

WAITING FOR THE COYOTES,
ABSOLUTION,
AND A CRITICAL AFTERWORD

by

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Waiting for the Coyotes

Warren stared at the record on his turntable. This one pictured golden boots and a lariat on the label. He picked it up carefully between his thumb and forefinger and walked to his son's room. Alvin lay on the floor, puzzling over math problems for school. His tongue stuck from the corner of his mouth as he drew his pencil across the page.

"Is this yours?" Warren asked.

Alvin looked up from the math book and saw his father framed in the doorway, the record held like a smelly sock at arm's length.

"Yeah," he said.

"Johnny Cash? 'Wreck of the Old 97'? When'd you start listening to this dusty old stuff?"

"It's good. I like it."

"Since when?"

Alvin shrugged and turned back to the math problems. Warren didn't know what to do with the record. He stood in the hall, the record pinched between his thumb and forefinger. Finally he gave a flip of his wrist and the record went soaring across his son's room.

"Hey!" shouted Alvin, watching the record glide like a frisbee onto his bed.

"Don't leave 'em on the turntable."

Warren had always feared his son might turn into a little hick if raised in Kansas. It had just taken ten years for the symptoms to surface. It must be Alvin's friend, Maynard, thought Warren. He lived only three quarters of a mile down the road and played with Alvin after school all the time. Warren didn't like the boy. Maynard was too polite for his own good, always saying "yes, sir" and "no, sir," and smiling those angelic smiles. It made Warren nervous. And no matter whether the boy was wearing swimming trunks or his Sunday best, he always wore those grey cowboy boots with the blue Dallas Cowboys' stars on the sides.

Warren hated the Cowboys, truly hated them. As much as one person can hate a football team. He hated them because of their irritating competence and he hated them because of what they stood for--conservative values. Warren had gone to college in the late sixties and he had been in his share of sit-ins. He still called himself a liberal, although most everyone in Garden City turned red in the face laughing when he said so.

The next day Warren heard over the radio that the Beach Boys would be playing Salina, so he decided to take Alvin to the concert and, with some luck, head off this country-and-western thing before it got serious. The day before the concert, when Warren picked up Alvin after school, he found his son was wearing cowboy boots and a cowboy hat.

"Where'd you get those? What happened to your shoes?" he said.

"Oh, I traded them away. I gave Maynard my lunch and my old shoes for these. Pretty keen, huh?" Alvin said, holding up his left foot so his father could get a better look at the boot.

Warren drove directly to Maynard's house and spoke with Maynard's parents. But once he got back the shoes, Alvin refused to wear them. Alvin had made up his mind that he would never wear shoes again in his entire life, not unless he had the cowboy boots that is.

"Mom woulda let me trade. She always let me trade."

"She did not and you know it."

Alvin crossed his arms and didn't talk again except to say he wished he was in California with his mother. At first Warren thought, yeah, I oughta package you up and send you C.O.D. too. But the mention of Kristen made him more disappointed than mad, so he said nothing.

Two weeks ago, she'd run off with a real estate whiz who had a weekly television show at the same station where Warren worked as an editor. Warren had even edited the real estate whiz's programs. In his opinion, though, the shows looked more like evangelical meetings, ferns behind the podium, the agent's emphatic style of delivery. "Yes, this wee-ull change your life for the goo-ud." One day Kristen packed her clothes and left Warren a note taped to the bottom of the television

remote control. It said had she left with William to find herself in California.

Alvin stared at the dashboard. It wasn't fair, Alvin thought. His mother had always picked him up in the past, until she left with William that is. Now it was always his father waiting for him after school, and his father even insisted on parking on the wrong side of the parking lot. And he looked so silly sitting there in the car with nothing to do but wait.

The day of the concert, Alvin refused to put his shoes on until Warren threatened to pull out the belt. And once at the show, Alvin slouched down in his seat. Even when everyone else was jumping and cheering during the encore--"Good Vibrations"--Alvin frowned and stared at the seat in front of his. The only time he spoke was to ask for popcorn and Cokes. On the way back to the car, Alvin pointed out to his father everyone not wearing shoes. "There's one!" he yelled, running through the crowd and pointing at feet. "There's another."

At home Alvin said his ears hurt. He tied a handkerchief around his head, holding two sponges against his ears. "Take that thing off," his father said. And finally Alvin did take it off but then he covered his ears with his hands. Warren began to wonder if there were really something wrong after Alvin kept it up for three days straight.

That afternoon, Warren picked up his son after school and took him to the doctor's. But the doctor, an old fellow

who reminded Warren of Henry Fonda, said there was nothing wrong with Alvin's ears. He gave Warren a card for a child psychiatrist instead. Warren tucked the card into his wallet, which was the same as throwing it into a black hole, thanked him and left. He wished life was more like the movies. He wished he could pull out his editing scissors and snip out this section, but how would he know the precise spot to place the scissors' blades? Cut one was an easy one: just before Kristen left. But cut two: ? When would the bad part end? Maybe it doesn't end, maybe it all keeps getting worae. Maybe . . . Warren shuddered.

Pulling in his driveway, he found a large black and white dog standing on the lawn. "Oh, no," he said. Almost every other week someone dumped a dog in his front yard. He and Alvin lived two miles outside of Garden City, with a highway just 80 feet from their front door. Warren supposed that meant people could drop off their dogs and then get away quickly. Sometimes the family a quarter mile down the road adopted the dogs, and other times the dogs just disappeared all of a sudden, after having sulked around the house, tucking in their tails and running whenever Warren stepped out the front door. In the later cases, Warren suspected one of the other neighbors might be shooting the dogs. Just what you can expect from these redneck peckerwoods, he thought. Either that or the coyotes got them. And there were plenty of coyotes. On still nights, when their yips and howls could be

heard for miles around, Warren got goosebumps.

But this new dog just stood there, his tongue hanging. He ran up to the car and licked Alvin's hand. "Don't touch that dog, Alvin," Warren said. But Alvin left his hand outstretched as he climbed from the car. This is a good dog, Alvin thought. Most dogs would run for cover. But not this one. It even seemed to be smiling at him.

"I know you can hear me," said Warren. "Don't touch the dog. If you do he'll just hang around." Alvin started petting it. Warren clapped and shouted to draw the dog's attention. The dog ran twenty feet away and then looked back at Warren, cocking his head and panting. "Yaaa! Yaaa!" shouted Warren, but the dog just stared. And then as Warren started flapping his arms--"Shoo! Shoo!"--the dog started leaping up and down. When the dog got close enough Warren gave it a kick in the ribs. The dog ran across the yard and hid behind a telephone pole. Alvin's mouth hung open. He'd never imagined his father could kick a dog. His father had shot at crows with a pellet gun when they raided his garden, but he never hit them. And besides, birds don't have personalities like dogs do. Birds can't lick your hand and smile at you.

"Go inside and do your homework," said Warren, pointing to the house. He felt bad about kicking the dog. It was a nice, friendly dog, just too big and too clumsy for its own good.

Over the next week the dog kept hanging around outside

and Alvin kept asking if they could keep it, but in the evenings the dog would take off once the neighbor's back door opened and the neighbor whistled. Apparently they were feeding it. That made both Warren and Alvin feel a little better.

The neighbors were ranchers, whereas Warren just owned a one acre plot with a tidy yard and a small garden plot in back. The house itself had a brick facade and a wide, bell-shaped chimney. Planters of flowers hung from the window sills. Two months ago Warren had had an argument with the neighbor about who exactly owned the fence dividing the plots of land and the neighbor had called Warren a pin-headed fool. Since then they hadn't talked.

On Monday as Warren was hurrying to get his son off to school, Alvin noticed a splotch of white in the ditch. The dog had been hit. As Warren slowly drove past, Alvin stared out the window at where the dog lay dead, its teeth locked in a grimace. The dog lay not fifty feet from the north entrance of the neighbor's semi-circle drive. "They'll see it," said Warren and then drove on.

At lunchtime, Alvin was trading sandwiches with Maynard, tuna fish for salami, when the neighbor boy, Rudy, a short kid with dirty blonde hair and fat fingers, sat down at the same table.

"D'you see it, Alvin?" he said.

"See what?"

"The dog. It got hit this morning when my dad was goin' to work. Pow! I saw it. It flew in the ditch. It always followed him. This time there was a car zipping along when he ran out there."

"Not gonna follow him anymore," Maynard said and then stuffed an entire Twinkie into his mouth.

Alvin saw the whole scene play itself out in his mind, the car zipping over the two-lane blacktop, the dog loping beside the neighbor's beat-up pickup, smiling its same silly smile. Then he saw the dog crumple against the grill of the oncoming car.

"Man, it was dead," Rudy said, peanut butter and jelly smeared on his cheeks. Alvin looked at the boy's uncombed hair and wrinkled shirt. Mom would never let me come to school like that, he thought. Heck, even Dad knows better than that. Alvin's mother had always made sure his hair was combed just right before he left. She even used to lay out his clothes for the following day before he went to sleep each evening.

"Man, it was really dead."

"Shut up about it," Alvin yelled.

"What?"

"Shut up about the dog!"

But Rudy wouldn't shut up. He said Alvin's sandwich was really dog meat. "Where do you think salami comes from, Alvin? They grind up dogs, that's what. They're gonna grind up

that dead dog, too." That's when Alvin smacked Rudy in the mouth and sent him crashing backwards onto the floor.

Warren was shocked when the principal called him at work and told him what had happened at school: Alvin had never been in fights before. But when he picked him up that evening, Alvin wouldn't say anything about it: he just stared out the window.

That evening Alvin decided he would bury the dog. He grabbed a shovel from the shed and walked up the road, all the time hoping the neighbors wouldn't step out and see him. The dog's legs stuck out stiff and unnatural. The stomach was swollen. He gave the dog a nudge with the shovel and then cringed. The dog slid a foot down the embankment. Where it had lain, the grass was yellow and roly bugs burrowed back into the shadows. A car roared past and Alvin closed his eyes. He looked back toward the neighbor's and was glad it looked as if they weren't home. He gave the dog another shove and it slid to the bottom of the ditch. There he dug a shallow grave, pushing the fat blade into the ground and then jumping on it with both feet. Once the grave was a foot deep, he nudged the dog in with the shovel and quickly threw the dirt on top. When he finished he ran home. He didn't bother to clean the dirt off the shovel as he was supposed to do whenever he'd used it. He threw it into the bushes behind the house and ran into his bedroom, where he sat beneath the window and watched as dusk set in.

On Saturday Warren said Alvin's mother was coming to see him. They drove out to Garden City Airfield and watched from behind the plate glass window as Kristen walked across the asphalt, small single-engine planes taxiing in the background.

"What's that she's got on?" Alvin asked. Her shoulders were padded a good three inches and her dress was tapered at the knees. To Warren, she looked like a walking wedge.

"Yes, she does look sorta different, doesn't she?"

She fumbled in her pocket book as she walked, finally pulling out a package of cigarettes and a lighter. The wind whipped her hair across her bronze cheeks. She sure got her share of California sun, thought Warren. As she stepped into the terminal, Alvin ran across the tiled floor and hugged her. She bent over awkwardly, trying to hold onto her hat and keep her cigarette off his shirt at the same time. Warren slowly walked toward her while she straightened up.

"You haven't changed any," she said with a sly smile.

"Were you expecting something?"

"No. I suppose not."

Warren looked her over, from the black sheen on her high heels to the blue sequins on her hat. "Is this the yourself you found in California?" he asked.

"Don't be spiteful Warren. It doesn't become you."

They watched through the window as the Cushman cart pulled up with the suitcases. Kristen gave her claim check to

the clerk and he pulled out four suitcases and a guitar.

"My God," said Warren. "Did you learn to play that in California?"

"No, don't be stupid." She held the guitar toward Alvin.
"For you."

"Me? What am I supposed to do with this?" he said, peeking into the sound hole suspiciously.

"Play it. Have your father teach you."

"I haven't played a guitar in ten years," Warren said.

"Can I play 'Along Came Jones' on it?" Alvin asked.

"Sure. You can play whatever you want," she said.

"Even 'Boy Named Sue'?"

"Where do you come up with these dusty old hick songs?" said Warren.

"You can play anything you want," Kristen said. Warren kept waiting for an answer to his question, but Alvin just stared at the guitar.

Once they reached home, Warren wondered what to do with the luggage: "Where are you going to be staying?" he said.

"Why here? What'd you think?"

He shrugged and pulled the suitcases from the trunk.

"How long are you staying?"

But she didn't hear him. She was busy looking at the flowers that had died because Warren hadn't watered them. When Warren suggested that he sleep on the couch, Kristen said, "Don't be silly."

That night, Warren didn't go to bed. He fell asleep in front of the television set, watching a movie broadcast by the station he worked for. He cringed when the movie jumped over the section he'd been forced to delete so the movie would fit (including commercials) into the 10:30 to 12:30 time slot. At midnight the remote control fell from his palm and his head fell back on the La-Z Boy. He didn't wake up until three o'clock and then he just grabbed a blanket from the closet and curled up on the chair again, pushing the head rest as far back as it would go.

In the morning, Warren felt as if a small cactus had been embedded in his neck. He walked into the kitchen, tugging his collar with one hand, and found Kristen at the stove, already dressed and perfumed. She said nothing about his having slept on the La-Z Boy. She scraped the scrambled eggs and bacon onto a plate and set it in front of Warren. As the aroma filled his nostrils, he breathed in deeply and decided it was good to have breakfast again, after having eaten only sugar-coated doughnuts and milk while Kristen was away. She sat down across from him, her hands clasped on the table. She wore a tan blazer that Warren had never seen before, and her hair was done up something different also, hanging down loose so that it spilled onto her shoulders.

"I'm going to look for a job today," she said. "I'm not just going to sit around the house anymore. I'm going to get out and do things, work."

Warren didn't know what to say. He didn't know until then that she planned on staying. Then she started listing her grievances--the lack of attention he paid her, the parties they'd missed because he didn't like to go out, and most importantly the way he always lectured her on what she needed to do to improve herself. Warren knew everything she said was true.

"What do you expect me to do?" Warren said.

"I expect you to do things for me. I'm worth it, damn it."

Warren nodded. "What about what's his name, Billy Graham?"

"His name is William Furster and I don't want to hear anything about him."

"You just expect to start where we were as if nothing happened?"

"No! You weren't listening to me at all! I don't want things like they were. I want some changes."

Warren looked up at the clock. He knew this could go on for awhile. "Well, we'll finish talking when I get home this evening. I've gotta leave now."

But after work Warren didn't go home right away. He stopped at a music store and looked through the song books. Finally he found a booklet to his liking--Best of the Doors. When he picked up Alvin at the grade school, he gave him the song book. Alvin just stared down at it and then ruffled

through the pages.

"What is this?" he said.

"A song book. There's musical notes on the pages. After you learn to play your guitar, you can learn to play these songs. I know a little about it. I'll show you what I know."

Alvin ruffled through the pages again.

"What songs?" he said.

"Each page has a song printed on it. Look. See these marks? Those are a song. And here's the words. 'The time to hesitate is through. No time to wallow in the mire.' See?"

"Wallow? What's this about? A pig?"

Behind them a horn honked. Warren stuck his head out the window and saw a faded blue pickup. A man with a grizzled face and a grease smeared cowboy hat shouted for Warren to move. "I gotta pick up my son."

"Hold your horses, shit kicker," Warren muttered and dropped the car into gear.

Later that evening, Warren showed Alvin how to play a few chords, but Alvin's hands were too small for all except the most simple ones. Warren leafed through the song book until he found "Riders on the Storm."

"Here you go," he said. "The chords here are easy. Try this."

Alvin pushed his tongue from the corner of his mouth as his fingers stretched over the frets.

"Yeah, that's it," said Warren. "Keep practicing this

part right here. See, it keeps getting repeated. Practice that until you get it down pat."

At dinner Kristen said she'd found a job on her first day job hunting. Warren said, "Oh." He'd sworn she wouldn't find a job. She'd never held a job before in her life. Her father owned the television station where Warren worked. He was practically a millionaire. He gave his four girls whatever they wanted. Kristen said she'd be working at Garden City Savings and Loan. They'd even shown her what she'd be doing--pulling checks and deposit slips out of vacuum tubes and counting out stacks of bills.

To get off the subject Warren mentioned the dog.

"It lay in that ditch for two days straight before they did anything with it," he said.

"Oh, Warren. Not while we're eating, please."

Alvin stared at his father, his spoon frozen halfway to his mouth, and didn't move until his mother told him he'd dropped a spoonful of peas on the floor. He thought about the grave and decided it might stand out too clearly. He didn't want anyone to see where the dog was buried. So after he'd cleaned up the peas and washed off his plate, he ran through the ditch. The grave wasn't as he had left it, though. Now it was empty. Claw marks scored the dirt and clay. He looked up and down the ditch but the dog was no where to be seen. He ran up the other side of the ditch and looked over the open field where he played baseball and football, but the dog

wasn't there either. The first thing that came to his mind was that the dog must have come back to life, like a zombie or a vampire. But then he remembered the coyotes. At night he could hear them yipping in the distance. Maynard had even told him about hunting them once. Alvin decided the coyotes must have done it.

Now the open grave seemed profane to Alvin. He couldn't look at it any longer so he ran back home. He picked up the guitar again and tried reaching for the chords.

Over the next week, Alvin kept practicing the song until he could make the chord changes with ease. He didn't understand the meter markings on the page, so once he got the chord changes down correctly, he kept trying to make the changes as quickly as possible. Finally his father yelled he was playing it too fast. But Alvin liked it sped up so he kept playing it that way.

