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Catching Up: A Collection

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CATCHING UP: A COLLECTION

By

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To my wife, Kay Cleary, for her
patience, her humor, her intelligence,
for more than I can say.

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ABSTRACT

This is a collection of short stories in fulfillment of the Florida State University Ph.D. dissertation requirement. The collection contains eight stories. Its title is *Catching Up: A Collection*.

The stories form a type of sequential narrative, in that they are ordered by the age of the protagonist. In the one story where there are three protagonists, an average of sorts is drawn. The collection, therefore, travels from childhood to old age, gaining what insights it may from each time period. In doing so, it crosses gender boundaries.

All of the stories can be thought of as related to Florida in some manner, though in “Port and Starboard Liberty” the connection is somewhat tangential, and no attempt was made to treat Florida as a thematic element. Rather, the collection is heavily concerned with the problems inherent in the parent-child relationship and the consequences of lost love.

NIGHT FISHING

The house was shadowed and quiet, Jason’s mother and step-father asleep at the end of the hall. He should have been in his own room, in his pajamas, in his bed beneath the Harry Potter poster and the shelf of action figures he’d mostly outgrown, but the street lights threw strange pale squares across the living room rug and drew him on. He slipped past the leather settee and the dark mahogany table, stopping once when the joists above him creaked, then hurried to the sliding glass door at the back.

Outside, the Florida night blew warm and muggy, freighted with the wild scents of the sea. The sky glowed, bright with a nearly full moon and the glare of the suburbs stretching away for miles. In the distance, he heard the hiss of cars passing on the freeway, the low rumble of trucks as they geared down. The houses to either side and across the canal stood dark, and he waited for a second on the back porch, poised on the keen edge of something unexplained and wonderful.

He walked across the grass to the lawn’s end, where water gleamed darkly and surged, then withdrew. His step-father’s boat, twenty-three feet of polished Fiberglas, pulled against its nylon cords and gently nudged the bumpers hung from the pier. Behind it floated a small aluminum skiff with a ten horse outboard motor mounted on the stern. Earl hardly ever used his boats. Owning them was enough, but Jason had seen how unreasonable the man could get when his belongings were disturbed, and he half-expected to find his step-father bursting from the house, his robe cinched around his ridiculous paunch and flapping at his bony knees, running at him in fury.

Jason edged out along the dock. The black water below rose in oily swells and sloshed against the pilings. All day, he had been daring himself to do this, and the deep sea pole and the lines and the thawing bait were already in the skiff, waiting hidden beneath a green tarp.

He stepped down, and the boat shifted beneath him. His hands hurried on the stern and bow lines. The waves grew louder in the dark cavern below the decking of the pier, and the smell of creosote and old fish and decaying seaweed rose from the muddy bank. Finally, the knots loosened. He sat on the stern seat and waited for the current to drag him away.

Until recently, he’d lived all his life in Fellsmere, out in

the country in a small white clapboard house fifty-five miles from the Florida coast. A red clay road curved around live oaks, and he'd thought it would all go on forever, until the day he came home from school to find his mother helping his father load box after box into the back of his old, once-red pickup. His father was thin and wore jeans and a stained tee shirt and a ball cap he'd gotten as a Christmas present from his employer two jobs ago.

"It's the littlest things," he said, then, with a tight smile. "You have to watch out. You have to pay attention. The little things will get you."

But his father never watched out. He'd been filled with enthusiasm, eager to learn construction, roofing, plumbing, dropping the first to tackle the second, getting nowhere with any of them. Only fishing had been a constant, and that, the way he did it, was hardly an activity, but more an idle dreaming on landlocked water.

Jason hadn't completely understood at the time what was happening, what he was supposed to do. He didn't know why his mother was kicking his father out and where his father might be heading. "What little things?" he wanted to ask, but there was never a chance. Now, three years later, Jason guessed he'd never know. It was a lesson, of sorts, he thought.

The tide was ebbing. Soda bottles and paper cartons, hunks of lumber and the dark shapes of algae floated beside the boat as he drifted past the houses lining both banks. After a few minutes, he started the tiny outboard and throttled back to a slow mutter. The houses on the right disappeared, replaced by grass and picnic benches, and the houses on the left grew longer, were filled with glass and set back behind royal palms looking like gray concrete columns. Then he was out of the canal and into the wider water of the bay. The breeze freshened, and a small chop lifted the skiff.

Clouds drifted across the moon, and lights circled the night, ringing him in. The freeway rose up along one shore, lined with high-rise apartments and shopping centers. Across the way sat the shipyards and docks, yellow in the glare of sodium light. Beside them, four refinery chimneys blew flame against a background of smoke. Only to the north, where tankers were anchored in the water and blocked the view, was it dark.

The bay, before the crowds moved in, once had snapper and trout, snook and grouper. Now, there were sharks, or so his step-father Earl had warned, and he imagined them moving below the black surface, deep down in the mysterious, silent dimness, their long muscled nightmare shapes cutting through the water, searching endlessly. He had Earl's one-hundred-pound test line on Earl's deep-sea reel, all stolen from the shelf in the garage. In Earl's large green tackle box, just waiting, were hooks like small anchors and pliers and weights and gloves. Hunks of mullet wrapped in newspaper and taken from the freezer lay by his feet.

A wave from somewhere hit, and the boat bounced up and slapped down, and he concentrated on his piloting.

“I don’t understand why you’re being this way," his mother had said after his father left. "You’re eight years old, old enough to understand we all have our lives to lead." She was getting dressed to go out again, and he wasn’t used to how she looked. She’d always dressed casual, like a country girl, but now she wore a short black skirt, a red scoop-necked blouse and red high heels, as if she had no need for him at all. She said she was just going dancing, but she acted silly and would never tell him why. He knew she was hiding what she thought, what she was doing. It was as if everyone suddenly lived in little boxes, popping out now and then to say hello and announce the latest disaster.

He approached a tanker, a long, sleek oiler with the superstructure near the stern. He swerved and coasted deliberately along its length. The hull rose above him, a curved metal mountain. It was colder there, and up close he could see the flaked paint, the scabs of rust bubbled against the metal, the obvious age. He wondered what oceans it had sailed, what storms it had weathered, what strange business it had performed.

Then he was past and nearing the secret center of the bay and the channel to the sea. He imagined the bottom dropping off and dark monsters heading in. Anything could happen.

He throttled back, then shut off the outboard. He grabbed the gunwale and shifted to the center seat. The skiff rocked as he moved and spun in a quarter circle, aligning itself with the current. He saw himself being carried away to a life he’d rather lead, where parents stayed together and beaches curved white and undisturbed to points thick with palms.

The mullet was still half-frozen and resisted the hook. The lead weight rolled in his hand. He cast the line a short distance and braced his feet against the sides of the boat, ready. When nothing happened, he let out more line. Come on, boy, he thought. He was ready to kill a shark or two, something his father would never have tried. Here you go. Here you are.

An hour later, he was well in the channel to the sea. Factories and warehouses rose on both sides, and a bridge arched steeply against the moon-bright clouds. He reeled in his line and started the engine and fought his way back into the bay, then tried again. There weren’t many monsters, he thought. They were scarce. You had to wait. But when they came, everything changed.

Two years ago, Earl showed up at their house and started hanging around, collapsing on their sofa, drinking their iced tea. He was a “wet-finger” dentist. He would call himself that and waggle his hands as if they were already in someone’s mouth. He was pudgy and bald, with a fleshy face. His large nose, bulbous at the tip, sloped steeply down, giving him a snobbish expression. Jason didn’t understand what his mother could possibly be

thinking.

“There are inner qualities," his mother said, smiling. "You’ll understand all about that in a few more years." As if it were a club he’d join when old enough.

Then suddenly, he and his mother were moving in with Earl, giving up their own place for something fancy on the coast. “It’s a big improvement,” his mother said, but she hadn’t warned him. She hadn’t even asked his opinion.

Outside Earl’s wide double glass doors, there were no trees, no moss swaying from black twisted branches, no red clay road leading anywhere he wanted to go, merely freeways and houses stretching for miles and a canal gouged through coral and thick with debris. He thought of himself as held there against his will.

Twenty minutes later, his pole moved in his hands. It was a nudge, a jarring, more than a bite. He tensed and braced his feet. It was there, he thought. It was about to begin. But moments passed with nothing happening, and he was taken by surprise when his line grew suddenly taut and the rod slammed down. The clicker on the reel buzzed, and the boat turned in the water. He cranked furiously, but more line went off, and he nearly dropped the pole, trying to set the drag.

The line slanted over the bow. The boat swung again and moved forward through the water, slowly at first. The pole bent and shook. Jason half sat, half crouched, lost in the power below him, the muscled fury. He pictured the rough dangerous length of a Great White moving through the darkness. The boat gained speed, heading through the night into the bay.

He was moving at a decent clip toward the shipyards, a bright yellow on the horizon, and passed a channel buoy, frighteningly close. At first, he merely held on, trying to think. He and his father, his real father, had gone fishing often, floating bobbers in black bayous thick with catfish and bass. What would his father do now? Probably smile good-naturedly, then lose everything, shark and bait and pole. The silent breeze blew strange. A few stars swung above him.

He scooted toward the stern and grabbed the anchor and threw it overboard. The boat slowed for a moment, jerked heavily, then picked up speed again, angling to the left. He wasn’t certain if he should worry about where he might be going. He considered cutting the line and imagined himself suddenly adrift, bobbing alone and desolate afterwards, like his father in that small rented room in a half-abandoned farmhouse.

His father hadn’t handled the divorce very well. "I don’t understand," he’d said. "I just don’t see it at all." He’d finished up one job, but hadn’t bothered to find another. His clothes weren’t washed. There wasn’t any food in the tiny refrigerator.

“Would you like to go to Disneyland?" he asked whenever Jason

visited, and for a while it had sounded like something they would actually do.

“When your mother comes to her senses," he’d said, "we’ll all take a trip somewhere. Just like old times." But his mother acted happy around Earl. Jason wanted to tell his father that, to wake him up, to shout that everything had gone to hell, and it was all his fault, and he couldn’t just keep coasting through life, but he’d see him slouching at the table or laughing at a television show, and somehow the words never came.

The boat veered again, then slowed, and for a moment Jason thought it might be over, that pulling in his catch was all there was left to do. The line grew slack and lay in a coil on the water. He started reeling, but gained only a few yards before the resistance became absolute and the boat started off again.

How long could this go on? he wondered. His arms hurt, and the excitement was wearing off. He saw himself, a thin boy in the middle of the night sweating to no purpose over some uncatchable sea trash swimming along the bottom of the bay. He wanted to quit, to sit quietly in the boat and stare at the moon. He reeled in a few yards, only to watch the line he’d gained dragged back out again.

His shirt was drenched, and his arms were shaking when the change occurred. He started furiously hauling in the slack. He reeled in yard after yard and thought for a moment he’d lost whatever it was, then a few seconds later it breached, rising up and up, black and thrashing in white foam.

He stared at what he’d caused. There was no shark at the end of his line, no smooth sleek torpedo shape, but rather something wide and darkly flapping. Its hands were held out high, as if in surrender, and there was a hole where its head should be. It skated across the water for a moment, then fell back in a torrent.

“Jesus," Jason said.

The line spun off the reel, only to grow immediately slack, as if whatever it was were resting again.

“What have I got?" he muttered. "What the hell?"

He took in the line as fast as he could, just to watch it head off in another direction. He pulled hard on the rod, and the monster leaped again, arcing over the water and diving cleanly back.

He wasn’t as surprised this time and noticed the pale belly and the long, whip-like tail. It was a ray, huge, wider than the boat. It leaped again, closer, and he noticed how elegant it was, how the wings undulated. Cool, he thought and reeled in yet more line, pulling it near. It dove again and again, dropping into darkness, and each time Jason forced it more easily to the surface, until at the end there was no fight at all.

When he finally got it to the side of the boat, it wasn’t moving. He was going to cut the line – no way would he get near its mouth – and let it go, but he waited for it to thrash, to

regain its strength. As the minutes passed and the vast wings lay quietly on the water, Jason finally realized what must have happened.

It had fought itself to death. How could just catching it, he asked himself, kill it? That wasn't what he planned at all. Where were the sharks? Why hadn't they hit the bait? No one would care if a shark or two died, but the ray was a broad, sad mass in the water behind him.

He sat for a moment and looked at the sky. The moon lay near the horizon, and the breeze had freshened. The lights of the bay encircled him, as if he floated at the center of a small pond. Cars drifted slowly along the freeway. The refinery towers blew fire, like distant candles. After a while, he cut the line and tied it to a cleat, then carefully started the outboard. The boat rode sluggish and low in the stern. The ray threw up a small wake.

He hadn't given much thought to getting back, and from a distance everything suddenly looked alike, without distinction. The shoreline stretched long and uninterrupted, and he wondered if he could make it home. He hugged the rickrack, passing by a chain-link fence and a row of yellow trucks under bright lights, a field littered with cable wrapped on huge spools and small pyramids of concrete pipe. Two forklifts sat in deep grass. Then the houses began again, and he relaxed.

A week ago, Earl and his mother had married at the County courthouse, making it all binding, making it all permanent, and Jason had found the two of them afterwards kissing and nuzzling in the kitchen, the man's long nose moving across his mother's face down to her neck, his belly pressed against hers. She was smiling. Her arms were around his shoulders. Jason watched it all from the living room, hating it, but unable to look away. It was raining outside, and he wondered where his father was, what he might be doing.

"Listen," Earl said that evening, sitting in his recliner, "I know you don't like me. We just aren't compatible types, I guess."

Jason stood, listening. He wanted to go to the room they were calling his, but which had nothing he wanted in it, only the space in which to be alone.

"We have to learn how to live together," Earl said. "At least for a little while. It's just one of those things." He waggled his fingers in the air.

"One of what things?"

Earl looked confused. "One of what?"

Jason turned and walked to his room and closed the door between them.

He entered the canal. The ray planed behind, but now its leading edges and the scoop mouth plowed through algae and strings of plastic and the soggy scraps of paper carpeting the surface.

Jason looked at what was hanging from his catch and wanted to wipe it clean. He didn't know what to do to fix the mess and imagined cutting it loose, but then thought of the power of it, the graceful beauty, sinking down through the oil slicks and the dark water to the mud below. Who knew what was down there, what horrible sludge had settled to the bottom?

And yet, he couldn't take it home. How would he ever explain such a thing? Earl would be furious, once he knew his precious skiff had been tampered with; his mother would be horrified to think he'd been out on the water by himself.

He towed the ray up the canal and didn't look at it any more than he had to. When he tied the boat to the small pier behind Earl's house, the creature sank. Jason climbed out and tugged it by the line to the sloping shore and grabbed it by the gills. He hauled on it in jerks and fits, until its wings were on the grass and its tail still in the water, sunk down through the debris. He couldn't move it any further and had no idea where he would go with it if he could, but it was all so sad, such a waste, with it half in and half out and far from where it really belonged. He wanted the ray alive and back swimming in the channel leading to the sea, but knew that was impossible. Some things just couldn't be changed. Some efforts just didn't pay off. He thought of his father, the man without effort, then looked around at the houses and heard the hiss of cars on the freeway, the sounds of horns in the distance. After a few minutes, not knowing what else to do, he climbed up to Earl's yard and crossed the grass to the back porch and let himself inside.

CATCHING UP

Clarissa stepped out of the air-conditioned cab and returned home to Florida, into a heat hovering over fields of grass, radiating from the white clapboard house she'd known since childhood, shimmering off the asphalt road bordered on both sides by drainage ditches and stretching away to a distant horizon. She was overdressed in a light jacket and jeans, the style she'd worn in San Francisco for years. The late afternoon air drifted damp and alive with the sound of locusts, and by now, she knew, her father would be in the Hendry County Water Management Board van, driving across the flat, fecund miles, reading meters at concrete bunker pumping stations and looking with concern at canals thick with algae. So she wasn't surprised when only her mother stood on the porch to greet her. She was dressed in baggy Bermuda shorts and a clinging tee shirt with a horizontal two inch band of blue printed across it. One hip was cocked, as if she'd been waiting a while.

"You didn't have to take a cab," she said. "We would have picked you up."

Clarissa didn't want to start it all over again and simply gave her mother a hug and a kiss on the cheek and pulled her luggage into the house.

It was hot, inside, and small. There was the floral print overstuffed chair she and her brother had fought over and next to it the long green couch where the loser always sat. The TV, though, had been replaced, was now larger, flatter, and stood in a bolted-together hutch just beneath the painting of white egrets stepping through the wetlands. There was a new throw rug and a few bright vases she didn't remember.

"Your room's waiting for you."

She followed her mother down the dark, familiar hall and looked in vain among the framed photos for her wedding or her honeymoon in Hawaii, or her husband Harold with an arm around her and behind them the white foam of a Yosemite falls. Instead, there were graduation pictures, family gatherings from years ago, where she was much younger, less touched, as if time for her had stopped when she left home.

A single bed stood in a corner of her room, too small, too sad.

"I had to move my sewing out," her mother said, pointing

vaguely around. “I did my sewing in here, where it wouldn’t bother anyone. We borrowed the bed from the Hickman’s. They said we could use it for as long as we wanted.”

Gone were the white desk and the vanity with the mirror, the rug with the daisies scattered across it. She didn’t blame her parents for getting rid of her things. No one had ever expected her back.

“It’s perfect,” she said and looked through the window, still framed with her old white muslin curtains, at the unchanged fields of golden grass and the row of distant pines.

“I never really used it much, anyway. It was just nice, that’s all.” Her mother smiled, then leaned in for another hug.

Her father came home while she was still unpacking, hanging up the clothes she knew she might never wear again. He stood at the door of her room, and she went to him and pressed her cheek against his stiff white cotton shirt. She lost herself in his embrace, and the years fell down around her.

He asked her how she was doing, if she’d settled in. His hair had thinned and climbed even further from his high forehead. He wore wire-rimmed glasses, which gave him a distant, speculative look, as if, she imagined, he heard water somewhere flowing, secret and subterranean.

“I’m fine,” she said, but thought that just hours ago she had lived another life.

Supper was at seven, as always, and they were having her childhood favorite, mangrove snapper, mashed potatoes, and asparagus. Her brother, Alan, wasn’t pleased. She sat and watched his expression as he examined the food.

“Fish,” he said. He was a heavy man, now, with dark hair that hung in his eyes. He was a year older than Clarissa, but had never moved away. He did odd jobs and collected roadside trash when the County called him in. In the evenings, he usually went out with his friends or visited a few women he knew. Tonight, he’d already announced, he was spending with his sister, the entire family together again.

She sat at the dark mahogany table the family had owned for as long as she could remember and watched her father slice his food before eating. Her brother, who had already forked potatoes into his wide mouth, ate with jaw muscles massively working. Her mother fussed with the plates of food, passing them around, setting them in front of her. It was all so familiar, as if time had reversed, and yet Clarissa still thought of her San Francisco apartment as home, could nearly sense the damp ocean air against her skin, the sounds of traffic edging beneath her window.

“The Hickmans would like to see you,” her father said. “And, of course, they send their condolences again.”

She didn’t want their visit or their condolences and knew her wishes, for a while, would have power. “I’m just going to relax and catch up on my reading.”

He looked at her appraisingly, as if she were a problem he would solve. “Later, then,” he said, and carefully speared a crumb of fish and ate it with a smile for her.

That evening, she sat at the kitchen table, working her way through a text on basic electricity. She glanced at her mother and father in the living room, on the green sofa, staring at the TV. Though she couldn’t see him, she knew her brother sat in the overstuffed chair, ignoring her and thumbing pointedly through the Fort Myers News-Press.

“Come on out here,” her mother said. “Keep us company.”

“No, thanks.”

She’d tried to read her husband’s books, browsing through them while Harold was in the hospital, but she found most of them incomprehensible, filled with page after page of math or with charts of the characteristics of various integrated circuits or with sample programs illustrating buffer strategy. So she’d decided to start at the beginning, with copper wires cutting magnetic fields, and amps as the measure of the flow of electrons. There was a purity to it all, she thought. An essence of the cosmic.

