

Zachary Lazar

A Novel

Sway



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ALSO BY ZACHARY LAZAR *Aaron, Approximately*

*For Sarah Lazar,
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Christina Carrad*

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Sway is a work of fiction. Among other things, it is an examination of the way several public lives were detached from the realm of fact and became a kind of contemporary folklore. As such, the book should not be read as a factual account of events or as biography. While many of the characters in the novel bear the names of actual people, they and their actions have been imagined by the author and should be considered products of the imagination.

Part One

“Energy is eternal delight.”

—**WILLIAM BLAKE**, from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*

THE HOUSES, 1969

FROM A DISTANCE, they had the demeanor of prisoner and guard. Bobby looked down at the frayed cuffs of his shirt, pushing them back over his wrists as he followed Charlie away from the house. His truck stood in the sun, its fender dented, the bed enclosed by weathered wooden boards. Beside him, Charlie looked silently ahead, his hair covering his face and beard, his hands crossed behind his back. He was an ex-convict, maybe fifteen years older than Bobby, but it was hard to think of him as being any particular age. He had taken just one look at the beat-up piano in the back of Bobby's truck and his face had gone expressionless, as if it disgusted him.

"We'll take the Ford," he said, holding out the keys to Bobby in the flat of his palm. Then he smiled a little facetiously, a smile at nothing, as if they both knew there were intricate layers of pretense between them and Charlie was inviting Bobby to admit it. "Do you mind driving?" he said. "I don't really feel like driving right now."

There were two men coming up the road on motorcycles, some girls walking back from the corral, carrying empty buckets. Dogs slept in the shade beneath the broken planking of a shed. It was an abandoned ranch. The first time Bobby had seen the place he'd felt oddly protective of it because it had seemed so doomed. The buildings were falling apart — shingles missing, holes in the walls, windows covered by black garbage bags or sometimes just left as empty frames. There were drawings everywhere of peace signs, animals, birds. His first day there, with his girlfriend Kitty, they had all fallen in love with his teen-idol face, his jeans with the colored velvet patches. It was like a lot of other places he'd been in the past two years — everywhere along the coast now there were groups of young people with nowhere to go and no money to spend. It was as if they were living in a fort or a tree house. They scraped meals together out of plants they grew or things they scavenged from the trash outside of supermarkets.

He looked back at his truck as they got into the car. The piano was strung up with lengths of rope, a battered upright with a few deep scratches on its side. He was a musician — that had been his plan, to be a rock musician — but it struck him now, with Charlie there, that the plan had become unreal somehow, that it had been diminishing so slowly that he hadn't noticed. Two years ago, he'd starred in an avant-garde film about the rise of Lucifer, a kind of rock-and-roll god who seduced the world not into peace and love but into something more brutal, something more like ecstasy. He'd thought of it at the time as just a stepping-stone to other ambitions, but the role had also appealed to him, had spoken to his particular gift — “charm,” “charisma,” none of the words captured its unpredictability, the way it was sometimes in his grasp, sometimes not.

Yesterday, in one of the barns, he'd been looking for some twine or rope to secure the piano to the back of his truck when he'd come across a gun sitting in a tool chest, wrapped in a towel. Kitty had been with him — she was hardly even a friend anymore, just another one of the girls he would see when he was at the ranch. She watched his expression as she pulled up the halter strap on her shirt, her face a mocking reflection of his surprise. The gun was a revolver, the wooden grip splintered on one side, the wood as dry and smooth as bone. When he looked back at Kitty, his head tilted a little to the side, her eyes seemed to say, *Who do you think you are? You're really just some good-looking fool, the kind of boy I would have had a crush on in high school.*

“Be quiet for a minute,” he said.

She looked at him, her arms crossed in front of her chest. “Cut it out, Bobby.”

“You can stop staring at me like that. I know what you were thinking just now.”

He brought his hand to the back of her neck and tried to kiss her. She turned her head away at first, but he turned it back, his fingers on her jaw. His chest was heavy, his face unsmiling. He moved away from her a step, letting his hand slide from her neck down her back, the gun still in his other hand, pressing against her arm. Her hair was sheared off at different lengths, standing up in clumps. She was so small, so delicate, that he was almost afraid, his hand on her back, feeling the flat muscles beneath her shirt. She kept her eyes open, watching him, as he backed her toward the table behind

her, propping her up a little in his arms. He just stood there for a while, close enough to brush his body against hers, to feel the rise of her breasts against his rib cage. Then he unbuttoned the front of her jeans, using just one hand, the other one still on the gun.

