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This collection of short stories concerns a range of characters --- mischievous pre-teen boys, an elderly widow, and a disillusioned white-collar worker.

REGULAR DANGERS

by

Wilson McBee

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Approved by

Craig Nova_____
Committee Chair

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This thesis has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Committee Chair _____

Committee Members _____

_____

_____

Date of Acceptance by Committee

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KINGDOMS

Lewis was working in the attic on his secret Lego city when the doorbell rang. Lewis's mother had convinced her son that it was *okay* for a thirteen-year-old to play with toys—so long as the play focused more on exploring construction techniques and less on concocting character-based fantasies. But Lewis hadn't told his mother about how an illicit love affair between the city's mayor and its district attorney was flowering into soap-operatic scandal.

"Lewis!" his mother cried. "Bobby's at the front door!"

Down on the front porch, Bobby greeted Lewis with a winner's grin.

"I stole the keys to my Paw-Paw's Buick," said Bobby. "Let's go get those girls at the mini-mart."

Lewis went back inside and told his mother he was going to Bobby's to play video games.

"Bullshit!" his father yelled from the couch; but it was at the Braves game, not at Lewis.

Bobby's Paw-Paw's car was a great silver fish sleeping in the driveway.

"What happened to your Paw-Paw?" Lewis asked Bobby.

"I don't know," Bobby said. "He was in the bathroom for like two hours. So I took his keys and bolted. He might be dead."

Nighttimes that summer Bobby and Lewis malletted garden gnomes, plundered cigarette machines, bonfired for-sale signs. But this stolen-Buick joyride was, by far, their most advanced act of rebellion yet.

The mini-mart was located just outside their subdivision, which had been named by a committee and featured a golf-course designed by one of Jack Nicklaus's step-sons. After pulling in and finding the situation free of anyone—parent's friends, suspicious-looking adults—who might tell on them, Lewis and Bobby parked the car by the ice stand and got out.

The girls they had been pursuing were sitting on a bench beneath the awning, popsicles thrust halfway down their downy necks: Janie, Janie's friend Rachel, and Rachel's sister Bee.

"Check out my ride," said Bobby.

"Think it'll do eighty?" asked Janie. "There's a hill over in Cunningham that if you floor it going up you'll fly over the top like a roller coaster car."

"I've heard of that," said Bobby. "And I know how to get to Cunningham. Let's go."

"You stay here, Bee," Rachel said to her sister.

Lewis and Bobby lived in a rural county that was being slowly consumed by colonies of commuters, but Cunningham was way out where no realtor ventured. Pinetree thickets and rundown trailer-homes scrolled across the Buick's windowpane. Mirages slithered like snakes across the empty pavement. It was as if they were in some eerie, black-and-white horror movie, determined to accomplish an evil but not looking forward

to it. Even with Rachel and Janie's continual noise-making—singing Faith Hill songs, erupting into malicious laughter, decoding the inside of each other's hands—the whole world felt silent. Lewis fiddled with the cigarette lighter and wished they had tried to steal smokes from the mini-mart. He didn't know much about the cops over here in Cunningham, whether they sometimes pulled over suspicious Buicks full of pre-teenagers. *Where's your Paw-Paw, son?*

"Hey Bobby," Janie asked from the back. "I heard you got it bad for Rachel. Somebody said you wouldn't get out of the swimming pool last time she was wearing her two-piece. I thought you said this car could go eighty. Have y'all ever drank a beer?"

"Maybe you should slow down," Lewis whispered to Bobby.

"Where is this mother-fucking hill, anyway?" Bobby said.

The girls fell asleep after a while. Bobby turned the car around in gravelly dead-ends, and Lewis counted the missing letters on the same country-store signs, noticed the same raggedy dogs sleeping in the shade of giant satellite dishes. Afternoon expired slowly, and the tops of the trees glowed orange as the sun descended. Bobby pulled the visor down over the top of the windshield, but he still had trouble seeing through the glare: said something about Cunningham being a county, not a town. Lewis wondered about Paw-Paw's corpse, rotting in the bathroom; thought about his Lego city in the attic, untended.

"Hey," Bobby said finally. "I think this is it."

The Buick waited at the beginning of a long paved straightaway that ended in a steep ascent. Trees on all perimeters, darkness sneaking in through the branches, pinkish sun hiding in shame.

"We need to go get my sister," Rachel said. "It's been like an hour."

"This is the hill," Janie said. "Bobby, floor it."

Bobby gritted his teeth and make a sucking sound with his throat. Then the Buick hopped up like a mad hound breaking itself from a chain and raced down the road. When they began driving up the hill, everyone in the car breathed in something heavy and fell back in their seats. All they could see as the car climbed upward was the blue-black sky ahead, and on their sides the pine trees arrowing out at forty-five-degree angles. They seemed to be ten years waiting for the Buick to reach the top.

Finally the Buick, going at least eighty, leapt over the crest, and for a half-second Lewis's ass levitated above the leather seat and his heart let go of its bloody web. A rush of fear flooded the car like river-water. The four passengers briefly understood flight, realized that the last thing you saw before you died was the flicker of your mother's face.

Then the wheels of Paw-Paw's Buick kissed the pavement with a gleeful squeal. Lewis exhaled as Bobby reigned the car patiently down the backside of the famous hill.

"Oh my god," said Rachel.

Janie giggled. "You did it, finally," she said.

"Yeah, that was something alright. We were like on a rollercoaster, flying through the air," said Bobby.

"No you idiot," said Janie. "Look back here. Rachel finally got her period!"

Lewis and Bobby looked over the seat in terror. Sure enough: blood was all over the backseat, Rachel was blushing and pawing at her skirt in frustration.

"You bitch, you got blood all over my Paw-Paw's Buick," said Bobby.

"Your Paw-Paw's dead, you jerk," said Lewis.

"Rachel this is so great," said Janie. "You finally did it."

"We need to go get my sister," said Rachel. "I'm really in for it now."

The county was dead dark as the foursome drove home. Bobby clicked the headlights off for minutes at a time, Lewis watched for ghosts in the woods, the girls fashioned a makeshift maxipad from a McDonald's napkin. Lewis figured there was a throng of paramedics, investigators, and newspaper reporters in Bobby's front yard by now. They had become lost children, wanted for murder. Eventually his mother would walk next door and start asking what had happened. Either the Lego city would be dismantled, or Lewis would be made its prisoner.

A THING OF BEAUTY

The field where we played football was a sometimes-mowed patch of lumpy earth on the far side of a modular classroom. The sidelines were marked by thick stands of young pine the school district had planted when they built the junior high a dozen years before. Just beyond one end zone was a chicken-wire fence. On the other side of the fence lived an old man in a shotgun house with peeling paint and a sagging porch. This man had a severe stoop and deep wrinkles in his forehead, and he toiled daily in a little green garden in front of his shack. Every recess when we came out to play, he was in the dirt with his hoe or his spade. We called him the old man from the shack.

A couple of weeks before the John Lewis–Max Stevens trade, a visitor appeared in the old man's garden. He was a black boy around our age. He wore a white t-shirt with mud stains and a frayed neckline, blue jeans with holes, and beat-up canvas sneakers. When we came out to play, the boy would be working with the garden, but as soon as he saw us, he stopped. Then he would stand at the edge of the garden plot, dusty fingers holding the fence, head turned slightly as if he were trying to hear a distant sound. Some of the other boys called out to him---"Hey, boy from the shack, what you lookin' at?" "Hey, boy from the shack, you got a problem or do you always look that ugly?"---but the boy's only response was to blink his eyes rapidly and grip the fence so that the joints in his fingers went pale.

There were two classes in the sixth grade---Mrs. Walker's and Mrs. Sibley's. I was the quarterback for Mrs. Sibley's squad. I had the best arm in the grade, but I didn't waste it throwing Hail Marys all day. I loved to survey the defense and find the holes.

The recess supervisor was a fat old hippy with curling grey hair hanging below his ears and red-framed sunglasses named Mr. Buckley. On the first day of school, Mr. Buckley told us we couldn't play tackle because that would lead to injuries. But Mr. Buckley never watched us. He spent every recess behind the dumpster smoking cigarettes with the burger chef, Miss Louanne. We played two-hand touch, but there was a fine line between two-hand touch and two-hand *shove*---and we didn't really care about where that line was. If you were running with the ball and a defender was closing in, you had better be ready to get hit. Because I played quarterback, and had the ball on every play, I was a prime target of the blood thirsty tacklers. But I was expert at directing my blockers, at scampering away from the rushers, and at getting rid of the ball when I had no options. Sometimes I thought to myself that I could go the whole school year without changing my pants, I got dirty so rarely.

John Lewis was in Mrs. Walker's class and was the best player on the field besides me. John Lewis was the tallest, strongest, fastest boy in the sixth grade, able to juke and jump up the field with roadrunner speed, eluding the fingertips of his pursuers as easily as a leaf in the wind. I thought John Lewis could be the next Jerry Rice, a world-class receiver. He was the only reason Mrs. Walker's class stood a chance against us. Their quarterback, Hank Coleman, had barely any accuracy and no feel for strategy but he had enough arm to get the ball into the orbit of John Lewis, who never dropped a pass.

One Monday during lunch, John Lewis walked over from where he sat with all the other black boys and touched me on the shoulder. I was eating an apple and reading *Sports Illustrated*.

"Hey, Pete," he said. "I want to talk to you."

"Okay," I said. I closed my magazine but kept a finger at the place where I had stopped reading. I had never really talked to John Lewis outside of playing football on the field.

"Jimison wants to make a trade," he said, referring to a stringy black boy with above-average hands who had been elected captain by Mrs. Walker's class.

"A trade?" I said.

"Yeah," John Lewis said. "Somebody from our team goes to your team, and in return somebody from your team goes to our team."

"I know what a trade is."

"Ok. Here's the trade. Me for Max Stevens."

"Max Stevens?" I said. "Max Stevens is fat and slow. Why would Jimison want to make that trade?"

"Because I told Jimison I want to be traded. I want to be on Mrs. Sibley's team. I want you to throw me some of them passes," John Lewis said.

"I don't know," I said. "It doesn't seem fair. How can you be on Mrs. Sibley's team when you aren't even in her class?"

"That's the trade Jimison *wants*," John Lewis said. "He's the captain for Mrs. Walker. You're the captain for Mrs. Sibley. Do you agree or not?"

“We’re getting boogered,” said Hank Coleman before the game.

“Jimison’s the captain,” John Lewis said. He handled the Wilson youth-size composite football I brought to school every day in my backpack.

“I don’t care who the captain is,” said Hank. “Y’all are cheating us.”

“You don’t want to play, Hank?” said John Lewis.

“I’ll play,” replied Hank. “All I’m saying is, this is cheap. Pete just thinks he can run everything because he brings the ball.”

“That’s bull, Hank,” I said. “It wasn’t even my idea.”

“Like Jimison would come up with that trade on his own. You’re scheming. You’re a little schemer. I bet you paid them off.”

“Are we going to play or what?” John Lewis said.

“I’ll play,” Hank said again. “All I’m saying is---forget it.”

On our first offensive play, I lined up John Lewis in the slot and called a hitch-and-go route. I dropped back and turned my head to make Mrs. Walker’s defenders think I was looking for receivers other than John Lewis. John Lewis ran six yards and stopped, like he expected me to throw it to him. I pump-faked, and the entire defense froze. Then John Lewis lit out for the end zone. Two defenders trailed behind him by about three yards. They were too slow to keep up with John Lewis in the first place---plus they had been fooled by the fake. I floated the ball and John Lewis caught it in stride. The ball plopped into his palms like someone had handed him a baby. He jogged into the end zone. The play was, as the game announcers liked to say, a thing of beauty.

John Lewis did a little dance in front of the boy from the shack, shaking the football like it was a tambourine and rolling his hips.

"Quit hot-dogging, John Lewis," said Hank. "We don't have all day."

"What's up, boy?" John Lewis said to the boy on the other side of the fence. "You like watching me catch that ball? *Goddamn* that was pretty!"