“That’s not very polite,” her mother said, during the commercial. “You should be with your family.”

Already, it’s starting, Clarissa thought. She’d known they wouldn’t understand.

* * *

Deep into the night she plunged, as if jumping into the arms of her husband, sinking down and down to the bottom, where the membranes were thin and provisional. Night had never been this way before, but Harold’s death had changed it all, turning the darkness warm, deep and rich, and she hung from shadows, where the slightest motion would drop her through to a new existence, one she could hardly imagine.

She lay in bed, her arms and legs reaching out. It was life and yet not life. She wanted to say that God was there, in the night, but the word was just a word and had no relation to the sense of presence, of power shifting like curtains moving in the unseen dark.

She was thrilled, too excited to sleep.

* * *

Her mother cooked her eggs, working silently at the stove. Clarissa sat at the table and stared out the window at the Johnson

house in the distance, small and white against the miles of grass, and the mass of clouds above it, moving quickly across a powder blue sky.

The eggs were too runny. They were always too runny. She cut into them, and strings of milky matter lifted with her fork. When she was young, she'd gotten ill from such sights. Now, she merely looked at the substance and swallowed, as if it were a penance, gladly accepted.

"You've been through a lot," her mother said and sat down in the chair beside her.

Clarissa nodded and took a bite of toast, but her mother stared at her, as if something were wrong, as if she had dribbled or forgotten to wipe her lips.

"Now," her mother said, "we've got to see about getting you on your feet."

She was surprised. "I am on my feet."

"You're not going to get over it with that attitude."

Clarissa put her slice of toast down and sat back in her chair.

"You'll never get through life being mollycoddled."

Mollycoddled, Clarissa thought, a word only her mother would use, as if she came from another century, another land entirely.

"You have to be strong. You're always giving up, always babying yourself."

Clarissa tried not to look hurt. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

Her mother reached out, suddenly compassionate, and touched her arm. "You don't even realize, probably. Mooning around, walking in a daze. We talk to you, and sometimes you don't even answer."

Clarissa tried not to smile. They had merely forgotten how she was, how she'd always been. "I'm taking a break, changing pace. That's all."

Her mother stood and went to the sink and started running water.

* * *

That morning Clarissa studied. Voltage is a unit of force, like pressure in a garden hose. Wattage is a unit of power and equals voltage times amperage, or the pressure times the current. Circuits were either in series and the current was a constant or in parallel and the current in each branch became a function of the resistance contained in the branch. There were small schematics, a symbol for a battery, another for a light bulb. She underlined the definitions, then worked out the problems at the end of the chapter.

Before the accident, before the SUV plowed into the side of his Honda, Harold had specialized in electronic data acquisition for a commercial laboratory. “It’s a form of communication, I guess,” he’d said once. He’d described how he wrote programs, instructions to signal sources and measuring equipment, and it had all appeared so wonderful, so mysterious, with orders going out and results coming back, and he’d been in charge of it all. Now, though she’d never been very good at science, she was determined to learn what she could. There was time, and it was just a matter of not giving up.

* * *

She put on her shoes that afternoon and went outside. It had been two years since she’d seen the land she still knew best. She walked in the mown stubble at the side of the narrow road, paved now, but she remembered the white coral rock and the puffs of dust beneath her feet, the tall grass to either side, the way it once had been. In all directions, there was only the sky.

In California, something had always been in the way -- high-rise apartments, hills of live oak, mountains -- but now the flat earth, the unobstructed view, struck her as significant, imbued with purpose, and she realized she’d missed it all, the grass, the clouds, the intense sun firing among the palmetto fronds, the grasshoppers leaping in front of her. She turned off onto a dirt path and followed it down the gentle slope to the sinkhole.

It had been one of her favorite childhood spots. One side was steep and curtained with tangled masses of vines hanging above the deep, aquamarine water. The other sloped gently to the yellow shallows where the vegetation had been worn away, leaving only hard, white sand. It was one of a chain, all connected beneath the earth and, on occasion, the water turned dramatically green or black, or vanished mysteriously for a while, only to bubble up again a few weeks later. The chemistry of the change had never been investigated, and the hydraulics, the surge and pull, were still largely unexplained. Clarissa had imagined an underground world of water, ruled by its own laws. Now, she walked along the edge and stared down, watching where bream idled and minnows darted away from her shadow and crayfish skittered along the gravel bottom.

She should have come here sooner, she thought. Her husband had lingered after the accident, and then he’d died, and still she’d remained in her old apartment, looking out the blurred window at the fog rolling in, making winter of a summer’s afternoon. It had been cold and dark, and at nights she would wander through the apartment, touching Harold’s clothes, his desk, running her fingers along the backs of his books. That’s when the

idea occurred to her, in the middle of the night, his presence thick around her as she stood wrapped in his bathrobe, staring at his small library.

She hadn't been a very good wife. She'd tried, but she just hadn't been prepared. She'd never been very attentive during the science classes she'd been forced to take in high school, and when Harold sat relaxed in his chair, talking about his job, she'd listened without understanding, a child held back. It was staring at his books, though, once he had gone, that made her suddenly realize she had the time, now, to catch up. She pictured his surprise, his delight, when he met her at her death and found they could converse, after all.

She watched the sun reflected in the water. A small school of bream moved out of the brightness, and she imagined them swimming under the earth, traveling from sinkhole to sinkhole. How wonderful, how mysterious, such a dark journey would be.

When she arrived back home, the UPS truck had dropped off a box of books for her: Intermediate Electronics, Simple Circuit Design, Algebra for Engineers. She took them into her room and put them on the night table by her bed.

* * *

Her father said he just wanted some company, but she knew it was more than that. She walked out to the porch and sat beside him in her mother's rocker and stared out at the night. On the horizon rose three half-circles of light where distant cities were chained along the coast. Beneath her, she guessed, water moved in subterranean channels and passed through dark, secret caverns.

"Do you want to talk?" he asked finally.

"Sure," she said.

"Your mother's worried about you."

It was as if she were fifteen again. She almost laughed, but resisted. Resistance equals voltage over current. She wasn't going to help him on this.

"We know what you've been through."

Did he? What love had he ever lost? She remembered looking for hours out of her apartment window, wondering who she was and what exactly she should be doing. For days, she'd watched muffled people below her hurrying down damp streets. They were all so knowledgeable, so purposeful. She'd wanted to cry out to them, to warn them how quickly it all could change. She wanted to laugh or to turn away.

"The thing is," he said and then stopped.

They sat in silence for a few minutes. An owl hooted off to the right. A slow breeze drifted across the porch, brushing her neck, her cheeks.

“Would you like to see someone?” her father asked, finally. He leaned forward and removed his glasses, rubbed the sides of his nose.

There was no one she wanted to see. She smiled, but remained silent.

“We think you should see someone. We think it would do you good.”

She rocked away the seconds.

“I think you’re in trouble. I think you need help. You can’t just ignore everyone. You can’t just shut us out.”

“That’s not what I’m doing, at all.” How could she explain? In what way could she show him how beautiful her studies were, how lovely her nights? “I’m growing,” she said. “I’m learning new things.”

“I don’t know what you think you’re doing.”

She reached out and touched his hand. This worry will pass, she thought, and then things will be better. “I just need some time,” she said. “You can understand that.”

He leaned forward and stared at her, the dim light glinting from his lenses. “I’ve never known how to talk to you. I probably never will.”

* * *

Alternating current goes so briefly in both directions, getting nowhere, really, merely shaking in the wire. Reactance occurs. Capacitance, inductance. The world grows weirder, the formulas more complex. During the day, she studied. During the night, she dreamed of the clean lines of lifeless moons, barren stars above landscapes of jagged rock, perfect worlds of ice, too cold for anything but beauty. What perfect submission! What perfect equanimity. Vacancy spins around emptiness with an absolute indifference approximated only poorly by the ocean in storm, by dunes of desert sand stretching off into a baking sky.

* * *

The weeks passed, and it was as if she’d been at home forever, each day flooding into the next, unnoticed and unmarked. At first, her brother had been considerate and distant, but lately he’d become more casual, rougher, and now he sat across the table from her and smirked. All she’d asked him was a simple question, if he had a date that night. She was just trying to make conversation. Her father sat to her left and appeared abstracted. Her mother, to her right, ladled gravy onto her mashed potatoes.

“I said, Alan, ‘Are you going out tonight?’”

He jerked his head back, as if surprised. “I’m sorry. Were you talking to me?” He smiled. “I guess I wasn’t listening. I must have been communing, getting in touch with my inner being.” He stared at her, as if this were a dare.

Her father snorted, and even her mother smiled.

“I guess I was just too self-absorbed,” he said in a girly voice, his hands up by his shoulders, his fingers spread, as if nail polish were drying.

She stared at her plate and wondered how she could ever have forgotten all this, how her brother was, how her family could be. Conversation was just not worth the price. After she’d eaten and helped clear the dishes, she went to her room and sat on the edge of her bed. An hour later, she was still there, having done nothing, while her books waited on the table next to the lamp, well within reach. What was I thinking? she wondered.

* * *

Her dreams ended, and she began sleeping through the nights. When she woke, frayed, unraveled somehow, she found herself dawdling over a second and even a third cup of coffee. Oscillators she’d thought fascinatingly recursive and rectifiers were admirable in their simplicity, simply slicing off half an AC cycle. Filters and clamps were monolithic, tools one could use, but now she’d progressed into the digital circuits, and the world had been reduced to ones and zeros, on and off, here and gone. There were bits collected into larger groups called bytes. She found the words offensive, the concepts puerile, the contrasts extreme. She tried to tell herself this was just a stage, but she wandered around the house for hours and spent time watching TV, unable to force herself back to her work.

“I’m glad to see you’re finally taking an interest in things,” her mother said one evening. They were watching a dating game, Keepers and Losers. Clarissa looked down at what she was wearing, jogging pants and a tee shirt. Definitely a loser. She wondered if that had always been the case, and why on earth her husband had ever married her. She tried to remember her life in San Francisco. Hadn’t she been more elegant then? She wasn’t sure, and there was no one left to ask.

“All that reading,” her mother said, “and on top of everything else. Moping around like a shut-in, being little miss princess. I didn’t think I was ever going to get my sewing room back.” She laughed, but it might have been at the TV.

* * *

Clarissa hadn’t studied in weeks, when her father asked her over dinner if she’d like to come along with him tomorrow. He was inspecting a pumping station just outside of Felda and planned on being back by late afternoon. She’d spent the day fighting with her mother, and the house had grown far too small, so she agreed and rose early the next morning, packed a lunch of bologna sandwiches and threw cans of soda in a cooler. She remembered doing this as a child, going camping, her father a dark, tall woodsman standing at the sink beside her.

The sun was just rising, burning the sky pink, when they climbed into the van. They drove on McGuire for a few miles, the asphalt scarcely wide enough for two lanes. She stared out the window, and it all came back too powerfully, the family outings, the back-seat battles with her brother. What had she done since then that mattered?

As the miles passed, the clouds lost their pink and grew larger, formed themselves into brilliant white towers arching over her, icebergs drifting down upon her in an all-encompassing blue sea.

Her father drove without talking, except to point out a hawk overhead, a snake dead by the side of the road. The fields of grass disappeared and farms began, soon to be green with snap beans and, later, tomatoes. The dark plowed rows stretched away and stopped at wind-break pines.

They turned and a canal ran beside them. She watched her father as he stared into the placid water. His face appeared thoughtful, cold, and she imagined him calculating drainage rates in gallons per second.

“It’s pretty,” she said, though ‘pretty’ wasn’t the right word at all.

He turned to glance at her. “What?”

She waved her hand across the windshield. “This.”

He peered out for a moment, as if trying to see what she saw. His eyes squinted. His chin almost brushed the steering wheel.

It was important, she thought, that he understand how it all formed a part of her, how it spread her out across the sky.

“I suppose you’re right,” he said after a second or two. “Compared to where you’ve been.”

They turned. The first canal intersected another at right angles. She looked along its length and realized they were traveling in a grid of crossed canals, a chess board marked by water.

“They’re eighteen to twenty feet deep, on average,” her father said. “This used to be nothing but swampland.”

In school, she’d seen pictures of how it had been, large savannas of submerged grass waving in the currents and quick with fish, herons lifting from flat wetland meadows and nesting in the

branches of cypress. Now, instead, there was the plowed dirt, power lines, isolated sheds and farmhouses, the occasional billboard and the canals cutting through it all.

They drove in silence, and the heat began. The air blew through the windows warm and heavy with the smell of the earth. The water beside them reflected the sky and rippled with the casual fin of gar or bass or the quiet nosing of turtles.

The miles passed, until finally they left the canals and turned through a gate onto an unpaved road, merely two ruts in the earth running through farmland. On both sides, elevated sprinklers shot arcs of water across the fields, and Clarissa imagined broad harvesters and bladed tractors booming close behind them. She wondered if they had a right to be there. The van bounced slowly along. Outside Clarissa's window, sprays of water fell, lighted by intermittent rainbows.

They broke through a row of pines, and the land rose white in front of them. Her father slowed and pointed to where the ruts climbed the hill, then disappeared.

"Pumping station's just over there."

She didn't say anything. Okay, she thought.

"You know," her father said, suddenly stopping the van. When the engine quieted, there was the sound of rushing water. "I try to understand things." He turned in his seat and looked at her. In the sunlight, she noticed that the skin behind his glasses was mottled and baggy, the creviced flesh of an aging man. She wanted to pull it smooth.

"I hate to see people suffer," he said. "I like to put myself in their place and figure out what they need, how I can help, but I'm not very good at it, most of the time. I'm terrible at it. I hardly understand anything about what makes people tick. Usually, I just hope being there, hanging around, counts for something."

She looked at her father, his face painfully open, his expression tender and baffled. There were her studies, neglected, nearly impossible now. She imagined her husband's disappointment, and she wondered if she were crying. She didn't want to cry. Hanging around, just being there. That's all she'd ever done. How could it possibly be enough?

Her father reached out and pushed her hair back from her eyes, and she fell helplessly against his shoulder. It had all been so strange. She didn't know how anything really worked, and her life stretched out in front of her, as uncertain as it had always been.

Her father edged the van forward. She sat up and held to the door handle as they bounced over deeper holes. They climbed, the tires crunching a scatter of white rock, then they turned to follow a broad canal, and she realized they were on a levee. Two hundred yards away a beige, windowless building sat surrounded by a chain-link fence. At the rear of the building, an angled pipe

the width of a car shot water into the air.

They climbed out of the van and walked along the canal. The sun was high, now, but the air cooled with each step. The water roared from the pipe in a confusion of foam, looking somehow solid until the column broke at the top of the arc and fell in a scatter of spray and mist.

“Aerating,” her father shouted above the noise. “We’re pumping it up from the aquifers.”

She stood there, consumed by the sound and the moisture in the air, and imagined the water pulled irresistibly from its secret darkness deep in the earth. It was horrible, and wonderful, and for long minutes she couldn’t look away.

COLD FRONT

Davis

Of course it was raining, he thought. Of course. It had started nearly without warning a half-hour ago, flooding up against the windshield, slowing only now and then beneath the branches of the large oaks lining both sides of the road. He waited at a light, watched the water running in swift rills along the curb, and imagined his seven year old daughter in the passenger seat of his ex-wife's Honda, riding before the storm, an ever-smaller object pushed on winds down the freeway to the south.

The light changed. He turned left on Talmidge and right on Crescent and drifted finally into the driveway. He glanced at Vicky beside him. He wasn't sure how it happened, but they'd been living together now for over a year. His luck with women didn't usually run that long.

She stared ahead at the closed garage door, her eyes half-hidden beneath the tangle of her dark hair. He sat for a minute and watched the water fall against the glass, waiting for her to say something, then jumped out of the car and ran to raise the door. Through the falling rain, he saw Sean sitting in a white plastic chair on the back porch, his booted feet propped on the small white plastic table in front of him. Already, Davis thought, it had been a long afternoon.

He dashed back damp to the driver's seat and eased the car into the dark garage. It was only four, but already the light was gone.

"He's there again," Vicky said.

He cut the engine and set the brake.

Her son was tall, with dark hair, classically good-looking, but to Davis there was always something a little soft around the cheeks, a little giving in the eyes. That's what he gets for being the son of a pediatrician, he thought. Always having an easy ride.

He climbed out of the car and walked around to her side, opening the door and waiting patiently until she swung her legs out. She had great legs, long with slender ankles beneath the short white skirt she wore as a part-time cashier at Eckerd's Drugs. It was a shame she always wore sweat pants at home.

"I don't want him here," she said.

He looked down at her dark eyes raised to him. “I know.”

When Vicky lowered her head and ran across the flagstones to the porch, he pulled the garage door closed, ducking out himself just in time.

The rain was cold and heavy, but he walked slowly across the small patch of grass and up the weathered wooden steps to the concrete slab of the porch. The roof, there, was an add-on, a sheet of yellow corrugated plastic nailed to the house and supported on four-by-four posts. Since he’d moved in, with every storm, he’d expected to see the porch roof lift and blow away.

Vicky fumbled with the lock, while Sean stood, loose-limbed and smiling, just behind her. On the floor near the table lay his backpack and beside it the maroon tube of his sleeping bag.

“I’ve been waiting for you guys,” Sean said. His hair hung in his eyes. His wide lips were smiling, his country boy expression, but the last time Sean had hung around the place, Vicky had tasted urine in her white wine and, before that, found feces wrapped in her underwear in her chest of drawers.

She opened the door, and they went inside, passing through the utility room to the kitchen. Davis knew the signs and walked around her, as she stood by the half-filled sink and patted her face dry with a dish towel, then drew her hair back with her hands. She stared for a moment at the window. Davis sat patiently on the edge of the table.

“What are you doing here?” Vicky asked and turned to face her son. She wiped her hands on her pants.

Sean smiled again, servile and fawning.

“Dad kicked me out.”

“I’m not surprised,” Vicky said.

Davis knew she was going to let Sean beg. It wasn’t any of his business, but he hated to see her do it. Just tell the boy straight out, he thought.

Sean moved closer to his mother. “I thought maybe I could stay here for a few days, just for a few days, until I can talk to him. I could sleep in my old room or on the floor. Anywhere. It doesn’t matter.”

“You know the answer already.”

The smile disappeared. Sean’s face grew tight with petulance.

“Don’t look at me,” Davis said. He knew what it meant to have no place to go, but the boy was a problem, took too many drugs, had too little control.

“Please?” Sean said.

Vicky stepped away. “I’m not going through that again.”

“I won’t be any trouble, I promise.”

“I said no. I meant no.”

Davis stood and walked up to the boy. Sean stiffened.

“You’ve gotten your answer,” Davis said.

“What the fuck is it to you?” Sean was taller, but backed a

step away.

“Don’t hurt him,” Vicky said.

“It’s time for you to go. You gave it a shot.” Davis wanted Sean to leave without a fuss. He was tired of taking out other people’s trash.

“Get the hell away from me.” Sean pushed Davis in the chest. “It’s none of your damn business. You’re just the asshole my mother is sleeping with.”

Davis smiled, then shoved the boy into the utility room. “You keep your hands off people.”

“Mom!” Sean shouted.

“Be nice,” Davis said.

The air smelled of dusty cans and laundry detergent and wet wood. Sean swung wildly, and Davis blocked it with his arm. The boy knew nothing, had never spent two years in a barracks or gone behind a dumpster with a street-fighting foreman.

Davis took him by the jacket and forced him against the washing machine. The boy’s arms flapped. His eyes were wide, and he made a moaning noise, nearly a keening.

“I haven’t touched him,” Davis said, then turned the jacket loose.

Sean fell to the floor and looked up with a twisted face.

Strange son of a bitch, Davis thought. He opened the back door and grabbed Sean’s hand and dragged him over the sill, out onto the porch. The air blew colder, and the rain beat against the yellow plastic roof.

“Be a man for a change,” Davis said. His breath came in gasps, and he wondered if he were getting too old. “Get up.” He nudged the boy with his foot.

Sean crawled to all fours, then rocked back onto his heels and finally stood. He looked out at the backyard, the thick green vegetation. “It’s raining,” he said.

