

Free Birds

a short novel

by

G.T. Hogan

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Ptarmigans are rare birds in the north-country which are illegal to hunt. Some Ptarmigans make a loud croaking noise. In Japan they are known as “thunder birds.”

1.

Abe and I went on the trip with Ernie Cain just after he killed Mr. Cain, his dad. It was in Kearny, New Jersey, County Hudson, on the family estate which doesn't have a long driveway like all the other shithole estates in our town. Abe picked us up the next morning but he didn't hear about it right away.

“Don't say anything to Honest Abe,” Ernie said, like he was prepping for a vacation that he truly needed.

If the trip was a year after the bad dinner, it might have been a sanguine, happier time. But it wasn't. And making it worse, the dad incident is nothing compared to what Ernie was involved in, or performed a month later. Whether we should have taken the trip at all—who knows.

If you asked Ernie on the way south-west whether he meant to kill his father, he would've said no. But the fight was clear and ugly. Arguments can turn violent, but no, there wasn't one. It was purely physical and pretty much quiet minus the grunts, skin rubs and bone knocks.

Of course it didn't help that I liked Ernie's ex-girlfriend. I felt very strongly at the time that I simply knew her better. Her brilliance wasn't fully appreciated! He'd been with her for two years, but they had separated months before. They weren't together anymore, romantically involved, dating—whatever the best way to say it is—not an item, not a thing, not sleeping in the same beds, not having sex, to be scientific about it. Yet very surprisingly, towards the end of our long adventure, they still arranged to have a

private time. And that's partly why it hurts so much—just the thought of them driving off together, smiling, etc.

They took the Big Trip—and whether they went by air or by water is still debatable. And yes it was partly metaphorical for me because I had to come to terms with both of them being present in my life, their togetherness, and then their disappearing act. They drove off when I didn't expect them to. And I wasn't invited.

Before it, Oli and Ernie were no doubt my two favorite people—despite my general criticisms of the 'Ernie method.' And that's when I decided to write a novel about all this, maybe to be called: *The Life and Death of Human Animals*. And if it's ever turned into a movie, it would end there, with them both looking happy, flying in the car halfway over the water.

After three weeks on the road, the first chat with Ms. Olive stands out in my memory. Ernie indeed cried a little. He sniffled with his eyes red and wet and stood up from her table and excused himself. I had seen him cry before, but it was a decade ago when we were ten or eleven. I was a little on the surprised and honestly happy side for seeing him break down a bit.

“Sorry, I don't know why I did that.”

“Sit back down, Ern.”

“Dude, you killed your dad,” I reminded him.

“Yeah, whatever. My dad died a long time ago.”

Ernie was definitely correct in one way, but an emotional death is much different than a physical death. He, and his sister

Cate who lives out in Seattle, could no longer fight with, or ignore, their dear old dad.

The road trip was right after school, in fact just a few months before my cousin Dwayne turned my world upside down, but that's another story. When Abe picked us up at the short Cain driveway, Ernie was hosing off the blood-stained pillow from the couch, but then he shook his head and threw it in a plastic bag, coiled it up, grabbed his duffel bag, and we hopped in Abe's vacation-vehicle sport-trooper. When Abe asked him about the wet pillow, Ernie just said: "Maybe later."

For the first time, I had a general nervousness—with all the extended hang-out on the schedule—that had never been actuated before. In the past, people were somewhat cautious around Ernie the more physical kid. But this minor fear had been taken up a notch. It was realer than expected, than I knew what to do with. Pal Ernie had always been the guy who, in theory, was a bit more dangerous. In yearbook verbiage, he would have been elected: Most Likely to Actually Kill a Person. Now by sad circumstance, he'd made a reality out of the joke, and it didn't take much effort to be a bit overwhelmed. It was yet another thing to think about, or to try to leave behind and not think about.

A year before, south of Perth Amboy on the Garden State, on our way to the Shore for a beach day, we got pulled over by a DOT trooper. And then a second trooper showed up. We were confused because we weren't speeding at all, maybe seventy-two in a sixty-five zone. The trooper asked whether we saw the alert on the electronic billboard a few miles back for a blue Subaru with Ernie's license plate—and then we were doubly confused. Ernie figured it was a typo in the plate number and a coincidence in the color, but the cop said it was a silver alert for two young men who

had mugged a man back in Kearny, and who matched our general descriptions.

Ernie in the driver's seat let out a loud "Aaahhhhhh, I get it now," he said. And then he explained pretty politely to the cop that we in fact had not done any mugging. "We invite you to search us and the car to see that," he said. "The call no doubt came from my dad, James Cain, who gets dumb drunk every day after work, and sometimes before work. The call no doubt came from him trying to stop us from leaving town," Ernie explained.

"We're going to the Shore, officer," I offered.

Ernie then told the cop that he could lean in and see from the towels and two boogie boards that a day at the beach was getting started.

"We're not going far," Ernie added. "And we'll be back by seven or eight I'm sure."

Though probably not standard practice, the youngish cop then for whatever reason believed us—partly because it was true—and chuckled at the whole scenario.

"The disagreeable dad," was all he said, and then he added a grin.

"Yeah well, disagreeable is one word for it," said Ernie. "He probably tossed his wallet in the bushes to make it look like he'd really been mugged."

Ernie then looked down the road and exhaled.

“So anyway, officer-man, we didn’t mug anybody. Again search the vehicle if you want.” The cop was on the passenger side and just stood and backed up a step. Then he added with a straight face that he’d put a call in to have the silver alert taken off the electronic warning signs.

“Drive on, fellas.” He said, and waved us on.

Ernie floored it out into traffic and shook his head but didn’t say anything.

Abe wasn’t there that day.

At the beginning of our trip a year later, I told Abe that story since New Jersey highways were the new topic.

Maybe this should be called “How to be a Killer in Three Easy Steps,” but that makes death sound like a no-big-deal thing. But surprising deaths happen to people every day. It’s not unusual! And no, this story doesn’t intend to shock too much. Yet strange it is that death makes us stand up and pay attention. It’s closer than we realize, and forces us to look at things in a different way.

2.

One of my searches in life will be to figure out where the word “friend” went, and what the everyday look-alike imposter means. To say “friend” is overused now is a stupid billion times exponential overstatement. With whatever day job I’ll get, my

other life goal is to be a good story-maker, to expose the human condition, as unoriginal as that might sound. And of course not to lose people's interest. "When I grow up, I want to be a writer," I should still say.

Then a little more recreational got me thinking—about everything. For starters, I learned from my B's in creative writing that being a good storyteller is a lot more than just being a good phrase-maker. And life isn't fiction! A damned wild story happened right in front of me! Ernie's gigantic life-ending event was the unexpected precursor to our little coast to coast adventure. And then during the trip, we learned more about Abe's sad and difficult situation. Names have been changed to protect all of us, and any character-evidence is just conjecture.

By nature Ernie is physical and short-tempered. In college he was a strong-kid cocaine-fiend. But he wasn't a typical drug addict—more like he worked out a lot and coke was just his performance enhancer. Once walking in Porter Square he out of nowhere lifted his elbow and fist to scare a guy walking towards us—truly scared the guy was—like Ernie was really going to hit him extremely hard. It wasn't just a lean-over pose. And Ernie didn't laugh at the provocation. He was just mad and a little low on life that day.

In contrast, Abe has a quiet mind—which can have more going on than is obvious.

Ernie's mom died when Ernie was ten from a big cancer tumor on her spine, which Ernie said spread fast without getting noticed—mistakenly thought to have been just a bad back pain for a while. When she passed on, his friendly but silent grandma moved in to help raise him. But you might say that she alone did

the raising because Ernie's dad didn't help much, to say the least, not having a great nurturing side.

Ernie's mom died way too soon in young Ernie's life. His dad on the other hand stuck around, and switched after a bad car accident from office work to driving a forklift—at a building place down on the Kearny flats where they keep a huge amount of sheetrock in several warehouses. I always thought this kind of work was bad for anybody for being so simple and repetitive. That's all he did all day long, take it off delivery trucks, rearrange it, and load their company trucks. He was the only white guy in the yard there, not that that matters, with a handful of Mexicans and Puerto Ricans, as well a few guys from my high school.

Then by message, on that weekend just before our trip, Ernie told me he would be down in Kearny from Boston on Sunday afternoon. I went over around five. He and Grandma had just finished making a nice dinner and I enjoyed the peaceful hang-out. Around six his dad came home from Claddagh's and the peacefulness went away. Violence begets violence.

Aside from his temper, which Ernie probably got from his dad, he definitely got a lot of his crass sense of humor from his mom's side. He looks a lot like his mom's brother, Jeffery. At ten years old, Ernie was probably sad and confused when he thought about his mom's departure. At eleven, he was maybe less sad but probably equally confused. At twelve he was quieter altogether, maybe having digested it for better or worse, and probably distracted by the changes that were happening, life and all that, quickly becoming a man. At thirteen he grew a foot, and at fourteen and fifteen he made an extra effort to put on muscle. He soon became a super-strong short-tempered asshole—a metamorphosis if you will.

Mr. Cain's wife—Ern's mom—left the picture, but that was certainly no excuse for being the chief asshole and hurting Ernie for twelve years. And there's no statute of limitations on being a bad dad or abusive father.

Soon after the giant road trip, it was Abe who gave me more big news—with a twist no less. His own situation took a turn for the wholly unexpected—and it was largely because of getting to know Ernie a little better.

* * *

For the 'last supper' in Kearny, I went over to the Cain house partly because I knew it would be a fun evening with Grandma before the ginormous trip. Together Ernie and Grandma made chicken thighs, tater-tots and green beans, and the three of us just had a nice innocent time in his kitchen. Grandma went back and forth to the counter and the oven to make dessert, and Ernie told her about our big plans. Then the peaceful atmosphere ended when his dad joined the party. It wasn't known in advance that he'd be in a bad mood, but it certainly wasn't a surprise.

In his early teen years, the ear "pinch" became kind of a routine for Ernie. He came to expect it, and told me that it was something he stopped fighting or fearing. He'd let it happen. Once when he was eleven or twelve, his dad told him: "You know this is for your mom—right, Ern?" And Ernie without question disagreed from the get-go—it didn't make any sense that it was from his mom or for his mom or whatever it was his dad was trying to convince him of. It hurt, and Ernest knew that mom wouldn't do that. For Ern, the loss of mom was painful enough already. It didn't require more pain caused by dad.

Ernie's new routine, established over the college years, was not to have that pain, not to have that routine or anything close to it with his dad. The old routine might have been helpful for his dad at some point, but its lack of goodness for Ernie more than made up for that. Years ago, he expected and came to sort-of almost need it, that painful bonding with his dad, or so he told me. "But things are different now—I'm passed that. Dad can bond alone," he added.

In college, Ernie went home only a few times, to visit his grandma, again just to check in on her—and that's after not going home at all for nine or ten months his freshman year. The first time he went home he told me it was only: "to see how things are!" It sounded like he was somewhat sarcastically optimistic. But I know nothing about the details of that first visit freshman year. But it must have been not good at all, because he went home just a few times more during the rest of college, always "just to visit Grandma," he said. Maybe coinciding with this, his dad looked a little worse the few times I saw him on the street maybe every other year.

I saw his dad a couple of times in our hillside Kearny neighborhood, stumbling back from the bar at night as I drove my brother's car by. It never looked very good. I know this description sounds somewhat cartoonish, but each time I saw him, maybe three times over three years, he seemed to be a little bit shorter, heavier and slower.

Back in Boston a few years ago, I couldn't help but tell Ernie, after the second time I saw his dad, that he should consider reaching out, because as much as they weren't close and didn't get along, there was the genuine metaphor of the snowball rolling down hill. The problems were probably getting worse year after year, distance and loneliness, etc. Age itself was obviously a

simple factor, time passing and all, but Ernie just said this, which was pretty much the last time we ever talked about his dad—he said: “Hey now. I’ve got things to do! I am not going to get emotional the way I did when I was a kid back home.” And my own personal reaction was just that it was too bad his mom wasn’t around. She was like the gluten that held the bread together. Now he and his dad were “GF” and the bread was crumbling.

Yes, I was there when it happened. But I’ve eaten dinner in his kitchen so many times. I can describe people’s actions, but not so much the décor. I know generally what the place is like but memories of the younger years are stronger than my recent knowledge of the look of things. Let’s just say it’s different than a few years ago, more spare, plain, and basic, and a little messier and more cluttered, too. For example, the refrigerator was new, yet seemed older, the traditional upper and lower doors with no water dispenser. The velveteen couch in the living room was the same, though along with the coffee table it was strewn with junk mail and new magazines. The big TV-entertainment console was also newer. It was a dinner in the kitchen which then moved to the living room, where things got out of control.

Ernie’s dad sat at the kitchen table breathing somewhat heavy and flipping through a car magazine that he wasn’t reading. Ernie’s grandma was tired and already seated on the side of the table. With her age and basic slowness, she cooks in the kitchen but not quickly.

Overall Ernie was not excited about having dinner at the family table again, even with me there. He was about to sit down when his dad said: “Hey, get me a fork, would ya!” And Ernie had no trouble with that request, but then it grew into his dad needing a paper towel and then a glass of water. And just when Ernie thought

he was through prepping his dad for his nicely prepared, sit-down dinner, his dad clearly decided not to get up at all and said: “Where’s my food—my dinner? I thought you were cooking tonight.”

“Yeah, we cooked,” was all Ernie said.

His dad was hard drunk again, and I don’t mean good, loose and tipsy from a few beers, but stupid drunk after two or three hours at Claddaugh’s down the hill, with five or six Tennessee bourbons or whatever Mr. Cain’s choice was that day. His breath had it. Sitting down, Ernie was no doubt upset and perturbed, with the general lack of happiness for being there made worse.

I remember Ernie’s dad distinctly, from that night and before. I also remember the few times that Ernie talked about him. It never sounded good. He was a true asshole—though I must say as Ernie is also at times, to a much lesser kid degree. His dad seemed past due, past retrieval, past help. And for people like this, you might get to a point where the ugly behavior is bound to have bad results, even if there’s a bit of bad sympathy for your human condition.

Ernie fast-filled a plate of food for the father at the table, Mr. Cain, out of convenience or else an ironic, defiant act of servitude. He held his dad’s plate at an angle over by the counter so the food at first almost slid off, just to give it that look of a plate that wasn’t carefully handled. Then he dropped it with a clunk in front of his dad, and with that some of the beans near the edge of the plate jumped off. Ernie was purposely showing his dad a slight indifference.

“What the fuck!”

“Oh, man. Sorry about that.” Then Ernie sat down. “What about you, Grandma? You have everything you need?” To which she slowly nodded.

“How long you here, Ern?” his dad asked.

“Tomorrow ‘til Abe gets here,” said Ernie.

“Short and sweet,” his dad grumbled.

“Yes,” Ernie agreed. “But Grandma, it’s too bad I can’t stay longer! Let’s have some family time in the morning before I go, even though dad won’t be here,” he said referring to his dad being at work.

“Yeah,” I added, “but Abe should be here pretty early though.”

Mr. Cain for whatever reason then got up and got a cold leftover turkey leg out of the frig and started gnawing on it. He wanted to show that the dinner cooked for him wasn’t quite right. Then he stood looking into the living room taking big bites.

For dessert, Grandma had baked two different batches of brownies, one regular and one with her naturopathy, or her “medicinal” brownies, as she called them. Ernie and I, and his dad, all took off the regular brownie plate and avoided hers. In the past Ernie’s said his grandma can’t be trusted sometimes because she grinds up her meds in a mortar and pestle and then sprinkles “the magic dust” in her cake or brownie mix. In conclusion, that evening maybe we all should’ve had the peaceful brownies.

One way or the other, pot brownies in fact might have saved a life here. It would have put a simple small damper on the tension. No, it doesn't help all situations, but having some for the holidays—or family get-togethers—can no doubt take the edge off.

As expected though, the regular brownies were good. Ernie and I each had one and Ernie's dad took three or four. This then added to the temperamental mixing bowl in his dad's stomach, all the un-digesteds, liquids and solids that would soon make their presences known.

In the living room, Ernie's dad asked him about the "love mark" on his ear—as if I wasn't there or didn't know about it—a mark that never fully went away. To this day it's a darkened, misshapen bit of cartilage on the back rim of Ernie's ear on the right side, a more sensitive area, as Ernie described it, than the softer ear lobe.

His dad asked him about it, and just as Ernie was deciding what to say, his dad, stepping past him to watch whatever game was on, surprised Ernie by reaching down and grabbing hold of his ear again, which set Ernie off. Ernie grabbed his wrist with his right and immediately pushed back and stood up with the grab, only for his dad to lose his balance, and Ernie then shoving him down into the couch. Ernie was kind of like a grenade whose pin had been pulled, or a stick of dynamite for who the short wick was lit. Ernie didn't let go of his wrist, in fact got a better grip and bent and twisted it down so his dad had to twist sideways as to reduce the pain that Ernie was starting to inflict hard.

Ernie put a knee in his back and his free hand onto the back of his head, pushing him down into a pillow in the middle of the couch, and while holding that position, that pose, he said to his

grandma: “Hey, Grandma, you don’t mind if I kill him, do ya?” And he wasn’t serious of course, about actual killing, but he thought it was a clever remark, and Grandma then gave it the thumbs-up. But Ernie wasn’t quite sure, he said later—as I wasn’t—if that meant she really didn’t mind if he did it. Anyway, without long-term planning, he held the position and came around and took a deep breath. But that was probably thirty seconds or a minute after his dad made a disgusting, muffled, throw-up noise. And then probably five seconds later, as Ernie described it innocently, sound and breathing were over, far quicker than expected.

Overall, he made it all fully believable when he went over it. He just didn’t see it happening, despite the deadly serious force and maneuvering involved. Several times, he went over his moves in exact detail, trying to justify the dead dad lying face down on the couch.

“Sure,” I wanted to kill him,” Ernie explained to me. “But I didn’t mean to make him dead! It just happened. Call it bad luck!” In a confluence of emotions, Ernie made it clear he was pretty shocked but in no way grief-stricken. He wiped his forearm across his forehead as if he’d just loosened a nut far too easily that wouldn’t budge at first.

Grandma just shook her head and said: “Oh, well.” She was used to outliving people, so for that reason alone she probably wasn’t too shocked or surprised, as un-planned as it was.

A little later as I left, as the front door closed, I imagined Ernie’s mom’s ghost leaning out of the house. She said: “Jon, thanks for being here. It will help Ernie—he won’t feel so

responsible.” A little perplexed, I walked back to the Acheron house to finish packing.

While Ernie suffocated his dad, albeit more quickly than we realized was possible, I just stood there and watched. No, you’re not supposed to kill people just for being assholes, but the argument can be made that real survival is survival of the fittest! It’s a competitive world we live in, right? And if you don’t behave well, there might be bad consequences. In many ways it was much like Ernie’s dad killed himself. Ernie’s pillow treatment was just icing on the cake really. If you develop some serious bad karma along the way, the price might be very expensive.

And I say all this of course with the names changed to protect “friends” of mine. I don’t want to turn anybody in for any degree of violence, purposeful or not. That’s not my point here. My point is just to tell the sad story, and to show that I did look for a little truth along the way.

It would be wrong to suggest Ernie is totally free and clear on this, even though Grandma and sister Cate seem to think he is. This Officer Svikhart is a clever one. There might end up being a price, i.e. charges for this. The next morning early, two plain-clothes cops came to the Cain’s door when I was already sitting on the porch steps. I forget their actual titles, but they were like CSI Newark. They said they wanted to ask questions about what happened the night before. When Ernie came out to greet them, I stepped off the porch to give the young Mr. Cain some space. I looked back when I was halfway to the sidewalk and Ernie gave me this quick glance with his eyebrows raised, as if to say: “We’ll see how this goes!”

3.

As it turned out, our buddies aren't always exactly the people we thought they were. Things happen, accidental or not, that have to be taken into account. You don't expect everything, your proximity to the madness of it all.

As for Olive, when Abe and I drove into her small, artsy, Midwestern city, I figured she probably didn't know the latest. In fact, the very latest was that Ernie wasn't with us! In the spirit of things, I wanted to tell her in person about the Ernie-dad thing so she would better understand the potential violence of the crazy male personality. She should know the truth about her former beloved, I figured. They broke up in April before school ended no doubt because they figured out they had nothing in common and it was time to move on.

Two days before the trip—one day before the bad dinner at the Cain house—I called Olive just to say hi and to tell her off-the-cuff that not much was happening but our big road trip was about to start. Note, it's mostly because of Olive I have to make this story a little about myself, too. "I'll stop by your place," I said casually, and I thought about when that might be because we had no planned schedule, "maybe in mid July," I said.

Then she laughed.

"Oh maybe you'll meet a friend of mine when you're here," she said. "They might be coming to visit around then."

“Okay,” I said. It could be any type of person. She had friends of all types, I knew. But her laugh was loaded, like I might know this mysterious person already, maybe a college person.

In mid-July as loosely planned, at her new place in Iowa City, I told her the shocking bad news. But then she surprised me.

“Yeah, I know. He told me. He actually called me and was really upset.”

Then she added more which I wasn’t expecting, an untrue statement—not her style.

“Man, I feel stupid for having gone out with him! I never should have done it.”

“You make it sound like—” I started but stopped.

“He’s human, but still!” she added, showing her poetic angle on things.

“For a year and a half,” I pointed out.

“Yeah well, it was college and he was wild. It makes me shiver just to think about it. He was crazy. And this latest news sort of proves it.”

“You’re also talking about him like he’s in the past tense.”

“No, but he sort of is for me,” she said with a shiver. “I’m remembering certain things. Anyway,” Olive added with a deep breath, “my friend will be back here soon, and you’ll be quite surprised who it is.”

“Enough said,” I told her on the subject of “wild and crazy.” I didn’t want to get near the privacy line.

“But all considered, you’re pretty lucky to have him as a best friend.”

“Yeah,” agreed Abe, who’d just walked in from the car. “He has a certain kind of simplicity.”

But I didn’t like that description. Simplicity was too generous a term for Mr. Ernie.

I then had a back-flash to a somewhat amusing conversation that Abe and I had. It was a few days before at a diner as we headed east through Utah. We were at a truck stop and Abe let his mind go to that special Abe place—that place he goes when he takes his “quiet time.”

“Have you ever considered the name Ernest and what it implies?” Abe asked this as if it was my own name, and it was typical for Abe to get caught up on ridiculous tangents like this. “Think about it,” he encouraged me. “The different spellings,” he started up again, “of the word earnest, which means you’re earnest, you know honest and hard-working, versus the person’s name, Ernest, which sounds the same... and therefore implies that!”

I still don’t know what plant, or planet, he was on, or if Abe’s brain actually thinks this way. He looked out the window as if he’d really hit upon an important truth. Then he smiled, turned in and looked across the aisle to the other booths. He seemed to ponder it more, but then quickly turned back forward as if he’d suddenly discovered the answer.

“Think about it! The two parts of the word—ear and nest!” he exclaimed quietly with his eyes squinted as he does. “They suggest an ‘ear nest’ is like a safe place in the very delicate ear, like a nest for baby birds.” Abe then smiled as if amused and partly convinced. “It’s a sensitive, happy, peaceful place!” he concluded, as if explaining an old cryptic word in a dead language.

“Ah, I see!” I gave him. “I think you’re onto something,” I said crassly. “You should ask Ernie about this. See what he thinks.” Abe knew it was mostly a joke but still looked at me like I wasn’t on the right wavelength.

“No,” he disagreed. “This wouldn’t be a good line of thought for him. The subject is never the creative one... in these... deeper think tanks,” he added.

I thought about it and then said this:

“Ernie’s pro’ly doing his best to change the meaning of his name—what’s implied there,” I clarified. “He pro’ly wants ‘doing something Earnestly’ these days to mean more like the way he’d do it,” I presented.

“Well...” Abe said, as if not convinced that anyone can man-handle the meaning of their own name like that. “It must have come from somewhere,” he added.

“Honest, heartfelt, sincere?” I asked to the sides to our make-believe TV listeners. “Those words don’t quite fit,” I said conclusively like a team family-member, as I slid out of our booth. “Hey, let’s go,” I suggested then to close our deep discussion. After a beat, I also gave a final positivity: “But hey, you never know!” ...which is pretty much true about everything in life!

Then in Iowa City, when it was just Abe and Oli in the room, I added a few more.

“Is that what he has?” I asked. “Simplicity?”

But then I turned it back to my world—a topical subject, but usually under-cooked.

“I like that idea,” I said, “...a girl who parties a lot because she’s got me, another crazy animal.”

Olive smiled like she got it immediately.

“A girl who celebrates the wild stallion in you,” she said smiling.

Abe got a surprised look on his face and then went back out as if not to interfere. He knew pretty well that this rendezvous had been a big part of my plan.

“Yeah! A stallion!” I said to show conviction with a smile.

Then she smiled a little too sympathetically—a half-Balinese Tennessee girl.

“You’ll probably end up with a girl who partied too much and wants to recover.”

“You make it sound like I’m a hospital or a church.”

“No,” she replied with a smile. “Think of yourself as a sanctuary.”

“Yeah well... one might not take that as a total compliment.”

“It is!”

“Sanctuaries sound like safety nets.”

Then she re-directed.

“Ern’s kind of temper, for whatever reason, is something I’ve always felt a connection to. I’m surprised you didn’t guess that about me.”

“Uh...” I wasn’t sure what to say.

"Who do you think I am? Some kind of nice girl?"

“No, of course not.”

“Forgive me for being inappropriate or shocking you, but to a certain extent I loved hanging out with him. He was an animal, and forgive me, I don’t just mean that in a sex way. He’s a real beast of a person and I wanted to get to know that.”

"Wait. You’re saying I’m not a wild beast?" I said cleverly.

“No!” Olive said smiling again. “You’re a thoughtful sensitive guy. You’re probably a stud in your own way and I totally mean that.”

“Yeah,” I said in surrendered acceptance, but not necessarily in agreement. Then I thought about it some more, to help me look at life in a more helpful way. If the world didn’t have sensitive studs we’d be up shit’s creek.

4.

It started on a mid-June Monday. After he had a quick chat with Grandma, Ernie met me outside and worked on the pillow again. Abe then picked us up wearing brand new hiking boots and he drove us to the Kearny diner that of course he'd never been to before—but he liked the idea. He was really looking forward to the trip. He had never taken “a real guy trip like this.” Abe’s car had a very small but noticeable hole in the muffler so it sometimes sounded gravelly, but it wasn’t too bad. He apologized for “the car’s imperfection,” he called it.

Ernie ordered us three farmer’s breakfasts. With Ernie near us, I explained to Abe, big farmer plates would likely be a standard operating procedure.

At ten fifteen AM we got gas and Ernie used the lavatory. With the car door open, and between a couple hesitant breaths, Abe said he was actually glad Ernie was coming on the trip. From Abe though, I knew it was just a superstitious gesture, a personal pep talk from a kind but cautious spirit. Abe didn’t know the trip was actually Ernie’s idea to begin with, not mine.

“I like the guy—I do,” he said.

“No you don’t.”

“Yeah, I do—he’s got a good heart.”

“Oh yeah?” I asked.

“Surre,” Abe answered, a little condescendingly.

“Well . . . you might be right, but when you’ve known him

as long as I have, you know it's just . . ." I paused to find the correct words but realized I didn't know what they were exactly.

"What. You know it's just . . ."

"Forget it," I told him.

"Don't worry, friend—I wasn't planning to steal him from you."

"That's really funny."

"What time is it?"

I looked at my under-utilized Iron-man sports watch.

"Jesus," I said to Abe. "We're late. Out of state!" I added as a reminder of our big plan.

Ernie and I met Abe sophomore year living in the same dorm. The three of us had an acquaintance or two in common. Junior year we all lived off campus in apartments not far from each other, and that's when our family differences became that much more obvious. Ernie and I and this other kid, Aubrey, had a skinny, two-floor apartment, a Boston row-house. Abe had the whole place next door to himself. He was social though, and because of that we had any group gathering over at his house. It got to the point where we all treated it like one big place, with Abe's personal rooms above the downstairs social or party room. Senior year, Ernie and I moved farther off campus to new places. Abe stayed in his big place.

Abe and Ernie didn't seem to be cut from the same cloth, as they say. They were in the same place a lot of times, but they were

never hanging out in a smaller group than three or four. They had a certain distance between them that almost made sense, like on good days it seemed to be a kind of distant respect for each other. But who knows really. There was a mild hatred, too, that couldn't be totally hidden, especially from an observant third party. They didn't trust each other, they didn't laugh at each other's cracks. It was as if the competitiveness of the world gave them full-throttle awareness of each other as animalistic competition they had to be careful around. They were both independent types who, when they weren't hanging out in a group, were more often alone—or with a girlfriend, I might add. It was Stacee (her spelling) for Abe from early on, and for Ernie it was a few ladies over the years, including the poet in the Midwest, even though it became this Julia, or “Jule” as Ernie called her.