This grated on Warren's nerves. He liked "Riders on the Storm." He even owned most of the Doors albums. When Alvin played the song, though, sometimes singing the verses in haphazard fashion, the song became a happy little chant. "Like a dog without a home, like an actor with a bone, riders on the storm." Ding, de-de, ding, ding, ding. Warren sat down with his son and showed him how to play the easy parts of other songs, but Alvin always fell back upon "Riders on the Storm."

After Kristen's first pay day, she brought home the

money in one dollar bills and spread them across the living room floor while Warren sat watching TV. Then Kristen said they should get interested in real estate. Warren just stared at the television.

"Oh, come on, honey," she said. "It's easy. You should know. You edited all those shows for William. We can do it. You just never use your own money for any down payments. That's all. You use everybody else's instead." She sat on the arm of the La-Z Boy, one knee drawn to her chest. She grabbed Warren's hands. "Come on," she said as she stood up, tugging him to his feet. "It's been so long. Right here. On the money. With all the little Georgies staring up at me."

"What?"

"Let's make love."

"What about Alvin? What if he walks in?"

"Forget about Alvin. Think about me. Alvin's outside. We'll hear if he comes in."

"This is crazy. Look at yourself." Warren turned and walked away.

Outside, Alvin batted a baseball around the field beside the house. In his mind the Royals and the Rangers were playing. He hit for every hitter, throwing the grass-stained ball into the air and then swinging. Bottom of the ninth, down by two, bases loaded, two out, George Brett at the plate, the wind up, and here comes the pitch, a long drive into right field, deep, deep, way back, it could be, it could

be, it is, home run! The ball landed over the barbed wire fence and disappeared. That was the only drawback to hitting home runs: Alvin had to search for the ball in the alfalfa field.

Alvin crawled between the strands of barbed wire and just as he did he saw the mangled carcass. He knew what it was the moment he saw it, even though its head was missing, as were all but one of the legs. There was just the trunk of the body, flesh scraped away to the bone, Alvin didn't doubt what it was. He left the ball where it was, grabbed his bat and ran inside.

Every day after school Alvin went out to the field and looked at the carcass, and every day the carcass had been dragged to somewhere else on the field. It didn't look anything like a dog any longer. There was no black and white fur, only bones and the reddish brown flesh between the ribs.

The next day when Warren picked up his remote control, he found out that Kristen had moved in with her parents. "You don't appreciate me and it's obvious you never will," the note said. "I was foolish to think you could." Warren sat down on the La-Z Boy and stared at the floor until Alvin came into the room. Alvin picked up the note and read. "Ape-reck-eye-ate. What's that mean?" he said.

"Gimme that," said Warren.

"Is she gone again?"

Warren nodded.

"Was it because I didn't clean out my closet?"

"No. It wasn't you."

"Why?"

"I don't know."

"She'll come back, won't she?"

"I don't know that either."

That night the phone rang and Warren answered. It was Kristen. She said she was planning on filing for a separation. The next day she picked up all her things. "I've rented a cute little place over near the bank," she said. Alvin sat at the top of the stairs, peering through the railing as she marched out to the car with boxes full of plants and shoes. It didn't make any sense to him. Mothers don't move out.

Later on, Warren heated up two frozen dinners while Alvin set their places at the table.

"Do coyotes eat people?" Alvin asked.

"No, not that I know of anyway. I don't know too much about them though."

"Maynard said that one time a bunch of coyotes--"

"A pack."

". . . What?"

"A pack. Not a bunch."

"A pack a what?"

"Of coyotes."

"What about 'em?"

". . . Go on with your story."

". . . about the coyotes?"

"Yeah, go on."

"They cornered this guy by a pond."

". . . And so?"

"He had to jump in and swim around for a couple hours, until they went away. You think that's true?"

"I haven't the foggiest."

That night once Warren had settled down in front of the TV, Alvin sneaked into the garage and stacked cases of oil one of top of another until he could reach the top shelf and his father's pellet rifle. He grabbed the rifle and jumped down. From a cabinet he pulled out the tin of pellets for the rifle. Then he went out onto the field. The moon was out and nearly full. Every thing stood out clearly in a bluish-grey glow. The wind was soft, riffling through the grass. It felt warm on his face. He walked across the field to where he last remembered seeing the carcass. It was still there. He crept thirty feet away and slid through to the other side of the barbed wire fence. There, he sat down, the rifle balanced on his knees. He pulled the tin of pellets from his pocket and one by one started filling the ammunition port. From here he could see every part of the field. To the east, over the highway, a field of wheat moved like a wave as the wind pushed through. And further east, Alvin could hear coyotes. They yipped like pups. Every night the coyotes were down by

the creek, making their racket. Sometimes when there wasn't any wind, Alvin could even hear them as he lay in bed. After an hour, his legs began to fall asleep from sitting cross legged. He stretched out belly down on the tall grass, the rifle pointed through the fence. Now he could feel the tiny chigger bites under his shirt. It itched inside his jeans and it even itched in his socks, but he wasn't going to move. He looked through the rifle sights and across the wheat field, but there weren't any coyotes. The warm air seemed to have gone dead, weighting him down, especially his eyelids. After another ten minutes he was asleep.

Alvin didn't awaken until two hours later. What woke him then was the coyote sniffing his hair. Another sniffed his shoes. Alvin jerked his foot back. He pulled up the rifle and his finger found the trigger. The rifle fired and a coyote yipped. It tucked its tail beneath its legs and ran. He raised the rifle and fired again and again. By then the coyotes were gone, except for one. It stood fifty feet away, wobbling on weak legs. Alvin fired at it and the coyote winced. Then it turned and started away, but it didn't move like the others. It stumbled and nearly fell. Alvin ran off after it. In the moonlight Alvin could see that this coyote was different. It was almost white. He closed in, the rifle held above his head as a club, and when he was close enough, he brought the rifle butt down on the coyote's skull. The coyote went down head first, tumbling in the high grass, its

legs flailing. Then it stood up again, its legs shaking convulsively. Alvin raised the rifle and brought it down between the coyote's ears. Now the coyote lay still. He raised the rifle, aimed at the coyote's ribs and pulled the trigger. And then he kept pulling the trigger, firing pellet after pellet into the coyote.

Warren awoke when he heard the shots. The TV was humming with the test pattern. He fumbled for the remote control and when finding it he punched the mute button. The shots were damn close, he thought. His first thought was that it was the neighbors. Out firing rifles beside his house. He'd let them have a piece of his mind. He jumped up and ran outside. His face was flushed and his ears red. He was going to scream at them like he'd never screamed before. He couldn't see where the sound was coming from right away: there wasn't anyone standing in the field. Then he saw a dark patch. He walked toward it.

"Hey, you. What the hell you think you're doing?"

The shots didn't stop. Warren climbed through the fence and ran toward the shadows.

"Hey, fool, you hear me," he shouted.

Alvin still fired the rifle, tears running down his cheeks. When Warren got within fifty feet, he knew it wasn't the neighbor. The shape seemed familiar somehow but he wasn't sure why. From ten feet away he saw it was Alvin.

Alvin lifted and aimed the rifle again.

"Is that a coyote?" Warren asked, but Alvin didn't answer. "It's dead."

"It is now," said Alvin and he squeezed the trigger again.

Warren reached out and grabbed the rifle. Alvin didn't object. He released it. Warren knelt down beside his son. He wanted to ask Alvin what was going on, but his son's eyes were glazed over. He picked him up in his arms and carried him home. He helped undress him and pulled back the bed sheets. Just after Warren had pulled the bedroom door shut and was walking down the hall. He heard the guitar. It was the same song as before--the sped up version of "Riders on the Storm." Warren sat down on the steps and listened. Alvin began singing.

"Into this world we're born, into this world we're born, like a dog without a home, like a actor with a bone, riders on the storm."

The second time through, Warren began to softly sing along, singing Alvin's version. Their voices echoed through the house.

Absolution

Chapter One

From grades one through nine I attended Sacred Heart--a three-story church and parochial school with three-foot-thick walls and yellow-and-black air raid shelter signs--and the one thing I remember most is the monolithic wooden cross that hung above the altar. When I was five or six, I started watching the cross, a smooth modern art impression of the Crucifixion, Jesus's arms outstretched--like an eagle sweeping over the congregation--and I wondered how those thin cables running to the ceiling's high arch could ever support such a weight. That cross must've been fifteen feet high, and it always hung there, poised in mid-flight, its reddish-brown wood so perfectly smooth.

When I was seven or eight, I started wondering what might happen if one of those wires were to snap. I imagined the cross breaking loose in the middle of Mass, Jesus's feet, like a huge pickaxe, smashing the altar table--candles and flowers flung through the air as the table snapped instantly.

If my mother had known what I was thinking she would've taken a hickory switch to me once we got home, either that or given me those verses in St. Matthew to read--"For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries,

fornication" and so on and so on.

Once at confession, when I couldn't think up any good sins to divulge, I told Father Lewis about the cross, but he only got confused. "That doesn't make any sense son," he said. I was explaining it for the third or fourth time when he gave me three Hail Marys and sent me away.

And then one day when Sister Teresa told me to extinguish the altar candles and I was completely alone in the chapel, I decided to see what might happen if I were to touch the cross. Standing on the altar in my stocking feet, the candelabrams and flowers pushed aside, I strained upward, but just as I did, the cross moved. Or at least I thought it moved. Actually, the cross wasn't moving at all, of course. It was me. And I was moving straight down. The altar table tipped and I--along with the candles, flowers, and Bibles--skidded onto the floor.

I lay there wondering what had just happened until I heard hard-soled shoes--click-clack, click-clack--headed down the hallway in my direction. I grabbed my shoes and didn't stop running until I slid into the boy's restroom.

The new kid was there, fanning the air like crazy as smoke rose toward the ceiling. "Damn it! I thought you was a nun," he said. I'd never seen anyone eight years old who smoked before, so all I could do was stare. He was looking at the shoes in my hands. "Supposed to wear shoes on your feet, ya know," he said.

Then I heard the hard-soled shoes again. "Sister Madeleine!" he said. "We gotta hide. She'll smell the smoke." He knelt by an air vent. The vents were at floor level (no grilles), a good foot and a half square. "Come on," he said, "or you're dead meat." His head and shoulders disappeared up the shaft. I'd never paid much attention to the vents before, except for the time an art assignment blew off my desk and a vent sucked it up. The kid's feet disappeared. Then the restroom door was shoved open. "I know you're in there. Come on out!" I slunk back against the wall. The row of five toilets was between her and me. If it were any other nun, I'd have been safe, but Sister Madeleine would come in after you. Once she grabbed a guy by the collar while he was doing his business at a urinal. (He just about ripped his peeter off zipping up so fast.) I decided to risk going up the air vent, so I slid in head first. And when I did, something grabbed me and pulled me up. I envisioned a giant fan sucking me through the vents and slicing me into two or three dozen odd-shaped pieces, but then a voice whispered in my ear: "Put your feet on the ledge." I fumbled for a second and then my feet found it. We were both standing straight up in the vent, not daring to breathe, as a shadow swept past the air vent opening beneath us. The stall doors creaked as they were pushed back, the hard-soled shoes grinding against the concrete floor, but finally the restroom door slammed closed. We slid from the vent and brushed the dirt from our jackets. (Everybody had to

wear those hot rub-your-neck-raw blazers.) Now the kid was clutching a pair of binoculars. I didn't know where they'd come from.

"Like 'em?" he said.

I nodded.

"They're mine."

Etched on their side it said "Property of Sacred Heart." They were Sister Madeleine's. She used them to watch us on the playground, always staying behind the plate glass window in the nurse's office, writing on a clipboard while we played.

"They're beauts, ain't they?" he said. "Wanna look through 'em?"

I shook my head.

"Take 'em home for me," he said. "Would ya?"

I didn't know what to say to him. He was odd looking. His hair was cut in the shape of a bowl and his nose was hooked like a buzzard's beak. His wrists stuck out of his sleeves a good three inches.

"My name's Durwood," he said. And then he smiled.

I just stared. I'd never heard the name Durwood before.

"Just come in after school and stick 'em in your empty lunch box, okay? They'll be on the ledge in the vent."

I knew I shouldn't do it. I never got in trouble. I was the kind who volunteered to clean erasers after school.

"Just come back by after the final bell. I'll get it

down and put it in your bucket. You just have to take it home, okay?"

He didn't wait for an answer this time. He patted me on the back, smiled, said "See you later," and sneaked out the door. After final bell, I was planning on running out of my classroom and out the back entrance, not even going near the restroom, but the second after the bell started ringing Durwood was waiting for me in the hall. As I walked from the cloakroom, he grinned while sliding next to me. "Sorta like spies, huh?" he said and we walked straight for the restroom. He cradled the binoculars as if they contained nitroglycerine while setting them among the crumpled paper towels he'd added for padding in my lunch bucket. The second we appeared in the hall, though, Sister Madeleine (striding through the sea of kids) bellowed "Durwood! Come here!" He gave me a quick thumbs-up signal (that she couldn't see), just before she caught his ear with a hand like eagle talons. Durwood twisted at her side, walking on tippy-toes, as she pulled him toward her office.

My mom was waiting out front for me. She got off work each day at the Bonner Springs Bank just in time to pick me up. As I climbed into the car, I slid the lunch box behind the front seat, hoping she hadn't noticed anything unusual about it. Apparently she hadn't; instead, she started yanking on the collar of my shirt.

"I told you to keep this top button buttoned. Is that

too much to ask? You look like a bum when you go around like this."

"It cuts into my neck so I can't breathe. You want me to get strangled?"

"There are people all over this world who would fight to have such a pretty shirt as you have and here you are complaining because the collar doesn't fit perfectly."

She had a way of saying "collar" that made it sound like the most insignificant thing in the world. I bet she could've done the same thing with the word "noose."

We drove down the hill from Sacred Heart, under the tall elms that overhung the road. The houses were pretty and tidy on both sides. Large porches with gliders and clean picture windows. We bumped across the railroad tracks, the city limits, and Mom pushed the accelerator to the floor. The Volkswagen engine screamed as we swayed across the center line and passed a pickup.

My mom used to be a nun, but you wouldn't know it from the way she drove. She drove like Richard Petty was her brother. The tractor in the distance grew in size until we were almost on top of him. Then she twisted the steering wheel to the left and we buzzed past.

If it weren't for the black-and-white glossy of her in Father Lewis's office, alongside glossies of all the nuns who'd ever worked at Sacred Heart, I don't think I could've pictured her as one. The picture looked like her anyway, the

same narrow face, framed in an oval by her habit, and the eyes were the same, like slowly melting ice cubes.

Mom clicked on the air conditioner and the painted ceramic Jesus hanging from the rear view mirror danced in the breeze. I busied myself thinking about the binoculars behind me and the trouble I'd be in if Mom found out about them. But when we got home, Mom was more concerned about the stray dog in our yard. She ran him off while I sneaked the lunch box into the house (dumping the binoculars under the bed and setting the lunch box on its usual place on the counter). Then Mom put me to work cleaning out my closet. That's what I was doing when I turned around and found Durwood standing in the middle of my room. I didn't even know he knew where I lived, but he must've. Of course, in Linwood, practically everyone knew where everyone else lived.

"How'd you get in here?" I said.

"How ya think?"

He must have just walked right in. If he had knocked or rung the bell, Mom would have told him to wait outside while she yelled for me. She would never just send a kid right on in, particularly if she'd never seen him before.

"So where's the binoculars?" he said. I pulled them out and he grinned. "Mission accomplished," he said while picking them up. "There's something I want to show ya. It's why I got 'em. Come on." His eyes didn't have their usual predatory glow. And his mouth had lost its eternal sneer. He seemed

genuinely excited about whatever it was he wanted me to see. If he could think the binoculars were so important, maybe they were. So when he led the way out the bedroom window, I followed. We crawled through the bushes on our stomachs and then dashed for the creek, keeping our heads low. We took off our shoes and socks, tied the laces together, hung them around our necks (as in prison break out movies), and waded downstream until we reached where he lived. His father was a Tinsley farm hand, so they lived in one of the Tinsley shacks. I wasn't supposed to associate with any of the kids who lived there. Mom said they were shiftless and untrustworthy: "They might steal the clothes right off your back." The shacks were red--one coat of paint over sheet metal walls. Windows were covered with plastic. I followed Durwood out of the creek and up a hill.

He led us to a tall sycamore, with a tree house twenty feet above our heads. Branches swayed close to the ground, grey bark peeling away to reveal smooth white wood. Durwood climbed hand over hand up the tree, the binocular's cord clenched in his teeth (though I don't know why he didn't just sling it round his neck), and I scrambled after him. As I pulled myself through the trap door, I heard a strange noise, and when I turned around I saw Durwood with his pants unbuckled. He aimed for a gallon bucket nailed to a tree branch, jutting his pelvis forward until the stream arced just right and echoed in the can. "My piss bucket," he said

and buckled up. "You can use it if ya want." I couldn't believe what I'd just seen. The bucket was in clear view. Anyone looking at the tree house could have seen him. At first I thought that was what he meant for me to see, but then he pointed over my head and said "Take a look." I scrambled to my feet. From the tree house I could see just about everything. The sun was beginning to touch the tree tops way to the west. Mr. Zimmerman, his bald spot reflecting the sun, carried out the trash from his grocery store. Over by the Tinsley shacks, a woman scrubbed down a goat, for what reason I don't know. She had the goat in a tub and she doused him with a bucket of soapy water. Down the street further yet, Miss Baker worked in her yard, her hair wrapped in a red scarf, watering her flowers, reds and purples and pinks. Mist rose from the sprinklers and swept down the street. There was my own house, just before Tinsley's land started. The house was nothing different from the others. White. A little back porch sitting on stone pillars, a bird bath in the middle of the backyard. Tinsley's driveway started right where the road ended, as if the street were built just for him. Little concrete lions, growling, sat on brick thrones.

