Amoco near the Colorado border. Milse had only half-listened to her as he watched leaves fall past their porch door. They bickered over matters that Milse could not seem to forget in any detail—house prices and closing dates, fees and bonds and notes, first days on new jobs.

The practical questions didn't really interest Milse. He had already made his plan for their new home in the dead Colorado mining town, Aguilar. In the fall, he would start out with a woodcutting business, then snowplowing in winter except for that period when nothing but a Snowcat could reach them, and professional outfitter work in the spring and summer. His arguments with Emma were not real, or at least they seemed less real to him than they did to her.

Milse didn't regret the conversation even after there was no doubt that Emma was gone. If he could have known that her death would take place after she put down the phone, a part of him would not have stood in the way of these aerial events. And this would have been not out of spite, but out of what small part of their relationship was not spiteful—out of the part that was their struggle to bring their views into the same latitudinal line.

So the conversation was not his regret at all. It was the place. It was the fact that she had been so many hours removed when she nodded off and crossed the center line.

This was the shape of his regret and unease at allowing Marjorie to enter their house any farther than the alcove behind the kitchen, just inside the back door. Almost every afternoon at three, when Milse could close down his radiator shop without fear of missed business, Marjorie would come along in her blue pickup and park on the road in front of the house. Then they would sit on kitchen chairs just inside that alcove, close enough to the door to feel the whistle of cold under the door

frame, and they would drink hot tea and talk about the house that he was going to help her build over the summer.

Marjorie understood. She had never been married except for three months when she was twenty, but she did understand. She was pretty and just his age, but Milse held himself apart from expectation, allowing for the daily chance that the blue pickup would not appear. They both knew that all he could offer in his discomfort was the alcove and the tea and vague swipes at the future. She stayed for exactly an hour each time and then drove back to her apartment in Iowa City.

Milse was just old enough to know that was not enough, could never be enough. He tried to talk directly about these matters with Marjorie, but veered off each time, fearing that it would sound as if he had plans, as if he was ready to take his eyes off the ground. He only discussed her future as a thing separate from his own day-to-day life.

That was the reason he waited until the day before he was leaving to tell her he was taking a trip west.

"When you come by tomorrow," he said.

"Uh-huh?"

"I won't be here."

"Then I won't come by."

"I'll be here on Sunday. I just have this day trip planned for tomorrow."

"That's okay."

"I'm driving out west to have a look around is what it is," Milse said. The cold sliding in under the door had the smell of snow. He held his jaw against a chatter.

"I could come by and feed the dogs," Marjorie said.

"No, thanks. I just said that so that you would know."

Milse studied her clean, simple face, looking for a sign of understanding. He had no way to interpret what he saw there. He believed that eventually her economical expressions would speak to him in the same ways that Emma's larger ones had. He also believed that his blindness toward Marjorie was

as temporary as her willingness to stop at tea with him every afternoon.

In leaving the following morning, he looked for reasons that the trip could not take place. The truck was burning oil and that was taken into account. The rear tires were almost bald. One of the dogs, the bluest of the two sheep dogs, favored her right forepaw from time to time. She could have a mishap with one of his skittery little mares. His progress toward the truck was slowed but not stopped by these thoughts. He held onto each one consciously as a safeguard against introspection. But gradually, the house faded into the background and then the dirt roads gave way to gravel roads and then to the interstate.

The sun broke out above the ground clutter when he crossed the Iowa border into Nebraska. Chicago faded away on the radio and Milse turned it off, not wanting a station in Omaha. The place was just too foreign to him. In another hour, he picked up Kearney. It was reassuring that the disc jockey had the same uptilting northern accent as the ones at the Chicago station. Milse sang along to everything until he lost the station just outside of North Platte. North Platte had nothing that interested him and he couldn't get anything in the yet distant Ogallala.

The closer he came to the Colorado border, the more the land seemed both to flatten and to tip gradually up. Milse could feel himself rising slowly. The green drained out of the surroundings and was replaced by sand colors of yellow, charcoal, and rust. Much later in the day, when he knew he was less than an hour away, he left the radio off. His fingers began to feel cold and he pushed the heater knob over another notch.

Just short of the border, he crossed into mountain time. With a little maneuvering, he was able to reset his watch to show the hour he had gained. There were more cars on the road than he had imagined; more refrigerated trucks coming

from or going to the packinghouses clustered further south. It seemed less remarkable that Emma's car had been able to find another to collide with.

Marjorie, Milse realized, would be different. She might run the car hard into a ditch or down an embankment, but she would not have hit head-on. He didn't believe she could be that direct.

Emma, on the other hand, had been a barrel racer—a regional champion with trophies and blue satin ribbons. Her inner thighs were as resilient as stretched canvas, but soft in a way that seemed sad when Milse remembered how she valued her hardness. She explained to him how she used her legs to guide the horse among the barrels.

"You talk back and forth," she said. "His shoulders, your legs. One squeeze and you've said more than you could say in a week."

In fact, she told Milse before she left for Denver that there were things she could express to a dumb animal that she could not express to him.

"What does that say about our marriage?" Milse asked.

"Everything."

"I'll miss you," he told her. For just an instant, he had wondered why they couldn't talk together without this friction. Then it subsided when he realized that he really would miss her. Her dry brown hair blew to one side as she opened the car door. She had bright cheeks. He reminded himself that at the age of sixteen, she had married on a dare.

"I'm not easy to miss," she said and pulled away, waving in the rearview.

Milse wondered now why he hadn't taken her prophecy to heart.

He saw the sign for Ovid, Colorado, out of the corner of his eye as it swung past. His hands tingled with sleep. The overpass, he had been told, was about two miles north of the eye-

blink town. He thought he would know the spot but didn't and went past the underpass almost to the edge of Ovid before turning around and coming back. He stopped the truck on the north side of the overpass and got out onto the shoulder. Wind moved the tough dead grass. He waited, leaning back on the cold metal of the truck, looking up at the white sky.

Before, in planning the trip, he had seen himself walking the shoulder of the road and coming up to the exact point of impact, finding glass and tire burns and ruts in the dirt. Why these things would be preserved for him after almost a year he didn't know. Anyway, the truth was he had no idea where the place was within the mile stretch of interstate.

He did not feel her near him until she stood up in the tall grass. Her hair was filled with the grainy heads of wild cane. She was dusty from sleep and crumbs of dirt sifted down the front of her shirt. Her eyes were wry, a normal expression. When she opened her mouth to speak, Milse found himself looking at the edge of a fence that had posts made of cut sandstone. These posts were shaped by the strong wind and some of the shapes were quite womanly. The one he looked at was not Emma. Emma believed in the trinity of the holy spirit and would never have left her soul to occupy a column of rock.

She had told him once before, in fact, that the trinity was their only real problem. "You don't believe in God," she said.

"I believe there's a God."

"But not a father, son, and holy ghost."

"No," Milse said. "None of that stuff."

"I see your trinity," she told him. She pointed to a stack of *Playboys* under his coffee table. "Your worship. A trinity of behinds and big boobs."

"It's the only thing I collect," he explained.

Emma never had understood his beliefs. Milse had proof of this within their first week of marriage. Right after their honeymoon, he had accidentally maimed a barn cat. It was

asleep on the corn conveyor that carried the newly shucked ears up to the bin—a big, heavy calico with white feet. The conveyor was only on for a moment, but that was just long enough to pull its hindquarters in between the rollers. Milse had not named the cat. At the animal clinic, it seemed wrong that there was no name to put on the form he filled out. He tried to make one up while the vet's assistant hovered over him, but couldn't.

The vet—a young man about Milse's age—was surprised at Milse's expression when he placed the cat on the metal exam table and it moaned from the pain.

"It's a stray, didn't you say?"

"Yes. A stray."

But the cat had been there in the corncrib the day the realtor showed them around. When Milse had seen it, he had hoped someday to belong that much to the place. He had hoped the same for Emma. But Emma hadn't been calmed by the scene—the lazy-eyed stare of the cat, the salty smell of corncobs in the wood, the light in the cracks of the timber. He could never get over the feeling that she was there on a dare.

The vet put the cat down with an injection. Milse wasn't thinking clearly at the time and thought that the shot was an anesthetic. It didn't really come clear to him until the vet took off his glasses, pinched the red marks on his nose, and asked him if cremation would be alright. Milse nodded and walked out. He felt light-headed. On the drive home, the road seemed to shimmer under the truck.

"I wish he had told me beforehand," he told Emma later. "I could have put it down myself."

"It only suffered a little longer," she said.

"I mean I could have put it down *here*."

Emma gave him an impatient look. She knew that he had his own beliefs in the aspects of the spirit. And just like hers, his beliefs made up the three sides of a trinity. He had not realized this until the death of the cat. And then Emma's. There was the

first aspect, which departed into a dark beyond. The second stayed behind, tied to the nearest living spirit. The third occupied the place of death.

It was this third aspect that Milse could not really talk to Emma about. He could not tell her the reason for the sudden weight in his groin in the clinic or name the disappointment he felt at knowing that the spirit of a barn cat would not be occupying a barn.

Milse did not wait long by the interstate. The land emptied itself before him as darker clouds formed in the whiteness. Upstream, some gate was closed and the cars came fewer and fewer. It was the end of the tea visit, Marjorie's time. Milse felt afraid now that he had come there and wasted that hour.

In full knowledge of everything that was not his, he stepped back into the yellow Ford. He decided to try and make it back before midnight.

Marjorie wore a navy blue dress when she came for tea on Sunday. It had a red tie at the collar. Milse trembled when he poured the tea, puzzled by the change. The cup made chiming sounds against the saucer.

"What is it you want?" she asked, when he couldn't meet her eyes.

"Wholeness mainly," Milse said. "I have felt like things are still in pieces."

She sighed and put her cup and saucer down on the windowsill. She crossed her legs, bumping his own. The alcove had shrunk.

"I'm the type that eats what's on her plate," she said.

"I've never asked you to come here," Milse said.

"There's a futures broker in my office who would sleep with me if I asked him."

"I want to," Milse said. He moved to take her hand and then his own sureness scared him and he left the hand in the air between them. She was looking at him with a hardness that he

had assumed she did not have. There was real strength in the muscles of her legs as she got up.

Milse couldn't look at her any higher up than waist level.

"I don't know my own needs," he said.

Marjorie's voice was patient but permanently changed.

"I know," she said. "But I know mine and I can't waste another hour."

Milse listened to her heels on the porch stairs and then he took their cups and saucers in and stacked them in the sink. Her truck was out of his hearing after a minute. It seemed later than usual and the sky was abnormally dark. He looked at his watch and discovered that he hadn't yet given up the hour gained the day before.



People



The day he hired the new girl, he thought to himself, this girl, I'll bet she comes from good people. He told her she could call him Carl, but she laughed and said, "No, no, your last name is okay, I'll call you Moody." She laughs at everything. She tells him the kind of work she has done in the past—libraries, tollbooths, movie theaters.

"I like having one thing to say to people all day," she told him. "One thing that is always the right thing to say no matter who it is. And then I like having the people go away and never come back again."

This makes them both laugh. They understood each other. He tells her that he doubts she would talk to anyone in this job, except maybe him, and she looks pleased by that and takes off her coat. She isn't bad compared to some of the help he has hired in the past—flower child leftovers, wheelchair cowboys, cocktail girls. He figures there was a spread of maybe eighteen, nineteen years between them. She has a boyfriend in Cheyenne, he is sure. Probably some kid younger than her, selfish, wearing a denim jacket with a sheepskin collar and Tony Lama boots, driving a Jeep. He will pick her up at night, maybe. Maybe he will come into the shop and bump around in the aisles, impatient, looking gloomy. And she will come out of the back room, changed and ready for a nice time. Her hair will be combed and airy like angel's breath along the edges. She will smile cautiously at the boyfriend and say something like, "Let's have a nice time tonight," meaning instead of the bad time we have most of the time. In leaving, she will look at him and give him a real smile and say, "See you in the morning, Carl."

But wait, wait. He always gets carried away. The girl has just taken off her coat and is waiting for him to show her the ropes. She stands in front of the window, watching sprays of snow and tumbleweeds crossing the small parking lot. There isn't much to see to the south, the way the shop faces, but to the

west there is the front range, which looks like shadows against the white sky, and to the east there is the highway, disappearing and reappearing between the gentle hills.

He's got a good place, that he knows. He's been in the souvenir shop for nine years. It's the only thing he has had since the air force. And he had nothing before, and doesn't like to talk about that time. The women have all been the daughters and nieces and cousins of the people he was part of then. So there have been no real women.

There have been customers. They come in from Nebraska, from all over the north and northeast, going to Colorado, to California, to Nevada. They don't know where they are when they stop into his store. They're dazed, nervous, so much distance and white they have been staring into. "How far," they ask, "to such and such? How far am I from this or that?" He understands. He tells them to reset their watches. "The time line," he says. "You're in a new time zone. Mountain time." Bewildered, they silently obey. In the winter, he sees thirty or forty carloads a day. The summer is slower.

It's nice for the very reason that the girl pointed out. He talks to each of these people for less than a minute and then never sees them again. That minute is a fine one. He has found so many pleasant and innocent ways to converse for a minute or two. Some of the finest conversations he has had, in fact, have lasted that long and much less. It's the time in between cars that can be hard.

But enough now. It's time to get on with it, with training the girl. Before they start, she puts a hand on his arm and says, "I put Maria on the application. It's really Mary. Mary Beth." She turns as red as she was pale the moment before. Her lips quiver. He finds that he can't seem to comfort her enough. He compares it to giving the wrong weight on a driver's license, but she still doesn't look him in the eye for most of the first day.

This Mary talks well. That's one of the next things he notices. By the second day, he's shown her everything, and to everything, she has said, "Alright then," and "Quite sure" and "Is that so?" It's nice. He begins to listen to his own voice, and feels a little shabby when he hears the Wyoming in him.

He doesn't find it in her. She wears wool skirts and stretch tops, not sweaters and jeans. Her hair falls straight with a little flip on the ends. He decides that either she is from someplace else or she wishes that she were. A question comes to mind again and again and he keeps pushing it away. Later, he tells himself, later. She's going to be working here for a while.

They start on a new shipment of Indian pottery that he bought from a traveling sales rep. She has good strong nails. He lets her peel off the little gold sticker from the bottoms. With a small brush and a bottle of India ink, he makes a mark, like an artist's mark. They're quiet for so long that it starts to be funny. Hours pass, and when she glances up at the clock he winks at her. They laugh but they still don't talk. It's a contest. Then at lunch, he gives her his sandwich because he wants to and because he has no appetite. His stomach is nervous, yet everything in life is perfectly fine. He tells himself that. He takes Roloids. Nothing works.

"I'll bet you haven't talked so little in a long time," he says to her, after lunch. She smiles because she has won.

"I think you find out a great deal about a person by listening to them," she says. Her eyes are wide and brown. Why he isn't put off by the way she makes sentences he doesn't know. Maybe it's that she can't help it. Maybe he likes it because she couldn't stop doing it if she had to.

"I haven't said much," he tells her.

"I'm listening anyway. The cars are going by. The wind. Jets from the air force base."

"Sounds like a poem," he says.

"I do write poetry. I take things from my everyday life and I write them into poems."

"I'd like to read them," he says, but realizes he couldn't give a damn actually.

"I used to write," he says. "A column for the *Laramie Sentinel* called Plains Notes."

"Before this?"

"In between this and the air force."

They keep glancing up and away, up and away, bobbing like plastic drinking birds. He wishes he had more Roloids, and half wants them not to say anymore, to stop now.

"You're a bachelor?" she asks, turning her back. Her behind tips up at him when she bends to lift a new case. Sweet. Nothing wrong with looking, he tells himself, just two persons here, healthy, no wedding rings on either side.

"All this time," he says.

"No takers?"

"Hard to hit a moving target," he says. "I've been all over."

"Really? Where exactly?"

"Oh, White Cloud."

"North of Shoshoni?"

"I can't believe anybody knows it," he says. It really is the first time someone has heard of White Cloud, as well as he can remember, and he would remember.

"I don't like telling people I'm from there," he says.

"Don't say another word." Her smile jerks. She stands looking down at all the new Indian jugs, upside down in the box she opened. Her arms are up like she has just come from the sink and he can imagine the water and suds running down her bare forearms. It's so nice he wants her to know something more.

"I don't like to," he continues, "because we had a house in the middle of the stockyards. A mud floor. We used to, pardon me, relieve ourselves down a hole inside the house because we didn't know any better. I'm the middle of nine kids. We had thirty-two dogs."

"Thirty-two," she says.

"We didn't feed them. I mean, we weren't cruel but how could you feed them all?—we just couldn't. They ate what they could find, I'm sure, just like us. Rabbits, squirrels, skunks, cats."