The boy held the fence and blinked rapidly.

In gawking at the touchdown we hadn't noticed that Max Stevens had finished the play on the ground. In a desperate attempt to get around one of my blockers---and maybe to prove that his trade for John Lewis wasn't such a giveaway as everyone thought---Max had tripped and landed on his arm. Now he let out a groan and started crying.

"Oh, Jesus H. Christ," Hank said. "Get up, Max."

"I think I broke something," Max said. "I heard a crunch."

"Bones never crunch," Hank said. "They snap. And I didn't hear a snap. Get up."

Max stood. He rested his left elbow in the palm of right hand.

"Can you move it?" I asked him.

Max looked down at his arm like a poisonous snake was coiled there. He shook his head.

"Try," Hank said. "Try to move your arm. You didn't even move it."

"No. I'm going back to Mrs. Sibley's class," Max said. "I quit."

"That's just great," Hank said as Max walked toward the school building. "Now we have odd numbers."

"Why can't he play?" John Lewis said. He pointed at the boy from the shack. "Hey boy, you want to play football? You know how to play football?"

The boy turned to the old man, who bent over his hoe. They exchanged a few words, and then the boy walked around the back of the house and emerged at the tree line.

"Come on, get over here. We want to play," hollered Hank.

The boy trotted over.

"You want to play football?" I said.

The boy shrugged and lifted his lips into a half smile. He nodded.

"Where do you go to school?" said Hank.

"I don't go to school," the boy whispered.

"What do you mean?" Hank said. "Everybody goes to school."

"I help my granddad with his farm."

Hank laughed. "You call that a farm? Oh man."

"What's your name?" I said.

"Roosevelt," said the boy.

"How long have you been at your granddad's?" I said.

"About a month. Ever since my mom got sick."

"Think fast!" said Hank, and tossed the football into Roosevelt's chest. Roosevelt flinched and fumbled with the ball before dropping it.

"Good God," Hank said. "He might be *worse* than Max."

I played free safety on defense. I waited at the back of the defensive formation and made sure none of the receivers got past. Mrs. Walker's class struggled without John Lewis. On first down Hank had a receiver open but he missed. On second he tried to sneak it but only gained two yards.

Hank came up from the pile cursing at Roosevelt, who had been in front of Hank.

"You were right there," Hank said. "Goddamnit, boy. If one of their guys is coming to get me, knock him down. I'm the quarterback."

Roosevelt blinked at Hank and backed away.

"Give the boy from the shack a break," John Lewis said. "He's just learning the game. You should have cut it towards the outside anyway, Hank."

"You shut up," Hank said. "Traitor."

On third down Mrs. Walker's class tried a little razzle dazzle. Hank handed it off to Jimison then went out for a pass himself. Hank came open for a second, but Jimison threw it ten yards too long.

"What was that?" John Lewis said. "That was ugly."

Mrs. Walker's class punted.

On second down I hit John Lewis on a screen pass. John had a lane leading straight to the end zone that I figured would stay open just long enough for him to score. He turned it upfield and left the defenders flailing in his wake. But then Roosevelt came after John Lewis. Roosevelt was running at a breakneck speed, pumping his arms and taking long strides. He caught John Lewis --- from behind. No one had ever done that. As

they neared the end zone John Lewis and Roosevelt actually ran neck-and-neck, as if they were in a race. I thought Roosevelt might *pass* John Lewis.

"Tag him!" Hank Coleman shouted. "Tag him down!"

Roosevelt laid his hands on John Lewis and the play ended.

"Did you just see that?" Hank said to me. "The boy from the shack can *run*."

After that the game fell into a back-and-forth battle. I was still able to get John Lewis open and connect on some passes, but Roosevelt's speedy defense curbed John's ability to breakaway. Now that they had the fastest man on the field, Mrs. Walker's class had an offense. They could pitch it to Roosevelt and watch him go. Or Roosevelt could run distraction while Hank looked for a receiver down field. Or Roosevelt could trail the play and wait for the lateral. When the bell rang, the teams were tied up, 56-56.

As all the sixth grade boys headed for the back door to the school, Roosevelt ran toward the edge of the field. His grandfather watched him from the garden.

"Didn't expect that score, did you," Hank said to me.

"I don't expect any score. I just like playing football."

"You like winning. All you care about is winning. Even if you have to buy somebody off."

"You're trying to mess with me, Hank. Stop it."

"Stop what?"

The next day at lunch I walked over to John Lewis.

"Hey, John Lewis," I said. "I want to talk to you."

I told him about the defensive “spy” strategy I had concocted to counter the boy from the shack. Wherever Roosevelt went, John Lewis, as the “spy,” would follow. The key was that John Lewis stay on Roosevelt even when the boy from the shack was out of the action. This would convince Mrs. Walker’s class that they couldn’t even fake it to someone else and wait for John Lewis to fall off. He would always be close by Roosevelt, even if it meant giving up a big play.

When we came out to the field, Roosevelt waited on the other side of the fence. Mrs. Walker’s class won the coin toss. They could barely move the ball. John Lewis blanketed Roosevelt with his lanky frame, trailed him up and down the field like he was chained at the waist to the boy from the shack. Hank Coleman had to focus on other receivers, and he had no other receivers. On offense we were able to stay comfortably ahead. Roosevelt remained an impressive defensive stopper---he could chase down anyone on the field, from anywhere on the field---but I called a bunch of quick strikes and gadgets. John Lewis truly inspired the Joe Montana in me. I threw it into double and triple coverage, to the one open window where he could make the catch. I lofted it to the back corner of the end zone. I rolled out on bootlegs and sailed it down the field. We won going away, 42-21.

Hank Coleman spent the entire game cussing his teammates and kicking at the dust.

“Hey, Hank,” I said. “Good game.”

Hank looked at my hand and smirked.

"Yes, you were victorious today, Pete," he said. "What can I say? Your nigger was better than my nigger."

"Don't say that," I said.

"Say what?"

"You know."

Hank spit on the ground and shrugged. He refused my outstretched hand and jogged into the school with the rest of Mrs. Walker's class.

Roosevelt skipped home to the shack. It was as if he hadn't even noticed that his team was getting throttled, or that he barely touched the ball. He wore the same expression of unworried calm, blinking fast and breathing through his teeth.

The next day Hank Coleman began the game playing defensive line instead of dropping back into coverage like he usually did. Five-Mississippi rush was the universal rule on the field. In other words, I had five seconds to find a receiver and get rid of the ball before the defensive live came at me with at full speed. Usually I didn't need that long. And only the least athletic kids played the defensive line. A sack was a rare occurrence.

But Hank Coleman was faster than most kids who played the defensive line. He counted faster too. His "One-Mississippi" was more like "One-M'sippy." One our first play, he got to me two seconds after the hike. I looked across the field. Hank Coleman charged at me. I blinked, and then I was on the ground as he laughed. His laugh was an awful nasally noise, like a pig looking over a bucket of slop.

“Oh, boy, Pete,” he said. “I barely even touched you. You toppled over like a house of cards. You’re lighter than my little sister.”

“That wasn’t ‘Five-Mississippi’. You didn’t say the whole word.” I wiped grass from my hair and stood.

“No, I counted to ‘Five-Mississippi.’ Everybody heard me.”

On the next play John Lewis streaked across the middle of the field, and I tried to zip it to him before Hank put his hands on me. But I led John too far and the ball fell incomplete.

“You’re cheating,” I said to Hank. “You have to count to five-Mississippi like a normal person.”

“What’s cheating?” Hank said. “What’s normal? You get to buy off our best player? But I can’t rush you a little bit? You’re a pussy, Pete.”

“You’re too stupid to know how to count right,” I said.

After the offensive display of the past two recesses, that day’s game turned oddly into a defensive struggle. The two teams were scoreless after twenty-five minutes. Our spy strategy kept Roosevelt in check, but with Hank’s relentless blitz, I couldn’t get anything going. My khaki pants were grass stained. I had grit between my teeth and dirt under my fingernails.

“What’s the deal, Pete?” John Lewis said after another one of my passes failed to find his fingertips. “You okay? You want me to play quarterback for a little while?”

“No, no. I got this under control.”

But I didn't have it under my control. It was the worst game of my life. We couldn't stick it in the end zone for all the money in the world.

We were back on defense, and the time for the bell neared. Roosevelt broke open on a run after John Lewis collided with one of our own players. At free safety I was the last thing between Roosevelt and a touchdown. I came across the field at angle, hoping to meet him ten yards before the end zone. Hank Coleman ran behind me. No way could he make a legal block. But he shoved me hard in the space between my kidney and shoulder blade, and I fell. Roosevelt coasted into the end zone.

Hank laughed again in his grunting way.

"That's a touchdown. How did you like that block, Pete?"

"That wasn't a block, that was a clip. That touchdown shouldn't count."

"What a wimp, making excuses cause he got blocked."

Then I stood and made a step in Hank's direction. Before I could tell him what I really thought, he socked me in the nose. A crowd formed around us---not to break us up but to cheer us on. Hank hit me a few times in the stomach. I shoved him off with my left hand and hit him with my right. He snatched my hair and twisted me sideways. I backhanded him across the jaw. Then he grabbed my shoulder, placed a foot in front of me, and pushed me over. I fell down on my right arm---and heard a snap, not a crunch.

Mr. Buckley ran onto the field, "Who's fighting? Y'all better not be fighting!"

The crowd of boys dispersed.

"Who are you?" Mr. Buckley said to Roosevelt.

Roosevelt ran for the shack. Mr. Buckley took one glance at me as if trying to guess how hurt I was, then took off after Roosevelt. Mr. Buckley stopped after about ten yards, heaving and coughing and hanging his head over his paunch, as Roosevelt disappeared behind the trees and emerged on the other side of the fence. If Roosevelt hadn't run straight home, Mr. Buckley probably would have never found him.

Mr. Buckley sent Hank and me to the principal's office.

They called my parents while the nurse put my arm into a temporary sling. Hank grinned at me with bloody lips.

"Good game, Pete." he said.

The next morning Mrs. Sibley was teaching us how to diagram a sentence when the principal knocked on the classroom door.

He told us we were going to have a new student in our class. Roosevelt followed him through the door. He wore a new yellow polo shirt and creased khaki pants. Mrs. Sibley sat him in the desk next to mine.

"What happened?" I asked him.

"They put me in the group home," he whispered.

Then I asked the boy from the shack to sign my cast.

REGULAR DANGERS

Billy met Davey Tisdale in the summer before seventh grade. Davey and his parents had been living next door for nearly a year, but their neighborhood wasn't the kind where new arrivals were greeted with casseroles and invitations to lady's luncheons. The Tisdales were the fifth family to occupy the red-brick two-bedroom in as many years. Billy's mother was ticked off about the pen Mr. Tisdale installed for his Rottweiller in the grassy strip between their houses. She said it encroached on their property. She said the widow who owned the red-brick house was a slumlord. She told Billy to stay away from Davey Tisdale --- which wasn't difficult because Davey was a year older than Billy and they tended to sit at opposite ends of the schoolbus, Davey in the back where all the fights and cussing happened, Billy in the front reading comic books and waiting for the ride to be over.

Davey's parents were loud at night. Billy could hear them listening to rock music and shouting at one another long after he had gone to bed. Then one Saturday afternoon in August, Billy was bouncing a basketball in his driveway when Mrs. Tisdale came out of her front door hauling a suitcase on wheels. She wore hip-hugging blue jeans, a wrinkled Oxford shirt that hung down to her knees, and house slippers. Her hair was wet. An unlit cigarette hung from her mouth. She got to the end of the driveway and turned to face the front door.

“I never loved you!” she shouted to the summer night, to the fireflies that were just coming out, to the miserable brick box from which she had just escaped, to Billy and to anyone else who might have been listening. “Never ever ever ever.”

Then she took the suitcase on wheels --- with frustration, like it was an obstinate dog at the end of a chain --- and pulled it down the street.

