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This thesis consists of six short stories. The stories were written between October, 1971 and December, 1972. "Gasper Zappula" has been published in The Greensboro Review (Winter, 1973) and "Bones" has been published in Hellcoal Fiction (Spring, 1973).

The only acknowledged goal of this thesis was the creation of good fiction. In each story a main character confronts a common metaphysical situation: the loss (or the threat of loss) of his own imagined conceptions and possibilities for the future. The stories present this crisis of vision or imagination and describe the character's reactions to it. Two stories deal with imagined possibilities of a religious nature; four others involve sex, parenthood, social maturity, and memory. There is no significance in the order in which these six stories appear.

GASPER ZAPPULA AND OTHER STORIES

by

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APPROVAL PAGE

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GASPER ZAPPULA

Like I get around to saying sooner or later when I talk to people about Gasper Zappula, I once shared a first class seat on a flight from Chicago to San Francisco with an amateur weight lifter who was flying to the west coast to try out for a spot on the United States Olympic Weight Lifting Team. He was probably the only man I can ever remember seeing who was bigger than Gasper. It was raining hard that day, and there had been some kind of accident involving a private plane, and so we waited at the end of the runway for an hour or more before the plane took off. While we waited the weight lifter told me an amazingly filthy joke. Like Gasper always did, he started to howl halfway through his joke, pounding his huge fists against the back of the seat in front of him, and he bungled the punch line completely. It was a joke about a parrot--a very famous joke the weight lifter later told me--and one I think Gasper would have loved to tell. The man had something of Gasper's coloring, and his hair was reddish blond like Gasper's, and I remember while laughing at his joke hoping to myself that he was a cousin or something, perhaps a distant relative. It would have seemed to me almost a magical discovery if he had been.

No one ever knew Gasper's real height and weight. Gasper himself never went around bragging about his statistics; he in fact took a kind of devious pride in concealing them. People guessed of course. Everyone guessed. As soon as he stepped out of a room or was out of earshot, the guessing began. He was most often compared to football players, famous ones, huge defensive tackles. If he had known, Gasper would have been furious: he generally held a very low opinion of most football players. When I'm pressed about it, I tell people Gasper probably stood about six feet seven inches tall and weighed well over two hundred and fifty pounds. He really did not look like an athlete, though, and indeed he was not. He had only average coordination, only his tremendous size gave him an advantage in the one sport he genuinely loved--basketball. As big and strong as he was, he could have never posed for pictures in a health magazine. His body had no real definition, no clear classical lines. It was not that he was fat or bowlegged or stooped. He had a massive barrel chest, the kind you associate with caricatures of lumberjacks and Army drill sergeants, that seemed to extend all the way to his hips. He had no stomach to speak of, his chest seemed to cover it up. His hips began where his chest ended--and they were huge, but not soft or fat-looking. Gasper's body was a very particular one: midway between that of Greek god and professional wrestler.

He was proud of his rather unconventional name, and proud of his Italian heritage; yet he did not look Italian in the least. Not only was he immensely big, but he had reddish blond hair, clear, blue eyes, and fair skin. Surprisingly, he was very handsome, if his face had been a little less full he would have had almost movie star good looks. Although he seldom appeared to have a difficult time convincing people that he was Italian--no one ever gave him much serious argument--people still disbelieved him without really saying so. Gasper's father, a doctor, had immigrated to the United States before World War II from a small town in northern Italy, and Gasper was only too eager to tell people how the inhabitants of that part of Italy are often blond and fair-skinned. When he was drunk, and somehow on the subject of his lineage, he would grin and say in apparent seriousness that he was the direct descendant of a Barbarian king, a man named Thalakuld, who had sacked Rome and then retired to the north of Italy. As often as not, he was believed. Partly, I think, because you wanted to believe that a man like Gasper had come about in such a way.

Gasper was so totally unlike any other human being that I have ever known that he is difficult to describe or to classify. All his life he devoted most of his intelligence, and almost all his energy, to having fun. He was so good at it that people constantly wanted to be with him, and I

was no exception. He was not ordinary about it, he was never silent; it was as if he had only one mood, one consciousness--always to be smiling, laughing, making jokes, always to be active and alive. No joke, no story was ever wasted on Gasper: he laughed at almost anything, including himself. But Gasper was not the comic idiot, he had plenty of wit and intelligence, more than most; it was just that both were used almost exclusively in the way that most suited his nature: having loud, boisterous, carefree fun. Surprisingly, he got along well with his teachers and with most adults. You could not help but like him. He was essentially good: instinctively trusting people, never only superficially friendly, always generous. Yet he was an odd, particular person, someone who lived at the edge, the extreme. It was not that he was better or braver or wiser or smarter than most of us, just that he was so completely different. He was a natural leader, a person who did not have to seek after followers or admirers; they were just there, from the beginning. People met Gasper, and marvelled at him, and came away with a distinct impression--not always good perhaps--which they had to tell to others, because to experience Gasper Zappula was to experience something unique.

Gasper and I were from the same neighborhood, and went to the same grade school. He was, of course, even a kind of folk hero in those early years, but his name and the

telling of his adventures was confined to approximately five square miles of the far west side of our city. Gasper was the acknowledged leader of our school by the time he had reached the eighth grade. All the girls were afraid of him, as were many of the boys, and the nuns and lay teachers in the school feared him almost as much. It was not that he was mean, or malicious, or intractable. He simply enjoyed having fun in a boisterous, wild, carefree way that no one I have ever met could match, and so he seldom failed to frighten girls, and sometimes boys, and even his teachers. He was loud and rough, he delighted in telling dirty jokes even then, and his physical presence alone was intimidating. Still, no one ever denied him his essential good nature. The girls whispered about him, walked across the street to avoid him, told their mothers tales about him, the nuns sometimes labelled him a prince of devils; yet I am sure they all really liked him. You could not help but like Gasper Zappula.

In grade school he was our leader and organizer in such things as throwing snowballs at cars and girls, in printing our initials in wet cement; and in our more devious and dangerous undertakings as well, such as stretching twine across the street to rip off car aerials, lying on the roof of my house and shooting at cars with BB guns, and the time we carefully sneaked into his neighbor's back yard and made off with three huge steaks he was cooking on

his grill. We carried the steaks into a field near my house, built a fire and finished cooking them, and then ate them, pretending all the while--at Gasper's suggestion--that they were buffalo steaks. The rest of us were full and satisfied, and had no desire to do anything but talk about the adventure. But Gasper wasn't satisfied. He wanted to go back to his neighbor's house, sneak behind the house, and deposit the steak bones on the grill. And he did just that, while the rest of us watched him from behind the fence. He was like that--he never wanted to stop. He always wanted to stay out a little longer, or stay up later, or to try and stretch our luck a little further.

But it was in high school that Gasper really came into his own. He was a huge boy by grammar school standards, but by the time he was a senior in high school he was full grown. He had a larger audience in high school, too, and his adventures became real legends, and the gulf between Gasper and the people who talked about him became greater. He became a star, a personage, and those of us who had known him in grammar school found ourselves acknowledging with a proud nod of the head that we had known him then. Gasper defied any of the usual classifications for notoriety: he was not an athlete, not a class president, not a brilliant student, not anything but himself really. He was his own classification: Gasper

Zappula. He somehow maintained control over his impulses during school hours, and he seldom got into serious trouble with his teachers. He was so friendly and outgoing that all his teachers loved him, even the ones who felt that they could not trust anyone who was like Gasper. They seemed to accept him in the same way as most students did, as an entertaining wild man who could not be tamed, who you would not want to be tamed.

By the time he was a sophomore Gasper had cultivated a taste for alcohol. He did not really need to drink. I don't think drinking was for him what it was for most of us then: a new and easy way to become brave or foolhardy, or happy, or accepted. He seemed to drink out of pure enjoyment. It was the taste, he sometimes said, that was the all-important thing. In alcohol his tastes were catholic--he would drink anything: beer, or wine, or whiskey, good liquor or bad, cheap or expensive, whatever was the most available at a particular time. No one loved to drink more than Gasper. It was as if none of the bad things about drinking ever concerned him. He was not afraid of it. As might be expected, he could drink in enormous quantity. He never bragged about his capacity, others did that for him; but he was proud of it nevertheless, and he enjoyed nothing better than drinking with someone who doubted his abilities. He did not change much when he was drinking. He sometimes talked a little faster,

slapped your back a little harder, and walked a little clumsier, but drinking never brought out any hidden meanness or violence, and I never saw him so drunk that I couldn't like him.

Most girls, of course, were still very much afraid of Gasper. And like all of us then, he classified women and girls into two distinct groups: sluts and good girls. Sluts were everyone but mothers and wives, girls under fourteen, and a few certain virgins our own age. Gasper's sexual feats were always a matter of rich and obscene speculation. But even the loose girls in our high school stayed away from him. Perhaps they thought that being linked with Gasper was tantamount to being thought guilty of the wildest and most perverted kinds of sexual activity imaginable. To the mild, average, wholesome girls Gasper was indeed a mixture of wildness and depravity. One once told me that she might consider fainting if Gasper would ever ask her for a date. I told Gasper what she had said, and the next day he was standing outside the door when she came out of her first period class. He stood there, hands on his hips, rolling his tongue and winking with his left eye. She froze when she saw him, then dropped her textbook. Gasper retrieved it effortlessly and handed it to her with one hand while patting her on the ass with the other. "Not bad," he said, grinning at her, "What are you doing Friday night?" Everyone started to laugh, and the

girl stormed away, looking like a ghost. She was too frightened to be mad. Gasper tried to apologize to her later, but she would have none of it. She was a rather pretty, tiny girl, who I think really believed some of the more ridiculous stories about Gasper. I imagine she still thinks of Gasper as a wild-eyed pervert.

Gasper Zappula got his sexual experiences from whores for the most part. By the time he was a senior he had led a select group of his followers and several of the braver football players on journeys into the city's black ghetto in search of them. Gasper found them, of course. And if the stories are to be believed, they have not been the same since. It was accepted as common knowledge by many that Gasper had several whores who knew him by name, and one fat madam who squealed with delight whenever he walked through the door. His male organ was variously and colorfully described: "as big as a goddam tree," "more powerful than a speeding locomotive," "of championship calibre." I had one boy tell me over lunch in the cafeteria, in apparent seriousness, that the only reason Gasper went to whores was that "his thing" was too big for the average girl. "The whores love it," he said, "but he could kill the average girl with it." I think he really half believed what he told me. We were all middle class, suburban, Catholic boys at our high school, and the prospect of driving into the black ghetto at night to go to a whorehouse

was as mind-boggling an idea as running off to join the French Foreign Legion. Gasper seemed to take along football players more for his own sport than anything else. If he is to be believed, most of them were not able to handle the situation too well. Gasper delighted in telling the story of our famous fullback, who took one long hard look at the naked whore sitting on the bed across from him, and then proceeded to run down the stairs and hide in the car.

Yet I am sure Gasper wanted a girl in the way that every high school boy does: a nice, romantic, pretty, innocent girl who is crazy about you. I would often see him looking at me with a strained and powerful longing when I would walk into the stands with a date at Friday night football games. He would have a bottle of something under his coat, and he would hoist it up to his lips as I passed by, wink, then smile as he put it back inside his coat. But I could feel him watching us as we climbed up into the stands. I sometimes think he was secretly in love with some small, pretty girl in our high school, one of those shy, mysterious girls who tagged along with her girlfriends as they marched back and forth in front of the stands during the game, hoping to catch the eye of someone, anyone, who would follow her into the gym afterwards and ask her to dance. If there was such a girl, she never found Gasper, and Gasper would never acknowledge her

existence. There was a great deal of discussion the spring of our senior year as to who Gasper would bring to the senior prom. It was strongly rumored, and indeed hoped for by many, that he would arrive at the prom, resplendent in a tailor made tuxedo, with the famous whore Mamma Chicky on his arm. However, that was not the case. His mother got him a date with an Italian girl from the east side of town. She was polite, and harmless, and more than a little awed by Gasper. She followed him around that night like a little lost dog. Yet there were many people there who really did think she was some famous whore. I know a lot of guys told their dates it was so, even if they doubted it themselves.

Gasper was accused of being gross, crude, and immature. I suppose, to a certain extent, he was all of those things. But he was crude in an excellent and innocent way. He liked to shock people, to have fun, to do anything that was wild or exciting or dangerous, anything that promised to be fun. The same kind of intelligence and enthusiasm he applied to his grade school adventures were in evidence when cars, alcohol, and other things were added to his repertoire. If Gasper was indeed crude and gross, it was with a kind of fanatic zeal and humor that was truly magnificent. He was good at being gross, and for him it was simply a matter of having fun, and he could never completely understand why the person or persons who were

the object of his fun sometimes did not have much fun. During his junior year Gasper led "bushwhacking" expeditions into the parks and fields of the western half of the city in search of boys and girls in parked cars. He planned his forays like military operations: assigning certain positions in the car to each man, arranging elaborate hand and voice signals, setting up alternate escape routes and rendezvous points, and inventing numerous contingency plans. Usually he would park the car several hundred yards away from the target, then carefully sneak up to it, often crawling on his hands and knees, and then order the rest of the party to surround it but to stay hidden. When Gasper was satisfied that everything was in order, he would cup his hands and give out with the worst imitation of a bird call I have ever heard. Then he would come running out of the bushes toward the car screaming and yelling at the top of his lungs. On Gasper's orders, the rest of us would stay hidden, but join him in yelling as loud as we could. Gasper would carefully position himself several yards in front of the car, and as soon as the headlights came on he would turn around, drop his pants, and bend over, laughing so hard he sometimes fell down. "When I'm in a particularly good mood," Gasper sometimes said, "I let out with a fart." Naturally the people who were treated to the figure of Gasper running out of the bushes at them, and later of a lighted view of

his huge posterior, did not always appreciate the experience. They had no way of knowing Gasper meant no harm, and had every right to feel afraid. Of course not every operation went off without problems, Gasper's contingency plans notwithstanding. Once while Gasper was displaying himself a man ran out of his car with a baseball bat and smacked him directly across his ass and knocked him to the ground. He probably would have killed Gasper with the bat, but his girlfriend started screaming and he ran back to the car. Gasper thought the whole episode was extremely funny. It was one story he loved to tell himself.

Gasper Zappula was a hero to almost everyone in the school; he was universally liked. Even those who were absorbed in books, or student politics, or chess, or photography, or in merely being ordinary, or shy, liked him. They somehow sensed that even though Gasper had little to do with them, he still liked them well enough. No one ever made a name for himself by declaring that he hated Gasper Zappula. He was not a bully, not even aggressive or short tempered. His size and boisterous manner occasionally made people think that he might be, but he wasn't. I don't think he ever could have been. Part of the problem was that almost everyone who met him had heard dozens of stories, usually not altogether accurate, before they actually shook hands with him and heard him speak. Some of the stories were ridiculous, of course, and I think even Gasper would have been ashamed and horrified

at some of the things people would swear he had done. He created a lot of legends, but he didn't need them himself. He was real enough.

Gasper continually exasperated his parents. At home he was a dutiful, model son, and the reports of what he did outside the house baffled them completely. Dr. Zappula, a serious, religious man, was always at a loss to explain his son, and worried about him a great deal. Many of his patients knew Gasper, of course, and while patiently listening to their ailments in his office, he also often had to listen to some of the more outlandish stories about Gasper. My father loved Gasper, and he did his best to defend Gasper's actions to Dr. Zappula, but without much success. Gasper's mother was convinced that Gasper would grow out of his wildness at any time, since there had been no one on either side of the family who had been at all like him. She shut her eyes to most of the things she heard about her son, not really believing he was capable of them.

Gasper became known throughout Northern Ohio and parts of Michigan, and in a hundred other places throughout that part of the Midwest, because of his appearances in the Lake Erie Islands several times each summer. In the summer months these islands--there are several of them, all just several square miles in area, are popular resort areas. People from Cleveland, Detroit, and Toledo, and many

smaller cities, build summer cottages on the islands and spend their weekends swimming, fishing, sailing, and driving their boats from island to island. There are several wineries on the islands, and on South Bass, the most populated island, there is a small village, called Put-In-Bay, built in a tight semicircle around a natural harbor at the northern tip of the island. Put-In-Bay consists of a large park which borders the shore of the lake and a street about a quarter of a mile long, packed with bars, novelty shops, small grocery stores, and restaurants. On holiday weekends hundreds of people our age came to the islands, mostly just to drink wine and beer. In the past there have been fights, small riots, mass celebrations. There was also Gasper Zappula.

In the summer Gasper lived for these weekends. He would gather most of us together at least a week in advance of an upcoming holiday and spend hours carefully formulating plans for the weekend. Each of us was assigned a certain kind of liquor to bring, and a prescribed quantity of it, or a certain amount of sleeping bags, or food, or bail money, or any inconsequential thing Gasper thought he might possibly have use for. He was a stickler for detail when it came to having fun, always wanting to be completely prepared. Gasper went wild on these weekends, as we all did, but as always, just watching Gasper, at least for me, was more enjoyable than anything else. By his second

summer of visits, the year we graduated from high school, he was the acknowledged King of Put-In-Bay. People would come back from Detroit, from small towns in Ohio, just to see Gasper again. I really think he reserved his greatest feats for his annual visits to Put-In-Bay. His first Fourth of July there he organized and led what later became known as "The Great Raid of the Chickens."

In one corner of the park several of the local residents had set up a huge outdoor grill on which they could roast several dozen chickens at a time. Every couple of hours or so they would put the barbecued chickens on sale at $3.00 apiece. The price was outrageous, of course, and for two days no one but tourists or people off the yachts in the harbor would buy any. The hunger that manifests itself in the early evening, after a day spent in doing nothing but drinking beer and wine, is a unique one; and by that time on Saturday most of the kids on the island could think of only one thing: barbecued chicken. The smell from the barbecuing chickens was everywhere. It filled the park and the town, and even found its way into Frosty's Bar, where Gasper was holding court at a small table in the corner of the room. Suddenly Gasper slammed his fishbowl down on the table and announced to everyone present that the profiteering had gone on long enough. He was determined to teach the bastards a lesson. He proposed a raid on the chickens, and he offered to lead it

himself. His announcement was met with cries, really howls and screams, of approval. It was plain to me that Gasper's real motive was not to avenge himself on some selfish merchants, but to simply have some fun. In fact he really did not care much for chicken. He swiftly organized things in his usual military fashion. He sent out "scouts" to reconnoiter the situation, planned several avenues of escape, and proposed a diversionary attack to draw off the police, who were gathered near the town hall at the other end of the park. When everything was set to his satisfaction, Gasper proudly marched out of the bar at the head of a group of about seventy-five people and began to advance upon the chickens. He marched stiffly, swinging his arms, with a huge grin on his face. There were two men and a woman running the barbecue, and when they saw the huge figure of Gasper Zappula advancing steadily toward them, followed by dozens of shouting supporters, they froze. However, not for long. First the woman broke and ran. Then one of the men. When Gasper was about twenty yards in front of the barbecue the remaining man, who must have been the owner, threw up his hands in despair, grabbed a fistful of money out of the cash register, and started running for the far end of the park, screaming for the police. Then Gasper let out with a piercing yell, and charged the chickens. Gasper was in and out of the barbecue in seconds, proudly holding two chickens

in each hand. He was not stupid, and he left the scene immediately. Others were not so lucky, and about a dozen people ended up spending the night in jail. Gasper promptly gave away his chickens, bought himself three hotdogs, and retired to Frosty's. Gasper became the instant hero of everyone on the island, and when he stepped off the ferry for his first visit the next summer, people were still calling him the Chicken King. He never got a chance to repeat his exploit however, because ever since his famous raid two policemen have stood guard over the barbecue from dawn until dusk.

