SMITH, STEPHEN EMERSON. The Chain Letter and other stories (1971)
Directed by: Mr. Fred Chappell pp. 44

This thesis consists of four short stories, the titles of which are as follows: "The Chain Letter," "Empty House," "The Meeting," and "Jokes." I have been unable, thus far, to establish any philosophical relationship between the stories contained herein. Each must be considered separately, and I believe no explanations are necessary outside of those which are clearly stated by the fiction. All of these stories were written during my period of graduate study at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, and they are arranged in the order of completion.

THE CHAIN LETTER AND OTHER STORIES

by

Stephen Emerson Smith

A Thesis Submitted to
the Faculty of the Graduate School at
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

Greensboro
April, 1971

Approved by

Fred Chappell
Thesis Adviser

APPROVAL SHEET

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

Thesis Adviser Fred Chappell

Oral Examination Committee Members Robert Watson

Robert M. Calhoon

April 20, 1971
Date of Examination

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I owe my sincere thanks to: Fred Chappell, who criticized and advised; to Manly Wade Wellman, who encouraged always; and to my wife, faithful reader.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

THE CHAIN LETTER

After his children had left home and his wife, Sarah, had died, Mr. Murry sold the white frame house on Banks Street and purchased an eight by twenty aluminum mobile home. He located a sparsely wooded lot on the outskirts of town, leased it, and moved the trailer to that location. He had decided to make such a move only because he could no longer endure the center of town--the noise, the crowds, the rapidly declining neighborhood, the smell of diesel trucks that rumbled down the street at night--and because there were too many memories that he associated with the old house.

Mr. Murry had spent thirty-seven years as the supervisor of the men's department in a large, well established downtown store. Except for a brief gall bladder ailment during the late forties, he had worked every working day of that thirty-seven years. He had never been late. He had never loafed or quit early. He had been, in fact, the perfect employee: neat, courteous, mindful of the store's best interest. When he had reached retirement age he had requested that the manager tell no one that he was leaving, and, after walking out of the store on his final day, at five sharp, he had never returned.

Mr. Murry was, by disposition, a stern perfectionist. This fact was ever apparent in his appearance--the even, clean features of his thin face, his clear small blue eyes, neatly combed white hair, and his impeccable dress. Characteristically, the house on Banks Street had

been a masterpiece of organization. Each spring he had the walls repainted the same shade of flat white. The floors were always kept polished, the windows spotlessly clean, the flower beds weeded, the grass trimmed and cut. The furniture and wall decorations were simple and unpretentious. Every carefully packed box in the attic and basement was labeled as to contents and date stored. He kept precise notes on all the plumbing and the electrical wiring. Everything in Mr. Murry's life was methodically arranged. He left nothing to chance.

The Murrys had had two children. The first, a girl named Mary, was the image of her father. She was an excellent student, quietly married a local boy of good reputation and moved to California. Their second child, Robert, was born shortly after the war. He was a small, sickly child. He cried easily. The object of most of Sarah's affection, the boy grew up somewhat detached from his father and sister, and, by the time he was of school age, it was more than apparent that he was not all that his father expected. Discipline was administered without results. Robert seemed to detest his father's overbearing sense of order and he did all that he could to disrupt it. His performance in school was particularly poor. He was expelled twice and quit before his senior year to take a job as an auto mechanic.

It was obvious to Mr. Murry that the numerous scoldings administered during Robert's school years had been ineffective--if anything they had made matters worse. So during the boy's late teens Mr. Murry simply chose to ignore him. They did not take their meals together. They seldom spoke. Finally, after an accident in which Robert was arrested for driving under the influence of alcohol, Mr. Murry could tolerate him no longer. They argued bitterly. Robert packed his bags and left the house.

The boy's departure had very much disturbed Sarah. Once or twice a week, usually during the early hours of morning, Mr. Murry would be awakened by her sobbing. He left her alone during these spells and went for long, steady walks through the empty side streets of the town, halting only occasionally to stare at his reflection in the dark store windows.

He had not heard from Robert since the argument.

After Sarah had passed away--she died quite suddenly of a cerebral hemorrhage--there was no one left. Mr. Murry had no close friends. He did not attend church. He belonged to no clubs or organizations. He did, however, receive each month a carefully written letter from Mary. These he kept neatly tied together with white string in the order in which he had received them. Often he would read the letters over, starting at the top of the pile and gradually working his way down until he had read them all.

As soon as the trailer was securely anchored on a cinder-block foundation, Mr. Murry set about redecorating the interior. He removed all of the old furnishings and replaced them with furniture he either built or purchased from a local thrift shop. In the sleeping area he constructed a bed out of pine boards which he stained the color of aged walnut. For the kitchen he purchased a small oven with two burners and a Leonard ice box. An iron frame, vinyl-covered sofa was pushed against one wall. Beside the sofa he constructed a book case to hold a set of encyclopedias which, during his spare time, he read slowly and with great care. In the center of the small room sat two evenly spaced aluminum lawn chairs and an oak table. The walls were left bare. On top of the book case sat a high school graduation photograph of Mary.

Every Tuesday and Saturday Mr. Murry would walk to a market not far from the lot and purchase some ground beef, milk, bread, and frozen vegetables. Once a month he would buy an apple pie from a bakery near the market.

During the week he followed a strict schedule. He would awaken and dress at seven-thirty, start working in or around the trailer at eight, break at twelve for lunch and a nap, resume at two and quit at four-thirty for supper. After a light meal he would listen to the radio, play solitaire, or take up reading in the encyclopedia where he had left off the night before.

One afternoon in late September Mr. Murry was working in the lot raking up dried grass that was left from the last cutting. The weather had been unusually dry and some leaves had already begun to fall. These he raked along with the grass into small mounds that he spaced at even intervals around the yard. Towards the end of the afternoon, as he was assembling the last of the smaller piles, he noticed a young man leaning against a garage that stood on the opposite side of a narrow dirt road. The apartment had previously been unoccupied. He watched the young man carefully but discreetly, noticing during the following hours that he entered the apartment twice and then returned to lean against the side of the building. Except for the final gathering of the smaller piles into one large pile, the raking was complete. Mr. Murry continued, however, to rearrange the piles, combining two or three and then separating them again. He kept track of the young man's movements.

Presently, the young man crossed the road and walked onto Mr. Murry's lot. He scuffed through some of the leaves that Mr. Murry had

carefully gathered together, partially scattering them, and came to a halt not more than two feet from where Mr. Murry stood, still raking.

"You Mr. Murry?" he asked.