"Cats?"

"See, that's what I say. We didn't know anything. My sister and me found a litter of kittens and we took three because it was January and the dogs were all starving. I took their heads off with an axe and threw the bodies to the dogs."

He looks up at her, pausing. She's cradling one of the Indian pots and listening. The usual type of woman would react, and he realizes then that she's not that type.

"Anyway," he says, wiping his mouth with a handkerchief, "that's the sort of people I come from, and that's not even the half of it. The people you come from, that's everything. Everything you are and are not. Some look at what they came from and become it, and some become the opposite."

"That's a good way to put it."

"It's true," he tells her.

"Then you must be the opposite," she says, "because you seem nice now."

"Ha," he says, but nods and his ears feel to him like he has been grabbed up and pushed headfirst into a fire.

At the end of the fifth day, he asks her what she is doing with herself after they close the shop.

"I probably shouldn't ask," he says, "lots of good TV tonight."

"No," she tells him, "I don't watch TV. I read."

She starts smiling after she says this because he is smiling—he has no TV.

"I have a Christmas wreath I make every year," he says. "I thought maybe you would like to work on it with me in my kitchen. Just for a few hours. I've got some soft drinks and some eggnog without the rum."

This Mary's face is uncertain for a moment and he feels hot. He wonders where he wasn't specific enough, where she

might have gotten the idea of some dirty intention. And then she lights up. "That sounds like fun."

"You have someone to call?" he asks, but knows that there isn't anyone. The boyfriend doesn't exist.

She says "No," and he helps her on with her coat for the fifth time in a week, and they go out together. Their usual quiet starts up again and lasts until he lets her into his house. She lets him win this time.

"I love brick houses," she says.

"One floor makes sense to me," he says. "No attic to leak and no basement to flood."

He turns on all the lights in the two rooms they can see. The frame for the wreath, a circle of plywood covered in chicken wire, leans against the fireplace. He already has wood on the grate and newspapers stuffed underneath.

"I do this in the morning," he tells her, and wishes that he hadn't that morning. She shouldn't get the idea he has planned anything. He lights the fire anyway and pulls two high-backed chairs over to it, but keeps a good distance between them.

"Here's how I do it," he tells her. They sit down after he brings a good pile of pine branches. The branches are fresh and sticky, thick with pine cones that are still tight and dark brown. He watches her as she takes one off the top and brings it close to her face, sniffing deeply.

"Isn't that something?" she says.

"Watch out," he says. He takes one of the boughs and fastens it along the edge of the frame with green pipe cleaners, favoring the curve of the branch. He hands her some of the pipe cleaners and tells her, "Go with the grain, all the needles lying the same, like fur."

They work on opposite edges. He pricks himself time after time until his fingertips are full of little pinholes. He can't seem to watch where he is going. Mary's hands seem to be his own, and he keeps watching how they move. Every now and then, the plywood seems to be his own skin and the needles

the long dark hairs that poke out above his shirt collar. And Mary's fingers, moving.

She wants to talk. His living room isn't as sure to her as the behind-the-counter setup they are used to.

"Who taught you to do this," she asks him, "your family?"

"No, no," he says. He laughs, even though it bothers him that she hasn't understood yet. "My people never taught me a thing. They're trash. I don't talk to any of them and I don't care to ever talk to any of them again."

"Okay."

"I'll give you an example," he says. "When I was in high school, my little brother and I used to go looking for my old man in downtown White Cloud. We'd go in this tan El Camino, and I mean this seriously now, we intended to run him down in the road if we saw him. He was a wino of the sort that sleeps in dumpsters. Sold two of my brothers to some folks for a bottle of Ten-Hi bourbon."

"Sold them?"

"Adopted them out is a nicer way to say it, but the payoff was still a bottle of hooch."

"How many is there in your family?" Mary asks.

"*Was* there, you mean. Nine of us kids. Who knows about our mother. She sold Avon and then Amway and wasn't around much. My dad, I'd say he's dead. And the rest of them, well, let's say I'm the only one who left it all behind. I am the prodigal, in other words. The next closest thing my family has to me is a brother of mine who turns tires inside out and paints them and sells them as planters."

"Simple people," Mary says.

"Dirty," he says. "Alkies and wheelies and collectors of welfare checks. People say, oh, don't mind him, he went to Nam, and never you mind her, she did acid for too many years. They forget where these people came from, that they were mean and dirty and came from that type of people long before any of this other stuff."

She nods as her hands work their way down toward the bottom of the frame and his work toward the top. The legs of her chair scrape on the floor as she slides closer. He could turn the frame. He thinks he will and then a moment passes and then another and before long there is so little space between the moments that he can't speak at all, can't breathe at all. When she bends, that little flip in her hair comes to rest on his knees, drags across it, starts over again.

"So it's just been you celebrating Christmas," she says, "no family or friends?"

"So far."

"Well," she says. She slows the moments down until they stop, just by the rising tone in her voice. Her fingers push and smooth the needles in a way that he has only seen women use their hands.

"Well," he says.

"Maybe that will change sometime."

"I've always thought a family would be nice," he says. As soon as he has told her that, it feels like that bottle of Ten-Hi has been poured through his own bones. Everything that has been done by his volition seems to be Mary's now. A glimpse of himself beside the dumpster at the White Cloud Seven-Eleven hits him, and the old man is beside him, and he says one word to him.

He says, "See?"

In the morning, Mary says, "You'll like my family."

"I like most people," he tells her.

"They're all still up in Shoshoni."

"Shoshoni," he says.

"Just south of White Cloud."

"I know where it's at."

"I might ask my mother if she knows any Moodys up there," Mary says. "She's bound to know some of your people."

"You didn't say you were from Shoshoni," he says.

"I guess I didn't. I thought you figured it out for yourself."

"No."

The silence of the morning isn't the same as it was the night before. It's not the quiet of new snow lying in drifts under a winter moon. It's the quiet after a tree has hit the frozen ground, and the earth momentarily mourns.

"That's okay, isn't it? Shoshoni isn't White Cloud."

"No," he says, "it isn't White Cloud."

"My family is nice—you'll see."

"I'm sure."

"My dad tips the bottle a little, but he was in Korea."

"I'm sure they're good people," he says, and gets up from the bed. From across the room, he looks at her and how young she is and wonders how he got to be this old without realizing there was never any escape.

"Would New Year's be a good time to go up?" Mary asks. He sees that her breasts hang on her when she sits up in bed. Her mouth looks so hungry.

"Sure," he says.



Flying Lessons



I can't fly. Tumino doesn't know it yet. He hired me to give flying lessons, but he never asked me if I could fly. He never asked for my certification. He never even asked if I knew the difference between attitude and vector. I do, as a matter of fact, because of my childhood, but he never asked. People are always forgetting to ask you the one question you've got the answer to.

I guess Tumino couldn't imagine someone walking in off the highway who wasn't certified and applying for the job. I can't blame him for that. You'd have to be crazy to do something like that or, at the very least, suicidal. I'm not either, as far as I know, but I don't think about it that much.

My head is full of things I don't think about very much or things I don't think about at all. Some things I don't think about at all are home, school, either of my parents, Cathy, or anything that happened longer than three hours ago. I tried setting my limit so that I didn't talk about anything that was more than an hour old, but it was impossible to have a conversation with anyone. I hate it that you can't keep from reaching back into the past about once for every hour you are alive, but it's true; you really can't.

Tumino is a short, heavy man with a tall, tall crew cut. It's higher in the middle and whether he realizes it or not, it looks like a Mohawk from the side. He doesn't know how stylish he is. It's all accidental with him as it is with most people if you really watch them closely. At some point, Tumino was an Italian, but you can't tell now. He wears a blue nylon flight suit and high-top tennis shoes. He drives this year's Cadillac, white with gold trim, and parks it in the hangar beside a King Air. I didn't really hate him until I saw the car and the light of pride in his eyes as he showed it off. But I think most people hate Tumino when they first meet him. He brings it on himself.

I walked in from the highway in the middle of the afternoon. It was hot in a way that makes you feel like you've been cooked and your pores have broken open as big as robin's eggs. Then

you see yourself, reflected in the window of a gas station or a dry cleaner as you walk by, and you realize that you look a little sweaty is all. I guess it's a good thing you don't ever look exactly how you feel.

I was just going to ask for a glass of water and leave. Tumino was putting high octane into one of the wing tanks of a King Air when I came up. We smiled at each other like we were friends and he came down the ladder. The heat rippling off the aluminum wings made him weave around. I told him straight out that I wanted a glass of water and he took me into the office. We said stupid things about the heat and how much hotter it had been one time we remembered. I love talking to people for the first five minutes. It's like a script and you know all their lines and they know all yours. It feels good, those first few minutes. No surprises. Then, when it works out the way it should, you go your own ways until you run into someone else to talk to for five minutes. And when it doesn't work out the way it should, you're stuck there and suddenly you're at the end of your script with nothing left.

That's the way it turned out with Tumino. I finished the glass of water he gave me, which was actually a tiny paper cup that didn't even wet my throat, and I was about to start into the thank-yous and the good-byes when Tumino pointed out the window toward two Cessna 172s.

"Well, those are the trainers," he said.

I looked at them and somehow I knew immediately that he had taken me for someone else.

"My dad had a 150 when I was real little," I said. I didn't want to tell him that, but it was all I had. He seemed to take it in and work it over. He chewed his lip and looked at me like I was covered in clear Plexiglas instead of skin. Just when it looked like I might slip in a quick thank-you and a good-bye, Tumino spoke.

"That's exactly why I started flying, too," he said. "My dad had an old Mustang he brought back from Korea. War surplus."

I nodded. I was still working over the one thing I had said that I hadn't meant to, looking for the weakness in it. Admitting I had a father was probably alright. Being little once, that couldn't be helped. My father having owned a Cessna 150, that was bad. The Cessna 150 is a clumsy piece of junk. I shouldn't have mentioned it. I hate talking to anyone for longer than five minutes and this is why.

Tumino went on talking.

"There will be one other instructor. Gary. He's an alright guy," he said. "All the guys I know are alright, in fact. I guess it's because they're all pilots."

I stood on my shoe and dug my thumb in a crack in the counter. It was getting worse now because I could tell he was matter-of-factly putting me in the group of alright guys. Pilots. The moment he found out I wasn't a pilot, I knew I would be just a big kid to Tumino. That's all I am to people who know me, but since nobody knows me now, I guess that's all I am to myself. I couldn't tell Tumino that every one of these alright guys he's talking about probably has a kid at home not much younger than me that hates his dad's guts. I couldn't tell him because I was an alright guy. Tumino had said so.

"You live close by?" Tumino asked.

I told him the truth. I told him I lived nowhere, that I had hitched out to the airport.

"I just happened by," I said, and figured that was it, that it would finally dawn on him. I kind of held my breath.

But he just smiled. He seemed to like that. I guess it made him think he knew what I was about. Older people love to hear about kids having a hard time.

"That's okay," he said. "I've got a room here in the back. Cot, a little fridge, windows that get the light in the morning."

I couldn't believe it. This is what I mean about Tumino. You have to hate anybody so blind. He hasn't asked why I'm living no place, but just in case he does, I've made up a military discharge story. I roomed with an ex-marine in college for the

one and a half semesters I was there. I know enough to fake it through. Dean the marine, that was my roommate. About himself, he used to say he was the type who liked to skim off the shit. About me, he used to say I had only one God-given gift, a perfect memory. His shit-skimming didn't keep him from flunking out, and my perfect memory didn't help me much either.

But he was right. I do remember everything. I force myself not to think about most of it, is all. My mother used to say that lying would catch up with me one day. What she didn't realize is that it can't catch up with you if you believe the lies are true. Nothing gets mixed up when you believe everything you say.

What she also didn't realize is that lies can be outlived. When I was eleven, I smashed a headlight on my dad's convertible Mustang with a dirt clod. It was an accident, but when he asked me, I said I was mad and did it on purpose. I don't know why I said it except it seemed like he would go easier on me if he thought I was mad. He knew all about being mad because he was so much of the time. But he called me a liar and a worthless son of a bitch and some other things and shook me pretty hard. I never did tell him the truth and I never will. That was one I managed to outlive. As I was storming out of the house this morning, I took a rock and purposely smashed out a headlight on my mother's Audi. That makes it true and what I said about smashing the headlight out of anger really happened. It just took time to come true, like a lot of things.

Tumino looks me up and down. He takes out his wallet and gives me a \$100 bill. There's nothing worse than a man who carries \$100 bills on purpose. I take it with wide eyes and nod and smile like an idiot, just what Tumino wants.

"That's an advance," he says, with a big gesture. "A fellow should have money in his pocket."

I fold it in front of him and ease it into my pocket like it is my pass into heaven.

"Okay," he says. "Let's take one of the trainers up so you can get a feel."

I say okay. I'm not worried. It still doesn't seem like it is really happening, although truthfully, things like this are always happening to me. People look at me and see everything, anything, nothing, apparently whatever they want. You can't help hating them. It's human nature.

But Tumino can't fly either. That's one nice thing I find out. He steers the Cessna down the pitted asphalt runway like a car and when the lift is strong enough, he just pulls back a little and we leave the ground. Nothing poetic about it. I don't know much about it, but I know flying, real flying, is more than that. It has to be. There has to be a reason to make yourself that vulnerable, just you and this tiny plane and all the big empty. You might as well be squatting on the back of a bumblebee.

I remember flying now that Tumino and I are up together. I remember one time in particular, me and my dad in the crummy little Cessna with ripped seats. That seems to be a good time in my life when I remember it. I was only four at the time. We were all living together in a house on a cul-de-sac. There isn't anything to remember before that, and everything after it is bad or worse. So it's a hard memory to have. I can only think about it when I can hit it squarely in my mind and not land anywhere afterward or before.

But I remember flying. Flying is like the dream you have where you are high up on the side of a slippery cliff, and you slip, and instead of falling, you glide. And it's frightening because it leaves you without the one comfort you have in a dream. In a dream, you know you can wake up.

Tumino leans back and stretches.

"Take it," he tells me.

It's not like he's testing me or anything. But he does watch to see just what I do. I only hesitate long enough to find the pedals and then I do take it. It's no big deal. I was doing this at thirteen—on Saturdays when my dad had me. We flew because we couldn't talk to each other anymore. I guess it was pretty rough for him. He had to live with the thought that I was going home at night and sleeping with the woman he had

married. I had to live with being treated like a buddy of his that had somehow wound up with his wife. We watched each other the way Tumino is watching me.

“Smooth, isn’t it?” he says.

“Not bad.”

Tumino sits back again, relaxed with me like he has known me all his life. He still thinks I’m a pilot and as long as he does I know I’ve got him. That’s what you realize with parents like mine, how important it is to mislead people, how it can save you.

This goes back to that same time. The time before my dad finally wised up to what was going on and moved out. I was maybe five. In the afternoon, Mom and I were home alone. We took these long baths. You know more than you remember knowing at that age. I can remember thinking that I was probably the only kid taking three-hour baths with his mother every afternoon. It was paradise though. The steam. The warmth. All the soap smells. And then the hurrying. My mother slapping powder on her breasts and between her legs in that dark clump. Toweling off the mirrors. The hurry not to be caught taking a bath when my dad came home. I guess I noticed the hurrying the most. I also noticed how she wouldn’t talk about what we had been doing all afternoon. He would stalk around, glaring. And I would smile at him, trying to get him to smile, and feeling like I wanted to throw up.

We weren’t really doing anything then, except shutting him out of that little part of the day.

Later, we started up in cub scouts. The three of us went to the chili suppers every Thursday night. My mother walked beside me, ahead of my father, and tried to keep a hand on my neck or shoulder all the time. There were all these fathers and sons running around in the blue shirts and gold bandannas. And then there was the three of us. They had the spoon relay every time. Father and son teams were supposed to hurry back and forth with tablespoons full of water, filling this little cup.

The fullest cup was the winner. You could win gold collar pins in the shapes of bears and wildcats and panthers.

You wouldn't believe it, the way these fathers tried to fill this damn cup. And then there was my father and me. We left a trail of water on the floor every Thursday night. Water was spilled everywhere, of course, but we always had more around us. We couldn't fill the cup. That was all there was to it. We just couldn't. I quit after six months and burned the shirt in our fireplace when no one was home. My mother found the brass collar pin in the ashes.

That's what I'm doing at Tumino's airport. I had to leave. My mom called Cathy on the phone when I was at work—found her number written on my desk blotter and called her. I didn't find out until this morning. She just came out with it while I was standing in the kitchen. I called Cathy last night, she said. Very plain.