"See that house over there? Beside the one where the man just got out of his car?" Durwood said. He pointed to a plain house with two dead elm trees beside it. "Watch," he said. We waited. A minute later, I still hadn't seen anything. "Look for what?" I said. "Just watch," he said. So we waited.

"There!" The back door of the house crept open and a woman stuck her head out. I'd seen her before but I didn't know her name. She jumped down the back steps, her hands pulled to her stomach, looked both directions and then ran. She hurdled the fence, sprinted to the man's back door, and knocked. After a couple seconds the door opened. The man, Mr. Perving (whom I knew from Little League), stuck out his head and looked around. Then he held the door open for her and she ran up the back steps and inside. Soon the blinds were pulled down.

"Ha-ha. Happens every night as soon as he gets home," Durwood said. Then he pointed down the street. "Miss Baker'll quit watering in a couple minutes and then she'll start burning her trash. And over there--at the picture show--Max'll start sweeping his concrete sidewalk. He'll come out the side door, behind the ticket booth." I watched for the next few minutes as the sun crept lower in the trees. And sure enough Miss Baker stopped watering her yard and lit her trash on fire. But Mr. Lennox didn't come out right away. We waited and waited (trading the binoculars back and forth) and finally the door opened and he stepped out with his broom. He was mighty proud of that sidewalk. It was the only one in town.

"This is what I got the binoculars for," he said. "Now we can see everything. We'll know everything." I didn't know what he meant at first, but as I continued to gaze out over the town, the cars pulling into driveways, the sprinklers

being turned on and off, the lights one by one illuminating the front rooms of each house as dusk sat in, I started to understand what he meant. And as crazy as he normally was, it seemed that maybe this one time he was onto something.

So as it began to get dark, and I said I had to go home (supper was undoubtedly ready by now), I promised I'd return the next day. And return I did (even though the piss bucket made me cringe), everyday after school for the next week. We drew up a rough schedule of when everything happened in town and then we sat and waited for each thing to happen. It seemed as if we knew everything there were to know.

I felt a bit uneasy around Durwood, though. He constantly seemed just on the verge of doing something utterly bizarre (or obscene). But nevertheless it seemed as if there were a great secret we shared, and so I started waiting for Durwood every morning at school. (Our both being from Linwood, instead of Bonner Springs, put us in a special club to begin with. The other kids called anyone from Linwood a Linnie.) His father would drive him up (along with Durwood's two brothers and three sisters) in a Ford truck, rust eating through the rocker panels in jagged holes. They'd pile out while the truck coughed clouds of black smoke. One day Durwood had a black eye. It glistened. "Damn cow kicked me this morning," he said. We walked up the stairs and into Sacred Heart. Before we got ten feet past the door, Sister Madeleine yelled at Durwood to stop. She wanted to speak with

him. She stood with her hands on her hips, squinting through her pop-bottle-thick glasses. "Follow me into my office." He stuck his tongue out after her as they walked. I stayed in the hall and watched. She bent over him with her thumbs on both sides of his eye, inspecting the shiner.

"Who did this?" she said.

"An ol' milk cow. Kicked me this morning," he said.

"A cow didn't do this." Durwood just stared. "Your brother had a black eye the other day. He said he fell down the stairs. And your sister had a bruise on her arm. Tell me the truth. Where'd you get the black eye?"

"An ol' cow kicked me."

"That is not the bruise caused by a cow. It looks more like the bruise caused by a fist."

Durwood folded his arms and tucked his chin to his chest.

"Did your father do this?" she asked.

"No."

"Look. This doesn't have to go on. If your father did this we can do something about it."

"I told you he didn't do it."

She looked him over again, her hands on her hips. Then she noticed me watching. "Get out of here!" she yelled and slammed the door shut.

At the end of the day, Durwood met me outside my classroom. "Come on!" he shouted and grabbed my arm. We

darted past the other kids and into the restroom. "You gotta do this for me," he said. He disappeared up the air vent. A second later he was back, holding a woman's change purse. "Give me your lunch box." I just stood there, so he tore it from my hand.

"No!" I shouted. But he didn't listen. I tried to grab back the lunch bucket, but he elbowed me in the stomach.

"After everything I've shown you, you owe me," he said. He dropped the purse into my lunch pail and closed the lid. "Take it home like the binoculars. I'll pick it up later." He ran to the door. "I'll make sure the coast is clear," he said and stuck his head out the door.

That's when I had a brainstorm. Why couldn't he just take the purse home in his own lunch bucket? Why'd he need me at all? His lunch bucket was sitting on the floor beside mine, so while he peaked out the door, I opened them up and made the switch, dropping the purse on top of his half-eaten apple.

"Oh, shit!" he said. "She saw me!" He turned and dove for the air vent, but just as he did the door was shoved open and Sister Madeleine came in after him. She saw his feet before he could disappear and grabbed his ankle. With a yank, he came tumbling onto the restroom floor.

"Stand up," she yelled. When he didn't move, she jerked him to his feet. Then she noticed me again. "What are you always standing around for? Get out!" I grabbed my lunch

bucket and ran for the door, but before I left I looked back. She searched through his jacket and patted down his shirt and pants pockets. Then she spied his lunch bucket and the lump in my throat turned into a small grapefruit. I ran out the door and jumped down the steps. That was the last time I ever saw Durwood at Sacred Heart.

On Fridays my mom and I usually spent the evenings reading the Bible. It had been part of our normal regimen for as far back as I could remember. She would light a row of candles over the mantle and we would read for at least an hour--how long depended on how she felt or what I had done during the week. The time I bought a transistor radio and she found me listening to music she didn't deem fit--I think it was Buddy Holly's "Rave On"--we recited until nearly midnight. "Heathen music. Jungle rhythms."

So on this Friday Mom had me preparing to read the part in First Corinthians about eliminating evils from the church. (That had me sweating from a minute or two: I thought maybe she knew what had happened at school.) But the door bell rang. I ran to answer it and who should I find standing there but Durwood. He didn't say a word. He just stared. His eyes were blank and his narrow, v-shaped jaw hung loosely. Sweat left clean trails down his forehead.

"What do you want?" I asked.

He continued to stare, not showing the slightest

emotion, and then he unzipped his fly. I jumped back and slammed the door. With only the drone of my mom's RCA Victrola in the background, I listened as a steady stream hit the outer door panel and ran onto the front porch. When the stream stopped, I heard soft, methodical footsteps. I peeked between the Venetian blinds and saw Durwood slowly walking down the street, not once looking back.

At confession I meant to tell everything about the cross, the binoculars, and Durwood, but when I pulled the curtain shut and the confessional became dark, I knew I wasn't going to say a thing. Father Lewis sat quietly for a long while, waiting for me to speak. "How can I help you, son," he finally said leaning toward the grating and peering at me with one eye. I stared at the floor. Usually I prepared my list of sins in advance, being careful not to reuse the same sins very often, in fear that Father Lewis might think I was both lying and unimaginative. Now my mind was blank. I couldn't remember what I'd said the previous week. I couldn't think of any sins at all. "Is that you, Josh?" Father Lewis said. I nodded. "What's wrong?"

"Forgive me Father for I have sinned," I mumbled.

"What?" he said.

"Forgive me Father for I have sinned," I repeated, maybe a little too loud.

"Oh," he said. "Go ahead."

I kept concentrating but nothing came to mind except the same old puny little sins. "I used the lord's name in vain," I said. "And I didn't clean out my closet until my mother got mad." I was sure he knew I was lying, and I was sure I was going to burn in hell for having given a false confession. But somehow that didn't matter. I was just glad he gave me absolution and sent me on my way.

Chapter Two

In eighth grade my mother got me a job at Zimmerman's Corner Store. I'd been in the store with her before and each time she bugged Zimmerman about letting me work. She laid the guilt trip on him, complaining about how she could hardly pay the bills anymore and needed me to bring in just a few extra dollars a week. "It would mean so much." And finally Zimmerman gave in.

Zimmerman was past fifty. Back in the '30s he'd been a catcher with the Kansas City Blues. On the front window of the store he'd taped a program of one of those games. The program was yellow, cracked, and crumbling but if you looked closely you could see a little picture of him, his face much narrower. Beside it it said: "Bernard 'Ducky' Zimmerman. 4 HR, .236 BA." He said he got the nickname from his walk. He didn't waddle anymore, though. He walked with a limp, a pin in his hip from WWII. Now he was heavy, his gut falling over his belt like a roll of dirty bread dough. I could hardly

picture him jumping out of the catcher's box after bunts.

I started working for him during my last year at Sacred Heart. And I continued working once school started up again in the fall. But now I had to attend Linwood High School. My mom hated the idea of me going to a "regular school," but there weren't any Catholic high schools around.

I joined the school choir and that made her feel a little bit better. One day at practice, I heard some of the others talking. Three guys were gathered around a locker and past their bright green band uniforms I could see a Playboy magazine. They leafed through the pages.

"Where'd you get it?" said one.

"I bought it."

"You didn't buy it. They'd a kicked you outta the store."

"Didn't say I bought it from no store, numb nuts."

"Where then?"

"New guy. Name's Durwood. He'll sell you all you want."

The chances it was a different kid named Durwood were zilch. I didn't run into him right away, but he found me somehow. It was a tap on my shoulder after choir practice. There was this tall, lanky guy behind me. He stuck out his hand and we shook.

"'ey it's Josh," he said. "I heard you were here, man."

I nodded.

We stared at each other sort of stupidly for a few

seconds. I didn't know if I was looking at the same person I knew long ago or what. There was a resemblance, a nose the size of a Buick, and the same haircut, like a bowl (but now with the Beatles that haircut was in style). It seemed I knew him, but I wasn't sure.

"Good to see you again," he said.

". . . You too."

"I hear you're working at Zimmerman's now."

I nodded.

"I'll drop by some time maybe. Check things out, maybe buy a thing or two. You never know." He turned to run off but stopped after a few steps. "Hey, I listened to you for a while, when you were doing that last song. You sing like a fucking canary."

Every afternoon after choir practice, I worked for a couple hours at Zimmerman's, helping him restock his shelves or arrange the bottles of milk and tubs of margarine in his old refrigerators. Talk about someone who needed a few extra dollars a week.

Just a couple months previously, Old Man Tinsley had built his own store just a couple hundred yards away. Every Wednesday afternoon, Mr. Zimmerman peered through the Linwood Gazette, checking on the Tinsley Grocery ads as he pushed his thick-rimmed glasses off the end of his nose. Steam would roll up from his coffee, fogging his glasses. He'd pull a soiled handkerchief from his pocket and rub circles on the

lenses. Every now and then he'd mutter a word or two, but I could never make them out. It was Yiddish, I think.

One day I was putting up cans of dog food, cutting the boxes open with a razor blade and carefully stamping the cans with a price marker just as Mr. Zimmerman had always taught me--("It's in the wrist, son. Hit 'em quick.")--when the brass bell over the front door rang. It was Durwood. He stood framed in the doorway. Then he stepped forward, his eyes running around the edges of the ceiling. I waited for him to make a move, but he didn't look down either of the aisles. He only gazed up at the bundles of flyswatters and the coolers hanging from the ceiling as if he were afraid they might come undone and bounce off his skull.

"Hey, Josh," he said, his eyes still roaming over the store. He sauntered toward me, his hands stuck deep into his pockets as he slouched to a stop. He didn't look at me; he kept his back turned and spoke in the opposite direction.

"About those magazines," he said. When I didn't answer right away, he swung toward me, raising his eyebrows. He seemed to think he'd asked a question. He bit his bottom lip and then smirked. "Come on, Josh. You know," he said, his thumbs hooked in his belt loops as he cased the store again.

"You have to tell me what you want. I can't read minds," I said.

"Come on smart guy. Playboys. What'd you think?"

"What about them?"

"Since when did you get so stupid, Joshua? You know what I mean."

My first thought was to yell for Mr. Zimmerman. Tell him what Durwood wanted and see Durwood's face go limp, but I didn't. This was just between Durwood and me.

"You're not old enough to buy them," I said.

Durwood's eyes swept toward the ceiling as if watching a flock of birds fly over. He let out a long sigh.

"Josh, Josh, Josh. How can you be so dumb, my friend? I'm offering you a business deal. Money for Playboys. You sneak 'em out to me and I give you a quarter a copy."

I could picture Mr. Zimmerman if he ever found out some of the Playboys were missing. He only started carrying them because Old Man Tinsley did. He was convinced God would ultimately strike revenge on him for selling such material, but with his wife already gone, he said he didn't have much to lose anymore and he had to make ends meet. He never let his daughter, Sandra, put away the magazine shipments, though; he always made sure that was done before she started work in the evenings.

"They cost a dollar," I said.

"They don't cost you anything. Just get 'em to me, okay?" he said. He stepped back into the middle of the floor. "Hey, get the mag as soon as you can and I'll get you the quarter." He said "quarter" as if he were offering me some kind of award, only bestowed upon the most fortunate of

souls.

I didn't move as he turned for the door. I wanted to yell I wouldn't do it, but the words remained lodged in my throat.

"Drop by my place on your way home," he said and then he was gone.

Mr. Zimmerman kept the magazines behind the counter. Whenever one of his older customers came in, he'd scramble to throw a Linwood Gazette on top of the Playboys. I knew how easy it would be to slip a copy of Playboy into the trash. I could slip past Mr. Zimmerman to the trash bin and tuck the Playboy behind the back steps. But it always seemed that he kept track of those magazines, a number written down somewhere to tell him just how many had been sold, probably on a slip of paper in the cash register. But when I checked the drawer, all I found was some odd change.

It seemed so easy. But for Durwood?

As usual at sunset, Mr. Zimmerman grew melancholy. It was the same melancholy that struck him every evening when the fluorescent lights above the Tinsley parking lot came on and attracted a mist of mosquitoes. He yelled for his daughter to take his place.

Sandra always struck me as pretty in a fragile sort of way. No big luscious curves, but a delicate, china-doll kind of beauty. We'd been friends long ago when we went to the same baby sitter. But like Durwood, anymore she didn't really

seem the same person. Maybe there was some memory of the past inside her somewhere, but she seemed different somehow. When I was at work, she usually stayed secluded in the back of the store, where she and her father had a small apartment.

"Yes, Papa?" she said as she edged out from the stockroom.

"I need you to take over again, Sandra."

She grabbed an apron from the coat rack and pulled it tight around her waist. And then when he started to leave, he started the same shtick that he did every time she and I were in the same room.

"You know, Josh, you and Sandra ought to go to a movie sometime. I'll give you the money. Sandra never gets out. All she does is stay in her room and listen to those records." He smiled at her and she stared at her shoes. "Maybe you're a Catholic, but you've got a good Jewish name--Joshua."

Sandra blushed and pushed him toward the backroom. "Go rest, Papa," she said.

I really would've liked to ask her out, but with all the pestering, I knew I'd never say a thing to her, no matter how many classes we had together. It became the one thing in the world I could never say to her under any circumstances.

Once Mr. Zimmerman retired to his reclining leather chair to soak his feet in a tub of Epsom salts, Sandra grabbed the feather duster and began dusting the shelves. With the twists of her thin forearm, a ripple swept down her

body, gaining momentum until reaching her rear, which wiggled once and then stopped, sort of like a shock absorber. I watched her as I set the last of the dog food onto the shelves. I thought about her soft hair. I knew how sweet it smelled from those times she'd passed by me and a fragrance had lingered for a second. But then all I could think about was how her father had botched every thing between her and me. And I knew he would keep up the same shtick in the future. At times he seemed so pitiful.

It was then I decided that one magazine would never make a difference, and while Sandra was realigning the stock, I slid the top copy of Playboy into the trash can.

From then on, every time a new shipment of Playboys arrived, I'd sneak one copy into the trash. This went on for quite a while. Durwood would give me the quarter he promised and the next day, once Mr. Zimmerman went to the restroom, I'd slip the quarter into the register.

My mother was proud I was doing so well working at Zimmerman's: I was bringing home close to twenty dollars a week. She'd ruffle my hair and say how I was beginning to become independent, before long I'd be grown up.

But eventually that day arrived when Mr. Zimmerman kept running his thumb over the edges of the Playboys, silently counting the copies as his lips formed each number. He shook his head and muttered, cursing himself I assumed, either that or begging for forgiveness; they both sounded the same to me.

Before he could tell I'd stopped working while watching him, I dove back into cleaning the front window as if it were the most intellectually demanding job ever created on earth. It took all my attention as I rubbed the window spray with a flourish, even yelling to Mr. Zimmerman how the window cleaner was the best I'd ever seen.

Mr. Zimmerman slowly walked toward me, his feet dragging as if they were suddenly too heavy to pick up. He stared up at me on the ladder. I couldn't keep up the act any longer. I swung away from him.

"Playboys have been missing, Josh. Do you know about them?"

I didn't say a thing.

"Come here, Josh," he said, sweeping his large paw of a hand onto my back. His hand was limp and lifeless. He pointed toward Tinsley's, vaguely visible through the last bit of twilight. We waited for what seemed an eternity, not moving, his arm around my shoulders and his heavy breath swirling in my face.

