Touchstone

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David Baker

Mushrooms

--for my mother

Once again, the sun cool in the half-light of trees,
we step down into bottom land and feel the sink
of the earth. Here, between this sheer slope, a scarp
of limbs and rock, and the other one surely rising
through the distant trees (yet out of sight as we descend

the final steps), a river once rolled itself to sleep
and died. We know this from the rock, the shape
of land that's left, a memory the earth keeps of itself:
that's what you told me years ago, one spring, when
we first walked these grasses in our search.

It was mushrooms, then, we hunted--whites and browns
that rose like sponges under rot-black leaves,
or luckier, giant reds the size of skulls. For miles
we walked, heads down, and followed every fallen
log along its northern side. Stumps were good, too,

and maple trunks, and best, the grassless ground
beneath the frequent patches of May-apple. We filled
our sacks that afternoon, then stopped looking and walked
until night. The wind carried in trees above us
the faint brooding of a stream we would never find.

Today we've simply come to talk. No bag. No hunt.
Yet to talk we've come back here, spring again,
the land the same, us the same. We are another way
the earth remembers itself. Wild flowers bloom
where they bloomed before, water moves slowly

beneath our feet: we walk where we have walked.
You point out now a familiar log, white with fungus,
where then we found mushrooms, how they were growing
hidden near that hollowed cave of wood, and how,
even now as you step on one, a dozen more come into focus.

Shaya Kline

Lehi: Tel-Aviv

We are men without names, without kin
--Avraham Stern

1942

No matter how hot
it is during the day
in the middle of the night
a cold wind begins
and it is impossible
to get warm. I walk
into the kitchen.
My wife sits next
to the stove reading
DEATH IN VENICE.
When I put my hand
on her neck
she cringes, pulls a quilt
tight against her.
I announce that I am
going out to daven Maariv.
She knows there are no
minyanim this late.
She knows it is past curfew.
She says nothing.

The wind
blows in from the sea.
I wait for Yaaqov
on the corner of Allenby
and Hayakaron. A woman
with a yellow rose
in her hair is sitting
behind the window
on the second story
of a grey walkup.
Seeing me she waves,
opens her green robe.
Her breasts look like two fists.
I think of a friend

who slept with a twelve year old
Bedouin in Yafo.
He got gonnorhea
and gave it to his wife.
When the baby was born blind
all hell broke loose
in that house.
I turn away.

I hear a crack
like it is twenty below zero
and someone with an open palm
slapped a fat woman's backside.
A gull that flew against
the side of a building
drops on the roof
of a cafe. I can see
two British sergeants and
four Jewish policemen pushing
Yaaqov into an alley.

Silence.

The scream of a man stung
on his testicles by wasps.

--for S.E.

Shaya Kline

Arabs Have Placed Bombs

Arabs have placed bombs all over Jerusalem.
There are more bombs
than mikvoth, than synagogues, than Chassidim.
Mothers must warn their children:
"Look both ways before you cross the street
and be sure not to play with any bombs."
On a sign in immense red letters:
BOMBS
BEWARE OF WOMEN WITH HUGE BREASTS
I ride the bus,
eyeing shopping bags, briefcases, bulging pockets.
My wife frisks me before I can enter the apartment.

Sukkoth

The word of the Lord that came
to Yirmeyahu concerned droughts.
Yirmeyahu 14:2

1.

Every time someone mentions you
I am back at the Kothel
(hands over eyes, lips against stone)
on the day I left Jerusalem.
You smoked a cigarette, waited,
while I prayed German tourists

wearing green kibbutz caps
came down the steps
from the Arab suq.
One held a fish
and told me in English
that he had caught it in the Dead Sea.

As it began to rain, Leah,
I tried to embrace you.
Stepping back
you slapped me,

then leaned forward
and kissed me lightly on the cheek.

2.

As my sherut circled down to the sea
orange swirling clouds
wrapped themselves around Jerusalem.
The delicate walls of sukkoth bulged inward.
Rain mixed with hail, sand, boulders,
wings and heads of birds,
smashed the windshields of Egged busses.
All the streets flooded;
cars caught in the rapids tossed
against the sides of buildings.
Floating among debris,
schach, mezuzoth, torn pages
of a Sefer Torah
and a little hand reaching up
from the center of a whirlpool.
A father cried for help.
A policeman yelled he couldn't swim.
A mother in a flowered dress fainted
and tumbled off a balcony.
Just as she was about to hit the water
a great blue whale opened its black mouth.

After forty minutes
the rain slowed, then stopped.
Windows of boutiques and cafes misted over.
Laughter could be heard from poolrooms,
evening prayers from shtiblekh.
Lovers, arms filled with falafels and slices of pizza,
kissed.

3.

There is an index of romantic images
I no longer can remember.
I have little news. My poorest uncle,
the one with two million dollars,
died and didn't leave me a cent.

Shaya Kline

My parents will not talk to me

because I called the shiksa
my brother married a whore.
Leah, this is the fourteenth letter
in six months. You haven't answered.
I know you believe I'll never return.
Maybe the Chassid was right

when he warned me
never leave Jerusalem.
That it was bad luck.
While I'm gone the Moshiach might come.
Crying he kissed my hand
and asked me to think how I would feel then.

--for L.L.

Joseph Duemer

Weather Report

It gets darker
all afternoon.
The weather in this
part of the country
comes like a scythe
swinging back.
I am learning that
the scythe must swing
back to rush forward,
that birdsong fills
the garden some days
even though today it is
absent, that the earth
in spite of everything
is beneath my feet.
Seen correctly,
the world should
make you dizzy.

All afternoon
a brown spider
has been rigging its net
between the window
and the storm window
of my study:
a box elder bug
has already blundered
into the fresh web
and set the spider
dancing as if some
spider music had begun.
A spider knows exactly
where its prey is
just by tugging
the spokes of its web.
Now, as the storm breaks
the phone rings once
a pole somewhere
has been struck
by lightning
and I get the message.

Joseph Duemer

Goats

are not cruel in the way of swine,
can be heard by anyone
close enough to be called a neighbor,
prefer high places
like the shelf in the garage,
the tilting pinnacle of the woodpile,
the hood of a guest's car.
They are not radical omnivores
but finicky though bizarre eaters.
Their reputation for concupiscence
is likely the result of the violence
of their copulation: a buck will
break two-by-sixes to get at a doe
in estrus. And their eyes, the pupils
of which are shaped like coffins
and which are almost always brown,
are masterful as the eyes of young women.

Joseph Duemer

Only This Much

--after the Polish of Julia Hartwig

O yes you are fit to be a martyr
With your poor health
And short breath
With your delicate habits
And taste for hot baths everyday
O yes
   Nor is it anywhere written
That you will not walk to slaughter
With that gentle smile of yours
That they will not scatter your old books
That one day blood won't seep
From your discarded face
   And what will it be worth
If it does not accomplish a miracle
Our mother strokes our hair and we forget
Death and our legs
Never ache
Nobody talks too much
Or tries to improve us with lessons
There is no more boasting
Everyone lives according to his capacities
Dressing and cleaning up no longer
Devour the time
   And there are fewer poets and those
Who remain alive
Are treated like children with ancient parents
Every evening it's the same
A walk before supper
Nodding to each other as if
They carried some great secret
Between them
But they have forgotten it now
They are so old
Do we expect only this much
From a miracle

Ann Carrel

Exits

Two bucks lift their heads
from the surface of the pond
where they are drinking.
Their eyes have no fear,
but they have stopped
what they are doing.
They watch my slowing car,
probably only blur to them
and sound, then
wheel, bumping shoulder and jawbone,
scrambling for the brush,
tails flashing
once, twice,
many yards away.
Immediately they slow
to trot across the plowed
field as if to gather
dignity, their horns just
budding from their heads,
their eyes focused
on the line of trees edging
nightfall, and when I know
they have gone in
where they do not feel
me watching them, or care,
I watch instead the stars
above the field a long time until
they enter the pond.

Edward Byrne

Slipknot

Like everything else,
you have to work at it.
You must learn a certain procedure
that takes practice to perfect.
But, after a while, it becomes
a ritual. Each gesture is the result
of an unconscious effort.
You twist the cord around itself
and you are no longer surprised
when a small clot appears.
Then you pull tight
and it is a success.
You are left with nothing.

Edward Byrne

Signs Of A Storm

I open the windows
and the entire house
is filled with light.
The pillows appear
to be mounds of snow:
the sheets, fields
blazing under a luminous
moon. The shadows
of the furniture
have become dark forests
that rim a village
somewhere in Asia.
The weather is cool
and there are signs
of a storm drifting in
over the high ridges
of the sofa. Pockets
of warm air collect
above the old stove.
The sides of the sink
are ski slopes.
Each dish laid out
on the white tablecloth
is a frozen pond, unscarred
by the ice-skates
of children. In these
few moments of winter
only the people are missing.

I Have Allowed Her To Enter

It is evening and the sky
is beginning to buckle
into darkness as a last
dazzle of sunlight hovers
over the horizon. Far away
the faint figure of a woman
twists her body toward me
and I know it will be
another sleepless night.
With short steps, she nears,
the yellow lawn blackens
before her, and each tree
she passes seems, momentarilly,
to seize her. I have allowed
her to enter my life again
and again, hungered
for her unreal presence,
watched her undress, timidly,
in the half-light of a night
window, and felt her skin
against my own. I've listened
to her when she told me
she lived just for me,
and believed my own words
when I said she was all
I wanted. The love she offers
never wavers, nor does my need
to breathe in the delicate
fragrance that plays about her.
Together, in our nakedness,
she unravels the frayed ribbons
coiled inside of me
and discovers the tattered spool
she calls my heart. With her,
I can sense the envelope
of my room opening
and the nightwind spilling in
from the ragged crests
of the snow-covered mountains.
Always, in parting, we touch.
I've not yet given her a name.

Frannie Lindsay

Saying the Pachelbel

What was intended as "background music"
is absense inclusive of all of us: quartet for quiet
instruments left on their arm chairs.
Three hundred years, and the same peace rises away
from the gramophones. Versions of voices keep on turning
over. Each phrase is an end
of something said gently. Once, a kind of gossip

was passed around softly until the last fan
disappeared. So the quartet keeps on folding
over itself, while the bicycles churn out their weightless
roads: steel circles blooming their delicate miles
behind them. Theirs is a map well-tended.
And the music is retrospect: the same attention
gracefully straying. The sprinklers arc out
and back, and bring wet color over the evening's
flowers. Against the chipped lattice,
the ramblers are hauling a damp destination along
in their stems: somewhere the green will stop. Evening

of everywheres, the daytime compass closes on four
final downbows: the beams of the slowest star, the
reluctance
of each retardando. How slowly the voices revolve
on this detailed goodnight: lace curtains filling with
silence
like boatless sails that fill with location. And the music
goes solemnly on, its gentle monotony barely
embellished, an even breathing outside
the peculiar borders of sleep. The silent, extending
property.

