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FERGUSON, WESLEY WILSON. Rat Killing, Two Prisoners and Molting: Three Short Stories. (1973) Directed by: Fred Chappell. Pp. 59

These three short stories are united in an exploration of the possibilities and limitations of behavioral observation in revealing emotions. As much as possible, observable details reveal the characters' emotional states in order to create, through images, the tangible stimuli from which conclusions about a person's feelings naturally derive.

The problem was to select what a character sees and does ostensibly that reveal his inner feelings. By revealing his emotions in this indirect manner, through observable reality, his inner self becomes tangible and, hopefully, more capable of evoking emotive responses in readers.

Through this technique, though structured in a straightforward, traditional manner, the stories are intended to become more concrete, vivid and dramatic.

APPROPRIATE PAGE

RAT KILLING, TWO PRISONERS AND
" MOLTING: THREE SHORT
STORIES

by

Wesley Wilson Ferguson

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the Faculty of the Graduate School at
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
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of the Requirements for the Degree
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Approved by

Fred Chappell

Thesis Adviser

APPROVAL PAGE

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

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RAT KILLING

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RAT KILLING

I always liked Uncle Cleve. He'd do anything for anybody if they asked, and they usually did. He was a mechanic and worked without pay on relatives' and neighbors' cars at night between the two oak trees in the front yard where he had a block and tackle slung up in the air to pull out motors. A long black cord also hung down from a limb with a little metal cage surrounding a lightbulb on the end of the cord. He rigged these up himself and was proud of them, but Aunt Dora hated "all that junk in the front yard that made it look like a nigger house." I thought it was great; even when I was a little kid and came to visit, he would pull me up on the hoist—all the way into the tree leaves.

Though Uncle Cleve wasn't a big man, he was strong, and as he would pull me up the hoist the muscles in his arms always stood out like knotted ropes under a thick layer of black hair and grease smudges. Each time he'd give the hoist a quick pull, he'd laugh, and his Adam's apple, bristling with short whiskers like black briars, would jiggle up and down. His long greasy hair would fall down across his bony forehead, and he'd toss his head, flinging the hair out of his eyes, then give the rope another swift jerk.

But I was fourteen now and big for my age, almost the same size as Uncle Cleve, and when I asked him to pull me up like he used to, he said, "You can pull yourself up." He winked a dark eye. "You're getting too heavy for me, Butch. Go ahead; try it by yourself."

I wedged my shoe into the big iron hook and shook the ropes loose from each other. The sun was going down, and the ropes spiraled up out of the dark shadows into a sunlit place high in the tree. I steadied myself, pulled the rope and slowly began to rise. As I entered the gold patch of sunlight, Uncle Cleve's upturned face blurred into the shadows, and the rusty tin roof of the house moved behind a cloud of leaves.

I squinted about ten feet up at the big wooden pulley and began to spin, slowly at first, then faster. The leaves and a patch of sky began to blur together, but I held fast to the rope.

I spun like a cocoon held in the air by a single thread; then my arms and legs tried to fly out. As I slowed down, the loop of rope between the pulley and the limb tightened as it twisted and began to spin me in the opposite direction. But Uncle Cleve took the end of the rope I held and walked backwards until the spinning stopped.

I lowered myself quickly.

"You should of told me that thing was twisted."
I pried my foot loose from the hook. "I could of busted my ass."

Uncle Cleve laughed. "You looked like a tangled up yo yo; I don't know how it got all twisted. Peggy might of done it playing. Want to try it again?"

"I reckon not; maybe later."

Uncle Cleve could make anything. He made a swing set with thick, strong legs for my cousin Peggy out of scrap iron, and he made the most powerful lawn mower I've ever seen. After he finished making the lawn mower, he started mowing down the weeds that had grown chest high in the back yard. He accidentally bumped into the swing set while mowing, and quick as a blink the mower chopped three inches off one of the iron legs, without even straining. He also chopped up two coffee cans, four roots big as your arm, and a blacksnake, not counting all the rocks and sticks that shattered into the side of the house. I knew what he chopped up, because I picked up the trash while he tightened some bolts on the mower after he was finished. He talked to me about what a fantastic machine it was and how much he'd of had to pay for a regular mower that wouldn't of done the job in a month. He told me he thought he might hire it out to farmers to cut down trees and clear land, hire it out to the junk yard to chew up

all the scrap metal and old cars. I knew he was teasing, but I was convinced he could make a machine to do those things if he only had the money.

What little money Uncle Cleve made at the Ford place went for the bills, and if there was any left over, Aunt Dora spent it on herself, Peggy, and the house—in that order.

Ma had to quit her job when we had come to live with Aunt Dora and Uncle Cleve, but we got a check sometimes from my father—enough to get by on I guess. I didn't know how much my father sent, but it was so little that Ma and Aunt Dora got mad at him a lot and so little that Aunt Dora seldom asked for part of it.

On one of Ma's morning walks to get some fresh air and keep her weight down, I asked her if we'd ever have enough money to pay Aunt Dora back for letting us stay with her.

I had just pulled a may pop from a vine growing on top of the red clay bank, and I bit into the watery seeds. The cool sour liquid spread through my mouth, and I spit out the pits. Ma was still thinking about what I had said; she looked way down the road as if the answer might be written on a distant mailbox. She spoke without looking at me.

"What we're paying is worth more than money; we're paying with our pride."

Then I helped her up the bank, and we found a shady spot to rest in. The bigger Ma's belly got with the baby, the more often we had to stop and rest on our walks.

Ma and my little brother, Mike, slept in the same room with me. He slept with Ma in the big iron bed. The posters on the iron bed were hollow and open at the top except for a small rod welded across the opening. Uncle Cleve said there was a lot of money down in the posts, but I couldn't tell if he was telling the truth or playing. I never found out. The bed was too heavy for me to turn over by myself to try to fish the money out, and when I asked Uncle Cleve to help me, he laughed and said, "Let it stay; it ain't going nowhere." Aunt Dora said the bed must be a hundred years old and if there was any money in it, it was probably confederate, just like the trunk full of worthless confederate money my grandfather burned in the fireplace back in the thirties, just before he shot himself. After I figured out the money wouldn't belong to me anyway, I forgot about trying to get it out.

I slept in a single bed near the window. I liked having my own bed, though sometimes when it stormed I couldn't sleep. I was too old to get into bed with Ma like I used to, and I was ashamed to admit I was scared of storms.

It was hard to get to sleep anyway because of the rats that ran clicking their nails over the linoleum, or rustling in kitchen drawers. We seldom saw the rats during the day or at night before the lights were turned off, but once I found a whole nest of pink newborn rats in the back of a drawer. I used to sneak into the kitchen, open the drawer carefully, and watch them squirm and pet them with a finger. They were always warm. Then one day Aunt Dora caught me and made Uncle Cleve get rid of them. I was sorry she caught me—not so much because she yelled at me, I was used to that, and not because the rats were going to be killed—but mainly because she started yelling at Uncle Cleve again and nagging him to do something about the damn rats.

Peggy had her own little room separate from Uncle Cleve and Aunt Dora's room, until Uncle Cleve started sleeping there, and Peggy began sleeping with Aunt Dora.

W.C. had been coming around for a couple of months before Uncle Cleve stopped sleeping with Aunt Dora. It all started real friendly and natural. W.C. had Uncle Cleve fix his car one day, we all met him, and Aunt Dora invited him to stay for supper. He stayed all evening and watched t.v. with Ma, Aunt Dora, and myself while Uncle Cleve fixed more cars out between the two oaks. After that, W.C. came over almost every day, and Aunt Dora started dressing nicer, fixing her hair, and she didn't yell at me while he was there.

W.C. was W.C. The initials stood for nothing else. He was twice as big as Uncle Cleve, and he looked twice as mean, though I was disappointed he never did anything but sit around and talk. He had a big jaw that stuck out like a bulldog's, and his face was scarred with pock marks like fried fatback. He lived alone with his mother in a big white house two miles down the road. I saw the house, but I never saw his mother, and he was the only person I knew who drove a new car. He worked in a furniture factory that made nothing but chairs, and he made twice as much as Uncle Cleve, about a hundred dollars a week I figured.