I got sick. Really. She was paler than I was when I came out of the bathroom. My head was pounding so hard her face was dark around the edges. I didn't ask her what they had talked about. It was so clear what they had talked about that I couldn't. I took one swing and broke up one of the lazy Susans that sits on the hall table. Then I walked out and smashed the headlight on her car, and kept on going.

It took me the morning and part of the afternoon to hitch out as far as Tumino's little airport. Now that I'm here, I don't know what's going to happen. I'm taking it an hour at a time just like I always do. I do a few easy banks while Tumino keeps an eye out for traffic. I pick up the language right away and we chat back and forth about wind patterns and close calls. The only stories you ever hear from pilots are stories about how they almost died, or how some asshole who thought he had a guardian angel did die. The faster the approach, the shorter the warning, the longer the plane fireballs and rolls, the better the story.

Tumino thinks they're all funny, especially when the asshole dies. He loves that. I guess everyone uses some different scale to make the world make sense.

"You'll do," he tells me and leans forward to take the wheel. I surrender it. I smile and feel the way I always do when I am getting away with something. Very good and then twice as bad as I have ever felt—sick. I think about airsick bags and spot one tucked into the visor on my side. Tumino's approach is jerky but precise. He uses instruments. I see him watching the altimeter and realize that he sits so low in the plane he can't see all that well anyway. So he has faith, and has to because of his size. Even with all the crap in the world, I have to admit some things make sense. My height makes sense to me. I can see a long way even in a crowd. I need less faith and that's good because I have less.

That's why Cathy and I were a match made in heaven. She had some guy get her in a headlock on a date and do what pretty much amounted to rape. She was a sophomore in high school at the time. We had rules. One was that we would hug or hold hands until she felt like doing more and if I screwed up that was it. No second chance. I didn't care. We worked at the same office and rode back and forth to work together. She had a way she sounded on the phone when I called. A voice she only used with me. I couldn't care less about sex. Really and that's no joke. I would've agreed never to touch her if that's how she liked things. My only rule was that we would never come to my house. I made her drop me at the corner every night and pick me up there every morning.

We had just started talking about an apartment. She said she already had everything, all we needed was a bigger bed. We both like a lot of room when we're sleeping. She asked me if my mom would let me take my bed and maybe we could tie the beds together at the frames.

I was an inch from telling her then. We had just talked about the date rape a few weeks before. I wondered how I could

make them sound similar and then remembered why they weren't—that no one had put me in a headlock. So instead I told her we couldn't spare any beds. That was the truth. I tried to stay in the truth with her more than anyone else. I have never really had a bed. When my dad was gone, my mom moved us in together into their bedroom. She gave me the bottom three drawers of the dresser just like he had had. She shouldn't have done that. That had been one of my dad's rules, that I stay out of his things. Every time I saw him, I thought he knew. It didn't occur to me he knew about all of it. I was just afraid he knew about the dresser.

I was ten before anything really happened. I would wake up in the morning and she would have her hand down there, rubbing. At first I just turned my hips and we both laughed and got out of bed. A game. Then she started throwing her leg over mine, pinning me. She got stronger as she got older because of all the jogging she did. Her body got younger and younger.

I figured out how to separate it from me as long as it happened in the morning. I pretended it was part of the dream I was having between being asleep and waking up. When I was already too awake and knew it was going to happen, I got sick. I can still do it whenever I want to. The muscles in your stomach get trained. I read somewhere once that Houdini could do it and that makes it sound better when I think of it that way. I'm an escape artist, too, when you look at it that way.

We touch down. The landing isn't good because Tumino hasn't got the instruments calibrated. The attitude reading is zero but I feel us tilting a little when we hit the runway. Tumino tries not to look surprised but I know he is. He really, truly believes in those instruments.

Walking back toward the office, I feel like I want to put my hand on Tumino somehow. Not anything strange, just something to even us up. I feel like he's done something for me, although I don't know what it is, and I want to pay it back right

away. I have seen my dad just take someone by the elbow when they've done something he liked and he can convey everything he wants to tell them just in that. When I can't sleep, I imagine him doing that, just putting his hand on my arm and squeezing. It's something I have to imagine. It's something I have only seen him do.

When Tumino leaves me in the office and tells me he has to finish gassing up the King Air, I think about calling my dad. We talk about once a month. You should hear us on the phone. You've never heard two people try harder to stretch nothing into a conversation. I tell more to people I've known for five minutes. I'm sure he does, too. We're both afraid of what we might talk about. If I ever came out and told him, I think he would hang up. I'm not sure, but I think he would. Maybe he would just be quiet and make me do all the talking until I put it all on myself, which I can. Just give me the rope.

Maybe I won't call him, but I have to do something. I can't just walk out yet. I can't have Tumino actually watch me walk back out to the road and keep on walking and know what a liar I am. And that makes me furious all over again because I haven't really lied at all. I'm suffering for the fact that Tumino is an idiot. But I don't want to think about what he's going to say to me when he finds out.

He comes in after a minute and sits down in the broken swivel chair behind his steel desk. He tells me I'm the first one to answer the ad. He also tells me he's paying me \$250 a week. Cash, no pay stub. No benefits. This part bothers him. Tumino is in business, but doesn't like the business part of it. I see this. I tell him okay.

"I know what other airports are paying," he says. "But that's as high as I can go. I'm spotting you that hundred until Tuesday."

"Fine," I say.

Tuesday means nothing to me. I'm looking ahead only to my next hour, and then my next. Escape keeps nagging at me.

I think what a perfect captive I am. If I were captured during a war, I would already know what to do, how to wait for the right time. Knowing how to wait is half of everything. I fail at the other half, but the waiting I have perfected.

"You could have a student today," Tumino tells me.

"That wouldn't be bad," I say.

"I warn you," he says. "Because I'm going into the city for parts and I need you to stay and watch things."

"No problem," I tell him.

"I'll be less than an hour," he says, going out the door.

When he goes, I feel like I am saved. Now I can go anytime I want. I leave him his money pinned under a coffee cup on the counter. Then I think again about the way I walked in off the road. It seems like anything could happen to Tumino while I'm gone. Someone else could walk in from the road—one of the mental patients roaming the highways. I start hating Tumino all over again for trusting people. Somebody ought to teach him but I know it's not going to be me. I'm going to be mysterious and just leave him wondering what happened. I can't just leave people angry. And I can't leave them knowing.

The hundred dollars goes back in my pocket. I sit down in the hard chair behind the counter and find myself looking at a plain black telephone. Cathy is at work. She's sorting invoices, laying them out in rows like solitaire. Every time she thinks of me she gets a cold shiver, and she cries a little and then she shakes it off and goes on sorting. I'm sure this is what she does. How else do you act when something like this happens to you? Something so bad and strange.

There has to be one reason to pick up the phone or I wouldn't have sat down in front of it. I believe that I'm constantly trying to trick myself into being a better person, into doing the right thing. But just as I'm about to talk myself into it, I hear a car coming down the driveway into the parking lot. I hope it's not Tumino so soon because I'm crying without even knowing when I started or why. The car I see coming to

a stop in front of the door is blurry. But I don't have to see it clearly. As I'm wiping my eyes, I know this car has one broken headlight. Don't ask me why I knew it would be her. Let's just say she's always been where she was least expected. Like the cub scout meetings.

I get up and walk to the glass door. She is already stepping out of the green Audi. Her flowered scarf is tied over her head. Where women get this I can't guess, but it makes her look frumpy and pale. She has her running suit on. When she sees me, her face squeezes up and tears begin running. Mine stop instantly when hers start. We have never cried at the same time as far as I can remember.

I can't stand how desperate her hands are when she motions for me to come out. She does everything as if she were starving for air. I push open the door. I still can't believe she's really here.

"I can't believe this," I tell her.

"I've been everywhere," she says. She is coming around the car. I look around, afraid of Tumino's return, looking for someplace to go out of view of the road. She comes right up to me and tries to take hold of my arm and then my hand when I pull away.

"I've been looking everywhere," she says again. We look right into each other's faces and she looks old. Old. She has loose skin under her jaw and it's wet from the crying. She has blemishes on her cheekbones like rust coming through. I make a fist with my hand and she stops fishing for it.

"I was scared," she tells me, kneading her hands. An old, frightened woman.

"I was going to call you," I say.

"I knew you just wanted to scare me," she says. "I knew you wouldn't really leave." She smiles even though the tears are in the furrows around her mouth. She is close. Her breath is souring the air, she's so close. I can never seem to get away from her when we're talking. She crowds people.

"I did leave," I say. "I meant to. You had no right."

"But I thought you were gone," she says. She takes a relieved breath to show me how she feels. I hate the high school actress that is still in her. She was Juliet, and tells the story of wanting to do the death scene in the nude. That is her. She is the same high school kid that didn't get something she must have wanted awfully bad. I've tried to figure out what it is she missed that she can't seem to stop wanting. I'm something more to her than a kid to be in anguish about all the time and I always have been.

Still, I don't know how to say it to her. There isn't any lie for me to hide it in that she would believe, so I try something true.

"I have a job here," I tell her.

"Oh, Bob," she says. She doesn't believe it. She didn't believe me when I told her about Cathy either.

"What about your other job?" she asks.

"I've lost it," I say, as hard as I can. I want her to know that that isn't all she's cost me. She sees what I'm trying to say and the tears start again. My arms start shaking. I have never hit anyone in the face but I know exactly what it would feel like. Something like that you just know.

"Any mother would want to at least talk to the woman her son is sleeping with," she says.

"You should be glad I'm sleeping with anybody at all," I say. "Or at least I was."

"We didn't talk about anything really," she says. Her voice is jerking now over sobs of air.

"What did you say then?"

I'm trying to look under her scarf and her dry hair to see her face. She has it tipped down so I have to stoop. The tears are falling free. She shakes like she has a bad chill.

"I asked her about herself," she says. "Job, plans, nothing. Nothing important."

"She'll know anyway," I say. That one is just to hurt her. I know it is and it still feels good. I have her where I want her,

but in a way I have had her where I wanted her since my dad left. We have had each other. I have done whatever I wanted up until now. Quit cub scouts; quit Little League basketball; quit swim team in high school; quit college. She always said the right things. Called the parents of the assholes who were jumping me after school; called the coaches; called the financial aid office and got our money back—always on my side. Telling my dad I am too sick to go goose hunting, too tired to go out to the drag strip, saving me from that—from him.

This is what she has cost me, and this is what she has given me. I know that's true when I think about it.

But I've really had it. Things never come out even all around anyway. I'm ready to stand my ground, ready for that first student to show up. Then I remember again that I can't fly.

It doesn't matter. I'm ready to put her in the car and make her leave. I take her arm at the elbow and steer her toward her side. She doesn't resist me. She believes I'm doing something for her just like she had me believing when I was ten that she was doing something for me. You can't let people inside you that way. Anything could happen. I could throw her face down on the asphalt right now and back over her with her own car. My dad would believe me when I told him it was an accident. We're an accident-prone family. My cousins used to have accidents all the time. Great elaborate accidents. A girl cousin of mine was rolled over by a riding lawn mower once. I remember feeling jealous. It seemed like it would be nice to have such an obvious problem. To have something you could show to other people like she could and say, "There. That's where it got me. And there, too. And there."

Cathy used to say that everything shows. I don't know about that. She said she could see something on me. She didn't know what it was, but she said it was there.

My mom glides away from me when we get to her door. Then she has me, one of my hands, trapped between both of hers.

“Let’s forget about this,” she says. “Let’s just go home.”

I don’t say anything at first, but I take back the hand. I have to jerk it. She clutches. She loses her balance and falls, luckily, against the car. I grab her and I’m rough when I pull her upright. I see how kids get broken necks. It’s moments like this. The parents go to jail and I think that’s sad because it’s so natural to hold someone and shake them at the same time. It’s such a perfect expression of the love and hate you feel.

“God,” I tell her. “Just leave.”

“I can’t think about you out here.”

“Don’t think about me at all.”

“Just for now.”

“No.”

I open her door for her. I’m hoping for another minute of luck to get us through, but it doesn’t come. Tumino’s Caddy makes the turn off of the highway and slides down the gravel drive toward us.

I don’t have to say anything to her. She sees the way I am watching that car come toward us. I get smaller when I’m afraid. My shoulders cup inward like folded wings. My mouth sets hard.

She has instincts about my troubles. She knows me. What I hate most about the fact that she found me is the thought that she knows how I think. We know each other. We both look the same when we’ve decided to run.

“Get in,” she says, and jumps into the car.

Sure, I go. I get in on the other side, and slide down in the seat. I don’t have to tell her to go. It’s just like any time in my life. She doesn’t ask why we’re running. I know she believes it’s better if you don’t ask, but I don’t believe it—not anymore. I can’t remember how long I have known this.

“He thinks I can fly,” I say. We pass Tumino and I watch his eyes. They glance at my mother but never fall on me. He’s barely noticing what’s going on around him. That’s going to hurt him. It’s already cost him a hundred dollars.

“You used to fly with your father,” she says. It hits me that she is doing what she always does, siding with me, trying to find the little bit of truth in that huge lie.

“It’s not the same, Mom,” I tell her. “Not to anybody.”

“Shh, shush,” she says, and pats my thigh.

We head back toward town. I sit up taller and watch in the side mirror for Tumino’s Cadillac. I’ll send him the money—money I can’t live with. I try hard to see what is going by but I can’t. My eyes keep focusing on the glass. Fingerprints. My mother talks and I hear only the end words of her sentences. This is me digging in, preparing for her groping in the morning. Her hand pats my thigh.

“I think your girl and I could be friends,” she says.

“I don’t have a girl,” I tell her. “We’re over.”

“You’ll have another then.”

When she says that, she throws me far ahead in my life. Ahead to when I’m thirty. Forty. We’re coming up on a red light and I take hold of the door handle to keep from being sick in the car. She stops the car and I push the door open and lean out.

Then I’m on the pavement on hands and knees, and then I’m running. Running between cars. Jumping a grass ditch and going up a hill. I hear her behind me, calling from the open door. Her voice quavers. The ground crunches under my feet. My stomach still rolls but I keep going until I’m on the other side of the field. I come out in a parking lot behind a Seven-Eleven. I walk.

When I look back, I can’t see where I’ve been. The highway is back there somewhere, I know, but this seems to be another place. Inside the Seven-Eleven, a girl my age argues and rolls her eyes at me before she will change a \$100 bill. I’ve never had the cash from a hundred dollars in my hands before. I wad it up in my hands and try to hide it as I go out to the pay phone. While I’m fumbling around with a quarter, a pickup pulls into the Seven-Eleven lot. Boys jump out of the back.

Their caps are down tight on their heads. Their jeans are pulled up too high.

What a great age, I think. They don't care how they look. The quarter falls. One of the secretaries answers but I don't try to disguise my voice. It's Dorothy. She's big and has dirty teeth.

"Cathy, please," I say.

"Cathy's not in," she says. "She's sick today."

I get off the phone and stand there in the booth with the change from Tumino's hundred in my hand.

The boys come out of the Seven-Eleven. They're so small. One of them can't be much older than six or seven. They have cherry Slurpees and they're sucking like crazy at the straws. I'm not even there for all they know. They don't know what's going on. I can't help but wonder which one it is, which one of them is getting it from his mom or his dad. I can't tell, but whichever one of them it is, it's okay. I forgive him for not knowing what's going on.

It doesn't necessarily mean anything that Cathy called in sick. That's what I'm thinking as I'm wondering whether to try her at home. I know the number. If I have one real gift, it's a perfect memory.



Open Twenty-Four
Hours



In the early afternoon, Gil came down from the higher elevation in the blue Ford. Cowboys on dark geldings loped along ahead of him all the way to town, looking back now and then but never sliding over to let him pass. The one nearest the snowblade on the truck looked to him like a boy he had seen at Shanna's school. The boy had a black hat and a full cheek. He dipped his face and squirted juice at the ground.

Where the muddy road forded a creek, the boys split off and were pulled into the shadowed timber. Gil watched in the side mirror but lost them at the city limit marker.

Libby and Shanna were already there in front of the Hyline. He parked in the long stand of trucks and got out, putting on a vest. The last of the snow was draped in sandy lines along the street, but it seemed to him like it could come down one more time. Dense clouds were held back on the horizon by the highest bald peaks.

Shanna's heavy legs looked cold to him as she stood next to her mother. She had on a short skirt under her jacket. Gil put his hand on her shoulder when they went in through the door. They followed Libby to a booth by the windows at the back. The two women sat on the same side of the table.

Libby unfolded a menu and looked around the room.

"I don't see him," she said. Her eyes searched harder. She had wrinkles in her mouth deeper than other women her age. Her gentleness was all in the way she was in bed. Naked, she lost certainty. Her stomach and hips could all seem to be one curve.