Strangely, both guys a few times said they needed my help with something. Abe called it “moral support” the time when he needed a “bud” to hear him out about whether he should go out with this girl Stacee with her mom coming along—back in her mom's pre-stroke days. Ernie on the other hand used the French pronunciation ‘assis-tōnce,’ making a small effort to disguise his unusual request for emotional aid, if not guidance. It was just clear to me that these two guys were both somewhat needy—like most people, right?—despite the personas they tried to pull off. Ernie had the difficult home life to deal with, that he knew I knew about, and Abe told me once that I had a certain “joie de vivre” that told him he'd found “the right guy to council on important things.” Stacee's creativity or energy in bed didn't give me any joy to hear about—but I knew that a friend simply has to hear what a friend is asked to hear.

With the tank filled and Ernie back from the john, Abe

surrendered the wheel without hesitation when Ernie asked for it. At ten thirty we got on the wrong highway going in the wrong direction. The Shore was not on the itinerary.

“Yeah,” Abe then said, back on the topic of people not wanting us to leave town. “Stacee didn’t want me to go at all—with her alone with her mom now. But she wouldn’t go that far,” he said referring to the story about Ernie’s dad calling the cops on us. “Ern, your dad’s a piece!”

“Yes well, he was,” Ernie couldn’t help but saying, but he changed the conversation’s direction. “Hey, but why is your girl being alone with her mom bad?” Ernie asked Abe.

“I’ll tell you later,” Abe said minimally. “I don’t want to think about it right now.”

On the subject of people not wanting us to leave much, my own mom just said: “Oh, Jon, I could use you in June! Why don’t you and your friends go later in the summer?”

An hour later in central Pennsylvania, Abe gave Ernie the Cliff’s Notes on his situation. He made it somewhat funny, being a little farther from it.

“Stacee’s mom—a double stroke victim—and she’s got dementia, early-onset, with short-term memory loss—repeats herself all the time,” Abe said sadly at first and shook his head in a shiver just thinking about it. ““I walked three miles every day,” Then ten minutes later: “I used to walk three miles every morning.” Then ten minutes after that, she surprises us with: “You know, I used to walk three miles each and every morning...”—

repeated ad nauseam. You play along acting dumb to make it better, but after a day or two that effort goes away.”

Ernie and I stayed quiet, though Ernie smiled once during Abe’s second repeat.

“And it’s particularly bad because now she doesn’t walk really, or feed herself well. Physical therapy? Rehab? In theory, sure, but...” Abe then shivered his head again to dispel it—and tried to end the conversation.

“Suffocation with a pillow works,” said Ernie to Abe, “as long as there’s no autopsy.”

“What? Oh Jesus the human, that’s morbid.”

“I’m just saying.”

“With respect, Ernie, I don’t think I live in that world,” said Abe to Ernie.

It was a strange comment but maybe a good sign that Ernie was making light of his recent, life-altering tragedy. Abe didn’t know he was speaking from experience.

Ernie drove all day. We weren’t concerned with the division of driving duties yet.

Back in Boston, Ernie had a job two days a week at a lumberyard making, as he said it, cold hard cash. In contrast, I made little cash at a retro music store called Upside Your Head, specializing in vintage grunge and hip-hop on vinyl. It was fun to be there, of course, but it was increasingly obvious that I should reconsider things. As I might have implied already—Ernie wasn’t

exactly career-oriented, but more money-oriented, theoretically gearing up for business school, which in theory he would start after summer ended. But, worthy of note, he was always very anti-establishment—anti-many things—which is good, I guess, to naturally be a critic of everything—a self-proclaimed and vigilant victim of “all the damn video garbage in the world.” He said it’s making us stupider not smarter. “Our brains are getting wet-nursed along, coddled, and not helped,” etc. No doubt there are too many video bits in all our heads.

However, if you were to ask Jon here, it’s just an evolution. It’s the way humans communicate these days. Everyone does it, so therefore it’s good.

Upper Jersey produced both of Ernie’s parents, whereas two whole other countries produced Abe’s parents, Lebanon and Germany, which always surprised me for no reason, that match-up. Either way, having two thoughtful caring parents, married or not, is like winning the lottery. It’s unusual! Aside from living together, in contrast to Ernie’s situation, Abe’s ‘rents were both “successful at a young age,” Abe told me. They were both engineers, and then together had a big airplane parts company, “third in size to Boeing and Airbus,” whatever that means. Abe once described it as a huge company on three continents that supplies all the small parts to the big airplane companies, everything they don’t make themselves.

It was also junior year when Abe first told me about his girlfriend Stacey and her mom. It was casual, off-the-cuff stuff. But with the strokes that year, he was definitely in anguish, upset in large part for how upset his girl Stacey was every time she spent time with her mom, helping her out. At first I laughed as if it was a somewhat predictable story about a girlfriend’s parents, but it was definitely in another dimension, a much different kind of situation

that required serious respect and understanding.

At roughly the same time, Abe deserves credit for making Mr. Ernie into a slightly mellower guy. He introduced him to good pot. Though of course it hasn't stopped all his crazy behavior. Abe knew he was a tricky patient, but must have decided it was worth it, from a distance, since they were never that close. Abe would encourage him to join a group of friends or acquaintances to simply hang out, and Ernie must have run out of reasons not to "just be," as Abe described it. Ernie was an interesting experiment to Abe, or maybe Abe just thought of it as a type of community service calming Ernie down. Abe was much more knowledgeable about these things at a much younger age. He said he went to a boarding school in Connecticut, and had a grower in California before he was sixteen.

Abraham was a nice rich kid we met up in Cambridge-Somerville, who wore a lot of cashmere sweaters and hung around mostly with drama students, that is, when he wasn't getting crazy-high at his off-campus bungalow. He easily entrapped people with over-stuffed couches, a big-screen TV, as well as strategically-placed mini-satellite-speakers—converting some of us almost entirely over to Stevie Wonder or Mr. Marley for a while, the deeper cuts, like *Caution* for one.

Abe was the wealthy guy who always had a cigarette for a troubled college kid—three packs a day for a while, less than half of which he smoked himself. Out of those he did smoke, he didn't smoke very much of them. At first, Abe came off as a distracted Don Juan, like a Northeast poster boy for a private personal life—the soft-skinned Marlboro Man. But, then he met Stacey, and he grew, as he said half-jokingly, to "focus powa," as Daniel-son learned in the original *Karate Kid*. Ernie decided early on that

someone probably told Abe he looked like a young Marlon Brando during his New Haven Shubert Theater days. If you're good looking and brooding and keep a few turtleneck sweaters around, then Ernie sees you, this is what you'll get. He knew that Abe was never auditioning for anything, and couldn't help asking him repeatedly whether the directors of "Streetcar Named Desire" had called him yet. Abe was always a little flustered by this. It seemed to kill him—as if his cover had been blown. He never had an answer. Or, he did have an answer and just didn't bother to give it—but probably the former. What's certain is only that Ernie always knew how to challenge people.

Anyhow, long before Ernie tried marijuana and long before he started going anywhere in corduroys, he once made a telling comment about his music tastes—about his inner beast really—that maybe said a bit more than he meant it to. He'd known Abe only for a week or so, and Abe hit him with one of those questions that you might still get as a freshman in college:

"Hey, so you guys like the ol' Grateful Dead?" Abe asked.

Ernie let go a big hard breath.

"Well," he began, "it's like this. I like the music . . ." he paused, and sighed, ". . . but I hate Deadheads. They're either old, or they're posers."

And I was like, Jesus, of course he'd say something like that, a true postmodern paradox, or irony perhaps. And the problem is I'm not even sure I disagree. There was a certain sense to it, despite its unpleasant ramifications.

Somewhere south of Reading, Pennsylvania, on a long curvy downhill with no trees, we saw at the bottom that a car had gotten pulled over by a cop on a motorcycle which had its lights going. We could see in the distance the cop was standing next to the minivan he pulled over, maybe just for looking suspicious. Then the cop in his full get-up started walking back to his bike and the minivan suddenly threw it in reverse and slammed into the cop's bike presumably on purpose. The big bike fell over and was almost upside down at the edge of the dirt.

As we got fifty or sixty feet from the scene we saw a weird combination of smoke from the minivan tires and the flashing police lights at the same time like a psychedelic episode of that Cops show. The cop as surprised as we were turned left and right to figure out what was happening and looked understandably helpless. He also then reminded me of that motorcycle cop in *Harold and Maude* who looked serious but got duped by the funny old lady Maude.

The cop shot a glance at his mangled bike nearly upside down at the edge of the ditch and then spun back around putting his hand up telling us to stop after the other car U-turned and peeled off north again. It was a Toyota minivan, which looked like it has been used for many things besides families. It had dents and rust and one of the sliding doors was a different car-color probably from a scrap yard. It was clearly used as a work vehicle, or for plain old survival, not as just a kid soccer van.

“Nope! I’m not stopping for you, sir,” said Ernie as he slowed down a bit but then resumed back to our thirty or thirty-five. “You think we’re gonna stop and give you the vehicle?” Ernie

started as a question, “just because you’re in black leather and got a nice tin star?”

Down the road Abe just said: “Wow. I can’t believe that.”

Then, half jokingly, I agreed with Ernie’s choice.

“Yeah, he mighta gotten that costume from Party City!” I suggested, to sound adamant and ironic at the same time.

Three hundred yards later, we saw in our side-view mirrors another cop car show up. It picked up the first guy then U-turned and dashed off to north after the bad car.

Then Ernie explained his thinking and action to his passengers.

“If we passed two seconds later than we did... that cop would've been out in the road and forced us to stop. But he wasn't there yet, so I kept our rubbernecking to a minimum. And I don't kill pedestrians—that's my rule,” Ernie added.

“Yeah, killing a cop would be a bad idea,” gave Abe.

“Especially if he had a kid,” added Ernie. I then looked at him and he saw it. “No, we’re not going there,” he gave me vaguely, so Abe wouldn’t pick up on it. But Abe already had his loud window open and was somewhere else adjusting an ear bud.

In Lancaster, PA, Ernie tailgated an Amish horse and buggy from way too close for about a mile, and double-clicked the high beams to get them to scoot over more, which they didn't. Abe got offended by this, and spoke from his spot on the hump in the

center of the back seat.

“Just tell me, Ernest Cain, are you gonna be like this the entire trip?”

“What? Oh. N’ n’ no. You can probably count on me getting pretty rude and aggressive by the second or third week or so. Think you can handle it?” To which Abe didn’t answer.

The copse of travelers in the path-trooper drove through Gettysburg and beyond.

5.

The next morning, somewhere well south-west of Harpers Ferry, I got finger jabs from nervous Abraham. He was worried about rain—mostly because I’d decided not to use the rain guard with his brand new tent. He was also the first one awake, and didn’t seem to like it. He made small but annoying sounds fidgeting with his boots. Then I had a twenty-second dream of the three of us out West somewhere on a rocky plateau near the edge, but I woke up. Abe poked both of us and said he’d be waiting in the truck. Ernie looked up, groaned and slept more.

I dressed and went to the restrooms then walked back.

“Anyone mind if I drive again?” Ernie later asked, stuffing the tent in fistfuls into its bag.

“Not me,” I told him.

Abe climbed out the driver's side and dropped the keys on the front seat. He slid into the back and picked up where he left off with his postcard, or whatever it was, up on his knees in front of him. I had a few postcards too—including one 'Virginia is for Lovers'—which I covertly scratched a greeting on and made out to Olive's address in Iowa. Minding his own business, Ernie kept his eyes on the road and aimed the truck for Virginia's southwest corner.

The little truck was Abe's, but Abe wasn't the type to care about driving too much. Abe would just as soon stare out the back window if he wanted to know what a road looked like. He was always looking around. When Abe drove you somewhere, he not only sought out scenic routes at all costs, but he drove them like he was always in the market for a dream house—which he very well might have been. Abe bought an expensive mountain bike once simply because he was a mile and a half from his apartment and didn't feel like walking. He'd gone out for a stroll, and just didn't feel like finishing it, a wealthy child.

I, Jon Acheron on the other hand, am wealthy in spirit. A wise observer, who believes it takes a special, mellow kind of guy to ride shotgun these days, across or through America. In our nation of drivers and passengers, Acheron is a navigator—distracted but not completely aloof like the guy in the back gets to be. I demand the good forward view that only the passenger seat, the death seat, can provide, even when there's nothing to do but sit back and try to enjoy it.

I picked up the fun paper Road Atlas again for the big view and made a visual of the eastern third of the continent, the dots already connected as well as those up for soon consideration. We were back on 81 moving fast—Roanoke in late morning, then

maybe Atlanta by the end of the day. And the air was already different, thicker than just a few hours earlier, and cooler as we flew through the southern Appalachians. The view was a blur of racing trees occasionally breaking open to fields, hills and farms to give us a hazy view west.

In college you're supposed to study hard, though Ernie and Abe proved that it's not necessary. Ernie had it in his head to go to business school, "where grades matter more," and Abe seemed to have no plan whatsoever besides joining and "helping," he said, run the family corporation, with an MBA likewise, as probably a symbolic gesture to the hundreds of non-chosen-one workers there. Grad schools are fighting for Abe's and Ern's dollars, or dollar loans in the case of Ernie. Not sure what I'll do yet.

Into Tennessee Abe went over the cost of his girlfriend Stacee's mom situation—and not the emotional cost, the financial, which for Stacee would be either employing "a full-time home nurse for fifty thousand dollars, or putting mom in one of two nursing homes for eighty thousand a year," Abe said. "Either way, we don't like the options, even with Medicaid in a year." Abe was also considering what he and his parents could do to help alleviate the pain—Stacee's money pain. "Those places are okay, but..." For Abe initially, getting rid of the mom was not an idea.

A month or two before the trip Abe had gone off on it. He was thrown for a hard loop by a particular bad day.

"Man, you should have seen her when we brought her out of the hospital. She was hyper-rude the whole time, and it wasn't an accident! I mean her complaints weren't even legitimate—she was a bitch beyond belief, acting like everybody was her servant. She called everybody "boy" or "girl" almost like she was an old-

school racist who was finally out of the bag. She's lucky they weren't all African-American."

"Whoa," I said, or maybe just implied with raised eyebrows.

"They were glad to see her go, and as bad as it was, we were glad to get her out of there so she wouldn't make such a public spectacle of herself. Oh, but then Stacee couldn't deal. We were in the car, after spending fifteen minutes with hospital staff getting her in and comfortable, and she was then talking to us exactly like she'd been talking to the others. Short-term memory loss is one thing, annoying at best, but hers went to a world where she didn't know anybody. In the car we were just transport helpers like she was a rich old heiress talking to a new driver, with an assistant. "Turn the heat up. Where are you taking me?"..."

"Yikes," I said.

"We got back and it was clear it wasn't going to be the same place. Stacee was totally silent after the car ride, and pulled me aside to whisper in a sob that she didn't know if she could handle it."

"And mom isn't a rich old heiress, either," I remember throwing in.

"No! More like the opposite! She isn't even that old!"

"Maybe she was just play-acting, you know, making it dramatic."

"Yeah, that's funny. But it doesn't count as a joke unless you know you're telling one," Abe said. Then he went back to his

rant. “Back at their place, man, things were different. ”When we were just house-mates... it was okay!” Stacee said crying. “But now she’s gone, totally gone!” I was like “Hey, maybe this will pass, once Stacee re-acclimates.” But she knew it wasn’t temporary. Strokes are bad, man—different every time—weird, and bad. Big problem is she probably won’t improve much, they admitted to us or warned us.”

“What do you mean, not improve. Everybody impr—”

“No! Strokes are with you, man. You first believe it when they tell you rehab can make a difference! “So the brain can re-learn!” they say. But come on.”

Abe looked sideways when he was telling me this. He looked like he was searching for an intelligent answer to close with, but then kind of gave up and looked back with a smirk, like with bad sarcastic humor.

“Life isn’t simple when mom goes demented.” Then Abe added to it. “And for us of course it only got worse. She can’t really take care of herself anymore.”

“Yeah, you mentioned the second one.”

“Yeah so four months later, she suddenly can’t move her lower half very well,” which made me jump in with the obvious.

“Hey, that’s what professional help is for—you know—assistance!”

“Yeah well, Stacee knows now that extra nursing costs a lot of moolah.”

Abe paused a last time with a deep breath. “It’s a lose-lose situation. Mom won’t improve much, and she’ll cost a huge amount of money, whether she stays there with Stacey or Stacey puts her somewhere else.”

What he and Stacey would do was a darn good question. I had no good advice.

The mom had two strokes, separated by four months, and she was obviously looked at very carefully. Abe said the doctors were trying to figure out what was going on with this woman at only fifty-six years old, and why these strokes were happening at her relatively young age. Abe had settled down and imposed on me more details.

“They found what they decided was more than likely the cause. They ran a genetic test on her, “not covered by insurance, of course,” for this possible condition called Heterogeigus Leiden Factor 5. Then it was determined that she had it, which equates to having syrupy-thick blood that requires a strong blood-thinner every day for the rest of your life. Simple as that, but damage done,” Abe said.

The mom had been a sales manager at the Neiman Marcus in downtown Boston. But then she had Stacey to take care of, Abe threw in explaining nothing really. As for a dad, Stacey never officially had one, or “got anyone specifically identified,” Abe added as if the possibles were in a line-up. Then he said her mom didn’t talk about “that particular year, she referred to it as”—when Stacey pushed her on it once. “She admitted she wasn’t exactly sure who the dad was, and didn’t really care, she decided.” Apparently Stacey moved on from the subject.

It was down the road, out in Wyoming somewhere, when Ernie half-joked and gave Abe an evil suggestion. Stacey and her mom weren't being discussed that day but on long road trips a few days can go by and any comment might still sound like a logical continuation of a previous conversation. But Abe at first didn't seem to get it.

"Maybe the necessary blood-thinner pill doesn't have to be given!"

"No, it does," was Abe's immediate response. How to save costs was the issue still being thought about, he figured.

Or else, Abe was just quick to stop the spread of violence coming from the Ernie mind.

But Abe then jumped to a different subject. There was a rich high school friend of his living on the big Shoshone Araphoe reservation just east of Yellowstone, not too far from Thermopolis, "with enormous natural hot spring pools," he added.

6.

"Stop! Pull over!" Ernie exclaimed. Then a second later: "Bang! Got'im!" he said after taking a picture of the woods, using my phone.

"You got her, you mean," Abe said looking back and out at an angle.

“What?”

“You got her! You know, a doe, a female deer. Like the darnn song,” he said dryly.

“What?” Ernie asked again before deciding he didn’t really care. “Drive on, slow poke,” he said, addressing me while passing back my vintage iPhone 5.

The little truck spit stones and jerked forward.

By the time we reached our next campsite we’d seen a hundred more deer, by then more concerned with missing them than with getting them. And we saw a hawk fly across the road.

On the far side of Knoxville we walked through a flea market and Abe bought a big bunch of bananas. “For only eighty cents!” he told us, as though to suggest a new lean toward bargain hunting. Ernie quietly inspected a few Elvis booths but bought nothing. Abe and I sat on a picnic table near the parking lot and waited for Ernie until he was done.

“Just so you guys know,” Ernie said quietly almost mumbling subconsciously as he passed us toward the cars. “I’m not a big fan of either of you.”

“What did we do?” Abe asked quickly like it was just an unimportant joke.

“A big part wishes I was out here exploring on my own,” said Ernie, quietly again like he was achieving and sharing a very real confession.

“Don’t worry, Ern. It’s almost like you are,” was all I said. I wanted to sound like a friend who understood—even though we weren’t anywhere near being alone.

“I don’t get it. Does he really hate us?” Abe asked earnestly.

“Yeah, he hates us. But he likes being with people that he hates.” And I went on. “He expects to not like the people around him.” Then I thought about it even more. I couldn’t help it, and it sounded right for Abe the third party, more thoughtful like I was a psychiatrist explaining a testy, somewhat dangerous patient who was sitting at a table all by himself in a crowded room at the mental ward. “He prefers to be with people he’s critical of. He’s used to it.”

“He’s a twisted one,” Abe concluded.

But the “twisted one” comment put me on yet another version of the diagnosis.

“It’s kind of like going to the park and walking a dog that doesn’t get along with the other dogs, and just might attack them.” And after my analogy or kind-of simile, I questioned whether this road trip with both of them was a good idea or not.

“Oh. Great,” Abe said sliding off the table we were sitting on. “I always knew he was a bit high-strung, but now...” Abe stopped with that—purposely leaving the future open.

In the car again, Abe said that all he wanted to do when he got back was find some peace and quiet, but Ernie made it clear he didn’t like this sort of talk.

“Would you just shut up with that? And why the hell did you buy so many bananas?” He stared into the rear view mirror with his chin up. “Pass me one,” he told Abe.

“It was beautiful—they were only twenty cents a pound,” Abe said as he broke one off and passed it forward.

“Where do you guys want to go?” I asked. “We can go through western Tennessee or we can go through Alabama.”

“Memphis,” Abe said.

“Alabama,” said Ernie.

“Pick one,” I told them.

“Okay, Alabama,” said Ernie.

“What about Georgia? Somebody wanted Atlanta before. And what about Florida?”

“What about Memphis?” Abe said again. “We should go to Memphis. See Graceland.”

Ernie thought about it—it was obvious he was thinking about it because he was driving then and pulled into the slow lane to drop the truck down to fifty.

“What’s the difference, man? I say no museums on this trip.”

“Yes, actually, I agree,” Abe said. They were on the same wavelength—a rarity.

As for Graceland, it might go unvisited, but it didn’t go

unconsidered. Abe brought it up, but he didn't really care. And Ernie, from the look and speed of things, already back in the fast lane, probably wasn't thinking about much else besides cops. He looked back and forth between the speedometer and taillights of the car in front of him. It was as if he wanted nothing more than to drive Abe's truck into the ground, force it to do things it had never been asked to do before. To his credit though, he knew his strength and knew that subtle heavy handling can be more effective than killing a thing quickly, before you've gotten what you need out of it. Maybe one of Ernie's hidden agendas was to see Abe's truck die of exhaustion after the trip.

Ernie gave Abe the wheel near the top of the Georgia Alabama line and then stretched out across the back seat with his eyes closed. Abe pulled off onto a secondary, or tertiary, two-lane road that ran along the border. When the car stopped at a stop sign, Ernie sat up.

"Why are we stopping?" he asked.

"Stop sign," Abe answered.

"Where though?"

A couple miles down the road we passed a peach truck with a sign "fresh peaches" nailed to the side of it, parked near the middle of an otherwise empty intersection. Buckets of peaches filled the bed of the truck, and a man with a hat over his face was lying on the tailgate.

"That guy was in the middle of the fuckin' road," said Ernie after we passed him.

"Let's go back and get some," Abe suggested.

“No way. No backtracking.”

“But peaches. I can still see them,” Abe said, looking into the rear-view. “They’re probably cheap.”

The road bent slightly, and the peach truck was soon out of sight. A sign flew by—speed limit, thirty-five. Abe was breaking it but not by much.

7.

On the second day of our trip in the central northern Deep South, we were on a highway that had a wider median strip than I’d ever seen before. Cars sounded farther away than they actually were. It was so un-crowded. There was less around us. Our side of the highway was empty but the other side was like a silent movie.

Later after we stopped driving for the day I got a call from Ernie’s older sister. She tried Ernie first but she said it went right to voicemail. His phone was still in Jersey. She then tried me, she said, because she knew I would answer. I didn’t know who it was at first but I saw Seattle so I picked up. I was standing near the edge of Alabama’s Guntersville Lake, checking out the pine trees and the campsite while Abe and Ernie were off at the bathrooms. Ernie’s sister Cate had talked to their Grandma, and was quite surprised of course, and wanted to hear about it “from the source,” she said.

First of all, “Cate with a C” and Ernie are five years apart. Years ago she went to college in Northern California and then

moved out there. She and Ernie stayed in touch but just weren't that close. Ernie said she settled quietly into the Amazon world and was "off living in that bubble," like *The Truman Show*, he'd compared it to. Yes, Ernie and his sister lived in different worlds. She also didn't seem to care for their dad very much. Maybe she'd achieved separation. Ernie said once that his dad didn't mention her anymore. Maybe his dad considered her gone the way Mrs. Cain was gone, with the old family life gone.

"Grandma said Ernie didn't mean it!" sister Cate said. No, she's not a nun—she's just not a regular person in my life. But Cate talked to me like we were best friends or brother and sister, even though we hadn't talked at all in five years. "Is that true?!" she asked with energy..

"Well, umm," I started. "I think no. I don't think he meant it," I continued. "But it wasn't a pure accident, you'd have to say."

"What? Oh I get it. Guys get in fights," she started with. "They don't mean to kill the other guy, but they try like heck for a few minutes."

"Yeah!" I agreed enthusiastically. "That's it, but it was at the house, in the living room."

"I think I understand," she concluded. She paused a few seconds. "Grandma said he's not officially in the clear yet. Make sure he knows. They'll want to talk to him again."

"Yeah, no doubt," I said.

"Oh, and Grandma also said he wasn't as tense as she expected when you guys left."

“Yes, he was strangely calm,” I offered.

“Tell Ernie that I like the cremation idea and that I’ll travel back for a few days in late July for a get-together. Okay, Jon?”

“Okay, I’ll tell him. Sounds good.”

“You guys enjoy your road trip. Get your minds off the stressful things in life.”

“We’ll do our best.”

“And feel free to stop by my place in Washington... if you’re in the neighborhood.”

“Yeah, who knows!” I told her. “But thanks,”

It was an hour later when my phone rang again and it was the home area code but I didn’t know the number.

“Hi, Jonathan Acheron? This is Officer Svikhart calling from Newark.”

“Oh, hi.”

“In a no big deal way, they put me in charge of the paperwork having to do with your friend Ernest Cain and the death of his father Frank Cain.”

“Right. Sure,” I added to reinforce the no big deal approach.

“I know you guys are on a big road trip but I want to pass on the word to Ernest that I’ll need to talk to him when you guys get back. His grandmother said he left his phone back in Kearny

and that you would be the one to call... to make contact with the travelers.”

“Yeah, I guess. But I’m not really a phone guy,” I said, but not to be rude.

“No, of course not. None of us are. Just tell Ernest, or Ernie he apparently goes by, that I’ll call his phone in a few weeks, so we can just have a meeting and talk a bit.”

“Okay, Officer. You bet, I’ll tell him. He’s not around right now, otherwise I’d hand the phone to him. But I’ll tell him. He’ll be sure to tie up any loose ends when we get back,” I said.

Later after dark by the light of one of Abe’s candles, we watched a raccoon cub wiggle up out of the woods on the path behind the truck. Ernie threw a boot at it, so it turned and wiggled back into the woods the way it came. Near his candle, Abe looked up from another postcard but went right back to it. Then we talked a bit, and it was mostly Ernie.

Ernie was slightly buzzed on two beers and told us out of the blue that his mom took him to Jazz Fest in New Orleans once when he was a kid.

“Tell us more about her,” Abe said, “—what you remember.”

“I can’t tell you what I forget...” Ernie started but then stopped. Abe just looked down seriously to help encourage him.

Ernie then talked. He either decided consciously to share stuff in front of Abe or else he couldn’t help it.

“Nobody knew my mom like I did,” he said.

According to Ernie, her life story just wasn't to be touched by anyone else. And Ernie still worships her as if he was ten or eleven, though there probably aren't many ten or twelve year olds with a negative view of their mom. So whoever she really was, in depth, she got somewhat lucky by leaving behind such a good reputation with the highly-critical Ernest. After saying a surprising amount, as if maybe it was brought on by this nice remote pine forest in Alabama, Ernie went to bed in Abe's truck with a push from the inside on the power-locks.

“Whoa. I didn't know any of that,” said Abe.

I knew the basics, but it was a fresh delivery. And there was more.

It was about a year before his mom died, when they were just beginning to deal with the bad news of the cancer spreading, when Ernie's dad got in the bad car accident. With his head hitting the wheel and the glass above it with no airbag, he got a Traumatic Brain Injury, a “TBI,” as Ernie put it. Apparently it wasn't high-speed but a near-head-on with a box truck in a narrow work area. Ernie called it a bump on the head because there wasn't any blood.

Ernie was eleven, but had it explained to him again and again over the years. His dad said he didn't bleed because he was so “thick-skinned,” and also that it was “that damn airbag warning light” on the dashboard that kept them from getting millions from Honda—there was apparently a failed attempt to sue for damages.

His dad wasn't hugely impaired—no broken bones—and he seemed almost back to normal a month later. The TBI just took

him out of the office at work into the warehouse and yard—working outside for fresh air, which sounded like a smart move. Ernie said he was one of the managers before the accident, but afterwards, “he chose to simplify his life,” Ernie reflected with some positivity. “He stopped the boring desk work and went outside and drove one of those cool fork-lifts,” Ernie added.

Before the accident and before Ernie’s mom died, Mr. Cain was “an okay, agreeable dad” who for a while he had no complaints about. Ernie loved him as any son would probably do. Ernie didn’t put it in these terms, but I remember a decade ago, in the early days, his dad was chipper by nature, and for whatever reason Ernie also smiled a lot.

