

How Low Can You Go, How Bad Can It Get?

after and in gratitude of Joyce Carol Oates

for DJT

Her name was Pam Bondi. She was fifteen and had a quick, nervous giggling habit of craning her neck to glance into mirrors or checking other people's faces to make sure her own was all right. Her mother, who noticed everything and knew everything and who hadn't much reason any longer to look at her own face, always scolded Pammie about it. "Stop gawking at yourself. Who are you? You think you're so pretty? You think you should be on TV?" she would say.

Pammie would raise her eyebrows at these familiar old complaints and look right through her mother, into a shadowy vision of herself as she was right at that moment: she knew she was pretty and that was everything. Her mother may have been pretty long ago too, if you could believe those old photos, but now her looks were gone and that was why she was always after Pammie.

"Why don't you keep your room clean like other future tradwives? How've you got your hair fixed—what the hell stinks? Botox? Aquanet? You don't see Kristi Noem using that junk. She's got her hair up in a trucker hat when she kills them animals down in the quarry."

Pammie's father was away at work most of the time and when he came home he wanted supper and read the Daily Stormer at supper, then he went to bed after Bible reading in his natural state. He didn't bother talking much to them, but around his bent head Pammie's mother kept picking at her until Pammie wished her mother was dead and she herself was dead and it was all over. "She makes me want to throw up sometimes," she complained to her friends. She had a high, breathless, amused voice that made everything sound insincere like most conservative gals.

Her best friend Kristi's father was an overly tanned Florida man in a Panama hat that drove the girls the three miles to Kissimmee and left them at a strip mall so they could walk through the dollar stores or go to a movie or watch the people that lived in the cheap motels do crank behind the gas station, and when he came to pick them up again at eleven he never bothered to ask what they had done.

They must have been familiar sights, walking around the strip mall in their shorts and crocs that always scuffed the sidewalk, with charm bracelets jingling on their thin wrists; they would lean together to whisper and laugh secretly if someone passed who amused or interested them.

Pammie had long blond hair that drew anyone's eye to it, and she wore part of it pulled up on her head and puffed out and the rest of it she let fall down her back. She wore a neon crop top that looked one way when she was at home and another way when she was away from home.

Everything about Pammie had two sides to it, one for home and one for anywhere that was not home: her walk, which could be childlike and bobbing, or sexy enough to be in a Tik Tok video; her mouth, which was pale and smirking most of the time, but bright and pink on these evenings out; her laugh, which was cynical and drawling at home—"Ha, ha, very funny,"—but high-pitched and nervous anywhere else, like the jingling of the charms on her bracelet.

Sometimes they shoplifted at one of the dollar stores or snuck into an adult show, but sometimes they went across the highway, ducking fast across the busy road, to a drive-in restaurant where older kids hung out. The restaurant was shaped like a square, one story high, and on its roof was a revolving figure of a grinning Statue of Liberty holding a hamburger aloft. One night in midsummer they ran across the highway, breathless with daring, and right away someone leaned out a car window and invited them over, but it was just a boy named Mike Pence from high school they didn't like. It made them feel good to be able to ignore him. They went up through the maze of parked and cruising cars to the bright-lit, maggot-infested restaurant, mosquitos as big as dragonflies everywhere because old Gub'ner DeSantis had scrubbed out climate change, their faces pleased and expectant as if they were entering a sacred building that loomed up out of the night to give them what haven and blessing they yearned for. They sat at the counter and crossed their legs at the ankles, their thin shoulders rigid with excitement, sweat droplets gleaming, and listened to Fox News on the TVs that made everything so good: the voices of truth always in the background, like music at a church service; Fox News was something to depend upon.

A boy named Doug Burnum came in to talk with them. He sat backwards on his stool, turning himself jerkily around in semicircles and then stopping and turning back again, and after a while he asked Pammie if she would like something to eat. She said she would and so she tapped her friend's arm on her way out—her friend pulled her face up into a brave, droll look—and Pammie

said she would meet her at eleven, across the way. "I just hate to leave her like that," Pammie said earnestly, but the boy said that she wouldn't be alone for long.