"We're early," Gil said. He ordered coffee and cherry Cokes. Over the steam of his coffee, he smiled at Shanna. She had opened her parka and was showing a small, pale valley at the tops of her breasts.

"You look cold, honey."

He thought first about everything he said to her. She could tell him she didn't need another father at any time. Her features were slow and shy. She nodded and pushed at her bangs.

"I was going to wear jeans," she said.

Gil looked over at Libby. She blew a thin stream of smoke over his head.

"If I had her legs, I'd never wear jeans," she said.

Before the third refill, Turner's Cadillac turned into one of the narrow slots between pickups and pushed all the way up to the restaurant wall. The doctor slipped out of the narrow space, moving well for his size. His partner had to work himself loose on the other side. Gil was bending to ask a waitress to bring chairs when Libby and Shanna slid out.

"We'll just get some soft serve," Libby said. "We'll be right over here." Turner and the partner Gil didn't know came straight in and sat on the opposite side of the booth. He shook hands with the partner and missed his name and then shook Turner's hand.

"Well, what do you think?" Turner asked him. He had a round, plain face divided by wire-frame bifocals.

Gil had been to him for a kidney stone and for a cut above his eye from a pie-plate thrown by Libby. He had also seen Shanna when her first period had been a year overdue.

"I eat here twice a day," Gil said. "I think it's fine."

"He means investment-wise," the partner said. He had his face tipped up at Gil, his chin on the points of his fingers. His eyes were blue and wet and looked lost in his heavy face. Gil didn't know anything about him other than he looked like the sort that had always carried too much weight.

The name came back to him. Hods.

"I knew what you meant," Gil said to Turner.

"This buddy of ours is ready to get out from under," Turner said. "All it needs is good backing and it will go."

"I'm ready," Gil said.

Turner peered away at a place on the floor. His glasses spread disks of light over the tabletop.

"Well, us on this side of the table, we've had businesses," Turner said. "That's about what we've done in life—am I right, Thomas?"

"I'd say," Hods said. His loose face tightened into a smile.

"You take a broader view, Gilbert," Turner said. His pink hands opened on the table to show his meaning.

"I've had a business," Gil said. "Firewood delivery, guide work, snow removal all up and down the canyon."

"Oh, sure," Turner said. "Sure."

"He's meaning like a place you open the doors at such and such and close at such and such every day," Hods said.

"Dedication," Turner said. "That's a word that works here."

Gil folded his arms to his chest and chewed at his lip. There was something in their uncertainty that he liked. They were moving in on him softly and from the side as if he might still slip the rope.

"Look, I might as well spend it with you as someplace else," he said.

Turner blew a breath up at the green glass fixture suspended above. The third man shifted in the booth.

"That's not what we're looking for here," Turner said.

"Not quite," Hods said.

"Well that's what I've got, you guys."

"Okay," the doctor said. "The rest is pencil work. We won't beat on it."

"Suits me," Gil said.

He took a mint from his shirt pocket and worked the wrapper off. Turner slowly bobbed his chin before him, seeming to roll the deal around in his mind. His eyes worked carefully over the room. Gil tried but couldn't seem to have Turner's thoughts, did not have whatever it was that was so directional and vigilant.

"You and Libby have any future plans?" Turner asked. Gil angled himself between the doctor's white face and the impression of Libby and Shanna out of the corner of his eye. Shanna was closer, her parka spread back over the stool, and a long, plain expanse of leg rising from her tan shoes to a firm swell just below the skirt.

"Oh, yeah," Gil said. "Who knows?"

"Shanna looks eighteen already," Turner said.
"She starts eighth grade," Gil said. "In the fall."

Toward the end of the day, Gil drove them to clear pools in a bend in the Colorado. He showed them the panfish hovering in the current and helped Shanna out to a rock that still caught the sun. She squatted there and looked into the water with a toddler's expression.

Libby held back on a ledge above them and waited for him to come up.

"The doctor didn't look all that happy," she said. She sat with her elbows on her knees. Her face was broad and not as pretty when the light was behind her.

"I don't think he was," Gil said.

"But you're partners," she said. "You have to get along with partners."

"It's not what they think of me that matters," he said. "They just wish I was less interested in the means."

Over her shoulder, he caught the flash of something bright and the end of the arc of Shanna's arm. It splashed downstream in the heavy current. The second time, he saw it leave her fingers. A coin. He would ask her later what she wished for.

"I just worry," Libby said. "The doctor should be happy. I think it would be better if he was."

"He's alright."

"Still, if there was something we could do, some little thing . . ."

Gil nodded absently and looked past her again at the stream. When she was direct like this, he was reminded that she was not really with him, that she was still centered in her separation from Shanna's real father, Jack.

This Jack was back in Arizona near Redding. He had height and a sure voice. And he had an all-night cafe down the highway from the same correctional institution where he had been for nineteen months. Libby talked about making the signs to put in the windows. *Open Twenty-Four Hours*. The way she

looked when she told him, it seemed to be one of the brightest moments in the marriage.

He was thinking these things about her and half-watching Shanna's dark head at the same time. In the shadow of the sandstone bluffs where they were, he saw his breath.

"You really did it, though," Libby said. "That was nice. I really wondered for a while if you could."

She looked back toward the river to locate Shanna and then took his sleeve and pulled him toward the light timber. Moving into the shade, she had her jeans open and down past her hips. She sat on the dry forest floor and worked them over her shoes, laughing at the way he hurried.

"You worked for it," she told him after, buttoning up.

During the ten o'clock news, the phone rang in the kitchen and Libby answered. Gil was crouching on the footstool, trying to imagine the mild skies predicted for the next day. The blue would not be as bright or full, he decided. Light stratum on the back range. On the floor, Shanna sprawled in pajamas with feet.

Libby leaned across the counter with the receiver trapped against her breasts. She sounded out of breath when she told him it was Turner.

Shanna sat between them on the drive down. She chewed on a thumbnail and looked straight ahead at the road. Libby carefully searched through the pockets of her purse by the light of the glove compartment.

"Here," she said finally. Shanna took the gold-colored tube and held it in her fist without looking down.

"I could have done this in the morning," Gil said. "These guys can wait. That's how they got so big down here. They know how to wait."

"The doctor sounded ready," Libby said. "Ready means ready. Christ, Gil."

"Shanna shouldn't be up so late is what I mean."

"She's okay," Libby said, patting her leg in the dark. "This is a family thing."

"You sleepy, babe?" Gil asked.

"I guess not."

"You hungry? We'll get some eggs at the cafe."

"That's okay."

"Gil," Libby said. "Flip on the inside light."

He pulled the headlight knob another click and Shanna tipped her chin up in the rearview. She twisted the lipstick open and made two firm passes over her mouth.

"Jesus," he said. "It's just the cafe. You think you're going to see some cowboys tonight?"

Libby let out a laugh and put her palm down on Shanna's knee.

"Oh, she's just like me," Libby said. "Hurrying to grow."

Shanna twirled the lipstick in her fingers and moved her feet around.

"I can get a new outfit tomorrow," she said.

"Uh-huh."

"Shoes, too?"

"We'll see, baby."

In the parking lot, he parked beside the only other truck. Turner's blue Cadillac stretched across one unlit corner of the lot. It seemed larger in the dark.

The doctor's glasses pulled in the light from all over the cafe. Gil spotted him in the corner booth. He seemed to like the corners. He stirred coffee with one hand and motioned with the other. The third man was nowhere in the room.

Gil was ahead of Libby and Shanna and he didn't feel them slow and fall back by the counter until he was almost at the table.

"Put it down there, Gil," Turner said. His feet were stretched across to the other side of the booth and he took them away.

"What's new?"

"I've got it all here," he said. His thumb spread a thin stack of papers. "This is like the final round."

"Sounds good."

"I'm counting on you to tell me if you're all the way in," Turner said. He wet his lips and nipped at a liver spot growing in the center of the upper one.

"I'm going to sign," Gil said.

"Sure," Turner said. "I know."

He sat back and pulled down the glasses, pinching the red marks on either side. Gil asked for coffee from one of the girls who was going to be working for him.

"Let me ask this," Turner said. "Are you as various as you seem? Hods, he thinks you're too various. He told me he couldn't watch you cross at a corner and guess whether you'd look first."

"I probably would," Gil said.

Turner tipped his face to look through the bottom half of the glasses.

"I hope so," he said. He flipped through the stack of papers and opened one on the table. "Use my Cross."

Gil took the pen and moved one after the other through the stack. After, Turner fastened them with a heavy paper clip and folded them in his hand. Libby slid in on the edge of the vinyl bench.

"So," she said. She was smiling and she pushed a hand between his body and the seat back.

"We're in," he said to her.

"Very close," Turner said. "I'll make my mark tomorrow, first thing."

Gil shoved the salt and pepper shakers aside and took out a menu. A handwritten card advertising the special slipped out.

"Get Shanna over here," he said. "I told her I'd buy her some breakfast."

Libby worked her hand up onto his shoulder and let it rest there. He felt some restlessness in her fingers.

"We don't have time, hon. We need to take a quick run down to the Basin."

"Tonight?"

"I had Lucy hold out our mail. She'll expect us since I told her we'd swing by."

"We better go then," he said. "Shanna has school."

"Well, maybe the doctor wouldn't mind dropping her off," Libby said. She was scooting away from Gil out of the booth and then she stopped and held in one place, looking evenly at the doctor.

"No, no need for that," Gil said. "It won't take so long." He put a hip against Libby and tried to hurry them out of the booth.

"You go up the pass anyway, don't you?" she asked.

"Right by," Turner said. He was tipping back his head and looking past the two of them at the counter.

"We'd appreciate it," Libby said. "She's real tired tonight."

Under the security light outside, Libby pulled at the edges of Shanna's parka. Her hand made a feinting move at Shanna's dark bangs. Gil stood by the truck and watched Turner amble tenderly over the gravel to the blue Cadillac and crawl in. The parking lights came on around the edges of the car. Dust hovered in the reddish light. Then Turner started the engine and the dome light came on. Gil could just make out the top of Turner's head above the headrest.

Shanna walked past him without looking up.

"We'll be an hour at the most, babe," he said. "At the very most."

"Okay. Bye."

"Bye-bye."

The doctor leaned across and pushed open the passenger door. When Shanna slammed it, the dome light went out. Gil heard the big engine idle down to a low grunting sound.

"Come on," Libby said. She let herself in on the other side of the truck and unlocked his door.

Gil slid into the cab and fumbled with the ignition. He watched himself from some distance, seeing his awkward

hands start the truck, roll down the window, adjust the mirror.

"Let's go, Gil," Libby said. "Lucy's waiting."

His hands went up to the gearshift and stopped. He looked over at the Cadillac and waited to see what Turner would do, whether he would leave first or sit it out until they had gone.

"She's in the eighth grade," he said, toward the cold thin air outside.

"Christ," Libby said. "It's just a ride home. He's your partner now."

"I know what it is," he said, and dropped the shifter down into drive. "And I know I've got a partner now."

When the truck rolled back, the Cadillac eased ahead toward the exit, crossing his bumper.

In the reflections shifting slowly across the broad windshield, he thought he could see Turner's face. At the least, it was the outline of his jaw, pale and taut with a smile.

He waited to see which way the Cadillac would go out of the lot. The big car shuddered on the slight incline and then turned north up the highway. Gil stepped down on the gas and gunned the truck toward the other exit out of the lot. He hit the Cadillac broadside just behind the driver's door, pushing the rear wheels off the road into the ditch.

Libby leaned up from the dash cursing and holding her forehead with one hand. With the other, she swung at him with a clenched fist, hitting him twice before he slid down from the truck onto the ground.

The truck's engine had died. He could smell the antifreeze washing down from his split radiator onto the road. Turner climbed out standing and then suddenly sat in the gravel and looked up at him. The glasses were gone and his small gray eyes were blinking and tearing.

"You don't know what you did," he said. "You have no idea what you just did, you crazy, you son of a bitch."

Toward morning, before Shanna's alarm went off for school,

Gil stood on the small aluminum porch of the trailer and sipped a warm beer. Libby had fallen asleep on the couch, her face still drying and losing color.

The wrecked truck sat in the driveway over a puddle of its own coolant. The clouds that had come in during the night had dropped a mist so heavy that the pavement was dark and everything dripped. The air that was left behind had a washed smell and he breathed it in, feeling that things were new again.



Fashion in the
Third World



THE CAPTURE — DAY 6

It already amazes me that so many assumptions could be made about our whereabouts. My office hasn't called once, which shows you how reliable I am. They must believe that whatever I am doing, and wherever I am, I am keeping the company's best interests in mind.

Cathy's school called once on the third day. Joanna gave them a simple explanation and they haven't called since. My car has not moved from its position in the driveway in all this time and not one of my neighbors has thought this unusual enough to stop over. It suggests to me that if there is one thing that is definitely wrong with our country, it's that we are all so extremely busy we don't really notice each other.

I've made a pact with myself that when and if the whole thing ends, I'm going to pick myself a person to watch who is no relation of mine and I'm going to keep track of where they are and what they are up to all the time. I might even start some kind of campaign and go and speak before Congress and all of that business. I kill a lot of time thinking about it and mentally composing my congressional address. I have a lot of time to kill.

I discover that without a job to go to, there is more than enough time for everything. And I find myself thinking about things that I haven't had time to really think about in years. I'm having the clichéd repentant reactions to captivity. I'm planning the ways my life will be different when it's over. It's a sign that I'm still hopeful.

And actually, we're all doing pretty well. I find myself at least thankful that our captor is sane. His name is Rajnee Jabamet. He first made our acquaintance while I was jogging last Sunday morning around the track near our house. Rajnee was sitting in the grass watching a bunch of us grunt and moan our way around the track. At first, I took him for one of the foreign students that I sometimes saw around the campus. The curious

thing was that he was wearing green army fatigues and black army boots and looked like he hadn't slept inside in weeks.

I thought he picked me because I looked like I wouldn't struggle. Later, I found out it was because I stayed the longest and was the only one left on the track. He approached with an unlit cigarette and pretended not to speak English. I smiled understandingly and patted my pockets to show I had no lighter. He produced a machine pistol that looked like a metal cigar box with a barrel.

That was the first day. He wouldn't say what he wanted. He wouldn't talk at all except to give orders. We went home and he ordered me to cover all the windows and take all the locks off the inside doors. He asked for the keys to the car, the house, and the burglar alarm. He was thorough and solemn.

"What is your name?" he asked me. He had a heavy foreign accent that was hard to place.

"Ron," I told him.

"You have a gun, Ron?" he asked, pronouncing my name like "throne."

"No."

"I will kill you if you lie," he said. "I believe you, but you are all flawless liars."

Joanna and Cathy came home from the shopping mall at three, loaded down with packages. Rajnee let them in and made us all sit on the couch in the living room while he made a phone call. He pointed the pistol our direction while he made the call, but his eyes were fixed hypnotically on the bright pile of full shopping bags in the middle of the hall. After a brief conversation in his native tongue, he hung up. He stared down at the packages and prodded one with the toe of his boot.

"You have been purchasing the latest fashions?" he asked, looking at Joanna. She looked at me in disbelief and then put her arm around Cathy.

"In my country, the women wear men's army uniforms," he said. "They are good fighters."

That was the first day. We sat on the couch and weren't allowed to speak. Rajnee squatted in the hall comfortably and asked for nothing but utter silence. Now it is the sixth day and I am amazed at how calm we all are. But the fact is, I'm not that surprised. With all that goes on in the world, this seems like the logical and inevitable next step.

When his vigil has made him restless, Rajnee gives me the sketchy details of the plan. He is not alone and he makes that quite clear. A guerrilla army of many thousands is scattered across the country, placed strategically near major military and supply lines. Dozens of families in every major city are secretly being held hostage. He tells me these things with the greatest pride and light in his sober dark eyes. He is clearly an intelligent man and would probably be a teacher or a diplomat had he been born in another time or place. He is also thin and small and reminds me of a starved teenager although he is probably my age or older. He entered the country like the rest, he says, on stolen or blackmarket visas.

"We will bring capitalism and its corruption to its knees," he tells me. "Do you know what that will mean?"

I tell him that I don't.

"Happiness," he says. "Justice. Not just for a few. For all people. Wouldn't you like to be happy? Look at all you have and still you are unhappy."

"I am happy," I tell him.

"Yes, but look at all you have," he reminds me.

THE VIGIL — DAY 9

Rajnee (my daughter has started calling him Roger and he doesn't seem to object) is waiting. He talks on the phone daily.

At first, the phone conversations were brief and calm. Lately, they have been more emotional. He has shouted into the phone once or twice and angrily slammed it down.

During his calmer moments, I point out flaws in his plan.

"All these families you're holding are going to be missed," I tell him. I don't really believe this with absolute conviction. I say it because I know it is my duty to torment my captor.