But Ernie explained to Abe that things changed quite a bit once it was just his dad and Grandma taking care of him, without his “loving mom” around, his dad with a “slightly reduced ability to deal with everything,” as Ernie understated it.

8.

The idea came up for a big road trip the previous New Year’s Eve. Ernie and I drove around Kearny all night into the dark morning. It would be the free romp, the precursor to the real world—our chance to find the beauty and truth we might have heard about in school.

“We should eat,” Ernie said. “Yeah, let’s eat something,” he repeated, staring across to the trees on the downhill side of the road as we climbed to the Kearny ridge. “Man, the trees look dark

tonight.” On both sides of us were forbidding dark trees.

“It does look cold out there.”

“It’s December, Acher. Of course it looks cold,” said Ernie. He often called me the first two syllables of my last name—coincidentally with the ‘ache’ right in it—though phonetically softened, like I was a strange driver in a suspicious world of ashes.

The frozen fog whistled by my window, open an inch for a rip of cold air and to counteract the car’s heater. It was one of the last dark mornings of December, as late as it can be without getting, as Ernie called it, Led Zeppelin’s “eastern glow” over the rooftops.

“Go to Ancient Grease,” Ernie said next, after a few quiet moments looking out the side window. The Greek diner was the only twenty-four-hour restaurant on that side of town and the only choice we had at that time of morning. At the east side of the hill, I turned my parents’ old Chevy wagon down towards the commercial world again, the sparse lights of Kearny’s flatlands out in front—NYC the lit dark towers in the distance.

Ernie and I drove aimlessly for several hours after leaving Claddaugh’s after midnight. It was our last winter break, and that’s when Ernie first suggested a big summer road trip. It was also the night I decided to seduce Olive—Oli. I knew a cross-country beatnik road-trip would be seen as the very cool thing to do—with an impromptu visit to her strategically arranged. Some people say you can’t see the country and win the girl on the same trip. But I would have disagreed.

At the restaurant Ernie stepped over to the snow-covered

sidewalk box and got a copy of our thin local paper. When he let the door go it slammed and made a bang like a gunshot.

“Two?” the old waitress at the door asked us.

“Yes ma’am—two,” Ernie said.

We followed her down a row of occupied booths to a free one.

“Coffees?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Two?” she asked with a wink, maybe teasing me the slower one.

“Yeah. Two,” I answered.

“Maybe more,” Ernie added. “Maybe you should leave the whole pot.”

“One of those nights, huh,” said the waitress.

“You could say that again,” Ernie answered her, handing me a menu.

I sometimes imagine Ernie and I are working through a similar fog—everything black and white instead coming out a million shades of gray. But the theory didn’t hold much water. Ernie never saw it like this. He’d always been a touch more on the practical side. I was slumped in the padded booth with the farmer’s breakfast half finished in front of me, and I knew I didn’t have much else to say to Ernie. He understood only that I was beat and didn’t feel like talking.

“I’ll talk. You eat,” Ernie said. “Hey, listen up. Let’s do a big drive this summer. Let’s do the whole damn thing.” He looked left and right. “We’ll whack it, Kero-whack it. Burn baby burn, like roman candles! We’ll burn ‘em at both ends!” He paused. “Save up cash, hombre.”

In my throat was a post-nasal acidic spot and the peppery home fries had not been easy.

“Where’ll we go?”

“Where won’t we go?”

“Ahh, silly me.” Of course. I took another fork-full to think more. “How long?”

“I don’t know, a couple months. As long as it takes.”

Ernie listed the places he wanted to go see: Atlanta, Chicago, Phoenix, Vegas, and more.

I listened to his long list and drank the brown-plastic glass of water that was left on the table by the other townies before us. I didn’t notice the drink wasn’t mine until Ernie pointed out the black lipstick on the lip of it.

“Definitely New Orleans,” he continued. “And I want to see Vancouver.”

Our elderly waitress walked with a limp, and walked slowly. In time she came by and took a twenty for the meal of twelve sixty-something. I was expecting change but she didn’t bring any. When asked for it, she asked how much I wanted back. After a pause, I said just a dollar, to be generous, and she gave us

both a look like: ‘Oh, what men you are.’ A lesson learned for the future—not a good idea to ask for a dollar from an old woman serving you food in the middle of the night—better to ask for two or three or not to ask at all.

“Trip trap, trip trap,” Ernie said, with a happy soft chuckle, amused by her look and treatment of us. She was clearly a tough girl. The look was one I’d only seen come from Olive before. It was the look Oli gave us whenever she witnessed anything childish, such as anytime she went out to a bar with us. It was a look she gave Ernie far more often than she gave me. Back at school I always made a point of being slightly less drunk—in the harmless college way.

If a friend commits a murder, what do you do? Is my friend really a killer? Sure, maybe you question what “friend” really means. No, we’re not talking about privileged rich kids who always get away with bad behavior. They always seem up to no good and guilty! In contrast, we’re talking about upstanding citizens, as much as college kids can be—as is the somewhat strange compatriot Abraham.

No, I’m not turning anybody in, but guilty is as guilty does.

I hate to say it, but a true coming of age story for any kid is realizing that people in your life might be guilty of a crime. Just because we know them, what does that mean? And how easy is it to want to kill someone?! Just because you have bad thoughts, that doesn’t mean you’re a maniac. It’s just too easy. It’s all around us, the world being so imperfect and overcrowded.

“Hey, what are you doing tomorrow night?” Ernie asked next with a last mopped-up mouthful of toast and corned-beef

hash, turning my attention back to the present.

“Nothing.”

“It’s New Year’s Eve, guy! You know you should do something.”

“Like what? Go out and—”

“God you’re an ass sometimes,” he said, cutting me off.

“Well, you just said I should be saving my—”

“Forget it.” He opened the newspaper for the third time and then closed it again. “Eat your farmer’s plate—before I do.”

And there was too much of this. In the right mood, I could turn New Year’s Eve into any other night of the year. There was even a party to go to in The City the year before, but in the past it’s always been enough there wasn’t anyone in either city I was in love with.

This time the situation was different. But Olive was too far away to factor in. She was on winter break in the White Mountains. A bottle of affordable bubbly and a few good jams in the ears would do the trick nicely. On New Year’s Eve, I would sing myself into a merry mellow stupor. And Ernie would go to his new girlfriend’s ski house in Massachusetts, no doubt wishing he was still together with his ex. I was sure of it.

It gets to the point where you just don’t care so much about your friends. With all due respect, they become people you simply know, people you’ve met and hung out with for one reason or another. But when you’ve matured a little, you realize the only

important person is yourself! So the real struggle is my own—me, Jon, coming to terms with who my friends are, what the warm and cuddly term “friendship” really means, and what it doesn’t. How loyal am I? Sadly, the answer to that question is often too automatic, without thought.

When we were done at the diner, the freezing fog had lifted, but the breaking sun was still low behind the Big Apple. It was still half dark but the air was clearer as we did our last loop through town, our little industrial port town, our supply town. Tired, dirty and hoarse, I tried to remember all the pointless turns we’d taken since leaving Claddaugh’s.

“This place really does bite it,” said Ernie, as we drove under the railroad bridge on Route 7. I nodded my partial agreement and we continued on eastward through the marshes.

“Grandma said she can’t believe we stayed friends all these years.”

“Did we?” I asked him. But he said nothing. Then in a strange moment of clarity he offered up something of an apology for himself, some of his own self-criticism—a bit of repentance maybe for his short-tempered violent past.

“Did I tell you she called me an ectomorph? My own grandmother called me an ectomorph!” he added. Then he went silent for a look out his own window. “Well . . . I guess I was a pretty crazy little kid at times.”

“Don’t kid yourself. You were a crazy big kid.”

Closer to the turnpike, Ernie stepped it up again, his random reflections.

“My dad told me I was a mistake. I got him to admit it. Can you believe that? Jesus! And people wonder why I have to kick their asses all the time.” He laughed a little uncomfortably.

“They might have been right,” I told him.

“Hah, hah. Very funny. They got what they had coming—not my fault. Have a big physical kid and then party all night with your hippie artist friends. See where that gets you.”

The sound of all this was wickedly unusual and I laughed a bit but stayed mostly quiet. He wasn’t talking about the abuse and the ear thing—he was talking about the earlier days when he was just a kid with regular kid problems, and two parents. He sounded like one of those struggling comics whose best joke is just too real to make other people comfortable.

“I’m glad someone’s enjoying this,” Ernie said. “Hey—you see that street sign? I think they changed Crown Street to Clown Street.” He smiled with his optical allusion.

“Really?”

“Yeah. You missed it,” he said. “Guaranteed,” he added for no good reason, our old statement of cartoonish certainty. I turned back forward then leaned in and turned the radio dial. “Just keep driving for a while,” he said.

“Okay.”

“Hey, Free Bird. Leave it.”

So I did. I left it, and turned it up. I kept driving for a while and enjoyed it, thinking calmly about Olive—his Oli, our Oli, my

Oli—a woman with guts, beauty, and now sense. The best things, I knew, come much quicker to those who are patient. A summer road trip with a couple friends was a great idea.

9.

In the middle of the night on Guntersville Lake in Alabama it was beyond quiet—no birds, no creatures, and no wind off the water. I half-woke to the sounds of a car door closed at its regular daytime speed, then hard sniffles and footsteps walking away from our campsite. I didn't think much of it but then minutes later I woke up completely and heard full-throttle crying behind a wall or inside the bathrooms thirty or forty yards away. I got up, stepped into my shoes by the zipper-door and shuffle-stepped in that direction. In the clearing and twenty or thirty paces from the brick bathrooms, Ernie walked out of the men's room and not at all fast, like he didn't have a direction picked yet or was dazed like he'd just seen an alien or ghost. He saw me standing there walking towards him, but I slowed down to show I hadn't come at two AM to use the facilities.

“You like words, right?” He asked me rhetorically, and I saw how upset he was. His face looked gaunt, exhausted and wet like he's just run thirty miles in a rainstorm. He didn't look at all like the Ernie I saw a few hours before that. He was borderline crying—at least it looked like he'd cried before his question, and now he was just continuing his new thought for conversation. And it didn't make perfect sense, at least it was abstract, or maybe so specific that you quickly understood things if you knew his story.

“They don’t matter anymore. They don’t do anything. There’s no healing. There’s nothing you can say anymore, and nothing you can hope to hear. Life’s over. Done. See-ya!” Ernie called out to the dark pine trees around us. He looked at them like he was questioning their presence, like he wasn’t sure if it was safe to say things there. Then he wrapped it all up. “And it’s nice when you did it, when it’s you,” he said referring to himself with sarcasm. Then he let go a quick abrupt laugh and turned back to face me for a second and he then looked off a bit refreshed, like he’d taken his water break and was then ready to conquer the world. “I’m done, man. Done with it all. They say you have to cry once, right? Well, that was it. I’m done.” He strode back to the bathrooms and I let him go, to give him back whatever privacy he wanted or needed. I had a role to play. The best friend had done his listening. I wasn’t obligated, or expected in this case, to say much or fix things, but if you find your tough-guy pal crying in the middle of the night at a campsite far from home, you do the least to let him know you heard him.

Ernie had never wanted to talk about the abuse, but I remember one day by surprise he basically started a new routine. He came over to my house smiling in a weirdly big fake way. As it turned out, he was making a big solid effort to deal with what he was dealing with back at home. With that big grin on his face—I wouldn’t even call it a grin because that sounds happy—but with that fake smile on his face he said: “Hey, I’ve got a new game. Do you want to play this new game where you just listen to the things I say, and I tell you crazy stuff that’s not true?” I was like: “Uhh... okay.” I didn’t know where he was going with this, but it was an unusual offer and I wanted to be supportive. So it took all of four or five minutes and he told me this sad somewhat generic story

about a father coming home from the office—and ‘the office’ was the big switcheroo, because his dad didn’t have one.

“This fictional dad comes home from the workplace and without a word gets a bit abusive on his teenage son, slapping him around and pushing him, and eventually throwing out a few words “to put some icing on the cake,” as Ernie said.

The kid in question, though an inch taller and pretty damn strong, did absolutely nothing.

“I just sat there and took it,” Ernie said.

Ernie showed up again a month later with that same look on his face, and at first I was confused, but it took me only three or four seconds to remember or realize what the reason for it was. He told me another story about this “fictional” father going food shopping and taking his young teenage son with him and getting downright abusive in public, with real anger, pulling the elbow, making it seem like worse was going to happen once they got back to their car or house.

A week after, almost thirteen and in seventh grade, Ernie told me that his dad had come into his room drunk and sat on the bed, with Ernie just lying there reading or doing homework. His dad then grabbed Ernie’s left ear and twisted and pinched hard, actually digging his thumbnail in. Ernie said he was totally silent by the surprise pain. His dad just sat there and made it hurt hard, as if to remind Ernie who was really in charge. He made a blood blister that lasted a few days but no skin was broken—and of course it never fully disappeared—his dad made sure of that. At first, as painful as it must have been, it seemed almost worse for

Ernie when he told me about it a week later. “What was I supposed to do?! I’m twelve, for God’s sake.”

And with Ernie’s girlfriend Sunshine in high school, his dad was difficult. And it’s not like he was against Sunshine in particular, this girl from the DR, he was just against the girlfriend concept, and I think only because what made sense to him, what equated with pleasure, emotional or physical, the girlfriend concept represented love, and happiness, and that sort of thing he was going to disagree with and disallow. His dad used the excuse of high school being an important time for only studies and getting into a good college, and tried to put the argument up that happiness was anti-productive, and he made that argument pretty strongly the several times that I saw it, and probably a lot more often than that, too, basically making it as difficult as it could be for Ernie to have any kind of social life that wasn’t simply hanging out with his amigos, or that had anything to do with simple fun or freedom, like any nights after ten.

Not that Ernie didn’t go out late in high school, but he never went out with the blessing of his dad. It was always before or after some confrontation, and when I saw him and heard about something afterwards, it was always counted as bad behavior on his part for doing anything at all.

And his dad—I don’t want to portray him wrong—his dad was not, as you might be thinking, any kind of close-minded, uneducated, New Jersey redneck. That wasn’t him. He’d gone to college and he was increasingly defensive about being well-educated and intelligent, and Ernie said every year his dad seemed “to get worse just because of that.” Maybe it was the reality of him driving a fork-lift at the sheetrock yard—which at first seemed to be a therapeutic, positive move, but after a year or two, “the side-

effects set in. Dad was pigeon-holed with fewer good options,” Ernie said almost sympathetically. But his dad got worse, more mean and abusive, partly a result of his son just being a teenager. Ernie wasn’t a wise and open-minded college kid yet. He was a basically innocent teenager held uncouthly accountable for not being as old or “mature” as Mr. Cain.

Eventually, the words from Ernie just stopped in Jersey, which pretty much coincided with us moving to school in Boston. And up there somewhere in week one, we were talking about getting settled and he said off the cuff something like: “The Kearny stories are over!” This didn’t make any sense to the other guy Aubrey who was with us, but I knew exactly what Ernie was talking about. He was looking away as if announcing it to himself, but out loud because he knew I would understand—I’d appreciate what he was doing his best to say goodbye to.

“Hey let me see your phone,” Ernie surprised me with at the edge of Guntersville Lake.

“Why?”

“I want to feel how light it is.”

Oh! I thought, so Ernie is considering a new one—so I gave it to him.

He then he threw my phone high and hard halfway across the lake.

“What the fu....” I started to say, but somehow managed to refrain, after the shock had passed, knowing that this was a brand new world, a new situation, a new life we were in, and that friend

Ernie had recently experienced, and was no doubt still experiencing, more than I could quickly judge or appreciate.

I also had a back-up, an older phone that I was content to put back into use, with an extra SIM card no less, even though it doesn't have as good a camera as the newer phone.

Later past Birmingham, a female cop, a state trooper, pulled us over for going eighty-four, she said, to which Ernie responded, to my great surprise, with a very creative lie, about us going eighty-plus because of his friend Jon's unique situation. He nodded and turned his head halfway to me to indicate my presence. Apparently I had to go to Montgomery to propose to my "hard working" girlfriend and "try to win her heart," Ernie said. She had broken up with me because I was so "indecisive and wish-washy" Now I had to propose to her... that afternoon... before she left town for her new life somewhere in upstate New York. The woman then said nothing after she asked for Ernie's license and the registration and walked back to her car. But in a minute she came back. She looked into the distance the way we'd come and the way we were going, and then said that she appreciated what we "had to do" and the "noble effort that was being made." She just gave Ernie a quick verbal warning, about going over the posted speed-limit, and then she wished us on our way. Her last words were: "Okay. Good luck!" she said, stooping to say across to me, to which I said my best thank you.

We spent night three on the coast in Mississippi near Biloxi. For twenty dollars, the campground gatekeeper gave us a "reserved spot" in a large empty grassy area just past the campground's pool area. It was only late afternoon but we agreed we didn't want to get to New Orleans in the dark that night. The

pool had a flaking old blue water-slide and dark green water behind a locked fence. At night we learned the campground was also very close to a set of train tracks, though by nine or ten the heavy rolling and clanking of the freight cars mesmerized us and put us to sleep. On the Mississippi coast highway we passed marinas, casinos, beaches and parking lots. There was nothing really to marvel at really except for the Gulf of Mexico's water temperature—though it wasn't pretty. Each step stirred up thick, powdery silt up to our knees. We were too close to the Mississippi Delta, a couple explained to us on the beach. Then they said, "You really have to go to Florida to find water worth swimming in."

We stopped only twice on the way to New Orleans—once for a snack-bag refill at Wal-Mart and the second time for po-boys at Caldwell's Good Food and Game room on Highway Ninety near the Louisiana line. We ate them in the very hot parking lot, with three medium cokes and fistfuls of extra brown napkins. Then I wiped the excess grease from my hands and Abe put a good squeeze on the steering wheel. Everything was a bit muffled with the heat and humidity and the thicker, stiller air near the quiet Gulf. We were eating and driving quietly and our spring-break trip to southwest Jamaica came back to me with the heat.

Two beers strong I stepped up onto the wall and tucked the edge of the cliffs with my toes. Abe had gotten quiet so I spoke again.

"What's that dark spot?"

"That's Hell, my brother—a wimp's salvation awaits you down there." He sipped his drink. "Whenever you're ready, Mister Jon—the tide's going out. Let's get this over with."

After our last day on the beach, Abe and I left the others to look at some cliffs that had scared us all week, the taller quieter cliffs just east of ‘Rick’s Café’ at L.T.U. For what it stands they don’t say, maybe ‘last turkey underwater’.

We leaned against patio chairs fifty or sixty feet above the cove, an inlet swelling with the steady rhythm of some unseen ocean lungs—perhaps the Kraken’s own. We talked about the distance, the surface tension of the water, and the questionable depth. We stared at the water until the sun went down and the cove got dark. A spotlight hummed to life below the ledge, and in a minute I knew that my staring was lifting the cliff higher.

And so I jumped, feet first, arms at my sides, and chin down. It took two or three seconds. The light from the top faded quickly as the cliff wall went past me. I dropped so fast it was like I’d fallen out of a plane. Then I hit, and the surface water shot past me like a full-body wet-suit being ripped up over my head. I hit the dark bottom hard and fast, and my heels took a jolt. It wasn’t deep enough. Then twenty feet back to the swells and the air, keeping my blinking bloodshot eyes on the spotlight jumping around above me. I took a giant deep breath, and then Abe the gentle wonder-boy crashed into the water taking it hard to the chin.

Back at the hotel, Ernie and a few others were sitting on the balcony eating jerk chicken from the cart down on the corner, special sauce spread generously around their faces.

“You guys really jumped that shit?” Ernie answered to the group.

“Yah mon,” Abe said. “It was not’ting.”

A bit later the girls from across the hall came over.

“Holy shit! You guys really jumped off those cliffs?” they asked. “You guys are animals!”

Yeah, well.

In New Orleans, we saw the Louisiana Superdome, “The World’s Largest Room,” from three blocks away on Canal Street in New Orleans. Abe parked us curbside near the front of the French Quarter and then led the search for an affordable hotel. He took us without reason or rhyme several blocks in and several blocks over. He disappeared into the Chateaux Lemoyne on Dauphine Street. As we learned from a small brass placard, half hidden by a tall potted tree, the chateaux is actually a Holiday Inn, built into an old antique boarding house. When Abe came out he told us about a special. “Seventy-two bucks for two big beds and a balcony,” he said with a thumbs-up—an early summer, early in the week deal for a room that was three hundred on weekends.

Later in the afternoon we swam in the hotel pool and sat around in lounge chairs in the hotel courtyard. Then at nine or ten PM there were strange high-powered spotlights and a crowd of thousands just two blocks from the hotel. “A big movie’s being filmed,” the valet explained to us—“something about a pelican.”

We were sharing the balcony with the room on our left looking out—three or four college girls from North Carolina. One of them, a good-looking one, came out and sat down at our table with a book. Yours truly had been alone. I said hi and made conversation for a minute, and she smiled through most of it. I then closed my magazine and tossed it up to the middle of the table where it half covered the umbrella hole. I went quiet and pretended

to get all caught up with the color of the sky just over the horizon. She kept reading. Five or six minutes passed and I came up with nothing else. Then the girl leaned forward and put her hands on the arms of her chair.

“Feels like a nice night for a swim,” she said.

“Yeah. That sounds nice,” was all I said.

She continued to her feet and stepped a slow step away from the table into the clearing between our two doors. Abe “the Sensitive Terrorist,” as Ernie describes him, “the freak who terrorizes you with his gentle niceness,” was off on a jog. Ernie was inside the room whispering on the phone probably with Jule the new girlfriend.

“Would you like to go down on me?” the girl asked.

What she really asked was: “Would you like to go down *with* me?”

A little confused but polite, I said:

“Actually, I’m pretty beat. I’ll probably just crash,” was my strategic anti-social answer.

And so she left, and there Acher was, as Acher was before she came. Ernie was still talking on the phone, but the door had been closed. The bright room was silent behind the glass. The sounds of the large crowd of onlookers below rose to a feverish pitch. One of the stars must be making an appearance. I reached for my magazine just as the big blank of sudden solitude set in, and I got the old familiar shiver.

I closed my eyes and imagined myself up in Iowa with Oli on her farmhouse front porch. The all-important visitor has arrived. She knows I am the logical choice, and she'll feel the need to act on it! Out-cooling Ernie Cain to a college girl poetess not to mention party girl will be a piece of cake. Oli and I will arrange our alone time, and Ernie will be stuck with his new girl Jule or Jewel or whatever on the phone, and Abe will only be informed enough only to facilitate things.

The French Quarter sky was thick with Oli, the girl who understands this smart yet romantic attitude, this craving for the exotic and the normal at the same time. A poem of hers rang in my head from the reading she gave at the record store. "I'd grab this agony, God, and kick it in the teeth, if you promised me bliss. But I'll wait . . . (pause) for what I don't know." I couldn't remember the rest but I knew it was just as amazing. Everybody cried and clapped and laughed and looked at each other and a few folks hyperventilated, and a few others let go short spastic yelps. And a few people looked around doing nothing and then fell over and hit their heads on the ground. And best of all, Oli was back in her seat looking at the floor before anyone knew what hit them.

10.

Near the Texas line Abe said he was pretty ambivalent about heavy hiking but that he definitely wanted to see the Grand Canyon and Yosemite. Ernie said he liked those ideas, but he also wanted a border crossing.

"Banff. We've got to go to Banff."

“Isn’t Banff in Canada?” Abe asked.

“So what?”

“Well,” Abe began, “I thought we were doing the American road trip thing.”

“We’re doing the whatever-the-hell-we-feel-like road trip thing,” answered Ernie.

“Right. Sure. Hey Jon, take the next right and head up to Banff.”

In Dallas, Ernie pulled off the highway around sunset to get closer to the neon-silhouetted skyscrapers, but there was nothing as we got closer. The special effects were better from a distance, so we got back on the highway.

“Oh by the way—I forgot to tell you fools, I’m flying back to Boston when we get to San Francisco.

“When are we getting to San Francisco?” I asked Ernie.

I didn’t know at the time that Ernie was hiding something.

“Well, I sort of have to get back to see Jule before she goes to France, and she’s leaving on the Seventh or the Eighth. So I figure I’ll fly on the Fifth, which gives us a solid two weeks.”

“Two weeks to see the National Parks and maybe even hang out in Banff for a few days before we drive down and drop you off in San Francisco?”

“Why not? You saying it can’t be done?”

“No. I’m saying it won’t be done,” I told him commandingly.

“Maybe you should fly from somewhere else?” added Abe.

“Forget it. I’ll figure it out in a few days. Maybe I’ll have to—maybe I should just plan to fly out of Vancouver or something.”

“Right. Vancouver—we’ll swing by Vancouver on our way down from Banff.”

“There you go,” Ernie agreed.

Just after Wichita Falls, an older man at a mini-mart told Ernie and me that a guy just minutes before had skipped out on his gas payment and was heading west in a stolen pickup.

“The Rangers are settin’ up a roadblock. The guy might be armed,” he told us.

Ernie put his burrito up on the counter and thought about it.

“Now by heading west, you mean going that way?” Ernie asked the white-haired scraggly man.

“That’s what I said.”

“How do we know the guy’s armed?” I asked him. But Ernie cut me off. He raised his right hand like he was stopping a small hatchet at the top of its arc.

“Don’t be dumb, Jon,” Ernie said. “Sir, what’s the quickest way to get out of Texas?”

“Same direction, boys” the man answered, his brow pulled into a bunch, maybe putting two and two together with our strange questions and our strange accents. “Well, there’s really only one way to go out here.”

“West, you mean?” Ernie answered.

“Unless you want to go east, I guess.”

“So, if we...” I began. I gestured to the left, facing toward the front. But Ernie and the man ignored me so I stopped.

“I see—heading left or west on this highway we’re on now,” Ernie said.

“Yes, that’s right, this highway,” the man answered carefully, as if he was being truly helpful with confused travelers. “Not many people head right out here,” he said with a smile.

Abe was stretched out snoozing in the back. We told him nothing because we needed him for the morning leg.

“Abraham doesn’t need to know about this,” said Ernie. “Might spook him. You know, might put him over the edge.”

A little farther west, over the sea of Texas, Ernie and I saw nothing else besides a few strange lights in the sky that definitely were not airplanes. Unidentifiable objects zinged slow and fast through the dusty overnight sky. As we finished our roll across Texas, I shifted and turned as the smoothness of the dark highway and the quiet inconveniently stirred the sauce again. My head steered irretrievably into that opaque puddle called Relationships with Women, first in general, but soon back to thoughts of one in particular. I used to think a woman could only be cool if she was at

least a year older than me. But I'm beginning to think all women are cool women. Maybe a girl is only as un-cool as the men she's had to deal with in her life, and maybe less.

The last time I saw Olive she hugged me and dug her claws into my back. Then she gave me the look, the big look that said words would only be stupid. It was a sublime catharsis—though something told me it was stupid to think of us together. We knew each other too well. We've seen each other go through some pretty retarded shit—her old deal with the Ern-man, and for me, a small number of affairs with girls who simply weren't the ones.

Sex with Ms. Oli would be amazing—close to total rapture. It was barely imaginable. However, for what I couldn't help, a new movie played on, me and her together, and the West Texas dark early morning brightened slowly. Wonder-girl was on top of me in the middle of Iowa and she knew I'd be coming through there, if I could arrange it.

We stopped at a big rest area where fifty tractor-trailers were sleeping, each glowing with its various sets of decorative running lights. It was time to wake up Abraham. Ernie was drifting and swerving, hovering over the centerline, and it was a bit of luck that the road was empty. Ernie switched with Abe for the back seat to sleep but slept only minutes. It was six AM and day broke hard across the red rocky desert. The sun rose up strong behind us warming the backs of our heads. The view had changed considerably since sundown—a new world of dry, red-shrubby fields, and miniature canyons, scale models of what we'd see farther westward. Then for no reason besides boredom with the highway Abe turned us north onto a secondary road. Miles of fences ran us up into the hills, flying along on forgiving shocks, gaining altitude only slightly at first, but then in leaps and bounds

as the vehicle skated up to the near edge of something enormous, high, wide, and vast, a plateau, a butte, a mesa, the West. We'd arrived. We drove over and along the high ground until it gave again, mellowing into meadows and fields, with cattle, from time to time a horse or two, and packs of unknown raptors swooping low across the tall brown grass. We camped at Storrie State Park two miles north of a small town called Las Vegas by chance. Ernie and I both fell asleep upon arrival, and I fell into a dream. The two of us were in someone's front yard, out near the street in an unfamiliar neighborhood, landscaping, edging and pulling weeds. And then there was an explosion in the middle distance, and smoke all above the rooftops and chimneys. I moved past a fence with a wind screen, and then I saw it. A plane had crashed, but a large section of the plane was still intact. There was also a crane, and a station wagon being lifted by the crane, up and out of the middle part of the fuselage. The station wagon was loaded for a family vacation—bicycles, inner tubes, kids and a dog. It was quickly clear what the family had done, what we all do on some of the rougher ferry rides. They had chosen to stay downstairs with the vehicles instead of venturing up on deck in questionable or inclement weather. The wagon was completely char-broiled, but the family was unharmed. The sky was clear and the sun was shining hard.

