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### First, Plant Your Feet

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FIRST, PLANT YOUR FEET

By

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Bachelor of Arts, Oregon State University, Corvallis, Oregon, 2003

Thesis

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## The Book of Mutilations

Deputy Swango unloaded the contents of his U-Haul into the garage of the house next door to us. He didn't have any help. Just a hand-truck, and two barking, bouncing miniature pinschers. I wanted to go help, but for the first time in my life I was in the care of my biological mother, Hollis, and she'd ordered me to stay in the house all day, out of sight, until she got home from work. If there was one charge she didn't need added to her sheet, she told me, it was child neglect. To keep me busy, Hollis bought me a set of 1954 Britannicas from an estate sale, leather-bound, coated in a permanent layer of dust. I'd asked for a newer bike. She told me to read the encyclopedias and to work on my spelling. She had decided to track me down when I made the front page of *The Oregonian* after winning the state spelling bee. No fourth grader had ever done that—certainly no foster kid.

Back then, I was new to Perrin Street and I had to discover its peculiar terrors for myself. There was the gray-bearded old bachelor who built to-scale, fully-functional, remote control airplanes out of balsa wood, aluminum, and rainbow-colored wiring. Spitfires, B-29s, Japanese Zeroes, crop dusters, twin props, Boeing 737s, anything that flew. He spent Saturdays with his garage door open, spraying paint and lacquer, hand-detailing the appropriate logos, making sure the double entendres and puns that captioned the lewd artwork on the noses of the fighters were historically accurate. He flew his creations over the football field of the high school. Hollis told me to steer clear: his *real* hobby, she said, was getting boys my age to blow him, and although he'd never been

caught, it was only a matter of time. I listened to her; what choice did I have?

There was the Grimble's front yard, full of appliances, toys, cats, assorted toddlers, metal objects moist with tetanus. A pothole on Chatwood Street wrecked the rims of bike tires. On Bowers Road, there was a slobbering rottweiler that had a taste for the human calf muscle and ankle bones. The concrete storm ditch behind the houses on our side of the street became a river in a heavy rain, enticing daredevils and imbeciles to live up to their reputations.

Around our neighborhood—as everywhere—people earned their monikers and lived out their days proving everyone right.

“Earless” was Swango's moniker. Friendly tracer bullet, Desert Storm, 1991. Which brings me to the number one terror of my neighborhood: Lawrence Burr. Lawrence dubbed Swango “Earless” in the last week of summer before school was scheduled to start again. I was two feet away when he said it.

Lawrence looked like a mixture of chimpanzee and giraffe. He lived in the house across the street and had failed fifth grade twice. Tall and burly with a long skinny neck and large sharp face that made him look at once vulturous and fragile. Freckled, red-headed, two-fisted, preacher's son. Lawrence's father, Mr. Burr, was actually Pastor Burr. You'd see him at the Baptist Church over on Chatwood, changing the letters on the sign, shuffling the weekly words of wisdom, stopping to wave at every car that passed. No kid in grade school had parents older than Lawrence's. Pastor Burr spent his days mowing the church lawn, spreading the church mulch, trimming the church trees. Occasionally, I'd get bored in the house, so I'd climb onto the roof, and from there, I

could see Pastor Burr wave as he rode the lawnmower, his white hair visible like the bulb of a lighthouse. I attended services once and Mr. and Mrs. Burr sang a duet. They were terrific singers, but they didn't know spit about raising a decent human being.

Lawrence and I had an arrangement: I traded him items from Hollis's underwear drawer in exchange for not getting pelted with rocks, Indian-Burned, Texas-Titty-Twistered, or Wet-Willied. Once, he gave me a deep knee bruise because Hollis' laundry was dirty and I had to give him beige control-tops with snags, which meant I had it coming.

When Hollis got home, I ran outside to look into Swango's garage. He'd emptied the U-Haul and was sweeping it out as his dogs sat in the lawn watching me with their mouths open.

"You want help?" I asked him, our first words together.

"Well hello, Boss," Swango said, push-brooming a ribbon of dust and packing peanuts out the back of the U-Haul..

I asked if his dogs would bite, if he carried his gun all the time, if he needed help putting stuff away. He answered, no, no, and if I wanted.

"This is heavy," I said, lifting one end of a wooden chest that sat in the middle of the garage.

"It's full, that's why," he said.

"What's in it?"

"If you really want to know," he said, "I'll tell you. But we'll have to keep it to ourselves. What do you say, Boss? Are you trustable with secrets?"

I said I was and prepared myself to marvel at a load of pistols or handcuffs or Iraqi ears and skulls. As he bent down to open the chest, I got a look into the hole where his right ear used to be. It resembled a deep belly button. On its edges were sprigs of hair sticking out like an unruly cowlick. When he got the chest unlocked, he caught me staring and said, as if he knew what I was thinking, “When they sewed it up, I was so mangled that some of the skin from inside my ear had to be pulled out to cover the hole, so that’s ear hair you’re seeing. I’m wearing it on the outside now.”

He held the chest open just a crack and leaned towards me so we were face to face.

“Don’t believe that looks don’t matter, Boss,” he said. “Women pretend to be fair as judges. ‘I like a man with personality’ they say. But try lopping your nose off and watch them scatter.”

I asked him if it hurt when his ear got shot off.

“You hear stories about shock and how people lose a finger and never feel the hydraulic press come down or whatever. Don’t believe it. This hurt *huge*. Like I’d been stung by a bee that was burning alive. I *wish* I’d gone into shock. The guy standing next to me when it happened had to wrestle my hand away from my head because my fingers were disappearing into my skull. He told me later he thought I was trying to pull my brain out through the hole. I told him he should have let me, but that was, you know, my *immediate* reaction. I’m completely better about the whole thing now.”

Swango slowly raised the lid of the chest, making a creaking noise with his mouth as if it were the crypt of some ancient Egyptian monster, and then he flung it open. It was

full of dishes wrapped neatly in wax paper and hand towels.

That night, I sat down to play Nintendo while Hollis drank White Zin, popped aspirin, and telephoned whichever man she was seeing to yell out her problems. I pressed buttons, collected coins, earned lives, warped, and advanced. Up to that point I'd spent my life in unfamiliar houses, but I'd never seen a collection of belongings anything like Swango's. As for furniture, he had only a couch and that wooden chest. No mattress, no box spring, no television, no refrigerator, no kitchen table, no chairs, nothing that wouldn't fit in a fruit box or a milk carton. I'd asked him if his furniture was being delivered, and he said no. It was as if he was forever traveling light. The couch was a fold-out. He didn't watch TV because all you heard was bad news and sports scores, and he could live without both.

He said he knew things. He knew the suburbs were the inevitable setting for copycat gangs of white boys. He knew that as long as Jordan could walk, Drexler would never win a championship. He knew that the next major terrorist attack would be perpetrated by a well-to-do white suburbanite woman who felt massive guilt for aborting the babies of her various lovers for the last twenty years. He said black drug dealers were in cahoots with Castro to topple the American work ethic. He'd rather have lost a leg than his ear, because, he said, "No matter what they tell you, women can't see past a hole in the side of your head, but there's an amputee fetish that would have been a wild ride."

My life up to that point had been spent in strange houses, sifting through the accumulated things of people I didn't know. I was always snooping—a problem I have to this day, a problem my wife says is a symptom of "something else." Snooping made my



new surroundings familiar. The grandmother-type, out of whose care Hollis “saved” me, had been sweet and stupid. She fed us Whoppers or Big Macs every night. She had tole-painted, caricatures of black children eating watermelons lining her mantel and boxes of thirty-year-old electricity bills all of which were marked “Paid” in a flowing, grandmotherly script. The ex-navy widower, Colonel Harstreet, hoarded foster children in his large ranch-style, carrying on the tradition of his dead wife and her compulsion to save things. She saved cats, dogs, parrots, ferrets, cockatiels, newspapers, pennies, coupons, magazines, old clothes, buttons from presidential campaigns both successful and not, buttons that said *I Like Ike* and *Madly for Adlai*. Before the colonel was the orphanage, with its closets full of spiders and dead letters. Before that was Hollis’s mother—my grandma—her trailer full of floral-printed wallpaper and upholstery. She gave me my name. If a baby picture of me exists, she took it. When I fell down the steps and bit off a chunk of my tongue, she stuffed my mouth with a damp washcloth and drove me to the emergency room. I got booster shots while sitting on her lap, wrapped in her arms. She died too.

“What’s that man’s story?” Hollis asked me once she had slammed the phone down for the final time that evening. The men in her life—and her reactions to them—was the worst part of living with her. Her current boyfriend tended bar at the Ron-D-Voo Tavern. He slept over occasionally and made noises like a ox.

“He’s the new deputy,” I said.

“Really!” she said. “Right next door?”

“He has dogs. Two of them,” I said. “And no furniture.”

“None?”

Immediately I worried I’d betrayed Swango. There hadn’t been any actual secret, nothing in the chest but dishes, but still I’d told what I knew about him. And at the time, I owed Hollis nothing, wasn’t obligated to tell her a thing.

“A couch,” I said. “Right *now*, he has a couch, and I think the rest of it’s on the way.”

She got up looking puzzled, left her empty wine glass dangerously close to the edge of the coffee table, and locked herself in the bathroom. When she came out, she looked frazzled, saying, “Finally all that taxpaying will pay off, huh? A deputy right next door, that’s something! Some-*thing*.” Then she went to bed and left me free to stay up as late as I wanted.

I found out soon enough that Hollis had a capacity for gift-giving. She started coming home from work early so she could bake hamburger, corn, and mushroom soup casseroles for Swango. She covered them in tinfoil and ordered me to be the delivery boy. Because I’d never lived with her before—I’d only met her once at my grandma’s funeral—I didn’t yet know that she had a keen sense of abandonment. She could smell it coming. Could hear it, feel it, taste it, and see it a mile off, like a vaporous watering hole in the desert. The mortgage killed her. Her Visa and Mastercard were maxed out. Bad luck compounded by disastrous decisions. The first night we were reunited as mother and son, she told me about her rap sheet and that she saw a shrink off and on, whenever she had money. The shrink preached honesty and prescribed anti-depressants, both of which

Hollis couldn't afford. She split her dosages and washed them down with the White Zin, and so the news that our own pseudo-body guard lived next door made her weepy. I doubted he could do anything specific to protect us, but to Hollis, Swango's cruiser parked in the driveway was as good as a cannon, his name painted on the mailbox as deterring as a moat.

One day in late June, I couldn't take staying indoors any longer so I decided to ride my bike once down our street. Oregon weather had never been so perfect for wheelies and plywood jumps. The grandmother-type couldn't afford to buy us bikes; the ex-navy, widower colonel lived on the side of the Coburg Hills and even though there were dozens of bikes in the cluttered "shop," they were all rusted through from the constant mountain mist.

Around noon, on my sixth or seventh trip around the block, Swango backed his cruiser into his driveway. Instead of paying attention to where I was going, I watched him back in, veered off the sidewalk, and steered my bike head-on into the front of Pastor Burr's parked '78 Chevy stepside. I went over the handlebars and smacked the grille.

When I stood up, a little dazed, I couldn't see out of my right eye. I stumbled a few steps and fell down again. I looked into the chrome hubcap of the truck and saw what looked like a sheet of red velvet covering the right side of my face.

Suddenly Swango was standing over me. He pushed me onto my back and began wiping at my face with his jacket.

"God in Heaven, Boss!" he said, holding my eyelids open, blinding me in the sun.

“Are you lucky or what?”

I started to say something, but a large swig of blood ran into my mouth and the salty taste made me gag.

“Not used to the taste of blood? Then you shouldn’t be head-butting parked cars.” He used one of his sleeves and wiped at my mouth. “An inch lower and you wouldn’t have an eyeball.”

He told me to lie still while he tied the sleeves of his jacket around my head like a bandana. He said I had a three inch or so gash through my eyebrow. From the looks of it, I sliced myself on the top edge of the license plate. Later that night, I ate leftover spaghetti noodles with butter, and I could still taste the blood caked in my molars.

Swango led me to the house. Without knocking, he opened our door and called in.

“Where’s Hollis?” he asked me. I’d never heard him say her name before. I was sitting on our lawn so that I didn’t get blood on the driveway.

“She’s working,” I said.

“There’s nobody watching you, Boss?”

“I’m not supposed to leave the house.”

“You’re looking at a dozen stitches,” he said. “But if I take you in somebody will want to know where your mother is.” He stopped, shut our door. “Come on over to my house. We’ll wait until she gets home and she can take you to the emergency room. I’d take you myself but then there’d be reports to file.”

I went with him. I still didn’t feel any pain, although in a few hours, when I got to the ER, I’d feel the stitches going in and pass out at the thought of my eye being

inadvertently punctured. Hollis's presence wasn't exactly comforting.

"You sit here," Swango told me when he got me situated on his kitchen floor. If I dripped, I'd drip on the linoleum instead of the carpet. "Keep applying pressure. I'm going to go bend that license plate back before the Pastor sees it and starts asking questions."

After that day, Swango became a sort of guardian. Hollis explained our situation to him: her two ex-husbands in Oklahoma City, the pain it had been to clean herself up, the situation with Intercontinental Collection Services, her inability to afford proper child care, my smarts, my spelling championship, which had convinced her that I could take care of myself. Actually, my ability to spell obscure words was a function of memory, not smarts, requiring only that I read the letters that popped into my brain.

But Swango agreed that she had it rough. Rather than insist that she arrange adult supervision for me, he told her he'd stop in a couple times a day to check on me. Crime in Linn County was a nocturnal nuisance, like cockroaches, and when he worked the day shift he had all the time in the world.