Exactly one year later, on another Saturday night over the Fourth of July weekend, he was again in Frosty's. He was standing against the bar, slightly drunk, and in very good humor, and he proposed a challenge to three boys, fraternity men, from a small college in Indiana.

"At exactly midnight," Gasper announced to them, "I will run naked with a beer in each hand and a hotdog in my mouth from one end of the street to the other."

"Naked?" one boy replied, looking at Gasper as if he were insane.

"Naturally," Gasper replied.

The three of them started to laugh, of course. They obviously did not know Gasper and were sure he was joking. Even when Gasper insisted that they would have to do likewise if he were successful, they continued to treat the matter

very lightly. "Go ahead man," one of them said. "We're with you all the way. All the way." A wide grin broke across Gasper's face. To make the whole thing even more exciting, Gasper said, he would eat the hotdog and drink both of the beers while running to the end of the block. They somehow were not impressed. As I have said, the main drag in Put-In-Bay is not very long, but that Saturday night it was naturally filled with people off the boats, tourists, about a dozen cops, and huge groups sitting and drinking in the park.

At exactly five minutes to twelve Gasper took his leave of Frosty's and walked down to the end of the block, accompanied by half a dozen followers and the three fraternity boys. He handed his clothes to a friend, stuffed the hotdog into his mouth, took hold of two opened beer cans, and started to run. It was truly an amazing sight, one that can never be duplicated. As Gasper had correctly anticipated, a path cleared for him immediately. Most people froze when they saw him. A lot of women and girls started screaming. The sight of a naked Gasper Zappula, lumbering along at what was a run for him and a jog for most, choking down a hotdog, waving two cans of Stroh's beer in the air, was the most extraordinary sight most people who saw him that night had ever seen, or probably ever did see. Several policement saw him, of course, but by the time they could really react to what they were

seeing, Gasper had sped by them and was safely obscured by the huge crowd charging after him. When he reached the end of the block he ducked behind a building and disappeared into a nearby field. A friend was waiting there with his clothes.

Naturally, the three boys who had agreed to Gasper's challenge did not think it was funny at all. They were certainly laughing as they watched Gasper strip off his clothes, but they were not laughing much when he strode back into Frosty's looking for them. Strangely, they had not tried to run away. I don't think they could have managed it anyway, surrounded by Gasper's friends, but I think they also realized that if they had run away Gasper would have searched the island until he had found them and their fate then would have been even worse. Gasper, grinning with both pride and satisfaction, bought each of them a hotdog, inquiring of each beforehand whether he preferred ketchup or mustard, and furnished them with two beers apiece. They sheepishly followed him outside to the end of the block. Gasper watched contentedly as they ripped off their clothes and began to run. They were probably as scared as any three people I have ever seen. I think one of them was about to cry. I don't think Gasper could understand their fear. The whole thing had been a wonderful, enjoyable experience for him. I'm certain he was thinking that they should have been laughing. The

first one got about a hundred yards before two cops grabbed him. The other two got only a little further. The cops reacted better this time. As soon as they heard the screaming, they must have figured that the red-headed monster was on his way again. All three of them spent the night in jail, but on Sunday morning Gasper presented himself at the town hall to pay their fines. He had spent the remainder of Saturday night standing beside the door in Frosty's, beer in one hand, hat in the other, soliciting contributions for their cause from everyone who passed through the door.

Gasper started college that fall at a small school in Cincinnati. I went to Ohio State, and several weekends that year I drove down to see him. He adjusted to college life remarkably well. He went to most of his classes, read a great deal, and I think at times worried a little bit about what he would eventually do with himself. He made passable grades, and removed as she was from the center of his operations, his mother began to think that Gasper had finally come of age. His father was not so sure, however, and still worried a great deal about his son. Gasper grew a beard, became the hero of his freshman class, led the freshman football team on excursions across the river into Kentucky to the whorehouses, threw wild, drunken parties at which he was the star attraction, and even managed to hitchhike to Chicago for a weekend.

Gasper organized the first "King Size Shit Contest" his school had ever known. The prefect of his dorm, an old Jesuit priest, found it very hard to believe that anyone could think of something as crude as what Gasper proposed, and proceeded to carry out. Gasper decided that a prize ought to be awarded to the man who could produce the largest single chunk of prime fecal matter. With himself as the final arbiter, he appointed a panel of judges to decide on the legitimacy of entries, to supervise correct measurements, and to keep an accurate score sheet. The contest lasted a week. Try as he might, and I'm sure he actually did try, Gasper couldn't win it himself. The grand prize went to a biology major who lived down the hall from Gasper. He awoke Gasper at six in the morning, two days before the contest was to officially end, and urged him to come down the hall to observe his entry. It was certainly deserving of the highest praise, but as Gasper later told me: "It scared me to death when I first looked at the thing." The entire floor gathered while Gasper fished the winning entry out of the toilet with a hunk of newspaper and placed it on the floor. Gasper then hurried into his room and got out his Polaroid, and with the biology major kneeling beside his prize-winning entry, Gasper took a picture of them together. Whenever he finished telling the story, he would reach into his back pocket, pull out his

wallet, and proudly display the picture as evidence for the truth of his tale.

Gasper suddenly discovered himself with a steady girlfriend midway through his sophomore year. He was kidded about it unmercifully by his old high school friends whenever he was home, but Gasper defended himself using arguments we had all at one time used against him: she was beautiful, and of course a fine piece of ass; she didn't hassle him at all; she was rich and smart, and he still took his freedom anytime he felt like it. I have no idea how he met her, or started going with her. Gasper never talked about it much. Suddenly she was just there.

Her name was Nancy Maloney. Her father was a doctor, like Gasper's, and she was an only child, as Gasper was. Other than that they had little in common. She was tall, taller than I was, but still tiny to Gasper, and had a pretty face and a marvellous body. I was always a little awed by how good looking she was. Nancy Maloney had all the necessary features: long, slim legs, curving hips, flat stomach, breasts that seemed perfectly formed and were just the right size, a face whose features seemed to fit into one another exactly, and long dark hair. I had always thought that any girl Gasper got involved with would have to be at one extreme or the other. She was a proud, independent girl, very nice to talk to, and I think she was attracted to Gasper because he was so much of an

oddity. She had found in Gasper a man remarkably unique, and for a while she was very satisfied with her discovery. I'm sure some of the things he did, and was known for doing, didn't particularly please her, but she never complained too much. She was glad to be with Gasper, and she revelled in the excitement he always produced. They both liked to show one another off, but Nancy was a little more enthusiastic about it. I don't think she ever saw anything permanent in Gasper. She liked him well enough, perhaps even loved him in schoolgirl fashion for a while. They never talked about commitments or love, Gasper once told me. I never tried to question him too much about his real feelings for her; I knew he would just joke about it. Sometimes, though, I think he must have thought of her as that one special girl, that very first girl, who is romantic and innocent, who loves you, who you always keep as a secret in your mind. Gasper did bring her home to meet his parents, and they accepted her immediately. And Gasper seemed to take great pride in that fact. He calmed somewhat in her presence, but it was slight, not really noticeable unless you knew Gasper very well. It was as if he felt it was expected of him to do so.

That summer Gasper again went back to the islands. Nancy wanted to go with him for the Fourth of July celebration, but Gasper was totally against the idea. All his friends, myself included, agreed with him. We wanted

Gasper all to ourselves on a Put-In-Bay weekend. But Nancy was obstinate, and she announced to Gasper shortly before he left for the weekend that she was going to go up there with her girlfriend, whether he approved of it or not.

The weekend had started great for him. I knew that as soon as I saw him. I had had to work that Friday night and I didn't reach Put-In-Bay until early Saturday morning. I was sitting in Frosty's, drinking my first fishbowl of the day, when Gasper strode into the bar. He had on his usual weekend clothes: school T-shirt, jeans, moccasins. He walked directly to my table, smiled, and then did an about face and looked toward the door. He raised both his arms and flexed them. I HATE FOOTBALL was printed in huge block letters across the back of his purple T-shirt. He ordered two beers, and we began to talk. I asked him if Nancy was still around. Gasper replied that she was, but that he didn't know where, and that he had been successfully avoiding her since Friday afternoon. In between gulps of beer he told me of his adventures the night before. They were unusual as always, but not that unusual for Gasper.

Problems did not come until that night. It was about ten o'clock or so, and we were back at Frosty's, and as always I was very tired and slightly drunk by this time. Gasper was still going strong, though, standing at the bar and drinking beer and listening to a short fat boy from

Detroit tell him an endless parade of gorilla jokes. The boy did not quite know what to make of Gasper, probably never before encountering anyone who was willing to listen to more than one gorilla joke, or anyone who was seemingly so easily entertained. Gasper roared at every joke, sometimes embarrassing the boy, and continually urged him to tell more. I saw Nancy walk in with her girlfriend, look at Gasper, who was attentively listening to a joke, and then push her way through the crowd to a corner of the room, about twenty-five feet away from Gasper. I continued talking and drinking for a long time before I looked over at her again. There were two boys with them now, neither of whom I knew. I was immediately frightened for them a little, not so much that I thought Gasper would come over and kill them--I didn't think then that there was much chance of that happening--but because if they had known the real situation they probably would have been too scared to move, certainly the boy trying to make time with Nancy would have been. Yet I could hardly blame them. Nancy and her girlfriend were easily the two best looking girls in Frosty's that night. Both of them were tanned very brown, and wearing only cut-off bluejeans and bikini tops. The one with Nancy appeared to be pretty sober. He was small and dark and wore a white knit polo shirt. He was smiling and laughing a lot, but I knew he didn't feel much like laughing. He was doing it because he had to, because Nancy

was laughing; and if she were laughing he must have reasoned that she was enjoying herself, and getting the girl to enjoy herself is usually the first thing you must do. I'm sure he was thinking about what it would be like to unhook her bathing suit top, and in his mind he was outside, in the park, under a tree. Gasper was still standing against the bar, laughing and talking, with his back to them. It was clear to me what Nancy was up to, and I really felt sorry for her friend. When I looked back again, Nancy was kissing him. Normally such things go unnoticed in Frosty's: the jukebox is blaring, everyone is drunk, the place is packed with people; but several people who knew Gasper noticed.

Nancy did indeed put on quite a show. She was leaning against a wall, kissing him, and I could see her hands and arms running all over his back. I'm sure he was calculating approximately how many minutes he was away from the soft grass of the park. Then someone poked Gasper. He turned around and saw them almost at once. He just stood there for several seconds and stared at them, his face blank. I don't think Nancy saw him right away--she was too busy trying to get him to notice her, and it was obvious by this time that she was enjoying herself. Finally her girlfriend, who was white-faced by now, started nudging her, unsuccessfully at first. I started to work my way down the bar towards Gasper. Before I could reach him I

saw him very delicately place his mug down on the edge of the bar, and then begin to walk towards them. If Nancy did not see him coming, she must have sensed it, because she let go of her friend and stood flush against the wall. I could not see her face because the boy was in the way. But I saw his. It was like he was lying on the ground and staring up at the elephant who is about to crush him. He stood there alone, his friend was already on his way out the door. He had started to cower and half-heartedly bring back his fist when Gasper grabbed him around the neck. Without shaking him, but in firm control, he reached past him and grabbed Nancy by the neck with his other hand. Then Gasper Zappula started to howl. He was suddenly screaming wildly, but almost laughing, and so loud that people outside on the crowded street must have heard him. No one, myself included, knew what would happen next. I am sure most people there thought he would crack their heads against the bar or throw them both through the window. They both looked like tiny puppets dangling from his arms. He stood them up very straight and walked them over to the bar. He let go of the boy's neck for a moment and reached for his beer. He took a sip, still laughing, and then proceeded to pour the remainder over both their heads. I was standing very close to him now, and he motioned to me to hand him my beer. I did, and he poured it slowly over their heads. Neither Nancy nor her new boyfriend had said

a word since Gasper had grabbed them. Then he took the boy's neck again and walked them both to the door. People began to pack tightly behind him. When he reached the door, he tossed them, almost gently, out into the night.

He walked back to the bar still laughing, and people started crowding around him, pumping his hand, offering to buy him beer. He immediately downed a huge fishbowl in one nervous gulp. I think he felt immensely proud of himself at that moment, but for the first time I think he needed other people around him to tell him so. I was rather proud of him, and loved him, because I now knew that Nancy had been that mysterious girl, that high school girl, that secret girl, who now was no longer a secret. A little while later I went outside to get a pack of cigarettes. I saw Nancy and her new friend, hand in hand, walking through the park. He had a sleeping bag under his right arm. I had to envy him a little, because Nancy was such a beautiful girl, but I also hated both of them as intensely as I have ever hated anyone. I went back inside Frosty's and joined Gasper in his conversation with the boy from Detroit. Gasper had begun to lecture him on the follies of football, how it was such a ridiculous game, how it seemed to attract an inordinate number of people with low intelligence. Basketball was the game, Gasper told him, you could never go wrong with basketball. Gasper kept on drinking, and his eyes never left the boy from

Detroit for a good half hour. Yet there was a nervous strain in his voice that embarrassed the boy; you could tell because Gasper himself realized he was not talking as Gasper should, and every minute or so he would consciously lower his voice, as if he were trying to fight off something deep inside him, something that was running out of him with the speed and power of a fast-moving train. We continued to talk about the relative merits of football and basketball, but I was thinking about Nancy and her new love. I think Gasper was too. We imagined her having the beer kissed from her face, and her bikini top being unhooked.

Gasper stayed in Frosty's until closing. There were only a few of us left then, and we followed him back to the state park, all of us drunk and Gasper screaming incredible obscenities into the air. It was more than a mile to the park, and we followed a poorly paved road in complete darkness. There was no moon, no stars. When we reached the park we could hear the waves crashing against the rocks below the cliff. It was suddenly very cold and windy, and all of us groped for our sleeping bags, wanting nothing but to get warm and go to sleep. But Gasper was not satisfied. He screamed in laughter that he would drink until the sun rose. He searched the tent frantically for liquor, and finally found a bottle of cheap island wine. Wrapping himself in a blanket and putting on the sailing

hat I always wore on Put-In-Bay weekends, he staggered out of the tent.

Several hours later, just as it became light, he strode into the tent, yelling that we were all shitheads and that it was time to get up. He waved the still full bottle of wine in the air, occasionally lowering it to swat someone across the ass. He opened both tent flaps completely, and cool air and sunlight poured in on us. Gasper was in tremendous spirits. He decided that we should all go swimming, and two of us actually agreed to go with him. We both had tremendous hangovers, we were really still drunk. Somehow I thought swimming might clear my head. The three of us stood at the edge of the cliff and pissed into the lake, then we started down the path that led to the tiny beach. Gasper could not resist taunting us about our hangovers. As usual, he claimed his own head was clear. "I'll bet both your mouths taste like two horses stood over you all night, one shitting and the other pissing!" he shouted at us. The comparison was a new one, and Gasper started to laugh so hard he lost his footing and almost fell. The lake was calm. There was a cool breeze blowing, but it was from the northeast, and we were on the leeward side of the island. Gasper was stripped and into the water in seconds. He was like a huge porpoise, swimming and diving, rising to the surface and spitting out water and air. His red hair made a sharp

contrast with the gray and green water. We swam for several minutes, until a park ranger told us we had to leave the beach, since swimming was forbidden without a lifeguard on duty.

Gasper drank his bottle of wine for breakfast, and held court in Frosty's until late in the afternoon. We caught the last boat back to the mainland. He made no overt attempt to look for Nancy, and he never mentioned her that day, and seldom afterward.

Gasper returned to college for his senior year with a copy of Thomas Merton's The Seven Story Mountain in his trunk. His father had given it to him to read. He in fact offered Gasper $50 if he would promise to read it. Gasper did. He finished it the last week in October and received the check the following weekend. Gasper and I had made plans for that weekend. I was to bring down two girls with me to Cincinnati, the girl I had been dating steadily since May, and her girlfriend, for Gasper. He took us to one of the plushest restaurants in Cincinnati, and we spent the entire $50 in one evening. Gasper pronounced the book one of the most interesting he had ever read, although it was obvious to him that Merton was crazy. Still, he thought him worthy of respect; and, at Gasper's insistence, we finished the evening by drinking a champagne toast in the honor of Tommy Merton.

The last time I saw Gasper Zappula was on a Sunday afternoon during the winter of his senior year in college. Two weeks later he was dead. I had half expected Gasper to either live to ninety, spending his last years telling dirty jokes to his great-grandchildren; or to die young, maybe in a war or in an accident connected with one of his adventures. He did die young, when he was twenty-two, in an automobile. He was alone, and he failed to handle a steep, icy turn properly, and he drove himself into a wall that ran alongside a road above the Ohio River outside of Cincinnati. He was dead when they brought him to the hospital, and nobody ever knew whether he said or did anything spectacular just before he died. He had a very happy funeral. His parents cried, of course, and they were joined by my father, but they were the only ones who did. Most everyone else got very drunk, as they assumed Gasper would have wished.

About three years later I was at Put-In-Bay with my new wife. It was a weekend early in August. We rented bicycles and I showed her the island. In the afternoon a squall hit South Bass, and we parked our bikes and ducked into Frosty's to drink some beer and wait out the storm. It was dark and quiet inside, and there were few people. Susan and I stood at the bar, looking out over the room. At a table just in front of us were three boys, about eighteen or nineteen, and three girls. I heard the name

Gasper Zappula mentioned. My ears pricked, and I began to listen to them. One of the boys said that his brother had known Gasper, but it was obvious to me that none of them had known him, just a few Gasper Zappula legends. The three boys were telling the girls about Gasper, who seemed to know nothing at all about him.

"He was an absolutely massive guy," the first one said. Another continued: "He was the biggest man I've ever seen, bigger than Dick Butkus. He was a tremendous football player." The girls seemed unimpressed. "Listen," the third boy began, "I once saw Gasper Zappula carry a one hundred and fifty pound girl completely across this room!" "He just picked her up and carried her across," the first boy said. I could tell that the three boys had told the story before. They were looking at one another and trying hard not to smirk. The girls seemed uncomfortable, they were not all impressed with Gasper Zappula. Finally one of them put down her glass, slightly annoyed. "I don't see what is so spectacular about that," she said. "I think almost anyone could do that." "Yeah!" the first boy replied, slamming his mug down hard on the table, a huge grin on his face, "but with his tongue!"