“Hey, Bozo! Get up!” Ernie shouted above my ear. “We’re going for a drive.”

It was mid-afternoon. Ernie and Abe wanted food.

We spent the rest of the day in town, first at a Mexican restaurant by the town green and then at the little movie house where we saw a special screening of a Jurassic sequel. The theater had rustic timber posts and natural wood paneling—and it seemed

like the whole town was there. When we arrived, single seats were the only ones available so we were forced to split up. All three of us ended up in the front three rows of the theater seated with all the town's under-twelve year olds. There were many screams throughout the film, and even some sobbing among the littler ones. Ernie and Abe were in the front two rows. At one point, Ernie lightly bopped a young movie fan on the head with a big, flat, rigid hand.

After the movie, Ernie asked to borrow my phone. We separated from him and walked around the little town square for twenty minutes. Then he walked back holding it out.

“I called Jule,” Ernie shared with me, with Abe then window shopping at the western-wear place across the street. “I don't think she understands me,” he added.

“Who does?” I asked off the cuff. Then I thought to clarify: “Does she know?”

“Yeah, of course she does. Well, she knows the light version—that my dad choked on his vomit. She's funny though,” Ernie said after a moment's thought, a little uncomfortably. “She'd probably say it's better to never fight back.”

“What? Submissive? You?” I asked.

“No, not me,” Ernie said with a slight laugh, looking back at the theater. “I'm just saying... killing a parent should be avoided.” Then he added a bit more. “If it was after this trip, this vacation of ours, I probably wouldn't have done it!”

We got a bottle of Bushmills whiskey that night and had two-thirds of it. I was quiet, thinking mainly about the eventual visit to Iowa City. Abe whistled nothing recognizable at the back end of the truck then sat down, with us all facing the lake as if that was the campfire for the night. After four or five takes from the bottle, Ernie suggested we tag each other with fake high-school yearbook titles.

“Yeah!” said Abe as if that was a brilliant idea. “But let’s start with Jon,” Abe suggested, to which Ernie smiled then began.

“That’s easy, ‘Least likely to succeed,’” Ernie said with a cartoonish shock-face you don’t see on him very often—like *The Scream* without the hands. Abe smiled wide and agreed.

Next, Abe, coincidental to the old joke, said Ernie is: ‘Most likely to hurt someone’—which was very interesting coming from him, knowing nothing about the Mr. Cain accident. I chuckled at this but Ernie didn’t of course. He grunted and looked down at the insult.

Ernie then looked out and straightened his back as if speaking to a roomful of people.

“Abe here is ‘Most likely not to appreciate reality,’” which I chuckled again at, as did Abe though not quite as loudly.

After the not-intentional warm-up Ernie then went on an unexpected sharing tear, unlike any I’d seen from him before with a third person present. Abe and I sensed it was a bit of an unraveling, a rare experience, so we just sat and listened. A defective baseball falls apart—the leather comes unstitched and the string on the inside is exposed and starts to unravel.

Ernie started out of left field, talking about his mom I quickly figured out. He was more than just happy drunk, having some sort of emotional backflash, much more round-shouldered and round-backed than usual. His eyes were pointed at the grassy dirt eight feet in front of us.

“She took me to the giant rock in Central Park.”

“Oh!” we said in a surprised response to this tangential change of subject, from whatever we were loosely talking about.

“I stood on top like forty feet above her, and she pointed up to the people she was standing with—strangers. Then she took me and you, Jon, and that kid Sven, to the Intrepid and I remember her working that big artillery gun in the lower seat.”

"Yeah," I said. "I remember."

"She stood out in the middle too—remember that?—when she waved her arms stiff like she was on the flight deck, like the *Top Gun* guy with a helmet and the sticks."

"Yeah!" I said with more enthusiasm.

“And then she held her chin down to the side to look like she had a radio, you know, like in the helmet. It was crazy windy. We almost blew off the upper deck.”

"Yeah Sven almost did fall off," I remembered.

Ernie was talking drunk in a slightly different way than usual, in the new and much different place. Abe looked over when Ernie's chin was down, only to turn back again as if Ernie wasn't the same Ernie he thought he knew. Abe was relaxed sitting

Indian-style and drew make-believe hieroglyphics in the dirt in front of him. Ernie then sat up straight for a few seconds.

"I was such an ass," Ernie said. He slumped back down.

"Sure, but we all were asses back then." But Ernie was already somewhere else.

"I remember she took me to Chinatown for real Chinese food." Ernie chuckled. "I was scared. It wasn't a restaurant—it was like the eatery at a back-street mall in Beijing or wherever. Outer space!" He half-laughed, then he stopped, and looked around. The sun had dropped behind the hills past the lake and the sky was darkening fast. "That might've been all one day."

"No. The aircraft carrier was a different day. I remember that," I said. But Ernie ignored me, getting in his sleeping bag—it had dropped from eighty-plus to the sixties or upper fifties.

At Ernie's dad's last supper, I was sort of like an apostle, a friend, a witness. The ghost of Ernie's mom's was also there. Yes, it's fair to say that there were other forces at work on Ernie and his dad besides just the one on one. A huge part had to do with the mom. She wasn't there in the flesh—she hadn't been there for a very long time. I remember the kid-years when we were eight or nine or ten, when I would eat dinner over at Ernie's house and it was all smiles. The olden days are now like an exaggerated TV skit, with the dad putting his hat on a coat hook and saying: "Hello! How is everybody?" Then mom, who maybe got home ten minutes earlier, says: "Hi, honey," and gives him a smooch on the cheek. But Ernie's mom in fact hasn't been there for ten years, and each person's ghost of her is different. It's not just one in the room, but two—or as many ghosts as there are people, in their

subconscious or right in front of them, like their own hologram, with them talking separately to her or just feeling her presence.

There's a bit of tragic-com here, I think, when we consider that Grandma might see what the others don't see. Maybe she observes two ghosts of her daughter with one ghost in great disagreement with the other—Ernie's ghost being middle-aged and wiser, and much more accurate of course. His dad sees the younger mom before mom-hood was an issue. Maybe the two ghosts converge into one in front of Grandma, and then the ghost says something like: "Ma, I don't have any choice in this—there're two of them!"

I shook off my vision.

"Hey what should we do tomorrow?" Abe asked me in a quiet whisper.

Thursday morning early, Ernie woke up, looked around a bit, and then fell asleep again on clumps of stiff grass and pebbles near the truck. It didn't look comfortable, but he was already asleep, too heavy to notice, like Godzilla crushing a few cars with his feet. He woke up with weed-clump and pebble prints over the whole left side of his face.

Later in the morning, Abe said to Ernie—because Ernie had mentioned his mom again, his mom having taken him to the "Grand Canyon of the Adirondacks" in upstate New York in Ausable and then some Catskill dude ranch.

"Hey, don't miss her so much it makes you more of an asshole." This was Abe testing the toughness-waters, to see if

Ernie was back closer to his usual self. Ernie stayed quiet for a few seconds.

“Touché.”

“Sounds like you might have a bit of a complex.”

“Yeah, an Oediplex,” I offered.

“A what? Oh, I get it—like a Oedipus complex?”

“Sounds like a movie theater that only shows twisted sick movies,” Abe said smirking.

“Yeah. Killing your dad does build character,” Ernie said jokingly.

“Yes, that's very Oedipus of you,” I added.

“But not with my mom gone! It isn't really Oedipus at all.”

“He's got a picture of her,” I told Abe, “on his bedroom shelf... when she was in her thirties. She was a very nice-looking woman. It'd be difficult not to have thoughts about her.”

“What?” Ernie then asked me accusingly with his eyebrows in a cinch.

“My issues are more with a Wicked Witch of the North,” Abe offered.

“How so?” asked Ernie getting up. But Abe didn't expand on it. To Ernie, it probably sounded like no big deal and therefore

nothing to inquire further about. He got to his feet and walked down the low-grade hill a bit.

We heard thunder before we saw the lightening that produced it. Storm clouds were rolling over the hills on the western side of Storrie Lake. We then sat inside the truck listening to Abe's Mozart mix and the thunder as the dark electric sky with columns of silver rain moved over and by, with its great parade of lightning bolts striking down all around us.

And there was a man out on the lake windsurfing. He crossed to our darker side on a final pass and then beached the board down in front of us. Like a neoprene nightmare he walked out of the water and right up to our vehicle. Abe turned the key and put the window down.

"You fellas look like you could use a hot meal. Come and join me."

"You should see what you look like, mister," Abe told the guy. The guy smiled widely.

The black clouds passed and the warm Southwest sun came blazing. The three of us stepped out into the mud and started down toward the guy's VW Vanogan. He told us he was chasing down a low-pressure system and that he'd be leaving for another lake at the end of the day. "Another system came through just south of here," he told us confidently. "That one was just a freak squall."

I was looking down at the slick ground in front of me but turned up and around to get a look at the parting clouds.

"Hear that, Abraham?" began Ernie. "They named a storm

after you.” Then Ernie slipped suddenly and slid for several feet before regaining his balance, arms to the sides like he was trying to keep the lids on a couple of exploding garbage cans.

The guy served rice and beans in his VW kitchen and gave us names of good places to visit in northern New Mexico and southern Colorado. Abe talked to him about directions while Ernie looked around. Yours truly, overwhelmed with the utilitarian cozyness of the VW’s living room, started to think about Olive again, and then about Ernest—how truly different the two of us are. He’s short-tempered, well built, and too strong.

But she had grown tired of the Ernie type. That I was sure of.

In the late afternoon Ernie and I watched big birds, black desert vultures—as opposed to the more common turkey turnpike vultures back east—hopping up and down at the edge of Storrie Lake stretching their wings. The name was a gift from the windsurfing guy, now more than just strange birds of prey—particulars indigenous to New Mexico. The three of us then met around the hood of Abe’s truck to plan the next few days—Santa Fe, Albuquerque, Taos—and discovered quickly we couldn’t plan anything after that, let alone that. Abe disappeared to the trees to the north while Ernie wrestled with the muddy tent under a spicket by the ranger’s hut. I sat on the back bumper with the door up and pondered life.

At the beginning of college I thought I knew some things. Then for four years I tried to figure out whether any of that stuff was true. Second semester senior year I tried not to worry about it and hung around on the grass a lot, trying to fill the void. Uncertainty, loneliness, what have you. I was a guy who always

assumed that the people I knew I would always know, and that my future soul mate would, by necessity, turn out to be a young lady I knew. Sand and water will no doubt harden soon into something more concrete.

The water skidded up to the sand on her bike. I didn't see her coming. She laughed when she saw the fear on my face. She stepped off and we walked the three or so blocks to the Boston subway, a.k.a. the T. She looked all business, the business of the busy college student. She had on a typical outfit of her white cotton yoga pants and her vintage Kansas City Chiefs three-quarter-sleeve T-shirt—and a dark-blue cotton sweater tied loosely around her waist. The outfit was plain, but revealing. I knew her body well. I had memorized the whole light-olive map of her right up to where not being her boyfriend restricted the access, near and around the revealing edges of sporty running shorts and T-shirts. And she knew what I knew. I made no secret of my looking. It was just a natural, and unfortunate, aspect of our situation as friends. We were talking as we walked. Oli breathed deep a few times after her dismount from the bike.

“Have you ever been to Sedona?” she then asked me.

“Sedona?”

I'd never heard of it.

“It's this place in Arizona—I was reading about it for one of my classes.”

“Yeah?”

“It's out in the middle of the desert. There are these huge red rocks there. And these vortexes. People go from all over to

meditate there.”

“Why there? What is it, one of those desert health spas?”

It was important that I followed these Oli conversations to their logical conclusions.

“Probably, but the vortexes sound pretty interesting. They supposedly have these energy currents that go straight to the center of the earth. The Indians built up a bunch of rocks around them.” She was quiet for a second or two. “That’s where the people go to meditate.”

“Sounds pretty neat,” I said. “But do you really believe in all that—all that New Age nonsense?” I asked Olive boldly.

“Of course I do. What’s not to believe?” She looked at me. “The stuff is there!”

We arrived at our split— Olive heading outbound on the Red Line and me heading inbound. I stood there while she locked her bike to a parking meter. I was about to change the subject, to see what her night looked like, but it didn’t work.

“There’s nothing New Age about it,” she said with a frown, quite clearly disappointed with me. She opened the door to the outbound T-station and was gone.

“See ya later!” I shouted to her through the heavy closing glass. She was forever leaving me standing.

When the guys got back to the truck, we left the lake and then saw the town’s one Chinese restaurant. Ernie said: “Hey, next time I’ll tell you guys about the place my mom took me to in

Chinatown.” I was about to tell him that he told us about it the night before, but I said nothing. It was clear he had the most Bushmill’s the night before.

Abe drove and I stared out my window, leaving behind the little Vegas with its night lights only at the gas station and the A&P—moving quickly again with a half-eye open for the filming of some brave new cigarette commercial. Were we like cowboys in a car? It was a good time to have one. It had been a long time.

“Ern, pass back a cigarette.”

“What?”

“You heard me—a cigarette—pass me one!” Ernie turned and looked at me, with a quizzical look at first, but then it was gone and he turned back around.

“Not a chance, psycho.”

“Just give me one—I need it,” I declared, noticing adobe buildings running by in quickening succession, heading southwest toward the outskirts of Santa Fe. But he didn’t answer. He chuckled to himself for a second, just as amused as he needed to be. And I saw Abe shake his head. Then he leaned in to change the music.

“Just forget it,” I said nonchalantly. I turned, and started sand-sharking my hand in the wind out my window sporadically back and forth side to side.

11.

We slept that night by a small river outside Taos. The next morning we hiked up into the ski valley farther north of town. We made it to a spot that takes your sense of balance away (if your sense of balance is precarious the way mine is), way up on a rock ridge that marks the southern boundary of the ski area. The view was an all around us one. In every direction was a snowed-over peak, held in place by the wide shoulders of a high valley of Aspens and pines. We even saw a few fresh ski tracks in a rocky chute nearby and some big-paw cat tracks, leading up from the base of the ski-lift to a small cave.

Then we stood in the middle of the Rio Grande Gorge Bridge outside town in a solid wind, six hundred and fifty feet above the river.

“Can you imagine jumping off this thing with a goddamn rubber band tied around your ankles?” Ernie offered.

We agreed that many bungee jumpers had probably visited the spot.

“If it was me, and it probably wouldn’t be,” started Abe, “I’d get terrified just dangling at the end of the thing, you know, slowing to a bounce for a minute.”

“Yeah, I don’t know about this. Seems a little sketchy,” said Ernie, as if he was evaluating the spot like an experienced coach or technician.

A few hours later, soon after we entered southwestern Colorado, we stopped in at a small dirt parking area that had a sign

for a hiking trail. We hiked to the top of a four mile switch-backing path that ended at a waterfall. Just past the keystone that divides the flow of water into two hard streams, the path continues along the rim of the valley wall to a very old mining cabin, wedged into the side of the mountain and propped up by rickety stilts on the steep downhill side. Inside were thousands of initials, dates and dedications, and on the far wall was a six-foot cast-iron stove, no doubt much heavier and sturdier than the old floorboards it was sitting on. Abe and I stood against the uphill side of the little room reading the walls and ceiling beams. Ernie popped into the tiny cabin breathing heavily. He looked around fast and then located a clear spot on the back. He went to work with Abe's car keys. He got eight letters up on the wall—"JON ACHER"—but then said he got tired. The big key wasn't sharp enough to finish, he explained.

"Why not your own name, dick-head?"

"I thought you'd appreciate it."

"Acher? Why not at least Acheron?"

He stepped back and laughed a little.

"My hands are tired. Finish it yourself if you want." He jumped back out to the narrow trail back to the waterfall.

The unfinished carving I left as is—where it can probably still be found.

Soon thereafter a very attractive blond woman showed up, not from the top of the trail that brought us there, but down through the trees and boulders above the falls. She looked thirty-five, maybe just thirty, dressed in jogging gear and sweating lightly. She bent down to the river above the falls and splashed water on her

face, and then rubbed some on her forearms and neck which were all as tight and sinewy as the rest of her body, especially her calves and thighs. When she stood up she spoke.

“Hey kids, what took you so long?”

“What?” Ernie whispered almost frantically. “Is she . . . who’s she talking to?” He looked around sharply. “Us?” Then we heard the footsteps, small scuffing footsteps, and when I turned to look up the path behind us four wiry blond children appeared.

Ten or eleven minutes later, Mom came over and talked with us. She said she was in southwest Colorado for a statewide amateur swim meet. We told her about our trip for a minute, where we’d been, where we might go—Grand Canyon, Yellowstone, Yosemite. Then Abraham announced he had an old friend from Choate he wanted to go visit, living with the Arapahos and Shoshones on a big reservation in Wyoming. It was the first time he mentioned it. Ernie immediately spoke up and said: “No, we’re not doing that.”

“Wow, the East Coast!” the woman began. “I’ve never been there. Actually, I’ve never been east of Colorado—but I did go to Los Angeles once. I hated it! So I came back.” Then she leaned down over our backs, and I was about to lose it from the closeness when she pointed out hot springs at the far end of town, under our toes. It’s a town no bigger than a good sized pond.

At the bottom, in town, at seven-thousand feet, my phone rang. It was Newark and probably Officer Svikhart again. The number was the same but this time I didn’t answer it. In a minute, my phone chimed again because of a new message.

“Hello, Mr. Acheron. Officer Svikhart again. We hope you guys are enjoying the San Juan Mountains. Just a friendly reminder to have your friend Ernest call us when you guys return to the Garden State. Or give us a call at 862-666-1231. Alright, thanks. Talk to you soon.”

“What?” I thought. “How do they know we’re in the San Juan Mountain range.” I hastily put it out of my mind, but looked up to make sure there weren’t any spy-planes nearby. Maybe they had GPS surveillance on Abe’s car. Maybe they’d stuck some tracker device under a bumper. But I largely ignored the call knowing it was a recorded voicemail I could always listen to again later. Ernie and Abe both glanced over their shoulder when I pulled back to listen to it.

In the morning it was Sunday, and we drove to Telluride for the last day of a Bluegrass Festival. I was still tired, a tad hung over, and each mile of road upward pulled me farther from familiar elevations. I was halfway out my window grabbing huge breaths of the thinner air, taking in all the country vistas as best I could as we twisted our way up into the San Juans.

In Telluride, the kurortish town where my college friend Marcus is moving for the ski season, because his mom lives there—but that’s another story—it was clear that most of the people came from somewhere else, somewhere far away judging by their long hair and backpacks. Veggie burritos abounded, and kids our age leaned against sacks or each other as they ate them, stretched out under the towering snow covered peaks and Technicolor hillsides—laser-coated lenses, orange marmalade hacky-sacks, dirty roped hair, and unisex sun dresses. Everyone pretty, everyone sleepy, and a little gritty, way up around eight thousand feet high, high as kites above sea level. And we

ambivalently heard no bluegrass music. Three hours before the end of the festival they were still asking twenty-five bucks at the entrance to the town park. I hadn't even spent twenty-five bucks in the three days leading up to being there.

“Who needs that preppy hillbilly shit, anyhow?” said Ernie. “Come on—let’s go watch the Bull’s game.”

“I’m going for a walk,” Abe said. And he split.

“Have fun, Abraham. This seems like your kind of town,” Ernie said, as Abe stepped out onto Colorado Avenue and crossed to the north side.

Ernie and I ate a quick lunch at Baked in Telluride, briefly facing east on their dark afternoon porch. Afterwards, we walked up the slight hill on the side street and across Colorado Avenue to the Steaming Bean for coffee. There was a mob on the sidewalk spread around on a few benches and a twenty-foot stretch of curb, doing absolutely, positively nothing. Lots of dogs, also. Big dogs. Mountain dogs. And there was a line almost out the door, more a pack really, making access to the counter difficult if not unlikely. So we walked farther down the sidewalk and up a flight of wooden stairs to an out-of-place sports bar where we watched the NBA Championship. On this tiny town’s “most crowded day of the year,” some local lamented to us, there was just a handful of people in this place watching easily twice as many TVs.

After the game we stepped to the street wondering how we were ever going to find Abe, but instead he found us. He called to us from one of the benches in front of the coffee shop. He had a bunch of girls around him. He pushed himself to his feet, kissed

two of them, and then flagged down the shuttle bus that took us out to the parking fields where our car was.

Ernie drove us out Colorado's back door into Utah. Three or four hours later he pulled the truck into a sand parking lot sheltered from a dry desert breeze by two big trees and a fortifying line of RVs. We were in Moab. I wrestled with one of the collapsing tent-poles for a minute or two while the other two emptied the back of the vehicle. We slept until well after sunrise. I was apparently the last one to wake up. Ernest and Abe were dressed and eating fresh Telluride cherries and talking quietly and leaning against the picnic table.

"Oh. You," Ernie said, with a pause to spit out a pit, as I crawled out of the tent exhausted from the hard dirt sleeping. "Let's go."

"Shotgun," I called, quite cleverly, I thought.

"Jesus. Do you two ever stop?" Abe complained. "Why can't you sit in back for once?"

"All is fair in love and road trips, Abe," Ernie offered, as he rocked himself forward and walked to the truck. Abe turned and put the twisty back on the cherries.

"That's not really what I asked, now is it?" he said. "But don't worry about it."

"Abe, I sat in back all through . . ." I tried to remember.

"I said don't worry about it, loverboy."

"Not in the front, he won't," Ernie added.

“Just drive, you.” Abe said to Ernest.

“Right. I’ll drive. And you’ll slide around in the back.”

Ernie laughed.

“Take shotgun, Abe,” I told him.

“No thanks, Jon. It belongs to you. Really.”

“I’m serious. If you want it, take it. I’ll stretch out in the back.”

“God you’re an ass sometimes,” Ernie said to one of us, I wasn’t sure which.

“Just close the door, Jon.”

“Fine!” I exclaimed whole-heartedly.

I closed the door and Ernie drove the truck through Moab out toward Canyonlands, fast.

It was Monday morning and the music was up loud. For a few minutes on the sunburned highway I forgot that it wasn’t just me and Ernie. It made me grin a bit, no doubt foolishly. I looked around to place Abe in the situation, but I didn’t see him. The seat was down and the bags were pushed to the sides. A long towel was covering something running up the middle, and at the way back I saw Abe’s blue pillow and a tuft of jet-black hair. I turned back to the road ahead and then to Ernest and then to the road again. I looked in the side view mirror, pulled down on my cheeks and then rubbed my eyelids with my fingers. I fumbled through the glove compartment for my sunglasses. Ernie asked me what I was

looking for and then took them off my head and handed them to me, all while looking forward.

“These sunglasses?”

“Thanks.” I took the shades from his hand and looked at the lenses from all sides, scratched to hell, and cheap to begin with. I tossed them up on the dash.

June 24th. Then we were just driving, myself with vague intangible thoughts of the world dropping out from underneath us at any minute. An uneasiness was circling through my body, doing crazy turns in my bloodstream but advancing slowly and steadily in concentric circles out from the base of my spine—the feeling you would get in a huge wingless airplane just before the end of a treacherous nine mile runway to the edge of a cliff—a monstrous disaster movie in the making—genuinely nervous about us missing a key canyon road sign.

12.

Down in Canyonlands National Park, a man who could have been Picasso passed us in an open Jeep Renegade on the road out into the back country, with a tan bald head and an open Bermuda shirt exposing a dark stout belly.

“The movies are here, fellas,” he said shaking his head. “The fuckin’ movies.” He pulled his jeep back into the road behind us and disappeared.

Around a bend the secret was revealed, and appropriately, without modesty. Lined up were some twenty charcoal gray trailers. “Geronimo Redux” was painted on the side of one, Next to the trailers were two three-ring-circus tents, and next to the tents were a hundred horse trailers, filled with maybe twice as many horses. All about were men in cavalry and Indian outfits. Ernie said he saw the actor Gene Hackman standing by the door to one of the trailers.

There was a turn-off up to the lot just where the red dirt road went the other way. The two guys working the driveway—standing out in the great open with thick crossed arms and well-gelled hair—shook their glistening heads and pointed in the direction we had been heading. Ernie leaned out the window and told them they would never work in this town again! I was driving. Abe leaned over, shook his head once to the side of Ernie, and silently pointed out that we were down to a quarter tank.

Thirty miles further south we found a girl, seventeen or eighteen maybe, holding a stop sign. Ernie jumped out and jogged up to her, with his very deliberate running back’s warm-up stride, slow, wide stance, concentrating on foot placement. He pulled up and said something that made the girl smile. Then she nodded and he handed her an apple we didn’t know he had. He walked back. Ten minutes passed before the pace car showed up. It did a partially off-road U-turn and then escorted us two miles down the red-land highway. The yellow dashes up the middle were clearly fresh and the wind had smeared them a bit at the crests of two slight hills. Past the painting trucks the driver of the pace car pulled another U-turn and waved us by. There was another young girl with a stop sign and a line of five cars waiting for their turn to go east.

We set up our eleventh camp way out into the Needles part of Canyonlands by a dried-up creek bed. And it wasn't at all cold out, but Abe collected armfuls of bone dry wood anyway and built a raging, spreading fire all over the place. Out of nowhere the wind had picked up, and for a few long minutes we were convinced we'd lit the whole park on fire. Wildfires, we quickly saw, are not the work of arsonists.

"Christ, Abe!" Ernie began, "What the hell were you thinking?" He was sweating like a pig and exhausted. Abe told him to get over it.

"Are we sure it's all out?"

"Yeah, pretty sure, I guess."

At four AM the little canyon was dead silent and much colder. The temperature had dropped about twenty-five degrees. Instead of going back in the tent, I climbed into Abe's truck and closed the door slowly. I rummaged through the old tapes on the floor until I found Abe's "Miles mix" with "Sshhh, peaceful." I went back to the tent for the ignition key in Abe's boot then sat mostly still watching the strange moonlit landscape, patiently waiting for the sun to show up, and working out further abstractions for a drop-in at my young woman poet's.

This was as far west as we would get that week. The next day we turned north to Wyoming, and then a bit east again. The vote was two to one, over Ernie, to skip the grander canyons farther south-west for the sake of the higher cooler country above us. I saw on the map-app that if we went up the east side of Wyoming and then swung west through the middle, we could do it all! I would present my new proposal at sunrise.

13.

To be forthcoming, Wyoming was humble pie and not scenic. The short of it was that we planned in western Colorado to do the hot spots in the east first—Cody aka “Buffalo Bill Town,” Abe told us thinking it would enhance our interest—the *Guide to the West* said it was a great stop with real rodeo. We would also hit Devil’s Tower from that old 1980’s movie *Close Encounters*, then Thermopolis, “home to the largest hot spring in the world!” All this was on the way to see Abe’s friend on the Shoshone Arapaho Indian reservation before we hit Flaming Gorge, Jackson, the Tetons and then Yellowstone. However though, we were delayed.

In Rock Springs at the Renegade diner-bar we had a late lunch, and because all the booths were taken we sat at the bar and ended up having a few drinks. We were punch drunk and then also actually drunk, and laughing a bit about the long day so far.

We then by the front door saw a neat hand-written magic-marker sign on a scrap piece of graph paper. It was on the wall behind Abe’s head. It cracked Ernie and me up, but Abe turned his head to see what we were laughing at. He turned back and said only a: “Huh. Probably not good for business.” The unofficial sign on the wall said: ‘This is NOT a family restaurant.’

“That depends, Captain Ahab,” Ernie gave him. “What d’ya think? Are they banking on kid meals? Or would they rather get lots of fat truckers in here shoving food in their faces?”

“Well that’s a pleasant thought,” replied Abraham.

“I vote for kids,” I said to be on the controversial side.

“You would, wouldn’t you,” Ernie said last as we followed the hostess to our three stools. The diner booths were all taken so we stepped up to the bar. It had pie and juice machines on display but also had a wall of liquor bottles and a dark mirror.

Then a serious looking officer of the law came into the place and was talking to the waitress at the register to our right. He was probably a year or two older, and Abe said the next morning that he looked like my twin brother. Ernie chuckled hard at that.

At the diner-bar, we didn’t all pay attention to him as a group, but his presence was obvious if you weren’t in a booth. He was putting on a little show with his uniform, belt and sunglasses. He didn’t have spurs on his black boots, but he might as well have. His other cop accessories made the knocking and clinking noise.

Back in the car, two blocks from the diner, it was Ernie that didn’t register things.

“Wait. That’s the guy from the diner!” he said to the side mirror as the cop walked up.

“You swerved back there,” were the first words out of the cop’s mouth.

“What? Oh!” I said, remembering that I’d done a small swerve when I was clicking in the old seatbelt. He was on the young side of middle age and seemed made for his job.

“I saw you boys all drinking back at the Renegade,” were his next words. And I tried to think of something intelligent to say. We were planning to go to a campsite up the road a few miles, so I jumped on his implication that we were reckless.

“Officer, we’re just—“ I started, but he interrupted.

