
WHIRLWIND

An electronic magazine striving for the very best in
contemporary fiction, poetry, and essays.



VOLUME I
NUMBER 1

PREMIER ISSUE

MARCH 1, 1994

OTHER ELECTRONIC MAGAZINES ON THE NET

InterText, a bi-monthly magazine publishing fiction of all types. Back issues are available at network.ucsd.edu, under the /intertext directory.

Quanta, a science fiction magazine. Each issue contains fiction by amateur authors and is published in ASCII and PostScript formats. Back issues of Quanta is available from export.acs.cmu.edu in the /pub/quanta directory.

The Sixth Dragon, an independent literary magazine devoted to publishing original poetry, short fiction, drama and commentary, in all genres. In addition to 3,000 paper copies, *The Sixth Dragon* will publish ASCII and PostScript editions. For more information, e-mail martind@student.msu.edu.

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Cover photo by Amy Lynne Moskovitz

Whirlwind cannot continue without submissions from established and amateur writers on the net. If you or anyone you know is looking to publish contemporary fiction, poetry, or essays, please don't hesitate to get a copy of the work to us. Mail submissions to: sw17@cornell.edu.

NEXT ISSUE OF WHIRLWIND: MAY 1, 1994

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WELCOME

March 1, 1994

Welcome to the first issue of Whirlwind. Why I suddenly decided to start this magazine is a mystery to me. I'm currently a senior at Cornell University studying English -- this is my last semester, when I should be attending bars instead of classes, concentrating on doing nothing of substance.

But instead of just loafing around, I thought that the net needed a magazine like mine, one that specializes in contemporary fiction, poetry, and essays. I believe every single work that went into this first issue is a good read. That is the single most important rule that I believe all works of fiction or poetry must abide by -- that first and foremost, they must be fun and entertaining.

Putting this magazine together has taken far more time than I thought, but I think it has been worth it. I would like to thank Jason Snell of *InterText*, who gave me sage advice and a ton of useful information. I would also like to thank Amy Moskovitz for her photographs -- it goes without saying that her pictures look far better on paper, but they have nonetheless managed to make this magazine visually beautiful.

Sung J. Woo
Editor

BARKING DOGS AND FLYING SAUCERS

BY KEITH DAWSON

It is 1979. Jeremy is fifteen, and he rides the subway home from school every day. He rides from his school at 86th Street and Lexington back to Brooklyn. It is an icy day that winter. He wears a blue snorkel parka. While waiting for the train, he leans against the wall. In the process, he ruins a drawing someone has made in chalk in an empty ad space.

He makes a mess of the back of his jacket. This will cause his mother to complain. Worse, he's just obliterated a delicate white outlined picture of a barking dog. Above the dog was a flying saucer. The dog was barking at the flying saucer, Jeremy thinks. It is hard to tell. A strange blocky stick figure stood by the dog, listening to the saucer. Now it is a tangled mishmash of chalk on a black background. The barking dog is more of a lop-sided polygon.

He thinks nothing more about the ravaged chalk drawing until the next day, when he and his cleaned jacket get off the train at that same stop. He looks across the tracks at the downtown side, and sees a man standing in front of the former chalk drawing.

The young man is dressed in a bomber jacket and dirty ripped jeans. He has short cropped hair, not quite a buzz cut but close to it. There is an earring in his left ear. His jacket, years old, is black leather, covered with stains from markers and spray paints. It bulges slightly under his arms and in the small of his back. The man looks almost twenty.

He runs his fingers through his hair as he surveys the damaged piece.

Jeremy watches as the young man looks around quickly, then pulls a large piece of white chalk out of his sleeve pocket and tries to reconstruct the drawing. He reconnects some of the lines, bringing the dog back to life. There is nothing he can do for the saucer. He shakes his head and walks away slowly. The artist turns to look down the platform for the next train, and as he does he catches Jeremy watching him. The artist smiles back brightly. Jeremy feels ashamed.

Autumn, 1986. Jeremy is grown and the artist is fa-

mous. Those simple drawings of vocal dogs and radiant saucers are pop icons. The artist's graffiti is coveted modern art, prized for its urban chic. A review called it "the rebirth of the urban primitive." One day in Barnes and Noble, Jeremy leafs through a book on graffiti art. He sees a picture of the artist's subway work from the late seventies, a black and white chalk drawing like the one he rubbed out by mistake. The photo's caption says the drawing has been destroyed, like those Old Master paintings blown to bits by bombings during World War Two. Jeremy remembers seeing slides of demolished frescoes and paintings in his college classes. They were in black and white. Soon, no one will be left alive who remembers the colors. He feels a brush with history, a touch of greatness.

The artist tries to hide his illness, but it is impossible. Whispers start as soon as he begins missing appearances, losing weight, coughing in public. The rumors create a speculative frenzy in his work, because the works of a dead artist command more than those of a live one. Word of the artist's illness percolates through the art world for months before it ever reaches Jeremy.

At twenty-two, he is an aspiring writer working for a publishing company. During the day, he reads manuscripts and throws them back into the refuse pile. At night he writes madly, dozens of stories and fragments of novels. He is still just learning.

He goes to a party thrown by his company for one of their books. Jeremy hasn't worked on the book, but it is policy that all editorial assistants go to the parties. The company wants rooms to be filled with lots of young people and their friends. It makes parties more attractive to the important people the company wants to court. The young people, including Jeremy, fawn on the hordes of famous old writers, the occasional rock star and government official. It is part of their job. Jeremy enjoys these parties.

This one is for a collaboration between a writer and an illustrator. It is a book of cartoon drawings with a running text called Pete's Bar. Jeremy thinks it is a good

looking book. He gave it to some of his friends as Christmas gifts. They like it, too.

He is introduced to the illustrator by his boss, Paul, a fortyish man with a beard and a long ponytail. Jeremy doesn't like Paul much, but they get along on the job. Paul doesn't publish a lot of books, which makes Jeremy's life a lot easier. Jeremy and the illustrator, who is in his late thirties, strike up a conversation and Jeremy tells him the story of his encounter with the artist.

"He has AIDS, you know," the illustrator says.

Jeremy winces and says that he didn't know that. The illustrator tells him that it is well-known among artists, that he heard from a friend-of-a-friend who knows him well. Jeremy feels like he has just stepped in dogshit. Like a beautiful woman has slapped him in the face for making an indecent proposal. Like he did when he was nine years old and he wet his pants on the roller coaster at Great Adventure.

Thanksgiving weekend, 1988. Jeremy and his girlfriend have spent the weekend visiting her relatives in eastern Pennsylvania. He's dropped her off at her apartment on the West side and is driving alone down a deserted Broadway toward the Budget rental car place under the Brooklyn Bridge. It is about four in the afternoon on Saturday.

He stops at a traffic light a few blocks south of Canal Street. There is no one else around. No other cars, no shoppers or pedestrians. He lets his attention wander and looks up at the spires of the Woolworth Building coming up on his right. It has always been one of his favorite buildings. He admires the work on the cornices, the elaborate stonework set beneath and between each window.

He looks back at the traffic light, and it is flashing DONT WALK for the opposite traffic. Someone is walking past his car, carrying a large canvas covered in a plastic tarp. Jeremy knows the face. It is a little more pinched, perhaps, but he recognizes the person he saw that day in the train station nine years before. The face has been featured in magazines countless times since then. The light is now green for Jeremy, but the artist hasn't made it across the street. As he passes Jeremy's car, he looks right at Jeremy behind the wheel. Jeremy starts and waves at him. The artist, perhaps realizing he has been recognized, nods his head and smiles without breaking stride. Then he turns his head away.

Jeremy follows the artist with his eyes and drives

away very slowly.

Two days later Jeremy finds himself in a gallery in SoHo, inquiring about the artist's work. He is the only customer. The woman working there is dressed in a smart green dress and black stockings. She is about thirty. Jeremy finds her attractive. She is cold to him. She quotes him a price range and he blanches. Of course he does not have several thousand dollars to spend on a painting, he works in publishing. He gets paid fifteen thousand dollars a year. She watches for his reaction and when he says thank you and walks away, she follows him.

"We do have a few items that you might be interested in," she says. She shows him a room where several tiny framed objects hang on the walls. It is the room of the small things, he thinks.

"Everything you see here is under a thousand," she says. That is still much more than he wanted to spend. But he looks anyway.

The items that hang in this room are not what he expected. The artist's work is more varied than he thought. Jeremy knows nothing about art. He knows the artist because of what he saw with his own eyes, the famous barking dog drawings of the 1970s. And from the magazine articles he's read over the years. He never would have read them, of course, if he hadn't felt some connection with the man who was growing steadily in stature. Barking dogs were everywhere.

But here there were few dogs or flying saucers. There were a few pencil drawings, some of them strikingly realistic. Faces of people drawn in a careful detail, rendered delicate and lifelike, not abstract at all. As he moves around the room, he is at turns shocked and delighted by what he sees. Here is a cityscape in watercolor. It is as fuzzy and warm as the stick figure graffiti is stark. On another wall is a pastel sketch of several men sitting at a table. There is a crystal vase on the table. Jeremy is impressed with the way the artist has drawn clear glass using colored chalk.

One piece catches his eye. It is a tiny collage of drawings, shapes and colors without form to the untrained eye. It is centered around orange, red and yellow plastic cut-outs. Behind and around them are what look like fragments of newsprint. The background has been filled in with tiny detailed drawings in colored pencil. Jeremy can't tell. He looks at it for a good long minute, unable to make sense of it, unable to turn away.

He buys it for eight hundred dollars. It just fits under

the limit on his Visa card.

It also fits on the wall above his kitchen table. Jeremy moves the television across the room to clear a space for the piece. Now, whenever he eats, he stares into the orange and yellow shapes.

He does his writing at the kitchen table. Most nights he drags out the laptop he bought second hand and types for about an hour after dinner. For the first weeks since buying the art, his writing is uneffected. Then he begins to run dry. There are no more stories. New ideas vanish from his head quicker than he can think of them. His eyes tend to wander from the keyboard to the collage above his table.

Jeremy writes in his journal when he has no stories. It is better to keep in practice by writing something, anything, than to write nothing at all. Now is a good time for that, he thinks. He starts by writing about the art work above his kitchen table. He describes it, and some of the others that he saw in the gallery. He writes about the Pete's Bar party and the illustrator. And finally, he writes a long entry about his encounters — both of them — with the artist. It takes him several hours and when he is finished he is very tired.

The next night is not a writing night. Instead, he spends it with his girlfriend at her apartment. When he returns the night after to the Idea Factory (what he calls his kitchen table) he is still blank. He stares up at the artwork and thinks about the artist. He owns a piece of him now. He, Jeremy, possesses a piece of the artist's work. But only the artist knows what the work means. Jeremy certainly doesn't. He doesn't even know what the colors and shapes represent. He can't decipher the code. That satisfies him, somehow. I can rip it to pieces, or set fire to it, he thinks. It's mine to do with as I wish.