"There," he said as the lights above Tinsley's parking lot came on. He pulled me to his side, his shirt damp with sweat. "You see them?" he asked. I nodded. "They're doing this to me. Running me out of business. Do you think they care about this town? But I care and look what happens to me. . . . You know what I have to do then, don't you?" he asked.

I nodded.

"You've been a good worker, or so I thought. But now I don't know any longer, what was going on when I wasn't looking, I don't know. . . . I'm sorry, Josh," he said.

I wanted to explain about Durwood, but I couldn't find the right words. It would've seemed like whining. I just untied my apron and folded it neatly before dropping it into the hamper. I kept waiting for him to say no he didn't mean I was fired, but I didn't hear a word.

To walk home I had to pass by Durwood's. Sometimes when I walked by, he'd be out in the yard. He'd fade back as if he'd received a snap from center and fire his football at a tire swinging from a tree.

It was March, heading into baseball season, not football, but there was Durwood. I tried to slip past, pretending the cool air was keeping me from raising my head, but before I could get by the glow from the front windows, Durwood leaned against the fence.

"Hey, Joshua," he yelled.

At first I pretended I didn't hear him, but at his second yell, I had to turn. He grinned at me, or at least it seemed like a grin. I couldn't be sure since the porch lights were behind him.

"When you gonna get the next one?" he asked.

I let out a long sigh and told him he'd gotten me fired. He threw the ball into the air.

"Hey, Josh. Go out for a pass. Square out, right. Let me see what kinda hands you got. We're gonna need players for next fall."

"I don't want to catch--"

"Go ahead," he said and he took the snap and faded back into the pocket. I didn't want to run, but I did, moving slowly as if every muscle in my body were sore. He cocked his arm and the ball whistled toward me, a missile guided right at my head. My fingers became the net and they dragged in the ball just before it would've slammed against my face.

"Hey, great hands," he said. I walked back and underhanded him the ball. "So, did you get me the Playboy?"

"You got me fired."

"I didn't do nothing. Don't blame me."

I just stared at him.

"Can you still get me one? I already sold it. It's supposed to have pictures of Ursula Andress in it. I got five bucks from Ralph Beckerly."

I looked down the road toward home. Durwood hopped the fence and stood beside me.

"Come on, Joshua. The Jew fired ya. Dirty fuckin' Jew."

"Maybe it's in the trash can out back," I said. I'd dropped it into the trash before Mr. Zimmerman discovered that Playboy magazines had been missing. "Maybe he didn't see it. I don't know. Maybe it's not there. Maybe he burned the trash. Go look for yourself."

"Show me where," he said. "Come on, Josh. Let's go." He slapped me on the back and started running toward Zimmerman's. "Come on," he said.

I watched him run and then I looked down the road toward home. I took a couple steps in Durwood's direction, but I didn't want to follow him.

"Come on!" he yelled. "Run!"

I didn't want to run, but I did. I jumped down into the gully and followed his trail. We had to sneak up from the backside of Zimmerman's, where the weeds grew tall and left pink slashes on my forearms. The lights were out in the front of the store and only a small orange light filtered through from one of the apartment windows. Durwood led the way to the trash bin, brushing aside the weeds as he slid forward.

The trash bin was buried in the shadows, so grease stained over the years that it was almost a perfect black. Durwood pushed back the trash bin's sliding door, but when he looked off to the side he froze. He grabbed me by the collar and pulled me into the shadows. I assumed someone had heard us and we were just about to get caught, but Durwood peeked back around the edge of the trash bin and motioned me to take a peek. At first I didn't see anything, but then I saw movement behind that window with the orange glow. It was Sandra, and we could see her from the waist up. She was brushing her hair in the dresser mirror, and she was only wearing a bra.

She had a fuller figure than I had ever thought possible before. Maybe it was just all the loose-fitting clothes and bulky sweaters that kept me from realizing what was underneath. As she brushed her hair with long, smooth strokes, her shoulder blades slid up and down, her long mane of hair wavy and black. There was something different about the way she held herself, her shoulders thrown back and her head tilted majestically; now she seemed confident, even elegant maybe.

But then I noticed Durwood's reaction. He was practically drooling at the mouth. Not to say my window peeping was any better than his, but you could practically see the hair start growing from his palms.

"Oh, man we gotta get a better view," Durwood said. "No," I said, but it lacked any real weight. He grabbed the top edge of the trash bin and slid on top, chest first. This guy was really beginning to get on my nerves. He didn't have any right doing what he was doing. Especially since it was Sandra. He started to stand up but when he did the sliding panel on top of the trash bin gave away, and with a horrible grinding of metal on metal, he disappeared feet first into the trash. I sank back into the shadows and waited. When I peeked around the corner again, I saw the blind had been pulled down. Durwood popped up and shook his head. Egg shells flew from his hair.

"Goddamn trash."

He shoved his arms through the opening and in each hand he held a can of spray paint. He shook the first one and the metal ball clattered loudly. When he pushed the button, nothing happened. He tried the second can: this time the ball didn't clatter nearly so distinctly, and when Durwood pushed the button, paint spewed out.

"Fucking bitch, man. She knew what she was doing," he said as he rubbed the side of his head. He rolled over the side of the trash bin and onto the ground. "Come on." He crouched down and ran to the building. I could've left right then, but I felt responsible for what was happening. I couldn't just run away.

"Don't!" I hissed through my teeth, but he wasn't listening.

"Goddamn bitch. That's what she is."

He pushed down the spray paint button and I watched take form a three-foot-wide swastika, the can sputtering its way through the last arm. He threw the can to me.

"Draw something, Josh," he whispered. "The fuckin' Jew fired ya. You're not gonna let him get away with that, are ya?"

I just stood there with the can in my hand until Durwood stepped beside me. His fingers curled around the can of paint, clamping mine down tight. Then he raised the can toward the wall. But when he did I pulled away from him and hurled the can into the sky. Durwood stared at me. "You're

nuts," he said. He cocked one eye, shook his head, and smirked. Then he disappeared into the weeds.

When I got home, my mom'd just lit the candles over the mantle. It was Friday and I knew she expected me to recite Psalms with her again. At this time, though, that was one thing I really didn't feel like doing. I didn't want to be around anyone, but before I'd taken off my coat, the phone rang. My mom answered and said it was for me. "It's Mr. Zimmerman."

I was sure he'd discovered the swastika. And it would seem so obvious who was responsible for it. One and one always add up to two. I cursed myself for being so stupid and allowing Durwood to pull me along. I prepared myself for one of Mr. Zimmerman's long talks about how Tinsley had made his business so difficult, and how he now had to put up with vandalism. He'd have to paint the side of his store and he couldn't afford it.

But instead of hearing one of his sermons, he started apologizing. He said how sorry he was that he'd been so harsh with me. He said he knew what it was like to be a young man and have all the curiosity about women's bodies. He said he supposed the pictures hadn't really hurt me any. And then at the end, he said for me to come back to work the next day. He would pretend nothing had happened. I wanted to tell him he was wrong--that I hadn't been taking the magazines for

myself--but all I could manage was a weak "okay."

I told my mother I had to leave and she said I couldn't. We had to pray. I said I was leaving anyway. I grabbed some money off my dresser and ran out the front door. And as I ran down the steps she shouted something about God not forgiving me, but I didn't care. She said something about God not forgiving her and taking away my father, but I didn't care what she was saying; there was something I had to do.

I ran to Tinsley's, that haven of gleaming chrome and freshly waxed tile, bright orange-and-green plastic. The clerk smiled as I walked in. I lowered my head and walked around the aisles. "Finding what you need?" I didn't answer. I just kept searching. It had to be there somewhere. And finally I found it. Spray paint. Flat black. I paid for it and ran back to Zimmerman's. I turned the swastika into a giant square. I knew Mr. Zimmerman would stand there puzzling over who would paint and why'd they paint a black square on his building, but anything was better than what we'd painted.

When I got home Mom was kneeling before the candles. She didn't look up when I entered. I ripped off my coat and threw it into the closet. She didn't say a word as I passed by her and slammed my bedroom door shut. I didn't bother to turn on the light as I dropped onto the bed; I liked it pitch black. In the distance I could hear my mother offering prayers and reciting verses. "And these are they which are sown among thorns . . ." Her voice was soft, but it always reverberated

throughout the house like the buzzing of a hornets' nest.

Chapter Three

After school Monday when I got to work, I found Durwood leaning against the soda fountain, sucking on a Coke. At first I saw just him and thought about the Playboys. If I were still working he'd be wanting them again, no doubt. But then I saw Sandra. She was behind the counter, giggling at something Durwood said. Durwood turned and looked at me. "How's it going, Slick?" he said. Durwood and Sandra kept talking until it looked like he was going to claim squatters rights on that stool. I didn't like seeing her with Durwood but there wasn't a whole hell of a lot I could do about it. I was getting a bit pissed after I had to ring up a couple customers with Sandra giggling and doing no work at all except wiping the same spot on the soda counter about fifty times.

Everyday the next week, there was Durwood, resting against the soda fountain, talking to Sandra. He'd have his legs wrapped around the stool legs, his hands tapping the counter to some song only he could hear.

On Thursday I just about screamed when I walked through the door and found him. "What the hell are you doing here again?" I said.

"Hello to you too," he said. "Josh has a nice way of greeting people, don't you think Sandra?" She giggled. She

was starting to piss me off too. She always stood there and listened to him go on about his playing quarterback. I swear he must have told her everything in the world he knew about football. He told her all about every piece of his uniform, from the jersey to the knee pads. I thought for a minute he was going to tell her about his athletic cup. He even brought in his football to show her how to throw. They went outside for a little bit and he threw her soft passes from ten feet away.

"Sandra, you got your homework done?" Mr. Z yelled out at her.

"No, Papa."

"Well, get in here and do it then. Sorry boy. But I guess you'll have to run on home."

I didn't feel very good that evening after work. I lay in bed thinking about how to get rid of him. But I couldn't think up anything that wasn't outright stupid. So I decided the next best thing would be to just plain ask Sandra to a movie.

In the morning Mom woke me up by pulling up the blinds in my room. She tugged them down and then let them go flying to the top. That's how she always woke me. I hated it. The neighbors could look right into my room, particularly since the dinner table of the house next door was right across from my bedroom window. I asked her to stop waking me that way, but she didn't listen.

I once took the bell off my old American Flyer and rigged it up on the bedstead and told her to ring that instead. But she wouldn't do it. She always let those blinds go flying to the ceiling--whop, whop, whop. Then she'd ring the damned bell.

"Don't forget you have to hoe the garden today," she said.

I pulled the covers over my head. I thought about Sandra and decided I'd better get down to the store early, before Durwood got there. I slid out of bed onto all fours, crawled over to the window, and peeked over the sill. Yeah, like usual, there was Mr. Owens, stuffing down some sausages, grease covering his fingers and running down his wrist. His wife, rollers in her hair, looked right at me and waved. I stepped back into the shadows and pulled the shade down. I got into my jeans and shirt and walked into the kitchen. Mom was at the stove, beating eggs with a fork.

"I thought you said breakfast was ready?" I said.

"Well, you normally don't get out of bed for twenty minutes, until your food is cold."

"So you lied then?"

"I don't lie."

"What do you call it then?"

"Motivating."

"Hmm."

"What gets you out of bed so quickly today?"

"You said I have to hoe the garden."

"Since when does that get you out of bed? If I'd known you were so crazy about hoeing I'd have let you do it more often long ago."

I just smiled and let her win that one. I picked up the morning's paper and started reading. After a couple minutes she set the scrambled eggs and bacon in front of me.

"Just where were you last night?" she asked.

"I went over to Dwayne's after work." Dwayne and I had been friends since 9th grade. We use to pool our allowances so we could buy all the best comics--Tales From the Crypt, Weird Science, Crimesuspense Stories, among others--but now he was putting all his money into souping up a '52 Chevy his father bought him.

"You know what night it was don't you?" she said.

". . . I plumb forgot it was Friday. I'm sorry."

She didn't say anything for awhile. I tried eating, but I wasn't much hungry.

"That's the second Friday in a row."

"I know and I'm sorry."

". . . So what'd you and Dwayne do?"

"Oh, he put some mags on his Chevy while I watched. . . . Then some chicks came over and ripped our shirts off."

"What?"

Sometimes I liked to tell her the most absurd stuff and

watch her eyes get as big as Kennedy halves. "I was just kidding."

"Don't kid about things like that. You think it's funny now. It's not. It's serious."

Usually she'd act huffy for a couple seconds and then go back to normal, but now she kept staring at me. It made me feel creepy. I hurried up and finished eating.

Hoeing didn't take long. The garden wasn't big. Some cow had been walking around in it, though. Probably one of Old Man Tinsley's. Good thing Mom hadn't seen it. Whenever Old Man Tinsley's cattle got out of their field they always ended up in our garden, walking all over the tomato plants and green beans. Mom would grab a broom and run out the back door. She was thin and almost anemic looking, but there was nothing weakly about the way she could swing that broom upside the heads of cows. She reminded me of Ted Williams. I'm sure she would've been a mean pull hitter. And she'd always break the broom. You'd think she would've learnt, but each time she saw the cows milling around her garden, she rushed out the back door, grabbing her broom as she went, and then she clubbed the cows between the eyes. After the second or third one, she'd only have about a foot and a half left of the broom stick, but she'd still be bouncing it off their skulls.

I finished hoeing and got to work about an hour early. To my relief Durwood wasn't there yet. Sandra was waiting on

Miss Baker, so I just said "hi" and pushed on into the back. I didn't feel much like working yet, so I picked up Mr. Z's newspaper and started reading. But soon Sandra was finished with Miss Baker and stepped in back. I looked up and asked her if she'd like to go to a matinee at the picture theater on Sunday. Her face went blank for a second and then she smiled and said okay.

Durwood didn't come in that day and I was glad.

The next day, after I'd been to church with Mom, I walked over to the store for my date with Sandra. She wore a red dress, plain, and patent leather shoes with white socks. She looked good. As she walked, her hips slid forward with a silent grace.

"I figured Durwood was planning on asking you for a date," I said.

"Oh, he did, about fifty times, but I didn't think it was such a good idea. I mean he's okay I suppose, but there's something about him."

We walked over to Lennox's Cinema and Shoe Store. I think Lennox made more from selling shoes than from showing movies. (Mr. Lennox had this idea that people shouldn't just sit down and wait for the movie to start, so he sold shoes in the lobby. He had one of those stools with the slide and the metal contraption and the whole bit.) There were never many people in the theater, even on Saturday nights. Most people drove to Bonner Springs where they had two theaters and newer

movies. All the movies here were ten years old or so. The theater held maybe fifty people but this Sunday Sandra and I were the only ones there. I bought us some Cokes and M & M's and soon the projector came on. It was a sci-fi movie I think. I don't remember much about it but I think some flying saucers exploded.

"Needing any shoes?" Lennox asked after the movie.

"Aww, I don't think so."

"Got a sale this week, look here. I've got--"

And then I listened to his whole spiel. I felt sorry saying no to him. The place was so quiet. So instead I bought Sandra and myself another Coke and we walked on home.

"I don't care much for that kind of movie," she said. "I mean it was okay, but I just like comedies more."

"Yeah, too many explosions maybe."

When we got back to the store, I raised up and gave her a quick peck of a kiss as she stood on the stairs above me. It was a bit awkward but what the hell. My face felt hot. Then the door was pulled open.

"Josh! Come on in." It was Mr. Zimmerman. "Finally got around to it, eh?"

I started regretting the whole thing. He could make me feel embarrassed quicker than anyone alive. He shook my hand. I didn't think he was ever going to let it go. I wanted to head on home but he pulled me in. "Come on Josh," he said. He limped a little worse than normal and Sandra asked him about

the limp but he just waved his hand. "Take a seat," he said and motioned to the soda counter. I sat down and he circled in back.

"Ever had a beer before Josh?" he said.

I shook my head. He opened the pop cooler and pulled out two beers.

"You don't even ask if I want one," Sandra said and smirked.

"Get outta here. This is man talk now," Mr. Z said.

He set the beers down. Sweat ran down their sides and left rings on the counter. He fumbled with the can opener and punched open both cans.

"I enjoyed this afternoon," said Sandra.

We didn't really do much, but I guess I enjoyed it. "Me too," I said. And then she was gone.

"Now don't tell your mother about this or she'll chew off my butt. Go ahead and drink."

I lifted the beer to my lips. It tasted bitter but I drank anyway. It was his gift. He'd been drinking long before I got there. His breath was hot and lethal.

"You never knew your father, did you?" Mr. Z said. I shook my head. I was only a few months old when my father died in Korea. Mom says he never even saw me.

"Your father was a good man. It was in the newspaper when his plane went down. A big story. I remember there was something about a dog show down in the corner--picture of a

Scotty, no, a Pekingese--but the rest of the page was about your father. Big hands, wide shoulders."

At home Mom only rarely mentioned him. There were only two pictures of him in the whole house. One showed him in his uniform. A Marine. His hair cut close, his face long and thin. The picture looked fake, though. It'd been painted and the colors were wrong. The face looked as if it had ashes smeared on it. The other picture was better. A black-and-white glossy. In it he was squatted down, petting a terrier. My dad had a strong face, heavy lines, dark eyes, thin lips, and a chin that was hardly a chin at all but rather a series of steps leading down to his neck.