“Yes, it is.” Life was tough, Davis thought. You did the best you could. “Pick up your things and get the hell out of here.”

Sean’s head lowered until the hair hid his eyes, his mother’s child. “This is my house, too.”

Davis stepped back into the utility room and closed the door behind him. It couldn’t be helped, he thought.

Vicky was in the bedroom, rummaging through her chest of drawers. “I know it’s something bad,” she said. She was bent over, and he watched the gray stretch pants and the blue blouse figured with white fleur-de-lis. She was still an attractive woman, but heavy-set, and Davis pictured her for a second, naked, bent over, still searching through her clothes.

“He’s going,” he said, and imagined stepping closer, touching her to the sound of falling rain.

She turned. “No he’s not. He never does. He simply disappears for a while.”

Three months ago, Davis had changed the locks and replaced the fasteners on all the windows. There was no way the boy could have gotten in, unless, somehow, he'd crawled through the cracks in the ceiling, or slipped in the gap between the door and the jamb.

She slammed one drawer closed and opened the next while he watched, not knowing what to do. He'd tried talking to her before. "Can I help?" he asked, thinking it was such a crappy day.

She shook her head, so he wandered into the living room and stood at the front window, looking out at the rain blowing in the street. A week ago, Carol, his ex-wife, had phoned to notify him that she was taking his daughter to Miami to live, some six hundred miles to the south. He'd been divorced for five years and assumed his ex-wife was over her bitterness, but the move to Miami was unnecessary, vengeful and deliberate.

After a few minutes, Vicky went to work on the living room, lifting one by one the flowered cushions of the couch. "He's supposed to be with his father," she said. "That's what we agreed on." Her voice was climbing. "That was the arrangement."

Davis knew he was merely supposed to listen. He wanted to hold her, but was afraid she'd misinterpret his motives. She always assumed the worst, especially during his times between jobs. It wasn't his fault that construction was slow. You had to take what you could get.

She went to the matching chair and shoved her hand down into the deep folds. She removed the cushion. There was a stain, and she held it to her nose, but put it back, as if it had passed muster.

Finally, she went into the kitchen and stood at the refrigerator lifting the green jug of wine up to the light, then poured a large glass cautiously and stared down into it. "I'd like to kill him," she said. "I really would. Can I get you something?"

It was nearly evening or close enough. The rain blurred the windows, and the lights were on. "Sure," he said. "Bourbon and seven." Wine wasn't such a good idea, considering what Sean had done the last time.

She handed him his drink, and he wandered out back, making certain the boy was gone. The lawn mower stood in a corner, its handle resting against the wall, with the old kettle barbecue, dinged and black, next to it. The house needed painting, he thought, and rubbed a few flakes from the wooden window frame, then stared out at the wet, green tangle.

He imagined his daughter in her mother's car, sitting in the passenger seat, being stolen away, while the miles between them passed. Maybe they were both staring at the rain, he thought. Maybe they were both feeling a little sad.

Vicky

It was the rain, always the rain, scratching at the windows, nuzzling the sills. There was a howling beneath the wind. When would it stop? On the weather channel, cold front after cold front marched across half the country, moving in from the west. It had been raining for hours. The wind lifted the asphalt shingles on the roof, and the water formed circular stains on her ceiling. Below, she imagined the foundations shifting in the growing mud, her tiny house moving like a boat beneath her.

"This place is falling apart," she said. The house was part of her divorce settlement, a sop thrown to get her gone, anything to move her out of the way, and she'd been after Davis to replace some dry-rotted wood along the front porch and around the windows, to reseal the roof. Trivial jobs for someone who framed houses for a living, was actually in the construction business, and had plenty of time, now that he wasn't working.

They'd eaten a quick supper, some leftovers she'd wanted to use up, and had a few more drinks, and now it was a commercial, and she wanted to remind him about the house. They were watching re-runs of "The Dating Game," and Davis was quiet, the thin muscled length of him sprawled beside her on the couch, putting up with her choices as usual, as her ex had never done.

Robert had grown to be a pudgy, obsessively groomed martinet, too worried what the neighbors might think. One simply didn't behave in that manner, he would say, with his hands drawing horrified circles in the air, until mocking him became a sport.

She never missed her husband, but every time it rained she thought about the house she'd left. She wandered in her mind through its spacious pale rooms, or strolled by the pool rippling blue in the back. In the winter, steam sometimes hung above the water. And she saw herself again in her Bill Blass gray tulle sitting too close, perhaps, to Donald, an old family friend, or hiding too well in the shadows on the patio with, what was his name? -- Frank something? -- a lawyer in town to lobby the State Legislature. It all had been rash, crazy, but part of the life, irresistibly demanded by the Coach Cooper sofa, encouraged by the sibilant whispers of the pool. It was unfair, tragic, that she'd never have such a life again.

The rain gusted, beating against the side of the house, and she thought of Sean, her only son, out in the dark, somewhere, maybe hiding in a culvert the wind blew through, but more likely at a friend's, stretched out on the floor and smoking pot. It wasn't her fault. She wasn't a bad mother. After all, he was supposed to be at his Dad's. It was his father's responsibility.

"What do you mean?" Davis asked. His voice was sharp, edged with bourbon.

She said each word slowly. “This place is falling apart.” She thought of the kudzu engulfing the back fence, a green mound now, and spreading across the yard, creeping relentlessly toward the porch.

“And what do you want me to do about it?”

He was smiling, actually smiling. She hated him sometimes, his presumption, his arrogance. “You could do a little something around here.”

She saw it forming in him, the anger, dark and billowing, growing behind his eyes, then rolling down like bad weather. He was like this, she thought. This was the man she had chosen, hoped someday to marry.

“Forget it,” she said. “Forget I ever mentioned it. Please excuse me for thinking you live here, too.” She was sorry immediately that she had said those words, and yet her heart raced, as if this were a dare she were taking.

He leaned toward her. “You could get off your dead butt and do it yourself.”

Davis slumped against the arm of the couch and was silent for a few minutes, then stood and walked into the kitchen. When he returned, standing just inside the doorway, his glass was filled again.

“I know what you’re thinking.” His eyes were red, as if he’d been crying, but he hadn’t been gone that long. She’d seen the transformation before, had been startled by it.

“You’re just upset,” she said, and thought of his daughter, a dumpy, dull girl, probably in Miami by now.

He nodded slowly. “It’s been a crappy day.” He turned and bounced his knuckles against the door frame. He’d punched through parts of the wall before and it always started with gentle taps.

“Why don’t you come here and sit down.”

He merely looked at her. “I know what you’re thinking.”

And, of course, she thought, he had no real idea. He would never guess she was thinking how silly he looked, how much like a child, a large, dangerous child. He reminded her of Sean, in his fourteenth year, the summer he’d grown nearly six inches, shooting suddenly above her.

<u>You’re sure getting small, Mom</u>, he’d said, smiling, obviously pleased, but his eyes gleamed, strange and appraising, and she’d wondered, then, what had happened to the boy she knew.

“You’re thinking I’m just a convenience,” Davis said, “something handy to have around.”

She wanted to laugh, but smiled instead. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

“Oh, I’m ridiculous?” Some of his drink slopped over on the carpet. “You think you’re so much better than me. Little miss pediatrics. Well, I know a few things you don’t.”

“Like what?”

“It doesn’t matter. You’re not in charge. You’re not

setting the agenda, like my wife always said. Setting the agenda." He smiled again, then stopped. "You're not so hot. You're getting fat, like a hog. An old lady with a hog body."

She knew he was trying to hurt her, that she shouldn't let it affect her. It was a game they were condemned to play, because she had no other choices, had packed her bags and left her choices behind. "Fuck you," she said quietly.

"People look at you, they feel sorry. They say, Here comes a sad old hog lady." He walked around the room, his legs spread wide, his arms curved out in front of him.

"Quit it."

"Quit it," he said, his voice high, mocking.

She looked at him posturing. Nothing, she knew, would do any good. This was her life, how far she had fallen. This was what she'd become. "What do you want from me?" she asked, finally.

He stared at her a moment and then stepped closer, until he was standing only inches away from where she still sat. She raised her head, stretched her neck, looking up. "What do you want?" she asked again.

He slapped her face, softly, and smiled. "What do you think?"

She pressed her cheek against his leg. Things will get better, she thought. It would be okay. She rubbed her skin against the stiff cloth of his jeans and listened to the rain beating on the roof.

Sean

Ahead, the blurred cones of street lights curved away into darkness, as the rain swept across his face, flattened his hair. The small houses to each side hid behind the black, massive branches of oak, the heavy leaves of crepe myrtle, the dangerous hedges of glinting oleander and azalea. The cold had probed his neck and ears first, nearly medical, then sought out other pockets of warmth, invaded the dryness beneath his arms, the folds and creases of his groin, until at last Sean had become the cold, had disappeared into the storm. He was frog wet, lizard slick, living in the watered leaves, swimming through the puddles back to mom's. He'd been hours away, but now was close again, in time for the big surprise.

He should have been at his father's, but that was over, at least for a while. He'd gotten drunk, swiping some of his father's Scotch, and then stoned from some stash of his own. When his father finally shook him awake, he'd sat up to find that somehow he'd peed on the maroon leather couch. He looked down at the dark stains beneath him, and it suddenly struck him funny, hilarious, heartbreakingly ridiculous. Anyone in his position

would have laughed.

A gust rushed down the street, raising a moving gray pattern against the asphalt. Sean stood beneath a tree, sheltered by the leaves, and watched it approach. It was weird, he thought, how even in the midst of rain there was harder rain. And strange, too, that now, when he had no idea what he was going to do next, no one asked him about his plans for the future. You can't just lie around the house forever. You have to apply yourself. As if application were all it took. It was as if he'd stepped into another dimension, a world next to his, but unnoticed, where people were shadowy, nearly invisible, and everything moved at a different speed.

He rounded the corner, and the road grew into a dark wet tunnel, hung with leaves. He thought of his mother, pink and prancing with her latest boyfriend. He knew what she was doing, what she was always doing. He'd seen his mother naked before, several times in fact, once as she was running to the bathroom and again as she danced with some man on the living room rug. And there was the evening he'd returned early and found her on the sofa having sex, her pink butt rising and falling to the sound of her grunts. For a moment, the thought of the bare flesh, the sweep of it, the calling comfort, made him ache. She was a bitch, and his father was a fool, and neither of them were the parents he'd wanted. A son, not a son. Here today, gone today. It made him laugh.

He slogged through the puddles, braced against the wind, and, when it was time, left the sidewalk and cut through the yards, climbing fences, skirting the plastic toys and broken bikes, the piles of lumber and composted leaves. Dogs belled, but he ignored the ones in the houses, and avoided the ones running free. He'd been there before and knew which was which.

He reached his mother's and quietly set his pack and sleeping bag on the back porch, as if he'd never left, as if Davis had never thrown him out of his own house, though the afternoon had drifted so far away, already too lost for anger.

He slipped around to the side, back into the rain, and peered into his mother's bedroom through the bottom crack the blinds always left. The table lamp was on. His mother must be bathing. Her boyfriend stood in his boxer shorts in the bathroom doorway, his shoulder against the frame. They were talking, but when Sean put his ear against the wall, the words buzzed and hummed and carried no meaning.

He waited, wanting to see them discover the six very used condoms, little water balloons of love, spaced out across the sheet, but the rain was steady and fell into his eyes, and the paint from the sill rubbed off on his hands. It had been a lousy day.

The boyfriend walked over to his side of the bed and dropped his drawers, exposing lengths of unpleasant white flesh, then

pulled the covers back, and stopped.

How great it was! Sean thought. How wild!

The boyfriend stood there, pale blob of a blurred face looking stupidly down at the bed. He called out, and Sean knew the moment had truly come, wet and slick and full of promise. They were both waiting for Mom, both eager to see her reaction. That's what guys did, Sean thought. That's what it was all about. He peered in, ignoring the rain, as his mother walked out of the bathroom.

She was wearing a short white robe. Her expression was eager, painful to see, then she looked down where Davis was pointing, and it changed, growing darker. Davis said something, and she started yelling. The words shook the glass in the window. Davis raised his hands and moved toward her.

Hit her, Sean thought. Pop her one.

But Davis stopped and drew her close, and they stood locked together for a moment, Mom looking up at her boyfriend's face.

What is this? Sean muttered and danced back and forth in the rain, in the disappointment. The rubbers, he thought. He wanted to shout to them, to remind them what was important, but they just held each other, like two people he didn't want to know, posturing and posing. He watched his mother strip the sheets and wad them into a ball and throw them in the corner.

She left the room for a moment, and Davis looked uncomfortable, standing there naked, waiting, with nowhere to go and no pockets to put his hands in. Then his mother was back and making the bed. They were talking, now, spreading the sheets, smoothing them nicely.

His mother stood by the table lamp, dramatic, staring at Davis and smiling. She let her robe fall, and for a second Sean saw his mother's flesh again, the soft jutting of her hips and the shadows beneath her breasts, the heavy mass of her butt, the dark hair curled between her legs. Yes, yes, he thought, then the light went out, and the window turned black, and his own reflection jumped at him, pale, a vast moon-like whiteness with dark hollows where the eyes should be.

He fell back, stumbling, his arms flailing. "God damn you!" he shouted. "To hell with you. All of you!" He spun in a circle, staring at the falling rain. "Bastards! Bastards!"

He ran to the porch, grabbed his pack and sleeping bag, stumbled across the yard and climbed the fence, hands full of crushed kudzu. Behind him, the lights came on, and he dropped to the other side, as if falling a great distance.

He lay there a moment, then rose and cut back through the yards to the sidewalk. The rain appeared as a shower of drops in the streetlights, and the houses stood dark to either side. Everybody was having such a fine old time, hiding in their little boxes, he thought. He imagined the walls of the houses collapsing, the roofs flying off, and all the oh-so-comfortable

people surprised and dismayed, sitting up in their beds as the skies burst above them. That would be the moment! That would be fantastic!

He grew tired of walking through the dark. He came to a strip mall and stared at the bright lights of the fast food franchises sitting in their bunkers near the street. He slept for a while on the third level of the parking structure at the Community Hospital, sitting on his sleeping bag and propped in a corner against the rough, unfinished walls. When he woke, it was still night, and he took a toke or two, looking around, getting back with things. The structure was all concrete slopes and angles, lonely in the yellow security lights, and he thought again how strange it all was. He tried to tell himself that it was simply another bad day, but the rain fell just outside the exit, and the world stretched wet and empty beyond him. What had happened? Where will I go? he wondered. And what will I do, after this?

PORT AND STARBOARD LIBERTY

“We got to go,” I said. We were sitting at one of the small tables in the San Francisco Club in Naples, Italy. We had Cinderella liberty, and the last boat back to the ship left in fifteen minutes, so I stood and took out my wallet and stuck it down one sock and pulled my cigarettes from my dress jumper pocket and put them in the other sock and removed my watch and held it in my fist. It was only a hundred yards or so to the pier, but the gangs could get you easy between here and there, especially if you weren’t feeling your best. There was usually no violence, no physical danger, but dozens of kids would surround you, crowding you in among them, and small hands would pat you down, lifting your money, testing the strength of your watch band, snagging your smokes. There wasn’t much you could do about it, but some sailors, now and then, got claustrophobic or weirded out, and then the Shore Patrol got involved, blowing their whistles and writing their reports. It was easier to take precautions, and if you lost something now and then to tell yourself it was the price you had to pay. But it didn’t make you feel any better toward the Italians.

But Hamp just sat there, as if I hadn’t spoken at all. He was a thin guy, fresh out of boot camp, a little too wild-eyed for my tastes, but he was a radarman striker, and that has to count for something. We’d been out to sea for months, and now drinking all night, and Hamp had been throwing back the beers pretty fast, telling me how much he hated the Navy. I told him we all have our problems. Mine was the wife.

“How are you doing?” I asked, knowing he was pretty wasted.

He looked up at me in a sorrowful way. “I’m not feeling too good,” he said.

But drunk is a Navy tradition. Just last night, when the Starboard Section came back from liberty, one of their men fell asleep with his head still in the lower compartment trash can, having previously blown chunks in there once or twice. For hours, we had to hear his moaning inside the can, hollow and strange sounding, as if something dead were rising. And the officers got drunk on a regular basis, as well, staggering up the gangplank, shouting “Attention on Deck” and then bursting into giggles or trying to be cool with their hands in their pockets, all relaxed and casual and human for a change. So, I didn’t think anything of

it, at first.

I helped him from the chair. “Let’s go, sailor,” I said. “Hup, hup, hup,” which might have been exactly the wrong thing to say, because he sat back down. “There’ll be other nights,” I said. He dismissed this with a wave of his hands, but I grabbed him under the arms and stood him on his feet again, and we started walking to the door.

“You know what makes me really sick?” He stared at me a moment.

I shook my head.

“The only thing you ever talk about in the Navy is the Navy.”

Which is pretty much true and put me in mind of the time we were steaming in to Trondheim, Norway. It was winter, and it had rained heavily just that morning, and when we pulled up to the pier the entire city was covered in ice -- the roofs, the statues, the fences, the streets. We’d been out a long time, and to come from a world of gray ocean and gray sky to see the ice gleaming and sparkling in the sun, an entire crystal town, was simply amazing. And there were women on the pier, actually waiting for us, blond, beautiful, eager. I wanted to tell Hamp all about it, how such things could really happen. And I planned on doing exactly that, but when we got to the door, he stopped.

“I don’t want to go back.” He stood there, shaking a little, and looked at me with large eyes, almost pleading.

“You’ll feel better in the morning,” I said and guided him through the door.

Outside, the night was cool, and for a few minutes we were left alone with the neon lights of the bars along the narrow, cobblestoned street and the old buildings rearing up all around.

Then the first boy appeared, stepping out from the shadows. He was selling small winged penises poured from lead and hung on a cheap chain. Why, I have no idea, but you could get almost anything you wanted and a lot you didn’t want in Naples. The boy also had playing cards and, for some reason, a bolt of cloth that looked like silk. I shook my head to all of it, and we walked on, and suddenly there were thirteen or fourteen of them around us, smiling and jabbering and waving their arms and laughing, thin, dark-haired boys, some without shirts. You could tell them to fuck off, and they’d pretend not to understand. Nothing you could do would change a thing, as they closed in tighter and tighter.

“Cigarette?” some of them asked, as if you were going to stop and pull out a pack and offer them one. I didn’t pay them any attention, but kept walking steadily, as if they weren’t there all around us, and more of them every minute. I could tell Hamp was getting upset.

“Godamn,” he said, quietly. “God fucking damn.”

Then he started pushing at them, lunging forward with his arm out, but they all backed off until he put his arm down, and then they crowded in again. I could see their hands working on his

clothing, but there wasn't anything I could do about it.

"John Wayne," one of the kids shouted, and everyone laughed.

Then Hamp started screaming, harsh, high sounds that must have hurt his throat, and the Italians backed away. He windmilled his arms and spun in a circle. The boys stared at him a moment, uncertain, then smiled broadly. They shouted and gestured. They shook their hips and fingered their chins and barked with raucous laughter. As Hamp lunged forward, they fell back in a happy, shrieking scramble. The noise echoed from the brick walls around us and the street filled with sound. Then, in the distance, I heard the Shore Patrol whistles blowing, short, imperative blasts, and the taunting died. One of the older kids said something in a dismissive, guttural Italian, and they all turned and simply walked away, their arms around each other's skinny shoulders.

We waited until they were gone. Hamp trembled. His hands shook and his eyes were wet. I looked at him for a minute. "What the hell were you thinking?" I asked, but didn't really expect an answer. "You can't let them get to you like this," I said, just to be saying something.

We started walking and reached the square, where the street ended and the statue of someone riding a horse stood in a pool of water. To the left was the chain link fence and the Shore Patrol guarding the entrance. Beyond that lay the quiet brightly lighted length of the concrete pier.

Hamp started to backpedal a little, and I had to move him forward with my arm. The guards, with night sticks and armbands and badges, stared at us for a moment as we passed through the gate, and I suppose at least one of us might have been a pretty sorry sight.