Mr. Murry looked up. The young man wore tennis shoes, blue jeans and a sweat shirt with cut-off sleeves. All of his clothing was splattered with paint. His round face seemed unusually small beneath his thick, dark hair. His eyebrows grew together, his lips were rather full and his skin, a dark olive, was made even darker by the unshaven bristle that shadowed his face.

"Saw your name on the mailbox and I thought I'd drop over and introduce myself--Phil Johnson."

He extended his hand. Mr. Murry replied by extending his.

Philip went on to explain that he and another boy were renting the garage apartment and that they were both seniors at the university. "Looks like we're goin' to be neighbors for a year or so."

"Is that right?"

"Yep. Listen, I was wonderin' if you'd mind if my buddy and I used your mailbox to get our mail? Save us from havin' to buy one."

Mr. Murry did not answer.

"Something wrong with that?"

"No."

"Well, can we?"

"I don't know. Let me think about it and you stop over in a couple of days and I'll let you know."

"We aren't goin' to hurt it or anything. It's no big deal, we just want to get our mail in it."

"You or your buddy stop over and I'll let you know."

"Yeh, all right I'll stop back."

He turned and walked across the yard, scattering another pile of leaves as he went. Mr. Murry watched until he disappeared into the apartment.

Two days later Mr. Murry was trimming up the grass that had grown ankle high around the foundation of the trailer when he happened to look up and see Philip plodding across the road. He was carrying a folding lawn chair and two cans of beer. Mr. Murry did not bother to stand, but continued to trim the grass. Philip set up his lawn chair beside the trailer and seated himself with his legs outstretched, digging his heels into the damp ground. He pulled off the top of one of the cans, took a long swallow and yelled, "How 'bout a beer Murry?"

Mr. Murry answered sternly, "No thank you."

"Sure ya won't have one? Tastes pretty damn good."

Mr. Murry didn't bother to answer. He continued trimming, pulling out several clumps of crab grass and tossing them in the general direction of Philip.

"Hey, I didn't say anything to piss ya off did I?"

"No."

"Ya don't mind me havin' a beer do ya?"

"No."

Mr. Murry went on trimming. Philip went on talking, asking questions that Mr. Murry answered politely but with the least possible words. Finally the grass around the foundation was cut level with the ground. Mr. Murry went into the trailer and returned, carrying one of his aluminum lawn chairs. He seated himself a respectable distance from Philip.

They talked for over an hour. Mr. Murry learned that Philip was from Baltimore and that he was an art major at the university.

Philip leaned back, stared reflectively at the trailer and asked, "What the hell do ya do here alone every night?"

"I read. Sometimes I listen to the radio."

"What kinda stuff do ya read?"

"The encyclopedia."

"The encyclopedia?"

"Yes . . . something wrong with that?"

"No, I guess not. I just never thought of just sittin' down and readin' the encyclopedia."

"It's very interesting."

"I'll bet . . . do ya ever go to movies or anything like that?"

"No, I never cared much for movies.

"Ya waiting for something?"

"What do you mean 'waiting'?"

"Ya know, waiting to move to Florida or to go on a vacation or something like that?"

"No, I'm not waiting for anything."

"I see," said Philip. He nodded his head, puckered his lips and stared at his tennis shoes. "Ya don't mind me droppin' over like this do ya?"

"No, I don't mind."

"I figured as long as we were stuck out here in the sticks together we might as well be friendly."

Mr. Murry forced a half smile.

During the autumn that followed, Philip visited with Mr. Murry at least once a week. They would sit talking in the evenings until

darkness forced Mr. Murry to switch on the stoop light. At times their discussions were very general--current affairs, jokes, old stories remembered--and on occasion they exchanged theories: "I think that the trouble that most people encounter is directly caused by their lack of planning. If they just took into account the consequences. . . ." and "There's just too many things ya can't plan. Anyway, ya never get anywhere if ya don't take a chance once-in-a-while" and so on.

On the nights when Philip did not visit, Mr. Murry would sit by the trailer window and stare at the light that burned dimly in the distant garage apartment. He would read the encyclopedia, stopping more often than usual to fidget around within the four walls, occasionally glaring at his reflection in the clear glass.

During the winter months they played two-handed canasta which Mr. Murry consistently won. "You're pretty damn lucky," Philip would say. "Skill," Mr. Murry would answer.

One night in February, as the two sat talking in the trailer, Mr. Murry spoke of his son Robert. He told the entire story. After he had finished they sat quietly for a few minutes.

"What the hell do you want me to say?" Philip finally asked. "That you were right and he was wrong?"

"No, I don't want you to say that."

"Then why the hell did you tell me about it?"

Mr. Murry said, "I don't know why I told you."

In late March Philip purchased a regulation horseshoe game. Together, on Mr. Murry's lot, they paced off the distance between the stays and turned over the sod to form the pits. Each evening they

would spend several hours playing. At first Mr. Murry had difficulty scoring, but after a few weeks practice he developed a feel for the shoes and began to score more points than his opponent. He rarely made a ringer but he always managed to lay the shoes close enough to the stays to score with each throw.

The shoes dug deep dusty pits on the lot, and the constant practice wore first a blister and then a callus on Mr. Murry's thumb.

One evening in late spring Mr. Murry answered a knock at his door to find Philip standing with books under his arm.

"I was wonderin'," he said, "if I could study here for a while? My roommate has some people over and I've got an exam tomorrow."

"Of course," said Mr. Murry directing him to the table.

While Philip studied Mr. Murry read in the "I" volume of the encyclopedia. Two hours passed. Philip finally closed his books, leaned back in the chair and lit a cigarette.

"Listen," he said, "I graduate Sunday and my roommate and I are goin' to have a little champagne on Saturday night so why don't you drop over?"

"Well, I don't know."

"Ya got anything else to do?"

"No."

"Then come on over."

"Well, I don't know. . . ."

"Ah, come on. Ya never seen our apartment anyway."

He paused reflectively and then answered: "Well, all right."

"I'll be expecting ya about eight, O.K.?"

"Fine," said Mr. Murry.

Philip collected his books and went to the door. "Wish me luck on my exam."

On Saturday morning Mr. Murry slept until nine o'clock. The day was overcast, so he puttered around the trailer, washing the inside windows, scrubbing and waxing the kitchen floor and cleaning the oven. He ate an early supper, showered, shaved and carefully combed his hair. He dressed in a blue seersucker suit and buffed up his black shoes. Outside a light rain had begun to fall.

He worked his way along the edge of the lot so as to avoid any mud that might have developed on the road. A light glowed from the parking area beneath the apartment, illuminating one small red sports car.