Frannie Lindsay

In The End There Will Always Be The Tango

There have been violins
shadowed by birds in a downbow south.
A music that leaves us again and again.
Have there been dancers? The night I waltzed my way
upwind toward the orange balcony, you were not
part of that sunset. You were not
there with your arms thrown open,
for passion. So balance is absense:
partner and stranger. One of us missing.
There is just half of an orchestra here.
The rest is meadow. The rest
is a search: I am still gone. Close your arms,
you are holding a socket
for an enormous eye built of light. Not looking,
you tried to hold everything. Close your arms again.
I am still gone.

James E. Roper

Hiding

The first bird I shot
was a cardinal on a naked twig.
I raised my air-gun, fresh
from the box and smelling of oil.
I shot him neatly
at the crease of his folded wing.
He fell without a sound or any
motion but the falling
to glow against the colorless
thatch of winter leaves,
a swelling BB of blood
stringing beads
more beautiful than feathers
down the curve of the unruffled breast.
I was eight years old and hid
my trophy on the flat
tarred roof of the garage.
With the curling, scaly feet
lightly pinched between my thumb
and forefinger, I sent it pinwheeling
against the sunless sky,
brilliant as a flare.

R.T. Wilson

The Stigmata

In the broad auditorium we are still children
reading Jesus through this man's flesh like braille
the facsimilies of nail and thorn pass
from side to side where an old nun watches
our sea-gull eyes, letting us fill up
our loose pockets with God. And he

cannot even speak English, pointing a bandaged
hand at the projection screen where nothing
is like Lourdes or Fatima or mild Bernadette
but the cripples. The gentle Dominican
who speaks our tongue, tells us what must be
willed: how Stephen fell gladly at the side
of the living tree and Savio slept in a bed
of thistle, dreaming hard of paradise,
how the stigmata prays that he might also
have the mark upon his side before he dies.

And this is the picture I still carry in my skull
of Adam, more real than crucifix or scapular
or my Christian middle name: how lights came up
and they wheeled him down the aisle of sparrowed
eyes, arms spread like wings tipped white
with satin, his head noble enough for a Roman coin.

Michael Simms

The Answer

I have forgotten what I wanted to say.
I remember we woke covered with webs of light.
The air was blue around us.
It was snowing outside.

I won't bore you with similes.
Being alive is like nothing else.
But this morning arrived
like a letter I must answer at once.

What can I say?
I no longer believe in anything.
Every moment I grow smaller.
Everyone is forgetting me.

Then suddenly sails appear and continue as clouds.
I hear leaves spin inside the bare sycamore.
Children yell with voices that were here
before they were born.

I turn to you and say I love the world.

A Harness, A Halo

He had grown tired of hurting, being hurt.
He had married himself, needing
no other.

She covers her body with a robe
of birds. While the bread bakes
she lectures him
on love.

We have to keep relearning our feelings,
she says, pointing to the swan
in his chest,
the swallow arcing over the laurels.

When mass stabilizes
it is called
weight.

When mass changes
it is said to have
radiance.

Radiance is the source
of the original
mystery
of woman and man.

She says
Look at the wild violets.
They've been a success in the backyard.

He notices the delicate
evaporations
the eternal passage of souls.

He still wants himself, only himself
she wants children--

a swan, a swallow,
a crowd clinging to a grain of sand,
each day like a harness,
each night like a halo.

Denise Low

Big Springs Cemetery

this burial hill rises
between Stull and Clinton
on past the new reservoir
where we hiked all afternoon
the November wind and the graves
chill the boys
they hop over the sunken pits of weeds
and race each other to the car
while we step slowly
reading stories from the marble markers

we look for the oldest dates
the youngest babies
the largest family groups
names approaching our own

Place

is it the eagles returning to Lecompton, old Eagle Town
to that stretch of lookout cottonwoods on the Kaw River

or those rivers we measure our towns by
where we wait for flood and drought tides

or finding my grandfather during a storm
clouds and lightning and his face by the window

is it the house I grew up in
the way the sun slanted through the front window
warm bars of winter dust and light

is it a locus inside a muddy muscle
the heart squeezing rivulets of blood
again again again

How To Look for Arrowheads

There is a logic:

Start with water--they had to.
Visit your favorite creek
a clear winter day
and climb down the stubbly bluff
to water level. Look back up
through willows, cottonwoods
for a place to spend the night,
a hill to dull the northern winds.

Look for flint,
jagged, horn smooth,
not weak limestones and shales.

Tens and hundres of flakes--
discards--
mark the old workshop.

You can find the tools:
scrapers, burrins, knives,
with squirrel gnawed edges,

and maybe,
lodged sideways in gully clay
or flat under wet leaves
you will pull out
a pink, finely worked heart.

Victor Amburgey

Sun Code

I have deciphered
the sun code
through blinking leaves
like winking nails
on a new roof.
The shadows
speak in tongues
oriental days
and our nights
here
are bearers of messages--
other codes other
questions.

I have deciphered
the sun code
and like the elm
and the aster.
laugh,
while we struggle
for those answers
we bask in.

Apprehensions

1.

Something tells you
not to pick up the phone.
For one thing, it's not ringing.
For another, you have no one
to call. Still
you pick it up, the phone,
as if what you are thinking
could be worth telling,
as if who you remember
could be worth the trouble
to dial.

2.

When you pick up the phone
the dial tone oppresses you.
If you wait too long
it will stop being a dial tone
and scream at you.
Everyone screams at you.
You don't even have to dial
to be screamed at.
But for now it is stable.
It is a mantra--held close
it is silence. But it will end.

3.

When the phone rings, it's three a.m.
and your lights are on.
It always rings at three a.m.
This is the easy call.
They say nothing to you, and you
continue reading,
phone on your shoulder like a hand.
If they didn't call, you would worry.
If they called sooner, it would be a lie.

Vince Corvaia

No one hangs up first. One night
you will read out loud.

Bed of Nails

This is a sort of trick I've learned, don't ask
me where. I can lie
still like this for hours
and you can't make me flinch. Keep the light
off and pull over a chair. I know you have time
and this makes you nervous but soon you won't notice.

Is that a new outfit? I notice
things people usually don't, don't ask
me how. I can tell when you have time
and when you don't, when you lie
and when you're honest with me. I feel almost light-
weight having been this way for hours.

This wasn't simple to plan. It took hours
trying to align these points. Did you notice
I'd built it myself? Your hair is lighter.
Have you been in the sun? If you ask
me you oughtn't spend too long lying
unprotected like that. Myself, I never find the time

for that sort of frivolity. Don't you find that time
in fact has nothing to do with hours,
that in fact we measure our lives with lies?
I find that so. It's not something we notice
every day, though. Though you probably get to ask
yourself all sorts of things out there in the sunlight.

These days are colder though and the light
leaves earlier at night. I lost track of time
waiting for you. I've meant to ask
what becomes of your hours
when you're not in the sun. Don't think I don't notice
the distance even now. You watch me lie

here and you say you don't understand. Don't lie.
Don't say you're at ease in the dark. There's more light
in this room than you can notice.
Come here. Sit next to me, you have time.
Just ease yourself down, you owe me hours
and we can be alone all night. It hurts less now, don't ask

why. Conditioning. Don't ask anything. Just lie
back now, it's quiet. In a few hours you'll be lighter.
By that time you won't even notice.

Mary Kissel

Night Watch

They are all restless
tonight. My husband's legs
quiver in his dream, his breath
a pause I touch. He sighs
and turns. I listen.
From other rooms
a flung arm,
low cry, soft creak
of blankets rising and falling.
I wait while feet scrape the carpet
to my bed. My daughter
can't sleep. I reach out
and pull her in. She molds herself
to my body and finds instant sleep
against my shoulder.

I lie awake, listening
to the tick of the house, the furnace
turning off and on. I touch
my husband's leg with my leg
and smell my daughter's hair.
I listen hard. The whole house
listens as dark shapes move
and meet and dissipate. I watch
the darkness like my mother,
like the dinosaur, like the first
mother who ever lived.

Todd Werts

In Case Of Emergency

Every so often you should
Look into a very clean mirror
If for nothing else, then
Just to see your outsides.
I suggest a very large mirror--
Of perhaps a mile or two
On each side.
What you see is, of course,
Your choice
And the mirror's.
It's between the two of you.
If you two
Disagree, and the conflict
Is both unresolvable and unbearable,
You have another choice.
Three basic options:
Break you or the mirror or both.
Leave it for as long as you can stand.
Be a very clean mirror.

Peter Mladinic

At The Reuben Meat Company

No pretty girl will come and ask to sit at my table.
No gazelle will walk back and forth across the room,
no madonna with little crosses in her sharp black eyes.
This is a world without women. Nothing feminine
touches this floor which is cold and made of stone.
No finely shaped hand opens this door which is steel.
We men talk among ourselves. Here there are boxes,
and bells to tell us when to stop and when to begin.

Sometimes I go off by myself. I go down the dock
and inside the freezer a woman dances before my mind.
I see her russet hair, her large brown eyes, fair skin.
I hear her. She tells me she has a son with my name
and walks from table to table in the little restaurant.
She asks what I am writing. I say you, Gail, are all
I am writing. Her son and husband have no place here.
I am on a forklift moving pallets of roast beef eyes.

No fragrance, no faces like wheatfields, only frost
on boxes and voices over a loudspeaker and beef smells
inside truck carts after the trucks have been emptied.
Blocks away women with big hair, backbone and style
mingle in the lives of other women, other men. Here
on the dock hangs a grill that kills flies and bugs
to keep them away from the meat. And in the cooler
men dressed for winter and loneliness hustle and thrive.

Hussein

I used to go down to the Blue Coccoon almost every night. There didn't seem to be much else to do in a little town in Oklahoma except sit in a bar waiting for time to pass and watching the people who passed by. I would sit by the big smokey plate glass windows and watch the cars and stare at the Acme Tavern across the street. Besides, the only people I really knew were at the Coccoon every night.

It was still cold, but not too cold, and I ran the few blocks from my place to the Coccoon wearing my short coat and no gloves. It gets a little chilly by the window and I liked to keep the coat around my shoulders and pull the fur collar up around my face. The red fox looks good with my coloring, keeps my brown hair from looking so much like just another shadow in the bar.

My friend Selina Woods has blonde hair, all curls, the way it's stylish now, and she even dresses the way the models in Vogue look. She was married then, though, so I didn't consider her competition, you understand. But a woman still doesn't like being overlooked in all the glare.

She was late that night, and I was sitting there by the window all alone. Sam, the bartender, is a friend of mine--he was in the English Department before he started bartending and he lives just a block from my apartment--but he was too busy mixing drinks to keep me company. I hated sitting in a place like that alone, hoping the creeps wouldn't come pester me and knowing that if some good-looker sat down he'd turn out to be a masher anyway, but then I

still wanted someone to sit with me.

The only other person I knew in the bar that night was Selina's husband Bart, and he was over at the pool table watching a big game. I sat sideways to the window, so I could look out and see who came in but still watch the crowd at the game. There were about a dozen people around the table watching; that meant it was a high-stakes game. I'd never seen such intensity around a pool table until that winter at the Coccoon when Hussein moved in.

I say "moved in" because Hussein was the Coccoon's resident pool hustler; it was rumored that he made a living at it, over two or three hundred a week--a lot more than I made teaching English to college freshmen. I suppose he set up shop there because the Coccoon was the place in town where everybody showed up sooner or later. He could probably count on getting business, even if it was only from half-drunk cowboys coming in after the beer bars closed, looking for any kind of excitement. He could always take them for something, or so I'd heard.