He's the one who took me to have my stitches removed. He brought me lunches from the Mexican restaurant that was next door to the pharmacy where Hollis bought her pills. Around noon each day, he'd come into the house without knocking, find me parked in front of the Nintendo, and set my lunch on the top of our cabinet TV. When strapped for time, he'd give me a military salute and disappear without a word; if he had nowhere to be he'd sit on the couch and thumb through the Britannicas and ask me to spell the longest words he could find. We'd bring the pincers over—Jack and Jill were their

names—and Swango would lecture all three of us about the dangers of drugs, the unprofitability of crime, the inscrutability of women. They were as dangerous as bear traps hidden in the brush.

“Now listen,” he said, “I don’t mean your mother necessarily when I say that, but females as a general species.”

“You think they’re dangerous?”

“You ever seen a bear trap?”

The ex-Navy colonel had one on the wall in his shop, hanging over all the rusted bikes.

“Tell yourself,” Swango said, “that you can take them or leave them. *That’s* the attitude you want.”

“Is that your attitude?” I asked.

“Absolutely,” he said.

In July, Swango went away to fulfill his duty in the reserves. A week in Georgia doing drills, then a week at Ft. Hood taking classes. He gave me a spare key so I could go into his house and feed his pinschers and made me swear not to leave the house for any other reason. I stayed indoors as best I could. But after the second day of no visitors, I took my bike down to the E-Z- Stop to buy a jalapeno corn dog, something I had done a few times before I wrecked into Pastor Burr’s Chevy.

The clerk at the E-Z-Stop was named Taz. He’d covered himself in tattoos and wore a set of nuts and bolts in his stretched earlobes. He had green hair which grew like a

spine out of the top of his head. Somehow, he recognized me from the newspaper when I won the state bee—the clinching word had been *argillaceous*, meaning: containing, made of, or resembling clay.

Taz bet me one Crazy 7 scratch-it that I couldn't spell *monosodium glutamate* off the back of a bag of Fritos. He'd told all the other clerks that a bee champion frequented the store, so the normal clerk—an older woman with gigantic pearlescent dentures—would sell me cigarettes for Hollis if I could use various words in sentences. I'm sure she had no way of knowing if my sentences made sense.

I handled *tetrasodium*, then *pyrophosphate*, and even the proper nouns, *Kalamazoo* and *Michigan*, but Taz kept offering to go double-or-nothing, pulling different products off the shelves to find words that would stump me. Finally, I nailed *methylisothiazolinone* off the back of a bottle of Pert Plus, and Taz had had enough.

I went outside with my corn dog and my tickets. I saddled my bike but didn't pedal off. I stood down and scratched the tickets. I remember being giddy at the chance of winning, given to me for nothing more than reading the letters in my brain.

The sixth ticket I scratched earned me five dollars. Tickled, I scratched the seventh and found that I'd won two-hundred-fifty more. I don't remember my first frenzy of thoughts, but the first thing I did was step off the bike and cash the ticket inside. Taz seemed at once indifferent and excited to shrug off the company's rules. He had no problem giving a twelve year-old lottery tickets and he had no problem handing over twelve twenties and a ten in cash. I paid him for the twelve tickets he'd given me and rode off with the wad of two-hundred thirty-eight dollars cash in my back pocket, the

place where I'd eventually keep the brown leather wallet I planned to buy with some of the money. On it, stamped in Western-style lettering, would be my name.

I almost made it home without any trouble. But when I got to my street, Lawrence Burr headed me off on the sidewalk.

"You're quite the little suck," Lawrence informed me.

"Okay," I said.

"Your babysitter let you outside?"

I said no.

"So where you been?" he asked, turning his bike so that it blocked the entire width of the sidewalk.

"Getting a corn dog," I said.

"And where is it?"

"Gone. It was jalapeno."

"You only had one?" he asked, and I nodded. "That means you got change. Give me it."

Before I had a chance to tell him no or yes, he pulled me off my bike and held me against the cement, pinning my left arm under me, my right in his ogreish junior high grip. I started to panic, worrying that the blood rushing to my head would pop the seam of healed skin that held my eyebrow together.

Lawrence turned out my pockets and found some change and a lottery ticket. It was the five dollar winner. I'd forgotten all about it. Lawrence checked the ticket twice, held it in front of my face, and asked if I was serious.



He didn't wait for me to answer and turned his bike toward his house, disappearing into the garage. I went back inside and took the wad of cash out of my back pocket. Lawrence hadn't bothered to check there. I folded each bill into the pages of Volume 3 of the Britannicas. I looked at the book edge-wise and saw that it looked no thicker than it did before.

That night, I went to feed Jack and Jill. Swango moved in almost two months earlier, but cardboard boxes still lined the hallways. The couch was two feet out from the wall and the wooden chest sat in the middle of the living room at an odd angle, too far from the couch to let you put your feet up, too far away to serve as a coffee table. He still had no TV. On the wall in his bathroom, above the hand towel's chrome ring, a gold nail tacked his purple heart to the wall.

Should I have been hunting around Swango's house? No. But I'd spent my life surrounded by the unfamiliar, and like it or not, I was a burrower. I got into everything. I emptied boxes, crates, drawers, cabinets, any container that hid its contents. Replacing everything was easy because Swango had packed like a frazzled evacuee. I wasn't looking for anything in particular, but moving from foster home to foster home had made me curious, even suspicious. If Hollis had abandonment issues, I had search and rescue issues.

And my snooping would have been harmless if I hadn't felt compelled to look in the wooden chest again. The unwrapped dishes were gone, and at the bottom sat a photo album. I opened it up, and a Wal-Mart Photo Lab envelope slid onto the floor. I left it and flipped the first page of the album. A photo of Swango, his head wrapped in a white

bandage that looked exactly like the standard bandage drawn on Wile E. Coyote or Elmer Fudd, except Swango's was spotty with blood. In the picture, Swango's eyes are half closed, like he's been bonked on the head. The caption beneath the picture, written in red ink on yellow legal paper, read 'Out of commission, Kuwait City, 1991.'

But the next page shows Swango without the bandage. Black sutures crisscrossing the wound like something out of Frankenstein. A yellow ooze has leaked out and been smeared by a rag, presumably for the sake of the picture. The side of his head is shaved. His eyes are wide open, and he stares off to the side of the camera as if focusing on an eye chart. The caption reads, 'I needed this like a hole in the head. Yuk yuk.'

Flip the page and there's a woman holding up a mangled hand. Her fingers are clearly broken and from the look on her unfocused face she is experiencing the merciful shock that never descended on Swango in Kuwait. Her knuckles are white, from either the lack of blood flow or the intensity of the flash. The caption, written in Swango's familiar block lettering reads, 'Fight with a hydraulic car jack. Jack, One—Lady, Zero.'

Then a torso sitting in a mangled car, headless. In red block lettering, simply, 'Ouch!!!, 1987, Austin, TX.'

A black and white photo with deckled edges, a naked woman floating face down; next to her, a cop in a poncho leaning precariously out of his boat, looping a rope around one of her legs: 'Reeling in the Big One, 1959.'

It went on and on like that, page after page.

I put it back and picked up the Wal-Mart envelope off the floor and found photos of Hollis, coming and going with various male friends, sitting on the counter-tops,

drinking wine, screaming into the phone, all framed by our kitchen curtains. I went into Swango's bedroom, held up one of the photos, and determined that he stood right here when he snapped each one.

Whenever the subject of Hollis and Swango comes up, I tell my wife that they were an “inevitable” couple. She only likes the story because I lie to her. I make it romantic, courageous, chivalric, tragic, a magical story of destiny. I don't mention the photos. My wife loves fairytales, loves the way they end. To her *Romeo and Juliet* is a fairytale, a story of a perfect love despite the final act where the lovers start offing themselves. If I had to pinpoint exactly why I love her, it is because she *expects* the fairytale ending. In the face of the most egregious lie I could tell her—a lie about love—she doesn't even have to struggle to believe. Sometimes I look into her ears as if I might catch a glimpse of her peculiar brain, that beautiful organ that refuses to distinguish truth from absolute bullshit whenever the possibility of happiness is involved.

After I found the pictures of Hollis, I stayed indoors until Swango got back from the reserves. I played my games, watched the History Channel, Discovery, Nova. I worked my way through to the Cs in the Britannicas and learned a few new spelling words, but I scanned ahead and found that my encyclopedias had nothing about JFK, Charles Manson, Hitler's obsession with the Occult—all frequent subjects of the History Channel—so I abandoned them. A lot had happened since 1954, and the entire set was as worthless as a thirty-year-old phone book. Swango was thirty-seven, ten years older than

Hollis, and in his lifetime, the collected knowledge of 1954 had become obsolete. *John Kennedy: congressman from Massachusetts, elected 1948, ran unopposed in 1952 to claim his second term.*

Two lines in '54; pages, doubtless, in '64.

Unopposed one day, assassinated the next—he must have been startled.

But for Hollis and Swango, things were going considerably better. At my suggestion, she invited him over for casserole at our house, in the kitchen he'd documented with his camera. I ate, then sat in the living room struggling with the maze in the castle of level 7.

“He's got brains,” Hollis said, meaning me. “Serious brains.”

Swango agreed and made a crack about me running into the truck.

“You know I'll pay you back for those stitches,” Hollis said.

“In your own time,” Swango said.

“I got the damn credit card company calling me at work at least four times a week, and since I'm the one who answers the phones, I can't even pretend I'm not there.”

“I bet you brighten their day anyway,” Swango said.

“You should have more wine?” Hollis asked him.

“You're the boss.”

“No,” Hollis said, “but I'll pay you back as soon as I can. My Lord, four hundred for a few little stitches!”

“I'm earning nearly thirty grand a year, you know,” Swango said, “and I don't have any mouths to feed other than two dogs. You can take your time.”

When Swango left, Hollis gave him a kiss on the right cheek, as if the whiskery ear hole didn't bother her a bit.

After that, Hollis started cooking at least two sit-down dinners per week, and Swango attended both. I'd leave the table early, go into the living room and play my Nintendo while they talked. Staying inside most of the summer, I'd gotten so good at saving the princess that I rarely died. When I did, I had to turn away as Mario or Luigi let out their electronic scream, jumped toward me, and fell off the screen into video game Hell. The game had invaded my dreams, and at night I'd find myself at their funerals, wearing black robes and beating my fists on their coffins, mourning the deaths of the Mario Brothers as if they were unrepentant Catholics.

"The house payment is thirteen hundred," Hollis told Swango one night, breaking down. "The Visa and the Discover are overloaded when you take into account interest, and my ex hasn't sent me a check in years. We can't afford the whole-grain bread much less my prescriptions, so I'll just have to rough it."

"You're doing a fine job with the boy," Swango said.

"I'm thinking about trying to get another credit card."

"I've got a war chest over there," Swango said, "and you're welcome any time to borrow some."

"That's sweet and everything," she said, "but I have to think long-term. Another card seems the way to go."

"Maybe so," Swango said.

Swango paid the next month's house payment, and Hollis started spending two nights a week at his house. One Saturday morning, she walked through our front door wearing one of Swango's uniform shirts and hurried to the kitchen. Public television was running a show about an autistic girl who could replicate any structure out of matchsticks without using any measuring tools. Her matchstick models were exactly one eleventh the size, on the money, every time.

Hollis sped past me, said 'good morning,' and grabbed the carton of eggs out of the fridge.

"Where's our cheese?" she yelled into the living room.

"Don't know," I said.

"I can't believe you ate all the cheese!"

"What do you need it for?" I asked her.

"He has to have his breakfast! What do you think is going on here!"

Nowadays, I tell my wife that Hollis kept pictures of my father in the hallway of her house, on the mantle, near her bed—that her walls were covered by his image until the day the bank foreclosed—but it isn't true. Hollis never mentioned him to me once in the summer I lived with her. Not even his name. I tell my wife that he died a few months after I was born and *that's* the reason Hollis gave me up. The father I've constructed dug swimming pools for a living. He squirreled away money, and had it not been for Hollis's severe depression after his death, she might have been able to handle raising me. As far as my wife knows, Hollis is "mother" to me. As far as she knows, I'm torn apart by Hollis's remote location, I'm constantly planning ways to visit her, I sit up nights

budgeting a vacation. But I hardly think about her. I give her as much thought as I give the grandmother-type, Colonel Harstreet, or my bunk neighbor at the state orphanage. Hollis has a bed in a rathole assisted-living home on the east side of Portland, not forty miles from my house where I sleep with my wife.

As I continued watching the autistic girl recite dimensions while her mother confidently checked her math, Hollis took the eggs and crossed in front of the TV, heading for the door.

“I’m cooking him eggs this morning. Next time, I’d appreciate it if we still had cheese. He’s not paying your bills for nothing.”

I told her maybe another boyfriend wasn’t the answer, which made her look at me cockeyed for a moment before she disappeared out the door.

I ate my cereal and sat staring at an accelerated video of the autistic girl constructing a miniature Tower of Pisa. When it was over, her grinning mother held a photo up next to the completed model to show how perfectly her daughter had reproduced the lean.

In the normal course of human events, two single people living next door to one another will naturally test the other’s waters—almost out of instinct. That was how Hollis explained her relationship with Swango. “Watch more Discovery Channel,” she told me before leaving me in the empty house for the night, “it’s all there.” Then she’d flip the channels until she found naked African women sitting Indian-style, weaving rudimentary baskets that didn’t quite cover their unfuzzed-out breasts.

Pretty soon, Swango bought a bed. I didn't help him move it in. Hollis continued borrowing money, and Swango continued forgiving the debt. Once, near the end of the summer, he came in with my lunch from the Mexican restaurant.

“Where's she keep the meds?” he asked me.

“Top of the fridge,” I said.

“You doing all right?” he asked.

“Fine,” I said.

“When she gets home let her know her prescription is up there.”

“Did you pay for it?”

“She phoned it in, I picked it up.”

“But did you pay for it?” I asked again.

“Sure did, Boss.”

I told him I already knew that.

“Then what are you asking for?”

“No reason,” I said. “You know what the pills are for?”

“What's the problem, Boss? You and me are going to make a great combo. We'll be like Andy and Opie.”

