

Copyright 2010, 2023, Lon Rivers Publications

All rights reserved.

Contact: takacsjeff@gmail.com

THE SWITCHING YARD

PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE – THE SWITCHING YARD

A name, a name, he thought, I'll need a name. Phinneus. Fine.

He got off the train and went toward the lights. He beat the braggart out of a belligerent Mexican, no problem. He rode on. The train found the city.

He took a cheap room and hid his little swatch of cash. He got proper gloves and a trainer. Beat a nervous Pole early and convinced a few. The next fight was a disaster. His nose broke, cuts under the eyes, one less tooth.

He thought, It's too much, go back to Cleveland Heights kid, keep your face.

He found a nighttime railyard, quiet save wind and tarp, made his sore hands slap the side of a boxcar. Dust rose, frigid air jumped and mixed with breath, the slap banged the night and the train like the whole epic of history

didn't even shift, just sat there, strong and lean on a determined course, but still, suspended on its track, lifeblood and alien to its country, rigid in its memory of pride, taking it standing. I could buy a ticket, Phinneus thought, I could stretch myself in front of those wheels, I could jump on and hold, or I could keep slapping the side of this joke of a train on this laughable line— Southern Pacific—all the way to where? To whom? How embarrassed these trains must be, just sitting there, glory days so far away. He figured now he ought to kick it. Whatever else is petitioning? So he did it harder and harder, punchlines in the night, a couple rotten ghosts, little girls, ever-nascent breaths and hovering nightclothes, never been loved, lost in fires, lost in floods, stray bullets spitting to protect, to cut down, whatever, their fault, someone else's, doesn't matter, but listen in these nights and go on out there, take a little walk, maybe have a drink, just go and look and listen, when it's all quiet. And when the quiet overwhelms make a big noise, slap a train, don't punch it, the thud is too dull, give it a nice hard open hand slap and listen to the snappy bang of unprecious metal, and you know what occurs to you: something very real and very sinister may have happened while that sound you made, that split second sound, rang, died and came down to rest. That snake of opportunity, that ghost behind your ear, it may just be waiting to get into a better position to strike and it doesn't want to make a sound and alert you to its designs so it just waits for you to negate the audible night and when you do it, you may imagine there was a quality in the air beyond the bone, flesh, and aluminum, and you're probably right.

He looked down the line as far as he could, half a mile maybe. Somehow he could wind himself back to Cleveland Heights, to the machinist father and that mother who likely now stood wondering where their little boy went, even a year later, out which window, to the uncles and

cousins and the two-room castle with the asylum heart, and he sang the song of the previous child and called himself Phinneus again.

He thought, Good job, Phinny boy, keep that little fear. Keep it and use it.

An expansive feeling went with him as he walked his strong legs and quick feet back into the noise and the lights of the city and he was happy and of high humor. Show me what there is to see, then, give me your fruit, your brine. He was of jubilant spirit and purpose.

CHAPTER TWO – ACCOUNT OF A LOSS

Cheat Washington was a black man past his prime but with a known uppercut still somehow fast and vicious. No one followed him anymore, but he'd show up fight after fight like there was nothing else to do. As Phinneus tried to relax in the pre-fight period in the corner, he looked over at Cheat and saw power but also age and slowing fat. Cheat's knees worked hard to bring him standing.

Phinneus skipped up to the center and their gloves like swollen lips kissed. Phinneus saw the milkiness of Cheat's dark eyes. Eyes like wet stones. In tiny bits of time Phinny wondered about Cheat's eyes. In those same bits Cheat hit him.

Phinny's chief liability was his wandering mind.

In the middle of any contest, with his mark before him, his mind would often go out some mythic window onto some imaginary prairie, grove, bayou, machine. Like turning a candle of darkness onto a lit room, the sharpness of his reflexes could dull, and that is a great danger. Whoever can kill in a ring has no true consciousness of the larger system, of his time and place in history, or even upon what mantle he'll set his reward. He only thinks to hit quickest and hardest. This is what Phinny could rarely do.

Cheat caught him and banged his right rib. The bell saved him and he was back in the corner.

Cheat opened tough in two, then Phinny pushed and knocked him good on the temple. He stumbled but recovered and they were back to dancing. But then, the wandering mind. I wonder if old man Washington here has kids at home. I wonder this, I wonder... and then he kissed the rosy beast of darkness, whirled and spit like a tendril in the storm, fell to the floor, and watched a little river of noseblood gentle down his lip and ease into the blue sea.

He found his feet and the referee looked deep into his eyes and did not see what was there. They fought on and the bell saved him again.

His trainer, Bert LaButte, clipped a piece of skin over his eye and yelled at him. It was time to return to the center.

Now, Phinny said to himself, focus now. Do not let your mind wander. Do not let it go. This is where you change your whole system of operation, buddy, this is where you focus on the man and beat him.

But he'd been thinking about Winston Churchill, of course, and the legs of the city and the rising skirt, so he got the glove in the stomach and found the mat, face first. His eyes puffed and his ears rang and he had nothing to do but wait and ride the gentle give and take under Cheat's victory bouncing. He waited eleven matted seconds for the drowsy spring and thaw. The referee tugged at his arm to make sure he would live. Phinny thought, Listen, Jack, just gotta wait a minute till my nervous system comes back. It did come back, so he got up and found the little referee's thin shoulder for support.

Fantastic job, what a swing you got, he congratulated the victor, but it came out more like, Fannik jawb, futtah shingy got, to which Cheat seemed toothlessly appreciative. Those eyes – pride and courage now, the milk

gone. Phinny followed their gaze to some graying woman in the first row and he thought he saw tears. He didn't know what that meant.

#

Phinneus was robed and given water. Bert threw his towel, cursed his luck, and shook his head. They did all the little medical tricks and that was that. Phinny went back and showered. 2-2 now, no win since June, bunch of promise, wandering mind. You dumb spoiled child, he thought. Your mind wandered, Cheat's did not. Had it not wandered, you'd have won. Since it had, you lost. The night is poorer. But not for Cheat. A soldier somewhere faces another. Whose mind does not wander kills, the other dies.

When Phinneus walked in to put on his clothes, Bert just sat there, his double chin hairy, smelling like cologne and capitulation. He was jolly enough and a good trainer for technicalities and fundamentals, but his eyes were merely contented or worried, two of the lowest devils in Phinny's estimation. Bert tugged at his belt to bring it more comfortably against his paunch.

How you feel?, Bert said.

Like I lost.

How's your head?

The thinking part or the punching bag part?

The punching bag part.

Like it got punched.

What am I gonna do with you?

Yell at me and then meet me at the gym on Tuesday and watch the tape.

But what am I gonna do with your heart? Where the hell is it? Is it in there?

It's too big, we gotta rein it in.

Rein it in. You're too good to lose to that old loser.

Then Bert smashed his clipboard and yelled, You're too good for this!

I'm sorry, Bert. I'll work harder. I will. I'm sorry.

He pulled Phinny close and massaged his neck with his big meat hand.

Phinneus finished tying his shoes.

Bert said, You okay, buddy?

Nah, I'm Phinneus.

CHAPTER THREE – PHINNY'S CASTLE

He went back to his room and looked around the low castle. He felt an exuberance derived of exertion and near poverty and he remembered with some fondness the mother and father he'd once had and then his rightness in having left them, though the reasons for doing it could not be explicitly defined. The reasons were something to do, he felt, with the mother's and father's driving desire to protect him from the world he wanted to know.

He had chosen, or he had partly chosen according to the limits of his understanding, to live to learn, to fight. He wanted only to feel and know all that could be known or felt, like communion with the ghosts of yesterday, like communion with those who would be ghosts tomorrow and the day after. A roach went into a dark corner and disappeared.

He listened to the trains and thought of where they went. He gazed at his face in the mirror. Allow a solipsist his rhapsody.

His beauty wasn't fading, as to fade takes time. It was transforming, let's say like glory, he thought. It's a cubist face now: eyes going everywhere - some alive, some dead, varied patterns, a martyr's eye, a thief's; several noses - a smooth one from youth, a slid one from the recent round, a postulated one, according to the angle of the slide; a few mouths - some gulping, some spitting out; and all the flesh between just flat thin temples variegated and soft. Like war-beat Europe, he thought, it looked pretty good, as irreversible must mean true, and true is always good.

The door opened and his roommate came in with his buddies. They were drunk and laughing. They tolerated Phinny just fine and gave him a beer, but there was some wall he couldn't climb with them and he regretted that. Half of everything they said made no sense and therefore fascinated.

CHAPTER FOUR – HORACE J. JANUCK

Had Phinny the heart of a champion, he would have paid the sin of the Washington loss with double-time sessions at the gym and early morning runs up and down the post office steps, but he would not be denied the pursuit of herrings and hares on his path to glory. He would not be denied his fascinations no matter how brief. He was the sole reader of his autobiography, which he made up as he went along, and he enjoyed turnarounds and plot twists. He entered a phase of high narcissism, or romanticism. He thought of it as fanciful realism. He wandered one day and became the universal soldier, the bullet in the gun, the warrior's impulse, and also the messiah of peace.

He found his way to the library, its gorgeous standing welcoming him. He looked at the great war and its pistol shot start, its new machine gun music, its trenches of expectant jovial Brits, its Ottoman muscles on red ground with the French bullets beside them, its airwaves rung with Wilson's plunge, and he imagined his shoulder raw and bleeding and his hero's return to Cleveland Heights, Ohio, and the woman there who would bear the son who would fight in a similar theater when those first bills came due. He read Wilfred Owen and was afraid.

He looked at the aftershock and saw its Jews turned to dogs, its railroads to horror, its Poles looking heavenward as hell drank their blood, its Georgian killer on a bare chair next to the lame gray snake with the cigarette next to the baby-faced sea lion, its eastern mushroom

and the god it killed, and he imagined his own boots soaked with Normandy and the Cleveland Heights fire that would warm them on his return and the stories he would tell of his bravery in the generation known as the greatest. He saw the number of American soldiers dead: 300,000, and while his heart quickened to the call of heroic sacrifice he also was afraid.

And then of course he typed Vietnam and he saw its rice farmers on fire, its bullet in the temple, its dysentery on the Bassac, its exhaustion of purpose and resolve, and he heard its Dionysian music through the plastic speakers on his ears - speakers made of course by the enemy's northern ally, and he imagined his stomach twisted first by worms and then by the spits and curses on him at his Cleveland Hopkins return. Everything about it scared him.

He wanted somehow to feel all that history and all that blood. He wanted to believe what he'd just read that Dylan Thomas said of Owen, that it "was impossible for him to avoid the sharing of suffering... he had so many deaths to die..." And he did feel it. He felt all of it. Horror, misery, glory, effort, and other terms both perfect and meaningless commingled. And he waited for that spark of conviction that would determine him to die all those deaths and risk his own singular death because on the other side of those deaths were lives—real, good, purposeful, joyous lives—which breathe the air death bequeathed them, whether they know it or not. And he thought, I will be the dead soldier who grants the thankless pacifist his summer and his children, for it is only to my conscience that I am tethered, and conscience differs in this Babylon world.

He loved the world.

He looked up from the screen and past the boundaries of his carrel to see this life he was so rapturously describing to himself. There: students his own age poring over fat study manuals, rag people with plastic bags and

romances, young nerds with their science fiction, an anxious young woman with some periodical. These angel hordes must be defended, he thought. And no one was as able to fight as Phinneus could, given a contest worthy of focus. He would be first in class at boot camp, he would lead a platoon. If he were indeed to die, he would at least damage the enemy first. Of that he was confident. So he waited again for the spark of conscience. But, he thought, you may debate and dawdle, and your moment may pass. He considered that while some men are born into a generation that is not called to fight, such was not his placement. Deliberation was not his luxury. So go, fight.

And he also thought there would be honor in it and he wanted that.

He went out into the blinding daylight and sat in the park and surveyed the hordes again. There were still the searchers in their books, but there also were two boys throwing a football, there was a young couple in the bliss of romance, there was a near infinity of all the different lives one could and probably will lead. He began a brisk walk to the recruitment office. He'd been passing it almost daily and it always called to him. He stood outside its glass doors, that portal to who knows what, and his conviction trembled a little. He remembered O'Brien, who called himself a coward for having gone to fight the Viet Cong.

He walked straight back to the library and thought, A-ha! I've considered the wars of the past, but I think about this one. What about *this* one then?

He called up the pages and confusion added into his coursing conviction and fear. It troubled him that he could not see the homecoming coffins, that he had attended no solemn parade. Everything troubled him. I can feel the Dresden prison better than I can feel the Basra bombs, he thought. Anger welled in him but he couldn't identify its source. All he knew was that he

wanted to know. He read on. He found some figures, some charts, some speeches, embarrassments and triumphs. He was looking for the whites of the eyes. And then he found this:

Horace J. Januck (20), U.S. Army Private First Class, of East Lansing, Michigan, went missing in action on November 19, 2007, in a firefight north of Bhagdad. He was claimed captured and executed by a group called The Islamic Power in Obediance to God and His Prophet on November 21, 2007. U.S. Army and CIA officials said there is cause to believe that claim, though no DNA or other identifying evidence has yet been produced or established.

Horace J. Januck, thought Phinneus. The name conjured the Greeks or the Romans, he wasn't sure which, and the last name conjured some balkan, possibly Slavic mystery. Phinneus read on and saw that very few soldiers were MIA in the current war and he wanted to know more about this Horace.

He found an article published in the Lansing State Journal newspaper not long after Private Januck's disappearance. The article read,

Horace Jonathan Januck, 20, of East Lansing, Michigan, the only child of Edward and Celia Januck, played left wing on the East Lansing High Hockey Team and is known to his friends as Johnny. A tall, strong boy who from an early age loved model trains and planes, Pvt. Januck once placed first in a county-wide model train competition for his construction of a one hundred and twenty-three foot train track modeled on the Southern Pacific line of 1883, which ran from the old South to the far western territories of the young nation. Prior to his enlistment, Johnny was frequently seen at the

Veteran's Administration Hospital of Lansing where his grandfather, Colonel Horace Helland, was suffering complications of Alzheimer's disease. Pvt. Januck was last seen by his company...

The article went on to state bluntly that the missing are rarely found alive, but the Michigan flags had not been lowered for him and the death would not be recorded until definitive proof came forth.

Phinneus printed the article and put it in his pocket. He walked out of the library again with no warrior nor pacifist conviction, but with just enough specificity about this one young man's life to direct his thoughts. He saw a black POW-MIA flag waving and wondered if Januck had really been killed, if he was now wasting in some enemy prison, or if he had somehow miraculously escaped and was figuring a way back home. He began to think of this missing son as one might think of the Unknown Soldier's Tomb, as a test and a prod, a reminder and a scourge. He didn't know what to do with the story, but he reread the brief article many times. In some way, he wanted to become Horace Jonathan Januck.

But Phinny also wanted to live. He did not want to die. He went to bed a civilian.

CHAPTER FOUR - TOM

The next day Phinneus wandered. He had breakfast in a park and watched the life shuffling around him. He looked through newspapers and let thoughts come in and out, but he thought more about fighting in bright shorts than in camouflage. He figured many thoughts could wheel around and you could still be within the lines of your objective and he was glad to be within those lines. He bought a pack of cigarettes and looked both ways against the off chance Bert happened up to him. Bert didn't and he smoked a cigarettes and relaxed.

He went over to the gym and watched the fighters while he did a light workout. He imagined himself across from each of them and how it would go. One guy was quick so he'd have to overpower him. One guy was strong so he'd have to outpace him. He knew, though, that it would come down to the mind that wandered less. He watched them, anyway, for the beauty of the form, and let his thoughts go without resisting.

He worked out until a small sweat had broken, and then he showered and went to the gym office, which paid him a small amount to do some clerical tasks. The office was dressed with clippings of their fighters and Phinny often got lost looking at them.

A fighter maybe ten years older than Phinny came into the office to pay his monthly dues. He was a sandy-haired guy in shorts and a sleeveless tshirt. He was a little flabby, but strong, a light heavyweight. The guy

announced his purpose but when he took a seat and brought out cash he practically collapsed. He exhaled long and slow.

Phinny said, Tough day?

The sandy-haired guy gleamed up at Phinny with bright blue eyes and immediately engaged. Oh man, he said. You see that little Mexican?

He directed Phinny's focus to a ring where a tiny Mexican was moving about as fast as a bee in a tornado.

Yeah, he's fast, Phinny said

Oh, he's fast. You're that small you're fast.

True.

Not me, man. He could run under my legs four times but if I got one shot in on him...

You might not get that shot.

No kidding. Cause I'd be dizzy from chasing him around.

Yeah.

Worked my ass off today.

That's good.

Next fight's in three weeks.

Good time to work then.

Okay, here you go.

The man presented his money but Phinny said, Keep it. This month's free.

What? Really? You kidding?

I am kidding, I don't have that power, I'm sorry.

Oh, geez! The man laughed, pleased it seemed that someone was joking with him.

Name's Tom, the man said.

Phinneus.

I'm from Beantown.

Yeah? Never been.

Never been to Beantown? It's great! Great town.

He surveyed Phinny and judged favorably.

Wanna go get drunk?, this Tom said.

Ahhh, ain't got much money for it.

No? When's your next fight?

Two weeks.

Two weeks?

Yeah.

You'll win.

Yeah?

Come on, I'll buy you. You win, you pay me back.

Yeah?

Sure.

The Constitution of Phinneus, Amendment IX, covering nighttime regulations, mandated that offerings of free things must be taken.

All right, let's go, Phinny said.

#

Phinny finished his duties while Tom showered and dressed and then they walked the darkening street. Tom led and Phinny liked him very much. Tom had big blue eyes and very watery. They bounced around like a drink on a boat. They were the optimistic kind of eyes, surpassingly hurtable. No doubt what bested other men made Tom write a little letter to himself and put it in a pretty box for later. He seemed like the kind of guy who was formerly a pipsqueak, did his growing late, and still regarded even much

younger men as older brothers. Phinny thought, This is the rare man who, if we met in a ring, I'd beat in three easy rounds, not for my savagery, but because, like mine, his head and heart would block his hands. I'd win on pure youth.

They walked, the cool sweat in the chilly air felt good. The last warmth of summer was just about gone. They were enjoying the company and there was little to say.

A couple women walked by and Tom made no secret of turning full to watch them once they passed.

That one, he said. Damn. Damn!

His face scrunched tight, thinking about the girl, then he looked at Phinny and opened up completely, like a clown without his nose, until Phin agreed with him, and they laughed.

I'll tell you what, man, he said, but he didn't say what.

Lemme ask you, he said. There are these girls that hang around the gyms, right?

Yeah.

You ever get any action from them?

I have, Phinny said.

Damn!

Then Tom jumped up and spun around.

Lucky dog!, he shouted. Lucky dog! Four years I'm a lonely bastard. I mean, I get some, I do, but not much, man!

He laughed and repeated, One of these damn days, one of these damn days... I'll tell you what. You win your next fight then you introduce me to one of your admirers, then you don't have to pay me back for tonight!

The girls around fights are nice, everyone knows that. And they come, it would seem, to rescue and protect. But it's not true. They come for

punishment. Tom was more spaniel than bull, though, so Phinny doubted he'd have luck with those girls.

Nice to have a drink on a Friday night, Tom said with a mild lisp. His declarations had the uptilt of a question. Answer me, please?, he seemed to be saying. Don't leave me alone?

So where you from?, Tom said.

It wasn't true, but Phinny told him he was from Greeley, Colorado. Phinny had landed on that response awhile back because it was more romantic than Cleveland Heights. If Tom had quizzed Phinny on the place, he could have only described what its great name conjured—the dusty air and wild sounds of tents and wagons—but nothing else.

Wow! That's pretty close to Roswell, New Mexico, isn't it?, Tom said. Sure is.

That's a place I've always wanted to go. They got the UFO sightings there. I want to be abducted by aliens, honestly. I want to go up there with them and start a gym, marry some alien woman. I bet they're all right.

Tom looked at Phinny like he was a little scared he'd overstepped, but Phinny ratified his notion.

You know what I mean? See an earthrise, start a little corner gym for alien kids? You ever been to Roswell?

Oh, sure.

Man! How long were you there?

I've just been in and out a couple times.

How old are you?

Twenty-two.

You're just a rookie! You'll do fine. You're a big kid.

I'm working on it.

You seem a lot older than twenty-two.

That pleased Phinneus.

Old soul, I guess, Tom said.

Phinny hated that cliché, but he let it go.

The threatening pouch of black cloud gave and locks of rain rattled from the sky. Two old men looked up, as if to beseech a power long retired as their pipe bowls filled with water, and simultaneously rolled their wrists, dumped the brown water, rose, spat, and walked.

Tom didn't jump from the downpour because spaniel-like his first regard was to his partner. His now even wetter, luminous, backlit blues asked a question of Phinneus: did the rain make him happy, sad, angry, or other?, because he was prepared to work toward alleviating whatever extreme caused any suffering on his watch. But Phinneus jumped and then they were edging along a building and only got a little wet.

You are gonna win next week. I'm sure of that!, Tom said again. His big eyes searched for agreement. Phinny agreed, so Tom smiled and hit Phin's shoulder with affection.

So then I will go the city, dear God, Phinny had once thought. And there you will deliver me a lesson and perhaps a friend.

The rain thinned Tom's light hair and Tom seemed to go down into some hole known only to him. He was down there a minute and then he came back and opened his eyes to any new thing that might be coming.

CHAPTER FIVE – TOM'S LUCK

A couple head honcho-looking guys hustled across the street, jumping their expensive shoes over the forming gutter river. A woman who seemed embrassed to be so pretty and alone clutched her coat up by her chin and her keys dangled there. An old Chinese shopowner with gearlike tendons blanched a slur on his outside wall, the paint ran in the rain.

Great job!, Tom said. Keep it clean!

The old man turned and muttered something about bums. A bum is someone an old man is talking about.

My socks are soaked, Tom said. But he caught himself and stopped his complaining. Ah, they'll dry!, he said. Hey, ya got a light?

Nah, don't, Phinny said.

A little leaf of a man half-waked under an awning. Tom went to him and asked for a light. He looked up at Tom and Phinny, assessed quickly, then looked in all directions and handed Tom a light.

If it works, the man said. Sometimes don't work.

Tom gave it four or five tries and passed it back to the man.

Try it with your left, the man said.

Tom gave it a shot with his left and the little jewel worked.

Hey!, Tom said. That changes everything!

Sometimes works with the left, the man said. He took the lighter, put it in his pocket, and looked around again for something like he was paranoid.

They walked on, smoking in amazement, the rattling bolts of rain winding through the narrow spaces of sky between the buildings and finding their marks on the street, some errantly hitting the windows, the bricks, the jailbars of the stores, wetting hair, tendering eyes. The last glow of the dreary day broke through the weaker clouds, the early night in swing.

Where you live?, Tom said.

Phinny, who had become dishonorably inclined to lying, told Tom he'd been evicted the night before.

What?, Tom said very seriously.

It's okay. The room wasn't really mine to begin with.

Phinny...

It's okay, really.

Where you put your stuff?

I got most of it right on my shoulder. The rest is at the gym.

Oh, boy.

It'll be fine.

I'll tell you what. That lighter I lit with my left hand, that lighter was magic. That was a sign of magic. That was a sign of great things!

Oh yeah?

Yeah, definitely.

Let's go back to that lighter!, Phinny said.

Yeah? Why? No, come on, come on. Time for drinkin, we don't wanna mess with the fates.

Come on, Phinny said. I wanna try it.

You wanna try it with the left?

Yeah!

Tom clearly believed the successful left-handed lighting by the gardenvariety paranoiac really was an important indicator of significant change,

but he didn't fully believe the magic was repeatable. As some consider a daily good deed their insurance against malady, others like Tom search for harbingers of bright luck. So he preferred just to walk on in a deluded stupor with an unscientific hope and a story for his buddies. But Phinny considered himself to be more of a realist than that, albeit a kind of fanciful one, and he enjoyed knocking true romantics against the rocks of fair trial, if even just to witness the persistent rejuvenation of the romantic spirit, which cannot, if it's true, truly be knocked. Phinny turned back.

Man, I'm thirsty!, Tom said.

Come on!

So Tom relented and they went back to where the little paranoiac still sat and smoked. The other thing about making friends, Phinny remembered, is if you ask them to do something they'd rather not do and they end up doing it, they tend to like you better and your friendship deepens.

They got to the paranoiac and Phinny asked him for his lighter again. He looked very suspicious but handed the thing over. Phinny pitied Tom his superstition and tried the lighter first with his left. It worked and Tom bellowed and beamed. Well, there you go! There you go! There you go!, he said. Good things, man, there you go! Good things! A win! Good things!

The man took the lighter back and Phinny thanked him.

Okay, okay, the man said and did not stop searching with fearful eyes every crack in the cement.

The rain seemed to increase and Tom started running. Phinny followed and as they ran Tom said, I liked that guy! I liked that guy! I liked that guy, Phinny, I like that guy!

They got a couple blocks and Tom stopped. Here's the bar!, he said, and he fussed with his buttons and then the young men went inside.

CHAPTER SIX – DIPLOMACY AND PROPHECY IN THE BOARDROOM

The goodtime sounds which were dull through the door clarified and excited when Phinny and Tom got inside. A country is its fists, right or wrong, according to the drowsy father Phinny'd once had. Phinny thought of that and then he thought of his potential heroes and buddies who were just now out there on some field fighting for this night right here at home. But no. Fist is too pretty a word. As are *young men* and *will*. A country is its carotid arteries. A man can fight without a fist. He thought for a moment of how he was not there among them risking, dying, living, glorying, whatever it is they do that is so noble and necessary. If at bottom a country is its physical means of enforcing its will, alcohol must be the diplomatic ecumenical slackening of such readiness. In that swollen chorus of fraternity, drunk in a bar, one finds a congress most disciplined and committed to peaceful treaties, toward the forgiving of offenses. And treaties that will last epochs comparatively, at least till the evening's close.

It was a cheap and charming joint. The pleasant air of cigarette smoke hung and Phinny thought, So a place still exists... It called itself The Boardroom. A big voice called out, Tommy!

It came from a far table of uniformed construction men.

Tom smiled and went to them, Phinny following. There were five men and one soft, rounded woman with big backlit blues like Tom's. She put her cigarette in a tray and greeted Phinneus demurely with, Hello, nice to meet you, how do you do?

Okay, thank you, Phinny said.

Okay, okay. She nodded and adjusted her shirt.

These were Tom's drinktime friends. Occasional it seemed, but necessary to his good soft heart. When he wasn't fighting, he was building things with these. The woman was the site manager for their crew. She signed their time cards and sent orders for materials when they ran out, then drank with them when the day was done. The men try, but she'd never grant unnecessary overtime or order supplies for personal use. They'd offer loud praises of her big body, but she could not be won. You wish, Keep dreamin, Good luck, she'd say. Then she'd drag in the wish that their praise was true and blow out the resignation that it was not, her face flushing red then back to bright pink, her eyes shooting around the room like highbeams.

Tom called out to the crowd, This is my buddy Phinneus!, and he was greeted warmly by all, save a craggy-faced man in the corner seat who said nothing. But once the hellos were called, that man lifted from his slump.

My brother!, the man said to Phinny. My brother!, he said again. You fight with Tom?, he asked.

Yeah.

My little brother! Duckie says he seen a guy at one of Tom's fights look just like me. Here he is! Look at this guy - it's him!

The man was nuts, Phinny thought. They looked nothing alike. He was bald, sharp-nosed, fair, twenty years older than Phinny, at the very least. Phinny didn't know what the game was here. It felt violent, but he couldn't tell. The woman said, Oh Al.

I'm serious. Is this my brother or not?

Everybody laughed and looked at Phinny, expecting little, but in Al's deep eyes was some kind of challenge. Theatrically, according to Phinny's

talent, he waited, then said, Well, somebody did you a fine compliment, brother.

There was a pause, then laughter, then Phinny was admitted with a chair kicked out for him. Tom was proud and ordered Phinny a beer. The cute young barmaid brought it over and Tom and Phin took deep pulls.

The place was hot with potential. I could end up dead or president, Phinny thought. The cold beer whizzed into his brain quick. Sherman's march stalled, everybody drunk and happy.

The men teased the big girl about a man she wanted from another crew. She blushed again, told them to get real, and lit another smoke. They said he came asking for her when she was on break and he smelled like expensive cologne and had obviously just brushed his teeth. They said he said he had room in his room, but they insisted he'd said it in a different and more classy way. She said she was sure he did, in an alternate reality when she was thirty pounds lighter. Al offered to screw her tonight to prove to her what a beautiful woman she was. Oh yeah, that would do it, sure, she said. Al said even if it didn't prove it, he'd at least prove what a beautiful man he was, in case she had doubts, and it's good to know beauty, he said.

Al was called upon to tell a well-known story, but he said in a fine clear voice that he didn't talk good. Somebody else told it instead. It was a brief lurid story of Al's having courted and made love to a deaf girl during a one-week traveling job in the capital of the nation. The guy who told it was no storyteller - fits, starts, poor syntax. People semi-laughed, but more out of familiarity than actual comic punch.

But big Al couldn't stomach the shoddy telling of one of his highlight moments so he rose from his slump again and dug into his story like meathooks. The girl in the starring slot was, in Al's telling, which was lifted from Phinneus and Tom's sport, a knockout. On a scale of one to ten (one

being dogbite ugly), if you ever see a ten, he said, this deaf girl was a high eight, which is high indeed. She was a local at the site and he was the traveling man so he wooed and wooed her for days until, on the last day of the job, she told him that night was his and hers alone. So he cleaned up and she was there at his hotel lobby on time, all dolled up. He said it looked like she even put some sparkle on her hearing aids. They got some take-out chicken and booze, went up to his room, ate the chicken, put the finished box outside the door, and when they were back in his room and in full throttle, the ecstatic cacophony—low and garbled—from this high eight's throat caused a fellow worker named Clarence-

Clarence!, someone laughed.

Jesus, Clarence!, someone else laughed and shook his head. They were all hanging on this story they knew so well.

-in any case, Al continued, they were in full throttle and she was ecstatically shouting these very strange sounds. What Al didn't know was his buddy Clarence happened to be coming down the hotel hall at the time. Well, Clarence heard the sounds, knew it was Al's room, and saw the box with its half-eaten chicken outside the door. Good Clarence thought poor Al was choking on a bone. So Clarence the samaritan acted quickly to save Al's life. He kicked in the door and ran in, ready to pull that bone out of Al's windpipe, and therefore was shocked to see an act of wonderful lovemaking between a very virile Al and a lovely naked woman whose ecstatic face let forth what sounded like rough and masculine cries of distress. Al said he rolled off her and laughed so hard he couldn't understand a single mangled word as she rushed to dress and ran away crying.

The men cracked up on this, drinking through their laughter, rolling off their chairs, and the whole place seemed to laugh along, Phinny included. Even the site manager lady laughed, though she repeated many times

through her laughter how terrible big Al continues to be. The laughter died down but new stories slicked by easy and a quiet fellow with a big beard said he wanted to bum somebody's smoke. Phinny offered Tom's smokes and bought the table a round, on Tom.

The woman had to go. Her children get mad if she's not home by the time they sleep, she said, so she left amid cheers and last-call efforts to bed her by half-serious men.

I will be there Monday morning before any of your sorry asses, she said.

A fine lady! Goodbye, baby, hope to see you again! They were brothers and sisters all now, children of the same mother, as that one mother went to her specific children and cooed them off to sleep.

Though we've only glimpsed her in the dark before sleep, Phinny thought, our mystic mother must be large and jolly, but strong and severe, and she must be wealthy to have and keep such many children, and she must employ this barmaid as her servant, and she must know how to teach us lazy children how to make a buck in this world, because she charges for drinks. She must keep our father busy, for he rarely speaks. We have each other and we spill on each other, we light each other's smokes, filch and ardor, from urns and altars.

Couldn't it be the last supper every night, but minus the crucified man of sorrows at the center, especially in the era of our redemption? Women and men alike! Neither Jew nor Greek! Loaves, fish, and roast beef sandwiches! Wit and parody, shared suffering when needed. One who wants a conversation and a laugh must turn gymnastic flips to justify any time spent outside a bar or boxing ring. Justify not being drunk in a bar at all times. Just try to justify it and you can't.

A couple hours passed as they will and Phinny was at the bar looking into the mirror through lines of net and the wild fishbowl ins and outs of the stacked bottles. The head of a big Elk presided, like Yahweh who refused to change his law despite the constant demanding of the subjected.

A hard hand grabbed Phinny's neck and pulled him off his stool.

My brother!, big Al's voice boomed.

He practically dragged Phinneus outside where the rain was still coming down. His breath was hot.

I've been watching you, he said. Where you from?

Greeley, Colorado.

How long you been here?

A year and a half.

You like fighting?

Yes.

It's getting your face.

Maybe that's why they say I look like you.

Tom says you're twenty-two.

That's right.

How much your mommy and daddy send you every month?

Phinny said the truth, which was, Not a damn nickel. Not a red cent.

That true?

Absolutely true.

What do you do for work?

Clerical stuff at the gym where me and Tom go.

Big money?

No.

What do you want?

Now that question was Phinny's least favorite in the whole world. There's no good way to answer that you alternately want to be blasted to kingdom come and that you want to be blissed and drunk in hobo jungles and that you want a wife who knows you and pats your head while you read to her kids by the fire in your mansion. It's the question of a mean-spirited maniac at bottom. But Phinny knew that's not how Al meant it. He had something up his sleeve.

I hate that question, Phinny said.

Listen to me. Listen to me. I see you, you're strong, you're a buddy of Tom's you're a buddy of mine. How much money do you think I have?

Phinny knew it was his duty to underestimate here so he said, A truckload.

A boatload. A boatload. That's how much. Ocean liner load. You know? I know everyone in construction in the whole city and every single one of them wants me on their crew. You know? I work hard. I have ethic. I never miss a job and I do every job well. Do you understand this?

I do.

So I'm asking you a simple simple question. Do you want a job?

Phinny paused.

Let me rephrase, my brother. Do you want to be a bum?

No on the second question.

Okay. Do you want a job? Simple simple question. Do you want a phone call at night telling you where and when to be the next morning and then do you want to show up early every day and do your job and collect your pay and put that money somewhere good and wake up in the morning knowing you made your life and no one else did it but you?

Phinny paused.

Are you thinking about it?

Phinny admitted that he was.

I respect that, Al said. I respect that you do not take it lightly. It is not light.

Right, Phinny said.

Do you have any idea how many guys are looking for good honest good-paying work? I am offering to get my brother into a situation that many guys want but only if he will not ruin the reputation of my recommendation. Can you appreciate that?

I can.

While you think, let me ask you this. Do you have the talent and desire to be a champion boxer?

That is yet to be decided.

Then you don't. I'm telling you you don't. If your Russian mother is not waiting for a purse from you, or your goddamn fifteen uncles in the Dominican or wherever, if you even have to think about that...

You're right.

I know I am.

Phinny knew he was right, but he was not in any mood for the giving up of dreams even if they were weak dreams.

I'm waiting, Al said.

I cannot in good conscience tell you I want the job and I will perform to your noble expectations.

Al put his very strong arm on the brick wall and said, Give me a cigarette. Phinny gave him one and lit it. Al took in the smoke and let it go and said, You know what? I respect that answer. I do. It is a mark of integrity. You're the right guy, Phinny. If and when and if you change your mind, you find me and talk to me and the work will be available.

I appreciate that.

You should. Let's drink.

Al swung the door open and Phinny followed him inside. The room was hot and bright. Phinny regarded in his mind Al's evaluation of him and he thought it was rash. But he was apparently like Melville's Handsome Sailor: the world can't stop bending toward his happiness and promotion. May his evaluation be correct, Phinny thought, for I am yet unconvinced. Phinny remembered the article on the sad, mysterious Horace Johnny Januck sitting within his bag and he went over to his chair to be near it. Something will come of it, he thought. Someday Horace, Johnny, I'll take a knee and thank you, in the here or the hereafter.

He lit a cigarette and watched the smoke go up like Al's job offer. He considered the father he'd once had. He was a good man in every usual sense. He had worked very hard, running machines at a materials plant. He put food on the table. His back got twisted and his arms bulged unevenly and he did it five days in a row. If the wisdom all that had gained him was to keep silent about his wisdom, his son was not wise enough to want it. Phinny wanted an unknown thing and he wanted it very badly. It was a thing he could sometimes smell. It came from a long ways off. He became severe in his thoughts and said to himself, I will not opiate myself into some mechanical job just as well done by someone else.

And If I'm gonna go for virtue, he thought, I'm gonna strap on ninety pounds of armor and try to kill some kids with some other kids and while we do it we're gonna know the brotherhood and ecstasy that comes in a flash of shared danger and I'll bet that's the only ecstasy there is. And you can respect me for that.

He surveyed the room and its fading glow of joy and saw Tom coming to him. Tom had the kind of eyes that just keep getting brighter as the night goes on.

People are starting clear out, Tom said. You wanna go to another place with me?

Sure, Phin said.

Tom's eyes brightened even more, he was almost overcome with excitement and relief that Phinny had accepted his offer. And then Phin thought he realized at least one source of Tom's affection: his buddies had moved on, gotten wives, left childish things behind. To hell with that for now, Phin thought. And besides, I don't know which way is better, but this is important now. It is.

He watched them putting their coats on. A couple of them half-waved to Tom and Phin. Big Al went right out the door without saying anything.

CHAPTER SEVEN – CINDERBLOCKS

The rain had turned to drizzle and the cold air took some of the drunk off. Phinny followed Tom a few blocks down the street. There was an odd little parking lot next to a yellow building and a yellow cinderblock wall was there beside the building. Tom hoisted himself up on it and Phin did too. Tom's horn still had some blowing in it and his wallet seemed bottomless. He put his hand on Phin's shoulder as he drew down another smoke. Spotty light came down on the asphalt at their feet. He rubbed his face.

Good guys, Tom said.

The best.

Al offer you a job?

Yeah, he did. Was he serious?

Oh yeah.

Is he good for it?

Oh yeah. You take it?

No.

You oughta think about it.

Hey, we're boxers buddy.

I'm two, maybe three fights from quitting.

You're kidding.

It's for Dominicans, man. You should think about taking Al's offer. You want your face?

He put his head into his hands, just resting them there a minute, turning his neck this way and that. Phinny was disappointed. He wanted a big speech from old Tom. A big drunken speech about life and God and sport. Some fanciful realism.

I don't care about it anymore, Tom said. I just want a woman and a real life.

This is a real life, buddy.

Yes it is. Sometimes I think I keep fighting cause I get embarrassed, he said and laughed. Sometimes I get hit with a good pop and it triggers something and I get so embarrassed I just want to throttle the dude. I'm not even hurt that bad usually, I'm just so embarrassed I want to kill the guy.

Don't know why that keeps me coming back.

Embarrassment drives us from our diapers, Phinny said.

Maybe.

Tom smiled at some unspoken dream. Then he leveled with Phinneus.

Phin, it's why we fought the Revolution.

Phinneus was uncertain if that meant anything and they both laughed.

They smoked there a minute and Phinny thought, A hangover is no punishment, it is the exhausted state of joy. Soreness follows exertion, it must be good.

Come on, Tom said.

CHAPTER EIGHT – VIOLENCE ON THE SONS OF BILL SENDOWSKI

The yellow of the building yielded to a darkness inside. This was a place of Tom's own. Phinny couldn't imagine Tom's work buddies coming in here. It was too far off the path, for one thing, and too gloomy. Where the last place had the elkhead, here were dim red lamps. They sat at the wooden bar next to a low-functioning drunk with a Rubic's Cube. Probably a physicist.

It took a minute, but the lady behind the bar, who was on the other side fixing a drink, came over, set down her rag, and said, Hi Tom, with a smile.

Hi ya, Mary, Tom said. This is my boy Phinny.

Nice to meet you, she said.

Nice to meet you.

And Phinny was struck dumb. The red light caught the girl and Phinny's senses and abilities junked. This Mary had a real woman of sorrows mouth and beauty that hit like the poison dart. As she stooped over to pick up a pen, Phinny put his hand on Tom's shoulder and Tom laughed, but softly, in agreement. Her eyes were painted deep black their entire circumference, so except for the white crescents they were voids. Down from each eye was soft white skin like some ancient parchment, though Phinny had never seen such parchment. Her throat went down in its inverted pyramid, haloed just perfectly by the dark dress low on the thin shoulders. Down further, the cut

of her dress promised a field of delight and relief and the very slight exaggeration of the tops of her breasts cooled and heated Phinny's head.

But then he noticed something foreign coming up between the mild cleavage and he had to work for an angle. It was the tattooed head of a snake, possibly in tones of red and green, with its tongue lashing, as if in constant aim of the black necklace. The body of the snake disappeared below the cloth of her dress. O, to charm that snake, Phinny thought.

Tom ordered a whiskey for himself and Phinny.

Phin said to Tom, That's the prettiest woman. That's it.

Tom laughed softly and said, That's it. All the world.

The idiot drunk next to him laughed too. He said, Well rookie, if you're different in any other way from anybody else I ever met, I can't see it.

Tom laughed and called the man Roger and introduced Roger to Phinny. Phinny immediately didn't like Roger. He wished he was back at the other bar with all the construction men or watching his and Mary's child run across his mother's porch in Cleveland Heights. He was getting way outside the lines of his purpose.

She may be an English maiden, Phinny thought, the princess betrothed to the young America when the young America broke its vow and followed Washington's march to Bunker Hill. She may be an errant wish of God, preflood, still looking for the ark. And yet she could not possibly have existed in the time before great cities, in the world before pure steel lifted bedrooms into the very clouds.

She returned with the drinks. She brushed a spot with her rag then went to attend to some other probable worshipper.

You ever think about going to war?, Phinny said to Tom.

No!

Hell no, said Roger.

Why, do you?, Tom said.

I think about it.

Don't do it, Phin.

Why?

You wanna die?

No, but they're not dying for nothing.

Roger said, They're dying because they want to. That's what they do.

He cursed his Rubic's Cube.

There's got to be a reason, Phinny said.

Because the country is sick, that's why. Because the Democrats and the Republicans are a bunch of sick bloodthirsty devils. A plague on both their houses!

He drank.

A distaste for himself and Tom and rose in Phinny. It congealed with the loathing Phin already had for Roger. Cowardice is ranker than tobacco and booze. But cowardice and booze is the rankest combination in the world.

Tom said, Maybe there's reasons, but no.

The talk of politics runs a lot of conversations straight down and Roger put a stop to it.

He took out his wallet and fished out a business card on which was printed this:

PICK A NUMBER

1 2 3 4

In memory of Bill Sendowski

Who's Bill Sendowski?, Phinny said.

Good old guy ran a joint in Baltimore, he said. Pick a number and tell me what it is.

Tom thought about it and said, Four.

Phin said, One.

He turned the card over and it said, Five. Roger laughed loud and hard.

It just said pick a number!, he said. It just said pick a number! It didn't say you had to pick one through four! It just said pick a number!

You see, this is the kind of jerk who rigs it against everybody else, Phinny thought. Some memory. I hope the stupid card was on Sendowski's gravestone, for shame.

Sad Mary came back wiping her little hands. The three men sat like beggars.

How you doin, Tom?, she said.

Oh, I'm doin okay. Me and my boy Phinneus been having a good old time tonight. Phin's a boxer, too. He's got a big fight next week.

Mary said, I don't understand you guys fighting.

She took a strong sip of Chambord.

Guys fight!, Roger said. Men destroy! Tom builds morgues by day and gathers the bones by night.

I'm just trying to enjoy a drink and pleasant company, Tom said.

Well, you're not gonna do that next to him, Mary said, and then she went to some table on the other side.

God, that is a fine fine woman, Tom said.

Sure is, Phin said.

Roger chortled.

What? You don't think so?, Tom said.

Hell.

You had better?, Tom said.

Hell.

Oh, yeah, sure. Sure you have.

Best of luck boys.

You had better than Mary? What a big-talkin bastard.

No, I ain't had better than Mary, Roger said.

Then watch your little hiccups.

Roger leaned back as far as he could on his stool.

I ain't had better than Mary, he said. I had Mary.

Tom and Phin nearly lost their drinks. Tom leaned back in his chair and Phin turned and looked square at the man. The man played coy awhile. He tongued a cold sore on his lip.

True, he said.

We sat and waited. He turned his neck to make sure she wasn't near.

I'd been coming here at least a year and a half, he said, pretty much every night. I'd come here and, you know, of course I was in love with Mary like everybody –

Mary's damp purple scent drifted toward them and Roger stopped without looking up. She took a bottle from the well. They all held their breaths until she was gone again.

Roger continued. -I was in love with her like everybody else is and of course in this place nobody but gay Jimmy has any money to really make her and of course he has no interest. But of course of course the other thing about that is Mary would never be wooed with money anyway – there's just no way, you know, none. And the same is true with all sad women and sad women are, of course, the only women worth having. A happy woman is not a woman. A happy woman is a bad drink. Promising, but useless.

These men whose only analogies are to drunkenness, Phinny thought. I mustn't become like that.

But Roger went on. The sad woman is Christmas egg nog, he said. And very little by the way, young gentlemen, can woo a sad woman. But a guy likes to think there's something in the world he can do to achieve a thing he wants. Money is the biggest and easiest fishhook a man can place his dreams on but it's powerless against those sad women, finally.

So, come on, come on, Tom said.

Roger laughed. Well, I just flat wore her down, he said. Protests of true love, resistance, true love, resistance, old song and dance, but she just totally wore down until one night—

Mary came back carrying a couple drinks like baby birds. He stopped his narration. She asked Tom about the night, how wet it was, how cold, as if she hadn't come in from it and would make her first entrance to it tonight. Tom told her how it was and she got a pack of cigarettes from the counter and started to go outside. He made an awkward pause as if she wanted Tom to join her and Phinny could see that he wanted to, but nothing could keep him from the story, so she went alone.

-So one night, I made a version of my standard plea and she looks up at me right there, Roger said, pointing to a spot about two feet past the cut limes.

-and she looks at me with those eyes, you know, and without hesitation she nodded yes. Can you believe it?

Tom lightly collapsed onto the bar, head on his forearms. Tom picked himself up and leaned back again.

-So she nodded and I didn't hardly know what to do, sort of started fumbling around, fumbling with my things in total shock. Of course, I wasn't prepared at all for her to say yes. Obviously. I mean I was just going

through my nightly routine. Truth is, it wasn't the best night for it – for me. I mean, I really was tired and on the night you get your wish it's probably better if you've got the stamina to enjoy it. I don't know. Maybe that's one of the curses.

She came in through the door with a little cough and went straight to a table in the back.

Roger continued, So she packed up right then, cleaned her hands on a new towel, got her little bag, and put her hand on my arm as we walked out the door and went toward my place. It was a hot night actually, but as we walked a cold breeze blew. I expected her to shrink sometime during the walk, to tell you the truth. You know what I mean when I say she seems at least eight feet tall behind that bar.

Oh, yes!, said Tom.

-Well, we walked and she didn't shrink. She actually seemed to grow, she grew and grew and continued to grow, up and up like Jacqueline the beanstalk – I was scared she was gonna grow too darn big for my room. She barely fit her massiveness in my door when we got to my damn place-

She returned, but just briefly, for a maraschino cherry.

-But she did get in my door, her first, me second, and she dropped her hand from my arm and patiently waited as I found the light switch. I got the room lit and she stood looking down, which meant I couldn't see her eyes, and she held her little bag with two hands in front of her lap. I told her she could sit if she wanted while I washed up. I went into the bathroom and looked in the mirror and I didn't actually know what we were there for. All the time I'd been asking her to come back to my room I always figured I knew why but once I got her there I wasn't sure — was she gonna baptize me? was I gonna baptize her? were we gonna watch late night shows? You know! So I looked at myself as I washed and said to myself in my mind,

Roger, Mary is in your room. And I decided I'd go back out there and follow her lead. I dried my hands and face and walked back into the room and she was there, still standing, still fifteen feet tall, but she'd put down her little purse by my bed. When I got out, I awkwardly took her hands in my hands and made a small move to kiss her cheek. She allowed this and then dropped my hands and I didn't know what to do. I started to make another move to take her shoulders but then I saw she was up to something. She had her eyes raised toward me, but her nose was slightly down, she was looking up from under her brow – the space and time don't make sense, I know, cause if she was fifteen feet in the air how could she be looking up at me? I know, I know. Maybe I had grown to eighteen feet, I don't know. Couple a giants? I don't know. But I could see the eyes now and she was looking at me like this and very gently she removed her black shawl and the softest hair sort of tumbled out and onto her shoulder, which was still under her dress, and there's that goddamn scary snake licking her clavicle or whatever that's called.

If you're lying..., Tom said.

I ain't lying. -And then her little hands go up to her dress with the little buttons at the top and she unbuttons the top button and then the dress slides to the shoulders and very gently, so so slowly like a sloth climbing down a tree she slides her blouse down over her chest, down to her hips, and then she steps out of it. My eyes started at the tongue of that snake and I followed down to its head and then its body which keeps going between her breasts. I always wondered where it went. Well, boys, it keeps going down and it gets bigger as it goes, continuing down her perfect perfect stomach. It gets larger and starts to coil around as it gets to her waistline and it's very scary and violent, but then it's amazing. The snake gives way as you get down there, if you know what I mean. It transforms, it becomes a beautiful

scene of clouds and a big sun and its rays going through the sun, but the sun is a little heart and it's right down there where it can't go anymore, and I know because her panties were off by this time. It was a doggone sun in the shape of a heart. Really very well drawn. Very artsy. Sunlight. Sunlight was drawn into it.

Roger shivered slightly and drank.

After that, he said, I shouldn't say.

Tom kept looking at him. She was standing about fifteen feet off talking to a customer, her eyes in shadow. Finally Tom turned and looked at Phinny, his big blues coming bright through the gloom. He exhaled a worried man's breath. Phinny found that his spine had straightened so he let it loose and

Roger continued to drink.

Bullshit, Phinny said. Pure lies.

Roger laughed.

Phinny saw with some dread that Mary was coming their way. She took a tip off the bar, clapped it in acknowledgement, dropped it in a glass, and began the slow glide toward the men. Tom and Phinny looked down.

Guys, she said. Here's some change – one of you want to put a song on the juke box?

Tom and Phin looked at each other and Tom nervously said he'd do it. He took the change in his hand but did not rise.

Roger clinked his ice and set down his drink. He smiled broadly and said, Mary, I was just telling the guys about that night and the nice sun on your belly.

Her eyes went dead and she walked away fast.

Tom tore the cruel man off his stool. The man made a little noise as Tom kicked the door open and dragged the man out. Phinny followed to help but when he got outside he saw Tom needed no help at all. Tom's left forearm

was on the man's throat and his right fist was not punching but rather was just below the man's sternum and moving into his upper abdomen in a very slow and powerful push, like you'd push the last stone in setting concrete. His face was against the man's and as his fist moved ever inward the man's face was reddening and his breath was almost gone. Tom had seemed so peaceful and docile, but Phin saw the fighter here. His face was utterly composed and his hand steady as he pushed the life out of that small and wretched man. He was not playing by the rules of the sportsman's ring, that's for sure. The man's body was taut and defenseless. Tom's fist was nearly at the man's spleen when he released both arms and the man fell to the concrete. He was gasping. He did pick himself up and then he vomited and Tom told him that he shall never come into this bar again. Tom watched as the man limped away.

Sorrow all over Tom's face and then the veins bulged in his neck and he brought his fist now in a real punch against the yellow brick wall.

His knuckles bled and he stood for a moment.

He opened the door of the bar and Phinny followed him. Mary was in the back corner but she was watching as Phinny followed Tom to the restroom where Tom washed his hand and wrapped it in a towel.

It's not broken, he said.

She was there in the hall when they came out of the restroom and she clutched his arm.

I'm sorry about him, Tom said.

She said nothing but held his arm.

Tom quickly became shy and said, We gotta go.

Phinny said a hushed goodbye to Mary and followed Tom to the street.

Tom led Phin to his apartment, a few minutes away. They said very little aside from cursing Roger. Tom gave Phin a blanket and went to bed. Phin

lay on his couch and looked around the room, which slowly spun. It was a bare room with a television on milk crates.

CHAPTER NINE – THE PROBLEM OF THE SOLDIER

When Phinny woke, Tom was still asleep. Phinny left a note of thanks for the fine evening and went out the door. He walked back the way they'd come, past the yellow bar. He remembered why men drink, the thing he didn't know before he'd really done it. He got to a park and got a coffee and an egg sandwich. He observed the life again.

The bright sun showed the life spilling into the street and through the parks. Life with coffee cups, paper bags, life was eating, life was reading bedrolls about what other life was doing.