I'd never really met him, although I'd spoken to him once when I'd been walking past the pool table. I said hello to some guy I knew and Hussein caught my eye. "I'm a nice guy too," he said. Anybody else I'd have frozen out, but he looked so bitter and I didn't want him to take me for another Oklahoma redneck who turns her nose up at a Palestinian, so I said "I'm sure you are." But I said it very coolly, and kept on walking; you have to keep a balance in these things. He was still a man and a stranger and I didn't want him to think I was handing out any invitations.

That night nobody was snubbing him; they were all gathered around betting on him. He had an odd grace when he shot pool, sometimes he looked just like a dancer when he leaned over the table a certain way. The red and blue beer light over the pool table made his skin gleam like good satin does, with a dull richness. His skin was a fine almond color, and his hair was thick and black and curly. The only really wrong thing with the way he looked was his big, hooked nose, but there under that light he looked very picturesque: his nose and bitter mouth took on the kind of cruel beauty that a falcon or a hawk has. And his eyes were very large and luminous.

I was sitting there thinking all this when Selina finally came in, and I was glad she didn't say "penny for your thoughts" or something flippant like that. She just sat

down, settling her curls the way she does, and cocked her head so she couldn't see Bart.

"Ghastly day, Madeleine," she said.

"Oh?"

"Bart and I had another row. I almost didn't come tonight but I didn't want to leave you stranded. I've been so depressed though."

"What's the problem?" I asked reluctantly. We'd been through this before. Selina had a prologue of tragedy that warmed her up to other topics.

"Oh, you know. Bart--marriage on the skids--all that."

"Mmm. Any new developments?"

"Well. I decided after the knock-down drag-out we had today that if he's going to play around so am I."

"My. Who with?"

"Don't get technical--maybe someone interesting will show up."

"What would someone interesting be doing in Oklahoma?"

"Oh, you're such a pessimist."

"You're such a romantic."

"It's so true, dear, but it's good for you. A person needs a little fantasy life, even you. Admit it. Aren't you sitting here every night waiting for it to happen?"

I laughed. "It?"

"You know--something exciting, something to stir you up again. I'm tired of feeling all dead and dull inside." She pushed at her curls.

"You're hardly dull, Selina," I said, knowing she was fishing for ego support. "You want a drink?"

We caught Sam's eye and ordered a gin tonic for her and another one for me. We were in our gin tonic phase then; the month before it had been screwdrivers.

"What did you and Bart have the row about?"

"Money. He's such a spendthrift. Oh, dear, here he comes now."

She looked out the window as if she hoped he was only walking out of the bar and not to our table. Bart stopped and stood there for a minute, rattling the change in his pocket and frowning. Then he walked back to the pool table and started talking to Hussein.

Selina, still with her back to the window, whispered "Where is he?"

"Talking to Hussein."

"Oh, the Palestinian pool shark?"

"Selina!"

"Well? I don't see you getting chummy with him, Miss Liberal."

"Oh--"

"Actually I think he's kind of cute in an odd way, don't you?"

"Well--"

"I do. Exotic is the word, I think. I wonder if I could make Bart jealous."

"You wouldn't!"

"Of course I would. Serve him right, too. Maybe he'd spend a little less time shooting pool and a little more time with me."

"You flirt."

"You ought to try it."

She was teasing of course but I could sense a little dig. Selina was always introducing me to people, trying to pair me off. She couldn't understand why I was still single and unattached.

"Here's my chance," she said. Bart and Hussein were walking toward us; this time Bart was heading for the door and not for our table. But Selina caught his eye and forced him to greet us.

"Selina, you know Hussein. Hussein, this is our friend Madeleine."

"I am very pleased to meet you," he said to me. I probably imagined it, but I thought he bowed slightly, just perceptibly, as he spoke.

I nodded, and I felt a twinge of sympathy for him; Selina was about to unleash herself on him, and he might not know the rules of the game.

"Well, Hussein," she said, tossing back her blonde curls, "You've been winning again?"

"Yes--a very good night."

"Oh," she went on, "but you always win, don't you?"

"Not always."

"Oh, now," she batted her eyelashes, "don't be modest--"

"Cut it, Selina," Bart broke in.

"What?" She feigned innocence. "Why, you always bet on Hussein yourself dear."

"You weren't so approving of my betting this afternoon--dear."

"It was your losing I didn't approve of," she snapped.

I retreated further into my fur collar and stared at the table. We were in for it again. I tried to tune them out; I managed to lose track of the words but I was very aware that they were making quite a scene in the club. Selina stamped her foot, tossed her head, and strode dramatically out of the bar. She walked across the street to her car, where she paused, looking back at the club. I knew she wasn't at all sure she wanted to leave, but she had committed herself by then: if she returned, the effect of her exit would be lost. With renewed petulance she slammed the car door behind her and drove away. Only then did the rest of us breathe again.

Bart slumped into a barstool and stared at the floor. Hussein looked embarrassed and, I thought, a little disoriented. "May I sit here?" he asked me, "just to talk for a minute?"

I nodded, of course. What else could I do?

He focused on my eyes. "They...do this...often?"

I though that was a little personal, but I just shrugged my shoulders. You have to make allowances.

Slowly he said, "I am only still curious about relations between men and women here." He'd seemed to sense my discomfort at his opening line; I was rather impressed by that perception. "It is much different in my country."

"Oh?" I said, giving him the lead.

"In my country, for instance, women do not go to the bars like this."

I was sitting there thinking "Sure, they wear veils and walk ten steps behind you" when I realized that I was not only forgetting to allow for cultural differences, I was not saying a word.

Hussein was filling in the conversational gap, rather lamely I thought, poor fellow, with "But it is very...different here."

"Oh yes," I said quickly, "There isn't much else to do here."

"Don't you like this town?"

"Well...it's so small."

"Ah. But there is a very good life here. I have a very good life here."

"Oh?" I said, interested. "What do you do?"

"I study petroleum engineering. There is a very good department here. Someday I will take this technology back to my country. You know about petroleum engineering?"

I had to say no. He was making me feel very ignorant. While he explained to me what "production evaluation" was I retaliated mentally by wondering whether it was a cliche for a Arab to be studying petroleum engineering. Unfair of me, I know, but he put me on edge like that. Me trying to figure out if I was making racist responses or just re- acting naturally and him alternately proving and disproving my preconceptions. It was very confusing.

By the time he finished telling me about his family, the PLO on campus, and his plans for a career in the oil industry--very lucrative-sounding--I was on my fourth gin tonic and ready to order another. Maybe it was just the gin that made me feel that way, a little dizzy and warm, but it might have been his eyes, the way they kept staring at me, or the way I could almost feel his energy clear across the table. I think it was mostly the gin, but I was still relieved when Bart came to take him back to the pool table.

"The out-of-towner wants a rematch. If you're up for it we can really take him."

"Sure," he answered, and I felt relieved, but then he looked at me again. "May I come back to talk later?"

"Why not?" I said offhandedly, pretending it didn't matter much. Saying no might have been embarrassing all around--it seemed better just to go along. Besides, it was rather polite of him to ask like that--not your usual barroom manners. Still, I was beginning to wonder if I really wanted to sit there all alone while he shot the game, when Sam took off from the bar and joined me. My face was beginning to feel cooler. Sam was so safe; there was no pressure. I consciously relaxed my muscles, and my head began to clear a little.

I could sit and talk to Sam about nothing at all; that time I think we discussed brands of gin. I watched Hussein shooting pool under the blue and red lamp. He wore a European-cut shirt in a dusky print, rather more fashionable than you usually see in a little Oklahoma town. I liked it. He looked rather striking posed under colored lights; exotic, as Selina had said. I caught myself then; things were getting dangerous when I began thinking like Selina. She's my friend, but I think she's definitely too superficial.

I asked Sam if he thought Bart and Selina would split up or if this was just a stage they were going through.

"Well," he said, "Bart'd have more time to shoot pool."

"Sam!"

"Madeleine," he answered, "sometimes it comes to that."

"To what?"

"Well, sometimes you can live with a person for years and what it boils down to is that, for all you know 'em, you'd get as much satisfaction out of shooting a good game of pool. Or more." He downed his drink.

"Pessimist."

"Have you ever tried it?"

"Now you sound like Selina."

"Heaven forbid! I take it back!"

Bart and Hussein both came back to announce another victory, and they bought us a round of drinks to celebrate. Or perhaps it was Hussein who bought my drink. I'm not sure; I didn't mean to encourage him.

Bart was toasting Hussein. "Got time to teach me that shot later?"

"Maybe. I got another game soon, then I think that's all for tonight."

"Hussein's teaching me some new shots," Bart explained to us. "Maybe I'll become a pool shark myself."

"I'm no shark. Just have to make a living."

"You do that playing pool?" I asked.

"He certainly does," Sam affirmed, "Over two hundred dollars a week."

"Not that much all the time. Some months, just two hundred dollars for four weeks."

"But isn't that a pleasant way to earn it?" I was certain it was more adventurous than school-teaching.

"It's all right. You got to train though. Before big matches, out-of-town guys, I run two miles over on the track and work out. Get lots of sleep. And I don't drink ever until after I play."

"That last part sounds especially rough." Sam raised his glass as if to toast him.

Bart pointed across the room. "I think the next loser is waiting for you. Can I watch?"

"Sure. You go tell him I come in a minute?" Hussein slid out of his chair and half-crouched behind me, as if he did not want the others to hear. I looked at him quizzically.

"You like me, huh?"

I hesitated. "Well..."

"Yeah. You do. You come home with me tonight," he said

as if it were settled, and he walked away.

I looked at Sam: I couldn't tell from his face whether he had heard. I didn't know whether to tell him; something made me want to keep it to myself. Perhaps Hussein had no idea how...inappropriate he had been. He was, after all, a foreigner. I ordered another gin tonic.

Sometimes the best defense when you're being hustled in a bar is to imagine the character in another context. That was what I did then; I closed my eyes for a minute and imagined where else I might see him. I thought of the university coffee shop, broad daylight, where the foreign students gathered in their white university T-shirts, books spread out over the tables, cigarettes spilling out of ash-trays. I tried to picture Hussein in a white university T-shirt. How incongruous! Then I tried to imagine myself meeting him there--ridiculous. Me in my mouse-brown hair in broad daylight. I opened my eyes.

I was glad to be in my nightclub with its darkness and tiny colored lights. I pulled the fur collar around my face again, and I took another sip of my drink. I looked at Sam and decided I'd better not say anything. He'd probably think I was just getting a little drunk anyway. Sam looked a little drunk himself.

"Did I ever tell you," he said, leaning across the table the way he does when he starts getting nostalgically tipsy, "that I published a story in the New Yorker once?"

"Yes." I squeezed the lime section into my drink.

"It was...one hell of a story."

I stared at the table. "I know," I said slowly. I was thinking that Hussein really seemed intelligent, that maybe I was being unfair to him. I didn't know what to say to Sam; I never do when he talks about that story. I looked around the bar and the whole place seemed sort of dim, as if it were disassembling. I looked across the room and noticed Hussein casually bend over, double-bank the cue ball, and sink the eight.