I turned away from them and back to the bar, and took a sip from my beer. I looked at Susan, who had not known Gasper Zappula. She was laughing. I wanted to both laugh

and cry. I started to smile. Just smile. I really missed that crazy man, that gross bastard.

BONES

"I know there's a heaven because there's got to be one. It just makes sense to me, that's all. Joe, I've been telling you all this a mil-lion times."

"Well, Bones, you won't know until you're dead. And I think you might be surprised."

"I know it now. It's just gonna be like getting some-thing I knew I was gonna get all along. Plain and simple. That's it. That's what I tell my boys, Stevey and Tommy.

"What about hell, Bones?" Joe started to laugh.

"There an't no hell. I've told you that before too."

Bones picked up his gloves and safety helmet and stood up from the lunch table. He grinned at Joe. "It's time for my big trick."

"I'm waiting on you, Bones."

"Well, I'll do it."

Bones stood perfectly still. Then with one hand he flipped his yellow helmet into the air. It came to rest squarely on the top of his tiny head.

"I can al-ways do it," he said, proudly.

"I know, Bones, you can AL-WAYS do it."

"It's time to get back to the saw." Bones looked up to the clock on the wall above the coffee machine.

"Bones," Joe replied, barely able to contain his laughter, "you just go right ahead." As Bones moved past him, Joe lowered his head and stared down into his coffee. He began to chuckle as he blew on the hot liquid.

Bones walked out of the lunch room, through the tiny locker room, and out into the factory. He passed the crew from the #1 furnace as they headed for the lunch room and their mid-morning break. He nodded politely to each man; it was far too noisy to speak.

Sam was the first into the room. He immediately sat down across from Joe and lit a cigarette. As he did, he smiled at Joe. Then he made a quick motion with his hand.

"He sure did," Joe replied.

"Goddamn!"

"That man should be a preacher or something," Ralph, the foreman, said. He was unscrewing the lid from his thermos of coffee. He had a son in the seminary.

Joe's lips parted, his bright, white teeth snapped into focus, and he began to laugh, throwing his head back with force. "No way! Absolutely no way! Hell, he's too shy. And he's too dumb. God, that man is dumb. Just plain dumb." He looked at Sam. "Now, you know that, Sammy." His eyes returned to the foreman's. "He couldn't even pass the mental test to get into the Army. My oldest boy, George, did so well they wanted to make him a buck sergeant right off. Bones is some thirty years old

and he can barely read and write." Still smiling, Joe looked around the table; it was completely filled now. He was greeted with smiles, light laughter, and nodding heads.

"He might be what I call a family preacher, though;" he continued, "he just preaches to his family!"

"And us," someone said.

"That's right! Joe yelled. He slapped himself on both of his heavy thighs, letting his cigarette dangle precariously from his lips. "He's the preacher and we are all the congregation!"

"I got a wife like that," Sam said, addressing the crowd.

"So do I," Joe replied, shaking his head. "She's as Catholic as they come."

"I've got a son like that," the foreman said, "but he keeps it to himself." His son, Ralph Jr., was two hundred miles north in a Methodist seminary in Michigan. But they lived a long time, that was what he had read somewhere and that was what he sometimes told people when they asked about his son: they live a long time; ministers died old.

"He ever tell any of you what he thinks heaven's going to be like?" Joe continued. The foreman shook his head, so did all of the others--except Sam.

"Bones told me once. He thinks it's going to be harps and white clouds and angels with flappy wings. Just like

in the pictures. Everybody sings hymns all the time. And--get this: everybody has blond hair and wears a white sheet!"

"Yeah," Joe replied, putting down his coffee, "like ghosts."

"Well," the foreman said, "you never know. It might just be like that. You just don't know. I really don't think so, of course, but then--" He stopped and smiled. "When I was a kid I used to think you made a woman pregnant by pissing up her crotch!"

The laughter was so loud that Tom, who was in the locker room taking a shit, yelled: "What the hell's so funny?"

"Fuck," Joe replied, "when I was sixteen I found out pretty quick that wasn't the way it was. And fuck, I've been living with it ever since."

"Sixteen? Sixteen!" It was Sam. "I would have you all know that I was twelve years old when I got my first piece of ass."

"Who was it, Sam?" the foreman asked, "Your grandmother? Your mother? Your little baby sister?"

"You were twelve years old my ass hole!" Joe yelled across the table. "Your wife probably had to show you where to put it on your wedding night."

Sam stood up and addressed the table: "Well, boys, as a matter of fact that is exactly what she had to do."

He swallowed hard and cleared his throat. "Because, you see, I was blind drunk!"

One of the men got up to leave. "Well, all I know is: singing and playing harps doesn't sound like much fun to me."

Joe looked up at him, sticking out his right hand, pointing a finger directly at him. "But Bones has got an answer for that one too. He says that when you die all of a sudden playing harps becomes more fun than you can possibly imagine." The man shook his head slowly as he walked out of the room.

"The Arabs have the best heaven." It was Tom, the youngest man on first shift; he had just graduated from high school. "All you do is screw and get drunk and eat steak for breakfast and bet on the camel races."

"Now that doesn't sound too bad," Sam replied.

Tom began to scratch his armpit. "Can you imagine screwing some gorgeous girl for days and days?"

"You'd be dead," answered Joe. He began to laugh, rolling his eyes, shaking his head, "I know I'd sure be."

He believed in heaven absolutely. The others, especially Joe, just couldn't understand, and that was why they made fun of him. He worried about Joe because he wanted most of all for Joe to believe; Joe had given him his nickname and Joe had broken him in on the saw. But Alice,

his wife, believed in heaven. And Tommy, who was only eight, and Stevey, who was only six, believed in heaven. He had seen to that. His father had, his father had believed in it absolutely, his father had taught him to believe. And his mother, yes, his mother too. There were some at the church who really believed. Smith, the grocer, had said once that he believed in heaven. He had met a man in a bowling alley once who believed absolutely. He remembered the man's name: it was McNulty and he was from Pittsburgh. Believing wasn't hard if you understood. He believed; he didn't worry about it at all.

Joe. He would see Joe in heaven someday and they would laugh about it all together. He sometimes pictured Joe with a harp: fat, he was really fat, and his black hair become yellow forever, and singing away and praising God and just plain loving every minute of it. That would be funny; he and Alice and the boys would laugh about it for at least a couple of hundred years.

It would all just be set right when everybody was dead. He wasn't worried about wars and tornadoes and houses burning down with people inside, or folks dying off of diseases, or like when his little brother, Robby, got run over and killed by a truck in front of their house in Texas. When everybody was dead no one would care how they came to be dead. He certainly wouldn't care; he wouldn't care a whit. Things just seemed unfair to you sometimes when you were alive.

He remembered his father, how he had died: burned up in an oil field fire in Texas. That was unfair. He had been very young, but he could remember. He remembered his mother crying for days and days. But he was sure his father was in heaven. He would be up there looking down and laughing about the whole thing. "Burned alive!" he would be saying, his hair gone yellow and holding a harp in his hands, "Why it hurt like hell for a while, but it sure don't hurt none now." He looked forward to seeing his father again; he wanted to ask him many things. The most important thing, of course, was that he meet Tommy and Stevey and Alice. They would all have a big reunion.

Forever was the best thing. The best thing God had ever made. He would praise God for that when the time came. That one thing would be good for years of praising. And he would have Alice and the boys forever. He thought about that a lot: sometimes after supper, when he drank his coffee in front of the TV; and when he woke up on Saturday mornings after a nice dream; and always he thought about it when their grandmother came and took them away for two weeks in the summertime. They would be with him forever when they were all in heaven. Stevey could already sing pretty good--and Alice and Tommy already had yellow hair.

He was done for the day. He pressed the cut-off switch and the big steel blade stopped whirling and

swishing; and, suddenly, before his gloves were off, it was still. He looked at the piles of neatly cut pieces of aluminum and magnesium; he was pleased with his day's work.

"You still got both hands, Bones?" It was Joe.

"Sure do, Joe." Bones turned and raised both hands into the air. "See?" But Joe was already past him and on his way to the locker room.

It was already gray at three o'clock, and the two dozen men of the first shift passed like furry shadows out through the lunchroom door and into the cold and white of the factory yard. The snow was already deep: it covered the huge piles of scrap, the metal boxes, the tractor trailers waiting to be emptied of their loads of smashed pop cans, broken screen doors, and thousands of skinny metal strips which read Vestinghouse. They walked together to the parking lot, impressed, as always, with the discovery of quiet. The snow was falling heavily, blurring them to one another as they walked, and as it fell there were comments made about moving to the South, to Florida mostly, as they had all known one or more old timers who had packed up with retirement and gone off to that magic land. Many of the wives, sitting in warm cars in the lot on the top of the small hill by the road, as they watched the men cross the yard, reached their hands down to the heater and moved the blower up a notch. It

was early December, and snow was to be expected, but those women who sat in cars without snow tires prepared for angry blasts from tired men. They all lived in a small town, and many of the women knew one another; there were nods and waves through foggy, snow-covered windshields and an occasional cigarette was tossed from one outstretched hand to another.

It was three o'clock on Friday. In the tiny locker room, sheltered somewhat from the noise of the furnaces and the big cutting machines, the men joked and laughed as they dressed. Joe was taunting Bones; it was always a part of his daily ritual.

"Going home to pray, Bones?" Bones was standing at the sink soaping his thin hands and arms.

"It don't really mat-ter that much. But I pray some-times. Mostly I pray when I'm at church."

"Pray to go to heaven, I bet."

"Nope. I never do. I'm already going there. So are you, Joe. So's everybody."

"Yeah, but I'm a real mother-fucking son of a bitch, Bones." Joe began to laugh and he wheeled around on his heavy feet and addressed Tom: "An't I?"

"You sure are, Joe."

"Joe?" It was Sam. He had dressed quickly and stood, lunchpail in hand, next to the time clock. "Joe, I'd

bet you'd fuck Bones's wife if you had half the chance. You're that bad." Sam shook his head and smiled. Bones continued to wash his hands.

"That ugly hog? I've never seen her but knowing Bones she must be ugly as hell." He hesitated for several seconds, then he rolled his eyes obscenely. "Why sure I would!" He grabbed his groin with one hand and waved the other in cowboy fashion above his head. He began to hop up and down in place, his heavy legs moving in a nearly perfect rhythm, almost as though he were skipping rope. "Uhhhhhhhhhhhh! Uhnnunnnnnh!"

Tom crossed the room and stood next to Joe. "She's loving it! She's loving it!"

"I'm loving it too!" Joe yelled back. "Uhhnhhhnuuh!"

"Ride that woman, Joe!" Sam yelled from the time clock. Then he walked out of the room.

Joe stopped. The room was half-empty now and the laughter had ceased. The remaining men returned to their dressing, and all avoided looking at either Joe or Bones. But eventually, in seconds really, eyes began to search out Bones, who sat calmly in front of his locker.

Joe, you're not my friend any-more. You can't be my friend from now on. Not unless you make-up to me and my wife."

"I an't apologizing to anybody--especially not to your hog of a wife." Joe began to smile, conscious of the stares

but feeling self-assured.

Tom moved over to Bones. "Hell, Joe just fucked your wife."

"Well, he's got to make-up. What he just did was indecent."

"I an't apologizing. I an't apologizing, Bones. Say, does that mean I'm going to hell?"

"No . . . You're going to heaven. Just like every-body else."

"Bones." Joe sat down on the bench in front of his locker. "Bones, we'll talk about it up in heaven. That okay?"

"Say, Bones?" It was Tom again. "Do people screw up in heaven?"

"No. They just praise God."

"Shit, man, then I an't going."

"Yes you are."

"I am not, you crazy man."

"Yes you sure are."

"Goddammit, Bones." It was Joe, completely dressed now. "The man shouldn't have to go to heaven if he doesn't want to."

"We all just go."

Second shift was rapidly filling up the room.

"You're dumber and uglier than I thought, Bones." Joe picked out his time card from the rack and waved it

at Bones: "I'll see you Mon-day morn-ing."

That night, while Alice slept soundly beside him and the boys were quietly asleep in their room, Bones dreamed about Joe. Sometimes he fell asleep thinking about heaven, and in this dream he was in heaven. Joe was with him. Everyone, Joe included, stood on white clouds, one person to a cloud. And the clouds stretched endlessly, and the sky was a bright blue. Below them, deep in the distance, they could see the world. Everyone was dressed in white, white robes that mixed with clouds at the bottom so that you could not see your feet. Joe was on a cloud next to him; together they looked for Tom and Sam and the foreman. Bones was also looking for his father and he asked Joe to help him look. He told Joe what his father looked like, and Joe agreed to help.

God came, dressed in a golden robe, sitting on a huge throne with long yellow hair covering his shoulders. There were angels with him, flying above him, their wings motionless, without clouds at their feet. God was angry with Joe. He called him to the foot of his throne and talked with him for a long time. Bones tried to listen, but he could only stand at a distance and watch their lips move. Finally, Joe returned. He was crying: God had banished him from heaven. Bones found himself arguing with God. He stood up for Joe: he told God that Joe

really did believe, that he was here now because he did believe. But it was no use, for Joe had to leave heaven. Joe continued to cry. He cried so hard that Alice came over to him and comforted him, wrapping him in her arms and stroking his cheeks. Joe's hair became wet with sweat and his tears soaked his robe until it glistened. There were white lights all around him. Suddenly the lights began to flicker. There was singing, and then everyone had harps and they were all singing--even Joe.

Sunday morning Bones and his family listened to a sermon on hell. Bones had heard them before, but always, as his father had once told him to do, he ignored them. He just thought about what his father had told him: "They just talk about hell to scare people into being good. Anyone with a lick of sense knows there an't no hell." But the sermon contained strong words, scary words that Bones had never heard before. The minister told them that anyone who did not believe in hell was most certainly a person who was going to go there.

"Daddy, I thought there wasn't a hell?" They were all walking home from church. Tommy ran ahead a few steps, then turned, waiting for a reply.

"There an't, Tommy. Don't worry your-self."

"But the minister says so."

"Yeah, Daddy," Stevey said, "everybody says there's hell. It's the place for bad people."

"There an't no bad people, Stevey . . . Anyways, when we die God for-gives us and makes us good for-ever."

Alice reached down and took Stevey by the hand. "William, there's some bad ones, I think. The grocer, Smith, is mean. He cheats people. Betty Reid says he's been cheating people for years. I bet he's cheated us."

"I'm hungry," Bones said. He began to pat his stomach. "My belly was growling all through the service."

"Daddy?" It was Tommy again. "Do mean people go to hell? What's hell like?"

"No. Now I told you there an't no hell."

"Sometimes I an't so sure, William." Alice released Stevey's hand. "Smith's going to hell if anyone is. He's a cheat."

"What are we going to have for breakfast?" Bones asked.

"Same: eggs and bacon."

"I can taste it right now."

Tommy was out ahead of them again. He picked up a handful of wet snow and began to pack it into a snowball. "Daddy, is there snow in heaven?"

"No, there an't. I told you plenty of times. There's white clouds."

"Clouds?" Stevey asked.

"You know that. Now I told you. There's clouds."

"Like in the sky?"

"That's right." Bones began to walk faster. "Boy, I can taste that hot coffee right now."

Bones didn't notice that Joe's time card was still in its slot when he punched in five minutes late on Tuesday. The locker room was already empty, even the last of the third shift had disappeared. As he dressed Bones saw the foreman walk into the room. He stopped at the water fountain and took a drink, then he stepped over to the bench across from Bones and sat down. He was not smiling, and Bones expected a balling-out.

"Have you heard yet, Bones?"

"Heard what, Ralph?"

"About Joe's boy: he got killed in Vietnam."

"No. You see, I just come in."

"Yeah." The foreman began to pick his nose. "Yeah, I can see that."

"What happened? He get shot?"

"Who knows? The bastards did something to him. Things are pretty bad with Joe. I just talked to him an hour ago on the phone. Mother-fuck! I call the man up to see if he can come in a little early and he tells me his oldest son just got killed. I can't believe it. I really can't." He began to shake his head. "I call a man up to see if he can come in a little early because #1 is acting up and he tells me he just found out that his son got killed."

"Where's Joe?"

"He's home, you idiot. Crying, I suppose, like I'd be. Shit. Ten minutes ago someone came over from the office and tacked up the notice." He gestured toward the bulletin board above the time clock with his arm. "The funeral's Friday at St. Luke's." He began to shake his head again. "First time anything like this has happened around here." He stood up, rubbing his hands on his green work pants. "I'm glad I don't have to worry about things like that. I thank my lucky stars Ralph's safe in that stupid seminary. Poor Joe's got another boy in the Army."

"Joe's boy's in heaven, Ralph. I know it. It's alright."

"Ha! Tell that to Joe next time you see him."

"I'm gonna."

"Jesus, Bones." The foreman was picking his nose, but smiling. "Just go to the funeral and say your prayers. Maybe he is in heaven anyway."

"What color hair he have?"

"Who?"

"Joe's boy."

"Hell, I don't know."

"Well, it's yellow now. And he's plenty sa-satisfied with all that's happened.

The foreman began to laugh: "Yeah, Bones. Right."

Tommy and Stevey squirmed in their seats while the priest led the group in the rosary. They did not understand the prayers, and their minds and eyes wandered, and Bones worried as he watched them; they should be more respectful, he thought. It was their first visit to a funeral home, and for them the experience was one of curiosity and wonder: the buckets of pretty flowers, the soft thick carpets, the hushed voices, the absolute order and cleanliness in the rooms. Bones and his family had come in during the rosary and they had taken seats in the back of the room. Bones knew nothing about the prayers, and his mind wandered too.

After the rosary he led his family up to the casket. There were soldiers standing all around it. Joe was with them, talking. Bones decided that the soldier who looked a little like Joe must be Joe's other son. Bones nodded to Joe as he passed by him, but Joe turned his head and continued talking to the others.

The boy had yellow hair, and Bones was very pleased. The observation even made him smile a little. He was thin, not fat like Joe. The uniform was green and covered with medals and colored stripes. Bones decided that he had been a hero; he would tell his boys that. He knelt down on the kneeler in front of the casket and motioned for Alice and the boys to stand behind him. As he thought it would be the proper thing to do, Bones leaned his head

forward and buried his face in his hands; but he kept his eyes open, peeking through his fingers at the body of the dead boy.

When he was finished with his prayer he continued to look at the boy for a while longer. Then he got up and motioned for Alice and the boys to kneel down. He stood over them proudly while Alice mumbled a short prayer and Tommy and Stevey stared uncomfortably at the dead boy's waxy face and the rosary wound in and around his hand. Tommy looked for signs of death: bloodstains or bullet holes. But he was very much afraid of the strange figure in the casket; yet he wanted to touch him. He wanted to feel the green cloth and the shiny medals. He was afraid that the eyes would suddenly open. Then he felt his father's hand on his shoulder.