A week later, at around the same point in the evening, Billy was in the driveway shooting baskets when Davey Tisdale appeared. Davey didn’t say anything at first. He just lingered under the hoop. After Billy shot the ball, Davey took the rebound, gave it a few dribbles, and put one up. Billy’s mother got home from her second job a couple of hours later. Billy and Davey were still in the driveway, finishing their tenth game of H-O-R-S-E.

Because Billy’s mother had forbidden him from spending time with Davey Tisdale, Billy feared she would shoo away Davey immediately and take him inside for a scolding. Instead she extended her lower lip in an expression that other people might take for a frown but which Billy knew to mean she was thinking hard about something. Then she asked Davey if he wanted to stay for dinner.

From that point forward, Davey was a regular at Billy’s mother’s dinner table. Billy didn’t believe Davey came to eat out of necessity. He had seen Davey buying cokes and bags of chips from the vending machine after school, and Davey always had plenty of coins for the arcade at the mall. But Billy didn’t think there was much cooking happening next door. Or much parenting at all, for that matter.

Davey's father wasn't gone. That was about all you could say for sure about him. He must have been paying the rent on time, for he and Davey continued to occupy the little brick house. But it wasn't clear what Davey's father did for money. He didn't follow a schedule like other grown-ups. His truck would vanish for a few days, then return while the neighborhood slept, a band of light on Billy's bedroom wall and a rumbling engine outside his window. Davey never talked about his family, and Billy knew better than to ask.

At first the friendship between Billy and Davey seemed purely transactional. Davey showed up just before supper was served. He avoided Billy at school and on the bus. Then Davey started coming over earlier. It turned out that he liked to read some of the same comic books as Billy. And he didn't turn his nose up at Billy's ancient Nintendo game system; like Billy, he appreciated the classic, two-dimensional gameplay of titles such as *The Legend of Zelda* and *Super Mario Brothers*, even though the pixilated spectacles offered by the Playstation and the Nintendo 64 were more popular among the boys at school.

But more than video games or comic books, Davey was interested in guns. He had an obsessive love for firearms which Billy thought must have recalled the young Einstein's for physics or the young Michael Jordan's for basketball. He read magazines like *Guns and Ammo*, *American Shooting*, and *World of Handguns* and seemed to retain every word. He had an encyclopedic knowledge of guns --- ranges, weights, lengths, proportions. His textbook doodles were all assault rifles emitting arcs of bullets like the animated trails of butterflies. Davey was on a first-name basis with the firearms salesman

at the local Wal-mart; he liked to hang around the counter until someone came up who might actually purchase something, and Davey would get to see a gun removed from behind the glass partition, and he could get close enough to smell it.

Davey knew the gun collections of the fathers of the boys on the bus and the boys in his classes better than he knew the U.S. states and capitals.

"Peter Henderson's dad hunts deer, so he's got a thirty-aught-six and a muzzleloader."

"Jimbo Davis's dad has a 92 Beretta he keeps in the sock drawer."

"Ronny Brown's dad has an antique Civil War musket above his mantel."

"Lewis McIntyre's mom has a Saturday Night Special she carries in her purse. She even has a license for it. She's crazy."

As for Mr. Tisdale, Davey was proud to say that his dad owned a Winchester 94 with a scope and a .357 Desert Eagle pistol. According to Davey, Mr. Tisdale kept the guns in a padlocked steel safe in his bedroom closet. Davey offered to show Billy the safe, as if the safe itself were something worth seeing.

"Do you have the key?" Billy asked.

"Of course not," Davey said.

"Well, why would I want to see a steel case in your dad's closet?"

"Because it's where he keeps the guns."

Even if Billy had wanted to see a safe that held a couple of guns, he probably still would have turned the offer down, because he hated going to the Tisdale's. It smelled like old food, cigarette smoke, and mildew over there. The lights were always off. The

house was a series of caves. Plus Billy was terrified of Davey's dad, even though he hadn't seen him than once or twice.

When Billy asked if Davey's father had let him shoot the guns, or at least handle them, Davey demurred.

"He says I'm not old enough yet."

One afternoon in October Davey and Billy were bouncing the basketball and arguing about a secret level in Super Mario Brothers. A layer of leaves decorated the ground. A slight wind rolled in their ears. But the sun shone brightly. It was the last breath of summer more than it was the first whiff of autumn.

Then Davey made one of his announcements: "Ryan Pinkerson's brother has a potato launcher."

"Who's Ryan Pinkerson?" Billy said.

"He's a rich kid in my study hall," Davey said. "Today we got to talking about guns. His brother built the potato launcher himself. Ryan said he'd show it to us if we came over there."

"Where does he live?"

"Northbay."

"Northbay? How are we going to get out there?"

"I figured we could ride our bikes."

"Ride our bikes? All the way to Northbay?"

"Sure. I know a way that stays off the main roads. It'll take us thirty minutes tops."

"I don't know. We'd have to be home by eight. I don't think my mom would be happy about us riding our bikes all the way to Northbay."

"Don't worry about your mom. We'll be back in time."

Northbay was one of the subdivisions on the outskirts of town. These neighborhoods had golf courses and swimming pools and gates that closed at a certain hour every night. These were the best places to go trick-or-treating on Halloween, because the mothers doled out full-sized chocolate bars as opposed to apples or candy corn. The kids from Northbay and the other subdividions --- Eaglewood, Briarcliff, Chaseridge --- didn't have to ride the bus after school. Their mothers picked them up in gleaming stationwagons, the leather interiors of which Billy imagined to be as luxurious as those of limousines and private aircraft.

The entrances to the subdivisions were on Hoy Road, a narrow two-lane road with a constant stream of those mothers' stationwagons in addition to tractors, horse haulers, and dump trucks. Billy knew from the morning radio reports that there were accidents on Hoy Road all the time: so many cars going so fast on a road never meant for heavy traffic resulted in plenty of fender benders, pile-ups, and ditch crashes.

"What about Hoy Road?" Billy said. "Even if we went a back way, we would still have to go on Hoy Road to get to Northbay. That's where the gate is."

"We'll only be on Hoy Road for a little bit," Davey said. "Besides, there's not that much traffic at this time of day. We'll be fine."

Billy and Davey set out for Ryan Pinkerson's. Each rode a bike he was too big for, pedaling at a half-standing, half-sitting crouch. They had received these bikes when

they were nine or ten. The bikes had originally come with training wheels attached, and they still bore remnants of childhood --- a few spoke beads, portions of G.I. Joe stickers that hadn't been entirely ripped off, the corny names *Scorcher* and *Pro Thunder* printed on the shafts.

For the first part of their ride, they kept on the sidewalks and crossed the street with care. They biked down Main Street past the department store, the drug store, and the post office. They cut through the parking lot of the Baptist Church.

They reached the final leg, the stretch of Hoy Road that ended at Northbay's entrance. They stopped their bikes before turning onto the busy thoroughfare. The temperature seemed to have jumped ten degrees. It was nothing but mid-afternoon sunshine on Hoy. No shady trees, and no shadows. The black pavement simmered with the cars and trucks ripping by.

"Stay right behind me," Davey shouted above the noise of the traffic. "Don't even look at the street or the cars. Just keep your eyes on my back."

Davey turned onto Hoy. Billy followed. The county government hadn't bothered to build a sidewalk here. Hoy was the kind of road that pedestrians and bikers avoided. The shoulder was nothing but a skinny strip of gravel between the pavement and a deep ditch. The bike wheels bounced over the rocks. Billy tightened his grip of the handlebars and clenched his teeth in concentration. The vehicles rushed by. He felt like a cowboy caught next to a stampede of bulls. He focused on the back of Davey's head, the swirling brown hair at the peak, the pink cliff-face of his exposed neck, the grey cuff of his sweatshirt.

Davey and Billy biked onward, single-file. The entrance to Northbay appeared a hundred yards away.

Then Billy noticed that a blue van had slowed down and was driving alongside them. A blonde lady was behind the wheel. She waived wildly at Billy and Davey. Then she rolled down her window and shouted.

"Hey! Where are you kids going?"

Billy was afraid to look at the car for more than few seconds. He feared he would lose control of the bike, slip on a rock, and either roll down into the ditch or fall into the oncoming traffic. So he kept his eyes on the back of Davey's head and tried to ignore the lady in the blue van.

But she was intent on getting their attention. She honked her horn in staccato bursts and long moans. Cars plugging up behind her began to honk, too.

Davey turned around to Billy.

"Just keep going," he said.

The blue van accelerated down Hoy Road in front of them and pulled onto the shoulder. The lady stepped out of her van and sprinted toward them. She was a short, skinny blonde lady in her high-heeled sandals. Her earrings beat against the side of her face and caught the light. Davey and Billy stopped riding and set their feet on the ground.

"What are you doing?" she shouted to Billy and Davey when she reached them. "What in the hell are you doing?"

Her face was pretty, but in a perpetually worried sort of way.

"We're going to Northbay," Davey said.

"Where did you come from?"

"We live in town, on Montgomery Street."

"Where are your helmets?"

"Helmets?"

"Ok," the lady said. "Get in my van. *Get* in my van."

"We're not getting in your van," said Davey. "You can't make us get in your van."

"You're right, I can't make you get in my van," the lady said. "It's a free country. But if you won't come with me to get some helmets, I'm just going to follow alongside you and make sure you don't fall and get hurt."

Davey tugged at his collar and turned to Billy. His eyes passed over the horizon and he a took a deep, significant breath. Billy hoped Davey wasn't planning to run for it. It seemed undeniable that they were caught. Pulled over on the side of Hoy Road in the middle of afternoon traffic, they didn't have a lot of options.

"Where are we going to get the helmets?" Davey asked. "Are you going to take us to the bike store? We don't have money to go buying helmets."

"I'll take you to my house," the lady said. "I have extra helmets there."

Davey shook his head.

"We're getting kidnapped here. You're kidnapping us. Where do you live?"

"I live in Northbay," the lady said. "I was just going home."

"How can we believe you?"

"Well, Northbay is right there. If I'm lying, you'll know pretty quick. I promise to take you straight to my house, and nowhere else. I'll give you helmets, and then you can go on your way."

Davey shrugged. "Alright," he said. "Let's go."

The lady's van was the size of those used by church youth groups to pick up kids from school. Its door opened by sliding backwards. A long bench was in the middle row, behind the front seats, but the back seats had been taken out, as if the van were used to haul machinery.

The lady didn't need help lifting the bikes and pushing them into the back of the van. Her twiggy arms were stronger than they looked. Billy and Davey climbed in and sat on the middle row.

"Do you realize how dangerous it is to ride a bike without wearing a helmet?" the lady said as she drove. "You boys could get hurt. Do your mothers know what you're doing?"

"My mom's not home from work yet," Billy said.

"Well," the lady said. "You should have a helmet. It's stupid and irresponsible for you not to have a helmet. You can tell your mother I said that. Tell her I said that she's a stupid and irresponsible mother."

"You shouldn't talk about Billy's mother like that," Davey said. "You don't know her."

"I know enough," the lady said. "I know that her son's out riding Hoy Road without a helmet, an inch away from losing his life or incurring serious brain damage. Now what kind of mother but a really bad one would let her son do that?"

Her house was one of those big stucco places Northbay was famous for. It sat atop a sloping, manicured lawn. Above the front door was window through which you could see a painting of a yellow cross. They pulled into the three-car garage and got out of the van.

"Get some helmets and then I'll let you go," the lady said.

She opened the door to the house. An anguished howl came from inside. It was a shudder-making scream right out of a horror movie. It sounded like the voice of someone who was experiencing both extreme pain and profound confusion.

"Give me, give me," the voice said.

"Oh, hey, munchkin, hello there," the lady said.

They entered an enormous kitchen. Billy felt like he had walked onto the page of the Williams and Sonoma catalog. Acres of gleaming tile and stainless steel. The smell of ginger and bleach. Their shoes squeaked as they moved across the floor, like basketball players on TV.