W.C. had been coming around about a month, and I kept watching to see if he was going to kiss Aunt Dora when he thought I wasn't looking. I never saw him do it, and I was glad for Uncle Cleve he didn't.

On one of our walks, Ma said, "You know, Butch, Dora ought to be ashamed the way she acts around W.C. It's sinful."

I knew she wanted me to talk to her like a grown-up, but I began wondering if she had seen them kissing, or worse, so I asked, "Acts like what?"

From her second quick glance at me I knew I had asked the wrong thing, the childish thing.

She fumbled, "You know, mooing and goooing all over him."

"Yeah," I said. "She does get fixed up for him."

Ma nodded, more to her own thoughts than to me.

"I feel sorry for Cleve," she said. "She couldn't ask for a better husband."

From then on, I didn't like W.C., and I hated Aunt Dora even more. I watched carefully everything they did.

The rats got worse. If you sat in one place for fifteen minutes, you could see one, big as your fist, scurry around a corner. As more and more were bred in the walls, at night the walls were alive with their scratching, they got hungrier and hungrier and braver and braver in search of food. Ma knocked three of them off the table one morning from where they sat eating left-over bisquits from a bowl. Uncle Cleve claimed with a laugh that they wouldn't eat much.

Then one evening we were all watching the new t.v. when this great big rat, big as a man's shoe, ran right out in the middle of the floor. He stood up on his hind legs right on the picture of a bundle of giant roses sealed in the linoleum rug and looked at us innocently.

"God in heaven!" Ma drew her feet up into her chair.

Aunt Dora, sitting between Uncle Cleve and W.C., screamed and threw herself into W.C.'s arms.

Uncle Cleve started to laugh and jumped to grab something to hit the rat with, but as he looked at Aunt

Dora and W.C., he stopped laughing. He turned away quickly, picked up a shoe and threw it at the rat. The rat leaped through a hole in the screen door and was gone.

Aunt Dora pushed herself away from W.C. and touched her short blonde curls stiff with hair spray.

Though W.C. let her go, his hands slid down her arms while he looked straight at her.

She didn't look at his eyes. "I'm scared to death of those damn rats. Cleve, you've just got to do something. I've told you over and over." She straightened her skirt, her face changing from embarrassed red to angry red. "And here we got company over, and rats everywhere."

"Yeah we do." Uncle Cleve got up and left.

"Aw, don't mind me," said W.C. "I'm not company."

Nobody objected; I pretended to watch the t.v.

That night I heard Uncle Cleve and Aunt Dora yelling at each other in their bedroom. It was the first time I ever heard Uncle Cleve yell angrily at anybody. The next day he traded bedrooms with Peggy.

I was drinking a dipper of water from the bucket in the kitchen when Uncle Cleve, with hangers of clothes, met Aunt Dora in the hall.

"What's Maude going to think?" Aunt Dora asked. Maude was my mother. "You might as well stay put. It doesn't make any difference anyhow."

Uncle Cleve usually let her yell until she was finished and said nothing to keep her going, but now he spoke, his voice sounding strange because he was usually so cheerful.

"Do you think I like it? You don't make it any easier for me. I'm sorry. Do what you like; I won't hate you. Maybe being away from you will help, if that's what you want."

"Cleve," she pleaded, "I can't help it. Try to understand. For Peggy's sake."

"Just forget it. I don't want to talk about it anymore."

He walked away, and I silently sunk the dipper in the bucket and slipped away.

Soon afterwards John came to visit. John was tall with black curly hair, hollow cheeks and broad shoulders. He didn't have a car and walked or hitchhiked everywhere he went. He was strong and limber and just drifted around wherever he took a notion. He taught me how to do push-ups, sit-ups, and how to drink liquor.

John had lived with us (Ma, Mike, and me) when we lived in Reidsville, and his living with us caused Ma to get in a fight with the landlady. I knew he slept with Ma, but I didn't hate him for it because Ma was happier when he was around. Not that she laughed a lot when John

was there, it was just that she didn't sit alone much and cry like when he was gone.

Ma and me were sitting on the front porch waiting for the house to get cool enough to sleep in. Dora, Uncle Cleve, and W.C. had gone to a wrestling match in High Point. We sat there talking softly so the kids wouldn't wake up, and we rocked to make a breeze. In the moonlight the road was silver all the way past the blind woman's house, and down in the woods a whippoorwill seemed to gargle his name through water over and over.

A dark figure came up the middle of the road in front of the blind woman's house. "There's somebody coming," I told Ma.

I could feel her get tense and shift in her rocker. Not many people came up this way at night on foot. A long minute passed.

"Is he still coming?"

"Yes Mam."

She pushed herself out of the rocker and stood beside the porch post resting her belly against it. I knew she couldn't see that far, especially at night, since her glasses got broken.

"I can't see him yet, Butch; is he still coming?"

"Yeah. He's almost to the mailbox. The moon's behind him; I can't see his face."

"Let's get in the house and shut the door."

Then he called, "Hey Maude. It's me, John."

Ma held to the pole and leaned her head against it. She breathed "Oh my God" to herself and clutched the pole tighter. Then she let go the pole and stood there shaking her head. With tears on her cheeks, she swayed as if she might lose her balance.

"Why don't you sit down, Ma?"

"No. I'm all right." She swept her long dark curls over her shoulders, then pulled half of her hair forward to hang over her breast.

John stopped at the edge of the porch and leaned a long arm against the post. His white teeth glowed, and his dark eyes glistened. "Hi. How've you been?"

He glanced at me then back at Ma.

"I got something to do in the house," I said.

Hoping they wouldn't ask me what it was I had to do, I went inside. Through the screen I saw their cheeks touch.

I turned on the t.v., low so as not to wake the baby and Peggy, and watched Bill Cullen tap a pencil against his glasses and explain why he voted for number two.

Ma finally came in and said for me to listen out for Mike and Peggy while she went for a walk with John. She looked very serious, and by straightening up the pillows on the sofa, she was careful not to look at me directly.

John and Ma had been gone almost an hour when Uncle Cleve and them got back. Aunt Dora came in first, with W.C. holding the door for her.

"Where's Maude?"

I wanted to say "None of your business," but I just said, "She went for a walk."

"For a walk. In her condition? At night? What's come over that woman? Some nigger'll probably . . . Cleve! See if you can't find Maude. She's out alone."

I knew I had to tell it all now, so I told her Ma was with John.

She shut up for a minute and sat down. W.C. sat beside her, his big jaw seeming to grin at me.

"I can't believe he has such nerve." She was talking to W.C. now. "The law is probably after him."

W.C. looked at me and then back at Aunt Dora. He shook his head and listened.

Uncle Cleve came in. "What's going on, Butch?"

"Nothing. Ma just went for a walk with John."

"Here. Brought you something." He handed me a coke and a candy bar.

"Thanks; you shouldn't of done it."

"Well," he tossed his hair and reached for the coke. "Then give it back."

Laughing, I wrestled away from him and hurried to the kitchen for an opener. As I came back, Aunt Dora

said loudly, "I've just had it; I can't take no more. This just takes the cake."

Peggy came in rubbing her eyes and saying she wanted some cake too. Uncle Cleve picked her up and answered Aunt Dora. "Now just don't ruffle your feathers; John don't cause nobody no trouble. I bet you five dollars he'll be gone tonight."

"Well, I've got to go to the store before they close," she said, "to get some bread for tomorrow."

"I'll run you down." W.C. stood up jangling his car keys.

"That's all right. Cleve can do it; we can't be using your car all the time."

"I might as well put this one back to bed," said Uncle Cleve. "Go ahead and take her, W.C."

"Cleve," Aunt Dora called from the door, "if they get back from that walk before I do, I want you to get rid of him. There's something about him I don't like."