"Besides," I add. "We have thousands of soldiers on just one or two of our military bases."

He smiles at me like I am five years old.

"Ron," he says. "You forget Vietnam. Strategic guerrilla warfare by a few can render a multitude helpless."

There is nothing I can say to Rajnee about war. He has heard it all. I could try to reason with him if it were a government he was fighting for but it's not. He does it for himself and his ideals. When I ask him what his ideals are, he says: "I could more easily explain God to a goat."

"You should give us more credit," I tell him.

"Capitalism runs on credit," he says.

He has been unsettled about the television and the radio. Only now will he allow the television to be turned on for thirty minutes in the evening to watch the world news. After each news item, he gives a simple summary of his opinion: "Lies," he says.

"A clever twisting of the truth."

"A minor conflict greatly exaggerated."

"A rumor at best."

He has finally taken to one of the chairs in the house. At first he would only squat on the floor, but now he has settled on a low, hard three-legged stool. I also watch what he eats and notice his diet is expanding. Single slices of bologna, Joanna's lemon yogurts, and snack-size bags of Fritos turn up missing more and more often.

THE COUP — DAY 13

Rajnee explains terrorism to me.

"It is the voice of a man who has had his voice taken away from him," he says.

"How much courage does it take to plant a bomb?" I ask him.

"How much stupidity does it take to invite a fat man to step on your spine and break it?" he says. He is full of allegories, as full as I am full of rationality.

Rationally, I ask: "What exactly do you want?"

"The world shall renounce capitalism."

"You mean give it all up?"

"Absolutely."

"But I've worked for what I have."

"The blood of many is on all that you possess," he says.

"Then what?" I ask.

"The absence of the greed of capitalism will bring peace and prosperity for all."

"What makes you think greed isn't the natural human condition?" I ask.

"In my country, you would see the natural human condition," Rajnee snaps. He leaps up and stands on his stool when I say things like this. I would have worried before. Now I just smile. Anger is what he is all about. "We have hunger in my country," he says rabidly. "We have suffering. We have disease and fighting and death. That is the natural human condition!"

"Where are you from?" I ask him for the hundredth time.

"A poor country at war," he says for the hundredth time.

I ask him once again to tell me what the war is about.

"It is a question of religious freedom," he says. "You could never understand."

When he says these things, I wonder if even Rajnee knows or remembers. But I know one thing. He despises me.

"You know, Ron," he says, "I could talk to you like a man if I didn't hate everything you are."

I find I am no longer afraid of him. He is losing the edge of exhaustion and hunger he had when he captured me in the park. He is clean-shaven now except for a ragged moustache.

"What's so great about you?" I ask him.

"I am a great fighter," he says. "You are soft and fat."

"I'm a few pounds heavy."

"You sit all day in air conditioning and swindle other men out of their money."

"You're confusing business with crime," I say.

"Capitalism is all the same."

"Then killing is all the same and that makes you a murderer."

That makes his eyes blaze with a little of the original anger. He points the machine pistol right between my eyes.

"I have a cause," he says deliberately.

I nod in deference and smile.

"I have a cause!" he shouts at me, but his voice is only loud, not angry.

"Of course," I say, and that seems to satisfy him.

THE OVERTHROW — DAY 16

I finally realize I have never had a better vacation in my life. For over two weeks, I have done almost nothing but talk with Rajnee. I have fewer worries than at any time in my memory. Joanna and Cathy are safe. Happy. Rajnee listens in on all of our phone calls, but it's unlikely we would mention him. Cathy tells us that a friend from school has been out as long as she has. "Debbie Turner," she says.

"Turner," Rajnee says. "Yes. That is one of our families."

That night, I can't sleep and I come downstairs for a glass of milk. For the first time I find Rajnee asleep on the couch with

an afghan pulled over him. An empty Pepsi can sits on the coffee table beside him, surrounded by a light dusting of Oreo crumbs. The television is mutely showing a test pattern.

He hasn't made or received a phone call in three days, but he says his orders will come soon, very soon.

"What then?" I ask.

"Capitalism will be toppled. U.S. meddling will be ended. The imperialists will die."

"I'm an imperialist," I remind him.

"Only the worst imperialists," he says quickly. He doesn't want me to worry even though he insists he hates me. "Your women will not be raped or harmed in any way," he adds, patting me on the arm.

"That's comforting," I tell him.

THE NEW GOVERNMENT — DAY 17

I wake up and Rajnee is gone. I go immediately to the television and switch it on with my heart pounding in my chest. I expect to see a grave Peter Jennings or a morose Dan Rather reporting on the fighting. Instead, I find an ornithology expert discussing the plight of the emu with a grim Jane Pauley.

I rush to the window and then out the front door into the street. It is still early and only one of my neighbors is up. He is jogging with a chocolate brown cocker spaniel. Both turn a curious eye my way and then go on running.

Back inside the house, I search carefully for some sign of something, but I don't really know what I'm looking for. My frantic rummaging wakes Joanna and Cathy and they come downstairs. When I give them the news that Rajnee has gone, they seem let down.

It takes a few days to readjust to working. We're expectant. We believe that something has happened but we don't know what. We share meaningful looks with those who were also

mysteriously ill or absent for a few weeks. When nothing happens, we slowly make discoveries. Joanna mentions that some food is missing. A box of Oreos, a six-pack of Coke, some granola bars. I check my closet and discover an old summer suit is gone. Cathy is missing a pair of jeans.

"Which jeans?" Joanna asks.

"My Calvins."

"You're probably his wife's size," I tell her.

Now, from time to time, I'll imagine I see Rajnee on the street. I'll tail some small, olive-skinned man down a side street or into a store and stop him. It is never him. And the man will look at me in that wary, irritated way that Americans do when they realize someone has noticed them.

I find that the experience has changed me. I no longer take my privileged life for granted. I have a gun hidden in a spring-loaded drawer of my bedside table. A smart little Beretta and two extra clips. All you do is push a button on the side and the drawer pops out. Nifty.



The Principles of
Flotation



“Swimmer?”

She was calling for him, using her calm morning voice. She cupped a hand over the phone as she stood beside the bed. Swimmer could see her through the dark bedroom, framed in the gray-lit window, but she couldn't see him looking. He waited.

“It's your mom,” Susan said.

“I know.”

“Then come here and take the phone.”

Swimmer rolled up and took the receiver, cupping it like Susan had. He swallowed a few times and rubbed his face before putting it to his mouth.

“Hi.”

“Hi. I didn't want to wake you up, but I just wanted you to know we're leaving now.”

“I thought you'd be gone by now.”

“No. It's just now six.”

“Oh.”

“Well, I just thought I'd ask one more time if you would go.”

“Mom . . . I really didn't know Grace.”

“Your voice sounds funny. Are you sick?”

“It's just early. I'll call you Sunday night and you can tell me about it.”

“Alright. Love you.”

“Mm-hmm,” Swimmer said. He started to put the phone down and then waited until he heard her hang up first. That was something he had always done. If for some reason they didn't talk again, he didn't want to remember being the first to hang up.

Susan was in the kitchen when he walked out of their bedroom. It was raining but she was opening the windows.

“We can finally get the heat out of the house,” she said.

Swimmer poured himself a glass of ice water from the bottle in the refrigerator and drank it straight down.

“She's been really strange about this,” he said. He sat, naked,

at the kitchen table. The cold leather of the chair softly adhered to his damp skin.

“It was her grandmother, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah, but Grace was ninety-eight. I just don’t know what she wanted with me. I think I met Grace once and Mom’s called me three times trying to get me to go to the funeral.”

“Did you ask her why?”

“No,” Swimmer said. He realized Susan still didn’t understand how it was with his family. Susan’s family was close. She talked to her sisters often, and even though Swimmer could hear Susan sometimes arguing with them, it seemed they never let each other off the phone without exchanging apologies. That seemed to be important. Coming out with things honestly, arguing if necessary and then forgiveness.

Swimmer couldn’t remember ever forgiving anyone in his family. But he also couldn’t remember anyone ever giving him a reason. There simply weren’t any confrontations. All he knew was that they all got along, somehow.

“It was probably the alcoholism,” Susan told him once, when he brought up the subject. “That’s the behavior of a family harboring an alcoholic. No matter how bad things are, pretend that it’s all okay. Cover up the alcoholism. Avoid disgrace.”

Swimmer didn’t see that clear connection the way Susan did. But then he had never needed to have things explained in the neat, simple way that she did.

It was like his name. When he had first met Susan, when they were both teacher’s assistants at the community college, Susan had asked him where he got a name like Swimmer.

“We’re all swimmers in my family,” he explained. “My mom used to be a lifeguard. I guess maybe she gave me that name. It’s William on my birth certificate.”

He could tell by the expectant way she had looked at him that she wasn’t satisfied, that she wanted there to be more. But when Swimmer let her look through the oldest of his family albums, the one filled with page upon page of black-

and-white snapshots of lakes and boat docks and swimming pools, she looked up and said: "Now I know why you're called Swimmer."

Swimmer stared at those photographs trying to see the knowledge of what Susan had seen, but it wasn't there for him. He looked back to the very oldest snapshots, the ones printed on hard, yellowing paper with the edges like they were cut out with pinking shears. There he saw his mother and his father before they were married. His mother was always wearing a spotless white one-piece suit. His father was skinny in his black trunks and usually had a cigarette dangling from his lips, no matter whether he was in or out of the water.

Swimmer was drawn to those photographs. He took the album from his mother's house and he kept it where he could pick it up and look through it whenever the feeling took him. Most of the album was put together long before he was born, but he was curious about the lives that had created his own. He looked for some sense of direction there and tried to understand the plan his parents had had in mind.

Even more than that, he looked for the mistake in their pale, ghostly faces. He looked for what it was that happened, what wrong decision had wrecked the happiness that must have settled at least briefly before he was born.

He looked for it because, at twenty-nine, he couldn't afford to make it. Susan had her teaching degree already, and a contract with a local school. He had taken the test for certification twice, and failed.

Susan was angry the first time. The second time she hadn't said anything. And as the summer went on, they were talking less and less. Swimmer was sleeping more. The time for the third and last offering of the certification exam was coming up and Swimmer couldn't seem to do anything but look at the album.

Sometimes, he thought he could see the foreshadowing of a later life in his mother's eyes. Her poses before the camera, her smile, they were all the classic bathing beauty poses of the

era. She had rich dark hair and perfect teeth. But there was something in her eyes and Swimmer could particularly see it when she and his dad were together in a shot.

It could have been the water. Later in their lives, after his dad had had a bad harness accident while water skiing, the water gradually slipped away from the background. The gleaming white and chrome powerboat disappeared. The wet suits and the diving gear were sold.

Swimmer remembered none of these things, but he saw them all in the pages of the album. The one thing he did remember was learning to swim. One of his first memories was the cold of the tile in the YMCA on Saturday morning. And being suspended in the shallows from grown-up arms, face in the water, blowing bubbles.

He couldn't recall learning much from that except the basic lesson that was intended. Breathe air in, water out. But he did learn. He learned from locking his small arms around his mother's neck, pressing a cheek into the rubber swim cap, and riding her back as she pulled them both forward through the water with clean, strong strokes. The memory of her grace in the water was as strong to Swimmer as the memory of his first real fear.

In fact, he had read something not too long ago that put words to the intuition he had felt then: "The man who drowns is trying to climb an imaginary ladder upward out of the water. The man who swims pulls himself along an imaginary ladder that lies flat on the water."

Susan had shown it to him in one of the textbooks for her English class.

"That certainly makes it sound easy," he said.

"It's like anything, Swimmer. It's easy to learn, but hard to do."

"That's the good thing about humans," Swimmer replied. "If they can't swim, they can still float."

Susan put the book away and didn't say anything else. But

THE PRINCIPLES OF FLOTATION

looking back over what he had said, Swimmer realized he didn't even believe himself. Not everyone could float. Floating itself was a skill based on faith.

He decided he had said it because Susan didn't believe in flotation. Not as a theory or as a practice.

Swimmer's mother called again on Saturday night, after the wake. She sounded strangely frail but exuberant over the long-distance lines.

"I wish you could have heard what the minister said about Grace," she said. "It was all so upbeat. It's different when someone has lived as long as she did. Everyone was happy for her. Not that she died of course, but that she had done so much . . ."

Swimmer tried not to listen as she went on with an almost word-for-word recount of Grace's eulogy. He realized he was often trying not to listen when she was speaking. Especially when she got that insistent edge to her voice, and he knew there was something more that she was trying to tell him, but she could never seem to come out with it. After he hung up the phone, he kept hearing echoes of the conversation—his mother's voice, hollow and quavering like it was skipping on water.

When Susan came in from grading essays, he was still standing by the phone.

"That was spooky," he said to her. "Mom just called from the wake. She sounded like she'd been to the circus."

"Sometimes wakes are like that when people are really old," she said matter-of-factly.

"Then she gave me Grace's life story. I didn't think I was going to have to suffer through that until Sunday."

"She probably just wanted to include you. She wanted you to feel like you're a part."

Swimmer frowned and looked back at the phone.

"Why don't you help me do some papers?" she said.

"It's your class. I can't be grading people I haven't even met."

"It's good practice. You're going to be doing this yourself soon."

"You don't know that," Swimmer said. "And neither do I."

"You've got five more weeks to study. You'll pass."

"Yeah," Swimmer said, gradually.

"You're looking over the material again, right?"

Swimmer hesitated. He turned his eyes toward the books lying open on the desk.

"That's what I was about to do," he said impatiently. "The damn phone keeps ringing."

"Let me get it then," she said calmly, and walked back into the kitchen. Swimmer waited until he could hear the sharp hop and slash of her pen on the page, and then he sat down at his desk. He stared down at the open books. Then he looked up at the fat leather spine of the photo album where it was wedged between a dictionary and a hand-thrown jar. He pulled it down gently, cradling it in his hands, listening with one ear to make sure Susan wasn't coming in.

He started flipping through the album from the back. The first things he ran across were some newspaper clippings that he had looked at more times than he knew. Both were obituaries, the first dated August 19, 1939. It was about an uncle Swimmer never knew, his mother's older brother who drowned while swimming in a swollen creek. The obituary read, "Thomas Robert Gann, 11, and a colored boy drowned in Beaver Creek Saturday while swimming."

It went on, but Swimmer always noticed that not one other mention was made of the black boy. The other obituary was from 1971. Arthur Thomas Gann, Swimmer's grandfather. Dead at age sixty-one from liver failure. He could hear Susan's voice in his mind once again saying "the alcoholism . . ." Others in his family had died since then, but his mother kept only these two. But he had a feeling that she would be wanting the album soon. She would want to save Grace's obituary.

He carried the album into the kitchen with him and put it

down in the middle of Susan's scatter of papers.

"I was just thinking something," he said to her. She looked up at the album and, sighing, put down her pen.

"What?"

"I was thinking how hard it must have been for my mom. She must have gotten to a point where nothing made any sense. First her brother died, and then her father. It was all wrong. It all happened in the wrong order. And then the divorce five years later."

"That would be hard," Susan agreed.

"But now Grace. The one who should've been first. It's like it's finally righted itself. That's how she's sounded on the phone. Like after all this time, it's all working out the way it should."

Susan leaned back in her chair and looked at him. She was nodding at what he had said. Swimmer realized it was one of the first times they had really agreed about something since he failed his certification.

"I think maybe all this time she was feeling like she had made a wrong decision somewhere, and now maybe she recognizes that she didn't."

"That sounds right," Susan said. She watched him as he stood up again and left the room.

He took the album back to the desk and put it away. He sat down again, took one look at an open page of one of his textbooks, and got up. He walked to the other end of the room and sat on the edge of the windowsill and looked back at the desk. He was feeling like he wanted to do something. There was a pull coming to him. It was coming to him in the phone ringing and his mother's voice on the other end, the album, Susan.

But it wasn't a downward traction. It wasn't the bottomless feeling he had when he woke up in the morning. Normally, when he felt this way, he walked. But even that didn't seem quite right.

He decided he did want to sit down. He checked his study

outline and found the book and the correct page and he started to read.

Another short, heavy rain shower was just ending when the phone rang Sunday afternoon. Swimmer had been awaiting it so intently that the sharpness of the ring made him jump.

"Well, we made it," his mother said. "We meant to leave earlier but everyone wanted to know about you and whether you were planning on coming to the family reunion in August."

She paused and Swimmer waited in silence.

"Well, I told them that I didn't know and that I'd have to ask you, so you're not committed to anything."

"When in August?" Swimmer asked.

"Oh, late. Late August," she said quickly. "I know you'd rather not, but I think it's important. I don't think we've been as much a part of the family as we could be. It's easy to forget we belong to something."