“You know, you’ve been here so long you can’t even remember your own name anymore,” he said. “I thought you were a little smarter than that.”

“I don’t really care what you think.”

“All this ‘Charlie is Christ’ bullshit. Or is it ‘Charlie’s the Devil’? I forget.”

“My parents were strange people,” she said, leaning back, her hand on the table. “They never really talked. They just sort of policed each other. I never understood what they were so afraid of. What are you so afraid of?”

The words and ideas were not exactly hers. She had become smarter than before, but also dreamier, smarter but also absent. He thought of the first time he’d seen her walk off with Charlie, maybe a month or two ago, her hand in the back of his jeans, sloppy and blatant and stoned. “Turning them out,” Charlie called it, “breaking them in.” If you seduced them like a father with his daughter, if you scared them a little, got inside their heads, then any kindness you did them afterward would seem like an act of God.

He pushed his fingers down through the opening of Kitty’s fly, feeling the rise of muscle beneath the tangled wedge of hair. She looked right into his eyes and seemed to barely see him.

This morning, he’d found her in the kitchen, washing dishes in the ragged slip she sometimes wore as a dress, her nose and the skin around her mouth burned red by the sun. She was all forearms and shins, barefoot on the dirty kitchen floor, even smaller than he’d remembered.

“You just need to leave me alone for a little while,” she’d said.

He thought of her hips rising toward him in the barn, the freckles on her rib cage reminding him somehow that she was sixteen, a girl from a house with a swimming pool in Brentwood. He told her that he was going to take the used piano over to his friend Gary’s place, pick up the twenty dollars profit, use the money to buy some motorcycle parts. He asked her if she wanted to come along. He spoke in a purposeful voice, as if nothing had happened between them, but she just smiled at him in a disbelieving way, as if she knew that Charlie was about to walk in and say that he and Bobby needed to go have a talk.

He got in the Ford with Charlie and they headed south toward Los Angeles, listening to a faint scratch of music on the radio, not speaking. The rocks outside were gray, the plants a grayish green, the dirt tan. Everything was the color of dust, except the sky, which was a washed-out blue behind a thin yellow haze. At the little store outside of Chatsworth, they pulled over and Charlie bought a six-pack of beer and some things for the girls: a booklet of find-the-word puzzles, some candy bars.

Bobby started the car and backed up, looking over his shoulder. When they got on the highway, Charlie lit a joint, examining its smoke as it leached out the cracked window. He passed it over, his hand low, down by Bobby's knee.

"You're kind of quiet," he said.

"I'm not quiet, I'm just wondering where we're going."

"We're going to a friend of mine's house. It's nice there, peaceful. You'll like it."

They were on Highway 118, heading toward Topanga Canyon. They drove for a while, looking at the sparse houses surrounded by trees — oaks, sycamores, a few tall eucalyptuses. After the hills, they came eventually into the suburbs: gas stations, coffee shops, a movie theater.

"I always thought you were a nice kid," Charlie said. "But I guess maybe there's more to you than that. Like maybe you weren't just bullshitting me about the time you spent in that reform school, for example."

Bobby looked ahead at the road. "This is about Kitty, isn't it?" he said. "Whatever Kitty told you."

"What does that mean?"

"This little talk we're having. Whatever this is. She knew about this."

Charlie looked down at his lap, rubbing his knees with his hands. "You need to stop thinking so much," he said. He brushed something off the dashboard with the side of his hand. "Turn up here," he said. "Take a left."

"Left?"

"Up here at the light. Put your signal on."

Bobby turned from the wide boulevard onto a two-lane street, steering with one hand, the other on the vinyl armrest between them. They passed a Safeway supermarket on the corner, then a post office and a school, then they were in an ordinary neighborhood of small houses behind sidewalks and fences.

“That piano you had in your truck back there,” Charlie said. “I was just wondering, where were you taking that thing?”

Bobby looked at him blankly, not even understanding for a moment. “What?”

“That piano you had in your truck. I was wondering where were you taking it.”

“I was taking it to Gary Hinman’s. He’s buying it from me. I got it cheap at one of the auctions.”

“Yeah, well, I figured something like that. I was just wondering where you got that piece of shit in the first place. I wanted to make sure you didn’t find that on the ranch somewhere.”

“I bought it at an auction.”

“That’s what you said.”

“Yeah. That’s what I said. What is this?”