Mr. Murry's knock was answered by a tall red-haired boy who was wearing shorts.

"Is Philip Johnson in?" asked Mr. Murry.

"No, his parents came down last night and he went out to eat with them."

"Do you know what time he'll be back?"

"He's not coming back. Packed all his stuff this morning and moved out. Said he was goin' to spend the night at the motel with his parents."

"I see," said Mr. Murry. "Thank you."

The boy nodded his head and closed the door. Mr. Murry walked across the road and back to the trailer. The next day the garage apartment was empty.

Mr. Murry returned to his strict schedule. Each morning he would awaken at seven-thirty and work around the yard or in the trailer. On Tuesdays and Saturdays he would go to the market. Once a month he

would purchase an apple pie.

Two years passed. He completed the "K" volume of the encyclopedia. He had three teeth extracted. The garage apartment fell into disrepair and was torn down when the dirt road was widened and paved. The price of ground beef and milk went up. Grass gradually filled in the horseshoe pits until they were no more than slight depressions not at all visible in the thick spring grass.

One afternoon in May Mr. Murry went to his mailbox and found a long envelope. It was addressed simply: Mr. Murry, Route 3, Box 33, Huffines Road, Cary, N. C. It was postmarked Baltimore, Maryland. There was no return address.

He slipped the envelope into his shirt pocket and walked slowly back to the trailer in the warm sunshine.

Once inside, he seated himself at the table and examined the envelope, noticing the scribbled address and torn, crooked stamp. With a knife he made a precise tear along the top of the envelope and removed two unevenly folded sheets of paper.

The letter was a photographic copy of a typed original. It read:

> Some of the world's greatest financiers met in Chicago, Illinois, in 1932:
>
> President of the largest independent steel company.
> President of the largest gas company.
> Greatest wheat speculator.
> President of the New York Stock Exchange.
> One of the President's Cabinet.
>
> They should certainly be considered the world's most successful men. At least, they found the secret of making money. Now some thirty years later, where are these men?
>
> 1) The president of the largest steel company, Charles Schwab, died a pauper. The last few years of his life he lived on borrowed money.

2) The president of the largest gas company, Howard Hopson, is now insane.

3) The greatest wheat speculator, Arthur Cotton, died abroad insolvent.

4) The president of the New York Stock Exchange, Richard Whitney, was released from Sing Sing Prison.

5) The member of the President's Cabinet, Albert Fall, was pardoned and released to die at home.

The same year, 1932, a down and out apple vendor by the name of Walter Heston found a ten dollar bill in a New York gutter. Within five years he had turned that ten dollars into three million.

Conclusion: Accept life on its own terms. Forget about your troubles and go fishing.

The luck of this letter has been around the world four times. The one who breaks the chain will have bad luck.

Do not keep this letter. Do not send money. Send this letter and four copies to five of your friends to whom you wish good luck. This is no joke.

Add your name to the bottom of the list and omit the name at the top.

On the second page were ten names the last of which was Philip Johnson.

Mr. Murry read the letter four times, running his index finger under the words and forming them silently with his lips. Finally, he folded the letter and replaced it in its envelope. From the table drawer he removed the stack of letters from his daughter. He put the new letter on the bottom of the pile and retied the package securely with white twine.

EMPTY HOUSE

On the day before their marriage ceremony they were given permission by their supervisor to leave early--at 6:15 A. M. to be exact--and they left the mill and drove into Burlington a good forty-five minutes before the third shift went off. As they drove through the city, early sunlight filtered between the brick buildings on the east side of the street and was reflected in the dark glass store windows that lined the littered sidewalk on the west. The street was wet. Two black men leaned against a store front, waiting. Somewhere in the distance a train whistle sounded, fell silent, sounded again.

"How much further is it?" she asked.

"About two miles," he said.

They turned off of Church Street, crossed over railroad tracks and entered a residential area, away from the center of the city.

"A short-cut," he said.

She lit a cigarette and nodded.

The street was lined with shabby, once-white houses and gray trees. Except for their grimy blue fifty-eight Buick with its shattered side window and rusting dented fender, the street was empty. They drove on, the front wheels of the Buick shimmying from the encounter with the tracks.

"Is it the closest place you could find?" she asked.

He said, "It is the closest one we can afford."

They stopped at the corner and then turned right onto a commercial boulevard that ran parallel with Church Street. As they traveled north they passed three hamburger drive-ins, a fried chicken takeout, six gas stations, a shopping center under construction, two discount stores, a cotton mill, and six box cars on a siding.

They turned off the boulevard onto a side street and then into an unpaved alley. Along the sides of the alley sat six small houses. In one of them a light burned.

"What's the name of this street?" she asked.

"Murphy Street," he said.

"Which house?" she asked, flipping her cigarette out the window.

"That one," he said, not pointing, but nodding his head to the left.

There was no curbing. He parked the car half on the broken sidewalk, half on the black cinder road.

The house was old. It rested on piers, and brown weeds filled in the space between the earth and the sub-flooring. A sagging porch stretched along the front of the house. In two or three places the bevel siding had fallen away. The peeling paint was a dull grayish white. There were no shutters.

"Is this the best you could find?" she asked.

"Well, let's at least look inside before we make up our minds," he said.

When they walked into the front room, she wrinkled her nose. "What's that smell?"

"Smells like wet newspaper to me," he said.

"There's something dead around here," she said.

"I guess it hasn't been lived in for awhile."

"I guess not!" she said, sarcastically.

The walls of the room were covered with faded pink flowered wall paper. In one corner the paper had been ripped away, exposing the wooden slatting that lay beneath. Beside the door a large water stain extended from the ceiling. In the center of the ceiling hung a beige, bug-filled light fixture.

As she surveyed the room he watched her carefully, trying to gauge her reactions to the house, but also trying to imagine her in something other than blue stretch slacks and a white sleeveless blouse. He tried to picture her with her hair long or, at least, with it up and knotted fancy on her head. He could not. In the three years he had known her, her hair had always been dull brown, ragged and short. She wore it that way, he guessed, so that she would not have to bother with it at the mill. Most of the women at the mill wore their hair short; sometimes they teased it, but they always wore it short. Thinking of her now, she was in fact almost indistinguishable from the other thin, hunched-shouldered women who worked the night shift. Her only unusual characteristic was her badly decayed teeth. He remembered what his friend Harry, the spinning foreman, had said when he told him he was dating her. "She's got the most god-awful teeth I ever seen." It was no use trying to imagine her as anything but what she was: a female Abbott winder operator who worked the night shift at Thomas Mills.