"As long as it's not the last weekend in August," Swimmer replied. "I've got my certification to take again."

"Oh, it won't be the last weekend," she said. "We can work it out but I know it won't be."

Swimmer smiled when he put down the phone. Susan would be even more surprised than his mother had been. Maybe he would drop the news to her after they went swimming.

Looking out his window, it seemed like the afternoon was shaping up into a good one for a swim.



The Venus Tree



A long time ago, at a place where two rivers came together to form one broad river that ran to the nearby sea, there grew a tree. It grew in a rain forest that was as full and deep as night.

The tree rose three hundred feet above the forest floor and its thick canopy stretched out as though it were the sky. The branches of this tree stretched down until they brushed the face of the blue river and the rolling waters carried away the yellowed leaves that fell from the rich canopy. The bottom of the river's deep channel was carpeted thickly in these same yellow leaves.

Water birds of all colors came to the shade of the tree in the afternoon when the sky was clear and the morning rains were past. Hidden in the shade, they stood still in the clear water, spearing the minnows that came near, seeking cover amid their silent orange legs.

The birds would stay on until the sun passed away and slid down into the jungle to sleep for the night. At dusk, the birds moved out into the river's deep water and, packed tightly together, would wait out the night and watch for the alligators that sometimes ventured out beyond the muddy shallows and cattail beds.

When night began settling around the tree, and the canopy had changed from brilliant green to black, the canoes came from the village upriver. Lovers, moving through the water without torches or other light, making almost no sound with the sandalwood oars as they dipped them into the river, came down to the tree.

The young men came in the lead canoes. Their black hair was combed back with water and their skin shone under the growing moonlight. Bare-chested, they were first to pull their dugouts onto the shore beneath the tree; as they did so, they beat the shallows around them with the flats of the paddles to frighten alligators that might be lurking.

With the canoes ashore, they waited in the shallows for the women to glide in so that they might pull the boats in for them

and help them onto dry ground. The women came in their bridal dresses, made from cotton that had been dyed in the purple berry of the very tree to which they had come. They wore bright flowers in chains around their waists, and their bare breasts between the long streams of their black hair were moistened with banana oil.

Alone now, beneath the canopy, surrounded by the night calls of giant toucans and banana parrots, the young men separated from the women and allowed them to go about the gathering of the purple berries of the tree. The women plucked the hard berries from the tree in clusters and held them in the aprons of their bridal dresses. When there were enough, they came back together and arranged the clusters in rows on palm leaves that the men had spread out on the soft grass.

When all was ready, the lovers paired off so that each was kneeling on the opposite side of the berry clusters from her true love. The women lit tightly wrapped bundles of flower petals and slow-burning roots and placed them on the palm leaves where they might smolder and fill the air with sweet smoke.

When the hour was right, and the moon had risen until the light was falling between the leaves of the gently blowing branches, each of the young men took up a cluster of the tree's purple berries and held it in the palm of his right hand.

If the spirits favored him that night, then the young man either was visited with the knowledge of love for the young maiden kneeling before him or was visited with the knowledge of the desires of the flesh. This knowledge was said to emanate from the tree itself and might infuse itself into every heart of every young lover to kneel beneath its branches.

If the young man was visited with the knowledge of love, then by putting the cluster of berries back on the palm leaves where he picked it up, he made a promise to wed his true love one year from that moment and to make no efforts to taste her love until their wedding night.

But, if the young man was visited only by the knowledge of the desires of the flesh, then he was forced to eat the cluster of

berries he had picked up from the palm leaves. If he was able to do this, then he was allowed to take his lover deep into the jungle, away from the tree, and make love to her until morning.

In the morning, she would return to the village alone and send men back into the jungle to find his body and bring it back up the river, where, after the burning of a raft of his belongings and a pile of flowers gathered by the girls of the village, he would be wrapped in vines and palm leaves and set adrift in the river so that the spirits of the other world would find him and care for him.

“What if he couldn’t eat the berries?”

“Well, then he had to leave the village and the girl and he couldn’t ever come back.”

“What if she had a baby? Then there wouldn’t be any dad around.”

“If she had a baby, the baby was cared for and loved just the same as the babies of the other women in the village. Children were sacred and nobody cared where they came from.”

“Okay. Good story.”

“Thank you. Now sleep. I mean it.”

After every night’s story, Abby stands naked beside the sink on the bathroom scale. She steps off, face serious, and puts her feet into slippers with the faces of rabbits. Robe half-on, she scuffs over to me and sits.

“I’m very fat and very beautiful,” she says.

She’s not fat. She’s a good hundred and fifty, but not fat. When she stretches out in bed, any fat fades into strong lines. I have less muscle. A lot less when you throw out the physical aspect.

That time is almost the only time we touch. She tips her head back and I start at her throat, working my fingers along the gentle sag of her jaw, rubbing deep along the hairline, seeing without seeing.

I put what I can into the touches, moving down to the hollows of her breastbone, then down again to the light scratch of her underarms. She drops to her elbows toward the end, making of her torso a flat, solid surface as firm as earth. Her belly has the wrinkled memory of Linden in its lines but her pelvis points down to her plump vulva as surely as a stream channel.

She works on the next night's story while we're still wide awake, talks through it out loud, with the lights out and the window letting in the muffled night.

"Here's something I was thinking about," she says. "I'm wondering if they shouldn't change that line in the Bible that says, 'And the lion shall lie down with the lamb.' I say they add a line that says, 'And two years later, the lamb shall develop a reduction in weight and a chronic and persistent superficial gland inflammation and shall die of a gross failure of his immune system.'"

"You think there's a story in that?"

"Oh, there is. Believe me. If you only look there are good stories all over."

When she has something she can work over in her mind, without me, I go to sleep. I hear her get up three or four times in the night and write in her spiral notebook, then I feel her weight on the bed again.

Linden gets her bath in the morning. Abby sits wide-legged in the soapy water, her big breasts tan on the small billows of suds. Linden sits between Abby's thighs with her own knees up, a scale model of Abby, closing her eyes tightly, waiting for the rinse.

Abby gets the plastic pitcher ready and Linden stands up, steadying herself on Abby's round pink knees. Abby pours. It's a cold rinse. Linden shrieks and does a war dance in the steaming tub.

I come in after Linden has gone to school and Abby is crying. She holds the end of the toilet paper to her face with the other end still attached.

“That buckle mark is still on her bottom,” she tells me. “I wonder sometimes if it’s ever going to go away.”

“It will.”

“I’d like to call that fucker up and invite him over for a romp in the hay.”

“Go ahead. I’m looking for a job today.”

“Huh. And get the clap for my trouble. No, thank you very much.”

I wet my face to shave. There’s no reason to stop for Abby’s emotions. They come and go like nesting birds. She’s already dried up when she wraps her arms under mine and works her way between me and the sink.

“What’s this about a job, Nelly?” she says. “No jobs. People are for their presence.”

I have shirts I cannot wear. I have shirts that were never sewn for mortals to wear. Buttons and buttonholes have no real relationship to Abby. Sleeves go on and on without limit, or stop short at the elbow. She makes shirts until we all go weak from the exertion and fall into bed, and at dawn she is up again, sacrificing the lives of curtains, tablecloths, to the vigilant black Singer.

I try to stand clear. She is dizzy with giving and she talks in her delirium to the sewing machine and the dusty windows, to me, sort of, and to June wafting along the sidewalks outside.

“My mom called me ‘Poor Heart,’ when I was little,” Abby says. “I made doll clothes for everybody so they would like me and when they didn’t and I came home bawling, she called me Poor Heart. You know why? Not because she was sorry, no. Because my heart was empty. She meant I was giving all my heart stuff away and keeping nothing for myself.”

She sighs a little, then, a long time later, she sits back and says, “My, how I’ve changed.” And laughs.

Giving is what put her here. She gave for a dishwasher that drifted into the restaurant where she works and then in a few weeks drifted out again.

"He was small," she says. "And clean. At my age you go for the possible, not the beautiful."

I've asked her his name.

"None of them," she says. I don't remember any names. The faces, though." She taps her temple. "Keep those right here."

"So really," I say, "it could have been any of them."

"You've heard that old joke, haven't you? Two ladies are sitting in a veterinarian's office with their little dogs on their laps, and one says to the other, 'Well, that's a nice-looking dog, what's it doing in here?' The other woman looks embarrassed and says quietly, 'It's sort of embarrassing, but he's got syphilis.' 'Syphilis!' the woman says. 'How in the world did he get syphilis?' 'Well,' the other woman says. 'He claims he got it from a tree!'"

June ends with Abby waking me at two in the morning to talk about stories.

"Nelly," she says, her round, shiny face very close to mine. "You've got to work on your stories. You've got to give them a beginning, a middle, and an end and you've got to make them mean something. There has to be a point."

The warmer our summer gets, the more she has to say about points, about purposes. We watch TV with Linden between us on the deep couch. Linden leans on Abby's shoulder but throws one of her small legs over one of mine. Abby talks in a fever, explaining and explaining the plots and motivations of the characters to all of us, even herself. I don't stop her. I doubt she could stop. Linden sleeps and I try, but Abby is tireless and the rooms fill up with the blue light and a haze of her words.

Later, Linden moans on my shoulder when I take her up the stairs and the sound is like "Dodo." When I tell Abby, she gets wet eyes and stops unbuttoning her blouse.

"That's yours now," she says and she takes a hard, sudden hold on me that pulls me down. The ring where her fingers held burns for a moment. "Understand?" she says.

“No.”

“That’s what she called him when she was just little.”

“She was sleepy,” I say. “She just thought I was him.”

“I’m telling you,” she says, serious. “It’s yours. Be wise and take it.”

She weighs and then comes out to where I’m stretched on the bed and eases onto me like I am a rubber raft on deep water. Her hair carries the smell of cold grease from the restaurant and another, deeper smell. The blood of meat.

After a breath, she rolls over, pulling me on top. My thin legs slip between the soft fold of her thighs and I can’t stop my hips from pushing just once against that joining.

She wedges an elbow between us then, and shakes her head.

“You ought to go to the bank and talk to my friend,” she says. “You’d like each other. You could share these things.”

I’m speechless when she says that. Not because of what she said—she tells me about the girl at the bank all the time. It’s how she says it, how easily she gives. She gives away herself. Now she gives away me.

July fifth, we celebrate my birthday at the hospital. Abby is sitting on the metal table, swinging her tan feet, a box of Puffs on her knee. On Tuesday, it was snuffles and a lot of quiet. Thursday, I was up for an hour before I realized Abby was still in bed. Light was falling on her fingers and she was turning them in it, the rest of her perfectly still, her eyes wide and dark around the edges.

I dropped Linden with the neighbors and we drove along in sunshine with rain falling in thick spats on the windshield of my truck.

“Well,” she says, when we pull into the hospital lot. “I wanted to wait to give it to you later, but here’s your birthday present.”

She looks up to the sky and, following her gaze, I see it, too.

“I don’t know where I’ll keep it,” I say.

“Don’t. Give it to somebody else.”

In the room, they give her a surgical green gown. We're adrift in white and only the lights seem to be affixed to the ceiling. It's the first time I really see, with the pale green, with the painful white, that Abby's color is not so good. Her face seems gray like the stone of statues, like a goddess of legend.

In minutes, we're in Ben Franklin's, buying the new bottle of ampicillin. I hold it in my pocket, sure and brown, a mojo against all the things I imagine but can never see.

There's a story I heard about a Chinese prince who wanted to find the most perfect pair of goldfish for his garden pond. He was willing to pay any price for them and he sent out a messenger to tell the kingdom of his wishes. It just so happened that one of the young court attendants, a boy of fourteen, was in love with the prince and he wanted to be the one to find the beautiful goldfish. So he sent a message to his grandfather, an old gardener in a nearby kingdom, to find these goldfish and to send them to him.

The old gardener, having age and wisdom on his side, went to his own prince, knowing that the prince possessed a most excellent pair, each of the fish fully ten inches in length with papery fins and a color like polished gold, and easily the most beautiful in the entire Mainland.

He humbly suggested to his prince that he might improve his negotiating position with the neighboring kingdom if he would satisfy the other prince's wish and supply him with the remarkable goldfish.

So, the following day, a royal entourage made the long foot journey to the other kingdom with the goldfish. The two princes met in the palace court and the gift of the most beautiful pair of goldfish was made.

The boy was very pleased because, by way of explanation, his prince came to understand that it was he who had arranged not only the gift of the goldfish, but also the meeting of the two kingdoms on a very favorable occasion.

At the end of the meeting, as the visiting entourage was preparing to depart, the prince took the boy aside and said, "You have served me well and been so clever that you are probably the finest thing I possess. Therefore, I must now make a gift of you to the prince of our neighboring kingdom to show my good faith and my desire to promote health and welfare between our kingdoms."

And so he gave the boy who was in love with him to the neighboring prince and the boy never set eyes on his prince again in his lifetime.

Abby listens to the story, buoyed by pillows without pillowcases in the middle of our wrecked bed. She has slept fifteen hours. While I talk, quickly because her tiredness is so heavy in the room, she looks at the alarm clock on the table. I know she is counting up the hours she has slept.

"That's it?" she asks me.

"It's just one I heard," I say.

"Keep working on it," she says. "And don't tell that one to Linden. Not until she's old and fat like us anyway."

It's two in the afternoon on a Sunday, and Abby is asleep. I'm trying to be in other places, trying to push myself into other rooms, but I never get far. Linden roller-skates on the runner in the hallway and bumps the wall every now and then for balance. The bumping sounds are big and muffled, like something is trying to get down the hallway and into Abby's room.

But Linden's skates are fierce on the floor above my head. I feel better knowing it won't get past her.

Downstairs, I'm sitting in the kitchen on a chair, looking down both hallways. One leads to the living room and the other leads to a small laundry room, a bathroom, and a short hall that ends at the stairway that goes upstairs.

I'm just looking at the designs, the way Abby's pans are hung

with nails on the wall, the number of towels stacked on top of the washing machine, the kind of bleach bottle on the shelf above the white metal sink.

I'm trying to see her plan in all of this.

By four, I've worked my way to the third step from the top and Linden is sitting on the top step. She's breathing hard and the sweat stands out on her pink face like a fine oil.

The skates are still on. She wears a top Abby made from kitchen curtains. Grape clusters, purple, red, and green, are dyed into the fabric. With tan arms and her one black braid, Linden looks like a Latino princess. I tell her so and she just bites her upper lip and fumbles with the lacing of the plastic skates.

"I wish we had a tree," she says. "A big one with big branches."

"You'd climb it?"

"I'd sit under it."

"And the boys would swarm like bees."

She fumbles more and more with the lace.

"Who knows," she says.

When Abby wakes in the evening, she is as pink as the roses in the bedsheets. I don't know why I don't have a shirt just like it. She rubs under each side of her jaw. Her damp hair clings to her cheeks. She makes me rub, too, and I feel what she means—no more swelling.

While I'm still holding her moist throat, she says she wants to go to the Fun House.

"We have to celebrate every time," she says seriously. "That way, we'll also celebrate the time it doesn't go away and we'll have a reason to be happy that we won't be able to get out of."

I nod, agreeing, but I can't seem to say anything. I'm trying to turn my face some direction so she won't know she's holding up better than I am. When she wriggles the nightgown up over her head, I wipe my face and make it out of the door into the hallway.

In the truck, Linden clicks her skates together, toes and heels, toes and heels. Abby let her keep the skates on. "For luck," Linden had asked. I wish I had a pair, too.

We come off the dark highway into the strip malls of Raytown and coast into the lot behind Fun House Pizza. Linden struggles for a few yards across white gravel, then hits the smooth downhill walk and glides, legs stiff, arms straight out to the door. Because of the skates, she's not really on the earth with the rest of us. I admire her for finding a way to do that.

Inside, we each take a hand and tug her along. Passing video games on both sides, Linden suddenly stops and points.

"That's us," she says.

When we look, there's a carnival mirror. It is us. But we're pushed down to two feet tall and stretched three feet wide. There's more to us than there ever was before.

Abby's smile opens like wings on her face and flutters there before slipping away. She bends down and covers Linden as if to make of herself a cocoon around both of them. While she cries, I look into the mirror and try not to see how frightened I am.

At bedtime, Linden lies down beside Abby in a nightgown with a pale blue bow at the throat. I tell them both the tree story. Linden snores lightly through the ending.

"What if he couldn't eat the berries?" Abby asks.

"Well, then he had to leave the village and the girl and he couldn't ever come back."

"What if she had a baby? Then there wouldn't be any dad around."

"If she had a baby, the baby was cared for and loved just the same as the babies of the other women in the village. Children were sacred and nobody cared where they came from."

"Okay," Abby said. "Good story."