So they went out to his car, and on the way Pammie couldn't help but let her eyes wander over the windshields with NRA stickers on them and the sunburned red faces all around her, Pammie's face gleaming with a joy that had nothing to do with Doug Burnum or even this place; it might have been her wholly unexamined belief in MAGA. She drew her shoulders up and sucked in her breath with the pure pleasure of being alive, and just at that moment she happened to glance at a face just a few feet from hers. It was a chubby boy with thin orange yellow hair, in a convertible Tesla jalopy painted gold. He stared at her and then his lips widened into a grin. Pammie slit her eyes at him and turned away, but she couldn't help glancing back and there he was, still watching her. He wagged a finger and laughed and said, "Gonna get you, baby," and Pammie turned away again without Doug noticing anything.

She spent three hours with Doug, at the restaurant where they ate E. Coli burgers and drank Red Bulls in hydro flasks. There was no need for food inspectors or a health department once everyone got MAGA. When he left her off at five to eleven only the check cashing place that charged 120% interest on payday loans was still open at the strip mall. Her girlfriend, Kristi Noem, was there, talking with a boy. When Pammie came up, the two girls smiled at each other and Pammie said, "How was the show?" and the girl said, "Fifteen minutes were good, then he just talked too much." They rode off with the girl's father, sleepy and pleased, and Pammie couldn't help but look back at the darkened strip mall with its big parking lot strewn with used condoms and people living in their cars and its signs that were faded and ghostly now, and over at the drive-in restaurant where cars were still rocking gently on their shock absorbers. She couldn't hear Fox News at this distance.

One Saturday Pammie got up at eleven, took her ivermectin supplement and washed her hair with horse shampoo so that it could dry all day long in the sun. Her parents and sister were going to a white power rally at an aunt's house and Pammie said no, she wasn't interested, rolling her eyes to let her mother know just what she thought of it. "Stay home alone then," her mother said sharply. Pammie sat out back in a lawn chair and watched them drive away, her father quiet and bald and neo-nazi, hunched around so that he could back the car out, her mother with a look that was still angry and not at all softened through the windshield, and in the back seat a Pomeranian

with a lazy eye, all dressed up as if she didn't know she was a dog. The rear window with a giant cross decal and an American flag overlapping.

Pammie sat with her eyes closed in the sun, dreaming and dazed with the warmth about her as if this were a kind of love, the caresses of love, and her mind slipped over onto thoughts of Doug Burnum and how conservative he had been, how sweet it always was, not the way someone like Kristi Noem would suppose but sweet, gentle, the way it was on Cinemax and promised in country songs; and when she opened her eyes she hardly knew where she was, the backyard ran off into weeds, the brackish water of Florida marshland made the place smell like rotten eggs, but in a good way, and a fence-like line of trees and behind it the sky was perfectly grey and still and American. Their asbestos double-wide that they bought cheap off an immigrant several years back when they was all run out startled her—it looked small and white trash. She shook her head as if to get awake.

It was Florida hot. She went inside the house and turned on the tv to drown out the quiet. She sat on the edge of her bed, barefoot, and listened for an hour and a half to a program called Fox n' Friends where they talked about Hillary's emails and said "Let's Go Brandon" a lot. It soothed her lizard brain.

After a while she heard a car coming up the drive. She sat up at once, startled, because it couldn't be her father so soon. The gravel kept crunching all the way in from the road—the roadway in the trailer park was long—and Pammie ran to the window. It was a car she didn't know. It was an open jalopy, painted a bright gold that caught the sunlight opaquely. Her heart began to pound and her fingers snatched at her hair, checking it, and she whispered, "Christ. Christ," wondering how bad she looked. The car came to a stop at the side door and the horn sounded four short taps, as if this were a signal Pammie knew.