He watched her walk into the kitchen. He went to the window, leaned against the wall, rubbed a small circle in the dirt that clung to the glass and peered out. In the corner of the front yard, half

obscured by a leafless bush and a clump of brown weeds, lay the broken and rusting frame of a tricycle. He stared at it thinking that probably children had once lived in this house and that perhaps they had done the damage to the wall paper. He did not like children.

Across the alley a man and woman emerged from the house in which earlier he had seen a light burning. The woman stared at his Buick while the man locked their front door and then they both walked quickly to their car, not looking at each other, and, as far as he could tell, not speaking. In a moment they were gone.

She stood in the kitchen staring at the old oven, the moldy icebox and sagging sink. Some tile squares were missing from the floor and a brown, shriveled apple core lay near the base of the stove. The kitchen was small, and there were no windows other than a tiny glass square in a door that she assumed led to the backyard. She had lived all of her thirty-seven years in a house similar to this one. In an identical kitchen she had cooked for her mother and younger sister. She had hoped that the house they would rent would have a large kitchen, but this place, she thought, was no improvement at all. If anything, it was worse--it was filthy. She opened the oven door and looked in. The sides were caked with a black, gritty crust and there was only one removable rack.

She left the kitchen, pausing to notice her fiance who was standing with his back to her. He was looking out the window. She had never liked the blue-green work clothes he wore. They made him look heavier and older than he was. She observed that he was in need of a hair cut and that his brown oily hair looked almost silver in the

gray light of the window. She could not see his face. "Get yourself a haircut this afternoon," she said, as she walked into the bedroom.

She decided that she liked the bedroom better than any room in the house. It was spacious, and the wall paper, which was blue, was covered with endless lines of dancing ballerinas. There was a large closet and next to the closet an alcove. They could put the crib in the alcove, she thought.

She looked over the bathroom carefully, deciding that it would have to be repainted and that a new fluorescent bulb would be needed in the fixture above the mirror. She stared into the mirror, stretching back her lips to expose her decayed teeth. She moved her lips up and down to adjust the degree of exposure. She closed her mouth, stepped back against the wall and smiled. She grunted and walked from the bathroom into the front room where she found him struggling to open a window.

"Something wrong with that window?"

"Seems to be stuck. I'll have the landlord fix it."

"A lot of things around here need fixin'."

"What do you think?"

"I don't know."

"Should we take the house or shouldn't we?"

"I don't know. There's a lot to be done. That bathroom needs repainting first thing and this room has to be repapered. It looks bad right now."

"You have to remember that the place is empty. It'll look better when we get the furniture in."

"Maybe so."

"Do you want me to tell the lady we'll take it?"

"If this is all you could find...I guess you might as well."

"I looked everywhere. This is the best for the money. We'll keep our eyes open for something better."

"Tell her we'll take it then."

They went out of the house and sat in the Buick. He started the car engine. She lit a cigarette. In a moment they were gone.

THE MEETING

By the time Thomas Baader had struggled down to the second floor, his left shoulder was throbbing; his vision was blurred. Fending himself off the brick wall with his shoulder, he stepped mechanically downward. Crumbling bits of white mortar slid from between the bricks, leaving chalk-like streaks down the arm of his new tweed suit and causing a miniature rock slide to plummet down upon his freshly polished cordovans. Halting, he dropped his suitcase solidly on the stair step and attempted to regain his equilibrium. He could see down the dark stairway to the glass double doors below. The hall was deserted; rain pounded against the door glass.

Balancing momentarily on the edge of the step, he questioned whether he should go forward to the airport or return to his apartment, two stories above. He had already made reservations with the airlines and a Chicago hotel, and today's meeting was very important. His immediate superior, Mr. Floyd, had made that point more than clear in their telephone conversation of the day before. "A most important meeting," he had said. "All the wheels. Good people to know if you expect to make it in the life insurance business." And so on. But then the pain was unusually intense today, and he wondered if going to the meeting in his present condition might not be a mistake. Of what use would he be if he could not sit upright in his chair? What kind of first impression would he make? And it was almost impossible to

to think with any degree of clarity while his shoulder was aching. Relaxing within the warmth of his own apartment he could lie on the bed, apply warming ointments and a heating pad, and perhaps, if he were lucky, the pain would subside just slightly. He knew, however, that if he was to proceed to the airport and commit himself to this meeting, then a day of complete agony was assured.

Of this fact he was positive. He understood the shoulder pain. For two and one half years he had struggled with it, and, although he had never discovered its cause, he knew exactly what to expect.

The pain had come with the job. Not that the two were related in any way--he had long ago dispensed with this theory--but that it was only after he had taken the job that the pain had made its first appearance.

He had accepted employment with the Mutual Insurance Company while still at the university, and after graduation he moved to the city and into a moderately priced, five story, brick apartment house. The apartment was convenient to both the office and the downtown area, and, except for the thin walls and the unusually noisy upstairs neighbors, it was much to his liking.

He progressed well in his training program.

One afternoon at the office, while reviewing some applications for benefits and validating death certificates, he noticed a slight twinge in his left shoulder. He took no particular notice of it--it was not even a pain exactly. And he had experienced thousands of similar twinges and twitches. He shrugged it off as nothing more than a small muscle spasm. The remainder of the day progressed uneventfully, with no reoccurence of discomfort.

But that night he was awakened by a deep, dull ache throbbing in his shoulder. As he lay very still in his bed he felt it spread, arching slowly but steadily across his chest, growing stronger and tighter, until it seemed almost to be choking him to death. His head ached. He was sweating. Thinking that he had somehow impaired the circulation to the left side of his body, he rolled onto his back and found, as he was to find every night in the months that followed, that it afforded no relief, merely a redistribution of pain. Lying alone in the darkness, he could suddenly recall the death certificates of many young men who had died suddenly of heart attacks. He imagined that he was having a heart attack and spent the remainder of the night thinking about death and questioning whether or not to call a doctor. The following morning he carried the pain to work where he spent the day doubled over his glass top desk. He acknowledged co-workers' polite inquiries with a despondent moan or mumbled under his breath, without looking up from his paper, "Cramp, muscle cramp." Five days later the condition was unimproved, and he made an appointment with a local physician.

In the sterile silence of the examining room a short, pug-nosed doctor wordlessly inspected him. When the physical was complete he was summoned to the doctor's office for counseling.

"You need to lose five or ten pounds," the doctor began, "but other than that your general health is excellent. I can find no physical reason for any shoulder discomfort."

Thomas was enraged. "What do you mean no physical reason? I can't even sit up straight. I haven't slept in two weeks. My god, the pain is sure enough real. There's got to be a reason for it. I can't go on like this much longer. . . ."