"Thank you. Now sleep. I mean it."



The Barrel Racer



Norma met May Collins on the first day of her separation. She hadn't driven up to Medicine Bow wanting to meet anyone, but it just so happened. She had had a plan to come up and see her brother Henry, just to kill a day, and to spend a little time figuring out what was going to shake out of her abandonment of Bill.

Henry had concerns in town that kept him there even when it seemed to Norma that he was just marking time. It was his second year up there and he still drove a big, low-slung Buick with a loud tail pipe. He had told Norma that it was his way of reminding himself of the objective. He had gotten the use of words like that from their dad, a traveling housewares vendor. Norma got their mother's good hands and her suddenness.

She left Bill late at night and, by the time she had crossed into the foothills and the light was coming, she was driving in and out of clouds. They sat down in the valleys like cotton lids. The blue of Wyoming sky was just burning through them as she came into Medicine Bow. She cruised past Henry's holdings in a daze from all the hairpin curves—the Sonic Drive-In, the laundromat, a bar called the Salt Lick.

There were more, surely, but she couldn't remember what was what, what he had said and what she had imagined he had said.

When she pulled up outside his double-wide, a woman's face appeared for a moment in one of the windows and was as quickly gone. Norma caught only the expression of her mouth and it seemed to make no commitments one way or another. Henry came out in his socks with his vest unbuttoned and put a careful arm around her. Something was putting weight on him, she noticed, and attributed it to the face at the window.

He brought her inside without speaking. He wasn't really good at these things except in his silence.

Inside, a plate was on the table for her, and a cup of coffee was cooling beside it. The woman Norma had seen leaned through the little divider of counter and cabinets. Her face was

bright and big-eyed for that hour of the morning. She had straight salt-and-pepper hair that was cut short and seemed to make her eyes even larger.

"Norma," Henry said. "This is May."

"Hi," Norma said.

May smiled and showed perfect square teeth. She rubbed her hands together. "Norma," she said. "I just can't tell you how glad we are you came to see us."

Norma could only blink and try to match the size of May's smile. Henry ushered them all to the table, sweeping his arms like a field hand putting cows into a chute. May put down a skillet of scrambled eggs on a pot holder. Then she bowed her head. Norma looked over at Henry and saw that he was following. She stared down at the pattern on her plate and wondered what might have happened to Henry since she last talked to him. When could he have acquired faith?

"Thank you, O Lord," May said softly. "For these thy gifts that we are just about to receive. Amen."

"Amen," Henry said.

"Henry, I put a little Tabasco in the eggs," May said. She rolled some of the eggs onto his plate, then Norma's.

"Oh."

"I thought it might spice them up a little."

Henry picked up his fork and prodded the eggs. "Well," he said to Norma. "I want you to stay as long as you want. If you want me to do anything in the way of money you let me know."

"I've got money, Henry."

"I mean as far as getting a lawyer. I know several hereabouts."

"No," Norma said. She took a piece of toast off the tan stack May offered. "Not for right now."

May patted her arm warmly. "I know just how you feel, Norma," she said. "I hate to think about money."

Henry got up from the table and buttoned his vest. He folded a down coat over his arm.

"I've got to show a place," he said. "See you all at supper."

After he had gone out, May picked up his plate from the

table. Norma saw how he had rested a piece of toast across the eggs so it would look like he had eaten a few. It was quiet while May scraped the plate off into the plastic trash can.

"So how long have you and Henry been together?" Norma asked.

"Oh, well," May said. She laughed with a little jerk of her head. "Me and Henry are really just buddies. I have my own little place down the road."

"We don't talk all that much," Norma said.

"I come over and fix him breakfast some days," she said. "Even when he threatens me not to." She took the skillet of eggs from the table and banged it upside down on the edge of the trash can. She chuckled to herself and then sighed. Norma watched from the table as she ran water in the sink. May seemed horse-built. She had a broad back that stretched her red flannel shirt and a square, solid butt.

"Henry hasn't really told me what you do," Norma said.

May turned off the faucet with firmness. A washer groaned against her.

"He barely knows," May said, still facing the window. She turned and waved her hands to dry them. "No, I shouldn't say that. Henry is too good. It's not his fault."

Norma nodded. It seemed that May really knew Henry. She wasn't another of the girls from town Henry was known for—the beauty salon owner, the Amway representative, a girl hitchhiking to Eugene, Oregon, who had used his side yard to camp out for a few months. Her name had been Cartar and he had taken her to a town council meeting once. She had done something astonishing and funny that Norma could no longer remember.

But those had been girls younger than Norma herself. May was older. Maybe older than Henry, she thought.

"If you want to," May said, clapping her hands together, "I'll take you up and show you my place." She was suddenly smiling again.

"I've got no plans," Norma said, and picked up her dishes.

May's trailer was a shorter distance up the canyon than Norma expected. She knew that the people that lived in the foothills liked to put space between themselves and it was usually miles between places. The jeeps they passed carried thin, bearded men in military fatigues, going to town.

"I don't know why they want to survive it," May remarked. "I'd rather be up in heaven."

Norma knew they had arrived when the road emptied out onto a flat of bright sandstone. May's place sat back against a bluff that was as smooth and rounded as the inside of a bowl. It had the color of bleached wood from the wind and sand that blew through the canyon. A split-rail fence reached out in a loop that took in the trailer, a small metal utility building, and a compact lot of land. May parked beside the utility building.

After they climbed out and stood for a moment in the wind, she went to the building and opened the sliding doors. Norma smelled hay and then the harder, richer smell of horses. Blue sheep dogs with stout legs came from somewhere and tried to sit against her feet. They licked at her extended fingers.

Then May came out on the back of a tan and white pony.

"This is a barrel horse," she said. "See how she's short-legged and deep in the chest?"

She thumped the little horse with her heels and rode straight out into the open area. Battered orange barrels stood in the center of the loop with distance between them. May brought the little horse to a stop, leaned right to make her sidestep, and then bent at the waist and thumped again. They went hard toward the first barrel, pulled up, and sunk deep into the turn with May low in the stirrups and absolutely still in her seat. Her stillness made the motion seem to stop and then the pony's head came around and they whipped up and out and came back hard the way they had come.

She did a set of three, shaving the turn a little each time, bumping, but not upsetting, the barrel on the last one. She had a hard red in her cheeks when she climbed down next to Norma.

"You've seen barrel racing, haven't you?" she asked.

"I guess I have."

"I teach it," May said, breathing in little puffs. "That's what I do besides boarding, saddle training when I can get it, and some guide work, but that's pretty unusual."

"That's great," Norma said.

"Oh," May said absently, bending to slap at the sheep dogs' necks. "It's wonderful up here, Norma. The weather's beautiful all the time and I've got my horses. I just love it." She paused and looked down at the dog's face in her hands. Some of the resonance of her expression faded. "And there's Henry, too," she said. "He's good, he really is."

"He always comes through for me," Norma said. She stood far enough from May to see worry in the lines of her mouth. May gave the dog a last pat and stood up.

"Why don't you wait for me inside, Norma," she said. "I'm going to walk her."

Norma went to the trailer and let herself in. She sat down in the nearest chair, next to the window, and watched as May led the horse around the perimeter of the fence. She saw how, after a few minutes of walking, May shook whatever it was that occurred to her and walked with stronger steps.

Over the next few days, Norma thought more and more about May's separateness. About how she had a place out of the wind and animals that counted on what she did, the company of people she chose the way she chose Henry. Norma spent as much time as possible out with May and away from the phone. They talked about good and bad horses, what kind of clouds carried thunder and which did not, how important it is to take body pains seriously when you live away from a city.

When there wasn't any way left to avoid it, she went into town and met Henry for lunch in the cafe. Henry ordered her a buffalo burger.

"You're busier than me," he said, when she sat down.

"Oh, you know, Henry."

"I know how it is," he said. He was sitting back in the booth

with his palms together, the fingertips under his lips, smiling.

"You can be the first one to know," he said. "I got out from under the coin-op yesterday."

"I didn't know you were trying."

"Oh yeah." Henry smiled. He drummed his fingers on the Formica. "Long time. I'm letting 'em buy me out. The land vultures from Laramie and Greeley. They can have it. They think they're ranchers or something. Me, I don't have their delusions. Did you know I turn fifty next month?"

"I'll be thirty-eight," Norma said.

"I know, but you're a kid next to me, Norma. I've got to make a move."

"Don't grow up now, Henry," she said. "You almost made it."

He dipped his chin into his chest with a laugh. He was still the only man who thought she was funny.

"There's a furniture chain I've been talking to somebody about," he said.

"Where?"

"It's east. Eldorado Springs, Ottawa, Wichita."

Norma thought about Henry living on the plains, getting in with a small town investors' club, driving store to store over faceless prairie in his big Buick. It all seemed to fit. The Buick finally made sense to her.

"So it's definite," Norma said.

"Good outlook," Henry said.

A waitress in pale green brought the burgers. Henry covered his in ketchup and then tucked a paper napkin in between his collar and chin. Norma opened the bun and decided to eat the potato chips and the dill pickle.

After a silence, Henry asked, "So what about Bill?"

"I was afraid of this," Norma said.

When Henry dropped her off back at the trailer, May's pickup was sitting out in front. Henry seemed pleased and nodded toward the trailer.

"This is going to be it for me," he said.

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THE BARREL RACER

"I can't believe this is you," Norma said. She got out and walked around the car. Henry rolled down the window.

"Anyway, about this Bill business," he said. "Call him or don't. It's up to you."

Then he eased the Buick away before she could answer. Inside, May was making chili and noodles in Henry's kitchen. It seemed to Norma that all May's recipes were based on chili powder and noodles. She was whistling a campfire song. Norma remembered parts of it from some time long past. She dropped into a kitchen chair.

"I heard Henry," May said. She was sweaty and pink-faced when she looked up from the stove.

"He bought me a buffalo burger," Norma said.

May scraped chopped onions into the chili pot with the back of a knife.

"I hear that Buick when he's way down the road," she said. "I keep finding him jeeps he could buy and he keeps on driving the Buick."

"I doubt he'll part with it now."

"It's funny what he will part with and what he won't," May said.

She stepped back from the stove, wiping her hands on a towel. "I asked him last week why I hadn't seen anything of that little Amway girl. She was real cute. I thought they looked nice together, you know, but Henry just laughed when I asked him."

She looked at Norma and shrugged. "I don't know," she said. Norma sat forward in her chair. She tried not to look directly at May, but could find nothing else in the room to look at. May leaned on the counter and looked down to the floor.

"Henry probably told you I was married once," she said.

"No," Norma said.

"When I was sixteen, I got married," she said. "Lasted three months. He was a loudmouth heel roper. You know what a heel roper is?"

Norma shook her head.

"He's the one that goes for the heels in team roping," she said. "Comes up from behind. Nobody needs that type around."

"I guess not," Norma said.

"On our wedding night, he thought I wasn't a virgin. I told him it happened at about fourteen when I was riding, but he didn't believe that."

"I've heard of that," Norma said.

"I've always been kind of glad," May said. "At least I *loved* the horse."

Her mouth jerked with a laugh, but made no sound. The chili came to a boil on the stove and she went back to stirring.

"You aren't really wondering what happened to the Amway girl, are you?" Norma asked.

"No," she said. "No, I guess not."

She looked down into the chili pot like it was bottomless.

"I figured you knew what Henry is doing," Norma said. "I knew when he mentioned the laundromat."

"He thinks we should get married," May said.

"I figured."

"I've been married," she said. "I just don't have any plans to do it again."

She stirred the chili once more and then rapped the spoon sharply on the pan's edge.

"But then again, Henry's not a loudmouth," she said.

"No," Norma agreed. "He's not."

"I'd feel like I *bad* to do it with someone else," she said. "But not with Henry. I believe I can hold on to what belongs to me."

"That's good," Norma said.

"I can't help but think that way," May said. "I've tried not to blame myself. You might as well blame the rain for mud."

"I think you're right," Norma said.

May nodded and rubbed tears away with her wrists.

"Damn onions," she said.

The next Sunday, Henry said he was taking them out to shoot blue rock. He borrowed shotguns from one of the newer operators in town. A little Weatherbee pump that handled like curves of smoke, an over-and-under Remington, and a blocky double-barrel with no recoil pad. He rolled them in old quilts and tucked them into the Buick's trunk with two sturdy boxes of blue rock and a hand thrower. They picked up May in the sandstone hollow before light. She had wax paper sacks of donuts and a cotton gun bag.

"I've got us the guns," Henry said, lifting the trunk lid.

"This is my four-ten, Henry," May said. "It's my gun."

Henry took it out from under her arm.

"Well, you can't . . .," he said quickly, then pursed his lips. He gently fitted the gun bag into a safe spot. "It's tough to shoot blue rock with that gun. I got you a twelve gauge."

"I'll be fine," May said.

The drive took up the rest of the time until the sun broke through the ground clutter. They watched the foothills change from dark impressions on the morning stars to the expectation of shape. May talked above the news station that Henry had tuned in. She talked about scuba diving in Florida—about jellyfish and the sting that feels like alcohol on an open cut, and cameras that photograph from two points of view at once and create a third dimension in pictures.

"Remember Viewmasters?" she asked. Norma said nothing from the backseat, expecting Henry to answer. Henry tuned and fine-tuned the radio until May's statement drifted and then faded away.

Just before full light, Henry parked on the edge of a deep grass open that stretched out and down. Trees made a wind-break behind the meadow and the sound they heard in the trees was the Chinook coming down from Canada.

"If you see a turkey, shoot it," Henry told them, while he loaded the guns.

"Oh, come on," May said.

"No, really. It's the season." He handed Norma the pretty Weatherbee, keeping the over-and-under for himself. May pulled slender shells from her pockets and scattered them at her feet. They made Norma think of mountain flowers of the kind that grew in crevices and rain pockets.

When they were ready, Henry slipped one of the fragile clay birds into the thrower arm and cocked it. "You're a team," he said. "Take turns lead shooting with the other one following. You first, Norma."

The first bird jumped from the snapping arc of Henry's arm and climbed up. Norma shot and missed. May's shot took a puff of yellow powder before the bird shattered on a rock. Henry silently reloaded and threw. May's shot chipped off a shard and wobbled the bird. In its slower rotation, floating against the dim sky, Norma shot and the bird powdered.

"Good follow," Henry said. "Lucky you've got a strong partner, May."

May smiled and studied the ground for another shell. Henry went on throwing. Haze from the gun muzzles settled like mist, and Norma tried to remember when anything had smelled as solid and nice. Her shoulder ached and her ears rang. She was beginning to take the bird the moment it leapt clear of the thrower. Even then, May's shot was almost on top of her own.

"May," Henry said. "You're rushing Norma. Let her take her time."

"She has time," May said. She broke open the four-ten with a sharp snap and reloaded. Henry turned and put down the thrower. He carried the over-and-under to where May was standing.

"You should give this a try," he said. "It's sweet as candy."

May fumbled her load and dropped the shell in the grass. She turned her back on Henry and didn't say anything while she scanned the ground.

"Come on, May," he said. "This baby's worth a shot."

She raised up and looked at him, glaring back over one

shoulder. "I like my gun, Henry. I'm just getting warmed up."

Norma put her own gun on the edge of a smooth rock and moved a few feet away. She grabbed up the bird thrower and a clay bird and tried to load it. In the quiet, a little knot of doves dipped into the meadow. Norma watched them swirling like the leaves caught in a down draft. They separated above the rocks and turned many ways, climbing. Behind her, Henry said, "Okay, May."

It was the expectant sound of his voice that made Norma look. May looked, too. Henry raised the over-and-under to his shoulder, swung it smoothly, and took his shot. The nearest dove tipped its wings and went headfirst into the rocks. He swung on a second bird but pulled up short and brought the gun down, breathing.

"Well," he said. "That's what it's all about. That's why you practice."

May hung her gun at waist level with both hands. It was still open and looked dead, cradled as it was.

"It was a nice shot, Henry," she said. She still seemed to be checking the ground for her dropped shell, but her eyes were fixed on one spot.

"I'm going to go pick up my bird," he said. "You want to try this gun now or not?"

"Yes," she said.

Norma tried to look somewhere else, but found herself waiting for some sign from May that it was alright. She waited, but May did not take her eyes from Henry's back.

In another week, Henry turned loose of the hamburger drive-in and the bar. Norma sat down with him in his office one afternoon. His bookshelves were empty and cardboard boxes made islands on the bare floor.

"I'm not selling out from under you, Norma," he said. "You stay as long as you want, and when you're done, I'll put my place up."

"What about May?"

"Already got a call on that place. A group of doctors from Denver looking for a hunting cottage."

"You're moving fast," she said.

"Huh," Henry said. "Wait until you're forty-nine."