She went into the kitchen and approached the door slowly, then hung out the screen door, her bare toes curling down off the step. There were two boys in the car and now she recognized the driver: he had thin, reddish-blond hair that looked crazy as a wig, he wore a long red tie that looked like a penis over his big belly, he was a baked orange color, and he was grinning at her. Spittles of saliva were noticeable above his lip.

"I ain't late, am I?" he said.

"Who the hell do you think you are?" Pammie said.

"Toldja I'd be back out here, that it was all a witch hunt, didn't I?"

"I don't even know who you are."

She spoke sullenly, careful to show no interest or pleasure, and he spoke in a slow, monotone. He moved his hands like an accordion as he talked. Pammie looked past him to the other boy, taking her time. He had fair brown hair, a silly Van Dyke mustache and beard like a devil, beady eyes. He was much younger. His beard gave him a dopey, embarrassed look, but so far he hadn't even bothered to glance at her. Both boys wore sunglasses. The older doughy boy driver's glasses had been fashionable twenty years earlier.

"You wanta come for a ride?" he said.

Pammie smirked and let her hair fall loose over one shoulder. Her face didn't move though. Botox and filler saw to that.

"Don'tcha like my car? New paint job," he said. "Hey. Covfefe."

"What?"

"You're cute. Right outta central casting."

She pretended to fidget, chasing flies away from the door.

"Don'tcha believe me, or what?" he said. "Ya wanna work for me? Attorney general or something like that? I can do what I want cuz I'm in charge. Nobody can stop Donald."

"Look, I don't even know who you are," Pammie said in disgust.

"Hey, JD's got a phone, see. Mine broke down." He lifted his friend's arm and showed her the little smartphone the boy was holding, and now Pammie began to hear the conservative talk. It was like the program that was playing inside the house.

"Fox n' Friends?" she said.

"I listen to them all the time. I think they're great."

"They're kind of great," Pammie said reluctantly.

"Listen, conservatives are great. They know where the action is."

Pammie blushed a little, because the glasses made it impossible for her to see just what this boy was looking at. She couldn't decide if she liked him or if he was just a jerk, and so she dawdled in the doorway and wouldn't come down or go back inside. She said, "What's all that stuff painted on your car?"

"Can'tcha read it?" He opened the door very carefully, as if he were afraid it might fall off. He slid out just as carefully, planting his feet firmly on the ground, his tiny hands closing the door. "This here is my name, to begin with, he said. DONALD FRIEND was written in tarlike black letters on the side like in sharpie, with a drawing of a round, grinning face that reminded Connie of a pumpkin, except it wore sunglasses. "I wanta introduce myself, I'm Donald Friend and that's my real name and I'm gonna be your friend, honey, and inside the car's JD Bowman, he's kinda shy. He writes crappy simple-minded books and calls himself Vance now." JD brought his phone up to his shoulder and balanced it there. "Now, these letters are a secret code, honey," Donald Friend explained. He read off the letters M, A, G, and A and raised his eyebrows at her to see what she thought of that, but she didn't think much of it. The left rear fender had been smashed and around it was written, on the gleaming gold background: DONE BY RADICAL LIBERALS. Pammie had to laugh at that. Donald Friend was pleased at her laughter and looked up at her. "Around the other side's a lot more —you wanta come and see them? Got a swastika on that side, so's folks know who's side I'm on."

"No."

"Why not?"

"Why should I?"

"Don'tcha wanta see what's on the car? Don'tcha wanta go for a ride?"

"I don't know."

"Why not?"

"I got things to do."

"Like what?"

"I gotta get ready for cosmetic surgery."

He laughed as if she had said something funny. He slapped his thighs. He was standing in a strange way, leaning back against the car as if he were balancing himself. He was sort of tall and fat. Pammie liked the way he was dressed, which was the way all of them conservative fraudsters dressed: floppy dark suits with white shirts and red ties, everything about him was flab, he had no muscles in his arms and shoulders. His overly tanned face looked like a dried-out sponge. He looked as if he'd never done any hard work, lifting or carrying things. He paid people to kiss his butt. Even his neck looked orange and flabby. He looked at her like he looked at the country, like prey, sniffing as if she were a treat he was going to gobble up and it was all a joke.