"I don't feel so good," Sam said.

"Maybe you drank too fast. Want me to get you some water?"

"No. I'll get it. Or maybe some coffee." He swayed heavily as he rose, but steadied himself enough to aim toward the bar.

As soon as Sam had moved Hussein appeared at my table.

"Where's Bart?" I asked.

"I let him shoot this game."

Lamely I said, "That was nice of you."

"No. I have other games to play."

I felt a tightening in my chest. "Games...?"

"You ever roll dice?"

I breathed again. "Yes."

He drew a pair out of his pocket. "I won fifty dollars early tonight."

"Those stakes are too high for me. What would we play for?"

"Dominance."

"Dominance over what?"

"Just...dominance." He shook the dice in his hand. "You call."

"Ones."

"Snake-eyes," he corrected. The dice rolled across the table, one onto the floor. "Ah. You're lucky so far."

"I am?"

"Call again."

"Ones, again."

He rolled the dice. One black dot showed on each cube. "You win." The corners of his mouth turned down. "You have dominance."

"So?"

"I must obey you."

"Well..." I shrugged my shoulders.

"But let's roll again. Best three out of five."

"I don't think I want to play this game. I think I'll get Sam to drive me home."

"Too late. I just saw him leave. You live far?"

"Next to campus."

"I walk you."

I looked around the club; Sam, indeed, was not there. "I guess I don't have much choice," I said. I walked out quickly, slightly ahead of him, letting my hair fall across my face. I fumbled with my purse, trying to keep my hands away from his, just in case. As we walked I concentrated on the dull gleam of the pavement under the neon lights.

Hussein shoved his hands into his pockets and stared at the moon; it was covered by a fine mist.

When we came to my building I simply said, "I live here," and turned toward the door.

"Don't you want to come with me?" He motioned across campus and then touched my arm lightly.

I shrank back. "No...thank you," I said a little unevenly.

He frowned, only slightly. "If you do not want to be with men, then why do you go to the bar?"

I actually, for a minute, wondered what he would do if I did say yes. You never can tell.

"Agh!" he scoffed, scowling. He turned slightly away, putting his hands into his pockets again, frowning at the moon with his deep brown eyes.

I protested: "There's nothing odd about--" but it was lost.

"Good-bye," he said, and walked toward the street.

I went into my apartment, locking the door behind me. I took the white gauze of the curtain aside from one corner of the window and watched him as he crossed the street, walking away through patches of light in the darkness.

The Carnival

She said, "You don't have to listen if you don't want."

"I know," he said. He stood on the crest of the hill with his back to her. Below them were the pink and white lights of the carnival.

"He was waiting for me when I came through the door," she said.

Tortoise shell barretts pulled her long hair back in smooth wings above her ears. Organ music filtered up in the night. In the trees down the hill children threw firecrackers that crackled and spit fire.

"He'll cool down," he said. "It was only a party. We didn't do anything."

"I turned the light off, then saw him there," she said. "Out the corner of my eye I saw him. I guess I saw him in my mind the whole time at the party too."

"You feel guilty now. We didn't do anything, had a good time, and now you feel guilty about it."

"I don't," she said.

"You weren't hardly drunk," he said.

"I was plenty drunk and you know it." She left the side of the car and walked to the edge of the road. "He didn't come to bed last night. And he left early for work this morning."

"It's Saturday," he said.

"He left," she said.

"For good then?"

She shook her head no, but he did not see. He watched

the string of carnival lights sway in the wind.

"Let's go down to the fair and watch the kids ride the bumper cars," he said.

"He said we'd have a serious talk, but he didn't come home." She looked to the ground. The cold breeze blew up from the valley and whipped her dress up around her waist. The power line hummed overhead.

She said, "I used to be so quiet with him. I don't think he believed I could do a thing like that."

"We didn't do anything," he said. "It was just a party."

"When I turned the lights back on he saw me stagger," she said. "That was the end of it."

Children screamed in the woods. The firecrackers popped like distant guns, their fire flickered, then went out.

"Let's go down to the carnival," he said.

"I'm afraid," she said.

"The kids love to ram each other with those cars, you know." He leaned out over the falling hill. The wind blew the smell of gunpowder in their faces. "You ever see them? The bumper cars...how they race around in the circle, some of the cars running the wrong way, the electricity motoring them around so they can slam into one another. Knocks hell out of everybody. The best damn ride they got this year." He looked down and rubbed the toe of his shoe in the dirt.

"We can't go down there," she said. "He's down there."

"We'll miss him."

"No we won't," she said. "The bright lights."

"This is so typical," he said. "So damn typical. You know that? So typical and common."

"It's different though. I never--"

"That's right," he said. "Never."

The wind kissed her face.

"I needed him," she said.

"You used to," he said. "Did he ever need you?"

"He used to, just like I needed him."

"Nobody fills anybody's needs. You know that," he said.

She turned back for the car. "We used to."

"You did?"

"Yes. I think so."

"You think so?"

She nodded in the dark.

"I never knew one way or the other," she said.

"You never talk?" he said. "Hell, at least we talk."

"Don't mention her."

He breathed deeply and stared out over the carnival. A pair of voices sounded in the trees.

"I have to go home," she said.

"Hell, let's go home," he said. "I didn't want to go down the hill anyway."

She moved close to him on the front seat as he turned the engine over and pulled the car off the shoulder to head down the hill. The headlights flashed white the faces of a young boy and girl behind a tree. They held a giant purple bear between them and as the car lights struck their faces they looked down and staggered blindly for a step.

Inside the car he turned the heater on and she dropped her head to his shoulder.

"Your needs," he said. "You never knew?"

"I never knew," she said.

She stood next to the car on the hill and waited for him to come up from the valley through the woods. Her two wings of hair were drawn tightly to the back of her head where one barrett tied them together. Her hands were inside a fluffy white muff that she held at her waist. Twigs snapped and she saw him clear the crest of the hill, his silhouette thrown against the halo of the carnival.

"It's the last night," he said. "If we don't go tonight we'll miss it this year. Ernie told me the bumper cars are really tearing the kids up. Best damn ride they got."

He kept his hands in his pockets and stood next to her.

"What's the matter?" he said.

She brought the muff up and ran it over her face.

"He wouldn't talk it over," she said. "If I'm not home in fifteen minutes he'll know we can't go on with it anymore. It's just a joke anyway."

He kicked the dirt with his heel.

"What's the use of blowing your whole life because of one slip-up?" he said.

"What's to blow?" she said.

"Don't start crying." He moved his head from side to side. "Don't let him get to you. He'll cool down. We can still see each other on nights like this."

"I'll lose half my life that way," she said. "And I'm not crying...at least not for the reason you think I'm crying. It's not him or the need, it's the desire that's gone."

Peter Hager

He looked down at the carnival for a long time.

Sparks flared and blew from the power line terminal overhead.

"Damn fair's milking the county dry of electricity," he said. "We'll all be in the dark before it's over."

"Let's go down and watch the bumper cars," she said.

He started down the hill, then stopped. "You sure?"

"Has it been fifteen minutes yet?"

He angled his watch toward the carnival. "Thirty."

"Then let's go down and watch the cars crash," she said.

The Dancing of the Deer

I saw him on the lawn, lifting one foot and then the other, faltering at first, his white bucks like spilled milk in the grass and then poured again in strutting arcs. He was red in the face; his lungs strained to fill the bag. The screeching, wheezing, screaming of the pipes rang in the forest. Deer appeared two at a time, a summer's light brown. Their flaccid tails twitched as they stepped onto the lawn. They seemed timid but in awe. He marched back and forth behind the house, strutting. I could see him from the cracks between the gray weathered boards of the sugarhouse. The grass was still green in the fading light, and he awkwardly began to dance in it. His arm squeezed the bag to his side, the bellows of his cheeks first puffed like rich fat and then collapsed into the ribs of his face. I saw through the wetness of my eyes and the humid air that he squinted under the strain. I even thought that I saw him wink at the stepping deer. His head was nearly bald, chest bare and hairy. I saw many scars even from that distance. He wore the Gordon kilt; the pipes were of the clan Cameron. Each step was slightly newer than the last, and then suddenly he was on his toes. The deer came forward on their hind legs, one at a time, to step with the piper. They were a wonder of controlled strength, and the notes themselves danced in the heavy air.

"There ain't no gold or nothin' buried down here. I don't care what you think, you knucklehead. You just like cellars.

You're just like a rat with fleas."

"You're just like one 'cause you smell like one. And Mr. Omstead said there was and he knows 'cause he's old. He said the Sisters buried it with Indian bones in one of the farm houses." I didn't look up from the hole I was digging in the cellar floor. My brother would never believe a thing unless he worked at it himself or my father had told him.

"Those sisters didn't build these old things. Men did. Sisters had 'em built and used up all their gold doin' it. It's obbeus. And besides, Dad don't want you diggin' up the cellar."

"Bug off, Shithead." I continued and he told my father and my father sent me to bed wondering out loud what kind of an animal I was that dug holes. I thought about him in the quarries and I went back afterward, without them knowing. I found many things there.

My first year in the woods and my brother's third buck on the ground. He and my father at work. My father's tam-o'-shanter slanted across his forehead like a scar. He told us that this one had been in the apple; not Wolf's nor Omstead's nor even O'Brien's, but the Badger place. He stuck a crab apple on the end of his knife and held it up. The stench was sickening but it seemed subdued in the brown, November light, which seemed to radiate dully from both the gray skies and the perpetually wet, dead leaves. The slick liver did not look unlike a wet root at the base of an ash. The wisps of blood were so many birch twigs on the forest floor. The stomach lining the shade of dead lichen. Rich layers of fat like rich layers of fat. I held a hind leg aloft and imagined the tongue, incredibly long and gray, to be a dead trout on a bank, a snake or lizard in a photograph, the simple turn of a sheet. Anything but a dead tongue. He hacked at the bone in the hips to get to the terrible rectum. The blade twisted in the cool air, gracefully; swing, swing, swing. I felt something loosen inside of me and then I felt the snow in the air and I thought of a warm bed and Sunday night in a quilt beside the fire--"The Wonderful World of Color" and the sickness that came with not doing homework for Monday morning, being naked in the boys' shower, and watching blood adhere like fine mist to the hairs on a man's hands.

I told him that I might be sick and he looked at me steadily. My brother smiled but was silent. My father's face

did not change. His wrists were as thick as roots, and as strong. He was a big man, use to the woods and fields; used to the stone quarries where he worked with dynamite and slabs of rock as large as cars. He was used to World War II and the silk and pushing men from planes, then following them into the air, a machine gun held to him by straps and the perforated barrel whistling in the wind. He told the story once and only once of the time a man landed on his chute and slid past him and how he'd reached for and caught the spiralling cords and how, when they landed together, he heard one of the man's legs snap like a closing door in the wind and how he'd left him there to go about the business at hand.

He was used to eating goats' stomachs, blood pudding and brain, and bucking a saw all morning for a dime to see the matinee when my grandfather didn't take it to town with him. He'd fought anyone who made fun of his sister and he'd always won. He was used to venison and quail and trout, rabbit, woodchuck, bear, suckers, yellow and white perch--always.