We waited at the end of the pier with a few other sailors. Our ships -- there were six of them -- were moored together about a half mile offshore, the *Alacrity* and the three other minesweepers we sailed with, the *Brumby*, a destroyer, and the *Yosemite*, a tender. It was the *Yosemite*'s boat we were waiting for.

The bay was calm, and at night, when you couldn't actually see what was below the surface, it was pretty, with the city lights in a half circle up the hillside and the holiday lights rigged on the ships all reflected on the water. Hamp was quiet, just standing beside me, and I started to think about the wife and wondering what she was up to, back in Pensacola.

Sherri is a touchy girl, and we'd been having problems. She has long, blond hair, a nice pixie smile, and a country way of looking at things. She's a bit heavy now, but most of the time wonderful to be with, except when she gets into one of her moods. We've been married over four years, but I'm not sure you should count the months I've been away. I know I leave her alone too much, but the ship sails when it sails. Still, I stood on the pier and stared at the lights on the water and pictured her

enjoying the Florida mystique, sugar sand beaches and the clubs of Panama City just a few hours away, the sun and fun seeming so distant, so glitzy now. I wondered if there were another man with her, taking her places. It happens, that sort of thing, to sailors all the time.

The liberty boat was a spot of white in the blackness, growing larger, then it turned broadside, and I saw the wake and the coxswain sitting at the stern. A Captain's flag flew jauntily from the bow, and, as always, I thought what great duty it would be, piloting the thing, plying back and forth, out in the fresh air, with the wake following hard behind.

The boat tied up to the pier in a wash of foam, and we got in one by one. I helped Hamp, who looked nearly panicked, down into the boat and along the seats and sat him on a cushion roughly amidships. We bobbed a bit while waiting for the stragglers and stared at the massive concrete pilings and the dark damp caverns between them, and then we were off.

"This sucks," Hamp said quietly. His white hat was down around his eyes.

"What does?"

"No, no, no," he said, staring behind us.

I looked back, but there was only the sodium lights on the pier receding into the distance and, of course, Naples itself, with its fainter lights strung across the hillside.

"I'm sorry," he said, standing up, "but I've got to go."

I sat there. The words made no sense at all. Then he started for the rail and actually had one leg hooked over and was stepping down into the water before I realized what was going on.

"Hey!" the coxswain shouted. The engine slowed.

I gripped Hamp around the hips and held on. The boat was suddenly very busy. Someone yelled to grab him, but I was already doing that.

"I'm going home," Hamp said in a reasonable kind of voice.

The boat had come to a stop, and the wake caught up, and we wallowed for a moment. Hamp shook and struggled on the rail, and I held on. Finally, some sailor from one of the other ships grabbed Hamp's shoulders and arms, and we pulled him back inside and threw him on the deck between the seats.

"Keep that stupid son of a bitch in the boat," the coxswain called out, apparently to me.

Hamp had lost his white hat. I looked over the side and saw it bobbing, a pale saucer on the black water, and debated reaching for the thing and figured to hell with it. He was lucky it wasn't more. He sprawled on the deck, not sobbing, but with tears running down to his lips. He asked to go back, for someone to please take him back, and I thought how glad I was I wasn't him.

"What the fuck's wrong with this guy?" one of the sailors beside me asked, and I just shrugged. We all stared at Hamp for a while, waiting, but he had settled down, so I half watched him and

half enjoyed the ride.

We crossed the open water briskly, but slowed when we approached the mooring, the six ships rafted together and anchored at the center of the bay. We drifted by the bows, one by one. Ships are most impressive when viewed from the water line. They rear up above you like monstrous metal acts of God; and to see your home from this angle gives you a funny feeling, like you never really noticed how things were built, like you had taken too much for granted.

We drifted around the bows to the very end, to the *Yosemite*, and along her hull to amidships, where the rope ladder dangled into the water. There was no gangplank because there was no pier, and climbing the thin slats of wood swaying back and forth between the ropes made you stop a moment and consider.

I forced Hamp to go first. He was still saying, “No, no, no,” and as I watched his slick black shoes above me slipping on the rungs, I pictured him falling into me, us both hurtling down into the water, into the liberty boat. He stopped once, froze up, and I shouted at him to get his ass in gear, wondering what I was going to do if he didn’t, but we finally made it to the top and crawled onto the main deck.

“Permission to come aboard,” I said, saluting the flag at the stern and the quarterdeck watch standing at the podium in front of me.

There was no response, and I realized the watch was looking at Hamp swaying back and forth, waiting for him to obey the protocol.

“Salute the man,” I said quietly.

And that did it. Hamp charged the podium and knocked the watch down, though the man was considerably larger. Probably, he was taken by surprise, and he was still on the deck when he started reaching for his gun.

“Are you out of your fucking mind?” I shouted, not knowing if it was Hamp or the watch I was talking to, but by that time Hamp was running, and the watch scrambled to his feet and hit a switch on the wall sounding General Quarters. All over the ship, klaxons blasted on and on and on. Sailors appeared at the entrance to hatches, half-dressed, but already racing to their stations.

Jesus, I thought. Jesus H. Christ. Fucking new guys.

Hamp had headed toward the bow, running up the slight incline, then disappeared around a jut in the superstructure. I followed him, thinking there was little choice, that otherwise someone could get killed, but when I turned the corner, he wasn’t on the weather decks anymore. He had gone inside.

The passageways on a large ship are confusing, and I don’t remember exactly where we went. Down narrow corridors, and through spaces jammed with electronics and offices and berthing quarters. The klaxons were going, then they fell silent, and the P.A. started shouting about intruders and madmen, and some of the

sailors I saw were standing with chairs raised above their heads and wrenches in their hands. There was screaming down the passageways, and when the ship itself shuddered and shook, lurching back and forth, it was like it was all coming to an end, that some sort of moment might be at hand.

I learned later that an engineman on my own ship, having the midnight watch, was taking a few minutes to show a striker how power was applied to the screws. When the alarms went off, he apparently panicked and accidentally filled the clutches, and the screws started turning, and all six ships moored together strained at their anchor chains, trying to head out into darkness.

I grew confused, and lost Hamp for a while, then followed the sounds, until at last we burst out onto the weather decks again. Behind us, cables snapped with the sound of rifle fire and bollards smashed into bulkheads with a deeper thump. I saw Hamp climbing, racing up a ladder, followed by a gang, some in whites, some in dungarees and some still in their shorts. They were shouting at him, and few minutes later they all vanished into the wheelhouse high above.

By the time I got there, five or six medics with needles in their hands were trying to get to his arms or legs, and several sailors thrashed with him on the deck, wrapped up all together beneath the ship's wheel. Finally, they quieted, but for their cursing. They stood, and Hamp was the only one still down. His face looked up at the overhead. His mouth hung open. His eyes stared, and I thought for a moment they'd killed him. Then two of the men moved him around, putting his arms into a straight-jacket, and I assumed the guy was still alive.

An officer stood on the bridge looking down at the group of men. "Who the hell is this?" he asked finally.

I stepped forward and gave him my name.

I learned later that Hamp had a girl he was worried about losing, but it was the Seconal they found in his pocket that got him out of the Navy. They took him away, and I never saw him again.

But two days after that, just before liberty went down, the Operations Officer walked up to me and put his hand on my shoulder. It's never good news when they touch you. He was holding a clipboard, and I guessed what the matter was.

Every few weeks or so, the Navy sends to its forces afloat the divorce pending list. This time my name was on it. Radarman Third Class Korvis, Alan R. I'd been sending my wife gifts from every port we hit, and letter after letter, telling her how our life wasn't that bad, how I'd probably get shore duty soon and not have to go out to sea again, but that afternoon she kicked me in the stomach and made all my efforts ridiculous. I looked at my name and signed in the blank space beside it, and it came to me that there was now no reason to go home, no home to go to, as if the world had rearranged itself beneath my feet. All the ports

now would be nearly the same.

When liberty finally went down, I found myself in the San Francisco Club again, this time sitting on a stool at the bar. I was drinking too much beer and staring at my white hat in the mirror when a sailor from one of the other ships, a big, hefty guy, sat down beside me on my right.

We introduced ourselves. I bought him a round, and he bought me one, and things were going along okay, when he asked me if I'd heard about the fucked up ship that tried to get underway while anchored. My uniform has the name of my ship on a half-circle patch sewn at the top of my sleeve, but it was my left sleeve, and he couldn't see it, and I was grateful for that.

"No," I said and then tried telling him about the time we lost steering while entering the Straits of Gibraltar. "This ain't no shit," I said. "There we were in the largest shipping lane maybe in the world, and it's night, and we're veering all over the place, and we're going to collide with God knows what, but our generators are down and the only thing we can do is sound the fucking horn."

He appeared interested, so I bought him another beer and told him the entire story, and he bought me one, and we got along together pretty well.

LAKE JACKSON

Ellen was hunkered again at the apartment kitchen table, mooning over a travel magazine, -- blue island mountains, a solitary woman in a red string bikini stepping daintily from white sand into tranquil turquoise water. Ellen's black hair curtained her face. She'd been happy at the beginning of our marriage, bouncy, ebullient, but I'd forgotten my vows a single time, and though I was certain she never knew, our marriage shifted beneath my feet. I suspected she was about to leave me. I always guessed she wanted to.

She flipped the page to an ad for Disney World.

"We can go there," I said. We lived in Tallahassee and it was just a hundred miles or so to the south.

"You always say that."

I wasn't sure if I did or not. "I mean it."

She ignored that, and I knew I should leave it alone. "You never enjoy yourself, anyway. No matter where you are. At least, when I'm around."

We'd talked about her affairs, her numerous infidelities. She denied they ever existed, and it was true that I had no evidence of any kind. She claimed she thought I was making it all up, crazy with my insecurity, no longer the man she'd married, but I often imagined her in the terrible grasp of others. It was only reasonable she would want that.

She closed the magazine, and the room grew smaller. It was thrilling that it had begun again.

"Just what the hell do you mean?"

I wasn't really sure. I was just talking. "You're not happy. It's like you're marking time. I can tell."

Then she leaned back, and I knew the steam wasn't there, that she was about to break my heart again. "This is getting old, Porter. I don't want to play anymore."

I looked at the yellow porcelain teapot sitting on the stove and the calendar on the wall next to it, showing a snow-covered cabin nestled among blue-white crags. There's no telling what I might have said, then, if the phone hadn't rung.

My mother was on the line. It was Thanksgiving and she wanted me to come over; she wanted the whole family together. She knew I hated such things.

"Please!" she said, and already her voice had changed.

“I don’t think so.” I wanted to be patient and kind.

“Please, please, please, please.” She’d gone into her childish register, a singsong cant she must have thought cute.

“Mother,” I said.

Then she cried, and her words became jerky and constricted. “You don’t understand. You have no idea, what it’s like. You have to help me. I can’t be with him, any longer.”

Over the years, she’d said my father beat her and withheld her food and locked her for hours in closets, or urinated on her and pinched her arms, or would sneak up behind her and scream in her ear, trying to give her heart failure. She said once he claimed to be dead, returned from the grave, and proved it by floating above her bed that night. She swore he hid her medication and refused to let her watch her favorite shows on TV. I didn’t really see how my father put up with it all, but it was his problem, not mine.

“There’s turkey,” she said, shouting.

“I’m hanging up, now,” I said.

The sobbing grew constant, and I knew it would last for long minutes. I pulled the phone away from my ear.

“We should go,” Ellen said. “It’ll do you good.”

I put the receiver back in its cradle. “What?” I asked. “What?”

* * *

The day was warm, but not yet oppressive. Outside the car, a slight breeze blew, lifting the leaves of the overarching oaks, ruffling the screens of kudzu. Shadows flashed pleasantly across the windshield. We drove along a white-fenced pasture and a distant horse cropping grass and then the state marker for the Indian mounds. An unknown tribe, one which had disappeared before the start of Florida’s written history, had erected tall hillocks covered with grass surrounding an open courtyard. As we drove by, I pictured how it might have been, with ancient men and women walking this very land, living a life forever hidden, and gone with hardly a trace.

“You know what your problem is?” Ellen asked.

She turned to me, and I wondered how many conversations had begun that way.

“You’re cut off, emotionally,” she said. “You keep everyone at a distance.”

She was so wrong. There was always someone crowding in, pressing me, handing me one outrageous demand after another. I was safe only at work, dressed in my pressed white smock and surrounded by benches of obedient electronics.

“It’s been way too long since we’ve seen your folks.”

I let that stand, as well.

We went up Meridian to Miller's Landing, then turned onto the unnamed single-lane asphalt road. In my youth, there'd been nothing but red clay, dusty in winter, boggy in summer, and now the way was paved. We went to the end of the cul-de-sac, one of the few that the developers of malls and fast food franchises had somehow forgotten, then parked in front of my parents' weathered clapboard house. The white paint had faded, and it was still on blocks, awaiting floods no longer occurring. The yard in front was dry and stubbled with brown grass and littered beneath the huge pine with needles. To either side were empty lots, a tangle of oaks, kudzu and trumpet vine. Behind the house, I knew, lay the lake, decorative and deeply disturbing. Every twenty years or so, it would disappear, sucked down into a sink hole, and then just as unaccountably return. It was full now, the water lines high against the myriad cypress knees, but just a year ago it was dry, and the city staged a five mile race across it. They called it the Bare Bottom Run.

I turned off the engine and watched my father bound down the steps and run to meet us. He was that way, even at eighty-three, a tall, energetic man with shocked white hair above bice blue eyes. He held Ellen's door open.

"Now, you behave yourself," my wife whispered, as she put on her best family smile and stepped out.

They hugged, his hands low on the waistband of her slacks.

"How are you?" he asked her. "You're looking wonderful."

"Fine," she said. "Just fine."

"Porter," he said to me, nodding, as if about to sell me insurance. He appeared delighted.

"Father."

He was holding up well, I thought, for a man old enough to have fought in World War II. As a child, I'd always wanted to hear him talk about the battles he'd been in, but he'd pushed me away whenever I asked. Also, I'd heard, when the war was over and he'd just gotten home, was still in his uniform, there'd been an argument with another soldier at the bus station. He'd beaten the man so severely that, in spite of his service to his country, he'd been put on a county work crew for six months, set to scything the underbrush at the road's edge. The family never spoke of the war or of this, but I often wondered about the man he'd been.

Now, he slapped me on the back and we walked single file up the flagstone path to the house, where they all were waiting.

"It's been a while," my father said. The sweet odor of his after-shave spread around us.

* * *

It was dim inside. Dark paintings of European harbors hung on the paneled walls, as always. The sofa was new, but the old chairs, blood mahogany straight backs, still stood in the corners. Though no one was watching, the TV was on. It was set to the Style channel and muted. Thin women in sequined and embroidered dresses strode down a silent runway.

The rest of the family were in the kitchen. My sister Elizabeth, portly, scented with powder and fruit-flavored shampoo, pushed pots around the stove. My brother Jason and his wife, Deborah Ann, sat at the table. Jason looked puzzled when he saw me. "Who is this?" he asked. "It's been so long, I can't quite remember." He smiled and waved. "Hi, Porter!" He returned to picking the cashews out of a bowl of mixed nuts and popping them into his mouth. Deborah Ann opened cans and poured them into an aluminum pot and stirred the mixture with a large wooden spoon. She looked up and smiled briefly. I could hear the kids in the back yard and through the muslin curtains saw the grass stretching down to the dark lake.

My mother sat in her wheelchair at the far end of the table. Her hair was the color of New England stone, and thinning. Her eyes moved restlessly in their sockets. "Son!" she cried.

They all crowded around me. I walked over and kissed my mother's dry hollowed cheek.

"We'll be eating in a half hour," Elizabeth said. "How are you doing, brother?"

Better than her, I thought. She was a sad woman, overweight and divorced. She worked as a school counselor and had a six year old boy to care for. Her life was filled with problems – "challenges," she called them. "Fine," I said.

"To what do we owe the honor?" my father asked. He'd taken a seat beside Deborah Ann and leaned back in his chair.

I debated telling him the truth, that Mom and Ellen had badgered me, tag-teaming me into dropping by. "Just thought it was time," I said.

He looked at me with those unblinking eyes, the gaze I remembered from childhood. His expression still made me uneasy, and I was glad when my wife started bubbling around, as she always did when she was being social.

"Is there anything I can do?" she asked Elizabeth and leaned over the stove to peer into a skillet. "It all looks so delicious."

"You're a guest," my father said. "Have a seat. Relax."

She sat beside Jason and asked how his job was going. He was General Manager of a tire store. How well could that possibly go? But I wasn't doing much better. I worked in a quality assurance lab, calibrating test equipment, and business was bad. The items simply weren't coming in. There hadn't been a promotion or even a raise in years, and now they were talking about layoffs. Each day, we'd stand by our benches in our professional, ironed white

coats, looking at the empty shelves and wondering if anyone still remembered we existed.

Ellen next wanted to know what new projects my father had started. Her hands drew elaborate figures in the air in front of her. She smiled. When Elizabeth finally asked someone to go fetch the kids, I volunteered.

* * *

Jason's two children, a buzz-cut boy and a girl in braids, squatted in the earth by the back porch. They were digging a hole, perhaps to bury the small plastic cars grouped around them. I told them to go inside and then headed down the slope of the lawn to the lake.

David, Elizabeth's son, squatted between two cypress knees at the water's dark edge. He floated debris on the surface and bombed it with small pebbles. He appeared lonely, a little abandoned, waiting for something to happen.

The lake still disturbed me, frightened me when I saw its darkness, the tannin-stained water, and thought of its depths sinking into a maze of vast unexplored caverns. As I watched David's bent blond head, I realized there must have been a time when I, too, sailed leaf boats or searched the shallows for crawfish and salamander, not knowing any better.

Then I remembered the overpowering smell of newly cut grass and the cypress screening the sun. There was water on the tips of my fingers. I squatted, bent over, and without warning, something hit me in the back, and I fell into the lake, sinking helplessly down into the cold darkness. I writhed, spun, and above me saw the rippled surface and the wavering face of my father standing on the shore, his arms outstretched.

But then it faded, and a few seconds later it was all simply something horrible I'd done to myself. The sun beat down, and locust buzzed in the distance. I cleared my throat and told the boy it was time to eat. He raised his head and squinted up at me. His lips pulled back in resignation, then he pushed himself to his feet and walked with me to the house, his small body companionably strolling beside mine.

"Have you been here long?" I asked.

He was silent.

"Have you noticed anything weird going on?"

"What?" he asked. His face shone almost impossibly innocent.

I rested my hand on his shoulder.

* * *

Mother sat in the dining room at one end of the extended table. She was in her wheel chair and wore a short-sleeved black dress with white trim. Her mouth was working, but her plate was empty. My father sat opposite her and smiled broadly when Elizabeth set the turkey down in front of him.

"It looks great, honey." He put his arm around her thick waist.

Elizabeth nodded, her face flushed and pleased. "Everyone together again, of course it looks good."

The children sat at a nearby card table, and she rumpled David's hair as she went back to the stove. She brought out gravy in a ceramic boat and stuffing scooped into a bowl. It was sad that she worked so hard for so little in return, and her life depressed me more than usual. She sat down. Jason droned on and on about the tire industry, how the recession, which we were all trying to put behind us, might affect his yearly gross.

My father carved the turkey and carefully set the slabs on the platter, then bowed his head and waited. We folded our hands obediently. The silence extended. Come on, already, I thought.

"Would you please?" my father asked Jason and pointed to the end of the table.

My mother was still lost in thought. Her eyes were open, but her head tilted back, as if something fascinating were occurring on the ceiling. She was often this way, -- reliving her childhood, she'd said once.

She was raised in Portland, Oregon and liked to recall the days driving with her parents up Mt. Hood. She'd described the road for us, a narrow swath between thick firs, with always a soft rain falling. She'd be in the back seat, young eyes open, breathing in the cold, pure air. Just above the rain, the trees were sheathed in ice and sparkled against a cobalt sky.

Jason grabbed her shoulder and gently shook her. She jumped in her chair, her eyes wide, ready to scream, then looked at my father. A moment passed. She closed her mouth, folded her hands, and bent her head.

"Even the crazy," my father said, "are invited to praise the Lord."