The lady went to a table at the other end of the kitchen where a boy around Billy's age sat in a wheelchair. He drooled and shook his head spastically, as if he were being hounded by a big fly. A young woman in a nurse's smock stood nearby with a spoon in her hand. On the table was a plate of what looked like mashed up broccoli covered in ketchup and melted cheddar cheese. The lady knelt by the boy, wiped food from his face

with a napkin, and whispered in his ear. He calmed down and smiled with animal pleasure.

"Teddy had fun at the group play," the nurse said.

"Oh did he? Did Teddy have fun?" the lady said.

Teddy chuckled.

"They didn't have helmets?" asked the nurse.

The lady turned to the Billy and Davey, as if she had to remember what the two boys were doing in her kitchen.

"Yes," she said. "These two were out riding on Hoy Road, can you believe that? At this time of the day? And they came all the way from Montgomery Street, in town."

She motioned for them to follow. They walked through a dining area and across a vast living room. She led them into a bedroom. The bed was piled with what must have been fifty brand new bicycle helmets --- the kind with a styrofoam interior and a plastic shell, with a triangular visor extending from the front. The helmets reminded Billy of a pile of sculls from a documentary about Africa they had shown in Social Studies class. Nothing else much was in the room. A bookcase with paperbacks and a few framed pictures on the floor. The window blinds were dusty and the ceiling fan strung with cobwebs.

"What size are you?" the lady said to Davey. She frowned and put her hands on his head, as if she were casting a spell. "Feels like a forty-nine, or a forty-nine and a half, somewhere in there. Let's see." She turned to the bed and dug through the helmets. "Red or blue?"

“Red, I guess,” Davey said.

“Try this one,” she said. “You can fix the straps here. And here.”

Davey put the helmet on and tightened the strap below his chin.

“Ok,” he said. “Great.”

The lady touched the top of the helmet and shook it. She shifted it back and forth across Davey’s head.

“Not even,” she said. “Not even tight enough at all. Here.”

Davey rolled his eyes.

The lady took the helmet off and fidgeted with its system of buckles and straps.

“If you don’t keep these helmets on tight, you might as well not wear them,” she said. “Now.”

Davey put the helmet on again.

She tried to shake Davey’s head. The helmet didn’t budge.

“Like a glove.”

Now she turned to Billy and lay on her hands. For a moment they were as intimate as doctor and patient. Billy stared at a mole on her neck that had a blonde hair sticking through it. He could smell the fragrance of her body, a mix of citrus and sweat. Her lower lip dangled open as she estimated his head size. He wished she would leave her hands on his head a little longer.

“You’re more like a forty-seven,” she said.

The lady looked through the pile of helmets on the bed and hummed softly.

"Ok," she said, dropping the helmet on Billy's head. "I hope you like blue. All I got in a forty-seven is blue."

"Oh, blue's fine with me," Billy said. "Thank you very much."

They tightened the straps, just like with Davey. She put her hands on the helmet and tried to budge it.

"Like a glove," Billy said.

"That's right. Now your brain is protected. You've got to protect that brain."

"Can we go now?" Davey said.

"Yes," she said. "You can go."

More howls came from the kitchen. Then a crash. A plate of food and silverware had landed on the floor.

"I'm coming," the lady said.

Billy hoped they would go back through the kitchen so he could get another look at the wheel-chair bound boy. But she sent them down a hallway that avoided the kitchen and led straight to the garage.

They biked down the lady's big driveway and took a left.

"Pinkerson lives right around the corner," Davey said while unbuckling his chin strap. When they were out of sight of the lady's house, he removed the helmet and slung it to the pavement. The plastic made a rattling sound as it rolled down the street and into a gutter.

"What a trip," Davey said.

Ryan Pinkerson's house was another big stucco place, but it had a larger lawn than the helmet lady's.

His little sister let them in. "Ryan's upstairs in the playroom," she told them. Billy and Davey left their bikes in the grass by the front door. Billy carried his helmet inside.

Pinkerson was stretched out on a long leather sofa playing his Nintendo 64. The playroom was littered with kid junk: balls, Barbies, a ping-pong table folded against the wall, life-size cutouts of Arnold Schwarzenegger and Mickey Mouse, buckets of stuffed animals, every Nerf product known to man. Billy and Davey stepped over all this to join Pinkerson on the sofa.

"What are you guys doing here?" Pinkerson said, keeping his eyes to the TV, which was one of those mammoth forty-two inch sets that came with its own stand. Pinkerson had a bag of chips nestled underneath his elbow, and a can of coke between his thighs. The screen followed a soldier with sculpted muscles and two sub-machine guns through a murky basement populated by machete-wielding goblins.

"We came to see that potato launcher," Davey said.

"Well that's too bad. My brother's not here."

"So what?" Davey said.

"Well," Pinkerson said as the soldier started blasting away at the goblins. "I can't mess with that thing without my brother around. I mean, I could *show* it to you."

"Show it to us then," Davey said.

"Nah. I'm kinda busy."

"Come on."

“Dude, no.”

They sat there on the sofa and watched Pinkerson lead his avatar through more worlds of ruin. Green blood splattered against the walls. Organs were squashed like mealy tomatoes.

Billy tried to nudge Davey toward the door. If they couldn’t see the potato launcher in action, what was the point of hanging around only to watch someone play Nintendo?

After a while Davey got up. Billy thought he was about to say goodbye. But instead he took one of the Nerf guns and loaded it with styrofoam rockets.

“Go over there and stand by that Screech poster,” Davey said. “Put on your helmet.”

Billy stood in the corner and leaned forward. Davey cranked the Nerf gun and began firing the rockets at his head. Billy could barely feel the impact.

“Tough helmet,” Billy said, and knocked against it with his fist.

Davey dropped the nerf gun and picked up an aluminum bat.

“Check it out,” he said, and took a practice swing.

“Don’t swing all the way,” Billy said, clenching his teeth.

Davey clocked Billy a good one on the side of the head. Billy’s head stung pleasantly.

“You ought to try my pellet pistol,” Pinkerson said from the couch. “It’s in that drawer over there.”

“A pellet pistol?” Davey said.

The pistol was black with a fake wood pattern on the handle and a pump action on the barrel.

Davey admired the air gun from all sides. He peered down the barrel and stroked the trigger. He tucked it inside his belt and admired his reflection in the window.

“This could probably kill a small bird,” Davey informed Billy. “It’s meant to look like a Luger semi-automatic, but the barrel’s too wide and Lugers never had wooden trim. Still, it’s a pretty awesome for a pellet pistol. How much did it cost, Ryan?”

“How should I know?” Pinkerson said. “My dad gave it to me like five years ago.”

“I bet it was around forty,” Davey said. “You could pay more for an air pistol, of course, but there’s really no reason.”

Davey gave the gun five good pumps and aimed at Billy’s dome. The gun made a hollow pop like a suction cup coming unstuck from a wall. The pellet bounced off Billy’s head and landed on the carpet.

“Let’s see,” Davey said. He walked over and examined the helmet. “Didn’t even make a dent.”

Now he pumped it for twice as long as he did previously. This shot didn’t hurt either. The pellet ricocheted off Billy’s helmet and bounced right back at Davey, who had to duck to miss it.

“That was cool,” Davey said.

Then the door to the playroom opened.

"What's going on up here?" said a young man's voice that tried to be deeper than it was. Ryan Pinkerson's brother entered the room. A sleeveless U.S. Army t-shirt showed off his muscular arms, which glistened like they had just been shaved and rubbed with oil. He wore navy blue sweat pants and combat boots. Judging by his physique, he looked to be well into manhood, but the sense of maturity was contradicted by the sparse blonde goatee struggling to cover his chin and the animated play of his blue-gray eyes. His smell --- a threaded aroma of musk, hair gel, and cigarette smoke --- surged through the room like a blast of hot air.

Ryan's brother smiled at Billy, lined up against the wall as if were facing a firing squad, and Davey, who held the pistol in a ready position. "Y'all look stupid," he said.

"Hey, Jake," said Ryan from the couch. "They want to see the potato launcher."

Jake folded his arms in an exaggerated motion and lifted his eyebrows halfway to his hairline.

"Oh, do they?" he said, and looked down at Billy and Davey. "I don't know if these squirts are ready for the power that is Jake Pinkerson's potato launcher."

"Could you show us, Jake, please?" Davey said.

Jake reduced his eyes to slits.

"Do you know that potato launchers are illegal in Madison County?" he said. "I could get in big trouble. What I'm saying is, can I trust you?"

"Sure, you can trust us," Davey said. "We do illegal stuff all the time. We'll be real cool about it."

Jake led Billy and Davey downstairs into the garage, which was a mess of lumber, brick, and planks of drywall.

"My dad's a contractor," Jake said. "He built half this neighborhood. But he don't know what's in his own garage."

Jake climbed a pile of two-by-fours, removed some of them, and extracted a piece of PVC pipe with a duct-taped scope and a red button at the base.

"Hold this," he said to Davey.

With the gun in his hands Davey's eyes grew big, and he nodded at Billy.

"Wow," Davey said.

"Yeah," Billy said.

Jake handed Billy a canvas sack filled with potatoes. It was so heavy that Billy had to carry it with two hands. He was still wearing his helmet.

They followed Jake, who carried a can of hair spray and a golf club, out the door of the garage into the back yard.

The Pinkersons' back yard was on the outer boundary of Northbay. There were no houses directly behind it. The unfenced lot dipped into a ravine beyond which was a swamp eventually leading to the state reservoir.

Jake went down the hill of the yard into the swamp. A series of boards had been laid out across the murk in an elevated walkway. They trooped further into the woods, following the boarded path. Once or twice the boards sunk below the surface, and Billy and Davey's shoes were flooded with black water. The sun was low in the sky now, and inside the swamp light fell in random shafts. The air was damp and buzzed faintly with

mosquitoes. After walking a few hundred yards, they reached a clearing of dry land. At one edge of the clearing was a wire like a clothesline tied between two trees. Jake walked to the wire and attached some paper targets shaped like people.

First Jake took a potato and stuffed it into the barrel, then used the handle of the golf club to push the potato all the way down the pipe.

"You unscrew the bottom here," Jake explained. "And give it a good taste of that hairspray. Then you close that up. Here on the handle is the button where you fire it. Like so."

Jake grunted as he lifted the launcher onto his shoulder.

"3..2..1.." he counted.

The launcher let out a boom like a boulder falling off a cliff. A hole a half foot in diameter appeared in a paper target's torso.

"Wow," Davey said.

"Yep," Jake said. "Made it myself using common household items. You wouldn't want to have one of these mothers pointed at you."

Jake loaded another potato and sprayed the shaft with hairspray. He held out the launcher to Davey.

"Want to give it a shot?" he said.

"Yeah, sure," Davey said, and held out his arms.

"It's probably too heavy for you to hold by yourself," Jake said. "Why don't you let me hold it, and you can aim and fire."

"Ok," Davey said. "Thanks."

Jake held out the launcher with two hands and invited Davey to stand in the space between his elbows. Davey dropped his helmet and walked over. The outline of Davey's head fit neatly against Jake's whiskery chin and neck. Davey leaned against Jake's chest as he searched for the trigger.

"The sight that's on there is from a genuine World War II bazooka. I ordered it from an Army-Surplus catalog." Jake's voice barely raised above a whisper.

"Cool," Davey said.

"Ok, let her rip."

Another boom resounded off the Cyprus trunks, but the paper targets hung still and undamaged.

"Ah shit, I missed."

"That's ok. Try another one."

Davey took a potato from the sack and stuffed it down the barrel of the launcher using the golf club while Jake held the thing steady. They assumed the same position, aimed, and fired again. This time a large chunk of the shoulder of a target disappeared.

"Yes!" Davey said. He gave Jake a high five.

Jake looked at Billy.

"Want to try?" he said. "I'll hold it for you."

"Yeah," Billy said. "But I think I can hold it myself."

"A strong man, huh?" Jake said. His smile failed to hide his disappointment at Billy's answer.

"I guess," Billy said.