"O.K. O.K." Uncle Cleve waved her out the door.

W.C.'s big black Buick growled and the headlights lit up clouds of dust in the dark as it turned around in the yard and rocked out of the driveway. I wished I could of hid in the backseat to find out what they said and what they did. I got chills thinking about it and wondered if Uncle Cleve wished the same thing. It seemed funny that he never appeared curious about what Aunt Dora did while off with W.C.

In a few minutes, Ma came up on the porch alone, then inside. She stood near the doorway looking at the floor like somebody waiting for the judge to speak.

Finally she started through the room, and Uncle Cleve, rocking Peggy, spoke gently, "Maudie, I think you ought to go to bed. Dora's maddern hell."

Ma didn't say anything. She bit her lip and nodded quickly as Uncle Cleve stood up with Peggy.

"I brought you a coke, Maude, and a candy bar. I'll put them in the refrigerator for you."

I knew Ma was straining to keep from crying, and I was glad she went on to bed. After putting Peggy down, Uncle Cleve took the rest of the cokes and the sack of candy to the kitchen.

A rat came out of a hole in the wall and scurried along the baseboard. He went behind the woodbox and stayed.

When Uncle Cleve came back I asked, "Why is Ma crying?"

"I don't know either," He sat down in a rocker and scratched his thin, bristly cheek. "At your age, Butch, everybody says that when you get older you'll understand. It ain't so."

I nodded, got up and turned the fine tune knob on the t.v. The picture never got really clear like real life, just degrees of fuzziness.

About a week later, John came back. Uncle Cleve and me were minding the kids that evening while W.C. took Aunt Dora and Ma to visit Uncle Harvey and Aunt Ann. I liked Uncle Harvey and Aunt Ann a lot—of all my aunts and uncles they were my favorites—but I didn't like going anywhere with Aunt Dora.

It was almost dark, and Uncle Cleve played patty-cake with Peggy. I had already put Mike to bed and sat on the porch beside Uncle Cleve when John came down the road running. John ran a lot to keep in shape. He said he could run twenty-five miles without stopping, and I believe he could.

He stopped running in the yard and pushed the brown paper bag back down in his hip pocket. He didn't even breathe hard as he said hello to us.

Uncle Cleve asked him to have a seat. He took a little silver comb out of his pocket and straightened his curly hair as he eased himself into a rocker. We talked a long time about the hot weather we were having, then Uncle Cleve told him Ma was gone off and probably wouldn't be back until late.

John took a deep breath and twisted his mouth up like he had smashed his thumb with a hammer. "Damn. I got to get moving soon. Tell her I'm sorry I missed her, will you?"

Peggy was asleep in Uncle Cleve's arms.

"Nice talking to you," said Uncle Cleve as they stood up together, Uncle Cleve moving stiffly, like a crippled old man with Peggy balanced on his chest. He smiled and shook John's hand, then went inside.

I started walking with John across the yard.

"Show me how to take a knife away from somebody again," I said. "Will you? I forgot."

He stopped at the edge of the yard, drew himself up tall with a crooked grin. "Are you going to forget again?"

"No Sir."

"You got to keep in practice so when you need to use it, you won't have to think about it. You've grown a lot this summer, haven't you? Are you still doing push-ups and the other exercises every day?"

"Not every day, but almost."

"O.K. I'll show you one more time."

He walked over to the monkey cigar tree, took the bag out of his pocket and laid it gently on the grass. I could tell from the shape it was a pint of whiskey.

He showed me again how to disarm a knife attacker; we used a stick for a knife: you grab the knife arm by the wrist with your opposite hand, almost like shaking hands, pull the knife arm past you, under your armpit and stiffen your arm so you're standing beside the knifer. Then you throw your other arm over his outheld arm near

his shoulder and fall forward, tripping him as you do it. Once on the ground, you got two hands to hold the knife arm and beat his wrist on the ground until he drops the knife.

"Always remember one thing," he told me after we had practiced. "Anytime you mess with a guy with a knife, you're going to get cut. Expect to get cut, but keep going. If you don't expect to get cut, when you do, you'll stop to look at the blood, and then he'll kill you for sure."

He pulled up his shirt and showed me two scars: one down across his ribs and the other one over the rippled muscles of his belly.

"If I'd of stopped to look at my blood when I got these, I'd be dead."

"Is the other guy dead?" I asked.

He just gave me that crooked, knowing grin of his again, picked up the bottle and took a long swallow. He growled as he took the bottle down and bared his clenched teeth.

"Let me have some." My face got hot, and I was glad he couldn't see me blush. I knew I'd be a kid again if he didn't let me have some, so I said, "Aw, come on. A little liquor won't hurt me. Uncle Cleve lets me have some after supper in the wintertime."

"With sugar in it?"

"I had it once without sugar." Then I lied, "It tasted good."

"Don't you tell your Ma who gave it to you; promise?"

"Yeah. I promise." I took the bottle, braced myself and turned it up. I took about five swallows trying not to think about the pain in my throat.

"God Almighty!" He held the bottle between his eyes and the porch light on the other side of the yard. "You drink like a bootlegger's son."

We sat crosslegged under the monkey cigar tree, and he asked me a lot of questions about Ma—had she been to see the doctor, was she planning on staying with Uncle Cleve after the baby was born, was she going back to work. I answered his questions as best I could while he drank more whiskey. A fire in my stomach started my head spinning. I wanted another swallow to make sure I got drunk. I begged him for just one more sip; he finally said I could have a small one.

I gulped down several swallows before he took the bottle away from me. He said he had to go and started walking down the road. I stood there watching the house flex and blur in the night. When he was almost out of sight, I ran after him, afraid I still hadn't drunk enough to find out what being really drunk was like. My legs couldn't tell me if my feet were touching the

ground or not, and I had a hard time keeping in the center of the road. I caught him on the curve and asked for more. He said no and told me to go home and go to bed.

I walked back to the house, falling down twice on the way. Each time I fell down, I didn't want to get up again. I lay in the side ditch a long time after the second fall and closed my eyes over and over to try to make the stars quit spinning. If the stars quit spinning, I knew the sick feeling would go away. I wiped cold sweat from my upper lip. When I finally got to the house, Ma and Aunt Dora were back; W.C. had already left. I had to show myself so they wouldn't suspect anything. I slipped into the living room and leaned against the wall, watching t.v. like everybody else. The t.v. was a mess; it looked like a pot of oatmeal somebody kept stirring and shaking.

I heard myself ask, "Will somebody please fix the t.v.?"

"It's not too bad," Aunt Dora said from far away. "If it needed fixing, you could do it yourself. But it's fine. Keep your hands off it."

"The t.v. looks like shit," I said. "How can you stand to watch it?" Not only did my words sound strange to myself, but I couldn't feel my lips at all. To see if they were all right, I touched them with a finger. I heard Ma say something about cussing and "What is the matter with you?"

I started laughing. I could hear my voice laughing. I knew I sounded crazy, but I couldn't quit. I tried to walk to the bedroom but fell over the coffee table. Aunt Dora swore at me.

"Go ahead and cuss me out, you bitch." I laughed at her, stood up and tipped over a chair. Aunt Dora started yelling at Ma.

Ma ran into the bedroom and came back with a belt. She grabbed me by the arm and started beating me.

I laughed and fell around the room ahead of the lashing belt. "Ma, cut it out. That tickles!" That was the last time she ever beat me. I could hear the thick leather slapping against my legs, but it didn't hurt.

She beat me harder, and I laughed harder. The last thing I remember was her beating me, and me laughing and then bending over and puking into Aunt Dora's empty shoes.

I woke up at noon the next day with Ma's warm hand on my forehead as she held me over the side of the bed so I could puke in a bucket. I heaved, but nothing came. The air was full of sour puke smell.

I couldn't keep anything on my stomach, not even a sip of water, until after Uncle Cleve got home and put a raw egg in a cup with a drop of vinegar and salt and pepper and made me swallow the whole mess. I cried the whole time, knowing I would puke it up, but the egg stayed

down. By bedtime I felt better and was able to eat a slice of light bread and drink half a glass of water.