I didn't like what he said about mother, and I hated the family prayers, perhaps because I knew he enjoyed them immensely. He drew them out, turned them into sermons, while the food cooled on our plates, making the whole thing more like discipline than prayer.

When it was over, I sat and ate quietly. Ellen filled in for our side of the family. She was obviously intent on being the perfect guest, asking questions when the conversation lagged, ignoring me completely. Now and then, she'd give me a puzzled frown, as if my behavior was somehow calling attention to itself, but I simply sat there and watched my father's hands as he slowly

sliced and ate his food.

After the main courses, Elizabeth served pumpkin pie with scoops of vanilla ice cream. When we finished, my father complimented her again, then stood and walked over to my mother, bent down and released the brakes on her chair.

"She wants to go," he said, "where it's all more comfortable." My mother looked abstracted, flustered, but vaguely pleased. As my father wheeled her from the room, I noticed a small yellow bruise on her arm, just below the sleeve.

"Well, little brother," Jason said, sliding his chair back, "shall we join them?"

* * *

The living room was lighted by the shaded glow of a small tasseled lamp and by the flickering colors of the TV, now showing the skyline of some ancient European city. The new sofa, covered in a deep green flowered print, stood against the wall. Mother was wheeled to a position beside it and locked into place.

"Would you like something to drink?" my father asked her.

She moaned and stared at the images on TV.

He smiled at my brother and me, his eyes sly and secretive. "We can take that as a no."

I wanted to leave. The walls were too close and the room too crowded. Elizabeth brought out coffee in large mugs, then returned to the kitchen where she and Ellen were cleaning up. My father stood in front of me, smiling and displaying the bottle, then added the jigger of bourbon the holiday required. Jason sprawled beside me on the sofa, his thigh pressed against mine, his legs kicked out in front of him. He smacked his lips as he sipped. On my other side, my mother sat and watched the silent television. Her words that morning kept coming back, the sobs, the anguish, the accusations.

My father sat stiffly in one of the blood mahogany chairs, his feet firmly on the carpet. He asked about my work and I told him things were sure to pick up, once the economy got going again. He shook his head in sympathy. He'd been retired for fifteen years now, and I guessed he was only making conversation. Jason mentioned a boat he was thinking of buying, as soon as Deborah Ann agreed, and he and my father reminisced about fishing in the Gulf, while I quietly drank my coffee.

When Ellen and Elizabeth finally joined us, -- Ellen looking tired and wiping her hands on her slacks -- I excused myself and slipped down the hall, past the bathroom to the door of my parents' bedroom.

The room was dark and familiar, crowded by the heavy, black four-poster bed and the matching chest of drawers. I breathed in

the smell of Listerine and age and remembered the times as a child I had stood in that exact spot, as if at the entrance to a cave, begging to be let in. Now, I simply entered and rifled through my father's socks and underwear, my mother's brassieres. I dropped to my knees and stared under the bed at the clots of dust, not knowing what I was looking for, but hurrying, knowing something was very wrong.

I climbed back to my feet and spun in slow circle at the center of the room. Then I realized that the pictures on the walls had changed. There had once been a series of framed photographs of my parents taken in the forties and fifties, the largest one just before the end of World War II, when they'd gotten married. They were standing poised in a ballroom. Behind them rose a three-tiered cake. My father was in uniform and had his left arm around my mother's waist. She was smiling shyly. Smaller, less professional shots had shown them in front of their house or on vacation, standing at the southernmost point of the Florida Keys. Now, the walls were either bare, faded around the rectangles where the photos once had been, or covered with landscapes, oceans crashing onto shore, cowboys leaning on a fence and staring into the desert distance. My father's taste. I imagined my mother staring helplessly at the blank hostile walls, with nothing to help her remember the important moments of her life.

In the closet, I found what I was looking for. The clothes, mostly my father's, were hung on the left and on the right, leaving a large empty space in the middle. I stepped inside and closed the door. The air was thick and redolent of must and old fabric and the faint scent of lilacs. Light seeped faintly through the louvered slats, and I imagined being shut in there for hours. My throat constricted, as if I were drowning.

* * *

My mother stared at the ceiling and laughed, huge peals of merriment, going on and on. All I'd said was, "Mom, I'm taking you to live with me."

She sat in her wheelchair by the sofa. Her head wobbled with hilarity. I wanted to cover her mouth with my hand.

"Please stop," I asked, nearly panicked, but she kept laughing, until at last my father got up and walked over to where I stood beside her.

"What the hell are you doing?" he asked.

I wasn't sure, but knew it was drastic and horrible. He leaned over me, and words refused to form in my mind. All I could feel was a tightness in my head, as if I were once again a disobedient child. My father smiled, pleased, delighted with

something, and I hated him, then.

"I'm taking Mom," I said finally. "I'm getting her out of here." It sounded like questions, my voice shook so badly.

"What?" Ellen said, after a few seconds had passed. "What did you say?"

My mother continued to laugh, loud and raucous, hysterical and ecstatic.

"You're doing what?" Ellen asked again.

I knew this would most likely spell the end of our marriage, never too strong to begin with. I looked at my wife's surprised expression, the face I knew so well, and I wanted to spare her this, but couldn't.

"Please," I said to her. "I'm sorry. For everything." For a moment, I imagined her again in my arms, my life the way I'd hoped it would be.

My father stepped closer. "You're getting your mother upset."

"I'm getting her out of here." I looked over at Jason, no longer slumped in his chair. He was sitting up and smiling.

My father raised his eyebrows, obviously confused.

"I know what you've been doing," I said. "I saw the proof."

"What <u>are</u> you talking about?"

I wasn't absolutely sure. I stared at him. His blue eyes were still merry, though his mouth was no longer smiling, as if he were two different people and each pretended a different emotion.

"I've seen where you lock her up."

Mom quit laughing. "The mountains are so beautiful," she said in a girlish voice.

My father's face grew hard, and even though he was old now, I thought of that time at the train station when he'd so badly beaten another soldier. "You have purely lost your mind, son."

My voice rose, gained power, finally. There was something inside me exulting. "I was in your bedroom," I said slowly, carefully. "It's all true, everything. I saw the space in the closet."

My father frowned. "What about it?"

"It's where you lock her up."

He smiled grimly. "It's where we keep her wheelchair, when she's in bed."

It sounded like a lie, and there were the missing pictures, and my mother's words. I wanted more. I needed more.

My father turned his back and walked away, his arms swinging at his side, then he spun to face me. "I can't believe it. I just can't believe what the hell you're thinking."

Something inside me had broken loose, and I was suddenly slipping down and down.

"My own wife? Who the hell do you think you are?"

"The family idiot," Jason said.

"You just shut up!" I shouted at my brother.

My father swung his arms, as if he were fighting a midget. “Son of a bitch!” he said over and over again. His head shook. I couldn’t remember ever seeing him this way, and yet somehow it was all so familiar.

He charged me and knocked me back against the wall. “You little bastard,” he said. His arms wrapped around me. His mouth was close to my ear. His chest pressed against me, while his knees worked on my thighs, my groin. “My baby boy,” he whispered in a strange falsetto. “You can’t do that to my baby boy.” He grabbed my head and slammed it against the paneling.

Ellen shrieked, and then my father screamed in a thrashing of arms and legs, as Jason pulled him away from me.

“God damn it, Dad!” Jason shouted. My sister stood at the door to the dining room with her arms crossed in front of her stomach and cried. My father grunted and whined. His feet slammed into the coffee table, knocking to the floor a blue ceramic bowl filled with red artificial roses.

I stood, unable to move. A few seconds later, Ellen grabbed my shoulders and turned me toward her.

“Are you hurt?” she asked.

I wasn’t sure. “I’m fine,” I said. Over her shoulder, I watched my father, a thin, impotent old man, struggling in Jason’s grip.

“Now, Dad,” Jason said. “Behave yourself.”

“I hate this,” Elizabeth said, her face wet and twisted. “I hate it so much. We can’t even have one single holiday together.”

Ellen stood near me and held my hand tightly. She was standing by me, right by my side. The rest were all across the room.

“Are you going to leave me?” I asked Ellen, after a few seconds had passed. I was simply gathering data, assembling something in my mind.

She looked at me strangely. “What?”

“Are you going to leave me?”

“You’re all insane,” she said, her voice rising. “It’s genetic or something. Of course I’m not going to leave you.”

“I’ve never understood the son of a bitch,” my father shouted. “It’s his fucking mother’s fault. She coddled him too much.”

My mother still sat in her chair. Only now did I notice her wide eyes, her hands shaking on the armrests. I had no idea what to do.

“It’s just one day!” Elizabeth cried.

“He’s a sloppy, strange, undisciplined bastard.” My father pointed to the door. “Get the hell out of here. I want you both out of here. Get the fuck out of my house.”

“Don’t worry, Dad,” Jason said, letting him loose, helping him stand. “He’s always been that way.”

What way? I wondered.

“I think we’d better,” Ellen said. She walked stiffly over to her purse sitting by the couch, picked it up, then stopped by my mother and took her hands and said something softly. She kissed my mother’s forehead and pushed her hair out of her eyes.

“Please don’t go,” Elizabeth said.

Ellen grabbed my arm, giving me little choice. She marched me to the front door and down the porch steps. She leaned against me, making me stagger on the flagstone path.

“That poor woman,” she said.

I wasn’t sure which woman she was talking about. We’d left two behind.

“He’s an asshole,” she said. “Always has been. Don’t you worry. In a week or two, he’ll have forgotten the whole thing. You’ll see.”

And then what? I wondered. I couldn’t imagine that far ahead, but thought how good it would be to go back to work, to stand in my pressed white smock, my equipment spread out across the bench. The lab was quiet, the conditions controlled.

Ellen stayed close to me. In the car, her hand gripped my knee. I looked behind us at the weathered clapboard house and the lake, dark and full beyond it. I imagined my mother, dazed and staring at the ceiling, my father roaming the rooms where once we all had lived. “I love you,” I said to my wife. “I really do.” It was the only important matter I knew anything about at all.

WATCHERS

George lay there on the linoleum, miraculous in his sweat pants and flowered Hawaiian shirt, incongruous between the walls of his double-wide. I couldn't stop staring, though I was tired and wanted to sleep, anxious and wanted to run, remorseful, now that it was too late. His head was thrown back, the double-chin gone, the mouth gaping open. One eye pointed at the ceiling, but there was nothing on the ceiling, merely the off-white textured surface, the frosted globe of the overhead light. I took a drink of water at the sink, then held my hands in the startling cold stream. There were decisions to make, courses to plot.

I'd visited the place often, we were old Navy buddies, George and I, and we'd served on the same ship for a while, the *Brumby*, and my fingerprints would naturally be everywhere, as they should be, but I wiped down the surfaces I could remember touching last, the doorknobs, the faucet handles, the table top, the armrests, the geode I'd smashed his head with. It was a beautiful deep purple amethyst. You can't find those here. You have to buy them from The Nature Store. George had gotten his from a rock shop in Arizona. Little suspecting, I suppose. I mean, who would? Being happily on vacation, and all that. Then his wife had died of breast cancer, and the rock remained hunkered on the middle shelf of the entertainment center, patiently waiting all these years.

There was a buzzing, and I didn't care to think about it. Biological matter. But maybe it was just my imagination. Surely, the room hadn't actually shrunk. And I couldn't get over the thought that George might still be breathing. I mean, I checked a while ago and knew that was impossible. Wasn't it? Someone just doesn't start up breathing again, does he?

I backed to the door and opened it and stepped out into the late afternoon sunlight, remembering to wipe the knob with my shirt tail after slamming the door shut with my hip. It was hot. The pines stood in a circle around the clearing. My Buick sat in the ruts of the red clay road snaking through the trees. The day was silent and hot. It's strange, how hot and silent it can get in among the pines in Pensacola, with the breeze stopped by the branches, and every footfall muted by the carpet of brown needles. On occasion, it's eerie.

I climbed into my car and sat there for a moment, uncertain what I wanted to do, where I should go, then shifted into reverse

and backed my way out. George's trailer stood there, white near the roof, gray at the base, where the rains splashed dirt on it. Pink and white periwinkles dried in a planter just beneath the window. I knew I'd never visit it again, that terribly sad, forlorn clearing, where the misery of the world poured down.

It was only fitting that I was in a somber mood, with death and decay and the end of ancient friendships. What took me completely by surprise was how jolly the world appeared a few minutes later on the way home. It was actually a beautiful day. When the pines disappeared and the view opened up, I was startled how things sparkled, the KFC sign and the gray slate roof of the Oyster House and the strip mall with its line of cars heading in to the Super Lube. At the intersections, waiting, I lost myself for a while, and finally decided to drive along the coast. It was ten or fifteen minutes out of my way, but I always enjoyed the view of the Florida Gulf, the green waves, the creosote pilings mounted by pelicans, the unrealistic feeling that, with just a twist of the wheel, one could ride the water to distant horizons, to new possibilities.

Carol wasn't home when I got back. I smiled, knowing for once where she wasn't.

* * *

That morning, the local gas station had changed hands. It had always been an Arco and suddenly a Union 76 sign towered at the corner. I'd left home right after Carol. I thought I knew where she was going. She'd kissed me on the cheek before leaving, her hands on my shoulders. Heavy lips brushed me casually. Continental masses moved. Glaciers broke from the shelf and fell into a deep, black sea. She'd shouted she'd be back. It was a Saturday, and there was no reason to hurry, and I needed gas first.

I waited behind another car and watched as an old woman in a lime green pants suit fumbled with the hose. I imagined what my wife might be doing, in a spill of arms, a slide of wet limbs, the windows fogged with exhalations. Then it was my turn, and I slipped the Arco credit card into the tank's slot and stared at the small screen, which for some reason told me now to go inside to pay. Just in front of the door, a middle-aged black man in blue overalls tried to hand me an orange rubber ball with the number 76 painted on it. He had a heaping bucket full of them. He laughed.

"It's free," he said. "For the kids."

I didn't want to talk to him, or to anyone. I pushed the ball away and walked inside and stood at the end of a long line in front of the cashier. A chubby, overheated white man in a pressed

white shirt and orange bow tie went down the line with an arm piled in tee shirts.

"Here," he said.

I shook my head.

"It's free," he said.

"I just want some fucking gas."

He stepped back, and his expression changed, growing wary.

"We're giving the shirts away," he said, as if I'd hurt his feelings. "We value our customers. We want people to know that."

I didn't answer. He stared at me for a minute and then finally went on to those behind me. When I reached the register, I waved my credit card at the heavy, dark-haired girl behind the counter. "This doesn't work," I said.

She looked at me, obviously confused. "That's because it's the wrong card."

I knew it was the wrong card, but it should have worked. It had worked just a few days before, when all these people weren't crowding around. "I want to get some gas," I said.

"You can apply for a new card," she said, doubtfully.

And then, without my wanting or planning it, I leaned over the key chains and pencil trolls and plastic wrapped pastries and started shouting, every fourth word an obscenity, telling her I would never get gas in her fucking station again, that it was the sorriest goddamn operation I'd ever seen. I stepped away. They were all staring at me, as if I were the one at fault. I ran past the long line of customers and out to my car, where I sat for a few minutes, just breathing and wondering what exactly had happened. I stopped for gas at a Dixie station a few miles away, and then, of course, I drove to George's.

* * *

But Carol hadn't been at George's that morning. She'd actually gone shopping. Or so she said, when she finally returned from wherever. She was dressed in dark slacks and a white blouse, as slim and composed as always, but now that George was dead, she had changed, somehow. She usually stood stiff, nearly brittle, her face controlled and unmoving. Instead, I sat and watched her gracefully place the bags from Sears and Burdines on the table and with long, flexible fingers push her long brown hair back out of her eyes, and I thought of the girl I had married, uncertain and vulnerable. I knew something she didn't, and it surprised me a bit to discover I despised her for this.

"How was it?" she asked, meaning my day.

"I'm not feeling too well," I said, trying not to laugh.

She shrugged, then grabbed the bags from the table and carried them into the bedroom.

I watched TV, waiting until the local news came on, but of course there was nothing of interest, a pile up on I-10, new water purity regulations for the bay. I punched my way through the channels, looking for more.

* * *

That night, Carol lay beside me, sprawled in a slat of moonlight, snoring lightly, the sheet wrapped around her limbs. I couldn't get to sleep. I kept thinking of George, motionless, a gaping lump in his trailer, defenseless, and the insects and the animals that must be moving around outside, scenting decay, scratching their way in. Finally, I got up and walked to the window and stared out at the silent neighborhood, at all the dark houses.

The last ten years in the Navy, I'd saved my money, the re-enlistment bonus, most of the per diem, storing up my leave days; and when I retired, I cashed out everything and bought my home, financing the rest on the G.I. bill. I'd been proud of the place, considering it a real accomplishment for an over-the-hill sailor, but now I thought it a little shabby, one of a row of nearly identical boxes squatting on the edge of the Gulf. I looked out at the homes, at the darkened windows, and imagined everyone around me was up, standing in their shorts and bare feet, looking out into the night with their silent faces, -- thousands of us, stretching for miles, all wondering just what was happening, what it all could possibly mean. My skin grew tight, and my eyes hurt, so I went back to bed.

* * *

It was three days later, after work, when George appeared on the evening news. I called Carol out to watch. "Dear?" I said. She walked in from the dining room, where she'd been doing her nails at the table. There was a shot of the trailer, only they called it a mobile home, but the clearing appeared as quiet and hot and depressing as ever.

"Something about George Taylor." I watched her expression, but nothing changed. She was, if anything, perhaps a bit peeved.

"What's he done?" she asked.

"I think he's been murdered."

She frowned. Small vertical lines formed between her brows as she stared at the TV, her green eyes intense. I wondered what she was thinking.

"You're kidding," she said, finally.

The announcer, a perky young woman, described how a neighbor had found the body, peering into the window when no one answered the door. The police were investigating, but as yet had no suspects. On the screen, two people, neither of whom I recognized, stood by George's door as the paramedics carried him out in a bright blue plastic bag. Four days of heat and neglect, I thought.

They followed that with an old picture of him, showing him at his most pleasant, looking out at the camera with crew-cut sandy hair, his large nose hanging above a sappy smile.

"Who would want to hurt George?" Carol asked.

I almost said, "A jealous husband, maybe," but that would have been too blatant. "Everyone has enemies," I said.

"Not George."

The station went to commercial, and Carol turned and put her hand on my shoulder for a second, then walked back to the dining room and her waiting polish.

It was strange, I thought, her reaction. "You're kidding," she'd said and simply stood there, watching TV. No hysterics, no real horror. I tried to figure it out, but suddenly my stomach rolled and my head grew light. The room spun a bit, as if I'd been drinking. Things were catching up to me, I figured, so I pushed the recliner back and closed my eyes for a while.

* * *

That night, I woke up, startled, simply suddenly awake, my heart beating furiously. I tried to go back to sleep, but my thoughts were confused and terrible, and then I woke Carol up by pressing myself against her, kissing the hollows of her neck and throat, grabbing her breasts, moving my hands everywhere.

At first, she pushed me away, still logy, but gradually let herself be persuaded, and then we were hard at it. She looked up at me from the tangle of her hair as if amazed, and I imagined for a moment I was George, rearing back, plowing another man's woman. I wanted to trumpet, to shout. Carol, who usually acted as if sex with me were something warm and cute and mildly amusing, this time arched her back and grunted and cursed. Then it occurred to me: Isn't this what George's been enjoying all this time? Isn't this what he was having? And there I was, in the dimness, shouting down to her. "Tell me your secrets!" I said. "It's okay," I said. "Tell me the truth."

She stopped and looked up at me with that strange expression again. "What?" I think she said. I'm no longer sure, but whatever it was, it wasn't enough. My body became a fist, a knot, a whip. My muscles spasmed and shook. I leapt in the air and came down on her, shouting "Bitch! Slut! Whore!" words I would

never use, my lungs gasping and the room alive with ugly sounds. Then suddenly there were feet in my face, against my chest and throat, and I tried to grab them, put them back where they belonged, but they wouldn't stay still.