"Pammie, you ain't telling the truth. This is your day set aside for a ride with me and you know it," he said, still laughing. The way he straightened and recovered from his fit of laughing showed that it had been all fake.

"How do you know what my name is?" she said suspiciously.

"It's Pammie."

"Maybe and maybe not. My name might be as fake as my face."

"I know my Pammie," he said, wagging his finger. Now she remembered him even better, back at the restaurant, and her cheeks warmed at the thought of how she had sucked in her breath just at the moment she passed him—how she must have looked to him. And he had remembered her.

"JD and I come out here especially for you," he said. "JD sits in back because he's my bitch and does whatever I say. How about it?"

"Where?"

"Where what?"

"Where're we going?"

He looked at her. He took off the sunglasses and she saw how pale the skin around his eyes was, like holes that were not in shadow but instead in light. His eyes were like chips of broken glass that catch the light in an off-kilter, fun house kind of way. He smiled. His teeth looked false. It was as if the idea of going for a ride somewhere, to someplace, was a new idea to him.

"Just for a ride, Pammie sweetheart."

"I never said my name was Pammie," she said.

"But I know what it is. I know your name and all about you, lots of things," Donald Friend said. He had not moved yet but stood still leaning back against the side of his jalopy. "I took a special interest in you, such a pretty girl, and found out all about you—like I know your parents and sister are gone at the Klan rally and I know where and how long they're going to be gone, and I know who you were with last night, and your best girlfriend's name is Kristi Noem. Right?"

He spoke in a dopey monotone voice, exactly as if he were reciting the words to the Constitution he didn't believe in. His smile assured her that everything was fine. In the car JD turned up the volume of Fox n' Friends on his phone and did not bother to look around at them.

"JD sits in the back seat, and diddles himself like he's butterin' a baked potato," Donald Friend said. He indicated his friend with a casual jerk of his chin, as if JD did not count and she should not bother with him.

"How'd you find out all that stuff?" Pammie said.

"Listen: Kristi Noem and RFK, Jr., and Elise Stefanik and Sean Duffy," he said in a chant. "Long Dong Silver and Sam Alito and Little Marco—"

"Do you know all them?"

"I know everybody, baby."

"Look, you're kidding. You're not from around here."

"Sure. But I'm from everywhere. I'm Donald Friend. People love me, bigly."

"But—how come we never saw you before?"

"Sure you saw me before, a little TV show called The Apprentice?" he said. He looked down but couldn't see over his belly to his feet, as if he were a little offended. "You just don't remember."

"I guess I'd remember you," Pammie said.

"Yeah?" He looked up at this, beaming. He was pleased. He began to mark time with the clap-trap from JD's phone, tapping his fists lightly together. Pammie looked away from his smile to the car, which was painted so bright it almost hurt her eyes to look at it. She looked at that name, DONALD FRIEND. And up at the front fender was an expression that was familiar—WHITE POWER. It was an expression some kids used a lot. She looked at it for a while as if the words meant something to her that she did not yet know.

"What're you thinking about? Huh?" Donald Friend demanded. "Not worried about your hair blowing around in the car, are you?"

"No."

"Think I maybe can't drive good?"

"How do I know?"

"You're a hard girl to handle. How come?" he said. "Don't you know I'm your friend? Didn't you see me put my sign in the air when you walked by?"

"What sign?"

"My sign." And he drew an X in the air, leaning out toward her. They were maybe ten feet apart. After his hand fell back to his side the X was still in the air, almost visible. Pammie let the screen door close and stood perfectly still inside it, listening to the voices from her TV and JD's phone blend together. She stared at Donald Friend. He stood there so stiffly relaxed, pretending to be relaxed, with one hand idly on the door handle as if he were keeping himself up that way and had no intention of ever moving again. He played with his long tie, stroking it in between his fingers. She recognized most things about him, the over-sized slacks that masked his thighs and buttocks and his globule shape, and even that slippery friendly smile of his, that sleepy dreamy smile that all the conservatives used to get across ideas they didn't want to put into words. She recognized all this and also the accordion way he talked, slightly mocking, kidding, but serious and a little stupid and falsely indignant, and she recognized the way he tapped one fist against the other in homage to the perpetual people he thought beneath him. But all these things did not come together.