Charlie stared at him with an expectant frown, as if waiting for more. Then he turned away, and Bobby wished he had never seen the piano, or that he had found it on the ranch, that he had stolen it.

“I just wonder what goes on in that head of yours sometimes,” Charlie said. “Selling a used piano like that. Wasting your time.”

Bobby turned the knob on the radio. “I’m trying to make some money.”

“Yeah, well, money. There’s lots of ways to make money.” He passed the joint, not looking at Bobby. “What day is it today?” he said. “Friday?”

“I think it’s Thursday.”

“Not bad. Just driving around on a Thursday, getting high. Why don’t you just cool off and relax?” Charlie nodded then, his mouth half-open, drifting into some sort of sarcastic daydream. He had a way of miming his emotions, acting them out so that they came across as artificial and sincere at the same time. It was the way he played his guitar, dipping and bucking his head, giving himself up to the song, but also making fun of the idea of giving himself up to the song, making fun of you for believing it.

They drove on in silence. It was like this sometimes when you were Bobby. The way he looked — the fact that he was good-looking — made it hard for people like Charlie to believe that he really was who he was. They were always giving him nicknames — B.B., Cupid, Bummer — as if “Bobby” was too intimate, as if saying it was like kissing him on the lips. He remembered being out in the desert one time, just he and Charlie riding around in one of the jeeps, when Charlie had spiraled off into one of his

moods, suddenly angry, hectoring and strange. The world was always at war, he'd said. It wasn't just Vietnam, it was the nature of people, the way they made sense of things. Look at a newspaper and all you'd see were soldiers, riots, assassinations. You'd see things being pulled apart, sides forming, rifts widening: black and white, rich and poor, young and old. It was like everyone had looked down and finally seen that they were standing on a tightrope. They didn't know which way to walk (that was the problem), they didn't know how to choose. Some of them were so scared that they just wanted to fall off. They might seem harmless, but you had to be vigilant, because they wanted you to fall with them — that was the peculiar thing about their fear.

Bobby was usually embarrassed when Charlie talked this way. It seemed involuntary, a way of showing too much of his hand.

They turned at the next stop sign. The house on the corner was invisible behind its high brown fence, garbage pails in front, thick tufts of palm trees pushing out over the wooden slats.

"That's it up there," said Charlie. "Park up there a little ways."

He raised his chin at one of the houses across the street. It was a Mexican-style bungalow with a carport off to one side, a front yard covered in smoothly raked gravel. There were cactuses and yuccas planted in little islands behind white bricks. It was so neat that it looked almost like an old toy that had been pressed into service as something real.

"I don't think anyone's home yet," Charlie said. "Why don't you let me have the keys."

Bobby looked at him skeptically. Then he handed him the keys and Charlie nodded, clasping them in his hand.

"Just wait here for a minute," Charlie said. "I'll go and see if anyone's there."

He got out of the car and crossed the street, heading up the sidewalk that bordered the gravel yard. He had the sack of beer cradled in one arm, his free arm dangling at his side like a little boy's. Bobby watched him walk around to the side of the house, following a winding path of concrete disks. Then he disappeared around the back, his head down.

Bobby wiped his eyes. He looked through the windows at the houses: ranch houses, Spanish houses, a miniature Tudor house with a lawn and a chain-link fence. The neighborhood seemed empty, abandoned for the day of work and school. It was like the neighborhood he'd grown up in: middle-

class, somehow accidental. There were sidewalks, but nobody outside to walk on them.

He thought of Kitty, the way she had leaned her head on her shoulder last night, looking down at Charlie's hand on her wrist, then back up at Bobby, her eyes sleepy, dismissive. Maybe she was just acting a part — you would see it happen around Charlie sometimes, a certain carelessness in people's faces, a faint edge of sarcasm. Bobby had just kept talking — he'd been acting a little like Charlie himself, he realized now — staring at Charlie to show how little it mattered: he could have Kitty back, she was Charlie's girl now, there were others. But the more he thought about it now, the more distorted the memory became, his face not calm but twitching a little at the cheeks, like a rabbit's.

He looked at his face in the rearview mirror: his dark hair coming down over his forehead, his blue eyes beneath the hatch marks of his eyebrows. His head felt empty, full of air. The longer Charlie was gone, the less he trusted him. Charlie said that fear was the end of thought, the end of lies, an opening up to what was real and true about someone, his soul. But that had always sounded to Bobby like just more of Charlie's bullshit, words for the others, not for him.