“They're for depression,” I said. “She has mood swings. I could tell you all about it.”

“I know that, Boss. I know everything there is to know.”

“Then are you depressed too?”

“That's a hoot, Boss. But cops aren't allowed to be crazy,” he said. “That's one of



our rules.”

With one week before school, Swango bought my supplies and added the price to the debt he planned to subsume once he and Hollis were married. The Oregon rain came early, causing flood conditions in the river towns along the Willamette. The newscasters preached sandbags. Sandbags were the answer, sandbags were the cure-all, sandbags could save your everlasting soul. Swango and the men of the town joined the volunteer firemen filling and stacking sandbags along 1<sup>st</sup> Street. The ditch behind the house was filling fast, and occasionally I’d see a lawn chair or basketball rush down it. I’d spent my summer keeping to myself, occasionally sneaking out of the house to visit Taz or to feed Jack and Jill, and the specter of school was forgotten for a week thanks to the quickly flooding streets.

It was a Wednesday. Swango came over for dinner. Meatballs and broccoli with cheese sauce. I ate in the living room in front of the TV. I heard Swango talking about ice cream: did we have any? Could we get some? Should maybe Hollis run to the E-Z Stop? She drove off with the money he gave her.

“What do you think, Boss?” he said after she left.

“About what?”

“This,” he said, holding out his hand. “You think she’ll like it?”

He held a ring, gold, with a square diamond on it. My first thought: I wish he hadn’t bought the big one.

“How much was that?” I asked.

“*Four thousand!*” he said. “I’ve never even spent four thousand on anything, not even my truck.”

He was honestly giddy, and I remember thinking that adults are no more equipped to make correct decisions than children. If standing on the edge of a raging flood, it’s still a coin flip whether or not they’ll jump in.

“Does Hollis know?” I asked him.

“She will when she gets back!” he said. “She sure will.”

Hollis’s answer to Swango’s proposal was a slaughter. Swango might as well have been shot in the head like JFK or shot in the gut like Oswald. He left quietly.

Hollis, on the other hand, threw dishes around the kitchen for an hour or so before collapsing on the floor of her room letting the bottle of White Zin pour out on the carpet. When I tried to roll her over onto her back, she latched onto me, clawed my head and neck, and called me the names of her various male friends. She didn’t mention Eddie—Swango’s first name. In the morning, I woke her up so she wouldn’t be late for work, and she complimented me on my sense of responsibility.

Even then, I knew why she turned him down: a woman hellbent for misery has no business recognizing when someone truly loves her. Is there an older story? For Hollis, the light at the end of the tunnel probably is an oncoming train, it can be nothing else, and knowing that, she still wouldn’t veer off to the shoulder because she wouldn’t know what to do with such good luck.

The flood waters continued to rise, and Swango spent all day down by the river

stacking sandbags. Hollis stayed home from work, recovering from the proposal she'd turned down. With Hollis around, I had no reason to stay in the house, which made no sense to me: I could brave the outside world if she sat moping and drinking in the living room, but if she was behind her desk at work, I had to be in the house. It was if one of us needed to be imprisoned in there at all times.

The rain had filled the ditch behind our house, and even it threatened to overflow. Instead of solitary basketballs or lawn chairs, waves of debris flowed past like a village had been destroyed somewhere upstream.

I left Hollis and let myself into Swango's house. I opened the wooden chest and flipped through the album of mangled bodies. I was midway through when Swango came out of his bedroom wearing a white T-shirt and a pair of blue briefs. His legs were coated with black hairs, reminding me of a picture in the Britannicas of an Italian welterweight champ from the 1930's—Tony Canzoneri—a “non-stop puncher” if I remember correctly. Swango's crewcut was matted down, like the spots of carpet beneath table legs.

“Yo, Boss,” he said, raising his right hand in a lazy salute, scratching his hair with the other.

I started to say something to defend myself for snooping, but he didn't care or even notice that the album was open on my lap.

“Hell of a mess outside, huh?”

I said yeah.

“I couldn't go in,” he explained, as if he owed me. “It's just too much to do. Between stacking all the sandbags and keeping these idiot high-schoolers in their

dinghies off the streets, I'm exhausted."

"I bet," I said.

"I get most of those pictures out of the file cabinets in police stations," he sighed, pointing at the album. "They keep them for years, which is overkill, so I just started taking them home."

And before I could ask the question, he gave the answer: "Because they make me feel relatively lucky, if you know what I mean."

"Did you take the ring back?" I asked.

"Uh-huh," he said.

"They give you your money?"

"Oh, sure. They refunded it back onto my Visa."

"That's good, right? Four thousand extra dollars."

"Fabulous," he mumbled.

"If it makes you feel any better, Hollis is sitting over there drinking in her pajamas."

His face flushed. "You think that's *good*, don't you?"

I said no, I was just saying.

"I know you were Boss," he said. "My emotions are all catty-wampus. You're looking at a lonely man."

"I think she wants company, though," I said. "She'll be like this all day, and then tonight she'll just stare at our backyard if nobody stops her."

"You stop her then. What goes on is no longer my business."

I left. Whenever I take a long sweeping curve on a mountain road on the Oregon Coast or pass a fender-bender where someone might have been injured and photographed, I think about that sentence: what goes on is no longer my business. *Where? With whom?* He didn't say. What goes on *in general*, he said, was none of his business. As I ran to get out of the rain, I imagined him bleeding from his ear-hole after a self-inflicted gunshot. Some other cop, maybe his replacement, could add the official photographs of Swango's body to the big book of horrors in that wooden chest.

The weekend before school, the streets were impassable and the town shut down. The rain had stopped, but the water still covered everything. Canoes replaced cars, and people put on waders to go out to their mailboxes only to find that the mail was only available at the post office. But it was a cheery time. The men passing in canoes waved and rescued dogs. The fire department took grocery orders and made deliveries for a donation. For a weekend we all lived in Venice, we all had beachfront property.

Hollis, perhaps regretting some of her decisions, was entrenched on our couch, hadn't left the house in days. She ate, drank, slept, went to the bathroom once a day, and not much else. The word that most precisely described her was *valetudinarian*.

We ate our cupboards bare, and after I discovered that tomato paste does not make a palatable entree, I took twenty dollars out of my stash in the Britannica and went outside to give the fire department a grocery list. I sat on the hood of Hollis's car, waiting for their boat. I could hear a buzzing in the sky, looked up, and saw a miniature prop plane cruising overhead. I watched it for a while, until finally it came down over Perrin

Street, landing on its pontoon landing gear, throwing up a tiny rooster tail of water. Down the street, I saw the old grey-bearded bachelor drifting in a flat-bottomed fishing boat, smiling wide. He paddled up to the miniature plane, loaded it up into the boat, and rowed off. He tipped his hat when he saw me watching, and I looked the other way.

And saw Lawrence Burr standing less than a two feet away from me. “You ran into my dad’s truck didn’t you?” He might have been there for the entire ten minutes I stared up at the plane.

“It’s been like two months,” I said.

“Two months, ten minutes, who cares?” Lawrence was dressed in his Sunday church clothes. I wondered why his father had bothered holding a service: the parking lot was a shallow lake.

“I already got hurt. See this,” I said, pushing a finger against the grain of my eyebrow to expose the scar.

“What do you got?” he demanded.

“Hollis is out of underwear,” I said. “She’s been wearing the same clothes for like a week. And she doesn’t do laundry anymore.”

“Then what do you got?”

Before I could answer, he pulled me down off the car and started rolling me over on the tiny bit of our slanted driveway that wasn’t under water. I kept twisting my right hand pocket away from him, panicked that he’d find the money.

He turned me over, flipped me around, wore me down. He managed to keep me on the high ground, but I fought back and ended up wriggling into the lapping edge of the

flooded driveway. He got his hands into my pockets, chanting “What do you got? What do you got?” until his fingers found the unique texture of American currency. He leaned his elbow into my chest, squeezing my heart, and tried to pull my pocket inside out. With what felt like my last ounce of strength, I thrashed under his elbow as his eyes went wide, seeing the edge of the twenty sticking out of my pocket. I don’t remember what I was screaming, but Swango came out of his house, still in his blue briefs and T-shirt. He hugged Lawrence’s mid-section, pulled him up and off me, and stood him up against our garage door.

“You’ll rot in a cell next to a toilet with no seat if I see any more knots on this boy’s body, get it?” he said, his forefinger thumping each word into Lawrence’s chest.

Lawrence looked terrified and bewildered as he scanned Swango up and down. Then, in typical Lawrence style, he forgot to be scared and got mean.

“Eat me, Earless,” Lawrence said, looking smugly into the distance as if he was being scolded by a substitute teacher.

That was all it took. On another day, Swango might have given Lawrence a lecture, maybe took him over to his father so Lawrence could repeat exactly what he’d said, how hurtful he’d been. On any other day, Swango would have made a joke, had a flip remark for a ghoul such as Lawrence, a self-deprecating reply not unlike the captions written under the photos in his book of mutilations. But he was in no mood.

Before I knew it, Lawrence was spun around, pointed at the backyard. Swango held him by the white starched collar of his church shirt, tugging and yanking him along into the mud patch that was our back lawn. Lawrence yelled like an angry man, cursing

Swango, using language that would shame his father and shatter his mother's illusions. When Swango got him to the ditch, he pushed him to his knees and told him to pray. Lawrence started to say something, but before he could finish his first word, Swango pushed his head into the rushing water.

“There!” he said. “Right there!”

He pulled Lawrence up, let him catch his breath, and dunked his head again.

Even though Lawrence couldn't have heard with his head under water, Swango hissed, “There's a thing called the law!” and I wasn't sure if he meant the rules of society or himself, the Law.

He pulled Lawrence up again, and then dunked him again.

I told Swango that he shouldn't do this, but he couldn't or wouldn't hear me.

When he pulled him up the third time, Lawrence was crying. Speckles of filth stuck to his wet face, like coffee grounds. This did it. Swango stood up, letting Lawrence loose. I watched Lawrence choke out a stream of water, then sputter and cough until he had his breath. He got up shakily, looking half-defiant, half-terrified, and hurried through the mud, into the flooded street. Swango watched him go and, without looking at me, left the backyard and disappeared into his house.

My wife has heard this story many times. It sticks out in my mind. When I tell it to her, I give her the ending that never happened. The ending Swango might have hoped for immediately after assaulting thirteen-year-old Lawrence, the ending in which Hollis recognizes how much Swango cares for me, forgives him even though he loses his job, and, in tears, tells him to go re-buy that ring. I tell my wife that after Swango was fired



from the Sheriff's Department, he and Hollis married and he became a successful private investigator, specializing in tracking down deadbeat dads and wives who vanish to South America with only the family's life savings to cure their nervous breakdowns. The story goes: He sold the PI agency, the clientele list, and the company's good name and bought himself a house attached to a trailer park. He managed the park until he died, fixing refrigerators, laying new carpet, collecting pet deposits and rent. A happy life. Swango's money, combined with my dead father's fictional swimming-pool-digging fortune allows Hollis to live in relative happiness, somewhere in the Florida Keys, as far from Oregon as one can get in this country.

What actually happened is this. I sat on the edge of the river of rainwater, feeling every bit as terrorized as Lawrence. Before long—a minute, two at the most—I ran out of the backyard and into my room. I grabbed my stash from Volume 3, crossed the street to Pastor Burr's house and knocked.

Mrs. Burr answered the door, and in typical high-spirited fashion, invited me in. Clearly, she knew nothing of what had happened.

"Lawrence is upstairs," she said. "Go on up if you like."

For the first and only time in my life, I climbed the stairs to Lawrence's room. I walked in without knocking and found Lawrence laying on his back on the wet carpet next to his bed, his eyes red, snot drying on his cheek.

"Hey," I said, stepping over to him.

He didn't look at me directly, but from where I was standing, leaning over him, my face was nearly in his line of sight. His red hair was brown. The unique twists of his

outer ear were inlaid with algae.

“Take this,” I said. “If you keep your mouth shut, you can keep it all.”

I dropped the wad of twenties onto his chest. It landed over his heart like a wet washrag, and he actually looked willing, even eager, to accept the deal.

“Two hundred and thirty-eight,” I said. “Cash.”

On my way out I answered ‘I’ll be there’ when Mrs. Burr invited me to Sunday evening services that night, lying through my teeth.

Back at my house, I showered, took off the wet clothes and put on dry jeans and my U.S. Navy sweatshirt. I turned on the History Channel and found yet another show about JFK’s assassination. They were replaying the Zapruder film in slow motion, analyzing what they could from the grainy celluloid. This time, what got my attention was Jackie’s pink suit. A blurry pink bolt leaping onto the trunk lid of the convertible. After that day, no first lady could ever wear cotton-candy pink again. November 22, 1963, was all she wrote for pink pillbox hats and pink skirts in the White House.

Then I heard Swango outside the front door, calling out “Boss? You in there, Boss?”

I opened the door. He sat down on our couch and stared at the ceiling. I tried to talk to him, but he didn’t answer. I wanted to tell him about the deal I’d struck with Lawrence, but I wasn’t entirely sure Lawrence would keep it so I didn’t want to get his hopes up. After a while, Swango picked up one of the encyclopedia volumes and started reading entries aloud. Finally, after an eternity of this, I turned on the Nintendo. I screamed through the levels, holding down B, running, jumping, sliding at full speed,

ignoring the coins, ignoring danger, ignoring Swango. I was doing so well, I knew that Lawrence would keep the money and his mouth shut. Turns out, that's what he did, and Swango never had to answer for his actions. He stayed on and eventually lost three straight elections for Sheriff. He's married and living in Idaho. Once a year, we exchange letters.

And never had I been on such a roll, when Swango stopped reading and started lamenting his fate; he knew consequences were on their way. He was in deep.

"On the plus side, I was trying to help you out," he said, unsolicited.

"Yeah," I said, sitting on the floor between the TV and the couch, not turning around.

"That's got to count for something, right? At least your mother might appreciate it?"