He had removed everything from the glistening bellows and stared and mumbled once and only once, there in the falling snow, that men must get used to the simple things. He wiped the knife on his pants, handed me his shotgun, and somehow threw the huge carcass over his back. There was a softness in the dark night and a terrible loneliness as we followed his puffing toward home.

"You ain't never shot nothin'. You're worse than the Japs against John Wayne. You couldn't hit a bear in a box."

"So what!"

"What's the matter with you, that's so what. Dad thinks you're yellow." I went for his throat, though I could barely reach it, and he held me off with a stiff arm. "Yellow, yellow, yellow!" I finally kicked him and he yelled and knocked me down and picked me up by the heels. He bounced my head off the frozen lawn as if I were a dull post-hole digger and he was caught in the monotony of the job.

Behind the house there was the lawn. Behind the lawn--the field. Behind the field--the forest. Behind the house and across the lawn and the field and into the forest and its stands of sugar maple and hog backs of spruce and fir and balsam and down over the cliffs and then across the

road was the swamp. The swamp itself was small, but the surrounding hillsides made a basin that was an hour's walk straight across and they were filled with spruce and alder so thick in places that even the dogs had to milk their ways through, squeezing first here and then backing out and then there until they found a path.

Behind the house there was the swamp. The swamp with its deer beds and slick silver leaves, hummocks, hog backs, and pots of clay that seeped in long veins through the bog and its leads until they found an escaping brook. In these brooks, over thousands of years, finger-sized claystones were formed, each a different shape and all as smooth as paper and without sharp edges. Ducks, drops, and pellet-shaped claystones were my favorites, because they seemed to fit in the corners of my pockets to be found like old friends months later.

The sidehills were thick and rotten; dark, wet and full of holes for rabbit, squirrel, and ground hog. Partridge and woodcock liked the cover, and my father took me there. We pushed the bassets onto the rabbit tracks and stood quivering in the cool air as they worked the scent, our quiet guns cradled in our arms and growing heavier and cold. First there were yaps and short squeals of excitement, and then the hollow deep baying of the chase. My father had always known the swamp it seemed, and as he heard the direction of the hounds we were off running to a fenceline or hummock or opening in a dead apple orchard--where he left me. He said the dogs would come that way and then he was off alone down the hill to some dark place where he met the rabbit and tried to turn it and the thick-voiced dogs toward me.

As he pushed away through spruce and fir and clacking alder, I began to shiver again. I always hope the rabbit would go deeper and turn before my father reached it, but I worried for the dogs in the leads and felt selfish. I saw him push away, his red hunting coat growing darker as he went, the sounds of his boots on the cracking leaves and fallen branches already gone, and only the ponderous scent of the Pall Malls that he smoked in streams left to hang in the ancient air.

Brisk, clean air of autumn, sky so blue it hurt the eyes, the tree line bursting in color at our squinting eyes, the lawn burned brown in places but still green and more

rich earth showing through than in the summer. The summer was when we smelled the grass; spring, the decay and fungus of mole tunnels; winter, the warm fragrance of snow; but autumn was dirt, rich fertile dirt that wanted one's knees and elbows for the last time.

The house was maple brown with white trim; the forest on the other end; the log landing with a man swinging a mall on one side; and on the other, a fire pond, low from summer's heat, and a gray sugarhouse with its cupola opened to the sky and the sun on the winking eye of the window that faced the lawn.

Six grass-stained and smudged boys with a football spurting back and forth. The air full of noise: boys' yelling, grunts and groans, the sudden sharp whack of the mall in maple, elm, black ash, black cherry, apple, beech, yellow and white birch, or poplar; the hollow talking of the dogs within; the easy wind.

The exuberance, the lunging, grabbing, bright movement, and the cool dampness of the ground. The spiked ring of the sledge on metal wedge, a taste of sweat and the autumn air on dry lips, the house suddenly above me and the quick feeling in my chin when it broke as I slid under the edge of a garden tractor that was parked beside the house--the lawn moist there from shadow.

And I remember the faces above me in constant swing, a twinkling from one side and the man at the other, at the screen door, smudging out his cigarette, wiping his forehead, removing the tam-o'-shanter and tossing it onto the hook of a deer antler that was nailed to the door jamb, laying the mall against the house, and then his rich voice telling me to be more careful next time covered by the slap of the door as he moved through--something hanging in the void. And then my brother telling me that it was just his way.

My father told me it's the simple things that count. He rarely spoke, but acted as if his mere existence would be all that we needed. He often came home with granite wounds on his body and brash hands and I came home from football or basketball practice, sports that my brother had excelled in but I hated, with sprained thumbs and wrists, water on the knee, pulled muscles, hemotomas on the tops of my feet, bruised chins and forearms, charlie horses and bad ribs and even worse, the tiny nicks missing from my own hands. Unlike

him, I was never proud of scars. And then we often stood in the living room after arguing about the war, by the huge slate fireplace that he had gathered from the fields and placed together like a dream, all with his own hands. Huge deer antlers, the bases as thick as a man's wrist, hung over the fireplace--largest buck of 1963. We stood there in the living room, toe to toe, my brother gone from college and already in Asia, having told me before he left that it was easier and better to acquiesce, his new word, and I having told him to mind his own business. My mother hiding in the kitchen and him talking about duty--we began the dance, countless times--the hardwood snapping beneath our feet--slowly at first and then feinting, counterstepping, jabbing, boxing, and finally it was as if we were whacking at each other with axes--the controlled swinging of axes in broad arcs, there in the firelight, the constant movement and gentle nicks as if from honed steel--until we slapped out different doors--him to shovel a rink for my sisters on the firepond or to play his pipes or to leave for his clan bar in the nearby town and me to watch from the sugarhouse or lie in the swamp on my back in the wet march grass and play a game with my eyes and the dead alders above, a game of peek with the night clouds and always there was the sickness of cigarette smoke in the air.

"You oughta get a haircut, boy. Dad thinks you're a freak."

"So what, MAN? I gotta be a skin head like you and him? Next thing I'll have to do is drop outta high school and pretend soldier like you. Whoop Pee!" He was in uniform and looked different each time I glanced at him, and yet it seemed as if he were cast in bronze and would never change.

"Being a man is probably just an impossible dream for you, Shorty. Sure, make fun like you do for everything else. At least I'm doin' somethin' important."

"Ya, I'm sure they'll thank you like crazy if they can find anything to thank. Shit, you got no idea why you're over there you big dummy."

"Ha, Dad says..."

"Due Tee. I know what Dad says." Sometimes the sun set behind red clouds, the air turned orange and almost thick and we could almost taste it like metal on our tongues as we watched it fade to gray, then to dark green, and then into night.

I was in Europe for a year and then the first of the letters, this one about my father. He was losing weight since I'd left, his breath came harder and harder so that the pipes made him ill, but he smoked more than ever. The constant smoke. He'd begun to drink too much and when he did play, deer would come from the swamp, curious of the sinewy notes. My mother told me that he'd all but given up the guns, that the young men they'd come from Nova Scotia with were dying, that two had shed their last blood in this life together in one fall in the quarry--and, of course, that blood was the only thing known to man that can stain granite. That he had asked to be transferred to the sheds to package headstones because the Italians had all of the good jobs. That the dogs were getting fat and dying off and he would no longer breed them. How my sisters said it was male menopause when he yelled at them for nothing, but that she, my mother, thought it was something else.

And then the letter that his kidneys had failed. That is was alright because one of my sisters was compatible, but wouldn't I come home. And I did, through Canada, lest they were looking for me, and crossing the border at night east of Derby Line, through the swamps of Warren Grant and Warner's Gore and across the great Nulheagean Basin and along the Memphormagog where Roger's Rangers were slaughtered. Then to Canaan and home. He was sitting in the living room watching the empty fireplace, smoke curling above him among the antlers like a network of veins. I gently let the screen door close behind me and stood beside him. He was thin and smaller than I'd ever seen him, but he was still bigger than most men I knew and when he turned his head to me I smiled. He pulled on the cigarette and asked me quietly why I wasn't like my brother, and I asked him what he meant, though I knew. He said that my brother was now in his second tour, a patriot, fighting for his country, a thing that I obviously knew nothing about, and he turned back to the rustling ashes on the hearth. And easy breeze had begun to settle through the open flue as the air outside grew dark, and dry lightning flashed.

I told him that I'd come all the way from Spain just to see him, that my brother had nothing to do with it, that my beliefs had nothing to do with it. He stared at the hearth, eyes squinting from the smoke from his lips and he began to hum a Scotish tune with all the rancor of the pipes--his voice brittle in his throat.

I worry about him sometimes. You gotta start bein' nicer. Quit gettin' him so mad."

"It's not me."

"Bullshit. He's gotten...he's not so strong like before. You leave him alone or I'll nail your fuckin' shoes to the floor with your feet in 'em." We heard him outside wheezing. I left.

I stood thinking about my brother in the jungle and wondering if the jungle was different than the swamp. I heard the humming beneath the green vision in my mind and saw a picture of father and son as one in fatigues, caught almost still but moving in a flash of light. I gently closed the door behind me and lay in the cool grass of the lawn, watching the lightning in the distance. I liked the way it seemed to explode in the sugarhouse, filling the one glass eye in an instant and then disappearing like a wink. I marveled at the cool air on my open eyes.

Then the letter and the telegram at the same time. I could not imagine my brother dead and tried not to see him fall from the wound. I went to my room that he and I had shared, to the closet, and found the forbidden pistol that he had used to shoot Jap bottles and rats in the dump. I had always thought it odd that my brother should own it because he had never done another thing against my father that I knew of. I cradled the gun and listened to the mice run in the tunnels in the walls and attic and knew that there were spirits running with them up there. I had never liked spirits so I went to the cellar with the souls--untroubled souls that I'd known for years. Spirits were alive in fox fire and swamp gas which I saw in dreams, and in antlers and deer heads that waited for no one. The cellar, with its heavy slate slabs stacked one on the next from the dirt floor to the hand-hewn beams of the house. Those slabs put there over a hundred years before by huge horses and dangerous men. Where each spring, water seeped through the spaces between slabs from the back lawn, and I imagined that the rivulets were the juices of those buried in the Cutlure Cemetery, though it was two miles away--I could smell them in the spring--unpretty smells, but rich and sharp at the same time--where souls sat with me on the dirt floor and talked, loudly sometimes, of the ways that things used to be

and the mistakes they had made, of how hoping for things was usually better that having them--how I used to hear them through the walls of my closet when the spirits were away in someone's dreams, or through the back lawn when I had an ear pressed to it on summer nights--and I could see their sacred impressions in the dirt. I ran my fingers over the hard packed dirt. He had only said, "It was the boy's duty," when he'd read the letter, and while sitting there in the cold, damp cellar, the cool steel almost hot, I could hear him filling the bag outside and I asked the souls what my duty should be.

It was nearly dark as I crept to the sugarhouse and watched through the cracks as the deer approached. He coughed dark blood between breaths. I knew that he would never change and I imagined myself on the lawn, filling the bag and beating a steady time with my heel and then rising with the deer and dancing with them into the swamp. I knew that he would be more compassionate in death than he was in life, but that did not matter. I heard the wailing of the pipes and watched the dancing deer. I wondered if I could make them dance with the same kind of grace.