Mr. Z offered a toast. "Here's to your father." We tapped our beers together and I drank down the rest. I stared down at the table. My face felt hot again, and I guess it showed because Mr. Z changed the subject. We talked some about the Kansas City Athletics--Would they continue trading all their best players to the Yankees for has-beens? And we talked some about Jim Brown--Did anybody ever use a stiff arm more effectively? And that got him started about me playing football in the fall, but I knew my mom would throw a fit if I ever said I wanted to play football. "It's a waste of time," she'd say. And then he went off talking about the time he played against Hank Greenberg and they struck him out on three inside fastballs. And then the time he hit the homer off Bob Lushbaum, who I'd never heard of but he thought was

someone special. Finally he laid his head down on the table while muttering something about "blue battalion" and Sergeant Yocum, and soon his eyes closed and he began to snore. I sneaked out the back door. The sun was nearly touching the treetops and the air was crisp. I breathed in deeply and felt the air inside me. It felt sharp but good.

Sometimes after work, I'd sit around and watch some TV with Sandra and Mr. Z. Mr. Z'd usually go to bed after a half hour or so. Then I'd curl my arm around her and we'd kiss some. I never really cared much for kissing. I always felt guilty about it. And kissing in general seemed odd. Sucking on someone's face just wasn't my idea of a good time.

Mr. Z listened to the Kansas City A's on his portable radio. Everybody had a portable radio then. It was the summer of '65 and "Satisfaction" and "Like a Rolling Stone" were blaring from every tiny two inch speaker. Mr. Z didn't go in for that "shit." He listened to WBND from Kansas City. Big Band Music. Benny Goodman's "Sing, Sing, Sing" and Woody Hermann's "Woodchopper's Ball." But at game time he always listened to the A's. Sometimes we'd leave Sandra in charge of the store and go play catch, the radio sitting in the window, turned up loud. The A's weren't worth a damn, though (as any real baseball fan can tell you), except for a young pitcher named Catfish Hunter. Toward the end of the summer, when the A's were well on their way to losing a hundred games, we

switched over to football. The Chiefs always had good teams then, but they kept finding ways to lose games. This year their star halfback, Mack Lee Hill, died on the operating table while undergoing knee surgery. (Seriously, knee surgery!) To liven up the Sunday afternoons, we'd sometimes throw a football around. He kept telling me to go out for the football team. So maybe in the end I agreed to play just to make him happy, which I knew I would regret after the first five minutes of the first practice. "This isn't just football," Coach Layton said, his upper lip stiff, his knuckles white as he gripped his clipboard. "This is a way of life. You'll live football, sleep football, dream football, and by God, if you're lucky, some of those dreams might even be wet ones." Practices were hell, pure and simple--especially the mile run at the end after we'd bounced off one another for a couple hours under the August sun.

After the first week, I threw my football pants down in the basement for my mom to wash. Not fifteen minutes later she was hunting me down. "What are these?"

"My football pants."

"What are they doing in the basement?"

". . . They're dirty. They need washed."

"They expect me to wash them for you?"

"I guess so."

"Come on," she said and grabbed me by the wrist. She led me into the basement. "This is your doing. You know I don't

want you playing to begin with. I'll be damned if I'll wash them. If they're going to get clean it's because you wash them, not me." And then she showed me how to use our tub washer.

Coach Layton had me playing end, which was fine with me, that way I could keep away from most of the blocking. Durwood was quarterback. He had a good arm. I could run my little ten yard turn-ins and the ball would be waiting for me. He had a soft touch when no defensive backs was near and he could drill it when they were.

If the line ever gave him time to pasa we might have done something, but he was always running for his life. Coach Layton thought that was a good reason for us to stay on the ground. But it was the same thing with our running game. The other teams ate our running backs for lunch. I caught a couple passes in game two and Mr. Z congratulated me after the game. We went back to the store and had a beer. But we'd lost just the same. He was there at every game except for when his brother in St. Louis was in the hospital. He missed the game that week but he was back in the stands the next.

Mom wouldn't come near the football field. Most of our games were on Friday evenings and that made things even worae with her. When Sunday rolled around sometimes she wouldn't even say it was time to leave for church. She'd walk out the door and I'd have to hurry up and catch her. Once she got backed down the drive before I got out the front door. "Oh,

you're coming today. What a surprise," she said as I climbed into the car.

On occasion Durwood came into the store. He'd talk to Sandra some, leaning over the counter and whispering, her giggling. Once during the football season he told her to come to one of our games and watch him play. I don't know if she ever made it there, but he was sure looking for her. He kept staring into the stands, searching. Once he walked up to the line while staring into the stands. He didn't realize at first that he was lined up behind the guard. In the second half he stopped looking into the stands and then he got hot. He hit me with a couple long gainers and then he ran for a touchdown himself. We ended up winning that game. His passes were tight, always spirals.

That next spring Sandra and I started going to a swimming hole down by Turkey Creek. The creek was muddy but so was everywhere else to swim in Linwood. No one in the whole town had a swimming pool. Linwood wasn't a rich town. The muddy water would leave our fingernails a putrid yellowish-brown, but the water was cool.

At night I'd lay awake in bed, the sweat damp sheets sticking to my arms and legs, and no breeze to speak of, just stagnant air. So those nights in the muddy water of Turkey Creek seemed damned refreshing.

Sandra and I would cross the woods behind my house, to the place where the creek widened. There was another place

closer to Highway 24, where everyone else went swimming in the evenings. They'd bring along coolers of beer and the word was they went skinny dipping. But Sandra and I went alone to the pool further upstream.

Sandra looked good in a swimsuit. She was a bit thin but she moved with gentle sweeps of her limbs, her breasts casting triangular shadows on her stomach as the full moon made everything a bluish-grey. She'd hold her face up toward the moon and her whole face would become a bluish-grey mask, water droplets running down her cheeks and sweat beading on her forehead. Her skin was smooth, so smooth. When the moon hit her just right she looked like a statue, her head reclined as she leaned back on her elbows, water running in rivulets onto the dirt and sand.

When I touched her, her skin seemed cooler and softer than I'd ever imagined. Her hair smelled of the creek. But even that excited me. It was the most exciting mud I'd ever smelled. When I'd lie in bed, with that stagnant air pressing down on me, I could only think of Sandra. The bed seemed on fire.

One day I was pulling on my shoulder pads when Durwood patted me on the back.

"Hey," he said. "I hear you're dating Sandra."

I let the shoulder pads drop into place and then grabbed my jersey, not recognizing that Durwood had said a thing.

"You're dating her, aren't you? What's it like?"

I just stared at him.

"Come on. What's it like? Gettin' anything?"

I stared into my locker. I don't know what I was seeing. Nothing really existed in front of me. Durwood patted me on the back again. I wheeled around, knocking away his hand. He stepped back, the corner of his mouth twitching. He tried to smile but it looked cockeyed.

"You oughta lighten up, man. Take things easier. Look at yourself. You're gonna bust a gasket." Durwood rolled his head back and laughed. I got suited up and onto the field as fast as possible.

I was mad at everyone during practice. I hit like it was a game. All anyone talked about anymore was cars and getting laid--even my best friend Dwayne, especially my best friend Dwayne. He spent all his time working on his Chevy. He gave it headers and a supercharger and at night he cruised real slow through Bonner Springs, hoping the girls would turn and look at him. Always seemed a waste of time to me. If they weren't talking about how they'd souped up their cars, they were talking about who was getting what from whom and how and where they were getting it.

The guy that really pissed me off, besides Durwood, was the guy Durwood hung around with, Eddie Rush. He kept his shirt unbuttoned down to his naval. He was sprouting some chest hair and he wanted every girl in the solar system to know about it. Maybe the girls liked it, I don't know. But

he'd sit in the locker room on Mondays telling about his weekend conquests, sometimes drawing diagrams on the chalkboard, while the freshmen and sophomores sat around and listened--"She did what with your lube gun?"--until Coach Layton told them to get their "lilly white asses" out on the field.

That fall, a couple weeks into the football season, Mr. Z got word that his brother in St. Louis had died, so he left for the funeral. Sandra and I ran the store while he was gone. It was still hot then in mid-September and after Sandra and I had closed up the store, we decided to go swimming. Just after we dove in, clouds rolled up in the west and the winds started swinging tree branches. The air was chilled so we decided to head on back.

We ran to the store and went laughing into the storeroom. Water dripped from Sandra's hair. We both left puddles of water on the floor.

The store seemed so empty. The laughter was gone from her face, replacing it was an almost blank stare. I kissed her and she didn't really respond. Then I kissed her again and she began to come alive. She wrapped her arms around my neck and nuzzled her face against my chest. It seemed like the right time, so I took Sandra's hands and led her into her bedroom. I started to fumble with the bra and she told me to stop. She undid it herself and laid it on the bed. Then she crossed her arms on her chest as if she were cold. I brushed

her hair back from her face and kissed her again. We fell back onto the bed. The wind picked up outside and tree limbs scrapped the side of the store. Sandra put her arms around me and pulled me to her.

"You love me, don't you?" she said.

"You bet."

She buried her head in my chest and muttered something. She pulled off her bikini bottoms and stood up in the bluish-grey glow of the room. Her body glistened, water from her hair running between her breasts and down her stomach. We fell down onto the bed and as I fumbled with my trunks, Sandra lay back on the bed. Her skin was so smooth. I just wanted to keep running my fingers over it, marveling at its coolness. Sandra pulled her knees to her chest, but when she did I sensed that something was wrong. Something was all wrong. The moonlight played on her face, shadows that lengthened across her eyes and cheeks. Her eyes shone, eyes that were gentle, a soft glowing brown. But this was wrong. I felt it in my stomach. I stepped back from the bed. Sandra sat up and hugged her knees.

Then is when we heard the crash. I pulled my jeans on and ran to the back. The screen door hadn't been latched so the wind was beating it against the side of the building. I reached out and grabbed the screen. Then I went up front to see if everything was okay there, but when I stepped past the cash register I saw the headlights turn into the parking lot.

I dropped onto the floor and peeked through the shelves. It was Mr. Z. He was back already. Sandra jumped from the bed and started pulling her clothes back on. I buttoned up my shirt, pulled on my socks and shoes and ran out into the storeroom where I sat down at the table. Just then the front door opened and Mr. Z came in. He stopped when entering the storeroom and sat the suitcase down. His porkpie hat hung down around his ears.

"Holding down the fort, huh?" he said.

Then Sandra stepped out.

She had a slice of apple pie in each hand. She set them down on the table and then helped her father off with his jacket. Blood was pounding against my temples. I knew I had to get away from the store. And after Sandra returned and sat down opposite me, I said I had to be going. She saw me to the door and then I was gone.

Things weren't the same after that. I didn't know what to say to Sandra when I saw her at the store. We weren't together much until just before closing on Friday, once Mr. Z had retired to bed. Then is when she asked me about the other night. I just shook my head. I really didn't know. She just stared at me.

"Did you hear his car drive up?"

"I don't know."

I said I had to be going and left. On the way home I realized that I really didn't want to go home right yet. It

was Friday and my mom would be praying again. I didn't want to join her and if I didn't I'd feel guilty if I were there in the same house, so I decided to drop by Dwayne's and see what he was up to.

Dwayne's parents weren't home so he'd called over a couple friends, Rich and Claude. I didn't know either of them very well. They were the guys that Dwayne was running around with nowadays. Once I stepped through the door I regretted having gone there. I felt out of place, but I had to go ahead and sit down for a little while or it would've seemed rude. Dwayne ripped a beer from the six pack and threw it to me.

Claude was sunk back in a chair, his feet up on the end table. His hair hung down over his eyes. Nothing excited him much. He'd just give the same bemused stare no matter what was happening, his pale face a perfect blank. Rich was a talker. He got on my nerves. He liked to talk about bars he'd gotten into, telling all about the women he met, every last detail down to the color of nail polish on their toes. Sometimes I wanted to stuff a towel down his throat. He was a bit heavy and every time he spoke it sounded like a whine.

Dwayne was setting up a projector--a little bitty thing made out of plastic and tin. "You got here just in time," he said. "It's almost show time. I got this through the mail from an ad in the back of this magazine--Nudity Today. Two dirty movies and a projector for only five bucks. You can't beat that." "Fuck no," said Claude. "Fu-uh-uck, no." He

didn't raise his head. Rich started talking about how he was going to send in for one also, but I wasn't listening to him. "This first one's called 'Girl and Her Pet Dog' and we have another called 'Cheerleaders Jump For Joy.'" "Think it's gonna really show the dog humpin' her?" said Rich. "Just watch the fuckin' movie and find out," said Claude. Dwayne got up and turned off the lights. I wanted to leave but I knew I couldn't. I knew what they'd say if I tried. Dwayne flipped the switch and the projector lit up the wall. A girl skipped down a street, her dog following at her heels. "Whoa, it's a big goddamned Saint Bernard. I thought it might be a chihuahua or a weenie dog," said Rich. The girl kept skipping for a couple minutes and then a truck ran through a puddle and splashed her with mud. The screen was bright white again. "What the fuck was that? I spent five bucks to see a girl get muddy?" "It's a dirty movie. That's what the ad said 'Dirty Movies.'" "I know what it said, Dumb Fuck. I know what it said." He started threading the next movie through the projector. "This one better be the real thing." "This is pretty funny," said Claude. "You didn't spend five bucks on it." "It's pretty funny." Dwayne started the next movie and three cheerleaders jumped up and down about ten times and a truck drove past and splashed them with mud. "What the fuck is this shit!" He grabbed the projector and stepped onto the front porch. He threw it and it shattered on the street. He left it there. "Let's go cruise Bonner," he said. "Grab the

beer. Let's go." Claude and Rich jumped up. I said no thanks and headed on home. It was still early, though, and I didn't really want to head home yet. I looked back east of town and saw the tree house standing up in the old sycamore. Something about it seemed attractive; I'm not sure what, but anyway: I decided to check it out.

I dashed past Durwood's home and into the woods. I balanced across the creek on a two by four and then ran up the hill. I looked behind me to see if anyone was watching and then I climbed up. The moon was full and everything stood out clearly. I ran my fingers over the planks and they were rough. And then I brushed against something smooth. I thought it was a tin can at first, and I thought "the piss bucket!" but it was too small. I picked it up and started to turn it about. Binoculars. I pulled them close to my face and in the glow of the moon could make out four words clearly. Property of Sacred Heart. I looked through them and out over the town. A door opened on the street over and light spilled across the gravel. I looked down at my watch. Nine o'clock. Mr. Lennox, closing up the theater. Then I turned the binoculars toward Mr. Z's and I saw an orange glow at the back of the store. Must be Sandra's room. Then I heard a noise. Somebody shouted "I'm so horny the crack of dawn better be careful around me." It was Durwood. "Oh, Sandra come tug on my love muscle." Then they came into view. It was Durwood and his little brother. Tolson was about three years younger than Durwood but they

almost looked like twins. I watched as they walked by the creek toward the highway. But before they got there they angled up toward the store. I kept watching, hoping they'd pass by the store, but I knew what was happening. And in my mind I saw the orange glow that I saw long ago when Durwood and I crawled through the brush at night and saw Sandra through her window. So I knew what Durwood had been doing. Even without the binoculars I could see shadowy movement within her room. I thought about the night I was in her room and wondered if Durwood had been out there then. Things he'd said to me earlier in the week at football practice started coming back to me. "Lady killer" he'd called me. That'd seemed odd at the time. "Casanova" he called me once as well. It hadn't made any sense then. I knew what I had to do. I grabbed the binoculars and dropped from the tree house. And then after I'd wrapped the strap around my fist, I swung the binoculars. They hit the tree trunk with a hollow thud. I swung them again and this time glass shattered. The binoculars clattered over the bark and I swung them again and again, until they were just hollow bent tubes. Then I hurled them toward the creek.

After that is a blur. I took off down the path to the creek. I ran through the weeds toward the store. I ran into a bush and it scrapped the side of my face, but I didn't care. Durwood and Tolan heard me coming, though, and were looking back. I lowered my head and rammed into one of them. Air

burst from his lungs as he landed on his back. "Let's git!" someone shouted. Something hit the side of my head and everything started spinning. I swung and hit something solid. There was a gasp and someone started running. "Run, Durwood!" Tolan shouted. I swung again and missed, spinning and falling. I began to get back up when something hit me again. My ear felt like it was ripped clear off my head. I was afraid to touch it. Then I was in a headlock and couldn't do anything but bull forward. "What the hell are you doing, Josh?" shouted Durwood. I kept bulling forward. He kneed me in the stomach. "Stop!" I pushed him backwards still. He kneed me again. "Stop!" I dropped to my knees and he took off running. "You're fucking crazy," he said. I heard the brush crackling as he ran back home.

When I turned back to the store, the blind had been pulled down. I clenched and unclenched my fists at my sides, staring up into the sky. The moon moved out from behind the clouds and in the distance I could hear the yipping of coyotes. They were putting up quite a racket, probably closing in on some farmer's dog or cat. Dust from the scattered leaves and brush circled and rose toward the moon. I felt empty. I felt like Sandra should've been there to congratulate me or something stupid like that.

Chapter Four

I'd like to say autumn in Linwood is something really

special--the trees turning a brilliant orange and yellow and red, the smell of freshly cut wheat wafting through the air-- but the thing I always noticed was the bare fields. After the corn and wheat have been harvested, the fields are huge patches of brown with grey stubble. The northern wind sweeps over the fields, funneled by the rows of hedge apple trees lining each field, until smacking the town like a whack in the mouth and stripping the leaves from every tree. And everything was always damp--particularly the football field. They never quite crowned the field correctly so the rain would run off. Of course, that meant the middle of the field always became a mud pit in late October.

By halftime of the home games, the announcer couldn't make out the numbers on our jerseys, so he'd say things like "That young man just picked up fifteen yards on the pass from the other young gentleman before being tackled by those two young ruffians."