He wonders if the artist meant to create a thing of mystery by draping it in obscure images and hazy shapes. The artist will probably die soon, Jeremy thinks.

December. Jeremy still can't concentrate on his writing. When he reads over some of his journal, an idea strikes him. He prints out what he wrote about the artist. It works just as well as a story. He makes a single paper copy, puts it in an envelope, and seals it. He stops for a moment, unsure, because he thinks that what he wrote was very good. Then he screws up his courage and deletes the entire file from his computer. All that is left is what he holds in hand.

It takes Jeremy another week to get up the nerve to

go see the artist. He is listed in a two-year-old Manhattan phone book Jeremy keeps in the bedroom. Jeremy goes to his apartment without calling first. The artist lives in a very sedate brownstone downtown. It is a quiet block, lined with trees. Pleasant noise drifts down the street from the elementary school on the corner. It is a clear, bright winter day.

Jeremy finds the artist's name on the buzzer and hesitates for just a second before pressing. The artist lives on the second floor. There is no intercom. He is buzzed in. He hurries up the stairs, carrying the packet under his arm. He rings the bell at the artist's door and hears a voice from inside the apartment. "Come on in," it says. Jeremy opens the door and steps inside.

Brilliant southern sunlight fills the studio's large front room. Each wall is covered with art, large and small. A large purple painting hangs across from the door, the first thing any visitor sees when they enter the home. It is easily eight feet high and ten feet long. Jeremy has never seen anything so big outside of a museum. It is a red and purple variation of the tiny work that hangs in his own kitchen. Like his own, it is part painting, part sketch and part collage. This is twenty times larger than his own. From across the room, he notices an old motif: unlike his piece, this one features barking dogs and flying saucers and dancing stick figures. Jeremy is impressed with its size. And with its warmth.

He steps further into the studio and notices the artist spread out on the floor with his materials. He is squatting on his haunches over a large white canvas. Most of it is empty. Jeremy can't see what he is doing to it. The artist is wearing jeans and a gray sweatshirt with the sleeves rolled up. He wears white canvas sneakers. All of his clothes are stained with color. The canvas is spread out in a room right off the main foyer. That room's walls are empty except for two or three sheets of drawing paper tacked up where the artist can see them.

He looks up at Jeremy. The artist has very little hair. Jeremy can see the boniness of his arms and hands, the thinness of his face. His frame carries the sweatshirt like a coat hanger. The man must weigh 120 pounds, Jeremy thinks.

The artist was expecting someone else.

"Who are you?" he asks. "If you're here to sell me something, don't waste your breath."

Jeremy doesn't know what to say. He hasn't rehearsed this part, and of course the artist doesn't know who he is. Instead he proffers the packet. "I've brought you something. This is for you," he says. The artist sits up, cross-legged on the floor.

“Do you want me to sign for it?”

Jeremy is embarrassed, he doesn't know what to say or how to act. So he apologizes. He's sorry for interrupting, he says. He's sorry for what happened in 1979, he's sorry that he ruined the drawing in the 86th Street station. Uncontrollable apologies fall out of his mouth. He's sorry for something else too, something much worse, but he knows enough not to say it to the artist.

He tells the artist about their two previous encounters. Jeremy opens the manila envelope he carried and hands the artist a folder. Inside, Jeremy tells him, is a story he wrote.

“Creativity straight out of my head,” Jeremy says. The artist looks at it without seeing it.

“It's yours,” Jeremy says. “You can do anything you want with it, it's the only copy.” He pauses for a moment. “If you destroy it, then we'd be even.”

Jeremy leaves the artist's apartment feeling drained and stupid. He drags himself home, but he feels worse

than when he started out. The thought of the encounter, what he had done, makes him wince. The reaction reminds him of the summer he spent putting pink insulation into a house. It was weeks before he stopped pulling invisible slivers of fiberglass from his forearms. It is almost that long before he sits down to write again.

The letter from the lawyer arrives a year later with a package too large for a single deliveryman. After he signs for the letter two men carry a sealed and insured box up to his apartment.

The letter tells him what is in the box, and his stomach flutters. The artist remembered him in his will. Inside the box is the purple painting. Jeremy opens it and slides the heavy canvas and its frame out of the wooden box. It is not the same.

He draws a heavy breath. The artist has cut up strips of paper and added them to the center of the purple collage. He's cut them into shapes. Dogs and saucers. Jeremy's story, given up for gone, is part of the collage.

Keith Dawson <kdawson@panix.com> is a writer and father of a sparkling daughter.

THE SIDE SHOW

by DANIEL SENDECKI

Errant knight - reverent killer
Don't you know?
The Holy Grail, Sir Galahad
is not deep in the tenements
nor high in the battlements
It sits beside a cupie doll, dusty and spent
it travels with the circus
Those who admire it
The Bearded Lady, The Strong Man
realize - not everlasting life
but their own tarnished reflection.

Daniel Sendeki <rn.6333@rose.com> is a young, emerging Canadian author, who is currently pursuing his writing at home, but who intends to further study English Literature at McGill University in Montreal, Quebec. His story “A Serpent's Embrace” will appear in an upcoming issue of Sunlight Through the Shadows.

EAT LUNCH WITH THE HOMELESS

BY E. JAY O'CONNELL

Chinatown.

I emerge from the subway skirting pools of greenish fluid, slipping past boarded peep show arcades with names like The Pussycat, and The Over 21. Ranks of ducks sweating fiery orange grease hang upside down in shop windows, glaring at me through death-filmed eyes. A cat washes itself sitting on a counter inside, beside a fan of faded Penthouse Magazines crawling with Ideograms. An Asian beauty sucking her forefinger, her nipples round and brown like pennies.

In front of me, a business suited drone skips over the splinted leg of a darkhaired girl sitting on the sidewalk. She's practically blocking the way. She has a cardboard sign that reads 'HUNGRY, please help.'

"Can you help me out mister?"

My rule is, if I don't have change, I keep moving. I hand her 50 cents, change from my breakfast coffee, and turn to leave.

"What are you reading?"

I look back at her, puzzled. There's a paperback in my hand, the latest Doug Adams.

"I mean, I like to know what people are reading," She speaks quickly. "When you're on the streets, you got a lot of time on your hands. It helps to have something to read, get your mind off yourself." She takes the book from my hand.

"It's fantasy."

She furrows her brow and reads the back cover blurb. She is of indeterminate age, neither young nor old. Her eyes are disturbing, one of them pointing slightly askew. She's wearing a dirty white tee-shirt and jeans, and her long brown hair is pulled back in a single ponytail.

"It's escapism, really," I say. "We all need to escape."

"Yeah, what do you need to escape from?"

"I'm not crazy about my job."

"Better than this boy." She gestures about herself, as if this were her office. "It's not listed on your everyday list of hard jobs, but let me tell you, its rough. I try to make, ten, twenty bucks a day, so I can get something to eat.

"Where do you sleep?"

"Oh, with friends, the shelter..." She trails off. I turn to leave.

"Could you buy me a soda?"

I squint at her. "You mean, buy you one, and bring it back here?"

"No, I mean, we go get one."

I've got a lunch hour by myself to kill. "Okay."

We walk upstairs to the restaurant. Her splinted leg doesn't seem to give her any trouble at all.

* * *

The restaurant is actually six restaurants sharing a common dining area, rows of battered tables and plastic chairs sandwiched between the stalls. Above each stall cardboard placards crawl with ideograms, with the occasional scrawled English afterthought. I contemplate purchasing the ominous sounding "Five delights," but I'm sure the term delight doesn't translate across cultures. A single six foot tower air conditioner struggles valiantly against the burning heat of dozens of woks, deep fryers, and the press of bodies. The clientele is about half Asian, half Caucasian. I stand looking up at a menu board, realizing that I can't eat with her watching me. Even if I do buy her a soda.

"Let me buy you a rice plate."

"Okay."

We order and sit to wait for our food.

"So you stay with friends?" I'm trying to figure just how homeless she is.

"Yeah, I live with my boyfriend. I used to have a problem with needles a while back, but I'm clean now. No AIDS, either, I know, I had the test."

"Lucky."

"Yeah, real lucky. Now, if I could only get a job."

"What about Burger King, that kind of stuff?"

"I can't deal with the people at Burger King. I used to work there. Buncha niggers, think they're, they're, I don't know, gods gift or something."

I flinch at the word nigger. "I've worked at Burger King. I hated it."

"Me and my last boyfriend worked there. Now there was a piece of work. Cut his fucking arm off." She draws

a line across her left forearm. "Right there."

"He cut his arm off?"

"Yeah, Like I found this out after I broke up with him. I thought he lost it in Nam. But no, he did it to himself, trying to commit suicide."

"How did he manage it? An ax?" "No I think it was kitchen knife."

"Did he just mess it up, and have it amputated?" My mind can't summon up the picture of someone actually completely severing as substantial a body part as an arm.

"No, no, he cut it right off, with a kitchen knife, I think. I know, because he talked about the paramedics, looking for it so they could, you know, graft it back on."

"Uh-huh." I remain unconvinced. Where did he put the arm after he cut it off?

"Why are we talking about this?" She mock shudders, grins and holds her face in her hands. "We're going to eat."

"Yeah, sorry."

"That's okay."

Our food arrives, and we're quiet for awhile as we begin to eat.

"How is it?" I ask. "Too hot?"

"No, its fine. I hate the stuff when its too hot. What's the point? When you can't taste the cumin and coriander and saffron and stuff, just the burn. I like a little burn, when its appropriate, but not the super hot stuff."

"I think its the culture. You know, if you grow up with it—"

"—I fuckin did!" She interrupts.

"What?"

"My dad was Indian. We ate the stuff when I was kid."

I'm trying to figure it out. She's sort of dark skinned, but not really Indian looking. "Your mother was—"

"—From Connecticut. They met in church. Ain't that a bitch? He was a Moslem."

"Your mother was a Moslem? In Connecticut?"

"No she was a , what do you call it, a congregationalist. My dad met her in church—"

"—A mosque?—"

"—No, a church, a Christian church. He was there because he liked to sing. He sung in the choir."

"I see."

"So my parents, they were real hung up on ideas about class and economics. My mother, oh boy, she was fucking case, that one. Didn't like it if I hung out with truck drivers. She'd say, no wonder I'm in such trouble, sexually. What the fuck! Like a trucker is any more horny than a businessman in a suit."

"Uh-huh."

She is bent over her food, shoveling it in. "I'm going to have to have them wrap some of this up. I can't eat it all."

I nod and eat my curried chicken. "So you worked at Burger king, where else?"