Touchstone Student Creative Writing Awards, 1982

The Winners:

John Weis, poetry

Lisa Ulrich, fiction

Michael Mott was this year's poetry judge. His books include Absence of Unicorns, Presence of Lions (poetry), Counting the Grasses (poetry), Helmet and Wasps (novel), and other books. He is currently completing the authorized biography of Thomas Merton.

Gordon Weaver, this year's fiction judge, is the author of Give Him a Stone (novel), Circling Byzantium (novel), Getting Serious, and other books. His work has appeared in many anthologies, including The O. Henry Awards and Best American Short Stories.

John Weis

On Water's Edge

"'It's not that you're necessarily
shallow,' she'd said, 'it's just
that you're entirely without depth.'"
--Obscure

Why do women seem so damn shallow?
Vast ambiguous country ponds with muddy bottoms
and clever currents flowing about
dubious and dangerous: a threat
to any fool with a fetish for wading.
Untrained men-kids with air guns
roam the shore truantly plinking at
wooden plank relics of no swimming signs
sighting in across the murk at an
old rubber tire floating there
in the Saturday afternoon.
And high school guys with
beer-can hands of paper-cut fingers
--all those books and volumes--
stare with impenetration over the waters
waiting for Sir Francis Drake to maybe
sail up in the Golden Hinde
or even Captain Blood in an
amphibious Camaro with
flesh stereo overhead cam.
At sundown the sheriff comes cruising
and chases all the children away.
Pausing he stares without reflection at this pond
in falling shadows and turning
sends a smouldering butt arcing
orange over the surface
where light yet meets dark for a while
till the moon might rise.
And the pond seems stillest
in evening after the life forms
within it have fed though
the water itself has not been sated.
But this will pass
as night saps primal fellows
sending some
crude and original into its depth

John Weis

to roam and haunt in
quest of some lament
in Johnny Walker pick-up trucks
county road red-rosemobiles
with high-beam headlights.
And the Sunday morning paper of the nearby town
recites the ledger
of all men and boys
reported lost while wading after dark.

Lisa Ulrich

The Sacrifices of Autumn

Carney, Iowa, just forty miles south of the Minnesota border, was a small, ordinary farming town. Although Carney claimed less than nine hundred in total population, it boasted two grocery stores, a full-service gas station, two movie theaters, (one which used to show nothing but x-rated movies until it was picketed by the Ladies' Auxiliary and several other God-fearing social groups), and a rather large Montgomery Wards. There was even talk of a Baskin-Robbins 31 Flavors opening in Carney someday soon.

Forty-three years ago Marilou Penner had been born in that familiar dusty town of Carney, Iowa, not three miles from the farm her family lived on now, and she planned on dying there when the Almighty called upon her for the last time. In fact, she failed to comprehend the reason her eldest son, Frank Jr., was so intent upon fleeing the only world he had ever known. Often she wondered if it had been a mistake to send him into Des Moines to that advanced school where they had filled his head with images of the big city. Perhaps the rural school in Carney would have better prepared him for the farm. However, Frank Sr. had insisted, along with Frankie's teachers, and it was not within her means to cross her husband on any matter.

Although she worried some about Frank Jr., her heart lightened when she thought of her youngest son, Robert, who would join Frank Sr. in running the farm full-time after graduation in the spring. Bo, as he was called, felt no need to leave Carney the minute he was old enough. The farm was

all that interested her tall handsome Bo--that and chasing those Harper twins from the farm down the road. Maybe that was why Marilou did not feel uncomfortable around Bo as she often did in the presence of her older son. Soon Bo would more than likely be informing them that he planned to marry Penny, though how he managed to tell one twin from the other was a mystery to Marilou.

Frank Sr. argued that Bo was too flighty--he was going to get into trouble someday. Lately he had even taken a disliking to Bo seeing the Harper girl. Of course, Marilou openly agreed with Frank Sr.--she would never have even thought to do otherwise--but inside she felt that Frank Jr. was the one who was going to find himself troubled. His ideas were just too high-browed for this part of the country. Anyway, she had yet to see anyone with too much knowledge who was not unsatisfied with the life they had. She would not be surprised if Frankie decided to accept one of those jobs he had been interviewed for during the last month in Detroit, finding the farm he had grown up on too small since his graduation.

As she snapped the freshly picked green beans, mechanically throwing the tips into a paper bag to be fed to the pigs later, Marilou gazed out of the kitchen window, her eyes wandering over the front fifty acres of fall wheat bending under the steadily falling rain. It was a dismal afternoon, a good day to stay inside and bake gingerbread and gossip. Perhaps the only regret that Marilou had was that God had never seen fit to bless her with a daughter with whom she could have enjoyed such pleasures. However, she seldom voiced that single discontent, for it angered Frank Sr., who believed that people should be thankful for what they had, and hadn't he given her a good husband and two healthy sons? When presented in that way, Marilou had to agree, but she permitted herself a small grin when she envisioned how a pretty girl would brighten their lives. Perhaps after summer harvest she would have the only thing her simple life lacked. Surely Doc Evans could not have made a mistake, could he?

As she watched from behind bleary rain-streaked panes of glass, her husband came into view around the side of the cowbarn with Frank Jr. following along behind. Knowing they would be wet and uncomfortable, she instinctively rose to put a pot of coffee on the burner. A few moments later the kitchen door banged open, and two of her men entered the

warm kitchen. Water streamed from their heavy plaid jackets, making small puddles on the faded linoleum. But Marilou did not scold as would have some wives.

"Coffee?" barked Frank Sr. as he dropped his muddy jacket at his feet.

"It'll just be a minute. Care for a cup, Frankie?" Marilou bustled about the small kitchen, scooping up her husband's neglected coat and hanging it on a hook to dry.

The thick aroma of brewing coffee reached Frank Jr.'s nostrils as he handed his mother his own dripping jacket and bent to take off slime-covered work boots. The shoestrings were wet and tangled, and his hands were like two clumps of ice, refusing to function for him.

"I'll get those for you, Frankie. You just sit there and warm yourself before you catch cold. You're so thin! People probably think I don't feed you at all!"

As Marilou bent to untie her son's shoes, Frank Jr. gazed down at her aging figure and suddenly pity and anger washed over him at the same time. All at once he felt uncomfortably warm despite his shivering body.

"No!" He jerked away, feeling instantly sorry as his mother looked up at him with hurt gray eyes. "I mean, Ma, I'm almost nineteen years old. You don't need to cater to me like a slave. I don't want you to!"

"But..." rising unsteadily to her feet, Marilou let the issue drop. Hurrying to the stove, she tried to hide the pain she was certain showed on her face. Her boys were men. We no longer need you, Ma.

"Where is that coffee, Marilou?"

Filling two great cups to the top with wickedly black coffee, Marilou handed the mugs to the two men. Steam rose from the burning liquid, causing Frank Jr.'s wire-framed glasses to mist over and scalding Marilou's calloused fingertips.

After a few moments the door burst open again, and Bo flew into the kitchen. The chilly air of autumn followed him in, stroking Marilou's bare arms with icy fingers. She shivered, hugging herself as she turned to meet her youngest son.

"Ma, could I have a cup of that coffee? Lord, but it's a pissy day out! I'm near soaked through!"

As Marilou turned to help her son, something cracked like a gunshot behind her. Frank Sr. had leapt from his chair so abruptly that it had crashed to the floor. Shoving

Marilou out of the way, he grabbed his youngest son, who stood a full three inches taller than the slim gray-haired Frank Sr., and threw him against the wall.

"Where the hell have you been, Bo? The west gate was down and me and your brother have been chasing cows all over the damned countryside! Where were you, boy? Answer me, damn you!"

Frank Jr. sat motionless, the mug in his hand forgotten, as he watched the scene in front of him with wide blue eyes. Near the sink, Marilou absent-mindedly massaged her hip where it had slammed into the corner of the formica.

"I was helping Penny Harper, Pa! Her and Pam's car got itself stuck in the mud out on Donahoo Drive, and I just happened along! I couldn't leave them stuck there helpless in the rain, could I, Pa?"

Tightening his grip on the bigger man's soaking jacket, Frank Sr. shook Bo with uncharacteristic fierceness.

"No, you would just leave your own Pa and your brother to catch their death while you chase those damned girls all over hell and half-acre!" Releasing Bo, he spit disgustedly and sat back down at the table, quickly downing what remained in his mug. Marilou moved to refill his cup, but he waved her gruffly away. Neither Frank Jr. nor Marilou dared to speak, so surprised were they at Frank Sr.'s outburst.

"Sorry, Pa," Bo, more stunned than hurt, mumbled as he bent to remove filthy boots.

"Drink this, Bo, before you catch your death," Marilou said, subconciously echoing her husband's words.

Abruptly Frank Sr. rose from his place at the table again. Bo jumped back like a whipped dog expecting another lashing, but his father only began to pull on his still-damp coat.

"I'm going into town."

Marilou stared. Frank, a natural home body who enjoyed the comfort of his family in the evenings, never went into town without a reason. In fact, Marilou could not recall ever wondering what her husband was up to while she sat at home. Because of her full surprise at the situation, she did something she had seldom done before.

"What for, Husband? Dinner is in an hour."

Never looking into Marilou's eyes, Frank Sr. pulled on his boots.

"I should be home for dinner, and when I get back the horses and pigs had better be fed. And the chickens watered,

too. Hear me boy?"

Although Frank Sr. had never looked at or indicated which son he was referring to, Bo knew he was the one being addressed.

"Sure, Pa. It'll be done."

"See that it is. And I don't want to come home and find you have hiked over to the Harper's place, either. You're to stay put tonight and get your schooling done."

"But, Pa, I..."

"Listen to your pa, Bo," interjected Marilou before Bo could get himself into any more trouble. She turned back to the stove as Frank Sr. opened the kitchen door, hunching his shoulders against the ever-increasing downpour.

"Ma, what did I do that was so wrong? God Almighty, you would think I let those cows go myself. Where is he going anyway?" Righting his father's overturned chair and slumping into it, he took a huge gulp of the steaming coffee, only to wince in pain as it seared a path down his throat.

"Hush, Bo. You needn't go chasing those Harper girls everyday. It just angers your Pa that you weren't there when he needed you is all. He's good to you boys and all he asks for is help around here."

That night, after waiting for an hour, the Penners sat down to supper without Frank Sr. for only the second time that they could remember. Afterwards Bo did not go to see the Harper twins, but instead labored over his English Literature until finally asking Frank Jr. for help. Marilou fell asleep while waiting for Frank Sr. and never knew when he finally slipped into bed. Of course, she would never dare to ask him, but it pained her because it was one time that she really needed to speak to him. Marilou had always depended on him so.

Frank Sr. sat at the kitchen table, consuming his biscuits and eggs without thought to the food before him. Today his mind was troubled with worries that did not belong in the usual scope of his world. The farm was coming along. A week ago he thought that he knew exactly what the remainder of his life would contain. After graduation in May, Bo would start working with him full-time on the farm. Perhaps he would even hire an outside man and take some more time off. Eventually Bo could take over the farm completely, and Frank Sr. and Marilou could retire, living the rest of

their lives in peace.