“Step out of the car, please,” he ordered me with his manners.

So I did. I walked the line and didn’t do so well. He then explained that because none of us were fit to drive, he was going to have the car towed back to town. And because I was the only one driving at the time—that was the reason I alone would be given the police station’s B&B for the night. Pretty drunk and all tired, we surrendered and got out of the path-trooper.

A thousand-dollar fine though, nearly maxing out the young one’s credit card—as with a nice DUI on the record.

Abe and Ernie joined me in the station for a few minutes and saw my cell-room. There was nobody else in it, so that was good! It had a thin mattress on a shelf-bench and a toilet stall, providing more privacy than what I’d seen in prison movies. And it seemed pretty clean.

“Don’t worry buddy. “We’ll break you out of here!” Ernie said walking out.

“Are you serious?” I asked—part of me indeed thought that he might be. Then Abe said:

“No, of course he’s not serious. We’re getting hotel rooms.”

And they did—two rooms, where they probably had long phone chats and some VR sex with the girlfriends. In the morning at the police station, I could hear Ernie before he got to my cell-door. He called out: “Mister Jon! “Mister Jon!” It was like Forrest Gump saying an annoying “Lieutenant Dan! Lieutenant Dan!” over and over again.

That next day early enough, we re-grouped and took a fresh start. Glacier International Peace Park—the young travelers mostly agreed—was the potential-nirvana-goal.

“I’ll do a special trip to Wyoming another time,” Abe said as he pulled us out of town.

“Yeah, you do that,” said Ernie. Fly your family jet out here in August,” he suggested. To which Abe though said nothing. Such comments about his family were inappropriate, he’d argue.

Wyoming—maybe proof that you can have an ugly time in a pretty place.

14.

When we got to Glacier Park in upper Montana, days upon days after Colorado and Utah, Abe’s path-trooper seemed to be a bad-bit smaller. The BFFs were ragged and a bit on the bored side. A natural enthusiasm for very long drives had slightly waned.

“Put up your window. It’s cold back here.”

“Deal with it, pussy.”

“I don’t want to deal with it. Put up the fuckin’ window.”

We were all no doubt distracted by how the trip would change soon. For Ernest, it was this hypothetical plane back to Boston to catch in San Fran, for Abe probably just the trip’s second beginning after getting rid of Ernie, and for me, as my wise cousin on the spectrum might say, it was a combination of a mixture of things.

“So what color was the wolf, ma’am?” the ranger at the Glacier Visitor’s Center asked. “Did you get a good look?” he added, maintaining a frown of genuine concern.

“Real grayish,” said the woman in front of us at the counter. “It was gray, with maybe a little brown and white on its side.”

“Well now, if it had been all gray, with a spiffy blue collar, then I could reassure you it was one of the wolves we’ve been keeping track of,” said the ranger. “However—”

Ernie turned and raised an eyebrow and grinned an imposing princely grin. “Hear that?” Wolves they haven’t kept track of.” He rubbed his hands against each other three or four strokes. “Sure you guys can handle this?” He then turned acting surprised by the stuffed young Bald Eagle behind him—the card on the glass said it was killed by poachers who then had to pay a two-thousand-dollar fine, no doubt all because its head hadn’t turned white yet. We looked back to the ranger as the woman stepped to the side slightly looking puzzled.

“Thanks for reporting it though, ma’am. We’ll certainly

keep our eyes open. Hi, fellas. What can I do for you?”

“We want to do some hiking,” Ernie answered.

“Of course you do,” said the ranger quickly.

The ranger was a silver-haired guy, with arms bigger than Ernie’s. Ernie bench-presses two hundred forty pounds, sleeps over a curling bar and travels with dumbbells, like the perpetual high school wrestler, as if life was actually just a string of high school varsity tryouts. Oli complained about it. She said she tripped over the curling bar all the time, but she wasn’t strong enough to move it, and the room of course was too cluttered to roll the thing. She even wrote a great poem about all this, once upon a time, one of her best, I always believed, from the renowned “My Days with Stupid” collection.

The ranger asked the lady if there was anything more he could do for her, and then escorted us over to the relief-map diorama, next to the pamphlet rack and the young bald eagle that someone shot before its head had grown white. ‘Thrown in jail and levied a fine of fifteen hundred dollars,’ the plaque read.

“How much time do we have, men?” the ranger asked.

“How much time do you need?” Ernie asked him back.

“No no, captain—I meant how long do you plan to be in the park?”

“Oh. Day and a half, I guess. We have to get to San Fran by—”

The ranger cut him off. “Okay, these over here are the

glamour spots, boys,” he said with an authoritative double tap of his schoolhouse pointer. “And over here are the grizzlies.” Another double tap. “For a bunch of men like your selves, there’s this hike over here,” triple tap, “up off the Loop. You have to go up through some pretty serious terrain, right up through Grizzly City—but up on top, up HERE,” big single tap, “is the Garden Wall.”

The ranger paused to look at us to maybe gage the kind of customers he was dealing with.

“From up here,” tap, “men, you can see the entire world.” He indicated the entire world with a tight flourish of the baton, as though conducting a quick line from a familiar symphony. “If you want to see the entire world, it’ll take the whole two days. Maybe more. Quite a hike.”

“What’s this spot over here?” Abe leaned in and asked the ranger, reaching across the map pointing to the Many Glaciers Hotel Area, marked on the list of sites by ample parking, the hotel, and access to a handful of shorter day-trails—‘This way to Iceberg Lake’, ‘This way to Ptarmigan Tunnel.’

“Oh sure then,” the ranger began again, looking a little disappointed but not surprised, “plenty of good day hikes up there—and the drive is lovely, on the Going to the Sun Road, up over the Divide. And it might even look familiar to you fellas—they film a lot of car advertisements up there,” he said with emphasis on the ‘vertis’. He finished with a hard, sticking tap pressed against Avalanche Lake. “And this is just up the road here—a swell warm up.”

So Ernie drove us a little farther up the road and parked the truck. We put our boots on, Abe and I. Ernie had his on already.

For the first time all trip I laced mine up tight. An extra shirt for the colder air, a bit of stretching and then up the path that turned out to be wheelchair accessible for the first half of an easy mile—a wooden walkway—the warm up.

“That ranger was a prick,” said Ernie, a hundred feet into the woods.

Looking at the treetops, Abe smiled.

“He was?”

“I’m serious, fuck-wad.”

“Everyone knows you’re serious, Ernest.”

At the top of the trail, near the base of Avalanche Lake where it funnels into the icy stream that leads along the footpath, Abe stepped off the beach and walked out onto the logjam. The lake was an unbelievable blue green—a color probably only found in glacial lakes up north in late June under an absolute sun—electric and the most colorful from a distance, and from up close, the clearest water ever seen. Ten waterfalls striped the rock walls dropping through slanted cracks and chutes from top to bottom, each probably hundreds of feet tall, or thousands—there was no way of telling—no people and not many trees to compare them to, one or two or three miles away across the lake and up.

“Now what’s he doing?” Ernie turned and said a little piqued.

“What?”

“I hope the fairy falls in—and freezes his ass off.”

“This place is unbelievable,” I said before noticing Abe again out on the lake.

“What the hell is he doing?”

“I don’t know.”

I squinted to see Abe more clearly, halfway across the jam, and then something tiny caught my eye, scooting along the dry log tops—a chipmunk, standing still all of a sudden on one of the fatter tree trunks. Abe moved close to it, and just stood there for a few minutes, never taking his eyes off of it. The two of us, Ernie and I, sat down on the bank and hooped our arms around our knees.

Abe was talking to it. He stepped up to the log next to the one the chipmunk was on and stopped. The chipmunk turned one hundred and eighty degrees to the left, and then one hundred and eighty to the right. Abe bent down, as if maybe to tie a shoe and then snuck a picture of the guy, holding his cardboard camera down around his ankles. (And the picture came out perfectly—chipmunk perfectly square to the camera up against the lake up against the glacier.) Then Abe stepped carefully back to the clearing at the end of the trail.

“Let’s head down,” he said, quietly and discreetly, stepping up to the trail almost as if he’d just been sitting there next to us.

“You see what I’m saying?” said Ernie.

“What?”

“The guy is a freak—he’s truly a freak.”

“Let’s go. We’ve got another drive in front of us.”

“He’s a freak—say it. Say “my friend Abe is a freak.””

“I laughed weakly for a half second but made an effort to keep it under my breath. I cleared my throat.

“Hah—I knew it.”

“Come on. Let’s go.”

“You’re right. Let’s get out of here.”

Fifty miles and eighty minutes later we reached our sixteenth or seventeenth campsite. We drove along the winding edge of the world up through a tunnel and over the Continental Divide at Logan Pass where Ernie got his gruff picture taken with a billy goat eating grass and shedding in clumps above the hairpin turn. The world was kind of softened and muted on the Going to the Sun Road with our ears, at least my own, succumbing to the air pressure.

At the St. Mary’s intersection-outpost on the east edge of the park, we stopped into a supermarket and bought ready-to-eat barbecue chicken and a six-dollar gallon of Gallo wine. The guy at the check-out smiled like we were obvious tourists.

“Do we amuse you?” Ernie asked him in a non-threatening, submissive tone.

“You’re just talking a bit louder than the locals—that’s all,” the guy said chuckling.

“Oh, yeah—the ear thing. Sorry about that,” Ernie said back seriously.

Outside, Abe told Stacey he loved her for fifteen minutes on the phone while Ernie and I waited after the filling the tank. Then we drove to the Many Glaciers area near Bab with a parking lot and a campground next to it. In camp that night we met a guy who was, as he confidently told us, almost fifteen.

When Patrick first introduced himself he said he was the son of a firefighter. Soon, though, he told us that sometimes he gets bored and throws rocks at the Mexicans on the San Diego Freeway. His eyes were down. He was utterly serious—just swapping a story for a story.

“Hey, you guys like Black jokes?” he asked next, hesitantly, as though he had a couple Hustlers that he knew he couldn’t show to just anybody.

“Well, little dude,” Abe began.

“No, we’re not into those” Ernie said quickly.

“Well, dude,” Abe began again, his voice a little less soothing than normal, “a few of our best friends are African-Americans . . .” and so on.

Ernie then said something like he thinks the funniest kinds of jokes are the ones you tell about yourself or the people you’re related to—which was a nice, humble surprise.

The kid turned away from Abe and stared, it seemed, halfway across the fire in the direction of Ernie. He then said sharply that he thinks his best friends are probably the ones he rags on the most. “If I had good white or black jokes,” he asked, “why shouldn’t I tell them just cuz I have white or black friends?”

No one answered him at first. We were probably all tired. But then Abe looked at Patrick directly as if to verify he had yet another interpersonal dilemma on his hands.

“It’s racism, kid. We know that people shouldn’t live in that world,” he said.

The kid dropped his head again to inspect the narrow trench he’d been digging with his thumbs. Maybe just confused or disappointed the kid said: “Just jokes—that’s all.”

“Take it easy there, Abraham,” Ernie whispered from his sleeping bag.

“Go to bed, Ernie,” Abe said, flustered a bit, his brow knitted in a bunch.

And Patrick didn’t seem to hear them. Ernie pulled the flap up over his upper half and zipped himself in. Abe got up and got something from the truck, but he was still talking, whatever it was a bit more loudly. Then I walked through the trees to the bathrooms, and Abe’s voice glided along the path halfway there. Then it was silent, until I reached the buzzing door-light of the facilities, moth wings fluttering in a loud but muted chorus. The screen door flew open when I pulled on it and then bounced back and slammed when I got inside.

Back at the fire, Abe was lying on his back smoking a fresh joint I didn’t remember him having. Patrick was across from him, staring at Abraham and Abraham’s hand, round-shouldered and red-eyed, looking pretty comfortable, stretched out and saying nothing.

“I’ve been telling Patrick about the meaning of life,” Abe

explained.

“Don’t listen to him, Patrick,” I told the kid. “Abe’s a crazy man.”

They were quiet then, and I got in my bag in the tent and fell asleep.

In the morning, the sound of popping joints and loud yawns sat me up in the tent. I watched Ernest for a minute as he blinked a few times and scratched an awkward itch in his cargo pants, which he apparently slept in. He put his left hand on his gut, winced a little, looked forward at nothing, moved to the truck, grabbed his narrow roll of toilet paper, towel and shampoo, and headed off through the trees. I pulled on a sweatshirt and left the tent. “Oh, hey, dude,” said Patrick, startling me, still in the dirt by the fire—the fire still going a little.

“Hey, you know what time it is?” Patrick asked next.

“Oh, I don’t know,” I started, but then looked at my watch. “Eight eleven.”

“Oh, shit!” Patrick then jumped to his feet and was gone through the trees.

Two hours after young Patrick left us, at the edge of Iceberg Lake inside a towering horseshoe glacier, we sat down and ate Stoned Wheat Thins from Wyoming on a small rocky beach. After a few minutes, a prairie dog of some kind, a mountain prairie dog, hustled up to the icy clear lake for a drink, five or six feet to Abe’s right. Abe turned and slowly nodded, very slowly. Ernie had been skipping stones across the lake but then threw one at the animal. The rock missed and hit Abe in the side just under his

elbow.

“Oops.”

“What the hell, man.” Abe said, justifiably annoyed and no doubt slightly hurt.

“Oh boy,” I said, preparing to stand up.

“Sorry, sweet thing,” Ernie said to Abe, not feeling at all bad about it. I then climbed to my feet and walked up to the edge of the hillside meadow and turned around. Ernie threw a rock across the lake in the air. It made it most of the way across then glanced off a small floating iceberg and splashed in the very blue water.

For the rest of the day, Abraham hiked a hundred yards in front, or a hundred yards behind at times, feeling his “place in the world peacefully” by himself, he later said.

I laughed a little when he made the fuss about the rock, but I knew Ernie really hadn’t thrown it very hard, so I suspected there might be something else.

“What’s on your mind, Abe?” I asked him a bit later. But he just stared, and didn’t answer, as if somehow I was supposed to know. The rock was obviously a symbol of something, somehow the tip of the iceberg at Iceberg Lake. Then he just looked disinterested.

“I’m not sure about you, Jon—Jon the mon. Sometimes I worry about you.” He walked a bit more aggressively for a minute at a slightly faster clip.

“Hey, where’s Ern? I think we lost him—I’ll hang back.” I turned around and waited.

“Sure—you do that. Hang back.”

Back that Presidents Day Weekend I showed up drunk at Ernie’s apartment. He thought I was back in Kearny but I’d come back up to Boston that Saturday because this guy Marcus called and said he hadn’t flown back to California as planned. We went out and drank beer at Shay’s. Then later I was walking and very close to Ernie’s and I stopped there for no reason.

“It’s me!” I squawked, but on the second floor he wouldn’t open the door all the way.

“You’re a mess, Turkey,” he said. “Look at yourself.”

I nodded and tried to look past him. I realized he was entertaining a guest, and he wasn’t going to let me in.

“Well, at least let me say hi to her,” I said.

“Sssshhh! You can’t come in. It’s not who you think it is. Go to your place.”

He was whispering all this with the aggravated facial movements of an angry shout. I sat down in the hallway and told him to call me a cab. Then I heard a very quiet muffled voice ask who it was, but Ernie didn’t answer—he was calling the cab. Who was it, I was curious. It didn’t sound like Olive. He would’ve let me in if it was her, our familiar pal. I knew they were starting to part ways from each other, but I was just an outsider to their personal stuff, so I only knew so much. Maybe it was a new girl he was quietly entertaining. It wasn’t a happy, easy Oli time. When he

came to the door again he said the car was probably already there, and threw a T-shirt at me. He said he'd just ordered it from some snow-boarding catalog. He said he bought it for himself, but now...

“I think you should have this, my friend. Put it on. You stink.”

I smelled myself. I did. So I laid it across my knees and then pulled it over my head. He read the shirt's logo out loud to me, safely going on the assumption that my eyes weren't much in the mood for reading anything. In varying sized letters, slightly skewed in a revolutionary, hip-hop kind of way, the shirt says rather simply, in Ernie's voice:

“Un-cool shit for losers. High fashion for a hip-hop fool,” Ernie added.

“Oh, I get it,” I said. “This means I'm cool and I'm a winner, right?” I said and then pulled it on over my other t-shirt.

“Now get out of here and get some sleep,” he said. “Call me tomorrow if you want. We'll go get a Taddy Porter,” he said referring to a favorite beer of ours. He stopped at the outside front door and directed me down the walkway to the waiting Ube rot Lyft or whatever it was.

It was only about two when we got close to camp again. The trail to Ptarmigan Lake and Ptarmigan Tunnel branched off to the left on the way down, and Abe was waiting at the fork when Ernie and I sighted him. Abe raised his arm to the other trail and disappeared onto it.

“Now what the hell's he doing?”

“He’s making us hike more,” I suggested.

“Oh yeah, well who says he gets—”

“Just come on. It’s nice out here.”

“Yeah—fine,” Ernie agreed. “We can throw more rocks at him.”

“Just hike,” I told him.

Halfway up to the lake, with the lower valley down to our right then, we spotted what looked like a glider soaring overhead. When it approached our side of the valley it became an eagle, a white-headed eagle, an eagle about the size of a big drone or small airplane. And instead of coming all the way down (where it could have asked any question it might have liked), it flapped its wings once or twice and glided back up to a thousand feet.

Ernie picked up another flat stone and winged it a mile straight up, about halfway to the bird. Abe was up in front about fifty paces and turned around but then turned back again shaking his dark-haired head. The stone cratered on the path right behind us and a moment later another one up in the bear grass to our left.

Ernie then threw another stone at Abe, but probably overshot him on purpose and sailed the rock into the thick trees below the trail. When the two of us caught up to Abe, he was standing still on the trail, looking downhill. He said he’d heard something moving around down in the woods.

“Don’t forget, you two—if you come up on a bear and surprise it—”

“What?” chimed Ernie.

“Well . . . let’s not have the occasion to find out. Bears are even harder to deal with than you two goons are.”

“Oh now I’m a goon I guess,” I said as a joke.

“Don’t sweat it. Everyone’s a goon to Abe, here. It’s good to be a goon,” Ernie explained thoughtfully.

Ernie then stepped up and shoved me in my backpack. I barely got my arms up and bumped Abe pretty hard. I immediately felt a little bad about it. Abe turned, half angry, half perplexed.

“What’s going on, J-dog? You seem to have some sort of problem today.”

“Who me? Well, you know, hermano. Mi problema es tu problema,.” Ernie listened, laughed and then shoved again, though not hard the second time. I stopped to adjust the backpack and he skipped up ahead.

Two and a half weeks together—I was actually surprised it hadn’t gotten worse than this.

In thirty minutes we noticed hikers further up the path. We could barely make them out at first, so far away and higher. They looked like mirages of us where we wished we’d gotten to already. We’d been on the trail for five hours. They looked the way people look when up against a thing that’s monstrous, mountainous. Their motions were undetectable, but the zigzag of the trail was etched clearly into the mountainside. In thirty more minutes we reached the same spot.

At the path's end we reached Ptramigan tunnel, the cool black hole just below the high-line, passageway to the far side of the mountain. The view on the near side was everything we'd hiked over since morning, all the way to Iceberg Glacier and the ends of the earth beyond it. The view on the far side was the other half of the world.

We then stepped through the slushy tunnel onto the black stone balcony, a mortared ledge high over an abysmal drop-off. I stepped up to the edge, leaned my chest down on my forearms, and put my chin and fingers over the far side of the wall. Abe put a foot on the wall, an elbow on a knee and his chin on a hand. Ernie Cain, a favorite old friend since elementary school, took a seat to the right, facing in, leaning down to pack the first of several wet snowballs. From a distance behind the low stone wall, Ernie threw big wet ones off into the giant glacial canyon. Most of them broke up though, and turned to small sleet storms long before getting anywhere near the snow down below. And there was a lake down there—a full two miles by crow, the Peace Park visitor pamphlet said—as much below us as it was out in front, or so it seemed. We thought with good tosses we might be able to hit it. But our snowballs after soaring out forward dropped like snowmen out of sight below the rock outcroppings. (It's one of those cliffs whose steepness and tallness makes the lateral distance down to the snow in front appear much closer than it really is—for example, like speculating about jumping off a tall building onto the roof of another shorter one across the street, but then you end up just crashing to the sidewalk in front of the one you're on, maybe after glancing off the windows and sills on the way down. So instead, you just stay there, enjoying the hell of a view for a few minutes. Then when it's time you sulk back home to your lackluster lustful life.)

I stepped back and watched the others, staring long and hard at their backs, and then at the edge of the ledge, and then again at their backs. The high altitude sun was something else entirely. Ernie packed another one and took a huge run-up. Abe tossed loose handfuls, making rain out of the whiter snow on top that had piled up there in June. Ernie packed one last one and tossed it lazily over the stone wall. Then he wiped his hands and went back through the tunnel. Abe was then waiting just inside the shady dark entrance, running his fingers along the mossy black stones of the ceiling. I wiped my icy red hands on my shorts and after the others backtracked through the rock ridge the way we came—Ptarmigan Lake again below us, looking for a moment like a shiny nickel in a big cupped hand.

Then back on the north side of the tunnel, Ernie really surprised me. He and Abe just laughed it off like it was a comical performance, but I knew there was a little more to it. Ernie had thrown his shirt on the ground and dropped his shorts and his boxers to his ankles. He was standing there up on the bolder butt naked literally, not facing us of course but with his arms raised holding a deep lung-full of breath. Then he yelled. It was loud and animalistic, like a three-way cross between Tarzan, an opera singer belting out the final note of a tragedy, and maybe some sort of high-altitude coyote. I looked around to survey the environment, which probably wasn't used to such yelling. If he was Tarzan, he was frustrated there were no trees.

“Put your clothes on, Puccini,” I told him for a good reason. “There’s a lady coming up.” Closer to the lake, way down on the lower part of the path up to the tunnel, I saw a lady with gray hair walking up with a walking stick. But she was at least a

thousand yards away and looking down as she walked, so Ernie did have his all-important privacy.

About thirty or forty yards off the zigzag trail, a long swath of knee-deep snow over ice ran the length of the side of the giant bowl—the one narrow un-melted section of an otherwise rocky mountainside—as we learned, a glacier that will soon disappear. With long damp shorts, I sat on the nylon jacket from my backpack and pushed off for the bottom. Halfway down I dropped my heels into the snow but wasn't slowed in the least. I was two-thirds down and completely soaked with boots and socks drowned in icy cement. The speed was frightening, and the ride lasted a full thirty seconds, a long ride on your ass by any measure. Ernie zoomed down behind me, and with no jacket to sit on, howling like a big dog trying to stop himself on a finished wood floor, no longer as concerned with scaring the mailman. Abraham ran down jumping through the snow on his feet. At the bottom, I rolled out onto the dirt and rough-rock mud plain but somehow came up all right. Ernie planted his feet authoritatively and came out running. Abe was walking by the time he reached the bottom third, and at the end sat down on a low boulder to finger the snow out of his waterproof hikers. Feeling pretty good all in all, I looked back up the run to see another slider coming down. It was the older lady with her somewhat scraggly hair blowing in the wind behind her. Between her legs she held her shell-jacket sled like a pommel in a rodeo, and with her free hand she held her walking stick out in front like it was protection against those Pokémon Go creatures. At the bottom she gave out a long holler. She said she couldn't believe it. She couldn't wait to get back East so she could tell her grandkids what she'd done. We named her Eleanor of Orlando, Lady of Ptarmigan Lake. Ernie knighted her, with his big tan right arm held out rigid to her shoulders.

At four or five in the afternoon we were on the trail down from Ptarmigan Lake walking loose-kneed downhill back toward camp. Ernie had thrown a few more rocks backward to the lake and Abe was just far enough ahead that we could only see him on a few of the long straight-aways. The hillsides were noisy and wet. There were more invisible waterfalls than visible ones, rushes and trickles under the bear grass and denser bushes as the hillside seemed to be slipping out from underneath us. The valley floor was a rich radiant green. At a distance the fist-sized blossoms of bear grass looked a little like snow. My breathing was heavy. The air on the trail was much steamier than it was in and around the stonework of Ptarmigan Tunnel. In camp we rested for a while and then walked through to the parking lot again, this time to the hotel where we sat on the porch in log chairs and ate the split-pea soup of the day. At nine PM it started pouring. We raced back to our campsite, folded up the tent, and jumped in the truck. Abe was in the driver's seat and drier than the two of us. He volunteered to look at the map while Ernie angrily helped me shake out the wet tent, trying to free it of some of the mud and pine-needles that had clung to the underside. I fell asleep quickly in the back but slept only a few hours at first. Sometime after midnight we crossed into Idaho, and I woke up abruptly when Ernie swerved to miss a few deer in the road. But then he hit one. We thought we were missing it, but hit it in the chin or cheek. The side mirror somehow didn't get damaged but the deer keeled over, as I saw in the side-view and tail lights a few seconds later.

"I always thought you were a killer—and now I see it!" said Abe turning back around.

Ernie and Abe had recently switched. Ernie was doing seventy-five on a secondary road. His primary goal was by then

decisively San Francisco, where he would get to say goodbye—an occasion for all to feel pretty good about.

15.

Acher the sleuth, the clever one, or Acher the sloth, the not clever one—the jury was still out in the middle of week three.

On the Thirtieth of June, we camped at Fort Stevens State Park on the northwestern tip of the Oregon coast, the southern tip of the Columbia River mouth, coincidentally, as a sign commemorates the exact point where Lewis and Clark reached the sea, downstream and west of the Columbia River Gorge with its famous winds. “The windsurfers actually fly there,” Ernie told us, “like hang-gliders!” Something about sails that flip sideways to double as glider wings. Though indeed, Ernie was being largely ignored by this time.

We spent the previous night driving, from Glacier International Peace Park on the Canadian border to the International House of Pancakes in Spokane, Washington. We crossed the Idaho panhandle sometime between one and three in the morning, way up in the north-country where piles of dead deer litter the sides of the road. At one point Ernie swerved Abe’s truck to the edge of the grass on the far side of the road to miss more live ones. He no doubt saved our lives as well as theirs. But even so, we’d grown tired of Ernie’s company.

In Spokane at dawn, we drove through a downtown intersection under siege from a battalion of giant soap suds—huge

wind-broken puffs like low rolling clouds—laundry detergent dumped into the spouting fountain on the sidewalk by the river. We pulled up to the light there just after sunrise and were surrounded by white suds pushing up against the doors and windows of the truck. A bit of overnight mischief that Ernie is convinced was perpetrated for his benefit—his juvenile instincts always wide awake. The sun came brightly up a few Spokane side streets.

We parked near the center of town and got out to look around. Abe went right and we went left. After a block or two, Ernie stopped and stood in front of a church bookstore and just shook his head. I walked backwards to him and he looked at me sideways and then asked a question I didn't expect.

“What do you think—should I believe?”

“Oh! Uh, not sure... about that,” I told him. I thought about it for another second. “I'm serious. I don't know. I'm probably not the guy to ask,” I elaborated with conviction.

“Look,” Ernie instructed me. He was in front of the little bookshelf outside that was designed to get the attention of people walking.

“At what?” I asked not knowing what it was on the sidewalk display that got his attention. But then I saw it when he pointed from a foot away and said “second from the right.”

“This one?” I said.

I reached for, inspected and opened the identified old hardcover. It was a book titled *Lesser Known Saints*, and there

were three examples featured on the cover, one of which was a Saint Ernest.

“I didn’t know there was one!” Ernie said with a light heart, as if it was significant that Saint Ernest was beyond his hard-drive, his terabytes of data. I looked at the cover and then opened it and found the first page.

“Ah, interesting,” I started. “It says Saint Ernest was the Patron Saint of Over-Reacting,” I added to be funny, and then I ducked sideways fast an inch as if I was getting surprise punched.

“Yeah you better watch out,” Ernie said in a non-threatening way just to acknowledge my joke. I closed the book and looked at the back cover and the write-up on Saint Ernest.

“He lived in Germany from 1148 to the early 1200s,” and “fought in the 2nd Crusade to defend the Holy Land from the Turkish.”

“Wow,” Ernie responded flatly, as if to express a basic lack of amazement.

“Huh.”

“Who knew,” he then said as he stepped away and resumed our stroll through town. I noted the interesting little bookstore but then walked on also. We were done with our little sidewalk trek and headed back toward the soap suds and Abe and the car.

In gray Seattle Ernie got pulled over for making an illegal left turn—the old Boston left on red—by cops riding bicycles. Then we stopped at the Space Needle but didn’t go up. The sky

was thick and misty, and the elevator ride cost money. I took the wheel and then stopped for a cup of Seattle coffee at a gas station, which tasted a lot like New Jersey coffee. Then Ernie said his ears didn't pop until we got to Seattle.

"Mine popped back in Idaho," Abe told us, as did my own, or the far western edge of Montana. Ernie said he didn't know they were still plugged, but they popped when a muscle car going way too hard and fast blared its horn at a yellow muscle car both roaring around us. Abe laughed when Ernie said the sudden noise was like getting hit over the head with a frying pan.