"At school, I used to do volunteer work at a radio station, BCN, but after awhile I realized, whoa, I gotta get a real job, I can't just be some stupid volunteer for my whole life. I gotta put a roof over my head."

"You went to school?"

"Yeah, studied TV and Radio, but couldn't get anything going with it." She sets down her fork and grabs at her crotch in an exaggerated gesture. "Bullshit walks, this talks. I told myself, I'd rather spread my legs as a job, then spread my legs for a job. Does that make any sense?"

"More honest, I guess."

"Let me tell you, I did it too. You don't think I could afford heroin on this do you? But I was lucky. Most of the guys were nice. Just a business proposition, just a job."

I nod sagely as if this is the kind of thing I hear all the time. Begging is a step up the ladder for her.

* * *

We talk about jobs, work. She can't temp, she says, because she's a little dyslexic. Can't type fast enough. I can't get up the nerve to ask her about the wandering eye. We talk about drugs. When I mention my psychotic episode, she shows her first genuine interest in me, asking focused, penetrating questions. Such as: "Did you think up this stuff on the acid, and then believe it when you came down?" and, "So you believed, you were like, the risen Christ, and the devil—"

I nod and smile "and the holy ghost and the Antichrist, all rolled into one."

"Whenever I did it, I was careful to not believe in it too much." She pushes her plate away, half eaten. "Like, I'd write the stuff down, and look at it later—"

"—to see if it made any sense."

She's smiling too, now. "It usually didn't. Like the one time, I'm driving over the golden gate bridge in San Francisco, and I think this isn't real, this an hallucination, but I know it is real, because I can feel it, I can feel the steering wheel in my hands."

"You were in San Francisco?"

"Yeah, I moved out there."

"Why did you come back?"

She smiles. "Stupidity. Stupidity."

"One thing I always wonder about is, if you are go-

ing to be homeless, why not do it somewhere where the weather is nicer? I mean, if you can manage it.”

“Not so nice, in the summer, and fall.”

“Too hot?”

“No, cold. That wet, down in your bones kind of cold, you know, when you’re kind of hungry, and its about fifty, and its misty. God, the mist. I hated it. Mist all the time, everywhere, not rain, but mist. Soaked you all the way through. You couldn’t get dry.”

“You work out there?”

“No. Nobody wanted to pay for the call to the east coast to check my fucking references. Anyway, it was too easy to just be a hippy. I crashed in Peoples’ Park. Let me tell you, three generations of hippys out there. Three generations out lying on the grass. I said, what did I step into a fucking time machine? Is this 1968 or 1988?” She paused. “Then the fucking niggers came and ruined it all.”

I frown. I realize that I’ve been frowning every time she says the word nigger, like some kind of Skinnerian exercise.

“So what’s it like, in the shelter?”

“Welllllll...” She says, smiling sheepishly. “You want to know the truth...” She flags down a busboy, and asks him to bring her a box for her food. “My parents rent me a room in Shrewsbury. Its a hole, though. I take the T into the city, so I can hang out with people.”

She walks me back to work. She knows the names of a lot of the beggars I pass everyday. Trite, but somehow, you don’t think of them as having names. She even throws some change in another beggar’s cup.

“The karmic wheel, you know?”

We say goodbye like old friends. “See you later.” I get on the elevator, to go back to the job I hate. I’d be fired at the end of the week myself, but I didn’t know that.

E. Jay O’Connell <ejo@world.std.com> is a 30 year old writer and artist living in the Boston Area.

WHILE WALKING BY ANDREA KRACKOW

These sidewalk shoes grin
and pretend our life.
Do you live? In tenement shacks of
Chunky Chicken, I dream of becoming
your wife.

Thumb walking,
limp talking,
my words are week-
day normal,

(I speak like gravel).

Will you walk on me?
Or take a sideway street?
Or leave roses by my corner?

Leave roses by my corner.

Andrea Krackow <krackoa@alleg.EDU> is a first year student at Allegheny College studying ceramics and poetry.

THE HIGH COST OF LIVING

BY NANCY BENT

(In 1988, a young man arrived at a hospital emergency room, where the staff thought he would make a good organ donor because he was only twenty-three. Involved in drugs, he had been shot above the fourth cervical vertebra.)

When he was still alive on the
Third Day, they told him he would always be
Unable to move his body below his jaw.
Privately their words were "A head in bed."
It would be like this:
They would beat on his chest and
Maybe have to break his ribs if his heart
Stopped. They wanted him to understand that.
One doctor said to himself in such a situation
He wouldn't want to live.

He would have to imagine the feel of water
When they bathed him.
He would never touch a woman with long black
Hair or flirt with her,
Never beat another guy in a fight.
He could only breathe through a machine.

By blinking the young man could speak.
Twice for yes and once for no.
Amazed that he wanted to live,
They asked him again.
He blinked twice, each time.

After four years he went home to constant family care.
His mother in the day and the rest taking turns at night.
The family stuck together. They had fled from Mexico,
Crossing the Rio Grande where it slowed to a trickle.
But they had not left hard times.

Now he was reborn, passive, pure,
A dedicated mother by his side,
His hands helpless on the tray before him,
Nothing expected, nothing possible,
Only belief in life.

He explained, using a voice box,
"If I hadn't been shot,
I would have died.
My sister brings me food,
I go outside, I see my family.
This is the way it is."

Photographs by Amy Lynne Moskovitz





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SAVEWAY

BY JIM ESCH

The rain woke me, lying in a bed that was soft but now was hard. The window was half open and the rain sound filtered through the screen and dogged my late night thoughts. I can't quite describe how it felt to be lying there, still and wet, with planes of light dancing on the black wall, and the slow drip of the light rain spilling from the leaves and scuttling through the spouting. I was caught between the heat being cooled and dry being wet. I stared at the wall and the reflected light show of street lamps and passing cars for I don't know how long, and I was kind of hypnotized by the stillness that accompanies late night when most are hidden in dreams locked in rooms.

But this numbness of thought was so clear that I might not call it numb, except that I wasn't really thinking of any subject as a thing to be thought about. I rolled over and tried to shift my hips so that my back would find comfort on the hard mattress and I thought about concrete action. Pumping gas wasn't good enough. Eight months of pumping gas was too long. Every morning and some weekends even, standing in the heat or the cold or the rain was too much anymore; too much in the sense that it was too much the same and there was no movement in this job and no satisfaction. Curling my body with the sheets, I came upon the answer. That was it — no satisfaction, no movement. I was not who I wanted to be. My friends were not who I wanted them to be. I wasn't living on a farm and I wasn't in a flat and I wasn't in a clapboard house and I wasn't in a mansion overlooking a valley. My world was one of aluminum-sided apartments and brick facing and commercials for discount appliances, and it was not what I thought I wanted it to be.

After graduation I chose Drexel because it was close to home and I could stay in touch with my friends and then later move on and blaze my own trail somewhere else. But Drexel didn't last and that waiter job at Seafood Shanty didn't last and then the stock boy job at Super Saver lasted too long because I made good money and didn't want to move and made these friends out of acquaintances that were too easy to forget to want to

leave them. So I rented my own apartment and bought records and had people over for drinks. Then, being laid off in January and pushed into the street, I found this job jerking gas and stuffing thick wads of money into my workman's pants. Summer would end soon. What would be new at the station? Would anything move? There's no fulfillment in a gas station. I remembered the woman yesterday who spent the night here. I always thought that a woman would be fulfilling, that the closeness of one body with another was enough to keep one satisfied. She was older than me and said I was good. It rained that night too and I thought about the way rain always made me think about not being satisfied. She was good for about five minutes. It wasn't what I expected.

But I remembered Mandy and how she might have been the one who'd fulfill me like I thought I should be. She was the ideal woman, the one that every man sees and knows for the first time: "This is the one that I was meant to be with, who, when she is with me, will complete me." Kind of like Brigham Young coming through the mountains and saying that this was the place where the Mormons would stay and build a big temple that no one was allowed to enter. And for a short time in high school she focused my life. Every action arose from an impulse stirred by her presence. And this was a happy time — to live in reflection of someone else, to be a shadow and want to be that way.

Amanda. She became a friend and almost something else. But we had reached a point where, after that point, the plot of our lives diminished and drifted apart so that now I had lost the thread that had connected me with her. I remember once in the hallway when we shared a Pepsi and I was going to ask her; I almost asked her and I was building up and she talked to me of Florida and the sun and it was so right because her hair was gold and she was cuter than ever at that moment in her light track shorts and rolled down socks and the curve of her body within the loose cotton shirt. And it came to a point where my blood was racing and my heart pumping so as to release this emotion for her. Then I looked outside the window of the metal door and her mother was waiting

in a Scirocco out front and Amanda walked over and saw her mother and said an affectionate good-bye and waved. The Scirocco pulled away and from then on I was lost.

The rain had now stopped, but the trickle of the spout remained and beside this brook I slept a comfortable sleep because I was thinking how it used to be when I thought I could make it with her.

The next morning was sun-filled and pretty, so I got up early and made my breakfast. The instant coffee was bitter and it burned my tongue. I thought about leaving then, leaving and finding her. If I could find her again, find out where she was, and what she had done with her life and make one last pitch, then I could move on. Someone around had to know what had happened to her. I searched my drawers for old phone numbers, of friends I hadn't talked to in years, since a homecoming or a chance meeting in a shopping center parking lot. I came up with some numbers and later that afternoon made my calls. Some weren't home, others had moved away, and some never answered or their lines had been disconnected. But I did reach Phil, one of her best friends in high school. Phil told me about his accounting job downtown and that he had just married a Jewess from Jenkintown. He'd just bought a home in Bryn Mawr along the road to the hospital, in a development of sandalwood and solar panels. Phil was proud of himself and his wife and his house on the Main Line. I told him I worked for Exxon in sales and distribution. He approved.

Then I asked about Mandy. He said she went to school at Georgetown and he'd heard that she'd been engaged to a guy from Alexandria. Well, engaged could mean anything I thought. But there wasn't much time to spare.

I grappled with the options. Either stay here and pump gas in the August humidity and then the fall and winter, or steal away to Virginia and buy into a dream. Maybe she was waiting for me; even in school there was a part of me that said she really cared and she would come around. And I still believed that without us together she'd be incomplete too. I wondered whether she ever repressed a desire for me or whether she knew I loved her down to her bones.

Life continued at the station and nothing changed except the air got colder. The night came on faster and it became chilly after dark, as September rolled into October. But I'd been planning. The second weekend in October was reserved for me and the Alexandria Holiday Inn, for a room with a king-sized bed. I took that Friday off from work and drove down for the weekend. All along

the highway, in the hills on both sides, the trees were burning and I felt vigorous again, as if I was back in the hunt and even acts like turning on the radio assumed importance.