Frank Jr. was an uncertainty since he had received the job offer from a place in Detroit, but not necessarily an unpleasant one. Although Frank Sr. had never been compelled to seek higher education and a world beyond Carney and the farm himself, he felt a certain pride in his son's longing for a different life. Perhaps this was unusual for most fathers, who would expect their oldest son to take over the family farm, but Frank Sr. considered himself an open-minded man. Besides, he knew it would reflect well on the family if Frankie should really make a success of his life. Regardless of Frankie's decision in the next few months, he would still have Bo to take over the farm for him.

With pleasure, he also reflected that he was in good health, (Frank Sr. did not drink or smoke), and looked much younger than his actual fifty-four years. In fact, it was common gossip amongst the town women that Frank Penner certainly looked sharp in his good suit on Sunday, and Marilou had better keep a close eye on that man.

Frank Sr. glanced up at his wife, who was draining bacon grease into an empty milk carton, and an icy anger gripped him, causing the clump of biscuit he was chewing to stick in his throat like clay. Because of her insane prayers for a daughter, his whole life's work was going to be shattered. He could not let it happen when things were going this well.

Pushing his plate away, he rubbed a rough hand across his mouth and looked hard at his wife, who was just sitting down to eat.

"Ran into Doc Evan's wife last night in town."

Marilou froze for an instant, the plate holding the bacon quivering in her hand. Then, regaining her composure, she set the heaping platter before her sons. Bo tore into the bacon before his older brother could get a chance, typically ignoring Frank Jr.'s sharp look. Turning to Frank Sr., he spoke as he ladled thick syrup onto his fourth biscuit.

"Pa, do you care if I go over to fix the girls' car after school? Their Pa's laid up, and I promised I would do it for them."

For a moment Frank Sr. stared blankly at Bo, his mind on Marilou, and the boy began to fear that he had once again angered his father. But Frank Sr. only shook his head.

"There'll be no need for that, Bo. I need you to help

with that fence today, hear? Besides, I ran into one of the girls last night and after hearing that ol' Tom Harper was sick again I went ahead and fixed it for her. 'Twas nothin' but loose brakes. Took me only a little bit."

Surprised, Bo nodded.

"Aren't you going to be late for school, boy?"

Bo shoved the rest of the biscuit into his mouth as he jumped up from the table. Perplexed at his father's agreeableness after the night before, he grabbed his jacket and headed out the door, relieved that he was once again free of Frank Sr.'s wrath.

Marilou had not uttered a word, but continued to fiddle with the dishes on the table.

Sensing some tension between his parents, Frank Jr. pushed his half-full plate away and stood up.

"I'll go get the feeding done while you finish breakfast, Pa." Glancing nervously at his mother, he lifted his own heavy coat from the peg by the door and traced his brother's path through the barnyard.

"I ran into Mrs. Evans in town last night," Frank Sr. repeated.

He knows, thought Marilou with despair. If only he hadn't stormed out last night. I was going to tell him, but he didn't give me a chance.

"And what did Mrs. Evans have to say, Frank?"

Frank Sr. pushed away from the table and lit his pipe. Marilou could see the fury burning in his blue eyes.

"A real strange thing." Frank Sr. took a long drag. "She tells me, 'Congratulations are in order, I hear, Mr. Penner. And how is your Missus?' Well, I'll tell you I was pretty confused. So I says, 'Congratulations?' sort of stupid-like, and the doc's wife starts to open her mouth, but then shut it up real fast and said something like, 'Well, I thought you knew, surely you know?' And when I just sat there without saying anything, she said, 'Oh, Virgil's going to kill me. I've done it again.'"

Frank Sr. took another long drag on his pipe.

"Well, if you were dying of some disease, I doubt the doc's wife would have congratulated me, so I put two and two together. Since my own wife has been lying to me, I figure I owe Mrs. Evans a favor."

Although Frank Sr.'s voice was controlled, Marilou well knew that the anger was there, and she tried desperately to catch her breath. Now she not only had to explain that she

was pregnant, but try to convince him that she would never lie to him.

"Well, woman? What do you have to say? Are you?"

As she spoke, a great strength invaded Marilou. Subconsciously she laid a calloused hand on her abdomen. "Yes, Frank, I'm pregnant. And I had hoped that you could share my happiness."

Springing from chair, Frank Sr. tore the smoldering pipe from his mouth. His voice rose for the first time, and Marilou felt her newly found strength fly swiftly away.

"Happiness? Marilou, do you know what you're saying? Your sons are grown men! It's time for us to relax, to enjoy some free time. Not start over with a new family!"

Looking at the table, Marilou rose from her seat and began to clear the breakfast dishes away. Frank remained standing at the table, his anger nearly paralyzing him.

"You can't keep it."

Marilou gripped the stained formica counter, her knuckles white.

"Please, Frank, be sensible. It's not the end of the world. Please...."

"You're the one not showing good sense. I know that nowadays there are perfectly safe ways to handle this sort of problem. You will not keep it."

Marilou never turned as she heard the door open and then slam behind her. She realized that she had been gripping the counter so hard that her hands were cramping. As if in a nightmare, she turned and sat at the table. Putting her head down on folded arms, she sobbed as she had not done for years.

That was how Frank Jr. found her when he came inside fifteen minutes later.

"Ma, are you okay?" He had never seen his mother like this before.

When Marilou raised her head and saw Frank Jr. standing there, a certain dread in his face, she quickly stifled her sobs. She was embarrassed.

"Oh, Frankie, I'm fine. Just fine. What do you need?"

What do you need, Ma, wondered Frank Jr. Out loud he said, "Oh, nothing Ma. I was just going to fill a thermos with some coffee. We're going to work out on that fence today, and Pa likes to have some coffee while he's out in

the cold like this."

Marilou rose and, avoiding her son's probing eyes, started to reheat the breakfast coffee.

"Ma," started Frank Jr. hesitantly, "is there something wrong that I should know about?" Remembering his father's reference to the doctor at breakfast, a sudden dread turned his knees to water. "You or Pa aren't sick...I mean...?"

"Oh, no, Frankie! Really! Your Ma is just getting old and weepy. Don't you worry no more about it, hear?"

Marilou turned from the stove to her oldest son and put a hand to his puzzled face. His eyes are so much like his father's, she thought, but so different.

"You worry too much, Frankie. Way too much--about everything."

Then Marilou dropped her hand and returned to the task of filling the red thermos. Somehow it always embarrassed her to show affection to Frankie, who had such a hard time returning it. Perhaps that was why she had always gotten on better with Bo. Bo had always been easier than Frank Jr.

Frank Jr. knew his mother was ashamed to have been caught crying in such a way, and he stopped himself from questioning her any more. Besides, he loved his mother but had never been able to be as close to her as Bo was. Something inside stopped him, even as he began to explain his feelings to her.

During the three years that Frank Jr. had attended the Des Moines prep school, thirty-five miles away, he had crossed the river every day. Each day as the dilapidated pick-up rumbled noisily over the loose boards of the bridge, Frank Jr. thought to himself, "Someday I will cross that bridge and never, ever come back." Once, angry at Bo for some reason now forgotten, he had voiced the thought aloud, as a threat, only to be laughed at by his younger brother, who readily agreed. "Yeah, that's right, smartass! You have to go over the bridge to get to the cemetery, and when you make that trip you sure as hell ain't comin' back!"

Now as he manuevered the Ford across the one lane bridge, the scene with Bo flashed again in his mind. He threw a glance at his mother, who sat tight-lipped next to him, clutching an overnight bag to her as if she feared someone would steal it--or as if when he slowed down she would leap from the truck and run for cover.

Lisa Ulrich

It had been two weeks since the morning he had found her crying at the kitchen table. Since that time a change had come over his once quiet, compliant mother. She was no longer just quiet, but silent, and she looked at his father differently now. Frank Jr. searched for the right word and was surprised with what he found. Where before his mother had gazed upon his father with only simple and willing comliancy, there was now a deep contempt in her eyes. It was an emotion he had seldom, if ever, seen his mother display, and never toward his father.

She had asked Frank Jr. to take her to Des Moines for the weekend. To see relatives, she had said. What relatives do we have in Des Moines? Frankie had asked. You've never met them, she had answered, the new steel in her voice stopping Frank Jr. from questioning further.

As they took the Des Moines exit, Frank turned to his mother to ask for directions. She was still clutching the overnight bag, but her eyes no longer held contempt; only cold, raw fear.

"Ma...uh, what's wrong? Are you sick?" Instinctively he knew Marilou was not sick, but the invisible wall between them kept him from probing any deeper.

Marilou took a great lungful of air and tried to calm her heart.

"Frankie, you need to take a right up here. Then turn left at the stoplight."

"Ma, this can't be right," Frankie said, his voice gentle. "This is downtown. The business district."

"Please, Frank, do as you're told. Please." Although Marilou's tone was harsh, Frankie sensed the pleading in her voice and drove on, his apprehension mounting. All sorts of fears were running through his mind. They were losing the farm, and Ma was coming into town to try and get a loan. Or Ma had lied, and she really was sick, maybe dying....As she instructed him to stop at the Des Moines General Hospital, fear began to clutch at his muscles as he jerkily pulled the truck to a stop in the parking lot. In the silence that followed, Frankie's eyes followed an older man, leaning heavily on a young woman, making his way toward the glass doors. With growing unease, he noticed the man's disease-ravaged face and too thin body.

Finally Frankie pounded his fist down on the large steering wheel, turning fiercely to Marilou. Wild fear changed his normally light blue eyes to a deep smoke. "Ma,

you have to tell me, I can't take this! What is it?"

His unexpected outburst startled Marilou out of her own personal reverie.

"Frankie, stop it." But her voice was gentle. "I should have told you, but..." Marilou had never been a liar, and as the story spilled out she sensed as much as saw Frank Jr.'s disbelief. "I'm sorry to put you through this for such a silly little thing, Frankie, not even an operation really..." No not an operation at all, thought Marilou. A murder. "But, it's one of those...those women things, and I'm so used to being secretive around you boys. If I had had a girl it would have been different...." But now there would never be any hope of that. Oh, Frank, why are you doing this to me?

She felt her composure slipping, the tears building painfully in the back of her throat, so she stopped and looked away. Frank Jr. gripped the steering wheel.

"Ma, I'm sorry."

Marilou could only nod. She managed to open the door and get down from the cab of the pick-up before Frank Jr. realized what she was doing. But as soon as he saw her intent, he leapt from the truck and easily caught up with her, firmly taking the overnight bag from her hands even as she protested.

"There's no harm in seeing you inside." His voice was strong, and Marilou again had the thought that her sons were no longer boys but grown men.

"I guess not."

When her turn had come, she sat down at the admitting desk. The trim receptionist rolled a form into the typewriter and began clicking off the usual questions. Marilou answered mechanically, all the while praying the girl would not reveal the true reason she was here to her son, who was standing so bravely beside her chair.

"Your doctor, Mrs. Penner? clicked the receptionist.

"Well, my doctor is Dr. Evans, but for...this...I believe his name is Dr. Aiken."