Had I woke on down pillows and new cotton sheets, Phinny thought, I'd still have walked out into this yellow morning to see the blue sky drape the white clouds. I'd still feel a kick of action when all these people come and go. But maybe I wouldn't have made a friend, maybe I wouldn't have seen the working of justice against a transgressor like that scum Roger. Had I not put on some gloves and hit somebody, and felt them hit me, he thought, maybe I'd be that scumbag working out his darkness on girls. Or unwilling men. Maybe the problem with war is the civilians dying. The soldiers know what they're getting into.

His thoughts were going freely.

He formulated a concept, probably written by many others. Philosophers he'd never read. The Problem of the Soldier. The problem of the soldier is that his conscience is subordinated to his superiors up the chain of command. He follows orders, and that is what we need him to do.

We can't have a bunch of kids running around deciding whom to shoot and when. If a soldier follows his superiors' commands, he cannot be responsible. That's what made the slurs on the returning Vietnam soldiers so evil. The moment of conscience is the moment of enlistment. After that, you're off the hook. And enlistment itself is a kind of subordination to that which you can't possibly judge, having so little access to the intelligence or training in the interpretation of it.

And then he thought, So the problem of the soldier is also the problem of the civilian, but from the other end. The problem of the civilian continues every minute you forego enlisting. I can define that as neither a greater nor a lesser burden than the burden on the soldier. But do not mistake that it is a burden, he thought.

These are all civilians here, he thought, looking at the life. Now, the old lady's day has passed. The old man's has passed. Those young ones' days have yet to come. But quite a few of us—that one there, and there, and here!
—we're living it.

#

Allow a memoirist his art.

He got the taste for fighting one schoolday when he beat two kids one after the other. There had been a disagreement on something about the rules of a game and a crowd formed around them. The first kid was his own size and he beat him easy. The second kid was big—several years older than him—and when he saw the first fight, he couldn't resist. Phinny busted him fast and the kids nose bled and his eye bubbled over. He figured the crowd would offer their women and respect. They didn't, but it didn't matter. The fight was fair and voluntary.

He was taken to the principal's office and his mother was called. She arrived with a look of shame and fear. She made sure he was okay and then she said sternly, Picking fights?

And winning them, he said.

She took him by his then thin arm and drove him silent blocks. She sent him to his room, where he practiced footwork.

He was called out of his room when the father came home. The two parents of the newly exposed delinquent sat with iced teas on the evening porch and stared at him. He became aware that his fighting went against everything they were trying to build with their locked doors and parceled property. (The father was always complaining about a five-foot strip of property that had been included in the sale price of the land but that he later found out actually belonged to the city. He felt he'd been lied to or something. This is the kind of thing that just tangled the father's mind.) They were trying to build some kind of sacrarium for the safe and protective raising of their only child, that porch the outermost lookout against the horrors of the sinister world.

But protection was the last thing the young Phinneus wanted. What he wanted had to be hard won, to the detriment of his subtler features. He looked down the long street and saw how easy it would be. They didn't punish him hard that night. He remembered the night ending with some kind of ice cream. But the true punishment loomed: to inherit the fear. He tried not to laugh out loud when they took him to church on those Easter Sundays and ocassional times in between when they bowed in reverance to the least fearful, apparently, of all God's prophets. Allow the narcissist his misidentification with Jesus Christ.

But he did love the world and wanted to be a part of it.

He remembered an evening not long before he left. His father sat him down to discuss his deteriorating grades. The father was, after all, a machinist, and that was nearly the last thing in the world he wanted for his only son. He sat there with the grease in rivers on his hard hands and pleaded with the kid, but the kid turned it around.

Take me to work and teach me the trade, the boy who would become Phinny said.

He said, You don't want to do that.

Yes, I do.

Greasing monkeys? That's what you want to do? No.

He referred to his trade as greasing monkeys.

I gotta do something, the son said. I want to earn my keep.

Do something else. You got brains, do something with your brains.

I want to use my hands.

Maybe you got too many brains.

A foreman needs brains.

What in the hell would you want to be a foreman for? For one thing, a foreman doesn't start out a foreman. A foreman ruins his fingers for fifteen years, then maybe he gets promoted and becomes a foreman. Money's still no good. So what's the big deal? I don't know a single foreman who wouldn't retire this second if he could.

But-

I don't know a single foreman who doesn't buy a stack of lottery tickets.

But-

You're not coming with me. No, bud, no.

But-

You think I enjoy it? I do it for you and your mother.

No choice but to believe him. That said, he didn't know anyone, not a single soul in that place, who wouldn't leave whatever the hell they were doing for a winning lottery ticket.

#

The inchoate Phinneus had one hero. A real true golden hero to admire and emulate. That was his cousin Chuck. He was only a couple years older than Phinny, but that meant all the difference in those days.

He was strong and tough and appropriately resourceful in the shadow of his own father, who was a big businessman, and his successful and pompous older brothers. One day he showed up with his hair buzzed and announced he was going into the army.

The cheers and congratulations, the absolute pride, rose up from all those protective adults and it was impressive. Chuck sate there at the center, beaming like the sun. Phinny remembered seeing him off and thinking, Now there's a guy who ain't afraid of a risk and here's a risk these old goons actually appreciate. They saw him off and put a yellow ribbon around the tree.

Phinny was nearing the end of high school when Chuck came back after a year. The story was he'd suffered though he bore no visible wounds. There was a story that he'd been pulled from a burning truck by a friend. He sat back down on his father's porch in Cleveland Heights, now a million miles from the action, and he started to drink. It was very clichéd. And Chuck's father, Phinny's Uncle Jim, did nothing but badger and disrespect Chuck. He was relentless and Chuck just shrunk from it. One night, the underage Phinny snuck out with Chuck and his drinking buddies. The booze those

guys poured down their throats was incredible. Some of this is the war, Phinny thought, and some of this is Uncle Jim. Phinny felt powerless. All he could think was to get out of there, save himself, hit somebody. He couldn't go down the way Chuck had, and he couldn't go down the way his parents wanted him to.

So without a word he was on buses and trains to the big city with saved money for proper gloves and shoes. On his nineteenth birthday, he took a big pull of whisky with a couple other fighters and silently celebrated the birth that had become his own choosing.

Of course he sometimes thought to go back to all of them, but with every twist of his nose, pain in his ribs, and ecstasy of his spirit, he decided all that was done and best forgotten.

CHAPTER TEN – A WEEK WITHOUT FIGHTING

Phinny spent the next week training and working at the gym, wandering the city and wondering. Sometimes he wished this, sometimes he wished that, but he tried to keep his head in the game.

One night he was in his room reading and letting his mind go. He sometimes fell into a thought that he was the hero in some five act pageant drama of the world. It was an old habit. It's inconclusive whether it's a bad one. Certainly some versions of it are awful, but some may be harmless. And certainly one can be forgiven the thought, given the fantastic nonsense of it and the hideous impotence one has as one rides and becomes ground like so much taconite flesh in the great gears one can't help thinking is his inheritance and very destiny, breathed by lunatic chemistry into the wrong place and wrong time where sentience is but the muscle on some crankman's forearm and flesh the substance the crankman pushes into his tragic machine which turns everything into another bolt which will become stained by the blood of the new biology as it passes freezing over and eventually takes his place when finally he is swarfed or rusted and ground into the metal plate that holds the great structure in place until finally the crankman himself alone in the world jumps in and lets the machine run until the power flickers off.

As imaginary trumpets blared the process, he pumped his foot up and down on the loose mattress. He considered writing the thought but he did not do that yet and when he did come to do it he was already believing he is

not divisible in any ultimate sense from the rest of humanity and humanity is not some ferrous cog and there is no larger machine. His roommate came in and Phinny was embarrassed. He was eager to talk to somebody and he asked if his roommate wanted a beer. But the roommate, who was normally kind and genial, showed Phinny very clearly that he did not want company. So Phin tried to find his way back to the yellow bar but he couldn't do it. He realized he hadn't given Tom any way to get in contact and he wished he had. He eventually went home and slept.

#

Later that week Tom came into the gym and they were glad to see each other. Phin held Tom's bag and they worked out awhile and then went and ate and drank beer. They did not go back to the yellow bar.

But as they drank, Tom's eyes started that bouncing and he said, But listen buddy.

I'm listening.

When's your next fight?

A week from today.

That's what I thought, that's what I thought!

What do you got?

Guess who's gonna be there? Me and Mary.

You're kidding me.

Man, I went in there the night after we were there. I tried to stay away, but I went in there and she was there and she grabbed my arm and I told her we got rid of that guy and she thanked me and I said, Hey my boy Phinneus has this fight and she said she'd come.

It's a date!

Well, before that we're gonna go out tomorrow night. So it's a second date!

Tom was bubbling and Phinny was glad to see it.

So where are you staying?, Tom asked.

At Bert's, Phinny lied.

Oh, that's good. You looking at getting a place?

Yeah, I'm looking.

Good.

They finished their beers and parted ways. A lesson to the young men: that woman there, the one with the cage of loveliness around her, sealed, armored, and guarded, go ahead and ask. Phinny thought he ought to find himself a girl. He saw about twenty-five of them on his walk home but ended up sleeping with a book of poetry that gave him about four lines before he fell asleep.

#

The next week he finagled a lot of diversions and he wasn't sure where the time went. He spoke with Tom once on the phone and Tom reassured him that he and Mary would be at the Garden on fight night. On the night before the fight, Phinny's roommate was in a much better mood and they drank together. Phinny kept thinking he shouldn't be drinking, but his mind had wandered into a great desire to sit with this guy he lived with so he did it. He cut it off after awhile and went to bed at a decent time.

CHAPTER ELEVEN – FIGHT

The air was chilly now and October was on us all. Phinny stood in the clear alley outside the Garden. He smoked a pre-fight cigarette. Smoke it up good, little buddy! Your next smoke will be a conqueror's cigar or the cheap dirty pizzle of a losing chump. He closed his eyes and listened to the sanctifying smoke go down his chest.

And then he was in the locker room where the spirit of man dented every door. He laced up. Such perfect moments when something's coming.

The badged man called him and Bert led him down the hall and everything exploded and the lights were in his eyes and the lights were eyes and they were everywhere and they were on him. Greed and bloodlust were in them. Except the children's eyes, in which were only reverence and fear.

Bert parted the ropes and he ducked in. The floor gathered like a wave. He sat on the white chair in the corner, moved his head side to side, saw the earth and its number gently shifting as he did it. He caught the figure of Green, the Fighting Jew. If all of jewry were such as him, how history might have differed. He was smoothing his hair with his gloves and spitting into his bucket, his trainer and assistant rubbing his shoulders and arms.

The announcer's blaring became intelligible. A fighter with familiar statistics of height and weight, ...out of Greeley, Colorado, from Franklin Technical College... The referee was a small paunchy black man with bushy hair on the sides and a mustache. He brought the fighters to the center. Green with his big history unknown to Phinneus and Phinneus still with a

juvenile conviction that his history was yet unformed, that fate is a loser's wish for absolution.

Phinny's knees were good. His cracked rib was fine.

It got going real quick and Green was also good. Phinny was ropeward suddenly and sweating hard as Green like some Victorian put his calling card to Phinny's fine chest. He pushed his way out of it and scrambled right, swinging. He gave a jab more like a shove against uncaring forearms and they settled down into a dance.

Phinny caught the Hebrew eyes and the damn thinking began. Green seemed thoughtless, so it was decided. Phin smiled at his fortune and blamed Cleveland Heights. He'd come not to win, remember, he just wanted to learn, even the blue winter of defeat. Thank you, sweet Jesus and your precious Ohio, thank you for the teeth to blow. For the lesson I am set to receive. School of life, teach more slowly. It hurts. School of life, forge my diploma. He inched along the rope. Save the hills that make the wind, he thought in some ridiculous foxhole prayer and of course the Jew knocked his right eye hard and Phin clenched his abdomen and rocked forward to keep his feet. His chest heaved. Pilate smiled, but Phin was quick on the smile and nailed him just above the belt, which led to a doozy of traded combinations and the bell rang.

Phinny went to his corner with pride. The pride was knocked by Bert, who screamed in his ear that he was losing.

The bell brought him forth again and his left eye was seeing less than it had. He went straight into the fist of Green and the other fist came against his side and another rib cracked like a cheap wine glass. He locked and held tight, the referee parted them. He clutched the Jew again, but the Jew got out of it and rapped him on the head. Phinny tried like Pepp to trip him, but he was no Pepp and blood came into his mouth. He swallowed and entered a

dreaming fever wherein inevitability and the time it takes is the horror and if he could have wished for anything he would have wished for the whole thing to end but instead he got it again in the rib on the other side and the jelly in his legs somehow congealed and kept him up for a fractured nose that drew no blood so the fight went on, the crowds' lust roaring. The fever that had him allowed the objects that are often the focus of his wandering mind to parade without focus and he saw Howitzers and flares and dogtags and pussy and the Jew got him on the strong part of the shoulder, but somehow this broke the fever and he finally began to hit. He got the Jew back in the corner now but the bell this time was reverse salvation.

Don't open up!, Bert yelled.

I landed it, though!

Next time you won't!

Bert doused him with water and cleaned him. He spit blood into the bucket.

The bell came. The ref looked at him and scowled and then they were back at it and his first sensation was of a blast that may have flash-spoiled his blood and he was faltering. Something, some obscure muscle in his stomach that probably held it all together, bruised, and he bit hard on his mouthguard as he tried to step away. But he stepped into a left from the Jew and he went down and dark.

Then there were strange sightings and mysterious voices including his own and when it all sharpened he was in the medical room being patched, plugged, torn again, and sewn.

I'm okay, I'm okay, he was saying.

No you're not.

He writhed and tried to escape but they held him. There was an injection and more mysterious time passed until it focused again and then he exhaled and put his head back with his eyes to the ceiling.

The weight of loss came on him. The knowledge convinced him that he was hurt but not sick, that he was young and should take their stitching and leave as soon as possible.

He was being asked his name.

Jesus Phinneus Christ.

Good, Bert said.

I'm fine, Phinny said.

He should go to the hospital, the medic said.

I'm fine.

He's fine, Bert said.

He's hurt.

It's not that fucking bad, Bert said.

His nose is broken. His rib is fractured.

Day at the office, Phinny said.

His career is over, Bert said.

Your call, the medic said.

Let me go.

Let him go.

So a final bandage was placed around his ribcage, papers were signed, and the medic was gone.

Phinny sat up.

You gonna drop me, Bert?

We're not talking about that now.

Are you?

I said we're not talking about that now.

Are you?

Yes, Phin, yes.

Don't!

Phinny, Christ!

Bert wrung his hands like a Shakespearean and his belly heaved as he explained that he loved the kid but the kid lacks heart or discipline or some other wishful term totally outside the rigid lines of destiny that every man walks downward in his circle.

What kind of a miserable trainer am I, Phin, if I don't know how to get through to a hungry young fighter?

Prevailing in his defeat was not the physical hurt but the shame and Phinny, who would claim as true now that which could be true someday, straightened as best he could and smiled at the aggravated Bert.

I got something to tell you, Bert.

He allowed Bert to pause for the interruption and Bert asked him what he had to say.

I wanted this last fight, Phinny said. But you're right. I'm distracted. There's a reason.

Phinny paused to let Bert lean in to the tension of the secret.

Are you in trouble, Phinny? Tell me.

I enlisted yesterday. I'm shipping out in a couple weeks. I want to serve my country. I'm through with boxing, I'm off to boot camp. You've taught me so much and I'll never forget it.

Bert's face lit up with a thousand beams of light and he embraced Phinny, careful not to reset any bones.

My sweet Phinneus!, he said. Yes! Yes, you do have heart! Oh, yes, a hero, Phinny! Now you're a real hero!

Thanks, Bert. And thanks for everything.

Bert, who believed when he was not looking at his children that to fight is the greatest thing, went on and on about Phinny's heroism almost to the point where Phinny could become ashamed at his lie. But Phinny figured his new wounds earned him a little pleasure and he let Bert back out of the room throwing roses in front of his ex-boxer's limping steps.

Phinny gingered his clothes on and sat in the locker room. He had hoped for a bigger payday, but it had not come. So he fingered the eighty dollars in his wallet and thought of the two hundred left in the bank. Maybe enlistment just became a financial imperative, he thought. He also thought of Al's job offer. He didn't know what to do, so he walked, and as he walked, he thought of Cleveland Heights.

CHAPTER TWELVE – POST-FIGHT

He walked alone and thought he was not a man. He must consider at least one lesson learned, but he felt he was failing at manhood. His command of his country's oaths and songs also was poor. Oh to be shipping home, he thought, to the congratulations and the pride of the mind.

He was halfway down the back alley when he saw a seated form rising in the shadows. A voice called out. It was Tom.

Phinny was bitter but relieved to see him.

Phinny, he said meekly. Tom took the bag from his shoulder.

Then Mary rose and Phinny was glad to have friends greater than the filth and trash and anger on all sides.

Hi Mary, Phinny said. Sorry it wasn't a better show.

She did not hug him but from a distance he smelled the sweet acid of gin.

We been waiting for you, buddy, Tom said. We figured... They did a good bit of work on you, huh?

I'm fine.

Lemme see...

Tom looked closely at Phinny's considerable wounds and said, Mary's not crazy about our profession.

Well, I'm done.

Really?

Yes, sir.

Bert say something?

Yeah. And I'd been thinking about it anyway.

It's better, Phin. Give Al a call. Give it a rest awhile.

Yeah.

But how you feel?

I cracked a rib.

Mary gasped.

And my best nose. And I think whoever the hell the medic was made me worse.

Nah, he didn't.

Tom looked like he was uncomfortable. Phinny wondered if something was wrong with Mary, if he was drunk, or what. But Phinny wanted some camaraderie. He wanted to go to Tom's house and sleep it off, see what the morning light would reveal. But I will wait for the invitation, he decided. Or I will get on a Midwestern bus and never see these two again.

Phin, why don't you come have a drink with me and Mary? We were just gonna go find a place around here. A little whisky'll disinfect you.

I couldn't put it down.

Come on.

Come with us, Phinneus, Mary said.

Tom had such responsive eyes and they really lit when Mary spoke. Phinny wished it was himself her arms would hold tonight. He agreed to go, hoping shamefully for charity.

A Chinese laborer in a dirty sweater pulled a chain against a building, like some trawler on a vertical lake. Phinny wanted to thrash him where he stood.

They found a little place and went inside. Absent was any conviviality, any joy, any fraternity, any possibility of humor. There were a few booths of couples and their drinks, and a long bar half full. A few men at the bar, one wild-haired, well-dressed lady with a crossword puzzle. It was a depressing clown show of the lonely.

Hey, this place is great!, Tom said.

Tom took Mary's coat like a gentleman and hung it on the booth. They slid in. Phinny went carefully and everything stung. A waiter came and they ordered. Tom told the waiter to bring Phinny a warmed whiskey despite Phinny's refusal. Mary's eyes were dim, she seemed primed for a big drunk to rush her. She had a high neckline tonight and the serpent was not visible.

He hit me so hard I'm almost handsome again, Phinny said.

You're handsome, Mary said.

Guess what, Tom said. Guess where Mary's from. All this time I known her, never knew where she was from. Guess. Tell him, Mary.

Boston.

Beantown!, he roared and slapped the table. We never knew each other, though, obviously. Either she was runnin with the wrong crowd or I was!

She forced a laugh.

Maybe we bumped into each other some time. Maybe I bummed a light from you. Or maybe you even poured me a drink or something.

Could be, never know.

Nah, nah, I'da remembered.

The drinks came and Mary took a big gulp. Phinny barely sipped and it tasted rank. The full stench of Tom and Mary's breaths hit Phinny.

Phinny thought, A good sleep disturbed, somewhere in Cleveland Heights, somewhere else. Countrymen roused from dreaming to plot a new country. Rivers to cross now, fearful prairies, trembly skies, hidden intent,

game, an easy mine at the end: a couch, a porch, a hymnal, a chair, a bed, coffee, garbage pickup, a mother lion roaring for a lost cub, perhaps, it may be, or a father hung on nails.

He looked at Mary's glass, which was empty.

Want another round?, Tom said.

Sure, she said.

Tom's arm was around Mary. He hadn't figured out where it fit most comfortably yet, but he was trying to find out. Everything disgusted Phinny and he began the labor of rising.

I gotta get going, Phinny said.

You do?, Mary said.

Yeah, I do.

He loathed the idea of his room, he wanted something new.

Tom, Mary, Phinny said. Thanks for coming tonight, thanks for the drink. I do appreciate it. Finish it for me. I'll see you in a couple days. Probably give Al a call.

You should!

I might. See ya, Mary.

Okay. Take care, she said.

Phinny put his bag on his shoulder and walked out the door. He stood and looked up and down. The wind had started. The wind comes so as to blow a wish away, or dead skin. It seems to beckon an ending, but nothing ends. To clear a patch of gravel, to tend a fire and snuff another.

It was an October when I left Cleveland Heights, Phinny thought. Maybe October is when I return.

But that thought like all the others brought failure's mocking face to the night.

He looked back at the door of the sorry bar and thought, In time, I will gather all these things in my arms – this bar, that Mary, that Tom, the heroic Jew, even this cold street grinding and rolling here and there. Only now I need gathering, it is not my time to gather.

He looked at his footsteps and the shadows they made. I will be a trapper in the western woods, he thought, and he walked.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN - THE GOD OF POWER

Phinny!

He heard a voice calling him. He turned around and it was Tom just out the door of the bar.

Hey, come back inside!

I can't, next time!, he called back.

Come on, come buy us a round!

Phinny refused and turned to go but Tom came running to him. He stood awkwardly.

Come on back in.

I really can't. I'm hurt and tired. I have to go.

Though the night was cold, Phinny's body was hot in its churning effort to repair the damage it now carried. Sweat was on his skin and everything ached.

Listen, Tom said, and his aspect was sour, remorseful, drunk, and conniving.

You owe me some money, he said.

Money?, Phinny said, and abject loathing came into him.

From the bar. I'm low. She's thirsty, she's great, I hate to ask, but I have to.

Phinny paused and shuffled.

I mean, Tom began again, and then stopped, putting his hands into his pockets and looking down the alley off the street. The alley was full of trash bins. He offered Phinny a cigarette but Phinny did not take it. Tom's big blue eyes searched him. They bounced in hope that Phinny, who craved pity, would pity.

I hate asking for money from you, man, he said. I hate it, but, it's just... Phinny let him struggle a bit.

It's just, I mean, man, I just, you know I thought you were gonna win!

He laughed softly. I thought you were gonna win! But even that, I didn't care, I wouldn't, if you lost... But Mary, see... You and me spent a lot last week, buying rounds and stuff, a lot, and she's drinking me dry...

He laughed. He had no malice toward her thirst, he just wanted to fill it.

She's great, he said. And, I mean, you know, Phinny... Damn! I'm jumping the gun, I know. Just how I am.

Oh Tom, Phinny thought, a romantic must have money.

It's just how I am, I guess, and I'm not gonna let her go. I figured I never had a chance. She's so pretty, she's so good, too. And here we are, her and me! And she likes me! And I want to treat her right. And I mean, I got a job tomorrow but I'm not gonna get paid for a week, and now I'm broke. Phinny said nothing.

Tell you what, I could owe you.

Phinny let the notion roll around Tom's head for a minute and Tom obviously didn't like it. He didn't like having to ask for his charity back and the longer Phinny made him stand there with his desperation and fraternal failure floating in the air the more he angry he seemed.

I just can't do it, Phinny said, and he turned and walked.

Phinny's head was hot and he desired a curse from Tom's throat and he got it.

Man, I bought you drinks all night!, Tom said. Drinks, and dinner, and breakfast! And you thought you were gonna win tonight, you know? We kept saying that!

Phinny glared at Tom with a half-smile and held it long enough for the refusal and moral rebuke to register.

Oh come on, Tom said in answer to the moral charge. Tom's eyes flashed and he returned the unkindness.

I'm half dead, Phinny said. You want to finish me off?

Just give me the money you owe me.

Come on in here.

Tom followed Phinny into the alley. A sudden urge to speak unrelenting and exhaustive truth came on Phinny and he said, Tom, you're a washed-up alcoholic with a new alcoholic girlfriend who will sleep with any loser who tips her or buys her a drink, she's got another year or so to be pretty, you're right that you're lucky, you lack the courage to quit boxing and the brain to do anything else, she's got...

And that's all the further he got in his blatant provocation before the strong but somewhat flabby Tom was just a foot from him and trying to restrain himself from attacking the busted and defeated boxer who had been his friend.

Do it, Tom, think with your fists, it's what you got.

Tom kept himself from attacking but Phinny wore him down with foolish pretty and enticing words and then the two men both of them cowards and desperate wanted nothing more than to fight and Phinny was determined to provoke the first punch so his conscience could someday be absolved, for despite his wrecked body, he knew what he'd thought weeks before, that he would beat Tom based on youth and the strength of his superior focus given the conviction of the rightness of the cause. So Tom

went for the bait and Phinny found himself in his second fight of the unrelenting night

Tom was hot and mad when he shot his fist and struck the cracked rib

Tom's voice was raw from much protesting

No crowd no bells no bets no honor he kept crying as he hit again in the same rib

Phinny lowered his guard

Let it go baby!, Phinny yelled

They were rode on wretchedness pure

Phinny got him in the face

Tom was crying, big wet tears from those baby blue eyes

Phinny cut his hand on Tom's teeth

A fist in Phinny's stomach which ripped something else and he was bleeding again

A fist in Phinny's nose, the pain of which projected him into the most rare plane of rage

They'd been respecting the rules of boxing, absurdly, from habit, but Phinny recognized that nonsense and found a metal pole and brought it across Tom's face

But whatever metal Tom found got Phinny across the side of his own face and their blood then colored them both

They found the ground and as Phinny's ribs cracked further he brought the pole into Tom's throat and held it until Tom did not move

At which point Phinny stood dripping over the man

Phinny went into Tom's pocket and removed the ten bills that were there, money he now felt was rightly his own

And then the silence of the night and Tom suddenly seemed like a beloved friend again

Phinny put his head to Tom's mouth and felt breath so he propped up his head to open his air passage

Come on, Tom. Come on, Tom. It's okay, Tom, come on, man, it's okay, I'm sorry, he said softly and qickly, Come on.

He held his face tighter but more gently, as a mother might, his own blood fading fast onto Tom's cheek. Come on, come on. Come on, Tom, Tom Tom Tom.

He breathed, but his breath wasn't getting down very far.

Come on, Tom, I beat you, that's all.

Tom breathed. Mary was coming down the long alley like some judge. Her dazed black eyes found Phinny and Tom in a clump.

Hey, what are you doing?, she said. What're ya sink ya doin wiff pretty girl waitin for ya gonna leave my all night jiss waitin for ya?

The drunk had hit her, of course.

Mary, Phinny said.

Yeah, so so how long you gonna leave me you guys ain't leaving are you I'm jiss sittin there in there? Oh no, is he hurt?

He's hurt.

Whhhaat? Ohhhh, she stood looking, not bending down, finding her balance. How did he get hurt?

Phinny said, We were mugged.

And then a child like a second judge and infinitely more terrible in his surprising attendance and sobriety was four feet away looking at them dumbly, dirty.

It came you robbed you he got, wait, wait, you were rob?

Yes.

And they beat you up?

Yes.

Too mush, too mush, s'too mush, oh Tom.

The kid took a ginger step closer and looked from Tom to Mary to Phinneus.

Tom Tom, can you hear me? Is he gonna be okay?, Mary said.

Phinny saw the child, who was standing still and awestruck as if he'd just seen the god of power model perfection. Phinny called to the child and the child obeyed.

Phinny said to the child, You want a closer look?

The child came closer and looked down at Tom. The child's eyes were fascinated but not wild. They were focused. He was learning to be a man.

Mary lay herself next to Tom in the grime of the concrete.

Phinny reached for the kid. He recoiled but Phinny got his arm and the kid made no attempt to extract it. Phinny looked in his eyes and he held the gaze.

You watched, Phinny said.

He nodded, his eyes huge.

Go get bandages and water and come back, Phinny said and handed him some bills.

The kid went off in perfect obedience and Phinny had no doubt he'd come back.

Tom's breathing was shallow but steady and Mary was asleep at his side. Phinny sat with Tom's head cupped in his hands. His body felt nothing. No pain. Nothing.

Time passed easy as the passing of time was the big necessity.

The kid returned with the bandages and Phinny wrapped Tom's face and then instructed the kid in the wrapping of Phinny's own face.

They rested there and then Phinny woke Mary and told her to point the way to her place. The kid hailed a cab and the Arab driver asked no questions as the four of them quietly rode several long blocks.

Mary's place was mostly black with red and purple and Mary put Tom in her bed and lay by him. The child followed Phinny's orders and lay on the floor while Phinny lay on the couch and eventually slept.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN – RANK QUARTET

Sun came through dimly and the children accomplices woke. Mary made coffee. She wore a loose white shirt with a black bra beneath it, bare rounds of pale shoulders, the snake resolute, her hands tremoring as she spooned the grounds into the machine. The obeisant kid stood by the radiator. Tom coughed from the bedroom, but was still asleep. Mary asked what had happened and Phinny knew the lie that continues from day to day.

We were having fun, and then what?

I don't know.

She was by the stove. She bent over a small picture and closed her eyes a few seconds and her mouth moved quietly. She put her hand on her head lightly and exhaled long. Her weight went into her hand on the counter and her bare toes curled.

Want some water?, she said to the kid.

The kid shrugged and she gave him and Phinny water.

Do you want orange juice or anything?, she said.

She took out some orange juice while the kid waited. She poured three cupfulls and added vodka to hers. She offered the same fix to Phinny and he refused it. She drank slowly and joylessly.

Where did he come from?, she asked regarding the kid.

He's my brother.

Oh.

She went into the bedroom.

Phinny turned to the kid and said, What if I took you out of here and down the road a long ways?

He looked at Phinny, his new god, with scared excitement.

And then what if I beat you dead?, Phinny said, and the child kept his gaze and shook his head slowly side to side.

No, I won't, Phinny said.

An urge to return to a state of genesis. A state is impossible, nothing ever stops.

Sit if you're tired, Phinny said to the kid. He hesitated then did it.

Mary came back out and said Tom had blood on his pillow. Phinny went in his room and cleaned it. Tom slept and was breathing softy. The gash under his bandages was severe.

You were hurt bad?, Mary said to Phinny.

Pretty bad.

Do you feel bad?, she asked, and Phinny responded that he did.

The kid sat on the floor and put his head back against the soft cushion of the couch.

He'll be okay, Mary said. Right?

Yes.

My head hurts. Are you gonna take off your bandages?

I don't think I can yet.

You're too bloody?

I think so.

She sat at her table with her cup and looked at a thought she must have been chasing and said, I don't know... Do you want something?

Phinny said nothing.

I guess we should let him sleep, she said.

We just need to keep checking on him and make sure he's not coughing too much. Gotta make sure his mouth is in the right place to get air.

With his bandages off, Phinny's face in the mirror was not a face he had ever seen and it never would be again. Already the pus, blood, and elements within it had come out and begun to work, but there was a new mold to harden into and that was unchangeable. He set the bandage again and knew he'd need to keep it that way awhile.

The child had put Phinny's shoes and socks by the radiator and they were warm and crisped when Phinny put them on and went out alone.

#

The heat kept in his shoes awhile though the street was cold and biting his neck, mouth, and eyes. Stepping hurt. He withdrew his two hundred dollars and added it to the hundred he had in his pocket. That was it, that's all there was.

The names in the paper were EDGAR, Brian and FELIPE, Julio, dead at twenty-three and thirty-two, respectively. Army and Marines.

But all the flags were full mast, Phinny saw ten of them as he walked. He could not stand straight, the left leg limped and the left hand was broken.

He looked with scorn at businessmen and couples passing. Particular scorn went to the obviously religious, in their black suits or headscarves or bright cloth. Such animal acolytes, he thought. He tried to contrast himself to them but had no referent. He would have to construct one.

You did it, Phinny!, he thought after awhile. They can't take it away from you! What you have done very few do!

He couldn't think straight. All he could think was that a thought could spread and congeal and make less sense the bigger it got. He wanted the life

on the street to stop. The kid was probably at Mary's waiting for his god to return. Phinny walked through a park where a mid-morning hippie painted scenes of impossible and possibly immoral peace and safety.

80

#

Mary bent over a small book and her white fingers ran along it as she silently read. The kid ate. The kid was full in his great dream. He ate now in a palace with the god, with the mother of beauty, with the scalp of conquest. The conquered shallowly breathed on the bed.

She began to read to Phinneus from her book. She said, The Christians say, Do this in remembrance of me. But we say, Do this in remembrance of us. Now simply take a piece of this bread and think thoughtlessly—she sighed, looked down, and then continued—of all the beings in the world as you eat it, every ant, every woman, every man, every roach.

She handed a piece of bread to Phinny and the kid and they did as instructed. But Mary was not eating. She stared at her plate and said, But I want to kill someone. Whoever did this to you and Tom, Phinny, I want to kill them. That's my confession.

She looked down at the painted grain of the table and the child looked at Phinny.

That's my confession, she said. He was so strong.

He's not dead, Mary.

He didn't deserve that. I don't know what I'd do if I ever found the guys... Everything is so violent. Was it always this violent?

I think it's less violent now.

The child looked at Phinny and Phinny met his gaze sternly.

There were boisterous living things in the world and one of them scooted across the floor and under the cupboards.

Sometimes I wonder if we had money, Phinneus..., and she trailed off again.

She came and touched Phinny's wrists and kissed his cheek. He was glad his face was bandaged because her face and particularly her mouth had become mawkish and stupid. She made the child soup – she was feeding him like he hadn't eaten in weeks, and maybe he hadn't.

Where did you come from, pretty boy?, she said to the child. She moved to him, sat next to him, and stroked his mangy head over and over. The child froze as he was pet. She demanded an answer again and he said, I don't know.

She clutched him to her, his head below her chin in the tenderness of her throat. Rain down the spring of Empire, God, the seeds are here, Phinny thought.

A rustling came from the bedroom and Tom stumbled out. He spoke in a slow drool. He smiled and reached for something. Oooh, he said, and grabbed his side. He bared his teeth and grimaced. Hoo hoo hoo, he said smiling. He blew too hard on his coffee and it spilled. The child looked at Phinneus and smiled, laughing beneath Tom's gaze, then Tom looked at him and the child quit smiling, then Tom apelike smiled at all of them and the child smiled again, but differently, and only at Phinny while Mary cleaned Tom's spilled coffee with a damp rag as Tom tried to scoop the coffee off the table, but Mary stilled his hands with her own and he moved his head down to her hand and put his wrapped nose on it, smiled, closed his eyes, and sniffed. She kept still while he was at her hand. She waited until he moved his head and rested it on the table, his arms hanging down, then in his lap. She bent over and kissed his head and he stamped his feet and said,

Oooh, oooh, oooh. He tried to tear at his bandages but Phinny and Mary grabbed him and told him to stop, to go slow. He tried to go slow but he seemed to forget, so she took hold and removed his bandages slowly.

He stamped his foot and grimaced. She held his shoulders. Cracks and wounds covered most of the face and his blue eyes seemed to shine light on them. The metal had struck him obviously on the jaw and the wound there was similar to where Phinny had been struck. But where the strike had gashed Phinny with shredded ends, making the cosmetic wound more fearsome but the deep damage less, the strike that had hit Tom was solid. His was a deep contusion and the pulses it sent through him and the oxygen Phinny had denied him forged dumbness out of intelligence, complicity out of will.

The child got in closer and his awe for Phinny was increased.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN – LEAVING TOM AND MARY

Mother Mary led Phinny, Tom, and the kid to her bar.

Tom stopped now and then to look at a sign and sometimes he smiled and gaped, Mary cleaning the drool from his chin, his head waving back and forth. Occasionally he grabbed his side and she'd encourage him until he moved again.

She sat them at a back booth while she clocked in and spoke in whispers to her manager. She slung a towel over her shoulder and brought waters and a tea for Tom. She sat, put her hands over Tom's, and looked at him. He smiled a big, stupid smile.

Tom, she said.

Maaary, he said.

She looked at Phinneus and said nothing.

I'm right here, I'll be right back, she said.

Phinny put his hand on Tom's shoulder now and then. He mostly looked around him, but sometimes he nodded into sleep. Mary didn't linger with the customers or play the juke box. She drifted around the tables and behind the bar and tapped the bar when a tip came in. She fixed a purple Chambord and sipped it slowly. She brought Phinny a warm whiskey and ruffled his hair. The kid began to fade and he put his head against the back of the booth.

She took a break and sat with them. Tom began to make loud unintelligible sounds and Mary cooed, Shh, shh.

The child fidgeted and laughed and apparently had one pronouncement in him.

He's an idiot!, the child said with glee.

Phinny scolded him and he smiled down at the table.

No, he's not, Mary said.

Mary went back to drifting around the room.

Phinny looked at the kid to threaten him. The garbage rot smell that rose from the kid made him seem older than the clear young skin of his face. Tell me your name, Phinny said directly to the child.

I don't know.

Yes, you do.

So?

Tell it to me.

William.

Where are you from?

I don't know.

Phinny didn't believe him. He must have been a runaway. He was so thin, so gaunt and obedient. Phinny responded to his worshipping eyes.

Did someone hurt you?

He shrugged.

We're leaving, Phinny said to him and the kid sat up straight.

Phinny went to where Mary was slicing limes behind the bar and said, Mary, I have to go.

Where?

I don't know. Far away, probably.

Back to Colorado?

Maybe.

Oh, Phinny.

I'm sorry, Mary.

I'll take care of Tom.

He needs you.

I'll take the child with me.

Do you know where Tom works?, she said.

No. But I don't think he can work for awhile.

She put her small hand on Phinny and a greater distaste for her came to him. This sick creature. This tragic devotee. Please, he thought. We see how we want to see.

Phinny took Tom into the restroom, into the noxious odor, closed the door, and wiped his unbandaged face with water, cleaning what he could. Tom smiled. Phinny took Tom's head in his hands and cried while he and the kid baptized Tom without the authority to do it. Tom sat on the counter as the kid held the bandage on his ear and Phinny re-wrapped his head. They took him to the bar where Mary put her hand on his head and the child and Phinny left, Mary looking down.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN - GO, CHILD

Near midnight, Phinny led the kid into the train station, that heart with west-pumping veins. He had the kid's hand in his own. The child's strident confidence was gone, he held Phinny's hand in fear and his eyes looked around him like an animal does when cornered and sick. I should have bathed him, Phinny thought. The poor child stunk.

Phinny looked for a train bound for Cleveland. He found one! But it wouldn't leave for five hours.

They sat on a wooden bench, Phinny's bag between them, the child possessing nothing. Lay your head on the bag, Phinny said.

Two sailors in starched white suits and gold buttons sat near. One was white, one was black. The black skin against the white suit was stunning and profound, Phinny thought. Were they shipping out or heading home? Home, he figured, though their restless energy could have indicated either way. No visible scars or bruises on them, just rich radiant youth. They were proud and noble servants of life, Phinny's very life, his safety, yet he was wrapped in a bandage made by his own fever and a good man's blood in his mouth.

He hoped he disgusted those soldiers. Some urge said to fight them. He looked down at his hands. To suffer is easy on the conscience, to cause to suffer is not. The soldiers joked with each other. To laugh, the black one would clench his jaws and turn his head down and shake it side to side. The white one would throw his head back and guffaw to the ceiling and clap his hands.

Lay your head down on the bag, Phinny said again to the kid.

I don't want to.

Do it anyway.

He did it. Phinny stroked his oily hair. The kid fell asleep. Hardly more than a decade separated their ages.

#

Had I the words of Jesus, child!, Phinny thought. And would that you would listen if I had. And would that I could ever believe them. Soon, child, you will grow real fists of your own and meet some angry Phinneus or poor Tom, and it will be your turn to do the hitting, and this night you are now living will come back to you, whether a new cherub steps from the waste or not.

Does a mother's love extend beyond her child? Is she anything but a sword in the name of her child against the children who are not her own. Take care of your own, that's it.A childish virtue shone around the child as he slept. Perhaps he slept in peace, feeling the hand of a stronger one on his back. Some years should pass before this childish lightness does.

The soldiers had gone. The clock said four-thirty. The kid came awake quickly at Phinny's urging.

You okay?, Phinny said.

Yes.

Sure?

Yeah.

Come on.

Phinny led him to the one open ticket booth. The woman in the uniform looked up and was startled. Phinny put money on the counter so she could see it, to announce his honest intentions.

I need one child's ticket to Cleveland.

For the five o'clock?, she said.

Yes.

She said the price and he paid it. She said there was a transfer somewhere down the line.

Listen, Phinny said, my brother is traveling alone. Can you tell the conductor to look out for him and make sure he transfers correctly? He's never traveled this far alone before.

Yes, we'll do the best we can.

Can you please make sure that he gets transferred correctly? Can you just give me some assurance, so I can put my worry to rest? And my mother's worry?

Yes, we'll make sure he gets the right train.

Okay. Thank you very much.

And what's your name?, she said pleasantly to the child.

The kid scowled at her and Phinny said the kid's name was Phinneus.

Do you have bags to check?

No.

Okay, then. Boarding in fifteen minutes.

Thank you.

She gave Phinny the ticket and he and the kid walked from the booth. Early businessmen and travelers were beginning to cross the floor and one store had opened. Phinny bought water, some snacks, a glossy magazine, and a small puzzle for the kid. They sat on a bench and Phinny took a pen and paper from his bag. He wrote the telephone number and the address of

the house in Cleveland Heights and looked at the kid with all the intensity he could summon.

Now listen. Are you listening?

Yes.

He looked at Phinny with much fear.

Listen. You have to do what I'm telling you. I bought you a ticket. You are going to Cleveland. It's a town far away, in Ohio. Do you know Ohio?

No.

Can you read?

I don't know.

Can you read?

A little.

Take this paper. Do not lose this paper. This paper has an address and a phone number on it. Okay? You see?

Yes.

When the train stops at Cleveland—Cleveland—you tell somebody there that they need to take you to this address, or you have someone call this phone number. Okay?

He hesitated.

Are you coming with me?, the kid asked as if it was the one question upon which all other questions are founded.

No. I can't go with you. You gotta do it alone, it'll be fine. There will be people waiting for you there and they will be very good to you. Okay?

He hesitated.

This is the right thing to do. Okay?

Okay.

His young face broke now and Phinny wanted to hold him forever. But Phinny had curled into a child, too, and he also wanted to be held.

Now here. Here is a bag of things for you. There's some water, some snacks, a magazine to read, and a little game to play. And here is a little bit of money. It's not a lot, but when you get hungry on the train—it's going to be a long ride—you can use this to buy something to eat. Okay?

His eyes lit up at the money. Okay.

Now listen again. When you get to the house you're going to, there should be a man and a woman there, and they will be your new parents.

He was confused but Phinny continued.

So here is another piece of paper, okay?

Okay.

Put this in your pocket now. Do not take this out of your pocket until you get there. When you get to the house you are going to, you give them this piece of paper. Okay? That's all, just give them this piece of paper. Will you?

Yes.

On the paper was written, Love, Phinneus, take care.

The kid put the paper in his pocket and followed Phinny to the boarding platform.

A porter hung out one door. Phinny explained to him the importance of looking out for the kid and ensuring the proper transfer to the Cleveland bound train and the proper exit at Cleveland. The porter was jolly and cheerful and he assured Phinny the kid would be safe.

Phinny got down on his knees and embraced the kid and repeated the instructions. Then the porter led the kid to a seat and soon the train jerked into motion and as it pulled off Phinny saw the child get up on his knees in his seat to keep his god, his brother and father, in view, but quickly the view was cut.

Child, child, may you be received warmly. Let them there understand that my gift to them, and also my burden placed upon them, is you. Seek those who are not your blood and give your stranger's blood to them, who are not your kin, for that is dearer and nobler. Let them love what they did not choose, and choose what they do not love. So pronounced the gutter rat.

#

Phinny bought himself a ticket on a different line. The tunnel was dark but the countryside bright. The car was half full so he had two seats to himself. He watched the river go by and the strewn trash at its banks, the city thrust to the lip of watery nature. Workers were out, wearing heavy jackets, stoking fires in barrels. October leaves sat in heavy patches on the ground. The rich scent of coffee and warmed sandwiches came through. Behind him, a black woman roared about something to a man, but Phinny missed the sense of it.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN – HARRISBURG SOJOURN

Break through to nature, it's all different! Rolling city of the plain! Amtrak westbound for glory! A new sound, the zip of wheel on rail. A new light, windows full with waking dawn. The air in the train had gone stale but Phinny could smell the dew on the meadow, the sweet pepper of the wet hay, the tart bounty of the morning stove.

The train of predestiny, nothing to do but make the best of rocking back and forth, let those other rolling cities pass by in the night, in the day, on their way.

This country is made of fields! Lonely islands, aberrations, are the cities. The dew on the Pennsylvania field glistened, cows ambled with their plodding heads on their daily walk. There! The smoke plume of some farmer's breakfast. Oh, the view from the vein. The changed view!

Phinny's ribs throbbed, his nose was panicked in its numbness, his left hand fractured and useless, his chest hot and aching from strains and pulls, his left leg pulpy and poisoned, his body generally in a punished and unrelieved twist, but the empty seat beside him was a boon and his spirit found the ease his physic could not go.

#

He got off at Harrisburg, its big stacks smoking. He slept the first night at a bus station near the train station. The next night he paid for a cheap

motel room, but even the weekly rate would bleed his money too quickly, so he took a long shower and went back to the bus station. Knowing no hobo recipes, he paid for coffee and bread every day and even in that scheme his money bled.

After several days, he removed his bandages and looked into the dull mirror of a park restroom. The skin of his face was tortuous and plowed. The eyes were his, but the nose, the mouth, and all the rest of it were alien to him. He held his own gaze awhile in like responses of stupor and awe. He drank in a corner of the park until he wretched many times even into the day.

He allowed his head to pound and curl beyond the limit of what he imagined himself capable. The pain broke in deep night and he walked until he found the entrance of a factory. Submissive, he asked for a job and explained that he was a soldier returned from the war. He was given a night shift sweeping and emptying trash and was paid at the end of the week. The money cheered him and he took a weekly room.

He tried, but there was no conviviality, no fraternity, nothing Phinny could feel was worth the beastly toil. This is not why a man was born, he thought, to labor in a cement plant, to risk and slave all night, to sleep with curtains down through the day, to do it for children you will never know because you are slaving, to thoughtlessly fabricate another man's idea. This is my punishment, he thought. This is what I have earned. No. This is not why a man was born.

He stood at the rail of a bridge but did not jump.

He went to his shabby room where no one greeted him. He called wise all the people who did not greet him. He wondered how to call a prostitute and how much it would cost.

The room was undecorated so he thought maybe he should buy some pictures. The realist and the romantic in him had words. The realist saw himself bent and joyless in a few years like so many of the men at the factory, the romantic was disgusted. Romantics are often disgusted. He took last night's cans of beer to the trash and returned to the room.

#

Early October gave way to mid-October, which fell hard on Harrisburg. He began to walk around the little two-story motel and he felt total exhaustion but some power coming back into his blown body. Some minor healing had gone down in there. He wanted to run but could not. He sat on his floor and tried a sit-up but the pain would not allow it.

For the first time since, he thought of old Tom who had failed. He thought of the child who may or not be in Cleveland Heights now. He wanted to stop thinking.

#

He was paid on Friday and back at the motel by six. Dull light was showing clouds over the whole dome and he shut the curtains tight. A mutated pain was in his ribs. His body was performing some more operations on itself and though it didn't involve his will, it held his attention. There were constrictions of the veins, more congealing of the blood in the sides of the facial wounds, chapping of the lips where they'd split, throbs in the ribs, and groans in the belly. There were also more pricks and throbs of the spirit, like licks from the jilted lover the conscience.

He woke and without thinking gathered his things into his bag and went to the Greyhound station. The Greyhound gathers the directionless and moves them.

The station was bare save the grime. Phinny was dirty, but his boots were solid. He sat in a chair and waited, not knowing for what. He found a newspaper. He laughed at the God-fearing businessmen complaining they weren't yet fat enough to avoid sliding through the needle's eye. Phinny thought they were wrong.

The war pages were several. Here a dead boy, there a dead boy. There's a girl, she's dead too. Here a hero, presumably, and there's another! The names of two dead (may they also be heroes!): AARON, James A., 29, Cpt. Army National Guard; Lawrence, KS; Second Battalion, 127th Infantry Regiment. DISON, Frank N., 19, Navy; Twin Falls, ID...

No mention of his old muse Horace J. Januck.

He sat all day as small crowds and lone stragglers came and went.

What has seeped into all your sorrowed eyes?, he thought as he looked at them. Is there no reversing of this slow death we're on? Heroin? Alcohol? Hail Marys? Alimony? The problem of the soldier?

Indeed, yes, he thought, slowly and softly the problem of the soldier gathers and subordinates the subjects of the land into a constant thought of it, as if it were a forming storm. The ring of far-off bullets deafened the ears of the people at the station, their whirring gnawed at the faces, they carved the lines we blame on age. Shame at the bullets pulled at the mouths and impotence at stopping it drowsed the eyes.

He gave some change he could scarcely afford to an ugly old man who said he wanted it for liquor. Phinny appreciated the candor. He lay on a bench as the dim afternoon light flagged.

The night came and he hazily considered that he had not moved in hours. He had not pursued, he had not strategized, he had done nothing. An impulse came to move, but he stamped it. Thoughts came and went. Were they thoughts? Shards of meaning came and went, and a mental drifting to whatever they whispered. His back got sore and he let it, enjoying its throb, until somehow he was up and wandering madly, unsure, scared.

Do not go back to the motel, he thought. Do not go back to anywhere you have ever been.

He found the train tracks and walked along them in the dismal and cold night. He smoked cigarettes to ward off hunger until they were gone. He had taxed his body too much and he was very cold. There was nothing near but littered trees and the tracks. Occasionally a train thundered by. He lay in the cover of small brush and tried to sleep, but could not.

He pulled from his bag a book that had never made much sense to him but that he'd felt compelled to keep and carry. By his lighter's flame, he read sweet Marina:

They all lie in a row,
no line between them,
I recognize that each was a soldier.
But which is mine? Which one is another's?

This man was White now he's become Red.

Blood has reddened him.

This one was Red now he's become White.

Death has whitened him.

and then...

And so from right and left

Behind ahead

together, White and Red, one cry of

-Mother!

He wished the old impenetrable Russian could be his mother, that he had been able to choose, and that he could be her son. He believed she would have chosen him, or that she actually did, but that their meeting was prevented.

And then feverishly he turned the pages of his scraps to Januck, who in equal mystery had become his brother.

Horace Jonathan Januck, 20, of East Lansing, Michigan, son of Edward and Celia Januck, a former left guard at East Lansing High School and captain of special teams, known to his friends as Johnny.

A tall, strong boy who from an early age loved model trains and planes, and once placed first in a county-wide model train competition for his construction of a one hundred and twenty-three foot train track, modeled on the Southern Pacific line of 1883, which ran from the old South to the far western territories of the young nation. Pvt. Januck was last seen by his company...

If it's true there is neither Jew nor Greek, no man nor woman, no rich nor poor, there must be no mother nor son, no son nor father, no brother nor sister. Or they are all mothers, sons, fathers, brothers, to each other.

A resolve came upon him.

I will go to this Edward and Celia Januck, these bereaved parents of a disappeared hero, and I will be their son. Let them call me by their son's name, but let me make no impersonation of him. Let me only offer all I have —a name, a body, whatever of my mind and heart is good—and let me not offer anything I can't give. Let it be simple and let us therefore know that love that is beyond in spirit and purpose the bonds of blood or lineage. Let us rehearse the adoption into the family the sweetfaced and warhungry devil tries so ceaselessly to prevent.

That was that.

#

The bus from Harrisburg to Lansing was two long nights, with many stops and fields through the windows, a searching through books and stories impossible to believe, and he kept his head tucked into his coat for nearly the whole ride.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN – LANSING

The train arrived in East Lansing, Michigan, at a dual Greyhound/ Amtrak station, at 11:40 p.m. Phinny stepped off the bus and saw a sign: Lansing-East Lansing. It was a little, gray, unmanned station apparently on the outskirts. A couple travelers joined their people. Carlights lit the place then sped off.

He turned around. There was a QD Quality Dairy. A Kim's Oriental Market. Woody's Oasis, a sandwich shop, closed.

He picked a direction and walked up a street called Harrison. It led into the heart of a university. Perhaps this was the university Horace would have gone to on army money. Phinny was excited and nervous, but he thought he should get some sleep.

He found a dumpster and lay his head down. His bag was his pillow. Horace's paper was in it. Probably his name would never reappear in the national print. Maybe in twenty years, when his teeth are found and identified by a drilling team. Or maybe tomorrow, and then it will appear on those inside pages in that sad small font in the box, and then it will disappear. This paper will need to be disposed of and forgotten about, Phinny thought.