The motel looked just right, its flashing arrow standing as a beacon for the tired motorist. Everything went smoothly. The room was neat and the sanitized smell of the bathroom made me pure. I leafed through the ragged phone book for her number. It was still there under her own name. Tomorrow I would call on her. I'd make my stand.

I was hungry for some Doritos and wine. There was a SaveWay supermarket across the boulevard from the motel, so I figured I'd walk over, get some air. The evening had turned cool and the sun was setting behind overcast, cracked gray winter clouds. The supermarket was warm. The fruits and vegetables were ripe and fresh and colorful. Hard, shiny apples and juicy oranges and magical pears. I almost bought some.

At home I could never get out of a supermarket without seeing someone I knew or recognized. Usually it was someone I didn't want to see. But I never thought that in Virginia, in this wealthy neighborhood, with my guard down, that I'd see her in a supermarket. She was back at the meat counter. She chucked a pound of ground beef into her cart and rolled up another aisle. I was sure it was her; that face wouldn't lie. I was afraid, but I gathered myself together and snuck up to the other end of the aisle to watch her. She was choosing a box of cereal, which took a while because there were so many brands. I ducked into the next aisle, paper towels and tissues. She passed by to the next aisle. I couldn't stand the tension much longer. I followed. The junk food aisle. She grabbed a bag of tortilla chips, the same brand I liked.

Even when she bent over to price the soda pop, she looked innocent. She hadn't grown fat or anything. She was almost the same, maybe even better, because there were some slight wrinkles around her eyes, adding some character that wasn't there before. In a sense, experience had changed her in ways I'd never know, but it was still her in the living flesh and nothing could change that. Just looking at her filled me with warm energy. It was so much better than trying to remember her in the empty places of the present, where she was only a ghost of past moments. She rolled to the freezer section. We were the only ones in the aisle. My heart dropped like lead, like when you're dreaming that you're falling. The adrenaline was pumping hard and it would not let me back down.

I hesitated.

She picked out some frozen corn.

I wobbled closer. Still she did not notice. Then she glanced.

Nothing. I closed in the final few feet, hands in pockets and head sunk down. I stood before her.

She looked at me. I was scared and my eyes probably showed it, but I smiled and said hello. She was confused. Her eyes rolled back trying to recall my image; then she twitched and there was a moment when she recognized me. I know it.

Then she squinted and her mouth dropped and her eyes turned gray.

“Excuse me, do I know you?”

I told her who I was.

She stood there, faking at being puzzled.

“Sorry, you must have mistaken me for someone else.”

But I hadn't. It was her. Her hair was still gold as an October leaf and her face and voice were the same. I tried to break though again.

“Remember high school, spring track team? C'mon, you remember those times down at the track? Remem-

ber we shared a Pepsi and you're mom drove up —”

“No, sorry.”

It was the way she said it, like crushing an ant in the snow.

Then she looked one last time before rushing off, and in that deep drop of her eyes I could tell that she kind of pitied me, for I believe she recognized every secret hope that was never meant to be. I followed her to the check-out lines then gave up and only my eyes followed her as she carried her groceries back though the rain to her BMW. I didn't want to move further. The hard rain beating against the window held me back.

I stayed in my room all night. Didn't even swim in the indoor pool. When I was younger, I could turn on the radio and feel along with the songs, but that was behind now. The magic fingers didn't soothe me much either. I lay in bed and listened to the cars splash through the night. And I wondered why things don't work out and how all that was left was to remember the way it was under a May sun in a green field with her for a couple of minutes. That's all I had. There wasn't anything left to expect.

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IF I WERE A LOVER

BY JIM CHAFFEE

If I were a lover

would I love all or some
or none, save me.

Jim Chaffee <jchaffee@alleg.EDU> is a computer specialist who enjoys writing poetry in his spare time.

CINDERELLA REWRITTEN

BY RACHEL L. MILLER

As a small child
I loved a lie
Read to me by
A teary-eyed mother

You see—
My mother was once
Cinderella—woman of ash
The blessings of society
Hidden behind closed doors
By selfish brothers and fathers

Ella dared to challenge
The order, leaving
Her ghostly mother and
Alcoholic father's
Run-down rusty trailer
For the big city

Disappointment—
You can only buy success
Discovered my penniless heroine
She prostituted herself
To the lucky sons
In their shiny cars
Helped out of the gutter
By a fairy godmother
Wearing crushed purple velvet
Minus magic wand

When the lights went out
She finally learned
Her lesson—

Ella can only depend
On one person—
Herself
There is no better savior

Woman of ash
Rises from the ashes—
Like a phoenix

Now she buys her own shoes—
They fit better that way

She lets me choose
My own shoes, too

Excerpt from KISSING THE DEAD

BY STEWART O'NAN

Larry Markham's wife left him while he was asleep. Between four and six, he figured as he made himself an egg that Monday morning, because at three he'd gotten up—as was his habit, especially during the rainy season—gotten out of bed and, before looking in on Scott, turned the overhead light on and stood naked in the middle of the rope rug, amazed at the safeness, the pleasing security of their bedroom. The pictures on the dresser, the wicker hamper, Vicki's breathing—the whole instant struck him as overly familiar, as if lifted from a dream. Before he'd flicked the switch (though he knew it was foolish) he'd been prepared to see the musty inside of his poncho liner, his rucksack smashed against his cheek.

"Skull," Carl Metcalf was saying, prodding him with the tip of his jungle boot, "time to motate, bro."

No. This was Ithaca, not Vietnam, clean sheets instead of red dirt. The sudden jump pleased him. He looked down at his new foot to confirm it, and there was the prosthesis, perfect, not a single nick in its ridiculous, skin-toned rubber coating. He was alive. It seemed, he could admit, standing there soft and a little paunchy, an overwhelming piece of luck.

He had stood looking at Vicki curled and warm under the covers. Now, at the stove, he wondered if she had actually been asleep. The gas hissed, rushed and flowered into a blue flame. Outside, the rain made a sound he had not quite learned to ignore. He thought he should feel worse about her leaving, about Scott, but he only felt incredibly tired, leaden. It was unfair; October was his favorite month. He could not think of what to do. The house was quiet, his coffee steaming. There was one crust of bread left. It was enough today, now. He had work to go to, and after, his group at the hospital.

It was not the first time Larry Markham had woken alone to the radio and gone to Scott's room and found his bed mussed and his drawers empty. It wasn't a mystery. They'd had trouble early that summer, after a long good stretch. Since she'd come back they'd been trying, but lately every effort seemed to take all their

patience. There were nights after Scott was in bed that they didn't talk.

He'd called down the stairs, not expecting anything. She had leaving him down to a routine even he knew by now. The fight Friday night over who always drove Scott to his Rehab, who picked Scott up from the Special Children's Center, who did the food shopping, who did the laundry, had not been merely to set the mood for the weekend but a formal way of saying goodbye. How many times had she done it, and yet it still surprised him. She'd risen—he knew—a few hours before he was supposed to get up to run, and guided by the weak beam of a penlight they'd received for subscribing to Time (which he still refused to read), made her way through the house. She had skipped work the day before to pack a bag each for herself and Scott and then hidden them somewhere, Scott's closet or among her summer things in the attic. She'd gone to the bank just before it closed and arrived home at the same time as if she'd finished her shift at the Photo USA. There were variations of this, but it came to the same thing. He imagined her sneaking through the cold downstairs, noting the photographs she would miss, the plants she knew he'd ruin. Scott was upstairs, asleep, his huge head resting like a prize vegetable on the pillow, his disquieting eye open and sightless. The Ruster waited outside, its tank full. He'd have to take the bus today, probably be late.

"Great," he said.

The egg butted the side of the pot, dinging, and Larry spooned it out. He ran cold water over it and knocked it against a wall of the sink, picked bits of shell away from the dent. He set it gingerly in a dish, sat down by himself at the kitchen table and chopped it into bits with the side of the spoon, the yolk too runny, disgusting. He sat there, spoon in hand, and looked at the egg as if it were a sign, a reminder.

He wondered who it had been in the dream this time. He wondered if he'd called out the man's name in his sleep—if, creeping down the stairs holding Scott's hand, Vicki had heard him, and if because of that (not in

spite of it), she had felt even more sure, more at peace with what she was doing.

He'd dreamed, he knew, because he was exhausted, but which one?

"Doesn't matter," he said, and took a gluey spoonful and a bite of heel and sat there chewing, trying not to think, to focus on the positive, as he counseled his group, on the immediate, the real. It didn't work for them either.

There was no real. There were the dreams and there was what Larry Markham remembered. They did not change. In both, his squad all died. Pony, Bogut, Lieutenant Wise—all twelve, night by night, died, and Larry was grateful to wake to the ceaseless Upstate rains, the day laid out ahead of him like the puzzles his mother pieced together those long, drizzly fall afternoons, familiar and somehow comforting, a way to hold off the cold and the gathering evening.

Some nights it was one—Leonard Dawson or Fred the Head. Bates. Jesus, he thought, Go-Go Bates. Larry had fixed him twice, and still he died. He cut their fatigues off in dripping swatches, guided the syrette into their jumped-up veins. After he popped them with morphine he drew an M in blood on their foreheads so the doctors would know back at the aid station. Dumb Andy, Smart Andy, Soup. Carl Metcalf.

"What's it look like?" Lieutenant Wise asked when they'd thrown a perimeter around the downed man, and before Larry could answer, the face strapped into the helmet or cinched into the boonie hat changed, became all of them, none of them. They never looked down to see what had happened; they gripped his arm and looked him in the eye and waited for him to tell them. Nate looked up, the Martian looked up, clutching his elbow so it hurt.

"You're gonna be all right," Larry Markham said then.

"Truth, Skull." And still they wouldn't look. He did because it was his job, just as he ran to them when all he really wanted was to hug mud. "Corpsman up!" someone not hit called, and Larry saw his man and flung himself forward, his own skin burning in anticipation of the bullet. Sometimes there was nothing but a rag, a red flap, the unreal white of bone. With body shots, if there were more than four holes most likely the guy wouldn't make it much past dust-off, but you couldn't just let the guy go, not in front of everyone. Blood bubbled up between his fingers, ran over his hands. The dust could only soak up so much; then it flooded like a Coke knocked over—a gush and little rivers.

"Man," Larry said, sticking another pressure dressing on, "it don't mean a thing," and he could not tell from the change that came over their faces then whether they were grateful or hated him.

Other nights they came in bunches, the gloom of monsoon season filling the chill bedroom as he screamed into his pillow—or moaned, for their blood and stunted breathing no longer shocked him (as it had not shocked him originally, after the first few), but rather struck him with dread and, unable to stop or even slow the approach of the next one, he could only protest feebly, leaching out a "No, no," that drove Vicki to the living room sofa at least twice a week.