Carol screamed and shrieked, and for a moment it was as if I stood aside and watched it all, this crazy guy and this hysterical woman, thinking how strange life could be.

She kicked me backwards. I sat on my heels at the edge of the bed for a moment, then got up and walked around, feeling my sweat drying. I was suddenly cold, while Carol lay curled into a naked ball, crying into her arms, into the sheets. Time passed so slowly, as if the neighborhood had iced over and nothing was left but the silent stars looking down.

"It's okay," I said, trying to stop the shaking in my voice. "It's okay, now."

She jumped when I touched her, but I didn't want to see her hurting. I tried to make her feel better, but didn't quite know what to do. It isn't easy being a husband. "I'm sorry," I said. "It's okay."

Eventually, she grabbed the sheet and pulled it over herself, then looked at me, her face all eyes and wetness. "What were you doing?" she asked finally.

Like I would know. "I guess I got carried away."

"What's gotten into you?"

The conversation was getting a bit tiring. "You've made your point," I said.

"I've done what?"

By the tone of her voice, I could see the old Carol was back.

"I don't want to talk about it anymore," I said. "I've already apologized, so now let's just get on with things."

"With what?"

I wasn't sure. It obviously wasn't about sex, anymore. "Stuff," I said, finally.

She just stared at me, until I couldn't stand it and had to leave the room. I slammed the door behind me. God, I thought, in the darkness of the hallway. God Almighty.

* * *

The next morning, I watched her to see if she were acting strangely. We were both dressing for work. She had a job in Accounts Receivable at a local finance company, loan sharks, I called them, but they paid her okay, and I was a temp at the Naval Air Station, working in a small-tool crib, my third year in a not-to-exceed-one-year assignment. Five days a week, I stood behind my wire fence at the end of a large damp hangar. The breezes blew pretty good through there, and I'd watch everyone working away on

the planes and helicopters, stripping the fuselage, testing the struts, dismantling the engines, and now and then I'd sign out hammers and wrenches, screwdrivers and gauges. It wasn't much of a job, but I didn't need much of a job, and it was pretty nice, being out and talking to the guys, and at lunch I'd walk past the runways out into the fields beyond and look at the waves frosting the bay, the gulls drifting by and screaming.

Now, it was obvious that Carol wasn't talking to me.

"What kind of day are you going to have?" I'd asked her, as she stood in front of the bathroom mirror.

She was dressed in a blue skirt and white blouse and was putting on her earrings. I repeated the question, then got the point and turned and walked back into the bedroom. I hate when she does that, the silence, the coldness. It drives me crazy, and she knows it. I keep wondering what she could possibly be thinking, obsessing about it, and then she gives me, once in a while, that smug little expression, as if to say, "I know you're hurting, and it serves you right."

I stood at my chest of drawers, pawing through my socks, some of which were getting frayed at the heels, and thinking I didn't need this; I hadn't signed up for it, and I wasn't going to take it much longer.

Just as she left, slipping into her shoes and grabbing her purse from the bed where she'd thrown it, she walked up to me and gave me that look. "Anytime you want to explain about last night," she said, "I'm ready to listen."

And then, naturally, before I had a chance to say anything, she slammed the door behind her.

* * *

That afternoon, the police called me at work. When the phone rang, I was standing by my scarred gray metal desk, drinking a cup of bad coffee and looking out through the wire mesh at an electrician dragging a power cable across the concrete floor. I identified myself and listened to the detective's questions and thought I should be more nervous than this. I admitted I was a friend of George's and had been blown away when I learned of the murder on TV. I told them I hadn't seen him lately and had no idea who could have wished him harm. In return, I learned that the body was being sent up north, somewhere in Michigan, at the request of George's son. Naturally, I wanted to know if the police were making any progress, if there were any leads they were following up on, and, naturally, the cop said they couldn't talk about a case in progress, and then we said our good-byes, and that was pretty much it. A nice conversation. I thought there would be more; I thought it would all be harder.

* * *

On Friday, my wife was late again. I'd gotten home two hours before and waited as the minutes passed, one by one. Then I began to pace, for no good reason, until finally I stopped and found myself just standing there in the living room, staring out the front window as the shadows stretched across the yard. Each car driving by raised my hopes, then dropped them. She was merely held up at work; there's always a lot of paper to push when you're busy robbing the poor. Traffic, too, was terrible, so there was really nothing to worry about.

She wasn't with George. She wasn't doing that.

She was late, simply late, and it was actually so arbitrary. Here, there. One could be anywhere. There was never any telling. I called her at the office, but the phone just rang and rang. I tried it again a little later, thinking she might have stepped out for a moment, "to use the facilities," as she might say. The facilities, as if the bathroom were a goddamn gym.

The sun dropped behind the houses while the phone still rang, and I imagined the sound beating through the glass door and down the long, carpeted hallway, past the other darkened offices, drifting floor by floor into a tended silence. There was motion and there was stillness and nothing in between. It struck me as a great truth, and I wanted to write it down, but the sun continued to sink, the shadows rose, consuming lawns and shrubs, and after a while I simply forgot.

The streetlights struggled on, and the cars stopped driving by, and soon the details disappeared. There were circles of light spaced in the darkness, squares of light from the windows around, and it was as if everything were waiting.

I was standing on the front porch when my wife's green Honda finally pulled into the driveway. The windshield was black and empty, but the hood and the roof and the fenders gleamed. It resembled a picture from a magazine, something more than just a car. The seconds passed, and I grew horrified. I was trembling when my wife finally climbed out and reached back inside for her purse.

"Where have you been?" I asked.

There must have been something in my voice. She stood still, staring at me. "I was at work," she said finally.

My legs turned artificial, beyond my control, as if they were robot limbs that flopped and staggered on their own across the grass, heading to the driveway.

My wife said nothing, and giggles rose like bubbles inside me. Whatever was about to happen would appear silly, I thought, looking back on it. Bizarre, unlike either of us. Her face shone

pale in the light, surrounded by long hair darker than it really was. Her eyes were large, her mouth open, a hole, a chasm, where something once had been.

I walked to the back of the car and took the lug wrench from the trunk. My wife stepped away. I looked down at the silver bar in my hand, the weird right angle at the end, and wondered exactly what it was I had in mind.

I smashed the tail lights, first the left, then the right, watching them explode in shards of orange and red plastic. The wrench was cold and solid in my hand, filled with purpose, and I followed it around to the front of the car.

“What do you think you’re doing?” my wife asked. Her voice was soft, uncertain.

The headlights rained glass against my pants, showering my shoes, and I laughed or grunted, made some sound of pleasure, at least. I did it again, this time deliberately, and imagined all the neighbors living in their tiny boxes, seated at their dinner tables, suddenly stopping, looking at each other questioningly over their glasses of wine, their forkfuls of salmon.

I climbed onto the hood and balanced as it buckled slightly beneath me, then jumped up and down, in place, yes sir, at your command, until the metal sank to the ungiving engine. The windshield cracked, as the lug wrench slammed against the glass, starring it, but it was tougher than one might think. I smashed it again and again, working hard, grunting a weird music, then finally kicked it into the front seat.

My wife cried, sobbed really. She sat in the grass and looked up at me.

“Almost done,” I said, trying to be pleasant about it all.

The roof was next. The view from there was unexpectedly nice. It always surprised me how small changes made all the difference. The houses were grew smaller, hunkered closer to the ground, and exposed their asphalt shingles. I knew the neighbors were watching, standing behind their curtains, peering out at me, and it was if, for a moment, I stood again on the bow of the U.S.S. Brumby, the band playing behind us on the pier, as George and I set out to sea.

Then I smashed the roof down into the steering wheel.

* * *

That evening, my wife stood by the bed and carefully folded her lingerie and placed it in a small stack in her open suitcase. She arranged her perfumes and powders in a smaller bag and searched through the closet for just the right shoes. I watched her as she took her checkbook and a pair of sunglasses from her desk against the wall.

“This is my place,” I said. “I saved for it. I used my benefits.”

She ignored me, as if I hadn’t spoken, but a few seconds later she rummaged through her purse and took the house keys and the car keys off her chain and threw them into the waste basket.

“You know,” I said, leaning in the doorway, “we can probably work things out. Everything can be worked out, if you only try.”

But she obviously wasn’t interested in that.

“Okay,” I said. “Okay.”

She snapped her suitcase closed. Already, the house sounded empty, too large for just one man.

I followed her as far as the porch, then stopped and watched her climb into the taxi. A few seconds later, she was gone. Somewhere. Here. There. It was hard to know, for sure. I looked at my wife’s ruined car, the lights glinting on its jagged metal edges, on the shards of broken glass, and beyond that at all the houses down the quiet, empty block of my neighborhood. I didn’t know what to do, had no idea at all, and then it occurred to me. I’d have to call a tow truck, I thought.

THE CHARM

I had just finished the yard and was hosing the dirt and concretized dog crap off the mower's blades. The St. Augustine grass grows nearly an inch a day in the summer in Miami, and I'm always doing something in the sun, enduring my Florida retirement. I pushed the mower into the garage, then stepped into the kitchen and poured myself an amber glass of sweet tea. I lived alone. My first wife, Sarah, contracted cancer and died, and my second, a mistake from the start, had simply stormed out after only two months of marriage. Most of the house after that had grown slightly uncomfortable, so I spent the largest part of my time on the back porch, watching the lizards hunting on the screens, feeling the afternoon breezes, catching up on my magazines, and thinking now and then about the more active life I once had led. I'd just gotten to my rocker, about to set down my glass, when the telephone rang. I answered it and, as soon as I heard my son's voice, knew there was trouble, again.

The last two times, it had been financial. Harold had worked a strange series of jobs, picking up whatever lay at hand and setting it down again as easily. He'd been an assembly line worker, sorting through citrus, and an aide at an retirement home. Most recently, he'd been helping a man restore harpsichords, and I often pictured him in some sun-filled atelier, surrounded by curved, sweet-smelling wood, and hoped that job might hold his interest for a while.

But, it wasn't a financial problem at all. It was Margery, his girlfriend. "I'm desperate," he said. "It's all confusing, and I don't know what to do."

I'd talked to her once on the phone, and she'd sent me a birthday greeting, a nice card, not too gushy. The words below the poem were cleanly written and sounded genuine, but all I really knew was that my son had said she was loving, that she took such good care of him. "It's all changed," he said, now. "It's all grown bad, and I can't stand her anymore. At least, I think I can't."

He told me he'd tried to leave her twice already. The first time, he'd jumped a bus to Albuquerque, but a few days later had come right back.

"I don't know why. I just did."

Because you never finish anything you start, I thought.

“It’s like an addiction,” he said. “Like something I can’t fight.”

I let it pass. There were many things he couldn’t manage to fight.

The second time he’d tried for Miami, intending to stay with me, I presume, but had turned back after only a hundred miles.

“I don’t know what to do,” he said. “I’m dying here. I’m in trouble.”

It was just a matter of will, of inner strength, I thought, but the boy had always been too much like his mother, too swayed by every passing emotion. Nothing I’d done or said since she died had made any impression on the boy at all. “So,” I finally asked, when he allowed me the chance, “why are you telling me all this?”

“I want you to come get me,” he said.

I tried to understand. The ice clinked in my glass.

“I want you to kidnap me, to pull me away, to take me out of here and not ever let me come back.”

“I’d rather not,” I said.

“Think of it as an intervention, a de-programming.”

I didn’t want to think of it at all. It wasn’t something suited to me. After his mother died, I’d become an insurance adjuster and spent most of the rest of my working life examining wrecked cars, a man of quiet and steady habits. I’ve never even refused a bad meal at a restaurant, much less stolen people from strangers’ houses.

But I heard the whine in his voice, and the years fell away. I remembered Sarah combing his hair, taking such pleasure in her little man, or sneaking him into our bedroom to wake me up together. And, it wasn’t like my calendar was crowded. So, after a seven hour, glare-filled drive from Miami to the suburbs just outside Jacksonville, I found myself parking in front of Margery’s and sitting for a long moment, staring at the small, ranch-style structure, the sides and eaves needing painting, the grass growing high above the flagstone walk. This was a situation only my son could have produced, I thought, and dreaded what was coming.

Harold answered the door. It had been a while since I’d last seen him, and it took a second to readjust. He’d gained weight. Beneath his knit sport shirt, his tall frame bulged a bit around the waist and hips, and he’d lost even more hair from the center of his head, making his long face even longer and somehow more exposed, as if he were blinking in bright light. We hugged, experiencing an awkward moment.

“It’s a good thing you don’t live in New York,” I said and released him.

Inside, it was dark and close. Two couches, one lavender, one beige, bumped each other against a wall. In front of them stood two mismatched coffee tables. An overstuffed chair and a lamp sat in one corner of the room; an entertainment center with two TV’s and two stereos crowded the opposite wall.

Margery walked into the room.

"This is all his stuff." She pointed to one of the couches, to the second TV. "He won't let me throw anything away. You should see the bedroom."

She was a big woman, twice Harold's size, with meaty forearms and brown hair to her shoulders, and a tired, lined face. She wore a baggy tan shirt and black stretch slacks and walked quickly toward me. Without wanting to, I found myself backing up. Then she stuck out her hand, and I stopped.

"Harold said you were coming."

We shook. Her grip was gentle. I looked over at my son, standing loose-jointed, smiling uncertainly just behind her. He's almost middle-aged, I realized sadly, and his Dad is still bailing him out. I looked at Margery and imagined her thinking there was something wrong with both of us.

She pulled me over to a couch and made me sit. Harold slumped beside me, while she sat across from us in the overstuffed chair. "You should have given us more warning," she said, and then smiled. Her face suddenly appeared open and a bit shy, and the eyes were a warm brown.

"I figured I'd have to wait until June to actually get to meet you," she said, then waited. "That's the date we set." And still, she looked at me expectantly. "For our wedding?" She glared at Harold. "You mean, he hasn't told you?" She leaned over and playfully swatted him on the arm. Entirely too playful, I thought, wanting to swat him a bit harder.

"No, he didn't mention that."

"Well, naturally, we're going to invite you, of course. The father of the groom, and all." She laughed, a low pleasant sound, and then told me how Harold had proposed to her one evening at a local restaurant over bowls of shrimp scampi, and how she'd accepted right away, of course. But they didn't want to rush into things. They were willing to wait a few months.

"I understand," I said, and thought I really did, though it brought me no pleasure. I found myself beginning to like her, though she wasn't anything like I had pictured. I'd imagined someone slinky and sultry, calculating and devious, with a skirt cut up to the thigh.

She asked if I'd like something to drink and I said, "Iced tea, if you have it," mostly to get her out the room. "Married?" I asked Harold quietly, but pointedly, once she'd left.

He leaned closer. "I don't know," he said. "It wasn't my fault."

"It wasn't your fault?"

His face grew pinched. "It was all confused. I'd gone away, and then we'd just made up, and there it was." He pointed down, as if something ugly squirmed across the floor. "Somehow, it just happened."

Things just happened to my son. I wondered how he would have

turned out if his mother hadn't left us both so early on. He'd been alone a lot of the time, after that, bored and watching TV in his bedroom or out wandering the neighborhood with his friends, giving many things a chance to just happen.

"So," I asked, quietly, "when are you telling her?"

He stood, then sat back down, then clapped his knees together a few times. "I thought that was up to you. I was hoping..."

Margery returned and handed me a large plastic glass already damp with dew. "If it's not sweet enough, just tell me."

"I'm sure it's fine."

She handed another glass to Harold and kissed him on the forehead. "You didn't say how long you were staying," she said, turning to me. "There's lots to do in the area. St. Augustine, Amelia Island, the beaches."

"Actually," I said, knowing this was the way it had to be, "I'm just here to pick up my son."

She stared at me, obviously puzzled, as she had every right to be.

"I've come to take Harold home." It sounded stupid, saying it like that, as if I were a wife pulling my drunken husband from a bar. "He asked me to come up and get him."

She was a smart woman, and knew what I meant right away. I expected tears or anger or both, but she merely laughed. "That's the saddest damn thing I ever heard."

I found myself unaccountably angry. It was okay for me to think that.

"When are you planning on taking off?" Margery asked.

We were both staring at the boy. He looked pale and tense, and for some reason I remembered him as a child, back when Sarah was still alive. He'd climbed to the top of a tall guava tree and clung precariously to the main branch, grown thin and limber at that height, while the wind swayed it in giant arcs across the empty sky.

"Wouldn't you like to do that?" my wife asked, looking up at him, her dark hair moving in the breeze. "Wouldn't you like to take his place, for just an hour?"

He'd appeared terrified then, too, and the swinging had struck me as unpleasant.

"You'll want something to eat first," Margery said, finally. "And Harold will have to go pack, I suppose." She hesitated. "Unless you plan on doing that for him, too."

She didn't wait for my response, but spun and stalked out of the room.

I set the glass of iced tea down. "You better go get your stuff," I said. "And what about your furniture?"

Harold's face flattened, and tendons drew lines on his neck.

"Are cold cuts okay?" Margery asked from the kitchen.

"She can have it," Harold whispered. "Let's go. Let's leave right now."

For a moment, I imagined Margery rushing in, a butcher knife held high in her hand. “That’ll be fine,” I said to her, raising my voice.

Harold went eventually into the bedroom, where I could hear him slamming drawers, while Margery set out on the tiny dining room table a loaf of white bread and a plate of sliced bologna, some pimento loaf, lettuce, and next to it all, a large jar of mayonnaise.

“Help yourself,” she said, then hurried down the hallway and into the bedroom. It grew oppressively quiet. I made myself a sandwich.

“Dad!” Harold called out a few minutes later. “You want to come in and help me, here?”

“No,” I shouted back. The bread was stale. I wandered around while I waited.

The kitchen was small, hardly more than an aisle between the sink and the gas stove, but Margery had affixed on every available surface dozens of pictures of her and Harold. The two of them at Disney World hung above the dish drain board, mounted in a silver frame. Smaller shots of them kissing and hugging and smiling were tacked to the cupboards or clung magnetized to the refrigerator. I imagined Margery working in there, surrounded by Harold.

“Aren’t you ready, yet?” I shouted.

“Coming,” Harold said.

“He’ll be with you in a minute,” Margery said.

I set what was left of the sandwich on a paper napkin and put it by the sink, then walked through the living room to the front door. Across the street stood a large live oak. Gray moss drooped from the twisted branches, and I thought how much cleaner Southern Florida was, with its low-lying shrubs, its unobstructed views. Further south, but less southern. I’d started to feel better when Margery and Harold walked back into the room.

She’d been crying, of course. “I feel like you’re ganging up on me,” she said, quietly. Harold held two suitcases. She had one hand on his arm, as if they were going for a walk.

This has nothing to do with me, I told myself.

“I can’t believe you’re leaving. We were going to get married.”

I looked out at the oak, letting my son say anything that needed saying, but Margery only sniffed and cried, and finally I couldn’t stand it anymore.

“Let’s go.” I grabbed Harold’s other arm, and for a minute he was held between us like a wishbone.

Then we were running for the car. Harold tossed his suitcases in the back, and I slid behind the wheel. Margery stood on the flagstones and stared at us. I tried not to look, but there she was.

For some reason, this made me furious. “Don’t,” I said to my son, in a harsh, cracking voice, as we left the curb and

accelerated into the street. “Don’t ever...” I didn’t know what I wanted to say. I just knew that this was all wrong, and it was his fault, and I hated what he’d become, what I’d become. “Not ever again,” I said.

Harold didn’t answer, but sat twisted in the seat, looking behind us. In the rear view mirror, I saw Margery standing in the front yard, one hand high and forlornly waving. When she dropped out of sight, he straightened and leaned forward and switched on the car’s air-conditioning.

* * *

We spent that night in a Motel 6, after a dinner of barbecued ribs. Harold kept talking about what he’d do, now, as if his whole future were opening up for him, as if he hadn’t abandoned a fiancée, a job, and most of his possessions. I sat on the other bed, looking at the map. There was no reason we had to hurry home, I thought. No need even to stay on the freeway. There was the Kennedy Space Center, of course, and I noticed an Indian shell mound just south of Wilbur-By-The-Sea. I asked Harold if there were any other places he’d like to check out, but he just looked at me, as if I’d lost my mind.