He picked up the potato launcher. Even lighter than he expected, the homemade weapon was, after all, nothing more than PVC pipe and a combustion chamber. After stuffing the potato down the barrel as directed and lighting the fuse with hairspray, Billy lifted the launcher to his shoulder, aimed at the head of a target, and punched the trigger. The head disappeared, the target dropped to the ground. There was a mild ringing in his ear and a slight soreness in his shoulder.

"Want to take another shot?" Jake said, but he was already reaching out his hands to receive the launcher, as if he knew exactly how Billy would answer.

"Nah, you guys can shoot some more," Billy said.

Billy sat down on a stump.

Jake showed Davey how to kneel down on one leg and shoot the potato launcher as a projectile, as if one were trying to fire over a battle wall or from behind an embankment. The pair went down together, intimately close again, and fired one into the darkening sky, over the tops of the trees.

Davey and Jake seemed very impressed by that.

Billy wondered how long it would take them to get home from here.

Davey and Jake loaded potato after potato. Jake walked to the clothesline and attached more targets. The sky turned a mauvish shade, and a slight breeze whistled across the swamp.

"Hey, Davey," Billy said. "I think we should start heading home."

Davey stood next to Jake, preparing to shove a potato down the barrel of the launcher. He looked up at the sky, and then around at the trees, as if there might be a wall clock hanging from a limb.

"Yeah," Davey said. "You're probably right."

"Oh, come on," said Jake. "We haven't gotten to the main event yet."

And with a flourish Jake brought out a silver pistol from the waist band of his pants.

"Check this out," he said, and raised the gun for them to see.

"Ryan didn't tell me you had a .44 magnum!" Davey said.

"That's because Ryan don't know about my .44 magnum."

The stainless steel barrel glinted in the twilight. Billy could sense the gun's weight just by the way Jake bandied it about. It wasn't as easy to flip around as a water pistol. You could tell by the muscles in Jake's wrist. Gravity itself seemed to have changed, as if there were now a whole new center to the situation.

Davey approached Jake with hands open.

"Can I?" he asked.

Jake didn't answer. He smiled at Davey and turned to the line of targets. He leveled his arm right arm with one of the targets, supported the handle of the gun with his left hand. He fired, emitting an ear-piercing blast and a burst of orange light. Now there was a penny-sized hole right between the target's eyes. Billy stepped back from the noise without thinking.

Now Jake held out the gun to Davey, but before Davey could take it, he flipped it back like a cowboy and tucked it in the waist of his pants.

"I'm pretty quick with this mother," Jake said. "No fella's going to come along and swipe *my* piece. Check this out."

Jake stood with his back to the target. Then, in one rapid motion, he pulled the gun from his waist, spun around and fired one into the chest of a target. The gun jumped when fired, as if it were trying to escape Jake's grip.

Now Jake repeated the move, but with a twist---at the end he dropped down to one knee, as if ducking some imaginary counterfire, and fired another bull's eye.

He had a whole program of tricks. He jumped over a stump while firing away. He rolled on the ground, coming up blasting. He ran sideways and strafed. He looked at Billy and Davey after each performance, as if expecting applause. Billy remain seated and unimpressed, but Davey smiled and held out his hands.

"Ok," Jake said to Davey. He handed the gun over. "But I should hold you while you shoot. You won't be used to the kick."

"Cool," said Davey.

Davey fit himself in between Jake's arms. Jake put his hands on top of Davey's and they raised the gun together, aimed, and fired.

"Wow," Davey said.

"Smell that? 44's have some kind of special smoke aroma."

"Yeah, smells awesome."

"Hey Davey," Billy said. "We need to go. It's getting dark. I need to be there when my mom comes home or else I'll get it."

Davey looked at Billy from his cranny inside Jake's arms.

"Yeah," he said. "You're right. We better go." He untangled himself from Jake's briefly resistant hands.

"Oh come on," Jake said. "We've barely got this thing warm. Stick around, Davey, and shoot some with me. You can go home Billy."

Davey stood in between Jake and Billy. Jake held the gun barrel out, as if he were either aiming at Davey or offering the weapon as a gift.

"Let's go," Billy said, and he started towards the boarded pathway.

Davey followed him for a few steps and then stopped.

"I think I'm going to stay and shoot some more," he said.

"I can drive you home in my truck," Jake said.

Billy left the clearing and walked through the darkening swamp. He heard the gun firing and Jake and Davey laughing. Billy didn't bother to say goodbye to Ryan Pinkerson. He found his bike by the front door and pedaled down the driveway. He could still hear the gunshots as he rode away, appearing between longer intervals now but as loud and harrowing as when he was right there in the swamp.

He sped down Pinkerson's street and turned the corner.

The helmet lady was pushing her son down the sidewalk and humming softly.

The boy reached out as Billy passed and made that awful noise again.

"Give me. Give me."

"Hey!" the lady shouted, but she was in no position to catch Billy this time.

The traffic had increased on Hoy Road. Without Davey in front of him as a guide, Billy kept his eyes on the white streak of paint marking the boundary between the pavement and the gravel shoulder. It was almost fully dark now, and there was a constant blinding of headlights in Billy's eyes and on his back. Even though the noise of the passing cars and trucks was nearly deafening, Billy thought he could still hear the pistol's reverberations. They boomed deep within him, somewhere near his heart beat. He biked slowly, and watched the road for cars that were speeding or that might be out of control. Even with the headlights' glare and the reflectors on the rear of his bike, Billy knew it wouldn't take much for one of the cars to run him over. A helmet could offer only so much protection.

THE CANCER WALK

Bobby's behind the diving board doing one of his favorite moves---carrying a foam noodle wedged between his legs and walking around as if it were his elongated member. "I have a very very long schlong," he says in a fake Indian accent to a lifeguard sitting on the high-chair three feet above. "Would you be very interested in a poking?"

The lifeguard sits statuesque in her throne, skin glistening and motionless.

I am floating out in the middle of the deep end, Bobby's audience.

Bobby throws the noodle at me. It lands a few feet away and I swim over to it.

"My schlong is very good for floating," Bobby says.

This is our summer afternoon. The sun dying slowly on a bed of pink clouds, this beautiful goddess being paid to watch us act like the thirteen year-olds we are. The pool is nearly empty on a weekday, just us and a few kids. Some retirees with socktans and leathery faces might come down from the golf course and take a dip. Mothers with *People* magazines and cranky toddlers might show. But mostly, Bobby and I have decided, it is all for our pleasure.

"So you're doing the Cancer Walk tomorrow?" Bobby says to me, and starts to do a goofy little shuffle on the way to the diving board. "That sounds like a dance," he says. " 'You put the chemicals in, you take the cancer out, you put a wig on your head and you shake it all about. You do the Cancer Walk and you get to stay alive. That's what it's all about!' "

It's possible that a smile cracks the face of our elevated idol.

"It's a Walk *for* Cancer," I tell him. "No big deal. Just me and my mom walking with a bunch of other people from the high school to the town hall."

But Bobby doesn't hear me say this because he's already cannon-bombed into the water. He hoped to splash the lifeguard, but she's too high up. Only her feet get wet.

"Did I get you?" he says to her. She shakes her head.

Later we're back in my living room, our suits still wet, watching music videos. My mother is at the clinic with my dad. Pizza rolls are warming in the oven, the air conditioner is working hard to keep the hot breath of August at bay. Bobby leaves the room momentarily and comes back with a bottle of Scotch.

"We ought to taste this," he says.

"Ok," I say.

We each have half a shot-glass's worth. Then Bobby fills the shot-glass with water and dumps it down the bottle. "Ingenious," he says to himself. "Just brilliant."

"Who would you rather have sex with more?" I ask him. "Mariah Carey or Kelly Kopowski?"

"Here's the thing," Bobby says. "Would your mom know about it? I mean could I trust you not to tell. Because I don't want to ruin anything with her. Even for Mariah Carey."

Darkness falls as we're walking my rat terrier Raphael. The neighborhood is putting on her lights: dads returning, kitchens glowing, the soft purr of an engine in a garage. Bobby carries a cigarette we're going to share when we get to the undeveloped section of our subdivision.

We walk past the pool and the shuttered country club, where we meet a gang of elementary kids on bikes.

"Hey Bobby and Lewis," one of them says, "we're coming up here after supper to pay spotlight. You in?"

"Spotlight?" Bobby says. "With you? I think we'll take a pass, thanks anyway."

As we walk away the kid speaks up again: "Hey Bobby, guess what I saw today?"

Bobby doesn't answer.

"I saw Becky Sanderson's nipple."

"You did not," Bobby says.

"I did too. It was after you guys left. After we were all out of the pool she dove from her lifeguard's stand into the deep end. When she came up her top was a little down."

Bobby turns around and walks briskly in the kids' direction. "You ever been punched before? I'm about to do you a favor. I'm going to teach you something important. You need to be *punched*."

"Oh shit!" the kids say and start giggling. They all disappear down the street and into side-yards like pigeons from a motorcycle.

"What a bunch of turds," Bobby says.

After the cigarette we walk Raphael back to my house. My dad is in the kitchen warming a plate of lasagna someone brought by. My mom is resting up, he explains to us, in order to have plenty of energy for the walk tomorrow.

Bobby stays over for supper. Afterward we bounce a basketball in my driveway.

"I wish I had another one of those cigarettes," Bobby says.

"Maybe we should go play spotlight," I say.

"Hell no. With those little kids? I've got an idea," Bobby says. "Wait here."

He goes inside my front door and comes back out less than a minute later. He's carrying one of my mom's wigs, a long blond number received at her recent wig party.

"Check it out, I look like Axl Rose," says Bobby, putting it on.

"You've got to take that off," I say. "She'll put it on and smell your funk."

"Your mom's never going to wear this one. It was in the front hall closet with all the other junk nobody ever uses."

"Did my dad see you?"

"He was asleep on the couch. I don't think he noticed about the Scotch. Listen. Have you ever gone ding-dong-ditching?"

I tell him I haven't.

"Here's how it works. We go to someone's front door and give it a good loud knock. Then we run. When they come to the door, no one's there. It's hilarious. And this way with the wig, even if they see us, we'll never get caught."

"What if they see me?" I ask. "I'm not wearing a wig."

“But I will be wearing a wig. They’ll think I’m a girl. No one would ever think you’d be out playing with a girl, Lewis.”

“Thanks, Bobby,” I say.

First we try a townhouse by the third hole. I hide on the lip of a sandtrap while Bobby approaches the front door---stepping lightly among the shrubbery and garden figurines, golden locks hanging down to his waist.

Bobby tiptoes to the door. There is a single light on in the house, in the second-storey window. Bobby knocks loudly and flees to the sandtrap. As he runs across the yard a face appears in the window.

We lie in the sand waiting for the punchline. But no one ever comes to the door.

“I think we should go get em again, send a message,” Bobby says.

“What’s the point?” I say. “They probably know it’s a joke.”

“I don’t know,” Bobby says. “But I want to try again.”

Once again Bobby tiptoes toward the front door, blonde hair flipping against his back like a superhero’s cape. He isn’t able to knock this time, though. Just when he gets to the front step and raises his fist to pound away---the door opens, revealing a tall dark figure outlined in murky light.

Bobby turns and beelines it out of the yard. The figure, in slippers and a robe, runs after him. “Hey you!” the man says. “Hey!”

When Bobby is on the other side of the street and heading my way, he trips on a rock and lands in the grass. His chaser, who has been running, now walks toward Bobby. As Bobby stands up and turns away the man grabs his shoulder.

"Where do you live?" the man asks. "What's your name? Who are your parents?" His voice erupts into the stillness of the night like a quake. The man tries to turn Bobby forcibly in front of him, but Bobby hides his face.

"My name's...my name's," says Bobby in a high-pitched voice, "my name's Kelly, Kelly Kapowski. I live at 1600 Bayside Way. My dad's Richard Belding, he's a principal at the high school."

"Bayside Way, that's not in our subdivision," the man says, and momentarily loosens his grip on Bobby, who bolts.