She knew not to wake him with an elbow or by nudging his shoulder; once, coming out of it, he punched her in the throat and had to drive her to the emergency room at Tompkins County, where he knew his father would hear of it at shift change. That she had intentionally broken Larry's nose during an earlier, less desperate period (with an ashtray stolen from the club where she waitressed, drunkenly and furiously hurled with absurd, almost comic precision) was held not to his credit but as further evidence that the entire marriage had been, as his father had maintained from the beginning, a mistake in the first place.

He let the spoon drop and sink into the yellow mess. She never left him for more than a few days. That was what this was. It was Monday, and he was sure to have a full truck, big deliveries at Tops and Wegman's and the three P&C's. Some machines up at Cornell, then the loop of gas marts south of town. Group. It would be a full day, a good day.

He left his dish in the drainer, assembled a bologna-and-cheese sandwich, bagged an apple and got ready to go. He liked having the house to himself, the silence. He thought of not going in, but brushing his teeth he walked by Scott's door and noticed his ham radio, the happily-colored map of the world stippled with pins—all the places Larry had called and given the mike to Scott so he could mumble his name. He was eight but would always be three, four, the doctors weren't sure. Larry went back into the bathroom and spat. At the last second he remembered to put the answering machine on.

On the porch he fumbled with his keys, dropping his lunch with a thud. He was going to be late, which he hated. The trees had just begun to turn and a first layer of wet leaves filled the ditches. Rain hung from black branches across the road; the cows were out, standing and breathing steam. Farther up the hill a grey

barn leaned as if gently stepped on. The rain made him listen harder; it pricked his face but from habit he didn't blink. The chill of Ithaca had not lost its ability to surprise him. He could never get warm enough, even in the height of July. There was no reason; he'd lived here his entire life except for his tour. He knew that that one year shouldn't have such pull, yet often it seemed equal to the other thirty-one, a balanced half, and sometimes, the worst times, he was convinced it meant everything, summed him up and finished him before he'd had a chance to understand. In its lostness, its distance, it was something like childhood, vivid yet irretrievable, precious. Occasionally he thought he wanted to go back, to visit the paddies and dusty hills and meadows of head-high elephant grass with the amused, sentimental appreciation of someone visiting their elementary school homeroom. At other times he wanted the country burned, scraped and sunk. Either way, like his father's paralyzing mix of love and disappointment, it was his.

Next door, Donna Burns's old Impala sat with its nose against the rotting lattice of the porch, its bumper jutting over the sidewalk. 'Save the Earth,' begged an exhaust-filmed sticker. Taking up the back half of the drive, Wade Burns's nearly restored Camaro permanently wintered under a cloth tarp dotted with pockets of black water, and Larry thought that if Vicki couldn't stay for him, at least she shouldn't have run out on Donna.

They hadn't seen her this weekend, but the car had stayed where she'd parked it early Friday morning, crookedly, getting out loudly by herself and hooting at something utterly private. He'd complained to Vicki that she was getting worse.

"What else is she supposed to do?" she'd said, and rolled over, away from him. That he and Wade had been close—had talked about his leaving over cold Schaefer's in their garage months before Wade had gotten up the courage to actually do it—was a fact Vicki could not forgive him, and which he, seeing how quickly Donna had fallen apart, now helplessly defended to himself. "She's nice, she's the sweetest woman in the world," Wade admitted, then shook his head. "But she's not right. There's something very basically wrong with her. I've tried but I can't fix it." Larry promised that he and Vicki would keep an eye on her for him, which consisted of making sure she refilled her prescriptions, and occasionally, when she forgot, bailing her out. She had the habit, in the grip of her mood swings, of getting wildly drunk and smashing windows. One Easter morning they'd seen her in the backyard wearing nothing but a pair of tennis shoes and menacing Wade with a rake.

"I don't care who Jesus is!" she shouted. "I want my own radio show!"

She was better by the time Wade left, but they worried about her. Friday when she'd gotten in, Larry had seen her lights come on and lain in bed looking for her shadow, waiting for the crash and tinkle of glass. She crossed the windows and pitched forward, fell without a sound. At three, when he rose up in the thick of the jungle to find himself saved, her lights were still on.

Now it almost seemed funny that they were both alone, a weird coincidence. He'd had a crush on her once, a vision of her in a swimsuit at some summer barbecue, her dark hair halfway down her back. The children were little then. The judge had given them to Wade, and there was nothing to argue about, even she knew. So strange. After all their plans, it had come down to two houses, two people.

"Fucked up," he said.

He detoured around the Impala, wetting one leg of his jeans on the bumper's rubber strip in keeping to the asphalt walk. He could walk on grass now, but only when the weather was dry, and he would not step on dirt—it always appeared freshly turned and tamped. He could not explain why he still distrusted the ground; his foot was only the most obvious excuse. Early mornings, running the road, he had to pick his way through long puddles and ruts, herringbone patterns of mud laid by tractor tires, and when he accidentally touched one and his Nikes slipped an instant before regaining traction, his heart would spike and he'd swear out a cloud. He'd seen Dumb Andy fly backwards over Pony and then himself into a banana tree where pieces of him hung like drying laundry. Weeks ago, cruising by the bus stop, he'd caught the toe of his new foot on the lip of a pothole and was sent stumbling, and two girls smoking cigarettes had laughed. Dizzy with fear, he'd nearly had to stop to vomit.

The walk began to disintegrate, then ended ineptly in chunks of asphalt. He followed the road's tarred, irregular edge, listening for cars behind him. Far off, the pitch of their tires on the concrete mimicked the shifting rush of a Phantom levelling out for a run. It was a pleasing sound, but one which made him flinch—just slightly, for an instant hunching one shoulder to protect his face, like a sleepy duck tucking its head beneath a wing. From a klick off, the heat of a ville going up warmed his face like the fire in his father's den. When he'd first caught himself in the gesture, running with his old foot, he had been ashamed. There was so much of the world he didn't trust anymore. For months he taught

himself not to look over his shoulder, to let the noise grow behind him and not see the napalm canisters tumble from the rack, leave a smear of fire a block long. A stage passed where he could laugh at it; now it was a rare day that he gave it a thought, usually the sign of a bad one.

Carl with his hands out, the skin of his fingers seared together into mitts.

Just get me through today, he thought.

There was no one at the stop, for which he was grateful, only the Journal machine chained to the telephone pole. Something about the town trying to cut a last-minute deal. Typical Ithaca—nickel-and-dime politics. Cars came by with their lights on and their wipers arcing, each bringing its own small squall as it passed. One of them honked for some reason. Too late, Larry waved. Wind slipped under his collar, reached down his back. He fitted his lunch into the crook of his elbow and jammed his hands into his jacket pockets. He could feel the warm lint in there. The cows seemed to be looking at him.

“Got a problem?” he called, but they didn’t look away.

He checked his watch—there was still time, another ten minutes maybe. His luck. One must have just come.

Another car honked.

He waved.

“Why don’t you stop and give me a ride,” he muttered, watching it go.

A Duster passed, the wrong color and younger, hardly rusted. Vicki would have dropped Scott off already. She’d be at her mother’s over by Trumansburg, getting ready for work, rolling her stockings on, clipping her name to her uniform. He imagined what his father would say when he found out—and he would, Ithaca was that kind of town. Vicki would probably call his father to explain. Larry imagined him in the den after dinner, listening with that polite, untiring patience he used with the dying, thanking her for calling and then hanging up, continuing with his New England Journal of Medicine and half-finger of scotch. He would not be surprised; he would wait a day or two to call Larry to see if he was all right.

I’m okay, Larry would say.

If there’s anything, his father would say.

No.

All right then.

Okay.

By Friday his sister Susan in Michigan would

know the whole story and give him a consoling lecture of a call. She had divorced, remarried, divorced again and remarried her first husband, and she had advice.

From the barn came the bright clinking of a bell, and the cows sauntered away in a group, their tails flicking. He turned from the road and kicked at the base of the telephone pole, his boot leaving a smudgy ghost of its waffle design in the creosote. He made another print directly above it and practiced hitting the two, as if warming up for a more difficult exercise. With his hands in his pockets, he imagined it was good for his balance. He could feel the rain sitting in his hair but didn’t mind. He thought with a bitter kind of pride that he’d seen worse.

A Cougar came by flashing its lights.

“What the hell,” he asked, but waved. The driver—a fat, bearded man he didn’t recognize—waved back furiously.

“Everybody’s friend,” Larry said, “that’s me.”

He gave the shaft of the bus stop sign a spin kick, and the metal head shivered tinnily. Jesus, he hated being late. He hadn’t been late for work in three years, and that was a snow day. He showed up to find the store locked, the parking lot trackless. Vicki had teased him for his loyalty, then speculated bitterly on the chances of him ever becoming a manager. For years they’d waged the same two or three fights, resting only for a special dinner, a present, an inspired night of lovemaking.

A pair of headlights the right height flared in the distance, but it was a rental truck, college kids. Discover America! the panel urged, above a lumpy Mount Rushmore. At least the little snots didn’t honk.

“Come on,” he said, and looked at the sky, the wind cold on his throat. Above him, clouds tore themselves to bits, shredded like sopping handfuls of gauze. It was an all day rain, the kind that seemed to follow him around the globe. He’d liked them as a kid, liked sitting inside the dark house while his mother knitted to the radio. Susan was at school. His mother had a stack of heavy 78’s—The Budapest String Quartet, Glenn Gould, Charles Munch and the Boston Symphony Orchestra. On the covers were palaces and women in skimpy, exotic costumes. Her cane rested in the gap made by the couch cushions, its curved handle worn thin from her touch, the varnish hard and smooth as glass. Sometimes she had to try several times to get up. “Come give me a lift,” she’d ask him, and he’d carefully place one sneaker on the empty tip of her shoe and take her hand and lean back with all his weight. Other times she would call for Mrs. Railsbeck, their housekeeper, and

he would have to go outside or upstairs. "I'm all right," she would assure Larry before sending him off, but her eyes were tired and wouldn't smile. His first day, getting off the plane in Da Nang, he'd seen an entire line of men with those eyes. They were going home. In a year he would be there with the same drained expression, yet he would never catch up to her. They would have to be in the same room—the dying woman and the spared man—on a day like today, endless and unchanging. They would talk of what his father, her husband, could not know. How, though there were years, great plains and deserts of life left, one only hoped to die.

It was official, he was going to be late. It angered him like a defeat. He thought of what he could say to the bus driver, something about being paid by the hour. A bead of water hung icicle-like from his nose; he blew it off and rubbed the spot with the back of a sleeve. An orange Volvo shot by, flashing its lights, hauling behind it a wall of spray that settled upon him like a net.

"For Chrissake," Larry Markham said.

He was wiping water from his eyebrows with a knuckle when a large white car with its lights on slowed and stopped beside him. It was the Impala.