"I can handle a few bruises," I told him. "I'm used to it."

"No, no, no," he said. "You're too smart to have to put up with that. People like you have to be protected."

"Everybody needs protecting," I told him. "That's what I think."

"Oh boy, oh boy. I'm doomed aren't I? You can say it, I'm completely fucked now. Say it."

Then I solved the maze in the seventh castle; I ran under King Koopa unscathed; I'd been to level eight before and I'd saved the princess dozens of times. I felt like I could do it with my eyes closed, but with B held firmly down, my confidence soaring, I ran into a fireball thrown by an armored turtle and died for the first time.

“What happens now?” Swango asked. During the silence, he’d started to watch me play.

“I start again.”

“How come it’s not over?” he asked.

“I have about twenty lives,” I said.

“*Twenty?*” he said. “Dear God.”

I stopped talking to him and played the game. I wanted to hint that I’d squared things with Lawrence, but he wouldn’t stop wallowing. I recoiled at the thought of Hollis and Swango together: stories such as this are not the building blocks of healthy relationships. I decided their happiness wasn’t my concern. They were adults; I wasn’t yet. And hadn’t Swango suffered worse pain than this? The Brotherhood of the Maimed is a frighteningly large subset of humanity—and Swango, their self-appointed archivist, knew it. He should have saved his pity for someone other than himself. I let him sweat.

## **First, Plant Your Feet**

The gym doors open and I'll be damned if it isn't Charlie Magnuson. He's talking on a cell phone and wearing a suit. I nudge Tree and point.

"Where did he come from?" Tree says.

I know Tree hates Magnuson—at least he did back in high school. Magnuson was one of those kids adults loved, especially adults in authority, especially the basketball coach who benched Tree—a major talent with a rotten attitude—and played Magnuson every spare minute. Early in my sophomore year, I recognized the favoritism being shown to Magnuson's style of hustle and bootlicking, so I walked out of practice and that was that. But Tree never quit, and after the last game of the season, he took a swing at the coach. He missed and they suspended him, but that didn't matter because Tree never set foot in the high school again.

I yell down at Charlie.

"Cut that out," Tree says, looking into the straw of his Mountain Dew.

But it's too late. Magnuson sees me, takes a moment to figure out who I am, and starts climbing the steps. He's got on black shoes shined better than a showroom hearse, and with each step he takes up the steep bleachers, I can see his socks. Maroon argyle, silk-looking. One good thing—at least he's going bald.

"How long you been gone?" I ask Magnuson once he settles in and shakes Tree's hand. "Twelve years?"

"Exactly," he says and starts telling his life history since our graduation. He was

one of four no-shows at our ten-year reunion, although I doubt anybody noticed. “Four years at Oregon, then I got into a law school in San Diego. That took me four more years because I took night classes and had to work all day. But the firm I worked for hired me straight out...well...after I passed the bar, which took me three tries...”

Tree gets up, mumbling something about a refill. I’d leave too if I were him. Tree’s not married, never been close. Part of the problem is that he lives with his dad in an apartment over the Old Vault Restaurant, a converted bank. They take turns working; one finds work, and within a week the other loses his job. Maggie, my wife, thinks they’d be worse off if things were the other way around: if they both got jobs at the same time, they’d each have money, which would mean they’d be hard pressed to rationalize sharing a musty apartment the size of a bank teller’s cage. Tree spends all the meal-centered holidays with us, and Maggie insists on inviting Mr. Altree over as well, but only because she imagines him huddled in a corner on Christmas, carolers braying outside his window, plaster chunks falling into his soup. If she could see Mr. Altree smoking with us at the riverfront park every Friday night, or if she knew he spent his spare time learning the dictionary’s biggest words so he can better explain his theory that wives are God’s eleventh plaque—she might not be so quick to include him. Tree’s mom lives in Portland. She is *unpleasant*.

But Magnuson has more to tell. Turns out he’s married. To another lawyer. A yoga and Pilates and soy shake junkie. Whose Dad is a California state senator from San Francisco. Who hired Magnuson to work on socialist ballot initiatives for the last four years. It’s all so flat the way he tells it. A Jaguar, a two-story house up on Mt. Tom,

vaulted ceilings and marble surfaces. When he finishes, I'll have to decide what I'm going to tell him about myself. I'll mention Maggie because in high school she generated a lot of lust, even without Pilates, and he's probably figured out that I have a daughter in junior high who's playing in the game today, and I can tell him about Felicia, my youngest daughter, and Braydon, my five-year-old, which will give me at least one leg up: as far as I know he doesn't have any sons.

And then there's the reason Maggie isn't here with me today: she's eight and a half months pregnant with our fourth, an accident—which is none of his business. And if he really plans to live in Harrisburg again, he'll find out about Tyler Phillips, my other son who lives with his mother in the Straight Pine Trailer Court. But I won't tell him about that. I've trained myself not to even speak the names Tyler or Phillips, ever, because both those names will make Maggie cry. Besides, it's not as if Magnuson and I were friends in high school—in four years, I probably said two hundred words to him—so I don't *have* to tell him a thing. That's what I'm thinking when I realize that the game was supposed to have started by now.

“That's my daughter,” I say. “Number thirty-two. Samantha Flomer.”

“Oh yeah?” Magnuson says. “Mine's the redhead on the bench. She's number fifty.”

It's the fat girl with the red ponytail—Candace—and she's the worst player we've got. She has to play in at least two quarters per game, and only last week I remember telling Tree that I'll be happy when Samantha gets into high school and we won't have to worry about these pansy-ass middle school rules.

“Oh yeah. Candace,” I say. “I bet she’s a good rebounder,” which is like saying that an ugly girl is probably smart.

“She just likes wearing the uniform,” Magnuson says. “She takes after her grandpa, the senator. Not overly interested in competition. This is the first game I’ve been able to come to. The project I was spearheading in Frisco just ended last week. My wife and Candace got here in October, but I had to stay behind to sell the old house and sew up all the...”

The game is a forfeit. Monroe’s girls never show up, and so Samantha’s coach—Robert Waller, a six-foot-six, fifty-year-old whose oldest son is in juvenile detention for molesting his youngest son—decides to hold a scrimmage. He comes over to the stands and says he has to send the refs home, and he’s got an extra whistle if anyone is interested in refereeing. Tree jumps up, mainly to get away from Magnuson.

“So what are you doing with yourself, Flo?” Magnuson asks.

“Malpass Concrete. We’re pouring the walls for the new prison right now.”

“What about Tree?”

“Unemployment for three more weeks.”

“What happens in three weeks?”

“It runs out.”

The scrimmage dies quickly. Because the Monroe team didn’t show up, all ten of the Harrisburg girls have to play extended minutes. And it doesn’t take long for Candace Magnuson—whose last name I didn’t associate with Charlie until today—to start walking up the court. They get so tired that every other possession ends in a jump ball, which is



the constant monkeywrench in the engine of eighth grade girl's basketball. On top of that, Tree keeps calling touch fouls which makes Robert scratch his head before finally overruling Tree to let the clock run out on the first half. Robert doesn't bother finishing the game, announcing to the few parents gathered on this Saturday morning that one half is good enough. The wheezing and hunched over girls trudge over to the bleachers and follow their parents out to the parking lot. Magnuson walks ahead of everyone else, and gives Candace a bear hug. He opens the gymnasium doors and the sun hits the fabric of his suit, reflecting a twinkling spectrum of colors that makes me wonder how many weeks I'd have to pour concrete to buy my own. What have we learned about competition today? Absolutely nothing.

In the parking lot, Magnuson pushes buttons on his key ring until his Jag beeps and unlocks.

I tell him he should play basketball on Monday. "It's mostly guys from town."

"Here or the high school?" he asks.

"Here. Seven to nine," I say. "Tree wants you to see what a legend he's become."

Magnuson drives off without committing either way.

"What did you tell him that for?" Tree says as he starts the truck. Questions like this makes me want to shake Tree out of his funk. What happened to the kid who used to rant all weekend about how he could mop the floor with the entire starting five not to mention the scrubs on the bench? How he ever took a swing at a grown man is now one of life's great mysteries.

"He won't show up," I say. "But if he does, you'll tear him apart."

“You’re right,” Tree says, “he won’t show up.”

Monday night, me and Tree are standing on the granite steps of the junior high, sharing a joint while the regulars roll in. Tree tries to hide it when Magnuson approaches, but the smell is obvious. Magnuson is wearing a silvery sweat-suit with reflective piping and says only “hey.” Then he shakes Tree’s free hand very solemnly, and walks past us into the gym.

“When we get in there,” I tell Tree, “take it right at him every time. Embarrass him.”

“What if we end up on the same team?”

“Don’t be negative,” I say.

Tree pinches out the joint and hides it on the lip of a concrete planter the size of a monster truck tire. When I started at Malpass Concrete, new hires practiced for weeks at the planter forms until we got it right. We made dozens, most of which cracked in the sun the next day because we hadn’t sealed up the forms correctly. When my father started here, it was a union shop and bosses didn’t come around saying things like, “Fuck up on an I-beam and a bridgeful of cars will end up in the river” or “My dog could crap smoother concrete than that.” Tree started the same day as me, but he quit after the first week and never poured a single beam. Couldn’t take the boredom or the supervisors or the weather. We’d start at five-thirty in the morning and quit at one in the afternoon, freezing for three hours until the sun came out, then burning up until quitting time. I tried to convince Tree to stick it out, but he’d had it up to here with perseverance: three months

earlier he'd stuck out the basketball season, showing up to practice and early morning weightlifting sessions, only to watch his career peter out from the end of the bench. After the final game, in the locker room, Tree made his last stand, cocking his fist and swinging at Coach Grayson. After the punch sailed high and before Tree fell forward and was gang-tackled by his former teammates, the last of my friend's gumption was squeezed out of his body by a dogpile-worth of pressure. Of course, that's my theory, I wasn't there. I'd seen the writing on the wall and had had the sense to quit the team two years earlier. Nobody was all that disappointed, including me, and I never looked back.

But Tree, Tree was a major talent, a Harrisburg legend in the making. He was a removable in-sole short of six feet, both fast and sneaky, with a pickpocket's hand control. He's a lefty, tan from the middle of his biceps to his fingertips, with black back hairs like stunted wings growing on his lower rib cage. I've always imagined that his nose—which is long with deep pores—contains special powers that help him get to the rim, like some sort of dolphinnish basketball sonar. The kind of player who can glide through a game and never commit a foul, never notice who's guarding him, never get smeared by somebody else's sweat, Tree was poised to take his place alongside Shane Schatz, Sal Fiducia, the Lightner brothers, and Jason Rosencrantz, the Mennonite sharpshooter whose parents bucked tradition long enough for him to lead us to our only Oregon State Championship—when he was only a sophomore.

Tree could've been mentioned in that list, but he was damned uncoachable. From the student section, I watched him rot at the ass-end of the bench as the team fell to Mohawk High, watched as Coach Grayson picked Magnuson to go in and log some state

tournament minutes once the cause was lost. Magnuson had no discernable skills, yet Grayson loved him. From the stands, I searched Tree's face. Now, twelve years later, we spend our Friday nights drunk or high down at the boat docks, rehashing our lives, at which time I tell Tree how I could see him fuming all the way from the bleachers, that I could tell some shit would go down as soon as the game ended. But it's all baloney. And I say it because what I really saw was a kid about to cry, and nobody wants to hear that about themselves.

One time. One time I almost told him that I saw him that night on the bench, nearly in tears. We were at the docks, laying on our backs on the boat ramp that disappeared into the river. Crickets were probably chirping, possums slinking around with eyes glowing like headlights, raccoons doing whatever they do. I remember that it wasn't raining because we weren't under the gazebo. At the time, Mr. Altree had a job driving a combine, so he brought the weed. Tree talked about Grayson, who'd retired earlier that week after his final run at state ended at regionals. "Grayson knew the game," Tree kept saying, "Grayson knew the game." That's how the Altree men get when they're high—wordy.

"Then he couldn't recognize talent," I said.

"It wasn't that. He just had a way of narrowing the team down to the bare essentials. Two rebounders, a scorer, a point guard, and one kid who'd rather die than lose. I didn't fit the system. He knew talent. It wasn't that."

"Stan Grayson," Mr. Altree sighed knowingly, as if that name alone had clinched the argument. He took the first drag off our second joint. "Stan Grayson."

“He could have told you that you weren’t going to get in against Mohawk,” I said.  
“There’s no excuse.”

“No, no,” Tree said, standing up and walking to the grass-covered mounds that the city dumped over the concrete flood wall to hide the graffiti. “That game wasn’t any different. No different at all.”

It was then that I almost called him down for the bullshit he was spouting. Because of all the help Maggie and I have given him—rent money, odd jobs, dinner whenever he’s over—it makes me mad when he argues with me—as mad as if Braydon or one of my girls told me I didn’t know what I was talking about. Sometimes I have to remind myself that he’s not one of my kids or some stray dog biting at my hand after I toss out a plate of gnarled pork chops. It’s hard, after so many years, to accept anything but appreciation.

“Then admit, at least, that you were short-changed?” I said.

Tree said fine, I admit it, and then he shut up for a while. Mr. Altree started explaining his theory about Sodom and Gomorrah. According to him, it was a parable meant to guarantee that men kept getting married. You were supposed to read about the brimstone and the scorched rubble and think, How could debauchery be worth all this? Sure, God turned Lot’s wife into a salt sculpture, but that was simple misdirection. Kill a woman at the end to distract the reader from all the men, queer and otherwise, that God burned alive, mid-orgy.

“Every man in the world since then has been scared to do anything *but* get married,” he said. “It was a cataclysmic reification of the matrimonial institute.”

We listened in silence. Mr. Altree pronounced some doozies. Tree chewed the skin around his fingernails. I tried to track a particular ripple in the water, imagined it being a solid, buoyant thing, like a snake or a line of ducklings, something that I could be reunited with if I drove up river and waited for it to come floating by, maybe in Portland, sitting under the Burnside Bridge. I don't think I said another word all night.