John didn't come back that day. Even after Ma had Susie in the hospital, he didn't show up. Nobody knew where he was, nor even where he lived. Ma figured out it was John who gave me liquor, so I admitted it.

I didn't drink anymore for almost a year. For several months, even the smell of liquor made me heave. But in August, after Susie was born, Uncle Cleve got drunk.

Uncle Cleve was always ready to take a drink when somebody came by with a bottle, and in the wintertime he did always have a drink after supper—but seldom more than one.

He got drunk the day Aunt Dora went to the doctor's and came home worried. She looked scared and talked with Ma in the kitchen while they fixed supper. Uncle Cleve came home with a fifth of liquor, sat down on the green plastic sofa in the living room and started drinking. He didn't make jokes or laugh at all; he just turned on the t.v. and pretended to watch it. I knew he wasn't watching it because he never changed the channel, even when the Mickey Mouse show came on. Aunt Dora never went in the living room that day, and she went to the blind woman's house that night with Ma and all the kids. I stayed

with Uncle Cleve because I thought he might need somebody to talk to. I just sat and watched t.v. with him and waited. When a rat would run out on the floor, I'd throw something at it. Uncle Cleve usually did that, but now he simply sat and stared at the t.v. and drank the whiskey.

With just us two there sitting quietly, the rats began running around the room like they owned the place, and I got tired of chasing them off. I pulled my feet up and let them have the floor to themselves.

About ten o'clock the rats were everywhere. You could sometimes see half a dozen at once, big as full grown cats, running all over the place. Then Uncle Cleve looked at them, for the first time I think, and set down the almost empty bottle and stretched.

He started chuckling to himself and went into his room. He came back with his .22 semiautomatic J.C. Higgins and a box of Remington bullets and sat down on the sofa again. He filled the tubular magazine with bullets and moved the coffee table to one side.

I thought he might be going to shoot W.C. or Aunt Dora. I was getting scared, so I asked him who he was planning to shoot.

He set the rifle butt on the floor beside his greasy shoe and winked at me. "Don't give me any ideas, Butch. I was just going to shoot the rats. Come over here and sit beside me so's I don't hit you."

I came over and he pulled back the bolt and let it fly home with a clench sound. A big rat ran right out in front of the t.v. and he took aim. As the rat stood up on his hind legs, Uncle Cleve squeezed the trigger. Time stopped. The explosion shook the walls. The .22 sounded a lot louder inside the house. The rat came apart against the wall like one of the rocks from the lawnmower when slung against the side of the house. A man on t.v. said, "And remember—Serutan spelled backwards is Natures."

All the other rats ran for cover, but in a few minutes they started coming back out. He shot another one near the screen door, splattering blood drops all over the screen. I looked at the box of bullets; he was using hollow points, which mushroomed inside the rats, exploding them.

Bullet after bullet smacked into rat after rat, blowing them across the floor, and I pointed out fresh targets. He wouldn't let me shoot because he was afraid I'd hit the t.v. which was still going, though a little rat blood trickled down the screen keeping me from looking into the story that was playing inside.

After about an hour over two dozen rats lay dead around the living room, and there was lots of bullet holes in the walls. He shot one off a table in the corner and smashed a lamp at the same time.

The rats didn't seem to understand they were getting shot and kept coming out and looking at us with their dark, baby-like eyes. Some of the new ones started eating their dead brothers, and then joined their dead brothers as Uncle Cleve zeroed in.

Close to midnight, Ma yelled from the yard, and Uncle Cleve put the gun down and drank the last swallow from the bottle. Careful not to step on the bleeding rats, I made my way to the door and told them to come on in.

Ma came up to the door. Her face got white as a dead person's behind the screen wire, and she looked like she had the measles because of all the drops of blood dried on the wire mesh. I told her it was O.K.—Uncle Cleve was just getting rid of the rats like Aunt Dora wanted him to.

I was grinning, but Ma didn't think it was very funny. She took Aunt Dora and the kids around to the back door.

Uncle Cleve threw the empty bottle straight through the window, knocking the glass out of two panes. Then he went to bed, and I did too, though Aunt Dora and Ma stayed up nearly all night drinking coffee and talking quietly in the kitchen.

TWO PRISONERS

Beyond the west wall of the old, crumbling French fort, the sun was sinking between two green mountains. Peterson sat on a pile of still-warm sandbags and tried to remember if the colors of the sunset always changed in the same way. As the sun dropped out of sight, a long slender cloud turned purple, and the mountains became dark green, then black.

The plastic handset in his lap sputtered. He put the receiver to his ear and answered, "Four-by-five comm."

The patrol leader crackled a "five-by-five", and Peterson gave him a "roger and out."

He stood up and scratched his ass, remembering how he had just gotten rid of ringworm from sitting on sandbags. Then he sat down on an ammo box and leaned against the sandbags. Across the top of the fort, small groups of half naked Marines gathered around flaming pinches of C-4 sputtering under cans of food.

Over the barrel of the 105 Howitzer, the moon rose at the far end of the valley. Peterson cracked his knuckles and watched the moon grow smaller and whiter. After the stars came out, the patrol filed out of the jungle and stumbled up the dim path toward the fort.

With a rigid swagger, Captain Lawson ambled across the fort wall toward Peterson, to meet the patrol.

The patrol leader, a stocky, unshaven Sergeant, spoke to one of his men who came forward with two prisoners.

The Captain tilted his helmet back and folded his arms on his chest.

He spoke clearly, "What's the scoop, Sergeant Daniel?"

"Well sir, we caught him," he nodded toward the nearest prisoner, "sneaking off through the trees with a bag of tools tied to his waist."

"Tools, huh?"

"Yes sir, and this bitch tried to stop us from taking him."

"Did you interrogate them?"

"We let the ARVN do it; they made him confess."

The Captain nodded. "Good. Did you get any information out of either of them?" He remembered his flashlight, pulled it out of his back pocket and shone it on the two prisoners.

Sergeant Daniel tugged the blindfolds off their faces.

The man was middle aged and strong looking. He blinked in the light, then he stared straight ahead and tightened his lips.

The Sergeant answered the Captain: "No sir. Neither of them will say anything—except the girl. She keeps crying and saying he is her father and they are not VC."

The light shifted to the girl. She appeared to be in her late teens. She was pretty; that was obvious even though her face was still twisted with dry crying.

This was the first girl Peterson had seen in the field between the ages of ten and fifty. What amazed him most was that she had white teeth like the Vietnamese children. And she was pretty. He wished she were free. He wished he had met her in town on liberty. She looked innocent of everything: death, sex, blindfolds.

The Captain shifted the light to the man again.

"Take care of him." The Captain's voice sounded strange and unreal. "If he tries to escape, shoot him."

Peterson thought he heard a chuckle from one of the men standing patiently aside.

The Captain stared at the Sergeant.

The Sergeant led the man away into the night. A click-click sound echoed back down the trail as the Sergeant chambered a round.

The muzzle flashed near the edge of the jungle, and the report rang out across the valley. A ringing began in Peterson's head and would not go away until the Sergeant came back and said, "He tried to escape, Sir."

"Did he make it?" the Captain asked.

"No sir. I got him."

"Good."

The girl was not to be as fortunate.

The Captain handed the Sergeant his flashlight and said, "Interrogate the girl again. And don't let her escape either." He turned and went away into the darkness.

Sergeant Daniel took the light and moved its spot up and down her body. Her blindfold had been torn from her blouse, and her tan breasts stuck out firmly. The fuzzy spot of light crawled quietly over her curves. Though she was scratched and streaked with mud, her skin was smooth.

As the Sergeant led her into one of the fort's underground rooms, fresh tears glistened on her cheeks. Peterson swallowed hard and turned away. He gripped one of the sandbags fiercely to keep from crying, but the rotten cloth broke under his fingers and the sand poured down into a quiet pile.