He got out of the car and crossed the street, flicking the hair out of his eyes. He walked across the gravel yard — the cement circles, the cactuses in their little islands — but everything he saw was slightly blurred, as if he were looking at it through a smeared pane of glass. At the back of the house, he found a wooden door, a flimsy thing with a windowpane and a rusted brass knob. It was still open a crack, as Charlie must have left it. He stood there for a moment, hesitating. He had felt like a child in the car — *just wait here for a minute* — but now he felt even more like a child, standing outside the door.

Inside, there was a small laundry room, a kitchen beyond it, all of it dark. There was something hanging from the ceiling — three baskets connected by woven strands of yarn that held fruit and boxes of tea. The kitchen counter had all kinds of domestic things on it: a ceramic cat; several canisters for flour, sugar, and the like; a notepad by a telephone. He could see through a rectangular opening into the empty living room with its dim walls. Above the sectional sofa hung a clock shaped like an exploding star.

Charlie emerged from a hallway off to the side. He turned to Bobby with a kind of disgusted shrug, his hands crossed before his waist. Under his arm,

pressed to his side, he had what looked like a rolled-up extension cord.

“Not what you thought,” he said.

He turned and walked into the living room, his hair covering his face. In the faint light coming in through the picture window, the furniture looked strangely abandoned.

“What is this?” Bobby said.

“I told you that already. It’s a friend’s house.”

“What friend?”

“Right now it’s just a house. It’s just here. What difference does it make whose house it is?”

He sat down in a padded armchair, putting the extension cord down on the coffee table before him. The sack was on the floor at his feet, hidden from Bobby’s view, and he reached down into it, rattling the paper. He brought out a can of beer and offered it to Bobby with an upturned, cupped hand.

“You knew something like this was going to happen, didn’t you?” he said.

“I don’t know. I don’t know what this is.”

“This is kind of like the experiment where you break into someone’s house in broad daylight and decide whether or not you can handle it.”

Bobby looked back to the kitchen door. It was still partly open, sunlight brightening the little curtain in front of the windowpane, a bleached pattern of inkblots on pink fabric. In the living room, Charlie looked almost like a doll, dwarfed slightly by the overstuffed chair. He was small, only five and half feet tall, and yet the dark room seemed to gather itself around him, as if habituated to his occasional presence.

“You came all this way, you might as well have a seat for a minute,” he said. “Nothing’s going to happen to you here. Just trust me for a minute.”

Bobby was still in the kitchen. He looked down at the floor — linoleum with a pattern like Mexican tiles, the shapes fixed and identical, like bored eyes. Charlie pushed the beer to the far edge of the coffee table, toward him. Then he sat back, one of his elbows on the armrest, his fist beneath his chin, and Bobby stepped into the living room, sitting down on the floor, bringing his knees to his chest, looking down at the carpet as if being careful.

They were friends, Bobby had always thought. They played music together and rode motorcycles and drank beer, slipping off with the girls, and usually after a few days Bobby would leave. Other people came to Charlie as if he were a visionary, some sort of guru, but to Bobby he was another musician,

someone with connections. He knew the Beach Boys, Neil Young, a man named Terry Melcher who produced the Byrds. The music they played together was coiling and improvisatory, a current that Bobby helped guide, leaning in toward Charlie to hear his voice, a controlled presence next to Charlie's endless wandering. They were going to make a record together, that was the plan, but it never seemed to happen. There was another Charlie who didn't care about plans, cynical and distant, and it was this Charlie, oddly, whom you could most easily imagine becoming a star, swaying the crowd like a revivalist preacher, fully believing in his act until the moment it was over. This was the Charlie who always kept a special eye on Bobby, aroused and suspicious. He seemed to anticipate Bobby's thoughts, to always find them a little disappointing, evidence of squandered potential, close but never quite there. There was something compelling about dodging Charlie's moods. It was one of the reasons Bobby kept coming back, one of the main reasons. Sometimes a frightened daze would overcome him in Charlie's presence, but even the daze had an adrenaline sheen that felt almost like self-confidence.

They sat there for several minutes, neither of them talking. Bobby looked at the room, the pictures of family members on the walls, or what he assumed were family members. There was a middle-aged woman, her hair pinned back above her head, smiling behind cat-eye glasses with black frames. Her husband was off to the side, almost cut off at the edge, a man with thick creases in his face and a striped tie loosened around his neck. There were pictures of their two grown daughters: in their graduation gowns, separately, and gathered with their mother around a platter of food on the back patio. On the wall opposite the window was a crucifix and a print of an angel. There was an oil painting of a girl in the woods being serenaded by a man with a lute.