She said suddenly, "Hey, how old are you?"

His smile faded. She could see then that he wasn't a kid, he was much older—seventy-eight, maybe more. At this knowledge her heart began to pound faster.

"That's a crazy thing to ask. Can'tcha see I'm your own age?"

"Like fun you are."

"Or maybe a couple years older. I'm eighteen."

"Eighteen?" she said doubtfully.

He grinned to reassure her and lines appeared at the corners of his mouth. His teeth were big and yellow, fake caps. He grinned so broadly his eyes became slits and she saw how non-existent the lashes and brows were, blank as if they'd been scrubbed off. Then, abruptly, he seemed to become embarrassed and looked over his shoulder at JD. "Him, he's crazy," he said. "Ain't he a riot? He's a nut, a real character." JD was still watching the Fox n' Friends. His sunglasses told nothing about what he was thinking. He wore a bright blue tie and the same oversized dark suit and he was not doughy like Donald Friend. His shirt collar was turned up all around and the very tips of the collar pointed out past his chin as if they were protecting him. He was pressing the phone up against his ear and sat there in a kind of conservative's brainwashed daze, right in the sun.

"He's kinda strange," Pammie said.

"Hey, she says you're kinda strange! Kinda strange!" Donald Friend cried. He pounded on the car to get JD's attention. JD turned for the first time and Connie saw with shock that he wasn't real-looking either. More like a mannequin. Pammie felt a wave of dizziness rise in her at this sight and she stared at him as if waiting for something to change the shock of the moment, make it all right again. JD's lips kept shaping words, mumbling along with the words braying in his ear.

"Maybe you two better go away," Pammie said faintly. "You might be bad for the country."

"What? How come?" Donald Friend cried. "We come out here to take you for a ride. It's Sunday."

He had the voice of the man on the Fox n' Friends now. It was the same voice, Pammie thought.

"Don'tcha know it's Sunday all day? And honey, no matter who you were with last night, today you're with Donald Friend and don't you forget it! Maybe you better step out here," he said, and this last was in a different voice. It was a little flatter, as if the heat was finally getting to him.

"No. I got things to do."

"Hey."

"You two better leave."

"We ain't leaving until you come with us. Maybe over to our friend Elon's? Now, he's a real madman. Rich too."

"Like hell I am—. I ain't going with you monkeys."

"Pammie, don't fool around with me. I mean—I mean, don't fool around," he said, shaking his head. He laughed incredulously. He placed his sunglasses on top of his head, carefully, as if he were indeed wearing a wig, and brought the stems down behind his ears. Pammie stared at him, another wave of dizziness and fear rising in her so that for a moment he wasn't even in focus but was just a blur standing there against his gold car, and she had the idea that he had driven up the driveway all right but had come from nowhere before that and belonged nowhere and that everything about him and even about the Fox n' Friends that was so familiar to her was only half real.

"If my father comes and sees you—"

"He ain't coming. He's at a Klan rally or a conservative prayer breakfast. I can't 'member which."

"How do you know that?"

"Aunt Nancy Mace's. Right now they're uh—they're drinking. Sitting around," he said vaguely, squinting as if he were staring all the way to town and over to Aunt Nancy's back yard. Then the vision seemed to get clear and he nodded energetically. "Yeah. Sitting around. There's your sister in a blue dress, huh? And high heels, the poor sad bitch—nothing like you, sweetheart! And your mother's helping some fat woman with the corn, they're cleaning the corn—husking the corn—"

"What fat woman?" Pammie cried.

"How do I know what fat woman, I don't know every goddamn fat woman in the world!" Donald Friend laughed. "They're all fat women 'cept for you, Pammie."