Bones spotted Sam in a corner of the room and led his family over to him.

"Sam, meet Alice and my boys, Tommy and Stevey."

Sam nodded. "Pleased to meet you," he said.

"How's Joe been?" Bones asked.

"How'd you expect him to be? He's bad alright. George was his oldest son. He just turned twenty-three weeks ago. Well, now he's dead. I used to play ball with him when he was a kid." Sam talked directly to Bones, ignoring Alice. "I can't stand this anymore. I'm going downstairs and have a smoke." He turned and began to

walk away, then he caught himself: "Pleased to meet you," he said.

Alice was ready to go; they had done their duty, she said. The boys wanted to go. But Bones felt that he had to say something to Joe. He told Alice to take the boys into the big hallway; he would come after them in a minute. He found Joe surrounded by people he did not know: the priest who had led them in the prayer, one of the soldiers, Joe's son, and two other men.

"Hi, Joe. I was sorry to hear about your boy."

Joe flashed a quick, embarrassed look at Bones. "Thanks, Bones," he said quickly, "I appreciate your coming."

"Don't worry at all, Joe. Your boy's up in heaven right now. He's happy al-right." Bones smiled up at Joe. He saw that all the others were looking at him, and he was pleased.

"George was a brave and a good boy," the priest said.

"He was a hero, wasn't he?"

"Yes, he was," the soldier replied.

Bones turned to Joe. "That's what I'm gonna tell my boys, Joe. Your boy was a hero." Bones stepped toward Joe's son. He held out his hand. "Your brother's in heaven," he said. "Don't worry."

"My father said you'd be here," the boy replied.

"Sure. That's right. Your Daddy's my friend."

Bones was surprised to see Joe's card punched in when he came to work on Saturday. Saturday was an overtime day and there were only five men to a shift.

Joe and Bones took their morning break at the same time. They sat in silence at opposite ends of the lunch table and drank their coffee. Finally, Bones cleared his throat; he could contain himself no longer.

"Joe, I bet you can't wait to see your boy up in heaven."

"Shut-up, Bones." Joe did not look up.

"He'll be able to tell you all about it then. You'll both laugh about it."

"Laugh about what?"

"How he got killed."

"You know, Bones, you're crazy. You are just simply crazy." Joe was looking at him now. "You are really and truly crazy. Some mother-fucking Viet Cong shot him: that's how he got killed!"

"He an't dead, Joe. He an't really dead."

"Shut-up, just shut-up. Shut-up. Leave me alone, goddammit."

"He's laugh-ing about every-thing, Joe. You can have a good laugh about it together. When <u>you</u> die."

Joe stood up from the table and slammed down his coffee. His face tightened as he felt the hot liquid on his hand.

"You little stupid son of a bitch! Don't you know my boy's dead! He's dead, he's dead, he's dead. I buried him yesterday." Joe began to cry. He sat down and put his face in his hands. "I'm going home. I'm punching out. I was crazy to come in today."

"Why don't you try praying, Joe. It helps some-times." Bones felt that he was doing okay. He had cried when his father and his brother had died. He smiled over at Joe. It was a bright smile, a wide smile, so wide that he felt the muscles in his cheeks begin to twitch.

Joe saw the smile. Immediately he stood up, holding the half-filled cup of coffee in his right hand. Bones kept smiling. Suddenly Joe threw the hot coffee into Bones's face. Then he stepped around the edge of the table and reached for Bones, taking him by the shirt and shaking him, lifting him off the ground. As he did, he began to scream. He punched Bones in the face and knocked him backward onto the concrete floor. He began to kick him in the legs, the groin, the chest, finally the head.

Bones was unconscious for nearly a day and a half and during that time he often dreamed that he was dead. He was sometimes vaguely aware that Alice and a few others were standing around the bed, but always she was there in heaven with him--and so were the boys. Joe was there, so was Joe's son, with all his shiny medals pinned to his

white robe; he was a hero in heaven. But Bones had nightmares too; he dreamed about hell once, and everyone was there also, even his father; he saw the Devil sitting on his black throne. Sometimes in his nightmares he killed Joe: roasting him over an open pit fire, or shooting him, or beating him with a club until he was dead. The good dreams and the nightmares were mixed together, and sorting them out was hard work; often, it made him afraid.

When he was better people from the police department and the company came to see him. He did not understand them exactly, but he would not let Joe stay in jail, nor would he let him lose his job. He kept insisting on that. Alice wanted Joe to stay in prison forever, but Bones would not hear of it.

A few days later Bones gave Joe permission to come to the hospital to see him. Joe came and thanked Bones over and over again for not pressing charges and for talking the company into keeping him on. He made a great fuss over Bones, giving him a box of candy and telling him jokes--even in front of the two nurses. And when the nurses had left, Joe pulled up a chair and spoke to Bones in a soft and serious voice. He apologized for beating him and for insulting his wife. After a while his eyes became wet--Bones was sure he was going to cry--and he told Bones that he really did believe that George was in heaven. He

stood in the doorway and winked at Bones when he was ready to leave.

When Joe was gone, Bones felt very tired. He smoothed the sheets over with his good arm and settled back onto the bed. Peacefully, with ease, he fell asleep. Several hours later he woke with a start. The room was dark now and his bandaged head hurt. He sat up in the bed. "The boys," he said aloud. He wished that Joe were there.

BALLOONS

The city passed by like a movie. Michael did not mind the ride; he loved buses, the way they were tall and powerful, making cars seem so unimportant. The bus was a queen, a mother, and the cars infantile and as fragile as balloons filled with water. Michael watched Brother Andrew, who stood next to the driver, his black suitcase at his feet, his head square and his face pointed forward out the huge window. Sitting only ten feet behind him Michael could see the straight black hair shooting up like fence posts along the front of his scalp. The rest of his hair was cropped short and lay flat against his head. The boys in his classes sometimes called him Fort Apache.

The bus carried forty high school juniors, all boys, along the wide freeway which ran between the tall buildings of the central city and the shore of the lake. It was carrying them to the east, to St. John Retreat House, where all their souls could be cleansed and rinsed and hung out to dry. Michael rode in the front of the bus, and he carried in his father's suitcase several books and five packs of cigarettes and a cough medicine bottle full of his father's best bourbon. He intended to take it very serious, his first retreat, and the books were his proof--

he had packed them first. The cigarettes were for freedom, and he planned to smoke every one of them with vicarious pleasure. He looked forward to filling up ashtrays, to keeping his cigarettes flagrantly visible in his shirt pocket. The bourbon was strictly for show. He had packed it last. He looked forward to the restrictions, the silence. He intended to avoid his friends as much as possible all weekend; he already felt apart from them.

As a child he had heard it described as a curse, a horrible loss which God very seldom made good again, a sin of pride and selfishness. Michael no longer believed. His heart whispered blasphemy and what he sometimes thought were the Devil's own words: "God is a figment of my imagination." Michael feared unbelief, and he sometimes told himself that what he lacked was the simple courage to accept it. There was one night when he had cried in his bed. He had dreams which became brutal nightmares, visions of corruption as king of the world and evil as the cement glue of the universe. He would awake feeling himself lost and afraid, and possibly damned.

He was an old priest. He was standing in the doorway of the retreat house with the fading sunlight resting on his bald head when the bus pulled into the driveway. He smiled, and shook hands with Brother Andrew, and even held the door open for the first boy off the bus and into the retreat house. It was cold, too cold for early December,

but still bright in a kind of last gasp before five o'clock. The wind blew off the nearby lake and around the corner of the building and greeted each boy with a punch as he climbed down off the bus. Inside the retreat house it was dark and quiet, all spoke softly and resisted the impulse to click their heels on the shiny and polished floor. They smelled as one person, and the building smelled as expected: dry, like starched shirts, and sweet, like wine or incense.

Within minutes Brother Andrew had herded them into the chapel and the old priest, Father Newson, offered them his opening talk. He stressed the need for silence and told them that the next two days were days of great opportunity for each of them. He moved gracefully in a mixture of small and large circles in front of the altar, gesturing with his hands, sometimes waving them high above his head to make a point. Father Newson was stooped, his cassock was a worn black; it dulled the eyes. He talked with assurance, with dignity, Michael thought. Michael admired the sincerity of old priests, even if he was not sure he believed in them. He sometimes thought that all priests should be old.

Father Newson was not nervous, he had given too many retreats before to really be nervous. As always, he pictured himself as the father of each boy who sat in front of him. They were all here to ask his advice, to be

counselled, to have fears dispelled and hopes encouraged. As he talked he stared into their faces, tried to look into their souls. He also noticed the different colors of shirts, saw boys with glasses, imagined names. He worked slowly to his conclusion. He was careful with each phrase: the timid ones he spoke as he would a line of poetry, easily and quickly; the serious ones he delivered sharply, as though they were nails and his brain was pounding them with a hammer. He wanted to seal every boy into a mood, to push him down into the one corner of his mind where Father Newson believed God lived. He told them that God was close, that God wanted them to find Him. "I want all of you," he said, "to pray with me to Almighty God that this retreat is a success for everyone who is here tonight."

Michael ate the first silent meal of his life. Three small and chubby nuns in white habits brought them bowls of potatoes and platters of roast beef and plates of bread and pitchers of cold milk. The nuns moved with surety and quickness. Like polished waiters they served and collected, and then returned with more. They smiled occasionally, but said nothing, and in the midst of the strained silence Michael could hear their wooden rosary beads bouncing and clacking in bunches as they moved around the tables. He watched them carefully, noting their strange habits and wrinkled faces. They were different, alien to him, they

did not fit into his memories. He had been taught as a child by nuns in dark blue habits, by sisters who seemed young with their shiny red faces and powerful voices. The white nuns seemed to him a holy trio of grandmothers. Silence was new, and across the tables there was a great deal of smiling and winking--almost flirtation. Many boys made purposefully loud noises when they bit into their hard rolls. After grace Brother Andrew disappeared, but he returned with a tape recorder which he set up on a table in the rear of the room. There was a sudden sharp click, and all eyes found the figure of Brother Andrew standing against the wall next to the machine, his eyes and mouth wide. "For your listening pleasure, gentlemen," he announced with a circular sweep of his hand. Then he added, "Just listen and eat."

What followed was a lecture on love, written and recorded by Brother Andrew himself. Everyone in the room began to smile, the winking sharply increased. Brother Andrew's message was love, Christian love. He taught religion to sophomores, all four hundred, spread out into five groups of eighty. He lectured each group for forty minutes every day in the largest classroom building in the school. He was a natural actor, proud of his ability to entertain and arouse his students. Every week or so he would treat his classes to a Shakespearean monologue, a

famous speech, or a poem. His favorite performance was Casey at the Bat, for which he was famous throughout the school. He kept a huge baseball bat hanging on the wall above his desk, a bat perhaps five or six feet long, on which was written: "To my good friend Brother Andy--Best of Luck--Casey." Love was everything, everything could sooner or later be explained in the language and practice of love, and two or three times a week he passed out mimeographed sheets of paper containing his current thoughts on the subject. He succeeded in impressing a great many sophomores, and after two weeks of class Michael had pronounced him a great man--the first great man he had been privileged to know. That year Michael had given up his Christmas and had joined Brother Andrew and several of his classmates in a visit to a nursing home in the central city. He had felt very much a Christian driving into the city that day; alone in a feeling of innocence and goodness and possessing a knowledge and belief that was absolute, that two things--he and the old people he would visit--came together to make a third thing: God.

Brother Andrew had been a sparkle, a hot diamond, and he had told stories and had led the old people in Christmas carols, and had even used a broom in performing Casey at the Bat. Michael had sat between two very old women. He had smiled at them, sang with them, asked them

polite questions, and had hoped that their happiness at that moment equalled his. But when the singing and laughing had reached a natural peak, Brother Andrew had suddenly stopped his performance. He left the room and returned again within seconds with a handful of cards. On each card was printed The Prayer of St. Francis, Brother Andrew's favorite prayer, and he had proceeded to give a card to each person in the room. Then he had led them all in reciting the prayer. When he finished the room had been black and quiet. Michael heard a soft grunt and then the sound of paper being shredded into pieces. Then he had seen the old woman on his left stand up and walk out of the room. Michael marked the start of his loss of faith from that instant. He had felt betrayed, and he had hated Brother Andrew ever since. Michael considered him a misguided fanatic.

Mass was at seven o'clock. After mass was over everyone was free to go to confession, to meditate, to read, or to pray. Most went to their rooms and drank. They huddled in their rooms and chain-smoked cigarettes and played cards and mixed whiskey with tap water in paper cups. Quietly. Brother Andrew patrolled the halls, the lobby, the lounge, even the chapel.

Michael stretched out on his bed and reached for a book. He had many, all of which he had picked off the family bookshelf at home. He opened Peace of Soul by

Bishop Fulton J. Sheen, lit a cigarette, and lay back against two propped-up pillows and began to read. He wanted to read the words of a man whose belief was complete and unshakable, a man who was intelligent and educated, a man who had attended the University of Louvain. But as he read he saw his familiar fear wrapping itself around the book. He could feel the dark questions, the painful voice that called him a fool to read such a book. Michael did not fear death; he feared unbelief. Death was nowhere to be seen, to be felt. It was absent in his family, in his friends; it was still part of a future that he saw as almost limitless. He did not fear to die tomorrow, but he feared and hated a knowledge that told him that when he finally did die he would be carried off into nothingness. He feared the knowledge that said his parents were fools, that their existence was temporary and meaningless, that goodness did not really live. He felt it strange that for so long he had thought the world to be a tough place, a gigantic battleground where sin was real and punishment a certainty. Now it wasn't a tough thing, not a battleground at all, just an animal showcase, a worried and unfeeling place that was finally without hope. It was a world ruled by a devil called Mother Nature. As a child he had sometimes tried to picture heaven to help himself fall asleep. He had developed his own mythology, his own portrait of colors, sounds, and conversations to decorate it. But it

had been a strain to imagine for too long. Sometimes his head would actually begin to ache after tense minutes of strange colors and conversations with saints and knowing all of the future and all of the past. But he could not picture unbelief. An effort to imagine unbelief only brought nightmares and visions of a death that was complete. He could not imagine it.

He struggled to read. He forced the words and sentences up from the page and into his eyes. He lit another cigarette and turned the page. The new page was filled with pencil scrawlings in the margins of the text. They were old, faded, some were smeared. Michael immediately recognized the handwriting as his father's. He read his father's words, poured himself into what he felt to be a secret world. It embarrassed him to read the words. He felt he was an intruder; yet he spun pages looking for more words, wondering as he searched how old his father had been when he had read the book. The scrawlings were clustered in the first three chapters, the sections on communism, the existence of God, and sex. He searched for more, but they stopped abruptly after Chapter III. Evidently his father had never finished Peace of Soul. In a conscious imitation of his father he took a pen out of his shirt pocket and began to make his own notes. He read quickly, attacked and defended Fulton Sheen's arguments as though he were evaluating a textbook. Often he found

himself agreeing with the words, nodding his head and underlining sentences and paragraphs with blue ink. The activity pleased him. He began to root for Fulton Sheen in the bishop's battle with unbelief for his soul. He saw himself a frantic cheerleader, and he made his fear comic and pictured unbelief as the New York Giants. He wrote at the bottom of one page: "Bishop, you need a miracle. It's only the second quarter and you're behind by thirty-six points."

Michael read until ten-thirty, then he got up off the bed and began to undress. He laid his clothes carefully on his suitcase, which rested on a chair beneath the window that looked out onto the lake. He was in a corner room and he owned two views. Through the side window he could see a crazy blurring of orange and white, neon signs unreadable at his distance from the street. Michael noticed that the room was thick with smoke and he opened the side window, leaving his hand in the space that he had freed and feeling the cold air jump into the room and chill his naked arms and legs. He climbed into bed and lit another cigarette, careful not to stain the white sheets with ashes. He put down Peace of Soul and picked up a book by Jacques Maritain called Five Proofs for the Existence of God. That Maritain was a famous twentieth century philosopher was knowledge that comforted him. He did not expect to understand the five proofs completely,

but the thought did not distress him; rather it pleased him.

Several minutes later Michael heard his door rattle, felt a hand twist the outside knob. He guessed that it would be Brother Andrew making his rounds, and he jumped out of bed and unlocked the door. But it was his friend Mark Johnson. Mark's face was red and sweaty, and Michael guessed that his friend had been drinking.

"Throw on some pants, Mike. You've got to see something. Joe Stepinski is drunk on his ass!" He spoke loudly, almost shouted.

"Stepinski?" Michael replied, stepping aside and letting his friend walk into the room.

"I had to see it myself before I'd believe it." Mark Johnson was now standing beside Michael's bed. "Come on! W're just down the hall. I think Fort Apache has retired with his goddamn bat to the barracks for the night."

"Hell, I might as well." Michael walked to the other side of the room and lifted his pants from off the suitcase. Mark sat down on the bed.

"Got to get my head straight, Mike. I've drunk two six packs of Stroh's since eight-thirty. We put them out on the window sill and they cooled-up fast." Michael struggled with his pants and searched for an undershirt. "Christ, it's cold in here. Why don't you shut the goddamn window."

"The smoke."

"Yeah. Right. Got any booze, Mike? You said you were going to bring some."

"Plenty. Good stuff, too."

"I could use some."

"Help yourself, Mark." Michael tucked in his undershirt with one hand and tossed the bottle of dark-colored liquid to his friend with the other. Mark unscrewed the cap and took a small gulp. "It's full? Saving it for tomorrow night?"

"Yeah. I think so."

Joe Stepinski was even drunker than Michael had thought he would be. Shy and fat, his naked back a mountain of red acne, Joe Stepinski sat on the floor in the middle of his room. He had on one black sock and his underwear. Michael recognized the three other boys in the room and guessed that they had been trying to get Stepinski into bed. Stepinski seemed close to passing out, and Michael did not even bother to talk to him. He looked at Bob Liske.

"Think he'll puke, Bob?"

"He's got to. He drank a pint of Seagram 7. Straight. And Christ, he must have drunk the bottle in half an hour. It was amazing!" Bob opened his eyes wide and stared at Mike and Mark. "Like this." He raised his right arm and made jerky motions, bringing his hand as though cupped

around a glass back and forth to his mouth. "Boom! Boom! Boom!"

"Must be his first drunk," Michael said, and looked down at the figure on the floor.

"Stepinski? You'd better believe it," Mark replied. "He thinks he's having a mystical experience. Shit, I sure hope he doesn't puke in the bed." Bob Liske began to laugh. "I did once. Didn't even remember doing it. My old lady found me in the morning. Christ, it was awful."

Stepinski tried to stand up, but could not, and sat down hard on the floor and began to mumble blasphemy: "God is a bastard! God is a bastard!" Everyone began to laugh, but Michael decided that Stepinski was not as drunk as he appeared to be. However, less than a minute later he was asleep. He began to shiver and rolled over and knocked his cup over and it spilled warm water and whiskey on the floor. Michael helped the others put him into his bed. Then he returned to his room. He was tired, and he pushed the books off the bed and snapped off the light. He fell asleep feeling cold air on his forehead and thinking about the relative merits of Thomas Aquinas' first proof for the existence of God.