“Wilbur-By-The-Sea?” he asked.

I showed him the listing on the map, the tiny, bright red letters. He glanced at it, then grabbed the TV remote. I watched him staring at the screen, and it was as if he’d never left home.

“I’m here, too,” I said, “and maybe I’d like to see a few sights.” The words sounded strange, and I realized I’d inadvertently copied his mother, who’d always played the tourist. Enough was enough, I thought, and went to take a shower.

The next morning, I turned off the freeway at the Palm Coast exit and onto A1A, the old shoreline road I’d driven in my youth, Sarah slender and elegant and smiling on the plush bench seat beside me, Harold sprawled and whining in the back. The sky now was not as blue as before, and the white clouds, usually massed above us, built towers on the distant horizon. Sarah was gone, but Harold still acted the boy he’d been, somehow trapped in time. He wanted to go home. He watched the ocean-front hotels drift by, the pelicans coming at us in flights of four and five, and complained about the miles, the sameness of the scenery. I ignored him. I wanted more from the trip than what I’d already had, Jacksonville and Margery and the feeling of fighting for poor causes.

“It’s beautiful,” I said, “if you look between the buildings.”

And, for long moments at a time, we did see the actual Atlantic over a low railing and between white vine-covered dunes.

The water rolled in green, then faded to gray further out. We passed small dirt parking lots jammed with cars, and Harold leaned forward, trying, I suspected, to spot the girls in bikinis. Then there were the strip motels with coastal names, The Ocean Breeze, Land's Edge, and small concrete block homes, hunkered down and waiting for the storms. We passed a drive-in Christian Church. I pointed it out to Harold, but he was too busy ignoring me to look.

We approached Ormond Beach, and ahead of us rose a pale green water tower, swollen at the top. The traffic thickened, bogged, slowed. We waited at lights, at the intersection of snack shops and pubs, hair salons and tattoo parlors. An old couple, carrying blankets and folding chairs, crossed in front of us, the woman wearing a baggy shift, the man bald and grizzled in old shorts and a beard. They were followed by a woman sitting in an electric wheelchair and steering with her thumb.

"Are you doing this just to piss me off?" Harold asked, then retreated back into his sullen silence, leaning against the passenger door.

It all perked me up. We were, maybe, fifteen miles from Wilbur-by-the-Sea. Mannequins dressed in sou'westers posed in front of bait shops, and putt-putt courses sported Hawaiian themes. Then we hit Daytona Beach proper. Large hotels with names like The Tropicana, The Desert Inn, Daytona Beach Club, and Adams Mark formed a wall on the ocean side. A few miles later, at Dunlawton, A1A left the coast and headed inland, leaving only our destination straight before us; the sign at the turn-off said, "Wilbur-by-the-Sea, no exit."

We drove onto a peninsula, terminating at the Ponce De Leon Inlet, bordered on one side by the Atlantic and on the other by the Halifax River. The first section was residential, with open, undeveloped beach to the left, and I thought myself vindicated, somehow. Harold wanted suddenly to talk.

"We shouldn't have just left her like that," he said.

It took me a moment to adjust, to bring it all up again. We'd kept silent for so long about her.

"I'd like to stop for a moment," he said. "I just want to call her, tell her how sorry I am. She's probably feeling terrible."

"No," I said brusquely.

"One phone call. Just for a minute or two."

The idea was dangerous and unkind. "It's over. You've cut it clean. Why start it all up again?" The sun beat in through the windshield.

"It's the only polite thing to do." He spoke in his mother's superior voice.

"She's not an addiction," I shouted. "She's just a goddamned woman." And, suddenly, the day was dimmer, the ride unaccountably long. That wasn't what I had meant at all. "And even if she is," I said in a softer voice, "all it takes is determination, knowing

what's best and sticking to it. Then it passes. Then it's over."

"You just don't understand," he said. "You never have."

I thought perhaps I didn't. "We're not stopping."

"And we're not going home, either." He threw up his hands. "I'm lost in a tourist hell. We're going to drive around nowhere forever."

We were going to see an important archeological exhibit, something uplifting, something not connected to his hormones. "It's an Indian shell mound," I said quietly and evenly. "It was put there by people thousands of years ago."

He stared at me as if in great pain, and I wondered for a moment about his life, so filled with extremes, and nothing like my settled existence, my sweet tea and magazines on the porch. "That's where we're going," I said. "That's what we're doing."

"See?" he said, rather cryptically.

We continued to drive, heading for the end of the road. High-rise condos lined the shore for a while, then disappeared. The sidewalks, partially covered with white sand, grew vermicular and strange. We reached the guard house of a state park at the tip of the peninsula, and I asked the elderly woman handing out tickets and brochures where the shell mound was. All we had was a state map, the label sticking out into the Atlantic. I had to repeat the question.

"Shell mound?" she asked, finally.

"Indians," I said. "Archeological."

"Let's go home," Harold said.

She leaned out the window, as if to tell me a secret. "I've only worked here a couple of years."

"It's on the map."

She nodded and suggested we go to the Mosquito Inlet lighthouse a few blocks over and ask the people there.

"Maybe they have a phone," Harold said.

We backed out, surrounded on both sides by hedges of hibiscus. Large red flowers brushed against the right side windows. "I don't want to hear about it," I said, finally.

"I just want to talk! What harm can that do?"

We turned onto a small road and, now and then, above the houses and tangled trees, the lighthouse rose, a tower of red brick. At its very top, a metal cap in the shape of a bell crowned a cylinder of clear glass. It was rather pretty, but I didn't want to stop. "We'll find it ourselves," I said.

"Of course," Harold muttered.

I grew increasingly upset. There were only four or five roads traveling the length of the peninsula, with suburbs in the interior, boat yards and restaurants along the water. As we drove, I couldn't understand how we could possibly be missing an entire archeological site. "This is weird," I said.

"Can we stop, now?" Harold asked, after we'd been crisscrossing the area for a half hour or so.

Twenty minutes later, finally, we found it. We passed some construction, with chain link fencing and backhoes, looking as if another high-rise would be coming soon, and then a group of ranch houses with tended lawns and flowers along the sidewalk, and then nearly drove by a small undeveloped section covered with trees and scrub brush. Almost unnoticeable at the center of a stretch of vines and plants stood a small dirt pull-off and a sign saying, "Green Mound State Archeological Site." I had no idea what I expected, but it wasn't the nothing that was there. So, I parked and climbed out of the car and stood looking down at Harold. After a few seconds, he opened the passenger door and swung his legs out.

"What are we doing?" he asked, but I'd already discovered an overgrown path to the right. A small sign beside it gave the history of the midden, its origins with the unnamed and unknown aborigines of the St. John's River-Atlantic Coast region. It was important, I thought, that Harold know the facts, the truth about how things started and how they ended, so I pointed to the sign. He hardly glanced at it. Ducking beneath the branches, I entered the path at a crouch. Cobwebs clung to my face, and I pulled them off, then walked with my hands out, thinking someone should have better maintained this place. The ground sloped up, and I realized after a moment that I was walking on shells, half casings in good condition or cracked or shivered, everything lost in a white shell powder. And the path kept rising.

Harold trailed behind me, obviously reluctant. The trees and vines edged back, and we could stand, but now the sun shone down on us. No longer was there a breeze, and it grew hot. The trail of shells dipped and rose again. It had been a while since I'd climbed anything, and my legs trembled. Halfway up, I stopped to rest a minute and looked back. Harold was hunched over, scrabbling against the shells. The bald center of his head gleamed with sweat. He looked up at me. His expression was one of boyish irritation, then it changed to one of disgust.

"This is so stupid," he said, standing slowly upright. "This is something only you would do." Then, he simply turned and started back.

"Don't you want to see what's at the top?" I shouted.

"Let me know," he called out behind him.

I stood there for a moment, thinking this was my son, my boy, the only one I'd ever have. I watched him slouch and shuffle his way down the path and disappear around a curve, and I told myself he was a project I had finally finished. I knew he'd go back to Margery and marry the woman out of guilt or convenience. It was as if I could chart Harold's entire, sad life, an unending stream of compromise and acquiescence, and there was nothing I could do, absolutely nothing to be done.

I tried to imagine what Sarah would think.

"You get over it," I said quietly, as if speaking to her

again, seeing her tolerant, loving smile once more. “You heal. No pain is forever. It’s just a matter of discipline, of keeping focused.” The words sounded like lies, were patently insufficient. They explained nothing. “It isn’t my fault,” I told her. “I did what I could.”

I continued climbing, stopping now and then to examine the shells I was walking on, looking for arrow heads and pieces of pottery, but finding instead the jaw bone of a small animal, a rat or squirrel, possibly. I wondered how old it might be and then wondered why I cared. It suddenly occurred to me that “midden” was the scientific term for a dung hill, a garbage heap, and I saw myself alone, an old man at the center of Florida climbing up the steep slope of a mountain of crap.

The small trees still obscured the view, and my dress shirt clung to my back. I climbed, no longer very interested, but putting my feet carefully down, raising them slowly up, until at last I arrived at the top. I spun sedately, but trees still blocked the view West and South. In the far distance, beneath the clouds, might have been a glint of water, but all around me were the brown roofs of the suburbs, each house nearly identical to the one I lived in, and hardly worth seeing. So, this is what it is, I thought. The shell mound at Wilbur-by-the-Sea, where the climb wasn’t worth the effort and trying or not trying turned out the same in the end. “What’s the point?” I asked no one in particular, while the houses crowded around.

I pulled my shirt away from my skin and started slowly back to the bottom, where I was certain my son would already be sitting in the car, waiting for the air-conditioning with his long-suffering expression at the ready. As I said, there was no real need to hurry.

EXTENDED CARE

Edith Thompson didn't know if it were a matter of courage or cruelty. What was needed was a hardness of the mind, a strength she didn't possess. All she had were pleadings, petitions, the obligations owed a mother, almost nothing.

She sat for a moment more in the car, her fingers nervous on the wheel, and looked at her son's house. From the street, it appeared rather small, just another Florida tract home, but it sat on a lake, and she knew it spread luxuriously once inside, with views of placid water from every back window and furniture built to ample scale. She thought about the tidy air-conditioned rooms and hated what she was doing, what age had driven her to.

She saw her son's face at the door, pink mouth pursed, dark eyes hooded in irritation, and she waved, then struggled out of the car. "This is so nice of you," she said brightly when Brian got closer, though her son, she knew, had never really had a choice. She'd invited herself, forced herself upon him, and would have been guilty of interfering with his weekend plans, but for the fact that her son never had any plans. He preferred, almost certainly because of his weight, to spend every free hour at home.

He was fat, monstrously so. His brown hair was little more than a stubble on his scalp, and his neck swelled thicker than his head. Today, he wore khaki pants with zippered pockets and a flowered Hawaiian shirt hanging loose. She bent around his stomach, over a large hibiscus, to take his kiss on the cheek.

"I'll try not to be an inconvenience." She walked around to the back of the car and opened the trunk and waited until Brian dipped and pulled out her small suitcase and set it for a second on the ground.

"Trish will be delighted," he said. "She's at work right now, clocking in a few extra hours."

Trish was a legal secretary and her son a systems programmer. They'd lived together for eight years, but for whatever reasons had never married. Money obviously wasn't their problem.

She followed Brian along the sidewalk to the house, watching him sway from side to side under the load. "I didn't pack very much," she said and wanted to give him yet another lecture on his health, something she'd been doing almost constantly since his teenage years. Before that, he'd been normal, almost wiry, and she often wondered if something bad had happened back then.

Something bad was always happening.

The air inside the house was cool and still, the walls a pale green wash. He set the suitcase down in the living room, but led her through the quiet spaces to the Florida room at the back, where windows stretched on three sides. She sat gratefully in a padded recliner and looked out at the mirrored surface of the lake. Cypress ringed the dark water, and in the distance she could barely make out the gray roofs across the way. She thought of summer camp, as a girl so long ago, and overnight canoe trips with friends now dead or only vaguely recalled. It was a shame that Brian never went boating. Even swimming made too great demands, and she wondered how much of life the boy had already missed because of his size. Who could make those calculations?

Brian brought her out a glass of sweet tea and sat in a heavy wooden chair facing her. “How’s Evangeline?” he asked.

“She’s with a nurse,” Edith answered finally. “For the weekend.”

He nodded. “It’s good to get away once in a while.”

Evangeline was Brian’s older sister, and a week ago she had picked Edith up and slammed her against the kitchen wall and then had gone running, staggering through the apartment, shrieking. Edith lay on the floor, dazed, moving her limbs slowly and hoping nothing was broken. While she was there, resting, she heard Evangeline singing happily to herself, and she realized that, literally, she was too old for such things. She’d visited her lawyer, had her draw up the custodial papers, and then arranged for this visit to her son.

“If only you weren’t so far away,” she said. She’d always thought Pensacola a strange place for the boy to live, but she’d moved away from her parents, too. It ran in the family, she thought.

Brian ignored that, as he always did, and they talked about his job instead, the stress he had to deal with, the idiots who were in charge. Edith stared out at the tranquil water.

Trish got home at four. She stepped into the Florida room as if uncertain, wary. “Hi,” she said and walked over and kissed Edith dutifully on the cheek.

She was a small, thin woman, with straw blond hair hanging tangled and frizzed to her shoulders. Her face was plain, undistinguished, until she opened her mouth and exposed her teeth, twisted, bucked, dangling distant from the gum, resembling something from the Third World or the ancient Ozarks.

“You should have those fixed,” Edith had said on more than one occasion, unable to stop herself, but Trish had simply smiled, compounding the problem.

“Maybe someday I will,” Trish had said once. “There are so many things to do, aren’t there? I mean, when you think of it, the world is filled with things to do. How can one ever get around to them all?”

She'd gone on to talk about her job and her last shopping trip to Publix, and Edith had simply stopped listening.

Now, Trish walked over to Brian and put her palm on his neck, then bent down to kiss him. "I don't want to forget you," she said. "Not at all."

They loved each other, Edith thought, but she wondered what it must be like for her son, with his lips pressed against that mouth.

"So," Trish asked, sitting in a chair beside Brian, "how long will you be with us?"

Only long enough to destroy your life, Edith thought, and imagined Evangeline running laughing through their quiet rooms, shrieking in their hall, throwing herself against the glass door, trying to get down to the lake. "Just for the weekend, like I promised."

"That's too bad," Trish said, and Edith wondered if she really meant it.

"There's something I'd like to talk to the two of you about," Edith said.

"Would you like something to drink?" Trish asked, standing.

Edith glanced over at her second glass of sweet tea still sitting on the small table beside her. "No, thanks."

"I think I'll get me something, then."

Edith sat and listened to Trish working in the kitchen. Cabinets slammed, the refrigerator opened and closed, a blender roared, then settled into a high-pitched whine.

This is all very well and good, Edith thought, but it could have waited a few minutes.

Her son smiled and leaned forward. "Around this time, we always have a margarita or two."

Or three or four, she thought. Her son wasn't a drunk, but he always overdid things. She'd seen him down an entire pot of coffee at one sitting, a whole chicken for one dinner. And look where it's gotten him, she said to herself. His stomach sat on his lap, as if he were holding a large, flabby package.

"Alcohol is not good for you."

He grinned. "It may not be good for you, but it's great for me."

Edith waited until Trish brought in a pitcher and filled two glasses the size of small bowls with the frothy green liquid.

"You sure you don't want one?" Trish asked. She sat, then stood again. "I'll bet you'd like something to eat. After a long trip. Some crackers, cheese?" She smiled, showing her teeth. "It won't take me long."

"No!" Edith cried. "Just sit down. Please."

Trish lowered herself to her chair with an injured dignity. "I just wanted to make you comfortable. That's all I wanted to do. You're the guest, after all."

"I know. I know." It wasn't Trish's fault, Edith thought.

It was simply who she was. For a moment, she tried to imagine Trish tending Evangeline, changing her adult diapers, dressing her squirming body. Maybe she was exactly the type of woman one needed. “It’s just that I’ve got something terribly important to talk about.”

Trish put her hand on Brian’s arm.

Edith hated herself for what she was about to do.

“We’re ready,” Trish said.

“Yeah, Mom. Fire away.”

She had no choice.

“Is it good news?” Trish asked. “We’re always ready for that.”

“Please,” Edith said. She sat for a moment, then forced herself on. “I can’t take care of Evangeline anymore.”

Brian leaned back in his chair. “It’s about time,” he said. “It’s something you should have done years ago.”

“A woman your age,” Trish said, “she has to be careful. The bones get brittle, I’ve heard.” She smiled. “I had an aunt who fell out of a hospital bed and broke her hip. She was in there for her heart, but the complications from her hip is what killed her off. The marrow got all infected or something.” Her face twisted and her hands fluttered, as if she saw something disgusting.

Edith stared at them. Why were they talking about hips? “I don’t think you understand.”

“You’re getting out from under,” Brian said. “What’s to understand?”

“But I don’t want to commit her. I want to bring her here to live with you. I want you to take care of your sister.” Her voice shook, making it all sound more tentative than she’d planned.

Brian sat for a moment. His eyes were wide, his eyebrows arched. Then he laughed.

“You have so much space,” Edith said, but he continued laughing, as if it all were so delicious.

“Why on earth,” he said at last, “would we ever agree to that?”

She looked at their amazed, amused, implacable faces and was unable to answer, knowing already that words would be futile. Because she’s your sister, she thought. Because I want you to. Because I can’t just throw a sweet child away, lock her up baffled and confused, among strangers, terrified, crying in the night until they wrestle her down and drug her or worse.

“Oh, God!” she said quietly.

No one spoke for a moment.

“I can give you a little money,” Edith said finally. “Not much, but some.”

Brian smiled and shook his head.

“And I can move closer and help out. We can hire nurses and

Evangeline sometimes plays by herself for hours. It won't be all that much trouble." Her voice shook, then silence filled the room. She stared out at the flat surface of the lake, thinking a chain of some kind had been broken. Something had shattered irretrievably, but she wasn't sure what.

That night she lay in bed, exhausted but unable to sleep. Her legs ached, and she couldn't catch her breath. Passing cars swept pale lights across a shelf of porcelain dolls in Victorian dress and a large sepia photograph of Trish and Brian. In the picture, Trish wore stockings and garters and a corset, her thin legs crossed casually at the ankle, as she leaned against Brian's shoulder. She dangled a gun from one hand, while Brian sat in a chair, dressed in crossed bandoleers and a large sombrero, tilted back. They both stared out at the camera ferociously. Edith tried to breathe and imagined them asleep, wrapped in each other's arms, at peace and unconcerned, in the room down the hall.

The traffic was light on the way back to Tallahassee, the sky distant and dry, but she hardly noticed. The road home stretched ahead, undeviating, its ruled edges bordered by pines, as if her thoughts were hemmed in, forced at great speed to an inescapable conclusion. She was too old for this, and yet there was nothing else to be done, nothing at all.

A few times she found herself dozing at the wheel, only to jolt awake, panicked. She used the rest stops, getting out of the car to walk in the damp grass and stare at the pastel sky between the pines. She stood in the shade and watched children running in noisy circles around the picnic benches. As soon as she climbed back behind the wheel, she became drowsy again and wondered if she'd ever make it home.

Three hours later, she parked in her space and hauled her suitcase to the elevator. Her body floated light, disconnected from her head, and she imagined dying on the kitchen floor, while her daughter howled and rushed around her.

When she got upstairs, the nurse was already packed and watching TV. Edith wrote a check and listened while the nurse described incontinence and temper tantrums and disobedience, as if she'd never encountered such behavior before. Edith thanked her and walked her to the door, then closed it quickly behind her.

Evangeline was playing in her room, down a short hallway. Edith could hear the tuneless humming. She was a large, sweet girl, who would run and slam her body into hers, loving without caution, without thought. There was no choice, no option, so Edith braced herself, then walked to her daughter's door to tell her she was home.

Evangeline lay sprawled on the floor across the bodies of her dolls, rolling a blue rubber ball back and forth between her hands. Her hair hung dark and tangled, and she glanced up at Edith with secretive eyes.