Inside the gym, Magnuson is throwing bounce passes to a frustrated Braydon, who is trying to catch them in stride and make lay-ups. Braydon doesn't yet have the arm-strength to get the ball to the hoop, but even if he did, Magnuson's passes are off-target, either bounced too high or too far ahead.

"Take it easy on my boy, Chuck," I yell.

"This is your son?" he says. "The kid can really catch." If Braydon heard the compliment, he pretends not to notice, wrestling the ball away from Magnuson while the adults waste time talking.

"Has to," I say. "My wife gets drunk and throws flowerpots at him all day," which makes Magnuson laugh like he's ninety-percent sure I'm joking.

The regulars—including me and Tree—have played here for years, have seen every possible combination of players, and know exactly what each other person can or can't do. Tree will shoot from distance. Mike McKenney, with his short arms, will hustle for rebounds and flip in the occasional Mikan lay-up. Dustin Varnell will clutz around the outside, wasting his six feet-four inches, trying to get open for doomed jump shots. The old guys like Russ Yoder and Preston Prater will set lots of picks and then bitch when

someone forgets to roll. If Robert Waller shows up, he'll try to coach his team and eventually cause a shouting match in which someone will mention the sorry plight of his sons, and then we won't see Robert for a week or two. Sometimes, when I'm watching from the sidelines, it feels like I'm re-watching games that have already been played.

Because I can't make a free-throw, the sidelines is where I am now. By a stroke of luck, Magnuson is on the first team—Shirts—and to my disappointment, is Tree's teammate. Out of optimism or arrogance, he doesn't give away his identity, and the game is seven-to-nine before anyone recognizes him. He wears the sweat suit the whole time.

Magnuson's team wins easily behind four three-pointers by Tree—and during the interval, a few guys ask him where he ran off to. He starts telling about his wife, the lawyer, and everyone listens with slack jaws, but I break up the story-telling and suggest they move their asses so I can get my fucking exercise.

But as the line forms, Jason Rosencrantz walks in wearing his jeans, brown shoes, a Farm-All hat, and his blue button-down shirt, the sleeves rolled up to his elbows. That brown dead rat of a basketball under his arm. We watch in silence as Rosencrantz gets ready. He is our martyr, our hero, our Basketball Jesus, the guy who might have won two more championships if he hadn't gone back to home school, who could have played pro ball in South America or Europe but chose to work in his parents seed warehouse instead, shooting hoops all winter on that rotted backboard with its rusty rim and tangled chain net, perfecting his ambidextrous hooks, behind-the-head, spinning post shots, and full-speed, running threes. Every shot he takes climbs absurdly high, tracing a towering arc that you never quite get used to. As soon as you think you know what to expect, he shoots

it even higher.

He's all ours. Short, paunchy, and bald with a blasphemous goatee. Stubborn, silent, moody, and talented beyond comprehension. The Einstein of rat ball. He's over forty—Tree and I were second graders when he won state—but if his parents knew he played hoops three nights a week with our rabble of nonbelievers, they'd fire him from the warehouse, then pray for his secularized soul.

The process of determining teams stops out of reverence, and we wait until Rosencrantz gets changed: a gray sleeveless T-shirt; a pair of Portland Trailblazer sweat pants that have been cut off too high; shoes intended for hikers. Without a word, he steps to the line, puts his feet together like a high diver (which is his one un-fundamental peculiarity, developed by practicing coachless and alone in the seed warehouse), and makes his free-throw without so much as disturbing the dust hovering above the rim. And with that stroke of genius, we're teammates.

Now, because Rosencrantz is a Mennonite, and we all know that it's against his religion to show even his knees in public, we always let his team wear their shirts. Nobody has to say anything anymore. Magnuson figures out what is going on and takes off the sweat shirt; and he looks like an infomercial for Bowflex. For Rosencrantz's sake, we're all conditioned not to say anything about shirtless men, but I know everybody is shocked, jealous, and pissed. To me, he looks *exactly* like a southern California lawyer: tanned, hairless, acupuncture—as out of place in Harrisburg as a roving tribe of Zulus or a skyscraper.

The game begins. Tree guards Rosencrantz. They trade baskets, although Tree's is



an uncontested three-pointer (Rosencrantz doesn't play much defense, but we don't mind). Tree is draped all over Rosencrantz when he swings the ball out wide, wraps it around so that it's nearly behind Tree's back, and scoops an underhanded shot in from fifteen feet. Everyone gets that look we get when things like this happen, and Rosencrantz smiles as he jogs up court.

We get on with it. Magnuson is guarding me, which I have no problem with. I'm not a scoring threat, so I usually hang out under the basket, throwing my butt into would-be rebounders, keeping my elbows out. This maneuver made me valuable as a freshman player. I sprouted early, developed this wide butt, which is good for nothing except clearing space, but when everyone else outgrew me, I couldn't clear enough space to make a difference so I forged a new identity on the court as a bully. The JV coach embraced the "new me," always shaking my hand after I committed my fifth foul on the head or knees of the other team's best player. But Grayson, who was all about honor, had no use for my style. I got the hint and quit before I became that sad-sack junior stuck on JV. Embarrassed the hell out of my dad. Now, my body is even wider and bulkier, but because we're all friends down here, I don't bother with the rough stuff. Magnuson's body, on the other hand, is one tight bunch of muscle. Lucky for me he's still as uncoordinated as ever. He doesn't score a single point in the first game, but neither do I.

We win. Somehow Magnuson makes another free-throw. Predictably, Tree swishes his as smooth as shooting an arrow into pudding.

"You want me to guard him?" Magnuson asks Tree before the third game starts, meaning, *You can't guard Rosencrantz, so why not let a better man have a crack at it?*

“Oh?” Tree says. “If you want.”

“Maybe we should give it a try,” Magnuson says. “This guy can’t stay lucky forever.”

“Let him guard him,” I say to Tree. We’ll see what happens when gym membership brawn meets seed warehouse genius. In the grand scheme of Tree’s life, it’s important for his self-respect to see the humiliation of Charlie Magnuson. Maybe this will be what convinces him that he deserved to be in against Mohawk, that Harrisburg might have won if he’d been given a chance, that Magnuson is a straw man, that the stubborn kid who refused to quit all season can be resurrected.

I almost told him as much that Friday night on the boat dock, months ago. Mr. Atree was still worked up about how God dropped the ball when it came to effectively flattening cities. Before I clammed up, I almost told Tree about how I wanted to call a lawyer and get back into Tyler Phillips’ life. He’s my son—he’s thirteen years old now—but we’ve only ever had one conversation. It was more of an encounter. After one of Samantha’s basketball games, I sent Maggie home with the kids, and I stayed behind to watch the boys team, to watch Tyler Phillips play. He wasn’t warming up with the other boys, but I spotted him in the lobby, plugging quarters into the vending machine. After his Coke dropped, he turned and saw me. I *know* he knew who I was—his mother loves to talk about how rotten I am—and besides, big secrets don’t keep in a town this small. People get so familiar even if they don’t speak. You see someone driving by, you wave or nod, both of you understanding that you’ll pass again on these streets sooner rather than later, and suddenly you know all you need to know. It was like Tyler and I had spoken a

hundred times and agreed we had nothing much to say. I said to him, “You’re not playing today?” He held his Coke, processing the question for an unbearable moment, maybe, after all these years, disappointed at the sound of my voice. Finally, he looked down and said two words: “My ankle.” I stood there with rocks in my mouth, my tongue swollen like a bull snake that swallowed a chicken—and then we walked away from each other. I’ve never told Tree that story, because it feels like I should keep it all to myself, like if I tell it, it will somehow mean less to me, like those two words, spoken too often, will become common, shrinking smaller and smaller until they’re no more significant than a cough.

But sometimes I think about that ankle. How did he hurt it? Whose foot did he step on? How many years will it nag him? Did he want to tell me more? Was he mad at me for not fighting to be in his life? Sometimes I want answers to these questions, other times I hope I die without ever speaking another word to him. I don’t think I could bear another face-to-face, and I live in fear of running into him in town. The more time that passes, the less hope I have for us.

But Tree. Best case scenario, Tree watches Rosencrantz embarrasses Magnuson back to San Francisco.

After the defensive switch, Magnuson stretches out nonchalantly, shaking hands with Rosencrantz before wiping his hands on the soles of a pair of hundred dollar sneakers that look so new I suspect he bought them earlier today. On the first play, Magnuson gets a pass, nearly trips, and throws up a concrete planter of a brick that bounces so hard off the rim, it goes out of bounds in the corner near the three-point line.

He shrugs it off, bunching up his massive, hairless shoulders, as if ridiculously terrible misses are all part of the game. He plays defense like he's fighting a death match, hustling like he's still in high school, and Rosencrantz starts missing.

The next time up the court, I try to set a screen but Magnuson barrels through it, knocking Rosencrantz down as he's planting his feet. There's a thud and a squeak as Rosencrantz hits the ground, scooting on his ass across the waxed wooden floor. The ball is bouncing behind him. Magnuson dives, dribbles across the center line, and barely makes it. On our end, Dustin Varnell shoots a born loser.

Six-zero, seven-zero, nine-one, and nothing changes: the Skins are lambasting us. Rosencrantz keeps missing with Magnuson painted on him.

Mercifully, Tree misses the potential game-winner, and I feel something pop inside me, like everything that has happened up to now doesn't matter. Like with this possession, we will begin erasing the previous mistakes, like we've got a real chance for a comeback. My knees are loose. Rosencrantz, standing under the hoop, is as still as a wooden Indian, except for the eyes, which are full of confidence, like he knows the exact moment to burst into the key, set his feet, and start us on the path to recovery. Magnuson stands beside him like a jailer, underestimating exactly how deadly Rosencrantz is with a basketball in his hands, too arrogant to see that we're in the presence of greatness. He doesn't understand. To the rest of us, the rise and fall of Rosencrantz's shot is a crutch; without it, this is just another game, just another group of guys getting away from the wife and kids, another rabble of *could-a-beens* and *never-gonna-bes* pounding out an ugly final score.

And then it happens. The ball swings to me at the top of the key, Rosencrantz crouches a bit, posing, ready to set everything right in the world, and he bursts up to the free-throw line, pivots to his left, knowing his exact position, sensing the required shot based on nothing more than the lines on the floor, then, as he is beginning to square himself with the rim, he puts his hands out for the ball like it is his long-lost wife running at him in slow motion.

It's not even seven thirty, but nobody wants to play anymore. Rosencrantz never even caught the ball. After Magnuson stole the pass but before I chased him down, Rosencrantz was already stalking off the court, grabbing his bundle of clothes and his bloated rat basketball, pulling his hat low on his head, and leaving the gym. Before he got out the door, I heard him say, "Fuck this"—loud, but calm, like a judge with a parking ticket, as if he knew there's no such thing as long-term consequences.

On the other end of the court, Magnuson lays in a heap, wincing, squirming, careful to keep his right shoulder away from everyone. With his left hand, he's poking the injured shoulder like it's electrified. Somebody mentions an ambulance, which makes Magnuson stand up, fight off a grimace, and take a dazed step on wobbly legs, like he might be able to get home on his own. I search his face to see if he knows what happened, but from the looks of him, he might not know his name. If he could only dribble and run at the same time, I never would have caught him.

We all head to the doors, surrounding Magnuson so as to be able to catch him no matter which direction he falls. Outside in the lobby, he leans against the snack bar

counter across from the Coke machine, and I tell everybody I'll make sure he gets home all right. From a few of my friends, guys I've been playing hoops with for the last ten years—from a few of these assholes, I get a nervous look, like they're afraid I might punch his shoulder as soon as they leave. I glare back at them and throw my hands out toward the parking lot, as if to say, *Do you see Rosencrantz's truck anymore? No! This brick-headed lawyer ran him off! Maybe for good!* But they don't look like they get the message.

“We're driving you home, Charlie,” I say, loud so everybody can hear me.

“No, no,” Magnuson says, dazed. “I can make it, I can make it.”

He still doesn't have his shirt on. I don't think he can raise his right arm more than a few inches off his side. At the least, the shoulder is separated, and if his collar bone is in one piece he really is superhuman. I'm trying to feel guilty, but it's not working. The whole incident lasted less than ten seconds: Magnuson dribbling clumsily up the court, his body outracing his ability to control the bouncing ball; me catching up, running as fast as I've ever run; Rosencrantz standing behind us frustrated and angry, deciding to go home and forget about this shitty night. When I catch Magnuson, I don't have time to think or rein myself in. I'm like one of those German Shepherd police dogs, jumping on his back, letting my weight carry him to the ground. He never even got the shot off.

“Give me a break tough guy,” I say to him. “You're riding with us.”

First, we drop off Braydon. I tell him to tell his mom that I'll be right back.

Magnuson rides in the middle, where Braydon usually sits, while Tree and I pass the joint

in front of him as we drive the unlit roads that lead to the big houses on the side of Mt. Tom.

“You want some of this,” Tree asks Magnuson, holding the joint in front of his face like a carrot to a donkey.

“I think I’m getting enough already,” Magnuson says.

But I suggest that he take a drag for Chrissakes, and he does. A car passes us going the other way, and I peak at Magnuson’s shoulder. No visible difference. I imagine collar bone shrapnel pinching off a major artery, causing more unseen damage with every bump in the road, and I can’t wait to get him home.

“I never got high once in school,” Magnuson says.

“I did,” Tree says.

I ask Charlie where we’re going.

“Tree’s driving, not me,” he says, holding his fingers out like tweezers to receive the joint.

“We don’t know where you live.” I’m getting impatient.

“I live here. This is my town.”

“Your house is in this town. Remember your house? Two stories, vaulted ceilings, Mt. Tom?”

“I don’t want to go back there yet.” If another car comes by, I’m going to look in his eyes and see if they’re dilated.