He woke with the sun. It had dropped some awful degrees in the night and the day was cold. He walked back to the QD Quality Dairy and got coffee. As cars passed, he was strangely conscious of Edward or Celia driving by and his ripped face somehow pinning itself into their memory and working them against him. He wondered what kind of people they were. From which side of the tracks? Rich? Poor? Old parents? Young? Stupid? Intelligent? Disposed to myth?

He wandered away from the university and the Michigan road turned forested and lonely. This was a big country and not so different than Ohio. He wandered straight into a place called Crego Park. It was dark under the trees, the sky's gray mostly blanked out by the canopy and though he shivered and was very fatigued and afraid, he wanted some last moment with the version of himself he had called Phinneus.

I am Buddha, he thought. Maybe I will just sit here, day after day. No, a sham, he also thought. Maybe I misunderstand the concept, but if I do understand it, I believe we were not made for such things.

He craved company.

The night was coming down and even as he trembled he found himself curled and committed to staying the night there.

It was a long, long night. He was afraid. He wished he was by a dumpster again in a wicked city. Unmanned nature scared him. He tried to burrow in and his thoughts went everywhere.

Eventually, he slept, and then he walked out of Crego. It was noon.

I need a map, he thought, and a phone book and a thicker jacket. Perhaps a shower, a fire, a bed. Ice was in the wind.

He found the map and the phone book. Printed clear as the blood on the doorway, JANUCK Edward and Celia, and the address. He checked the map. He was close! He could even walk! He had to go straight through the

university where eager students, angry students, disaffected students, many students of all kinds, hurried everywhere.

The campus seemed big. His legs were tired and his ribs ached again. He reached an intersection where to get to the Januck's he should have crossed straight but he made an impulsive left and then he was on the sidewalk of a busy street with many shops. A Halloween parade was on. Even in the cold, these Lansingites, or Lansingonians—he didn't even know—had some spirit! Ninja kids walked by with bags full of candy. Jacketed parents stood sipping coffee or hot chocolate and a band played. This is your kind of town, he thought. But he wanted to stay shadowed still, in case Edward and Celia were there. He sat in an alley with his jacket pulled around his face and the sounds of some band bouncing off the walls.

Forgive me, Horace. I mean no theft. I really do not. I accept with deepest gratitude your sacrifice for me. Thank you. Forgive me, Phinneus. Forgive me, CJ. He threw the paper away.

#

He walked back to the intersection where he'd made the impulsive left. He took the map out again, turned, crossed the intersection, looked at his boots, looked into the eyes of the town, and had no idea of his fate. None at all.

He was in a fine, stately neighborhood with curving roads, two and three-storied homes, lighted windows, huge yards. It was beautiful and rich. Phinny would have shuddered and spit and he nearly did, but that was the point, so he fished out a smoke and stood under an oak. He scanned for addresses and walked another block to the corner of Alton and Whitehills and was there.

There was the house. It was handsome and fine. It was wooden, white, and green-trimmed, with a red door. An oak and asphalt street. A flag out front. A light in the window but none on the porch. He stood at the bottom of the stone walkway. Grow up, buddy, he said to himself. He sang the song of Phinneus, which goes

Song of Phinneus

... ,,

And then he went up the walkway and rang the door of good Father Edward and good Mother Celia, brave countrymen, holy kin. He readied himself to stand nameless and make his pronouncement that he is Horace Jonathan, the lost son, and to receive the thrash of rejection or the kiss of welcome, and to know that nothing ever ends, not lies nor sins, nor courage nor sacrifice, but that new seasons do come and after all there is the subsuming of man into man.

PART TWO

CHAPTER ONE

I was on Jane's porch, then I was on Chuck's. Owned by Jim, but I say its Chuck's porch. I'll take another pop, Chuck!, I called out. Bring me a can of pop!

Jim came out with his phone on his belt. Some kind of platoon flanked him, or royal entourage or something, everybody must have thought his phone was a gun on a holster. He probably thought it actually was, and probably I bet it is, the way he's got everything arranged. But I tell Chuck No, buddy, he's just a dumb ass, he's no king.

Jim took the time to settle square on his feet, back and forth and back and forth with his legs spread so a punch to his chest wouldn't move him and then he said Hal, Jane will be here in one hour, I suggest you clean up. You hear me? I suggest you make yourself presentable. And clean up this porch, too.

Then Chuck opened the screen door and said, Got your pop, Uncle Hal!

But then he saw Jim standing there and he went back inside. Jim didn't even move. Those important feet were planted, boy, planted.

You hear me, Hal? I suggest you clean yourself up!

He suggested I clean *myself* up. Not just clean up, clean *myself* up. There was a lot of lead in that bullet, Jim doesn't say something if he doesn't mean it.

Got something in your ears, Hal? I'm talking to you.

No, I can't hear you.

I said clean yourself up and clean up this porch. Your wife will be here in an hour.

Why? I look fine, I told him.

You need a shave and you should at least change your shirt. And you think she wants to sit around a table full of crumbs? And look at that, a floor full of crumbs, too.

Chuck, stay back!, I yelled.

Hal, you got ten minutes to start cleaning yourself up or I'm gonna drag you in there by your armpits and spray you down.

A wrecking ball couldn't knock Jim over. Nothing can knock him over and he won't leave until he's done talking, so then he left. He left with his army and banners.

Chuck, coast is clear!

Chuck came out with the pop and the cribbage board.

Play?, he says.

Let's play, I said, let's play.

Jane was coming over, I was capable of understanding that and I was capable of understanding how I should look when she came. A whole bunch of things I'm very capable of understanding. We make a child and watch it until it's big enough to leave us. We keep it clean and safe and then it leaves apparently because it wants to and that leaves us I guess on different porches at the end of the day, me in my favorite shirt whenever I want.

It's not too tough to remember the other porch, the porch on the house I paid for, the porch on the house I built, the porch on the house I protected for twenty damn years so the woman and the kid could sit there and be safe from the damn monsters and it's not too tough to remember the kid on a summer evening all dripping from having run or punched the bag in the garage sitting there with us on the porch with some lemonade and Janey and I think, We did good, we did real good, here's a healthy, strong kid, got life in his eyes, and Janey might reach out and brush a strand of hair from his face and tell him he needs a haircut. Fine. Fine and easy to remember. Pride. Christ.

Good luck. Good luck if you think you got them walled in. Real good luck. Good luck finding some property. Good luck thinking it doesn't matter, good luck thinking it does. Real good luck.

#

A year or so ago, how long, maybe two years? Janey's reaching across the table on the porch to remove a strand of hair from his face. Young face, but taking on the lines of men. She's always reaching toward him.

You need a haircut, it looks like, she said to him.

Yeah, probably, he said.

But he was busy at school and figured he wouldn't get the haircut until the weekend.

I just like to see your handsome face, she said.

It was a handsome face.

Good luck if you think you got him walled in. Any of them. He grew, he gathered. A million experts—all of them primed for the fall, by the way—will hock you their stories of luck. If you try to stop him, he'll crush you. If you let him go, he'll suck all the energy out of you like he's a rocket and you're the launch pad sitting there stinking of fuel and smoldering when everybody's gone and he's up in space. Best thing is to distract him. Or maybe that's what we did, maybe that's the problem. I don't know. And that's the point, there are some things I know and some things I don't, just don't at all. But he grew, he gathered, everything got wrecked. Good luck in finding property. Good luck in thinking it doesn't matter, if that's what you think. Really good luck.

#

In the before time, I staked out the boundaries of our property and measured the distances so I could know just what we got. But I did it after we bought the place, and you know what I found? The real estate lady lied to us on the north side, which was by the kitchen window. There were five feet, some of it belonging to a gas meter. We paid for that five feet but it wasn't ours! It was bad zoning. Now look, though. In the front, there was six feet of yard that we did *not* pay for but that *was* ours. I measured it many ways. Long ago, this all seemed like a good sign, but it wasn't, it was a sign of failure to check and make sure. That's what it was. You make a big purchase, and you trust a real estate agent?! That's what you do when you

make your big, responsible, sentencing, menacing purchase? That's the way to do it? And a purchase you'll keep making in increments monthly for the next twenty years? You miss the crucial detail of what it is you are actually buying? You're a genius, I told myself. I let it go in time, as my bowels softened. But I walked the length and width of it so many times and there it always was, the five feet of gyp and the six feet of dumb luck. Guess we got lucky. But luck is not what you aim for. A man who aims at luck is worse than the coward who steals, isn't he? A guy can be lucky, but not on purpose. I walked along the border when I could, when I'd water the lawn, or after work to stretch my legs. A porch in the middle, with iced tea, usually, okay. Sit down and have a glass. It's the same everywhere, basically, with borders and towers or tunnels circled by them, owned by the partnership of banks and men, here a king there a king. Of porches, I was without one, then I had one, then later I was on Jim's, not my own anymore, but I was there so there I was. Things change around me but I don't change.

#

We had a kid. We named him CJ, after Jane's father. The kid grew, ate, did what it was supposed to do. The kid looked up to his cousin Chuck when Chuck was a kid, too. The kid played baseball, hockey, did chores, complained about some stuff like chores, the kid climbed his tree, had his dog for awhile, the kid was what she reached for constantly, I spread my hand from the porch to the lawn and behind my head to encompass the whole property and said, This can be yours. Maybe three bedrooms and 1800 square feet wasn't good enough? Maybe that's what it was.

The kid grew, the kid worried about money before it was time, the kid fantasized about everything, then he left, he was gone, and when we looked

after he was gone we saw years sitting on the yard, sitting in the tree, on the porch, on the couch, growing in the pipes like mold. We didn't know where the kid went and we couldn't find him. Not for lack of effort, but it was like a million trails starting from the door of our house and every one would take a lifetime to follow, but pictures charting his growth were right there on all the walls and so were the pencil marks all the way up to six feet, and I could try to forget and pretend that I hadn't been kicked in the groin or I could indulge it and bang the walls, but the kid was gone and now I had this woman who I both knew in every way and who was well beyond alien to me and this woman was reaching, reaching, and retching in the stew.

#

I was on her porch, then I was on Jim's porch. Jim marches to the fanfare of make-believe trumpets. He is so good at it I can almost feel the wind and smell the breath of the player, but no, it was imaginary. But he still rules his subjects. I was a subject when I was twelve and he was fifteen, I am one now. He had the body then, he has the money now. His father and mine raised us on the idea of what you could do if you could someday buy and he bought 'em! He bought 'em! Yes he did! He's got 'em! And he bought 'em! And he's got the right answer and he spots all the clues, and his youngest son has a medal on his shirt and pants full of shit, but that son of his is my buddy and he sits on the porch with me, not my porch, but Jim's porch, where I then lived cause my porch is Jane's porch but she doesn't want me there anymore, due to many reasons.

No, thank you, no thank you, I said to Jim. No, I don't want to, I said when he insisted. I don't know what he was insisting on, it didn't matter, that's what they didn't understand, I didn't want to, I was fine the way I

was, but they'll keep bugging me and bugging me until I say, Sure, fine, and then go alongside them however they want me to. I had a porch, yes I did, a ribbon on the giftbox of my house, but it didn't last and I was moved over to Jim's porch.

Chuck sat down and said, Tell me a good one, Uncle Hal.

I'll tell you something, Chuck, I said. I wanted again to ask him about the war and what he'd seen, but he rarely offered that information, especially when he wasn't drunk, and definitely not with Jim in the house.

No, no, Uncle Hal, come on. You want to play cribbage?

Sure, sure, I said.

So Chuck shuffled the cards and got the pegs ready. I cut the cards and then he dealt. I put down a 6, then he put down a 4, then I put down a 5, which means I made both a run (4-5-6) and made the cards add up to 15 (4+5+6=15), so I got 3 pegs for the run and 2 pegs for the 15, for a total of 5 pegs, and I laughed in delight and Chuck shook his head, then I said, Chuck, you know better than that.

I know, I know.

He could be a good player if he'd just concentrate. Then he put down a Jack and he was in the money for one peg cause it was last card and I had nothing smaller than a 6. And this, cribbage, after I was removed from my own house with Janey due to my being a menace to Janey's well-being and due to my being a menace, according to Janey and Jim, to my own well-being, was my real area of expertise. So in the next hand, I also outpegged Chuck, and not just because I had better cards, but because what cards I had I played better.

I said, Chuck, oh man my nails have gotten long. And Chuck said, Mine too. And Chuck and I sat there with long nails. Chuck was getting drunk. I ripped the tip off one of my nails so I didn't look like a woman. I showed

Chuck the nail and said, That's some nail, Chuck. And Chuck said, That's an impressive nail, Uncle Hal. So I ripped off some more when he was taking his turn and each time I did it he thought it was funnier and funnier, so when I was done with my fingers I took off my shoes and started on my feet.

Chuck cracked up when I undid my shoes but then he said, Uncle Hal, Dad is gonna get mad at you for that.

Jim can go screw himself!, I said, and he laughed, because he and I knew how we really felt about his father, who was the Lord of the Manor.

Chuck, I said, we got each other here. I can't have everybody telling me what I can't do.

Uncle Hal, do it! Take off your shoes and rip off those nails, man.

And I said, Yeah! Yeah! Yeah! And I ripped the tips off because we'd both been beaten down by the iron fist of my brother and his father, Jim, who I came to believe had always been a monster. He thinks because he made a lot of money he's the President of the United States, but he's not. And then of course Jim came out of the house with his phone strapped to his belt.

Okay, Hal, he said, time to shave cause Jane's coming over.

Janey is my wife of twenty-five years, but then Janey came to Jim's to visit me.

Up we go, said Jim.

Up we go!, I said.

Jim looked at Chuck and his junkyard of beer cans around the cribbage board.

Just enjoying the great outdoors with your uncle?, Jim said sarcastically to Chuck, who in these inquisitions always puts his head down and doesn't look up. Jim picked up a can and shook it so he could feel there was a little bit of undrank beer in there.

You got a little left in this one, Chuck. Can't let it go to waste! It's already four-thirty in the afternoon, you got some catching up to do, don't you?

Jim looked like God set to strike.

Come on, Chuck, what kind of a man are you if you can't drink a whole case before the sun goes down? What kind of Marine are you?, Jim said.

As Jim put his big hand under my armpit and I started to get up I yelled at Chuck, You should keep your hair trim so he remembers what you DID!

Chuck didn't even look up at this, but his haircut, which had been so valorously trimmed and kempt like it should be when you represent your country, shagged down over his eyes which he kept on the table. I stood there with Jim's hands under my armpits and Jim stood there breathing at Chuck. Finally Chuck stood up, not looking at Jim, walked off the porch, and took his keys out of his pockets.

You better not be driving anywhere!, Jim said. You're gonna kill an innocent person!

Chuck got into his car and Jim let me go. He walked off the porch down the steps and I sat down and tried to pitch my toenails into the beer can, like I was trying to win a goldfish at the carnival. Jim knocked on the window of the car but Chuck wasn't starting it up, he was just sitting there listening to the radio, I guess. He just wanted fortress from the enemy. Jim came back and said, Don't get comfortable, Hal, we gotta get you shaved for Jane.

Bring me some hot glue!

Let's go, Hal. And then his big hands were under my armpits again and I almost punched him. I really just shook him off, though, and I walked into the stupid bathroom myself.

Time to shave cause of Janey. I see. My oh my, the hairs get waterlogged, don't they?, look at that, they look like wood pulp at a logging

zone, look at that, okay, all right, here we go, wait, let me... No? Sure. I was all nice and shaved and he told me to put on some shaving lotion but I refused. He insisted though and hit the wall so I just did it and then I smelled like the prince I am and then went back onto the porch and sat there while Jim cleaned up Chuck's beer cans for Janey. Chuck was still in the car with his head back and sleeping. I thought, He could get cold like that, because it was March and the nights were still cool. When Jim finished clearing the cans, he sat down and looked at me.

Cribbage?, I said to him.

No, Hal.

So I started dealing myself a game. I was gonna play the game without him, that's what I was capable of now!

Best thing is for Chuck to go back in, Jim said. I'm praying they call him back in. Before he went in, he was rootless. Then he was a man, now he's rootless again.

Is it just this house?

I don't know.

I know, and it's not. What are you gonna do about Janey?

Kiss her right on the mouth.

Hal.

Jim shook his head and looked at me crosswise. His wife had left him a long, long time ago, and every once in awhile, when he wasn't busy commanding his lieges and squires, or when he forgot he deserved it, he thought he and I had something in common. It doesn't always go the way we plan it, does it?, he said.

You're telling me.

Sometimes. But I look around here and this house is what I was planning on. I set a goal, I worked, and I got it. You did the same thing.

I did?

Sure.

What'd I get?

The goal you set was not as ambitious as mine. It just wasn't. From the very beginning, it just was not as ambitious as mine was. That's all. You were satisfied with less, in a way.

I was?

Yes, Hal, you were.

I am!

You are?

I am!

You are satisfied with less?

Yes, I am!

I flicked remaining toenails off the table onto the ground but he was thinking about what didn't satisfy him. I don't know that it was true, what he was saying. We weren't in such different shape, we both had nothing we'd expected to have, and didn't have anything we had expected to have. Except for property. Though it looked like I didn't have that anymore, since Janey wasn't wanting me to live at our house anymore. But Jim's youngest kid was passed out at dusk in a car forty feet away, locked away from his dad, who let's not forget he had defended against people who wanted to kill him. I don't know what all we have, except property, which were only structures then. I guess the structures were still there. And his property and the structures on it were bigger than mine. Therefore emptier! Oh, a one up on Jim, that's absolutely funny. So I started to laugh.

What are you laughing about, Hal?, Jim said.

Nothing.

Nothing?

Nope!, and I continued to laugh.

Nothing seems pretty funny, huh, buddy?

Thinking about how you got a bigger lawn and a bigger house than I do and less in it!

He rippled his jaw like the king and looked around. Then he said, Two of my sons are living righteous lives. One is married, one is making money.

The other one, I said, is my favorite.

Knock it off, Hal.

I gotta tell you something, Jimmy, I said, and lowered myself in. I never told you this before, and maybe it doesn't matter, but lemme just tell you right now. Chuck has always been my favorite of your sons. Always. Now more than ever. By far. By light years!

Stop it, Hal.

No, no, I think you should know what a delight he is.

Stop it, Hal.

I don't understand. You like him less?

I love all my kids.

But if I said Craig was my favorite, would you be amazed that I didn't say Christopher? Or if I said Christopher, would you be amazed I didn't say Craig? Chuck is the hero, Jim.

I know he is, Hal.

He's got the best personality. You can actually talk to him. What's it worth if you don't have a personality? Like Craig! You ever try talking to him? What good is he?

That's enough, Hal.

Okay, okay, Chuck's going through a rough spot. Okay, big deal. But he's the best one. The rest of them are just assholes like a lot of other people.

And then I laughed because he was the other people I was talking about, and then I laughed more because I knew he knew he was the one I was talking about, and it was like we were speaking the clearest language we'd spoken since he kicked my ass when we were kids and I told him I hated him.

That's fine, Hal. Thank you for your input. I want you to concentrate on getting yourself together and getting back into your home, Hal. That's what I want you to concentrate on.

Now the important thing here is that sometime after CJ had disappeared or vanished or ran away Janey had taken in a strange kid—a kid we'd never known—a young kid—and this kid was living in a house that everybody was saying was mine. Her reaching had found its mark on this kid.

I want you to pull yourself together and get back into your house, Jim said.

So I said, I'd miss Chuck too much!

You're a fraud, Hal.

The kid is a fraud.

Janey loves him, that's all you have to know.

You work, Jim. Right? Now listen to me. You worked, and built something, like you said. Did you build it for everybody or did you build it for your own goddamn flesh and blood?

Yes.

Yes what? Yes what? Yes what?

I built it for my sons and my wife.

So did I!, I said. I didn't build it for anybody but my kid and my wife.

I sat back satisfied.

You ought to wear a coat, Jim said.

I'd been living with Jim for a few months then and I was becoming huge and much bigger than him in every way. I was expanding. I was constant, I was remaining very constant in heart and mind, except I was getting bigger and bigger and I became very funny. I'd spent so much time running around and thinking about provisions and supplies and all that when I was younger and when I had CJ and Janey, I never let my sense of humor develop as good as it had since Janey and Jim brought me here. Even the little toenail stuff with Chuck was a stroke of genius. You have to know your audience, but other than that, Jim ran around trying to patch up the leaky boat and I sat there and let it leak, and that's where the power is, I am telling as one who knows. No way in hell I was giving everything I ever made to an imposter or a charity case. If that is not believable, I didn't realize I was surrounded by a population of Ghandis.

Jim gave me my coat and I put it on more to show him that I wasn't going inside than because I was cold. Then Janey's car came up and Jim helped her up the house though she didn't need any help. I messed with the cribbage board and Janey sat down.

How are you?, she said.

I'm good.

Jim went in the house and Chuck still slept in the car.

Look at that, Jane, Chuck's sleeping in the car, I said and chuckled.

Look at that, she said. Is he okay?

Chuck? He's fine!

You two play cards today?

Oh, yeah. Yes we were.

Who won?

I was winning but we didn't finish cause Jim came out and read him the riot act.

Maybe he deserved it.

When Jim reads you the riot act, you never deserve it.

Maybe.

I wouldn't wish Jim's riot act on Hitler.

Okay, Hal.

We sat there awhile. The whole thing is very clear, crystal clear to me. So then what is there to say? And this is another arena in which I feel that I am just becoming gigantic. Just sitting there and letting the other animals crawl all over me while I am fixed and rigid. And if they decided not to crawl on me, but just to go away, I would continue to sit there pleased, and this is a hallmark of the strong.

Now, in our silence, I humorously looked out of the corner of my eye down to where her little hand rested in her lap and BOOM! my expectation was right. She was clutching the bunch of coat in her lap. The woman just needs to grasp. And finally, as I knew it would, up it came and reached out and brushed my hair. She muttered Hal, Hal and continued to brush my hair over and over again. Then she stopped and pulled her chair closer and it scraped mercilessly on the cement porch until it actually hit my chair where I sat rigid. Then she brushed my hair again and put her arm around me. Tough to understand. Very tough to understand.

Yes, sir, I said, Jim can definitely be full of puke when it comes to Chuck.

Hal. Hal, I don't like this, she said.

Got a question for you, Janey, I said. The kid robbed you yet?

No, Hal.

Is the place burned down yet?

No, Hal. I want you to stop that.

I spit to the right of me and she sat there with her hand on my arm and then she put her head on my shoulder, but without much conviction, and I could understand the lack of conviction, but it was tough to understand the overall gesture since she didn't want me to live in her house anymore. But it was an infested house anyway.

CHAPTER TWO

Before, when CJ and Chuck were kids, before both of them went, CJ always looked up to Chuck. Chuck was a few growth spurts ahead of CJ. CJ got bigger than Chuck ever got, but before that Chuck had energy and strength, he was like an early model Mustang. On the day after the house nearly burnt down, which was my stupid fault, Chuck was there with shovels and brooms and a big radio and CJ just thought he was it, and he was it, and he still is it, just his father is too noble to turn his neck all the way down there to see him. Chuck was wild too, and I knew that, but it was a young man's wildness, which is mostly harmless I think. If a young man ends up dead, you got a case of too much wildness, but Chuck did not end up dead. When the war came, he joined, and that was probably the right thing to do. Even Jim seemed a little proud of him. Craig was a lawyer then, Chris was making money every time he took a breath. Just a couple years ago. But Chuck was such a glowing guy. Yes, sure, trouble, yes, but he also had the kind of innocent spark that seems like the whole thing. Other than me, Chuck was CJ's main hero. I'm sure CJ saw right through Jim, and he saw through me a little too. But there was nothing to see through with Chuck cause there was nothing to him. He wanted to be like Chuck and anybody would.

When he came back it was like he got run over. But we got to see him on the one day there was a big change in him. Before he left, he had long

scraggly hair and a loping way of walking. But on the day before he left, he showed up on our doorstep with a shaved head and a whole new posture. His posture had respect in it. It was startling. He sat with us on the porch for about half an hour. He had other people to see, of course, but he gave a small yellow ribbon to Janey and me that he said could be a reminder if we wished to pray for him and everybody else serving. It was something memorized from another source, but that was part of its power. It was good. I watched CJ pretty carefully. He was in new manhood, which can happen to a boy in wartime, and he listened to Chuck like Chuck had authority. Janey went and I followed to the kitchen and listened at the window. It was weapons Chuck was set to learn. He was honestly not afraid, in response to CJ's question, but not in a bravura way, in a ready and calmly excited way. He had to go. Janey gave him a warm hug. CJ was too young, but he sat and imagined himself with his hair chopped, with his suit pressed, with the bloody heads of people who wanted to hurt his mother in a ring around his boots. And he saw himself, I believe, back on the porch, back on the porch!, knowing he had protected it and made it possible, while he and Chuck received well-wishers like veterans sometimes do.

And Chuck was gone awhile with no kind of consequential reports in either direction. CJ was on a workout regimen and was getting stronger and stronger. There was some girl from the high school who was cute that he went around with, and I was hoping the muscles were for that and not for some other kind of victory.

He asked me to take him to work with me, but I refused. You can grease monkeys and all that kind of stuff whenever you want, they'll take you, it's no big honor. But I thought maybe he could do something with his brains, cause they were good. Maybe he had too many brains, maybe they were poisoned from a long time ago, though that's not what I think. I hoped he'd

use his brains, do something like that. A foreman needs brains, he said. What the hell you want to be a foreman for?, I said. For one thing, a foreman doesn't start off as a foreman, a foreman risks his fingers and does stupid work for years and if he has a brain left sometimes he gets promoted and gets to be a foreman. He makes bigger money, but still what the hell is the big deal? I don't know a single foreman who wouldn't retire this second if he could. I don't know a single foreman who doesn't buy lottery tickets. And if you want to do that, still plenty of time, plenty of time. I said, No. No, bud, no. You aren't coming to work with me. No, bud. No.

And then it was announced Chuck would be home on leave. And then he came home and we didn't see him for awhile, even though we were all itching to. Jim said, Gotta let him rest, he doesn't want visitors.

#

We didn't see him until it was the day of Craig's wedding. Craig was finally doing what his groin or conscience instructed and marrying his girl. CJ was all dressed up in his tie and Jane was very happy with her two men.

At the reception, it was a sunny day out at a park and everybody was drinking beer and eating cookies, celebrating and feeling good with the family around. Jane got along with the women and there were enough kids for CJ to play with that were his age—more than enough—but I guess he was past the age of playing. He was muscular and tall but he didn't want to play. Everything about growing up is sad and a trick. All CJ wanted to do was sit with Chuck.

But Chuck was always going off alone, away from people slapping him on the back and saying Thank you, Chuck. Thank you for your sacrifice. To which he would not almost like he was surprised. Oh, thanks, thanks. But

people at least to my observation never went too too far with it, they allowed Chuck some breathing room and didn't make too big a deal about his real sacrifice when it was his brother's fake sacrifice we were all celebrating, stupidly. But Chuck was choking down beer and cigarettes like a real sailor, even though he wasn't a sailor, and that's what we all said: Well, Chuck's a real hero, watch him go, boy, when he wasn't around. And he usually wasn't around. He was usually on the other side of the cinder block wall with his buddy. The place where they had the picnic was separated into quadrants by cinder walls and Chuck sat almost the entire time on the wall on the other side of where everybody else sat.

But CJ was more interested in Chuck than in anybody else. He used to play on the rocks or run around and perform for everybody or climb on the trees and impress everybody with his quick jokes and his handsomeness, but this summer day he was fixated on this pasty-looking cousin soldier who was constantly drinking and smoking. Where was Chuck I wanted to know! Well, there he was. Now, it's true, below the paste and purple eyes there was a real hero, but the paste was thick. He also had an invisible kind of armor around him. I came to learn that Jim axed everyday on that armor and I don't think that's an effective strategy. I also came to learn you can't be always be a handsome young hero and that's how it goes.

It may have been as much CJ's age. And I'm sure it was a lot his constant reading and devotion to imagining the war. But it's chicken and egg, too. Well, me and CJ were talking to his second aunt twice removed and fat or whoever she was flapping her mouth without ending but somehow still cleaning a plate of grapes *and* cookies at the same time without anybody else able to get a word in so CJ and I strolled over to where the boys were – Jim, Craig, Chuck, and just one other, a buddy of Chuck's, his one buddy I came to learn. That's where the men were and

naturally I wanted to go there. As soon as CJ and I got there the laughter in the conversation stopped and people looked down and everyone there, not the least of them me and my son, and by the way their blood, too, knew how uncomfortable the whole situation was, so I just looked at everybody and put my eyes up and shrugged and said, Hey there, as if to say, Well, I know where I'm not wanted, but I'll be goddamned if my own flesh and blood are gonna tell me to leave, especially with my son here. And then Jim declared a condescending edict of, It's all right, Hal. And then somebody changed the subject and Chuck chased an ash away from the group.

What're you learning in school, CJ?, Craig the groom said and I admit I was a little pleased of CJ for scowling out his answer, Boxing.

That let the steam go.

Really?, somebody said.

Nah.

It was announced that the chicken on the barbecue was ready. Once Chuck was cleared from the group, Jim looked down from his white horse and said, Chuck has seen some hard combat. And it almost seemed like all those boys' eyes were glistening and if they weren't they were way down deep in their faces, although I could tell there was a little of Jim's old competitive pride in his eyes, too, and CJ felt that too and that's why he spit on the ground. I forgave him that, too. But the groom Craig had no pride anywhere in his face.

I wanted to know a little more about the Chuck problem later so I took a can of beer to where he was sitting with his back against the painted and repainted cinderblock wall on the other side and looking down. What were you looking at, Chuck? The cracks in the cement, Chuck? What? The ants? What?

Hey, want a can of beer, Chuck?

Sure, thanks.

He popped the can open and I wasn't sure whether to sit there with him or keep standing but I kept standing and looking down there at him with his muscles very tight and still.

How's work, Uncle Hal?, he said, and I thought, Bullshit. Bullshit, Chuck.

Oh, fine, fine. So you saw some hard combat, huh?

He said, Ah, not anymore than anybody else.

Well, if you're not gonna talk about it, I thought, what am I supposed to do about it? Am I supposed to read minds? I didn't know what to do but I was curious and he's my nephew, my own flesh and blood. He was very skinny. It seemed like he actually lost weight. He was a thin young head on a stick body.

A little eight year old kid came around the corner and despite the lollipop in his mouth he was snarling and looking from me to Chuck, back and forth.

Hey, buddy, Chuck said.

Hi.

Got yourself a lollipop.

The lollipop was the furthest thing of interest to the young kid in terms of conversation topics and his deepened scowl rebuked Chuck for bringing up such childish stuff, though he continued to suck on it. He sat down next to Chuck against the cement wall as Chuck slowed the rate of his beer drinking. I still stood awkwardly and drank even slower than Chuck. Every time I took a small gulp, for lack of anywhere better to put my eyes I stared into the can as if I could see something in there. Occasionally the little eight year old with the lollipop looked up at Chuck, and then he'd go back to snarling out over the slope of the park, at the playing kids in the distance, at

the kites flying. The whole family was behind us, we could hear the voices, and since I was standing I could see over the cinderblock divide at their shoulders, but Chuck and the kid stayed sitting. I saw CJ fending off advances from another aunt. He was bored. Everybody else was bored. Except in little minutes here and there, where some of the idealistic could get worked up over the idea that Craig and Melissa were finally married, everyone on a whole was bored. Except for Jim, who was constantly saying, No, no, a president should never be given a lifetime reign, that would be undemocratic, but thank you!, and those of us who were close to the soldier, who just some weeks or months before had been shooting and avoiding getting shot, everyone was bored. I couldn't tell if Chuck himself was bored or not.

The eight year old's entire mouth was lollipop blue when he said, Family, with a big adult shrug to myself and Chuck, as if we were in on some kind of adult joke. CJ came over to us, finally, and sat down next to the blue-mouthed kid and popped himself a beer.

Don't tell Mom, he said to me, and there was nothing I could or wanted to do about it.

The child regarded CJ and CJ said, Hi, buddy.

Were you in the war, too?, the kid said to CJ.

No. Just cousin Chuck.

It would have been amazing if his buddy had been in the war. He was a fat, very lazy-looking guy, no way a soldier. It was a dumb question from a dumb kid. Chuck gave a nod and the kid switched his eyes back over to the raw material and away from CJ, who had become totally uninteresting to him.

The kid said to Chuck, My dad said it's time for you to quit wallowing and grow up.

Chuck looked down at the kid.

Okay, Chuck said.

Tell your dad he's a jackass, Chuck's buddy said.

Then Chuck said, Just taking some time off, taking it easy, enjoying the family, enjoying the weather, brother just got married, family's here.

The kid said, Yeah, but you just sit around and party. When's it gonna end?

Which one's your dad? Sorry, it's been a long time since I've seen everybody, I don't really remember, Chuck said.

The kid stood up and walked to the edge of the cinderblock divider to point out his father but Chuck waved him off the case and said, It doesn't matter.

The kid came back and looked at Chuck but he didn't sit down. He stood right next to me and continued on his lollipop. I thought that lollipop might taste better if it was shoved down his throat.

Why don't you go find out when they're gonna do the cake, I said to the kid.

The kid honed in on Chuck. What do you think of that?, he said.

What?, Chuck said.

About you party too much.

Maybe I'll grow up one of these days.

At that Chuck and his buddy laughed.

The kid licked twice more and then apparently judged the answer satisfactory and walked away. Chuck seemed unbothered.

Hey, my man, Chuck said to CJ.

This delighted CJ, it was obvious. CJ did what he could to show the young veteran how strong his forearms had become.

Hey, Chuck.

You in school?

Yeah.

When are you done?

I'm done.

He did pretty good, too, I said.

That's good, man.

Some other little kid came chasing a paper plate around the corner and we heard the big bugle of Jim's voice nearby, beginning to address the populace regarding the majestic decree of his son's nuptial. It was time for toasts and speeches and apparently Jim couldn't find Chuck so Jim said loudly, Where is the hero? The one with the beer. I've misplaced him.

And Chuck turned to CJ and me and said loudly, What in the fuck?, and then threw his beer can and went to where his father and older brothers stood.

I said to CJ, Apparently he's seen some hard combat.

I know, I heard. Is he okay?

I think so. Likes to drink.

Well, he's a soldier.

Yes, he is.

As people began assembling for the toasts and speeches, a tall man in pressed clothes and a military haircut—this one clearly a soldier with the perfect posture to prove it—walked up to the wedding party and Chuck stepped out of their huddle and the man gave Chuck a big and very warm hug. Then they drew back and the man grasped Chuck by the shoulders and Chuck clasped his flanks. The man and Chuck let go and the man gave a firm handshake and big smile to Jim, Chris, and especially to Craig, the groom. Then he went back to Chuck and Chuck spoke to him out of our earshot and made a motion, after which the man got himself potato salad, a

hot dog, a beer, and then took a seat in the shade, where a couple of the young kids went to greet him, and he watched the stupid toasts until Chuck was done with his responsibilities. Then Chuck came down to him and they each got a beer and went back to the other side of the cinderblock wall, just the two of them, but I was beginning to enjoy being in Chuck's company, so I followed, but CJ had beat me there.

They were laughing it up when I got there. This soldier was still upright, like a steel pole had been pushed down in place of his spine. Even in his relaxation, he was regal, which made him seem ready and tough. Chuck had a foot up on the bench of the table where they sat and his body drooped down, his back slung backwards like a sack of something. Chuck's hair wasn't as long yet as it would be, but it sure wasn't the bristly fine soldier cut of this man.

When I got there they were laughing and saying something about somebody one of them had apparently known, and CJ laughed along with them, and even contributed some joke of his own, to which they all laughed. CJ looked more in his element than he had all day.

Hey, Uncle Hal, Chuck said when he saw me. He introduced me to the soldier and I sat there waiting for the good stuff, but they went on about baseball and cars and CJ piped up with a joke here and there, which they appreciated. Fucking fish, was an answer Chuck gave to a bunch of questions, one after the other, such as, What're you doing later?, You got plans this weekend?, Did you meet up with Sarah?, Are you gonna move out of your dad's house?, and each time it was funnier and funnier to them, and to CJ, too, and they continued to drink down their beer. The soldier seemed to get a little looser as it went on.

Check this out, the soldier said as he took his wallet from his pants, got out a picture, and set it down in front of Chuck. Chuck stared at it a little

while not saying anything and I couldn't get a good glimpse of it without knocking somebody over. I was getting to the point of having had my fill with the alcohol. It had been a long time since I'd really gotten drunk like these young men, and I could die without ever doing it again, so I decided I'd switch to pop but I didn't want to leave what was going on. The soldier turned the picture slightly to let CJ have a look. CJ took a big drink of beer and I could see him try to conceal his excitement.

The soldier was getting looser because he said, Chuck, gimme a fucking cigarette.

You don't smoke, Chuck laughed.

I know I don't, gimme one.

So Chuck gave him one and Chuck automatically reached the pack out to CJ and CJ lit it like a pro. I wondered what Janey would think but I kept on sitting there while they smoked. The soldier put the picture away.

This is nice, Chuck, the soldier said. You got a nice family.

Then the soldier pulled the picture out one more time and looked at it and said, It's fucking crazy!

Crazy, Chuck said.

I think the soldier was coming apart at the seams now.

And then Chuck grabbed him around the soldiers and announced to me and CJ that the soldier had saved his life, and the soldier gave him a big kiss on the forehead and made the mwah sound and then got up and walked ten feet away smoking his cigarette and watching the hill turn purple as the sun moved down beyond it.

I thought, CJ, we probably should get out of here and mind our own business, but there was no way CJ was leaving.

Jim came over to us and sat down and didn't even pay one ounce of attention, didn't think for even a second, that we all may have been

discussing something worthwhile or enjoyable while he was up fraternizing and playing the big man, so he immediately upon sitting down began talking, and he talked about it being a special day of blessings and good feelings, all of which was true! Sure, but it was the blessings he killed by flapping his mouth over all the other sounds and undercutting his whole point. So everybody nodded.

Probably be you one day, Jim said to CJ, meaning marriage.

We'll see, he said.

What, you don't want to get married?, he said, as if his own wife hadn't left him.

Oh, I don't know, I'm just saying we'll see.

Now, I forgot, Kemplin, he said to the soldier. Are you married?

No, sir.

Girlfriend?

No, sir.

Jim clicked or something, as if to say that the soldier better not be using his honor to run around.

Chuck whispered and the soldier laughed and protested. Then the soldier settled his laughter and turned back respectfully to Archbishop Father Pastor Jim.

You know, Chuck, there are a lot of people here who would love to say hello to you who you haven't seen yet. I'm glad you're spending time with Hal and CJ but a lot of these people came a long way to see the family, not just Craig and Melissa, but all of you boys, and some of them especially you, you know.

Yeah.

But you've been barricading yourself over here past the wall and drinking, what, how many beers you had? I'm sure they'd like to meet Kemplin too.

Okay.

How many beers have you had?

I don't know.

The answer, I knew, was a bunch. In a way you want him to get violent and give it to Jim straight, but he always just got dull.

Well, look at me, I said.

Chuck kept looking down.

The life-saving soldier insisted to the father that the drunk was okay. But the father wanted to see for himself, even though the drunk was sitting right there. He had quite a bit, but he wasn't falling over, he wasn't passed out, and he would be all right. It was a picnic anyway, what did you want, Jim? But the father wanted to see his eyes and finally Jim reached out his righteous hand and put it on Chuck's soldier so that Chuck quickly turned, like you push a button, and opened his eyes and rolled them back for his father, who held onto his shoulder for a good minute and then said, I'd take you in if I were a cop, you should say hello to your family. And then Jim walked away and tapped his pop can along the table edge and fingered his phone on his belt. Before he was too far away he was shouting something to Chris and Chris passed him a football which he caught above the table before it would have hit things off.

What does he want me to do, go around shaking everybody's hand and saying you're welcome?, Chuck said.

I don't know, man, the soldier said, like he knew the drill. CJ shrugged.

Hi, Aunt Ellie, nice to see you, boy you look nice, oh yeah, good to be back, yeah, it was rough, no, no, it was okay, it was fine, yeah, well, I mean

it wasn't fine, that's the wrong word I guess, yeah, it was rough, no I mean not rough, no, oh yes yes, I'm okay, oh yeah, oh thank you, well, it's nice to see you how's your kidney stone?

And then the soldier broke in laughing. Yeah, yeah, oh, thank you, well, my sacrifice is your sacrifice, oh thanks, well, I don't know, hmmm, that's a hard one, boy...

A bunch of hard ones!

Always a hard one right around the corner.

They lit two more cigarettes and Chuck turned and put his butt on the table ledge while the soldier sat on top of the table so he could watch the obviously threatening throng of aunts and uncles picking at the tables.

Fuck them, I'm sitting right here if they want to talk to me.

Then Chuck turned to us and said, I told you this guy saved my life.

Yeah, yeah, I said.

Fuck you, the soldier said to Chuck.

CJ sat very quietly, not moving when they did, but looking down at the table, smoking, running his fingers on the table. I didn't know what the hell I was supposed to do, I wasn't really a part of the conversation. Tell CJ to stop smoking? That didn't seem right. I was just sitting there, probably in the way or something, lucky that later I'd become a good friend of Chuck's on Jim's porch, but now I knew the young guys didn't want a middle-aged uncle hanging around so I left.

I went to stand with Janey and Jim because I wanted to be near Janey and let the boys be, but soon the soldier and Chuck came up to where Janey, Jim, and I stood and said, We're going out for awhile, and Chuck said it in such a way to Jim that communicated that he knew Jim wouldn't like it, but Jim might as well save his breath. And then CJ was behind them and said, I'll see you later.

CJ followed them to the soldier's new red truck and they were off. Janey and I looked at each other but there was not much we could do or wanted to do, so then we had to listen to Jim but I have no idea what he said.

#

I don't know anything about causes, and I don't know anything about precipitating influences, but CJ got home late that night after we were already in bed and that's all I remember.

I told Janey about what Chuck said to me and CJ about having his life saved by that soldier and she said, Just imagine being in that kind of position. I can't imagine. Poor Chuck.

I know.

I can't imagine... God. I hope CJ's all right.

She slept with her face toward me and her breath was hot as she drifted away. Yep! There it was, in that house, with the mortgage being paid every month, couldn't tell if it was rent or a mortgage I was actually paying, but I knew that if something broke, I was supposed to fix it, and I could sell it if I wanted to, for a decent amount of money at that time cause we'd been in it nearly twenty-five years.

I don't know what he did with the two veteran soldiers that night. I wonder if he got to the poison well and drank it that night, I don't know. But his head was pretty far out the window by that point. Maybe I should have followed. He was beyond following, though, he couldn't be reached, he was too fast to chase, he did what he wanted that night, he probably did what he wanted every night, he probably does what he wants now, if he lives. I could not have followed. And maybe they just sat in Sugar's and smoked

cigarettes, drank beer, and talked about girls or something. Or maybe the soldier and Chuck talked war talk and threw darts and maybe CJ listened. Maybe CJ didn't drink. Maybe he drove them home. I don't know, where's a pop? He came home that night and got into his bed.

#

Maybe I put too much on one incident but I wonder about it. There was a fascination with the war after that, there was a phase on books, but I think his head, which was always out the window, went further and further out it, which caused her, even while he was there, more reaching.

Some drunk stumbles through the house while I lay there in bed hoping Janey wouldn't wake up and hear it. It's natural, I thought, for a kid like him to try that stuff while he's young, but come on, C, show some respect for the woman who bore you. And the alcohol is not the poison, not to my way of thinking, cause Janey never left, and Janey never stole out the window, even in the during time when our searches were exhausted and the kid was gone, but she would steady her hands and get herself to sleep, and when I realized that Janey having a good night's sleep was an occasional phenomenon and a constant worry to me I wanted to toss something out the dining room window and let it bleed to death on the lawn, and it seemed like more than CJ and Chuck, but then I'd go water the lawn, calmly, in rows, and know that everything constantly changes on me, even though I don't change, cause it is just nasty out there, which is why a lawn is a piss poor modern day version of a mote, and if Jim were more serious about the protection of his own flesh and blood, which is the big deal once you have them, he'd have made a mote instead of a lawn, easy. I was glad to high hell that my

own father was dead, so I didn't have to say, Well, Pop, I lost your grandson.

How did you do that? Did he slip down a drain?

I don't know where he went! If I knew the drain, I'd crawl down there too, don't you think, and follow where it leads, to see if I can splash around in whatever repository it opens onto until I come up with him, don't you think? But I lost him through a window and across a lawn, and soon as you step out there, it's total infinity.

Your goddamn wife.

Okay, Pop, look, I gotta go wait on the porch in case he comes back I don't want him to find a locked door, all right?

I said, Jim, how's Chuck?

Well, Hal, Chuck is Chuck. He's alive. He'll stop drinking when he goes back. You can't be an alcoholic when you're fighting in the Marines.

Jim, that's how you become an alcoholic. That's the expert way.

What is he supposed to do, Hal? He goes back in four months. Is he supposed to get married and start a family and build a house right now in four months? So what do you suggest he do?

I don't know. Maybe I'll spend a little time with him.

Well, you're his uncle.

A statement of fact!

This was when I was shaved, when I got up early and put on my greasing shoes, when I was a dying little man.

Imagine not having a family and a house, Hal. What would you do?

I don't know, Jim.

How is CJ?

CJ is all right.

I am not a man who lies, but a question like this from Jim, while the only hero of his three sons was probably puking in the toilet, is not an honest question, and dishonest questions deserve dishonest answers. CJ, apparently, was not fine in his mind, and the poison must have been taking its effect then. Or maybe he was fine, and the sick truth of parenting is that it's nature, after all, and the cubs will strike out without another thought to the tit they sucked or the berries dropped into their baby mouths by their parents. Maybe he was fine, and tasting independence or manliness, but he was gone soon.

CHAPTER THREE

I always watched which well he got his water from. I went out looking for the poison one. I went out huffing and puffing like a pig, humiliating myself without anyone else even being there, and searching for the damn well. The kid came from us, and if she was stupid she wasn't evil, and if I wasn't rich I at least wasn't evil either. I couldn't find it and I spent some nights with my veins all popping out thinking, Well, what in the hell are you gonna do since you can't find the poison well where your own flesh and blood drank from?, and then I realized, Well, maybe you are stupider than you thought you were—give credit where credit's due—if you're a stupid asshole at least give yourself the credit of the description, and I finally realized that seeking the poison well was as useless as taking a sip from it myself: what is required is not the poison but the outright detergent, the cure, so go find the cure, and I thought, You don't wash out poison with poison, you wash out poison with sweat.

A child, all grown up and successful, mediocre, or worse, becomes a judgment on the father. You have all these great men and everything about them is great—their history and accomplishments—and then you look at their grown son—their alcoholic son, their teetotalling fat-faced useless son—and it's awful and embarrassing. Every single one of them, except for Henry Ford, whose sons honored their father, until the great great grandson, I think it was, who finally performed the usual comeuppance of the

generations that his own father and grandfather's blood was too pure to allow. Even I am a judgment on my own father, who is dead now, who had dreams of wealth and splendor for his children. My father got it in Jim, but not in me or Richard. I achieved something, yes I did, oh yes, but it was not done in the way or with the spectacular success my pop planned on. I married Jane and her father got me a job. Okay. My pop worked his ass off for a laborer? Yes.

But how do you sweat out poison? Well, Janey sweat, and I sweat, we sweat all around Cleveland, searching for him in the during time and it didn't occur to me till later that what good is my sweat? I'm not the one with the poison. Sweat then, CJ, sweat it out.

#

He got consumed by the death notices of the fallen and began posting them on a bulletin board in the garage where he was spending more and more time on his weights and punching bag. She poured another glass of iced tea and he re-emerged from his homework or whatever he was doing in his room and said, DOBBS, Manfred, 26, Ohio; RODRIGUEZ, Miguela, look at that *a Mexican woman*, 24, California; STEVENS, Michael, 32, Alabama. Three today. To which Jane and I would nod solemnly more in deference to his perspectiveless fascination and he would take his iced tea from the hand of his mother.

I said, I know you think you ought to go fight. Those kids are not there because they feel bad like you... and you know what else? They're glad a kid like you doesn't have to go. You can get a good job and have a family, that's why they're doing it.

He squeezed his tennis ball in his hands and his arm got stronger as we sat there.

What about Cousin Chuck?, he said.

I don't know about Chuck. Maybe he thinks it's the right thing to do.

So you think, CJ said, that some are there because they are convinced of the rightness of the cause?

Oh, I don't know.

Well, that's what you said.

Sure, yeah, I guess so. I don't know all the reasons anybody does something. Why does a guy get an earring? I don't know.

Jane agreed, but she was nervous and didn't like the conversation.

CJ said, You think any of them are convinced of the *wrongness* of the cause?

I don't know.

It's the problem of the soldier, he said. The soldier's job is to subordinate their ideas to the larger cause.

So are you convinced the cause is right?

No, no, I'm not.

See?

Jane brushed his head but he just stared.

Or maybe I'm just scared, he said.

Explain the cause, CJ, I said.

I can't. I don't understand it.

See?

He smiled, I remember very clearly, and leaned back with his iced tea. He said, I just like to play with these things in my head.

Yes, Jane said. You've always liked to do that.

Jane smiled, she liked that.

I have no cause, he said. Maybe I should have a cause, but I do not.

Here's your cause, I said. To grow up, learn a little, get a job, make some honest money, and get a family. Get married, have children, make a home.

And take care of your parents who will be getting old and who will need you, she said, and touched his hand.

I wished the seriousness of the conversation was on the level I was playing on, which was not very serious. It was light, it was just bopping along, but his face was serious as he looked out.

C, she said. It'll change when you grow up a little.

Sit on the porch, look out, he said.

Jane brushed his head. Now I'm surprised she didn't catch a hold of his hair while she could.

What did you do with Chuck the other night?, I said.

His eyes turned bright and he said, That guy saved Chuck's life! Did you tell Mom?

Yes, he did tell me! Gosh, I can't imagine.

I know, I know, so what did you do?

That guy who was sitting there at the park that day is responsible for Chuck still being alive. If that guy didn't do what he did, Chuck would be a heap of ash.

Is that what you talked about?

Partly. I mean, do you realize what I'm saying?

We realize, we realize!

Yes, it's amazing.

Do you want to know how it happened?

Yes, I said, because I really did. Jane tucked herself deeper into her chair and rocked.

I'm gonna get some more tea, he said, as if he was preparing for storytime. Jane got it for him instead.

It was blazing hot, he said. Once upon a time in a warzone. Okay? In a warzone. It was hotter than hell.

No it wasn't.

Dad.

It wasn't hotter than hell.

Okay. It was a warzone and it was incredibly hot. They'd been up for days. They were testing their youth, that's one of the things.

Jane scoffed at this with a gut-produced ugly sound.

Look, that's what they were doing. He told me this stuff! They're up for days, their maps were proven false a day before so you know the kind of fear that crept into them? What could they trust? Their maps were wrong. They knew what they were supposed to do but Chuck said the whole mission changed, cause they were camped out in this little house, there were four of them, and it had become very dangerous on the street, and it was tough to talk to other squads, and they didn't know which house was which, which one had the enemy, which one had the friend, which one had civilians. They did their best with the curtains in the windows to conceal that they had M-80s and M-16s poking out of them. Two guys were positioned at every moment at two of the windows, watching, watching, ready to blow anybody apart who came near. He said the other two would rest or try to figure out the maps as best as they could, or try to make some radio contact or something, but he said they were extremely hot and extremely dirty, their food was running out, they were going out of their minds, they were losing perspective and getting confused and angry. One of the guys, they said, while they were sleeping, nuzzled up against another guy. Why? Just for some warmth or something? And the other guy tried to

push him away and then let him lay up there against his body, but they couldn't sleep for very long, and they hardly slept at all, two guys by the window whispering to each other, trying to keep each other alert, and trying to keep each other from going crazy and shooting. Explosions in the distance, then it descends to terrible silence. And they're sitting there on the fourth day, and one guy, not Chuck or Kemplin, whispers real quick to everybody, Come here, come here, quick, quick, in this panic whisper, pure blood whisper. I can't leave my window, I can't leave my window!, said the one guy at the other window. Leave your fucking window! Come here!, the guy said. So they all go to the window and look through the little curtain trying not to be seen and there's an American guy with a big Howitzer or something who had just ducked out from a bush across the street and is coming across the street, looking up and down the street, but looking straight at them in the window and waving his hand, and mouthing words to them, like he was saying, Open up! Hurry! Let me in your house, let me in your house! But he was going slow like he didn't want to miss an ambush or something. So the soldiers are afraid because their cover is blown but they gotta get their guy in. They didn't know who he was or where he came from or what happened, was it all blowing apart or what was going on, but they go to the door and open it and yell at the guy, Come on, come on!, and two of the guys step just outside the crack of the doorframe and point their M-80s in different directions while their guy gets in. Finally the guy gets in and they start to close the door behind them and the guy raises his gun and shoots one of our guys straight through the face. He was an enemy. He was in disguise.