"Run!" he says to me. So I do. We cross the sandtrap together and go flying across the golf course into someone else's back yard, then around the corner of the house and down the next street. Finally we land underneath a tree a few blocks away and catch our breath. As soon as we are breathing regularly we start to laugh.

"I can't believe you said you were Kelly Kapowski," I say.

"It was the first thing that came to mind. But the guy believed it! Who are we going to do next?"

"No way, Bobby," I say. "After that, I'm done."

"Oh come on," he says. "You didn't even do anything. You need to try knocking one yourself."

"Nope," I say. "Not going to happen. It's getting late anyway. I have to get up early for the Cancer Walk tomorrow, remember?"

Bobby smiles. "The Cancer Walk, right." He does a little shuffle and starts to sing, "You put the chemicals in, you take the cancer out..."

As we walk home the moon comes out. There's barely a sound in the neighborhood besides the clap of our soles against the pavement. Once a car comes toward us down the street. Hoping it's a patrol-car, that our victim has called the cops to complain, we scramble behind some bushes to hide. But the car's only a regular Toyota.

We turn the corner in front of where Bobby lives, and we see that there's a black pick-up parked in the driveway of his house. This truck is only an occasional visitor to our neighborhood.

I know enough not to mention the presence of the pick-up to Bobby. We continue past his house.

We reach the fork at the top of a hill. One way leads toward my house, the other to the country club lawn where the elementary kids are playing spotlight. For a moment we stand in silence and watch the flickering spotlight dance along in the darkness, hear the distant giggles of evasion and pursuit. Occasionally the light finds a leg or a face, cheers erupt.

"*Happy Gilmore*'s on HBO tonight," I say to Bobby.

"Sweet," Bobby says. "Let's do it."

NEIGHBORHOOD KILLERS

Patricia Hurley fetched a fistful of rosemary from her backyard garden. On a lark she had decided to throw the herb into the biscuit batter she planned to serve to Paul, her neighbor's son, at lunchtime. The rosemary would give the biscuits an added punch as well as compliment the salmon salad.

Likely Paul had never eaten from-scratch biscuits. Had he even heard the word *rosemary*? Paul was in his second year of college, home on summer break, and he knew practically nothing about food culture or any other sort of culture. During the long, boozy lunches with Paul which had been occurring almost daily for the past two weeks, Patricia taught the boy cuisine and other subjects. Paul was obviously a sharp kid and he had a literary inclinations as well, but he had been told every day of his life that only serious things---math, science, the Bible---were worth studying. He soaked up Patricia's discussions like a sponge. Patricia never expected that in her seventieth year she would become friendly with a twenty-year-old boy. That although she had been barred by biology from having children and by her own idiosyncrasies from ever wanting them, she would suddenly adopt the mantle of motherly teacher.

Paul Wilkerson was a pleasant, quiet boy with curly black hair hanging over his ears and a minor outbreak of acne along his chin. Patricia had been driving home from the supermarket one day when she passed Paul on the side of the road. He carried a short

stack of books---entry-level beat stuff, Kerouac, Kesey, and Burroughs. He had just left the library. Patricia gave him a ride and when they were home she loaned him a copy of *Look Homeward, Angel*. In her living room they got to talking. Or rather, Patricia got to talking. She told Paul about the 1960s. Before he left she asked him to come to lunch the next day.

The Wilkersons seemed like oddballs when they moved into the neighborhood. Teetotallers, members of the Baptist church, Everett was a tax lawyer and Leslie a nurse's assistant. The decor of their home must have been inspired by a dentist's office. Leslie served a dip made from green peas and cucumber and which tasted like blended cardboard.

"They're Yankees," Patricia said to her husband after meeting the neighbors.

"They're not Yankees," Henry said. "They're from Tupelo."

"They act like they're from Minnesota."

Twenty-five years ago the Wilkersons may have seemed like oddballs, but they were more like pioneers. Now it was all about where you went to church and how often you exercised. These women looked at you funny if you ordered a regular Coke. Nobody wanted to play tennis. They would rather run around a track.

Patricia called them the New Puritans.

"New Puritans?" Henry laughed. "*New?* This is Mississippi, Pat. Ain't nothing new about these puritans."

But Henry, who was from a farming village two counties away, hadn't lived in this neighborhood when Patricia was growing up. She had listened to the Velvet Underground and smoked her first joint on what was now the Wilkersons' back patio. Allen Ginsberg had given a reading at the local college where her father, a doctor, was on the board of trustees, and afterwards the poet had passed out their living room sofa. In those days socialism wasn't an epithet; it was an idea like any other. If you were sixteen you could order a martini from the country-club bar just so long as you weren't driving home. If you were twelve you could drive your car to the drug store just so long as you didn't go farther than that. But for a brief period between starting college and her father's death, Patricia had lived in the same house in the same neighborhood all her life. She could say with some authority that things had indeed changed.

Henry didn't share Patricia's disgust for the New Puritans because they made his life easier. The blacks and the bohemians gave him headaches, but he knew how to handle these good Christian white folks. He had run the home office of a U.S. Senator and had been responsible for giving the time of day to self-important state legislators and local businessmen, for measuring the mood of the constituents, for corralling the requests for government jobs and recommendations to the service academy. Henry maintained an office downtown but spent most work days making appearances all over the state at golf courses, poker tables, and lunch counters. At home Henry shared Patricia's love for poetry and music. But given the opportunity he could fart and spit tobacco like any other good ole boy. Patricia had never forgiven him for turning Republican. The senator's

party-switch had been Henry's idea. They were able to get in early with Reagan and ride him through one re-election after another.

Patricia still had arguments with Henry over politics, even though his death from cancer was now two years in the past. She laughed as she imagined his jingoistic support for more wars in the Middle East, the way he would have praised the current president's phony evangelicalism.

"A strong leader plays well in the middle of the country" he would have said, or "People want to know what a man believes in."

"Oh, really? What do you believe in there, bubba?"

"I believe in winning elections."

When Henry died, Patricia discovered herself deep in debt. All those visits Henry had made to the golf course and the card table had not been without financial consequence. Secretly he had taken out a second mortgage and bled whatever of Patricia's family money he could get his hands on. With the selling of the boat and the hunting property and the house on the coast, the widow Patricia inched above water. After college she had worked at the public library, but she hadn't held a job since then. She could have found a new occupation to give herself some wiggle room. She chose instead to scrimp---eat mostly what she could grow, refrain from buying anything, give up entertaining and going places.

Before Paul Wilkerson started coming over for lunch, it had been since Henry's death since Patricia had cooked someone else food for free. Widowhood hadn't turned her into a recluse. She thought she always had the gumption within in her to be Emily

Dickinson in blue jeans. She always loved the Marianne Moore line about solitude being the best cure for loneliness. Now with her husband gone, she had no one to disappoint with her staying inside all the time. She worked in her garden in the daytime and in the evening drank a Jack-and-coke while watching *The Newshour with Jim Lehrer*. Once night fell she worked on her novel till she became too tired to lift finger to typewriter. The novel was going to be called "The Neighborhood Killer." It was a mystery, about a person who kills people in a neighborhood one-by-one. And not obvious murder deaths, either. He kills people by expert tricks---poisoning a gentleman's coffee so it looked like he had a heart attack. Minute disruptions to the engine of a young girl's stationwagon to make it lead her to crashing into a tree. Fake suicides, fake overdoses. The especially brilliant aspect of the killer's plan was that he waited long periods of time, sometimes years, in between killings. So the poor souls in the neighborhood didn't even know they were being targeted. Meanwhile the killer bided his time and worked down his list of names.

"Excuse me, Patricia?"

Patricia had one hand on the back door, the other clutching the rosemary, when Leslie Wilkerson called her from the carport.

Leslie had on her scrubs---which were never green anymore. These particular scrubs featured a garish pattern of fluorescent flowers. Patricia wondered what you would think if you came into the ER with a gunshot wound and were met by a woman wearing baby blue and bright purple flowers.

"I didn't see you there, Leslie. Good morning. You must be on your way to work."

"I have a question for you, Patricia. Really it is a request. It's about my son, Paul."

"What's the matter with Paul?"

"He's home from school. You may have seen him around."

"I have seen him, yes," Patricia said. "He's on summer break?"

"Not exactly. We removed Paul from the college. He has a drug problem."

"Oh my."

"I know. It's just been awful. He fell in with some bad sorts at school. We're hoping this is just a phase."

"You said you had a request?"

"It's about Paul. I've been taking double shifts at the hospital, and he's here all day by himself. Could you keep an eye out for him? Just watch for any sorts of you know, people, who might be coming over. Whether Paul leaves. I want to know what he does all day. He doesn't tell me anything."

Standing at her kitchen window and watching Leslie Wilkerson pull down her driveway, Patricia let out a chuckle. *A drug problem*. Likely Everett had found a bag of grass in Paul's glove compartment. Then called their minister, the college president, Paul's roommate, all his professors, the local chapter of Narcotics Anonymous. It was typical of how the New Puritans overreacted to any bit of chemical experimentation---with spellbound fear and Biblical swells of vituperation. The sad thing was that they had

probably scared poor Paul into believing he was an addict. No wonder he hadn't mentioned much of school or his friends during lunches at Patricia's. He was embarrassed about smoking marijuana!

Come to think of it Patricia might not decline a little toke if the opportunity were to arise. It had been decades since she had gotten high. But she had good memories of the weed. Thad Stevenson's Pontiac Grand Prix pulled to the bank of the Pearl River, the brown water lapping over a log and Crosby, Stills and Nash humming sweetly on the radio. Sex aided by it a few times in college, but she didn't see what the big deal was.

Henry hadn't been a pot-smoker. And not out of snobby moralism either. His lungs couldn't handle the smoke. He'd rather have a Scotch over ice with a touch of lemon, but more for the taste than the effect. The leaps of his brain brought him plenty of satisfaction. He'd read the Sunday paper and then go about the rest of the day with an intoxicated air, smacking his lips and licking the corners of this mouth. Patricia felt invisible then, while the knowledge throbbed his synapses like psychedelics in the bloodstream. Sometimes he became a little drunk, but only if you wanted him to. Then he grinned and squinted his eyes as if before a blast of white light, uncomfortable and a little scared.

Patricia had hoped Henry might be prescribed some marijuana for his chemo---you could get it in pill-form. They could have shared them and watched *Masterpiece Theater*. But Henry's death was so quick that the doctors never had time to experiment with pain medication. As he faded Henry wanted to keep lucid. He lay on top of the comforter in nothing but a v-neck t-shirt, listening to Chet Baker records and sweating

through the pain. An unopened container of oxycontin remained behind the mirror in the bathroom.

Patricia didn't go checking for the oxycontin on purpose. A couple of hours after her conversation with Leslie she entered the bathroom looking for a q-tip. The rosemary-infused biscuits rose in the oven, and all that was left for lunch was to slice the salmon and throw it on the salad mix. Paul would be over in a less than an hour.

The oxycontin didn't appear to have been touched. It was in the back of the cabinet where it had always been, behind the q-tips, her cholesterol pills, and a bottle of Paxil someone had given her after the funeral but which she had given up on after a few days. She read the oxycontin label and did a count. Sixteen pills were missing.

An image of rat poison---could you get it in capsules---flickered across Patricia's mind. Or better, a laxative. But there wasn't time to go to the drugstore. And since Paul had been stealing the pills for two weeks running, he already knew what they looked like. Patricia put the pill bottle in her pocket because she couldn't think of anything to do with it.

She diced an onion and tried to keep the waves of embarrassment and rage from subsuming her like a tsunami.

The worst part was that she kept hearing herself talk. The things she had said to Paul Wilkerson now made her face go purple. Silly, stupid stories about famous people she had met and tales from the neighborhood's past. Walker Percy's canary yellow sweater, how he gawked at Louis Pickford's fifteen-year-old daughter. Bear Bryant in the elevator of the Lamar Life insurance building. The fire at the old Courtney place, how the

blaze found the paint Jim Courtney was using on his old fishing boat, exploding the garage and threatening the Kirkendales next door. How every man in the neighborhood, including her Henry, had to take a shovel to dig an emergency trench in order to keep the fire from spreading. What drama, what significance, captured in a ten-block radius of bungalows, gablefronts, Colonial Revivals! Prattling drunkenly like a sad old aunt. Meanwhile Paul Wilkerson sat at her table feigning interest and respect.