I say, “Charlie, you’re fucked up. Look at yourself.”

“You got me good Flo,” he says, which is the first indication that he knows it was

me that pile-driven him into the floor. I turn away, look out the window; Tree has been driving in circles.

“Didn’t he get me good, Tree?”

Tree takes the joint back from Magnuson and flicks it out his window.

“It doesn’t even hurt,” he says, “See?” He shrugs both shoulders and slaps the top of his thigh with the bad arm.

“Take it easy,” Tree says.

“It’s too late for that, huh Flo?” Magnuson looks at me like I’ve been plotting against him, like he thinks I’ve had it in for him ever since he walked into the Junior High gym to watch our daughters bumble through a scrimmage. He must be one hell of a lawyer, because right now I’m feeling extremely guilty.

“Look Charlie,” Tree says, “just tell me where you live so I can get you home.”

“I don’t want to go home yet.”

“Then where do you want to go?”

Magnuson doesn’t answer. He keeps flexing his hand and trying to coax more and more movement out of his shoulder. Tree begins circling the block again when Magnuson breaks his silence. “RELCO,” he says. “I want to go jump the tracks out at RELCO.”

RELCO is the truss and joist mill in the middle of acres of pasture on the north side of town. RELCO hires the guys who don’t get on at Malpass Concrete. Elevated railroad tracks cross the road just east of the mill, and for years, Harrisburg kids have been demolishing the front ends and inadequate suspensions of their trucks by jumping the ramp formed by paving up and over the rails. It’s reckless, dangerous, and technically



illegal due to the stop sign at the top of the ramp; it's exactly the kind of activity a buttoned-down kid like Magnuson avoided. I'd like to think that Braydon and Tyler Phillips—and maybe the baby Maggie's working on now—will do it one day, maybe together, then come home and tell me all about it.

“Charlie,” I say, “your shoulder can't stand the jostling.”

“Can't feel a thing,” he says. “It's numb as a corpse.”

“It won't be tomorrow,” I tell him.

“Which is why *now* is the only chance I'll have.”

“Forget it,” I say, motioning for Tree to turn the truck around and start toward Mt. Tom. “If we don't know which house is yours exactly, we'll drop you off at the bottom of the hill and you can walk up.”

“This is my truck.”

“What?” I say.

Tree says it again: “This is my truck, Flo. If he wants to jump RELCO, we'll go jump RELCO.”

“Are you stoned?”

“Who cares?” Tree says. “I don't, so why should you?”

By now, Magnuson is jerking his shoulders around, eyes closed, dancing to music that exists only in his mind.

“It's my truck,” Tree says. “It's my truck.”

So we drive north, past Malpass Concrete and the treatment plant. Grass fields and fences. Tree turns right after a mile or so, but Magnuson is too zonked to stay upright

and inertia carries his right shoulder into my left. He's humming now, with his eyes closed. Tree stays silent, and I get the sense he's mad at me. Giving Magnuson his wish and actually jumping the tracks will do nothing but harm. I remember Tiny Slobik crawling out of his totaled pick-up and spitting blood. When we got to him, we found that he'd bitten off a chunk of his tongue, and his steering wheel was dented on the top where his chin had slammed down on it. Whatever damage I did to Magnuson's shoulder will be doubled the moment the truck hits the asphalt on the other side.

"He'll probably start suing you tomorrow if we actually jump," I tell Tree.

"He said he never got to do this. What's your problem?"

"He never did it because he was the type of kid to become a lawyer."

"What type is that?" Tree mumbles.

The word "smart" comes to mind, but instead I say, "Chicken: that's what type."

"Then again," Tree says, "How the hell would we know?"

I can see the tracks. Tree isn't slowing down. He nudges Magnuson to wake him up, but our passenger keeps right on jiving to the tunes in his head. I buckle up, reach around and grab Magnuson's lap belt for him. It's set to go around Braydon's tiny waist so I adjust it, create some slack. Tree accelerates and shakes Magnuson's knee to get his attention. We're going fifty as we pass RELCO's closed front gate. Tree lets out a "whoop." I check my belt, give Magnuson's another tug, and all the while the whole world gets louder.

"A lot of good this will do if the asslick doesn't open his eyes," I yell.

"Why don't you give it a rest!" Tree says, nearly shouting. "Forget about it!"

Five seconds away, and my fingers dig into the dashboard. Tree holds on to the wheel. I can't look over to see if Magnuson has come out of his trance. I guess it doesn't matter. Maybe he's happy like this, nearly blacked out between two acquaintances he hasn't seen in over a decade. Maybe Tree's happy. Anyway, the consequences won't hit us until tomorrow. Magnuson will definitely feel it. My knees will feel it, Tree's truck will feel it—the suspension shot, the front bumper, grille, and radiator all crumpled from the ground up, like shattered teeth after an uppercut—and as we hit the ramp, I see the stars, the underside of purplish clouds, the orange glow of a pulp and paper mill somewhere east of town, and for an instant, we quietly float, an instant in which I see Jason Rosencrantz walking off the court in his cut-off sweat pants, quitting but not *quitting*, leaving the gym until Wednesday, when he'll return as if tonight never happened. Because for him, there are no long-term consequences—one failure doesn't wipe out all the success—and there's no need for revenge. The word “stagnant” doesn't even exist.

## **Your Body, Your Temple**

I'm in my backyard, standing under the alley streetlight, swinging at wiffle golf balls. On every third swing, I slow down to realign my posture. My three-year-old son Levi stands next to me, stroking real golf balls into the fence. Each swing he makes is a graceful twirling dance, a motion so fluid he seems boneless. Levi has the muscle control of someone twice his age, and the feel of a well-struck golf ball tickles him. But he grips his driver oddly, right hand over left, and when I try to correct him, he twists away from me as if he knows my advice is wrong.

I tell him to keep his head still. Stiffen that elbow. Quiet those legs.

But he ignores me, blasting shot after shot into the fence with metronomic consistency. I live in fear that each successful drive will be my last. Deep down, I know my occasional triumphs promise nothing. Steady improvement is too much to hope for, so I rely on the odds, which say I'm bound to hit a good one now and again. Even though he's only three, I can tell Levi will never battle his swing. My wife fears I'm forcing sports on him, but nothing could be more unnecessary. Together, we hack patches out of the lawn, father and son.

Levi takes after my own father. Dad was able to glean proper technique through the miracle of televised sports. I remember the weekend of my college graduation, Dad marooned himself on my sofa and watched the U.S. Open at Westchester. Some no-name Scot was sprinting up the leader-board, knocking in putt after impossible putt, swinging a long putter in the most unorthodox manner: his belly apparently impaled on the butt of

the grip, the fingertips of his right hand guiding the club. That day, Dad bought a long putter and told us later that he'd negotiated Diamond Woods' back nine with only eleven putts, his personal best. He made a sixty foot snake on seventeen for his fourth lifetime eagle.

In the evening, we barbecued chicken and sipped cheap beer, rehashing past glories. I thought of my sole extra-base hit in little league: an honest-to-God double, which the rightfielder mercifully booted, allowing me to take third. I didn't mention it. Dad told us that when we reached his age, we'd have so many past glories we wouldn't know where to start.

"For every one you remember," he said, "you'll forget three or four."

And I remember how much Dad liked to sit in our front lawn, getting soused with my neighbors. Eventually he'd tire of shouting at cars and pass out amongst the deflated basketballs and crushed Pabst cans. The night before graduation, our lawn-sitting spilled past midnight. People stumbled home to their moldy duplexes and cluttered apartments. Wired from the beer, my roommate Joey and I began shooting free-throws.

"Ten in a row," he said, turning the ball over in his hands. "First one to ten wins."

"Wins what?" I asked.

"Just wins. Do you want to win or not?"

Joey loved challenges. He argued that he could tackle and pin a medium-sized black bear. His mother told me that as a child he would submerge himself in their pool, then stay down for as long as he could. More than once she'd jumped in thinking he'd drowned only to have him get upset that she'd broken his concentration. He had a

recurring dream in which he fought a death match with the world's last surviving Bengal tiger. He attended the non-denominational Christian church two streets down, ushering once a month, lending a sturdy arm to old ladies as they made their way to the pews. He studied the writings of C.S. Lewis, puzzled over the Gnostic gospels, and, to steel his will power, remained celibate. Tests defined his existence, something I didn't envy and couldn't emulate. You could find him at the gym most nights, amassing the kind of over-muscled physique that earned respect in bars. But in the service of strength he'd sacrificed finesse, and in Joey's hands a basketball was as cumbersome as a pumpkin.

He let me shoot first, and I made four before short-arming my fifth. Joey air-balled his third, and we both tried to shiver free of the alcohol. On my second turn I made seven straight. Joey got to five and declared he saw light at the end of the tunnel. Over the next hour, I watched the moon creep lethargically across the sky as Joey continued to miss. Occasionally, the alternating blue and red corona of police lights glowed above the rooftops like ghosts, and sirens ended celebrations. Joey grew frustrated.

“What's the most you've ever made?” he asked me.

“I've never really counted,” I said.

“Everybody counts.”

“Maybe twenty,” I said. “I'd remember if it was any more than that.”

After another hour, Joey said, “I won't sleep until I get to ten.”

“I'm already sick of this,” I said.

A few years after graduation, an ex-girlfriend of his died in a car crash on the Oregon Coast Highway. She'd ended their relationship, after all, but when I called to

offer my condolences, he said, “I feel like a widower.” He might not have admitted that if I hadn’t dialed his number, and I worried he’d resent me for it. But he pressed on. He began training for the Portland Marathon. I remember hearing he took second in his division, and I wasn’t surprised.

Then, a few months later, I received an invitation to his wedding. He’d quit bodybuilding, choosing instead to dedicate himself to running, and had collapsed to a reasonable size. He’d found his new bride at church, and she was tall, athletically built, another gym-rat maybe. As Joey slid the ring onto her finger, distinct shadows delineated her triceps. At the reception, I drank sparkling cider and inspected the decorative streamers, avoiding conversation. I feared the marriage was doomed. It had happened all too quickly—the death, the courtship, the engagement. To me, it was disturbingly obvious: instead of mourning, Joey had taken the death as a challenge, something to be bested. This was no way to rebound. When I finally ventured over to shake his hand, his palm was dry. I remember thinking the decades-long struggle of married life would provide challenge enough.

Then, not a year later, his wife died of lymphatic cancer. I read about it the alumni newsletter. Joey had made a name for himself, releasing a workout video that melded physical and spiritual fitness called *Your Body, Your Temple*. The commercials ran during Sunday morning’s televised sermons. Joey, wearing a coat and tie, quoted relevant scripture, while behind him, men and women toiled at various fitness machines. He was vigorous and seemed at peace. A man who wouldn’t sleep until all God’s children could do five pushups. I knew I wouldn’t be able to stand his God-fearing resoluteness, the

unwavering calm in his voice, so, instead of calling him, I ordered ten videos.

We ran into each other once at a truck stop in Boise. My wife and I had been visiting her parents, and Levi was merely a pea-sized cluster of cells inside her. We stopped for gas, and I saw Joey sitting in the snack bar, sipping bottled water and filling out a questionnaire. For a moment, I forgot about his dead wife and almost shouted out to him as if we were still flag football teammates. He happened to look up, and we shook hands.

“I’m just passing through,” Joey said.

I didn’t know where he was headed, but I said, “I’m going the other way. What are you working on, there?”

“It’s supposed to predict how long you have to live based on your habits.”

“That’s a shaky premise.”

“I haven’t finished it,” he said. “The first section dealt with exercise and I’m probably good there.”

“You look shriveled,” I said.

“I couldn’t maintain the workouts. I got to a point where the physical pain couldn’t distract me.”

“Then what’s the point, right?”

Silence ensued and as I stood over him, I tried to think of something to say. “You can get through this,” I said. “I’m sure. Stay determined. It doesn’t take talent to get past death.” I made myself shut up right there.

Joey pretended I hadn’t opened my mouth. “How’s your father?” he asked.



“Happy,” I said. “He died with a bottle in his hands.”

“He knew how to enjoy himself, didn’t he?”

I gave Joey some answer and left him with his questionnaire. I hurried to my car, found my wife squeegeeing our windshield, and told her to get in. Maybe I should have introduced her to Joey, but as I drove away I knew I’d done the right thing: the story of his life would be a contamination, an unnecessary injection of misery—and we had hours still to drive.

And when I try to remember Joey in college, a physical paragon singlehandedly dominating intramural football games, my clearest memory is of him missing free-throws. I never got to ten, and after thirty futile minutes I went to bed.

At sunrise, I stepped outside to wake up Dad. I’d slept maybe five hours, and Joey was still shooting foul shots. His shoes were off. His shirt hung in a bush.

I asked him if he’d slept, if my father had shown any signs of life, if he planned to go to church that morning. He shook his head and continued to shoot.

Dad had bits of grass on his lips. I kicked him gently, and his eyes rolled open. He felt for his wallet and stood up gradually.

Joey said good morning and threw up another streak-killer.

“What did me in?” Dad said. “Tequila?”

“More than just tequila,” I said. I handed him his jacket and asked if he wanted breakfast.

“I’m thinking Belgian waffles,” he said. “How about it Joseph? Belgian waffles? Consider it my graduation present.”

Dad straightened his shirt and scratched the back of his neck. He plugged one nostril and jettisoned a spray of mucus through the other. You never saw a sunnier drunk.

“I’m not going anywhere until I make these shots,” Joey said.

“He’s been up all night,” I whispered to Dad.

“All night?” Dad said. “What are you trying to do?”

“Ten in a row,” Joey said. “That’s all.”

For a moment, Dad scanned the tall grass. He asked if I’d hidden his shoes from him. I told him no. I did have his keys, but I didn’t let on. Still barefoot, Dad stepped to the spray-painted dash that served as our free-throw line and made eight shots without missing.

He stopped. “Ten’s the goal here?” he said.

Joey admitted that it was.