The girl wailed. A slap echoed from the dark doorway. Peterson felt numb and dizzy.

In a minute the grizzled Sergeant came through the doorway grinning and buttoning his trousers.

"Next," he said almost proudly, but he was nervous and tripped over a rifle.

Three men jumped for the door, but two yielded to the larger one. The Sergeant grabbed the big man's arm and with a laugh muttered something about "sucking better than fucking."

Peterson clenched his teeth, and his face began twitching on one side. He felt choked but could not clear his throat, because his lungs were trying not to cry.

From the doorway came pleads for mercy, crying, moaning and gagging.

Peterson dropped the handset, and with the back of a trembling hand wiped cold sweat from his brow. He walked away from the radio static and grabbed the Sergeant by the arm.

"Listen! You can't do that! She's a human being. You've got to stop."

The Sergeant smacked his arm away. "Get lost, turd. She's a VC."

"You just can't; you just can't GODDAMNIT!!"

A dark hand neared Peterson's face, the slender blade of a bayonet reflected moonlight on its cutting edge near his temple. The big Negro spoke slowly, "Listen up radioman." His face bulged and twisted as if the words tasted badly. "If you want to leave this fort alive, you better shut your mouth and keep it shut. Dig?"

The cold blade touched Peterson's cheek. All around him faces stared at him from the shadows of their helmets in the soft moonlight.

He took two slow steps backwards, clenched his fists at his sides and spun around. He plodded around the fort wall to a high corner near the river where he could not hear the girl crying. He sat down on the wall and puked into the dark jungle below. He thought of following his vomit head first, but he didn't have the courage. He cried and beat his knuckles on the concrete until they bled. Why didn't he persist? He gave up too easily. Now he would have to live with it.

"There is no God!" he yelled at the stars. "Just animals! Bastards!" He rammed his fist into the wall again and bent his body over the painful hand. "Dogs. Goddamn dogs."

And a wind came out of the northwest cooling the tears on his cheeks. He drew a deep breath, and it came out of his throat like fire. He trembled and hung his head. And the wind came in fistfuls, and a rolling black cloud gathered the stars behind itself. The wind came in quick breaths like a small child blowing at a candle; it tore at his collar and pulled at his trousers. His feet dangled in the abyss, but the cold wind made him lift his face.

The wind throbbled steadily, soaking the heat from his face and limbs. Chills gathered on his back. A long

nerve of lightening snapped into the sky and twitched several times. In the sudden flash, he saw a wall of rain sweeping across the river. The rain hit all at once, soaking what warmth was left from his body, and it was good. It was wonderful to be cold, to be cold, cold.

The slick ponchos and canvas tents on top of the fort beside him billowed, flapped, and swayed in the water-filled wind. Here and there tents collapsed, and the men underneath drew the tents about themselves for warmth, or they crawled out and tried in vain to set them up again. The two-niner-two antenna rocked and pulled at its guidelines like a tall snake.

Peterson crawled into his own tent, one of the few still erect, and shook Harrison by the leg.

"Hare." He shook him again. "Hare, please take my watch. I don't feel so good."

"Are you sick?" Harrison asked.

"I don't know. I'll take your watch sometime, O.K.?"

"O.K." Harrison pulled on his boots.

Peterson took off his boots and his wet jacket, and pulled the wool blanket over himself. He woke up many times during the night, listening for the shot that would relieve him, let him know that it was over, finished.

The shot did not come, and the next morning Harrison crawled into the tent and threw himself on his bedding, turning his face away from Peterson.

Peterson sat up and took a wet, green T-shirt from beside his air mattress and began cleaning the blood and dirt from his hands. The cleaning hurt, but he didn't want them to get infected.

"What happened, Hare?" he asked.

"I don't want to talk about it."

"I've got to know. I've got to know."

Harrison turned over on his side, resting his smooth, boyish chin on his hand.

"All right." Harrison pulled a cigarette out of his jacket pocket and stuck it into his soft mouth. He sat up, crossed his legs and lit the cigarette. After a long drag, he blew the smoke toward the bright entrance of the tent and stared across the valley as he spoke.

"The sons of bitches said they'd kill me if I didn't go in the room with the girl, so I went in.

"She was completely naked and huddled in the corner on one of those bags of rotting rice, staring at nothing. I took my canteen and offered her some water."

Harrison took another deep drag off the cigarette and kept staring across the valley, toward Hill 55.

"I'm glad she's dead now; she's better off. Anyway, I held out the canteen. She knocked it out of my hand and grabbed my trousers. Tried to unbutton them. I had to push her off. She just sat there breathing hard and making a grunting sound with each breath.

"You know, I had a dog once. Got run over by a car. I had to shoot him." His puffy eyes were narrower in their slits than usual. "He wasn't all busted up, just crazy—biting me, trees, rocks."

"I thought about shooting her, but I knew I couldn't do it. Then I just left. Went back to the radio."

"It wasn't until almost dawn that Sergeant Daniel got his whole fucking squad together again. Some of his men had been asleep for hours, but they didn't complain—he was on the rag.

"I've never seen him so scared. He cussed his men and kept looking to see how soon the sun would be up. He made them all bring their bayonets, and he made them all go with him into the room where the girl was.

"Then everybody came out, except that fat son of a bitch. One of the guys who came out threw his bayonet clean across the fort, down into the jungle somewhere. But even so, I could see blood on it.

"Then this guy brings a poncho, takes it into the room where Sergeant Daniel still is. And Sergeant Daniel and him come out with the girl rolled up in the poncho, and they take her off into the jungle. And running out of the poncho, there's this thin trickle of blood.

"That's all." Hare let his head fall forward onto his knees.

Peterson lay back on his air mattress with his hands under his head.

MULTIPLE

Uncle Harvey drank liquor almost every day, and he was in front of women and children. He was skinny and shorter than Aunt Ann. He was almost as tall as he was, and though he was only thirty-five, he had white hair. He said it was drinking that turned his hair white and kept his face red. He was quick and light on his feet, and his steel-rimmed glasses glittered as he moved. He wasn't afraid of anything. I had seen him stand a goodly number of times over five feet long, with his bare hands.

He had held his fist in front of the snake, watching it slither. The ugly brown head came back, the tongue flickered out like a black root and went back in.

The snake lunged, and quick as a lightweight boxer Uncle Harvey's other hand grabbed the joint behind the head, and he was on his feet.

"Look at that snake, Bitch!" He grinned and held out the copperhead.

I stepped back. The snake's white mouth was open all the way, thin glossy fangs dripping poison.

The snake's heavy body wiggled, slaking Uncle Harvey's arm. His tail slipped the ground, then flipped up again, and Uncle Harvey caught it firmly, letting go the body head at the same time.

MOLTING

Uncle Harvey drank liquor almost every day, and he cussed in front of women and children. He was skinny and shorter than Aunt Ann (I was almost as tall as he was), and though he was only thirty-five, he had white hair. Ma said it was drinking that turned his hair white and kept his face red. He was quick and light on his feet, and his steel-rimmed glasses glittered as he moved.

He wasn't scared of anything. I had seen him catch a copperhead over five feet long, with his bare hands.

He had held his fist in front of the snake, weaving it slowly. The ugly brown head drew back; the tongue twittered out like a black root and went back in.

The snake lunged, and quick as a lightweight boxer Uncle Harvey's other hand grabbed him just behind the head.

"Look at that cocksucker, Butch." He grinned and held out the copperhead.

I stepped back. The snake's white mouth was open all the way, thin glossy fangs dripping poison.

The snake's heavy body wiggled, shaking Uncle Harvey's arm. His tail slapped the ground, then flipped up again, and Uncle Harvey caught it firmly, letting go the bony head at the same time.

He slung the snake over his head, swaying against the weight. His steel-rimmed glasses flashed in the sunlight.

Still slinging the snake, he took several jerky steps toward a tree. As it swung around, the snake's head smashed into the tree. Again and again he swung the snake, beating the head against the tree until completely battered, and only a red nub, like a spark on a stick, circled in the air where the head used to be.