Patricia took a gulp of Chardonnay.

Paul knocked on the back door before entering.

"Miss Patricia," he said from the hallway.

"I'm in the kitchen."

He moved with the slow, cautious step of someone waking up early in a house full of light sleepers. Or the tip-toe of a practiced burglar. He wore a solid black t-shirt, blue jeans, red canvas sneakers.

"What's that smell?"

"Rosemary. Have you ever heard of rosemary?"

Paul shook his head and sat down at the table.

"Smells good."

Patricia refilled her wine glass and gestured with the bottle to Paul.

He nodded. She set a glass on the table and poured some in.

"How are you liking *Look Homeward, Angel*?"

"It's good," Paul said, fingering the table cloth and looking around the kitchen. "The dad's funny."

"It's very autobiographical. Wolfe grew up in a boarding house in Asheville. You can tour the original building. Henry and I went through there one summer."

Patricia began a narration of Asheville, Scott Fitzgerald, the Grove Park Inn, the Black Mountain School, Billy Graham, the Biltmore Estate. Her mind could turn on a recitation from travel books, encyclopedias, brochures with little conscious effort. Paul at least looked at her and appeared to be listening. He sipped from the wine glass. His nostrils pulsed minutely.

Early in their marriage Henry had been invited to a Republican staffer's retreat outside Cashiers. Patricia drove the mountain roads in their stationwagon, stopping in the mountain hamlets to shop for fruit preserves and moonshine. She and Henry argued over a ballroom gala he wanted to take her to. She plotted a hike that lead from the back door of the bed-and-breakfast to a minor peak. The hike took longer than she expected. She reached the peak just before dark. The valley of blinking yellow looked like the night sky reflected on a lake. Since she had packed a jar of the moonshine, a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, and a heavy sweater, Patricia decided to spend the night on the cliff instead of risking the treacherous climb down through the darkness. The high winds swirled. She emptied the jar of moonshine and entertained animations in the sky. Pinocchio dancing with the children the doctors said she couldn't have. The breath of her parents like a golden sneeze blown across the horizon. At dawn she woke in a tremble and descended as the forest went from grey to green. Back at their room she expected to be greeted like the lost child. But Henry wasn't home yet either. He arrived as she emerged from the shower. He had left the gala for the casinos in Cherokee. He had spent the night and the

early morning playing craps with the ex-Secretary of State. Only at this moment, as she continued to pour a stream of un-asked for information on Paul Wilkerson's curly head, did Patricia realize that she had climbed the mountain with the hidden hope of dying up there. The next morning had been a miracle she hadn't asked for. Everything since then a long, pointless exhalation.

Patricia served Paul a salmon salad and the rosemary-infused biscuits. She recommended an order for reading Fitzgerald. Don't start with *Gatsby*. Work up to it.

Halfway through his salad Paul asked to be excused to go to the bathroom.

When he returned he kept his eyes on the table and flipped the food around with his work while Patricia continued to babble. Now he made no attempt to appear to be listening.

"Aren't you going to finish your salad? More Chardonnay? I could open another bottle."

Paul shook his head and continued to avoid eye contact.

"Okay," Patricia said. She brought out the pill bottle and set on the table in between them.

Paul met eyes with Patricia for the first since coming back from the bathroom.

"You said yesterday you would read me some of your novel," he said.

Paul and Patricia swallowed two oxycontin each and washed the pills down with wine from a newly opened bottle. Patricia retrieved her manuscript pages from beside her bed and joined Paul in the living room. The boy may have been a thief and a liar but he was a good listener. Maybe that was all Patricia had ever wanted. She picked a point deep

in the story. The killer's next victim was a young librarian engaged to be married to a lawyer working in politics. The killer spiked the librarian's lemonade, stole her from her house, and led her to a clearing down by the river where others might believe she had walked. The killer carried her into the water, lowered her beneath the surface, and watched her drown, then lay her gently against the sandy bank.

SABOTAGING NAPOLEON

Tina and I were both writer-editors for the Publications team of Lowenstein Incorporated, a fading section in a slowly dying company. The management consultants were on a firing spree, using their calculators to decapitate redundant workers one after the other. Rumors abounded that Publications was doomed---that if the slick-haired MBAs in their suspenders and penny loafers didn't boot the entire section, with its outdated, bothersome obsession with grammar and style conventions, widows and orphans, type fonts and page counts, then they would at the very least take a couple of scalps. Because of this, Tina and I, along with the Pauleen, the team's other writer-editor, treated each other not as colleagues but as competitors. We lived on the lookout for an opportunity to highlight each other's mistakes, we told tall tales to the team leader about how busy we were, we searched for the project that, well-executed, would cement our reputation. It was an unhealthy way to live.

One morning I came to work with a computer virus named the Gomb in my pocket.

The previous night I had logged on to a fantasy-game message board I frequented and posted the following request:

"ATTN All Fatherland Members. I'm looking to crash a particularly troublesome machine in my office, euthanasia-style. It's too old to live

and needs to be put out of its misery. Here are the specs: Gateway 2000 386, with 33 Mhz and 16 MB of RAM (can you believe one of these still EXISTS?). The IT geeks at my work are pretty clueless, but the virus should be untraceable---wouldn't want to lose my job for killing one of their precious babies. Anywho, let me know if you have any ideas :)"

The board lit up with suggestions: some said Chernobyls, some said metamorphics, some said cavities. There was a lot of discussion about where to place the virus, whether in a batch or bait file, and I had to answer questions about the computer's operating system, what sort of anti-virus software it ran, and how much time I'd have to upload the bug. Eventually a consensus emerged around the Gomb. A user named Rufus006 emailed me the zipped-up version of the Gomb with instructions on how to infect the computer.

Tina huddled over a pile of papers in her cubicle and didn't notice me standing there. Two pens were sticking out of her ears—she looked like a horned animal being hunted. Her workspace stagnated with ruin: half a dozen tea mugs grew mold, out-of-print booklets and extinct directories teetered in unwieldy stacks, nieces and nephews stared sadly from cheap picture-frames. The scene reminded me of rot, a loner's tomb, of so much kindling. I saw it from the perspective of the management consultants: *how have we allowed her to fester here for so long? How quickly can we clear this shit out?*

She looked up out of her doom.

"Good morning, Arthur," she said.

I pointed to my pocket. I brought out the disk with the virus on it, held it aloft, and nodded slowly. Tima's smudged little face faded a deeper shade of gray. She extracted one of her pens from her ear and tapped it on the surface of her desk.

"Is that...?" she said

"Sure is," I said, and then I stepped toward her, offering the disk.

Tina watched me for a second, then shook her head *no*.

"I don't want it," she whispered.

"Shhh," I said. "Just take it."

She shook her head again, gestured emphatically with her eyebrows as if to say *get that thing away from me*.

I stopped. Held the Gomb up again, one final offering. But Tina refused to take it.

My own cubicle was next to Tina's. I made pains to keep my space neater than anyone's in our section. As the youngest member of the staff, with only three years of experience, I had to take my advantages where I could get them. I may not have been the team's best speller, or its best reciter of grammar rules, or its best writer, or its best page designer, or its best communicator, but no one could match my organizational intensity. My charts, my calendars, and my daily schedules were arranged to maximize visibility. Reference manuals, dictionaries, thesauri, histories of the company lined a shelf to the back. File cabinets ordered chronologically by project. Surfaces kept cleaner than a hospital. I was here to work. I was here to stay.

I logged on to my computer and looked the task aggregator to decide where my nine hours could best be spent. The due date for a set of posters advertising a corporate

retreat was two weeks away; I had the art---photographs of multi-colored men and women in sweaters and slacks, conversing at coffee and under bloomy trees---but not the taglines. I dragged "Write retreat copy" to the top of my queue. The draft of a press release announcing an assistant CEO's performance in a half-marathon needed to go out by C.O.B. I put "Compose marathon release" in the second slot, and so forth.

Pauleen passed by, head arched like a swan. Guys around Lowenstein thought Pauleen was a babe, they got off on the freckles that constellated her neck, they thought her nose was cute in a weird way, they were excited by how much her breasts had grown after having a kid. I could see their attraction. But those guys didn't have to listen to Pauleen. They didn't have to hear her brown-nosing our team leader, Janet. Or prattling needlessly about going to pump milk from herself. She dangled her motherhood in front of our faces as if it were a diamond ring (she had one of those, too---her husband worked in sales). But the worst part about Pauleen was that she was good. Her copy was clean. Her concepts were bold. She never missed a deadline. I was afraid she would get me in the end.

I followed Pauleen to her desk.

"Hey, Pauleen," I said, holding out a sheet of papers. "Here are those news items for the March issue of *Lowenstein News*."

One of Pauleen's lorded-over projects was the company newsletter. Getting my by-line in there would do much for my company reputation, but it was a hard item to achieve. I had spent a month reporting these news pieces: calling satellite offices,

responding to buried customer queries, following product trails lonely as desert foot prints.

"There's some good stuff in there," I said. "One of the sales supervisors in Terre Haute found an entrée into a nursing-home conglomerate through his ailing mother. A distribution center in Lake Pleasant was runner-up to a dodgeball-league championship. What else. Oh yeah, there was a pretty nice memorial service for a suicide in Big Bend. Probably could use some of those."

Pauleen put my sheet in a far corner of her desk. She had yet to look me in the eye.

"I don't know Arthur," she said. "The issue is already getting pretty full. But I'll see what I can do."

About an hour later Tina walked out for her morning cigarette, and I followed her.

Tina didn't notice me behind her until we were both outside and standing in the gravel yard back of our building where we're allowed to smoke. She jumped when she turned with her lit Kool and saw that I was standing there.

"Leave me alone," she said.

"Tina," I said, gently, taking the disk out of my pocket. "At least take it. I got it last night. It's called the Gomb. My friends said it was a sure-fire way to crash a computer. And it's undetectable. The IT guys won't have a clue, they'll just order you up a new computer!"

"I told you yesterday. I'm not crashing my computer on purpose. I could get in trouble. I could get fired."

"But don't you see," I said. "That with that old clunker you have now, you're likely to get fired anyway? That's a ten-year-old computer, for Chrissakes. IT is really screwing you over by making you use that thing."

"But they said because of budgetary restraints," Tina argued. "They can't afford to buy me a new computer."

"Tina," I said. "If your computer crashed, IT would get you a new computer. They have the money, they just don't want to spend it until they absolutely have to."

"This is stupid. I'm not going to crash my own computer on purpose. I could get canned."

"You'll get canned," I said. "But not for crashing your computer."

"Fuck you, Arthur. I don't understand why you're in such a hurry to help me out all of a sudden."

"We're colleagues," I said. "And our section is on the ropes. The bosses think they can do without writer-editors. That with automatic spell-checkers and word-processing, they can do it all themselves."

"Maybe they're right," Tina said. She flung her butt down with a flourish and stomped out of the gravel yard. The pleats in her khakis rumpled as she moved away and the smoke died in the air.

I lit up another cigarette. Fifteen minutes remained until the morning meeting. The clouds sagged over the office park, a purple ceiling about to burst its pipes. Our building was far enough away from the interstate that you couldn't really hear it, but it was still there: a perceptible hum at the bottom of life, kind of like how the ocean feels

when you're a few miles from the coast. I was the only one outside, for most people took their smoke breaks later in the morning. I climbed over some shrubbery and landed on the industrial campus that's next to our building, where there was a Levi's packaging center and a little pond with ducks floating. From the bank of the pond with its chemical-green water I threw rocks at the ducks.

At nine o'clock the team convened for a morning run-through---which projects were hot, which projects were up for grabs, which projects were headed for the grave.

About midway through the meeting, our boss Janet asked Tina about some new certificates she was working on.