"It was painful and a big surprise," Ernie admitted.

"You sound almost human!" Abe said.

"Are you kidding?" Ernie answered.

With a reluctant okay from Ernest, I drove us to his sister Cate's house. It was a boring mansion in a spic-and-span suburban neighborhood of mansions. Young small trees were everywhere and had probably grown ten feet. Ms. Cate gave us a warm big-sisterly greeting, as if we reminded her of all the others she used to know who hadn't done well in life. She showed us to one of the guest wings and said Rosa would get us anything we wanted if we were hungry. She was a VP or some such thing of operations, whatever that means, and Ernie said once that he heard her say not how much she makes but that it cost her and her husband sixty thousand every month to pay for his parents' retirement home nearby. That, Ernie explained to us, was one of their "annoying monthly bills," he said. Two years ago now, her job, albeit with an MBA, paid her six point something. We laughed at that because it was so high it wasn't real. It was beyond real. Then Ernie said

asked her if she liked her job, and she didn't even understand the question.

“Do you like what you do? I asked her,” said Ernie.

“What do you mean? It's work,” sister Cate said. “It's what I do to pay the bills.”

“Bills?! Are you kidding?!” Ernie said with his expert analysis. You don't have bills. Yours are like...” he paused, “community support expenditures,” he added with a dumb laugh. “They,” referring to unseen Rosa and any other help, “no doubt take your cash and use it to buy a family house back in the home country!”

“What they do with their paycheck, of course, is their own concern,” she offered. “But we do what we can to help.”

“Right—what you can,” Ernie closed it with. Then what turned out to be the doorbell rang—a loud, electronic “PING” like it was on the house speaker system.

After a seemingly free delivery from the Amazon pizza service, via drone out in front, we had a ten-minute visit in the grand eatery. The kitchen was huge and nice in a magazine way. It appeared very well equipped and spacious, though largely unused for cooking it seemed. The sink had a few coffee mugs next to it, and there was a used cereal bowl and spoon, but otherwise things looked untouched, either not used or very recently professionally cleaned.

“Honey, where did Miguel put the trash bags?” her husband Dave asked.

“I think over in the trash recycling.”

“I’m looking,” said Dave.

“Wait, check the narrow pull-out next to the sink.”

Dave then pushed shut the trash recycling, but it was a quiet-close and didn’t make noise.

“Hey Ern, I got a call from that Officer Svikhart in Newark,” his sister said next.

“What?” Ernie had no idea what she was talking about. “Who?”

“Officer Svikhart—he said he’s doing the due-diligence to speak to all the family members about dad’s death. I know you didn’t bring your phone, so he’s just spreading the word that he wants to speak with you when you guys get back.”

“Yeah, sure. His due-diligence,” was all Ernie said, and then ignored the subject.

After the pizza, we went back to the reality of our road trip.

In Olympia, Washington the truck got dropped off for a quick lube job. But after Abe got the keys, he locked the truck and took off for an hour-long jog-about. Ernie and I walked back to the lube place after forty-five minutes and then had a short conversation with the fat friendly guy behind the counter. The guy had a big tattoo “Fat Man” on his upper right arm. Ernie explained how Abe was usually beyond earshot when it came time to shake and fold up a dirty tent.

“Ah, dirty tents, dirty cars, same difference boys. For some reason your friend feels he needs to distance himself.”

“You’re a good man, Fat Man,” Ernie said to the guy.

When Abe came back, he jumped into the truck, started the engine, opened the windows, put in a tape, turned it up, and then jumped out to grab a towel from the back. He leaned against the truck as if he hadn’t a care in the world. We were to pay for the oil change, to get him back for a few tank fill-ups, so he might have been waiting for us to come back and pay the bill. Ernie was all fired up by this point and stormed out the garage door to confront him.

“Hey! Hey you! You happen to notice anything strange about your truck when you got here? Maybe besides the fact that it’s parked in exactly the same spot—did you happen to notice that the doors were locked, dip-shit?!”

As if still nothing was wrong, and he couldn’t be bothered even if there was (even if only the sound of Ernie’s voice), Abe reached under the steering wheel and pulled out the keys. He tossed them to Ernie, who was just staring at him in disbelief. The keys hit Ernie’s leg and fell to his feet. Abe walked across the street to a Chinese restaurant. Me and Ernie then went next door and relaxed in the big wicker chairs at Pier-1 Imports. Twenty minutes later Fat Man said we were all set.

I got behind the wheel again and drove the three of us south and west to the edge of the continent, where we set camp and unwound a bit. The big coast to coast part done.

We spent the following night in Oregon, also, two thirds of the way down at a coastal horse camp. This was our last stop before the big weekend in and around San Francisco, the weekend that would prove to end, as had loosely been planned, with the vital drop-off at the San Francisco airport.

16.

At the horse camp, the site we were given was called “primitive” by the resident ranger, designed for horses and tenters only—no RV hookups. It had a rickety open-air horse pen with room for three or four horses up against a tall yellow thicket, and big horse smells that Ernest wasn’t happy about. Strangely, I didn’t mind it. Just to be out of the truck again and on the salty seashore was all the freshness a guy could ask for. Then I walked out onto the dunes to try to get a better look at the coast.

“See anything yet?” Abe asked approaching from behind. He stopped and looked around. “What’s got you? You’re acting tortured again.” He bent down and picked up a shell and looked closely at it. “Is it Oli again? Or has Shithead finally gotten to you?”

Ernie was out of earshot, oblivious to the name-calling.

“It’s nothing!” I answered confidently.

“Sure it’s nothing.”

Abe sat down behind me. When I turned he was fiddling

with his work boots in the sand, leaning against the bench of the one-piece picnic table. He was holding up his laces to see if they were the same length, but they weren't. They were off by a couple of inches. He wasn't content with that. He dropped the ends and pulled up on the middle again.

"The way I see it, is that there are two kinds of people in this world," he said, "those who fall in love and those who deny it."

I looked back toward the ocean, seeing only the crest of a small dune about thirty yards off. The beach was loud, louder than any other campsite we'd had. The wind was whirring and buzzing through the shrubs and tall grasses.

"You know, man," Abe began again—"you might have a little fun while you're here. So maybe you shouldn't fight it for once."

"What?" I said, glancing over at him, my onshore ear open to the wind directly then, my nose open to the horse pen and the stale traveling clothes draped over the tailgate of Abe's truck. "What do you mean, fight it?"

"Relax, pal. Try to make the most of this," Abe said. "You look to the future too much. And you look so tense. I mean, look at us—we're in Oregon. We can practically see Japan!"

Abe was talking too much.

"It's hopeless," Abe said next, with a light grunt.

"Now what?" I inquired.

“Hopeless. I’ll never get these right.” He was measuring the laces on his other boot. “Either the leather is still too new, or these eyelets are too small.”

“An inch or two isn’t going to make much difference, Abe,” I instructed him. He pulled the laces up and they were still uneven.

“Sure. But either way though, these boots aren’t turning out to be nearly as foot-friendly as you said they’d be. Not to mention the tongues are always sliding down the outside.” He pushed his right knee over to the left to see the shoe from the side.

I was truly tired of Abe—just about as much as I was of Ernest. Abe was never a loud guy, a whisperer really, if anything, but when he did get around to talking, it was always annoying, introspective—a little too psycho-analytic.

“Oh I get it,” said Abe. “You don’t remember the speech you gave about your sweet new boots. You don’t remember the bit about how they’re so great they cut down on your need to get laid? That is what you said, Jon mon. I remember it well, the new shoes as better than sex speech: “Who needs to get some when you’ve got a new pair of boots to break in?””

“What’s your point?!” I asked him, nearly snapping his head off.

Abe grinned and went back to his laces.

Of course I remembered. It was the same day he drove the two of us to Maine and made me show him the what’s what when buying new boots.

Shopping at outlets was something Abe was never used to. Getting something at reduced cost was a little more awkward for Abe. He was certain that sales should only be found by people who need them. He just felt funny about it, that's all it was, and quite democratic. He was visibly uncomfortable when I told him he was getting the boots, the Gor-tex-lined leather hikers, for a decent price.

Ernie returned from a not-so-discreet trip into the bushes and took to whittling at the picnic table across from me, just a point on the end of an un-cleaned stick with sticks sticking out of it—a menacing but predictable point. I kept one eye on him as I always have.

Abe faced the picnic table also, with his left foot up on his right knee. The laces were tied and looked pretty well even. He was cleaning the bottom of his boot with a rubbery pine twig.

Abe had stepped in a big pile of horse dung, and Ernie didn't realize it. Ernie was bitching about the stink while making repeated pushes with his rusty buck knife, the one he'd bought a half-week earlier at a flea market in Montana.

I sat still, looking around a little, thinking mostly about sex with Olive, but in turn about sleep and just getting the day over with. The faster they passed at this point the better.

Abe turned and winked and loudly said he didn't detect any shit smell. Ernie looked up from his new knife but missed the wink.

“That figures,” he grumbled, shaking his head to the sides and down again. “And your shits smell like roses, don't they,

Abe.”

Pieces of bark and woodchips again cart-wheeled across the table.

Then Ernie said he was taking a walk and headed back toward the long driveway. And then for no good reason, besides maybe that we'd reached the opposite coast of our infamous continent, I wanted to check in on the one-on-one level to see how he was doing.

“Hey,” I said to get his attention jogging up to him. “

“Hey, what?” he responded not quite engagingly.

“So, how you doing, you know, internally?” I asked him on the old chopped up asphalt.

“What are you my psychiatrist now?”

“No, man,” I immediately said, not wanting to get off on the wrong foot. “I'm more like your Internist,” I analogized back.

“Well...” he offered with an unusual pause, as if he was actually going to say something real and maybe self-analytical or self-critical. “Good and bad... you might say.” To which I waited for whatever was coming next. “It's just that occasionally I have annoying memories from when he was a nice guy!”

“Oh, man!” I said trying to express the pain of that. Then I re-phrased it to simplify. “It was a lot easier when I thought of him as just a drunk old man,” I offered.

“Yeah,” Ernie started. “He was younger,” Ernie started, “before he was forty-seven...” The sentence trailed off.

“Hey, do you need a hug n’ stuff?” I asked him, like it was an obligational thing to offer. It was also my attempt at being jokey and serious at the same time.

“No, I don’t think so,” Ernie said a bit solemnly, like it was worth a formal answer. “Do you?” he then asked with a very slight chuckle.

“Yeah well,” I said. “You never know, I probably do.”

We walked then for twenty more minutes in silence. And no, it wasn't an awkward silence. It was the opposite of awkward. Copasetic to the Ernie philosophy, talking would've been nonproductive—more awkward just for trying to say things.

I thought you don't really care about your dad until you lose him, and then you might be like: “What did I do?” or maybe “What did I not do?” or “What the hell happened?” I can only try to imagine what Ernie was trying not to—memories and such. As for my own male parent, it’s nothing compared to the Cain story. Mr. Acheron Sr. was “very busy” over the last few decades. Today he’s probably never even heard of Super Smash Bros. Never great with tools, Mario, or for that matter the passing of the ol’ leather baseball. Let’s leave it with that.

But he will have a glass of beer on Saturdays!

As with Ernie, it was like the actual killing of two birds with one stone, the accidental hit and the on-purpose hit. “I shot

my arrow o'er the house" and... accidentally killed my dad, as Hamlet almost said.

Back at the camp my phone rang again. It was in the car but you could hear it because the windows were down. I ignored it for a few minutes, but then strolled over to see who it was—a missed call from Newark and then a voicemail. "Officer Svikhart here," the voice said. "I hope you guys are enjoying your trip. Maybe you've seen a few big mountains out there! I wanted to call and relieve you of any worries—I've looked at things and there is no reason to continue. There will definitely be no charges against Ernest. He doesn't have to call me when you get back. Just wanted to let you know. Thanks."

And it dawned on me. They know we've seen mountains because they were tracking us! They probably know roughly where we are right now. Maybe they stuck a tracking device under Abe's car. Or maybe they just have a serious network of surveillance teams that have been indiscreetly following us. I was stoned. I looked around and saw nothing. But anyway, I knew Ernie would be happy to hear the latest, that there will be no criminal charges to worry about.

"Ern, they were tracking you," I said, like it was a significant deduction. "They probably know more about your whereabouts than Officer Svikhart was letting on." Then I added: "Oh, and he said the case is closed. There will be no charges against you."

Ernie then stopped his whittling.

"First, butthead. They've been tracking you and your phone. But that's great to hear! One less thing to think about." He

paused. “I was starting to think I deserved something,” he added when another woodchip from his knife and stick flew and hit the table. I paused for a second or two to swallow the obvious.

“Yeah, I knew the tracking thing, of course,” I fibbed. “They get a phone-warrant and GPS stuff, but I thought you had to be a serious criminal for that, or be on America’s Most Wanted,” I said with some honesty.

“Dude, I killed my dad,” Ernie answered to that.

There it was, nicely put, the truth of the recent event, whether he fully meant to or not.

Then Ernie surprised me.

“Hey, let me see your phone. I want to get this confirmed.” He wanted to call Officer Svikhart back, so he grabbed my phone and walked away for a few minutes. Then he returned from his walk by the trees smiling and told us about it.

“Yes, charges dropped—or I should say no charges being filed,” he announced confidently as he leaned forward and put the phone on the picnic table. Then he added more. “Next time in Jersey I offered to pick him up a coffee or a Subway, which made him laugh.”

“What?”

“I told him also I didn’t go out of my way to keep my dad from dying, and that made him laugh, too, I swear it. We did have a fight, I told him, but fights are fights and there are accidents, and he knew that dealio.”

“Wow, so...”

“Yeah,” Ernie confirmed. “He also asked if we were having a good trip.”

“Yes, he asked me that, too,” I added.

“Oh,” Ernie then lied I’m sure. “Then he asked about you.”

“What?”

“I think he’s a little worried about your future.”

“Mine?”

“He’s concerned that you’ll be an accomplice... like complicit to an actual crime one of these days.”

“Why, because of who I hang out with?”

“Yeah,” Ernie said with a chuckle.

Then Abe interrupted as if he didn’t even know we were there talking.

“Hey Jon, let’s go in the water,” Abe said next, in his gentle indoor voice. “Let’s do a little body surfing, a little agua yoga.”

He climbed one lanky leg at a time out of the picnic table, and continued. “It’s a day for the warm-blooded, my man. Just look at this place. It’ll be great. We’ll be able to say we swam in Oregon.” He looked into the bushes, distracted for a few seconds. “The girls will say, what was it—`Wow, you guys are animals!” Abe grinned wide but refrained from laughing.

“What?” I said, not knowing at first what he was talking about.

“Jamaica, man. You can’t say you don’t remember Jamaica,” Abe said.

“I don’t remember a goddamn thing from Jamaica,” Ernie contributed, without taking his eyes off the rough-handled dagger he was shaping. “Not a fucking thing.”

“Do you have any idea how cold it is out there, Abe?” I asked him.

“Well, let’s go warm it up then,” he answered, facing due West at the water. “Check it out, the water looks great. Look at those breakers!”

“What looks great?” I asked, disbelieving. I pulled my feet out and stood on the picnic table bench to look again. There it was, the Pacific Ocean, spread out in front of us like the biggest thing I had ever seen.

“Come on. How bad can it be?” said Abe.

“Well—I guess we’ll find out.”

With wet legs and waves slapping my crotch, I stood in the great ocean and screamed with everything my moderate vocal chords could muster. Abe glided around on his back, periodically blowing water out his blowhole, singing a Bob Marley song in between spouts: “Cau...tion! The road is wet....”

After high-step sprinting up onto the dry sand, I wrapped myself in my towel and stood still like an inverted sleeping bat for

a minute, mostly motionless, though with a bad case of the shivers that were enough to blur my eyesight. The dropping sun was still pretty warm. It felt like gold against my cold bumpy skin under the towel, unexpectedly strong and reassuring.

In just a few days we would leave the unwanted, unusable baggage at the San Fran airport and push the new mission forward full strength, with the new group of two much better suited to the delicate situation unfolding just around the corner. My day of reckoning was getting closer by moments.

Then after that we start to get descriptions of the storms and the water and the flood and the old bridges in the Mid-west.

In Pacific City, Oregon, we stopped at a bakery with a good outdoor sitting area overlooking the harbor. If I had to, I decided I could live a long solid life in Pacific City—a cool breezy village built into an easy-going cove. But no, not in a thousand years.

In Northern California we saw big tall trees like ancient sky scrapers, like great green trade centers. If I had to, I decided I could live a long solid life in redwood country. But no. Not yet anyway. That is, not without . . .

On Scenic Route 1 north of San Fran we saw a slew of giant birds. They came from over the hillsides, sometimes just twenty feet over the windshield, and then two or three hundred or more out over the sea, and then back again, and then back out over the sea again, clearly circling something on the edge of the cliff. Ernie barked at me to keep my eyes on the road.

17.

Saturday under a rain canopy we spent in a narrow back yard in the city drinking flat beers and making fleeting attempts to interpret abstract garden sculptures made from plastic seltzer bottles, attached to each other in parts of the yard, but largely just strewn about.

On a rainy Sunday morning we ate breakfast at Wimbledon, eating bagels on the floor of Abe's friend's place downtown. I read the Sunday N.Y. Times Week in Review for July Third. The President bombed that Middle-East country, and weirdly someone else bombed a computer science professor in New Haven, or *at* New Haven, as an F. Scott Fitzgerald character would say, knowingly referring to Yale, one has to assume. We were sort of near the tall buildings downtown but that's all we figured out. Our visit was too brief to learn the urban layout.

Sunday afternoon we got sidetracked in the light rain at the Marin County Blues Festival. My boots were sweaty so I left them in the truck. Predictably then, the festival grounds turned out to be mostly gravel. I looked diligently in fifty vendor tents for flip flops but didn't find any. In the very last tent, I found a pair of rubber-soled huaraches for eleven dollars. I spent most of the rest of the day by myself, sitting in the wet grass by the main stage, listening to the music, thinking about my rendezvous-in-the-making, and staring at my new huarache'd feet.

We ended that weekend at a Fourth of July party in Sonoma wine country. The rain was a dark mist—we didn't think of it as heavy rain, but we got wet nevertheless. The place

belonged to a college friend of Abe's—with a live band, a keg of dark beer, a dirty little swimming pool, and a small fleet of hammocks tied between trees in a small orchard.

Monday, on our way to dropping Ernie off at the airport, we took a final detour to Ocean Beach. At the seawall I stood with my back to the truck and tried to imagine looking all the way around the earth to the back of my shaved head. No, I didn't go bald and ridiculous—but I did it with a trimmer myself leaving a dark rug. And no, not shag or regular carpet length. It was more like a short tight industrial skull-rug. I truly believed you aren't to be reckoned with unless you get a somewhat radical haircut right after your college education.

At the beach the waves were huge and I couldn't see past them, so I stared into their faces instead, spray ripping off the tops in a fierce offshore wind. An hour later we stopped to let Ernie out and he was through the passenger drop-off doors before we could say see-ya, San Ernesto! Three weeks on the road and Ernest was entirely content to be done with it, as we were with him.

Then Abe talked about back east almost immediately as we pulled out of the airport. It was raining pretty steadily but we were used to it.

“You know she didn't have Stacey until she was forty-three?” Abe started out of nowhere about Stacey's mom. “But man, still, at sixty-three you're not supposed to be like that!” He took a long pause as if he was getting ready for a tirade. “We're talking about a not-so-old lady who can't be trusted—can't take herself to the bathroom without being helped—and half the time she just stays in bed with the diaper. On top of it all, the nurse who starts in ten days said she might call me in to help when I'm there,

if she needs me, whenever she needs to be moved in the bed to a different position, or whatever!”

He went on, and I let him.

“She can only barely feed herself. If you make her hold a fork, she can eventually stab a piece of food with it, but it’s painful to watch, and it takes too long—she couldn’t possibly eat a meal fast enough to have it count as an actual meal. It’d be more like a science experiment to see if the old female ape or gorilla can still feed herself.”

He continued.

“If she was a silent stroke victim, I’d have more sympathy, but she’s not. I don’t think this is very common, but the lady got bad short-term memory loss from the first one, and with it her talkativeness went up! Along with being incapacitated, nearly-crippled now, her mom’s been talking crazy for eight months.”

Abe was acting like the trip was largely over, even though we were still in California.

We drove eastward by Lake Tahoe in the early afternoon and Salt Lake City around midnight. The drive was entirely uneventful, but we did find a good radio station in Salt Lake City and were both somewhat surprised. As for Nevada, we saw it the way Nevada should be seen after spending three weeks on the road to get to California, behind us, and quickly. We saw Utah only at night this time, with no regret. Sun up or sun down there isn’t much to see on the northern Utah highways.

The following midnight I was dead tired but not quite asleep in our motel room in Cheyenne, Wyoming. We didn’t get

the exact distance of this, from San Francisco to Cheyenne, but according to the map it was nearly a third of the distance, Pacific to Atlantic.

In the morning I went for a slow walk. The car seats, as well as a few other things—such as being alone in a car with Abe for a day and a half straight—had combined forces to cripple me. With certain misgivings we stayed put in Cheyenne for most of the morning.

So Ernie told us that he flew back to Boston to see his new girlfriend before she flew off to France for a month for some friend's wedding. Abe and I were thereby forced to do what two people always do when stuck without a third person, talk more. Since Abe was involved, it was mostly about serious things, sensitive things. Overall though, I was unbothered, tickled pink in fact, in a certain way buzzing like a very brave boy at the edge of a lover's leap. My scheme had materialized and was now on the front burner.

We would get to Iowa City quickly, and Olive was waiting for us, whether she knew it or not. She said: "It would be so cool . . . if you managed to go through my new little town." Ernie was perfectly out of the picture. I couldn't have done it without him, without his foolish obliviousness. He knew nothing of the return-trip detour. The trip's new alignment. My B-line. My thundering anticipation and master thievery. The boom boom in my neck and under my T-shirt. "You can always count on a murderer for a fancy prose style!" says Nabakov. What would Ernie say? It never mattered. This was no longer Ern's concern. This was about O-O-Oli and yours truly Achey, with a true but achy brakey heart, you might say.

Iowa City, Abe. No kidding around now fool. Iowa goddamn City.

18.

Abe and I stopped to eat at the Renegade diner again in Rock Springs, Wyoming, which we hit the first time heading north a week earlier. It'd been raining heavily all day so we had to jog to the door and we still got wet. We had the off-season Thanksgiving special again, and were served by the same waitress. She looked at the two of us for a second without saying anything.

“Where’s your friend?” the waitress asked, caring less it seemed. “There’re three of you.”

“We lost him,” I told her.

“That’s too bad. So what’a’ya having?”

“We killed him,” Abe added.

“That’s great. So what’a’ya having?”

“Oh, the usual.”

“I’m good,” she said. “But I’m not that good. So what’s it gonna be?”

Abe and I were at the closing end of a thousand-mile conversation. We talked nearly straight through from the Oakland Bay Bridge to the Rock Springs truck-stop. After Stacey’s mom,

we covered everything else: families, movies, religion, sex—which I generally don't like to talk about—what's kinky as opposed to retarded, like masks! Abe declared—coincidences, dirty windshields, dead bug buildup, and gas mileage, which had never really occurred to Abe, before me and Ernest had the occasion to count our fuel pennies in front of him. Abe wanted to talk about Shithead, but I really didn't feel like it, though it was tempting. It just gets to the point when you've talked *with* someone as much as you've talked with certain people, talking about them eventually loses its flavor.

My throat was useless after the first ten hours, but you really can't stop talking once you've figured out how good talking for talking's sake is. Though likewise, you might never talk again once you realize what a waste of time it is. It was pretty much clear by then, time on road trips is supposed to be not only wasted, but somehow wasted productively. Abe isn't a bad guy at all. He's just a different kind of guy, a really good guy at heart, and a damn good-looking guy. Ernie might look a little like Tommy Cruise, but Abe looks like David, Michelangelo's David. He looks more like David than he does like Marlon. And he also looks a little like a younger Keanu Reeves, with that certain strange combination of aloof soul dummy and stud. What have you. It is a bit freaky, how gangly and awkward and silky smooth he is all at once.

In Cheyenne, Wyoming in the motel room on the second floor, I woke up in the middle of the night after falling asleep late in the first place. The sleep was weak and inside it a dream spun and spiraled. Up and out of a subway station and it felt like Davis Square, Somerville, Massachusetts, but taller and bright like a bleached Gotham with lots of new concrete and few if any windows. For no obvious reason, Abe and I slipped inside a dark

crowded restaurant and headed for the back, a shortcut somewhere. Abe got caught up with the hostess and I heard him say to the women that he was worried about me and that he had to keep moving. I pushed past the cardboard produce boxes and through the back door with a big bang on the horizontal push-bar. Abe stepped up next to me. With me in the lead we marched through the now dark, suddenly dark, neighborhood. After a long single block we came to Abe's truck, a different one. The hatchback was open. And then it was so dark I had no idea where we were or what we were doing there, doing whatever we were doing, or were about to do. There didn't seem to be anyone to visit. And then it wasn't even Abe anymore. It was just a shape moving through the open space we'd parked in. I looked at the ground, but I couldn't see very much with the shitty flashlight. The person walked off through a door, but then I was thinking I was inside a house, on the first floor, inside a big dark room. The truck was nowhere. Then I was on the ground trying to keep warm under a heavy wool blanket, and then there was a huge THUD. A massive boom—a crash. A collision of one big thing with another. I was paralyzed—cold and twitching with confusion. I rolled toward what I thought was the middle of the room to get away from the outside wall which sounded as though it was getting punched by a wrecking ball, swung back out but maybe coming back again to get further inside.

Right after the thud, loud, unintelligible voices started in through the darkness and a figure rushed over me. Whether I was inside or outside was then a complete mystery in the black of it. First the thud sounded like a car or some other big thing hitting the outside wall. But then it was a tree, not a wall at all, a car hitting a tree. But then in another second we were camping in a small canyon in southern Utah, with more gentle sounds bouncing back

and forth between the rocks—a more comfortable place, where I wasn't scared suddenly.

Things with shape don't scare me—invisible boundaries scare me, like death. And flying through the vast buzzing blackness terrifies the dying shit out of me, getting closer and closer to the invisible wall that has no sides and no top or bottom so you can't tell how close you're getting. Like Luke Skywalker hurdling toward a death star that has no entrance and the lights are out, so you're swallowed up with only the small promise of soon smashing into it. I need to see what I'm up against. I function better in crisis situations when I know what the crisis is. In fact, I probably function better, period, when there is a crisis. Like when Ernie Cain is around, things are more obvious. It keeps me on my toes.

Ernie used to start fights. And often finish fights. He threw tantrums and his tantrums kept me company. The two of us used to get all messed up and cut and hurt and mad and sad and it never mattered that I bawled in front of him and occasionally him in front of me, like when I gave him that cut over his eye with the Whiffle bat. No doubt we couldn't help any of it. We were younger then.

“Yeah, Floyd, you turkey—ALL kids hear voices.” He was always Capone. He made me Pretty Boy Floyd, the infamous un-pretty one.)

“Yeah—well what were yours saying?” I asked him.

“Really wanna know?”

“Of course I wanna . . .”

“They were saying kick your little butt for being such a hyperventilating giggler all the time, not to mention such a crybaby.”

“Oh,” I said. He had a point. “So you did . . .”

“So I did. Yeah, so I did.”

“Oh. So . . .”

So I worry about the past a little bit, and I worry about the future a little bit. It keeps me safely stuck tongue-tied in the middle. I am the muted manic, whose demons aren't as easily detected as they used to be. I don't let them talk as much. I aim to be that man of few words. Mellow, mellow. Oh yeah man, mellow, mellow.

A man of mystery and romance. A man on a mission.

Abe was driving good and fast, on Interstate Eighty East through Nebraska with just under four hundred miles to Omaha and the far end of the state near the Missouri River. We'd been eating lighter meals since we lost Ernest. I was a slightly tighter machine already—a couple of jogs with Abe, and overall a little less greasy. We passed a sign, “Kimball 10, Sidney 50,” and with it came a little peace of mind, peace of place, to see this kind of marker occasionally, instead of only those that only tell you what's four and five hundred miles away. Who cares exactly how far Des Moines is from the middle of Wyoming? And the signs don't just indicate mileage out there. On purpose or not, they imply straight out that the next four hundred miles will be totally bleak and flat. As in the car dealer's showroom, the inside of the vehicle was more scenic than the outside world.

19.

Warmer air makes it warmer water and this water evaporates up into the clouds and this then makes the clouds bigger and darker and there are more of them and then the big cloud goes over across the land and brings heavy rain.

Rain falls out of the clouds and onto the land and it drops down into the creeks and rivers which then get deeper and heavier and faster and this causes man-made objects to face situations over time that they have never been asked to face.

There is more water flowing down and the water is deeper and the river is wider and it is flowing with greater force because it doesn't know what to do. It's fallen from the sky and now it's riding down towards the Gulf of Mexico.