Then he tossed the snake on the ground, and we watched it wiggle, wind and unwind as it died. The spot of red blood stayed on the black bark for a month.

Now it was the middle of August, and I was spending the day with Aunt Ann and Uncle Harvey in their big white house on the edge of town.

At lunchtime, I sat at the table sipping from a glass of milk. Aunt Ann set the plates out with a click and brought a ham from the refrigerator. It was a big ham, plump and not quite round—about the size and shape of one side of Aunt Ann's rear end beneath her tight red shorts.

She was the prettiest woman I'd ever seen. Her yellow-gold hair was pinned up behind; soft strands, too short to be pinned, fell down on the back of her neck. Curls hung in front of her ears.

"Why haven't you come to see us more often this summer?" She caught the slices of ham and arranged them on the edge of the platter. "You know you're always welcome."

"I don't know." I swallowed hard and looked away from her light brown eyes. "Can I use the bathroom?"

"Sure. You know where it is." She held out a plump piece of ham. "Have a bite."

"Thanks." Though she held it close to my lips, I took the ham in my fingers. It tasted both sweet and salty.

I really had to pee, but I had to stand in the hall for a whole minute just to get up enough nerve to go in.

At Uncle Cleve's house, where Ma and I lived, we had an outside toilet, and I bathed in a pan of water in the bedroom. Sometimes I took a bar of soap to the creek and washed there. But last June, while visiting Aunt Ann, I had bathed in her bathtub. And while I sat in the steaming water, slowly soaping myself, almost falling asleep, suddenly I felt like I was dying or dreaming or having a fit.

Feeling guilty and sticky, I got out of the bathtub. That was the first time. I had been scared when it happened, but by the time I dried off I had it all figured out.

Now I knew I was being silly, but while I peed, I forced myself not to look at the tub. On my way out, for an instant I forgot and looked. Over the side of the tub lay a pair of Aunt Ann's panties.

I zipped my trousers quickly and almost screamed with the pain. Only a tiny piece of skin caught in the zipper, but it couldn't have hurt worse if I had circumcised myself with a dull knife. It took a long time and a lot more pain to back the zipper off.

Finally, I managed, and went back to the kitchen.

Aunt Ann pushed a knife back and forth between cinnamon buns. I leaned in the doorway and watched. Her breasts rubbed against each other. I looked away, at a row of tomatoes ripening on the window sill.

"Put these on the table." She handed me a plate of buns. "Everything's ready."

I put a raisin in my mouth and squashed it between my teeth. "Where's Uncle Harvey?"

"Late," she sighed and flicked the burner button to simmer. "As usual."

Out in the road somebody slammed on brakes. Tires squalled and hollered, then the gravel crunched as the car slid into the driveway. It roared by the kitchen, a cloud of dust rising in the window over the sink where the tomatoes were. They'd have to be washed again. The car slid to a halt, and the car door clicked open and slammed shut.

Aunt Ann shook her head and looked at the ceiling.
"He's here."

The back screen creaked, and Uncle Harvey, grinning like he had good news, messed my hair up and squeezed my ear until it hurt.

"What the fuck you doing here, Screw?"

I smiled in spite of the pain, and he let go.

He grabbed Aunt Ann from behind, one hand on her rear and the other under her arm over her breast.

"Harvey!" She turned and blushed, cutting her eyes at me. "Behave yourself."

"Shit. He's got to learn some time." His eyes crinkled when he chuckled. He quickly pinched her nipple before sitting down beside me, gripping my thigh just above the knee.

"What's up, Fuzz Nuts?" he asked. "Going to spend the night with us?"

"I don't know if Ma'd let me." I looked at Aunt Ann. "I guess I'll go back with Uncle Cleve."

"Why don't you spend the night?" Aunt Ann poured soup into our bowls and sat across from us. "It wouldn't be any trouble. Just like when you were little. If you want to?"

"If you're sure it's O.K.," I said.

"Sure." Uncle Harvey winked over a spoonful of soup. "I'll fix it up with Cleve on my way back to work."

Besides, there ain't nothing to do out to his place except watch the rabbits screw and pull your noodle."

Aunt Ann's spoon clicked loudly in her dish.

"Can I get you some more milk, Butch?" Aunt Ann stood up and took my glass.

I didn't want them to run out of milk so I said, "Water'll be O.K."

"Give the kid some more milk," said Uncle Harvey. He turned to me and put his hand on my shoulder. "Drink lots of milk, Butch. It'll make a man out of you, put lead in your pencil."

I started to ask what he meant, but then I remembered what happened in the bathtub. I understood, and my face got very hot.

"Ah-ha! Look at that, Ann; he's become a man."

I didn't know how he could tell anything like that from a simple blush. Maybe my face did look different. Then, maybe he was bluffing.

But after dinner, on the back porch, he said, "I was right wasn't I?"

I nodded.

"Now, if you're going to be dipping your wick in these little gals around here," he put his arm around my shoulders, "use a rubber."

He handed me a large gold coin, at least it looked like a gold coin, but it wasn't heavy.

"That's a rubber. Open it up. It comes apart at the edge."

I dropped the coin to the floor and picked it up, fumbling at the edge with a thumbnail.

"Somebody's got to teach you about life," he spoke very sincerely, "and it looks like I'm it."

I pried off a side of the coin and looked at the rubber.

"Take it out."

I dug at a nailhead on the floor with the sole of my shoe.

"It ain't going to do you no good if you don't know how to use it."

I jerked my head up and stared at him with my mouth open.

One side of his face smiled. "Don't worry. I'm not going to make you put it on your dick. I just want you to know how to do it."

I touched the filmy thing. It felt like the snake-skin I found in Uncle Cleve's barn last week—strangely smooth, and I could almost see through it.

"Shit," said Uncle Harvey and yanked the rubber out of my palm. "It's sanitary. Used for the prevention of disease and the prevention of people—whichever one you fear the most. Hold up your thumb."

I held up my thumb. My hand weaved nervously in the tense air. Suddenly, Uncle Harvey grabbed my wrist.

"Now it rolls down only one way, so don't tear your dick apart trying to put it on backwards." He rolled the rubber down over my thumb. "Just like that. See?"

"Yeah," I choked.

"Then you're ready to screw. Just two things: Don't use the damn thing but one time. And put it on your dick—not your thumb."

"I'd figured that out already."

"You can't be too careful learning all this. So you can avoid the kind of shit John spreads around."

"Harvey," Aunt Ann called from behind us. I turned; she was at the door. "Harvey, I . . . What the hell's going on?"

She was looking at my hand. I looked down. The rubber was still on my thumb. I couldn't hide it, so I just stood there waiting for Uncle Harvey to speak.

"I swear, Harvey. What on earth are you trying to do to that boy?"

"He knows he ain't no boy no more. You might as well admit it too. Somebody's got to teach the kid how to avoid all the bullshit; you said so yourself. Besides, they say a little knowledge never hurt anybody."

"Yeah." Aunt Ann looked very tired. She pitched the dishcloth onto the table. "They also say a little learning is a dangerous thing."

When she was gone, Uncle Harvey handed me two more coins. "Buy your way to happiness with these, Fuzz Nuts."

Uncle Harvey went back to work, and I offered to help Aunt Ann with the dishes, but she said, "No, this is woman's work; you can mow the lawn if you like."

I was glad she asked me to do some work, and I jogged out to the garage to get the mower. I dragged it out into the sunshine and brushed grass and dirt off the gas cap. The cap unscrewed with a gritty sound. I knelt on the gravel with one eye over the tank. I couldn't see gas, so I stuck my finger in the hole. Only the tip came out cold. I sniffed my finger, then put my nose over the tank and took a deep breath. I knew a girl once who liked to smell telephone poles; I used to kid her and call her a dog. I liked the sweet, sharp smell of gasoline and the smell of dirt roads when they got so powdery a handful of the dust was as light as a handful of air and if you threw it, it just clouded up and vanished right in front of you.