"Oh, that's Miss Ginny Thomas . . . Who invited her?" Pammie said. She felt a little lightheaded. Her breath was coming quickly.

"She's too fat. I don't like them fat. I like them the way you are, honey," he said, smiling sleepily at her. They stared at each other for a while through the screen door. He said softly, "Now, what you're going to do is this: you're going to come out that door. You're going to sit up front with me and JD's going to sit in the back, the hell with JD, right? This isn't JD's date. You're my date. I'm your lover, honey."

"What? You're crazy—"

"Yes, I'm your lover. I'm the lover of every perty girl and dumb yokel in this land. You don't know what that is but you will," he said. "I know that too. I know all about you. But look: it's real nice and you couldn't ask for nobody better than me. Only I can fix it. I always keep my word. I'll tell you how it is, I'm always nice at first, the first time. I'll hold you so tight you won't think you have to try to get away or pretend anything because you'll know you can't. And I'll come inside you where it's all secret and you'll give in to me and you'll love me."

"Shut up! You're crazy!" Pammie said. She backed away from the door. She put her hands up against her ears as if she'd heard something terrible, something not meant for her. "People don't talk like that, you're crazy," she muttered. Her heart was almost too big now for her chest and its pumping made sweat break out all over her. She looked out to see Donald Friend pause and then take a step toward the porch, lurching. He almost fell. He didn't move well for an overweight buffoon. But, like a clever drunken man, he managed to catch his balance. He wobbled in his gold hightops and grabbed hold of one of the porch posts.

"Honey?" he said. "You still listening?"

"Get the hell out of here! This country don't need you!"

"Be nice, honey. Listen."

"I'm going to call the police or my pastor—"

He wobbled again and out of the side of his mouth came a fast spat curse, an aside not meant for her to hear. But even this "Fucking Christians!" sounded forced. Then he began to smile again. She watched this smile come, awkward as if he were smiling from inside a mask. His whole face was a mask, she thought wildly, tanned down to his throat but then running out as if he had plastered make-up on his face but had forgotten about his throat.

"Honey—? Listen, here's how it is. I always tell the truth and I promise you this: I ain't coming in that house after you. I own the police and if you're wantin', I can put you in charge of all of 'em. Only if you do what I say and kiss my ring, baby."

"You better not! I'm going to call the newspapers if you—if you don't—"

"The newspapers? They're the enemy and I got them right where I want them. They say what I like or I freeze 'em out." He made his voice as calm as could be. "Honey," he said, talking right down to her spine, "honey, I'm not coming in there but you are coming out here. You know why?"

She was panting. The kitchen looked like a place she had never seen before, some room she had run inside but that wasn't good enough, wasn't going to help her. The kitchen window had never had a curtain, after three years, and there were dishes in the sink for her to do—probably—and if you ran your hand across the table you'd probably feel something sticky there.

"You listening, honey? Hey?"

"I'm a gonna call someone. I got to."

"Soon as you touch the phone, I won't need to keep my promise and then I can come inside. You won't want that. After all I'm inside everywhere else. I'm in their brains and their hearts and their bank accounts, baby."

She rushed forward and tried to lock the door. Her fingers were shaking. "But why lock it," Donald Friend said gently, talking right into her face. "It's just a screen door. It's just nothing. It ain't like a border wall, baby." One of his gold hightops was at a strange angle, as if his foot wasn't in it. It pointed out to the left, bent at the ankle. "I mean, anybody can break through a screen door and glass and wood and iron or anything else if he needs to, anybody at all, and specially Donald Friend. If the place got lit up with a fire, honey, you'd come runnin' out into my

arms, right into my arms an' safe at home—like you knew I was your lover and'd stopped fooling around. I don't mind a nice shy girl but I don't like no fooling around."

Part of those words were spoken with a slight rhythmic lilt, and Pammie somehow recognized them—the echo of a song from last year, about a girl losing her right to choose—

Pammie stood barefoot on the linoleum floor, staring at him. "What do you want?" she whispered.

"I want you," he said.