Donna Burns leaned across the big bench seat and opened the door for him with what he thought was too much of a smile. For a second he imagined she had just stopped laughing. She was brightly made-up and had on sunglasses, a purple scarf, tan trenchcoat and black kneeboots, and Larry thought he didn't have the energy to deal with her.

"That's all right," he said. "One's due any minute."

"I don't think so. Don't you know?" She grinned at him as if he knew the answer but was playing dumb. She had an aggressive calm he associated—from his group—with lunatics. He wondered if she could tell from his face that Vicki had left him again.

"No," he said blankly, "I don't know."

"They're on strike."

"Jesus Christ," he said, thinking, it figures.

"Come on," she said.

He got in and they started off. She'd just gotten out of the shower and was wearing too much perfume. On the dash a red plastic coffee mug with a Cornell logo sat wedged into a matching base; in the trough of the defrost vent rested a bottle of Tylenol. She worked as a secretary for an obscure department, something to do with plants and psychology. He could not imagine how she dealt with people on an everyday basis, yet she did, and had even during her weird years. She turned down

the radio—new wave, all synthesizers and chilly English accents.

"They just started today."

"That's what I get for not reading the paper," he said.

She turned up the heater for him, offered him the coffee. "It's got a kick," she warned.

It had some sort of liqueur in it, creamy and intensely sweet. She laughed at the face he made.

"Too early for you?"

"Nope," he said, embarrassed for her, and then thought of riding around all day drinking the way he had when he first came back. A line of cars passed them in the other direction, people intent on getting to work. It pleased him to see life going on, even without him. It made his problems seem smaller, insignificant.

"Crummy day, huh?" She looked from the road to him. Her lipstick was smudged from the mug.

"Yeah," he admitted, and looked at the ranches and split-levels drifting by. Some had pumpkins on the porch steps, headless scarecrows made of old jeans and flannel shirts stuffed with hay. They slumped in lawnchairs or against coachlights, lay sprawled and fallen like dead VC. He'd have time to buy candy—or Vicki would. Scott was going to be Superman, she'd already made the cape.

"So how are you doing?" she asked.

It was a hard question. He wondered if she knew, if she'd figured it out or if Vicki talked to her the way Wade did to him.

"I don't know," he said, "okay. How about you?"

"Great. Never better." She took her hands off the steering wheel and put them over her eyes, leaned her head back as if rinsing her hair.

"Hey!" He took the wheel with one hand and brought the car back into the right lane. It was power steering, and hard to make it go straight.

"I suppose you didn't hear me come in Friday night either."

"We did. You sounded like you were doing all right."

"I'm not. Wade's moving to Oklahoma. Isn't that nice?" She took the wheel again, chased him away with a hand. "Tulsa. I'm not going to see Brian and Chris except for Christmas and two weeks in the summer. I think that's fair, don't you?"

"I'm sorry. What's he doing in Tulsa?"

"Fucking some redneck bitch. And he's got a new job. Oh, everything's going great for Wade. He says hello."

“Say hello back.”

“You do it,” she said. She took a long shot of the coffee and pushed it into its holder again, frantically lit a cigarette and stabbed it at the windshield, the wipers slapping the rain away. “You don’t know how fucking glad I’ll be when this year is over.”

“Tell me about it,” Larry said, and for a moment hoped she knew. They were coming into Ithaca, passing the long prefab barns of Cornell’s Vet school before the hill dropped into town proper. The dash clock gave him an even chance of getting there on time. All the roads east of town funneled into Route 79, and he was glad she had to concentrate on traffic. Behind the wheel, she bobbed and weaved as if slipping punches from the other cars. He thought of spending the day riding high in Number 1, the simple deliveries, stopping to off-load a tray of Donettes and Hohos and Ring Dings to people he didn’t know beyond a polite greeting.

“Well,” Donna said, “what are you gonna do, y’know?” She seemed to wait for an answer to this, then asked, “What time you need to be there?”

“Doesn’t matter,” he said, but at Seneca and Aurora she gunned it through a long yellow. He would punch in before he put his uniform on, get a coffee at his first stop. Over the years he had not lost a taste for the crumb cakes, and one of his great pleasures was driving with an open box on the dash, washing the bite-sized treats down at stoplights and feeling the caffeine and sugar kick in. He always paid himself for them, and the next morning ran them off, fifteen calories a minute, but everytime he tore the perforated strip from a new box, he accused himself of a sinful decadence, an intemperance indicating far greater weakness—which only made him eat more. Like everything, they tasted better in the rain. He knew he would polish off a whole box today, and it didn’t bother him, in fact made him grateful for the very existence of crumb cakes and to Hostess for making them bite-sized.

They didn’t say anything for a while, and he liked her for it.

Coming down Seneca they got caught behind a school bus picking up some kids. One had a camouflaged backpack which made Larry look away.

“Hey,” Donna said, “I know it’s none of my business, but are you gonna be okay?”

He looked back to the school bus, willing it to move. In the emergency door a crush of little girls not even Scott’s age were giving him the finger. They smeared their faces against the glass, blew their cheeks up monstrously. Donna looked at him pityingly, as if

she understood. The dash clock’s red second hand swept along.

“I’ve done it before,” he said, “Christ, I don’t know how many times now.”

“I know,” she said. She stubbed her cigarette out and frowned. The conversation seemed to have taken all the life out of her.

“Why,” he asked, “is this time going to be different?”

She looked at him as if what she had to say would hurt him, but said nothing.

The bus pulled its stop sign in, its lights went from red to yellow, and it pulled out with a burst of diesel smoke. Donna passed it, and after, paid too much attention to the other traffic. They turned left at Meadow Street and headed south down 13. The Wonder Bread outlet was less than a mile from them, wedged into the sooty gauntlet of used car lots and fast food franchises, muffler shops and budget motels. If they hit every light they might still make it.

“I don’t know,” she said, ducking a blue Buick. “I just don’t think it’s the same this time.”

“What did she say?”

“Nothing new, really.” She grimaced apologetically. “She told me to keep an eye on you.”

“Oh, great. When was this?”

“Thursday.”

“Thanks for warning me,” he said.

“She said you’d understand.”

“I don’t understand anything,” he said, though even she could see it was not true. Just to piss him off, the lights ahead of them dropped sequentially to green, and silent, the radio playing some maudlin song about the difficulties of love—There’s one thing you gotta do /to make me still want you/ Gotta stop sobbin oh-ho—they ate up the mile to the outlet.

It was a white cinderblock building infected with the product’s red, yellow and blue dots. Today they made him feel especially clownish; he hoped she wouldn’t notice.

“Hey,” she said, dropping him off. The chorus was going on and on. “Maybe I’ll come by later, okay? Or vice-versa, whatever.”

“Sure,” he said, and thanked her and closed the door, and for a few seconds walking to the rear of the building he was completely, blissfully alone.

He punched in precisely on time. The locker room was empty. Murray’s gold Eldorado was in the lot, which meant he was in his office. Derek was upfront, cheerfully taking care of the earlybirds; Julian wasn’t in

yet, his card still on the OUT side. Larry was surprised the kid hadn't been fired. He was nice if a little spacy—a Deadhead—and unlike Derek, seemed impressed that Larry was a vet. Julian was always after him for stories—and not obnoxiously, not kidding, he really wanted to hear them. Larry put him off—so much that it was a joke between them—but still it was good to have someone acknowledge what he'd done. Last week, Murray had asked Larry to talk to Julian about being late. Larry thought he'd gotten through.

Now he was late himself. This second he was supposed to be loading up the truck, ticking off his customers' orders against his invoices. Wonder White, Wonder Lite, Wonder Wheat. With a finger he flipped his locker open and began changing into the blue-and-white uniform. A picture of Vicki helping Scott onto a pony was stuck to the door. She had on red short-shorts and a peppermint tube top; you could see the white lines from her bikini. He began to remember the day at the lake, the trip to the gift shop, how Scott had been excited by the windmill and the water hazard at the miniature golf—and stopped himself by humming the song from the car: Gotta stop sobbin oh-ho, yeah, stop stop stop stop, gotta stop sobbin, oh ho, and on and on until he had clipped on his bowtie and zipped his Hostess jacket to the neck. Beside the picture hung a piece of Scott's art, a collage of fabric, macaroni and cotton balls signifying earth, sea and sky. Larry closed the door and pulled his cap snug on his head, took the keys to Number 1 down from the pegboard. He checked himself in the mirror, setting his jaw and tipping his chin up, then, satisfied, made for the front, untouchable, ready for the day.

He gave Murray a wave as he passed his window, upfront said, "Hey now," to Derek.

"Hey hey," Derek said, fastidiously bagging a couple boxes of Suzy Q's for a stout woman Larry had seen before. Probably a teacher putting on a Halloween party. Scott had tomorrow off, though he still had Rehab. Larry tried to think if she'd ever left on a Monday before.

He filled the orders on his clipboard, counting out cupcakes and mini-muffins, arranging the plastic trays in the dolly. Wegman's alone took fifteen minutes, and as his hands played over the soft bags and cellophane-windowed boxes, he remembered Leonard Dawson and Go-Go Bates eating pound cake at some night position in the hills. Nothing had happened, it was just a picture his mind coughed up, the thin, sickly black man with his thick, issue glasses, beside him the dan-

gerously energetic Bates, spooning contentedly from their cans. They played hearts together with a deck Leonard's sister had given him; he sent a card home every Wednesday, one for each week of his tour. He'd started with the hearts, so by the time they left Firebase Marge, the only card they had to watch out for was the queen of spades. Leonard said he was saving the deadly ace for last, that, defying all odds, he'd take it with him on the plane, pin the sucker to the peephole in his skivvies and play peekaboo with the stewardesses. At China Beach everytime they heard a 707 he would jump up from the table where he and Bates were continuing the game, race halfway down to the green sea and wave whatever cards were left in his hand at the departing Freedom Bird, prophesizing in a voice uncharacteristically bold with rice whiskey and Tiger beer, "You are mine, motherfucker. Ace of motherfucking spades!"

Larry finished the last rack of fruit pies, added an extra box of crumb cakes, then took it off again. He remembered he'd left his lunch in his locker, and retrieved it before rolling the dollies onto the truck. Behind his window, Murray lowered his newspaper and pointed to his watch; Larry nodded.

"Eat me," he said when he was past, then did an immediate about-face, thinking of the crumb cakes, but saw instead Leonard Dawson's small hands, the high school ring he was so proud of, and stopped himself. On the way out he gave a lariat-twirling cardboard cut-out of Twinkie the Kid the finger.

It was still raining; it was Ithaca. From the side of Number 1 the same boggle-eyed cartoon smiled down upon him, in full chaps and spurs yet horseless.

"Yahoo," Larry Markham said.