The doctor repeated, "I can find no physical reason for any shoulder discomfort."

He departed the doctor's office feeling not only the renewed and increased throbbing in his shoulder, but also the dull ache of medical indifference.

Unwilling to accept the doctor's diagnosis, he resolved to find his own remedy. After all, who knew better than he the symptoms of his ailment?

First, he submitted himself to daily rubdowns at the YMCA health club. But these rubdowns not only left him with the shoulder pain, but with a feeling of utter exhaustion. Secondly, he went on an egg and lean meat diet and trimmed off fifteen pounds. The pain continued. Next, he sampled innumerable bottles of completely ineffective pain relievers. And finally, he experimented with ointments and a heating pad and found that if he soaked in a hot tub and then applied this new remedy, there followed a period of slight relief. In this way he was able to carry on for the next year.

The following summer, during his two week vacation, he was examined by a doctor who had him admitted to a hospital for tests. After his discharge he went to the doctor's office.

"Mr. Baader," the doctor began, "your tests all look excellent--blood sugar, weight, cholesterol, heart, all look good. Your overall physical condition is excellent."

"But what about the pain?" Thomas asked.

"What pain?"

"My god, the pain in my shoulder. The pain you were examining me for."

"Oh, yes. Well, I can't find any physical reason for any kind of shoulder pain."

"You mean to tell me that this is a normal condition?"

"Have you ever thought that perhaps all this pain that you supposedly feel might be caused by the mind?"

"You mean that my shoulder doesn't hurt at all? That all this pain is something I just imagine?"

"Well, not imagine exactly. . . ." The doctor's explanation was cut short by Thomas' hasty departure.

That night, alone in his apartment, after applying an ointment and the heating pad, he cried. He had never experienced such despair. It seemed that there was no hope of relief. He thought about suicide but decided that he did not have the courage or, as he told himself later, the lack of it.

After showering, he stared at his reflection in the foggy bathroom mirror. The whites of his eyes seemed to have turned brown, and his once plump, red face seemed thin and colorless. His skin appeared to hang from his cheek bones, and his lips drooped limply open. There were two more spells of weeping before he regained control. Disgusted, he resolved that he would never again tell anyone of his ailment. He would not subject himself to the treatment he had received at the doctor's office. He would have no one calling him a "hypochondriac."

It was after he made up his mind to tolerate the pain that it first disappeared. He awakened a few days after his final physical and found that the pain had vanished. There were two days of complete relief before it reappeared, and in the months that followed there were other such periods. Whenever the pain disappeared he tried to convince

himself that it was gone permanently, but he always found that these pleasant interludes merely ushered in periods of greater agony.

Teetering there on the edge of the step, he made a decision: he would not go to the meeting. He would return to his apartment, call the airline and the hotel and cancel his reservation. He would call Mr. Floyd in Chicago and tell him that he was ill and that the meeting was out of the question.

He was turning to start up the stairs when Mrs. Porter, an elderly widow who had a morbid fascination with pain and sickness, appeared at the bottom of the stairwell and stared up at Thomas. A frown of the gravest concern flashed across her face.

Thomas was stunned by her sudden appearance. It was his rule to avoid her and her chicken soup remedies and her pack of pampering friends that lived in the apartment complex. He had once seen them descend like a flock of vultures on a sickly gentleman who lived down the hall, smothering him with their greasy cooking and cackling conversation. The old gentleman had been literally driven to take refuge in a local hospital, and after his discharge he had moved quietly from the apartment building in the dead of night.

She had caught him now, bent over, leaning against the wall, and he knew what she was thinking.

"Mr. Baader," she said, "are you feeling quite all right?"

A sudden panic gripped him, and he managed to straighten up and smile. "Oh yes," he said. "I'm feeling just fine, thank you." And after picking up his suitcase, he walked easily down the steps, through the double doors and into the rain. Looking over his shoulder he saw her suspicious face pressed to the door glass.

It was unusually cold for October. The sidewalk was crowded with people; the street was lined with steaming autos. Safely around the corner, he rested against the side of a building, massaged his shoulder gently, and then made his way painfully down the street to the parking deck.

Downtown traffic was moving slowly. While waiting at each intersection he propped his elbow on the arm rest and applied pressure to his shoulder. After sitting at one traffic signal for over twenty minutes, he reasoned that there must have been an accident somewhere ahead, and he attempted to change lanes. He flashed his turn signal and managed to angle the car in the proper direction, but traffic was very heavy and he was unable to move. Disgusted, he pulled out and cut off an oncoming vehicle. Looking in his rear view mirror he saw the enraged motorist brandishing a middle finger. He did not return the gesture. The defroster made the car unpleasantly warm. His head began to ache.

Finally he decided on an alternative route and worked his way out of the main stream of traffic, turning onto a narrow secondary street. This street, he reasoned, would make a connection with a primary artery that in turn would connect with the belt line. From the belt line he could easily reach the airport interchange.

He made good time, traveling over a mile and a half before being stopped at a street that was closed for repairs. Following the detour signs, he arrived, twenty minutes later, at the street from which he had originally turned. He was two miles back from the parking deck.

Traffic was moving more rapidly, however, and he was able to make up time. Thirty minutes later he was cruising north through a system

of concrete belt lines and bypasses toward the airport interchange.

The airport parking lot was filled with cars, and he was unable to locate a vacant space. It was only on the third level of the massive lot, a half mile from the terminal, that he was able to find a tight vacancy along a curve.

Suitcase in hand, he began the trek toward the distant terminal. The rain become heavy. Twice he stopped and rested, wiping the water from his face and massaging his shoulder.

Once inside the crowded terminal he waited in line twenty minutes only to find that the flight on which he had made reservations was one hour and twenty minutes behind schedule. "That one's in a holding pattern over New York," the ticket agent said. And Thomas went in search of an alternative flight.

A check of the major airlines proved fruitless. He was finally able, however, to purchase a ticket on a small airline that ran local flights to Chicago. The smaller airline still employed prop aircraft, but their planes were on schedule.

After checking his baggage he went to the airport restaurant and found a table near a large plate glass window. The window faced onto the landing runways, and, as he ate an undercooked breakfast steak and runny fried eggs, he watched a procession of whisper jets drop slowly through the clouds and touch down on the lighted concrete strips. He wanted to have his coffee cup refilled, but when he tried to get the waitress' attention she pretended not to notice. He paid his check and left the restaurant feeling as if he had over-eaten. Eggs always left a sour taste in his mouth.