"We shouldn't leave that car sitting out there much longer," Charlie said. "We need to get it out of here. You're going to need to make a choice about that."

He sat back in the chair with his hands on the arms, his elbows a little cocked, like someone posing in an old photograph. The brown carpet stretched across the living room toward the opening into the hallway. Its nap had been brushed back in swatches by a vacuum cleaner.

"I don't know who lives here," Charlie said. "It doesn't matter — we're not here to hurt them. I don't know anything about them other than the fact that

they live in this house and they wouldn't want us to be here. That's why we have to be here."

He smiled, a fatherly smile, almost helpless. It was full of a skeptical candor, as if he knew that no matter how hard he tried to communicate what he was about to say he wouldn't be understood.

"Those people at the ranch, they all come from places like this," he said. "I think you know what I'm talking about. It does something to them, I don't know what. They never stop struggling with it, even after they leave. It's like they have to hurt somebody or hurt themselves, it doesn't matter which sometimes."

Bobby turned his head and looked at him. "I don't want anything to do with your little private army back there," he said. "And if this is about Kitty, then all I can tell you is she's yours, fine, she's your fucking zombie."

Charlie looked down at the coffee table. "This has nothing to do with Kitty. I already told you that. This has to do with you now. How you're any different from those people back there, all those boys, those girls, the zombies, if that's what you want to call them."

There was some shift in the room's shadows that a moment later didn't seem to be a shift at all, just a deeper stillness. Time and space — these were favorite subjects of Charlie's, the prison of time and space, the way the mind was always desperate to escape from that prison. He leaned forward in his chair, sizing up Bobby's face, his thumb moving across his beard, his breath filling the air between them, staring at Bobby like an opponent.

What did Bobby suppose made him any different from those people out at the ranch, he asked again. How was Bobby any different from those people out there who were just waiting for some sign or some change that never came? Did he want to put himself above them? Did he want to be a star like Elvis maybe, or like Sonny and Cher — or maybe he wanted to be something more serious than that, a rebel, a criminal, Jack the Ripper maybe, or Jesse James. But what did Bobby want really, and did he even know, and why did he just keep drifting around, never asking himself these questions?

Charlie leaned back into his chair, his face in shadow. "Those people at the ranch are my people," he said. "You need to remember that from now on. They're not yours, they're mine. You can't just keep treating them the way you treat yourself, like it's all just a game or a waste of time."

He raised one of his hands, as if to pluck something small from the air, then did the same with the other hand. "Moving a piano, making a few bucks

like that,” he said. “One moment, the next moment — that’s who you are after a while, all those little moments. They’re not something you can just go back and change. They’re like rooms. They stay there after you leave.”

Bobby tilted his head back toward the ceiling, his eyes closed. “If you wanted me to leave, all you had to do was say ‘leave.’ ”

“I don’t want you to leave. I wouldn’t have brought you all the way over here if I wanted you to leave. I want you stay there, if you want to stay there.”

He steepled his hands beneath his chin. His hair was falling into one of his eyes, but his impatient, put-upon gaze was absolutely still.

“I’ll do this for you this time, if that’s what you want. I’ve done this plenty of times and it’s very simple. One of us has to go move the car. The other one of us is going to stay here and meet these people, take some money off them, whatever. I don’t have much else in mind, do you? You tell me what you want.”

Bobby shook his head. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Yeah, well, maybe you’re just like I used to be. All wrapped up in yourself, not seeing anyone else very clearly.”

“I don’t know what you’re fucking talking about.”

Charlie reached into his pants pocket and held the car keys out in his hand. He dangled them in front of his face, staring at Bobby, then held them out in his extended palm, just above his knee, the pose somehow biblical, deliberately so.

“I don’t want to keep you here,” he said. “If you want to leave, then maybe you should leave. You do whatever makes you feel comfortable. This is an easy one. This is almost like practice.”

“Practice for what?”

He wanted to be taken seriously. He wanted to be different from those people at the ranch, but he couldn’t even sit there in an empty house without being cowed by his own thoughts. Maybe he was the kind of person who spent his whole life sleepwalking, daydreaming, barely scraping by, never going too far or pushing very hard. Or maybe there was more to him than that. Maybe he could think of just one thing he’d ever done that would show there was more to him than that.