Jane put her head down and rocked. CJ looked at her and then went on.

So the other guy, not Chuck or Kemplin, shot the guy. They said they don't know what the enemy guy was thinking, there was no way he was

gonna survive, but he succeeded in obliterating their friend, whose face was splattered everywhere, on their clothes, everywhere, brains, blood, horror, and then the enemy guy in an American uniform was dead and they had no idea what to do, but they thought there may be more guys, so they ran out of the house with their guns up—Chuck too!—and they're looking up and down the street and into houses and Chuck swears he sees some guys duck behind a house so Chuck runs to the house, he said he just wanted to kill anything, anything. And I can see that. But this car comes down the street, just some regular car, and Chuck points this massive eighty pound gun straight at it, and Kemplin comes out by him and also points his gun at the car so Chuck starts turning around in circles looking for anybody else, and then their other buddy comes running to them cause he had been checking around the house, and the car stops and the driver gets out, he's just some guy, and they get in the car, all three of them, and they start driving. But they get down the street and the whole street is coming apart and there's a major battle there. Kemplin is driving, Chuck's in the passenger seat, the other guy is in the back seat, and Chuck and the guy are leaning out their windows with their guns and Kemplin has his left arm out the window with his gun and they are shooting, they are shooting anything that moves unless they can tell it's an American-but can you be sure? Can you?-and everything is moving. So Chuck is telling me this in the bar, over at Sugar's, you know? And he gets to this part and Kemplin was stoic the whole time and then at this part Kemplin says slowly, All right, man, all right, that's enough. So Chuck just finished that part of the story by saying their buddy got shot and died in the car. Shot and died. About a foot behind Chuck. However far it is from the front seat to the back seat.

God, Janey said.

I know. And then Kemplin got up to go stand outside or something and Chuck was talking just to me. Anyway, that soldier is dead in the car but they're still in the middle of a battle. I can't imagine.

Better not to imagine, Jane said.

Yeah. But what happens is their car catches on fire. To this day they don't know if it was a bullet in the gas chamber or some ember or whatever. But the car was stopped and both Chuck and Kemplin knew they had to get out of the car immediately. So Kemplin got out and started running but Chuck's side of the car was smashed in against a building or a car or something and for some reason he didn't think to go out Kemplin's side. He just sat there. He said he thinks he got afraid and he just sat there. He could see out the front window Kemplin running down the street in the middle of all this chaos and smoke. Kemplin is running and running and getting smaller and smaller and Chuck thought that was it. He said everything shut down and froze. Chuck said he actually put his head down and closed his eyes. Did nothing. He probably didn't know if he was dead or alive or what. But then he hears the driver side door open and Kemplin was there pulling him out by his shirt.

CJ showed what it was like to be pulled out by the shirt.

And then they make it to safety, somehow.

CJ finished his story and looked out on Cleveland Heights, which is what Chuck and Kemplin and the two other guys were protecting.

Chuck, Jane said.

CJ was high then. And it's blood!, he said. And death, and risk, and youth, and sacrifice, and... I can't believe Chuck told me. Kemplin didn't want him to, and I don't think he even knew he was doing it. He was drunk, and he was laughing a lot, but he told me, we were sitting in this bar and he just said it.

What did he do after?

After what?

After he told you?

Played darts, listened to music, I don't know. Didn't say anything more about it at all.

That's not your story to tell, Jane said.

I know that! I'm only telling it to you.

Poor Chuck.

I'm sorry I told it.

No, honey, she said, and touched his hand.

Jim said, You can explain Chuck anyway you want, but he flirted with criminality before, and he more than flirts with it now. You can explain anything you want, but that's how it is, and he is not welcome in this house if that's what he's gonna do.

It's movie stuff. Explains nothing, does nothing, CJ said. But saving somebody, or getting saved... I want to save Chuck. What else is there to do? Save somebody!

He's already saved.

Somebody's dying right now!, CJ said. And somebody else is getting saved. Right now!

#

CJ left soon after that, and I think there's a clue in that as to where he went. I think I think he went into the war, but I'm not sure. He wasn't old enough anyway.

Now I sit on my fingernails, Jim says I'm filthy, he looks down and covers his nose, where I am gigantic, I will call it.

His handsome face looked out at the darkening street past the lawn and he put his chin down on his chest, apparently to stretch his neck, though he looked like he was dead. I thought, He looks like he's dead. Janey couldn't help reaching out and punching his tough shoulder a couple times. His shoulder just sat there receiving the little hits like a soft kind of rock.

I'm gonna raise hell if we don't get a raise, I said. I swear to God the whole lid is gonna blow. When you work for all this, and you live on at least one major loan, and you get no raise and other people in the same institution do, count on hellraising.

You'll get the raise, honey.

I don't know. I don't know. I swear to God we better get the raise. We'll know in two weeks. Peter comes in there last week with a new car, did I tell you that?

No, you didn't.

Yeah, well, he did. We got the threat, all this hubbub and talk about not getting raises this year, everybody's worked up about it, Peter's the guy who probably knows, in all likelihood, and he comes strolling in there with his new keys dangling and showing everybody up. What a crack up, he is an ass.

CJ tore his orange and set the pieces on a napkin as he ate. How did those jaws, with those teeth, and those vicious muscles in his mouth, come from that woman? He was reserved by then and he looked out at the street and the couple of cars that passed with their lights on. He took one piece after another and I watched him through my eyebrows and Jane must have been holding onto her own pants' legs or something because she wasn't touching him. His head still had sweat on it from his workout.

Then CJ said, But what's crazy is after all that Chuck is back here in Cleveland Heights drinking at Sugar's. I mean, I don't get it. I feel like I'd

never lose energy again if I'd been through that. Like if you survive that it's gotta be somehow the greatest gift in the world. But there he is wasted at Sugar's. That's what I don't understand.

CJ left the porch when he was done with his orange and didn't let the door slam on the way in, which was appreciated. I may have hollered at him if he'd done that. There is respect for property, but only if you own it! And not if you don't! Don't slam the damn door!

I take a fingernail and flick it down onto the porch, now, ha ha ha, cause the nail's mine and so is the porch! He let the door close softly and Janey and I both appreciated that as night was falling.

I never knew at all what to do on a porch but survey the land, sip my iced tea, and respond to something somebody else said so that's what I did, and I did it a lot. I could bleach this whole lawn so it's orange, Jane, I thought. Why would I want to? Because I can. That's the only reason.

He went to bed and Jane went to bed and I went to bed that night as a very small man, I can admit that now. There was agony over dollars, which is small. There was planning against the wind for a future on a twig, which is small. A list of words the young kids spit out: honor, glory, goal, manly, achievement. A list of words they've never heard: lien, liability, repossession, half again, claimant. So I went to bed small and woke up stupid because he was gone when we woke up, and we figured there was some freak occurrence in which he had to be somewhere early, but he did not return that night, nor the next night, and he has not returned since.

CHAPTER FOUR

When we were together, we searched for him. It was like when we were first married at that point. We went out chasing him days and nights, to places where a young man might go. When Jane wasn't there, I looked into a couple strip clubs. What disgusting places. I almost hoped I wouldn't find him there. But I went. If I knew where they had dogfighting or heroin houses I'd have gone there, too. We searched every place we could find as low as Cleveland would go, which is low.

Jane, Jane, what in the hell do you think the chances are that we're gonna be in the exact right place at the exact right time? We'd have to be everywhere at once.

We went to the Greyhound station, on the corner of Chester. All of Cleveland was cold, the station colder.

Help with a dollar?

Need a ticket!

Gimme a dollar!

No, no, no, that's not here, and a lot of laughing.

That man robbed me, that man robbed me, and almost all black voices.

Hey, get back here!

Jane, Jane, look this way, look this way.

What is he doing here? Why is he here? He could get robbed.

He's doing the robbing.

What is he doing here?

Jane, Jane, he's not here.

Horrible smell, let's go home. She would not. Followed the black man up the street, around the corner, inside a bar, back sixty decades, a crazy-haired woman smoking through one of the creases in her face, showed the picture. Seen him?

No.

Darts flying, pool ball skirting Jane's foot, watch it, Jane! He's not here. There in the booth, a boy slumped, we got close enough and he woke up and snarled. We're sorry, we thought you were somebody else.

That kid has a mother somewhere, she said. She cursed his mother. That mother should be shot. She shook.

Shhh.

It was his mother's fault. That poor kid.

That kid is old enough.

When did he become old enough, Hal? When? That mother should be shot.

Don't shoot yourself, Janey.

She could have reached through the thick sickness and grime, she could have bloodied her hands, I pulled her away, come on.

I don't understand Jane. I'm going slack in the gut, I want to go slack in the gut. I'm letting my eyes droop. No sleep that night, a big headache in the morning. She had a brilliant thought: he's gone to church! He's a dreaming kid, a very spiritual kid, disagreeable always always to reality and perfectly willing to wholesale believe anything that's totally impossible or at the very least absolutely unknowable on any level and useless on every level besides that so I said, Yes, honey, sure. He's at church. So Sunday after Sunday and many non-Sundays too we'd go to churches and look and look for him and

he'd never be there and nobody ever heard of him or remembered seeing him by the descriptions we'd give. We even went to black churches – services lasting four hours – stamping and shouting, singing and repetition, no instruction at all, preachers waving around saying the same things over and over. Do these people go to seminary? Do they know a damn thing? Relentless repetition, no penetration so far as I could tell, and none to us for certain, and then we'd stay after and say, Here, preacher. You seen this kid?

No, no, no, sir, we can pray over him, if you'd like.

Well, no, you can't pray over him because he's not here and do you think she hasn't tried praying? She's prayed a thousand times and I don't think her lines to Christ are any more closed than yours are.

I even tried praying a couple times, for the record, and I even made a little game of it while I'd water the grass. Then it got cold and the grass didn't need watering so I said, Well, Jesus, I hope you're not strictly a winter listener because my prayer is time is up.

Every time we'd go to dinner in a restaurant, every time we'd go to the grocery store, reaching reaching reaching with her hands, reaching with her eyes as if they had hands growing out of them, reaching like a lightning bolt searching for its mark which is a pool full of children.

Maybe he joined the war!, she said, as if you join the *war*, I corrected her. You can join the *service*, but not the *war*. I don't know if he joined the service. So we went off to the recruiter's but the recruiter hadn't seen him or heard of him so she had him make phone calls and go into his computer to check the new recruits but his name wasn't anywhere. We got back from the recruiter's and we called what few actual friends he'd had but they were all from years ago. Did Philip Hubert know where he was? No, I'm sorry, sir, I haven't seen him since junior high.

Okay, well do you know who he runs around with?

No, I'm sorry, I don't.

OK, well, thank you.

Jane, Jane, Philip Hubert doesn't know. Okay, fine, I'll call Benjamin Ross, do you have a number? Okay, hand me the phone book then. I don't know where it is – when's the last time I had to call a number I didn't know by memory? Okay, let's see, Benjamin Ross.

His handwriting was always horrid, but I made it out. This number has been disconnected or is no longer in service, the voice said.

So then we drove over to where Ben Ross and his family used to live over by the Presbyterian church which is one of the places we'd gone hunting for him but no, no Rosses lived there, just a young family, a husband and wife with two little heartbreaks in strollers, so very sorry they'd never heard of the Rosses, but they had been living there for three years already and they bought the place from the Kirchners... The mother pushed the kids inside quickly, as if we were going to infect them, while the father offered to help. I would not tolerate a shame on Jane. No, sir, you can't help us with anything, thank you. Jane reached out and shook his hand with both of hers and thanked him and we drove off.

Well, here we are Jane, what do you want to do now?, I said while we stood in the kitchen, Jane looking down at the mass of papers she'd been carrying with her, making notes and notes of every place we'd been. She started to cry again, head down, gripping the counter top, her hands having finally found something to hold that wouldn't leave, shaking her head with tears on her cheeks. I could stand it but I didn't want to. Jane, Jane, come on for a second.

Oh, Hal, Hal.

Aren't you at all *angry* at him for just a minute? Wouldn't you like to slap his face if you saw him before you did anything else?

No, no, she said. No, no.

Well, maybe that's the difference between men and women.

She came over to me and I quickly had to drop the magazine I was fumbling through because now her reach was for me and she halfway collapsed on me and I held her up there so she wouldn't break her neck on the floor. I kissed her head a little and said, Shh, shh, Janey. I don't know.

I don't know, Hal. I don't know.

When we started going to the Presbyterian church, we sat at the back, and it didn't take long for her whole method of waking and sleeping to change, at least change is the way she looked at it. Prayers in the morning, prayers at the meals. I have no problem, I insist, no problem at all about asking God to bless our food, but it stands to reason that there are steps God could have taken to purify the peas before they hit our plate – unless he is the sort of devil that needs continual reminders of his supremacy from his subjects, in which case, yes, we should pray and pray and pray because he wants it and the punishment could be severe, but in this case I have very little, very little capacity to love him or want to walk with him on a summer's evening if the doing of it is forced under pressure of punishment. I worked for what I have. Maybe we should just say, We know you've blessed these peas, thank you for so doing. That seems more honest and the first guy to get e coli from peas will show us that either God does not love or maybe some peas are clean and some aren't and that is the specific job of farmers, isn't it?

It wouldn't hurt us to do what other people do before a meal, Hal.

Well, I've been doing it, haven't I?

Yes, you have.

Dutifully, dutifully, water the grass. The time will come, Jane, when you and I will be in diapers again. Dutifully water the lawn. I come from a

generation that believes in nothing, basically, and I always believed I was different than that and so was Jane. I do believe there is an honorable way to behave and that it's not all that difficult. Is it? Is it? Is it really? Now, you have your family, your flesh and blood, and you sacrifice for them. Did I always want to get up and drive him to school or pick him up at the end of a long day and help him with his homework? No, of course not. But you do it, I did it. Do you protect him? Yes. From a brutal world always at war with itself. Did I? Well, yes, I thought I did, but one night I'm convinced he slipped out the window and took a gulp from a poisoned well and that may have been it. Well, if that was it, Hal, then you can't get angry at him because it was the poison and not the kid. Sometimes you can't know what's poison until you're choking on it. But the kid made the decision, didn't he? Yes, he did, so where did that come from? He was a resolutely dreaming kid totally unable to grasp any kind of reality. His mother's son, I suppose.

Then I lay beside his mother and there may have been concrete between us and she would cry and cry. Excellent job, Hal, you've built your home with genius!

Just at the outset of the during time, he didn't come home and then he didn't come home and then he didn't come home. She went from Where the hell is he? I'm gonna ground him!, to Oh my God, Hal, something happened!, to no cop or coroner showing up and He's left us, Hal!, and then the commencement of our hunting and hunting to no avail. This, young son, was a very bad thing to do. A very bad thing to do, selfish and ungrateful.

Jane is ever changing and mercurial. I don't believe that I am, I don't think I am, very little has changed in me. But the circumstances around me change.

I am not going to water that plant, I am going to let it dissolve. I'm not going to turn off that television, this is what I can do.

#

A kid arrived one day in the fall. We got a call from a lady who said she was at the Cleveland Amtrak station and had a kid there who was looking for us. But he was not CJ. The woman said he was very dirty and in bad shape. We had no idea what she was talking about but I left work in the middle of the day and me and Jane got in the car and drove down there immediately.

Sure enough, there was a kid. He was ragged and he seemed slow to me. The woman who had called us stood with us as we met him. She said, Do you know these people?, to the kid. The kid said no. She asked us, we said no. She was confused, the kid was confused, we were confused. But the kid handed us a piece of paper and it said, Love, Phinneus.

He is family, Jane immediately said to the woman. Janey got down on her knee and brushed the hair from the kid's face and said, Oh, you are welcome here. Did CJ send you?

The kid said, I don't know.

Jane assured the woman. She said, It's okay, he's ours. It's been a long time.

The woman didn't know what to do but she accepted the argument and left. People always believe Janey, and they're right to.

What's your name?, Jane asked the kid.

The kid didn't say anything.

Is it Phinneus?

Yes.

Come on, we'll clean you up. It's okay, we're safe, come with us.

The kid followed us into the car and I started driving back to Cleveland Heights. Everything about Janey changed. She said, Hal, CJ sent this kid to us.

I really had no idea what in hell to do. But we got the kid back to the house and took him inside and I admit I felt like we were being invaded.

The kid smelled, he stank, but Janey cleaned him. He was suspicious, and I don't think he knew anymore what the hell he was doing here than we did. But Janey knew. She changed completely. Every day her task was this kid. But I disagreed with her.

We haven't worked all our lives to build a house for another man's kid, I said.

She would say nothing to me.

He's gonna kill us in the middle of the night and take everything we have. He's gonna burn the house down, I said.

She said nothing.

Jim said in a booming voice like he was God again, There is no greater human act than the adoption of the orphaned child, let us pray...

Jane said, He was sent to us from CJ.

For Christ's sake. Well, thank you then, CJ.

She said nothing but she wept while she held the child until the child went limp like he was in enemy hands.

You care for this child, Hal!, Jim said as we stood outside away from Janey and the kid.

No, I said.

He is a curse on you, Hal!, said Jim.

Yes, he is a curse. Yes, he is a curse. No, he was not sent by CJ. Yes, he is a curse of the after time. There we go. The room I am now in, with its second floor balcony, has the trains that go back and wake me up every

damn night. Right when I *desire* to be awakened. Yes, a curse. Sure, we live in a world of curses. Grease a monkey? Pay a loan? A world of curse, no. A man can construct his happiness, I have done this. I am waiting for the bloody report of how the kid snapped, poor Jane.

CHAPTER FIVE

I faked it. Got a problem with my tendon, Tim! Ow, my arm, can't get this thing to *catch*, Tim, need a hand over here. Big money. Let it fall sort of limp. I don't want to put on slacks or a jumpsuit? What do I want to wear? Sweat pants? Fine, that's what I wear then. A t-shirt third day in a row? That'll do.

Sit on the porch is what I want. You mean a man starts working when he's young and doesn't quit till he's old? Who said? Where is that written down? I take my chances, then, on, what, poverty? You mean there are people out there like Jim, with his phones, his papers, his machines, his astronomical salary and a bonus (which isn't a bonus, it's part of the deal, he couldn't not get it. That's not a bonus.) and these people will turn out their own flesh and blood when he's let it go soft a little? Jim, if there's a curse on me, there's a curse on you, too, and here I am. Unshaven, how does that look, little bits of gray in thin hairs, right on your porch, laughing it up with a soldier. Bring me a can of pop, Jim. No? Then I'll stink up your hall while I get it, watch me go. Deal a hand, Chuck. Where's the paper? Dollar a game. Double for a skunk.

I was glad at some point to be done searching for CJ. Look, you did it, CJ, whatever the hell it was you wanted to put your mom through, you did it. Congratulations, that's it.

Now I can, for example, play some hands of cribbage with Chuck and focus on the cards and be just jody tody. And that can go on for quite awhile. I sure wasn't upset about not having to water the damn lawn anymore once I was at Jim's, that's for sure. When Jane came over, that means that's a time when she's not on the porch waiting, and that I take as a sign of something. I was so big I was like a magnetic field all to myself, drawing all things to me, but not caring for them to come, which may be what drew them. Boy! And now I get to play with Chuck when he's around. They think they're punishing me but they're letting me off every hook.

#

But in the immediate during time, before the arrival of that child, we both got new eyes and these eyes were awful. Never have I so wished to be blind, but I kept cutting the grass in rows, and I kept washing my dishes in the sink at night, and putting them in the holder so they could be dry by morning.

The best times were when we'd be exhausted from running all over Cleveland and the Heights and everywhere else, when the sun would go down. Jane and I would sit with warm tea on our porch, together alone, without our son, not knowing if his body was ripped to shreds, but watching anyway for it to come loping up the lawn. Come on home, son, come on home, I would think, and even as my mind uttered it silently, she would reach out her hand and put a hand in mine. She would sip her tea.

How's your tea?, she would say to me.

It's fine.

I would tap my feet cause I'm impatient and to warm my legs. Janey had some kind of belief, though it was never spoken, that if we sat there on the porch, he was more likely to walk up, and so I would abide that the best I could. It was tough when the winter was coming down. When the sun would finally slip off, that was the coldest time and keeping the tea warm was a chore, so sometimes I'd go back in and warm it up, and sometimes she would. We both had blankets over our legs, and we would wait up there like that, rarely discussing what were looking for, for a good while, until the cold got too bad and it was time to prepare for bed. I think she was afraid that if he did return to the house he would only look at it and for some reason walk away again forever and that's why she was so hesitant to leave the front yard except to search. I wondered if she feared that he would walk up the street slowly in the evening, unsure in his mind if he wanted to come back and face us, and then stand at the edge of the lawn and look at the empty porch, then see some lights on in the house, and then turn away and be gone again. I believe she thought this may have already happened anyway, sometime after we'd lost the nightly battle against the cold, or gone to sleep. I think she wondered if, sometime in the middle of the night, he had walked even as close as to the window of our bedroom, or the window of the room he grew up in, and then turned away again. So she wanted to grab him if she could, and the porch was the closest she could get to him. If we moved, of course, she would have almost erased the chances of him being able to find his way to her, or of her being able to catch him if he came to the house, so she knew that she was jailed there. And every day, when no phone call came and no officer walked up our steps, was a day when he might come to stand at the edge of the lawn to decide if he wanted to come back in. If this happened, we could spring up and grab him before

he could get away again. This was her thinking, and I refilled her tea while she thought about it. But it assumes that his body is not in pieces or ashes. I never said this, because there was no point. Until we had word, he was out there somewhere. We believed he was dead somehow and therefore could not believe that he was dead. That was the belief, and that was the game.

Come on, Janey, let's go inside.

You go ahead in, I'm just gonna enjoy the night.

She talked about enjoying things then in the during time more than she ever had before, in the time when I believed she enjoyed things.

No, Janey, come on. Let's go see what's on the TV.

No, thanks, Hal. I don't like the programs tonight.

So we sat there some more and her poor reaching hands had nothing to grasp but her teacup. But it got terribly cold. Even if it wasn't much colder by degrees, a body sits there long enough it gets beat through by chilliness, and no night, once the sun is gone, is that enjoyable to look at that long.

Come on, Janey, let's go inside.

You gonna water the lawn?

Yeah, I'm gonna water the lawn.

All right, I might get ready for bed.

So she gathered the cups and blankets and went inside, shutting the door softly. I watered the lawn, which by the logic in her mind meant we had another twenty minute window for capture, and she trusted me to make the catch. And I water at night because if you water in the day, the sun evaporates a lot of the water before the lawn's had a chance to drink, even if it's not too hot out. But I watered later in the season that year than I had before, and I may have been drowning the grass since the dew was coming heavily in the nights by then.

Something Frank Sinatra's wife never did was cleaned his ash stain off the carpet herself. So why's my Janey doing it? Occasionally I didn't clean it up. Where are the servants? In Frank Sinatra's house.

#

You ever doubt you took the wrong train you might look at your bank account and get a clue. Jim took the right train. Chuck fought in the war like he was taught to all his life, but he got the raw end of the stick. He'd have insurance till he's dead, though!

Goddamn, carpet!, Janey said and I hustled off the porch and looked at her on her hands and knees continuing to scrub the carpet with her hands full of water. I poured her wine onto it and said, There, now there's no ash stain, Janey.

She went into the room and got in bed.

He's a tough kid who's probably doing tough kid things. You gotta get a little hold on reality, don't you think, Janey?

The kitchen rippled under the steam and she sat at the table to pay bills. She had the checkbook out and was writing and signing checks and putting checks paperclipped to the bills they were meant to pay, and then had a stack of envelopes and took the bills, made out an envelope for each bill, if the biller hadn't provided envelopes of their own, put the checks and the bill stubs inside the envelopes, and then sealed the envelopes and attached stamps. I could observe this, this was all I could do. Then she finished as the light was fading and went out to the porch, saying nothing to me, with her tea. I purposefully broke something in the house that she would find later and then I went out onto the porch with her and took a newspaper. She rocked in her chair on her porch.

Didn't we have dinner reservations tonight?, I said.

Yes, but I canceled them.

You're not hungry?

I wanted to get the bills paid.

Well, it's only six-thirty, we need to eat.

I'll make you something, she said.

Was this our eternal resting home? The porch of our house? My ass hurt from sitting so long on the damn porch. I looked at the paper and read it aloud.

DRAPE, Raymond A., 39, Bend, Oregon; MATHISEN, Christine, 23, Kansas City, Missouri...

Hal, I don't want to hear that.

ANWAR, listen, Jane, a Muslim kid. ANWAR, Mohamed, 27, all the way from New York City. A twenty-seven...

Hal, just read it to yourself.

...A twenty seven year old Jewish kid without a middle name. All the rest of them have middle names, but this kid doesn't.

Hal!

You want to live in a dream, Jane? You want to close yourself off inside a prison so you never see the outside? Huh? KOPECK, a Russian kid, I guess, maybe Jewish too...

Hal, I beg you to knock it off.

You want to live in a convent maybe? Maybe that would have been better for you?

Hal.

You want to get a shotgun and shoot the intruders or you just want to cut your eyes and ears off so you don't have to hear or see anything? LITTEL, Deborah, another girl...

I want to enjoy the evening.

Enjoy it, I never said don't enjoy it. I just want to read the paper.

Read it to yourself!

I am reading it to myself!

Read it silent. This is a stupid, stupid, stupid argument, Hal!, she said, and looked square at me, so I was quiet.

Janey, Janey, Janey, is so small sometimes. But she was so absolutely right. What I care about is her and him and this front yard, the front yard I had not been careful about measuring when we got it, probably because I was blinded by the idea of what I was going to do there, what I was going to make and build, what I intended to father. And I fathered and she mothered, but she and I, in the before time, also slept with each other. What happened to that? Now we sat on a goddamned porch and she was cold and I wanted to blow everything apart. We were untrained in whatever we were supposed to learn, apparently. Totally overreactive, I think. I craned in and kissed her neck and she exhaled like a popped balloon and a shiver went through her and she put her hand up to her neck where my lips were. I backed away and she held it there and didn't say a damn thing to lighten the situation so I went to bed and a little goddamn poisoned part of me hoped that this was the night he'd come and look at the house and then smell why he left and then leave again.

In the morning, she said, I'm sorry, Hal, as she put on her makeup. I said, I'm sorry, and went to work.

#

Chuck dealt so bad sometimes.

Are your fingers stuck?

Yeah, my fingers are stuck. Ha ha ha.

Well, get em unstuck cause I still got seven cards!

In cribbage, you should have six in your hand.

Okay, okay, and he spit on his hands, which we thought was funny, and then he dealt the cards right so we both had six, but then on the next hand, when it was his turn to start the pegging, he forgot and stared down the porch like he was waiting for me to start the pegging.

Chuck, buddy.

Oh, is it me?

Yeah, it's you. Where is your head?

So he put down a 9 and I put down a 6 for 15, which gave me 2 pegs.

Where is your head?

Right here, Uncle Hal. I wonder what happened to CJ.

Jesus, Chuck. Yeah, I wonder, too.

I wonder if he enlisted.

I think he did.

I wonder if he sent Phinneus.

Jane says that he did. Jesus, Chuck.

Chuck played a 6, which put it at 21, which is probably the worst play you can make in cribbage.

Do you have anything besides a 6?, I said to him.

Yeah.

Then you should have played it!, and I put down a 10, which made it 31, which gave me another 5 pegs and my little peg was scooting around the first turn. Chuck got a fresh beer and brought me some pumpkin seeds which I began tearing into.

I really wonder if he sent that kid, he said, and then his half idiot look changed and he smiled and said, Jesus Christ, ha ha ha, Jesus, I wonder if he really did send that kid?

Chuck!, we've talked about this before, what the hell is your problem?

I know, but shit if he sent that kid where did he send the kid from? Where did he get the kid?

The kid came from a New York train that's all we know.

Then he's in New York!

I called New York a million times since the kid arrived, I don't know that he sent the kid.

Ho, man, fucking hell!, he was laughing.

I don't know where he was sucking the humor from. Then he quieted down a little, raised his eyebrows, and started nodding.

Okay, okay, okay, he said. Fair enough. Fair enough.

Come on, Chuck, can't take this long for a single game.

He played a jack, I played a 6.

Why, where you gotta be, Uncle Hal?, and this laughing returned.

I gotta be everywhere!, I said, and also laughed.

Let's go drink tonight, Uncle Hal.

You go drink. I'll be here.

You come with me. I wonder if he enlisted. That would be nuts, if he did. Maybe he did, I wonder if he did. Hey, there's this girl who tends bar at Sugar's and she's got a-, and then he made a gesture to show what she's got.

Yeah, so?

So, I'm working on her.

That's good Chuck.

Yeah, that's good. She makes pretty good money, too, working at Sugar's. Steals *my* money, at least. She makes good money. A good can and good money, what more do you need?

Chuck I guess thought whatever was within four miles of him and visible to his naked eye was what made up the whole world and since he didn't see much exchange of money outside of a grocery store here or there and Sugar's, that girl with the good shape must be doing all right. How in the hell, Chuck, if you have been overseas to fight a war, could your range of focus go so small? This is what I love about Chuck, I guess.

Oh shit, Uncle Hal, oh shit, that's funny.

What is?

If CJ sent that kid. He left us in the dust, man, he was outta here!

Jesus, Chuck.

I had no idea where he was getting it from, but he was thinking things were pretty funny.

Come on, let's go get drunk!

Chuck, goddamn it, we're only halfway around the board, your head is not in the game! Are you gonna play or do I have to play alone? I don't care, I'll play alone!

Oh, no, here. And he played, but then he insisted again that he wanted to go get drunk. I didn't want to get drunk. Look! Look at the airplane, look at the lawn, I'm fine without getting drunk. I brought my palm down just inches above the table and focused on the hand and it seemed smaller than the surface of the table at first but then I refocused on it and it was much much bigger, actually, the table was sitting there under the hand, the hand was very live and had the fate of the table in it, even just one little part of its will, the hand and the brain it was connected to, my brain, can focus on a zillion things, big and small, at one time, can figure out that it would like a

turkey sandwich and deal a hand at the same time, and that's just a minute example, it can think all this stuff, both the brain and the hand connected to it, while the table, which seemed bigger than the brain and the hand, just sat there, captive to the will of the hand, which was moving around with its palm down feeling the chill of February bounce off the plastic surface of the table until BOOM! CRASH! WATCH OUT CHUCK, WATCH OUT CHUCK!

What the hell, Uncle Hal?

WATCH OUT CHUCK!

What the hell? What the hell?

And the cribbage board, the pegs, and the cards were flown all around the porch and the hand had smashed the surface of the table and made it fly against the wall and crash with a huge sound and everything flew, even Chuck's beer, and it scared the living hell out of Chuck. I stood above it taunting it with my mastery of it. But then I saw that Chuck was gasping for breath and standing with his back against the outside wall of the house and his face was contorted.

Oh, Chuck, Chuck, I said and went over to him. He put his elbows against his ribs, tucked his shoulders in, and put his palms up like he didn't want me near, but I got over to him and put my hands on his shoulders warmly and said, Oh, Chuck, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I should have warned you, I was just playing a little game with myself. Just with myself, Chuck, I'm sorry.

Jesus Christ, Uncle Hal, shit!

I'm sorry. Chuck, I'm sorry.

Jesus Christ, that was for no reason.

I'm sorry, I'm sorry.

I missed the fanfare, somehow I missed the blare of trumpets and the hooves of the giant horses amid all the chaos of the table and whatnot because the prince of Hillcrest Drive was marching up the stone walkway. He threw his lance upon the porch, spread his legs, and the army gathered around him when he said, What in the hell is going on around here?

Hey, Dad, Chuck said with hesitation. Jim looked at me.

What's going on around here?

Jesus Christ, Jim, we were just fooling around.

Are you breaking my table? Hal, this is not your table to break.

We're just fooling.

Sorry, Dad.

I just get home from a long day at work and I come to this. This is what you're both doing with your time? Get in here, Chuck!

I gotta go, Dad.

Get inside the damn house.

I gotta go, Dad.

Where the hell do you have to go?

I have a job interview.

Oh yeah?

Yeah.

What time is it right now?

I don't know.

You have a job interview and you don't know what time it's at?

It's pretty soon.

Chuck was twitching, he just wanted to get out of there so bad, and I wanted to help him out.

You have a job interview in pretty soon.

Jim, stop treating him like a five year old, I said.

Hal, I don't need parenting advice from you, thank you.

He's a hero, he's a soldier!, I said.

Get the hell inside the damn house, Chuck, he said.

No, cause I gotta go.

Open up your damn mouth!, Jim said.

No.

Open up your damn mouth, Chuck.

Why?

Because I pay your bills, I give you food to eat, I give you a car to drive, and I told you to open up your damn mouth.

So Chuck opened up his mouth and Jim put his head, nose first, halfway inside it and said, Breathe!

So Chuck exhaled and Jim pulled his head out fast, coughed, and spit onto the grass and looked ready to puke.

You have a foul breath, Chuck. Your breath is rank, it stinks, it smells like alcohol and unbrushed teeth. And thank you, Hal, for your support of my son's decline.

I'm sorry, Dad.

It makes me want to puke, son.

I'm sorry, Dad.

Jim took the handle of the door in his hand and opened it.

I'm sorry, Dad, and Chuck tried to stifle a whimper until it came out bigger than it would have if he tried not to stifle it.

You disgust me, Jim said.

Chuck, you're not ten years old, don't tell him you're sorry!

Jim let the door fall hard on its frame and Chuck pulled out a cigarette and put his hands on the railing after he got it lit. I was sorry about the table for Chuck's sake, but not for the table's. I wished I had some bleach for the

lawn. I could have gotten some, but I didn't want it that bad, I preferred to sit there and play some cards and make it up to Chuck that I'd scared him so I reset the table. I said, Shh, shh. I took out a card. It had a plastic coating, but the plastic had worn off in one spot so it didn't slide across the table cleanly. It slid for about an inch and then caught and rotated to the left. It did it again. It did it again. Then it was confirmed! I closed my eyes and tried to see if I could feel with my finger the imperfection in its coat. I tried to get where I could recognize that card in the heat of a game. I put it down then picked up another card to see if I could tell the difference. I could. I picked up the original card, I could still feel the slight imperfection, even with my massive hands. It was a two of clubs, not the best one to master, but it could be used, especially in the pegging, which is where the game is won or lost, some of the best players say. I shuffled it into the deck. Chuck went down and drove away. Jim ran out and yelled at the taillights as they sped off, then he got on the phone. I took the shuffled deck in my hands and closed my eyes and felt the surfaces of all the cards to see if I could pick out the malformed two of clubs. I found it! Then I turned it over and I was wrong, so I put it to the side to see if I could test it, then I tried again with another card and got it wrong again, so I needed to do more work on it, but I believed I could get it. And if I could master even ten of the fifty-two cards and learn their imperfections, then I bet I could beat anybody. Cheating is only cheating if you're caught. I could make a million dollars if I could feel the differences in cards. I could bet Chuck just for quarters to start off to test it. I rubbed some saliva into the ace of hearts to see if I could weight the card a little. An opponent would never know it if he wasn't looking for it, he'd have to have practiced with the same deck. That's what made the greatest card players so great, it wasn't superior luck. Any good thing happens through effort, whatever field you're working in. And if the great

players played somebody who thought they'd outluck the great players, well that's why the great player was great, because they weren't playing a game of luck but they were playing a player who was, so that's the advantage and that's money in the pocket. I could play Jim sometime and show him up in front of the princess. It captured my attention, still does, it is something to work on.

#

Jim said, Hal, it's time for you to go back home to Jane. It's been a rough year for all of us, but she wants you back. She's doing a great job with Phinneus and you're a great dad. Let's move you back in there maybe next week. Of course you're always welcome here, but let's put this rough year behind us.

I stood up and put the cribbage board under my arm and the cards in my pockets and began to walk down the stairs.

What are you doing?

Leaving, that's what you said for me to do.

Where are you going?

Guess I'll go down to Cleveland.

Hal, get back up here.

So I went back up there.

Sit down.

So I sat down.

Hal.

Jim.

Hal listen to me.

Jim, I'm listening to you.

Oh, you're so emotional, Hal. Listen, go back to Janey.

Jim, I interrupted him.

Yeah?

Chuck is your son.

Yes, he is.

You're an ass to him.

Jim took the long breath he thinks he's the master of.

Hal, Chuck is not welcome in this house.

Okay, then. I put the cribbage board on the table gently and began to deal myself a game of solitaire.

Don't give the child a cent then, Hal. Tell Janey you won't give the child a cent. Go back there and live there and just announce that Phinneus is hers to raise and you don't want to have anything to do with it. That's fair enough. You can always change your mind once you get to know him. But go back to Agmet, tell them you want your job back, and go back to Janey and tell her she's paying for the kid and that's it. Go back there, Hal.

No, I said.

I love responding to big diatribes in very simple little slaps. It is something only the confident can do. Jim sat and looked at me, I didn't know what he was trying to see exactly, but he kept looking at me. Finally he said nothing but just went back into the house and I practiced fingering the cards. It is gonna take awhile, I thought.

Chuck came back later. I heard him and got up from bed. I sat down on the porch with him and he had a cigarette and we talked about the Browns.

CHAPTER SIX

I opened my nose to the smell of Salisbury steak when Chuck came out onto the porch. Jim was making Salisbury steak! He was good for something after all. Chuck came out and sat down and rubbed his face, he was pasty and tired, but he'd shaved. He'd been sleeping all day.

There he is, the sleeping bear! Come on, a quick one before dinner.

So I opened up the board and set the pegs and shuffled.

Hey, you shaved. Very pretty, I said. You been sleeping all day?

Yeah.

Well, wake up, get yourself some coffee or something, it's almost time for dinner but I think we can get a quick one in.

I just got a phone call from a guy I fought with, he said.

Oh yeah?

But I don't remember him at all.

Let's just play some cards, Chuck, you don't need to remember all that.

He said I should come up and see him, though. He lives in Lansing.

Michigan?

It's not too far.

No, it's not.

I guess I'll go up.

Cut.

He cut a 4, which was easily beat by my 7.

When are you gonna go up?

I guess I'll go up tomorrow.

A car pulled up and Chris and Craig came out, I had no idea they were coming over for dinner, but Chris had a bottle of wine and Craig and Melissa had something in a pan. Chuck winced because he usually likes to clean up and wear something other than sweat pants when he sees them.

It's okay, man, they're your brothers, you're fine.

The brothers yelled up to Chuck enthusiastically and Chris gave me a pat on the back when he came up. They stopped at the table and asked about the game, but it was just starting so there wasn't much to say about it.

Steak tonight!, Chris said and rubbed his belly, which was larger all the time.

I can smell it, Craig said.

Smells goooood, Melissa said.

Come on, buddy, Chris said to Chuck, trying to encourage, obviously. Put on some jeans and let's go see how Dad is. You can finish the game after.

We'll be in in a second, I said.

Don't be too long, we got steak to eat!

Yeah, I'll be in, Chuck said, and I could see him looking around for a beer truck.

They went inside and I could hear Jim holler out a hello to them.

Come on, come on, I said, and played an ace to start it out, which was uncustomary and usually not that smart, but I wanted Chuck to get on his toes. It's the best thing to focus on something if you're out at sea like he was. He played, but he also sat back and looked at the wood or something over my head. It was always up to me to snap him back so I tried but he was out there.

I just don't remember this guy, Uncle Hal. I don't remember him at all. Horace Januck.

Chuck, I said, the truth hitting me. It's a scam! It's a scam! Don't do it, it's a scam. He's gonna scam you.

He didn't ask me for any money. I couldn't give him any money anyway.

He and I laughed at this. Laughed and laughed and laughed, cause it was so true.

I just don't remember him, but he described things I did. How the fuck did I block him out? Horace, Horace...

I don't know, Chuck.

Damn.

We played a few hands and were getting near the first turn on the board.

I don't think you should go up, I said.

I want to. I don't know why.

When?

I said tomorrow.

Tomorrow??

I already said that.

A guy calls you and tells you to go all the way up to Michigan tomorrow?

No, he called last week.

You didn't say anything about it.

I just did.

I don't think you should go.

I'm going to. There's a ten o'clock train in the morning, I think I'm gonna take that. You give me a ride to the train station?

What, in Cleveland?

Yeah.

I don't want to go down-

Come on, Uncle Hal.

Fine.

I thought to myself the last thing I'd want to do if I was him was leave Cleveland Heights. That's one of the great bad ideas, leaving where you're from, because it's not gonna be any different anywhere else. Here you have a street lined with oak trees, somewhere else you got birches, or sycamores out west, what, evergreens in the Rockies, it didn't matter, or go to the desert of you want and you still got telephone poles or cactuses sticking up out of the ground if you want something like that. It's just the same. I wouldn't have gone if I was him. I would sit where you are and enjoy the nice no need to move. But he was young. I needed to do what I could to protect him until he's back on his feet, but there was no intervening for him to not see his friend. He'd probably remember him.

Chuck said, He just said come up, we'll get a beer, talk about old times. I don't care about any of those guys except Kemplin.

Yeah, exactly.

But I want to see him. Shit, I gotta see somebody.

He actually had a nice hand to play, 7 7 8 8 9, for 16 pegs.

Very nice.

I don't care about those guys. What's the big deal? I don't want to go, he said.

Don't go. Tell you what, let's get up in the morning, tomorrow's Saturday, and you and I take the car, you take me over to Janey's so I can get my other shoes, and then let's go have a big steak and eggs breakfast.

We're having steak tonight.

Tomorrow's a new day!, I said.

Chris stuck his head out the door.

Come on, guys!

I heard Jim's voice inside. Is Chuck out there?, he said.

Yeah, Craig said.

Come on, it's ready, Chris said.

We can finish this later, I said.

So Chuck and I went inside and Chuck made a quick left to wash his face and I took a seat at the table but then had to stand because they like to stand behind their chairs to pray before they eat. Jim closed his eyes and bowed his head. Chris, Craig, and Melissa followed.

Hey, I said. Don't you want to wait for Chuck?

Jim started the prayer, Chris shot me a look like he didn't know and then closed his eyes so I closed my eyes too. Jim blew his trumpet to heaven and then finished and pulled out his seat to sit, but Chuck was standing in the doorway.

There he is!, Chris said enthusiastically when he sat, then he scooted his chair to make room and Chuck started walking up, but Jim stopped him.

I'm sorry, Chuck. I told you last night that you were not welcome. I told you last night that you were not welcome in the house but I want to clarify that.

Dad, Chris said.

I want to clarify what I meant by that, what I mean by that was you can sleep in your room but I am not making any meals for you, your brothers and uncle and sister-in-law are here for a meal and we would very much like for you to join us but not until we see some respect in terms of your behavior.

Fight! Fight!, I said.

Uncle Hal, Craig said.

Hal, Jim said.

Do you understand me, son?

Chuck said yes and then walked out. He was very embarrassed. I hate all kinds of things that have to do with these small, china cup kind of feelings, they are stupid. The only thing that can make a big man feel small again is getting caught in a fight with small people. Chuck is one of them but I had high hopes for him. All he did was put his head down and say okay and walk right out of the room like he was an idiot. Chris and Craig made a small start of a protest but Jim crushed it easily by saying, Your brother drinks too much. Your brother is on a downward spiral. The sight of him disgusts me. Plenty of soldiers... and on and on.

Poor Melissa scratched at her plate and wanted to be anywhere else. Nobody wanted to be there now, including Jim. So why were we there?

Oh look at that!, I said. Oh, look at that!

You okay, Uncle Hal?, Craig said.

Oh, man, I said, and then I leaned my head way back and put my mouth wide open.

Hal, Jim said. Close your mouth.

I walk on a high beam, Chuck. Occasionally I get up on a very high beam and walk without any trouble at all and look down. Everything is very clear up there. I'm not so much walking above a battlefield as much as above an opera or a stage play about battlefields. I walk on a high wire and look down at them. I see a team of soldiers pushing their bayonets into an empty...

Jim said, Hal, it is a shame on you.

Dad, take it easy, Craig said.

No, it is a shame on him. His obstinacy with the child and with his wife wanting the child has turned into a real shame and he is going along with it. Hal, pick yourself up from the floor and be a man.

...Jim was saying this stuff, but I wanted to finish the thought I was having which was how a team of soldiers were pushing swords or muskets, bayonets or something into an empty piece of armor that's laying on the ground, while another team of soldiers were defending themselves from another empty piece of armor that's also laying on the ground, and sometimes I want to jump down from the comfortable high wire and straight into one of the suits of armor. But Jim was speaking, and when Jim speaks, by golly you should listen!

He said, Be a man. You're much smarter than you let on, I bet you can get your job back, Janey will take you back, I know she will, she misses you! And you miss her! CJ hit the folly of youth, you have to let him go...

I'm not worried about him, I said.

What the hell are you worried about then?

Jim, I said, and looked at him. Jim, I spent all my life working real damn hard, last twenty years I've spent in a factory. I could have gone out and had a wild time but I worked and... I don't know, Jim. One preacher in the family is way more than enough. I don't want to live in her house. Especially not with that kid. I don't know what to say to it.

Yes, it is a shame! Yes, it certainly is.

I thought, this place is for the birds. I gotta get out of here. I'll get my own place. I have a meeting tomorrow at Jane's with the Worker's Comp people, so I gotta do that, and then I'll get a place around here for cheap. A thing about being big like I've become is not having to do what you don't want to do anymore. It's perfect, then I'll also have more time to learn the cards, which is also perfect.

Chris bless his coward heart tried one more time to stand up for a guy who might be in line for a medal of valor or something but the rival army shot him straight down to hell and he lacked the courage to counterattack,

while Craig and Melissa exchanged looks like they'd talked the whole thing through a million times and had decided in the end, upon what justification I don't know, to say nothing. Better than Jim's problem, but worse than any other human being that may be *linked by blood*. It's rare for viper pits to serve steak.

#

I had Craig and Melissa take me to Sugar's on their way home and Chuck was there like I figured he'd be, playing darts.

Hey, Uncle Hal!, he said.

Chuck was hot and he said he wanted to start a business. I said, Yes!, go tell your father immediately.

No, leave him out of it.

He said he was gonna get his soldier buddy Horace to go in with him with some money, if he had some.

Go tell Jim, he'd be proud of the thought, I said.

Nah, leave him out of it, Uncle Hal. Come on, buy me a drink while I think about how I'm gonna do it.

Dream, dream, and I bought him a drink.

The tall strong soldier, Kemplin, was there. I guess he was watching over the life he saved to make sure he didn't finally die in as stupid a place as this, but the soldier looked like he may be the one that needed saving. He was all red and crusted over. They were all hot, the place was hot, my ears were hot from being about frozen outside to burning inside so they were double hot. I burned my finger when I touched the bar. I didn't know they had hot beer but it scalded my throat as it went down in tiny sips.

Uncle Hal, welcome to Sugar's!, Chuck said again.

He leaned to my ear and hotly whispered, That's her.

He was having a good time. Kemplin threw and didn't hit the board but everybody's funny bone instead. I had to unbutton my shirt.

She's all right, huh?

Yeah, yeah.

And she makes a shitload!

Chuck jammed a dart like he was gonna poke it through the wall of the place itself.

We're gonna start a business, Uncle Hal.

I need a ride to Jane's.

Now?

No, no, tomorrow.

Oh, okay. Wanna go up to Lansing with me?

No, no, got a meeting with the Worker's Comp people tomorrow.

Oh, okay.

Then I showed Chuck how I could fake having tendonitis in my arm. He helped me practice, then he raised the beer to my lips and said, Uh-oh, let me help you with that. He poured too much, though. My mouth closed and some of the hot liquid went bubbling down my chin like grease on a griddle.

Now!, said the erect soldier loudly and then something in Spanish to a Mexican man who was standing with his lizardskin boots on. Chuck moved over there as the Mexican man put his hands up and moved away. The soldier took the darts, arched his back, and threw them straight up at the ceiling. One stuck but the others fell down so he beat everybody to picking them up and threw them again, though everybody yelled at him not to, and the bartender came down and then those guys got thrown out on their asses, thank Christ.

I drove them to a diner so they could sober up. I ordered some damn eggs and it was so smoky in there. This is a life I hadn't led and never wanted to. I was a building a home and a family at their age. Fine. No problem at all.

The guys didn't have much to say to each other, any of them. They could discuss from time to time what their dicks wanted to do. I wanted to know but I don't think they ever talked about much. It made me wonder what the hell people talk about anyway. I wanted to *level* with them, but what in the hell do you level about? Best conversations I ever had were about work? There's a bear in the bushes you can sometimes observe. In the mountains, in the trees. He lives without such threat of responsibility and he never talks. He kills when he kills, he eats, he eats berries sometimes, so he picks when he picks, he does what he wants, he doesn't kill his time in bars talking! Oh boy, change it up time. But I was very worried about Chuck.

Come on, eat your eggs and let's get out of here.

I decided to get a place of my own, I didn't need much. A secret I'd kept from Janey is that I put a bit of every month into a private little fund at the bank for my twenty-three years at Agmet. No stock market, no gambling or betting, just very small incremental *gains* and a little *interest*, so it got to be not huge but a decent little bit, I figured, for her or CJ or if something happened. But I was not gonna give it to the kid. I wanted to give it to Janey. But now I decided I'd use it for my own self and move into my own place. Never go back to greasing monkeys. I'd learned how not to need much and that is very very big, huge big, very nice! But I was having trouble not falling asleep in that diner.

I did fall asleep and they woke me up. The damn morning was almost there. The morning? Oh brother, I said. Chuck, I am not a young man. Jesus.

That was gonna give me a bad stomach all day. The other ones had gone but Chuck and the soldier sat there staring and very slowly finishing big sausage and egg plates and drinking coffee. I was very sick of everybody playing make-believe with everybody else, it was driving me nuts.

Let's face it, I said, and their blank drunk eyes looked at me. You saved his life, I said. He's still alive, now you're both drunks and you have nothing to say, let's just face it. Come on, guys, it's boring and one of you has to take me back.

Jesus Christ, Uncle Hal!

Take me back.

We paid the bill and I got in Chuck's car and he started driving back to Jim's but I said, No, no, you gotta take me to Jane's.

Now? It's five o'clock in the morning!

Right now!

I don't want to go all the way over there! I gotta get some sleep!

I got the Worker's Comp people coming over today!

Okay, Uncle Hal.

Take me to Janey's.

So he turned to go toward Jane's.

Man, I gotta get some sleep cause I'm going up to Lansing today.

Why don't you just call it off? I'll be back in the afternoon and we can play some cards.

No, I gotta go.

We got to Jane's. The house was quiet and dark.

See ya, he said to me.

Listen, Chuck.

What?

You're a vulnerable guy, okay? Whoever this fella is in Lansing, don't let him try anything on you, okay? If he asks you for money, whatever. Don't get drunk.

Okay.

Be careful. Have fun.

Okay.

Then he sped off.

#

I didn't want to wake Janey so I sat on the porch. It was getting lighter and it was late July. It would be a very hot day. It looked like Robert Pulaski was up because his kitchen light was on. I didn't like thinking of that kid in there with Janey asleep.

The note had said, Love, Phinneus, and it didn't look like CJ's writing to me. She insisted it was, but I don't think so. I don't have any other options for who sent the kid, so maybe it was. I don't know, but I don't run an orphanage. If it was CJ, so what? That means he's alive. That's fine and good. But if he does not sign CJ then he's not CJ anymore and that is his choice. Of course, he's still CJ, but if he doesn't want to be, what can anybody do about it?

One time, I had to explain this to Janey. I had to say, Listen, honey, maybe he's *not* crying out and calling out to you. Maybe you or me or both of us are what he wants to be away from.

Later, when we argued about the kid, she said, I was afraid he's dead, Hal.

Yes...

But this child tells me he's not. I will believe the child was sent by our son.

That doesn't trouble me at all. But the son is not here and this child is. He's not my flesh and blood, never will be. I did not do anything wrong to make C go away. We were good parents. We owed money, that's no good. I probably wasn't the best example for a job, going off to a factory in the morning and coming back with hands full of grease, but it was union, at least. We couldn't know. He decided to leave. Okay, fine.

Take me to the poison well! I want to know how good it tastes. It must taste great.