Part of me didn't care what Ernie had done, that he had spontaneously murdered his dad. I wanted to stay fair and not too judgmental, and on the trip I had other things on my mind. I was unavoidably and naturally distracted, a bit too romantic you might say. The climax of my own road trip, through the heartland of America, was anti-climactic. My dreamy plan did not happen in its imagined glory. I will share a few facts and details from our drop-in visit to the poet goddess, that day in Iowa City.

It was a week after the trip when I started to get clear-headed and move on with my life.

Abe and I ate our last meal in Omaha at a Chinese restaurant in a desolate downtown. After dinner we fought our way through one of those torrential rainstorms that this part of the country had been getting every other day. There were tornado warnings for the last hundred miles, as best as I could tell for right over our heads. The storm sounds drowned out the stereo and the spray from the big rigs blinded us, but we drove on.

“Why don’t we just get a motel room,” Abe said in eastern Nebraska.

“Why don’t we not just get a hotel room,” I answered him, getting so close to the Iowa state line.

We didn’t get to Iowa City until after nine PM on that Friday, but I made Abe drive around looking for her place. We found it when we found her, Olive in the flesh, sitting in the wet grass by the sidewalk and curb, tan as ever and wearing her very favorite shoes, her old leather sandals. She didn’t fall for the nylon river-running rave that the rest of us did. She lifted her eyes and chin when she heard her name. Rain water ran down her face, a blank expression. She looked hard at the truck, but couldn’t see inside. Then, I think, she realized.

“Is that . . . oh my god—holy SHIT, man—this is unbelievable—who’s that with—is that ABE? WOW, man—HOLY COW!”

She climbed to her feet, and the person she was with got up too. She walked across the street to where Abe was trying to parallel park, but I had opened my door and stepped halfway out of the truck. I was doing the weary routine, moving ever so slowly. She was in the middle of the street saying holy shit over and over

again. I had surprised her. And she was pleased. It was working. Abe was tapping the shifter waiting for his chance to reverse. I put both feet on the ground and stopped to tuck in my shirt, my now rain-soaked shirt, as though it was a painful and perhaps pointless operation, but necessary. I put my entire self into a full-body limp and ambled around the back of the Pathtrooper and rolled my neck and grabbed the back of my shoulders and raised my arms way over my head so my shirt would come un-tucked. I gave her the easiest smile possible and stepped up to within a few feet of her as though I hadn't the energy to speak from farther away.

“Hey,” I said. And when my feet were planted she jumped on me. I grunted and leaned back and made her think it was all I could do to keep from dropping her. Then she dropped down and backed up a step. If she then surprised and kissed me slowly and softly on the mouth there would've been climactic fireworks and total rapture. But because the great friend-hug was similar to previous hugs, it was like a home planet that I knew too well. I had been there many times before, not so much like outer space.

The car was turned off and Abe stepped out the driver's door and stopped without getting too close to Oli and me. I looked over at him and thought, cool, he's keeping his rightful distance. Then she said holy shit again and stepped to where Abe was and leapt on him. Abe leaned way down so as to make sure he wasn't picking her up or holding her off the ground longer than he had to.

“It's good to see you, Olivia,” he said dramatically. And then she took a few more steps back and spoke again.

“Can you guys BELIEVE this RAIN? Man, you guys HAVE to see the rivers around here. Tomorrow. I just can't believe you guys are HERE!” She looked over her left shoulder

and then her right and then exhaled with a huge smile. “Wait—what do we need—you guys are hungry—thirsty—what? Come on. Let’s go inside. I’ll show you my new little hideaway.”

So the only bad thing at first about finding her in her new town was the fact that she wasn’t alone—she wasn’t the only one kicking back near the curb in the rain with a bicycle. Abe shook hands with this intellectual Evan character. Then this Evan guy squeezed her hand for a full second too many and walked off down the hill with his rusty rickety teacher’s bike.

“Wait. How long are you—how much time, I mean, what’s your schedule? What’s next? Where do people go after little Iowa? Do you guys even have a plan—you probably don’t. You guys are the coolest—you two are pretty much the coolest guys I know. This is SO . . . GREAT. You guys really are the best. JON! I just got your POST-card. It was so sweet. And FUNny.”

“You only got one?” I asked before knowing better.

“Huh?” she said. “Yeah—from Virginia or something. It was neat. Hey, you guys got tired of Ernie-man. You dumped him in San Fran, didn’t you?” She giggled. “Abe, man, how have you BEEN? It feels like YEARS since I saw you guys last.”

It had been about a month or five weeks.

“Hey, Olive—maybe we could hear something you’ve written recently, something you’ve written since you moved here,” Abe said as we walked in through her side door.

No, Abe, I said to myself.

“No, I can’t—I couldn’t.”

“Sure you can,” Abe added. “This is a serious program you got into, right?”

Shut up, Abe.

“No, I’m not really into reading stuff at home. But, maybe you’ll hear something later.”

“That’d be nice.”

Shut up, Abe.

“What’s wrong, Jon,” she asked. “You look upset about something.” And I was, and it was making me dizzy.

“Huh? No no. It’s nothing.”

“Are you okay?” she asked.

Abe was now looking out her window.

“What’s it like living out here, Oli?” he asked.

She looked deeper into her kitchen and then over toward the window and Abe.

That’s enough, Abe. You can be excused now.

Olive got up from a kitchen chair and was then looking in the frig.

“I almost forgot—food. I don’t know about you guys, but I’m starved.” She didn’t answer Abe’s question, and I was happy about that. Abe didn’t seem to have noticed. He was fixed at the window looking out. He stayed only a few more minutes then said

he was beat and had to crash.

“I totally understand,” Oli said, and let hm go. She walked him back to the falling-apart screen door on the side and I quietly said to him that maybe I’d see him later. He stepped up the two steps to the driveway and disappeared into the lightning, thunder and rain.

She didn’t mention the bike guy, and I took that as my cue not to ask about him. And she couldn’t seem to take her eyes off my recently shaved head. She seemed concerned. I suppose it was kind of a cultish move, to have such a new and different haircut, but it was a decision made by an independent individual, which I knew would make it stand out even more. Not a boring I-got-a-job haircut, but a radical, full-deal, new appreciation of life.

Abe went to a hotel. He actually did understand the sanctity of all this, for his college buddy. He was cool like that. It took a few more minutes than I would have liked, and he was probably smiling at the whole deal, but he’s cool like that—on the positive-minded side.

After she ordered three orders of Indian—Dal, Chana Masala and Chicken Saag—she had an idea. She took me up and outside to the porch on the side of the house, where there was a porch swing that the family upstairs had given her unconditional use of. They no doubt liked having her there. They probably loved it when she came up and swung with them. Or maybe they loved it whenever she came up and swung. She said she was using it almost every night.

She lied down sideways and seemed to fall asleep in my lap listening to me talk a bit about the trip and the other travelers. She

said she just liked the sound of my voice—true that I wasn't saying much that was earth-shattering. She said it relaxed her. She said don't stop, but it didn't relax me much. I shook her gently when she'd been quiet through a few of my run-on thoughts. But she sat up and pecked me on the cheek. It was nine plus and she said she couldn't believe we all really came. But, it rang a little hollow. She seemed to be exhausted. It stunk of politeness. I was buzzing and humming tip to tail. Maybe tomorrow things will progress with us. Who knows! Anything can happen. I pictured every part of her, knees, stomach, collar bones, and in my hallucination she moved her face and small mouth down to my waist and took my belt off with her teeth. We rose to the occasion, sat up, turned her around, and tore her clothes away from her body. She gasped and sang out in a voice I'd never heard come from her before. I gave her love like a magician. Take the angel for your own. Beat the assholes of the world at their own game. Go forth with truth, righteousness and love and set an example for the rest of humanity! Potent, unfettered by foolish emotion, I am the greatest undiscovered lover the world has ever known!

But she stood up pretty fast like she'd forgotten something.

“Where's that Indian I ordered? Oh, and that friend of ours should be back soon that I want you to see.”

“Great,” I said.

Back in the kitchen I heard the side door then somewhat familiar footsteps. My long-time acquaintance from Kearny walked in—Ernie. Apparently, he went to a good liquor store a little farther away apparently to get Malbec, which he held up in its bag as if mission accomplished.

“Woah, you!” he said surprised.

“Me? How about you?!” I answered back without thinking.

“Well of course I shouldn’t be surprised to see you,” he said next, all calm and collected.

“Yeah... but I can’t say the same!” I clarified, “A touch surprised,” I was, and said.

“Hey, where’s that Evan?” he then asked Oli.

“But I should’ve figured,” I added.

He had come to the spirit woman, the humble shrine-goddess on the mount—or in the mighty Iowa City flood zone I should say. Yes, we both had.

“Where’s Abe?” he asked next, sitting down at the kitchen table.

“We got a hotel room,” I said to cover for the fact that it was maybe meant to be just Abe’s hotel room.

“Hmmm.”

Then her phone rang but she didn’t answer it. She said: “Finally!” then went out and through the side door to get meet the delivery person. Without her there I restarted the greeting.

“So!” I started minimally. Never in my life has so much feeling, and so little thinking, been with a two letter word. I didn’t know exactly what to say, so I let open a small floodgate. “Did

Jule not have to go to France? Did you lie again? Did you in fact not have to rush back?"

Ernie paused, breathed deep as if following medical orders, and then bunched up his eyebrows in a sad, serious way as if he was in front of a tribunal. We hadn't been there before but it was just me demanding a few answers. Unlike his usual approach to conversations, he didn't answer right away. Then he guessed at the best explanation.

"I like her a lot? I need her? I miss her?" He answered as if not knowing the answer, though of course he did. "I don't know, you might say I needed some mental time, some relaxin' time—therapy I guess—especially after spending a few weeks with you two freaks."

Then Olive came back in and into the kitchen smiling. Naturally, we ate and drank and let her do most of the talking, covering life and death and parents and kids and everything else. She was looking at me while she talked, but the subject-matter and her delivery suggested it was for Ernie's benefit—however maybe not right at him to take some of the pressure off. Even so, Ernie indeed cried a little, shed a tear or two. He sniffled with his eyes more red and wet and he stood up and excused himself. I had seen him cry before, but it was a decade ago when we were ten or eleven. I was a little on the surprised and happy side for seeing it.

"Sorry, I don't know why I did that."

"Sit back down, Ern," said Oli.

"Dude, you killed your dad," I reminded him, in a quasi-funny stoner way.

Then we talked, or mostly listened, as Olive set the world straight. We quickly finished the two bottles of wine.

“I should’ve gotten three!” said Ern.

I checked my watch and it was eleven, and I stood to end our surprise gathering.

But Olive also stood up. She reminded Ernie, who already knew, that she had the “gig” at midnight. She said she first wanted to show me—“the new visitor”—around town a little, “as best I can in the utter blackness!” There apparently was a downtown power outage before the Wonder Bowl and all the lights were still out. With no street or store lights, she skipped down towards the giant swollen river running through campus. Ernie stayed in the car. On the way through the sopping grass, she asked me about some little book that had gotten pretty famous.

“My dad said he just sent me this little book about some old covered bridges around here,” Olive said off-hand after passing a dark bookstore. “He said it’s been on the best-seller list for over a month. *The Bridges of something.*”

“What is it—a tour book?”

“I don’t know—I haven’t read it yet.”

“Oh,” I said absently.

“Are you okay, man? Do you feel all right?”

“Fine. Why?” I asked.

“You seem a little off—that’s all.”

“Well,” I began. “Captain Ernie has been a handful in recent weeks.”

“He does do things!” Olive offered on the Ernie subject with a chuckle..

“To be honest,” I started, “my big plan was to knock you off your feet.” I turned and half-smiled to show her it was a half joke.

She looked over at me but could see nothing in the darkness. She took it full-on serious as if I hadn’t at all been joking.

“Me?” she questioned. “Why me?”

Right.

“You’re cool, and pretty to look at—that’s all,” I said understatedly to keep it light and friendly. Then we walked a bit farther as she probably wondered how to respond.

“I wish I was that girl. I wish I was half as great as you think I am.”

But she abruptly changed her line of thought, as if we had limited time and should ignore the complicated unknowns, the unimportant stuff.

“Look at it here. Isn’t this wild?!”

Past a stretch of wet grass and the campus buildings we reached the river water, then forty feet up into the park area. She took off her sandals and waded down to a bench, which seemed to

be floating just above the waterline. I threw my new huaraches up on the high ground and did the same. Ernie stayed back on the dry land. For ten minutes I sat and listened to her talk about how important her poetry is to her and poetry in general. Then she laughed the whole subject away like a bit of foolishness and turned to look at the part of the river past me, staring across my knees.

“Oh guess what! I bought a typewriter. It’s just the best. It’s so much fun to use. It makes so much noise it’s like I’m physically scaring away all my demons.”

She stopped.

“Wow. That’s great,” I said in full agreement.

“So come on—tell me. Where are you and Abe going next?” she asked, then staring even farther down river, distracted by something, it seemed—who knows really, maybe excited with the mere subject of road-tripping. Ernie was a separate story, no doubt.

“Nowhere,” I said. And I then came to term with things. This was going to be it, the extent of things. There wasn’t going to be any cataclysmic touching. She’s thinking about other things, other people. The distance was familiar at first, once I got my full hand on it, but still the private embarrassment settled down on top of me. And up from underneath me. The subtle blast of catatonic weakness exploded within me. The river surged up and grabbed my throat. The fast brown water pulled me down and dragged me out along the black bottom miles and miles, all the way down to where the flooded Iowa River meets the flooded Mississippi, and then hard and dark down the full mid-belly of the country to New Orleans and the delta and the Gulf of Mexico and clear out across

the Caribbean into the sweet deeper waters of the southern Atlantic. I floated around there peacefully for a while until the sharks came.

Back at the car Ernie surprised me again, and said we were going to be late for “Oli’s big thing” if we didn’t get a move on. Then we drove back at her place to park, and for Oli to do a quick-change. At twelve was the “Midsummer Midnight Wonder Bowl,” Ernie announced like a tourist repeating what he’d learned in a pamphlet.

After I used the bathroom, a little drunk, I saw Oli rehearsing near the back kitchen door. She brought her hand out flat upward and then facing down as if she was testing the weight of a pancake and then flipping it. She’d changed her outfit, too. Ernie was taking a turn at the frig.

“This gigantic white flowy thing makes me feel more naked underneath!” she said with what sounded like enthusiasm.

“Are you going for that?” I asked blandly.

“I guess! It’s better for my poetry,” she said as if admitting to a performance truth.

“Well.... naked is as naked does,” I said to be creative in a non-creative way.

“Duh! Of course!” She exclaimed with a big kid-smile. “Come on let’s go,” she added, and then we walked the five blocks to get there. It was extremely wet and muddy but nobody on the way or there seemed to mind.

* * *

Olive that same morning got up before her unexpected guest. She made some lemon chai tea and sat on the back porch for a while thinking about stuff.

And she was thinking about her poetry again and thinking about the new guy Phillip and the fact that he always has that look on his face like there is more to consider, even if things were potentially funny, it never over-takes him, because he'd say there's always more going on than we realize. He is going to be a very good English teacher.

And Ernie—she might have thought with her brow cinched: “Gee whiz, you’d think they’d be more alike because they spend so much time together, and take a big trip together!”

He was a crazy unique animal at the beginning, but then became way too simple. And now.... Tough what happened back at home, but he was not one to relax. In life there’d be consequences for that.

And she might have thought about her friend Jon, who she might not know at all if it wasn't for some common friends.

They'll probably be fine, she figured. And then she went back to thinking about her poetry and her summer in Iowa City and the new friends including Melina and JoAnn and Philip the young teacher of course.

When Oli was in the amphitheater pit of the Wonder Bowl the river raged and dissolved concrete and took legs out from under it.

* * *

The Wonder Bowl was a medium side yard between three houses, with an amphitheater of tiered wood benches in the mud that could seat a few hundred people. Yet it seemed like the whole town was there. There were two weeping beech trees near the sidewalk before the drop-down which hide the amphitheater from view, so we didn't realize it was there at first. It reminded me of the first few days of that famous muddy concert in New York in the late Nineteen-Sixties. Ernie and I were forced to watch the whole *Woodstock* movie by his granddad, his mom's dad, when we were too young to appreciate the generational significance of it.

"Nice weeping willows," said Ernie pushing a few of the weeping branches aside.

"Weeping beeches," I corrected him only because I knew the difference, for the same reason you say things without having any good reason, when a conversation doesn't call for it but you say it anyway. "Beeches hang all the way to the ground." Ernie then held a few aside like he was holding a door open, instead of rudely having it close on the person behind you.

"Oh, kind of like you," he said and smiled, stooping his head down under the wet greenery, "where things go all the way down," he added with a chuckle.

"Ha."

He let go of the weeping whispies but then wouldn't drop the comparison.

“The willow got a trim but the weeping beech still has it long and crazy. Oh yeah, but you shaved your head, so I guess that doesn’t work anymore.”

Oli had gone around the top-side before she went down, so we just entered the general public way and found a bench near the top. There was wet grass and mud everywhere. We got there before midnight but a few of the poets had already read. There were three people standing off to the side down below, two of whom were nodding as they were congratulating a guy who’d just finished. Near the top row of benches, Ernie asked jokingly:

“Hey, should I hold your hand? I know poetry gets you all...” but he paused.

“Hey,” I replied back. “Fuck off,” I said with a light slap on his shoulder as I stepped up next to him. Then we had almost a spat. I made a clever comment which confused him.

“Just because you’re involved, doesn’t make it real,” I told him, a little abstract superiority thrown in for good measure.

“What?” he turned halfway and asked. “What are you talking about?” Then I took it a step deeper showing off my better knowledge and understanding of poetry.

“You don’t even know what *Ode on a Grecian Urn* is,” I added.

But he came back fast and unexpected, and I’m not proud to say maybe accurate.

“You don't even know what real love is,” he said, again looking forward and down.

“What?” I responded actually quite surprised with his argument and choice of words. “Whatever, you,” I said, treating him as the unpredictable animal.

The amphitheater was lit only by bamboo torches from Lowes or Home Depot which were all around the lower pit. Their flames were smoking and crackling as if still getting used to the moist air from all the rain. Across the top from side to side on wires were single lights every three or four feet but they were faint, and the grassy muddy hill all around with all the people was still pretty dark. And there were Peruvian prayer flags everywhere and that's fine—“they're still cool,” I remember Ernie saying, “even if you're in atheist.”

“Hey,” I said. “Chilean church flags,” I added as mild reparation but Ernie didn't seem to get it or care. He just said: “Huh,” but I wasn't sure what his point was.

Then it got even darker, as they extinguished a few of the bamboo torches leading to the center area and left lit only the two on either sides of the microphone. First there were the two hippie hosts and the hostess. They came out smiling but the woman took on a very serious face when it was her turn.

“Welcome, once again!” said the first guy with a big smile. “You can be sure that rain won't stop us!” he said with a dramatic look-around at the puddles on both sides of him. He looked a lot like that David Crosby guy from that really old band Crosby, Stills and Nash. Then the other guy said: “Hold onto your slippery seats!”

The woman then took over at the mic and made a long dramatic presentation of it. She had long wispy gray hair pulled back under a wooden belt-buckle of a barrette as big as a bar of soap or a building block. She was in a straight long teal or aqua dress with no sleeves and was clearly the woman in charge, even before the intros by the others. She got people ready including Oli with firm reaches to the poets' elbows and her chosen words said leaning back.

“Here we are! You’re about to hear them! The great young poets of our day!” Her smile then dropped and she was slow on purpose. “First is the young man you’ve all heard about, Mr. Ansul Biebka, with his very-cool stand-out minimalism” She looked to the side to confirm he was there in waiting and the mic cracked a little feedback. “Then!” she warned the crowd. “The woman who needs no introduction, the papyrus of our pantheon, the giver of truth and drama and poetic purpose.” The crowd clapped a little and there were murmurs here and there. The hostess cracked a smile but then it was gone. “After these next two, I will introduce to you a few other poets, and then also our free-form open-mic night—or early morning, I should say!”

“But first, all the way from Wherever-land, darkness and shallowness beware... Miss Olive Womack!”

“Man, she moves me.” I said quietly, as if I meant for just Ernie to hear the personal praise. But he stood and whooped loudly. Then he sat back down in the cacophony of other people cheering. Off to the left down below, we saw her standing with a few other females who were obviously fans of hers. They were happy, and smiling too much to be poets.

“Let me guess, Jon—you know how to ride a skateboard, but you’d like to learn how to do a good Oli,” Ernie punned with a wide grin looking forward and down.

It could mean a hundred things, I knew, but I just said “Yeah, right” But then I added:

“There is shit in the world you just don’t understand.”

“Hey, just because I don’t get all wordy about it, and try to write it all down....” But he didn’t finish that comment. Instead, he asked a stupid question: “What do you love more, her brain or her body?”

“You’re not a brain guy are you?” I said back in a non-whisper to be loud and clear.

Oli and the other guy then read three poems each. First was Ansul, with his tunic and shaved head, buzzed on the sides with the long stuff combed over and back. One of his poems was about car commercials and I almost memorized it. But I got only these lines from the middle, which I scribbled down while he was finishing:

space is old-fashioned
the more the older, like
speed-racers in the desert
or sportsters on a track
or sedans in the country
leaves blowin around

I liked “leaves blowin around” in particular, really bringing back the sound and feel of a car commercial. Ernie nodded after this first one.

Next Ansul Biebka read one about going to a concert, which I think made his minimalism work in a real way, since music of course is so much different than written words.

Ok
 here now
 empty
 seated
 noisy
 now crowded
 waiting
 waiting

 then song
 song
 song
 song
 spoken words
 song
 song
 song
 song
 song...

Ansul's third in comparison was wordy, but I did jot down the beginning. It got the crowd's attention, but then it wavered off and seemed to lose its verve.

It's nothing like Connecticut here
 in this heat, in this sand
 I serve in the military now

cooking food

for fighters

etc.

It seemed a little silly, this one, to have a guy obviously not in the military writing a poem about serving somewhere, probably in the Middle East. But it did get a respectful cheering and a few whistles from the crowd.

Then it was Olive's turn. She stepped up and performed a few of her great ones from senior year, including the perfect 'Sitting Inland' which she'd read at graduation at our school. When she recited it, having memorized it, she flipped the pancake over flat and pressed down when she said the line about "the cloud settling" in the "living room."

I trust the light always to tell me when
 there's a cloud settling in my living room
 again my inland air is becoming too still
 I've seen the coast and I've been persuaded
 by the freshness of the wind and sun
 I baked skin in the light and I have
 jumped from the point of an ocean rock
 into the thunder of a salty swell
 churning towards the cliff behind me
 falling spineless to the rocks and sand underfoot

It ain't even Wednesday in my week and
 I can't find time to waste
 sitting inland, idle in a windless life
 when my nature waits outside.

“That’s some pretty wonderful clever shit,” said Ernie under his breath. “Makes me want to sleep with her and hear poetry at the same time,” he quietly asshole. I ignored it and made my own critical statement.

“Yup, I like that one. Makes her sound like a tough ocean girl,” I said.

Then Oli read ‘Tread’. I have it word for word like ‘Sitting Inland’ because they were both in the Fall issue of our college literary magazine.

I've had it up to here with industrial carpet, too tight and noticeably unworn in the path to the doors by a thousand black-vibram poly-rubber soles, a clever, practical and durable design, a no-slip, no-nonsense, synthetic success, for your own floor? Naway. But industrially groovy understated and with a subtle utility, where we share and dare to care too much, at least, when we step from the blasted, glaring, humid concrete in through an out door, to a pallid hall an airless eco-lobby, barren and poisoned by freon, too crisp and sunless like the ground floor of our blue-iced picnic chests surrounded by spiced meats and mustard-seed cheeses, but odorless in cellophane, hermetically sealed in white deli paper with tape disguised by soapy roses and plastic vegetation rendered inorganic by roll-on antiperspirants

Do you remember now a powdery dirty velour path,
 a healthy worn carpet of clay or silt
 on an island weaving
 around medium storm-thrown boulders, past
 thickets impenetrable for most besides
 deer and pheasant that leap and duck and nudge so
 swiftly
 as if their nose-tips see better than our eyes
 that bent you under fir needles and
 cones of a sap laden branch that has been
 reaching farther across the path for years now
 as low as your chest or chin
 ducked under, limboed, or pushed aside but
 never snapped, trimmed or tied
 tempting your taste for the sweet gritty salt
 just clear of the clef in the shifty dunes where
 the path holds footprints n'more when
 your thin-skinned feet felt the heat of the land?

“Alright! The classic!” cheered Ernie. “I love that line:
 “rendered inorganic by roll-on antiperspirants,” he turned saying
 with a big grin. The crowd loved it too, and couldn’t help but react
 to her dramatic reading with their hearty claps and cheers at the
 end, after her repeated efforts to maintain a lower serious tone.

Then she read ‘Zeal and Frenzy’ about the “wolf-like
 serpent-child.”

The moon swings the temper of the beast, and
 this wolf-like serpent-child, the Kraken
 rears up, hairy-fanged and neurotic
 driven by zeal and frenzy

headlong and broad-shouldered
toward the blinking, recuperating little continent
as un-guilty as the truly insane, as
violent and predictable as the boy, whose
heart still thunders behind the stump, in the park
where it attacks again without notice, but is
expected, when order is nearly but barely restored
who is resentful, rash and free
whose interior sea-beast moves and shapes us
carving and sculpting the earth
with all its ridiculous adrenaline.

“I wonder who inspired that one!” I said to Ernie quickly before the cheers took over. But he ignored this and stood up to give her the official applause. I smiled, stood and clapped also. Then we backtracked away from the slippery hill and waited for Oli out on the sidewalk.

“You know, you're not helping me,” Ernie said out of the blue.

“Well, since when do you need help?”

“You’re deranged, you know that?” he said to me. So then I took a wide view and made a confrontational statement.

“I know you accidentally killed your dad, but it's not like I'm gonna treat you any better.”

We stood in silence for ten seconds, turning slightly, repositioning, waiting for Oli.

“Hey, you, the death of my dad has actually been bothering me a bit! Can you imagine? In recent weeks, I’ve tried not to think about it too much.”

Then I told him I still like him, which was meaningless—just an effort to keep it light.

“You’ve always liked me too much! Why are you even here?”

Then I lied a little.

“We heard you were here! That’s why we came. And I wasn’t surprised—I sort of half-figured you’d quietly come here. Oli confirmed it when I called her a couple days ago.”

“What?”

“We wanted to surprise you—let you know that we care. And we also knew that seeing Miss Oli would be a fun thing, too.”

I made it sound like a group decision.

Then Oli came through the weeping beech trees. I repeated the lie so she could hear it, knowing she wouldn’t interfere.

“Yeah, Oli told me on the phone the other day that you were here!” Oli cinched her eyebrows for a second, but let it fly, probably figuring that my white lie was for a good cause—or else just not caring, or perhaps being off in another world, poetically. I paused and then restated the lie. “It’s called politeness, or caring, us being here now. So maybe you shouldn’t feel you have *carte blanche* to annoy us whenever.”

“What the fuck, man?” Ernie said—legitimately wondering what the heck was going on.

“What the fuck to you!” I said exasperated. He was weirded out by all my statements, but he was tired and succumbed to it all.

“I’m done here,” Oli said changing the subject on purpose. So we happily shut up and followed her back up the street.

Then they both drove me across town to Abe’s and my hotel by the highway. It was in her same vintage rusty Volvo stick-shift wagon, with the protruding chrome door handles—a 1971, she was proud to educate us—the one Ernest used to manhandle and tip around curves in Boston all the time. Across the way from the hotel was a soccer field. I thought at first it was a pond or a lake, but my old friend Miss Olive giggled slightly and said: “It really is crazy around here,” and that’s when I noticed the tops of the soccer goals sticking only three or four feet out of the water, and the top of a swing set past them.

Olive pulled up under the hotel carport, got out, came around and gave me a hug.

“Take care of yourself, man,” she said. “It’s too bad you guys can’t stay longer.”

For a second I was thinking well, who said I couldn’t stay longer.

“And say bye to Abe the Babe for me.”

“Right. Of course.”

I stalled, then grabbed her and pulled her in again for a better hug. The big dumb volcano jumped to the top of my chest like a diabolical gland. You shouldn't think about things so much, she used to say. Yeah, so no big deal. She went back around and got back in.

“See you soon, hombre,” Ernie said without getting out.

“What are you gonna do?” I asked him next to his door.

“Oh, who knows. I'll probably stay here a few more days.”

“Wait—you can only stay till Monday. I've got a date on Tuesday,” Oli offered.

The fact that he was staying at Oli's house was a given. There was currently not a conflict. But then I was half kidding when I thought of a warmer way to end the evening.

“Hey, we could probably get you a cot here for the hotel room!” I said dead-pan like it was a serious suggestion.

“Oh! I bet there's room in the car too!” added Oli leaning over so I could see her. “You guys could give Ern a ride back!” She said with a smile knowing the idea would be rejected. I was going to laugh but Ernie spoke up before I did.