He checked the rear doors, got in and settled himself, letting the engine warm. He tugged on the knuckleless driving gloves Scott had given him for his birthday, snapped the snaps. He would call her at the mall, and then her mother if he didn't get her. The way he was going he'd barely have time to eat. He threw Number 1 into first and headed across the lot and clicked his turn signal on. As he was waiting to take the left, Julian's rusty Subaru turned in beside him and beeped. Larry honked back, shaking his head, and goosed Number 1 across Route 13.

Sometimes he thought he was happiest driving, with his mind only half-connected to the rhythm of bumpers in front of him, the flow of lights and signs. His eyes flitted over the road as if on ambush, picking out movement, gauging and dismissing it. The truck heated up. He got the defroster going, put the wipers on

low and tuned the radio to WSKG, which had the last movement of Schumann's "Rhenish" Symphony blasting. He liked Schumann, unlike his mother, who called him "that nut," and when told by the announcer that he'd composed a piece she'd been interested in, responded to the room at large, "Oh, him." As a child Larry liked how the music forced him out of himself, took him somewhere else completely. Now he let the rain and heavy strings sweep him along to his first stop at Wegman's, insulated from the day.

The first thing Ron the assistant manager asked was, "How's it going?"

"Good," Larry said aggressively. "You?"

It was all he had to say. Everyone else in the half-lit back of the store was busy tossing boxes or hosing down produce. They all wore the blue Wegman's uniform, and responded to his with the edgy, mutual tolerance natural between different branches of the service. He rolled his dolly along, following the yellow-and-black caution tape on the floor through a tangle of hanging plastic strips which swallowed him like a carwash. It was cold on the other side, and he heard the ring, clash and clatter, the high, grinding whine of a saw from the meat department, but passed the gleaming steel doors without looking in either porthole. Above the last doors before the actual store hung a sign that said: COURTESY FIRST. Beneath, behind violet-tinted windows, shoppers and their carts glided silently as fish. Larry paused an instant and straightened his cap. He liked the whole pageantry of entering from within, as if hustled from his dressing room through the chaos backstage to emerge perfectly from the wings. He took a breath, put on a game face and pushed through.

The lights were blinding, the air warm, the Muzak immediately lulling. It took him an instant to recover, as if he'd bumped a piece of scenery. No one noticed. He guided the dolly up the cookie aisle, set up shop and redid his shelves.

No one approached or interrupted him. Shoppers pushed past, oblivious, as if he were invisible. The company was featuring a seasonal orange-and-black jack-o-lantern cupcake, and to make room he had to tighten everything on that shelf. Someone had left a half-eaten Sno Ball on top of its wrapper; he put its pink remains on a tray to toss in the garbage on his way out. And the new Brownie Bites weren't moving, there was a form to report that. He checked everything against his clipboard and rolled on toward the bread corner.

His donuts and Donettes were fine, his mini-muffins and iced honey buns. He could have easily

shorted them a box of crumb cakes, but didn't, instead buying a huge styrofoam cup of black coffee at their fake European bistro. When he switched the hazards off and headed Number 1 for Tops, he was on time.

"Larry," the manager there said, "how are you, buddy?"

"Great," Larry said.

At the first P&C, the woman at the bakery counter asked, "How's the family?"

"Fine," he said, but this time questioned his enthusiasm, wondered if it gave him away.

"And your wife," inquired the woman in the second P&C's courtesy booth, "she still working up to the mall?"

"Sure is."

"And your boy, how's he now?"

"Goddammit," he said in Number 1, throwing his clipboard against the dash so hard his pen flew. He went into the back and grabbed a box of crumb cakes from someone's tray. No one would notice. He'd make it up next week.

At lunch he stopped by the IGA in Dryden and tried Vicki at work. He stood in the rain-beaded telephone booth, a chill sneaking through the accorded doors.

"Photo USA," another woman answered—Cheryl maybe, or Katie, he could never tell them apart.

"Is Vicki there?" he asked. A hand clamped over the mouthpiece. He heard someone muffled in the background.

"Is this Larry?"

"Yes," he said.

"She didn't come in today." She waited, as if challenging him.

"Not at all?"

"Nope."

"Okay," he said, "thank you," and hung up.

He let her mother's phone ring nine times before he retreated to the oily warmth of Number 1. He sat there in the parking lot of the IGA and looked at the puddles and the phone booth while he ate his sandwich and his apple and three more crumb cakes, and thought again of Leonard Dawson, how he had disappeared from his foxhole one night to pee and they had to go find him. He was just a little guy, Bates kept saying afterward, showing how the ring wouldn't fit his own pinky, but nobody really wanted to hear it. He wasn't the first and wouldn't be the last, and maybe if he'd showed around that picture of his fine sister, more guys would have liked him.

Larry wrapped the core of his apple in a napkin and stuffed it into the bag, balled it up, got out and threw it in a barrel by the electric doors. He tried Vicki's mother again but came up with nothing. At her work he got the same answer from what he assumed was the same person, which meant nothing. She could still be either place, and with the car she was mobile. He decided to zip through his afternoon stops and catch her picking up Scott at school—not to argue with her but just to show he missed them. It was a plan, and enough to keep him moving.

It was a slow time at the gasmarts, and everyone wanted to know how he was, whether he'd had a good weekend, who he liked between the Cards and Milwaukee.

"Fine," he said, "yep, oh, the Brew Crew," but kept his eyes on his merchandise, and hiding his rudeness behind work, hurried the clerks into signing his clipboard, refused their offers of coffee and swung Number 1 across the empty lots. It rained all day, as he knew it would. He finished early in Danby and rocketed back to town with his lights on, accompanied by a murky, Scandinavian tone poem. Below, to the north, an appropriate mist hung gloomily over the lake.

Pulling into the lot of the Special Children's Center, he was pleased to see the numbered buses waiting nose-to-tail with just their running lights on, chuffing out exhaust as their drivers caught a smoke under the overhang. Evening had begun to come down; a warm light filled the windows, made the emptying classrooms seem rich and busy as a hive. Only a few parents had shown up so far—no Ruster.

When they first sent him there, Scott had wanted to take the bus; they'd even tried it for a week, but Vicki found herself going to get him anyway, haltingly following the bus home. Larry joked with her about it, but now—and whenever he drove past the Center during the day—he felt just as helpless. It was his fault the doctors had to reroute Scott's intestines as an infant, his fault his son had—they told them when he was three—no sense of smell. Often when Scott looked at him with his mismatched eyes, his brow so large it appeared ripe, almost soft, Larry wanted to take the boy's face in his hands and with a power drawn not from God but simple justice miraculously heal him. Instead he had taught him how to turn the sound down on the TV so the cartoons he loved but would never understand wouldn't wake them up Saturdays. Two years ago, when he was picking up his first words, Vicki got him to say, "Smells good," whenever she creaked open the oven door. It

was a highlight of holiday get-togethers at her mother's. The one time Larry's father had witnessed it, he said, "Jesus," and turned for the living room where he'd left his glass. He never said it, but Larry knew he wanted another grandson to keep up the line. Susan's two girls didn't count.

Larry took the last crumb cake from the box, then put it back as a brace of cars pulled up and doubleparked beside the loading zone. One man in a Toyota took out a book and began to read.

A few students pushed through the doors and scattered, then stood dazed in the rain, trying to identify their rides. He recognized some from their coats and canes, and one from the steel halo bolted into his head. He was so used to seeing the contraptions in his group that he had to remind himself it wasn't normal.

A rush of students spilled onto the walk, and the bus drivers ground out their cigarettes. A mother flung open a car door and knocked a lunchbox from her son's pincer of a hand, waited patiently while he retrieved it. Larry didn't see anyone from Scott's class yet. Still no Ruster.

The children sprinted and skipped and wandered, some holding their coats despite the cold. One stood forlornly by the doors, resting his hooded head against the brick wall. A mother struggled with a science project made from aluminum foil and a large cardboard box. The first bus pulled out and the other two moved up. He thought he spotted a girl named Natalie that Scott had invited over to play once, and there was Jeffrey (Death-ray, Scott called him), and Matthew with his Smurf backpack, and Luke. The second bus was loading, heads filling the windows. A cheddar Chevy van swung alongside the curb, picked up one kid and zoomed off again.

The headlights of the second bus came on, showing how hard it was raining now. They swept across the lot as the bus wheeled around, followed identically by the third.

No one else was coming out; most of the cars were gone. Two teachers stood by the doors, a man and a woman hugging themselves against the cold, occasionally waving. He strained toward the windshield to see if Scott was among the stragglers on the walk, and when he didn't spot him, undid his seat belt, got out and picked his way through the puddles.

"I'm looking for my son—Scott Markham?" he asked the man and woman simultaneously.

"Wait here," the woman said, and went inside.

The man was young and wore a thin leather tie and pointy shoes. Larry could feel him looking at his

uniform.

“How’s it going?” Larry asked.

“Good,” the man said defensively, and asked him back.

They stood side by side watching the last cars go off, the clouds slide dramatically across the hilltops. Now the children were all gone, the lot empty except for Number 1. The lights inside went out.

“He wasn’t in today,” the woman explained when she returned. “The office has it as an excused absence.”

Larry tried to come up with something—a mix-up, crossed wires—but could only thank them. He knew they would watch him back to the truck and talk about him as he pulled out. What the hell, at least he had tried.

He started Number 1 and pulled his gloves on, and looking at his fingers saw Go-Go Bates with Leonard Dawson’s class ring on a bootstring around his neck. When they came to medevac him out the second time, the doc on the chopper automatically went for his tags. He squatted there with the ring in his hand as the skids rose and tilted. “B plus!” Larry hollered up into the rotor wash, “He’s B pos!” though his heart had already stopped, and when the other medic held a hand to his ear, gave up and pointed to his boots, where Bates had stashed his tags—one in each—so they wouldn’t clink and give him away on ambush.

“Jesus,” Larry said in wonder, and gently thumped a fist against the steering wheel. “Go-Go, man. B plus.” He opened the last crumb cake and sat there eating it while the rain trickled down the windshield. When he was done, the man and woman were gone, the doors shut.

The lights of Ithaca were on now. Rush hour had begun, and Larry had to jockey across several lanes to make the turn into the Wonder outlet. The front was busy with people picking up cheap loaves on the way home. Through the windows he could see Julian and Derek at the counter, and he thought he would have to ask Julian for a ride to his group at the hospital and then fend him off in the car. There were these two guys in our squad, he might say. A little guy and a big guy. A black guy and a white guy. A smart guy and a dumb guy. Then group, where it was his job to hear their stories, and later he’d have to catch a ride back with his father, when all he wanted was to be alone with Leonard Dawson and Go-Go Bates for the evening. Vicki would show up at her mother’s eventually with some loopy rationale for Scott missing school. Christ, it was tiring.