"Hello, Sweetie," Edith said, but Evangeline continued

playing.

She was often like that, and Edith wondered what the girl was thinking. Years ago, when she'd look at Evangeline's hazed, unrevealing eyes, it was as if her real daughter were trapped inside, submerged somewhere beneath the surface. She'd urged her on, tried to train her to brush her teeth, to use the toilet, to concentrate, imagining her spirit fighting to escape up through the flabby, undisciplined flesh. But she hadn't thought that in a long time. There was no real daughter inside, only Evangeline. She'd even stopped hating herself for thinking that way.

"It's just you and me, dear," Edith said, then left her alone and went to fix dinner. She stood at the stove, mixing macaroni and cheese, then turned off the heat and sat at the kitchen table, only half awake.

That night she plunged into sleep, sucked down irresistibly, beyond panic. She dreamed she was rowing across a large lake. Sunlight beamed into the clear depths. Drops formed bright crystals at the end of her oars. Evangeline sat in the bow, dipping her maiden fingers delicately in the water. At the center of the lake, a white steepled church floated, hung suspended, two feet above the surface, and Edith knew that she could stop rowing once they were inside. But as she approached, swimmers appeared, first one, then several, until her boat was surrounded by their packed bodies. The people were pleasant. They smiled and waved to her, but she could no longer move the oars without hitting one of them. She asked them politely to get out of the way – the lake was large, miles across, and there was plenty of room – but they simply nodded and smiled, and finally she took one of the oars and started beating them back, pushing them under. They screamed, again and again, and she was terrified, horrified at her actions. Then she awoke and realized Evangeline was crying in the next room.

She pulled herself from bed and slipped on her robe. The girl was tangled in her sheets, her mouth open, tears standing in her eyes. She quieted when Edith appeared, but her fingers picked at her plaid pajama bottoms. The acrid aroma was part of the room, a decades' old cry for love.

"Yes, yes," Edith said, grabbing a diaper from a stack near the bed. "I'm coming."

She'd become used to the sight of her daughter's genitalia, the thick, matted adult hair between her legs, but had never been able to overcome a sense of shame, a muted feeling of outrage occurring each time she wiped the region with a wet cloth and sprinkled powder from a plastic bottle with a baby on the label. Now, she looked down on her daughter and forced a smile. It was the middle of the night, and she hoped the girl would cooperate.

Evangeline turned on her side and drew her arms and legs in.

"Come on," Edith said. She grabbed a thick ankle and tried to straighten her out, but couldn't. She reached for the elastic

band around her daughter's hips and tugged the pajama bottoms halfway off. Evangeline thrashed.

"I can't do this anymore," Edith said softly, and Evangeline quieted, smiled up at her from beneath the wild bangs of her hair, her eyes gleaming through the strands, as if she were someone Edith never knew.

"What are you doing to me?" Edith asked quietly.

Evangeline looked away and squirmed as her pajama pants slid down her legs. When they were off, Evangeline lay quietly on her back. Edith unfastened one side of the diaper, and Evangeline kicked her hard in the shoulder, knocking her back against the wall.

Edith lunged and, for the first time in her life, slapped her daughter across the face. "Quit it!" she screamed. "Quit it!" Then she grabbed the shrieking girl and held her head against her. They were both crying, and Edith couldn't tell which sobs were hers.

"Oh, Sweetie," she said. "I'm so sorry."

Evangeline nuzzled close, then her crying stopped, and she struggled to get free.

Edith let her go and stared at her. "Oh, baby," she said. She reached for her, and the sharp pain in her shoulder dropped her arm.

That week she couldn't sleep, afraid that something might meet her in the dark. She sat up late in a chair with the lamp on, and the rest of the apartment vanished until all that was left was her circle of light. She dozed. During the days, she made arrangements and napped when Evangeline permitted.

Surprisingly, she often saw her husband, as he once was, tall and lean, standing slouched at the sink, smiling and cleaning a bass, or sitting in his favorite chair and shaking the newspaper folded. He'd worked for the state, in the Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission, but had died from prostate cancer in his late fifties, and she'd thought she was over the pain. Now, she wondered how much of him Evangeline remembered and, one morning, when the girl was stretched across the living room rug, Edith brought a picture of him in from her bedroom. "Your daddy," she said, pointing to his face. There was a moment of softness in the girl's eyes. "Your daddy," she repeated, then Evangeline rolled away, and Edith put the picture back.

Saturday morning, Brian and Trish stood in front of her door, ready to go. She'd called them up, and at first Brian had refused to help. He already had plans, he said, without giving any specifics, and she knew he was lying.

"You won't even do this one thing for me," she'd said.

Now, she looked at them side by side, the mouth and the belly, and her life for a second was something almost terrifying.

"Her things are in the hall." Edith hefted her own suitcase and took it to the car, then returned and grabbed Evangeline by

the arm.

"It's a good thing you're doing, Mrs. Thompson," Trish said.

The reassurance made Edith more uncertain than ever. They were using her car, but Brian, naturally, would be driving. She crawled into the back and buckled Evangeline into the seat beside her. When Brian finished loading the car, he sat behind the wheel and simply breathed for a few minutes, then glanced at Edith in the rear view mirror. "I know, mother," he said.

"I didn't say a word."

He started the car and pulled out of the lot. Trish was navigating and had maps spread across her lap. They drove down the canopy roads, arched over by oaks, to the freeway heading toward Ft. Lauderdale.

After a few minutes, Trish folded the maps away and leaned over the seat and smiled.

"Are you all excited?" she asked.

Edith was about to answer that this was a sad occasion, a horrible time, and not a trip they were taking for the fun of it, when she realized the woman was talking to Evangeline. Her daughter smiled and lowered her head.

"She's sweet," Trish said. "I've never really gotten to know her. The retarded, you know, are almost always sweet. It's as if only the nasty parts never developed."

Edith didn't know, at first, what to say. Trish obviously had no idea what she was talking about, but telling her so would be an attack on her daughter. She simply stared out the window at the lanes ahead and the pines standing to either side. There was nothing more to do, no options left, but to let her son carry her down the road.

Evangeline reached out and placed a chubby hand on Trish's head, then slowly stroked her hair.

The sun rose and shadows shortened, and all Edith could see out her window were the faded green pines and, above them, the jumbled mass of heavy white clouds drifting sedately. Evangeline sat beside her, muttering, forming a lopsided cube out of clay. She smiled and showed it to Trish.

"When are you two going to have kids of your own?" Edith asked, though she already knew the answer and thought they should at least get married first.

"Cut it out, mom," Brian said. He didn't bother turning his head, but pulled into the left lane and accelerated past six camouflaged Army trucks and an tractor-trailer loaded with citrus.

"I was just wondering." Edith knew her son had no tolerance for such personal questions. He considered it prying, but she hated not knowing what he was thinking. With a little more effort, she thought, she might understand how he'd turned out the way he had. It surely wasn't her fault, and her husband Howard had always been thin and reasonable.

"Families aren't for everyone," Trish said.

Especially the selfish, Edith thought.

"I had this dream, once," Trish said. "I suppose it was because I was watching the Discovery Channel or something, but I was standing in this meadow, where there was grass and flowers and trees everywhere. I was standing there enjoying how beautiful everything was, when suddenly it started raining babies, smiling and cooing babies, thousands and thousands of them, darkening the sky. When they landed, they started eating the leaves on the trees, the petals on the flowers, the blades of grass. They just ate and ate, and then they crawled away, and after they were gone nothing was left."

"Good God," Edith said.

Trish smiled again, showing her dangling teeth. "Pretty horrifying, huh?" She shrugged. "I guess it's just that kind of world we live in, nowadays."

"Speaking of eating," Brian said.

Trish laughed and slapped his shoulder.

"No, I'm serious. I saw a Cracker Barrel sign. We could stop for lunch."

"It's only eleven o'clock," Edith said.

"We could use a break." Trish smiled, as if asking for her understanding.

Edith knew when there was no use fighting. They took the next exit and turned left on a broad double-lane road lined with pines and gas stations and fast food franchises, then found a La Quinta hotel with a Cracker Barrel sharing its parking lot.

"This might not be a good idea," Edith said. Already, Evangeline rocked back and forth and moaned softly.

They climbed out of the car, and Trish took Evangeline's hand and held the girl close as they walked to the restaurant door. Edith watched them cross the wide parking lot. Her back and the joints at her hips ached, and she admitted to herself she enjoyed the stretch.

They entered a gift shop jammed with rocking chairs, funny signs, specialty foods and gaudy plastic toys. Evangeline looked around wildly, then broke away from Trish and ran coltish to a bin of pink, furry boa constrictors. She grabbed two and held them to her chest. Edith tried to pry them away, and the moans changed to cries, grew sharp and loud.

"Wait," Trish said. "I'd like to get her something." She picked up a snake and held it in front of Evangeline and walked her slowly to the cash register. When she offered her the snake, she took the other two and placed them back in the bin.

Trish smiled smugly. "I guess I'm just a natural mother," she said.

Edith knew she should let that stand; after all, what difference did such nonsense make? "Sure," she found herself saying, "if you just buy her everything she wants."

"It's knowing when," Trish said.

Evangeline rubbed the snake against her face.

The hostess walked them to their table, and Edith followed, wanting to go back to the car, to have the trip finally over and thinking it had just begun. Brian tried to squeeze into his chair, but a diner right behind prevented him, so they explained to the hostess that they needed a little more room.

“Aren’t you embarrassed?” she asked her son, as they stood there in the aisle while the girl searched for another table.

He glanced at her sharply. “You mean, because I don’t fit into the cookie-cutter, assembly-line shapes? That they can’t jam me into a cattle car? No, I’m not.”

She knew he couldn’t even fit into the seat on airplanes, that his weight had trapped him forever on the ground. “You could have so much more fun,” she said. He was her boy, her only son. She wanted to describe the life he could be leading, but he interrupted.

“I’m sick of it,” he said. “I’ve been driving since five this morning, and I don’t have to take this crap.”

“Fat does not make you unique.” The words came out without her thinking.

“You are such a bitch!”

Edith stood there, silent for a moment, unable to look at his expression.

The hostess motioned to them and walked them to a table off by themselves, and they all sat down. Brian ordered the barbecued ribs and chicken combo platter and a pitcher of iced water. Edith ordered nothing and considered waiting in the car, but decided to stick it out, the way her husband had quietly suffered his cancer, silent, but present, still part of a family. She ordered Evangeline a sandwich, finger food. It was simpler.

“You harp on my weight,” Brian said, after his meal arrived. He cut the meat off a rib and washed it down with half a glass of water. “Like,” he continued, ”that’s the only thing important in my life. You can’t let it go. Bitch, bitch, bitch.” Trish grabbed his arm, but he shook it off and cut a piece out of the chicken.

Evangeline squirmed when the waitress set her plate down, and Edith worried for a moment.

“You’re always criticizing me,” Brian said, “but I have a good job. I earn good money. I’m respected. And the way you talk about Trish makes me ashamed I’m related to you.”

“Hey,” Trish said. “Leave me out of this!”

He turned to her. The chicken on his fork shook. “Somebody has to tell her.”

“I’m sorry you feel this way,” Edith said, and suddenly saw herself as if from a distance, a stiff, elderly lady, a little pompous and struggling for words. Her stomach knotted. She glanced at Evangeline, who was eating quietly.

Brian swallowed the chicken and wiped his face with his

napkin. “I’m just tired of all this. Why do you think I moved away? I told you it was because of my job, but it wasn’t. That was just to keep you quiet. I couldn’t stand living near you anymore.”

“Honey,” Trish said quietly. “You’re overdoing it.”

He laughed. “And the downside is, what? She won’t be dropping by on her nasty obligatory visits?”

Edith remained silent and watched, almost in fascination, as the sweat collected on her son’s forehead. His eating was always an unpleasant sight. “Wipe your face,” she finally said.

Trish looked away. Evangeline dropped one half of the sandwich onto the table and rubbed her palm down the length of pink snake fur.

Through the restaurant window, Edith saw the white walls of the hotel and the clouds against the sky. Brian’s comments were unfair. Of course, she criticized. He had an enormous appetite, and she’d only been trying to help. It was a mother’s job.

She wondered what her husband Howard would have done. He’d been the quiet sort, a thinker. “It’s what fishing does to a guy,” he’d always said, “being alone on a large body of water.” But, no matter how he would have handled the situation, it all would have ended the same, with everything in her life broken and scattered. That, apparently, was the plan for her.

She kept silent as they all climbed back into the car. She was damned if she’d be the one to start the conversation going again. It was Brian who should apologize after the horrible things he’d said. She buckled herself and Evangeline in and then sat and waited.

The pines lining the freeway had vanished, replaced by flat fields of brown grass and the startled fronds of palmetto, or green pastures where cows grazed and white birds beside them hunted the disturbed earth. The silence became nearly a weight, a pressure on her mind. She couldn’t stop thinking how miserable it was making everyone.

“So,” she said, “we’re finally on the road again.” She tried to make her voice bright and cheerful, but no one responded. It was a blessing, she told herself. At least, she didn’t have to pretend to listen to Trish go on and on.

A hundred miles later, Evangeline straightened her legs, pushing against the seat in front of her and grunting, and Edith knew she’d need her diaper changed. She leaned forward and tapped Trish on the shoulder. “There’s a mother’s job back here, if you’re interested.” She enjoyed the girl’s irritated expression. “I thought so,” she said, feeling better than she had in hours.

The State Rehabilitation Center was just outside Ft. Lauderdale. Behind the wrought iron fence, several beige two-story houses connected by curving gravel walkways sat partially hidden between spreading banyan trees. It looked harmless enough, Edith thought. She’d tried to find someplace decent and kind for

her daughter, but there hadn't been many choices with the meager money she could provide. She stared at the houses beneath the branches of the trees and the pointed spikes on the fence and realized she knew nothing about the place.

"I'm sure it's fine," she said.

They drove through the open gate and followed the white arrows around a small circle to the administration parking lot. The building was long and glass-fronted, and Edith wanted to go back to Tallahassee. She climbed from of the car and helped Evangeline out, smoothed her white shirt and brushed some pink snake fluff from the sleeve. Her fingers shook. "This is your new home," she said. Evangeline's eyes were focused on the distant trees.

Brian was still behind the wheel. Trish sat next to him.

Edith walked back around to the driver's side. "Aren't you coming?" When she got no response, she tapped on the glass.

Brian rolled down the window. "What? You're letting out the AC."

"You may not see your sister for a while." Just saying the words made Edith's throat tighten. I can't do this, she thought.

"We'll wait out here."

"You've got to say goodbye to your sister."

He held up a paperback book. On the cover, a thin silver space ship rose against a mottled purple sky hung with moons. "We both brought something. We'll be fine."

Trish leaned over his lap and smiled up. "Yes, don't worry about us."

Edith stared at them a moment, then grabbed Evangeline and walked to the office door. She turned before entering and saw the two of them in the car, already absorbed in their reading. Monsters, she thought. No possible relation of hers. She pushed Evangeline through the front door and into the office.

A young, slender black woman with tightly braided hair sat behind the receptionist's desk, staring into a computer. Edith walked up and waited for the woman's attention. "I'm here," Edith said, then stopped. What else could she say? To drop off my daughter? To leave my daughter? To hand my daughter over to strangers?

"Yes?" the woman asked.

Edith simply stood there.

The woman punched a few keys and glanced at her screen. "Is this Evangeline Thompson?" she asked.

"Yes."

The woman smiled and pointed to a row of chairs along the wall. "If you'd just take a seat for a minute."

They sat together on hard plastic as the minutes passed. Edith put her hand on Evangeline's knee and patted it and then pretended to straighten her daughter's collar. She leaned over and brushed the dark hair back from the cheeks and the forehead.

“I don’t want you to go,” she whispered. “I want you near me always.”

Evangeline looked back at her for a moment, then pulled away. Her face grew flat, as if she were afraid, and she tried to stand, while Edith struggled to hold her down.

“Don’t, baby girl,” Edith said. “Please, don’t.”

Evangeline moaned and shook, and her breath came in loud gasps.

“I hate it, too,” Edith said, petting the girl’s cheeks, trying to forestall what she knew was coming.

Evangeline leaned back and shrieked. The sound poured out, filled with pain and fear, and Edith wanted to shriek with her, imagined them both side by side, heads tilted toward the moon, howling together.

“Stop it, stop it,” she said, grabbing Evangeline’s shoulders. She realized she was crying, that the two of them were making a scene, that there was nothing to be done.

A few minutes later, two women in green smocks ran toward them, then pulled Evangeline from her hands. A middle-aged white woman dressed in a blue suit and carrying a folder smiled down at her. “Don’t worry,” she said. “It happens all the time.”

What kind of place is this? Edith wondered.

Then she found herself outside, clutching a sheaf of papers. The sun was dangerously bright, throwing shards from gleaming windows, bouncing off the white coral gravel. She held her free hand in front of her eyes.

“I heard it out here,” Brian said, when she finally climbed back in the car. “Jesus.”

“Just be quiet,” Edith said.

They’d given her forms to complete, and she couldn’t see her daughter for at least a week, the adjustment period. She looked out the car window. There were banyans blocking the way. The seat beside her was empty. What am I going to do? she wondered.

She dropped Brian and Trish off at the airport, then drove alone along the coast. On the right, the ocean slipped without fanfare unto shore, then disappeared behind a series of long motels. On the left, shops sold souvenirs, pizza, sports clothes and burgers. She watched it all as if she were dreaming, as if the seat she sat in were the moving center of some strange new world. She had trouble concentrating on the car ahead.

For dinner, she surprised herself and stopped at the Pelican Inn, an upscale restaurant on the water. Why not? The sun was low on the horizon. She ordered a glass of wine while she watched the green crystal waves frost over to wrinkled gray, then darken to impenetrability. She had a week, she thought, but put it out of her mind. Her entire life was changing, and there was simply too much to think about. The windows grew dark and the lights inside shone brighter. She ordered red snapper and looked around at the other diners, the families at their happy, crowded tables.

The following Monday, she was back at the Center. A young thin woman with unkempt hair escorted her down a shaded sidewalk to the home where Group Six lived.

“She’s doing just fine,” the woman said. “She’s even learning some chores. You have absolutely nothing to worry about.”

“That’s good,” Edith said, and thought how vacant her new apartment was, how filled with silences her last conversation with her son. She followed the woman inside, stepping into cool air and a faintly industrial smell. The walls were a glossy white, and the green carpet looked like astro turf. A vinyl couch with a rip on one arm stood opposite a large screen TV. In the dining room, two women, their faces swollen, their gestures awkward, sat talking at a long Formica table, a vase of cut flowers between them.

She found Evangeline in a room she shared with another girl. They were both sitting on a bed and playing with interlocking pieces of brightly colored plastic. Evangeline looked up, and there could have been a moment of recognition, then she went back to her puzzle, her fingers busy.

“Hi, Sweetie,” Edith said, and waited. Then knew there’d be no dramatic reunion, no running across the room and love-clutching arms. She watched her daughter for a few minutes, knowing the girl was just as happy without her. She thought of Brian calling her a bitch and hiding in his house on a lake more distant than ever, and she wondered, now, who she was and what her job might be. She pictured herself alone in Ft. Lauderdale, walking on the beach, her mind drifting across the empty sea, with no reason to be in any particular place, with nothing around her but the still falling of time.

“She’s made a lot of friends,” the woman beside her said.

“She’s always been a happy girl,” Edith said.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Patrick J. Murphy was born in Bridgeport CT in 1946, but raised in Hialeah FL. He has a B.S. in Liberal Arts from Portland State University, a Masters of Divinity from San Francisco Theological Seminary, an M.A. in English from Florida State University and is currently working on his Ph.D. in English, also at Florida State University. He currently lives with his wife in Dallas TX.

His collection of short stories, *Way Below E*, received good reviews upon its publication by White Pine Press in 1995. Since then, he has published numerous stories in various journals and anthologies throughout the country, most recently in *Confrontation, Fiction Magazine, 100% Pure Florida Fiction, The Greensboro Review, The Tampa Review,* and *Other Voices.*

He is a full member of Phi Kappa Phi, the Authors Guild, and PEN USA.