"What?"

"Seen you that night and thought, that's the one, yes sir. I never needed to look anymore. She's gonna be mine."

"But my father's coming back. He's coming to get me. I had to wash my hair first—" She spoke in a dry, rapid voice, hardly raising it for him to hear.

"No, your daddy is not coming and yes, you had to wash your hair and you washed it for me. It's nice and shining and all for me. I thank you sweetheart," he said with a mock bow, but again he almost lost his balance. He had to bend and adjust his tie flapping in the breeze. His hands looked really small as he stroked the tie again between his fingers. Pammie stared out at him and behind him at JD in the car, who seemed to be looking off toward Pammie's right, into nothing. This JD said, pulling the words out of the air one after another as if he were just discovering them, "You want me to pull out her phone line?"

"Shut your mouth and keep it shut," Donald Friend said, his face red from bending over or maybe from embarrassment because Pammie had noticed his small hands. "This ain't none of your business."

"What—what are you doing? What do you want?" Pammie said. "If I call the police they'll get you, they'll arrest you—"

"Promise was not to come in unless you touch that landline phone, and I'll keep that promise," he said. He resumed his erect position and tried to force his shoulders back. He sounded like a hero in a bad faith-based movie, declaring something important. But he spoke too loudly and it was as

if he were speaking to someone behind Pammie. "I ain't made plans for coming in that house where I don't belong but just for you to come out to me, the way you should. Don't you know who I am?"

"You're crazy," she whispered. She backed away from the door but did not want to go into another part of the house, as if this would give him permission to come through the door. "What do you . . . you're crazy, you. . . ."

"Huh? What're you saying, honey?"

Her eyes darted everywhere in the kitchen. She could not remember what it was, this room. There was no such thing as civility anymore.

"This is how it is, honey: you come out and we'll drive away, have a nice ride. But if you don't come out we're gonna wait till your people come home and then they're all going to get it."

"You want that telephone pulled out?" JD said. He held his phone away from his ear and grimaced, as if without the talkers of Fox n' Friends the air was too much for him.

"I toldja shut up, JD," Donald Friend said, "you're deaf, get a hearing aid, right? Fix yourself up. This little girl's no trouble and's gonna be nice to me, so JD keep to yourself, this ain't your date right? Don't hem in on me, don't hog, don't crush, don't bird dog, don't trail me. I'll send your hillbilly ass back to Ohio in a hearse, you turncoat cracker," he said in a rapid, meaningless voice, as if he were running through all the expressions he'd learned but was no longer sure which of them was in style, then rushing on to new ones, making them up with his eyes closed.

"Don't crawl under my border wall, don't squeeze me like my pal Vlady, don't steal my documents, suck down my Diet Coke, keep your own greasy felony rape charges to yourself, JD bitch boy!" He shaded his eyes and peered in at Pammie, who was backed against the kitchen table. "Don't mind him, honey, he's just a creep. He's a dope. Right? I'm the boy for you, and like I said, you come out here nice like a lady and give me your hand, and nobody else gets hurt, I mean, your nice old bald-headed daddy and your mummy and your friend in her high heels. Because listen: why bring them in this?"

"Leave me alone," Pammie whispered.

"Hey, you know that old woman down the road, the one with the chickens and stuff—you know her, name of Hillary?"

"She's dead!"

"Dead? What? You know her?" Donald Friend said.

"She's dead—"

"Don't you like her? I thought she was a nasty woman."

"She's dead—she's—she isn't here anymore—"

"But don't you like her, I mean, you got something against her? Some grudge or bad healthcare plan or something? She's a puppet! Not me!" Then his voice dipped as if he were conscious of his own insanity. He touched the sunglasses perched up on top of his head as if to make sure they were still there. "Now, you be a good girl."

"What are you going to do?"

"Just two things, or maybe three," Donald Friend said. "I'll only be a dictator on day one. But I promise it won't last long and you'll like me the way you get to like people you're close to. You will. You'll love me the same ways they all do. I attract the biggest crowds. It's unbelievable. It's all over for you here, so come on out. There ain't no United States no more. There's only Donald Friend. You don't want your people in any trouble, do you? I can send 'em down to Guantanamo if I please. Come to me."