The kid had arrived in the middle of the day while I was at work at Agmet. I was on a break fortunately and Frank came into the break room and called me over to the phone in his office. Janey's voice was trembling. It made my heart flip. I thought they found something out about CJ. I thought he came back or some soldiers had arrived at the door with a flag or something—all the possibilities I had excluded became included again—and she said I had to come home, so I did, and we went down to the train station and everything changed all over again. We went around and around for months. First we did what we were supposed to do which was report we'd found a missing child. They took fingerprints and did all of that and no response came, no one claimed the child. They matched him to no crime, they told us this sort of thing happens. They told us we had no obligation to him, to which I said they were damn right, and they took him into state custody. But Janey wanted him. She said she felt selected. Eventually she got him and it was legal, pending discovery of the biological parents, which I thought was bullshit and not bullshit at the same time.

I thought about CJ at baseball practice, I thought about having had no other kids, I thought about the hard driving slow nails and a house that was

a match away from a heap, I thought about the tendonitis I was thinking about developing in my arm and my compulsion to watch the place combust, and I thought I don't want some outside kid leeching on like a freerider to everything we did and that was it.

Add Jim's sermons to it. We called Jim and he came over and looked at us deeply with his eyes, as if to acknowledge what a world-changing day this was, which aggravated me, and then he let his coat fall dramatically and went straight to the kid as if Jim was a dentist and the kid was a tooth. He worked on the tooth for an hour and then Janey put the kid upstairs and Janey, Jim, and I went into the kitchen to talk. Jim announced that we had to raise this child, and the shining star in the east under which he sees this child as being delivered, and so much else. Janey, poor Janey, Jim could not know. She had gone through the hell, had reached her hands to children of air for so long, had shriveled some. But right before the kid came I thought she'd started to come back together. She'd restarted her job at the library and was coming out of it.

Your own flesh and blood, Jim, I shook my head. Your own flesh and blood.

Janey had a question, but Jim stopped her and said, He's talking about Chuck, Jane.

That's right. Your own flesh and blood rotting on the vine. You tell everybody else how to raise children who aren't even theirs, and you abandon yours.

I have not abandoned Chuck, Hal...

And then he went on but he may have been speaking another language. I gave up.

The kid was fixated on violent things. That was part of the reason I always felt uneasy with him in the house and why I worried about Janey. If

he didn't do anything now, fine. But when would he? How long would it be? What had happened to him? I had no idea. Would he snap in two? Would he kill us? When the kid is your kid, when it was CJ, that was hard enough.

Robert and Edna Pulaski came over shortly after the kid arrived and they didn't know what to make of him either. I spoke with them afterward and they didn't trust the kid. They didn't trust his eyes, they didn't trust where he was coming from. They did not trust him. I did not trust him. Janey trusted him, fine.

I heard a stir. The light went on. The shower turned on. The street was wet. Janey was in the shower. Her legs and her body. I walked over to the donut store and got some donuts and brought them back. By the time I was back I was soaked with sweat and the shower was off. The kitchen was lit and rustling, so I knocked on the door and Janey answered. At first she was alarmed, but then she remembered I had my Worker's Comp meeting that day. She put a donut for the kid on a plate and shortly after the kid came out in the pajamas we bought him and said hello to me. Then he ate his donut and went out and watched TV. Janey had to go to the store but she didn't want to leave me alone with the kid. I told her I wouldn't leave the kid alone in the house if I was her and she told me I'd already made that clear on several occasions before, so I went to the store with her and that was it.

I waited for the Worker's Comp people to come and they came. They asked me questions about stress in my life, how much I weigh, do I drink (no), do I smoke (no), and all other kinds of stupid things until I explained to them that I have tendonitis and can't fulfill my daily job requirements, so I need some help from the state, and anyway I have paid into the state funds for my entire working life and never taken a cent, so that was the interview and they left.

Hal, do you want me to make you some lunch? Nope, I gotta get a move on. Why don't you let me make you some lunch? No, thanks, Janey, got some stuff to do.

#

I needed to go get this place of my own that I'd been thinking about and stop waiting. I didn't tell her about the secret money. I had her take me back to Jim's. I slept a couple hours because of the late night and early morning and then I waited for Chuck.

I enjoyed to think. Sit and think. Think of what I made, think of all the money that went out of that company and into me, think of what I did with it, things it bought and such, think of what of it went into Janey and how we stayed alive, by putting things in, by getting things to go out, think of the organization of the whole thing and how everything works. It was not a small project.

Jim said Chuck had gotten on that train.

CHAPTER SEVEN

I said to a decent enough looking guy, You know if the apartments on Taylor are renting?

They're rentals, yeah.

But are there *vacancies*? I know they're *rentals*, I want to *rent* one. Are there *vacancies*? *Availabilities*?

Oh, I don't know. You know, you might ask...

To the next guy, Did you hear me asking...?

Yeah, I have no idea. Fifteen on three.

To the woman in the aisle, Did you hear me asking them?

Excuse me?

I'm asking around to see if the apartments over on Taylor are renting?

On Taylor...

Yeah, down the street, to the left...

Oh. No, I have no idea if they're renting, I'm not sure.

I didn't buy anything and I left.

Hey, somebody around here know if the Taylor apartments are renting? Somebody, somebody, somebody, I gotta know quick I gotta know quick. Excuse me...

Yes?

Any idea if the Taylor apartments are renting?

Boy... Which ones?

The brick, not the stucco.

Geez, I don't know. I don't know.

Tell me this, then, sir.

Yeah?

Do you know if the stucco ones are renting?

No, I don't. I don't know anything about rentals.

Then why'd you ask me which one?!

I went on. There had to be somebody who knew something about how to rent yourself one of those apartments. They were shitty little apartments. Apartments four hundred pound men go to die in. Apartments black people live in, Mexican dishwashers, anything else like that. Janey would scream in horror – Oh, my Hal! What happened to him?

Nothing happened to him, he just realized that his bigness did not require him to pay through the nose and give his entire life and every last remaining unbroken bone to turning levers and greasing monkeys. So he figured out whether you like it or not how easily and cheaply he could live. And that's what he was doing! But gotta find somebody who knows something about getting a place. I figured I should go over there but I didn't have a ride. Come on, come on. I took a bus back to the factory and some of the weekend guys were just getting off. I knew some of them. I saw Rick. I never cared for him, little nervous laughing guy.

Rick, you know anything about vacancies at the apartments on Taylor just south of downtown, the white ones? Can you give me a ride there?

Hal, what the hell are you... woah, woah, slow down. How's it going?

Fine. I'm just wondering if you can give me a ride-

Rick leaned down and spoke in a whisper. You're not supposed to be here, Hal, he said.

I quit, I didn't get fired!

They told us you got a lawsuit against us right now.

Just for tendonitis in the goddamn arm, that's all, I'm not bringing down the whole ship. Just a Worker's Comp thing.

I can't talk to you here, Hal.

You gotta be kidding me.

Give me a call or something.

Well, let's get out of here, then. Gimme a lift.

What, you don't drive anymore?

Nah.

What the hell happened to you, Hal?

I'll tell you all about it, it's a great big story, we'll go get some-

You gotta tell me another time, Hal, I gotta get out of here. And I'm new on Saturdays, too.

Rick-

Hal, I can't.

Rick couldn't, so I went back to the bus and I figured out it stopped near the convenience market just a block away from the apartments. There was a lady in the manager's office turning a key and walking away when I was walking up. She was headed to her car so I ran toward her, but she was gone. So I turned around and the apartments came back into focus, but there was no sign of whether there were vacancies or not. I didn't want to go over to the brick ones but I did anyway, and in that one the manager's office was closed with zero sign of her. So now I had no way at all of knowing. I was a couple miles from Jim's and from Janey's. The important thing was to figure out if I could walk to Chuck's or if he could walk here cause I really didn't want a car again and he may not be driving long, I thought.

I have a child, I watch it grow, I wait for it to do whatever it's gonna do, and then it does it. Then I have opportunities once the child did what it was gonna do and now I can take those opportunities. I always believed CJ was

a miracle because of the circumstances. That's fine, we had a miracle. But now Chuck's being a real dumb ass, driving drunk, risking his life and future employment. This has gotta stop, Chuck. A place away from Jim's, even for a place to go for an afternoon, would be good.

But then the manager lady's office opened and she walked out pushing a shopping cart. But I thought people who lived places didn't push those things. Wrong-o, Hal. Again.

She told me these aren't open house hours but I convinced her I'd only take fifteen so she showed me a place and it was perfect.

What do you do for a living?

I'm retired from Agmet. I have a nice pension. Kid moved out, I want something simple and I want it now.

She shuffled into the office on the first floor, opened the door, turned on the light. What a dingy place. But I knew I wouldn't miss taking care of a rip in the carpet. It's just carpet after all, Janey. It's not the end of the world.

The lady said I could move in as soon as I gave her first month's rent and a security deposit. I didn't even hardly remember how any of that stuff worked. I told her it would have to be Monday. I figured helping me move would give Chuck something to do, too, and I'd let him stay there if Jim still had him kicked out. You'd think she'd smile and say Welcome to the neighborhood! or something like that, but nope, she looked around like she was nervous and put a key on top of some papers on the desk and then escorted me out like that was the last time I'd be lucky enough to see the inside of her little temple. It didn't matter. I was free.

By the time I walked back to Chuck's, I was drenched, so I dried off in the bathroom and then had a seat on the porch. Saturdays are the royal day of sweeping the kingdom, because Saturday is no church and no work for Jim, so he rampages instead.

It's fun being one of the guys again, isn't Hal?

Yes it is!

I got my pop out of the refrigerator and Jim sat there and watched me drink it.

No thanks, I don't want one, he said.

Oh, shoot, my manners!

He stopped and looked at me like I was a dog who finally got hit. I looked back up at him.

It is not for you to solve all the problems of the world, Hal. It is not for you to do that.

I wondered if he thought I thought that was my job. I wondered what action of mine he based this thought on.

You know that Chuck is a criminal, Hal.

No, I said.

Chuck is a criminal, Hal.

He is? From the war?

No. From several things. From the school, from we think a couple liquor stores around here. Also from stupid vending machines.

He robbed vending machines?

Yes.

He could get in trouble.

Yes, that's right. And innocent people suffer.

Okay.

So that's why, in addition to apparent alcoholism, I have asked him not to remain in my house until he cleans up his act.

And that's the kind of support you think will keep him from stealing? That's the only thing I know to do right now.

I see.

Jim has a very dramatic way of telling a story sometimes, and this to him was high drama, but it fell down and disappeared, because as I pressed for information, I found out that he clearly did *not* know if Chuck had done these things. These things had happened, Jim knew, but he did not really know if Chuck was the one who did them. That makes a whole hell of a lot of difference. I wonder what else Jim doesn't know, but Jim doesn't wonder that. But none of it justifies anything. Hell, what the hell do I know about it? Chuck is my flesh and blood, *CJ* is my flesh and blood, *Jim* is my flesh and blood, even *Jim*, and that's the way it is.

He left me alone and I was tired so I went into my bedroom, which still had all of Chris's trophies up, and slept. I remember thinking, as I was in and out of sleep, that there was a way to get something done that I wanted to get done but I hadn't explored that side of the options yet, and once I got up, I thought I should write it down before doing anything, but I took a shower and then it was gone. So I got a pop and went out to the porch and sat there with it until it was very late, and I hoped Chuck wasn't dead in a ditch somewhere in Michigan.

#

I understand the curse. His childhood was so happy. He was only the son of a machinist, a monkey greaser, that's what we always called it around the house for fun, and a good mother. We gave him pretty much whatever

we could, and there was only one of him. We sure as hell kept him safe, it seemed to me. He wanted to play Little League, he got it. And I coached when I could. He wanted a weight set and a punching bag, sure. We got him a beat-up old car when he turned sixteen. It ran. I don't think he could have wanted more than that, he wasn't a fashionable kind of kid who went after every hot thing. I think he had everything he needed. Sometimes I think he thought he was some kind of martyr. That's the toughest thing for me to grasp. He always wanted to know why we named him CJ - was it backwards Jesus Christ? Or Christ Jesus? He used to tell us Christ Jesus was a way people said Jesus Christ. No was the most basic and truthful answer to his idea, I'm sorry to say it. His name was an abbreviation of Cornell James, abbreviated because it sounded good - in honor of my father and my brother, that's it. That's it, C. I don't know. No big mystery, we just liked the sound of CJ. He wanted to know if his childhood was just. Jane disagrees, but I think he thought it was a crime to spit in the street. But that is the most wretched kind of thinking, because there is nowhere to go. Only Switzerland gets to not have an army, and that's a big joke.

I know he went to war. I know he did it. He wanted to save Chuck somehow, in his imagination, which is so young and foolish. Maybe he'd become convinced of the *cause* he was always thinking about. Look, cause or not, they'll make you go if they need you. That's what they've always done. If it comes to that, hey, different story. If Chuck was in a burning car, he wanted to pull him out, maybe. Well, Chuck's sitting right here, C!

I don't know how he got to the war, he wasn't old enough. He is now though, I guess. But he had a way of doing things, a way of talking himself into things and getting other people to do what he wanted them to. I think it's possible he comes back someday, I do. For now, though, I hope he doesn't die a horrible tragic death. I hope he is a hero, sure.

Buy a bag of chips, a bottle of pop, a deck of cards, I suppose. If I thought or spoke, that's what I'd say. Some people figure out how they like it, and I'm getting this apartment, and to hell with it. Chuck and Janey—even Chuck, I bet—are gonna take one look at the Taylor Street apartments and say, Oh, Hal, no!, but I'll tell the truth which is it's not where you live, it's how you live there.

PART THREE

...only one who is in pain really senses nothing but himself; pleasure does not enjoy itself but something besides itself.

-Hannah Arendt, The Human Condition

CHAPTER ONE

For a tragedy to complete, revelation and caution must sound and resound, the earth release a hero of great consequence. Balance restored, the citizens return with solemnity and gladness.

But none are so consequential here. Curses and blessings are no longer attributable.

Joy is of the home now. Outside the home, joy is scarce. But the home, the home's inhabitants, are temporary at best, prone to disappearance in spirit or body, and death is exalted beyond its merit. But the polis will remain until the last two, and the county lamps shone on some who wandered out looking.

In the morning, Celia turned her Ford onto 496. Ed went the other way, past the huge Meijer's grocery store, a left and then a right, to the fenced site of the half-built Szechuan Savings and Loan bank, where Januck Construction was halfway to payday.

Ed, the owner of the business and a worker at the site, worked with vigor until rain threatened and it was time to close up. He pocketed unstripped screws, cleared planks of dust, and threw wadded tape like baseballs to the bins. The lights of Lansing softened the falling evening. Cesar and Roberto hooked tarps against the wind. John Jewell, Ed's chief deputy, drank big swigs of water and hunched over a clipboard, his legs dangling childlike from the opened tailgate of a truck. Januck Construction was visible three times. The fastened tarps beat a wild rhythm. Pangs of the dumpsters rang out like cymbals. All this music still made him sing along.

John Jewell said, Boss.

Edward said, Jewell.

I bought a houseboat at lunch.

You did a who?

I bought a-

Get outta here!

Cheap!

Raspy-throated Carl, always quick, said, For your bathtub?

Jorge Escobar called out, Ai yai yai and something else in Spanish, laughed, and shook his head.

John Jewell raised his big eyes like he'd spilled his soup.

You bought a houseboat?

I did!

Carl said, Where's it gonna go?

I got a hanger for it.

You're gonna pay a whole winter for a hanger you can't even use it till spring?

I got it cheap!

Ed said, Carl, now on you're doing the purchasing. Jiminy Christmas, Jewell.

I got it cheap, John Jewell protested like he was innocent. He was laughing.

Ed said, You tell Cindy?

John said quickly, Nope.

Carl said quicker, Don't.

Escobar wailed like the Alamo just fell.

Poor John Jewell, flush with money, full with glee. Ed loved to pay the man.

The windows of the town except the coffee shop went dark. The citizens had gone. It felt good to Ed to be the last one working, to preside over the closing of the town on an evening. Now the site had been secured for the day, the money honestly made, and the men could return to their wives, home, children, beer, or whatever they worked for and went to.

Ed took three lefts and two rights through Lansing to East Lansing proper. He passed a boy walking slow, then turned right onto the curving street, then up the drive of the wooden white and green-trimmed house, and parked. He went into the warm light of the porch and through the door into rich scent and softness. We were deep in trouble, but we'd kept our lights on.

We had our ritual kiss at the beginning of an evening. It was a new ritual, but we did it.

He ladled some cream off the top and stirred. Tomatoes, tender potatoes, golden bubbled broth, crisp celery chopped in a bowl to the side. He stood

in cotton pants flecked with dust and steel. He washed his hands then went upstairs. He put his wallet and keys where they go and hampered his pants and shirt. He changed into softer evening clothes and came back down. He went to what needed attention and that was the stew.

She was noting something. He watched her from the kitchen, over the counter that divided the rooms. Though it was a shared project, she worked more intensely. He wondered what discovery she'd made and if she'd take a break to watch the TV with him.

How's tricks?, she said. It startled him. She was looking at him from her table.

Tricks is good, he said.

Good. Another thirty minutes on that?

If you say so.

I think so. So good day?

Good day, no problems.

Good.

He leaned on the counter. He crossed his arms and watched her as her eyes drew back to what she unraveled. He massaged his warming neck and thought. His mind opened onto a fenceless range and he did not question where he was, in what country, in what era. A pretty little melody, some brutal threnody came over him and left. His hands behind him pushed against the counter. He watched her burrow in. He saw her ears – ears he'd kissed. He saw her hair – hair he'd combed. He saw her hands – hands that had held him. He saw the map before her nearly all blue, so she was on a sea voyage. He went to the cabinet, took some dishes, and set them.

Mmm, looking pretty good, he said.

Okay, she said.

Her fingers began to mark her place but her eyes stayed on the papers. He set the butter and dropped the celery into the pot. He stirred and thought. She shut a book and came into the kitchen.

Good evening, dear, she finally said.

She lit the candles that beautified the place. We blew on our stew and took the cautious first sips. One mentioned some novelty in the news of the day, but we never dwelled in that. In the paper, Ed would glance at the names of the dead in the little box and count three or less as success. He often noted the strangeness of this calculus, but he knew that epochs were epochs and this epoch was his. And also, we thought, relative to the epochs before, three a day is nothing. Some celebrity had been reduced and that's what we chuckled over.

He dipped his bread in and ate it. She bent her head and blew on her stew and he knew her mind went far away.

From the kitchen window, Ed could see the minimally lamplit street. To Ed, the polis was the big thing and he thought of it always. The street was the artery to the polis, but also a sliver of the polis itself. His particular polis was but one manifestation of the history of men living together. He often wished to be in an ancient polis—those great dwellings of those people who gave the thing its name—when goods and ideas were everywhere and lives were lived most thoroughly there, in that time when home and bed were mere respites from real life. But this, he thought looking out, is now a polis of hedges and gates. But it is a polis still, he reminded himself, and we have work and enjoyment in it.

She crossed her legs and sipped her stew. She looked at the wax on the candle. Ed complimented her hair. We were committed to such things but it caught her by surprise, so she turned her head up and laughed.

That was fine, and he ladled another bowl of stew.

Nancy Russino made us a pie, she said. I'll put it in the oven if you want it tonight.

Oh boy, he said, and placed his hands on his paunch. Maybe tomorrow.

That's what I was thinking, she said.

He cleared the dishes and placed the butter. She put tea on and was back at the table, her woman's body inclined. He walked past her and went out the French doors to the backyard and out into that fine chilly evening of early autumn Michigan.

Tonight, the birds of Lansing. A few high calls through the damp air. A nice rose-breast in the tree and from somewhere the sanctus bell of a thrush. He called back but the birds preferred the worm to the converse with the man, as usual. He picked up a rake and turned it in his hands. He practiced his thinking. He noted the forks of the rake animating the ground beneath to sight in dull green and brown. Jumping, flipping, then still at his wish. He was satisfied to have noted the animation rather than only the blur of the forks. From just behind him, a rustle and then flaps. He chuckled at himself for having noticed the rose-breast but not the common crow. What a long road to this point, he thought. What a long long road, as the birds quieted on this big night of their comparatively brief lives.

And how does one arrive into a deep, singular fold of history? Into a unique pocket of a time and place, unknown and unknowable to the mass of citizens, scholars, and scientists who have thought so long and looked so attentively? You build and fill your own home, he thought. That is the pocket, the unreachable cul-de-sac of the polis. Unreachable to all but yourself and your family, if you are so lucky to have one. He thought of statistics and the golden rule that every statistic, no matter how thorough, how comprehensive, how stringent and correct the study design that

produced it, utterly fails at the level of the individual. Humanity may be predictable, but a human never is.

She did look out at him as he stood there dreaming, his attention on senses - birds and flowers and other untroubling things. Our condition was helplessness. Futility was our only expectation. We lost our son. We had nothing. We needed only expectation of something but had nothing. We felt we only had to choose, as the children of the beloved comatose must, between the shrugging-unto-death and the endless glucose drip. We needed a child. We were worn. Ed is wonderful, she thought. Celia is wonderful, he thought. We were sick.

He went inside and looked over her shoulder at the map folded to the arctic.

Like some more tea?, he said.

Oh, yes please, she said.

He warmed some tea, set her cup, and sat across the table.

Together we gazed at our work. It was the genealogy of our families' histories, our table had become an excavation site. We'd been working—Celia more vigorously than Ed—for nearly a year, but we'd reached a point that takes some genealogists a lifetime. We'd been aided by some early generations of record-keepers and were enjoying the revelations of the grand march.

Behold it!

Ed put his hand on Celia's warm knee.

A big overwhelming thing it was. A chart like a face in a rock, seen in some lights to weep, in others to scorn. In others it seemed to laugh in joy. A chart in its simplest utterings revealing facts (1870 Elizabeth marries Jack), perhaps revealing sense beyond rationale (were Elizabeth and Jack in love?), perhaps revealing cold rationale (did Elizabeth leave some good

lover Patrick for the dry but wealthy Jack?), and the issues resulting from these unions. How brazenly the chart declares the intention of mankind, which is to go on, of course. How the sixteenth century prince depended on the fourteenth century pauper. How the prince's line, surely envisioned by the prince to go on parading nobly and gloriously through eternity, found itself coughing in a Manhattan grotto in 1897.

We turned to the genealogy when Johnny was pronounced missing and action and presumed dead, which usually is dead, and we suppose we did it to feel something, some connection. Since the future was erased, Celia wanted to reveal the past, to find the world.

Sending Johnny to the world—to save it, to preserve it—seemed right. But then it took him and as we fought in those first months to regain vigor, we felt we'd slipped into a hole. We wanted that world that took him to acknowledge our sacrifice by pulling us up, by filling the hole, by coming to us with some comfort and love, and appreciation too. It did not, though, and our worldly ties felt financial only.

There it is – the fantastical. A tribute to the haphazard. The charts and papers of the thin threads leading here. Our great, trivial project. Impressive, important, nonsense, all at once.

Names downward in a line. Holy twinning fibers: an emotional graphic, if there can be one, of the blessed threads leading here. So they are: so far apart at the earliest, where her Norwegian ancestry could not have possibly known the location of its future kin, then weaving their way upward and upward, as if compelled. Periodic disturbances to the left and right, signifying wars, droughts, depressions, or the rare birth of a worldly adventurer or emigrant. Then a shift of the left rightward and the right leftward and like a covert and failed soiree coming closest together around Ansbach 1785 and then parting — another Prussian-dictated shift on

Edward's thread delaying its slow steady western slide until in separate violent tumults the lines retreat and remove across the cold Atlantic, just one generation apart, where they both come to the lakes of the Midwest, then Michigan, then near, nearer, and nearer again—single miles only!—when Celia's father, then-Private Horace Helland, takes Miss Eleanor O'Connor as his wife, and the first Edward Januck marries Lucille Stinson, and then another jump upwards on the tree to its penultimate stage, which is the marriage of Celia Helland and Edward Januck. And then, at the extreme top, the most recent in the line, Horace Jonathan Januck, his date of birth, and, in the lightest pencil, the dash to the right of the name, the underline with nothing above it, and the question mark. We declined daily to erase these last markings and ink the end of the line. Our declining, however, lacked resolve, as we knew the missing are almost always dead, and nothing in the circumstances of his disappearance could be interpreted as anything but the obliteration of his corpse. But still the end of the line was penciled and not inked. It may have been our last hesitating prevarication. The rest of the stones had been placed on the bodiless, plotless, but thoroughly imagined and soberly mourned, grave. It was the beginning of our second year of childlessness. Celia sleepily watched Ed as he readied himself for bed.

CHAPTER TWO

We drove on the Saturday morning the few miles to the VA nursing home, a fine place. It was early October. Soon these roads will be a battleground of slush and snow, but now they were clear. Colonel Horace Helland, servant of the United States and distinguished businessman of Lansing, Celia's beloved father and the best father Ed had ever known, lay wasted by dementia, waiting in a green gown the black horse. The plaques and seals of the nation, state, and county watched him there. Simple, basic, not mysterious in any way. Our simple animal hearts had this to bear, as well, and this was something beyond our complicity. He just lay there, of course. His eyes rolled loose in their sockets. Active in three wars, the man had outlasted the grandson he so loved.

From his vigor came Celia, and she had grown into a woman. Her hair and body was now dulling, but her mind was good. At the right time, she met Ed, at Michigan State. Langsites all our lives. Celia had grown in determined patriotism, the daughter of an honorable man. When she met Ed, Ed was twittering in the wind of a troublesome decade, not knowing to which side he should cling. With Celia, Ed achieved a career, a perspective, some honor. From our vigor came Johnny.

The sweet nurse Stephanie, with her overly black-lined eyes and the tattoo on her arm—stigmata of these strange youth?—came into the room and greeted us warmly, as always. She put her hand on Celia's shoulder and

looked at the great enfeebled man. Then she went about the task of cleaning the still living thing.

How's work, Ed?

Not as bad as it could be.

Great!

How are you today, Colonel Helland?, Stephanie said.

The thing gurgled but said nothing.

You look good!

So much was answered and solved one Thanksgiving Day during our junior year when Celia took Ed the few short miles to her parents' home, when Colonel Helland walked with us among the Thanksgiving oaks.

The admiration of the young generation for the older was rare then and rarer now, but Celia saw in her Ed a boy appropriately awed by a man. Somewhere near the boundary of his Michigan home, the Colonel took a gnarled piece of fallen oak in his yet untremoring hands and studied it. He held the branch as if his young daughter and whatever generations were to proceed from her were bound somehow with that wood of his field. This is a man, Ed thought.

The great Colonel placed the gnarled oak and walked on. Ed thought of the bright pink nipples under the sweater of the man's daughter. Ed admired his own fortune and lucky, inchoate fate. Bravely, he took her hand as the man walked in the lead. Helland was in his late forties then. Looking back, he was so young, younger than we are now, with a face of red health and black hair on his wrists. Conversation as we walked was sparing and Ed knew to run his mouth was to miss the answer to a question he didn't know he had. Celia's hand in his was cold but trying and our arms were distanced.

Helland stopped promptly and looked at the ground. His breath lingered in mist.

Can you recognize this, Ed?, he said.

Ed stepped forward to look at fresh, small scat. He admitted he could not recognize it.

It's from a young fox. She may see us right now.

Ed thrilled and looked in all directions. Celia watched her men.

You won't see her, Helland said.

Of course not.

But you can see an eagle nesting.

Ed threw his eyes to the tops of the trees and looked carefully at every one. He saw mainly dead leaves and cold finger branches. Celia watched him. Helland watched him.

Stop, Helland said.

Ed stopped and cupped his hand on his forehead against the gray sunlight which suddenly seemed bright.

Two o'clock, Helland said.

Ed moved his eyes two spaces east and still saw nothing. He looked at the top of the tree.

Down. One quarter down. Three quarters to the top of the tree. Ed did it but saw nothing.

An inner branch.

Ed moved his eyes just slightly and as if emerging from nowhere the giant head of an eagle was pecking twigs into an elegant nest. It was impossible to see anything else now. He was astounded at what wonders were so close and ashamed at how poorly his eyes were trained.

I see it!, he said.

She has three eaglets.

You've seen her before?

Oh, yes.

Wow.

The bird ignored them completely. She tended to some vital business. The fox surely did as well.

Do you spend much time in the woods?, Helland said.

I want to more.

There's time, Helland said.

With his smiling eyes on her, Celia stepped to Ed's side, moved under his arm, and put the full side of her body against his, as close as they could possibly be, and Ed was panicked as she knew he'd be, like he was the sham holder of another man's love, but he stood his ground and held her.

It's tough to see at first, Helland said, but the land reveals a whole mass of life when you look. I enjoy it immensely. It's a good land.

Yes.

Ed paused to look at the genuine territory. It summoned a question.

It's a good land, Ed said. Which you've defended, sir...

Helland's eyebrows raised a little and he said, Well...

Edward stepped away from Celia, the point made, and took a stick while he said, I understand that I am of the appropriate age and there is an opportunity to serve right now.

Helland watched him squirm and said, Do you feel that call on you?

Ed said nothing. Helland must have known how tough the question was because he said, Many are serving and many are gone.

Yes, Ed said. I know some. I know some who aren't coming back, too.

Sure. Yes, we all do.

Yeah. I just, I don't know...

Ed imagined Hanoi bombs in the Michigan woods. He looked away.

I'll bet, Helland said, I'll bet your girl would rather have you here.

Ed looked the man in the face.

I would, Celia said.

If everyone were there, Helland said, who would be here to exemplify and enjoy all the good so deserving of the sacrifice?

I understand that, Ed said.

She took his hand and gripped it strongly as we walked back to the house where a noon fire smoked out the chimney. Ed watched Celia's thin shoulders just ahead of him. How expectation impels. She surprised him when she turned and her severe little face burst into a major smile and she slowed to take his hand.

Mother Helland was preparing the Thanksgiving feast and Celia and Ed stepped out of their rubber boots at the back door. Helland took the axe from its cover and swung it lightly as he walked back into the woods for his solitary ritual of gathering tinder. Ed was not invited and he admired the man's insistence on having his time alone. Helland returned eventually, sweaty and flush. He showered and we all feasted in the late afternoon, when it was dark.

Out of some combination of fear and a desire for domestic excellence, Ed would never serve in uniform. Nor did the woods become his pursuit. He was a man more suited to the polis, to the intercourse of people. But his respect for his father-in-law would never abate.

Some years later, when Johnny was ten years old—after his initial exuberant growth and before his dark and troubled teenage years—this Thanksgiving walk was repeated. We were in our thirties, working hard and standing tall with our young son. We saw no eagle that day, but when we came to the back porch with the smoke out the chimney, the Colonel excused Ed and Celia but got his young grandson an axe of his own and the

hinging generations went back into the woods. We watched them walk. Johnny's small frame bent for the weight in his hand, but his earnestness and effort was hilarious and lovely. When the boy and the man came back they had wood, and Johnny beamed all day. Some kind of ropeline was stretched between those two and despite Johnny's trouble through school, and despite his periods of total separation from us, his grandfather was always some refuge and model for him. Even during Helland's rapid enfeeblement, Johnny visited the VA regularly. On the night before he shipped to basic, he sat alone with his namesake. How proud Helland would have been had he been able to understand what Johnny was doing.

Who becomes a soldier? We found out in those several weeks between his meeting with the recruiter, his tests at MEPS, his contract review, his oathtaking, and his shipping off to basic. Winston Churchill joins (1894), so does Gerald Ford (1942), so does Woody Guthrie (1943), also Klaus Barbie (1935), Napoleon Bonaparte (1785), Henry Percy (1380?), and Arjuna (500 BCE?). Also Chris Buller, who enlisted with Johnny. The reasons were various: a steady job and a steady paycheck, pride, respect, curiosity, speech impediments, discipline, love of country. There were the tall and short, the fat and thin, and all the rest. For variety, it was the closest thing to Ellis Island a hundred years ago. They were from every corner of the city and some from the way out farms. Ed was yet to think so heavily on the polis, but there it was anyway.

Johnny lightened in those weeks. It's true about expectation. We must keep expecting. Bends in the road are gifts before us.

For us, from the moment of his birth he had been the thing between us, the thing that was us more than we two wed individuals could ever be, and sometimes—when he was ten, eleven, twelve years old and growing—we

were of such a pact that all felt right with the world, but at other times—when he sank to his young oblivion—we had to reach across the pit to keep a hold. But his conversion of a day from a kid with some notion of an interminable future to a man with a heavy vow marked a deepening and broadening of our home. Nervous bubbles were in our stomachs. We would come down for coffee before a day of work and he would be there, having risen at five to train alone. He'd be eating fruit or oatmeal, his thick hair still glistening with sweat, his shirt soaked, his face so pure, fine, and smooth, even delicate but for the musculature of his jaw and the bones of his cheeks, and he would give us a good morning as he read the paper, the news of the world, of which he finally felt to be a part.

We all three went to the polis many times in those few weeks. We went as three alumni to East Lansing High School football games. We stomped and roared with the polis under the great white lights and thundering band. The bigness of it moved us! The smallness of it—the brave errant note of a fifteen year old's piccolo—touched us.

On a hushed November night we sat up with him as he folded his belongings tight into his bag. We sat before the fire with hot chocolate, his per orders one bag by the front door. We set the alarm for four a.m. and went to fitful sleep. By the time the alarm rang, Celia was making eggs, Johnny was in the shower, and Ed was in the backyard looking up at the rarely seen hour. We ate the eggs and drove to the huge Meijer's grocery store parking lot where a big military bus idled, its orange parking lights tinting the world. Other families and their young soldiers were there, yawning from nerves and the hour, jacketed against the cold. Soon the young soldiers ascended the steps and the bus pulled away, bound for Biloxi.

We talked to him often and saw him again at his graduation from basic. He was thinned but more muscled. We had steak and beer that night. Then he was off to fight.

The men came to the door and told us he was missing and presumed dead. The missing are usually dead. Repeat it, Janucks. In his case, the officers said, the fight was intense and urban and despite their best efforts no recovery had yet been made. Ed initially jumped and proclaimed that he might live, but the officers were quiet and Celia had been schooled from her upbringing in the facts of the whole thing.

A month later, Ed was raised from sleep by a dream. He woke with a guerilla conviction that if he did not go there, into the middle of it, legally or illegally, and do whatever possible to find his son, his life was for naught and his duty as a father abandoned. Celia held him and in rare tears told him that even now there are eighty year old mothers keening and waiting on some word from Mekong. Celebrate the life, Celia. Grind your teeth to rubble. Place the stones, Janucks. That's what we did. Know that in some small way you have merited the long gorgeous sunset of a Michigan evening. That seemed a harder task than dying.

Celia sat on the bed and held the old man's hands. Ed sat quietly in a chair. Stephanie came back from wherever she'd gone. Her eyes seemed watery so Celia asked if she was all right. She wiped her right eye with the heel of her hand and shrugged. Stephanie laughed and we followed in it. Oh, everybody's living their gigantic little lives. Despite the deep stylistic difference, Celia recognized something of her younger self in Stephanie. It wasn't the emotion so much as the firm push to grip life. Sometimes Celia accompanied Stephanie on her breaks, where we'd sit outside in that

starkest contrast to the efficient interior and Stephanie would smoke a youthful cigarette and tell Celia about her week.

CHAPTER THREE

Celia was at the table by dawnbreak.

Ed stood at the machine staring and doing nothing and then he drank the coffee to jumpstart exactly what? a day of work? a brave notion? A day of work, only that. He hummed some tune meant to brighten and the aggression of the false cheer infuriated her. A tapping of his fingers against the counter. He wished her a good day and left her in silence.

The morning sky was gray and as he drove the street he felt a strange chill. It may have been the autumn, it may have been a weirdly landed sensation of a passing car catching and reflecting light. Radio voices spoke importantly and far away. He saw the cars of morning shoppers and workers. Odd, distended marketplace, he thought. Faint sniff of a polis, easily snuffed. No producers of the goods on sale are in there. This is a flaw. Only the butcher comes close.

His crew in their jackets were working. A blue tarp covered part of the open structure and flapped like the flag. Manuel and Richard were on a break, drinking thermoses of coffee. He sat with them a minute and looked at a clipboard of the project status.

This is the polis, Ed thought, and the cream in the coffee.

John Jewell said, Mornin boss!

Mornin.

I'm gonna get 8 sealed before lunch.

Where's the-?

Jewell showed him the place that needed screwing so he got his gun and went to it. It was his favorite of the actual labor duties available to him. A gratifying grabbing and twisting, a yelling of wood. This had been the first allure of his life's work. He didn't need to do this anymore, but he enjoyed it.

A good era? A difficult era, no question. Ed practiced his thinking. He looked through the orange wood slats at the nowhere polis again. He wanted to see statesmen and craftsmen. He saw an old woman and his heart rent for her. She was tired and worn, with bulging ankles, walking on a street built for drivers, much too wide for old women walkers.

He tried to whistle while he worked. He wanted to call out loudly to his men and listen for their soulful response while they all together earned their bread. But these were not those times. They wanted more than bread, for one thing. And so did we. All he could do was dispense some relief through time off, bonuses, a pleasant attitude. His hands deftly screwed. Hand over hand he raised the screws, fit them, and drove them. To practice one's thinking is a discipline of orientation and a figuring of scale.

He saw the problematic Cesar - back bent, head bowed, looking down the street, one foot tapping. Cesar Aguilar was a wildcard of a young worker on the crew. He could be a John Henry when he wanted to, working like two men. Or he could be a stubborn mule, sullen and morose, breaking frequently and staring off into the distance. His eyes were wild and a hint of violence was in them. Ed was drawn to him with some worry and much respect. Ed considered that, of the people in this world he admires, none of them would opiate themselves into working thankless, mechanical jobs

without visible dissatisfaction. Cesar's eyes go down the street not to some mythic distance but to a city of real action, Ed thought.

He went to Cesar.

Pardones, boss, Cesar said and rose.

Sit, Cesar.

Ed offered Cesar a raise and increased responsibility. Cesar took the job and went to where Ed had been screwing important boards while Ed filled Cesar's job of putting garbage where it goes. The rain from the lake was coming. Beneath his recent rhapsodies, Ed knew he was full with resignation. Resignation is lucky and it is a sweet thing. It is a gift. It is also unsettling. More than anything, it is the mark of age, starker than the graying of hair or the folding of eyes.

John Jewell came to Ed.

Jewell, Ed said.

You okay, Eddie?

Am I okay?

Yes.

I don't seem okay?

Not really.

Okay.

Just checking in.

I appreciate it. You're fired.

Okay.

Pack up and go home.

Can you rehire me Monday?

Probably.

Perfect.

Celia sat with her head back, the muscles in her neck eased. The blood pumped slower. Her neck hung across the back of the chair for several minutes, and then it began to ache. With the return of painful sensation came more thoughts and more figuring.

Confounding ideas ranged in her mind. She thought of the real events of her country's time. She thought of these real events as driven by nothing but the ambivalent genius of her country's people. She wondered how capricious it was. What nuance of speech took an idea and drove it into an event?

She laughed at caprice. She thought of the day that was said to have changed everything but which she could never understand to have changed anything. She thought of the fevered screamings of at least five sides who looked at the same problem and saw different truths. Persuasion trumps truth. She recalled the fatigue when we lay in our bed and discussed all that had happened and fell heavy into a mutual admission of We do not understand, We simply do not. There are systems at work here far beyond what we know and maybe—and our soviet reasoning shocked us—what we should know. She thought how our union was ripping down the middle slowly. She wept at caprice.

We believed to avail ourselves to our country is to live in some happiness. Lucky and blessed, who offer themselves as sacrifices and are spared. Lucky, blessed. Blessed and unlucky, who offer themselves as sacrifices and are sacrificed. Blessed, blessed. Damned, who hide from duty but praise the fallen. Damned. Objectors? Object, then. And may elsewhere coddle you.

The decision to serve was Johnny's and Johnny's own. He is the one deserving of the honor, and we were proud of him. We believed these things, we had thought long on them, we had been brought up on them.

The afternoon was over somehow. Ed came in the door. Celia had wrapped herself in the warm blanket and lay on the couch. She fumbled to appear to be doing something. Ed came and kissed her, according to the agreement. Ed washed his face.

CHAPTER FOUR

The stadium lights looked like police lights and the whole place a crime scene. No relief to any of the faces and the shadows were severe and long. We were attacked at the gate by a woman who considered herself a dear friend. We had been a special project of this woman's since Johnny's disappearance. Tender as a tooth, she thought it her duty to distract us and her tactic was to blather every detail of her horrendously boring life and then scrunch her face in a sort of solemn ecstasy and make some exalted humming sound when we shared the details of our lives, which were Work is fine, Yes, we're making progress on the genealogy, Yes, getting ready for winter. She shepherded us to her spot in the stands where her husband had all the munitions: a gigantic styrofoam fist, a huge thermos of chocolate, blankets. He was accommodating but clearly cared as little as Celia did for any kind of conversation. Just watch those boys! Watch those boys carry the ball!

Ed of course could become riveted by inanities. He answered their questions and asked his own. The football coach was new – the details of his singular life were discussed. Oh yes, home prices. An old hardware store closed, a restaurant opened. The pancakes are fabulous, the woman said. We should bear in mind rumor is the owner's in the middle of an ugly divorce. God saved us from the tricky solicitation to attend church with them someday.

Indeed, Ed did find the game beautiful. Cynics say it's a rehearsal for war. It might be, but it's also just what it is: healthy young men in a controlled game of strategy, will, and power, trying to perform the difficult feat of moving a ball through a team of boys whose sole duty is to arrest that motion. An interception by a safety on a too-short pass and the fast safety wove his way on pure instinct through a baffled offense-turned-defense for a seventy yard score. The thing was gorgeous. The band was cued, the cheerleaders leapt. What exactly, in the small pursuit to enjoy one's life, is not meaningful?

Oh, you're just tremendous, the woman flapped to Ed and doubtless it made him feel just great.

As kids behind us began to speak loudly in ugly terms of gossip, Ed involved himself in a conversation about technology and furniture.

A wedge is occasionally lifted over a city or a country or what Ed would call a polis, we knew. The citizens look up and see it and as it widens descending the citizens scramble to one side or the other and hold to those on their side. When the wedge is driven down and in, it cracks the firmament and tears the things built on it. It leaves a great chasm, and those who had been neighbors, who had traded rugs and tables, thoughts and stories, may find themselves staring at each other through smoke, ash, and distance. The camps may retreat, regroup, and prepare defenses against the estranged fellows—those exiled and aliened citizens who may or may not be plotting against them—or they may begin stretching a platform across the divide and move cautiously toward each other to draft and sign some new covenant which may open the sides for the benefit of all, if there can be benefit to all, if they decide there can be, against every last indicator.

3%! 3% is the amount of time we had in a day to listen, study, think, and act politically. Raising our child, paying our bills, fulfilling our private promises and covenants – this took 97%. 3% should grow to 90%, she thought. There is nothing left. She wanted to herd the citizens and command them.

Into the fourth quarter, the score wasn't even close and Celia couldn't bear the mindlessness anymore so we left. Ed said a hearty goodbye to the woman and her husband. He tried to talk to Celia about the game as we pushed through the crowd to the exit. All paused for the tottering cripple. He was moving erratically in the throng. Poor, poor man. Poor dear thing apparently. Trying in an unfit world and balancing popcorn at the same time. Even the worst of the selfish dregs paused for him. The way was cleared. His guardian finally caught him and held him by the arm. Ed took Celia's arm, too, by the loose skin on the thin bone above and behind the elbow. The old sympathies weren't working.

We made it home with a smattering of usual conversations. It probably delighted Ed, Celia thought.

Ed wanted to go straight to bed but Celia was restless. She turned on the lights and looked around her for something to do. Ed waited.

She went through the day's mail. A magazine, a bill, an envelope addressed to her. The return address read *Bereaved Mothers* and some Kalamazoo post office box. She opened the letter. It identified itself as from a large and growing group of mothers, fathers, and sympathizers whose sons and daughters were killed in the war and who were now uniting in opposition to the government, who lied to the nation and to the families of the fallen, who recklessly and unnecessarily sent our children into harm's

way, who deserve nothing less than impeachment and shame. It said they were also, of course, opposed to the war itself, which was sold to the public under a calculated heap of lies. It ended, We love our murdered children and we know you love yours. But we know now that they did die in vain and the perpetrators of this crime are our own leaders. Please join us in our grief as we reclaim our country from the traitors and criminals... And then there were contact instructions and an invitation to dinner with a cell group of Bereaved Mothers. Bereaved Fathers and Sympathizers, the letter said, were also welcome.

Something agitated in Celia.

Ed, listen!

She read the letter to the soft man, the good husband, whose heart yearned only for meals and assurances of all that is pleasant and without consequence. He did not want to hear the letter and the whole thing confused him.

Do you want to join?, he said.

Do I want to join?

Yes, do you?

Ed, you're asking me if I want to join this group?

Do you?

No. I want to murder them.

Just throw it away. No one's thinking right.

I intend to oppose this. I hate this.

Celia, calm down.

Perfectly calm, Ed, and perfectly willing to fight what I hate.

He thought to himself, We have given the polis our most precious and beloved piece of ourselves and we have waited for the polis to come fill the hole created by this sacrifice, and this is what they give us? A political

opposition committee? He could as easily have thought, Yes, a political opposition committee!

She did not throw the letter away but she dropped the subject. We went upstairs and lay in the silence Ed willed. But Celia's mind was drumming. She had found something at last.

CHAPTER FIVE

The morning brought a pressure on her chest and the need to speak revived.

Ed dressed and spoke. He followed her to the kitchen and talked. He left soon. He was out the door and the door was closed. The house should be a sanctuary but it wasn't. She looked around her. Purchased things sat. Her genealogy sat. She went to it. Sometimes she looked at it and it seemed a hill too high to climb.

The television sat silent. She could turn it on and perhaps enjoy some rage. But that rage had become predictable and boring. They will say the same things, they will wear the same faces.

The bookshelf sat. It was promising! She hadn't taken inventory in a long time. Surely some classic sat there, reaching out to her with the comfort of the ages! She went to it and spent a half hour looking at the titles, opening some. Nothing happened. The books were either too specific or too general.

She placed her teacup in the sink, the fragility of the ceramic and its high ping infuriated her. She put on her coat. Maybe Ed's polis will clear the confusion, she thought. The radio was loud in the car. She turned it down. She turned it off. She drove west to Lansing proper. Seeing people might cheer her and maybe cheer would blast through a veil or two, she thought, so she went toward the commerce section around the great Lansing Capitol. She circled several times upward through a large concrete parking structure.

Heavy running water from the plant made the structure thrum as if under storm, but stepping out from the structure, the day was still dry and gray.

She walked past some businesspeople on lunch, a couple policemen. She went toward the grand sloping lawn of the capitol. Tributes marked the way for the foot traffic—the Palmer Shoe Fund; the rejected first names of Lansing: Pewanogowink, Swedenborg, El Dorado; the brain fever epidemic of the 1850s—and then she faced nothing but the lawn and the magnificent structure of the capitol building. It is good that government is housed gloriously, she thought. She remembered the first time Januck Construction landed a job on the grounds. That they would entrust such holy land to Januck made Ed proud and glowing for years. She walked along the sidewalk and came to the tribute she knew well, but which never ceased to fill her, to Michigan's soldiers.

Tuebor – Si quaris Peninsulam Amoenam Circumspice

Four large tablets in a row, with one even larger at the center of them. The center said *Michigan*. Facing it to the left, Celia read the first, *World War I*. The next, *World War Two*. Then the largest, *Michigan*, in the center. To the right of the center, Korea and *Vietnam*. Below the title *World War I*, the tablet read,

"Michigan, the arsenal of democracy, responded forcefully with men and materials to oppose the enslavement of peoples."

Under the title *Vietnam*, the tablet read,

"...by defying aggression America maintained hopes for world peace, disdaining slavery for peace with honor."

Nearby, the carved proclamation,

"We pay homage to our prisoners of war and those missing in action. Lest we forget. Dedicated eleven a.m., Thursday, November 11, 1982."

In November of 1982 Johnny was not yet born, she thought. Dad was probably at the dedication of this. The five-tablet tribute was so impressive and strong. A big centerpiece proclaiming Michigan and two smaller stone tributes on either side. Perfect symmetry. Another war, she thought, will throw its balance. Hasn't there been another war since? Haven't there been two? Where is the room for the tribute? Did the country stop at some point to commemorate itself and is that the apex from which we are now falling? Where, where will we go? Did they think all the trouble was over in 1982? She began to tremble at this and then the tribute looked like five vacant and misplaced graves whose ghosts inhabited the bodies passing before her, the hot dog vendors and groundskeepers.

Blow away the veil, Celia, she thought. Do not study the signs upon the earth, you do not have the skill. Consult those who have thought deliberately.

She sat on a bench. A family took a picture of their young daughter with the memorial and capitol in the background. Consult these!, she thought. But if she had learned a lesson about her people in her time, it was that they were not to be consulted. She wanted an ancient hand to come down.

She drove the few blocks to the library. She saw the familiar attendants and caught the clean scent. She knew well where the genealogical materials

were, but she didn't know where to find political philosophies. She found them eventually, but the rows daunted.

She saw words and words repeating. Citizen, honor, public, private, nation, responsibility... She picked up primary and secondary texts. She put them down and picked up more. A pattern emerged. Each one—a classic or an obscure academic text—would open and then veil itself and within fifteen minutes she would nearly weep in her frustration to truly understand it, as understanding means discerning its interests and the interest of its author, identifying the context of its writing, following its interaction with its antecedents, and testing it against its predictions.

Here is one, she thought, that frames its argument in theology, here in dramaturgy. Here is one using statistics—incarceration rates and demographics—leading to a moral philosophy of one sphere of civic action. The statistics gave her some confidence and she looked forward to believing the philosophy. She read its introduction. It was weighty and convincing. She thought to check it out and study it in earnest but was skeptic and curious enough to seek a counterargument. She followed the trail. She found an argument against it - using statistics. A sob was in her chest. The bookshelf now looked like another monument with a message carved: *Only now you seek knowledge? Your son is dead, your duty surrendered. The harm you have already done not seventy upon seventy years can undo!*

Your son is dead and you sent him. You send others even now to their deaths, they said, and she was briefly a pacifist. Your son is dead and they took him. Even now you give them breath for further murder, they said, and she was briefly a hawk.

She understood for a harrowing moment the honest peasant drive for a king. Someone just take care of us, she thought. I haven't the time nor the

wisdom. But make him an Olaf! Make him an Arthur! She could think of no other righteous kings.

She wandered from politics to the religious philosophers and theologians. She read the words of Christ but found only hazy political prescription. She read distillations of the Buddhists, of the long train of rabbis, these ones who had labored on the spirit. At best all she found was anarchic temperament. She saw self-abnegation, she saw renunciations of self-abnegation. Briefly she was a Buddhist and gave her life to meditation and to that which cannot be spoken, but other gods told her she was wrong.

She started to believe in her feverish searching that what it would come to at the bitter end of all its logic and poetry was that a path existed individual to each of us and she was on hers, painful or ignoble as it was. Something settled in her. A softness came to her spine and she cut the green light from the desk lamp and looked at the four covers of the books before her and ratified this end she believed she discerned.

It will be individual, she thought. It will be according to my idiosyncrasy, to my uncharted path, to my unknowable history.

She leaned back and closed her eyes again. Again tightness came to her neck.

She stood up and took her books in her arms and walked to a more solitary spot. She sat in a soft chair and spread the wisdom on her lap and wondered if the spell would last. She felt aglow in a new kind of knowledge. She leaned her head and relaxed her neck this time against a cushion. She closed her eyes and kept them closed. She began to see allness. She began to see shapes of things and illimitable blur together and counterpossessed, as she had not seen since she was a little girl closing her eyes tight and watching the pattern of her sightlessness. Yellow and black like melting and puzzle pieces. Movements of her blood and electric ripples

on her eyelids fascinated briefly, unmediated by any chemical or sickness save hope and despair, which since those are known to all cannot actually be said to mediate, but rather to gird, or drive.

The names on her chart came to her shut eyes and they all took shape. Each body in a line extended before her, fully clear and large, bearing the styles of their times, going above and below the roof and the floor. She went from face to face, up and down, and then sat back and looked at them all.

A flicker of the lights and a soft announcement came that the library would be closing. Softly she put her books aside, took her purse and coat, and walked out to the darkening street. A truck came past with a worker driving and another worker in an orange suit and hardhat hanging off it. A sign was posted with small numbers noting a municipal ordinance. A trash can sat, placed there by votes and labor. A corner of the great city of Lansing rose before her in steel and cement. All her achieved enlightenment buckled and crashed under the weight of the knowledge of the extraordinary concerted effort that achieved all of this. Again she did not know what to do.

She drove home. Ed was not there so she went to the couch, sat on it, and unmoving tried not to think.

Ed came home and we had our kiss. Celia did not apologize for the blankness of her aspect. Ed went to the yard for communion with the birds. He thought.