But mud or no mud, this particular autumn, for the first time in history, the Linwood High School football team had a winning record. After having gone 2 and 7 the year before, I don't think the rest of the league really saw us as much to worry about. So maybe we caught them overconfident. I don't know. But we beat them just the same. Sometimes with embarrassing ease. Durwood became a top flight passer. He'd stand back in the pocket, what pocket there was (the line was still less than the best), the defense converging on him, and

he'd play it cool. He'd step right up into the pocket and the defensive ends would fly by behind him. Then he'd gun it, usually deep. I was catching four to six passes a game at this time--that is, once Coach Layton finally decided to pass. If he decided to pass. Usually he decided that on third down after we'd already lost five yards trying to run. And once we threw the ball the offense came to life.

After the first couple games Durwood became the team leader. There was little doubt about that. At the pep rallies he was the one always getting up to make the speeches. All eyes were on him when he talked. His nose was still the size of Wisconsin, but he carried himself with complete confidence and that's more important than all the good looks in the world. He knew what he wanted and he knew how to get it. Toward the end of the season he began dating a girl named Robin. Her chest was always on the verge of bursting right through her sweaters. They were lovely sweaters. When he walked down the halls with her he always sneaked peeks behind him to see who was watching. He seemed to be winking at everyone.

After evening out our record at two and two, we won our next five games straight. That was enough to give us a berth in a post season tournament. We were seeded near the bottom so that meant we had to play our first round game against last year's champions--the Bonner Springs Blue Devils.

I'd like to say I caught about ten passes in that game,

including the game winner, and was carried off the field on the shoulders of my teammates, but it didn't work out that way. In fact, I didn't catch a pass. It started raining right before game time and the rain turned into sleet. Ice dripped through my helmet and shoulder pads. Wind whipped across the field, howling like a freight train through the scoreboard, the end zone flags stretched out as if they were starched. So with those conditions we couldn't pass much. We didn't pass at all in the first half. We didn't move the ball either. We had a minus ten yards total yards offense.

Back in the locker room, Coach Layton started yelling about how we needed our offensive line to get their heads in the game and start blocking. The linemen stared at the floor. They were mud slicks from head to toe. Durwood turned and shouted across the locker room.

"We have to pass!" he said.

"We can't pass in this rain," said Coach Layton. He barked out the words as his eyes became marbles. His jaw jutted forward a foot.

"They're setting up close every time," Durwood said. "We need a quick hitch every now and then to keep them honest."

"I've been coaching for ten years. I think I know what's best to do."

"Yeah, and look at the records of all those teams."

"Boy, if you know what's good for you you'll sit down, shut up and listen."

"I just wanna win," he said as he sat down. He was quiet the rest of the time as Coach Layton scribbled across the blackboard. I don't think he really heard a word Coach said. His eyes were glassy and he kept grinding his teeth.

Coach Layton was calling plays in the second half as usual, but Durwood wasn't always following orders. He'd change the play in the huddle after the tight end brought it in. The first time he changed a play he hit the tight end for a thirty yard gainer. Coach Layton was fuming but it's hard to argue in the face of success. On the next play Durwood hit the fullback out of the backfield for a touchdown.

And then with less than a minute left in the game, and us trailing 12-8, he changed another play, from a 24 Trap (a handoff to the halfback) to a Pass 24 B Fly (a bomb to the fullback). He hit him again, putting us on the ten yard line. And then with just thirty seconds left, Durwood ran it over himself. We'd beaten Bonner Springs.

After the game, back at Linwood High, there was a post game celebration. This was the first time in history that Linwood had beaten Bonner Springs in anything. Practically everyone was at the high school. There was a bonfire out front, but it would hardly burn because of the rain. They'd dumped so much gas on it that the whole school smelled like an oil refinery.

Inside, the pep team had arranged everything. There was a dance floor, with rock'n'roll records on the record player.

There was a punch bowl that someone had seen to spiking and spiking but good. The players were among the last to get there. We piled off the bus and everyone patted us on the backs as we ran to the locker room. After stuffing our stuff in our lockers we walked into the gymnasium. On the stage was the student body president. He yelled for Durwood to make a speech. Durwood smiled that sly sneer of his and then he bounded up the stairs. Rolls of toilet paper left trails across the air. "Yeah. The year of the Panther," Durwood yelled. "The eye of the hurricane. The calm before the storm. The crack of thunder. The flash of lightning--"

And everyone cheered. He could've been reading the telephone book and they would've been cheering just the same.

--the jaws of the shark. Blue cold at the north pole."

And still everyone cheered. I didn't know what the hell he was talking about, but nobody else seemed to care. They just kept cheering louder and louder until you could hardly hear a thing. Durwood raised his clenched fists, his head thrown back, and he let out a loud, piercing yell. The sinew in his neck stood out, his eyes closed and his nostrils flared. He stood before the crowded gymnasium and soaked up the cheers.

"A blizzard, in your face at seventy miles an hour," he screamed. But everyone was cheering and they couldn't hear his words. They just screamed louder than before.

Sandra was there. And later I saw her dance with

Durwood. Her legs moved in long clean sweeps, her ankles twisting fluidly as "Daytripper" bounced off the gym's cinder block walls. Durwood's hand crept down her back, his thumb hooked under the belt loops of her jeans and his fingers dangling over her rear. She seemed to be having a good time. Earlier I'd seen Durwood with Robin. They'd left, I thought. But here he was again. When I went to get my coat from my locker, I saw Durwood and Sandra together again. He had her pressed against the wall, her arms wrapped around his neck. They kissed. I walked back into the gym and someone patted my back. It was Dwayne. "Me and Claude are headed for 12th Street in KC. You want to come?" I shook my head. "Come on. We won. Let's celebrate. Let's get laid."

"I don't have any money."

". . . Can you pay me back?"

"I suppose so."

"I'll give you a twenty if you pay me back."

I thought about Durwood and Sandra. Then I nodded. There were four of us altogether--Dwayne, Rich, Claude, and myself. We crowded into Dwayne's Chevy and took off.

12th Street was deserted. It was still raining and the streets were like black mirrors. Neon lights reflected in shimmering reds and greens and blues. Beer signs flashed from behind rain smeared windows. The Pussycat Lounge with its black-and-white glossies out front, the strategically placed sequins. Go-go girls! Entrances were dark. Under lamp posts,

the corners were bright yellow.

I'd first learnt about 12th Street when I was in grade school. Without fail, every year on our field trip to hear the Kansas City Symphony perform, the bus driver would take the 12th Street exit off of Highway 24. I don't remember hardly anything about the music the symphony played, except for one piece about a duck with a long tail, but what I remember most about those trips are the black-and-white glossies hanging in the display cases outside the lounges and strip joints. I don't know if anyone really learned to better appreciate music from the Symphony's performances, but we did learn about 12th Street--and that was one lesson that wasn't lost (for better or worse).

This evening, Dwayne drove us up and down 12th Street about ten times, but we never saw any women anywhere. "You know what you're, doing Dwayne? Maybe you're driving wrong," said Rich. "It's not how you drive, you dumb shit," said Dwayne. "There just isn't anyone here. It's the damned rain." We continued up and down the street. The windshield wipers flopped back and forth leaving trails of ice. I was beginning to hope we wouldn't find any hookers. It seemed like a bad idea. Dwayne drove down Main Street, down 11th Street, past the Music Hall, a great block of a building, and then back down 12 Street. Nobody anywhere. "Goddamn." "Mother fuck." "Let's get something to eat. I'm hungry. Next best thing to sex. Food." So we pulled into a Denny's and piled out.

We sat in a booth, munching on fries and hamburgers, grill cheese sandwiches and onion rings. We were just about done when Dwayne saw someone he knew. She was wearing a long mink coat. She was black and her hair glistened. "Hold everything, boys and girls," he said and jumped up. He went over to her and they talked. A couple minutes later he was smiling. He held a little card with an address on it. "She said give this to the hostess. It'll get us in." We just stared at him. "Come on. Let's go," he yelled and everyone in the restaurant turned and stared. The rest of us slid out of the booth and followed Dwayne to the parking lot. By now he was jumping up and down, shouting up into the rain. "Where would you boys be without me?" He revved the engine till it screamed, and when he dropped it in gear, the tires squealed across the asphalt. We bounced onto Main Street.

He drove to the corner of 15th and Walnut. There sat a factory warehouse. We pulled around back and down an alleyway, a gully of water disappearing beneath the car as the lights cut through the dark. "There's nothing here," said Rich. "Only rain puddles and trash." "I knew I shouldn't have brought you. Are you gonna keep acting like a baby?" "There's nothing here!" "Just shut up. I'll find it." He drove slowly down the alley until the alley widened. There was a doorway with a small white light and several cars parked across from it. "This must be it." "I thought they were supposed to have red lights?" "Shut up, Dumb Fuck." He parked the car and we

climbed out. Dwayne ran ahead of us. He tried the door but it was latched. He knocked and we waited in the sleet. "This can't be the right place." "One more word from you and you walk home, you hear me?" A beam of light shot out from behind the door. Whoever was holding the light looked us over long and good. "What do you boys want?" a voice said. It sounded like a frog with a hoarse throat. "Got a card here," said Durwood and he held it up. The beam of light played across the card. "Where'd you get that?" "Brigitte gave it to us." "Brigitte?" "Yeah." The door was unlocked and Dwayne lead the way in. All I saw of the man behind the door was a white t-shirt bulging from behind the fur lining of his coat and a large knuckled, chocolate-smearred left hand clutching a Snickers bar. "Upstairs," he croaked. The stairs groaned. At the top the door was closed. Dwayne tried it and found it locked. He knocked. A little peep hole opened and a single light bulb over the door was switched on. Something metal slammed back and the door fell open. It was purple and pink inside. Lights spun in circles, leaving trails of orange and yellow. Flowers dangled from planters. A woman with a thick pancake of makeup and ruby red lipstick looked at us. Lace ran over her breast, her dress thin and white. One of her eyes was smaller than the other. She cocked her head and a curl fell across her forehead.

"What are you boys looking for? Your mommies?"

"No ma'am," said Dwayne. "We're looking for a good

time."

"A good time? I thought at your age that meant stealing your daddy's National Geographic and hiding behind the garage."

"No ma'am."

"You got money then? This isn't charity work. We're not the Salvation Army, you know."

Dwayne pulled his billfold from his pocket and waved a couple twenties in front of her.

"Well, come on then," she said and led us down a hall. Smoke drifted through the air. I could hear laughter, high pitched girlish laughter. The smoke smelled funny. It had a kick to it. There was a shadowy room with a revolving light from a glass ball. Men and women were sunk down in the over stuffed chairs and couches. There was music in the background. Some of the men pointed at us and laughed. "Boys, welcome to the Pastry Shop. Grab yourself an éclair," the woman said. The women weren't wearing much, panties and nighties, others wore robes. Hair hung straight and greasy. I kept seeing all the bare feet. They seemed so white and obscene. The women's faces were pale as well. They looked tired. One woman stopped before me, her breasts swaying beneath the sheer fabric. She smiled. Her teeth were brown and irregular. There were ripples down her hips and her stomach bulged over her panties. "Want to have a party?" Dwayne grabbed my hand and pushed a twenty into my palm.

"Fuck her once for me," he said. Dwayne followed a woman down the hall in front of me. He disappeared through a door. I stepped through the next door. "My name's Michelle," she said. She pulled off the nightgown and draped it over the bedstead. The room was bare except for the bed and a little night table. The floor was wooden. A little lamp lit the corner, while outside a neon sign flashed and the room turned red. "Put the twenty on the night table," she said. "Unbuckle your pants." She pulled a little basin of water from under the bed. "Go ahead. I have to wash you first." The water was cold. It was like she was washing the dishes. She dried me off and set the basin under the bed again. "Okay," she said and she sat on the bed. "Go ahead and take your clothes off," she said. I didn't know where to put my clothes. "Just lay 'em on the floor, honey." I slid onto the bed. I pulled her close to me and kissed her on the mouth. She pushed me away. "Not so rough," she said with a giggle. "I just got through my period and my breasts are still tender." She took my hand and placed it on a breast as she flipped her hair over her shoulder. "Take it easy."

On the way home we stopped in Bonner Springs at an all-night diner there that catered to the railroad workers. It was a clean place with bright white lights that lit up every nook and cranny. The waitress's name was Mildred. She had blue hair and the veins on her legs stood out, all blue and green.

We gave her our orders and then she disappeared to the back.

"Wasn't it great?" Dwayne said. "I can't believe little dick here."

"I thought you'd give me money."

"Why should I 've?"

"You gave money to Josh."

"So what?"

The door to the diner flew open and Eddie Rush came in. He kept his hair slicked back, all black and greasy. He walked like he had springs on his shoes as he bounced up to our table.

"How's it going?" he said. "I just got laid."

"Us too, except for Little Dick."

Eddie stared at us. "Why not him? Couldn't you all hold the cow any longer?"

"We got laid. 12th Street."

"I didn't mean pay for it. I mean I got laid for free. Sally Winters. You know her. She's got the firm little tits and the tight bunny ass. I fucked her. She didn't want to at first but she liked it. She went fucking wild. Dug her nails into my back. It was great."

The bright lights in the diner were really starting to bug me. Eddie stood in front of the booth, blocking us off from the rest of the room. Everything was closing in. He kept talking about the girl and my face felt hot. I hated the son-of-a-bitch. I curled my hand around the napkin dispenser and

tried to concentrate on something else. I closed my eyes and tried to block out everything, but I kept seeing Durwood and Sandra together, her smile as their lips met. And Eddie kept droning on: "She lifted her butt up like this and--" I rose up and swung at him. The napkin dispenser smashed against his ear and went skidding across the room. He fell into a table and chairs bounced off the floor. He curreed and staggered forward, shaking his head. He rushed me and we fell back in the booth. The table tipped and the Cokes spilled. He hit me good in the stomach and I lost my breath, but then he was gone. Dwayne had him by the arms and Claude slugged Eddie in the stomach. Eddie slid to the floor. "Damn it! Why the hell'd you hit him, Josh?" We ran out the front door and into the car.

Halfway home, a revolving red light lit up the road. We had to follow the cop back into Bonner Springs. He locked us in a cell and then let us each call our parents. I started to dial my mom but thought twice and dialed Mr. Z. He sounded groggy, but he shouted, "I'll be right there." The cop put me back in the cell. Dwayne scowled at me. "What the hell'd you hit him for?" I shrugged. Dwayne kicked the cell door. Rich was sitting with his head in his hands. Claude kicked the cell door after Dwayne. Then he scowled at me. "Why'd you hit him?" Mr. Z picked me up without asking any questions. We climbed into his Rambler and headed home. I watched as the moon raced across the empty fields.

But when we got back to Linwood, there were trucks sitting in Mr. Z's parking lot. Men stood in a semi-circle, staring at the front of the store. It was black. Mr. Z parked and we ran up to them. "What happened? What happened?" he kept yelling. "Somebody threw something through the window and caught everything on fire." "Molotov cocktail, most probably. One of those fucking commie draft dodgers at K.U., I bet." "A what?" "You know a--" "Where's Sandra?" They just stared at him. He shouted for her. She came running and they hugged. "You all right?" he asked. She nodded. Everything was wet. Puddles of blackened water. The front window of the store was gone.

When we went inside, the floor was covered with a black goo. It coated everything. The shelves were black, cans had exploded, coating the walls in baked beans. I got out the squeegee and pushed the black water out the door. Mr. Z just kept staring at it. He pulled out a beer from the cooler and started drinking. The ceiling was blackened. Plaster had fallen in large chunks. Boxes of aspirin floated on the black goo. It took a week to get everything cleaned up right, and even then the store still smelled like smoke. Sandra tried every air cleanser in the store but nothing worked. We kept the doors opened and put fans in the windows. It was cold but it helped some.

Every evening after that Mr. Z sat up drinking beer, muttering about Tinsley. He didn't look good. His face was

yellow and his breathing was raspy. He didn't work much the following week. Then his insurance company said he wasn't covered for this type of accident and they wouldn't repair it. Mr. Z locked himself in back and didn't come out. I told him it was probably just some idiots from Bonner Springs who did it since their team lost, but Mr. Z was certain Tinsley had done it.

On Sunday I stepped outside for a second and saw a pale blue car parked in front of Tinsley's drive way. The man staggered. Something looked familiar so I kept staring: then I knew why--it was Mr. Z. I got closer and could hear him yelling: "Here take the shirt off my back! You want everything else!" He tugged his shirt off and threw it toward the house. It didn't make it past the little concrete lions, though. He raised a bottle to his lips and drank. A brown streak spread down the front of his t-shirt. He looked down at the t-shirt and pulled it off as well. He was a hairy bugger. When he started to unbuckle his belt I ran and stopped him. He smelled like a brewery. As I tried to get him back into his car, he pulled away and sat in the middle of the road. He wouldn't budge. I tried running inside to call Sandra, but when I got to the front porch he got up and started running up the driveway toward Tinsley's house. I ran after him and got him stopped again, but he kept yelling for Tinsley to come out and fight, bare fists. This time when I got him stopped, he flopped over on the wet grass, his gut

shining in the sun. His mouth fell open and he started snoring. With him like that I ran and called Sandra. But once I got back to him, he looked worse than ever. He was asleep but his eyes weren't quite closed, just the whites showing. It was positively eerie to see him like that. A little bit later Sandra came running, her hair flowing behind her. I'd never seen her run before. Some women look like birds when they run, their arms jutting out at the sides, but Sandra swung her arms in step with her stride. Together we carried Mr. Z to his car and Sandra drove him back home.