After I filled the tank and connected the sparkplug I slipped the rope knot into the slot on the pulley and coiled the rope around and around. Already, drops of sweat were falling from my chin with tickles. I scratched my wet chin and braced myself, yanked the cord, and she started up slow, firing every other stroke. Then she

quit. I pulled the choke out and tried again. She revved right up, vibrating under my foot faster than anything alive. The exhaust trembled and plopped out puffs of blue smoke louder than the devil.

A rock clanged under the machine and skittered across the driveway. I pushed down on the handle, lifting the front wheels up and pushed her off the gravel onto the grass. I took my shirt off, threw it on the rosebush and eased the choke back in.

There's a hundred ways to cut a lawn, and I decided to cut the back in a figure eight. But the tree Uncle Harvey beat the snake to death on got in the way, so I just cut whichever way I felt like. It was fun cutting whichever way came natural, but I soon realized I was working harder than ever. Pieces of grass clung to my sweaty chest, and my hair burned under the sun like britches do when you stand too close to a heater. I wished it would turn blonde instead of dingy brown, and I wished it would stop curling so Ma'd quit telling people how pretty I was. Sometimes I wished I had a big jaw like W.C. or maybe a scar on my cheek.

I ran from patch to patch faster and faster, and when I was finished it was all evenly cut—as even as if I had cut it in tiny squares or in one big rectangle. Aunt Ann stood in front of a window watching me. Then she went away. I mowed the side yard quickly, and when I got to the front she met me with a tall glass of ice water.

I pulled loose the ignition wire and the mower gave out a big sigh and died. I took the glass, gulped down the bright water and panted. "Thanks." I rolled the cold glass over my forehead and touched it to my cheeks.

She smiled. "Want some more?"

"No. Thanks."

I handed her the glass and she flicked bits of green and brown grass off my chest. "You sure are getting dirty. Why don't you take a break and wash up?"

"I'd just get dirty again. Might as well finish. Ain't much left."

"It certainly does look better out back. Everytime I ask Harvey to mow it, he says . . . Well, I won't tell you what he says, but he won't mow it."

Together, we looked down the split-rail fence into the back yard. A bluejay and several blackbirds pecked the lawn, looked up and pecked again.

"If you need anything," she said, "just give a yell."

I said O.K. and cranked up the mower. After a turn around the yard, I could still see her, barely more than a shadow behind the screen door, waiting and watching. I tightened my grip on the handles, flexed the muscles in my arms and shoulders and pretended not to see her.

After mowing, I washed up while Aunt Ann went to the store for a loaf of light bread and some more sweet milk. I offered to go for her, but she said she needed to get out of the house for a while.

About four o'clock I sat at the kitchen table reading an Andy Panda comic book I found in the garage while Aunt Ann ironed.

Uncle Harvey came in from work and said, "It's all set, Butch. You can spend the night." He thumped me on the forehead, hard. His voice always sounded flat and had a twang like metal. "They're glad to be rid of you."

I rubbed my forehead, my elbow wrinkling the red table cloth.

Aunt Ann held the iron still for a minute and brushed a curl behind her ear. "You shouldn't say that, Harvey."

"Shit." He pinched her rear end. "He knows I'm kidding. Right, Screw?"

I nodded as he opened the pantry door and took out a bottle of Virginia Gentleman bourbon.

"Want a drink?" He held the bottle between us.

"No thank you," I said, and I meant it after that night a month back when John had got me drunk.

He opened the refrigerator and took out a tray of ice. At the sink he pulled the lever on the tray,

ice shattered loose, and tinkled as he dropped it into his glass. Rust colored bourbon splashed over the cubes and rose halfway up the glass, level with his eyes. The bottle and Uncle Harvey's hand were reflected in his glasses—a small distorted picture. He added a quick squirt of water from the faucet, shook the bourbon and ice around once and took a long swallow.

He smacked his lips. "You get any pussy yet, Butch?"

My throat quickly shut off air to my lungs so I wouldn't laugh out loud.

"Durn your hide," Aunt Ann yelled. "I'm going to stick this iron on you if you don't knock off that filthy talk."

Uncle Harvey adjusted his glasses, kissed her on the neck, and went laughing into the living room, the ice cubes clicking in his glass.

Aunt Ann followed Uncle Harvey into the living room. I pretended to read my book because they were talking low. After a minute or so I heard Uncle Harvey say, "You just keep your damn hands off that bottle; to hell with the kid."

Aunt Ann didn't raise her voice, but she said very clearly, "You don't have a tender bone in your body, do you? Except one."

She came back to her work, ramming the iron up into the crotch of a pair of grease-stained trousers.

The t.v. came on in the living room.

I went in and sat across from Uncle Harvey. He looked very old and tired, staring at his glass and glancing at the t.v. "The Secret Storm" was on.

In the kitchen, the ironing board folded with a clatter, then the oven creaked open. Aunt Ann came in and coiled on the sofa, sitting on her feet. Her brown eyes were dark and fixed on the t.v.

Two women on the t.v. talked sadly. Organ music got louder, then softer.

"What can I do to please him?" asked one woman.
"I've tried everything."

"Try licking his jewels, Bitch," said Uncle Harvey, sounding flatter and twangier than ever.

Aunt Ann let out her breath loudly, and got up to leave, but somebody knocked at the door. She flicked the hook off the screen, opened the door slightly, and talked for a minute. Then she said, "Well do come in for a minute while I run check on a couple of pots."

Two ladies came in, Aunt Ann ran to the kitchen, and Uncle Harvey and me stood up.

"Evening, Mam," he said. "I'm Harvey Slade; and this here is Slade Harris." He winked at me. "His Ma gave him her maiden name, but you can call him Butch like everybody else. Right, Kid?"

I nodded.

"I'm Mrs. Simpson," said the shorter lady with red hair and glasses. "And this is Mrs. Kimbell. We're with the Universal Baptist Church, conducting a census of the neighborhood."

The two ladies sat down.

"Looking for new members, eh?" Uncle Harvey eased himself back into his chair and glanced at the soap opera.

The tall, fat Mrs. Kimbell took over. "Well, we do want to bring the word of Christ to as many people as we can." She dug into her purse. "I've got some pamphlets. If you'd be interested."

"I'm not exactly the religious type." Uncle Harvey took the pamphlets. Slowly, he read aloud the cover of the one on top, "'The Evils of Drinking.' I think you better talk to my wife; she's got a very close relative who drinks something awful."

I shaded my hand with my eyes and took a deep breath.

He tossed the pamphlets onto a small table beside his chair.

Aunt Ann came back apologizing for keeping the ladies waiting. She pulled up a straight back chair.

Uncle Harvey started watching t.v. again, so I did too. The ladies talked to Aunt Ann for several minutes; Mrs. Simpson made notes on a form. Mrs. Simpson was about the same age as Uncle Harvey. She had a pretty smile and

a nice figure. I saw Uncle Harvey look at her legs as he sipped from his glass.

After four commercials, the two women on t.v. were deep in despair. One of them was crying on the other's shoulder. "What am I to do? I've tried everywhere to get a job. Now that he's gone, how can I earn a living?"

Uncle Harvey must have forgot about the church ladies, because he answered loudly, "Lay on your back and use your ass, you dumb broad."

Mrs. Kimbell stopped in the middle of a sentence with Aunt Ann. Uncle Harvey jerked his head around and blushed. He really blushed.

The fat Mrs. Kimbell looked like she had just witnessed a murder.

Uncle Harvey jumped up and apologized, "God Damn! I'm sorry Miss."

"Well I never!" said Mrs. Kimbell as she struggled to her feet and plodded out the front door. "I never in my life."

Uncle Harvey's eyes narrowed. "You must have," he called after her, "or you wouldn't know what I meant."

He sat back down, tipped his glass up and went on watching t.v.