A yellow Ryder truck pulled up at the trailer the next morning, bringing Mexican boys in ripped-up jeans. They were big and uncertain on their feet, but packed the trailer with the gentleness of girls. Norma watched and saw nothing scratched, nothing broken. They left the big pieces and took care to leave the larger half of the truck empty.

"One more up the canyon," they told her, pointing upward.

By that night, Henry was already on his way. He gave her a check and the keys to his office in town. He wore a new gold wedding band on his left hand. They seemed to make a point not to talk about it.

"You'll do fine," he told her. "Just stay away a few more months and you'll be ready to start life again. Anybody can do it at your age."

He pulled out in the blue Buick. In the passenger's seat beside him sat a globe of the world that he had kept in the office.

May didn't come by until the morning. The horse trailer was hitched to the back of her pickup. She met Norma's eyes with little glances as they stood on the cement patio.

"This is just for now," she said.

"Okay," Norma said.

"I'm coming back here," she said, looking at her squarely.

"I know," Norma said.

May pushed a folded envelope into Norma's hand. "I'm dropping my horse off just two miles down from here," she said. "Just send the rent once a week. I'd do it myself, but Henry . . . you know. I'll send more later."

Norma waved the envelope as the pickup moved off down the two-lane.

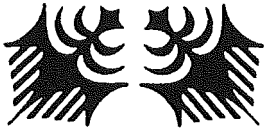
At the end of the week, she sent the fifty dollar boarding fee. She sent it off on Friday morning every week until the money was gone. She waited for more money; when it didn't come, she let the stable buy the horse and forwarded the check to the address Henry had given her.

Each day, on her way to the job at the postmaster's office in town, she drove past the boarding ranch and saw that the barrel pony was gone. Its absence started as something puzzling and then slowly expanded until it had a greater density and resistance than the clouds that sat down in the valleys in the morning.

She felt turned around most of the time. She didn't even know how she came to be on the phone when one night someone on the other end answered, and it was Bill.



Close Water



On the road, other cars appeared in faint reddish clouds and worked their way down to the turn. The makes and the models were all familiar, all the cars of kids from town who weren't kids any longer.

We stood on the porch of a girl's house and took draws from a silver keg. She was the homecoming queen at some time. If she was there at the gathering, she could no longer be recognized as ever having been a queen.

The latecomers were still gathered in clumps around the cars and the shade trees at the top of the drive. The light gusts of wind that moved ceramic mobiles hanging from the eaves of the house also moved their words. I heard what was said without meaning to and found myself turning away in the middle of a sentence to hear it again.

"That's something," a woman said. She looked at me and shook her head.

"What?"

"Somebody saw Dennis Burchett in his car. Driving toward Alamosa."

The boy I had been talking to cleared his throat.

"Well," he said. "That's a sad case."

"He knows," the girl said to him. "This is Richard." She nodded her head at me.

"I didn't recognize you," the boy said and walked away toward the keg.

"Christ," she said, and rolled her eyes.

"I don't know you," I said to her.

"No, you don't," she said. "But if you see him, tell him you ran into Betty. I was Betty Raymond once."

"Betty Raymond," I repeated to her, before throwing the last of a beer into a paper sack and walking away.

On the highway, a few miles went by before the junction that turned west toward Alamosa came up. The sign reached over the highway in a tall span and seemed larger than it had to be. The sun had made the car warm, and I rolled down the

window. Dry, early summer air blew in past the side mirror.

The exit for Alamosa took a long time to rise up out of the flat prairie and then took a longer time to pass out of view. I drove on toward Pueblo and remembered Dennis.

We caught the trains that passed behind his house. The line was a Missouri-Pacific and it was used hourly for the coal freighters going east. We boarded the middles of these trains at a trot and leaned out from the car ladders, hearing the gravel compress under the ties like ice under tires. In a mile or so, we stepped down and slipped into the woods, afraid of the dull faces looking out at us from the caboose.

On Sundays, we took the long walk down from his house to the shooting range. His family had three sections and a grain mill with a voting share in an elevator that covered everything from Alamosa to the New Mexico border.

Dennis Senior was known to people. In a flat, between a cluster of shallow cattail ponds, he had a shooting range that was nothing more than a pasture edging on the road with a clay creek wall at the far end. The clay there was yellow and heavy with limestone. When the sun dried it and a wind came down from the foothills, the sky shone yellow in the light.

These Sundays, the cars lined the far end of the shallow pasture. Their tires sat deep in the grass and left heavy ruts that we filled afterward with dirt. Shooters came from town with guns they couldn't use on a public range—Russian and Italian makes that had been modified in basements and back rooms. We lined up their empties on a sand shelf in front of the creek and then ran to the far corner of the pasture. Dennis Senior watched us from the line of cars and didn't turn away until we were clear.

The smoke and sound lasted a few minutes before there was surprised silence and then laughter from the shooters, and, finally, a slow milling around for more ammo boxes and another round of brown bottles dripping ice from the coolers.

After, we picked their brass out of the matted weeds, some

of it still warm from the chamber. Dennis Senior waited for us, leaning heavily on the hood of his Galaxy, red-eyed, smiling for too long when we would look up at him. The mouth of his bottle jutted from his front pants pocket. He had a bright reddish flattop and was carrying all of his weight in his legs and hips. His thin arms were no heavier than Dennis's. When he reached out for the plastic sack of cartridges, his smooth white hands trembled.

Then his wallet came out and he gave us two of the better dollars, folded.

"When you're sixteen," he told me, "you come work with me and Junior. We'll all have piles of loot."

He rubbed my shoulder with a hand full of vibration. Somewhere, he found the steadiness to bird-shoot and that was the only thing he seemed to have aside from the concerns in town, and the house by the tracks and the little family. He had a suddenness that worked for him in a flush of quail.

Dennis had that quality, too, but he didn't use it. He traded the over-and-under Senior gave him one birthday for a primer-gray Nova. As soon as we were out of the driveway with it, and the cowboy was waving with the new shotgun, he pulled the ashtray out of the dash and let it fall on the street. On the next corner, he threw the plastic beer caddy that had been hooked to the lip of the window.

The Sundays there was no shooting, we fished the ponds for the bass that floated back in the shadows of rotted stumps. The ponds were close to filling in and the water was shallow. Even at the height of the spring melt, there wasn't any open water within miles.

While we moved up through high school, Dennis was homeless and less. First the free hours were few and then there were stretches of weeks when we didn't even pass on the streets downtown. The mill sat on one end, high above the one-stories and the tight line of glass-fronted businesses.

When his car was there late at night, I would stop and tap

the horn a few times. For a while, he flipped away his cigarette as soon as he recognized the car. But later, it didn't seem to matter as much and he would slowly tap one out on the back of his wrist and light it while we both tried to remember what it was we used to talk about. His eyes were dark and his red hair was cut close to his scalp.

Dennis Senior wasn't around on those nights and was instead going in and out of the medical center at Pueblo every other time anyone heard. By the time there was a funeral, I was already out of the country and hadn't stopped in to see Dennis before going. I called once on a long leave for Thanksgiving and talked to Mickie, his mother. She sounded distracted when she knew it was me and said that she wasn't sure how long it would be before Dennis closed the mill and came home. I hung up thinking that she was going to forget our conversation.

When the note came about the reunion, I had been back about a month. Then it was three days later, on a Sunday, when I tucked one of the better bird guns into the trunk wrapped in an olive-drab vest and drove west.

The highway came down off a slight rise near the town; on both edges of the horizon, dark clouds were scattered. The clouds moved but there was no way to tell whether they moved nearer or farther away. Sun shifted between them, casting the surrounding land in patches of green and gray. Dennis's house was the blue speck midway between the distant elevators and the point where the highway turned north and disappeared.

Driving in on the frontage road, the light was lost in the growing clouds. I rolled up the window and pushed the heater lever over a notch. The place seemed to have faded. The blue of the house was powdery against the brown land. A ragged line of cars filled the driveway.

Mickie was standing on the porch and was watching me like I had formed from the yellow dust blowing in the road. She

had a drink in her hand and her figure was solid and steady in the frame of the screen door.

"Hello, Richard," she said. She stood in the doorway and then let me in, pushing the light door aside.

"Someone said Dennis was home," I said. I smiled and Mickie smiled back, but her eyes were pinkish and slow. Her cotton dress was thin. We stood on the porch for a minute with her form still between mine and the front door. Inside, voices were speaking low.

"He's been at Pueblo," she said.

"Working?"

"No," she said, and turned toward the dusty white door. "Come in."

The interior was dim. Lamps in the corners of the room threw faint circles of light. The room was scattered with Dennis's sisters and their husbands. They all watched a new color set with lines of snow skipping through the picture. Plastic building blocks were here and there on the brown rug.

Mickie led me straight back to the kitchen and went up the stairs. When she came back down, she looked at me like she had on the porch.

"He's coming," she said. "Why don't I get you a beer?"

"Sure."

"You drink, don't you?"

"Right."

"Of course," she said. She went to the cupboard and took out a squat pack of cans. "I thought you did. Dennis won't, but he's not like Senior was."

"I guess not." I opened the can and watched the foam rise steadily from the mouth until it sat two inches high on the can top.

"I thought Dennis might like to try out a new field," I said. "Before anybody plows the trash under."

"Hunting?"

"Just birds."

"Senior's guns are turning green in the cabinet," Mickie said. She shook her head and looked at me from under her eyebrows.

Dennis came down in his undershirt and jeans. He was wearing a pair of yellow boots with steel toe pieces. His hair was longer and curled on the ends. When we shook hands, he looked into the air just in front of my chest. He went to the refrigerator.

"What about some juice or something, Mommy?"

"We're out. There's lots of beer. Richard has one now."

"How was Germany?" Dennis asked. He rubbed his scalp and face with both hands.

"Clean. Like a golf course."

"I always imagined it that way," he said. He seemed to take me in in small pieces, glancing. The boots scuffed gray lines into the floor when he moved from one place to another. Mickie sat still in her chair.

"You ought to get out and get some air," she said. "Richard brought his bird gun."

"Just for the hell of it," I said.

"We ought to be open today," he said. He pushed the leg of her chair with a steel toe.

"We'll stay late tomorrow."

Dennis looked down at the floor. With his thumbnail, he marked a line in the kitchen table and dug it deeper. The white of his knuckles showed up bright in the dimness.

"Okay," he said.

He came out through the screen door with his blue shooting vest and one of Senior's twelve-gauge pumps under one arm. Before the door could bang behind him, he stopped it with his foot.

All along the road leading out to the better ground, we didn't say anything. When we came up on gates, Dennis climbed down and opened them.

We rolled down to the place where the river, the road, and the Missouri-Pacific line all turned parallel. From far on the other side of the opening, cows moved toward us at a trot.

"They think we're the hay truck," Dennis said. His tone of voice seemed to be more to himself than it was to me. We walked out through the dry shattercane into a cornfield. The rows were choked with browning cornstalks that had already been knocked down. I loaded my gun and waited for Dennis to load, but he just stood, looking out toward the river.

"I guess I'm on my own," I said to him.

"I'll wait to see what we get into," he said.

We cut diagonally across the field. Dennis walked a little ahead, kicking the trash.

"So what now?" he asked me. "Now that you've seen the world."

"Oh, who knows?" I said. "I'll probably get into a body shop. Some of my buddies have one in Cheyenne I can buy into."

"Cheyenne."

"Uh-huh."

"I've never seen Cheyenne."

"It's alright."

"I've been to Denver three times in my life."

"Denver's not bad. Too sprawly."

"Yeah," he said. "I thought that, too."

At the far corner of the field, Dennis spread the fence wires and let me under first. We were on a rise above the rail siding. The rails were riding high on a new bed of gravel. When we started down into the bedding, quail jumped up out of the tall grass, whistling as they went away. I shot twice and watched one bird tumble and stop between the ties. Dennis had his gun still cupped under his arm when he walked down past me.

"That was good," he said. He bent over the bird and then scooped it up in one hand and pushed it headfirst into his game pouch.

"Your turn," I said.

He smiled in a sudden way and looked at me. His face was tired and he never looked more like Senior than at that moment. With the quail hand, he jerked shells from the pocket of his vest and loaded Senior's old gun. We went on down the track bed with him a little behind. After a few minutes, we came on a place where we used to scare up pheasant long before. Dennis stopped and pointed in the direction we were going to head.

"So you were doing some work up at Pueblo," I said.

"I was in the hospital up at Pueblo."

He dropped his gun from the crook of his arm down to both hands and kept looking toward the side of the tracks.

"Oh."

"For drinking," he said. "Now I've got these meetings I go to, but they don't help much."

He waded down off the gravel into a soft spot. The gray water filled up his footprints before me in the mud. Cattails filled the opening into a short meadow and we pushed through them. We were close together.

"On this body shop deal," I said. "There might be room for one more. I haven't heard anybody say there wasn't room anyway."

"Uh-huh," Dennis said.

"I'm just saying."

"I know," he said. "Maybe I'll think about it."

"Whatever."

Dennis kicked along the edge of a low bed of brambles. When the hen jumped up, his gun was loose across the line of his arm. The bird came straight up at him and then tipped over his right shoulder, moving across toward me. My gun was up when Dennis turned and shot twice. I walked down to get the pheasant and when I came back he had the look of someone who had just remembered something.

We didn't say anything while we worked the hen into the

game pouch. His hands were shaking on the bird's wet body.

"Up until now, I've kept from shooting one myself," he said. "This is the first."

"It's just hunting," I said.

"Just the same."

We tried to go on hunting, but something had drained out of the sky over the river. Dennis stayed ahead all the way back to the truck, and neither of us said anything else until I dropped him back at the house.

"By the way," I told him. "Betty Raymond says hello."

"Really? You saw her?"

"Yeah. Maybe you should call her up."

He took his gun out of the back of the truck and left the pheasant in the soft hollow of the spare.

"She's married now," he said.

Later in the week, his Nova was parked out in front of the grain mill. It was there at all hours after that and was even there the morning I passed through on my way to Cheyenne.

Other Iowa Short Fiction Award Winners

1987

Fruit of the Month, Abby Frucht
Judge: Alison Lurie

1987

Star Game, Lucia Nevai
Judge: Alison Lurie

1986

Eminent Domain, Dan O'Brien
Judge: Iowa Writers' Workshop

1986

Resurrectionists, Russell Working
Judge: Tobias Wolff

1985

Dancing in the Movies,
Robert Boswell
Judge: Tim O'Brien

1984

Old Wives' Tales,
Susan M. Dodd
Judge: Frederick Busch

1983

Heart Failure, Ivy Goodman
Judge: Alice Adams

1982

Shiny Objects, Dianne Benedict
Judge: Raymond Carver

1981

The Phototropic Woman,
Annabel Thomas
Judge: Doris Grumbach

1980

Impossible Appetites,
James Fetler
Judge: Francine du Plessix Gray

1979

Fly Away Home, Mary Hedin
Judge: John Gardner

1978

A Nest of Hooks, Lon Otto
Judge: Stanley Elkin

1977

The Women in the Mirror,
Pat Carr
Judge: Leonard Michaels

1976

The Black Velvet Girl,
C. E. Poverman
Judge: Donald Barthelme

1975

*Harry Belten and the
Mendelssohn Violin Concerto*,
Barry Targan
Judge: George P. Garrett

1974

*After the First Death There Is
No Other*, Natalie L. M. Petesch
Judge: William H. Gass

1973

The Itinerary of Beggars,
H. E. Francis
Judge: John Hawkes

1972

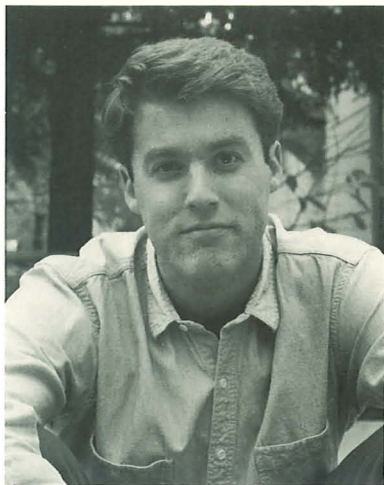
The Burning and Other Stories,
Jack Cady
Judge: Joyce Carol Oates

1971

*Old Morals, Small Continents,
Darker Times*,
Philip F. O'Connor
Judge: George P. Elliott

1970

The Beach Umbrella,
Cyrus Colter
Judges: Vance Bourjaily
and Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.



Angela Landis-Pritchett

Michael Pritchett works and writes in Shawnee Mission, Kansas. He received honorary mention in the 1986 New Letters Fiction Award and the 1988 Raymond Carver Short Fiction Award.

The Iowa Short Fiction Award and the John Simmons Short Fiction Award

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