"I don't have all the designs finished," Tina said. "But I'm almost there."

"*Almost?*" Janet said. "You said you were going to have the finished designs to me by yesterday. Do I have to remind you that this company retreat is happening in six weeks? Ted and the guys up front wanted to have those certificate designs outsourced. They wanted to give the assignment to a PR firm they've been flirting with. But I went out on a limb, said *I've got my Tina. Tina'll draw up some beautiful certificates* I said. Don't you see I'm fighting for our section? They didn't want to give Publications the opportunity to excel. And now look. You're late on it. You're *almost* there. As far as I can tell, this section is *almost* kaput. Why should they let us stay---if we can't keep our promises? Why should I let *you* stay---if you can't keep your promises?"

"Janet," Tina pleaded, face reddening as she sunk into herself, cowered. "I just need one more day. My computer runs really slow with Photoshop. But I'm almost finished, almost."

“Not this again,” Janet said. “Not your computer. I know that thing is old and if the company was doing better I’m sure IT would bring new equipment right over, but the truth is that we have to make do. I’m saying this to everyone. We have to make do, people. Not make excuses, but make do. I’m sorry your computer is running slow, Tina, but you’re going to have to work past that.”

“I’m sorry, Janet,” Tina said. “I’m sorry I’m late on those certificates. I’ll have them to you soon, I promise.”

“No more promises, Tina,” Janet said. “Outcomes. Outcomes, or consequences.”

Tina and I were outside smoking again, sometime after lunch, just the two of us. Around noon the clouds had come undone and pummeled us with twenty minutes of showers. Now the gravel under our feet was soggy, and spitwebs of mist were draped all around us. But the sky offered a few blue glimpses between the clouds.

“Okay, okay,” Tina said. “Give me that virus.”

“Are you sure?” I said. Something in Tina’s face had me spooked. Her lips were trembling, her forehead was deeply folded. She reminded me of someone who’s just made the decision to go after the suitcase with a million dollars, even though she’d be better off taking the three-hundred grand and running home. “I don’t want to force you into anything that you’d regret later,” I said.

“I want to do it,” she said. “The time for playing fair’s past.”

“That’s the spirit,” I said, and handed the disk over, but I didn’t feel as enthusiastic as I sounded.

About an hour later, I was putting the gloss on one of the poster taglines---*Lowenstein Retreat 2008: Rejuvenate Yourself for Just $69.99 a Night!*---when I heard Tina on the phone with IT.

"I'm telling you, I tried that," she said. "But when it boots up, the screen just goes blank. It's really acting wonky."

When I passed by Tina's cubicle, she was staring at her computer in mock frustration, punching her keyboard randomly.

About twenty minutes later, the IT guy showed up. It was Gary, a paunchy, bald-headed company veteran, an ex-gamer with whom I had once spent an hour of the company Christmas party talking politics of the virtual kingdom. Though he had quit playing the game after the 1995 revisions to the magic code---an old-school conservative, he feared what open-source revolution might bring---I remember him being impressively up to date on the movements of various super-gamers and regional groups.

Gary entered Tina's cubicle and, dispensing with pleasantries in the way of someone who's always been more comfortable with machines than with people, got right to work. I was sitting at my desk, faking a spreadsheet. I heard everything.

"So I hear something's wrong with Napoleon," Gary said.

"Napoleon?" Tina said.

"Napoleon. That Dell you got there," Gary explained. "Napoleon's been with this company for at least a decade. He was a determined old rascal back in his prime. Lead us on some important missions."

"I, I don't know," Tina said. "It---I mean he---just stopped working about an hour ago. I don't know what happened. I hope you can fix it. I've got a lot of work to do."

"We'll just have to see," said Gary, and I listened to Tina shuffle from her chair as Gary positioned himself in front of the computer.

Gary began to interrogate Tina about how Napoleon had been acting leading up to his collapse, but I didn't hear much of it because Pauleen interrupted my listening.

"What's going on in there, Arthur," Pauleen asked me.

"Oh, Tina's computer's on the fritz."

"Hmm," Pauleen said, and I could tell by the way her facial muscles twitched that she was trying to determine how the death of Tina's computer might affect her own professional fate.

"The thing is," I said, "That since they make us back everything up on the central servers these days, Tina really hasn't lost anything. She'll probably come out ahead when it's all said and done, even with her lost time, because they'll give her a brand-new computer."

Pauleen nodded slowly, and then looked at me.

"Oh yeah. Arthur would you mind keeping an eye out for Kevin, that new supervisor in Production Control who kind of looks like the guy from *Law and Order SVU*? He's supposed to come over here. We have a meeting to plan the new TJK catalog, but then I remembered I have to pump milk from my breasts. I won't be gone longer than ten minutes, promise."

"Sure, I'll tell him you'll be right back," I said.

A few minutes later Kevin showed up, a greaser with a ponytail and a leather jacket, and after looking around for a second, he stuck his head in my cubicle.

"You seen Pauleen anywhere?" he said.

I shrugged and went back to my task aggregator.

Next-door, Gary clicked Tina's mouse frenetically.

"Jesus, what is going on with this thing," he said. "You haven't downloaded any strange execution files off the Internet, have you?" he asked Tina.

"Of course not, Gary. I haven't got time for that."

"Hmm. Some viruses have insidious ways of sneaking over the firewall. Undoubtedly that's what happened, it was probably accidental on your part. You clicked a link an email, opened an attachment, something stupid, and now Napoleon's dead."

"I wouldn't do that," Tina said. "I swear I'm always careful. I don't download anything. I do work on my computer, that's all. I don't have time to surf the web."

"Settle down, Tina," Gary said. "I'm not convicting you of gross negligence, just negligence. I guess I'll have to order you one of those new HPs---and sign you up for our Internet safety seminar."

"Really?" Tina said. "But, but, I thought there were budgetary restraints about buying new equipment."

"There is a freeze on all new purchases that aren't absolutely necessary. But you can't really do your work without a computer, correct?"

"Yes, yes, that's right."

"Ok. I'm through here. Don't touch the computer or do anything. I'll have somebody come over here with a cart and we'll put it in the hardware dumpster, see if any of the parts are salvageable."

Gary walked by my cubicle. Tina came next and stopped. She turned to me and made a celebratory dancing motion with her arms, like a make-over subject who's just walked onto the set of a morning television show, or a mom at a sports game who's been captured on the jumbotron twisting to "Glory Days." I nodded at her and held both my thumbs up.

Pauleen came around the corner carrying her bottle of milk and heaving.

"What are you guys doing?" she said.

"Nothing," Tina said, and Pauleen, looking at us with suspicion, walked on to her desk. Tina stuck her tongue out at Pauleen's back. I let out a hiccup of a laugh.

At the mid-afternoon smoke break, I showed Tina the little pond and the ducks. The sky had finally pushed away the remnants of the noontime storm, and above us opened a cloudless ocean of blue.

"You throw rocks at them?" Tina said.

"Yeah," I said. "Those ducks are like the rodents of water fowls. And besides, I never hit them. Don't you think they're glad to have something to do, even swimming away from my gravel? Imagine spending your entire life putzing around that pathetic pond. They'd be better off on a golf course."

Tina leaned down and picked up a handful of gravel. Her throw was not nearly far enough and way wide.

"That felt good," she said. "But I want to hit one."

We went at it for a quarter-hour, but the ducks kept skirting out of range. Tina and I walked back inside the building a little sun-dazed, like schoolchildren slouching into a classroom after recess. I was thinking it wouldn't take long to come up with the last few taglines for the poster series. And the press release for the assistant CEO's marathon would basically write itself, requiring little more than an ordering of statistics and inserting publicity lingo.

I don't know what Tina was thinking right then. Some new energy seemed apparent at the edge of her scent, in the slightly lilting the way she waddled next to me. Her face was flushed and droplets of sweat were visible at her hairline and on the crust of her lips. Tina was humming. She had never done that before.

We turned into our section, where Gary stood, arms folded, in the space next to Tina's cubicle.

"Is my new computer already here?" said Tina.

"Does the word *Gomb* mean anything to you?" said Gary.

"No," Tina said.

"Let me see," Gary said. "Do you frequent the Everquest and World of Warcraft-themed message board, Fatherland?" Gary continued, his voice rising and his face reddening. "Let me see. Do you post on this message board under the avatar, KnightoftheRoundTable? Let me see. Because if you don't, I have unearthed the mother of all coincidences!"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Tina said.

"We'll see about that," Gary said.

Janet appeared at the front door of her office.

"What's all this about?" she said.

"Janet, I'm sorry to say that I have caught one of your writer-editors in the act of sabotage. Tina murdered one of our computers in cold blood. She uploaded a virus onto Napoleon earlier today, hoping to crash it and get herself a new machine."

"What your evidence of this?" Janet said.

"Well," Gary said. "At lunch today I logged into a message board I occasionally visit, and I saw a post, dated last night, written by someone looking for advice on computer viruses. This poster was hoping to crash a Dell with specs that matched Napoleon's exactly. It turns out that the virus the message boarders recommended produces the same symptoms as those I found in Napoleon. I can only assume that it was Tina who posted the original message, and Tina who used the advice to kill Napoleon."

"Tina," Janet said in an awed half-whisper.

Tina looked me. I did my best to present a face of honest shock. Tina seemed to be telling me something with those big sad eyes of hers. But I just stood there looking disgusted, as if to say *How could you?*

"I did it, I did it," Tina said. "I'm sorry. That computer was just so slow, Janet. It was keeping me from doing my work. And they wouldn't give me a new machine otherwise."

"Tina, come with me," Janet said.

I went into my cubicle and slumped into my chair. My face had gone white during Tina's moment of trial. Dampness had broken out in all my corner regions. The task aggregator blinked with stupid poignancy. Tina may have swallowed the blame on the first accusation, but I feared what might happen when she was brought before the big wigs. If Tina started singing, they might even can me and keep Tina, censure her for falling under my bad influence but reward her for honesty and the admission of guilt. This is what happens you when you go out on a limb for a colleague, I thought to myself. This is what happens when you let friendship enter the arena of the workplace.

But when Tina returned from her conference, no one called me in to follow. She was boxing up her books and picture frames and sniffing softly. I wanted to go over there and say some words of encouragement or condolences---*Maybe it was meant to be, you did hate it here,* or *I really owe you, Tina, don't think I don't know that*---but I was afraid of how such a bon voyage might be someone overhearing it. I just sat there and hit the keys of my keyboard randomly in an effort to show the rest of the office that I was as busy as ever. Tina left without saying a word to any of us.

At the next morning's meeting we divvyed up Tina's workload. I maneuvered well and grabbed a few projects that could bring me commendation if executed properly. Janet offered no eulogy, warning, or apology for what had happened to Tina. If anything she seemed lightened by the loss.

"Arthur, I need to see you in my office," she said to me as the meeting broke up.

"What's up?" I said as we entered.

"Sit down, Arthur," Janet said.

"I just want you to know how lucky you should consider yourself," Janet said. "After the events of yesterday. The truth is that if it weren't for Tina, you wouldn't have a job here anymore."

"I don't know what Tina told you, but I didn't have anything to do with that virus."

"It's not that. Tina didn't accuse you of anything. The consultants told me last week that I was going to have to let one of my writer-editors go. And it was going to be you. To be honest, you just weren't producing like Tina and Pauleen. Your copy has too many errors, your page designs are weak, your rate of task accomplishment is well below what we need in order to be effective. These taglines," she said, holding up the pages I had turned in that morning "are just garbage, plain and simple."

"Janet," I said. "You know I've been working hard to---"

"I don't want to hear it. You're not getting fired, so you don't have to make those arguments to me. Just know that you are fortunate. Say a prayer to whoever you pray to. That's all."

After that I went out for a smoke. It was raining, though, and I had to stand beneath the awning that lead out to the gravel yard. The cigarette smoke smelled especially pungent in the rain. I couldn't see the pond or the ducks from where I stood, only the grim parking lot, the corner of the building next door, and the grey sky.