A man should be faithful to his wife
A man should make money honestly
It is possible to make money honestly
Every step is not fraught with moral ambiguity
Every step is fraught with moral ambiguity

The polis is as great as the home

Where was the polis when I needed it?, he asked himself. Have I a right to ask for it?

Nothing, nothing to do but bellow and moan.

CHAPTER SIX

If one's great strategy is to live without bloody hands, these times do not reward ambivalence. A hesitation here is gain for them there. A moment of reflection is a moment not fighting. We are people of action. Celia's head lay on the chart, it had become a rude pillow. A good moment of memory, a fleeting thrall of flirty crush, a bout of laughter, all such things. Where are they? In what locket?

The news was barren of scope.

Perhaps, why not, an ironic gesture? A little mockery of darkness? Her head raised and then fell again facing the other way.

Ed came in the door and this roused her. She pretended to work on the genealogy. He made some conversation. She looked for the time and it was only nine. She had a new mischievousness which allowed her to pacify him with his desired pleasantries. He turned on the TV and laughed loudly. Poor Ed tried so hard.

The next day was Saturday and Ed, the great public citizen and vigilante, had it in him to play golf. Celia spent the morning on the phone and by midday had over a dozen mothers, fathers, and Anti-Bereaved Mothers sympathizers. They set a meeting for the following week at our house.

You're welcome to join, she said to Ed when he'd come home from golfing.

I don't want to join.

Fine, she said, and dialed again.

He busied himself in the house but could not shield his ears from the anger she clearly enjoyed spewing. Phrases and shards stood out. *Weak, disrespectful, utopian, cowardly*. Only *hippie* told Ed which group she referred to, and it was of course the other.

I don't want my house full of these people, Ed said.

You always want the house full of people.

Not these people.

You don't want your house full of grieving parents who are devoted to the memory of their children?

Call it what you want I don't want it.

For what seemed the first time in her life she respected his taking a position on something. But he was across the chasm already.

So what do you want to do instead?

Nothing, Celia.

Great. Do nothing then. They will be here Friday night.

I don't want them in my house.

It is my house, too.

They were in the house on Friday. There were four of them. Ed didn't make it out in time so he had to greet them and he did it. He was cold.

The meeting was fine.

They had several over the next two weeks. Mid-October was the era of the anti-Bereaved Mothers coalition and the era of our greatest disunion. These were not necessarily linked.

Occasionally she studied the faces of her army. She had always been inclined to judge the lazy and the insolent. Now she looked at this group and every detail of them bothered her. But disgusting work must get done even

if it disgusts! But, again but, the insistence of one couple to bring instant hot chocolate and sip it throughout their very serious meeting made her feverish with distaste. They all had something. A manner of speech. A style of dress. An intellectual loop. Some returned again and again to notions they believed supported their anti-Bereaved Mothers platform but which Celia thought were bankrupt notions. But the bad notions are leading to the right action, she thought, and such intellectual capitulation began to drip sand into her bloodstream.

The guilt was ours to bear and we bore it but stupidly, ridiculously. If anything we said could sound only if there was sense to it, we were mute.

The descent into political thinking, which corrupts the sanctuary of the home and does it violently and necessarily even when there is agreement, as political thinking is purely legislative as it has its ends in legislation which is categorically gunbacked, did just what it does.

A man and a woman cannot be to each other everything. A source of joy, a financial partner, a check on pride, a check on pridelessness, an intellectual stimulus, a sharer of humor, an audience for threnody, a patient when sick, a doctor when well, a fellow shuffler through wallpapered halls of fatigue, and also a paramour of sexual ecstasy? No, it is too much. Those demands are too high. We were then individually shocked into different thinking and what was worse was our habits were too familiar.

But the ills of our age do not find illustration in the breaking apart of a marriage. Such a thing says nothing of a particular age. Thieving, desiring, relentless, solitary, ungovernable nature, we thought. If anything, the ones who do not break apart are either utterly dead of spirit or receivers of oblivious luck, outside of age. Let them.

Draw down a veil now, Celia, she said to herself. Bring it right down around you. She slept in hatred of Ed.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Dreary weeks passed. The evening sky in late October was black by five.

The streetlamps had a welcoming quality, like a reward for having worked, for those who wanted rewards. Ed was not sleeping well. One morning, he rose at four a.m. At that time, the same lights against the same sky shone differently. They seemed not welcoming but sustaining, as if they were essential, like they were on the monitors in the sick ward at the VA.

His bones ached and his head was clouded but he felt a vigor to be risen that early. The chill was intense. When opened the door of his truck and sat, his lap seemed to freeze. He gunned the defrost hoping to warm his legs and blast the cloud from the windshield. His neck had no end of cracks. He leaned his head back and closed his eyes. He felt he could drift back to sleep and freeze to death and in some ways it didn't seem like a bad idea. But he still had a chance in this world, he thought. He would begin a journey that morning in his later middle age that he thought to but failed to begin years before, on the eve of his becoming a fiancé, when Colonel Helland had revealed to him what was there to see - a dispassionate eagle in a tree. A parallel universe of his own geography.

He drove through the sleeping neighborhood seeing only what his lights revealed: houses hooked to IVs, swaths of frost and mist, cold steel swingsets and slides. He got onto an open road and turned. The sleeping

polis faded behind him. He stopped the truck at the edge of Crego park, in a dirt parking space. He killed the engine and stepped into the cold again.

He could just make out a house across the street, also bordering the park. It was dark and dead-seeming. The rest of the clinical polis lamps were now gone entirely, there was only the faint glow of the rebounded electric light. He gloved and walked into the park without compass or skill. He had some trepidation. That he was too unprepared, that nature would punish the novice. There was light rain and an architecture of bare branches and he reminded himself to look down for mudholes.

He imagined a view from above. A mid-sized city, one hundred and fifty years growing, with satellite towns, itself a satellite town of Ford's dream, with soft orange and yellow lights dotting it, and then cuts of darkness, which were mainly forest.

He imagined a backward view. Dozers had come and paved asphalt here and cut trails there, before which settlers had come westward with axes, at which time and before which time natives had done whatever they did. And the forest still, he thought, houses the diminished but active muscle of panthers, squirrels, and other crawling and flying things, including the great, timid bear. And also, Ed noted looking down, a crumpled and frozen can of Old Milwaukee. He stepped over that and looked up at an eagleless tree. He could only see one row of trees, and that just barely. Stupid to come out before the light, he thought. But it's what he'd wanted to do. And, look at that, some hint of light in what must be the eastern corner.

He thought again of the view from above. Perhaps I see, if I am low enough or have great enough vision, one man walking into the forest darkness. The man appears at the very beginning of his route, at the very edge of one of the entrances. He has hardly penetrated at all. The airborne vantage might say he's not even in yet. But from *my* view *down here*, Ed

thought, I am in the belly of it. I see no town, no sign of human life. Nothing here could convince me I am not in the middle of wilderness, except my memory, which might be faulty.

But forget the above view! You are down here now so be here! Practice your thinking!, and he was heartened to notice a common squirrel scurry up a tree, naked as he is on a summer day. Just watching the poor thing chilled him more.

The cold chipped at Ed's nose but his chest and groin were moist and warm. His lungs were engaged and his legs appreciated the variation of testing the stability of a down log and then propelling over it. The hint turned into a thin silver break in the low sky and it was clouds all the way. I do go east, then, the navigator remarked. Now he wondered if this expanding light would show him buildings and factories just right and left. As it lit—too quickly, too quickly—it showed him only forest, and he was glad. Somehow, as if by his request, the coming light did seem to check its speed, suspend a moment, die down a bit, and stay at that level. That satisfied him and he went on. His breath billowed and was washed away into the breath of the forest. His boot crushed some thawing leaves and mud came over the toe. The sameness he'd expected was there and he respected again the world Helland had opened for himself, away from all that was too easy or demanding and into all that was so unnerved and unconcerned.

This is the final stage for me, Ed thought. I will submit to this. I will casually and inconspicuously remove myself from the polis, for reasons I don't perfectly understand, and I will submit to this anti-polis. I have done the work of the young man, I have done the work of the middle-aged man. I have destroyed where my hand could not help itself, I have gathered together and built some things and achieved some pride in that. But now I have the gracious slow walk ahead of me, on which little is required, and it

will be here. This will be my passion and this will be my breath. I will husband this. And everyone will know it. And they'll respect it too! Check your thinking, he thought. No one else is involved. Practice your thinking.

He nearly tripped over a twig that flexed under his boot and sprung against his pant leg. Stop! He stopped, breathed deep, and hung his cold head below waistline to stretch the warm ache in his back. He rose again, pocketed his hands, and chose a direction to look.

His eyes went determinedly and patiently from limb to limb, three quarters high up the trees. He saw no life but trees. A frail branch with a mixture of dew and frost teetered for a second, making only a slight creaking, and then broke and fell to the ground with a little thudding murmur. Wood was largely his trade. How much less violent and frenzied, he thought, are the processes by which unmanned nature destroys and reconstructs itself. Slow, slow movements, and a decades in the making revising of one single tree in a hushed fall. But then he reminded himself of volcanoes and earthquakes and he thought, The thing to know, Ed, is how full of shit you are. He chuckled at the thought and then thought, Good! Much, much to learn. Much shit to purge! Walk on, Ed, you have earned a solitary walk of thinking and releasing. No, Ed, you lover of the polis. You have earned nothing. You deserve the sentence of walking alone. Think, Ed, no opinion here. Just think and watch.

He looked back at the fallen branch and then up from it at hawkless and eagleless trees. He walked farther along the forest, along the wet dirt path. It must be six now and I am getting up, he thought. His legs felt their first burn of fatigue. He toyed with the notion to walk on past his physical limit. He then toyed with welcoming the seeping cold through his skin and into his bones and allowing his muscles to tire and become exhausted of the necessary protein and oxygen and letting his blood become parched of

water. But, no, he thought, suicide is not my calling. It must be six now, I am getting up and seeing Celia in bed and am expected at the site in an hour or so. He figured if he stopped here and turned back he would have an hour's walk.

He did stop and turned around. He was surprised though he shouldn't have been to see that the sky in this direction was a much darker shade of gray than the eastern sky. Of course. He fancied at one more nuance to accustom to. He tried to see an eagle, but then he told himself that though he should try he should also on some level hope to not see one, for seeing one was his prize and he had years left to win it. The lambent sky cast no shadows on the brown ground and he crossed the log he'd crossed on the way in. He saw no scat or sign of squirrel, fox, deer, wolf, panther, or bear as his boots went across the carpet of leaves and dirt. His early morning trepidation was gone and he felt emboldened for further pursuits. I can't wait to get back out here tomorrow morning!, he thought. A new home, not welcoming, not punishing, but fit.

But his boots slowed, his breath caught, and he focused his eyes off the path and through some layers of trees. He stopped moving. He saw the figure of a person in a jacket, wrapped and curled, fetal and asleep, with a bag beside it. Ed amazed that the first real quickening of fear in his morning forest sojourn should come from a man. I can escape the polis, he thought, but I can't escape the man. He wondered if the sleeping figure was a boy, a kid, a man, a woman, black, white, Indian, or something else, and why he was here. Was he on a sojourn like Ed's? Was he an auto worker who'd been kicked off the line as the cold months came? Not unheard of, he thought. He reasoned that the sleeping thing probably was a man, and a man down on his luck. He admitted to himself a lifelong fear of the unlucky. He looked at

the curled figure a moment. He saw that it breathed, so it lived, and Ed walked on.

As same and even as the sights had been on his way in, he was pleased to notice some markers on his way out. This heartened him yet again. He thought how quickly the foreign shapes into the familiar given time. The forest seemed to resume its rapid brightening. It was still a study in gray and brown, but it was brightening. He came to the edge and saw his truck. The house across from the truck, which had been so dead and asleep, now seemed awake and buzzing. The inside lights were on and he could see movements of people. He felt he knew exactly what was happening in there. The waking up, the running of water, of shower, the refrigerator's opening, the negotiating of space between the risen beasts trying to kick it into gear.

He had to defrost his windshield again and he did it and then drove home. It seemed an absurdly short drive.

But he did not go in. He stopped the truck at curbside and saw that Celia had lights on. A voice so contradictory to the serenity of the forest raised within him. He took the running truck out of park and drove up the street and around the corner. He thought one of the things many men think once or twice, So this is what this is like.

He knew, though, that he wasn't descending into infidelity or running away. He was just going for his own spin. He'd be back later. He started toward the site but saw a diner and thought he'd get a bite. Not that diner though, so he kept driving. The people hurrying to work seemed lucky to be so naive and narrowsighted.

Celia had received word of a man who was to seek office in Indiana on an anti-war platform. A tricky place to do it but that's how it was going. The man had dabbled in politics for years, but his life had been spent at the teat

of the private sector. His son had been lost to the war and his early campaign leaks had aligned him with the Bereaved Mothers. He intended to ride that horse right up to the top of the fickle nation's hill. She reviewed his record and believed he'd been on the wrong side every time. He was the incarnation of the lucky idiot, prospering and succeeding despite himself. She hoped his son hadn't inherited the family lunacy but had died in the knowledge that those much better than his father would honor his death. It fell to her to write the letter opposing him. The letter was conceived, laid out, and written in thirty minutes, and her heart again filled with the unsettling vapor of absolute confidence in its own righteousness.

Her day was before her, empty of appointments. Ed had left the bed at an ungodly hour. The charts sat dead and uninteresting. Myth tickled the slim facts at the bottom. Marginal names were left unreconciled. So why don't we get lobotomies and take up puzzles?

She found herself at the teapot and her fingers trembled slightly as she filled it. Have I got the tremors now?, she said to herself. She filled the teapot with water and opened the cupboard. She brought the tin down and looked through the assortment of tea. She thought, I have an assortment of tea. I am looking through it to pick just which one my mouth wants. There is plenty of work to do, but I want tea.

She went to the window and closed the blinds, though the dull gray light was not blinding or even bright and the neighbors were not spying. She flipped through a magazine of advertisements, hands moving and idle at the same time, as the water came to boil. The whistle sounded and she held the string while she poured. A turmoil was in her stomach. Do I have the flu now?, she asked. Don't ring phone. She feared dysphasia.

So she took her tea and sat down on the loveseat to keep from falling. She had forgotten a book or magazine or anything to occupy her mind but

the idea of getting up was awful. She let out a breath like a dirge and sank into her chair, not for comfort but for cover. She remained there maybe two hours and futility in every bland shape passed before her. Does it whorl? Does it whorl? Is it whirling around? Oh, for Christ's sake, she said to her sunkenness. There again philosophies and their philosophers came to her, and again they did not seem like adversaries all of a piece, but like adversaries all contradictory and all opposed to her. I can't detract from them, she thought. I can't ratify them, either. All, every one, no matter my allegiance, would mock my foolishness. The futility. Am I only appetite?

She was wild with feeling though still. She thought waking was impossible. She thought of a chart in the future, a distant future, a millennia from now, even two, and perhaps it is her sister's line and she is identified as a sister of the matriarch, from the land of Michigan, and nothing else is known.

Then what is this polis I yearn for?, Ed thought. He'd gone back to the edge of Crego park, following only urges. He'd kept the truck parked but running so the heater could work. The small point on the window where he rested his head would not warm. Then what is this polis I yearn for?, he thought again. What the hell time is it? It felt like midnight but he looked and it was only five in the afternoon. How a day can be so long, he thought. A dark, dark five. What is this polis?, he thought. A misremembered lesson from a civics class, certainly. But what else?

He drove to the poor section and as he did it he believed he was doing the right thing. Yes, the polis. I've spent too much of my small life in the comforts of what I've known, he thought, and I've lamented the loss of things without ever reaching for what I never had.

Nearing the edge of the poorer section, a liquor store was bright so he went in. Black music played loudly from a stereo and two black men, one large and one small, talked over the counter. The small one scratched a lottery ticket, cursed it, and threw it as the other laughed. They acknowledged him, but barely, and he pretended to look for something. What he looked for was the polis. He began to think of himself as in solidarity with the black men. But then as he placed a pack of gum on the counter, the smaller man moved aside and they went silent. No, I am not them and they are not me and they know it and I know it and that is how it is, and he left the store but drove further into the poor section. He looked at the little homes. They were closer to being shacks and he wondered if they were homes at all. But the lights were on and movement was inside and he thought, Of course they're homes. He drove slowly through their streets and wanted to go inside for some meal and conversation. It took several residential streets before he opened on to a light industrial section. There were auto shops mostly, with some more liquor stores, a piping outfit.

He parked at another liquor store and a variation of the first scene was replayed, except he bought himself a beer for some odd, could-have-been reason. He figured he would not be found guilty of any lawbreaking here and he opened the beer as he walked down the poorly lit street. The sky is high here, and the earth is low, he thought. The ceilings of the structures seemed lower than head height until he came to them, and even then they seemed very low. He passed a closed short order shop and looked in at the stacked plastic bags of buns. A guard dog slept under a rusted truck at a shop, a big German Shepherd, and the thing did not blink as he went by. Another chain-linked yard had another German Shepherd, though, and this one tore at the gate like he'd gotten through it once and Ed bristled at the threat. Unlike our section of town, the industrial street in the poorer place

was cut with residences and he walked by three in a row. Television sets were on. And this is my town, he thought. Oh, the slave quarters. Yes, I think the polis included quarters for slaves. They hauled bricks, they loaded baskets. Yes, I think that's right. And then he castigated himself for relying so heavily on a term and an idea he could scarcely define. And what he knew was that he was alone and that everything always changes.

He went home. The drive was so anti-climactic he almost couldn't bear it. I have been everywhere and nowhere, he thought. It all waits for me there, like a corpse.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Celia was on the phone and her crow voice was something else he couldn't bear so he went upstairs, had an evening shower, and felt he was done with the day. Seven-thirty, the clock said. He sat on the bed.

Well, destroy him, she said into the phone.

Her voice leaped up the stairs. Leaped, bounded, and shot his heart. He went down the stairs, fighting the filthy air all the way.

I say destroy him. I say bring out every last detail... Dirty? Oh, he's not playing dirty? Richard, he's dirty as hell. Well, I'm sorry to hear that, Richard. You know what I don't think is *decent*?-

Ed said to her, Who are you destroying?

What?, she said to Ed.

Who are you destroying? Who are you taking down? I say go get him! Let's get some guns!

Ed, I'm talking.

Go ahead, so am I!

Richard, pardon me, she said into the phone and walked into the living room.

Ed followed her.

Destroy him! Kill him! Send him to the war, that's what we should do! Who is it?, he said.

Richard, I'm sorry. No, stay on the goddamn phone... Ed, enough!

Who are you gonna destroy? I want to know!

She said to Ed, Some idiot from Muncie lost a son and he's *never* been some pacifist, now he's running on a platform... Forget it, Ed.

Oh, perfect! Destroy him!

Ed! No, Richard, okay, listen, I'm sorry, she said into the phone and then hung it up and blew up at Ed, screaming at him that he was rude. He screamed at her that she had become vicious. She screamed that he was weak. He loathed her and had a very full feeling of physical rage. He wanted to see her bleed. She wanted to slash at every insecurity he ever had and extinguish his pride which was buckling anyway. We had nowhere to go so he went to the backyard and she sat at the table with her hand on the phone.

The backyard was cold and he did not want to give her the satisfaction of the removal of his presence so he came back in and slammed the door in a rude and juvenile gesture. She appreciated it. It ratified and fueled her.

He sat across from her.

Make the call, go ahead, I'll just sit here, he said.

She put down the phone.

We seethed at each other. She studied his eyes for some recognition though she had no idea what it would look like. We were physicians studying the corpus of our age. It was sick. We understood the finest details of its disease, but we were powerless to operate. Our only thought, holding our gangrene and watching our vessels close, was to remember when the flesh was new and the blood ran strong and this plunged us further knowing that health could not return. Expert diagnosers, no palliative power, funny physicians, useless, sadder than all in the time that is not apocalypse but let it come let the banks foreclose out of owning the right to do it even if they

have no use for the houses having no one to sell them to let us all abandon Lansing and even all of Michigan and move into Chicago or Indiana let put pallets on Indiana streetcorners or us move into Indiana slums deserted houses and then in Michigan right here let the trees and shrubs and weeds and snakes push up against these floorboards we have left and gnaw through the carpet and make nests and dens and repopulate in a new honest strategy and let these new parasites of the earth be aided by wind and rain and above all fire and let it return to genesis so that when the ghosts of dead sons and grandfathers and fathers come back looking for their homes their hearths their beds and their people they will see with certainty what wreckage we wrought and they will excuse themselves from their love of us and go build temples to Baal or newer inventions on the other side of whatever this is if this is Styx or hell or paradise misunderstood let them burn the ruins of the churches and build different temples and speak of us if at all as the ashen ones who failed

For us, it was over. The political clarity she'd achieved had been thrashed the polis had revealed itself as empty of all but economic fear invading and thwarting human shells. Nature itself was disinterested, even prostituted, and it would not converse with him. We could look with expectation onto bowel trouble and old age.

If there was one stability, he could build ugly and efficient cardboard boxes for Chinese banks, but not if he hadn't the will in his neck to raise his head!

Her turmoil had risen like a lake storm and gathered into a greater cloud of religious fascination but then it too turned ugly and shone as fraught and cancerous, entangled contradictions impossible to break political action

then seemed humiliating and debasing our bodies repelled each other we breathed clear-eyed and red

The doorbell rang.

We were too well known to each other and years of knowledge cleared the huge scaffolding of affection we had tried to erect and the clearing revealed a muddy ruin of a recent project of our own time, unvaluable, unlovely. No past could be verified. No future expected. We seethed even while deadly cold across the table.

The doorbell rang again.

We continued motionless until Ed slowly began to rise for the door, then Celia said, It's John Jewell.

It's John?

It must be.

Why?

You didn't show up at work today. He's worried. You know you have a responsibility forget about me but to them-

Yeah, Celia, I know-

Well, it's one thing to know-

Celia.

Go ahead and quit if you want, go ahead.

I took a goddamn drive-

And gave away money. And lost your backbone, and lost your pride-

The door was then knocked and Celia rose wanting nothing but removal from Ed's will-less and brooding presence. Ed stood but as she disappeared toward the entryway he collapsed into the chair at the table and surveyed the glorious march of their lines through history into the fallowness attending this modern age of which he was the fool king and she the fool queen.

He heard the door open and then a gasp of his wife's spirit and she saw before her the scarred, uneven face, tattered clothes, and struggling bearing of a young man who was as foreign to her as any stranger, who shifted and drew a breath but tried to speak through the inhalation and therefore coughed and reshifted his bag on an enfeebled shoulder and she heard him say, Mother.

She said nothing. She only glared at him and he said again, Mother, Mom, Mother. It's me, Horace.

Still she said nothing and then he said, Mother, it's me, Horace, Johnny.

At times there is a willed breaking of the standard connections between what is true and what is not, a willed extinguishing of intellectual inquiry, and sometimes this is when the emotions are shocked by the appearance of that which must be considered from many angles but time won't allow for it, or when a word comes and goes heard but not apprehended. Her face must have tensed as she looked at the face of her Johnny – a warped and shambled face, with askew lips and slid nose. He continued to speak and the sound of his voice was high and thin, like it was a new voice or a voice with a new language, yet untried and unconfident of itself. He seemed to be physically faltering and weak and he dropped his bag as if to regain stability and she watched the bag drop. She did not reach out in case he were to fall but she said, Come in.

He picked up his bag and she held open the door and he went inside. She placed a firm hand on his back to guide him and we went through the entryway and into the living room. Ed's head hardly moved but his eyes narrowed and followed us.

Johnny stopped and said, Father.

Ed stood in some sort of daze, like he'd been called by God but when God appeared He did not appear as expected.

Come, come, Celia said and quietly brought Johnny to the couch. Sit down, she said.

He sat and looked up at us and then cast his eyes down. His head and hair were a tangled mess. The last time we'd seen the hair it was closely cropped and shaved in the military style. She set his bag down and he moved it closer to his feet and then he coughed and looked up at us with fear in his eyes.

Ed didn't know where to sit so he awkwardly pulled a dining room chair. Celia sat very close to the boy on the couch and looked at him. He reeked of filth, cold, and exhaustion, and something in her prodded her to stroke the matted hair from his face. She felt the raised scars on his cheeks and also the damp, oily grime of the unwashed skin. Some exaltation of the spirit came into her as she touched him. Her hands, at first timid, strongly went about the task of removing that hair from the face and he motionlessly received the act.

Are you thirsty? You are thirsty, she said, and went to the kitchen to get him water.

Ed looked at him and he looked at Ed with pleading in his eyes. Ed turned in a vain attempt to see Celia through the wall.

Celia came back with water and gave it to him. She sat and faced him.

He drank like he really needed it and coughed at the end. She went and brought back more and he sipped slower from this second glass. He finished a small sip, looked into the glass, and sipped again. And then he brought his two eyes up to us. They were bright and he began to speak.

I've come a long way, he said.

His voice began to find itself, the brittle thinness went out of it, and his words came fast.

...a long way, he said in continuation of some thought. But maybe not that long. I don't know. I was with a bunch of guys and I got very tired, really fatigued you know and I wanted to get out but I, I, I don't know, I just, I didn't know what to do... I got hurt-

Celia gasped lightly. Ed sat motionless, listening.

-like my face you can see. It's different now. But I don't know. I got hurt and I got fucked up.

We had never heard the profanity from him before.

-and a lot of it was my fault, I swear to God. I didn't know what to do. I'm sorry, I'm not articulate. And I saw some good people pretty hurt and it did something to me and I needed something to change. I mean I was in bad shape. I don't know, I kept thinking, Horace, Horace. And then I, I don't know what happened exactly... or I do... I don't know. But I was alone and I thought how do I get back? So I don't know what I did-

Celia stopped him. She took his face in her hands and held him for a moment and said, Shhh. He quieted. She released him and he took another drink of his water.

Am I dead?, he said.

Celia said, No.

He looked into his glass. His eyes were wide.

Ed agitated then rose and went to the kitchen. He brought back two glasses of water. He kept one for himself and gave one to Celia. Celia gave it to Johnny because his was finished again. Ed did not ask if he'd been discharged, or if he'd been shipped home, or if he was with his men, or if he was AWOL, or why he now called himself Horace instead of Johnny. No such questions. Nor did Celia. But Ed looked at Celia and then back at the kid and said, Are you hurt now?

He said, I'll be all right. I'm very glad to be here.

You need to eat!, Celia said.

She touched his leg and rose. She went into the kitchen and the pans clinked as she took out a skillet. She got eggs and cheese from the refrigerator. Ed left Johnny alone in the room and joined Celia in the kitchen. She broke four eggs and they sizzled in the hot skillet. Ed stood beside her as she poured milk and scrambled the eggs. Ed found something to do by taking bread from the drawer and putting it in the toaster. She turned to him and we looked at each other. Her eyes were filled. She extended her arms and put her hands on the counter and locked her elbows. Ed put his arms around her briefly. She looked at him and then held the fabric of his shirt at the shoulders in tight fists and small tears came into his own eyes. He reached to stir the eggs so they wouldn't burn and she leaned on the counter with her hands behind her. He turned off the heat and plated the eggs. She took the two pieces of toast from the machine, buttered them, and plated them. He took a fork from a drawer, she got a napkin, and we went out to him. He was sitting in the same position but with his bag against his chest. He looked up and the wounds of his face shocked us again. Everything came quickly. He put his bag beside him and received the meal. He thanked us and began to eat.

His body still looked chilled and she said, It's so cold out there.

It is, he said.

She got a blanket off the other couch and awkwardly draped it over his shoulders. It seemed more a symbolic gesture than anything but symbolic of what we didn't know.

The front door was knocked again. We froze and looked at each other. This time Ed got up and went to it. He came back and said, It was a trick-ortreater. A little snowman with a tophat.

We all laughed.

See, Celia said to him, we kept the porch light off this year... We *never* keep the porch light off but we did this year. It's been a very difficult year. And so we haven't had any trick-or-treaters.

Trick or treat, Johnny said, and we laughed again.

He finished his eggs and Celia said, What can we get you?

He said, Nothing, thank you. Thank you.

Would you like a shower or a bath?, she said.

Oh, yes.

Let's get you one. Come on.

He took his bag and the three of us walked upstairs.

Do I have any clothes here?, he said.

I don't think so, she said, for though his clothes were packed in a box he seemed to have grown three inches, and though he was somewhat emaciated his frame was broader than when he'd left. We did get a pair of Ed's sweatpants, a t-shirt, and a sweatshirt, and he put these on when he finished his shower.

We returned to the couches and Celia made some hot chocolate, in rehearsal of a tradition from his youth. His hair was unmatted and looked healthy now. We sipped the warm drink but his lids dragged until he was asleep. We lay the blanket over him. We shut off the lights in the kitchen, looked at him once more, and went up to our room.

In stillness we lay next to each other, wide awake. Eventually Celia turned her body and put it against Ed's. She held onto his arm.

After awhile Ed rose and put on his coat and shoes. He went downstairs and looked again at the kid asleep on the couch. Ed continued outside and got into his truck. He went to the metal box, unlocked it, and took out the small handgun he'd always kept there for protection. He came back inside, locked the house, paused by the room, and returned upstairs into our

bedroom. She did not rebuke him and it would take several weeks to move it from under the bed to the drawer to back out into its box in the truck.

In sleep, with the door closed and the comforter around, one is most unprotected. The mind, even as it retains its own character and obsessions and draws upon its own store of ideas, is somehow bared to the wiles of the extraordinary. God, the devil, the legion of angels and demons in between, these are poets quiet enough to enter while we sleep and turn our cherished phrases and names into different phrases and names, sometimes wildly different, sometimes different by a degree, a shade, and then in a cunning effort dull the vividness of their art, plant a granule of memory, and leave.

CHAPTER NINE

During the night the actual clouds over Lansing parted and the morning sky was not gray but brilliant blue.

Celia robed and went downstairs. Horace still slept on the couch, his mouth gaping. It was Saturday and no engagements claimed us. She made coffee. Ed soon joined and we sat quietly, remarking only on the born winter light outside.

The paper was thin but politics was its topic and Celia felt unable to comprehend even its most simply-worded claims.

Just gorgeous out there, she said.

Certainly is.

I'd love a good walk.

Yes.

And then we fell to a condition of waiting, to a peaceful and comforting position of expectation, such as we had not assumed in some time.

Soon we heard him stir and he came out to the kitchen, thinner in his sweats than he was the night before. Very gaunt. His face, though, was less shocking in its deformation. There were the scars, but already they didn't shock. He greeted us and we wished him a good morning. Celia offered him coffee and he accepted. He sat on a stool at the counter. He thumbed the pages of the newspaper, he looked out the window.

Beautiful out there, he said. I was in Harrisburg a couple weeks ago. It was drearier there than here.

Well, get ready, Ed said. It's just the start of it.

Oh yeah, he said.

He put his fingertips on the blonde woodgrain of the counter and several times made a motion as if he were smoothing it.

He liked the suggestion of oatmeal so we set about making it. We worked harder on it than oatmeal demands.

Thank you, he said.

We said nothing.

It's good to be here.

We served him the oatmeal and he ate.

Celia spoke of local sports a bit and though he'd begun to show some interest in that just before he left he seemed disinterested now and that was fine. She moved on to speak of his high school friend Andy Bemis and Ed threw her a look of disbelief but she persisted, saying, You know he ended up going to Cornell. He's still there doing great. I ran into Debbie.

That's great. He's a junior now?, he asked.

Yes, exactly! He's at the beginning of his junior year. I guess he'll be home on break soon.

Great, great, he said. Just over two years. He's a junior.

It didn't take long before he'd put his head down on his arm. He'd coughed several times and now he complained of a headache and he looked pale. We gave him aspirin and he asked if we'd mind if he went back to sleep. Of course we said we wouldn't. We took him to his old room and got new linens. We set them and closed the door. Celia put his clothes in the wash. She noted their sizes, went to the store, and bought him some clothes. When he emerged several hours later he was appreciative but still weak. He continued to sleep much.

The next day, too, he slept late and spent most of his time alone. He came out here and there and we attended to him. He was respectful and kind, but also exhausted and sick.

We busied ourselves with the house and thought about new furniture. We worked on the genealogy. Celia had a call with the Bereaved Mothers, but she took it into the den, away from Ed.

CHAPTER TEN

He slept the best part of the next days as well. During his appearances he told us he was feeling better and coming back to life. He walked around the backyard several times and we saw him jog a couple short laps. He came in winded but sat with us and read the paper. Celia asked him if he'd like to go out and he said he'd rather not right now so she asked him if she could bring him anything. He asked for a book so she jotted down its title and bought it.

He wandered the house a bit and once he went out the front door. We don't know what he did out there but he wasn't long. There's a piano in the house and one night he sat down to it and played some single note melodies.

Celia stayed home with Horace and was ready on those infrequent times when he wanted to talk. We did not ask him for the events or any explanation of his journey. Celia continued to speak with the Bereaved Mothers and on Wednesday of that first week met with them at Roger's house, but the rest of the time was spent quietly and attentively.

Ed worked hard at Januck. John Jewell's mood had not improved, but Ed had a new determination in him and he didn't worry too much about John. John's attitude was an annoyance, but he was getting his work done and that's what Ed wanted. Every day, Ed wanted to get home to the returning solace of the house and the mysterious expectation there.

On the mornings during the first week we somewhat expected him to be gone, but he never was and were glad for that.

On Thursday after work, Ed stood in the twilit backyard of a pristine evening when Horace came out and stood tentatively beside him.

My little ritual, Ed said.

Would you prefer to be alone?, Horace said.

No, no!

Okay.

He crossed his arms.

It's chilly, Ed said.

Yeah.

Ed began to point out the rather extensive changes made to the yard since his leaving.

See, we put new bricks in here. Worked out pretty well.

Beautiful.

We had to pull some stuff up but it was worth it.

We walked down the slope to the perimeter.

Every once in awhile, Ed said, every long once in awhile in the last year there's been an owl back here. Amazing. You have to be pretty still awhile and then you hear her hoot. It's wonderful.

Yes, wow.

And we installed a sprinkler system. I didn't really want to do it but the summer was so hot and I was working a lot. But it's amazing because it has sensors under the ground—you can't see them—and they measure the temperature and the moisture of the yard and they only turn on when the grass needs it! So if you have a summer storm you don't have the sprinklers going at the same time. But sometimes I turn them off and water the lawn myself because I like to.

I can see that.

Yeah.

The dark had arrived and we stood in the yard quietly.

A day as nice as this one was, he said, you expect it to not be back tomorrow.

Well, it might not!, Ed said.

That's true.

He coughed. A racking, nasty cough.

Maybe we should go inside. I think Celia's home.

We did go inside and Celia had grocery bags out. She was making a dinner big enough for six of us.

Ed asked if she'd found anything on the genealogy today. She blew out frustration and said she'd heard from a society member that this Norwegian personage Lovise, who had dangled on the chart a long time, was probably not on our own.

But I want her!, Celia said and laughed. I want her. She would be a great link. I know it!

Horace asked for details and she gave them. The disappearance of fact into myth, she said again. It is so frustrating.

We don't want to know!, Horace said.

His voice was louder than we'd heard it and playful.

We don't?, Ed said.

Definitely no! Maybe we're Jews. Maybe we're from a lost tribe. Maybe we're a criminal line, or a noble line, or maybe way back we're Africans.

True, very true!

We're everything. We're guilty, we're innocent. What we definitely are —without a doubt—are kin with *everybody*, way back.

It's true, she said.

I've come to believe this must be remembered!, he said. No matter what. It must be remembered! I've become given to grand declarations.

We laughed.

I am a fanciful realist now!, he said, and laughing brought his fist down on the counter.

We have no idea what this meant, but we were delighted and laughed with him.

He was asleep soon, before dinner was ready. He lay on the recliner with a magazine in his sleeping hand. He breathed deeply. His chest did not rumble. His mouth held open just slightly and his eyes beneath their lids moved gently. His ribs went in and out, in and out, like the sleep coveted itself. His neck was bent so his head was down on his shoulder. It looked almost painful in its angle but it was a peaceful sleep. His face certainly was marked by something but it was difficult to tell just what. He looked more like an old photograph of a boxer than anything else, though there was a scar along his cheek no glove could make. There are many opportunities for scarring in this world. His nose was depressed on one side and that side's breathing was the only evidence of present struggle. He seemed almost to have some of Father Helland's features. A serious aspect, even in sleep. His hair was curlier now, his jaw rounder. Parents looked at him and this felt remarkable.

We tried to be very quiet as we placed the dishes but he did wake up and came to the table groggily. He apologized for his exhaustion and we said it was perfectly fine and totally understandable. He thanked us for the meal as we began to eat it and he said he'd have to make the next one. We told him there's time for that but it's not yet, he can sleep and rest all he wants and let

us do the work of the house. He insisted he'd like to prepare a meal so we said that would be delightful.

We did not say, Here is the polis come through our door, Here is the absolution of gross sin, Here is the heavy demand of better action, Here is mythology at the throat of the unbelievers.

He paused at some point and sat back in his chair and said, Whew! So good! I'm getting full.

You need to eat!, Celia said.

When dinner was finished, we went out into the living room with tea. We talked some light politics. Ed spoke of Januck Construction. We spoke of our trips to the cabin despite our grief. We talked about John Jewell's houseboat. Horace said very little but asked much and then quietly faded and slept again. We wondered if he'd wake during the night with shouts or tremors and were relieved that he did not.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

He didn't leave the house for nearly a month, but his health was returning and he was diligent about it. He ran in the backyard, he jumped rope, he did sit-ups. His face became red and bright. As if overnight, he blossomed with enthusiasm and vigor. Occasionally he spouted high rhapsodies that belied a changed kind of imagination. As the weeks went on, we thought we should urge him to get out into the world, but we had no idea what kind of pace his recovery would need and his progress was so heartening we said nothing.

He read and wrote a great deal. He read widely, it seemed, and he wrote hard. His body sweat when he exercised, his hand sweat when he wrote.

He insisted on assuming some household duties so we let him. He was also keenly interested in the genealogy so she showed him more of its detail. He loved the stories of the colorful people in it – his forefathers, mothers, sisters, kin. She told him of her process of discovery.

I have this vision, she said. Here is the body of the chart: two lines going downward, lots of twists and turns. But over here...

She pointed to the marginal spaces to the left and right of the chart, out in unmarked territory.

...over here are all these other family trees – and for every marriage on this chart, that is the joining of some other tree to this one, and somehow this chart just is the furtherance of all these others. That's how I see it.

He said he could see it that way, too.

She found she had little to do. A pleasant idleness came. It was an old feeling. The house was clean, the laundry done. Five o'clock and darkening. Maybe a fire in the fireplace. She got it lit and opened a book. She sat facing the window and peered out as he stretched and took deep breaths between bursts.

Ed came home one night and we kissed according to the covenant. He sat next to her and stretched his back.

He's a worker, she said.

Look at that.

I hope he's not overdoing it.

A little effort's good for a kid.

Do you find, she said, that good memories are streaming back to you?

Flooding, he said. Rushing.

He put his arm around her and she drew her body into him. It was done in an ancient way. He tightened his arm around her. We sat and finally she moved her head softly until it lay heavy on his shoulder.

It's something we can discuss-

Shhh..., she said.

Ed hushed.

Horace came in from the back. We felt an odd compulsion to physically separate.

He noticed and said he was going to take a shower.

Showered, he sat at the counter in the kitchen with a book and read diligently, making marginal notes. Celia looked through bills and Ed worked on a pasta dish. It was odd but good that he put himself so near us. He

would favor the nearest chair. He didn't speak much that night. He mainly read and occasionally looked up and smiled. We appreciated his nearness.

Ed brought up to Celia the matter of Januck Construction finances. He felt it was a nice soft time so maybe her understanding would be in top shape.

Honey, he said, as he turned to face her. I think you know this. I think you talked about it with Jewell. The business has not done very well in the last few months.

Saying it so easily felt very good to him.

But the books, she said, are fine.

I have hidden some costs and expenses.

She met his gaze. Instincts told her this was a new kind of breach in nearly three decades of a partnership, but she'd also known in her gut that he'd been concealing something about the business. The stronger instinct told her he opened himself to her justified attack because he believed to do so was right. We both saw that Horace was paying attention.

I'm sorry, Ed said. I was afraid.

He could see her eyes change from their initial sternness. She accepted his apology completely. Her refusal to prey on him gave her a light feeling.

How much?, she said.

With Cesar's theft, about sixteen thousand.

You never told me about Cesar's theft.

John did.

Right.

Sixteen thousand. Wow.

It's been my fault every step of the way, but I'm going to have a conversation with John and I'll change it.

That seems like the right thing to do.

Thank you.

The phone rang and Celia answered it. It was one of the Bereaved Mothers. She lowered her voice and walked out of the room. She came back and nervously, busily tried to help Ed by setting the table for dinner. Ed showed her that he would try to be unbothered by the presence of the group he so loathed.

During dinner, Horace said, I was hoping you hadn't moved...

Well, we didn't.

Right.

Then he said, This is excellent.

It's good, Ed said.

You know what I've developed a taste for?, Horace said. I hope this doesn't offend you.

What's that?

Wine.

Offend us?, Ed said.

Ed suddenly felt playful and enjoyed the kid asserting some kind of desire. He went straight to the cabinet and took out a bottle of wine.

Celia, shall we?

Let's have a glass of wine!, she said.

The thick liquid filled our noses and soothed our throats. Horace had an impish grin and Celia could not help tossing her head back and laughing. She held her glass tightly. We toasted, with pregnant and unspoken joy, to toasting itself.

You know what we used to do?, Ed said.

What?, Horace said.

We used to get out my old reel-to-reel albums from the sixties and listen to them.

Let's do it!, he said.

So Celia rinsed the dishes and put the dinner away as the men went out to the garage. A dusty, wooden place with piles lining the wall. Ed took a step ladder and Horace stood at the base of it. Ed handed down a box of Christmas decorations.

We may as well just leave these out, Ed said. Christmas is coming. Horace put them aside.

Ed took down a heavy old typewriter. Then he found the big box of reels and a player and they took it inside and set it up. Celia added wood to the fire and the men had to rearrange the room to get the wires to the speakers. It took some curses but they got it set. The speakers breathed and readied for music. Celia poured second glasses, darkened the lights, and the three of us were serenaded by the bold, religious, now quaint music of Ed and Celia's youth.

Ed reminisced and Horace seemed fascinated. He prodded the nostalgia and begged for more stories. He looked through the shelves and found old photo albums. He stood facing us and quickly browsed the albums, silently. A big smile as he put them away and a tear came to his eye. Gratitude presented itself on his face and Ed thought of his yearlong feverish want for the polis to thank him, to come to him. It has come!, Ed thought. Our grief was real and it was long, but has it removed? It has removed! It is removing, and by the one who was its source. All thoughts were unclear and Horace said nothing, he just stood a moment looking around him with gratitude on his mangled face. Then he sat and held our hands. It was an awkward gesture but he committed to it and we sat there like that a long moment.

Rest beckoned - not for the exhaustion of the day, but in anticipation of the next day's promise. We said goodnight and went to bed. It had been a splendid evening.

Celia curled tight against Ed in bed and our breaths were quick, our hearts were fast. We said nothing but held each other and finally we slept.

In sleep, the unrelenting aspiration toward the condition of joy. A twist in sleep to the also-persistent drive toward reckoning. But warm covers too, and the heater hummed.

CHAPTER TWELVE

When we came down in the morning, he was at the table with coffee, writing. The day was open and awake. He greeted Ed and all three of us went about our little tasks.

Ed drove the frosted roads to the site. He was the first there save the sun in a sky of quick clouds, like a train on a mountain track, appearing in bursts. The coffee shop and the polis called louder than the work, so he went to it. The door jingled as he entered and two ladies—early citizens—chatted with Clark, the man behind the counter, his v-neck sweater on as always, his hair pulled by goop behind his ears. Clark had many confessions to make and many confidantes to enlist. An astounding number of local publications sat in the bin.

A loudmouthed Lansingite came into the place and everybody seemed to appreciate his volume and volubility. Ed lingered. Their talk was partly of politics, as the loudmouthed man supported some bill in the legislature requiring sacrifice now for some perceived greater good later. Apparently the loudmouth and the others had discussed this before, because the conversation seemed to be resuming. The honest Clark admitted reservations about the bill while others spoke of their being undecided, of compelling arguments on either side. But the mantra all agreed upon was that it, whatever it was and whichever way it went, was for Our Children and Our Children's Children. On that they all agreed. They repeated it several times. Feeling convivial and skeptical at the same time—not so

much of the bill but of the language surrounding it—Ed asked, What if I am childless?

Pleased to meet you. I'm Kenneth, the loudmouth said and offered his hand.

Ed shook it.

So what about that?, Ed said.

I don't know what you mean.

I mean the thing is for your children and your children's children. What if I am childless?

The man laughed and winked at the two ladies. He also looked at Clark, who made a motion indicating the clever question stumped him.

You see, Kenneth said, a thinker! Now, what if you are childless? Why would you support, you're asking, a bill for *my* child and my *child's* children.

Your grandchildren, Ed said.

My grandchildren. You would support that bill because... you would support that bill because...

I mean come on it's just a figure of speech, Clark said.

Do you have children?, Ed asked Clark.

I do.

So there, you have something invested in it, Ed said.

Well, yeah, I do.

You, Kenneth said to Ed, should support the bill for Clark's children's children. And mine.

Or not support it, Clark said.

I'm sorry?, Ed said.

Kenneth said, Or not support it but on the same grounds. For Clark's and my grandchildren.

But why do I care about either of your children?

One of the ladies puckered her nose and said, Oh, I feel like I'm in sophomore philosophy class.

The other lady laughed.

No, no, Kenneth corrected them. No, look, *all of life* is sophomore philosophy class.

They laughed again.

Oh, geez, that's why I'm in so much trouble, Clark said to much laughter and he stared down at the counter as he wiped it with a wet cloth.

It *is*, it *is*, though, Kenneth said. And the gentleman raises an interesting question. If you are childless, why support a bill or any kind of measure that will cost you here and now in order to benefit a generation you may not even see? It's a good question.

Because you care about other people's kids, too!, one of the ladies said. Doesn't seem that hard.

Now let's move on to proving that we exist and this isn't just the dream of a penguin in the arctic. I had to write a paper on *that* in college, Clark said. That's why I got a C and why I majored in psychology and why I work at a coffee shop. Which I am more than fine with!

Everybody laughed again.

I guess we got that settled, Kenneth said. Because you care about other people's kids.

I do?, Ed said.

I don't know, do you?

Seems like I should, but it's hard to know why I should exactly.

Oh, no it isn't!, the other lady said in terminal disgust.

There are two kids walking on a bridge, Ed said. The bridge collapses. The two kids are drifting down the river toward a big waterfall. You can

dive in and save one of the kids. One of the kids is your kid. Which kid do you save?

I save mine, said the woman immediately.

Why?

Because I'm his mother, that's my job.

Fair enough. Fair enough. But what if your kid is a troubled kid, a real pain, doesn't do his homework, acts out, is really a mean kid, and the other kid has a bright future and big ideas, like you know he's working on a cure for cancer?

My kid is still my kid.

What if they're both your kids?

Well, I try to save both.

No, that's not the game. You can only save one.

Clark said, If I'm a penguin in the arctic, I hope I'm not dreaming of *me*, cause I'm pretty boring. I'd dream of catching a fish or being Clark Gable instead of Clark Jonswald! That's what I wrote in my paper. F on the paper, C in the class.

Everyone laughed, including Ed.

I'd have given you an A, one lady said.

Very cute, the other lady said.

Look, Kenneth said. You can only save one, I know where you're going. It's a very difficult decision and it's really one of those things where you cross the bridge when you come to it. But it's not really what we're talking about.

I concede that, Ed said. But what if you could know the future and you know your kid turned out to be a murderer and the other kid did go on to cure cancer.

Oh, boo!, one lady said.

But you *can't* know the future, Clark said. Oh, when is the bell gonna ring?

No, you're right, you can't, Ed said. I still, though, I can't understand why I would vote for a bill that will make *my* life worse *now* so that the kid I *don't have* will have a better life when *I'm* dead.

Because if you're a good person that's what you do, Clark said.

It's really not a bad country, Ed thought. We have laws of prohibition, prohibiting certain acts, because we knew everybody would try to get away with everything. You can be charitable or not, selfish or not. It's up to you.

Yes, sir?, Clark said as a new man went up to order a coffee.

Hey, nice chatting with you, Ed said.

Everyone wished him well and he went out in high spirits to the patio out front of the shop. It was still early and no one was at the site yet so Ed sat in a chair and sipped his cooling coffee and thought about getting another. In time Kenneth came out and took a chair. Being a loudmouth, he launched right in.

You know, Kenneth said, I appreciate what you're saying in there. I really do. I guess there's no real solution. Either you believe in helping people you don't know or you don't.

Not a very contemporary idea, Ed said.

Oh, I don't know. Yeah, I know what you mean. But I don't know. I think people sacrifice more than they're given credit for.

Maybe.

So, no kids, huh?, Kenneth said.

Ed thought a moment and said, I was just being ornery. I have one son.

Kenneth laughed and seemed extremely relieved. Ha!, he said. You know, it's funny. Between you and me, your question... It makes a lot of sense for someone who doesn't have a kid. I've always sort of distrusted

people of more or less our age who don't have children. You know, for exactly the reason your question addresses. For *exactly* that reason.

I know what you mean, Ed said.

What does your son do?, if I can ask...

He just returned from the war, actually.

No kidding.

No kidding.

God bless him. Wow. Is he going back?

No, he's out. He did his time.

God bless him. That's terrific. Well, godspeed. I hope he knows how much he's appreciated. Sometimes we don't show that as much as we should.

I'll tell him you said so.

Do, do.

I will.

Well, Ed, great meeting you. Give the bill some thought, for your son's kids! He gave Ed another handshake.

Will do.

Kenneth walked off sipping his coffee, crossing the street to his car. He gunned his car and drove importantly away.

What if, Ed thought to himself, the bridge breaks and *three* kids fall in and one of them is yours and you can save either *your* kid and let the others drown or you can save *both* of the others and let *your* kid drown? What if you saved *your* kid and let the other two drown and in time your kid learned of your difficult choice that day and possessed of a pure moral spirit condemned you for it?

Ed was delighting in these exercises and he thought up several more scenarios, but just then John Jewell pulled up so Ed met him at his truck.

Jewell!

Morning, boss, John said as he took a bucket from the bed. Ed put his arm around Jewell's big shoulder and said, John, let's go across to the coffee shop and get a coffee before we start.

Something in Ed's head was giddy and jumbled. He didn't want to focus on any task. He wanted to talk, he wanted to listen. He was hearing things he'd not heard in a long time, things he'd depended on his entire life - distant trains, shouts in far-off markets, cavalry horses echoing somehow across time. He was hearing these things, knowing they were somehow present still. He heard also quotidian disappointments of computers freezing, of a man haggling with the phone company, these chaotic sounds without which he was lost.

Roberto and Jorge came ambling to the site and Ed said to John, These guys know what to do.

So Ed started those dependable guys at their tasks and the two men walked across to the coffee shop where Clark greeted Ed with, The childless wonder is back!

We got our coffee and sat outside though it was quite chilly.

Ed began the conversation by saying, Listen John, I know I've been on edge lately.

So have I, boss.

Well, we're running a company here and the company is not doing well. Yes.

It's no secret to any of us we've lost bids we never used to lose and we've had significant personnel problems including stolen capital and John

I can only say every single ounce of it has been my fault and I'm terribly sorry to everyone. And I intend to change that.

After a pause, John said, Actually pretty good to hear you say that.

Well, it's true.

I've wanted to do something but I didn't know what to do.

You've been perfect. I want you to know that raises and bonuses will be happening. I know the holidays are around-

No, no, I don't need that.

Yes, you do.

John looked into that distance where heavy things lay.

John said, I wouldn't mind.

I'm telling you it's going to happen. We are working, right? We don't have much lined up, but we're working now.

We are.

And if I hit the company's budget, I will use my personal budget.

I've made a heck of a mess.

Ed hadn't expected the confessions to turn around, but John began to emotionally confess an embarrassing compulsion to spend money unwisely.

The boat. What the heck was I thinking? What was I thinking? And it's not just that. I have these kids, I have Cindy, and I'm always on edge, I'm always worrying, I'm doing exactly what you're not supposed to do. I'm sorry, Ed.

I didn't know about that. Do you need some money?

No. I don't know.

I'm giving you a little loan. Pay me back when you can. Pay me back in the summer. Pay me back in ten years when you take over the business.

Oh, man, John said.

He was embarrassed and ashamed.

Ed, the other thing I have to say is I'm sorry for not being more understanding.