Frank Jr.'s concern began to rise again. "Who's Dr. Aiken?"

The receptionist shot Frank Jr. a look of annoyance.

"Hush, Frankie." Marilou looked apologetically at the irritated girl.

With exaggerated patience, the girl turned back to her humming typewriter.

"And how advanced is the pregnancy, Mrs. Penner?"

Marilou felt Frankie stiffen beside her. She could not have been more miserable. "Two months." She dared not look at her son.

Then Frank Jr. turned away, and Marilou knew without looking that he had walked to the water fountain. She heard the empty clump of the foot pedal and the hum of the cooled water.

The receptionist had asked her another question.

"I'm sorry, miss. I didn't hear you."

"Do you have insurance?" She spoke too loudly and distinctly, as if to a backward child.

Marilou heard the thump as Frank Jr.'s foot let off the pedal and the clumsy sound of work boots on the tile floor as he approached her. Still she did not look at him. She knew the girl at the desk was glaring at her, but she could not find strength to speak. Then she felt Frank Jr.'s hand on her shoulder.

Marilou felt the small thread of strength she had been clinging to come flowing slowly back with her son's touch.

"State Farm," she answered the receptionist.

Sighing heavily, the girl quickly entered the last piece of information.

"That'll be all, ma'm," she breathed with relief. "Have a seat in the waiting room,please."

Marilou tried to smile at the girl and failed. As she stood up, Frank Jr. removed his hand, and she felt a quick stab of loss. But then Frankie slid his arm tightly around her shoulders and relief washed over her. He moved her to a vacant seat in the nearly empty waiting room. As he sat down heavily next to her, Marilou dared to look at him for the first time. Thinking she would see only disgust in his face, she was surprised to see pain instead. His blue eyes shone brightly with tears. Marilou had the thought that if the teardrops fell, they would leave long streaks of blue down his smooth cheeks, so deep was the color of his eyes.

"Oh, Frankie, I'm sorry. I didn't want you to know."

Seeing her son in pain instinctively brought Marilou strength. Her own anguish was forgotten and replaced by the fact that her son still needed her.

"He's making you, isn't he?" His voice was low and tight, and his words fell like hard chips of granite from a great stone. Only his eyes betrayed his true despair.

His mother's silence was his answer. Suddenly Frank

Jr.'s hurt turned into an intense rage. However, his voice remained low, each word sounding as if ripped from deep inside.

"Why the hell do you let him do it to you, Ma? You're not a slave! Not to him or anyone else!"

Marilou was taken aback by the controlled fury in Frank Jr.'s voice. Oddly enough, she was reminded of Frank Sr., and the way he had told her he knew about the baby.

"Ma, don't you understand? You've been a slave to that bastard long enough, I..."

The sharp slap of Marilou's hand hitting the plastic arm of the chair abruptly silenced Frank Jr.'s tirade. A few people glanced curiously from the magazines in their laps.

"Now you listen to me, Frank Jr., I never, ever want to hear you speak such of your pa again. Do you understand me?"

Frankie opened his mouth to protest, but Marilou quickly cut him off by lifting her hand.

"Your pa has done nothing but the best he could by you boys. And me, too. Why do you think you're here instead of him? Because he couldn't bear to see me in pain, that's why. He's a good man, Frankie, and your pa--he deserves your respect. At this time he considers this the best choice for us both, and I have not the means or will to cross him."

At that moment, an overweight nurse pushed an empty wheelchair into the waiting room.

"Marilou Penner?"

Frank Jr. turned to his mother and laid his shaking hand on hers. There was a strength in her eyes that he had never seen before.

"Be careful going home, Frankie. Be back to get me Sunday, after church. And don't worry. I'll be fine."

Frank Jr. stood up with his mother, and after she had settled stiffly into the wheelchair, he gently placed the overnight bag in her lap.

"I'm sorry, Ma," Frank Jr. said. Then he turned and walked out the door.

That night Bo approached him in the barn as he was milking the old cow.

"Frankie?"

Preoccupied with the events of the day, Frank Jr. did not look up.

"Can we talk for a minute? It's sort of...well...per-

sonal."

If Frank Jr. would have been thinking clearly, he would have thought the request in itself odd--he and Bo were not close. Finally realizing his brother's uncharacteristic unease, Frank released his grip on the cow and turned to look up at his brother from the crate he sat on.

"Yeah?"

"Frankie, I want to marry Penny."

Frank Jr. leaned forward. "You aren't planning on running off, I hope?"

Bo jumped, but looked at his older brother squarely as he answered. "Well, no. Of course not. But I need to get married right away."

The "need" struck Frank Jr., and he gave Bo a hard look. "Knocked up?"

Bo nodded miserably.

"Well then, it seems you should be talking to her pa, not to me." Why was everyone laying the weight of the world on his shoulders today anyway?

"We'll have to quit school though, and you know how Pa is about that..."

Instantly Frank Jr. knew something else was bothering his brother. Bo would quit school in a minute, and that bubble-head Penny Harper was no better.

"What's wrong, Bo?"

Bo looked close to tears.

"What's wrong, kid, get the wrong twin pregnant?"

Bo stood there blankly for a moment, then shook his head, not joining in his older brother's laughter. "It's not...I mean...We've never.... It's not mine!"

It was Frank Jr.'s turn to be dumbfounded. Then the whole meaning of Bo's words hit him.

"You mean you've never...?"

"No, no, damn it! I've never laid her! I respect Penny, you know?"

Frank Jr. quelled another urge to laugh aloud. It was just like Bo to be so naive.

"You still want to marry her even so?"

Bo nodded again, his eyes riveted to the ground.

"Whose is it?" For some reason the question seemed important.

"I don't know. She won't tell me."

He was lying. Frank could always tell. Bo's face had had the same look the day he denied dropping the newborn

kittens down the well. He had been lying then, and he was lying now.

"Oh well, if you don't want to tell me, that's okay. Maybe it's better that I don't know anyway. So why are you telling me any of this?"

Then Bo was crying. Not just crying. His whole body shook with great sobs until he finally quit trying to hold them back. Frank Jr. sat stupified, staring at his tough little brother who was sobbing so hard that he could not catch his breath. What the hell was wrong with him?

"Bo, calm down...."

"She swears it was...it was just that one...one time...she swears. I made her tell me...I made her. Oh God, why did I make her tell me?"

Frank Jr. did not know what to do. Obviously his brother had been concealing some inner torment and had found he could no longer keep it to himself. So he had picked Frank Jr., for lack of anyone else, to spill his guts to. But what was he trying to say?

Bo was still crying, rambling brokenly. Frank Jr. sat there silently, waiting out his brother's grief.

"That one night when...when Pa jumped me. He...he went to...Oh God...it's my fault! She must have been scared...she was scared not to, you see? You know how he was that night, Frankie! Remember? And she was on...on her way to see...to see me! Oh God, it's my fault!" Bo suddenly looked directly at his brother, and his face cleared as if he had been working a puzzle and had finally discovered the correct answer. "Yeah, it was my fault. She was coming to see me. She met him walking and he offered her...a ride. She swears it was only the one time. And he must have been...been drinking! Yeah, he was drunk, and he...he didn't know what he was doing!"

Frank sat there on the empty crate, staring up at his brother stupidly, as the full impact of what Bo was saying slowly seeped into his head. Christ, would this day never end? Would he never wake up from this nightmare?

"So you see, Frankie?" Bo had quit crying completely now, and looked at his brother with something not unlike relief in his blotchy face. "So you see, Frankie? I've got to marry her. It never would have happened if not for me, so I feel responsible. I sort of owe it to Penny."

Frank Jr. stared up at his brother as if he had never seen him before. Indeed he did not know this brother who

stood before him spouting his illogical idea of responsibility. He felt fury grind his stomach muscles into knots so tight that he felt physically ill.

"Bo, where in the hell do you find any sense in..."

All at once, Bo was totally calm, all trace of tears gone. His suddenly old face seemed carved of stone.

"Shut up, Frankie."

"But Bo, you can't believe..."

"I said shut up, God damn you to hell!"

Frank Jr. shut up.

"And just keep your mouth shut! I should never have told you, but I did so now--just shut up! That is the way it happened." Then Bo's voice dropped so that Frank Jr. just barely caught his last words. "That is how it had to have happened."

Bo turned and moved out the door, walking quickly across the field through the rain. He was going toward the river.

Frank Jr. remained on his crate, still in awe over his brother's confession. Something about it seemed eerily familiar, and he realized that his mother had told him basically the same thing. When dealing with those that you love, you justified what they did any way you could so that you could go on. In Bo's case, Frank Jr. realized, he had to believe it was his fault, had to place the blame on himself. Of course, deep down Bo knew the truth, knew that it was not his fault at all. Just like his mother knew that Frank Sr. was not making her get an abortion for the sake of them both, but for his sake alone. More that likely, Penny Harper had not been forced either. But if Bo admitted that, he had to give up Penny, whom he obviously did love, as well as his father.

As he tried to absorb all that this strange day had revealed to him about his family, Frank Jr. took off his glasses, polishing them absently on his worn flannel shirt. So now he knew it all. His mother's secret, Bo's secret, his pa's secret, and even Penny Harper's secret. He felt the weight of his knowledge lying like lead at the pit of his stomach, and wondered if he could ever learn the trick of self-preservation that his mother and younger brother had obviously mastered. Suddenly he was glad that he would not be there if and when his brother ever decided to be honest with himself.

As Frank Jr. drove his new Datsun over the wheezing bridge, he reached over and pushed in the lighter. A light rain had begun to fall, and he rolled his window up part of the way.

As he drove down the muddy lane, inhaling on his cigarette, he noticed that Bo had been doing a fine job in the year since Pa had died. The crops looked good.

Since Pa had died. Funny, he thought, the sun had been shining for once the day we put the old man into the ground.

Frank Sr. had died almost exactly six months from the day Frank Jr. had left for the job in Detroit. Almost exactly six months from the day he had brought his mother home from the hospital in Des Moines. Almost six months from the day that he and Bo had stood in the barn, growing up.

Frank Jr. had come back for the funeral. He had stood over the grave, uncomfortably warm in his winter suit, and had tried to summon up some of the old rage. However, looking at Bo, one arm protectively around his pregnant wife, all he had felt was emptiness. And a great relief. Perhaps he could start to forget now. If Bo could, he could, too.

His mother had held his arm, he had thought, for support. But when Frank Jr. had glanced down at her, he had had a strong impression that she was supporting him.

Marilou had never quite been the same since that weekend stay at Des Moines General. Strangely, she had returned glowing with a certain strength, as if she had found a new drug during her stay which made her stronger. And while Frank Sr. had still lived, she had finally begun to assert herself. Strangely enough, the old man had seemed to let her, as if to apologize in his own way. Although she had been torn up when he passed away, it had definitely not defeated her.

Frank Jr. had received her last letter two weeks ago. This one had told him that Penny was pregnant again. "But," his mother had written, "Emmie will always be my favorite. Perhaps that isn't fair to the one on the way, but she was my first granddaughter. And somehow, to me, she was the little girl I always wanted and never had." In the past year, Marilou had written often, but she had never asked that Frankie come home. Nor did she then, but, somehow, Frank Jr. knew that it was time.

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