They were Charlie’s words, not Bobby’s. They were Charlie’s words in Bobby’s ears, Bobby’s mind, shared words. It didn’t matter after a while whose words they were.

Charlie left the keys on the table. Then he sat back in the chair, slouched a little, one foot up on the table's edge. The light through the window was a wedge of moving dust, a field of rays that rotated and shone. Outside was the car, parked in front of a neat yard with a low chain-link fence. Everything on the other side of the window was still, brightly colored, like a slide lit up by a projector.

"None of this is too complicated," Charlie said. "I'm just telling you some basic things you knew all along."

He worked one of his hands into the pocket at the side of his denim jacket and pulled out a balled-up wad of fabric. He shook it out in his hand — it was a black nylon stocking — and laid it out on the table next to the extension cord.

"Maybe you should go outside for a little while and think about it," he said. "Take a little walk, get a breath of fresh air. I'll stay here for a minute."

Bobby shook his head. "You're serious."

"Of course I'm serious. These people who live here, I don't know what they mean to you, why they matter so much. They don't think, they don't know anything they haven't been taught by someone else. You'd just be showing them another side of things for a few minutes. Just like what Kitty did for you yesterday. You and your little gun."

It turned out that all along Charlie had had it in a shoulder holster beneath his jacket. It was the same gun from yesterday, the .38 with the wooden grip splintered on one side. He worked it slowly out from beneath his jacket, tugging with his right hand, then set it down on the table beside the extension cord and the stocking.

Bobby looked down at his hand, his fingers on the carpet, not quite seeing them, lulled for a moment like a child. He looked at the things on the table. When he finally stood up and walked toward the kitchen door, the walking had as little to do with his body as if he were dreaming it. There was the kitchen — the telephone, the notepad, the ceramic cat. There was the door with its inkblot curtain. Outside, in the backyard, was the afternoon sunlight, flashbulb white and then a widening yellow haze.

There was nowhere left to go. Malibu, Topanga, Mendocino, Big Sur — in the last year, Bobby had crossed these places off one by one as overcrowded, menaced by cops. It was the war in Vietnam — the war had somehow permeated everything, even things that had no relation to the war

itself. It made everyone feel like fugitives, wary of the same people they would have looked to as friends just a year before. It was why Bobby had kept moving, sleeping in the bed of his truck or on someone's floor, fixing up old cars and trying to sell them, bartering, helping out on drug deals. He had been trying to stay out of the war, but the war kept following him in its different forms. It was what made places like the ranch so confusing — dreamy but combative, childlike but also desolate.

They wanted you to grow up into some helpless combination of old person and infant. They wanted you to have a house and a family and a refrigerator and a TV, and not know how any of it worked. They wanted you to spend your life working on something that was never concrete, never anything you could see or hold in your hands, and if you didn't do that they wanted to put you in jail. Cutting down forests, poisoning the earth — it was a country driven by stupid, blind impulse. It was a country where nobody knew where their food came from or where their garbage went, they just flushed the bowl, kept eating it and throwing it away, building bombs and computers, cars and TVs, sending people off to Vietnam so they could set it on fire. It was a country that had turned against everyone he knew, cast them out like garbage, and all they could do was smile to themselves at all they'd learned and wait patiently for the fires to start here at home.

He stopped walking and looked again at the houses. Sidewalks, fences, lawns. It was a dead world. There was no point in pretending it wasn't, or that he could go back to it and find anything there but emptiness. What was he afraid of? What was Charlie asking him to do that he didn't already believe in, even if he'd never had the courage to really imagine it?

He thought of the pictures on the living room wall — the woman in her cat-eye glasses, the man's loosened tie. He saw them coming home, turning to find the stranger sitting in their living room. It would all become a paradise then — the living room, the kitchen, the star-shaped clock above the sofa. It would all become something precious he was about to take away, had already taken away, just by being there.

But what did they mean to him? And what would they think if they'd seen him on the street some afternoon, driving a beat-up pickup truck with a broken piano in the back?

To live inside Charlie's skin. To be empowered by fear, to use it like a tool. To go back to the ranch as someone transformed, not the pretty boy you

had a crush on in high school, not a musician or another lost soul, but a harder, truer soul he had always known was waiting there inside him.

He turned and walked up the sidewalk toward the gravel yard. The house was a living thing now, the watchful center of the empty neighborhood. He thought of the man and woman who lived there, and he had a sense that they were all bound by something he had never been aware of and had no name for. It made him sick to feel them inside him now, pulsing like the blood in the veins of his throat.