He found his departure gate and entered a glass walled waiting room. Settling back into a plastic form seat, he closed his eyes.

The pain in his shoulder seemed worse, and his head still ached. He tried unsuccessfully to shut out the airport noises--the hum and whine of taxi-ing jets and the announcements that preceded the landing and departure of each aircraft. He tried to fall asleep but could not.

He was conscious that the waiting room was filling rapidly. He could hear polite conversation and the shuffling of baggage and rain-wear.

"Mind if I sit here?" someone asked.

Opening his eyes, Thomas saw an enormous orange-haired lady standing over him. He looked around; most of the waiting room seats were taken.

"No," he said, "I don't mind."

Her hair appeared damp. Tangled and electric, it stood straight out from her head. Her plump face was caked with thick, plastery make-up. Her small lips were smudged red; her eyes were deeply shaded. He guessed that she was over forty-five. As she sat down he became aware of the odor of heavy perfume. In her left hand she held a handkerchief which she used to mop her nose. Occasionally she coughed.

"Nasty weather," she said.

"Yes it is." He replied only to be polite.

"You on flight twenty-eight?"

"Yes."

"All the way to Chicago?"

"Yes, all the way to Chicago."

"That's where I'm going."

He did not reply.

"I take this flight quite often. My sister lives in Chicago."

He closed his eyes, and she was quiet.

Presently, the arrival of flight twenty-eight was announced.

"There she is," the fat woman said.

Thomas opened his eyes. Through the rain-streaked windows of the waiting room he could see a small, two engine passenger aircraft. Its props were still spinning; green and red lights flashed on its tail and wing tips. A gangway was being pushed up to the forward hatch and small, yellow, tractor-like vehicles with attached wagons were moving around the plane. From the belly of the plane luggage flowed down a conveyor belt and onto the wagons. Workmen, dressed in yellow rain gear, moved around the plane, stacking and unloading luggage. When the wagons were loaded they were pulled away. The one remaining wagon was pulled beneath the belly of the plane, and the conveyor belt was pushed around until its base rested on the wagon. Through the open cargo door Thomas could see men pushing a long crate. Gradually the crate was forced into position, and slowly it was eased down the belt and onto the flatbed. Two of the workmen on the ground leaned their shoulders against the crate and slid it into position on the wagon. The crate was rectangular in shape; paper tags were wired to its top.

"Human remains," the fat woman said.

"What?" Thomas said.

"Human remains," she said again. "A body."

He stared at the crate. "How do you know that?"

"I can tell by the box. My husband was shipped home in one just like that."

"In a crate?"

"There's a coffin inside. The crate just protects it. They have

to do it that way. They ship 'um air freight you know."

"I didn't know that," he said.

"Oh yea. How do you think all those dead people get home after they die?"

"I don't guess I ever thought about it."

"Do you have any idea how much it costs to ship a coffin? And the paper work . . . ."

He stared at the crate, paying her no attention. It was raining harder. The crate, waiting unattended in the rain, had begun to turn a deeper shade of brown. He wondered if the name on the tags might not smudge and become unreadable.

The two men who had been working inside the plane climbed down a ladder and stood laughing on the ground beside one of the tractors. One workman lit a cigarette while the other blew steamy breath into his hands and stomped his booted feet on the wet concrete. Behind them, down the foggy runway, a jet taxied slowly out of view.

A few minutes later the wagon bearing the crate was hauled away, the passengers disembarked and the announcement was made to board the aircraft.

As Thomas walked to the plane, he searched the fence line and the hangers for some sign of the crate. He saw only the gray airport landscape. It had disappeared, he thought, into one of the innumerable hangers or buildings that clustered around the terminal. As he climbed the gangway he felt the pain flare suddenly in his shoulder, and he paused, leaning his weight against the handrail. He found a window seat and sat down. He pressed his head back into the seat cushion and closed his eyes.

"Mind if I sit here?" the fat woman said.

He opened his eyes and nodded reluctantly.

She slipped off her coat, seated herself, and adjusted the seat to a reclining position. She continued to cough. Occasionally she blew her nose and carefully cleaned it by wrapping the handkerchief around her little finger and then digging it deep into her nostril.

He tried unsuccessfully to ignore her. The pain in his shoulder seemed worse, and her constant wheezing made him feel uncomfortably warm.

There was an announcement about the possibility of turbulence and the desirability of wearing seatbelts in such conditions, and then the plane turned, taxied down the runway and lifted rapidly into the sky. From his window he watched first the airport and then the city, both gray and fog bound, disappear beneath him.

"Better put it on," the fat woman said.

"What?" Thomas asked.

"Your seat belt. They said that there might be turbulence, and on a small airline like this when they say that there might, turbulence there will be. You better put it on."

He fastened his seat belt.

"Sometimes these local flights get pretty rough," she said.

"Really?"

"Yea, we'll probably be flying at a low altitude."

The first vibrations were so slight that Thomas thought that it might have just been the power of suggestion. The fat woman nudged him.

"Feel that?" she said.

"Yes."

"That was nothing. You wouldn't believe how rough it gets sometimes." She sneezed and mopped the front of her blue, flowered dress with her handkerchief. "You know where the sick bags are don't you?"

"Yes, I know where they are."

The plane vibrated, rolled slightly sideways and then dropped suddenly.

"Myself, I never get airsick but plenty do--believe me!"

"I can imagine," he said.

"I flew back last September, and the poor man in the seat next to me, I thought he was going to die." She paused.

Thomas made no reply.

"I'll bet he filled up three of those bags," she said.

The plane lurched and then shook violently. The vibrating grew worse. The pain in Thomas' shoulder spread slowly across his chest.

"Liable to be some sickness on this trip." She coughed and then blew her nose loudly. She adjusted the back of the seat until it was even with Thomas'. "Better to sit up straight if it's going to be rough. A lot of people make the mistake of trying to lay back, and that only makes it worse."

The plane quivered and then dropped. A stewardess staggered down the aisle, holding on to the corner of each seat as she went.

"Yes," the fat woman said, "this may very well be a rough one."

Fifteen minutes passed. The fat woman grew abnormally quiet, and, except for the pulsing of the engines, the plane was silent. The vibrating intensified and continued. Thomas' shoulder throbbed. He was sweating. His head ached. He slipped off his jacket and loosened

his tie.

"This is a bad one," the fat lady mumbled.

He made no comment.

The silence was interrupted by the sound of someone vomiting in the back of the plane. A stewardess hurried down the aisle, and when she returned she carried a small, but full, paper bag.

"Jesus," the fat woman said. She slumped slowly sideways in her seat until her arm pressed against the bare flesh on Thomas' forearm. Her skin felt hot and damp. He wanted desperately to move.