But you've been incredibly-

When I think of what you've been through in the last year, I can't imagine. You know how often you and Celia cross my mind? Just about every time I pick up Kyle, every time Justin runs over to me...

John had always been emotional and now his eyes filled.

Why am I saying this?, he said. This is cruel of me to say. Ed, I'm sorry, I don't know why the heck my mouth keeps opening.

It's okay. Yes, it's been a rough year.

But, you know, I look at Kyle, I look at Justin, and they're just young kids, and I hope that someday, I mean I hope—I swear to God I hope it never comes to this—but I hope they can be the heroes that Johnny was.

I am not convinced of his heroism, Ed said.

Ed...

For an unknown reason, Ed began to talk about himself.

Do you know I have cheated as the owner of this company, Jewell? Half-truths in bidding, exaggerated costs passed on to customers, hidden...

Ed...

No. I am petty. Even when I've done good things I've done them to be seen doing them. I've purchased imaginary honor with charitable acts. And those charitable acts, measured against the wealth I have and have accumulated, are not even crumbs. I swear I don't know what to do. I just don't know what to do.

Ed, this hurts to hear.

My son may be a hero, but it's only because his father's world is a wretched world and his father did but little, but precious precious little to change it.

You want to change the world?

Ed laughed.

The most sophomoric, insipid, arrogant, impossible little desire there is. It is! I know it is. And leading to all manner of ridiculous, even harmful acts. It's like we can't help it – if we move, we break something. If we speak, we blaspheme. Change the world. To have one minute's worth of decent, attentive, empathic thinking. Have I ever had one? I don't know. Pure greed. To consider just once that who has wronged me suffers more than he makes me suffer because he has done it, because he has wronged me! Have I ever actually believed that? No, I don't think so.

You're way too hard on yourself, Ed.

I'm just a talker. It's good coffee.

John Jewell laughed and agreed it was good coffee.

In fact, John said, maybe we should get another cup. So Ed got a third cup of coffee and they walked back to the site, which was now bustling.

Ed thought to himself, I would like the pure symmetrical beauty of a tragedy. I would like to be stabbed through the stomach by an avenger and to lay dying with a pure, full thought of all my wretchedness which has damned me. But even while he thought it he was within an altering world and then he also thought, I think too much of death. He recalled holding the infant Johnny.

Maybe the great subject is *birth*. Maybe birth is more significant than death. Maybe it is!

He could not find any goodness within him. Nor could he define the precise evil. But he did find sharp limits to his knowledge, and he felt his heart continue to beat with great determination, and he wondered at these things and for their sake he was compelled.

He was back on trash duty and though his mind was restless he worked very hard, though poorly, as all work is poorly done. He did bring these thoughts to Celia in time and her hand on his cheered him and, however unearned, it was a reward.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Horace had been restless all day. Health returning, she thought. In the young, health is good, but it brings all sorts of wanderings and dissatisfactions.

He looked out the window and followed his gaze to the backyard. The first snowflakes had come yesterday and they continued. The ground was slick. He went without a jacket and stood on the deck, looking down the slope of the yard. Several times he walked the perimeter. He came inside and helped himself to something in the refrigerator. He slept. He woke and stretched before the French doors. She asked him if he'd like anything and he responded cheerfully that he was fine. She believed him. It won't be good for him to be cooped up too long, she thought. He went outside and exercised again.

Heightened moments followed one after the other in quick succession and there was a strange and strangely understood progress of these in his first month home.

Ed came in. She heard his patting of his keys and the nice ritual was rehearsed. We lingered in the kitchen until he came out from his postworkout shower and again took out a book and sat near us as we busied ourselves with small things.

There is opera!, Celia said suddenly. Oh, there's an opera on downtown!

She grabbed her calendar and flipped it open. Her pen was poised over the newspaper and she looked at her bewildered men. Ed thought she looked seized by some crazy excitement.

I just realized there's a lot we can do. It's winter so everybody wants to go out! Look at this. La Travi...ata... La Traviata. Downtown. Maybe that's stupid? Is that stupid?

Ed said, How would I know if it's stupid?

I mean the idea, stupid. Is it stupid?

I don't think the idea's stupid.

Seems like a good idea!, Horace said.

She flipped those pages fast.

There's a classical concert, too, if we don't want the singing. Looks like... oh, it's Bach! That's probably good! And a play... oh look several plays. There are a bunch of plays! Comedy, too. That might be fun. I love movies. I know Ed's not crazy about most movies, but I like them. Do you like movies?, she asked Horace.

Sure, yeah!

Okay, then, you should have a look through these when I'm done and I'm sure we can drag the big galoot along. Once it gets a little closer to Christmas there's all kinds of things to do. What did we do that one year, Ed?

The hayride with carols?

Yes, I know, I know what we did, but where?

You said *what* did we do.

I know, I know!, she said.

She was racing.

To the polis, then?, Ed thought. To the polis indeed!

But where did we do that?

Erskine's Farms, I think it was, Ed said. He turned to Horace, Erskine's Farms transforms this big barn into a big ham dinner and they do these folksy-

Yes, Horace said.

Oh, yes, Ed said.

We could even, Celia said, I don't know how this would grab you but we take the train into Chicago some night.

I like that idea. What about dinner tonight though?, Ed said.

Yes, we'll have dinner, Celia said. Look at this, this is strange. A puppet presentation of *The Raven*. By candlelight. Oooh, spooky. Or if you rock and roll boys want to do that, looks like there's plenty of that.

How about the grocery store?, Horace said.

The grocery store?

One trip we could make is to the grocery store.

You want to go to the grocery store?

I kinda do. It's been awhile.

Let's go to the grocery store!

So Horace put on a jacket of Ed's and we all got into the cold car, Horace in back, and Ed began the drive to the grocery store.

I haven't been to a real grocery store in awhile!, Horace said.

Well, that's about to change!, Celia said, and her deep laugh rang out.

Ed always thought her laugh was prettily self-conscious, like that tough woman was surprised whenever she was moved in that way. To discover her anew, Ed thought.

The street and houses passed and they seemed to hold Horace in fascination. His gaze was puppylike going out the window.

Celia turned to him and said, Is it good to be here?

She asked it with an honesty that touched Ed.

Horace looked at her eyes.

I'm sorry, she said.

It is. It's very good, he said.

It's good to have you.

He may not have detected the slight quaver in her voice but Ed did.

The boy returned his gaze out the cold window and there seemed to be some sadness in him. She continued to stare at his poor face with her body turned almost fully around. The imperfections in the window glass returned the reflection of a nearly whole face. Without turning his eyes from the things out there, he said, I could write a million beautiful words and not touch the thanks I feel to you.

Celia turned around and only the tires on the slush sounded.

You are our son, Celia said.

Truths spoken are sometimes heard strangely. Truths shown sometimes jar the viewer. Covenants drafted well are drafted arduously. But some promises are easier made than they seem before the making. Sometimes they are made before the pronouncing.

Ed parked the car and we stepped onto the wet black pavement. As we walked, he began a struggle. He was trying to tell us something about his being different now. Worry was rich on his forehead as he searched for the perfect words. The task seemed important to him and although we were uncomfortable we didn't interrupt his struggle. We slowed our walking. The automatic doors of the store came open but he paused and stepped off the rubber mat so we stayed outside while the door closed again.

What I'm saying, he said, is that I've been places. Strange places. Places I never want to go back to. Places I'm probably still in. Some places I left for adventure, and some from fear. And I've heard a lot of stories. I've told a lot of stories. And many of these stories conflict. Different stories. I'm being

unclear. Wild departures. And as I feel more and more comfortable here I'm probably going to be more and more different than you remember me.

Ed coughed and turned to survey the lot.

I've never meant harm to anyone, Horace said.

Celia became suddenly aware that we had not been in public with him since he'd arrived. A young couple pushed a cart with a wobbly wheel right past us. Horace put his back against the cement wall and closed his eyes in a grimace but we did not interrupt.

But I *have* harmed people, he said. I've harmed people who didn't deserve it.

Celia thought to interrupt, to tell him he was on duty and was already forgiven for any mistakes but she stopped herself.

Pretty severely, he said.

We just did not know what to think or what to do.

I'm not wanted by the law!, he said. Really, I'm not a criminal.

Well, that's good, Ed said.

He laughed nervously and looked around. Then we all had a small eruption of laughter as we decided this had so far been an unasked but crucial question.

But conscience is another kind of law and by that law I am wanted. By that law I am pursued.

A pretty young girl called out and chased her brother to a parked car. A pregnant woman walked with fingertips on her belly. All the regular things were again changing.

Horace went on, To make things right?

We didn't know what he meant but his voice went up at the end like he was asking a question.

To reorder the world? Was it in balance once?

That's not possible, Ed said.

No, it's not, Celia said.

Of course it's not, he said. Of course it's not.

He looked at us. He touched his face.

This is a beam of steel, he said.

Ed was moved with unexpected pity. He thought Celia would be too, and she was, but she was also unsettled and shocked again with grief. She sprang tears. She said, I'm sorry, and looked around her.

Let me have the keys, Ed.

Ed gave her the keys and she went to the car. In the locked front seat, she sobbed for her son.

Ed stayed with Horace and didn't know what to say or do.

I'm sorry, Horace said.

No, no.

They stood for awhile together and then Ed said, I have to go to her. He left Horace and hurried to the car. He tapped on the passenger window and she clicked the lock to open. He got in beside her and put his arms around her and together they wept again, her tears extracting his. He wiped her eyes with his hands. He held her fragile face, it seemed unable to hold itself.

If Ed, she said.

He held her tighter. She felt a familiarity. Maybe the marriage, he thought, was always a tragic desire, as he burrowed into her neck. Maybe while we thought it was heroic achievement and sexual communion it was really always to ensure that someone would be there to exonerate the inevitable sin.

Her poor frame was exhausted. He held her face again and she smiled through the wetness. She laughed. He looked at her with ready, responsive seriousness.

Ed, you're so good, she said.

She put her head back against his chair. He held her and disbelieved her. His knee was still on the center console.

Oh Dad, she said. You are the best that's ever been.

No.

Yes. And I had a very good father.

You did.

I don't understand. Maybe we've been chosen. Selected by God.

Very like John Jewell in its simple but somehow pious self-concern, Ed thought. But always for us a secret, lurking wish.

She fell back to tears.

The poor kid, she said. Doesn't your heart break?

Yes, it does.

He wants to break free. He wants to be good. He wants to be happy.

Ed listened.

Is it our country that beats him? Is it just the darkness in the world? What is it?

I don't know.

He must be allowed what he wants, they are not bad things to want.

Who knows what guises gods take?, Ed thought. Christ, Poseidon, Zeus, the sons of the cattle of the sun. Rarely, rarely, do I believe a thing that's said to me. But I always believe her, even when what's said is said in anger. I even believe that.

Come on, I hope he's still there, she said.

He was there, somehow suddenly smallframed and limp, light against the cold of the night and the heaviness of the structure behind him, vulnerable and young. He was sitting against the huge wall, looking down,

his breath rising. His scarred face looked up when we came, his mouth open and his eyes wide. He got to his feet quickly, like a soldier caught lounging.

She went straight to him and threw her arms around him in a mother's embrace. Though he seemed so small and light, he towered over her and his arms around her were a giant's arms. He really was a big, strong young man. Ed thought she looked like the sprite grandmother she was born to become.

However you are, angel, just however you are. We're so glad you're home, she said.

He received her second hug and her kiss and then we walked onto the rubber mat and into the nearly blinding light of the store. Ed put his arm around Horace's shoulders and squeezed them for a moment.

Horace's eyes were steel hard. Looking all around, looking hard. Into things, through them. Maybe he hadn't adequately finished his half-intelligible declaration. He was bothered. He glared like the criminal Cesar, almost like he was afraid of the harm he would cause the innocent things.

What do we want?, Celia said.

I don't know, Ed said. Cookies, maybe.

Horace?, she said.

Lots to choose from.

But what have you missed?

Lots.

He walked slow.

She put cookies in the cart.

Cookies!, Ed said.

I want to go to a bar, he said.

You what?

That's what I want to do.

Ed thought, He is the young nation wanting a bourbon on a summer porch, after the wind was gone with all its bounty. And so he was.

Then let's go to a bar!, Ed said.

Okay!, Celia said.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

We left the cart where it stood with its cookies and went back to the parking lot. Now we were his followers. Ed got the car moving and said, So you want to go to a bar?

Yeah, he said. Something dingy and dirty. I want you to meet my people.

Something dirty..., Ed said.

Celia pointed to a bright Bar and Grille with big windows.

No, he said.

Maybe by the Capitol, Ed said.

After a few tries we found a place that satisfied him. We were tired from the effort. It was indeed a dingy place. It was seedy and dark and stank of beer and smoke. Sad-eyed men mostly. He touched our arms and said, Thank you. He relaxed and brightened.

Three young men, college-aged, played darts in the corner. A few older men sat at the bar. Two women in the whole place, one at the bar. The other was the sole bartender.

Horace took us to three black stools.

Evening, the bartender said. She was young, but her skin was dry and oversmoked.

Evening, ma'm. Three whiskeys!, he said.

I'm not drinking that, Celia said. I'm not drinking that. I'll have a beer. A single beer.

Dad, whiskey?

You cry for the polis, Ed thought, and the polis answers how it will.

Yeah, sure, a whiskey, Ed said.

The girl gave Celia a beer and whiskeys for the boys. Horace's planted his hands on the bar and his arms propped him.

A pack of smokes, he said.

She delivered the cigarettes. He lit one like a pro and dragged it with relish.

Ma'm, he said to the bartender. Toast with us.

I'll toast with you, but it'll be water, she said.

However you like.

We raised our glasses and he said, To the parents I haven't seen in a long time!

We drank.

Is that true?, the bartender said.

Ma'm, I just returned from the war.

Really? Wow!

Thank you.

You're a hero, a middle-aged man adjacent said. He tipped his glass with sincerity.

The man next to him grumbled.

Horace said to the grumbler, I'm not a hero?

The grumbling man stiffened. His comrade said, Ignore him, he's an ass.

Listen, the grumbling man said. I didn't say you weren't a hero, kid.

You didn't say it well, but you said it, Horace said.

You're lucky. That's what you are.

To the grumbler, the bartender said, The gentleman just got home. You should be buying him a drink.

I will buy him a drink!, he said and fished a five out of his pants. Here's a drink – whatever he wants. He wants top shelf, I'll take out more money.

It's okay partner, Horace said.

Oh no it ain't. I want to buy you a drink!

The grumbler was full-voiced now. Raspy and scratched, but at high volume.

Put your money away, his comrade said.

I want... I want to buy the young hero a drink. I really do.

The man came over to us. He had dirty black corduroy pants over soiled white sneakers, an oily sweater, and a strand of thick gray hair over a loose mesh forehead.

He said, I say you got about another two weeks to be special so you might as well milk it. What do you like? Beer, whiskey?

I've got a drink, thanks.

Well, you probably deserve another one, don't you?

Bob, the bartender said.

I'm not doing anything! You his parents?

Ed said, We are.

The man extended his gnarled, spotted hand. His breath stank.

Bob, he said. Nice to meet you.

We all shook hands. Horace got up to offer his seat.

Bob said, Sit the hell down, soldier.

Bob I'm serious, the bartender said again.

Horace said to the bartender, He's fine.

I just want to buy him a goddamn drink. Do you want to sell drinks in here or not? Listen, he turned back to Horace. I'll buy you a drink and you can let an old man do his grumbling when he's sitting on a barstool.

You can grumble all you want.

Cause why the hell did you go if it wasn't so I could sit on this goddamn barstool and grumble?

Oh, plenty reasons additional to that, I suppose.

The man was not listening though and he continued, I'll buy you five drinks. But you know what? There are about four thousand or five thousand other guys I'd like to buy a drink but I can't. You understand? Not because I don't have enough money. I could have all the money in the world and I couldn't but them a goddamn drink. One goddamn drink from a pathetic old man. You understand?

I understand.

So if I failed to stand up and throw flowers at your feet it's cause I don't want somebody sitting here to get the idea that's how you get your flowers cause you know what? You're a kid. They asked you to go and you went and god bless you but you didn't have to go and a lot of kids didn't have to go and if they hadn't they would not be dead. Okay? And I know, I know you and your lovely little parents disagree with me but you think real hard and tell me in forty years if any of this has meant one goddamn thing. It's the god's honest truth. It's the devil's honest goddamn truth, too.

Sorry, folks, Bob's friend said.

I'm sorry, Bob said. You've probably been through a lot.

He has, Celia said.

I appreciate that he has. And you can just go ahead and tell me to shut my-

No you can't, his friend said.

I'm not telling you to shut up, Horace said.

I just..., Bob said.

He stood between us and braced his thin arm on the bar rail.

Boy oh boy, look at me, he said. I'm telling some very nice people how to think again. Forgive me. My opinion. But I got a vote, too. What a country. I swear to God I was against the goddamn war the minute the towers fell. I saw 'em come down and I said, Holy Jesus, bless all their souls and godspeed your mercy on their friends and families and cabdrivers and bagel vendors and slaves and masters and children, godspeed godspeed. And then I said, Whatever the hell this was intended to start, I am against it.

Why?, Celia said.

Because look at his poor face. Look at this face. And you know what, Mother? You are real goddamn lucky he's sitting here with you. You understand that, don't you?

We do, Celia said.

It's not every mother or every father can say that, okay? There's about five thousand of them that can't. More, no more. Eight thousand? What? Nine thousand? Okay?

I understand that, Celia said. I understand that very well, sir, but who said we haven't sacrificed? Maybe we did.

Maybe you did.

Well, we did. And all those sacrifices have been for you. You're right about that.

As I well know!

Do you? Is this how you repay the sacrifice?

Oh, Holy Mary Mother of Christ.

I appreciate your bleeding heart, sir, but it's a little easy sitting on a barstool and shouting about what a world we could have if everybody were just a little more like you.

One war!, he said.

He fairly thundered it and brought his old purple fist down on the rail.

One war! There was one just American war. Forget *just*. I mean *decisive*. There was one *decisive* American foreign war since probably 1812. Do you contest that? Roosevelt! ROOSEVELT! That's all. The only thing any other war decided was who would be dead, who'd be disfigured, and who'd get lucky.

Politics is gunbacked, Ed said.

I didn't say it wasn't. You're right about that. I didn't say it wasn't. Don't listen to me. No, listen to me! I'm probably a goddamn alcoholic son of a-

His buddy laughed.

I hated my father, Bob continued. I loved my mother and I hated my father. My mother loved my father, I could not understand. I'm old now but I realize I never became a man. Maybe I never wanted to be a man, I don't know. That's entirely possible. I have screwed up so many times and so big it's goddamn astounding. But I swear I got half a mind left and I read and I got my voice and I'll be goddamned if they're gonna take that away. I'll tell you one thing, Lieutenant. Private? What?

Yes.

Whatever you are. I'm awfully glad you're back. Awfully, awfully glad. Thank you.

Ed was riveted but he worried about Celia. She sipped her beer and he took that as a good sign.

This is not a holy place, Horace said. But it's no less holy than any other place.

It's the polis, Ed said.

This is the polis?, Celia said.

A corner of it, yes.

We can go plenty of other places, Horace said. But none of them are more or less holy than this place. Nothing God can't redeem.

Now I'm coming around to your side!, the man said. Nothing God can't redeem. Forgive me Father, for I have sinned. I have sinned. Forgive me.

You are my brother, Horace said.

I don't remember that, but okay. I may be a little old, son.

Then you're my uncle. Meet your sister - Celia Januck.

Pleased, sister.

Nice to meet you, brother.

I don't contest it, Bob said. When I know something, I know it. When I'm not sure, I believe what people tell me.

Horace lit another cigarette.

Can I have one of those?, Bob said.

Horace gave him a cigarette and lit it.

We were joined by the dart players, big yellow beers in their hands.

Their leader said to Horace, Did you say you just came back from the war?

I did, Horace said. His eyes again narrowed into tight agitation.

Well, cheers, said the young man.

Thanks.

Tim's thinking about going, the kid said and turned the focus on a shorter, chubby kid with a baby face.

And not cause I'm broke, Tim said.

Not cause he's broke!, Bob roared. And not cause he's broke!

Neither did he, Celia said of Horace.

The bartender poised the whiskey bottle above Ed's glass and turned her eyes up at him. Ed looked at Celia.

She said, Whatever you like, dear.

His too, Ed said, and she poured a glass for this father and son.

Can we join you?, the boy asked.

Pull up a stool, Celia said.

Horace said, We'll talk about anything but the war.

What else is there to talk about?

Oh, plenty!, Horace said. Where are you from?

It turned out Tim was from Oklahoma. He grew up on a cattle ranch and was in Lansing on a baseball scholarship. His story was quite fascinating. The short chubby one had an older brother he clearly admired a great deal. The brother was training to be an astronaut. Over one more round, we heard all about it. We also heard a long and breezy tale of Horace as an Army boxer. Some shudders went through us during his reporting of that.

We eventually left the place, stinking of smoke and beer. Bob's farewell to us was a sincere handshake.

Ed wasn't drunk, but Celia drove anyway.

A squalid place, Horace said on the way home. But sometimes it's the only place.

It is?, Celia said.

I don't know. I like to go where the guards are down. Walls and walls, closed gates, doors, litigations. Dead fraternity. The specific accomplishments of our people.

A little corner of the polis.

I just want to listen and I just want to talk!

We got home and went to bed. Ed waited awake in bed for Celia to wash up. We said very little until she said she loved him. She repeated it and he returned it. Then we made love, tenderly and sweetly, for the first time in a long time. It felt right and rich and natural.

As he slept, she leaned over his face and studied it as it appeared in the dim light. In his sleeping face was worry, age piled on age, pettinesses rendered and a rendering of pettiness, terrific fear of many pressures, weakness of character and spirit, cowardice deep in the lines, but also humor, pride of accomplishment, striving toward the difficult, and a desire for something good, and in the deepest lines she saw herself there because she was there, carved into him, and it came that all suffering was suspended and elevated and that he was one of many, and yet one, and so was she, and that as she depended on him, he depended on her, and all of them did, and if there was one reason not to shrink into her cowardice and fear he lay sleeping just now, and she believed that if he were to wake and gaze at her as she slept, he would see the same. But he didn't wake. He slept calm and deep until the morning.

As she lay back, she realized she was exhausted and cleansed from her crying and our lovemaking. She tendered a silent thanksgiving.

She thought, My husband, my husband, my son, my son.

But do you believe in reckoning, Celia? And has it come and passed?, she thought.

Stronger though was that joy drive, and that is what carried her to sleep.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The seal of the outer world broken, Horace itched to go out into it. Celia hesitated to let him go, but she knew it was right. We'd given him some money—just a little—and he gushed in thanks for it. When he came back from his first outing, she was flooded with relief. He went to the coffee shop, the movies, bookstores, bus rides, the capitol, probably some bars. He spent time at home, but he thirsted to immerse in the town. He seemed content to be alone within it and we wondered when that would change.

Celia decreased her involvement with the Bereaved Mothers. She wasn't sure why, but she scheduled fewer meetings and missed some. The big ad had come out to almost no response. She thought it was funny.

She focused on her chart.

Creaking wooden planks, sogged sails, the smell of brine... she speculated on the fact of a vessel imperiled in the Norwegian Sea around 9 A.D. Legend had it diverting to Orkney...

She thought, We can only tell our side. And then she thought, We can only tell our side if we believe we only have our side and if we presume against experience our side is ours to tell...

The philosophical and theological ghosts began to gather again and she permitted them speech but their speech corseted their aspects and she could not trust what could not look her in the eye and they left, not banished, not afraid, but gently, in mist.

One day, Celia asked Horace if he'd like to see his grandfather in the home. He said he would so we drove the cold roads to the VA. Helland was there, his flagging skin sacking his bones. He half-waked but without intelligence and his eyes neither accepted nor rejected his returned grandson. Celia had a burst of feeling when Horace put his hand on the man's head.

As Horace whispered something to the old Colonel, Stephanie swept into the room and was taken aback. Celia had declined to prepare the sweet girl for the strange return of the young man, so the conversation was quick and startling.

My God, Stephanie said.

Her face showed happiness and confusion.

I'm sorry, we haven't told anyone, Celia said.

Nice to meet you, Horace said.

I remember you, of course!, Stephanie said. And I've followed along.

Oh, yes.

Celia watched the two stand there and she swears she saw some dove set on the line of their gaze. Horace's questions were not of his grandfather as we drove away, and thrilling developments would happen in the next several months. Horace went to the VA often.

John Jewell vacuumed the dried cement and Ed felt a new surge of warmth for the man. Of all the perfect opportunities for good things to slip from one's life, it is amazing what doesn't, he thought. He announced impulsively that he wanted to rent a room at a restaurant and take the crew out for a celebration dinner and he needed dates that would work. Families were encouraged, so long as the young kids stayed away from Carl. Ed worked well.

John Jewell seemed distant and unenthusiastic. Ed would later learn John's problems were becoming intense, that he had spent and spent. He said it was somewhat to satisfy Cindy and then he recanted and said no, it was to satisfy himself. Ed had never seen John in this state and he could not have predicted such trouble would hit him, no matter how usual that trouble is. As he worked, Ed entertained the idea that John harbored secrets and was a malicious and irresponsible man. Ed entertained the ensuing thought that Ed Januck was a paragon of excellence. The delight in the revelation of another's distress. Ed put this thought into the screaming screw.

When Ed got home, Celia was making dinner and Horace was out. We ate quietly. In only a month and a half, one night without him and the house seemed still again. We remembered the phenomenon. This time it was a full stillness, though, a peaceful respite. This new stillness did not threaten and scorn. Still, neither of us wanted it to last. She'd cooked for him too so we had leftovers to store.

He did come bursting in, though, finally. We put down our books and then took them up again when we remembered a young man might want his space. He came and sat with us, though, and that was lovely. He told us where he'd been. He was just out wandering, but he was always seeing new things, learning his hometown all over again. He'd made friends with an old man at a coffee shop. A former journalist who was now a reader!, he said. He seemed delighted at this.

When Celia was in the kitchen on a phone call, he asked Ed about the train room. He said he'd been up looking at the train and he wondered if it ran.

Oh, let's go!, Ed said.

So he followed Ed into the train room.

It's a great piece of machinery, Ed said.

I bet.

We built this years ago...

Southern Pacific 1883.

That's right.

Ed hesitated a moment and then took the feathers off the shelf and dusted a stretch of track.

Celia, down in the kitchen, figured out where they were and couldn't stand being left out so she went up and timidly peeked her head into the room.

She heard Ed saying, ...And then I regretted having taken it down. It was a ridiculous thing done in grief, really. To spite Celia or something. It was ridiculous. So I decided to build a different track. So what you're looking at now is a miniature, scaled version of the whole of Michigan. It's a fictitious line – the train begins and ends in Lansing. It runs the whole thing.

Ed flipped the switch. The electricity hummed and the soft yellow lights glowed down onto the track. He dimmed the overhead lights so the stark switchlights and deliberate sunset could be better seen.

It's always a golden summer afternoon when the train runs, Ed said.

Ed saw Celia watching at the door and asked her to come in. She sat next to Horace while Ed stood over the track like some god in Michigan's sky.

And then the train went.

Out from the imagined Lansing station, the black train took grades west toward Lake Michigan. Its first leg was into the forest.

Horace's eyes were up and bright. Bright, bright eyes. Ed narrated softly, imagining he was an old time radio announcer speaking to the one

child left on the planet. She goes west from Lansing, he said. She curls north and chugs up into the forest. The forest is filled with deer, elk, even birds. See? She passes through to Grand Rapids—cereal town—rides through the smell of grain—then up the coast past Muskegon...

The lake to the west was painted a deep blue. The tracks took light grades uphill and down, past switching yards with small men at work, purchased from a fine specialty train shop one summer in Alpena. Then the rail swung over through more trees and the train disappeared into the long black tunnel Ed had named for Johnny, post-MIA, and this was the only conscious fabrication save the tracks of the whole design, and then down into sad Flint and a southwest turn so the conductor might have the orange sun in his eyes if he was on his way back home some evening to Lansing.

Then she comes safe and sound into the station, Ed said.

Ed shut off the power. He blew a fleck of dust. He was the wind that blew through Michigan. He shut off the light and we left the room.

With a glass of wine in the living room, Horace spoke more of his boxing and Ed was enthralled. He also spoke of those he felt he'd wounded—this was a constant thought—and his remorse and suffering were evident. When Ed offered forgiveness—which was not his to offer—Horace rejected it. He insisted what was done was done and there was no reversing any of it but this fact is not now nor ever can be any source of any comfort. His eyes went down, very hard. The steel quality seemed always waiting in him, as if in the tear ducts, and it would spring quick.

After a moment, Ed offered him a job at Januck Construction. The steel film receded. He accepted the job. Ed said he would start not tomorrow but in two days. Tomorrow he will tell the men.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Sometimes when a job neared completion Ed felt a sadness to see it go, but as they set the first pieces of drywall on this one, he felt pure relief. Just yesterday, a bid had come through. They would finish Szechuan in a week —just after Thanksgiving—and then have a couple weeks off. He resolved to pay his men so they'd not suffer during the holidays. He took Roberto aside and lavished praise on him for steady, dependable, and excellent work. Roberto was uncomfortable, having a shy nature, but his brown eyes belied a satisfied acknowledgment that he'd earned the praise. Ed then informed him he was being given a raise and the difference owed him on his next check. Roberto wiped his mouth with his collar and thanked Ed.

Ed pulled Carl aside and said the same thing.

Curses rang out from the mouth of John Jewell, who sat in his truck with the door open. He was on the phone and shouting. Ed began to walk over to him when John snapped the phone shut, stepped out of the truck, and slammed the door.

They found Cesar!, he said. He beat up his girlfriend! The cops got him on a domestic disturbance call and they found his girlfriend with a broken nose-

Oh, Cesar, Ed said.

And they found our equipment! It was sitting in his little apartment or wherever he lives! So we gotta go get it and I.D. Cesar and testify and all

that. I said hell yes we're pressing charges – he's a thief and we'll whip his ass.

John, calm down.

I'm calm! I'm excited! They caught him!

Roberto came over and John turned on him.

Roberto!, John said. They caught your cousin. He had every bit of our stuff. *Now* are you gonna stand there and tell us you don't know anything about it?

I don't know anything-

Give me a break, Roberto. What are you doin' side jobs or what?

Roberto said, John, I don't know...

Oh, come on, Roberto!

John!, Ed said. Calm yourself down.

That's *our* money, Ed!, John said. You want to screw the business go ahead. Go ahead, fine.

Hold on, man. Okay, they caught Cesar.

Where is he?, Roberto said.

Don't lie to my face, John said.

John!, Ed said. I'm not gonna stand for this. This is childish. You have no cause to blame Roberto.

Jesus Christ, Roberto said.

You want your stolen equipment, Ed? It's at the police station on West Michigan.

Of course I want what's ours.

Then let's go get it! And prosecute him to the fullest extent of the law!

Oh, Cesar, Roberto said.

Roberto was clearly worried for his cousin, who for so long had walked such a fine line.

I'm not pressing charges, Ed said.

Oh, you gotta be kidding me!

John, let's take a walk.

Don't give me that bullshit look, John said to Roberto.

John, get out of here right now. Right now. You get out of here and calm down and come back tomorrow if you can pull yourself together.

John looked from Roberto to Ed and his face, though angry, was flushed with embarrassment. He slammed shut the door of his truck and drove off.

Boss, I need to call my wife, Roberto said.

We broke for lunch and Ed resolved to go to the jail to tell Cesar he would not press charges but he was disappointed in him and expected much more from him. Many concerns had paled for Ed. But first he would finish the workday.

In the afternoon, he gathered the crew together, without John.

Looking at them, he suddenly felt very nervous and his voice began to quaver. He wanted John to be there. He rubbed his hands together and struggled to gain steadiness of speech. He smiled, though, and looked at his nine guys. He told them of the bid that was won yesterday. They were happy. Then he said, We're gonna have a new guy working with us starting tomorrow, to take the place of Cesar. It's my son, Johnny.

Confused faces stared back.

He came back home a week ago, Ed said. I didn't say anything cause, you know, I don't know. He was badly hurt and I know you guys haven't seen him in awhile but he looks different now but anyway I, uh, he goes by Horace now, too, and I, well I'm overjoyed. And we can use an extra man and I just ask that you're kind to him and I know you will be, but I'm just, you know, overjoyed.

They stared at Ed until Carl shouted, Praise Christ, Eddie!

And then a cheer went up and the guys asked questions and showed a real joy for Ed's happiness and it delighted Ed a great deal.

Ed called John later that night. We did not discuss his outburst. Ed only told him that Horace would be working tomorrow and he left the subject quick. Jewell said how happy he was, but he was distracted.

Ed also told Jewell that he would indeed get the stolen equipment back. In time, he did that, and he had to look Cesar in his hard eyes. Ed felt futile in his attempt to inspire the new criminal, so he practiced his thinking and let it go. He got the equipment back, but there was no joy in it.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

In the morning, Horace was up before us, showered and dressed in new boots and a work jacket. He'd washed his cereal bowl and was stretching when we came down.

You're up before the bell!, Ed said.

Ready to work!

He's gonna be your best guy in no time!, Celia said.

Ready?, Ed said.

Ready!

So Ed and Horace left. As they rolled down the morning streets of the neighborhood, Horace said, A life of work.

Yes, sir.

It's the way it should be.

It's the way it is.

Celia examined the house of Þóðrekr, who was now first from the bottom of the chart. We may as well call it his house, she thought. He is confirmed as it is and we won't get farther. We just will not. It lays here as it is.

The thought, to her surprise, was pleasant to her. She sat back and looked at it. The House of Þóðrekr!

She reveled in it then.

Not the house of Edward Januck, though he is good. Not the house of Horace Helland, though he was good. No, not even Horace Helland! He was

just a point on a line. But so was Þóðrekr himself! Not even the House of Lucille Stinson! The house of what?

It was preposterous and not at the same time, and she was moved by it. Her fingers crawled up the tree to Lucille Stinson, only three generations south from the top, but so far away! How much farther is this strange Póðrekr!, whose name I can't even pronounce. But for me!, she thought. His continuation is me! He dreamed of me! And Johnny, she thought. His son as much as mine.

She gazed at the name of Johnny, his date of birth, the penciled dash to the right of the name, the underline with nothing above it, and that resolutely hopeful mark of question. Þóðrekr did not die for us. He lived for us.

It is not death that holds such wonder, that causes such sway. It is life, it is birth.

She became agitated. She could not sit down. She wanted to *do* something. She felt full of vigor. But there was nothing to do. The house was clean, the bills attended to. Every fun event was circled and entered onto the calendar.

Start on Ed's line, she thought.

Bavaria, 1780 or thereabout. A long time ago! A good long time, indeed. So she pulled herself out of that gorgeous Scandinavia, all glittering green and tinged with dew, and took herself east and south, to that darker and grayer, ever conquered and conquering land of tyrants and subjects, where the blood of her husband and son now ran through some simple farmer - probably. Long time since she'd looked at Ed's line. This farmer was hazy, and he was probably not Germanic. The next steps would be difficult. There may be some Baltic in him. There was also a very slim chance but a chance of some Persian, up from Moslem lands in search either of wealth or

religious freedom. The thought of old, simple, noble Ed, with his confused American youth and hardworking American manhood having Persian blood in those grainfed veins elated her. What a wonder of a road it is, she thought. But nothing could be verified without work. So she wrote a query to the genealogical society and began to dig while she waited for a reply.

Ed put the radio to the oldies station while we drove to the site. Horace drummed on the dash. We were the first, so we shut off the truck and took a tour of the work.

It was all in place, empty of spirit but not of animus. Ed had thought many times that for sheer beauty if not structural integrity a building should be left half-constructed, like an Eastern country, with all the infrastructure showing. The pipes, the wires, the naked wood and beams, the bases of cement and foundation. There is no need for adornments. The adornments, the drywall and paint, obscure the accomplishment that is the place. We could stand some knowledge of what a place is, he thought. Some architect existed within him, some designer of the walls of the world. But he believed himself to be lower than the architect, to serve a purpose more base and somehow less foundational. He shuddered at himself. But the animus that existed without him and would continue when he left comforted him, and that was the flapping of the flaglike tarp in the breeze, the periodic small shiftings and settlings of the wood, other sounds he could not identify.

The Szechuan bank!, Ed said. It's a little piece of China in the middle of Michigan. Can't beat it!

Can't beat it. Impressive, he said.

We already got a bunch of drywall up over here, Ed said. We hooked a tarp and Ed put his palm on the smooth, soft surface.

We're in the finishing stages. But we've still got a decent amount of work to do over here. And there's your name, he said and pointed to Januck Construction in green and white on the tarp hooked to the fence.

There's my name.

John Jewell is my chief deputy. You've met him several times. He's been with me for years. Well, you've met all these guys, but of course I'll reintroduce you. But John's just great. He could run the whole show without me.

Good to have guys you trust.

We've had some hard times this year. The economy, of course, but there's also been some mismanagement, and that's been all my fault.

Just then John Jewell's truck pulled onto the gravel. John turned off the truck, opened the door, pulled on his coat, and without saying anything heaved his toolbox from the flatbed. He finally came over to us, set down the box, and extended his hand to Horace.

Welcome back, he said. Congratulations. Glad you're okay.

Thanks, Horace said.

Yeah, yeah. Umm, yeah. Yeah, welcome back. Good to have you.

Morning, John, Ed said.

Morning, boss. I'm gonna go prep these walls.

Okay.

He strapped on his kneepads and walked slowly over to the wall he'd been working on. Ed could tell John's dark mood had not relieved and that annoyed him, especially on such a morning as this.

I never asked you if you're any good with building, Ed said to Horace.

Well, I usually take to things pretty fast. But particular experience? No. I don't have any.

Okay, well, we'll show you.

I mean I know most of the tools, I'm just not practiced at it.

It's okay. These guys are really great.

Carl showed up and bounded out of his El Dorado and nearly ran over to Horace to give him a hardy hearty two-handed handshake.

You're a hero, buddy! I mean it. Welcome!

Thanks.

Let's have a look at that mug.

Carl would always call a thing what it was and Ed was grateful to be able to stare at the scars on the kid's face as Carl examined them. It's funny, Ed thought, the faces you can't examine because eyes are in them.

Ugly, ugly son of a bitch, Carl said, laughing. But prettier than your father.

Horace obviously appreciated the camaraderie greatly.

I have my mother's face, he said.

That's right. Damn right you do. Except your mother never went through a blender.

Ouch.

I hope you don't mind, buddy. I just say whatever comes off the top of my brain. Shit for brains, most of what I say is shit.

I don't mind.

Boss!, Carl said. We got a new worker and we're gonna nail this thing shut!

Get to it then before you're fired!

Will do. Hey John! You still a piss ant or are you all better now?

Still a piss ant, Carl.

Shit. I believe he is, Carl said to Ed.

In time they all arrived and greeted Horace warmly. Roberto mainly stayed away from John and Ed was angry that John made no gesture of

apology. But nothing detracted seriously from Ed's high feeling at seeing this returned son doing his best. One can know a man by his work, Ed thought. One can know those who made a man by the man's work.

John was quiet and kept a low profile. Walking slowly from his truck to his position to the water jug, he moved with supreme lethargy. The way he gripped and raised his ladder seemed overly effortful. It could have been done quicker and more simply. Ed wondered if John was protesting or just lost in some depressed state. Ed attempted conversation, but John responded weakly and walked away. Carl picked up the cheerleading post that John had vacated, and Ed was grateful for that raspy voice ringing out with jokes and spirit. The site is a vision of what a polis can be, Ed thought, and that was not a new thought. A man becomes depressed and another steps up. The success of an individual depends on the success of all the other individuals, and therefore there is no individual at all. It's a situation I can live in!, Ed thought.

But then he looked past the boundaries of the site to the greater Lansing.

Not on any logic could he argue the principle held in the broader world. Utopian thinking is a condemnation to hell, Ed thought, as he flung another bag of wet trash into the dumpster.

Later he assigned his son to work alongside John Jewell and Horace did it enthusiastically.

Despite John's negative mood, and possibly because of Horace's heartening introduction to the team, the work went very well that day. Dark clouds gathered as the sun sank so we closed up early. Saying nothing, John got into his truck and left. Carl made a comment about it but Ed ignored him. Horace got into the front seat without taking off his coat. He sat back and exhaled strongly.

What a day!, he said, and looked at Ed eagerly.

Yeah?

Man! I feel like I haven't done a decent thing in years!

Oh, come on. But, hey, you did great!

Well, those guys are good. John's a good worker, clearly. I'm not as fast as that, but I'll get good.

John said you did fine.

Did he?

He did.

Great.

We drove out of the site, Ed locked it behind him.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The boy's voice deepened, as if in second puberty. But the depth came from a stronger footing in the world. The range of his thoughts seemed larger and he wandered it freely.

Youth has these tests, Celia, Ed said, and you aim to pass them. He is passing them.

Yes, he is.

His ethic on the job was terrific. Szechuan ended well. In the weeks before the new job was to begin, he practiced in the garage. Ed had never felt like such a master as when he was teaching the young man. Halfway through the next job, his productivity increased tenfold and he was worth every penny paid. There was no resentment toward him among the crew, and he insisted on no nepotistic benefit. Michigan's economy was roughed with the rest of the country, but harder, as the winter is colder. But bids were also won and the winter passed, too. John Jewell's mood had settled into permanent gloom, but Horace was the brightest spot in his day. John's conversion from the mirthful encourager to the downcast drag was some kind of story in itself, but as the body forms calluses, Horace stepped into John's previous role and also kept John from sinking further.

He had a way with them - of humor, of well-placed rancor and bursts of rhapsodic religion. He became great with a ratchet set. He was an entertainer. Those ratchet clicks made some real music. He could twirl and flip and even juggle them. He kept the spirits high on hot afternoons. They

loved him. His health and strength, his laboring body, gave him a noble aspect. Though he never spoke of moving out, we knew he was thinking of having his own home, of financial goals, of political identifications, of his deepening appreciation for ideas of all kinds.

Indeed, Celia had not been wrong about Stephanie. Once, near the holidays, Horace had come in from seeing his grandfather and Celia said, How was the VA?

Fantastic, he said.

Then he checked himself and said, Sad, depressing.

Then he checked himself again and told us he'd been going out with Stephanie. In time, she became a fixture at the house and it was wonderful.

On Friday nights, he'd hustle out of Januck Construction, shower, and spend the money in his pocket on himself and his girl. When Celia would go visit her father without Horace the younger, Stephanie and Celia took to sitting together as two specially bound. The whole thing delighted Celia with nostalgia and expectation. A pageant, a pageant!, Celia thought. A timeworn pageant, older than polises, young as mankind! The plot of a story of what is and what is right. Dependable, self-multiplying happiness, beyond the tragic dialectic of suffering and repose, of achievement and failure. A union of elements producing a new thing and a thing that did not need to exist, but does! If such a story is silly and not unique, the lovers don't care. But it is unique, Celia thought, all too unique. And it should be told.

He reentered the paper form torrent of the world. Got his driver's license, dusted off his birth certificate. We didn't inform the army or the state. His time was done. He did not want those machinations and neither did we. It was easy. If at some point explanation must be made, we'd make

it then. We would have called it an oversight. It's no crime to make one's life one's own.

The face of the kid was healed, the scars powerfully set, and a gloss of health was on it. We saw some experience rendered there, and it's amazing how experience presents as handsomeness. A healthy young man has potent wildness in his bearing. He is never free from lusts and desires - physical, emotional, financial, and every other word of abstraction attempting definition of the electrical impulse to live, to live! The wildness, we know, is above all things an attempt to outlast the devilish drags on the consciousness of the older, settled ones. It can outlast physically and intellectually. It can go and do something. It is perpetual activity, maintaining nothing, with nothing to lose. His face was often turned lightward, upward.

But his face faced both ways. He had two faces. Some distance, some memory was always there on the other face, and in this way he was not quite young, in this way he was beyond condemnation, and in this way he scared us and we were unable to leave completely the brinks that form in the presence of the stranger. But stronger than that was the presence of joy, growing, and the expectation of unknowable fine things proceeding from a loved person.

Januck work was slower than usual by late Spring. But we were fine, we'd prepared for such times. Horace was impatient for more work but he and Ed began building things in the garage and Celia thought they were quite good. He and Stephanie seemed to walk in constant sunlight and her presence in the house was thoroughly a joy. She brought a round and hearty laugh out of him.

And summer came. Spring had rejuvenated as it does and the summer was fine and hot. We wore shorts and went out into the polis. We went to the cabin in Petoskey and took Stephanie. Horace and Stephanie would swim in the lake and sleep with books and magazines at their sides.

Sometimes we would think, Oh, how a thing is subsumed into another thing. Is a thing converted or transubstantiated into another thing? No, it's just sucked in with all the other things. Horace was indeed called upon to speak of the war at times. We'd figured our curiosity would have abated somewhat but it did not. It intensified and we began to crave his stories, but we never allowed ourselves to ask. We wanted to hear about basic training in Biloxi, the stories we knew – like the cocksure jock who'd vomited for days, the tiny girl who outshot all the boys, the modern Annie Oakley. We knew we'd never hear those stories. He continued to write vigorously in his little notebook.

Once, he asked about himself. He asked about our notification and we told him. Three men came to the door. We knew immediately... He seemed satisfied at the explanation.

Though work was slow, his expenses were few and his bank account blossomed. He purchased things and set them up in his room. He began to analyze and speak critically of these goods. He talked of value and technological superiority. He wanted the newest and best model of everything. He subscribed to magazines that weighed each development in those industries.

These are just things, aren't they?, Ed said to him once.

If somebody is gonna make something, they better make it good. I'm spending my money on it!, he said in response.

Once, he slammed his fist onto the counter and hung up the phone. He was angry at the bureaucracy of the DMV.

Yes, well, it's frustrating, Celia said.

He could be petty in his frustration at these details, these hurdles one must jump with the grace of one who understands that the world is imperfect. Was and ever shall be.

Happy Easter, Horace. We went to church with him and Stephanie at her prodding. He made an appointment to speak with the pastor and he kept the appointment later in the week.

I want status, he told us. If I am to marry and raise a family, I want to be a man of my time. I want to own something and be something. I guess I should buy a house. Buy a car. Have an opinion. A man of my time. What is my time?

He went out to think, he said several times. We believed he was figuring things out, confronting the realities.

We sat in our house with our buzzing achievements and wondered. Maybe we are just ants, C, Ed said.

Yes, we are neither cancers nor saviors. We are neither condemned nor saved. We are just doing what we do and that's all right.

We were already saved.

Yes, exactly! We were already saved and we were given some helpful instructions on how to live and if we do those things, our minds can rest. I mean work and strive, but restfully. Restfully?

You mean not rushing.

I suppose I mean valuing things, even thoughts, properly.

What a task.

Yes, yes.

You might be right.

We imagined the things—the buildings, the houses—fading to nothing. We felt we'd achieved something in these thoughts and we thought that as

we had once taught him how to ride a bike, we may now need to teach him the worthlessness of bikes.

But his mania in this kind of rushing was not consuming and just as often his playful excitement and deep gratitude would make him, as the old stories go, the teacher of the parents. As soon as he would depress in frustration at the quotidian ennui that is the hazard of the non-threatened, Stephanie would show up in some checkered dress and they would dance in the backyard with the music up loud.

Often he reminded us of his love for us and we slept well.

We formally ended the genealogy. Ed's interest in his side just was not there and Celia's searches had dried up, so it was called done. Old Þóðrekr was called the father of the house. The strangeness of it seemed fitting and we toasted to him, whoever he was. We framed the gorgeous chart and hung it in the living room.

On an evening, the birds of Lansing. We sat in the hot backyard with iced tea and noted the thrush. Celia had taken an interest in these things, to Ed's delight. And, true to her nature, her brief study of them was so intense she'd learned more in two months than Ed had in five years. She believed it was good to know where we were and what was also there. A soft rustling of shadowed leaves as a little bird did some mysterious errand and then a quick prattle of wings as he flew. The presence on the wall of a neighbor's new cat. Ah, the constant, unchanging changing of God's enjoyment. We laughed at it.

Most of everything is the way the light falls on it. The dipping light would catch the blonde woodgrain of the counter. Deep east-leaning shadows across the front door at eight p.m., she thought. Trouble in my knees in the evening, the light goes almost through the skin, the skin is fading, is it

fading?, it is dying, it is loose. The sharp sun of noon flattens all aspects and I will not remember anything in time, the yard will be the yard after I am there to know it. Someone will tend it under the same star's light. The summer night of Lansing is not so much a night, it is finally dark at ten but even then a moon and glow from the city lights where the young are still awake and alive and before I even know it the sun has jumped up into dominance again, it teeters back and forth. The slants catch the woodgrain, the dust pops into relief, how the light is so much of what is. Every spring is shorter as you go, the summer is here and it will also be brief.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Go, Johnny, toward the light.

The light is only metaphor.

Go, Johnny, toward the metaphorical light.

Soften it, bend it. Break the inheritance, Johnny, whatever was coming has come.

So thought Celia.

Celia, up, get up! Get up and shower. Dress, Celia, you are but one small piece, dangling in wind as much as driving toward end. There is no end.

So thought Ed.

Edward, Edward, consider chickens coming home to roost. Consider the simplest, most meaningless utterances. Edward, implausibility is the chief experience.

So we did.

Ed, what if we have achieved that kind of restfulness you spoke of...do you follow me?

Yes, sure.

What does dependence on other people mean to that restfulness?

You mean can that restfulness be thwarted?

Exactly.

Can it be thwarted?

Can it?

Of course it can. I suppose, yes, it can.

There was, again—oh, constant loop!—a fear, for we knew such an achievement of perfected happiness was possible only for the totally alone, and this must be some grand philosophical myth. We needed each other, we needed the boy, and the polis was there, too. We decided somehow that (since it was impossible anyway) we'd rather not be without such needs.

His ethic at work did not fail, but his enthusiasm for it flagged. He began to wonder more abstractly and less focused. If he drank enough, he would become boisterous and animated. In these times he spoke poetically of large and varied dreams flying his mind's pristine and sometimes dark territories. Occasionally he sank very hard and very low.

Once, he got drunk on a Saturday when we'd been out to an afternoon movie. When we returned to the house, he had beer cans beside him in the backyard. He had his paper and a thick black pen but he was only drawing imprecise overlapping circles with lines and arrows going through them. He knew his condition and warned us when we came in. We tried to let him be, but he wouldn't let us. There was no consoling, either.

He sat there on a ledge with a foot each in separate chasms. It seemed one chasm was memory and the other desire, but the two didn't touch. They sat below on either side and the more they scratched and gnawed at his foot the deeper he stretched his leg.

Everything was so difficult, he said.

He spoke in general terms, like they could have been anyone's terms. We didn't know what he was trying to swallow or if he was reliving some personal nightmare that was so incomprehensible and overwhelming it could only be uttered in the grandest and simplest generalities of despair.

I left them there! I just wanted to be held. I wanted, I wanted! I was awake. I was asleep. One minute we were fine, the next we were destroyed. It was so shocking. I shouldn't be so shocked. Of course! I loved him, I was a brother to him. *Understand, understand*. I hit him. I really thrashed him. And I *knew* I'd beat him. I *knew* it. I could see his eyes and I knew the damage I'd do and I continued to do it. I knew how it could end and how terrible an end it would be but I continued. I was in a rage. Everything was so difficult. Everything was broken, nothing was right. And she was so full of sorrow. Shot through with it. But see, her sorrow was softening because of his but I just thrashed it. Whatever heroics... whatever heroics there could possibly be cannot reconstitute him. It can't. He's a shell now. So who is there to forgive me? I don't know. I don't know.

Then he turned to us and said, That you have not given everything—your house, your home—is damnable.

He crumpled his can and got a foot from the wall and threw the can against it, apparently to feel the blow or hear the crash. He sat on the low bricks and cradled his head. We waited. Such a youthful tempest. But was he a solipsist if we cared?

But that other foot of his extended into the chasm of forward desire, unconnected to his torments of memory. He wanted a future, some space and time, and he spoke of this in terms of horror just as general.

He spoke of golden and green, of a bright baby's eyes looking at him. He spoke of having land, a wife, children, earning the day. His beggar's eyes went to glistening as he rhapsodized such simple wants.

We could do nothing but know the wants and we felt we knew something also of the horror.

There is a metal wire, he said, and it is a link on a fence and a conductor of energy. It is a barrier or a firestarter. And as a thing breaks it separates

from everything else and falls into the soil and becomes a root. The soil is chaos, so what flower does it root? Rust nourishes it and it grows to what?

He sat there with a broken posture. Poor Stephanie rang at the door. She was expected—we were supposed to be barbecuing, the four of us—and laughing the night away. She let herself in and Celia met her in the house and we walked together into the backyard. She put her purse on the step and went to him and rocked him gently, as if she'd done it before. He buried his head in her chest. We gave him water and put him to bed. We cleaned the yard of his mess.