Later she called and said something was wrong with him and would I help her get him to the doctor's. He was still in the car when I got there. His face was white and his breath came in great gasps. The doctor was a young guy with blonde hair and a smile that he turned on in an instant. He said it'd be best to keep Mr. Z overnight. They kept him for almost a week, running different tests on him. I went to see him with Sandra once. He talked like Sandra and I were married. After that, I didn't go to the hospital. And while he was gone, Sandra stayed at home and ran the store herself. After a week Mr. Z was back behind the counter again. He looked different, though. His arms and face looked skinnier. He stooped over some when he walked.

Sandra dated Durwood the rest of the school year, but it wasn't anything regular. Or at least I don't think so, I didn't ask her about it. I started seeing a girl named Ellen

Hart. Her mother was Ol' Man Tinsley's sister. They lived in a big house outside of town. It stood up on a hill to the west. The sun would set behind it in the summer. It had wide eaves and a brick chimney. Ellen walked like those girls who learn to walk with books on their heads. Her teeth were perfect, her makeup was perfect, her clothes were perfect, her hair was perfect. "If you buy me a Coke and popcorn then we can park out by the Kaw," she said. So I bought her the Coke and popcorn and followed her down the aisle of the theater. Her walk was so damned smooth. She sort of slid right down the aisle and into her seat. After the movie we parked in a limestone quarry, the moon lighting up the grey rock around us, the Kaw shimmering white and black. Ellen unbuttoned her blouse and pulled it off. Then she took off her bra. "Okay," she said.

High school graduation arrived all of a sudden. I didn't feel any different than before. I just knew I was finished with school and that was all. At graduation Dwayne had a pint of schnapps under his gown. His nose was all red and his eyes glazed. Sandra looked like a princess. Her hair flowed onto the shoulders of her white gown. Her eyes were dark. Her face smooth. Ellen was with her parents and relatives. She was hugging everyone, her mascara running down her cheeks. Durwood wasn't there, though. He didn't graduate with the rest of us. Afterwards Ellen and I parked in the quarry

again. But once I got there I didn't feel like doing anything. She pulled off her blouse and bra. I just stared out at the river. "If you're not going to do anything, I'm just going to cover back up." I didn't answer her. We stared at the river for awhile and then she put her clothes back on.

In July Durwood was arrested for breaking and entering a house outside of town. The judge gave him the option of going to jail or enlisting in the army. Durwood chose the later. I was working at the store when Durwood left for basic training. Durwood came in and bought a six-pack. "Football was great, wasn't it?" I nodded. He and his brother Tolan sat outside and drank the beer, building a pyramid with the empties. After an hour or so the bus pulled up and then he was gone. There were just the cans left stacked in the parking lot.

After boot camp he returned. Tolan sat in the parking lot, waiting for him while guzzling down a six-pack and crushing the cans under his heel. I watched from inside the store as the bus arrived and Durwood stepped down, pulling his duffel bag behind. Tolan threw him a beer and he turned it upside down, downing the entire contents in just a couple seconds as rivulets ran down his neck.

That evening, just before closing he came into the store. He walked in with his hands stuck deep into his pants pockets and began to case the store.

He asked for a pack of cigarettes and while I was reaching under the counter he said, "Remember, those times when we used to sit up in the tree house and watch the town?" When I didn't answer right away, he turned toward me, his left eyebrow forming a high arch while he bit his lip. "You remember that Josh?"

". . . Sure." We had never mentioned anything about that until now. I wasn't even sure he remembered it until he asked. "What the fuck were we doing?" he said with a laugh. "What the fuck were we doing? . . . Oh, well." His face grew stern. And then he stuck his hand out for me to shake. "Put her here, man." And we shook, for what I don't know. Durwood kept nodding and then he gave me a weak smile and left.

The next time I saw him I was walking home from work. Durwood was out beside his house throwing a football. It looked especially strange because he was still wearing his army uniform.

"Hey, Josh," he yelled. "Go out for a pass."

"Football's over," I yelled back.

"Yeah, well fuck you."

I turned and started to walk on home and then he yelled again: "Hey, I decided I'm not going back. I tell you that already."

"What?"

"Vietnam. That's where they wanna send me soon as I'm back. So I'm not going back. Screw 'em."

I couldn't figure out why he was telling me this, so I just stood there sort of stupidly and stared.

"What do I owe 'em? Nothing. Why should I fight for 'em? There ain't no reason. Screw 'em. Screw 'em." He wouldn't look me in the eyes as he talked. He turned and twisted, crossing his arms as the cold wind hit his face. "I'll shoot any mother fucker that comes after me, too." He turned and hurled the football at the tire--at least twenty yards away. It went through without touching.

But the next Sunday, when he was scheduled to return, Durwood was standing outside the store again, waiting for the bus. He didn't come inside this time. He just waited, stomping his feet to keep warm, and when the bus drove up, he walked up its steps and sat down.

That was the last time I ever saw him. His parents moved away the next year. Maybe he got through everything okay, maybe he didn't. I'll probably never know.

Just after Durwood left, though, Mr. Z went into the hospital again. Sandra and I decided to surprise him by fixing the store up some while he was gone. I bought some paint and finally got rid of that damned black square on the side of the building. Before I'd finished painting, though, Sandra came outside and gave me a bill to look at. It said the company would take legal action if the bill wasn't paid immediately. The bill was for over a thousand dollars. We checked through the other bills in Mr. Z's desk and found

that he owed everybody.

Mr. Z never saw that I painted the side of the store. He died the next week. They said it was cancer. The last time I saw him I couldn't look at him for long. The shrivelled man with the tubes up his nose wasn't the same man I knew.

A month later the state auctioned off the store and everything in it. I went to the auction and didn't like what I saw. The freezers were empty and sitting in the parking lot. They didn't look right without food in them. All the canned goods were in piles. People walked around it all, shaking their heads. It made me angry. Later I talked to Sandra. She was leaving with her uncle to live in Kansas City.

"Drive in sometime," she said. "Maybe we can go to a movie or something."

I nodded. But I knew I never would. And then she surprised me, while I was busy staring at the ground and shuffling my feet, by leaning over and kissing me on the cheek. When she climbed into her uncle's car I knew I was looking at her for the last time and as strange as it may be she never looked more beautiful than she did then.

Once everything had been sold, I watched them load it all on trucks. A man in a neat black vest went around with a clipboard shouting out numbers and saying what went where. When everything was gone, I stepped inside the store. All the shelves were empty. I noticed on the front window the old

program from Mr. Z's playing days. I pulled out my pocket knife and cut through the tape. The program just about crumbled in my hands. I folded it carefully and stuck it in my pocket and then I walked home.

Mom was busy slicing tomatoes over the kitchen sink. I sat down at the dinner table. I wanted to talk to her, but I didn't know what to say. So I just sat there and watched. Her motions were precise, with the exact same slicing motion repeated time after time, almost as if she were a machine. Each time as her knife touched the cutting board, her head bobbed like those little dolls in the backwindows of cars. She tried to be so precise, so mature, but occasionally something almost cartoonish might slip through.

"If you don't have anything to do," she said, "you can help me get dinner by peeling the potatoes." I hated peeling potatoes but I went ahead and grabbed the potato peeler anyway.

"Terrible about what happened to Mr. Zimmerman," she said. "He was a good man. Without his store I don't know what to do. I'm sure not going to start buying from Tinsley after he let his stupid cows walk all over my garden the past twenty years."

I was glad to hear her say it, but I knew she'd eventually start buying from him. And I knew I would as well. There was no way around it, not with the next closest store ten miles away in Bonner Springs. We couldn't go running

there everytime we needed kitchen matches or paper clips. I just smiled and started in on the potatoes and for once peeling them wasn't so bad.

On Saturday evening, I went to confession for the first time in over a year. Father Lewis seemed distracted, though. He muttered to himself as he walked down the hall and pulled open his door to the confessional. I meant to confess, at long last, about having gone to the brothel, but before I could say anything, Father Lewis moaned.

"Who is that? Is that you, Josh?" he said. "What is it with these people today? We're a little late on the bill and this guy sends over a bill collector, to a church, mind you. No respect whatsoever. People anymore are just concerned about money. They want more money, more money. They don't care where it comes from. Sends a bill collector. Fat guy, too. No, I'm sorry. Forgive me, Lord. Obese. He was obese. Oh, was he obese. The guy threatens me. He threatens me, just for the money on a stupid milk machine. You remember when we had it installed in the kitchen a few months ago?" I didn't know what he was talking about, but he didn't wait for an answer. "Oh, I'm mad. The guy threatens me. I can't believe it. Says he has ways of making us pay. 'Ways of making us pay': where'd he get that? Some third-grade spy movie. Gonna stick bamboo shoots under my fingernails. What's this world coming to? What's this world coming to?"

He kept going like that for another five minutes, but when he finally paused to catch his breath, I said "Forgive me Father for I have sinned." And then I told him all about the time I went to 12th Street in Kansas City. Father Lewis listened patiently, muttering "hmm" every now and then. When he finally started to ask me questions--"Do you feel that what you did was wrong?"--he seemed distant, as if he'd heard it all before. He talked slowly and softly, carefully accenting every other syllable, as if he were reciting a litany, while his words accumulated in the confessional, like a heavy, invisible fog.

Then he gave me ten Hail Marys and ten Ave Marias. I was expecting more than that. For stealing ten dollars from my mother's purse when I was ten years old, he gave me an even dozen Hail Marys. But nonetheless, for the first time ever, I actually felt better after confession. Usually I felt as if God were looking down on me, shaking his head in disappointment, but this time was different. I still felt the guilt, but it didn't seem as important as before.

After my mother gave her confession, we climbed back into our Volkswagen, and she drove, as she always did. Anyone else's driving made her nervous. She pushed the accelerator to the floor and the engine whined as if it were ready to explode.

"Sometimes," she shouted, "you just have to listen to him, Father Lewis I mean. He's getting old."

I smiled as she twisted the steering wheel to the left and we buzzed past a slow moving truck. Boy, could she drive.

A Critical Afterword

I'm a strong believer in the importance of plot. While E.M. Forster argued that plot and character are in constant conflict, I believe plot is an integral part of fiction. This can be seen in my own work as a fiction writer, where internal conflict is resolved through action.

But before I discuss this point further, I think it's necessary to define the word plot, for there seems to be some confusion over its meaning. For some, plot is everything artificial in fiction; while for others plot is the sole reason for reading.

When we're young we're veritable Aristotelians, insisting that stories have proper beginnings, middles, and ends. Just try telling a three-year-old child a story about three terrible wolves, only to stop the story after only two wolves have been banished from the kingdom while the third is left prowling the woods outside the castle, saliva dripping from his lips. As children we crave symmetry, so if two bad wolves were run off, so must the third bad wolf tuck his tail between his legs and skedaddle for the hinterland.

But somewhere between childhood and adulthood, we learn to become suspicious of plots--to regard as artificial and (thus the reasoning goes) as inferior anything not natural,

not part of life as it really is. We learn to respect stories which reject simple causal relationships, which instead present their human characters as complex and their themes as abstract (not reducible to mere morals). And in the process, plots have come to be regarded as contrivances--arbitrary designs which force characters into performing certain acts.

Much of the concern over plot is justified, for in requiring that the third wolf be dispatched we're demanding a specific kind of ending, one where the good in the world naturally wins out over the evil. And while that may seem the way life should be when we're young, we increasingly come to see such storytelling as artificial, as prearranged, as simplistic, and maybe even as propagandistic.

Thus, we learn early on that reading for the plot is (in the words of E.M. Forster) "a low atavistic form" (45). Modern criticism instead emphasizes "point of view," "tone," "symbol," et al. To utter the word "plot" in a writing workshop is to immediately risk one's reputation as a serious writer and critic. Or at best a literature class might discuss the "spatial form" of a work of fiction, complete with diagrams on the chalkboard and arrows going every which way, but very little is said about plot. Or if the word is mentioned at all, it might be used to get a somewhat quiet class to start talking about the work they've just read: "So . . . what's the plot?" the professor says to the student who's busy drawing Van Halen logos in the margins of his note

pad.

In The Theory of the Novel Philip Stevick charts some of the varying opinions toward plot. He says plot can mean (depending upon who's using the word) "essence, story, overt action, formula, skeleton, mechanism, contrivance--the very reason for which a narrative work exists, the means by which the narrative work conveys what it really wishes to say, or the cheapest kind of trickery, of the sort that promises chocolate ice cream if we eat our meat and potatoes" (139). So, with all of those definitions for the same word, is it any wonder there's some confusion over what a plot is?

For some, such as Tony Tanner and E.M. Forster, plot is responsible for much that is wrong with fiction. Forster says in Aspects of the Novel "To pot with the plot, break it up, boil it down . . . all that is prearranged is false" (152). And in Reign of Wonder Tony Tanner says, "conventional plot slights reality by its habit or erecting a spurious structure of eventfulness" (195).

But such attacks are based upon narrow definitions of the word plot--as if it were merely the external events which take place, apart from the characters and their thoughts. Plot summaries might be largely to blame for the prevalence of this negative attitude. In summaries, the emphasis is placed upon "what happened next" and the intricacies of characterization are omitted.

Or maybe the problem is a result of so many of the

familiar classic plots (as pointed out by R.S. Crane in "The Concept of Plot and the Plot of Tom Jones") being "plots of action"--as opposed to "plots of character" and "plots of thought" (142). In the plot of action the protagonist's situation is changed, but not necessarily with any subsequent effect upon his feelings or moral character. (But more about this later . . .)

E.M. Forster believes that our interest when reading a work of fiction should not be simply in "the imitation of an action" but instead upon "the secret life which each of us lives privately." The world does not naturally supply us with plots and literature should be as much like life as possible (160). But how can that secret life become narratable unless (as Peter Brooks says in Reading for the Plot) it displays a "design and logic" (5)?

When the writer tries to write a "real" story, he is faced with the problem of finding a "real" structure, a "real" design, a "real" shape that will seem "a probable reflection of the shapes into which life itself falls" (Wayne Booth, The Rhetoric of Fiction, 56-57). He must discover an organizing principle that makes the narrative understandable. A writer could simply describe everything that happens to a character during a given time period, but unless he chooses from the events, summarizing some and leaving others out altogether, while emphasizing the importance of others, chances are the narrative will overwhelm the reader, losing

him in a sea of incidents which are all described with the same neutrality. But the writer does help the reader, even in the so-called plotless fiction; he works with some type of organizing principle in mind.

But we've become suspicious of organizing principles. They seem to suggest that ultimately life is "finite and comprehensible" (Brooks, 4). And in our time, that is seen as artificial. This is what Richard Gilman is referring to when he says narration is "precisely that element of fiction which coerces and degrades it into a mere alternative to life, like life, only better of course, a dream (or a serviceable nightmare), a way out, a recompense, a blueprint, a lesson" (Trilling, 135). So in the rush away from plot as an organizing principle, character has been heralded as the correct focus of any work of fiction. And I would probably have to agree that ultimately the human characters are what any good story is about, but does that necessarily mean fiction must forego plot altogether?

Lionel Trilling in Sincerity and Authenticity suggests that "it is the nature of narration to explain: it cannot help telling how things are and even why they are that way The beginning is not merely the first of a series of events; it is the event that originates those that follow. And the end is not merely the ultimate event, the cessation of happening; it is a significance or at least the promise, dark or bright, of significance" (135-36). He goes on further

to say that a story is told by "a rational consciousness which perceives in things the processes that are their reason and which derives from this perception a principle of conduct, a way of living among things" (136). So if Trilling is correct, then we must either reject conventional narratives as inherently problematic, or rejoice in the order they bring to the seemingly chaotic events of life.

Well, I choose the later. I believe the writer can never really get away from organizing principles. While he might insist that the organizing principle at work in his fiction is theme or character, I would say that theme and character lead to very little at all unless they are part of a narrative which has been plotted. Out of the many possible conflicts present in any story, plot shows us which to pay attention to. Out of all the possible facets of a person's character, plot tells us which ones are relevant for the story at hand. Without this ordering principle, stories would be chaotic mixtures of emotions, characters, descriptions, and episodes.

A plot cannot do without characters, at least in conventional mimetic fiction it can't, but, as suggested by Aristotle, "character is included on account of the action," not the reverse (12). For Aristotle "The most important [part of a drama] is the arrangement of the incidents; for tragedy is not an imitation of men, per se, but of human action and life and happiness and misery. Both happiness and misery

consist in a kind of action; and the end of life is some action, not some quality. . . . The first principle, then, and to speak figuratively, the soul of tragedy, is the plot; and second in importance is character" (12-13).

It would follow that plotting is the process of converting the raw material of life (real or imagined) into a "causal and inevitable arrangement" (Holman, 335). This is what Wayne C. Booth is referring to when in The Rhetoric of Fiction he writes about the "synthesis of incidents, the plot" being "the author's single most important creative act" (436). (Many people have misread Booth and assumed he was heralding point-of-view as the all important element of fiction, but in the 2nd Edition of The Rhetoric of Fiction he clears up this issue.)

R.S. Crane possibly became the leading spokesman for the defenders of plot when he said, "For the critic . . . the form of the plot is a first principle, which he must grasp as clearly as possible for any work he proposes to examine before he can deal adequately with the questions raised by its parts" (144). But unlike Forster, who saw plot and character as caught in a constant struggle, Crane sees plot and character as working together for a common goal--where the function of plot is to translate character into action. And those actions themselves imply character. Even in the simplest plots of action, as in detective or horror fiction, the actions give us clues to the characters' qualities. (Of

course, the catch is in genre fiction, characterization is often irrelevant, but nonetheless the fact that a character is capable of performing a certain act tells us about him.) If we take pleasure in reading about a particular character, "the reason is thus not to be found in any inherent quality of the materials, but rather in the skillful construction of a living plot out of materials that might have been used in many different ways" (Booth, 13).