A lady in the seat in front of Thomas became nauseous, and an elderly gentleman across the aisle followed suit. In every part of the plane passengers were sick. The turbulence increased.

"Oh Jesus! Sweet Jesus!" the fat woman said, shaking her head.

There was a thick knot in Thomas' throat. His stomach felt heavy and bloated. He could taste the sourness of undigested egg in his watery mouth. His chest burned, and his skin felt hypersensitive. He gagged.

"Sweet Jesus!" the fat woman said, fumbling in the back of the seat for a sick bag. With all his strength, Thomas attempted to focus his attention out the window. Before the fat woman could find a bag she became nauseous. She clutched her handkerchief to her mouth, and yellow vomit spewed, thick and warm, onto Thomas' arm, down and across his pant leg. The odor was unbearably rancid. He felt vomit rising in his own throat. He fought to control it. He searched the forward pouch for a bag. There was none. His mouth filled. In desperation he climbed over the back of the still vomiting fat woman and tumbled headlong into the aisle. His shoulder struck the edge of the empty

seat and, as his head thumped against the floor, he vomited. Stumbling, he lunged down the aisle and slammed into a stewardess. His shoulder caught her just below the knees, and she tumbled forward with a screech.

He lay limply semi-conscious on the floor, aware of the vivid glaring of lights and the rapidly increasing din of confusion.

After cleaning himself up in the men's room of the Chicago airport, Thomas stood in front of the restroom mirror and smiled. He adjusted his tie and carefully combed his hair.

The pain was gone. There was no lingering after soreness.

He picked up his suitcase, which now contained the soiled clothing from the flight, and walked through the terminal and into the sunshine. The air was cool but clear. He could not remember when he had ever felt better.

He hailed a cab and requested that the driver take him to the Mutual Life Insurance Company in downtown Chicago. Riding through the countryside, he slid comfortably down in the back seat and locked his hands painlessly behind his head. He joked with the driver about the incident on the plane and made a few remarks about the pleasant weather.

But by the time they had reached the center of the city he was slumped over in his seat, the pain throbbing once again in his shoulder and chest, his face pressed against the coolness of the window glass.

JOKES

I

The room is dimly lit; pale light filters from the rectangular fixtures above the pool tables. The walls, painted a dull dark brown, are modeled with plaster leaf ornamentation, overlaid with cue racks and small blackboards. At irregular intervals, along a mid-wall railing, stand deserted beer mugs and wasted squares of green cue chalk. Shabbily dressed men mill about the room, watching games of eightball, drinking beer, and standing in small groups talking and laughing.

Robert, age six, is alone at the bar. Before him, on its smooth varnished surface, sits a mug of ginger ale, fizzling. His light brown hair is neatly combed. He is dressed in a blue sailor shirt, short wool pants, knee socks, and brown tie shoes. His gray winter coat is draped across the bar beside him.

Robert sits very straight on his stool. His legs swing slowly back and forth, the soles of his shoes barely tapping the foot rest. He does not smile. His deep set brown eyes, moving deliberately in time with the slow swinging of his legs, study the saleable articles attached to the opposite wall--bottles of hair tonic, cartons of cigarettes, combs, knives, pocket watches, a calendar with a semi-nude woman smiling above the dates.

His father is among the men. Lost somewhere in a tight bundle of bodies at the far end of the room, he appears periodically and

glances at his son.

Beyond a large plate glass window at the front of the room, cars move soundlessly through the Philadelphia streets. The sky, framed between the low flat roof tops and the brown fringe of an interior window curtain, is cloudless.

Twenty minutes pass.

Gradually the roar of conversation settles into a low murmur and then, suddenly, the entire room explodes with laughter. Men jump about slapping each other on the back. Others lean against the walls and pool tables. Doubled over, their arms wrapped around their ribs, they pause only long enough to communicate their delirium to others or to take a short swallow of beer.

Robert does not laugh. His eyes reach the calendar and stop momentarily before beginning the cycle anew--hair tonic, cigarettes, combs, knives....

II

Crouching in the boxwoods between a lawn shed and a small palm tree, Robert watched his mother. He slipped his chemistry book and a tablet under his knees to avoid staining his trousers in the grass. His mother leaned against the backyard fence talking to a neighbor, Mrs. Alton. A plastic clothes basket was wedged against her hip. Freshly washed clothing hung dripping on the line.

"I enjoyed Philadelphia," she began. "It was a nice town. At least the side we lived on was nice. I guess like any city there are sections that are undesirable, but the west side where we lived was

very nice. People kept their homes up and there was a park not far from our house. Good schools."

"We had wonderful neighbors. A Mrs. Shackly who lived two doors down was as fine a woman as you'd ever want to meet. Do anything in the world for you. And you know, her husband was an alcoholic. The worst kind--a woman beater. Stayed drunk most of the time."

"How many times have I heard that story?" Mrs. Alton said, nodding her head.

"And you know," his mother continued, "she would never say a word against that man. That's how good she was. And defend him! You just never said anything about him while she was around."

"An unfortunate situation." said Mrs. Alton.

"Yes, well you have that anywhere, I suppose. Philadelphia is just like all cities. Robert's father loved the place. Of course it was his home town. His parents owned a small store there. I used to try and get him to move away and take a job at some other G. E. plant, but he never would. He was a stubborn man and Robert gets more like him every day. They even look alike."

Mrs. Alton nodded.

"Well," his mother continued, "after he passed on . . . it was the winters mostly and Robert being so young at the time, I just thought it best that we move down here. My people live just outside of Tampa, you know."

"When did your husband die?"

"It'll be ten years this June." She paused. "He had a heart attack."

"That's what takes so many of them these days." said Mrs. Alton.

"He had a bad heart. In fact he'd had an attack just after Robert was born. Of course Robert didn't remember anything about it and it was hard on him when his father did finally die. All of his father's people had bad hearts. None of that on my side of the family."

Mrs. Alton nodded, pushing her lower lip over the upper in a gesture of compliance.

"I don't mean that it wasn't a shock . . . it was. Especially for Robert, he was so close to his father. And the circumstances were so tragic."

"Oh really?"

"Yes," she said, nodding her head. "I woke up in the middle of the night, about three o'clock as best as I can remember--everything happened so quickly--and his father was gasping for breath. At first I thought he was having a nightmare--he had a lot of those--and I tried to wake him up before I realized. Well you know, I'd seen it all before and I knew what was happening. I went into the living room to call an ambulance. When I got back to the room Robert was there alone with the body." She paused. "Poor Robert watched his father die."