Dad quickly made two more, the final one underhanded. This was his trick. It led to a familiar speech about how Rick Barry was the Mozart of the foul stripe. “For some reason nobody copies him,” Dad said, “except desperate big men, and the talent-less.” Joey mimed the motion, watching his own hands rise and fall.

Dad never explained the advantages of Barry’s method, and I went my whole life without attempting it—no one wants to appear talent-less.

While Dad located his shoes and relieved himself on the side of the house, Joey tried a couple shots underhanded, but after missing both, he extracted his shirt from the bush and before I knew it, we were eating miserably chewy waffles, listening to Dad relive a high school game in which he’d made buzzer-beaters at the end of each quarter.

He regaled us through a mouthful of golden, syrupy mush, and I watched old men with felt Stetsons and old women in dresses creep along the sidewalks, aiming for church. In a few hours I'd be receiving my diploma, and I remember wondering if I'd gleaned a single ounce of wisdom from my father.

Now, Levi finally grips his golf club correctly. He resists at first, but I convince him to try it once for Dad, using the same voice that persuades him to stop standing too close to the TV. He swings twice, missing badly, and I'm overcome by the sense that he's humoring me. But his next angry hack knocks the ball into the fence like an unwavering, white-hot comet. His eyes widen, and he smashes three more into the cedar. They hit loudly, as if settling some question, like gavel reports. I tell him good job, but the lesson's over, we're done. He wants to stay but I drag him into the house—I don't want the neighbor complaining about the noise. Dad died two years before Levi was born, but I can see the resemblance in the jangling ease of his joints, the way he never has to try. What does my son need with a teacher? I'm superfluous. Like everything else, true talent skips a generation.

My wife and I put Levi to bed and I start to tell him to stay determined, that talent alone is not the only path to greatness, but he rolls away from me and pulls angrily at his bunching pajamas. I go back outside and finger the dents Levi's drives have punched into the fence—each drive powerful enough to compress the threadbare, loose-grain cedar into a shiny dimple, smooth to the touch. I close my eyes and rub the indentations with the pad of my thumb. They represent a language I only thinly grasp. The pocks are gathered in a tight formation, placed there by a natural.

## The Specimen

Dad started taking in cats. They came and went, like his girlfriends. Geoff and I slept over with him weekends. Late Saturday night, Geoff had the idea to hog-tie and clipper Barry the Maine Coon. It took some serious doing, but Geoff was positive cats loved to get rid of those thick coats. He told me to imagine how super it would be to get to walk around naked all the time, feeling the nice cold upholstery on your butt. At four in the morning, the racket of Barry hissing and flopping on the floor like a fish woke Dad up. He saw Barry's fur lying in piles on the kitchen linoleum and kicked Geoff out into the street in his underwear. The next day, Mom called the sheriff citing child abandonment, but nothing much came of it because the walk from Dad's rented duplex to our house took less than three minutes.

Mom made nearly thirty thousand as Mr. Huber's personal assistant, so she used Dad's monthly support checks to make home improvements. She re-sided the house with aluminum because the salesman said she'd never need to paint again. She didn't believe him and painted the house yellow, twice, in the first three months. She hired a roofing crew to sit in our garage and wait for a dry day and fed them elaborate picnic lunches. When the upstairs bathtub overflowed, it took her three months to replace the ceiling in my room, and I could tell she hated the idea that the project wasn't, technically, a total waste of Dad's money.

Dad was our school principal, responsible for union dues, child support, and rent. He said the soundtrack of his life was the thunderous swirling sound of his paychecks

going down three enormous drains.

But Dad was an optimist. He was the kind of person who thought tolerance was an adequate first step toward love. Mom married him because he could tolerate a woman with a kid. Geoff was six months old when they met, and his real dad was God knows where. One night the idea of divorce came up out of nowhere. Mom and Dad usually argued about money, jobs, doctor's bills, Geoff's behavior, the proper way to do the laundry, the proper soap to put in the laundry, the particular infuriating way Mom folded Dad's laundry, or the way Dad got malicious and dried Mom's laundry on High Heat—but tonight the notion of divorce caught fire and became unmanageable in a matter of minutes over the problem of Geoff's insistence on calling Dad "Ronald."

At the dinner table, after Geoff asked Ronald to pass him the corn, Dad explained that "God knows where" was not the way to describe Geoff's real dad. "'God knows who' is more like it," he said.

But Dad didn't want to be divorced—not like Mom, who started having Mr. Huber over for dinner. Dad dated Ms. Epperson the Biology teacher for a week and was reprimanded by the school board. After Ms. Epperson, he picked up a woman at the Ron-D-Voo Tavern and took her back to his duplex. She stole his wallet, his milk jug full of coins, and his VCR.

Then he met Geraldine at the Dairy Mart. She was at least ten years older than him. Her hair was one shade of yellow and her skin was another. She'd paid to have midnight blue eyeliner tattooed on, which Mom said made her look like she was on welfare. The night Dad had Geoff and I over for formal introductions, Geraldine told me

that Dairy Mart's chocolate milk was made from white that had nearly turned. Geoff told her that was illegal and she called him a genuine snot and dropped her fork on her plate, loud. She walked home, then and there, and that's when I stopped imagining Dad's lady friends as possible-stepmoms. Dad screamed at Geoff about how sons should try to get at least a little bit of wisdom off their fathers. Geoff had the ability to plug his ears without using his hands. He developed it when Dad started calling school assemblies to talk about recent trends in student misbehavior. Nobody but our family knew it, but the trends were always things Geoff had done wrong the week before.

Back when Mom and Dad were still married, Geoff would draw detailed schematics of apparatuses he'd need to build in order to sew Dad's mouth shut while he slept. Or he'd take a picture of Dad from our big box of snapshots and sketch it in super detail, except he'd freehand a miniature bear-trap clamped to Dad's tongue. Some nights we couldn't sleep while our parents tried to figure out who to blame for Geoff's problems. Mom always defended Dr. Horton's post-session assessments, repeating that what Geoff needed was drugs and lots of them. Dad asked her why Geoff had to destroy his home life *and* his work life.

On nights like these, Geoff would sneak out the window and draw in the dirt, surrounding our house with imaginary armies, barking orders to search and destroy. I lost track of him when he graduated to ninth grade. I was stuck back in seventh. He no longer bothered to tell me what he was thinking, and even though our bedrooms were in the same hall, he became a stranger. After two years, I became a freshman and we were together again every day. I found out that Geoff was a joke at this new school, a weirdo

who scribbled during every class, designing futuristic weapons on the Formica desktops and in the margins of his spirals. Kids would say things to me like, “Zeke. Give us the low-down. Does your bro beat his meat? On your roof? At midnight? Under a full moon? With a shotgun gun in his mouth?” I’d say no, and then laugh at them, like they were the unstable ones.

Then, on a Monday, Geoff set off a Roman Candle in the glass trophy case in the hall outside the gym. It was January, and we’d hoarded our New Year’s fireworks because, Geoff said, he had elaborate plans. At lunchtime, he covered his fist with my sweatshirt and punched a hole in the trophy case glass. He had that look in his eye—that wild, electric, fun-loving look—and I crouched down, grinning, to watch his back like a good scout, and all over my body I felt a hum, like my heart was pumping rock music into my arms and legs. The Roman Candle ricocheted off the trophies, scorching little pearlescent bruises into the old brass. That would have been the end of it, except the last blast flew under the armpit feathers of the spread-winged, taxidermied golden eagle and disappeared inside. After a few seconds, the mascot’s feathers started to smolder and curl up on themselves and tar black smoke streamed from its open beak. Geoff and I watched, thrilled, as, in less than a minute, the bird melted into a turd-like mound. Our mouths were hanging open in amazement, and my head filled with the smell of burnt plastic and wood varnish. Then, somebody shouted “Fire!” and pulled the alarm.

The fire chief and the sheriff were at the emergency school board meeting the next day. I testified that Geoff had acted alone, that I’d been eating my lunch like everybody else. Geoff let his head drift around the room, acting bored, letting me get

away with the lie. Dad pleaded on Geoff's behalf, saying he'd take personal responsibility for him in the future.

The sheriff interrupted Dad's testimony. "Can I get something on the record?" he said. "This boy was *already* his responsibility and what good has that done so far?"

That shut everybody up for a few seconds. I couldn't think of any way to argue. When Dad opened his mouth to speak, nothing came out.

Then Denny Parrish, the president of the school board and Dad's golf buddy, said he'd known Geoffrey since he was a tyke and it would be a damned shame to let such an imaginative kid slip through the system. The school board stuck Geoff with a one-strike-and-your-out probation, and Dad shook all their hands.

Mom used the fireworks incident to convince the judge that Dad was an incompetent disciplinarian and should be reduced to supervised visits. It didn't bother me much because we saw Dad everyday in the halls. Plus, his duplex stunk. Geoff told Mom it smelled like he'd wiped the walls with wet diapers and that the light beige carpet had turned yellow, and she was tickled. It wasn't exactly true. Dad did have five cats, all un-neutered males who had a tendency to spray, but you could only smell it from five to five-thirty, when the sun came in through the front window and warmed up the carpet. But Mom believed Geoff and figured she could even get the supervised visits stopped if the social worker found out how Dad was living.

Then things got quiet. And eerie. And boring.

Geoff kept his nose clean for nearly six months, and Dad kept his job.

And then school let out for the summer like a big exhale.



And then it was September and Geoff was a senior. I was a sophomore—upperclassmen actually stopped to talk to me, mainly to ask what the deal was with my bro. As if I was the older brother, I said we'd been waiting for Geoff to come around for years now. Geoff and I had Ms. Epperson's first period Anatomy and Physiology. Each morning Geoff spent the class period singeing the edges of his textbooks with the Bunsen burner, until the bottom of his backpack turned gray from the ashes.

The first week school was back in, I ignored the judge's order and walked to Dad's place, alone. He was staring into the microwave glass, watching a cold steak rotate. Dad cut the steak into tiny cubes. I told him I shouldn't stay too long because this would be the first place Mom would look for me. But he wasn't listening. Barry the Maine Coon was dying atop a pile of clothes in the closet. Dad pushed the tiny cubes of unsauced steak under Barry's nose and said the other cats had ganged up on him. I saw a crusty scab where his left eye used to be.

"Your brother shaved him," Dad said, "and so his friends sensed weakness."

He said it was cowardly to take Barry to the vet where he'd definitely get put to sleep.

I tried to stroke Barry's head but he raked me across the back of my hand with a paw full of claws. Dad ran over and grabbed Barry, and the cat swiped at him too, cutting Xs into his forearms. I asked Dad for a Band-Aid. He raised his chin as high as he could to protect his jugulars and yelled that I was being really, extremely, not at all sympathetic to Barry and why don't I just beat it? The cat turned somersaults in his bloody hands, and I decided it was time to go home.

Outside, Geoff was kneeling on the hood of Dad's Geo hatchback, scoring the windshield with a glass cutter.

"What are you doing?" I said.

"Possum," he said. "I found it in the road."

Geoff took off his backpack and opened it. I could see a dead red eye and a pink, whiskery snout pointed up at me.

Geoff scored a spiderweb pattern into the windshield. He had to push hard, and I worried he'd crash through onto the dashboard. When he was done, he jumped down and the hood popped back into shape, making a noise like a twanged saw blade.

"Now what?" I said.

"You don't get it?" he said.

"Course I get it," I said.

"You're definitely not officer material," he said.

Geoff zipped up the backpack and put it on. He motioned for me to follow him. I shook my head no. It was only about nine o'clock, and cars still passed by now and then. The neighbors' lights were all still on. Down the street, Mr. Huber's car pulled into our driveway. He walked into the house without knocking.

I ran to the side of the duplex and made sure to stand in the shadows. Geoff climbed the wooden fence and in one cat-like leap, cleared the gap over the small side lawn, landing with a clank, sprawled sideways across the rain gutters. He pulled himself up and crouched, squinting out over our neighborhood. He climbed to the peak of the roof over the garage and stood looking down at the driveway. He reached back over his

shoulder as if for an arrow and pulled the possum out by its neck. I moved back a step and Geoff raised the possum over his head, but when he got his hand around its stomach, the possum squirmed to life and Geoff's body convulsed and he threw it down hard, onto Dad's Geo, into the circle he'd scored into the windshield. The possum hit and bounced backwards onto the hood in a mist of glass particles. Then, without even hissing at me, it walked off into the street, disappearing into the hedges surrounding the high school.

Geoff stood up straight, straddling the peak of the roof. "I thought it was dead," he said, then he grinned and pumped his fist and howled.

I ran down the street toward home. I hid behind Mr. Huber's car and looked back but Dad never came out of the house.

After a few minutes, Geoff climbed down and walked home.

The next day at school, right before lunch, Dad's secretary called us over the intercom to come to the office. I knew we were in for it, but I also knew, already, and with a lot of shame, that I was going to deny being involved. Dad would believe me because compared to Geoff, I was a reasonable human being. I stood on the other side of the office from Geoff, waiting for Dad to come back from the restroom.

He'd been crying. Geoff stared just over his head at the bookcase, looking bored again.

"What do I say?" Dad said.

Not "What can I say?" or "What should I say?" or "What am I supposed to say?"—all of which would have made sense. He wanted an answer.

"About what?" I said.

Geoff looked even higher up the bookshelf.

“What do I say every time something like this happens?” Dad said.

“Something like what happens?” I said.

“Your brother can tell you,” Dad said. “Can’t you, Geoffrey?”

I turned to look at Geoff, as if to say, *well?*, but he wasn’t playing along with my lie. When your dad’s your principal, you never get to grow up. You don’t get to live a new, different life at school. Same with the divorce. Other children of broken homes, as the poster behind the counselor’s desk called us, got to enjoy having their dad’s gone all week. Not us.

Dad wasn’t paying attention to me. He said, “I say...well, not to you two or your mother, but to myself, I say, ‘I deserve some pain’.” Dad paused and wiped his nose. “And I do. But I have to admit something to you boys: I can’t afford to be dumping money into that car. Can we call a truce until after Christmas?”