In the morning there were conferences. Each had its own topic: preparation for death, love and marriage, problems with parents, religious vocations, Christian charity, the value of prayer and the sacraments. After

each talk there was a fifteen minute break, and Michael would hurry into the lounge, lighting a cigarette as soon as he stepped out of the chapel, and sit down in a chair by the window and read. It was a gray day, the clouds so low they seemed to suffocate everything, pressing all that was above onto the brown grass that stretched for a hundred yards from the retreat house to the cliff above the lake. He often paused in his reading and looked out the window, hoping to see flurries, wishing it would snow. The lack of color pleased him; he felt it was appropriate, he welcomed it. The building had him locked tightly in its stillness, its corridors warm and dark like secret but safe passageways. At mid-morning Michael switched from Jacques Maritain to Thomas Merton. He began to read The Seven Storey Mountain, a story, he knew, of conversion. Several times before noon he was interrupted by one or another of the small white nuns bringing Christmas decorations into the room to hang on the walls or to place on the window.

Michael noticed a change in the other boys. There was less laughing, less talking. More and more after each conference he saw boys going up to their rooms clutching books or remaining in the chapel to pray or to go to confession. Such observations pleased him, comforted him. He envied their apparent belief. He saw Joe Stepinski, his head hung in both pain and guilt, go up to Father Newson

after the conference on religious vocations. Michael saw them all as becoming grade school boys again, pushing aside football games and girls and beer to chase for a while a spirit and feeling that was older than almost anything else. They were all Catholic boys from birth, and the constant exposure had rekindled even the lowest flame. Michael felt himself as on a sled and sliding down a hill toward belief. He acknowledged a feeling that he could not still be there and not really believe. As he listened to Father Newson he felt that it was only a matter of time, of hours, of a day at the most, before he would believe again.

At lunch there was another tape recorded lecture, this one entitled: "The Problem of Loving People Who Hate Your Guts." It began with references to Casey at the Bat, and jokes about loving someone who stole your girlfriend or who beat-up on your little brother. The jokes continued for several minutes, until the laughter joined with watery tomato soup and smiles from the white nuns to bring a great relief to the room. Michael felt that it was a needed relief; and as he stared at the figure of Brother Andrew next to his machine, arms crossed and grinning like a cat, he silently approved of him for the first time in nearly a year. But the humor ended abruptly, and for fifteen minutes Brother Andrew's voice spoke seriously of love in deep throbbing tones, in its best actor's style. "You

must love those who dislike you, those whom you dislike; you must love those who hate you, those whom you hate--because such love is the ultimate sacrifice, the ultimate proof that you have accepted God and Jesus Christ." When the recorder clicked off Brother Andrew rose from his chair and picked up the machine and carried it out of the room, cradling it in his arms as though it were alive, walking with serene but forceful steps, his black hair standing erect along the front of his scalp.

A Franciscan priest appeared at four o'clock and Brother Andrew announced in the chapel that the priest would lead them in the rosary. The recitation would take place outside, and no one would be excused. Michael had no rosary beads, and neither did most of the other boys, but when they returned with their coats to the lobby one of the nuns stood near the door with a box full of them. Each boy took one as he followed the priest out the front door. He led them around to the rear of the building to a cement walk which formed a huge circle in the area between the retreat house and the lake. Michael saw from the crosses at specified intervals that the walk was also used for the stations of the cross. He was in the front of the line and he could see the priest clearly. He liked Franciscans. They were different, exotic with their brown nun-like clothes with hoods and wide sleeves.

In summer they wore sandals, and he remembered seeing them walking the streets by their monastery when he visited his grandfather, their feet white and almost naked. Michael assumed their essential goodness, their seemingly natural humility. He thought of them as different from other priests, as true priests, as fathers. He agreed with what he had read that morning: in Thomas Merton's words they were the gentlest of priests.

The priest was young, but his voice was deep and practiced and Michael felt his loud Our Fathers and Hail Marys to be a kind of buffer against the cold and wind. Before they had been outside five minutes the priest covered his head with his hood. Michael kept one hand deep in his pocket away from the cold, but with the other he held the rosary open to the air and carefully used his fingers to record the Hail Marys on the black beads. His fingers soon grew numb, but the feeling seemed to invigorate him. He felt proud of the sting, and he wondered if his acceptance of the cold could be a mark of faith. He kept his eyes pointed downward, lifting them only when the priest led them past the cliff, and then he looked down into the lake. It was nearly dark when they finished. Brother Andrew greeted them at the door and took their rosaries and placed them in the box.

Michael waited alone in his room for evening Mass. His stomach was full and he was tired of reading. He went

to the chapel early, sat down in the second row of pews, and waited for everyone else to arrive.

It happened in one bright instant, as Father Newson bowed behind the altar and began the confiteor. It was a falling down, a submersion, like leaving a dark and smelly kitchen and descending the steps into a basement of bright color and light. He sat in his pew and recited the gloria and felt his voice pure and distinct. Belief came and like the fall of a heavy building crushed him. Doubt departed, was squeezed out by the crush, and fled. The words of Father Newson devoured it, the six candles in a row on the altar burned it, and it fled as stale smoke through the roof of the chapel. He mocked his fear, teased it, and it ran through his body as a black snake. He chased it around in a tightening circle in his head until it fell, exhausted. Then he killed it as he joined the others in reciting the creed: "I believe in God, the Father Almighty, the maker of heaven and earth . . . ." He felt the Holy Spirit resting on his head, a dove, but angry with its beak sharp. It plunged its beak into his head and grabbed the dead snake and carried it away to be crushed under the feet of the statues in the four corners of the chapel. He rejoiced in its death and he saw happy faces in a circle around him: Fulton Sheen, Thomas Merton, his father, Brother Andrew. He had imagined it differently, as a proud slamming of a book and a leap to the floor, of being armed to argue and defend

with serious and solemn arguments. But now his mind was untroubled, clear like a mountain lake, so deep a book thrown into it would sink forever. Michael whispered the words of consecration along with Father Newson. He was so close to the altar he could hear the old priest clear his throat before beginning, and the words slapped at his ears and made them tingle. He could smell the bread and wine: the wine sweet and stinging his nose, traveling to his brain and making him dizzy; the bread dry and salty. The chapel was silent, forty pairs of knees stuck against the kneelers, and Michael heard the old priest's bones crack as he genuflected before elevating the host. For the first time Michael felt himself a true witness to God's re-creation of himself. He spent long minutes almost in agony waiting for communion. He was nervous, as though waiting for an expected gift; and he felt again the pleasing sensation of falling, as though the minutes and seconds were carrying him downward to a special instant of time. When Father Newson broke the consecrated host in two, Michael pictured the halves as jagged white sheets which would soon wrap and cover him. The host danced in his mouth. It floated to the roof behind his teeth and stuck there, melting and dissolving. He patted it with his tongue, caressed it, and he felt the taste of salt trickle down into his throat. With slow steps Michael returned to his seat. He carefully laid his face into his hands, as

he had always done ever since his first communion. He saw God in the patch of pure white surrounded by an abyss that he imagined as his soul, and he thanked Him for his gift of faith.

After Mass they attended their last major conference. Michael sat in the first row, next to Mark Johnson. He sat and smoked and felt himself ready to agree with everything that was said. Father Newson began his second talk on sex, the talk earlier that day had been but a preparation. "The best time to talk about sex is Saturday night, not Saturday morning," he told them. Everyone laughed, including Michael and Brother Andrew. Father Newson had given many retreats: for high school boys, for high school girls, for married couples, for single people. Saturday night was the emotional peak of any retreat. The heart of the matter for high school boys was sex, and so he delivered his thoughts on sex in one enormous dose on Saturday night. Michael listened and made promises. He resolved to control his masturbation, to chasten it with the willpower that came with belief, to purge it and make himself clean. Father Newson's words were like added bricks to the new building which enclosed and guarded him. He remembered the Franciscan priest and thought of taking his rosary to bed with him when temptation was imminent, but decided that he would not have to. He dreamed of kissing girls with pure affection, of sealing mutual friendship and liking

with kisses that were warm and bright but not hot. His feelings, the mood in the room, dissolved the sweat of sex into a cool mist that hung like fresh rain. It would be his soul that crept up. He saw himself as pure until marriage, and pictured intercourse with his dark-haired wife as more spiritual than physical, a falling down into closeness with God. It would be like communion.

Michael's face itched, his cheeks stung. He climbed the stairs and walked down the dark corridor to his room. He was soaked with sweat and he suddenly realized that his face felt awkward because he had been smiling almost constantly for the past two hours. In bed, he proposed to dream of the most pleasant things he could think of. His mind spun and whirled and finally sunk itself into a deep and peaceful valley. It rested and reached long arms up steep hillsides to pluck dreams and memories and wishes which rested as apples in orchards. They were many and various and they came and were digested and the cores safely returned and buried in the hillsides. Some tasted better than others, and his mind was forced to build quick fences around them and make others wait by the gate. His mind tried to gather them one by one, but sometimes they rolled down, pushing and shoving in twos and threes. The long arms grabbed frantically, but in the sorting some were invariably lost. Michael thought of the girl who he hoped would invite him to her prom; he thought about

Christmas, about the baseball glove he had been given for his First Communion and the way it had rained that day, about his dog, about the model airplanes he used to build; he thought about what it would be like to score the winning touchdown in a National Football League Championship Game --he would return a kickoff the length of the field.

When he awoke to Brother Andrew's knock he felt as if he had been drunk. He could not remember well. As he dressed and packed and carefully made the bed, he thought about going home. The thought pleased him, but he saw himself embarrassed returning home a saint. He pictured his mother smiling, smiling as though she could see through his shirt to his heart and read the weekend as she would a newspaper. She would know, she would have expected it, his transformation. He would have to give up his cigarettes again. His father would welcome him as though he had just returned from a war. He would ask deliberate questions, try to pry loose whatever he had experienced. As a joke he would undoubtedly ask him to lead the family in grace at Sunday dinner. His sisters would look at him strangely. He did not look forward to any of it.

Michael shaved, and as the razor wiped his face clean he felt great relief that he now believed. But he felt himself a cool and relaxed distance away from the night before. At Sunday Mass he allowed his mind to run free. He only made himself concentrate on giving the proper

responses. He sang with vigor, but let himself be distracted by his friends and thoughts of his school's next basketball game. But after communion he made a prayer of thanksgiving, and he asked God to give him the strength to be good.

There was no lunch. The bus arrived promptly at noon and when they came out of the chapel they saw the bus driver sitting in the lobby leafing through booklets and magazines. When everyone had assembled with his luggage, Brother Andrew gave the order and they began to file out the door and into the bus. Father Newson stood at the door, smiling and shaking hands with each boy as he passed by. Father Newson was very tired and slightly hungry and anxious for everyone to be gone. He knew that he would not feel right again for several days. Retreats, especially high school retreats, were difficult things: he did not always know what to say to young people, and they made him feel very old, and sometimes very shy. He had stared into their faces for two days, and he now knew them all, but he also knew that within a week he would not be able to recognize a single face. As always, they had deposited large doses of pain, terror, sin, doubt, and worry into his eyes and ears. In the confessional and in private conferences and in the looks on their faces while in chapel they had told him their most secret things. He had seen them at their best, though. They had been supplicant and

afraid, sometimes terrified, but he had also seen them and been with them as they had made brave and quiet declarations to be good.

When the bus pulled away he walked back to the chapel. He had to gather up his chalice and Mass articles, but as was his custom, he stopped and sat down in the last pew and prayed for several minutes. When he left the chapel he went into his office and telephoned his brother-in-law. He invited himself over to watch the football game and to partake in what he knew would be an excellent roast beef dinner.

The bus moved as though it were a caterpillar, starting and stopping, halted by every red light. Traffic was light, there was no home football game to fill the streets with cars hurrying to the freeway and the stadium downtown. When the bus finally reached the entrance ramp, several boys in the rear of the bus began to cheer. Brother Andrew did not turn around, but stayed solid and continued to stand next to the bus driver and look out the front window.

Michael sat in the rear of the bus next to Mark Johnson and watched buildings dissolve and cars snap in and out of focus as they passed or were passed by the bus. He smoked one of his last cigarettes. His throat was sore and thick. The day was again dirty, the downtown buildings were like huge metal posts stuck in mud. The front of the bus,

chastened by the presence of Brother Andrew, remained calm and silent, as though the retreat was still in progress. But from the rear door backward the bus was alive with voices.

Michael saw it first. He poked Mark. "Take a look at that!" he yelled. A car had pulled up in the lane beside them. It was dead even with Michael, so close he could look down and clearly see the faces of the boy and girl kissing in the back seat of the car. Mark Johnson became ecstatic. "Look at this!" he screamed. He stood up, holding onto the back of his seat with one hand and waving to the entire bus with the other. Everyone in the rear of the bus clambered over to his side, pushing and shoving in the process.

"Sin!" someone yelled. More picked it up: "Sin! Sin! Sin!" they shouted. Mark leaned over Michael and began to pound on the window and wave. Others did the same. The front of the bus became a volcano of whispers and turning heads and questions yelled to the back of the bus. The entire bus seemed to erupt into shouting and laughter. The couple in the back seat of the car looked up, reaching for air, and saw the phalanx of faces above them. They began to smile. The girl waved and blew them all a kiss. The driver blew his horn. The girl kissed the boy, then looked up and smiled and rolled her tongue and then kissed the boy again. The boys in the bus began

to scream and whistle. "Sin!" someone yelled again. "You'll burn in hell!" The entire bus began to shout almost in unison: "Sin! Sin! Sin!" Michael watched for Brother Andrew's reaction. There was none. Michael saw him squatting down and talking to the bus driver. Michael joined in the yelling.

Michael saw the heads of the others as balloons, all different colors. They separated from the shoulders of those around him and began to rise until they bounced lightly against the roof of the bus. He watched the boy and girl kiss a last time before the car jumped ahead, and he felt his own head suddenly bounce with the others above him. And then the balloons were gone, sucked through the roof of the bus and rising into the air. One of his fingers began to itch, he felt it being slowly squeezed, and he imagined a string connecting his finger and the balloon.

ENGINE NOISE

There was one distinct sound George Warner could remember hearing when he thought of the summers he had spent as a boy at his parents' house on the lake--the distant cacophany of engine noise that drifted across the bay on Sunday nights from the speedway several miles inland. That noise, and the cars that had produced it, had been transportation for wondrous dreaming.

But he was now thirty-one, and married, a father, and visits to his ancient parents were infrequent, and it was quite rare to forego Chicago and visit them at the lake. Vacation time had come with August, there was the long drive from Texas to Michigan, and he found his parents as he had left them a year before: white and brittle, close to destruction. They arrived on a Saturday for a two week stay, and the Texas heat had vanished, nights would be cool, and his nine-year-old son marvelled at the limitlessness of Lake Michigan.

The house was small and rustic, but with every convenience, and it owned a splendid view. It was built on the leeward side of a three mile peninsula that jutted out diagonally into the lake. The peninsula was narrow, less than several hundred yards across in most places,

except at the tip, where it held a small amusement park. The bay was wide and long, and a causeway connected the amusement park and the mainland. From the house you looked almost directly west, into the sunsets, and at night the cars leaving the park in constant streams produced sights of wild color, vivid pictures of white and red, and at times the effect rivaled that made by the sun sinking into the blue water.

George had not seen the house at the lake in several years, not since Tommy had been a small baby, and it seemed smaller, as he had expected it to; it had shrunk, as had his parents. He felt that when his parents died it would simply disappear, that the marsh a quarter of a mile away would devour it; or worse, that it would be sold and thus become truly lost forever, and an insult to his memory.

The first week they would be alone with his parents, the second week his two older sisters, one from Buffalo and one from Denver, would arrive with their families. Tommy would have playmates, Susan would have Jackie's husband to flirt with, and he would have a dentist and a high school history teacher to drink and play cards with. His parents, though, would have everything. George was a real estate broker, as his father had been before his retirement, and he was slightly more than modestly successful, as his father had been.

On Sunday his mother demanded fresh sweet corn and peaches, and his father ordered an afternoon drive up the coast; and so George asked Susan to take them up to Watertown to collect fruits and vegetables and allow his father to delight in roads and farms and lake views through the windows of a large Pontiac. The sights, and the experiences, had given George's father pleasant visions for almost fifty years. George was left with Tommy, who had refused with tears the offer of another car ride. He took out his toy soldiers and played with them in the sunshine and dirt in the field next to the house.

George sat in a red chair in the late afternoon sunshine by his father's dock and watched the water and the many boats and the huge ferris wheel in the distance, which hugged the shoreline of the bay by the amusement park, a mile away. He read the Sunday paper, pleased that the sunshine was soft and lightly shaded by the tall cottonwood trees in the yard. At six-thirty Susan and his parents were still gone, and he assumed that they had stopped for dinner somewhere, probably at his father's suggestion. He called Tommy, who was still playing in the field, and they both went into the house, cool, and so dark it stung their eyes.

"What do you want for dinner?" George asked.

"I don't really care, Dad," Tommy replied. How 'bout hamburgers cooked outside?"

George thought for a second, then frowned. "Nope. I'll bet there's no charcoal." He stepped to the refrigerator. "Let's see. How about some delicious TV dinners?"

Tommy wrinkled his nose. "That'll be okay, Dad."

"Fine."

George opened the freezer compartment and pulled out two dinners, both heavily crusted with ice. He began to laugh. "I'll bet these things have been in here for years!" He laid them down on the counter next to the sink and looked at his son. "Take your pick, Mr. Thomas Warner. Which will it be: fish or fried chicken?"

"Fish."

"You're a very smart man, Tommy."

After dinner each returned to his spot: George to his chair by the dock and Tommy to a reconstruction of a bloody battle of the Civil War. It was then, while watching a splendid sunset, that George heard the speedway sounds: dull, heavy whines and thundering. As he listened he built up a picture of the track as he remembered it, and with no effort he slid silently to visions of his boyhood and adolescent past. He rocketed to close, tight pictures of himself as man of action: kissing girls on beaches, building tree forts in the nearby marsh, joyriding in his father's car. A face quickly brought another face, and his mind traveled in cool precision from a red bathing

suit to his friend Jimmy to a treehouse to beach parties to beer to lake sunsets to a blonde girl to fast red cars. There were periods of consciousness, and George noticed the absence of Susan and his parents and for a few seconds worried slightly about them. But it was difficult to fight for too long newly-discovered visions of an idealized past. The sounds from the cars were lubricants for a movement that was time and past and George, a falling down to a part of his brain that kept tightly a secret, powerful dream. It was an old dream, manufactured in the sleep wandering that comes before real sleep, in a child's body wrapped in a light summertime sheet; and it would come so powerful that it would almost bring bright light into a dark bedroom. He could touch his lips to a warm pillow and touch sun-baked, gleaming metal. And there were extravaganzas of glory and reward, of praise, or near death. And through all of it he would be warm and contained; but always he would have to fight the bitter fight at the end of things with the strange, mean being that decreed that you could never dream about the things you fell asleep wanting to dream about. And he seldom won the fight.