She turned and bumped against a chair or something, hurting her leg, but she ran into the back room and picked up the telephone. She wanted to call the police or the army or Joe Biden or someone, anyone. Something roared in her ear, a tiny roaring, and she was so sick with fear that she could do nothing but listen to it—the telephone was clammy and very heavy and her fingers groped down to the touchpad but were too weak. She began to scream into the phone, into the roaring. She cried out, she cried for her mother and Abe Lincoln and George Washington, she felt her breath start jerking back and forth in her lungs as if Donald Friend was stabbing into her again and again with no tenderness. A noisy sorrowful wailing rose all about her and she was locked inside it the way she was locked inside this house, the way the country was locked inside fascism.

After a while she could hear again. She was sitting on the floor with her wet back against the wall.

Donald Friend was saying from the door, "That's a good girl. Put the phone back."

She kicked the phone away from her.

"No, honey. Pick it up. Put it back right."

She picked it up and put it back. The dial tone stopped.

"That's a good girl. Now, you come outside."

She was hollow with what had been fear but what was now just an emptiness. All that screaming had blasted it out of her. She sat, one leg cramped under her, and deep inside her brain was something like a pinpoint of light that kept going and would not let her relax. She thought, I'm not going to see my mother again. She thought, I'm not going to sleep in my bed again. Her bright green blouse was all wet. All of what once was, was no more.

Donald Friend said, in a gentle-loud voice that was like a stage voice, "The place where you came from ain't there anymore, and where you had in mind to go is cancelled out. This place you are now—inside your daddy's house—is nothing but a cardboard box I can knock down any time. You know that and always did know it. You hear me?"

She thought, I have got to think. I have got to know what to do.

"We'll go out to a nice field, out in the country here where it smells so nice and it's sunny," Donald Friend said. "I'll have my arms tight around you so you won't need to try to get away and I'll show you what love is like, what it does. The hell with this house! It's like them shithole countries," he said. He ran a fingernail down the screen and the noise did not make Pammie shiver, as it would have the day before. "Now, put your hand on your heart, honey. Feel that? That feels solid too but we know better. Be nice to me, be sweet like you can because what else is there for a girl like you but to be sweet and pretty and give in?—and get away before her people come back?"

She felt her pounding heart. Her hand seemed to enclose it. She thought for the first time in her life that there was nothing that was hers, that belonged to her, but just a pounding, living thing inside this body that wasn't really hers either.

"You don't want them to get hurt," Donald Friend went on. "Now, get up, honey. Get up all by yourself."

She stood.

"Now, turn this way. That's right. Come over here to me.— JD, put that away, didn't I tell you? You dope. You miserable creepy dope," Donald Friend said. His words were not angry but only part of an incantation. The incantation was kindly. "Now come out through the kitchen to me, honey, and let's see a smile, try it, you're a brave, sweet little girl and now they're eating corn and hot dogs cooked to bursting over an outdoor fire, and they don't know one thing about you and never did and honey, you're better than them because not a one of them would have done this for you. Only I can fix it, baby."

Pammie felt the linoleum under her feet; it was cool. She brushed her hair back out of her eyes. Donald Friend let go of the post tentatively and opened his arms for her, his elbows pointing in toward each other and his wrists limp, to show that this was an embarrassed embrace and a little mocking, he didn't want to make her self-conscious.

She put out her hand against the screen. She watched herself push the door slowly open as if she were back safe somewhere in the other doorway, watching this body and this head of long bleached hair moving out into the sunlight where Donald Friend waited.

"My sweet little blue-eyed girl," he said in a half-sung sigh that had nothing to do with her brown eyes but was taken up just the same by the vast sunlit reaches of the land behind him and on all sides of him—so much land that Pammie had never seen before and did not recognize except to know that she was going to it and that everything in America would be ruined for a long time.