“Ha ha, I'm not getting back in that car.” He paused. “No, I think I'll stay at Mamacita's again,” he said with raised eyebrows looking forward like he was a hopeful puppy, as if the question wasn't answered by the humans yet. But he dropped it quick to a grin like he knew and looked at me again.

“That's a nice option to have.” I paused. “Maybe you'll get lucky!” I added.

“Maybe he won't!” said Oli still leaning over with a puckered up grimace on her face.

“Maybe I will!” he said with an overly dramatic wink for Oli to also see.

“We broke up, remember?” she said to him, reminding us both.

“Yeah well...” he said, and those were his next to last words he in front of to me.

“Whatever. Good night, you two,” I said to both of them. “Oli, see you on the flip side sometime, somewhere. And you, Ern...” I couldn't think what to say at first but then it came to me. “Guaranteed” was the one-word aloha we used to use, back in the Kearny days.

“Guaranteed,” he said with a straight face. I turned and walked toward the hotel.

They pulled out to the main road back into town. For a second, I imagined them talking about me for a minute. Oli said: “Do you think he's gonna be all right? Then Ernie replied: “Yeah, he'll be fine. He's just a little confused. And they laughed. I shook it off and went in. I asked for Abraham David's room, carded in and put on some generic cop show. Abe was sitting in his bed and reading. It was three AM. He asked the basics, which is all I gave him.

“How did it all go?” he asked.

“Nice to see her,” I summed it up with. I didn’t want to complicate it with the whole Ernie’s-surprise-visit subject.

“No, man. Tell me. How did it really go?”

“How did what go?” I said.

“Ah, well,” he started with a pause, “I guess she just doesn’t know what’s good for her.”

“Just keep reading, you.”

“Or maybe she... I mean, maybe you... maybe you’re too much of a philosopher!” He paused again for a few long seconds. “I thought of that the other day, but I forgot to bring it up.”

“Christ, Abe. Just go back to reading. And what are you doing up?”

“I couldn’t sleep.”

“Let’s get out of here early. I wanna get back,” I said for no reason.

20.

That night was the last time I saw them. The river had never been so full of water and had never pushed things in the way it was pushing everything that summer. It was like a paper bridge

over a raging waterway. The pavement on top appeared to be normal. It's like it was taped gently at both ends and looked good and stable like a still life.

I remember clearly the picture of her old Volvo wagon pulling away. It was dirty old white with rust around the wheel wells. What happened later was not a beautiful cinematic moment no matter how you look at it. The missing car was never found. There is no proof. Yeah, maybe it never happened. She muscled the long metal gear-shifter and worked the clutch like a professional, but maybe Ernie took the wheel for their final drive. It maybe took him a second, but he actually drove as smoothly as possible, to increase the speed of the shifts and therefore the vehicle's performance down the open road. They were together in the old non-sporty wagon asking it to be sporty. They were on their way unknowingly but instinctually to the launch pad.

And I didn't notice anything different or unexplainable for a while. When you aren't going to see people very much, you're not likely to notice their not being around. It wasn't habit to see Ernie everyday back in Boston. I had no worries. And no doubt weeks if not months or years might go by before I got any news on Miss Oli—an acquaintance from the college days.

Abe and I were bored out of our minds and I wanted to get back and do something. I just didn't know what. We were in western New York when the jump happened. There was a low highway bridge over the Iowa River, and then there wasn't.

With Oli, there was no expectation to see her, or hear about her even, except maybe from Ernie himself. And with Ernie, three months could've gone by before I called him to check in and say

hi. I didn't learn about it for three weeks. You'd think I might've heard about it on the national news, with the heavy rains and the bridge collapsing.

Abe found a hat shoved in a seat-back pocket that was Ernie's, so he called him, but Ernie's phone went straight to voicemail. He said he then called another number he had for Ernie but Ernie's Grandma picked up in Kearny. Then Abe called to quickly tell me, but I'd just heard about it already. Two hours before, I got the call from sister Cate and she told me about it, what was figured to have happened in Iowa. It was the definition of sad, especially when I added the Oli part who she'd heard a bit about over the last year or two. This kind of bad luck was especially hard when you tried to talk about it in words.

"Yeah, Ernie's gone. That bridge in Iowa. He was on it... with Olive Womack, his ex."

Then I had to tell Jule, Ernie's new girlfriend, who Ernie hadn't talked to for ten days. She was shocked and weirded out as if she didn't even know Ernie very well. She certainly didn't know me much, so her reaction was like to a stranger calling her with an abstract.

"Are you guys done with your trip yet?" she asked.

"Yeah, Jule, and I've got some terrible news."

"What is it?" she asked with a pause.

"I don't know how to say this, but Ernie died in Iowa," I said.

“Are you kidding?” she said, and she laughed nervously like it was maybe a typical joke that she wasn’t used to yet, something a friend of Ernie’s might say.

Not living anymore is sad, but one way to consider looking at it is that it’s not the world’s biggest dealio. It happens all the time, to everyone. I remember back when my mom’s dad died, she got mad and told me that I said “Grandpa died” too much. She wanted me to say and appreciate that Grandpa lived! Grandpa lived!

Despite how it might look, I want to paint a better picture, and maybe this story should end with them still in the air. They jumped their car like Thelma and Louise, their wild hair blowing in the wind with the open windows, a little like Smokey and the Bandit or the Dukes of Hazard, with Louise flooring it into the sky. The cinematic car looks like it drove off a ramp and was halfway across the Iowa River still flying.

Or maybe the Volvo splashed down nicely and under water turned into one of those old James Bond submarine cars. They went down the Iowa River to the Mississippi and then down to New Orleans to the French Quarter where they’re hanging out and still having fun.

Of course, they’ve been uniquely significant to me, but maybe I just needed to close those chapters in the book of my life.

No, you’re not dead at all! RIP ECOW

But I don't want to end this story on a sad note, so let me tell the rest, about life preceding when and after I found out about “the flight”—and about when Abe called me a few weeks later on a separate subject. It's sort of funny in a dark way.

21.

After a late checkout, Abe and I drove to Chicago—too far north on Lake Shore Drive then we circled back and parked under 400 Randolph where some old friends of his parents live. It was mid afternoon. We walked a couple miles around downtown and then into a bagel place just past Michigan on Randolph. I sat there and watched Abe eat a rather delicate alfalfa and hummus sandwich. After lunch we walked up Michigan to the canal where we saw what I was positive was the parking garage that Jake and Elwood Blues flew their car out of at the end of the Blues Brothers movie, but I wasn't sure, and I didn't ask anyone, so I remain not sure. We walked back to the condo tower where we got to meet our hosts who weren't around when we first got there. She was rich, and he drew freelance cartoons. Or maybe she was rich and he just drew cartoons. Anyhow, they showed us the guest room, which was more of a walk-in closet, and then gave us key-card access to the building.

When Abe called Stacey I ditched him. I took a roach from the sport-utility ashtray and smoked it in the underground garage and burned my fingers. Then I walked again—down the park, past the Art Institute, past the fountain from the beginning of Married With Children, past Soldier's Field, and on down past a marina

where a pack of kids were trying to get past the guard at the gate, evidently where the long-retired Scottie Pippen keeps his motor boat.

Abe took the two of us to a nice Italian place for dinner and picked up the tab. We were in the top part of the city—Lincoln Square, they told us, I'm reasonably sure. But it doesn't matter. Chicago wasn't my town. After dinner we walked down Halstead Street to a place with pool tables in a room open to the sidewalk, the side room of some Tex-Mex restaurant. We met a few girls there, wearing lots of blue eyeliner. They insisted on taking us down the street to a terrible Irish bar with way too much young Irish yelling.

“HEY—WHO DO YOU GUYS LIKE BETTER, U2 or 21 PILOTS?”

To make conversation I asked if they knew of any blues bars in the area.

“OH—YOU GUYS LIKE THE BLUES?”

After a while we left. They didn't come with us. The 'we're-on-a-cool-ass-beatnik-road-trip' thing was probably being laid on a little thick. They were perfectly nice. Two of them were even what some would definitely call hot. But we were gone already. It couldn't have mattered less. A block away we found a place, but the big man at the door said it was too crowded inside. A couple minutes later thirty people filed out—seemed like a fire drill—and when we went inside it was still too crowded, and loud as shit, but better. The band was excellent. Direct and sexy. The subject for the night's lecture was going down on your rider—Big Time Sarah seemed to be deviating from the planned set list, if

there ever was one—her gold teeth flashed in the dim spotlights—her B.T.S. Express tore the house down.

I bought a gray-blue “Chicago Blues” T-shirt the size of a sheet of notebook paper for little Nicky, my prodigal nephew I hadn’t met yet—born while we were camping in the deep South somewhere. I also bought a copy of Big Time Sarah’s CD, and spent the rest of my pocket cash on bargain doubles and the cab ride back to Randolph.

For a short while before going to bed, I stood on our host’s narrow balcony, on the twenty-fifth floor, looking out over the southern part of the lake, the park, and the city, and over to the Darth Vader Tower which had many more lights on than I would have expected for a Saturday night. Ernie the drummer said once that there are four rock bands per capita in Boston—everyone is in four bands. I figured it was probably much the same for Chicago.

For just a few minutes I stared out at the flat Midwest, with its lack of oceans, its ridiculous distance between places, and I was thinking about how bad it would be to grow up in a place with such a prefix. What have you. Mostly just about how tough it is to grow up anywhere at all, period. In the morning we bought a bottle of Seven-Eleven wine and dropped it off with the concierge. We left the city and its probably tide-less beaches minutes later.

Abe then used Indiana, well east of Chicago and Iowa City, as a reason to talk about Stacey’s mom again. “On top of crazy, you know, the first stroke and all that, these days she’s just not a friendly person! She either has some version of Turret’s syndrome or she just doesn’t like her daughter’s boyfriend. But of course, when she needs help, she goes silent.” Abe paused but quickly picked up again. “Oh man, you should hear Stacey about this. I

know it sounds funny, and I hate to say it, but she just doesn't love her mother anymore. But then it happens. Her mom melts her by going totally silent or by saying just the right thing, usually by accident, like "sweetie?" or some such shit. Then Stacey melts and cries and leaves the room. She quietly screams and goes outside for a walk." He paused again, but continued. "When her mom's wide awake, when she's hyper—and she does get hyper, even though she's never sitting up straight, she's like that girl in the Exorcist whose head spins around. Yes, possessed by the devil, she might be! And by hyper I don't mean, you know, wordy. It's like hyper in a nonsensical way. Her eyes are wide open, and she looks side to side with her mumbling loud."

Then he went silent again, and I didn't mess it up with any questions.

The first outside thing we saw of any significance between Indiana and New York was a full western Ohio rainbow, a giant one that straddled the highway in double-gold-pot glory, lit up amazingly by another fireball sun dropped beneath a black cloud-blanket that we saw in the side view mirrors—a supernatural phenomenon if there ever was such a thing.

Second significant thing was the eerie gypsy moth epidemic in western New York that kept us from getting out of the vehicle at two consecutive mini-marts. When we finally stopped to eat, we brought ten moths a piece into the restaurant just for having sprinted the twenty feet from the truck to the doors—the tree tents and the whole bit, vibrating white clouds hovering around spotlights—like a swarm movie without the make-believe, without the special effects.

At Camp David back in Old Westbury, I sat inside for a while, and then outside, between a hammock and a tennis court, and then flat on my back on the concrete around the swimming pool with my legs in the water—one of those magazine pools with the wide flat waterfall spilling over a marble ledge. Abe went to a car wash with his father. It was late afternoon.

The dead silent fatigue settled in like cement. I knew nothing about the accident, and I was tired beyond recognition. It was coursing through my flesh like the anti-energy, mumbling in the undeniable body language of the young and electric self, the pumping aching throb and the push-push to the ends of the limbs, the thump-thump, and the soft zooming slide, and the slow heavy boom. I felt it big and running up next to my bones again. And the earth quaked inside my chest while I lied down backwards with my eyes closed and my face to Space. A sledgehammer dropped onto my sternum from a half-inch above me, again and again and nobody was anywhere near me, and it looked like I'd be staying in the East for a while.

22.

July Eleven at Camp David—hazy, hot and humid.

On July Twelfth, Abe called me on his parents' intercom and said he was going into the City with me.

Click: "Abe. I'm going through the City—I'm not going into the city." Click.

“Sure you are. I’m not going up to Boston ‘til tomorrow, until I have to be there.”

“Oh, so I’m the next best thing.”

“We’ll stretch our legs—do some hiking.”

“No, you’ll stretch your legs.”

“Okay, so I want the company. There.”

“That’s sweet.”

“Good. Then it’s done.”

“Whatever, freak.”

So we drove from his parents’ house to the Westbury train station and took the train to Penn. It was still early in the day. The sun was hitting the sticky concrete Apple from the east side of the East River.

We walked for quite a while, two or three hours all through lower Midtown, down to the Village and Chinatown. In front of the World’s Biggest Store we saw a man in a dark pinstriped suit lose twenty bucks to a kid flipping thimbles over a marble. I made Abe carry my bag and to my amazement he took it.

Our first full stop was a small psychedelic Mexican place on the edge of Chinatown a few blocks off Canal. It has the front of an old VW bus stuck to the building above the door, but I didn’t see a name. For two hours we sat at the bar watching a women’s tennis tournament on the TV above the liquor mirror and drank five or six icy margaritas—twenty-five bucks in a single sitting

with no food besides chips and watery salsa. Yes, I'd been planning on quitting alcohol for good one of those days, but getting on the wagon, going cold turkey, never felt right. A mellow turkey is only a cool turkey. Abe on the other hand was a bit upset because Stacee was out of his picture for one more day than he'd planned. Tough luck, amigo.

After the match, after the unidentified brunette beat the unidentified blond six two, six three, we hit the pavement, and by this time the sun was coming down from the West.

"The drive back across the continent was boring," Abe said out of nowhere. But Abe then said he had a far better time than he expected. For whatever reason, I had a short memory of the two of them, Abe and Ernie, when they were laughing hard about something in Oregon. We didn't know about the Iowa bridge at all, so we were talking like it was just a typical road trip.

"Yeah, alright. So it wasn't all conflict between opposites, I guess."

"Opposites?"

"Eh, nothing. Whatever," I said.

We walked without talking for a minute.

"But still," Abe contentedly redirected. "I am not looking forward to going back to Boston. Stacee aside," he corrected himself.

"No kidding," I said.

Then he dismissed the topic. “Don’t you have an aunt that lives down here somewhere?” Abe slurred, referring in part to the parallel universe that exists in and around Canal Street, New York City. “You told me about some aunt that used to buy you beer.” Which was true. I did have an aunt. I do have an aunt.

Mom’s younger sister lived, still lives, two blocks south of the west part of Canal, in a studio apartment on the fifth floor of a building with no elevator, where she lives, or used to live, with a Puerto Rican guy and where she paints too many red and black ghoulish paintings on too many huge canvases. She was always easy to get along with, but she and Mom hadn’t talked since I was a freshman or sophomore in high school. I couldn’t remember exactly why—besides the fact that Mom is married to a guy with an overdeveloped sense of civic responsibility, of r-e-p-u-t-a-t-i-o-n, and maybe the fact that Auntie paints red and black ghoulish paintings on huge ghoulish canvases. Anyway, she and her boyfriend both ‘know how to party,’ so Abe followed me up the mile of mildewed stairs, and we found her as planned. She was by the windows, painting, with green. I hadn’t seen her in three years.

“Jonathan, Love—you’re drunk again.” Family generally refers to me only as Jon or Jonny or Jonathan. “Come sit.”

“Thhhhis is . . . Abe-braham.”

“Hello, Abraham. Have a seat, Love.”

So we sat there and talked a little, but it was noisy. Two little kids were playing Super Nintendo with Surround Sound. We told her a little about the trip, about the West and what not, and she listened intently as she picked up her brush and vigorously continued painting. An hour or so passed and then the three of us

went out. She walked us to East Canal to the edge of the Bowery, and we stepped into a bar that you don't see unless you've been there before, across the street from a big Seventies billiards hall and a car wash. Auntie was apparently a regular.

We drank Budweisers with a few guys from the outer reaches of Space who looked at us as if we were from the outer reaches of Space. But soon enough the men started treating me as a regular, ignoring me just as they seemed to be decent friends and were ignoring each other. One man was alone at a table and nodded to me, probably on account of me being obviously inebriated in the afternoon of a weekday workday, but then I figured he was probably just gay.

“Shit, Jonny. You look like you've aged ten years since I saw you last.” Auntie had turned sideways in her stool and was giving me one of those look-over's that only a mom's younger sister knows how to give.

“What makes you say that?” I asked her, at first thinking it was a pretty cool thing to have said about you, but then I dwelled on it for a second, as much as I was able to. What did my age feel like? It felt a lot like twelve, or else a hundred and twelve. At times I felt like if I aged another day my cross-circuited gray matter was going to blow out the back of my head. And at other times I felt like I damn well better get another ninety years or I'll die! Then it occurred to me that maybe looking an extra ten years drawn isn't much of a compliment at all, especially from Auntie. She was just thinking out loud the way she does.

After two beers there my eyes burned up and the capillaries began to break. After so many drinks I usually close them and hope the next thing I trip over is soft and roughly rectangular. But

there, with elbows hooked safely to the bar, I felt like I was fitting in. Though Abe, I could tell, was way too good-looking to be in a place like this. Abe looks just about exactly twenty-two. For the next ten years Abe is going to look about twenty-two. In the gray window were the remaining letters “Bu weis” on the electric coil sign facing outside. German for ‘Be smart,’ I told Abe, and he believed me, or so it seemed. I let it go.

Everybody inside seemed to have spent the whole day there. The walls of the place carried posters and stickers dating back to the Forties. “F.D.R. in Forty-Four,” “Love is grand. Divorce is twenty grand,” “It’s Sinatra’s world. We just live in it,” “Get even—live long enough to be a problem to your kids,” “Selling paintings is like getting paid to eat ice-cream,” “Don’t drink and drive. You might spill your drink,” “Beer, so much more than just a breakfast drink.” “Reelect President Kennedy,” “Bartenders are always in good spirits,” “Caution! Men drinking,” and over the toilet, my own sentimental favorite, “Skateboarding is not a crime!”

Auntie deftly slipped off her stool and went to the back of the bar for a while, and when she appeared again she and her girlfriend started cutting lines of coke on the face of a Schlitz beer mirror that the bartender took down from over the manual cash register. And that evening, late afternoon—in the late morning of my life—I went in for yet another great adventure. I had always said I wouldn’t snort anything—a man of discipline, a man of limits. My excuse? A good one—I was drunk. Abe was in the bathroom taking a piss.

He glided to the front when my face was an inch over the bar, my elbow high in the air. He was just as drunk as I was, but he lost his placid demeanor even quicker than I did.

“My God, Jon,” Abe said. Then he grabbed my arm and walked me up and across the street to the 4-5-6 subway line, furious. And he was stumbling, from all the booze we hadn’t been drinking over the course of the previous four weeks.

All of a sudden I was feeling pretty good—all of a sudden not the least bit drunk. I had to grab Abe’s arm because he was having trouble yelling at me and watching where he was stumbling at the same time. When I stepped to him he leaned on me like a drunken banker trying to discipline his track star son. I felt super strong, after only a matter of seconds really.

So we rode the 4-5-6 to Grand Central and checked the times for a Metro-North to New Nueva Haven, to my dad’s new place—seven thirty-seven. I took Abe to the underground Dunkin’ Donuts and sat for a while drinking the best damn coffee I ever had in my entire life. It was only seven ten.

“I’m okay, Abe. Honestly—I feel fine,” I told him, trying to cover for the fact that I felt like Superman. “Trust me.”

In twenty minutes I sent him on his way to Penn Station. “Say hi to Stacey for me,” I said. Then I went back to the lower levels and left for New England.

For most of the ride I paced up and down the car. But it was a crowded commuter scene, and I quickly got the sense that people were thinking I’d had a worse day than I did have, maybe just seconds away from pulling an assault rifle out of my sack. The idea was amusing, so I waved a pretend gun around over the people’s heads, glaring and hastily choosing targets—of course no people aimed at, but still several sickened faces. Then I hung around in the loading hallway and twice did twenty push-ups.

I had a few random things in my head on the train to New Haven. One, a play I never saw or read called “I Bombed in New Haven,” by Tennessee Williams. I didn’t know the author at first. And that song “Peace Frog” by the Doors, with that line, “BLOOD in the STREETS in the town of New HAV-ven, something something something, BLOOD in my love in my TERR-ible SUMmer.” Once it’s in there you can’t get it out, simple and stupid as it is.

The train flew up the Connecticut Gold Coast, through a few Lexus and Infinity filled parking lots, and then on through the back yards of Stratford, Milford, and West Haven before pulling into the clear behind New Haven’s Union Station. I walked down and through the silver spaceship tunnels and up the escalator into the great waiting room, a miniature of Grand Central, but I didn’t go outside. I didn’t feel so well all of a sudden. I sat myself back on a curved wooden bench, just breathing and checking my runaway pulse. The delayed drunkenness was sliding smoothly back into my bloodstream, like a billion-dollar parking ticket left too many minutes unpaid. I was two miles from a bed at my dad’s. I should have gone there, but all I could think about really was how it was the last place I wanted to go.

I was still a hundred dollars under budget, the miracle of all miracles, even after the NYC day. Maybe Abe picked up the Mexican bar tab. I couldn’t remember. I looked up to the black electric schedule-board and spotted a Northeastern heading for South Station at ten. I bought a ticket and went back down through the then unbearably reflection-filled tunnels, up to Track 8.

It was the Northeast in mid-summer. The air was heavy and thick.

I walked out to the near end of the platform and sucked in big gulps of the low New Haven sky. As it goes though, it wasn't good deep breathing. I was huffing like a fool and thinking about the city pool in Kearny I used to swim in as a younger kid—all the piss and chlorine and the burning—and the wicked, scare-the-girls bloodshot eyes. That's it, I decided then and there. No more swimming pools, ever again. No more red eyes. I put my foot down. Cut losses. Reduce variables. If a guy is going to look his best in this life, he's got to start with a few solid rules.

For half of the three-hour ride up the shoreline I tried to sleep, and I spent the bad part of an hour in the Amtrak bathroom using the stained stainless-steel sink as a walker. My stomach felt like a cesspool in an earthquake, and my head felt like a large train was running through the middle of it. After Providence I made my way to the café car and the nice man offered me two ginger ales for the price of one. He noted that I looked like I could use them. With all the extra allowance still a prominent thought, I took two sodas and paid him for I thought four, like a cool big spender, like the one I'd never been.

By the time I got to and through South Station and down under to the Red Line, I was more or less hallucinating. It was one ten in the morning and by then, the T should have been shut down for the night. Somehow there was a train. It might just have been parked there. But still, there was a train, so I slipped inside and sat. It made my whole day when the doors closed and the train started moving.

I rode the all too familiar college run through downtown, out over the river by Buzzy's Roast Beef, under the Institute of Technology and Central Square, and then up at Harvard where I began my foot trek halfway to Porter Square. to my bad middle-of-

nowhere apartment.

Then two days later Abe called me again, very surprised to hear I was up in Boston. He had trained up from Westbury via NYC the day before—he assumed I was still in Kearny. He then said that he could use my help, for “moral support, or at least for company,” he said. For lack of money, and for having no need to rush over there, I took the T all the way from Porter to downtown and then out to Brookline to Abe’s girlfriend’s place on Kilsyth Road. It took two hours to go nine miles.

Abe said he had planned on being at Stacee’s just for the weekend, but then she threw on him another four nights because she absolutely had to go to some conference in Denver, and she needed him to take care of her mom while she was gone. It was her mom who was keeping her unemployed for now, he said. It was a full time care-taking job that required you be there at least once every two or three hours.

Abe was not happy about this. It was the Talented College Kid conference in Denver. She was gone before I got there, and five hours later I was gone, too, back to Porter Square to start the cleaning up process. Though first, I went with Abe down to Beacon Street to get food. Stacee’s mom was fed and “ideally still napping,” Abe said.

Stacee was explained to by doctors that her mom’s blood-thinner medicine were “absolutely necessary,” which she then told Abe, which Abe told to me. Without it bad things were likely to happen. Three days of the meds not being given would be enough, they were told.

“Enough for what?” I asked Abe to clarify. He then looked

at me like I wasn't following.

“Bad things,” he summed it up with.

It was the second Monday after the trip, still a week before we learned about Ernie and Olive. Abe opened the door right after I knocked. He said he thought it was still Stacee because she'd just left.

“Hey, mon,” I said, or something thereabouts.

He looked sick, cold and sweaty and pale.

“Sorry about the hospital smell,” Abe then said, even though it didn't smell at all.

I was about to say he didn't look well, but color returned to his face in a visible wave, as if just opening the door had done the trick. Then his sweat looked simply like a guy on a hot day. “Fun to be back in Boston, ridin' the ol' T,” I said, as if it had been years.

“Yeah, I should do that sometime,” he said. He was behind me to close the door, but he left it partly open.

“How's Stacee's mom doing?” I asked.

“Fine—she's fine. Here, say hi to her. You might as well since you're here.”

Abe then stepped past me down the short hall to the bedroom on the right.

“Hey, Ruthie, a friend of mine is here. He wants to say hi before we go out to Walgreens for you.” We didn't end up going to

Walgreens but Abe explained that stating a trip or service for her was the general practice.

He led and I followed and held up my hand just inside the bedroom door and waved. Stacee's mom was lying back held up by four or five pillows though she was tilted a bit to one side as if slightly off-balance and unable to correct it herself. She didn't move her head but she did angle her eyes a bit in my direction, but not for long, then back towards Abe. She breathed somewhat loudly and with an obvious amount of effort. Then she asked in a slow, mumbled way:

“Where's my lunch?”

“Almost ready,” Abe told her quickly, and he angled by to go back to the kitchen. I turned a little to stay only half in the room, but then couldn't help but go in and make the visit official. I was there to help Abe, which was to help her a little, if needed. But she said nothing else. She just stared at the one spot, an upper area where the wall to her right meets the ceiling and kept her eyes there. I stepped a bit closer to the bedside.

“Hi. How are you today?”

But, she made no reaction. Up close she didn't look like a person who'd recently talked much. But lunch was important so she'd asked about it. She wasn't acting hungry, rubbing her hands together or acting dramatic at all. But Abe came back in and she turned her head slowly in his direction. He later explained that one of the things she can still do is call for a meal right on schedule. Abe said she at six would see the clock and say: “Where's dinner?”

Abe wheeled over the food table with his foot that Stacee

bought her so she could eat in bed, then he put the plate and the drink down with a fork and a straw.

“Today, the chef is serving potatoes au gratin,” Abe said with a French accent, “and a tuna sandwich on white—half a sandwich to be precise.” Abe sat down on the opposite side and got her first fork-full ready. He held it up to her and she took it in but wobbled a little as if it was hard to have great aim for a things right in front of the mouth. When the fork was pulled mostly empty, Abe poured a little Ginger Ale from the can to the cup and put in a straw. She wouldn’t drink for a few minutes, but the attendant did things to prep for everything. Abe re-centered the plate on the table and pushed the drink back an inch. He lifted his butt off the bed a few inches then readjusted and sat down again.

This all quietly repeated itself for ten minutes. She took five bites from the fork Abe raised and two little nibble-bites of the tuna sandwich that Abe held up. After these, she made a little grunting sound saying “no more,” then just waited for Abe’s offering of the cup and straw. She pulled the Ginger Ale up through the straw and only an inch of it went back down. Abe got up and took the plate back to the kitchen. He said nothing, just acted like a robot that was performing his task. Then he came back with her meds, two ibuprofens and a mild nap-time sleep-aid, he later explained, which were given with sips from the straw again. Then he pushed a pillow down firmly on the slumping side and gave her a small adjustment upwards reaching across and holding both her shoulders, realigning her by an inch or two. Then I took his lead that lunch was over and I followed him back to the kitchen.

On the counter in plain sight were the individually-packaged blood-thinner pills. It was a thirty-sheet and they were

about halfway done for the month. “Those she gets always after breakfast,” he said.

“Ah, the most important ones!” I added, to show my memory skills and appreciation of the whole situation. I’d came out of the bathroom, and he was facing me directly, holding the blood-thinner pills on their sheet up in front of him.

“Are those the ones?”

“Yes, sir,” Abe had answered officially as if suggesting they were controversial. The kitchen space continued into a small living room with good places to sit, not just the wood chairs at the kitchen table. I went to a big chair facing the windows while Abe followed me in and sat on the edge of a small couch, like he was there just temporarily.

“Hey, let’s go out and get chicken-parms,” he said looking toward the windows, knowing like him I hadn’t eaten lunch yet.

“Sure,” I said. I then looked out the windows also to see what he saw, a few branches. I pulled myself forward in the chair to prep for standing up with the elbows out, but then Abe went back to the subject of the meds.

“Absolutely necessary, or else bad things happen,” he said repeating what they were told on the last day at the hospital.

“Right,” I said with eyebrows raised, just innocently following the unexpected comment.

“These are bad things already, though. Bad things are already happening.”