George woke from his dreaming in stages, images changed and vanished, and finally he was bitten by a mosquito. He stood up and looked around for Tommy. The

field was empty, but George walked over to where his son had been playing. In the brown dirt his soldiers lay murdered and covered with ants. He walked slowly toward the house, calling his son's name. He found Tommy in the family room watching Walt Disney's Wonderful World of Color.

Monday morning Susan drove into town and bought a new bathing suit. She was already very tan, but she came from a dry Texas prairie town and Lake Michigan with its endless fields of water seemed to hyptonize her, and so she spent long hours on the beach stretched out on a blanket under a sun that was warm but not destructive. She helped George's mother with all the meals, did most of the laundry, and humored the old woman's grandmotherly concerns for Tommy. As always, she entertained both grandparents with stories of an alien, rural life. She spoke in a soft, trailing accent that charmed them both, especially George's father, who declared her to be, in his own guttural sounds, a peach of a wife.

All week Tommy engaged in a magical discovery of the lake. Susan and George took him down to the lake every day, where he learned to swim, to build sand castles, and to float on his back. He walked the beach looking at dead fish, both disgusted and fascinated, always eyes wide for the huge fish that he imagined swam somewhere in the lake, the fish whose decaying, fly-covered body would be ten

times the size of any other. His grandfather, who as a young man had spent summers working on lake freighters, told him strange tales of shipwrecks and storms, Indians, and long-dead lake sailors. His grandfather showed him how to fish for bass, crappie, and perch from the dock, and in the evenings, while Tommy patiently fished and prayed to catch a bass, his grandfather would fall slowly to sleep in the old red chair. On Wednesday George rented a small outboard and took Tommy and Susan on a ride to a nearby island. On the way back George stopped the boat a mile from shore. They swam in a hundred feet of water, in a blue void, kicking their feet wildly. Tommy was very frightened at first, but strapped into an orange life jacket, he swam with a steadily building confidence from his mother to his father.

George read two novels in three days, took an afternoon drive to Kalamazoo to visit an old college friend, and allowed himself to be sunburned badly playing with Tommy at the beach. One afternoon he consented to play golf with his father, who had not played in several years and who was really too old to play any more. It took them five hours to play nine holes, even using an electric cart; and once, when the old man whiffed five times before hitting the ball, George had a bright-colored vision of his father's impending death. Yet his father's pleasure in an old love impressed him, and he sat and

nodded, warm inside, as they drove home across the causeway surrounded by boats on water. The old man talked excitedly, sometimes almost squealed in childish delight, as he spoke of the week to come when all his family would be with him at the lake.

And all week George tried very hard to be George at eighteen, or at seventeen or sixteen, or at twelve or eleven, or at seven. Often, he did not have to try very hard. When he drove the yellow Oldsmobile into town or past the amusement park, the memories came charging at him with such force that it seemed to him that he was a beautiful woman under assault by a host of suitors. Without thought, he yielded himself up to an old girlfriend, even passing by her shaded, white house; or to the dangerous comedies of wine drinking; or to innumerable speedway visits; or to visions of the faces and bodies of vanished friends, enemies, and summertime employers. In wave after wave of five second sensations or minute-long dreaming he allowed his imagination to be captured, burnt-up.

On Friday evening, after dinner, George told Susan that he was going to take Tommy to the speedway Sunday night. They were together in the kitchen. As George spoke, Susan was watching Tommy through the window above the sink. He was out on the dock with his grandfather and grandmother.

"What on earth for," she said, not looking away.

"Oh, I don't know. I think it'll be fun. Give him a chance to see something different."

"Just the two of you? What about your Dad?"

With his arm George turned his wife away from the window. "Are you kidding? He never liked it, Susan. He always thought I was crazy to go as a kid."

She laughed. "You're all three of you looney." Lightly, she placed soapy hands around his neck and kissed him. George winked a reply.

"You know, Susie-Q, I used to really love to go to those things when I was a kid."

Susan turned to go back to the table for more dishes. "George, if you're smart you won't mention anything about Walt Disney between now and then."

"Why not?"

"Well, I've heard him say more than once this week that 'Davy Crockett and the River Pirates' is going to be on Walt Disney Sunday night."

"Shit."

"You can do better than that."

"Damn TV . . . . He watches too much TV."

Susan was over at the table now, scraping the remnants of a perch dinner off plates and into a large paper sack. "Well, again all I know is he's pretty excited about it. He told Grandpa that he should watch it too." She smiled, then turned serious. "Your Dad told him some crazy story

about a direct descendant of Davy Crockett's owning a boat at the marina."

George sat down quickly at the table and motioned with his hands for Susan to sit down also. The kitchen had become dark.

"My father is seventy-eight years old."

"I realize that. He looks it. He feels it. And he knows it."

"I don't know about that."

"Your mother's still pretty good--but then she's ten years younger than he is. She still has presence of mind. But I feel sorry for her George. She's sort of lost. She knows she shouldn't be driving anymore, for one thing. I don't know how the two of them made it all the way up here from Chicago last week."

George stood up from the table. The room smelled of fish. "We can have an old-fashioned family conference about it all when Jackie and Carol get here Monday." He picked up a plate and some silverware and headed for the sink. "I don't want to talk about it anymore."

On Sunday night the family ate early, at George's insistence. While the two women cleared the table the conversation turned to the speedway. George began to continue his build up for Tommy--who had been bribed with an unplanned boat trip to give up Walt Disney.

"Just wait, Tommy, you've never seen anything like it." George raised his arm and made quick motions with his hand. "Zoom! Zoom! Zoom!" He was pleased, as Tommy smiled back, slightly startled.

"It's all a waste of time, Son," George's father interrupted suddenly, looking at Tommy. "The whole business should be outlawed. There should be a law against people killing themselves." When he finished, he was looking at George. "Never could see it. Back in 1932 I saw three men killed at one place at one time. Never been to one since."

There was a loud crash. George's mother had dropped one of the plates she was scraping. Susan was there in an instant. "I'll get it, Mother," she said. There was silence for several seconds as she picked up the plate, broken into three pieces.

George stared at his father. "I never heard that story before."

"That's because I never told you."

Susan returned to the table, walked over to Tommy and patted him on the head. "Oh, I think he'll survive it alright, Grandpa."

"Well, I know three who didn't."

"Dad!" George was yelling. "That's not the same thing."

"Yes it is." He strained for breath. "It sure is. I know three who got killed. Burned-up completely. We

were right in front of it all, and we could even smell them burning."

"Tommy?" It was George's mother. "You pay no attention to your grandfather." All eyes focused on Tommy, who was busy eating his chocolate cake, his head low and almost buried in his plate. George looked at his father, feeling both worried and angry, and noticing his father's eyes; they were a bright blue.

Outside, the evening gloved his dreams tightly; it was warm, almost sticky heat, and the sun was still bright at seven o'clock. As George drove the sun bounced off the waxed hood of the car and sent invisible sparkles into the water that stretched out from either side of the thin causeway. The movement of the car let loose a torrent of images that ran at George without let up while he drove; the same pop-gun flashes of a wonderful past. Still, all the while he spoke to Tommy, who wore proudly his newly-acquired sailor's cap.

"We're a little early, Tommy. But that way we'll be sure to get good seats."

"How fast do the cars go, Dad?"

"Oh, it depends. It depends on the kind of cars that are racing. They have sprint cars tonight. I think they go better than a hundred miles an hour." George's eyes floated across the windshield to Tommy's, looking for reflected sparkles.

"A hundred miles an hour. Dad, didn't we go a hundred miles an hour on the way up here?"

"Well, yes. Sort of. Just for a few seconds. But you see it's different. These cars will be racing. There's a big difference." George turned and smiled at his son; they were entering the parking lot. "You'll see what I mean, Tommy."

At first, quite unexpectedly, George felt uncomfortable. He held Tommy's hand as they jostled in the crowd of people waiting for the ticket window to open. George searched for familiar faces, found none, and was secretly glad. He did not want to have to talk to anyone but his son. They bought their tickets and walked underneath the concrete stands, and up one of the short ramps that led to the grandstand. George took Tommy's hand more firmly and led him up the steps to the next to the highest row of seats. When they finally turned toward the track and sat down, George was out of breath.

"Pretty good seats, aren't they?" George asked, smiling. Tommy sat quietly and looked down on the asphalt track. The sun was behind them, and they both felt a warm glow penetrate their shirts and warm their backs. For several seconds Tommy's eyes scanned the track, the infield, the rows of strange machines parked peacefully along the edge of the track, the buildings and houses in the far distance, the people rapidly filling the seats below him.

Then his eyes glued to the high, webbed fence that stretched along the edge of the track directly in front of the grandstand. He pointed to it.

"Dad, is that fence to protect everybody when the cars crack-up?"

"It sure is." George tried hard to smile. "Of course nobody ever has a bad crash. I was here at least fifty times and I never saw a really serious accident."

As they waited for the first heat to be run, George tried to explain to Tommy what sprint cars were, how the races would be run, and the geography of the track. He spoke rapidly, and sometimes the constant effort to explain things simply and concretely irritated him. He felt that he was only confusing his son. At first Tommy nodded vigorously as his father talked, then less so, and finally not at all. George's mouth became dry from the constant explaining. Slow, dead minutes passed. Almost desperate, George went down to one of the refreshment stands and brought back cokes and ice cream.

Finally the cars came out onto the track, engines began to fire and spout screams, and the P. A. system crackled with driver's names and stories of past performances. There would be several preliminary heats, and then a fifty-lap feature race. The noise and the movement excited Tommy, and when the first heat began his blue eyes became clear and magnetized, and they carefully followed

the multi-colored cars as they roared around the track. Whenever the final lap began, people around them would jump to their feet and yell and scream for their favorites. George and Tommy stood up with them. George felt that his son was rapidly becoming a race fan. He watched his son closely, tried to anticipate his questions, which were frequent and constant now. Sometimes he actually cut his son off in the middle of a question, he was so anxious to aid in the christening of his son's imagination. He felt that they were settling into a closely shared dream.

The cars danced past him with noise and delight. For the thousandth time he became the experience of so many dark nights of his childhood past, with the spotlight sunshine, the wild smells of gasoline, the spraying of furious noise, and the delicate transformation of boy to man to race car driver. George's eyes followed the lead car, and memory would tighten its hold, and dream, and the numbness made possible and inevitable a leap in time and space and existence. He would simply be in it, the car would accept its new master, perform for him; but give him a slippery wheel, whines, sputters, screams, and falling oil pressure, much competition--and final victory. Then he would be in the pits, face grimy, soiled--but bright, white teeth, a Pepsodent smile, a victory smile.

When the last engine shut off the track settled into death and silence. George watched Tommy fidget in his seat

while they waited for the people below them to move out of the stands. When he suggested that they walk down to the pit area and look at the cars, Tommy only asked that they stop for ice cream on the way home. As they reached the bottom of the stands and turned to walk down the ramp, George noticed a group of young boys straining against the webbed fence watching the car crews load their machines into waiting trailers. It was something George had done often in the past. He stopped to watch with them, but Tommy tugged powerfully at his hand.

In the car there was silence for several minutes, then George began to speak.

"How'd you like it, Tommy?"

"Fine, Dad. It was great. I really liked it a lot."

"There was nothing I loved better when I was a little older than you are right now than going to the race track--the one we just left--on Sunday nights. My friends and I looked forward to it all week. One of their fathers would take us. And we'd plan to get there as early as we could. Sometimes we'd get there an hour ahead of time and watch them bring the cars in." George stopped for a second, took in another breath. "They were nights just like this one." He shook his head. "It's a shame there isn't a good track near home. Well, we'll just have to find us one. There's got to be one not too far away. Maybe we'll get you a go-kart when you're a little older." George was

smiling, and he passed his eyes, tiny fragile bubbles, across to his son, who had become blurred in the darkness of the car.

"Say, I'll bet you want to be a race car driver when you grow up?"

"Maybe. But I think what I really want to be is a sailor. The captain of a ship."

George began to laugh nervously, and he increased the speed of his car five miles per hour.

"A sailor?"

"Yeah, Dad. Someday I want to be the captain of a big lake freighter."

"Not a race car driver?"

"Well, maybe sometime later. It's awful scary."

"But you can drown in a lake. Did Grandpa ever tell you about the freighter that split in half in a storm on Lake Superior?"

"No. But I'm going to be a great swimmer, Dad. Besides, Grandpa says they all have lifeboats. Not like on the Titanic."

George wheeled the car into a frozen custard stand.

"What do you want, Mr. Thomas Warner, Sea Captain?"

"A ginger-ale float."

George stepped out of the car and walked toward the counter. He stood at the end of a considerable line, but he

waited patiently, absorbed in thoughts of serious sins almost committed, and qualitative, personal distinctions; and visions of Sea Scouts and books on naval battles, sea exploration, and Oliver Hazard Perry, and brightly colored plastic clipper ships, submarines, and lake freighters.

Susan was out to meet them before George had cut the engine or the lights.

"I'm glad you're back. I was about to call that stupid track and have you paged. Your father's sick. I think he's had a small stroke."

Without answering, George was out of the car and on his way to the front door. Susan grabbed his sleeve.

"Wait, George. Calm yourself. He's all right. I mean he's not really unconscious." Her voice dropped. "But he's delirious. He has us all mixed up. He thinks I'm your mother."

"Where is he?"

"In the family room, lying on the couch. I've already called the doctor you have up here and sent for an ambulance." They stopped together just inside the house. Tommy was still in the car.

"Where's Mom?"

"In the bedroom. Your neighbor's with her. She's afraid of him now."

They stood in the kitchen. It was dark. In a simultaneous motion Susan kissed his cheek and squeezed his hand.

George could feel nothing. George noticed that the door which opened to the hallway which led out into the family room was closed. "Here," she said, "sit down."

"George, he sat and watched the Walt Disney thing after you left. Then he fell asleep in the chair. Your Mom and I played cards with Mrs. Wilson in the kitchen. About an hour ago he must of woke-up, because he came in here." Susan lowered her voice, almost whispered. "He thought he was back at the dinner table. He started talking to all of us about that automobile crash he saw once. He was scared, George, frightened to death. He was shaking all over. He kept talking about it, your Mother just couldn't stop him. Finally, she started to cry. Then he just left and went back to the family room." She paused, squeezed his hand. George returned the pressure. Lightly.

"George, he's been having nightmares about that crash for years?"

"What?"

"Your Mother told me." George slipped his arm around his wife. "After a few minutes I went out there and he started calling me Lou and just talking nonsense." She wiped her face with her free hand. George released his arm. He heard the front door squeak open.

"Susan, when did you call the ambulance?"

"The doctor did. He said fifteen minutes. It should be here any minute."

George stood up. "Go put Tommy to bed. I'll go out and see Dad."

George found his father lying peacefully on the couch, his hands folded lightly in his lap. He seemed to be sleeping. The light above the TV was burning, the drapes were open and the window formed a huge wall of black. George called to him. "Dad." The blue eyes opened for an instant, then shut again, then opened, then shut. But the old man made no sound. George stepped closer, bent low, placed his hand on his father's shoulder. "Dad," he called, very softly. As he spoke he heard Susan come into the room.

Then the eyes opened, bright blue. The old man stared at Susan, smiling. "Lou," he said, "let's forget the dishes and take the kids swimming. Come-on," he continued, and he began to get up. He was almost off the couch when George gently pushed him back down to a sitting position. George's father reached out his hand. "Tell you what, Lou, we'll do'em when we get back." His voice had not changed; it was still low and guttural and clear.

George waited for the ambulance in the living room. It was late. Susan and Mrs. Wilson sat with George's father, tried to keep him calm, and humored his strange speech. Occasionally he heard them talking. His mother sat in the kitchen, midway between the bedroom and the family

room, more afraid than ever despite George's assurances that it would all pass. The nightmare had not returned. Tommy came into the living room, wearing his pajamas.

"Grandpa's sick?"

"Yes, Tommy. But we think he'll be okay. There's an ambulance coming to take him to the hospital." George stood up and held out his hand. "Come-on, we'll go out in the back yard and look for it coming on the causeway."

They walked outside, into the dark, into the wet grass. There were stars in abundance. Across the bay, a half mile away, they could see the brightly-lit causeway, lit like a chinese dragon by the red and white lights from the cars leaving the amusement park. The water reflected the light, sent streams of white and red shooting out across the dark water, almost reaching the dock. They sat down on the picnic table. Within seconds they saw it: a terrible, revolving red flash; and the sight brought sound, the pointy scream of the police siren.

George mixed his hand tightly with Tommy's. And he felt all his blood rush to his head, then it gurgled and coalesced and dripped down rapidly into his throat, swamping him, drowning him. He choked. Tommy tensed, raised his eyes. Then the blood seemed to explode, a crashing, and he saw himself in a fiery race car, burning. He feared his own memory now. And he felt that his dreams had become a beautiful white albatross, sitting wounded at his side.

GEORGE AND STANLEY, AND SWEET NURSE KATHY O'HARA

George opened crusted eyes at exactly seven-thirty. He had been dreaming about the accident, which distressed him, since he had fallen asleep in the midst of a determined attempt to dream about his daytime nurse, Kathy O'Hara. The room was a luminous green; the light from outside was weak, just enough to give the green wall of the room a slight early morning glow. The night nurse had shut the blinds, the light was depressed, and George lay in bed for a minute or two with just his eyes open, trying to decide if the light was real, if the moment was the start of a bright day; or whether the light was fake, and he was in the early moments of another gray January day. George was conscious of the familiar coarse pain, the pain in his arm. The arm was broken in three distinct places, held together by bits of wire and stainless steel, and safely enclosed in a white cast that ran from his fingertips to the top of his collar bone. His arm always hurt in the mornings, when he was in between medications. He forced himself out of the warm bed and onto the floor, and he padded across to the bathroom. For five days now he had not bothered to lift the toilet seat, and he could think of no good reason to do so today, so he didn't; in

fact, he relieved himself all over it. As he shut the bathroom door and turned to walk back to the bed, he glanced at the figure in the bed next to his: in the green light the body of the old man looked like a corpse. For a second George wondered if in fact he might be dead.