Mrs. Simpson just straightened her hair, touched her glasses and talked to Aunt Ann like nothing had happened. When she left, she smiled at us, Uncle Harvey too, and he stood up for her.

Aunt Ann stared at Uncle Harvey. "You never cease to amaze me."

He grabbed at her passing knee. "Aren't you glad."

Uncle Harvey had two more glasses of whiskey and kept solving problems on t.v. Plates rattled in the kitchen, then struck the table with a knock. The oven squeaked open, and the smell of browning pork, buttered corn, and the warm, powdery scent of hot bisquits got stronger.

My stomach growled.

"Y'all come on and wash up," sang Aunt Ann.

The refrigerator door clenched shut, and Uncle Harvey and me went to the bathroom. He soaped his hands and squirted the bar of soap at me out of his fist. I caught it and started lathering up. Bending over, our heads were close together.

"There's some nice looking ass in this town, ain't there?" He grinned.

"Yeah."

"You ought to tear off a piece, Butch."

I didn't say anything, but I knew he was right. When I went back to school, I knew my buddies would start talking about who they laid.

He flicked the other end of a pink towel to me. I caught it, and we dried our hands together. I liked Aunt Ann's towels; they were bigger and softer than any I'd ever seen.

At the kitchen table, Uncle Harvey said, "Just because that thing's got lips and jaws don't mean it has teeth."

Aunt Ann flinched; I couldn't look at her for several minutes.

"Could I have some money?" Aunt Ann asked. "To go shopping tomorrow?"

Uncle Harvey's smile faded. "Haven't got it. And our bank account is lower than whaleshit. You'll just have to wait until I get paid Friday."

After supper, there was another knock at the front door. Uncle Harvey went to answer it. He came back with John. John said hello to everybody and slapped me on the shoulder. He didn't say anything about Ma or about getting me drunk.

John hadn't been to see Ma since Susie was born in July. I didn't think it was because he was Susie's father; everybody knew that. John was just that way; sometimes he'd go off for several months. Nobody knew where he went, or even where he lived. He just came and went, nearly always on foot, and he never carried any bags.

I followed John and Uncle Harvey out into the back yard. They leaned against the fender of Uncle Harvey's black Chevrolet, folded their arms and talked. They looked funny together: John tall and muscled, black

curly hair and dark skin; Uncle Harvey short and skinny, white hair, red face and glasses.

I wandered over and hopped up on the fender.

John stopped talking and looked from me to Uncle Harvey.

"Don't mind the kid," said Uncle Harvey. "He knows the score."

"Like I was saying," said John. "Can you make it tonight? Just this one time? There ain't anybody else got guts enough, or a car. There ain't nobody can drive like you."

"I figure it's safer to take it nice and easy."

"Yeah, I guess that's so, but when things get hairy . . ." John laughed. "Is your car in good shape?"

"Sound as a dollar. She'll burn rubber in all three gears; but suppose something happens?"

"Nothing to worry about; old man Henderson'll back you up, and he's the richest man in Wilkes County."

I asked, "Where's Wilkes County?"

John looked at me carefully. "About forty miles from here."

"All right," said Uncle Harvey, "but don't say a word to Ann; she'd raise hell. We're just going out for a drink. O.K.?" He winked at John.

"Sure."

Uncle Harvey put his arm around my shoulder as we went into the house. "We were just talking about cars

and hunting; right, Butch?"

"That's right," I said and stretched my legs to match his long steps.

John and I stood in the kitchen, but when Uncle Harvey and Aunt Ann started yelling in the living room, we went back out to the car.

Soon, Uncle Harvey came out and took the air breather off the car. He checked the tires and the brakes and advanced the timing "to make her faster on top end" was what he said. Without the air breather, the motor made a hollow frying sound. They left, Uncle Harvey barreling the Chevy out the driveway in a cloud of dust and flying rocks.

As the car went over the hill, the tires made a little squeal—Uncle Harvey shifting into second gear. It was almost dark as I climbed the steps back into the house.

I closed the screen quietly behind me while my eyes adjusted to the half-dark living room. Aunt Ann came out of the bathroom, clicked off the light, and moved by me toward the kitchen. I switched on a lamp. She turned her head quickly away from me, but I saw blood on her lip.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"Oh," she smiled and touched a kleenex to her quivering lip. "This?" She looked at the spot of blood on the tissue. "I tripped. In the kitchen. Bumped the counter."

I looked at her for a minute; her eyes started to get moist. Before they spilled over, she went into the kitchen.

I turned on the t.v. After a while, Aunt Ann came through and went out on the porch. Then she came in and watched t.v. with me, but when I asked her about some part of the plot I missed while getting a drink of water, she didn't know what had happened.

About nine o'clock, I got tired of watching t.v. and went into the back room, off the kitchen, to lie on the big bed she had made up for me.

I left the door cracked and lay in the dark, my chin almost touching the window sill. Outside, the faint lights of the town glowed steadily in the distance, making the split-rail fence along the edge of the yard black. The moon had not come up yet; hundreds of stars flickered on and off in the big night sky.

I tried to imagine myself living in that town in a few years, married, with a regular job. I couldn't see myself going to work, coming home, watching t.v., going to work, getting paid—year after year—I might as well be dead. To the rest of the world, I would be dead. I wanted to see some of the places I'd read about and live some of the adventures other people only dreamed of.

A truck strained up the hill outside the house, its exhaust rattling the window in front of me. I pressed

my forehead into the crook of my arm and clenched my teeth. The truck changed gears, and then the window just trembled nervously, like beads in a gourd.

"Why are you lying on top of the covers?" Aunt Ann in her long robe stood outlined in the doorway.

"Just thinking."

She lay down beside me, resting her chin on folded arms and looking out the window with me. "Thinking about what?"

The line of her forehead and nose was a simple curve against the white lace curtains. I felt funny inside. "I don't know," I said, "just wondering what it's all about. The town. Me. You know."

"Yeah. I do know. That's the hard part. And your knowing makes it even harder."

I didn't understand, but I was glad she was there, her knee lightly touching mine.

We were still for a long time, then she turned her head away, resting it on her arms. The lights from the town made distinct shadows: the side of her face, her long fingers. I was sleepy; I wanted to sleep forever just being close to her, just close—that's all.

I touched her hair, lightly, near her forehead and ran my hand down soft strands, touching her cheek, then taking her hand in mine. She held to my fingers without moving or saying anything.

The night was warm. A cricket somewhere in the back yard chirped slowly, and the moon rose over dark trees, making the shadows on her cheek softer and softer.

Her breathing became regular and deeper; her hand went limp in mine. I shifted my weight, and she woke up.

"Why is the moon like a cross?" she asked.

"It's the screen wire. I don't know how it does it, but it makes lights look like crosses. I'll show you." I leaned over and unlatched the screen, shoved it out so she could see.

"Oh," she said, and I latched the screen back.

I held on to her hand. She pressed my hand to her cheek, and when she took it away, a streak across my knuckles got cold.

I sat up with her and looked into her eyes in the dim light. The way we didn't need to talk was a part of whatever it was I felt, but couldn't name. It wasn't sex, and I didn't think it was love—but it was something real. I knew she didn't want to talk about it either, but she wanted me to know. Her lips came together and forced a smile. Her bottom lip was swollen a little, making it stick out more than usual. I couldn't see the cut; it must have been inside.

She left the room, and I sat still for a minute thinking about how she used to tuck me in when I was little. Even after she turned off the t.v., I lay awake

watching the moon rise. The moonlight made hundreds of tiny stars disappear, but it made the split-rail fence between me and the town turn from black to silver-gray.

It was hot. I threw the covers back and took off all my clothes, even my underwear, and lay on top of the sheets.

After a long time, I just happened to look at the doorway. Aunt Ann stood quietly, her hands behind her head working with hairpins. The dim light in the hall outlined clearly one side of her body. One distinct, unbroken line ran from her raised elbow, down her side, over a hip, and down her leg. Her elbow came down, her hair falling across her shoulders; I didn't bother to cover myself.