I almost said I didn’t know what he meant, but Geoff spared me that, saying, “I’ll give you till Veteran’s Day.”

Dad straightened up and wiped the tears from his eyes. He shouted into the outer office for his secretary. He asked her what day Veteran’s Day fell on this year. She stuck her head in, annoyed, and said it didn’t *fall* on any day—it’s always November 11.

“What is that,” Dad said to Geoff, “about two months? I can live with that.”

We left the office and went back to class.

“Why’d you agree to leave him alone?” I asked Geoff.

“You really don’t know anything, do you?” he said. “The element of surprise is

vital in war. Any mercenary website will tell you that.”

“Dad means it,” I said. “He really wants a truce. Can you just give him till Veteran’s Day, like you said?”

“Jesus!” Geoff said. “What are you? Swiss?”

“Say it,” I said. “Say you’ll cool it for a while.”

“No,” he said.”

I opened the door of the cafeteria and let Geoff go ahead of me. I planned to eat lunch with him, like I did every day.

No one else would.

He stood in front of me in the lunch line and I saw that he’d stopped doing a good job of washing. The backs of his ears looked sooty. I noticed that he was missing patches of hair on the back of his head, like he’d tried to barber himself with a straight razor without a mirror. Right then, I saw why everyone thought he was creepy. My brother was a genuine oddity, something you viewed through thick glass.

“Say you’ll cool it till Veteran’s Day,” I said, “or I won’t eat lunch with you anymore.”

“Fine,” he said.

We sat together for the entire lunch period, but we didn’t talk.

For two months, Geoff stayed inside at night. I know, because I’d sneak out first and watch his window from the tree in our front yard. Despite the truce, I thought I had to keep an eye on things. But sitting with my rear wedged in the central crotch of the tree made me feel younger than I was, like I was still in middle school and that at this rate, I’d

never be an upperclassman, not really. I blamed Geoff.

Some nights, I'd see Mr. Huber and Mom step outside. They'd be arguing and hissing at each other in whispers. He practically lived at our house, especially weekends, and I figured out that Mom's tolerance for men was leaking out of her like air from a balloon. Then a few days before Veteran's Day, when it was getting to the point where Geoff could cut loose again, Mr. Huber, while stuffing his shirt into his pants, fired Mom before he got in his car. She stood there in her robe, looking shocked, silently mouthing words that began with W. When Mr. Huber drove away, she ran down the street after him. For an hour, I waited for her to come back, and then I climbed down and went to bed.

The next day at school, November 10, Dad called us into the office again and told us how much he enjoyed not fighting. He said that Mom had invited him over for dinner.

"What for?" Geoff said.

"I think she's sick of hating me. We're going to live down the street from each other, so we might as well learn to be neighborly."

I thought it sounded a little too good to be true

Dad said, "Can we make permanent this whole until-Veteran's Day cease-fire?"

Geoff shivered and I looked over to see if a window was open. I looked back and Geoff's eyes were squeezed close and his chin was in his chest. He saw me looking at him and put up the hood of his sweatshirt and cinched the cords until all I could see was the tip of his nose.

Dad came over and hugged us both. I hugged him back. Geoff just sat there.

That night, we all had dinner together for the first time in months. Dad looked around the house at the many additions Mom had made, many of them unnecessary, like the French doors she put in, which led to the back patio and gave a nice view of the above-ground pool.

“You’ve added some real equity, here, Lori,” he said.

Mom fluttered behind our shoulders and spooned casserole onto our plates. When she fed Dad, he looked up at her with closed eyes and breathed in deep.

“Geoffrey’s Art teacher told me he’s moving into abstract pottery,” Dad said.

“Wonderful,” Mom said.

“Why are you talking to my teachers?” Geoff said.

“It’s sort of my job, son,” Dad said. “As your father and your principal.”

“Wow,” Mom said. “Abstract pottery. Sounds beautiful.”

“All I did was smash a vase this stupid girl made,” Geoff said.

Nobody said anything for a while. Dad looked around the table every minute or so, checking the looks on our faces.

“Lori, is that a new ceiling fan?” Dad said.

“Everything’s new,” Geoff said. “She even bought new shower curtain rings.”

“I’m talking to your mother,” Dad said.

“She let me tear out my carpet with my bare hands.”

“Lori, is Geoffrey serious?”

Geoff was serious, and I could tell that Dad knew it. One thing Geoff wasn’t, was a liar. He considered ratting himself out to be a badge of honor.

“Let’s not tell me how to spend my money,” Mom said. “Anyway, it’s spent, so why talk about it?”

“Can you pass me the corn?” I said.

“We’re not eating corn,” Dad said.

“Oh.”

“Did you see that she built Mr. Huber an office in the garage?” Geoff said.

“There’s a new ceiling fan in there, too.”

Dad sucked his front teeth. He bit a spoon of casserole and chewed. After a minute, he got up and went to the garage. I heard a door slam, then he came back into the house and looked in each room like he was taking a tour. She hadn’t really built Mr. Huber an office; she’d just set up a desk and an old lamp from the attic, but I knew Dad wouldn’t be able to keep this in perspective.

“I want to see the receipts,” he announced when he sat back down. “I’m sure you kept detailed receipts, and I want to see them, is all I’m saying.”

“Can we finish dinner first?” Mom said.

“Yeah,” Geoff said. “I’m eating my dinner right now.”

Dad dropped his fork on his plate.

Mom dropped her plate into the sink.

And then she dropped the casserole dish into the sink.

And then she picked up each of our plates, if we were finished or not, and dropped them, one by one, into the sink.

“Break all the dishes,” Dad said. “Real nice. I suppose you can’t have new French



doors without new china.”

“Maybe we should try this again in a month or two,” Mom said. “You think you’ll calm down by then?”

This was it, I thought.

Dad had to come up with exactly the right answer.

I didn’t know what it was, but I knew what it wasn’t. By now, Geoff was leaning forward, looking back and forth from Mom to Dad, leaning over the table with a smirk on his face. He had that same wild, electric, fun-loving glow about him. Both of us finally looked at Dad, waiting to hear what he’d say.

He got up and walked out the front door. I thought he’d slam it, and I could tell he wanted to, but he didn’t. And that seemed about as good an answer as he could have come up with. Leaving without slamming the door. Mom picked broken glassware out of the sink and dropped it in the garbage can.

“I can live with this,” I told her. I meant it. I could. The mood was, to me, exactly tolerable.

The next day at school, we were dissecting foot-long baby sharks in Ms. Epperson’s class. She asked us to respect the creatures, because they, like us, had a right to dignity. Nobody wanted to be Geoff’s lab partner so I had to do it. On cow-eyeball day, Geoff spent the whole class bored, poking the black gooey marble with a probe. Looking bored, he methodically chopped the sheep’s brain into wet confetti and barely looked up as I chipped the feral cat’s teeth off with a rock hammer. On shark day, Ms. Epperson sat Geoff and I in the back, so it would be easier not to notice us.

I don't know what happened next. After the blast and the sounds of breaking beakers, a sheet of yellow grease ran onto my eyelashes, making them cling together. I wiped at my face to keep the stuff from going into my mouth, but I couldn't stop it. It tasted just like the shark oil smelled. Geoff was holding up a shredded piece of gray and red meat. He stuck it under my nose and I slapped it out of his hands. Kids screamed and ran out of the room. Ms. Epperson was lying in the middle of the floor, and the back of her head was covered in the yellow oil.

In less than a minute, Dad ran into the room with a janitor. He helped Ms. Epperson up, but when she saw that Geoff and I were the only two kids still in the room, she slapped Dad across the face. It took him a second to be stunned by the slap because he was still stunned by the slime sliding down the walls. Geoff stood facing the wall with his back to us. Dad asked me if I was okay and I nodded. He asked Geoff but Geoff didn't turn around. Dad bent down to yell in his ear in case his hearing was messed up. Geoff acted deaf and turned aside and ran out of the room. On the wall, written by a finger in the coating of quickly congealing oil, were the words *Suck It Big Time, Principal Ronald, Love Geoff*. Dad told us to head to his office. As I was leaving, I saw him smear the words out of the oil with his palm.

We walked into Dad's office and his secretary told us we better not think about sitting in the good chairs. The oil in my clothes was soaking to my skin and I felt all lubed up. I asked the secretary for a towel to wipe my face, but she told us we stank and shut the door.

"What did you do?" I asked Geoff.

“M220. I’ve been saving it all year.”

Dad came in with Denny Parrish. Denny was dressed to play golf. Dad’s hands were sickly yellow.

“So,” Denny said. “What the hell?”

“We’re not sure how it went down,” Dad said, “or who’s to blame.”

“We’re not?” Denny said. “I’m pretty sure we’re looking *right at* who’s to blame. Eh, Geoffrey?”

Dad sat down behind his desk and leaned back. Denny sat on the front edge of it with one leg hanging over the corner.

“Well?” Dad said. Every word he spoke sounded like a big sigh. “If it was you, Geoff, you know what this means.”

“Of course it was him,” Denny said. He was nearly shouting. “How many more times can we stand up for you, son? Ten? A thousand?”

“A thousand.”

Denny talked to Dad as if we weren’t standing right there. He said there was a point in every gambling situation when you had to cut your losses, and that Geoff was becoming too big of a risk. Dad referred to Geoff by name and I could hear him coming around to Denny’s point of view. He said the best years of his life had been spent cleaning up behind Geoffrey’s trail of mayhem. Denny said he was sorry, he knew it would be hard. Dad asked if there was no way to let Geoffrey slide one more time.

Denny placed his hand reassuringly on Dad’s shoulder. “What are you, high?” he said.

“I did it,” I said. “It was an M220, I’ve had it since New Year’s, and I stuck it in, in the shark’s butt.”

“You did?” Denny said.

“Yeah.”

Dad brightened up a bit. “That’s a shame. Why, Zeke, why would you do such a thing?”

“I’m angry,” I said.

“So this is how we’re going to deal with this?” Denny said. “We’re going to say Zeke confessed?”

Dad looked around the room at the three of us. “Okay?”

“This is stupid,” Geoff said. “I did it. You can’t get a 220 up a shark’s butt. I stuck it in down the throat. That’s the only way.”

“Calm down, Geoffrey,” Denny said. “Just count your blessings. For once.”

“Mr. Parrish,” Geoff said. He was almost in tears. “You don’t believe this? I did it. I mean, I *definitely* did it.”

“No,” I said. “I did it.”

“Mr. *Parrish*,” Geoff said. “You can’t believe him. *How* can you believe him?”

Dad interrupted. “Because he’s the reasonable child of two reasonable human beings.”

“Are you saying I’m not, Ronald?”

“Funny thing,” Dad said. “Nobody can say for sure, now can they?”

Geoff just left. Denny yelled at him to stay put, but we watched him run across

the street toward home.

“So now what?” I said.

For a week, I was suspended from school. Geoff didn’t come back even though nobody officially blamed him for anything. Ms. Epperson made a stink at the school board meeting, but Denny and Dad stuck to the story. The sheriff asked a few questions, but he didn’t seem to care too much, like as long as one of Dad’s kids was in trouble, justice would be served.

A month later, Mom invited Dad back over for dinner, but only if he could agree that the past was the past and there was nothing anybody could do about it so why make a scene? He said fine.

After the shark incident, Dr. Horton prescribed Geoff more drugs and Mom snuck them into his food as often as she could. I was hoping some sort of reconciliation would end the feud, but it was the drugs. Geoff lost his old exuberance and wouldn’t even turn his head when I put on “Full Metal Jacket” for him. He used to watch the first half, the boot-camp half, at least once a week. At school, he sat quietly in Art class and pushed his thumbs distractedly into clay. I got detention for a month, and even though he didn’t have to be there, Geoff sat in detention with me and stared at the wall.

“Aren’t you going to at least read something?” I said.

“Like what?” Geoff said.

“We’re in a library,” I said. “Pick a book, a magazine, anything.”

“I’m good” he said.

Mrs. Oulette, the monitor, looked up and put her finger over her mouth, and then she looked back down and marked the papers on her desk with her red pen.

“There’s probably a book over there about the Civil War or something,” I said.

Geoff leaned his head on his hand and closed his eyes.

“Look” I said. “Go get a book. I’m telling you to get a book. I’m not going to sit here with you if you’re just going to stare.”

Mrs. Oulette said, “Quiet, please” without looking up.

“I’m warning you,” I said. “I’ll get up and move over there. I will.”

“I don’t want to read anything,” he said. “I’m just going to sit here, if you don’t mind.”

I did mind. I minded a lot. I wasn’t used to detention and so I didn’t really know the kids who were sitting all around us, but I wasn’t going to sit there talking to a dirty-haired senior with blank, dull eyes and not even enough ambition to put his hands under his desk and flip Oulette the bird.

I got up and walked to the other side of the room. I sat down and crossed my arms over my chest to show Geoff exactly how serious I was. He wasn’t paying any attention. Mrs. Oulette looked up and was about to say something, but she saw that other than getting up and moving, I wasn’t bothering anybody. She was right. Geoff wasn’t bothered in the least. I stared at him, trying to get him to make eye contact. I was serious as hell—this was it for me. I wasn’t going to be tied to a brother who cut his own hair and acted like he was stuck in an invisible straightjacket.

I waved a hand at him. He didn’t look.

I put both hands over me head and waved them back and forth like I was trying to stop a car on the highway. He didn't look at me.

I stood halfway up in my desk and punched the air in his direction, but he didn't even move.

I sat back down and stared right at him.

Behind him on the wall, partially obscured by Geoff's head, was a poster of a cartoon owl with spectacles and a mortarboard, and although I couldn't tell what the owl was actually standing on, it looked like it was perched on Geoff's skull, maybe with its talons digging into his scalp, and for some reason, I was a little terrified by the fact that Geoff wasn't screaming.