In the four days they had shared their hospital room neither had said a word to the other. George had had his surgery performed on Monday, the day the old man was admitted, and he was semi-conscious all day following the operation. Tuesday the old man had been operated on, and he had been good for nothing but sleep and dream-like ravings for the next three days. All George knew about him was that his name was Stanley Williams, that his doctor was Eisaku, and that he was sixty-four years of age. That was what the white card said, the card which hung unceremoniously from the rail at the end of the bed. He looked much older than sixty-four, George had decided. He was only seventeen, but his father was fifty-two, and Stanley Williams appeared old enough to be his father's grandfather. The old man's head was completely shaved. In the dim light it looked smooth and barren, but the day before George had noticed sprouts of gray appearing on that portion of the old man's head not covered by the bandage. His head had been swathed completely in white when they had brought him back from surgery, but on Thursday a nurse had removed most of it. What remained was a patch the size of a coffee

cup, which spread itself neatly over the very center of the old man's head. Like a beanie, George thought. The skin around the incision was red and swollen, and George could see a few suture marks not covered by the bandage. Stanley Williams' face was filled with short gray stubble. His hands and arms were covered, only his face was visible above the sheets. George was intrigued by the old man's nose. He silently told himself that in all his life he had never before seen one any uglier. It was huge, almost as red as the suture marks on his skull, and owned two black moles: one fitting nicely on the bridge, the other clinging awkwardly to one of the nostrils.

George had been awake only a few minutes, but already he was bored. He would be bored until Nurse O'Hara came with breakfast and that would not be until eight o'clock. He made himself comfortable in his bed, and then reached over to the nightstand and searched for the remote control unit that would turn on the television. He hesitated for several seconds, not wanting to disturb the old man, but finally decided that Stanley Williams would still be in deep sleep. He pushed the appropriate button and was instantaneously greeted by the fat, smiling face of Captain Kangaroo. George winced, then smiled back at him; he had developed a strange attachment to Captain Kangaroo since he had been in the hospital. He carefully adjusted the volume to the lowest possible level. Almost simultaneously

he heard the sheets rustle in the bed next to him. George was greeted by a strained, hoarse, whispery voice: "Turn that goddamn thing off before I climb into that bed of yours and beat the shit out of you!"

George did not hesitate: he turned off the TV and sunk back into his bed. He felt as though the voice had actually scratched him. With his left hand he carefully and silently inched the sheets up over his chest and his cast. The silence in the room was complete. Then George heard the sheets rustle again, and the queer voice became a laugh, a low laugh, that ended as abruptly as it had begun.

"Have you ever heard the parrot joke?" Stanley Williams asked.

"No," George replied. He did not look across to Stanley Williams, but instead firmly pushed his head into the pillow a little further.

"Well, there is this guy named Joe who wants to buy a bird," the old man began in his hoarse whisper. "He has no particular bird in mind. Any bird will do." George could feel the weakness of the voice. He marvelled that the old man could possibly make himself tell a joke.

"Well, Joe wants some companionship. So he goes to a pet shop and begins looking around. He can't find a bird that he likes, so he asks the owner of the place if he could help him out. The owner says he would be glad to help.

'I have just the bird for you,' the owner says to Joe. And then he leads him into the back room of the shop. He stops in front of a cage in the corner. There is a parrot in the cage. The bird is just sitting there on his perch, minding his business."

"'This is the most amazing bird I have ever seen,' the owner says to Joe. 'It talks like a human. You can carry on a regular conversation with him. He will constantly amaze you.' 'Is that so,' Joe says. 'He does have one drawback,' the owner says, 'he has no legs.' Joe, of course, is amazed, because he could see the parrot sitting on the perch in the cage. So Joe asks: 'Well, how in god's name does he stay on the perch?' 'With his dick,' the owner tells him. 'He wraps it around the perch.'" Stanley Williams began to laugh. George could see the sheets wrinkling slightly near the foot of the bed, and hear the old man coughing and choking--but still laughing. Then he stopped, as suddenly as before. George had been unable and unwilling to laugh himself.

"Anyways, after the parrot does some talking Joe is sold on him and buys him on the spot for fifty bucks. He takes the parrot home, and they both got along together great. They talk together all the time, sometimes for hours on end. One day Joe comes home from work and asks the parrot what went on while he was gone."

"'Some guy came over to see your wife today,' the parrot says." Stanley Williams tried his best to imitate the sound of a talking parrot, but his efforts were lost on George, who was only further sickened.

"'Is that so?' Joe says. 'What did he do?'"

"'He started kissing your wife,' the parrot says."

"'What else did he do?' Joe yells back at the parrot."

"'Well, then he took off her blouse and started feeling her . . . well, you know, Joe.'"

"Joe is mad as hell now. He's running around the room screaming and yelling and pounding on the walls with his fists. 'Then what happened?' he yells to the parrot."

"'Well, he unbuttoned her skirt and started to take it off,' the parrot says."

"By this time old Joe is really going nuts. He's kneeling on the floor and beating it with both hands. 'Then what!' he screams."

"'I don't know, Joe,' the parrot says. 'My dick got hard and I fell off the perch.'"

Finished, Stanley Williams began to laugh, a low, croaking noise that filled the room and filled George with disgust, almost with fear. It was a horrifying sound, like the laugh of a ghoul, and George fervently hoped that no one outside in the hall had heard it. Again, George did not laugh. Instead, he readied his mind to answer the

inevitable questions he figured the old man would ask him: his name, where he lived, where he went to school. After a minute had passed without further sound from Stanley Williams, George lifted his head from the pillow and glanced to his right. The old man was asleep again, pretending sleep perhaps; George was not sure. He wondered if Stanley Williams was playing a game with him, or if the surgery performed on his brain had left him feebleminded.

George looked at his watch. It was nearly eight o'clock, almost time for breakfast, and almost time for Kathy O'Hara to make her presence felt for the first time that day. Nurse O'Hara was a student nurse, only eighteen or so, nineteen at the most George had decided; although he hoped she was even younger, perhaps only seventeen, like himself. Maybe she had skipped a year in grade school; it was possible. He had already decided that she was smart. George forgot about the animal-like horror of Stanley Williams for a while, lay back in his bed and adjusted the sheet until he was supremely comfortable. The pain in his arm had subsided. Then he thought better of his being in bed. He slowly lifted off the sheets, careful not to arouse Stanley Williams, and made his way into the bathroom. He combed his brown hair, greasy after several days without washing, splashed water on his face, and then did his best to brush his teeth with his left hand. He needed to shave, and his observation pleased him, but it

would be too much effort. In bed again he waited patiently, was ready, let his mind lapse.

Nurse O'Hara was a tortured soul; rather she tortured George. In the mornings, in the afternoons, the late afternoons, there were seconds, sometimes minutes, and at night hours, or so he thought, spent in dreaming with her. Sweet Kathy O'Hara he called her, not even wincing when he thought it to himself. It was her true quality, the most perfect adjective for her. She was sweet. He imagined her flowery, light, delicate, peaceful. He played with her name: Kathleen O'Hara, Kathy O'Hara, Kath O'Hara. He loved her being Irish, being a "colleen," as his grandfather would say. He loved the sound of the word: the beginning harsh and sharp, the middle lilting, the end easy and resonant. She possessed all his prerequisites: she was blonde, just below him in height (he guessed her at five foot seven inches), with a flat waist and long legs, so long they seemed too perfect, like the legs of a dancer; her face was pinkish--innocent he felt--pretty, not beautiful, the way he wanted it to be. Kathy O'Hara's skin was very white, but clear. It would never tan much he felt, and in the summertime her face would probably always be red. He imagined often her red nose peeling and blistering, the deep red in shadows under her eyes and streaking across her forehead. George admired her teeth, perfectly straight and white; his own mouth was full of braces. He studied

her carefully, obsessively, whenever she came into the room. He knew her dress size, number fourteen, from looking down the back of her neck when she bent over to examine his arm. He knew that she had three freckles, small, neat, all in a row, just above her left elbow; that she wore the same red clip to hold up her hair every day; that she had the unconscious, or so he thought, habit of placing her hands, fingers spread very wide, on her hips immediately after setting down his food tray.

But Kathy O'Hara behind the white starched uniform intrigued him the most. It demanded his imagination, that hidden part of her, and he tried to dream about it carefully, not wanting to let himself go too far. It evolved into a dark, dreamy kind of thing, which sometimes frightened him. Their being lovers together in his mind was something that was demanded almost; it was so natural. Yet sometimes he pulled back from going too far, afraid that she would lose her innocence, that she would become something that she was not. It was new, and often strange, to have such dreams and thoughts revolve around a single, particular girl. He loved her explicitly, in a hundred different ways, in a hundred different places; each dream brought something fresh, yet borrowed something old. He sometimes felt uncomfortable in the very closeness and privacy of his imagination, making such sexy worlds, such

perfect situations, such a mixture of the beautiful and pleasurable for them both. Often he was amused at the complete fantasy of his dreams: they coupled upon feather beds in Swiss chalets, on air mattresses in backyard swimming pools, under waterfalls, in the king size beds of penthouse suites in world famous hotels. Always they made love with care, and always she whispered great love to him, and usually they were married. Or about to be.

At precisely eight o'clock Nurse O'Hara brought George his breakfast. He was conscious of her as only white, as blurred, because, as always, he pretended to be asleep when she first entered the room in the morning. She went first to Stanley Williams' bed, which annoyed George, even though she smiled at him as she carried the trays to the table beside the old man's bed. She was about to speak, her lips had parted, when Stanley Williams, eyes wide and flashing like lighthouse beacons, cut her off:

"Well, well, glory-be. Look at what we have here. Come to me honey-pot. I'm all yours!"

He was still speaking in his coarse whisper, but the very strangeness of its sound gave it power. It filled the room. George was disgusted. He watched Nurse O'Hara, whose face seemed redder, George thought, than it would be in July.

"Here's your breakfast, Mr. Williams," she said nervously, placing the tray on the mobile table and gently

pushing it across the plane of the bed. She was almost smiling now. George was certain that it was a forced, angry smile. George could not see Stanley Williams' face. The old man was smiling up at Nurse O'Hara, his lips spread open, his tongue thick between his teeth. He reached feebly with his left hand for the tray while Nurse O'Hara went to the foot of the bed and began to crank it more upright so that the old man could sit up and eat. "There you go, Mr. Williams. I'll be back in a second to see how you're doing," she told him. He nodded, smiling. George had been lost in watching her, and he hurriedly closed his eyes as she approached his bed with the tray of food.

"Wake-up Mr. Wilson!" She was smiling. George replied weakly, stretching his arm out taut, "Good morning. How are you today?"

"Fine, perfect, wonderful, exquisite, feeling like ten million thousand dollars."

"That's good." She had set down his tray and was about to turn and leave. He needed something to say. "Looks like another lousy day, doesn't it?" Nurse O'Hara's blue eyes traveled to the window, directly behind George. The blinds were still shut, but there was bright gray rimming the window and seeping through the cracks in the blinds. "I think you are unfortunately right, Mr. Wilson." She began to step across the room to the window. "Well, I can at least brighten things up a bit for you two," she

called over her shoulder. With a firm yank she opened the blinds, allowing into the room a rush of light. As she stepped back from the window she called to Stanley Williams: "I'll be back in a minute." George watched her glide out of the room, marvelled at her exhilarating effect.

Sitting up in his bed, playing with the food on his tray with his good left hand, and watching the old man next to him, it became obvious to George why Nurse O'Hara would be returning: Stanley Williams was very weak, he had trouble feeding himself, and his left arm remained motionless under the sheets. Nurse O'Hara came back after dropping off all the other trays on the cart, and settled into feeding the old man. The whole business disgusted George, but he watched them intently nevertheless. Nurse O'Hara babyed Stanley Williams, cooed with him, spoke to him softly, almost affectionately, played little games with the spoon and fork, turned the grapefruit and oatmeal into animate objects. She mothered him: ". . . take one more bite now . . . you need your strength Mr. Williams . . . here we go. Now open up wide." He told himself that the old man was joking, just playing along, that anyone who could manage to tell the parrot joke at seven-thirty in the morning could feed himself. When he wasn't swallowing his food, Stanley Williams was talking, whispering to Nurse O'Hara, but so softly that George could not hear him.

Occasionally she would laugh, once she turned a starry red, and George felt his stomach tighten. Then she passed out of the green room and into the corridor.

After breakfast George asked Stanley Williams if it would be alright if he turned on the television. The old man replied in kind; "It's okay, but we have to watch what I want to watch." George deferred, disliking him even more, and together they watched quiz shows one after another. "I work second shift you know. I know all of these shows . . . I'm an expert on every one of them," he repeated to George at least three times before noon. George wanted silence, to be able to dream quietly and have his thoughts private, with the picture on the screen serving as an occasional respite. But Stanley Williams had found his strength. There was no peaceful rest for George. He asked George innumerable questions at first: where he lived (Chicago), his age (seventeen), what his father did for a living (lawyer), how old his mother was (forty-nine), if he owned a dog (no), where he went to school (St. Joseph High School), if he had any brothers or sisters (no). George answered him politely, desperately trying to mask his growing irritation. Seemingly satisfied, Stanley Williams went on to his own life. George was glad that he did not have to look directly at the old man's face. Their beds were parallel, and not directly across from one another. Yet he sometimes found himself glancing sideways,

catching glimpses of the long pink nose and the shaved skull with its covering of white. Stanley Williams told George about working for Penn Central for thirty-six years, about his experiences in Italy during World War II, about his only son, who had run off to Alaska to work construction, about the time he saw one of his friends practically cut in half when a bump twenty-five cars up the line had traveled along and pinned the man between the couplings of two Chesapeake & Ohio freight cars. He told him about his wife, Elsa, to whom he had been married for forty-two years. The jokes were the worst, though, and became increasingly obscene as the morning wore on. He sometimes hid them well, but only at first. He seemed to want to fool George into thinking the story was fact, sometimes only the old man's laughter in mid story signaled the truth to George. Stanley Williams was dream-like, ghost-like, wrapped in white in the gray and green room and telling George things he did not want to know. They were interrupted several times by nurses bringing medication, by the priest who stopped by to ask George if he would like to receive communion the next day, by the dark-haired candy striper who offered to sell them candy and magazines. Stanley Williams was friendly to all, tried to engage each in conversation. George was thankful for the interruptions, however slight, for they gave him quick seconds, sometimes minutes, to daydream, to grasp Nurse O'Hara in his thoughts.

He was embarrassed for the nurses and aids and orderlies who were subjected to Stanley Williams. And once he was embarrassed himself, when Stanley Williams told the black orderly that he and his friend George had become partners and would have to have all their medicine brought together at the same time. But George had his revenge: he laughed silently, but with satisfaction, whenever he caught a nurse or anyone else gazing at Stanley Williams for the first time; they invariably stared at his monstrous nose.

Dr. Eisaku, the Japanese doctor who had operated on Stanley Williams, came into the room just before lunch. He hovered over his patient for several minutes, his eyes popping back and forth from his clipboard to the old man. George did not trust foreign doctors, and he felt a strange sympathy for Stanley Williams. There was a nurse with Dr. Eisaku, who carefully took notes on her metal clipboard and who nodded approvingly every several seconds. George recognized her as the head nurse for the floor. He kept a succinct evaluation of her in readiness for whenever he saw her: old, ugly, fat, experienced. Stanley Williams was partially paralyzed; George guessed as much as he watched the doctor poke and pull at Stanley's left arm and leg. The nurse left after three or four minutes, and before she had passed through the door Stanley Williams had begun to tell Dr. Eisaku the parrot joke. He continued all the while the doctor examined him. Absorbed in his

examination, Dr. Eisaku only grunted replies; but when Stanley Williams reached the punch line, the doctor began to howl with laughter, letting his stethoscope drop to his chest and lightly throwing his clipboard on the edge of the bed. "Ah. That a very good joke," he said. "I must tell it sometime." Stanley Williams was very pleased, and as the doctor disappeared through the door he propped himself up on his right elbow and winked at George.

George's doctor, his mother's first cousin, came shortly after lunch and examined his arm. He was only mildly optimistic: "Another week or so of pretty nurses and gourmet food for you, George." George was strangely satisfied: he wanted to solidify things with Kathy O'Hara before leaving the hospital. A week would be time enough. Nurse O'Hara appeared with the black orderly at one o'clock. It was the first George had seen of her since breakfast. George did not feign sleep this time; he only wished that she had come alone. With the orderly's assistance she transferred Stanley Williams to a wheelchair. George had not realized how tall the old man was; he towered over both Nurse O'Hara and the orderly when they stood him up before sitting him down in the chair.

"We've got to take you downstairs to P. T. for some work on that arm and leg of yours." She said it sweetly, consoling him, even squeezing his arm.

"Sure enough, honey," Stanley Williams replied. "Let's go. I'm all set to go. Hell, I'm raring to go!" He looked mysterious and odd to George, sitting in the wheelchair, his red nose swollen, the thin arms and face as white as Nurse O'Hara's starched uniform. The orderly began to wheel the old man out of the room, with Nurse O'Hara guarding the front like a stagehand riding shotgun. "I'll have your friend back in a little while, Mr. Wilson," she called to him as the threesome passed through the door.

George tried to turn over in his bed, but, as always, his cast prevented him. He merely turned his head, faced the green walls, until the position became too uncomfortable. Then he switched on the light above his bed and began reading the biology textbook. He turned immediately to the chapter on reproduction, lost himself in the descriptions of testes, ovaries, sperms, and eggs. After a while his imagination aroused him, made him hard, which disgusted him. He slammed the book shut, tried thinking of Kathy O'Hara, wondered if Stanley Williams would enjoy watching her walk in front of him as much as he would. If she knew about the thoughts in his mind or Stanley Williams' swollen eyes, she would hate them both. Quickly, he put her in a more proper perspective: with him, in love. He even wished that they had been Adam and Eve. Together they would not have sinned. Stanley Williams was basically evil. He was sure of that.

The afternoon was spent in visiting. Elsa Williams appeared shortly after two o'clock, just after her husband had returned from therapy. George recognized the small, frumpy woman he had seen the three previous days. She huddled with her husband, whispering mostly. But every several minutes she would look up at George, smiling. After a half hour spent at his bedside, she placed herself in a chair near the door and she and her husband conversed openly. Stanley Williams made every effort to bring George into the conversation, but met with only limited success. After a while there was silence, and the old man drifted into sleep. Then Mrs. Williams was gone. George's parents came at four-thirty, and stayed for an hour. His mother brought him new wool pajamas, and his father handed him some new math assignments that one of his friends had brought over to the house. George was annoyed when his parents sensed his irritation with Stanley Williams. He did not want them to know. They knew nothing of his feelings for Nurse O'Hara, and he was glad that she always left the hospital before his parents arrived. She was a sweet secret that separated him from his parents completely.

After five days Stanley Williams was no longer confined to his bed, and he spent much of his time in his wheelchair, pushing himself along with great effort using his one good arm. He explored the floor dauntlessly, cruising between

wards and rooms as if he were searching for some lost treasure. He made friends with everyone, or so it seemed to George. The old man's voice came back slowly, a few decibels a day, until by the middle of the week George could sometimes hear him over the TV as he talked to a nurse or an orderly out in the hall. Late at night, when most patients were already asleep, he sometimes heard Stanley Williams' voice almost echoing down the corridors, always finding its way into his room. Then several minutes later the door would swing open and the old man would push himself in, looking feeble but almost spiritual silhouetted against the lights in the hall. He would curse the presence of darkness in the room, glide over to the wall and switch on the top light, reaching and straining to clasp the tiny switch. It was a vision to George: seeing the dark silhouette wheel in, hearing the coarse blasphemy, then the burst of white light followed by the figure of the old man's arm stretched against the wall. He still had to be helped into bed, and while waiting for the night nurse to come to the room Stanley Williams would begin a joke, crude, as always.