"Terrible." said Mrs. Alton.

"He was only eight at the time. At first I was afraid it might have a harmful effect on him but he's done real well. He graduated this year, you know."

"That's good." said Mrs. Alton. "Sometimes an experience like that can permanently damage a child's personality. Just the other day one of my friends, Mrs. Thomas (you know Mrs. Thomas, don't you) Well she told me about this ten year old boy who watched his father

and mother burn to death in a car wreck. There wasn't anything he could do. Some passers-by held him back and it took ten minutes for them to die and they just kept screaming the whole time. They were pinned inside. It was awful. I don't even like to talk about it. Anyway, this young boy saw all this and, you know, he was never able to speak again."

His mother smiled, grunted and shook her head.

III

It is raining at midday. Robert, dressed in a yellow rubber raincoat and yellow hat, stands outside the G. E. plant. His bicycle is propped against a nearby chain link fence. When the noon whistle sounds he walks a few feet to an open gate. Men stroll from the plant and across to the small diners that line the opposite side of the street. The last man through the gate is Robert's father. Tall and thin, he walks slowly, his head bowed, his hands pushed into the pockets of his brown raincoat.

"Mother sent me with your lunch," Robert says, producing a brown paper bag from beneath his coat.

"I'm going home for lunch today."

"But mother said you were going to eat here."

"Your mother doesn't know."

Robert grabs his bicycle by the handle bars and accompanies his father down the street.

"I didn't think you had time to eat at home and still get back before the whistle."

"I'm not going back."

"Did they fire you like they did Hanson?"

"No."

"Did you tell Mom?"

"No."

"What will she say?"

"I don't know."

"She'll get mad, won't she?"

"Well, we'll just pretend it's a joke."

"What kind of joke?"

His father laughs and then pats him on the back of his head.

IV

Robert sat sideways at the table, ignoring his supper plate. Across the table his mother sat eating earnestly, pushing in forkfuls of franks, beans and potato salad. She paused and then took a long swallow of iced tea. She stared at Robert. He did not look at her. Chewing, she mumbled a remark or two that he ignored. After swallowing she rested for a moment, cleaning her teeth and gums with her tongue, twisting her lips into grotesque near puckers. Her plump face grew still.

"What did you do in school today?"

He did not answer.

"I said what did you do in school today?"

No answer.

"Did you do anything?"

He shook his head.

"Nothing?"

He replied with the same gesture.

"You did go to school didn't you?"

He nodded.

"Then why didn't you do anything?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Well you better find out. From the looks of that last report card you need to find out what's going on." she paused. "Three D's." She scraped up the remainder of her potato salad and shoved it into her mouth. She chewed quickly. "You'd have to be a moron to get three D's." Small soggy strips of partially chewed food spewed from her mouth onto the formica table surface. "What's the matter with you? Can't you talk tonight?"

"No," he said.

He opened the icebox. Inside, encased in Tupperware, was what remained of other uneaten meals--fried chicken, canned ham, cottage cheese, roast beef. He took the container of roast beef and, picking up a knife at the table, went into the living room. He ate the cold meat while watching the local news on television.

There had been a large furniture company fire the night before and that very afternoon, a suicide. The suicide had taken place downtown during the height of the evening traffic. A man, whose identity had not yet been established, had leaped from the fifteenth floor of an office building into a concrete parking lot. After the program had signed off Robert changed the channel and watched the local news again.

Stretched out on the couch he continued to watch television. At ten o'clock he heard water running into the bathtub. At ten-thirty he heard the muffled sound of the television in his mother's bedroom. By midnight, after turning off the living room television, the house was silent.

Outside, on the screened-in porch, he smoked three cigarettes, slowly.

After locking up the house and turning off the lights, he walked quietly through the hallway and listened at his mother's door. As he eased the door open he heard the ticking of her alarm clock. The room smelled of perfume. The light from a street lamp shown through the window, producing irregular rectangular patterns on the floor and up and across the foot of his mother's bed. A patch of light illuminated the tent-like protuberances made in the white bedspread by her limp feet. He approached the bed and stared at his mother's sleeping face, mashed, open-mouthed, into a thick feather pillow. Her hair was drawn up in curlers and covered with a hair net.

"Wake up," he said.

She did not move.

"Wake up."

She stirred slightly, moving her face deeper into the pillow. She lay quiet again.

"Wake up."

"Umm? What?" She lifted her head and squinted in the darkness.

"I said wake up!"

"What? What is it? Is something wrong?"

"Yes."

"What? What's wrong? What's happened?"

"Nothing happened."

"Then what is it? What's wrong?"

"You're what's wrong."

"What in the world are you talking about? Have you been dreaming?"

"Do you think maybe I've been having a nightmare? I have a lot of those, you know."

"Will you please tell me what's going on. What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about you and those god damn lies you're always telling."

"Lies? I don't understand." She reached over and picked up the alarm clock. "It's two o'clock in the morning. You've been dreaming. Go back to bed."

"I was listening to your conversation with Mrs. Alton today."

She wrinkled her brow.

"I heard what you told her."

"What did I tell her?"

"Lies."

"Are you kidding with me?"

"No."

"Well, what did I lie about?"

"About how he died."

She did not speak.

"He had a heart attack and I was alone with the body. What do you tell people that shit for?"

She did not answer.

"Well, answer me."

She sat upright in the bed, slumped forward and wrapped her arms around her knees. "I won't have you using profanity in this house."

"Oh for christ sake."

She paused. "Well, it's no one's business how your father died."

"But do you have to tell everyone that long involved lie about a heart attack?"

"Do you know what people would think if they knew what happened?"

"It doesn't matter to me what people think."

"Well it matters to me."

"It shouldn't."

"Well it does."

He stared at his mother a moment and then said, "Tomorrow you're going to tell Mrs. Alton the truth."

Her eyes wrinkled with fear. She lifted her hand uneasily to her head and patted her curlers. "I can't do that."

"If you don't I will."

"You wouldn't."

"Watch me."

"Why are you doing this to me?" She shook her head slowly back and forth. "I just don't understand. I just don't understand what I did to deserve this kind of treatment."

"Don't give me that shit."

"I just don't understand. . . ." Her sentence trailed off into sobs. Slumping forward, she rested her forehead on her knees.

"It's no use crying. It's not going to change my mind."

"I just don't understand. . . ." she continued.

He smiled. "I know you don't. But it doesn't really matter."

He walked to the door. "Sometimes," he said, "I think you've lost your god damn mind." And then he laughed hysterically.

He closed the door as silently as he had opened it.