In the morning he was pale and exhausted and he apologized. He blamed it on his youth and acknowledged he didn't know what else to blame it on but that while he is terribly embarrassed and ashamed he is not shocked and he repeated his great love and thanksgiving for us.

We too were thankful for the spirit, even the trouble that spirit engenders, and throughout the rest of June he continued to work well at what work there was and he deepened his reliance on and generosity to Stephanie.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Celia's sister, Kathleen Frawley, nee Helland, called from Los Angeles and said she'd like to visit. We hadn't seen her in several years and she and Celia rarely spoke, due to things being how they are. But Celia had sent her the genealogy and she'd been moved by it. She'd also called in joy when Celia wrote her, in March, that Horace had been found and come home. So the date was set for the July Fourth weekend.

We picked her up from the airport on the first. Striking, the difference between the two women, we both thought. We rarely thought of ourselves as *Midwestern*, with all the hyperbolized associations, but the California career-woman that was Kathleen was a funny contrast to Celia.

It felt great to have the family there. Such a small family, but there.

We brought her home that evening and let her settle her things in the train room, which we'd converted into a guest room. She hugged Horace. He called her Aunt Kathy, according to tradition. She had enough Midwestern in her to hold him at arm's length and say, Wow! Gosh, you've changed.

I have, he said.

She told him what happiness it brought her when she heard he was back and he thanked her for saying it.

After she'd settled, we drove to a nice restaurant. Stephanie was there waiting for us. The five of us sat down and got reacquainted. Kathleen's husband, Keith, was fine. We had been to their wedding fifteen years ago,

but we didn't know him at all. They often traveled separately, she said. Such a different life, we thought. She'd never had children. The family is most definitely shrinking, Ed thought. And so is the polis. Everything is shrinking. What will be left?

We discussed the plot points of the past few years, dwelling little on Horace's story. He clearly didn't want to get into details. He addressed his name change, saying he'd asked people to call him Horace during the service just because. Kathleen remarked that Horace was regal and suited him.

Kathleen seemed keenly interested in Stephanie's life, the life of a young woman. And Stephanie seemed quite interested in the life of a worldly woman from California.

Can you say you're from California?, Celia asked.

You know, maybe I'll find out this week. I really don't know. I really feel pretty Californian. But who knows?

Who knows?

But you'll have to come visit us in LA one of these days.

We'll return the favor.

Return the favor, yes.

Throughout the next several days, Celia spent most of her time with her sister. Sometimes Ed went along. They took their memory lane trips – drove around town and looked at the changes, visited their poor shriveled father. Drove past the high school. Walked through the university.

Oh, Michigan!, Kathleen said at one point. I just wanted to get as far away from here as fast as possible.

You did.

I did.

She conceded on one hot evening as the sun tired how pleasant and peaceful a Michigan evening can be.

They also looked intently at the genealogy. They laughed and tried to see themselves in the dour, frumpy, laced woman Anne Steck when Lansing was little more than a pioneer town.

Her last day was the fourth so we had a barbecue. We invited the Jewells, but John said they couldn't make it, so it was just the three old-timers and the two young ones. To Celia's delight, Kathleen and Horace had an easy rapport and seemed to enjoy each other. Their humor was wiser and drier than everyone else's and they spoke some of the world outside Lansing.

Kathleen told stories Celia had never heard, some wild days she'd spent, some heartaches.

It's wonderful you're back!, Kathleen said to Horace. Sorry for being sentimental, but I never had kids of my own. Just wasn't my path. But I remember when you were born!

That last night of her stay was quite long and punctuated by happy blasts of fireworks from the stadium. We all drank maybe a glass too many, but we went to bed happy and dedicated to shortening the intervals between visits. We couldn't help the prideful feeling of having built something decent.

In the morning, we made breakfast for everyone and Kathleen packed. We drove her to the airport around noon and wished her well.

Horace was cleaning the house when we got home. We helped him.

What a fun week that was, Celia said. Exhausting.

We put away the photo albums laying in the living room. Celia and Kathleen had had a wild time of reminiscing with those. Their mother at our

ages. Their father's sad decline. The pictures of young Horace. When the dishes were done and the place vacuumed, we sat again in the backyard and watched the birds. Stephanie had a night shift so she left. Horace read a book and we were delighted that he was spending the Saturday evening with us.

Then he went inside, got the albums, and brought them back out. He thumbed through them again. His mind was very fast and we could never predict when he would be in a philosophical mood. He was that night.

These pictures, he said.

Yes.

Incredible.

There was little to reply to and neither of us did.

I think of the next step, he said.

Yeah?

Do I marry Stephanie?

Well!, Celia said and turned to him with a grand smile.

Hey, hey!, Ed said.

It crosses my mind, you know?

You really like her.

I do. She's lovely. She's great.

And she loves you. She really does, poor thing.

I think she does.

She absolutely does.

I think of next steps. I don't remember the story of your courting.

We laughed and Ed put his hand on Celia's.

Courting? We didn't call it that even way back then, Ed said.

It was pretty simple, Celia said.

Yeah, it was a confusing time, you know, in the country. But that was simple. What do you mean next steps?

Anything. What the hell am I going to do?

Whatever you want to do.

Whatever I want to do.

Yes.

Celia tried encouragement by making a fist and saying, Yes!

What did I want to do?

He looked back into the photo album. I'm a small child. I'm a baseball brat. I'm a ninja for Halloween. I'm a good looking kid.

You were beautiful.

I had yet to enter manhood, though.

Yes, so?

What did this child want?

Ohhh welllll, Celia said, it depends on which child you're asking about. The ninja? The baseball player? Which one?

What about this one?

He showed a picture of himself in the morose years. The camera had caught him despite himself.

I don't know what that child wanted, Celia said.

Ed said, I'd have given the house to know what that child wanted.

What did that child want?, Celia asked him.

I don't know, Horace said. I don't think he knew. No, I know. The glory and tragedy of the world. He wanted to become it! Somehow.

I don't think he thought in such terms.

Well, he did. He did and does. Maybe he didn't say that, but that's what he wanted. He just wanted it. He wanted to fuck it, he wanted to drink it, he wanted to love it, he wanted to fight it.

Sheesh, Ed said.

Has he done those things?

He feels those things are absurd and impossible wants and chasing them would be, I don't know, ridiculous, suicidal.

Yes.

But to not chase them would be some other kind of suicide. Murder the fucking world or it murders you.

Maybe he needs to revise his expectations of himself, Celia said. And the world.

He needs to grow up?, Horace said.

Call it what you want, Celia said.

Horace said aloud to himself, You have a great girl. You have a wonderful, giving, forgiving family. You have a job. You have a mind. You have some energy and ability. Recognize that the day has three parts: ambition, failure, repose.

Okay? So recognize it and do it.

And so I live. I am my own puppeteer. I go unpunished and everything I've abandoned is still out there.

See, Celia said. Here is where you are obsessed with yourself and it's unhealthy. Whatever your crimes, whatever you left – maybe they're not just sitting there waiting for *you*, you narcissist.

He laughed. He put his head back and laughed. He shook his laughing head. That's true!, he said. That's true!

Celia laughed nervously, surprised at her own stance. Ed was not surprised at all. He put up his shoulders and let them fall.

When he'd stopped laughing, he looked again at the book and quietly said, Still... Still...

The birds chirped and we fell silent.

Still what?, Celia said.

Still something!

Something *what*?!

Something! There's something, he said and looked into nothing.

You will enjoy and you will suffer, she said.

Ed said, The last year was the roughest of my life. Sometimes I looked down deep into myself to find out what was there and I came up with very little.

Horace said, Yes, I've found that.

We turned silent again. The sunset was ending and the yard was wholly in shadows. He closed the album and rose. He went to a bush and held a flower in his hand. He smelled it. He studied the bush. He turned around once and looked at us. We were both gazing at him. They were absent-minded gazes, we simply were looking. He lay the flower down, turned around again, and moved to a tree and touched its dark leaves.

Something in Celia had begun to agitate. Something had been agitating during her sister's visit. The closing of circles makes heat and some fire was rising in her. Horace asked if we'd like more tea and we said sure so he brought it out as the purple of the night emerged.

He sat, though he was restless. We were silent a long time, though there was no peace in the yard.

Celia finally spoke and said, If you had been dead, we'd have failed you. Since you weren't, we didn't. That was driving me crazy.

No, C, Ed said.

Oh yes. Oh yes, absolutely.

He looked at us.

You joined and you went to the war to achieve the honor you already had, she said.

I went because-

No! You went to achieve the honor you already had. Or the honor you could have achieved another way. Just you, I'm just saying you. Not everybody goes for those reasons, but you did. You felt you needed to become a man.

The problem of the soldier, he said, is the soldier's submission to his superiors is a willful relinquishing of his critical obligation. An earlier obligation. He must no longer evaluate what he is doing. He must take orders, he must subordinate. He must! That's a virtue, but it's a scary one, because what if his elders are wrong? The soldier subordinated himself, which is all he had.

He twisted in his seat. The man of twists and turns, Ed thought, driven time and again off course.

Horace said, And yet I live and many don't.

That is not resolvable, Ed said.

Now Celia twisted, for to her the greatest torment is the irresolvable.

The war is just, she said.

That is debatable, Ed said.

Time will tell.

It is always debatable.

I didn't tell anyone I was leaving. I just left. I found a way out. And I'm still unaccounted for. And you haven't pressed me to report myself.

That's a difficult thing to do, Ed said quickly and sharply.

What is?

Leaving.

Escaping?

Yes.

That's a difficult thing to do?, Horace said.

Yes.

It's an impossible thing to do.

Celia rubbed her hands on her face to signal that the evening should be ending.

If you want to let the authorities know, Ed said, you know we'd support you.

What would you do, he began, and leaned in to us with his eyes now covered again with their film of steel. What would you do if you got a call or somebody showed up and said my body had been found and you were welcome to view it?

We said nothing. She leaned back and looked ahead. The backyard lights looked sickly and were the only sources. He held his posture a moment and then slowly bent his head downward to the cement. Still we said nothing.

Implausibility is the central experience of living, he said.

No, Ed said.

We said nothing.

Well, it's definitely the central experience of loving.

We said nothing.

What would you do?, he said again.

Maybe it already happened, Ed said.

Maybe it did, he said and smiled.

He smiled broadly. He seemed to love the idea.

It didn't, Celia said.

It didn't?

No, Ed said.

No, Celia said.

It didn't, he repeated and sat back quietly, insolently.

I would spit in your face and throw you out, Celia said.

A sparrow hopped before the yellow light and we watched it. Ed considered how that bird or one of her sisters had been his companion and solace for many difficult months.

Celia said she had to sleep and without another word she left.

After a minute, Ed followed her and left Horace alone in the yard. She lay on the bed on her side and curled with her face to the window, away from the door. Ed looked at her. For once in his life, he felt he should demand an answer but he wasn't sure of the question.

He said to her, Angel.

Awkwardly, he lay next to her. He put his hand on her shoulder. She was cold, his hand felt warm.

His answer came when she said, Then he should not have taken his name.

Honey! Stop talking like this.

He should not have taken his name.

Ed didn't know what to do. Celia felt nothing but loneliness swallowing her, like she'd been fooled by a pleasant dream and then awakened to remember she'd long ago been exiled outside the gates.

You would not have let him in, he said.

You would have?

I don't know.

Why did he take his name?

To be let in.

I would have let him in!

No, you would not have.

I would have.

Then you are rare. Rarer than he had ever met.

I don't know that I would have, she said.

I don't know either.

But why should we?

No one else would have.

So what?

Then he'd be another one out wandering alone. Too young. Too young and untrained. Too young. Just violence is all he'd know. Someday we'd come across him and he wouldn't know us and we'd suffer. He'd become the very urge that slaughtered his namesake.

Oh Ed, he thought and heard Celia think, your innocence is as precious as it is preposterous. That urge has been multiplied so many times. The packs of those wolves are everywhere. But still, we didn't know and that's all we knew.

Are you glad he's here?, Ed said.

Of course I'm glad he's here!

She wanted to be a small helpless child in her father's arms, listening to his stories, feeling the rumbling of his voice against his stomach.

Contradictory thoughts begot confusing dreams.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

We expected him to be gone in the morning when we woke. But he was not. He was in the backyard exercising, sweat dripping from his face. He showered and came into the kitchen. He said, Going out for breakfast!, and left.

We made coffee and looked through the Sunday paper. The lives of the paper. Economic players, somebody's troubled somewhere, reporters' bylines, a young fashion designer has a big Italian opening, good for him, one dead soldier, a critic reviews a book, a farmer wins a prize, people doing things, people profiling the lives of celebrities, celebrities themselves.

I feel on the verge of tears, Celia said.

Ed looked at her with sympathy in his face.

Do you feel like the phone's about to ring or the door's about to be knocked?, she said.

No.

No?

Not really, no.

She looked back down at the paper and said nothing. He kissed her head.

The back needs trimming, he said eventually.

We went out to do that.

He came back around noon, made iced tea, and joined us in the back. Ed watched Celia, fearing the part of her that is unpredictable and apt to submerge. But she wanted the hands of a younger generation in that garden. He helped us trim.

I had a buddy, he said, who I think I can get in touch with. Around Cleveland, not that far away if he's still there. Do you mind if I invite him up for a dinner or something? I don't know how he's doing. He'd have to spend the night probably.

Absolutely. Call him, Celia said quickly and definitively.

Bring him up. Anytime, Ed said.

So Horace went into the house. He came back out fifteen minutes later and seemed delighted that his buddy, called Chuck, had accepted the invitation. Horace was giddy and nervous. He said the young man would come up on a bus from Cleveland the next Saturday, in one week. He called Stephanie, showered again, put on some nice clothes, and left.

We finished the garden and had a quiet lunch. Celia couldn't motivate for much. She slowly placed and unplaced things. She lay down on the couch but didn't sleep.

After an hour or so, she stirred.

Did you sleep well?

Oh, didn't really sleep. Got some rest.

Hey, maybe we should go out to dinner tonight. Maybe a movie or something.

What time is it?

About four-thirty.

Are you hungry?

Oh, not particularly right now but in a bit. I can check movie times.

Sure, she said.

She went upstairs and then came down in jeans and a longsleeved shirt.

I'm going out for awhile, she said.

Where are you going?

Just going out for a little walk.

Want company?

No, if that's okay. Just want to walk.

So she took her car and left and Ed troubled without direction.

She came back in the late evening after Ed had made himself soup and together we watched a show on television and then went to bed.

The morning came. Ed had slept deeply and remembered nothing of his dreams. But when he woke she was not there. He called but she didn't answer. It was a workday and Horace was finishing his orange juice when Ed came down to the kitchen.

Did you see Celia?, he said.

No. She's gone?

Yeah.

Maybe she had an early meeting.

I don't know.

No, I didn't see her.

Horace and Ed went to work.

She came home at nine o'clock that night and said she'd been at the VA with Colonel Helland. She was entirely without affect. She responded to his attempts at conversation, but vacantly.

He woke early the next morning as she was dressing.

Where are you going?, he said.

For a walk.

Everything okay?

Oh, absolutely.

And she left.

He called her from work again and she answered politely. He told her he wanted to go out to dinner and asked her to be at the house at five. On the way home, Horace agreed she seemed vacant. We got home and Horace went onto the computer for awhile. She was dressed and watching television. Ed asked her if she'd go to dinner with him. She said she would.

Ed changed and Celia washed up. We drove to Antonia's. It was a pleasant summer night, still near enough the solstice, so the evening was long and gorgeous. The sun would take its time going down again and Ed remarked how the phenomenon made him so happy. Celia agreed it was indeed the perfect time of year. Despite the heat, despite the sweat that jumps from the skin, it was good to be in a world bathed in light. We decided we'd go to the cabin in a couple weeks.

We got to Antonia's and had a seat near a window. That nice light sliced the plates and the glasses bent it. We discussed having wine and ordered an appetizer. She was barely present for the conversation. Her eyes were cold and shadowed. They darted around, scanning. Ed noticed but didn't question. She said she'd forgotten something in the car and went outside. A dark feeling came into him. She returned, said nothing about it, and the conversation moved on.

Interesting what he said about Stephanie, Ed said.

Yes.

It's not that I didn't see it coming, but it's sort of a happy surprise. It's good to see him so energetic or... You know, he's still just doing great at work. Just great. John is still a bear. I really didn't think it would last this long. I think I'm going to give him money. Just give him some money and

say, Look, don't pay me back, just use it, man, it's a tough time for a lot of people and it's tough for you and I just want you to take it. Would you feel okay about that?

Absolutely. Sure.

Okay, good.

Ed held a wine glass in his hand and wanted to squeeze it until it shattered and cut but he didn't. She straightened her back and turned fully around in her chair and scanned the restaurant. Ed watched her.

It might be a good time in our position to buy, he said.

Buy what?

Property.

Buy property? Oh. I don't want another house to worry about, though.

You're right.

I'm going outside a minute.

She rose, left her purse at the table, and walked outside out of view. He wanted to protest but he only sat. He was lonely and dumb. He sipped again lightly. The waitress came and he told her his wife would be back shortly and they'd look at the menu.

Celia came back in a few minutes and sat.

Do you know what you want?, she said.

She picked up the menu but looked from side to side around the place.

I don't know, I'll have a look, Ed said.

It all looks good.

Celia. Why do you keep getting up and what are you looking for?, he said.

Well, I'm looking for Johnny, you know.

She looked around again and then down at the menu.

You're looking for Johnny.

Sure, yes, she said. I'm keeping my eyes open.

No.

I haven't done a good enough job keeping my eyes peeled, you know.

Celia.

I don't ask anything of you but I'll just keep looking around.

Angel, he said. Oh, Angel, please.

Ed you know he did what Horace did, you know, you know. He escaped and I think he's very afraid. I think, yes, I think so afraid you know and he wants to come home but he's afraid what'll happen.

So you're looking for him.

Yes, I'm keeping my eyes open. I think he's afraid and he needs someone to, I mean he probably needs us to find him and tell him it's okay you can come out. You know.

I see. Yes.

Like I said I ask nothing of you here. You know, we've got our responsibilities but maybe keep your eyes open.

Keep my eyes open in case he's hiding in some corner.

Yeah, exactly.

In case he's peering out of some alleyway under a hooded sweatshirt and low cap.

Yes. I mean that could be the very scenario.

I see. And he'd come back here.

I think so, yes. We obviously can't be certain and it may be in a roundabout way but sure, yeah, eventually he'd get back here. Yeah, but a little afraid to come in.

Right. Yeah.

You know..., she said and took another glance around the unchanged restaurant.

The waitress came back and we ordered.

You know, Celia said, I don't think he's scared off by Horace being there.

She reached out and Ed met her hand. She held it warmly and stroked his finger with her thumb.

I really don't, she said. He's concerned about much bigger things. I mean, he'll probably be delighted about Horace, you know. Oh I just can't imagine what he's going through. But we'll bring him out and it'll be a lot of work but it'll be all right.

He listened to her and watched her but she didn't change. Change was impossible, as she contained all variations. Her neck was still tender and actual bones were in it, but her body held strangely. She was hard and limp, dry and drowned, and everything was coming to him with its opposite.

He watched her carefully as we left the restaurant. He agreed to a stroll. The summer night was pleasantly warm. Lansing's gloss allowed few stars but the dome was royal purple. He took her hand in his. She held it there just fine and he indulged every stop by alleyways or corners while she looked. She led us into a coffee shop with summer people laughing and joking and we ordered decaffeinated coffees. She walked slowly through the place and looked into the faces of everyone there—inside and on the patio—and then was ready to leave. We walked again slowly down the street toward where we'd parked. Her eyes did not dart now, they calmly scanned all forms. Her gait was steady and slow. He said nothing about their task but supported it despite the old sickness that had come to his stomach.

Horace was home when we got back. He asked us how dinner was and she said it was very good. He said he'd heard from Chuck again and the dinner was still on for Saturday and she said that was just great.

Horace stayed up reading while we went to bed.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

In the morning she was up before the sun again and in what he came to understand was her uniform. Jeans, tennis shoes, and a longsleeved shirt. She went to the bathroom and Ed got up and put on his clothes. She came back in the room and he said, You ready?

For what?

I'll go with you. May I?

Sure!, she said. Yeah, I'm ready. You ready?

Yeah, I'm ready.

You gonna miss work?, she said.

I'll go in a little late. Oh, I should leave Horace a note to take the car.

Oh, yeah.

So Ed left the sleeping Horace a note and we went out into the still dark summer morning.

Where are we going?, he said.

I don't know. Where do you think's good?

I don't know. Do you do rural areas or the streets or both?

Both, you know, cause who knows?

Sure.

So, I don't know. We could go in separate directions.

Let's stay together.

Okay.

You looked at Crego Park?

You know, I did, but maybe we should go back there. Cause I don't think he's staying in one place.

No?

No, I definitely don't.

You think he's moving around?

Oh yes.

All right.

So we drove out to Crego and parked.

We entered where Ed had months before, when it was cold. He followed her as she slowly walked and looked through sticks, rocks, and still trees. Some tufts of litter. Not deep into the preserve, she put on gloves. She stooped through bushes and searched the most obscured places. Ed followed her. Johnny wasn't there. Without disappointment, she moved to the next thicket. He was not there. Ed commented on their bad luck. She only said, Yeah, and kept moving and looking. Something twitched a few yards off and she turned. It was a jay. She admired it a moment and kept looking. Finally she said, Break time, okay?

So we sat on a log and stretched our legs.

Disappointing, Ed said.

Well, sure.

Honey, do you keep track of where you've looked?

What do you mean?

I mean we looked through some brush oh say forty yards in and to the right of the path. Do you keep track so we don't duplicate our efforts later?

Oh, that's a good point!

Then she rethought.

Well, no, she said. Actually, no, it doesn't matter because he keeps moving.

Oh, right.

See? So he's not here today but tomorrow-

-he might be.

Might be.

Right. Well, so then considering statistics, probabilities, we could sit right here and wait for him to show up.

It would be better if we sat in separate places.

Increases our chances twofold.

Right.

She waved a fly.

But I like to keep moving, she said.

Sure.

So we kept moving. The sun was up and we looked another hour through shadows.

When we got home we were tired. She checked the messages on the phone. It was only 9:30 in the morning. She seemed blank. Ed remarked how so much can get done so early in the day.

Yes, she said.

Ed went to work and the guys, drenched with sweat, worked well. He left her in the house searching through sounds and reflections of light for what could not be there.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

She had killed her son, she knew very well. Reasons, causes, none of these existed anymore, no consideration of these came, and though she knew it, she searched relentlessly, everywhere she went, many corners in three days, for a boy whose body had to have been in pieces, bones blanched and sanded, who could never live again but in dreams which punched through to wound her while she slept, fists from the dead or conscience, and she deserved it, she deserved more and more and more. She felt she'd failed all the dead and she had. Of course she had. In one rare moment while walking the alleys of Lansing she thought, And it is not just me who failed them, it is all of these, and she looked at every passing form as a monster of selfish savagery, cancers choking the greater host. She spat out to the street, Wicked!, and saw with some grim delight the cancers eyeing her with pity and trouble. She realized she'd been forgetting to look. She hadn't looked since the clothes store with the hats. Well, just go home, Celia, she thought. But he very well may be on a busstop bench back there and it would be such a shame to miss him now after all this time, so she went back. He was not there.

Then she was in the kitchen standing over a pot stirring something and Horace put his strong arm around her and the side of his body was against her. They were like a single plane.

Anybody have any menu item ideas for Saturday?, Horace said.

So we got your buddy, you, the two of us... Is Stephanie coming?, Ed said.

Yeah, she'll be here!

Anybody else?

You want to call Jewell?

Oh, I don't know, Ed said. What do you think, C?

I don't care.

No, let's just have it be us.

Okay, so five. Chuck isn't real picky I don't think. I think he'll be happy with anything. But I was thinking maybe a barbecue. Would you make some of your pineapple stuff?, he said to Celia.

Sure, she said.

She amazed herself that she was able to understand the questions they asked and answer clearly. We stand here a slum of murderers, she thought, but she also thought here is a child whose smile is due in part to me. The confounding forces were legion. She submitted even to this, and then she stood at the window and looked out.

Horace was energetic, even frantic, and his legs were all motion as he tried to concentrate on a book. He had been reading military books for weeks — volume after volume of soldiers. Ranks, insignias, names of commanders, and journals of current events.

We sat to eat. Celia was alive with us but that part of her that had always been preoccupied had metastasized and now she was sixty percent vanished to Horace and Ed.

Ed said to Horace, Do you have plans with Chuck beyond dinner?

I don't know. I don't know if I know him anymore. It's possible he won't even remember me. But I remember him well. And I have faith in my ability to move people toward some conviviality, if you know what I mean.

I know and agree. You do.

Yeah. So we'll see. We'll see. I might like to have a drink with him. Maybe the two of us. Maybe take a walk around the capitol.

That's always nice, Celia said.

Are there any fairs or anything on Saturday?

I don't know. Very possibly.

I think play it by ear. He'll probably get here in the afternoon. Sit in the backyard, I'll have some lemonade and some beer ready.

Sure.

He's a good guy.

Horace got a look of nostalgia in his eye.

Chuck comes from a sort of rough family, he said. I don't mean down and out, I mean tough on themselves. And just from our quick telephone conversation it sounded like he wasn't doing much. Maybe he's depressed, I don't know. God, I just really want to see him.

You've never mentioned where you were together.

That's true.

Is he married?, Celia said.

Horace laughed and said, Oh, I don't think so! No, I don't think so. I'll tell you I really looked up to him for a time. You know? He was one of those guys a kid falls in love with – wants to be near him, wants to be him. Just respects him and likes him so much on the tangible and intangible levels. I can't think of anyone better to have him in their home than us. I mean you. I guess I mean all of us. I don't know, maybe he's happy and wonderful. I don't know. Man, I can't wait!

It was good to see him so excited and Ed was excited, too. The issue of expectation surfaced again in Ed's mind - that life without it is not life at all, and that the old need the young because the young move faster. And the

young need the old so they can slow down! Among all the other reasons I don't understand, Horace wants a model of age, because he is expecting to not be young forever. Dear holy God, Ed thought, make me a worthy example.

We finished the meal and the sun still ambled up there in the golden sky so Ed suggested a walk. Celia declined so Ed and Horace went out together.

New mown lawn scents dangled and a couple kids played in the sprinklers.

Their parents are gonna have little blades of grass in their house for months, Ed said. They made a crucial error. No sprinkler business after a mow.

Makes sense, Horace said.

We walked on. Whoever lived in the yellow house had flowers to match. Apple blossoms. The beauty can't be denied, Ed thought.

Can you see yourself living here a long time?, Ed said. When you're out and settled?

This is just a gorgeous place, Horace said. You've done well for yourself.

For me and you, too.

Yeah. For many. You've done well for many.

I've failed more than I've blessed.

No.

I've failed more than I've blessed.

Some Jewish philosopher said, To God, one act of human kindness is worth the creation of the world.

Ed laughed and said, That right there is precisely why I don't understand God. Run the numbers on that. What's worth it to God is not worth it to me.

I can see that.

In his mind, Ed thought something like a prayer.

Yes, I can see myself living here, Horace said. I'd want to earn it and that's not the easiest thing, but I can see it.

But he paused to consider and turned to Ed, smiling. But I can see myself living almost anywhere, he said. I can see myself with wealth, I can see myself poor. I can see living in some slum, way out in the backwoods, down in South America. For some reason, I've always been able to see myself in all places.

That's confidence.

Probably part of it. And restlessness, he said.

You're young. You know, you raise a kid, Ed said, and you think you know how he's going to turn out, and then you think you don't know, and then you think you know and you dread it, and then you don't know again, and all throughout you recognize yourself in him for better and worse. A lot of worse, actually. But then it all kind of dissolves, at least for me, and you don't recognize or know anything anymore. You're kind of just glad somebody's still talking to you! But you worry more about the world in general, not just the kid. You get very, very soft. You start wanting everybody to just be happy. Which I always held as the most ridiculous and even irresponsible of notions. You want people to stay in one goddamn place and settle the hell down. And stay for dinner!

Horace laughed.

We turned one of the many lazy corners of East Lansing and the sun came down at a violent angle and we shielded our eyes and squinted.

You know what I've been dreaming of for awhile?, Ed said.

What?

The polis. Where everybody comes out of their homes and sure, they act in their individual self-interest, okay?, sure sure, yes, but they also try to find a way to debate and vote and everybody bears the load. We have jobs now, we don't have expertise. We have religious protection, we have no religion. We have laws, we have no spirit.

Is that true?

It's more true than not. It feels especially true when you give your son for the sake of the country and the country offers you a bereavement check in a pretty envelope in memoriam.

What did you want the country to do?

Ed thought about it and said, Stop all motion. Rend all garments. Wail. Sob. Pray, for Christ's sake. Confess the evil and stupidity in our hearts. Sit silently in vigil for at least one business hour, and only then resume the tasks of life... But solemnly and with greater and more noble purpose.

The sun reached its angle of attack and we turned another corner into long loose shadows.

That's all. That's all I wanted, Ed said.

But buddy, Ed continued, I am an inveterate and merciless dreamer! I dream of utter nonsense. Ideas with no emblem in the world. No chance of purchase in the world. A ridiculous, nonsensical dreamer. I don't know where these dreams came from!

That is precisely why you are my father and I am your son, Horace said. It probably is.

And why we are brothers.

Sure.

A ball rolled into the street and Ed kicked it back to its owner, a small boy. The boy picked it up and ran back to his yard.

Of the boy, Ed muttered to Horace, Look me in the fucking eye and say, Thank you, sir.

Horace laughed.

The little fuck.

We laughed together.

You're doing absolutely great on the job, Ed said.

Thank you.

I want to give you a raise.

Okay.

Done.

Great!

Horace put his arm around Ed in filial enthusiasm. Ed had a sense of his smallness and weakening. He was still an able man, but many years were under him. Horace was bigger and stronger.

This Chuck, Ed said, who's coming this weekend.

Yes.

You're really excited to see him.

Yes.

I've never pried and I'm not going to start, but you've never said where you were together or what you went through.

True, Horace said.

Yeah. Just pointing that out.

Yeah.

The night had finally fallen but the birds were still out for fun. Summer nights in Michigan aren't really nights, they are grand evenings that last till morning.

When we got home, Celia was not there. It was nearly ten o'clock. Horace said good night and went into his room. Ed sat in a peaceful haze for a minute until a rush of worry came.

He called her phone but she didn't answer. He began to pace. He took the stairs by twos and looked in the closet. The act of opening the door frightened him, but she wasn't there. He searched the backyard, looking through the shrubbery at the edges. He went back inside and took the stairs by twos again and went into the bathroom. He felt unable to breathe and tight in his chest. He brought the bathtub curtain back but only saw a dry depression of porcelain. He blew out breath he didn't know he had. He rushed downstairs and looked in the hall closet and then the front door opened and she came in. She was carrying a flashlight. She said nothing to him. She went to the computer. She wore her searching uniform and it struck him the uniform was grimy. Wrinkled, oily, stained, it had not been washed.

Celia, he said.

Yes?, she said without turning from the screen.

Did you find him?

No. Keeping my eyes open, though.

He grabbed her wrists and she turned a blank face to him. He felt he was wounding an animal whose confused and suffering silence was damning and shaming him.

Stop stop stop stop stop, he said. Honey, stop stop stop! Please stop, please please stop. Celia, Angel, please, Angel. Please.

Her eyes curdled and her chest jerked concave but she made no move to extract her wrists from his hands.

Stop, now, Angel. There is nothing to do. Nothing at all to do. We must believe he is dead. We killed him, we didn't kill him, may God have mercy on our souls. Stop stop stop. Please.

Okay, she said.

Her eyes did not change, but her mouth spoke acquiescence. He pulled her out of her chair and held her to him. Her arms completed the gesture around his back, but not well. He got her upstairs and into bed and she did sleep.

The next morning, Friday, she slept late. In her sleep she breathed steadily and calmly. Ed could not help fearing, though, what pounded in that sleeping brain. He looked at her a long while.

He went downstairs when he heard Horace. Horace was in a bright mood and dressed for work. Ed said he'd be taking the day off and gave Horace instructions for the men.

Okay, but don't forget we got a big day tomorrow!, Horace said. Chuck's coming, so we gotta be ready!

What do you want me to do?

I don't know. I guess nothing. I'm gonna go to the store tonight to get some stuff to grill and some groceries.

Sounds good.

Yeah, gonna be good.

So Horace went off to work and Ed sat in the chair. I want this chair, Ed thought. I want to want this chair and to have wanted it and to have worked to get it and now I'm glad I have it. And that. And that.

He didn't know why he was pronouncing these things to himself.

He waited but Celia didn't come down.

He finally went up to the bedroom. She lay in the bed awake but staring blankly ahead.

Darling, are you okay?

Oh, yes.

But she said it as an idiot might.

Honey, are you sick? You seem sick.

No, fine.

Get up.

I will.

The day passed slowly and Celia seemed to remove further and he felt powerless. She mostly lay, though she flipped through magazines and watched television some. Her responses to him were pleasant.

When Horace got home, he said everything had gone well at the site. Ed suggested the three of us go out to dinner but Horace had plans with Stephanie.

Why don't we go then, C?, Ed said.

If you like.

But there was so little enthusiasm Ed only wandered the house, listened to the television, and occasionally looked at the back of her head.

When the evening became late, Ed said, Tomorrow's a big day, honey.

She said, Yes.

In time, we went upstairs to sleep.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Celia asked what time it was so Ed groggily looked at the clock.

Nine-thirty!

She said nothing. We had slept late, like kids. Ed adjusted his eyes. The summer morning light poured in, so the clock wasn't fooling. Ed had an old feeling of this light being specific to Saturday. Ed stretched his legs in bed.

We needed it, he said. Feels good.

He looked over at her and her eyes were large and staring up.

So we have Stephanie and soldier Chuck from Ohio today, Ed said.

Right.

I've been thinking about new furniture for the patio.

Oh, yeah?

Yeah. How about we go look?

Sure.

But her eyes stayed above her and she didn't move to rise.

Honey, it's an important day for Horace. Chuck's coming today.

Yes.

So why don't we get up and start moving around, okay?

Okay.

Downstairs, Horace was bouncing with excitement.

Geez!, he said when we came down. What's with all the sleeping?

Almost naptime, Ed said.

Chuck doesn't have a cell phone. So I'm worried. He's supposed to be on a bus from Cleveland Heights arriving at 3:17.

So that's probably when he'll arrive, Ed said.

Yeah, he probably will.

Horace picked up the phone and made a call.

Sweetie, maybe you can come over a little earlier, he said into the phone.

We could hear Stephanie's playful voice say, I'm coming, I'm coming!

He hung up the phone and said, I'm getting a haircut.

He was out the door in a couple quick steps.

We went to the furniture store. We angled against the shoppers. Then a rare occurrence. We ran into old acquaintances and chatted a few minutes. The woman asked Celia how she was and Celia said, Oh, just great.

We settled on a nice set of striped chairs and a table with an umbrella. Plunk down the money and believe the old weak-kneed economy got a nice kick. Was the cash our greatest spiritual contribution? Perhaps. But Ed practiced his thinking and let it go.

We sweat as we set up the contraption in the backyard. Then we sat in the chairs. They had a gentle rock to them.

Celia sat now where she had been put and did what she had been told to do, but still she was off somewhere, or things could not get to her, or the nerves of her emotion had been severed. But Ed was restless and tried anyway.

How many changes this yard go through, C?

I don't know.

He said something else on some topic paltry and stupid and he believed what she heard was, Celia, I have little left in me, I am old and tired, I am

guilty, I am revoked. I want a hobby, I want chicken sandwiches for the rest of my time.

Celia looked at his face as it hung and fell in the hard light. His face would never be less aged than it was now. He seemed so small. Tiny, frail. But he'd also never be as big again as he was now. His hair still had a touch of its wave, but it had thinned and grown wiry. The baldness of his head seemed like old parchment easily torn. His easy little pouch sat like history itself over the braided fabric of his belt. At one time much earlier we had thought, These decisions we are making will have their consequence someday. But here we were now. And even now we make decisions. But where it once seemed such a strenuous and invigorating push, it is now an irreversible slide. May God or capricious science spare our memories and sentience. No, may they take them. May they have them. No, may we keep them. May we live in them. No. Yes. The light guides the determination. We have clutched for things which are all outside the folds and folds and layers and pins we are under. The guilty sat among their possessions possessing, of course, nothing.

The strange child came in with an inch less of hair. He sat with us but didn't notice the new chairs. In an easy wave, his mundane strangeness occurred to Celia.

Do you have the stuff-

It's marinating, Ed said.

Okay, good.

His feet pounded together and his hands were working.

You're nervous, huh?, Ed said.

I am, he said. I am.

Why're you so nervous?

I haven't seen this guy in a long time. The whole thing conjures a bunch of stuff.

We're here for you, Ed said.

Thank you.

I've been thinking about your grandfather, Ed said.

You have?

I have.

I'm thinking of going to see him. Do you want to come?

Oh, well, I feel like I have a lot to do.

Like what?

He hesitated and said, No, I don't. Sure, let's go.

Celia, you want to come?

Celia declined. She did not understand why they would grasp to stop circles that spin and are larger than us. The men left.

Poor Stephanie came over with her hair done up and Celia greeted her. We washed vegetables.

Ed and the kid came home and Stephanie derided him for making her hustle and then not being there. They kissed.

He didn't last in the kitchen long. He checked the clock every minute and then went up alone into the train room. Finally, he came down and said, Okay, I'm going to the bus station.

Stephanie picked up her keys and purse to join him but he stopped her and said, Darling, I'm gonna go get him alone, okay?

Oh, sure.

He wanted to apologize or explain himself but he couldn't find the bravery to admit to anything so he put on his sunglasses and left.

He was gone an hour. He came back with the soldier Chuck behind him.

Chuck was not what was expected, whatever was expected. He was small and slight, with a day's or so growth of weak beard. His hair was oily, matted, and shaggy. It hung over his right eye and down toward his dirty collar. His face was thin and stupid-looking, with a feral cat's apprehension. He followed the imposter like he was dragged and their conversation seemed to be at a halt or never begun. He was introduced. He did not step forward, but hung slightly behind as we moved to shake his hand. We took his un-soldierlike hand and sniffed a stink. He had been in a bus for several hours, sure, and that must was on him, but he also smelled of other days and faintly of alcohol and cigarettes. In a gesture that seemed decided upon before his arrival, Stephanie hugged him, but loosely, and he received her hug unwillingly.

The fraud's face was wild, as it had been months before, with something like glee and something like fear. But he was a performer and spoke in a loud voice.

Can I get you something to drink? Some water, some iced tea? Lemonade? Some beer?

Chuck hesitated and said he'd have iced tea. Ed moved to get it.

So this is the place!, Horace said. Come on, I'll show you around. Oh wait, your iced tea. Oh wait, your bag.

The fraud took his bag and set it in the hall closet.

Stephanie stood wondering what to do. Ed handed Chuck his iced tea and the thanks he offered was mumbled.

Okay, come on, Horace said.

Horace led him into the living room and pointed toward the genealogy but said they'd look at that later. Then they went out to the back.

Ed and Stephanie stood inside the kitchen a few minutes. Ed said, Phew, referring to the smell, and Stephanie laughed quietly.

We have to support this, Ed said.

Yes, Stephanie said.

Steph, Ed said. Does he talk with you at all about his service? You don't have to answer if you'd rather not.

Never, she said.

Never.

Nope.

After a few minutes, Ed said, Come on, let's go out there.

The fake son was sitting on the brick fence, dangling his legs against it, and Chuck was sitting in a new chair. His shoulders were high around his ears or his head was sunk into his chest and his body was tight. He was to be pitied. He made a respectful move to stand but Ed told him please sit so he sat.

I used to box a little bit, the boy on the fence was saying to him.

Oh, yeah?

Yeah. You ever do that?

A little.

Yeah.

Just a little.

Oh.

You good?, Chuck asked.

Won a few, lost a face.

That's from boxing?

No, I guess not really. I don't know.

Chuck drank from his cup.

We took our seats awkwardly. Ed went straight for what interested him.

He said, When did you get back from the war?

He shifted and said, I guess two years ago or so.

Yeah? And you live in Cleveland?

Yeah.

Heights. Cleveland Heights, yeah?

Yeah, Cleveland Heights.

Who do you live with there?, Ed asked.

Um, basically my dad and sometimes my uncle I guess.

Oh.

You like it there?, Stephanie said.

Um, it's alright.

That's good.

Poor Stephanie had an urge to hear pleasant things because she believed there were pleasant things to be heard.

I'm having a smoke, the imposter said, and he brought out a pack of cigarettes. You want one?, he said to Chuck.

Um, I guess I have some.

Smoke 'em while you got 'em!

He bounded down from the wall and lit Chuck's cigarette, from which Chuck dragged with his head downturned to the left and his eyes squinting. He coughed.

Ed put his hand on Celia's knee and rubbed the skin up and down.

I don't know, the fraud said to Chuck, it's just beautiful here and I love having people over! I've thought about you a lot!

They dragged on their cigarettes and one of them looked into the sky, the other at the earth, and the rest were quiet.

You remember the story, Horace said, that dude used to tell about screwing the deaf girl?

Stephanie was wounded by this and looked down. The fraud on the wall dragged again and smiled.

You remember that?

Chuck looked around quickly and said, Um, no.

The poor Chuck was a child who'd been surrounded and blindsided all his life and was again. The storyteller spoke. He was a trickster and a liar.

You don't remember that? He was like a Captain or something. Whatever, I don't know. And he used to tell this story where he was in this motel room with this chick, he'd just met this chick and the chick was deaf but she was I guess according to the story really beautiful and the dude—Al, his name was Al—was there in the room... See, it was a shared room, he was sharing it with his buddy, right?

I don't remember it, Chuck said.

But listen, listen. So it's a shared room with his buddy, they were on some job and staying two to a room, but his buddy was out. So Al and this chick are in the room and they're going at it but the chick is deaf so she's making all these guttural sounds. You hear me?

Chuck said, Yeah.

And his buddy comes back and at first he hears sounds outside his room so he stops like he's thinking, Should I go in? And then he sees that the dude Al had left a box of chicken outside the door that he and the deaf girl had eaten so his roommate immediately thinks, *Oh my god Al is choking on a chicken bone* so the friend busts through the door to try to save his buddy and he sees Al and this deaf girl just going to town.

The fraud laughed. He looked at Chuck in his laughter and said, You get it?

Perhaps his laughter was infectious, or Chuck's laughter was polite, but Chuck laughed a little, too.

Poor Stephanie did not smile.

Then the charlatan said very grandiosely, And that story is America!

He was blathering, foaming.

It is?, Ed said.

You know?, the fraud said to Chuck.

Um, I... guess so.

Does that offend you?

No.

I don't know, Horace said. I mean, you feel some pride, don't you? You're proud of fighting, aren't you?

I don't know.

I don't know either, the fraud said. I don't know. I don't have any idea.

I respect you, Ed said.

Yes, absolutely, Stephanie said.

Chuck looked like he'd been slapped again but then he looked down and said, Thanks.

I'm sorry, the imposter went on. I'm sorry, man. Look, I just wanted to see you again. I've always looked up to you. I missed you.

Chuck looked up very deliberately now to study this cousin he could not recognize. His eyes went all around the scars on the face.

The boy without a name said, Really, I'm serious. I don't know what you've gone through or anything or what life is like for you now, but I wanted to see you again. It's really good to have you here.

Chuck finished his examination, obviously having come to no conclusion, and said, Thanks.

Horace said nothing. He only blew smoke into the air and we were all quiet again.

Then Chuck spoke up and said, What do you guys do?

I'm a contractor, Ed said. I build mainly on industrial properties. I'm working on a new mall right now. Horace works with me.

The fraud put his eyes down at the grass.

I'm a nurse, Stephanie said.

Do you work?, Ed said to Chuck.

Uh, right now I collect benefits.

Fucking benefits!, the nameless imposter said.

Yeah.

I want a beer, the fraud said. You want a beer?

Um, sure, Chuck said.

I'll get it, Stephanie said.

What do you like to do for fun?, the fraud said.

Uh, I don't know. Play cards. Hang out.

Do you run?

What do you mean?

Didn't you used to be a distance runner?

Oh, yeah. No I don't really do that anymore.

Oh no?

No, not really.

Yeah, I hear you. I never got running myself.

Yeah.

Chuck looked like he was ready to shatter. Stephanie came back with beers for the boys.

Geez, thanks Steph, I guess I'm too old for a beer!, Ed said.

Oh, I'm sorry!

No, sit down, I'll get it. You don't want one?, Ed said.

Sure, I'll have one.

C?

No.

Celia!, Ed said strongly because he was begging her participation in the mindless pleasantry rites of a cruel tribe. He put his head to hers and tried to sweetly say, Celia, I wish you'd perk up.

But it was not sweet, it was determinedly threatening. But it was also a plea and she knew how she seemed and that was bound to distress poor Ed. Wisdom flocks to simpler things.

So Ed went inside to get more beers.

Tiny Johnny ran across the grass with the little bowlcut hairstyle. He beamed with exuberance and fell, but then he jumped back up and flailed around to expand himself. Then he ran again but would vanish every third step and in place of Johnny Chuck slinked farther into his chair and volleyed questions and starts of conversations from the unnamed kid. And then Johnny ran across the grass again and come through where the new striped chairs now were. Then he jumped shirtless into the water sprinkling upward from the filter on the hose.

The shameful kid laughed and bared his teeth. They brought out trays of food and skewered meat and vegetables. Chuck helped them start the fire and jumped back when the flame burst into being.

The political and philosophical ghosts climbed up on the walls and sat unwise, grieving. Simon called Peter was there, and Trotsky, and Lee Atwater, singing simple songs. They frightened her but Celia did not banish them this time. She weakly tipped a glass to them in their aged costumes. The fraudulent child was away from the barbecue again and taking aim with the BB gun. He laughed and pointed and wanted Chuck to come toward him. Poor Chuck who was so decisionless was dragged again and then it blasted and they missed the can they were going for. Ed went to them and said something and Chuck laughed. That was a fine sight. Then Chuck

cringed because the gun went off when he hadn't expected it while his back was turned. Chuck was right there next to Celia saying things to her.

Yes, yes, she said to him. Yes, yes.

I don't know, she said to him. I can't imagine.

He spoke more.

But I understand that, she said in response. He was occasionally looking over at the others but he wanted to keep talking to Celia.

I don't know how you... yes. Oh, dear, yes, she said.

He spoke even more.

Oh, yes. Hardest thing in the world, she said. Yes, yes. No. But oh, so glad you came to be with us, you're welcome any time.

He put his eyes to his turned arm below the veined side of the wrist and cringed there for a moment. Celia put her hand into his damaged hair and he let her smooth it. Chuck went to sitting in the chair and curled his legs behind him and put his elbow on the armrest and his head on his shoulder and closed his thin eyelids.

The poor boy ashamed of his fraudulence was next to Celia and kissing her head and whispered, You're so good for him. Thank you, thank you, he loves you.

He sat down next to her and was very quiet. She could tell his thoughts. It was he who thought himself a fraud. He certainly was, but no more than his wishes compelled. No other way to see it, poor poor thing. He relaxed then tensed up again and his eyes wildly looked everywhere.

I find no blame in you, she said to the fraud.

Ed came up behind and put his thumbs into the softness around her shoulder blades.

Chuck was awake and the sky was darkened but they had lights on and were playing cards. Poor Chuck still didn't know who his cousin was but it

looked like he was searching all the crewcut young men in his memory. He sipped his beer in a pretty backyard but doubted his sanity.

Uncle Hal, Uncle Hal.

The nervous imposter kept wanting to know about Uncle Hal. Where does he live? What is he like? What does he do? How is he? Between every question and answer the unknown asker's eyes were wide and he was full of anticipation. None of the answers settled him and his eyes would fall back to smallness.

Celia began to get very tired but she didn't want to leave these people, whoever they were. The ghosts retreated over the fence the way they came. Undependable ghosts. Come back!, she wanted to say.

Poor Chuck finally defended himself and said he had to leave. There was a bus at ten.

No, there's no bus at ten, the fraud said.

Yes there is, I should get back.

No, you're staying here.

No, I should-

You are staying here, have another beer.

Chuck got up and was moving away when the bigger boy took him by the sides of the shoulders even as they collapsed more forcefully forward. Stephanie's and Ed's bodies repositioned as if to keep a more agreeable relation. The bigger boy's face was cringed again, such a wanter as he is, and Celia figured whatever we'd done for him and he'd done for us was done.

Somehow the fraud pulled it off again because Chuck was back with a new beer and taking it steadily in large drinks.

My aunt's got a new kid. My dad and I don't know him.

Your aunt had a new kid?

Yes.

Your aunt Jane?

Yes. She adopted it or something.

A look of surprised delight then flashed across the scarred face.

Man, my dad, Chuck said. See, I fucked up pretty bad. I don't do anything! I don't do anything, and he's so frustrated, but I don't know what the hell-

What about Jane and Hal?

I think they might be getting divorced.

Ed was trying to follow and make some sense but poor dear Stephanie was understanding things and Celia hoped she could also get outside it.

Ed's look to Celia was worried and anxious. Who they are is not up to me, Celia thought. Things are a little better but not perfect with money.

They were smoking and eating again.

The fraudulent kid put his mouth in an O with his lips outcurled and his eyes intense on something unseen. He was breathing out in hard shh sounds and his shoulders were in Celia's arms.

The soldiers finally talked of a battle.

I don't remember you there!

I was there!

I don't remember you!

I was there!

I don't re-

I called myself Jack then!

I don't remember Jack-

I called myself Robert then!

You're not Robert!

I called myself Johnny then! Darren! Derek!

Celia rocked him.

A bunch of guys were up there, Chuck said. My friend Brian pulled me out of the car but he got hurt. He's back, my friend Brian, we hang out. Mostly drink.

The unknown kid was slumped in his chair holding Stephanie's hand and for the first time said nothing. He just listened to Chuck.

So that's good but he's in bad shape. He's good, he's good. But a couple guys died there, and one guy disappeared.

Ed leaned forward now and seemed ready to blow apart and he said, Who disappeared? Who disappeared? What was his name?

That was me!, the fraud said.

His name was Connor. He disappeared cause we thought he was captured but he was actually killed. We didn't know where he was for a few days, but I was in the hospital.

It's okay guys, Stephanie said.

Ed sat back in his chair and looked into the lit night sky.

The lovely Stephanie had it written on her face that she would weep later.

The fraud moved around the backyard and Ed sat with Celia again.

If you find no blame in me I'll find no blame in you, darling, and we'll face what comes.

Ed felt the wish and agreed to it so it transformed from a wish into a covenant.

The young ones' conversation had reached its appointed spot and Stephanie knew it so she heaved it up over the hill and they began to settle.

We set up a sleeping bag on the couch in the living room. Chuck's cousin insisted that Chuck take his room. He showed Chuck to it. Stephanie said

she should go home and the fraud held her tightly and then let her go. She seemed unsure he should have done that but she let him.

Celia watched the backyard from the upstairs window as the two young men stood out there, smoking and talking quietly and calmly. She believed they were trying to use ingenuity to achieve stasis but everything would keep going.

Celia came from the window glowing and peaceful, though she does not admit she glowed.

In the morning, we made coffee and eggs and poured orange juice for the young men. The kid who was briefly our son had little to say but he packed his bag quietly as Chuck waited. Chuck gazed at the genealogy. Celia pointed out some of the most interesting points on that mysterious thing. Then Ed joined Chuck in the backyard. He thanked Ed for the hospitality and said he'd be in touch. It took effort to come out of his constricted throat but he said he was sure Johnny was very brave and rightly to be honored. Ed said the same to Chuck. Ed said, No matter what, no matter what, you are a hero to me. Manhood has these ridiculous tests. You are not done, but you've passed one of them.

Which?

I don't know, Chuck!

He put his arm around Chuck and we laughed at something.

We took the boys to the bus station and hugged the imposter as warmly as we could, the poor fraud. His eyes glistened through a face that again looked utterly scarred. We gave him a paper with our address, phone number, and *Love, the Janucks* on it. The word was no romantic notion but a solid covenant beyond the laws of the state. They got on the bus and rolled away.

Later we purchased a grave for Johnny and decorated its bronze plaque with flowers we committed to tend, though we began to see his true memorial everywhere as it was. Without more definitive word we'd never know if he'd come back, but we decided we'd be gone long before the Michigan storms rub the letters off. There was no retreat then. We moved, though more broadly in some kind of suspension, with expectation among the possessions and desires on all sides of us, together, and outward, always, as our portion of strength allowed us, outward.

The End