Stanley Williams continued to improve, and the nurses, especially Nurse O'Hara, were very pleased with his progress. They congratulated him, teased him. Every afternoon Kathy O'Hara wheeled him down to physical therapy for treatments

on his left arm and leg. George's condition improved also; the pain lessened, and his skin under the cast began to itch. He and Stanley Williams formed a kind of truce. George listened patiently for the most part to the old man's obscene stories, sometimes even laughed, while Stanley Williams had his wife bring George a batch of chocolate chip cookies. As the old man's condition improved, he became even more active. He cajoled one of his railroad friends into bringing him two bottles of Gallo wine, which he insisted on keeping, despite George's strenuous objections, in George's suitcase--since no one would ever suspect George of doing such a thing the old man explained. He became fast friends with one of the night nurses, who somehow managed to get him a pizza one night. Stanley gathered some of his friends and a few of the nurses together in the room and split the pizza with them. George received the first and largest piece--at Stanley Williams' insistence.

George felt the need to plan his flirtations with more care. One week after the day he met Stanley Williams, George's doctor announced to him that he could go home in a few days. He needed to find out essential things: where she lived, her phone number, if she had a steady boyfriend. It was a desperate panic sometimes, when he felt his stomach burn as she left with his breakfast tray

and he had said nothing to her but good morning. He envied Stanley Williams' way with her. They joked and teased for eternities of time while he lay in his bed next to them, only able to listen and force a desperate smile. He felt her slipping away from him, he acknowledged a quiet fear that he would leave the hospital and she would be gone forever. The dreams were sometimes not pleasurable, no longer like miracles; he often feared them because he felt they were cheating him, mocking him. He wanted to mock her small breasts, the soft light fuzz under her chin, the tiny specks of dandruff he saw nestled in the strands of her hair.

The night two days before he was to leave the hospital George spent watching television. Stanley Williams stayed in the room that evening also, and as always, they watched what Stanley Williams wanted to watch.

"You know," the old man announced, a few seconds after the set had been turned off, "that young girl we have for a nurse in the daytime certainly is a good nurse." Stanley Williams had meant his statement to be a question, or so it seemed to George.

"She's only a student nurse," George replied. "In fact, I think we might be her first real patients. She seems pretty nervous most of the time. Sometimes that old bitchy one follows her in here to watch what she's doing."

"Maybe you're right. I don't know. But she certainly is a good looking girl. Nice too. Goddamn, I wish I were about your age."

"She's alright. Not too bad, I guess." George had barely finished when Stanley Williams broke in, his voice full and deep:

"Liar! You goddamn liar, George. I'm no dummy." Stanley Williams began to laugh. "You're just dying to get into that young female's pants. You're not even being crafty about it. It's as plain as it could be. I'll bet for a week now that girl's been going home every night telling her momma all about you." Stanley Williams continued to laugh, propping himself up in bed excitedly, George decided, as he heard the sheets rustle in the dark next to him. George was glad that the room was dark, and the old man could not see his face. In turn he pictured Stanley Williams' face: the long ugly nose, the skull now covered with a week's growth of white fuzz, the still red suture marks.

"I just don't want to fuck her Stanley," George replied. It embarrassed him to use the word. It angered him that he felt compelled to use it.

"The hell you don't! . . . I wouldn't mind doing it myself. I'll bet she'd make a fine piece of ass."

"You're wrong, I think." He spoke the words as slowly and objectively as he could, as if he were a teacher

commenting on a student's offhand miscalculation. "She's a good girl, probably a virgin even. I'm sure of it."

"I wouldn't lay a hundred dollar bet on it, George. You know about these nurses. She's probably been laid by every doctor in the goddamn hospital. Hell, I even asked Dr. Eisaku about her the other day--you know, just because I was curious--and he said," here Stanley Williams tried to imitate the doctor's Japanese accent, "'Ah. Student nurse O'Hara. She a very nice girl.'" Stanley Williams roared at his imitation of Dr. Eisaku's voice. Then he became more serious: "Well, George, you can guess what kind of girl she is--not that she isn't nice--when a foreign doctor says that about her."

"I still think I'm right." Inside, he was absolutely certain of it.

"George?"

"What?"

"If you want some advice feel free to ask. I can show you how to handle her. Seriously. I can."

Stanley Williams began a railroad story. George mumbled replies, only when necessary. The old man went on for several minutes, until George could stand it no longer. He feigned a desire to sleep, and told Stanley Williams that his story could wait until morning.

George was immensely pleased. He felt proud, vigorous, almost newborn. He watched the shadows on the wall--the

blinds were open--and waited for sleep, patiently, in no great hurry to be unconscious. He had defended her to himself. He was proud. Stanley Williams was dismissed; justifiably hated. The night had pleasantness; it was comforting. He saw himself outside in the snow, driving the car, in company with Kathy O'Hara. The snow pelted the car like harmless pebbles, falling so easy he could hear its softness over the mild drone of the engine. The radio was empty. He could smell her hair, her unrestricted combed-down hair, and the perfume. He drove effortlessly, the steering wheel was a physical extension of his arm, as she leaned lightly against his shoulder. It was dark and warm inside the car, with a soft pleasing glow from the interior lights. The speedometer read forty, they glided through the streets at the perfect, safe speed.

Stanley Williams slept through breakfast. Nurse O'Hara, after trying unsuccessfully to wake up the old man enough to eat, left the tray on the table beside the bed, frowning. George hoped that somehow she knew of the old man's betrayal. She smiled at George, beautifully he felt. For the first time, he called her Kathy. He discovered that she lived in Park Ridge, not many miles from his own home.

After lunch George put on his bathrobe and walked down the hall to the elevator. He was on his way to see a friend, a sixteen-year-old boy who went to the same high

school he did, but who was a year behind him. The boy was in for a tonsillectomy, and had announced his presence in the hospital to George the day before, in a strained whispery voice like that of Stanley Williams'. They played chess all afternoon. George beat him with ease, five games in a row. It was quiet in the boy's room, isolated as it was, at the very end of a long corridor on the top floor of the building. They played in semi-darkness; the bright sunlight was so glaring that George insisted that they shut the blinds. Finally, after winning the fifth straight game, George decided to leave. He could not miss his late afternoon snack, the last time he would be able to see Kathy O'Hara that day. He was going to ask her plainly, right out, if she would go out with him the next weekend. He felt confident; yet he walked slowly, let another patient ride the elevator alone while he stood in front of it and patiently waited for its inevitable return. He phrased the question several times, gaining even more confidence with each new version. He was alone in the elevator, and he spoke his affirmation out loud to the four moving walls.

George saw Kathy O'Hara standing against a wall across from the nurses' station. She seemed blurred, out of focus. He was conscious of her as a soft white against the harder white of the wall. She was enveloped in the fat arm of the

head nurse, and was crying. George tried to walk past her, but she broke the older woman's hold and stepped out into the middle of the corridor, blocking his path. Her eyes were salty red. Angel-like, she touched his arm.

"Mr. Wilson," she hesitated, "George. I'm afraid your friend Mr. Williams is critical. He's started to hemorrhage badly. He's in ICU now. I was bringing him back from therapy when it happened."

George looked at her, moved by her touch. His arm felt like rubber. It was plain to him that everyone loved Stanley Williams. Even Nurse Kathy O'Hara loved him. She touched him again. "I know how you must feel," she said. Then she was gone, stepping around him, swimming down the hall, followed by the old nurse.

In his room, absorbed by the green, echoing walls, he suddenly felt ridiculous, as though he were a clown. He could not relinquish a necessary hate. He would not feel bad if Stanley Williams died. He stretched himself out on his bed, let the afternoon sun blanket him. His awkwardness teased him, mocked him. Silently, but with a strange sweet pleasure, he called Kathy O'Hara a whore.

THE PRISM OF GRANDMOTHER MILATE

There was a different smell in the kitchen. It was Sunday, an announced day for fried chicken, and Mrs. Milate was carefully frying legs and breasts in the copper skillet on the stove. Outside the house was four inches of snow. Old snow, though, melting very fast in the midst of a January thaw. It was really very ugly outside, bright sunlight on melting dirty snow. Twenty year-old Michael Milate sat at the kitchen table across from his grandmother. Grandmother Milate was trying to feed herself, but she could not, and the fingers of her right hand were stuck in her bowl of vanilla ice cream.

He remembered very well, that was the whole problem. Because he could see and feel so clearly in his mind what she once was--what he once was--he was troubled. He could not understand the course of things, nor his own feelings, nor the old woman who was his grandmother, who sat quietly across the table from him. She no longer knew his name, or anyone else's. She was sick and very old, very shortly to die, very shortly to go to a nursing home she would leave only when she was dead. He felt frightened for her, but because she did not know or understand any more, that part of things did not bother him greatly. His father felt the

same way. He had said many times to all of them that with Grandma the way she was everything would be easier. Grandmother Milate only smiled now, and talked with her ghosts. As she was dying, they were coming to life more forcibly than ever before. As a child he had listened to her stories, her talk of the old life, had tried to imagine long-dead people and ancient places. But she wasn't just telling stories to him anymore, she was really living in them, in what he could only imagine, in times that were over before he was born. It was as if the past had already claimed her. And he could not understand any of it.

She was strapped loosely in her chair in a kind of harness. It allowed her to move her hands and arms freely, but it prevented her from standing up and possibly falling. A fall would certainly kill her, and his mother was always afraid that his grandmother would somehow manage to untie the straps, try to stand, and fall. But there was really little danger of that, since his grandmother could barely feed herself with her hands, and the harness was fastened behind her wheelchair. In fact, he usually tied it himself. She ate clumsily, like a child, playing endless games with her food before trying to bring it to her mouth. It always ended up that someone had to feed her. Sunday was his appointed day, and he reached over to her, taking the spoon from her hand, and began to feed her. The ice cream was starting to melt, but it looked

good to him, and each time he lifted the spoon to his grandmother's mouth, he also ate some himself. She would crane her neck forward whenever the spoon approached her mouth, almost meeting it halfway, like a small child who is being coaxed into eating something he really wants to eat, or a dog grasping for a treat.

He even remembered the smell of her old apartment--damp, musty, old, so different from his house. It was always very quiet at the apartment--just he and his grandmother, and usually very dark because there were few windows. But at night it was a very warm and secure place. He would sit in the front room watching television, staying up much later than he was used to at home, and his grandmother would bring milk and red MacIntosh apples sliced the way he liked them. During the day he would sit at the small kitchen table and play with his dozens of rubber and plastic soldiers, cowboys, cavalrymen, and Indians. He would erect huge forts out of Kleenex boxes and small pieces of wood and enact fierce and bloody battles, the Indians always winning. While he played his grandmother would cook or sew, but when she sensed his interest fading, and sometimes when she did not, she would sit down across from him and begin to tell him stories. She would continue for hours if he let her, but usually he excused himself to go to the bathroom, or to go watch TV,

or to tell her that he was hungry. He listened mostly out of politeness and respect, but sometimes he would creep to the edge of the chair, prop his head up with his elbows, and dream along with her, as she told of her cousin who played shortstop for the Yankees or the girl who once lived next door to her but was murdered in a field on her way to church. They were strange stories, different than anything he was forced to read about at school, and often they were very sad. In his grandmother's stories children died of measles and TB, men worked for a dollar a day, people were poor and stayed poor. He was often frightened at what he thought the world was like then, and he felt warm and glad inside when he could go home and see the new car in the driveway and could go out and play baseball with his friends. He felt those times were very sad and mysterious, a dark kind of time that he could not really understand, that there was a real danger in living then. But always he would feel himself being drawn into her shadowy world as she talked, and his imagination would create colors and shapes and places to fit the people and things she talked about. He would find himself in a world that existed only in his mind, in his imagination, like a dream or something he would read in a book. Sometimes she would hurry into her tiny bedroom and return with old, yellowing pictures of people and houses, the kinds of

pictures that portrayed the world back then as he really imagined it to be: gray, brown, without definite color, nothing in clear focus.

Because he had listened to her he sometimes could understand pieces of her conversation now. She never raved or screamed, but her thoughts existed only for seconds before changing or dying; and sometimes he would try to make her remember, but could not. She was in a world with people he knew about, but did not know. He knew that "Will" was her brother, that "Oregon Street" was the place where she was born, that "The Cathedral" was where she went to grammar school; but she was not telling stories any more, but living in them, and there were never any explanations because they were actually taking place. Many times now when he sat with her in the kitchen he would try to make her remember the times when he was young. But she could not, and he was forced to remember alone.

It was Thursday, not much snow left, what was left was dirtier than ever. Michael could hear his father talking as he closed the door to the garage and walked into the kitchen. His grandmother was sitting passively in her chair, almost motionless, only her right hand moved as it listlessly played with the buttons on her housecoat. When Mr. Milate saw his son come in he put down his coffee

and quickly stood up, looking across the room to his wife.

"Do you have all her things together, Helen?"

"Yes, they're already in the car."

"Well, get her coat then. We have to get going." Mrs. Milate shut off the cold water faucet above the sink and walked briskly out of the room. "Have dinner ready when we get back," her husband called after her. Then he turned to his son and motioned to him that it was time to move his grandmother.

Together they went over to the chair. Mr. Milate began to unfasten the harness while Michael just stood over his grandmother, holding her hand. His grandmother's face was nervous, contorted, and her eyes began to constantly revolve around the room, shifting focus and direction. Each man took one of her arms and gently but forcefully, as they were accustomed to doing, stood the old woman up. Mrs. Milate, acting on cue, brought over the heavy red coat and struggled to get it on Grandmother Milate.

It took five minutes for Michael and his father to walk her out to the car. She tripped once on the garage steps, and almost fell. Mrs. Milate hurriedly opened the front door of the station wagon, and Michael carefully lifted the dead weight of his grandmother and sat her down on the seat. Mr. Milate slowly backed the car out of the

driveway and headed for the nursing home. The car windows were filthy, and there was a strong winter glare from the dying sun and dirty streets. Michael's father spoke little except to comment on the cold front that was due to move into Cleveland that night. Michael sat in the back seat and watched his grandmother's white head, a tiny mass above the large red collar of her coat. Her head seldom moved, stayed solid, and she appeared to take no notice of anything. Inside he wanted her to scream.

When she was gone, she was also apparently forgotten. It was as if she were already dead. Outwardly, no one grieved for her; and while she lived she was really dead. Her name was seldom mentioned, she had simply vanished. She was visited often enough, but the half hour spent with her twice a week or so had a separate existence of its own and was never related to any other activity. But then, as everyone had said, she did not really know if you were there or not. Strangely the longer she was gone, the more thoughts of her began to possess and torture him. He could not understand the process of it all, of her dying, of her becoming a child again before she died, of any reason or purpose of her continued existence. And the memories constantly gnawed at him. He could not imagine himself being remembered the way she was, that there could be such an ultimate and final exclusion of all she once was. It

scared him to think of her, to imagine her as once young, as young once as he, and younger. She had once been a particle in her mother's womb, a pretty dark-haired girl, a bride, a lover, the cause once of a young man riding underneath a train from Cincinnati to Cleveland. But she was old when he was born, grew older and finally senile as he grew up. He could not imagine her as anything but old. He considered his life full, he felt he treasured a million memories, that life was everything and would go on forever, that he would never die, that he still hungered to grow older, that he was so confident of life he sometimes dreamed of romantic and heroic death. He had never known death close-up, and he could never imagine it as inevitable, as being so close--as it was for her--that one could almost reach out and touch it. Then her stories, the visions and dreams of the old world she had given him, would come back--as mysterious as sand and real as ever. He thought often of the times she described to him, still pictured the strange places and names, and even stranger happenings. They held a meaning for him, as did she, but he could not discover what or where they were.

The old Irish ghetto on Cleveland's near West Side was no longer Irish, except for a few collections of people his grandmother's age. On a cool night early in June he drove the ten city miles that separated his

neighborhood from hers and parked his car in a supermarket lot at the corner of the street on which she was born. The supermarket was like many near his home but seemed odd and out of place surrounded by old houses and short narrow brick streets. He got out of his car and began to walk up the street. It was very dark, and he was scared. Two children ran past him yelling to one another in Spanish. It was not easy finding his grandmother's old house in the dark. Often enough he had been driven by it and had it pointed out to him, but he had lost his orientation walking the street in the dark. But then he was in front of it. There were lights in all the first floor windows, but the upstairs was dark, and the high, arched gables slightly visible in the night made the house seem mysterious, foreign, years away from him. He looked at the house for several minutes, then continued to the north, toward Detroit Avenue. There was a strange feeling inside him. He had come to the old places to look for the ghosts, but knowing there would be none. He was struggling to find a feeling for those things gone, those things dead in the past, those things dying with his grandmother but refusing to die within him. It was a strange walk, down narrow streets that had seen three generations. These places were not special, not holy, but still places locked in memory and feeling, and therefore strangely eternal. There were none of the old faces there in the dark, but he could feel

them in the houses, walking the streets, in the stores, in the bars, in the spirits of children playing in the bushes around the old houses. A feeling of lightness came over him. As he walked he listened to the sound his feet made on the pavement and to the whistling of the trees in the dark. If there was such a thing as a past, he now knew of it, could feel it. He had a knowledge of what he had come from, of the kind of life that existed and ceased to exist before him, of the people and blood that made him. As a child he had been taught, now as a man the memories of the memories gave him a new sense of life, and a feeling about life that made him old.

It was nearly seven-thirty, a warm beautiful August evening. He came into her room and saw her lying in the hospital bed with white sheets tucked carefully around her, exposing only her white and withered head. The room was painted yellow, very bright, and with the fading sunlight stretching itself on the bed through the window, it was beautiful and warm. On her nightstand was a vase of carnations. He walked over to the window and looked down at the children playing baseball in the parking lot behind the houses. Then he looked directly at his grandmother, lying motionless, but almost smiling at him. He started to cry inside himself. He could see her watching

him, and still the half smile, very delicate. He went over to her, put his cheek against her mouth, and she kissed him. Her mouth jumped at him almost desperately, although no other part of her body moved. The light was beautiful on her face. He continued to look at her, but did not speak. Then he left, walked out her door, down the steps, through the lobby past the pretty girl at the desk and the two old men in wheelchairs by the door, and out into the parking lot. He leaned against the car, still crying inside himself. He was a boy with curly hair and freckles. And he was more. They were ancient and mortal prisms; they had their own positive brilliance but they could show you what you came out of and where you were going. They were good even when they were worn, and cut, and hopeless, because through them everyone could see what he really was. She had seen both sides for him all along. They were connectors, these people in white sheets and harnesses.

He stepped into his car, started the engine, and pulled out of the parking lot past the children playing baseball. Then he disappeared into the rapidly moving traffic.