R.S. Crane points out a distinction which might help at this point. He says that the traditional view of plot as simply referring to the action is too limited to cover what plot does in modern fiction. He suggests there are at least three different types of plot--plots of action, plots of thought, and plots of character. "Plots will differ in structure according as one or another of the three causal ingredients (action, character, thought) is employed as the synthesizing principle. . . . It is impossible, therefore, to state adequately what any plot is unless we include in our formula all three of the elements of causes of which the plot is the synthesis. . . . The plot . . . of any imitative work is, in relation to the work as a whole, not simply a means--a 'framework' or 'mere mechanism'--but rather the final end which everything in the work, if that is to be felt as a whole, must be made, directly or indirectly, to serve." In the plot of action the synthesizing principle is a "completed change, gradual or sudden, in the situation of the

protagonist, determined and effected by character and thought." In the plot of character the synthesizing principle is a "completed process of change in the moral character of the protagonist, precipitated or molded by action, and made manifest both in it and in thought and feeling." And in the plot of thought the synthesizing principle is "a complete process of change in the thought of the protagonist and consequently in his feelings, conditioned and directed by character and action" (141-44).

In my two stories, "Waiting for the Coyotes" contains a plot of thought and "Absolution" contains a plot of character. This distinction is important for understanding both stories. In "Waiting for the Coyotes" the protagonist, Warren, might not be a different person at the end of story, but his thinking has changed in a crucial way. As the story begins, his thinking is somewhat deficient. He does not truly understand the conflict which has developed between himself and his son, as well as between his son and the world at large. He's somewhat mystified by life and its complexities, not understanding what's happening to himself, not to mention to those around him. But at the story's conclusion, he begins to come to grips with the situation and this is signaled when he knowingly sings Alvin's version of "Riders on the Storm." What a different story it would be if Warren had insisted on the correct version of the song, instead of going along with his son's. The story doesn't continue and demonstrate how his

behavior will be affected for the good, but we can make some guesses. For one thing, he's come to realize that his son has been strongly affected by what has recently transpired, meaning both the departure of his mother and the incident with the coyotes, and he has also come to realize that it's his role as a father to try and understand his son's situation, not to simply cast judgments. Thus Warren isn't really a different person at the end of the story, but his thinking has been altered significantly.

Or if you believe Warren's son, Alvin, is the protagonist, a reading not altogether without basis since the story's action is built around the son, then the plot becomes a plot of action. Is Alvin actually changed by what has happened? Probably not. Has his thinking been changed? Probably not. But his "fortune" (Friedman, 63) has been changed because of the changes in his father's thoughts. (By "fortune" Friedman is referring to a character's physical environment: "his goods, honor, status, reputation, relation to others, loved ones, health, well-being.") His father will no doubt be a different kind of father in the future. The experience has been a traumatic one for the son, but this doesn't mean he has matured or even learned from the experience. (So ultimately we must see the story as Warren's because any change in Alvin's "fortune" is a result of the changes in Warren's thoughts.)

"Absolution" is a different case. It fits into

Friedman's "maturing plot" category (161). This means the story has a sympathetic protagonist, Josh, who lacks a will of his own, or at least lacks this will at the story's outset. Ultimately his character will acquire "strength and direction" through the drastic actions which take place. The direction he will go remains in question until the novel's very end, when it's suggested that he has learned to accept his mother as she is. Instead of reacting against her, as he has done in the past because of her drastic (in his eyes) demands, he learns to live with her.

This ending was a difficult one to arrive at. In one of the earlier versions of the story, Josh seems to end up rejecting practically everything--in an almost nihilistic fashion. This ending isn't totally without foundation because Josh seems to have lost nearly everyone and everything important to him by the time the story has ended. But I'm hoping he has had the time and the opportunity to learn from what has happened. So instead of rejecting the one person still left in his life, he learns that that person is important to him. That seems to me a better (and certainly a more affirmative) ending than the one I originally wrote.

Unlike Warren in "Waiting for the Coyotes," the change in Josh will not be simply in terms of his thoughts but in terms of his character as well. This change begins to take place early in the story--as early as the end of the second chapter, when Josh refuses to spray paint the side of

Zimmerman's grocery store as Durwood suggests. At this point, Josh isn't capable of doing anything to stop Durwood, but he is capable of refusing to implicate himself further. Instead of raising the can of paint toward the wall, he hurls it into the sky. Later on, he is still feeling the effects of his experiences with Durwood, but when he finds that Durwood has been regularly window peeping at Sandra, he reacts violently. He is still affected by the past, but now the past has become more of a nuisance to him and less of a weight around his neck. And even when Sandra and Josh break up, only for Durwood to take up with her, the effect (at least as I intended it) is for irony: Josh is no longer affected by his past experiences with Durwood, but Durwood is still there nonetheless--as if he were a part of some bad practical joke that fate were playing upon Josh. So to a large degree, the story is about Josh maturing to the point where he is capable of accepting the past for what it is, instead of fearing it or loathing it and letting it guide his life.

While I was writing these two stories, I wasn't conscious that one was a plot of character and the other a plot of thought, but I was conscious of plots from other stories that had influenced the development of my own fiction. "Waiting for the Coyotes," for example, was largely based upon my reaction to Tobias Wolff's "Poaching." Even while my respect for Wolff's story is great, I couldn't help but feel a little bit disappointed when the story's mystery

character (who has been keeping Wharton awake at night with an infernal noise resembling rifle shots) turns out to be a beaver--not the poacher as Wharton believed. Instead of giving us a confrontation between Wharton and a trespasser, it's revealed the noise was simply a beaver slapping its tail against the pond water. Now even while this seemed quite right for the story, the story's avoidance of the implied action struck me as very typical of contemporary fiction. So many writers seem consciously to avoid any actions which might be interesting in their own right, apart from their relationship to the characters. Of course there are many exceptions to this. "Walking Out" by David Quammen (which is anthologized in Matter of Life and Death--New American Stories, edited by Tobias Wolff) has a startling action scene at its center, a scene so graphically horrifying that it is bound to leave an indelible imprint on the mind of anyone who ever reads it. The characters themselves might fade from the reader's memory but not the scene where the father and son confront a bear protecting her cubs. But I'm finding that contemporary fiction writers are less and less interested in providing their characters with such powerful actions. Stories instead turn upon extremely subtle gestures and nuances--leaving the poor slob who only reads for the plot to scratch his head and mumble "Where hell's the story?" Well, I like my stories to have strong, bold actions--actions so powerful they create interest in their own right. By this

I mean you might not know anything about the person who did a particular action, but that action itself leaves an impression. That's where I usually start when planning a story--looking for an action so intriguing that I become obsessed with discovering the identity and character qualities of the person responsible. Such was the case with "Waiting for the Coyotes." I had just read Wolff's "Poaching" and I wondered what if the mystery were resolved in terms of a significant action that is described as if it were the single most important event in the story. The action itself that I started to tinker with was loosely autobiographical. This much actually happened anyway: One day a dog was dropped off along the country road where I lived with my parents; no family adopted the dog, but the neighbors did feed it; eventually the dog was hit by a car; it lay in the ditch, on the neighbor's land, for several days--even though the neighbors clearly knew the dog was there; one day after school I grabbed a shovel and, with the help of my two younger sisters, buried the dog in a shallow grave at the bottom of the ditch; the next day I saw that the grave had been dug up and when I inspected it more closely I found the earth was scored by claw marks; the dog was no where to be found for the next several days, maybe even weeks, but one day while I was running across a field, I practically stepped upon the carcass of an animal with a rib cage approximately the same size as the dog's; over the next few weeks, at

night, the carcass was dragged around that field (by coyotes?), until finally it disappeared altogether; end of story.

Now while the plain facts of the situation might create a certain morbid curiosity in the reader, they don't constitute an actual short story. I don't really remember what made my sisters and me choose that specific day for burying the dog, but I'm certain our reaction was simply one of "dead things are supposed to be buried" and if the neighbors didn't do it (they were lazy and lived like pigs) then us good little Americans in the neat, brick-facade house (with a two-car garage, three bathrooms, and a carefully manicured lawn) would have to do it for them, no matter how much it disgusted us.

I'd thought about using this as part of a story in the past, but I'd never really discovered a proper context for it. So I wondered what if the person who buried the dog was trying to restore a kind of order to his life--that something had changed in his life or was threatening to change and he had no say about it whatsoever, as if he were just a boy and his parents were going through a divorce. And then, and this was the clincher, meaning this is what made me stop going "what if" and seriously begin writing, what if the boy took offense at the grave robbing? Burying the dog was one of the few ways he could restore some semblance of order to his world, no matter how meager that action might seem, and now

that action had been defaced. So what does he do? He grabs a rifle and waits for the coyotes.

Now this is only the main action of the story, but the fact that a character performs such an act certainly says something about his qualities. So instead of starting with character, as many people do, I start with a clear idea of one or two actions and then go searching for characters capable of committing those actions. In using this method I try to insure that my stories contain strong actions. Writing is discovery, yes, but that doesn't necessarily mean that the writer has no idea where his story is headed before he starts. Writing is discovery in the sense that the writer discovers how the various parts of his story ultimately work together, of how the actions are related to the characters, and the characters to the whole. And even though I knew quite a bit about what I wanted to happen in "Waiting for the Coyotes," I had only a vague idea of how the actions were related to the characters. The actions I had in mind were only the genesis for a complete plot. I knew very little about Warren, for example, before I began writing, and since the story is ultimately his, then there was quite a lot for me to discover.

Because I was using Wolff's "Poaching" as a model, I had a vague idea of the relationships among the characters, but there are distinct differences between the fathers in the two stories. In "Poaching" the father is more aware of what is

happening. He's more intelligent and sensitive, but his nerves are a bit frayed. Warren in "Waiting for the Coyotes" will probably never suffer from an ulcer. He takes life very quietly. There are a couple times when he seems to get mad, such as when he picks up his son from school and the driver behind him honks at him, as well as at the story's end when he runs outside thinking the neighbors are firing rifles in the field beside his house, but overall Warren reactions are muted. And maybe that is his problem. In contrast Kristen in "Waiting for the Coyotes" is much more energetic than Ellen in "Poaching." Ellen is a bored wife who is aimlessly drifting through life, whereas Kristen is capable of startling behavior. But there are many more similarities between the two stories, so many in fact that I'm more than a little embarrassed to bring attention to them. This much is common in both: a father and son are living together after the mother has temporarily left; while she is gone a conflict begins to develop between father and son; and when she returns, there is tension between husband and wife. But whereas in "Waiting for the Coyotes" it is the son who is involved in searching for the interloper(s), in "Poaching" it is the father. Also significantly different is the tone of the two stories--in both stories there is comedy, but in "Waiting for the Coyotes" the situation ultimately becomes much, much more dangerous. In the story's last few pages, the elements of comedy virtually disappear, whereas in "Poaching"

the revelation that the sound keeping Wharton awake at night--he's sure it's a poacher in the woods behind his house--is actually just a beaver is, once again, comic.

"Absolution" was modeled in a similar fashion upon Barry Hannah's "Testimony of Pilot," or at least that's where I started anyway. Before I was through, though, Bernard Malamud's The Assistant and, believe it or not, Robert Penn Warren's All the King's Men became major influences. In "Testimony" the story starts with a scene when the narrator is just a boy. He and a neighbor boy use a homemade mortar launcher (a metal tube which uses flashlight batteries as projectiles and cherry bombs to provide the impetus) to bomb the house of another boy, and then several years later the narrator and this strange kid they bombed meet in high school. These first few pages of "Testimony" started me wondering what might happen if the narrator felt guilty about what he did to the other boy, and what might result if he tries to atone for that guilt by agreeing to the outrageous demands the other boy makes of him. That's where I started. The first chapter was the toughest of all to write. It went through at least ten completely different drafts before I was finally satisfied. It was difficult to write because it had to be a very delicate balance of comedy and pathos, and in earlier versions, the pathos tended to suffocate the comedy. For instance when Durwood shows up at Josh's house and urinates on the door, in the first several drafts this scene

was simply meant to be shocking. But in the final draft, this scene is meant to be comic. The difference is both we and Josh understand why Durwood is there. Because of a seemingly innocent act by Josh (switching the purse into Durwood's lunch bucket), Durwood is caught for stealing by the school officials and expelled indefinitely. We can imagine the horror on Durwood's face when his lunch bucket was opened by the priest and the purse were discovered. So when he appears at Josh's door later, we know that Josh screwed up, he let down a friend (?) in a significant way. In an earlier version of the story, when Durwood urinated on Josh's door it was simply an act of retaliation by a slightly off-center kid. Now it's the act of a kid who (while still slightly off-center) feels betrayed.

Before I knew any of this, though, I had a vague idea of how I wanted the story to start--even though I had no idea what was going to happen after the first two chapters. I began with a vague idea of one boy feeling guilty after performing an act which gets another boy kicked out of a Catholic parochial school. So, once again, I began by asking what kind of person might act this way, what kind of kid might actually feel enough guilt that he lets the other boy make him do things he would normally never do. And out of those questions the character of Josh arose--a boy whose mother is intensely religious. In a sense, she has been asking her son to accept the guilt that she feels, a guilt

only hinted at in the story. Her guilt is related to having been a nun at one time, of giving this up to get married, and then losing her husband (he's killed during the Korean War) while she's carrying his child. (How's that for melodrama?) In those weekly prayer sessions Josh has with his mother, he is being asked to accept her guilt, but he doesn't understand what the guilt is about. So by the time he meets Durwood, he's well-experienced at accepting guilt without understanding its basis. This became Josh's background and the story developed from there.

The Assistant enters the story, rather obviously, once Josh begins working at Zimmerman's Corner Store. Unlike Frank (the protagonist of The Assistant), Josh isn't working because he feels guilt. (Frank was involved in a holdup of the store he subsequently works for.) It's simply a quirk of fate that puts Josh in the stock boy's apron. The stores themselves are quite similar, though: both aren't doing much business anymore after new stores down the street open up. But even more similar yet is the fact that both store owners have daughters to whom the protagonists are attracted but with whom consummating that love/lust is difficult. (Both girls are even named Sandra.)

But the course of Josh and Sandra's relationship is based less upon The Assistant than it is upon the relationship between Jack Burden and Anne Stanton in All the King's Men. In both "Absolution" and All the King's Men, the

protagonists are confused about the nature of their relationships with their girl friends. For Jack Burden his image of Anne Stanton is closely linked to having grown up with her, almost as if she were a sister. And Josh's image of Sandra is entangled in his image of Mr. Zimmerman (who has become a kind of surrogate father for him).

The point I'm making is a simple one. The structure of the stories I write is strongly affected by what I have read. But with any luck at all, my stories aren't merely derivative. I hope the characters take on a life of their own, and I hope their situations aren't merely perceived as having been cribbed from the work of others. For me, writing is discovery in the sense that I'm discovering more and more about the characters I've created and how they're related to the actions. At times I might find that the characters are incapable of doing what I had originally intended them to do, and that means either going back to the beginning and looking for characters that will behave or, if I'm sufficiently interested in the characters nonetheless, discarding my original intentions and rethinking the story.

In short, when I start writing, plot is a major consideration. I may not know the entire plot, but I at least have a sense of where I'm headed. I have to feel confident that I have a story worth telling before I sit down and start typing. So only after having mulled over the actions and their consequences, as well as the characters capable of

performing such actions, only then does the writing actually take place.

This is no doubt linked to a yearning for order--to a desire, mainly on an unconscious level, to use storytelling as a means of explanation. For, as I see it, it's the writers role to make sense of what happens in life. The writer chooses what to include and not to include in a certain story (if not on a conscious level, then certainly on a subconscious level) because of his own ideas of structure and character psychology. As storytellers we're the interpreters of the raw material of life, and I would hope as interpreters we can rely on plot to make communication a little bit easier.

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WAITING FOR THE COYOTES,
ABSOLUTION,
AND A CRITICAL AFTERWORD

by

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Abstract. "Waiting for the Coyotes" is about the tension which develops between a father and son after the mother has moved out. Because they live in a Western Kansas town, Warren, the father, is afraid that his ten-year-old son, Alvin, is becoming a little "hick." Instead of being a compassionate father, Warren strives to turn his son into the person he wants him to be, but Alvin resists. Ultimately, the story is about Warren coming to understand that his son is an individual who has needs of his own.

"Absolution" is narrated by a young man, Josh, who is looking back on the events of his life. For several years he felt responsible, and thus guilty, for having gotten a fellow student, Durwood, kicked out of a Catholic parochial school. When these two boys meet again, several years later in high school, Josh's guilt allows him to follow the other boy's orders and do things he would never normally do--namely to steal Playboy magazines from the grocery store where he works. Josh eventually gets over the guilt, after Durwood pushes him too far, but Durwood's presence remains a nuisance that he has trouble escaping from.

In the Critical Afterword, I discuss the role of plot in fiction. I begin with a brief survey of the attitudes toward plot--quoting from E.M. Forster, Wayne C. Booth, and others--and then examine how plot functions in my own fiction--building upon the categories of plot developed by R.S. Crane (and elaborated upon by Norman Friedman). The purpose of this examination is to show that "Waiting for the Coyotes"

contains a plot of thought and "Absolution" contains a plot of character--a distinction crucial for understanding the two stories.