Murray’s Eldorado was gone. Larry fit Number 1 into its space and locked up. Inside, the picture of

Vicki in her tubetop ambushed him, and he banged the door shut so hard that it opened again.

He called her mother’s from the front; while he was listening to it ring, the lights flickered twice, signalling last call. When Derek had rung up the last customer, he chopped the lights off, neatly vaulted the counter and locked the front doors. He had his apron and uniform shirt off before they made the locker room.

Julian said he could give him a ride but first he had to lock up.

“And he’s going to open up tomorrow,” Derek said, hauling on his leather jacket, “and all week. Word came down.”

“All talk,” Julian said, but glumly.

“I don’t know,” Larry warned.

“I will see you gentlemen tomorrow,” Derek said. He punched out, and a minute later crossed the front window holding an umbrella and leaning into the wind.

Larry helped Julian wipe down the counters and stayed out of the way while he swabbed the floor. A car turned into the lot, realized they were closed and swung back onto the road. Larry peered out at the traffic, the lights going both ways.

“Wanna get stoned?” Julian offered, pinching a roach between fingernails.

“Can’t.”

Julian took a last hit and tossed it into the mop water, rolled the bucket to the sink and muscled it up and in. While he cleaned the sink, Larry picked their cards out of the rack and looked at Julian’s time IN.

He looked at the phone with its twisted cord hanging beside the time clock and thought he would have to call his father eventually. He picked it up and dialed the number, waited for the operator and then the receptionist to switch him to the office.

“This is Doctor Markham,” his father answered, as if prepared for the next, more difficult question.

“Dad, Larry. I was wondering if I could get a ride with you tonight.”

“Again.”

“Again,” Larry admitted, though the last time had been a month ago when the Ruster dropped its muffler.

“Car trouble?”

“Basically,” Larry said.

“Eight-fifteen?”

“Yeah, that would be great.”

“Meet you in the lobby.”

“Okay,” Larry said, “thanks,” and they hung up without saying goodbye. Larry stood there looking at the phone for a second, the swinging cord. It hadn’t

been bad, and yet he knew his father had already counted this—however small—as another failure.

“Don’t punch me out yet,” Julian called from the front.

“Right,” Larry shouted.

“So what did Murray say?” Larry asked in the Subaru. Julian had the Dead blasting—Red Rocks ’73, he said. He darted aggressively between lanes, making Larry press an imaginary brake pedal.

“Nothing. I just can’t be late for a while. I can do that. Don’t get me wrong, but it’s not like my dream job, you know?”

“Yeah,” Larry admitted.

“You know, I don’t know, ‘dream’ and ‘job’ don’t really go together for me.”

They turned onto Fulton and then State, headed for the Octopus, where the roads from the west side of the lake came together at the bottom of the hill.

“So what’s up with your group?” Julian asked.

“The usual,” he said, deadpan, to keep him from going further. The usual. And what was that?

A dead guy and a dead guy.

No one would touch Leonard Dawson until Larry cut him down and fit him back together.

“Fuck,” Lieutenant Wise said when he saw him.

“Fuck is right,” Bogut said, holding his own jaw as if it might fall off.

Bates came stumbling through the bush, half-awake. Larry saw Pony look away, saw the Martian turn to give the big man space. Carl Metcalf went to stop him, but Smart Andy held him back with a hand. Bates stood there.

“Aw, Leonard,” he said, and knelt down. “Aw, Leonard.” He put his sixteen aside and reached for his boonie hat to put over Leonard Dawson’s face, but he wasn’t wearing it. He used his hands to cover his friend, as if the torn skin were a blinding light, something not to be looked upon, and after a minute Soup came back with Leonard Dawson’s hat with its jaunty Australian curl and handed it to Bates. Everyone stood around in the dark while Nate read from his miniature bible. They could not get a dust-off until morning, and all night Bates sat beside Leonard Dawson as if he were only sick, feverish, and when the chopper came and they bagged him up, Bates laid him on the floor of the Huey himself, and while the rest of the squad watched, unzipped the bag for a last look, closed it again and patted Leonard Dawson on the shoulder as if he’d done a good job, and clambered out. The chopper lifted, dipped its nose and powered away, leaving a cloud of red dust that made them

claw at their eyes and spit.

“He couldn’t fucking hold it,” Bates said a few weeks later. “Fuckers probably got him in mid-squirt. Fucking Leonard. I told him, save that water for the middle of the day, drink your Cokes early on to get your motor going, but he’d have ‘em with dinner. He liked his Cokes, that was one thing he liked all right. Weinies and beans and a Coke on a shitty day.”

A day like today, Larry thought, watching the blurry taillights through the wipers. They were going up the long hill of 96 to the hospitals, the route the ambulances took, past Vinegar Hill. Below on their right lay the dark blot of the lake, the far shore defined by a few tiny lights. On the way down with his father they would see the lights of Ithaca. And what would Larry say to him? So often his life seemed without explanation, utterly defenseless, though he knew—deeply—that he was trying.

Carl staggered, reaching out to him stiffly, the skin on his face still bubbling, sloughing off in sheets.

Fucking rain. If she was gone for good, maybe he’d leave, go somewhere dry.

“Emergency entrance?” Julian asked, turning into the highly-lit grounds. The VA and regular hospitals were connected and shared parking.

“Right next to it.”

They pulled up ahead of a darkened Bangs ambulance. It was a local joke; downtown the Bangs family ran an EMT service and right beside it a funeral home.

“Thanks,” Larry said, getting out. “I’ll see you early tomorrow.”

“Okay, boss,” Julian said. As the Subaru looped back to the entrance, Larry could hear the Dead thumping through the doors, and thought that it was inevitable and best not to get involved. One way or another, he would lose him too.

* * *

It was always the goddamn Wall. All summer the ward had seen it being built on TV, on the Armed Forces Network. A big black V engraved with the names of the dead. It was being built not by the government but with private money raised by a vet, which they liked. They wanted Larry to go for them when it opened, to make sure their buddies were there. They joked about getting up money to send him, like the Fresh Air kids from the city. They wanted him to take pictures of names,

whole panels, and though he said flatly—laughing—that he would not go, each of them was drawing up a list of dead friends.

It was what discussion drifted to in rap group. They'd lose what they were trying to say about the war and go off into stories about people he'd have to find.

"Man," Mel White would say, or Cartwright, "this dude you got to get. He was one bad-ass Sergeant Rock motherfucker."

Sponge was the worst, because of the old hematoma. His memory wasn't good but it was full, and since he'd started talking again, no one could shut him up. On top of that he was a juicer, and an old RTO, and something about stories got him going. The rest of the time he played Othello and penny poker with Rinehart and Meredith and, like everyone on the ward, watched the game shows with a mixture of disbelief and scorn for not only the host and contestants and studio audience but any country that would permit such abominations. He had a dent in the side of his head like a little shelf, and sometimes he'd rest a pen there and forget it. He'd been in the Ia Drang Valley early on, a place Larry Markham even now considered himself lucky not to have seen.

"I wish I could remember his fucking name, this A-gunner. Everyone called him Dog cause he had this german shepherd he slept with. Couldn't sleep without him cause he was afraid of rats. Frank Something. I remember the dog's name was Toad. He was supposed to be able to sniff out trip wires and shit from the fish oil on the gooks' fingertips."

"And this Toad stepped on a package and waxed Frank Something," Trayner guessed.

"Emulsified his master, is that right?" Cartwright baited him.

Around the circle the rest of them waited for Sponge to come up with his usual sparkling bullshit. It was a game, and okay because Sponge knew it too and was good at it. It wasn't like trying to listen to Rinehart, who they all knew was telling the truth but couldn't make it interesting. They all wanted to see what Sponge would come up with, all except the new guy Creeley, who picked his nails with mock concentration. His face was subtly two-toned, the skin grafts from his thighs lighter, with bristly hairs. Across his forehead the contrast between shades made his hairline look crooked, as if he'd had the top of his head cut off and all but a small strip put back on, which in fact he had. He'd been on the neuro ward less than a week, and it was his first time in group. He could talk, but slowly and with a slur. His

file was frightening in its poverty of detail; all it said was that he'd been a SEAL working in the Phoenix program and that he'd been wounded in action, though it seemed obvious to Linda in admitting (who was 22 and had never been out of Ithaca) that he'd tried to eat a .45. He had no hometown, no birthdate, but sprang fully grown and half-healed from Bethesda Naval Hospital. As a counselor, Larry had been briefed on the Phoenix program, but vaguely, as if it was unlikely he'd see any of its survivors. It was totally covert. Assassinations—basically murder—working with Vietnamese cons paid by the CIA. It was something nobody wanted to admit to anymore. Larry drew a line next to Creeley's name on his clipboard. He'd have to talk to him one-on-one in conference, be patient with him.

"VC haul him off at night and boobytrap his ass," Meredith offered.

A beat behind, Johnny Johnson laughed, for no apparent reason. He had a teflon plate and no ears and was subject to long, exhausting fits. On his bedstand his mother had propped a picture of himself before the war wearing a floppy velvet cap and giant sunglasses edged with rhinestones and playing the bass. "Is it hot?" he would ask at anytime, referring, Larry supposed, to the landing zone or village he was continually approaching. He had been walking behind a man who stepped on a 250 pound antitank mine. The man was instantly vaporized. Johnny Johnson lost his right arm, right leg, right kidney, most of his spleen, half his pelvis, his testicles and his penis. The others considered him the worst off, and gave in to him on small matters such as extra desserts and what to watch on TV.

"It's a rat story," Mel White tried. "The rats chew his nose off and old Frank loses it."

"Unh-unh," said Sponge, "wait," and tipped his head forward as if to call for quiet or gather breath. As he did, he discovered a mechanical pencil sitting on his dent. He pinched it off and admired its intricacy a second, with such smugness that they knew he was done stalling.

"So we're out on night ambush—"

The circle as a whole ridiculed this pat opening with snorts and puffs of breath just short of a mass raspberry—save Creeley, who seemed annoyed by the entire process. His chart said he was heavily medicated for pain. Dilaudid, 3X. He looked off down the ward as if any minute a car would turn the corner of the nurses' station and pull up for him. Sponge acknowledged their derision with a nod, but kept on.

"We're patrolling around for a while and haven't

found a juicy position, no contact, nothing. You know, ghost time, everybody's spooked—"

"And the dog barks," Trayner said earnestly. He was the baby of the group, a month short of thirty. He'd caught a rocket in the face, though—as Meredith said—you couldn't be sure he wasn't like this before.

Sponge stopped as if pondering Trayner's suggestion, honestly trying to remember. "No, I don't think he did. He might have, I don't know. Cause all of a sudden we get some fast fire from the right and everybody hits it. Another mad minute, man. Like a year later it's over and you can hear Toad crying, and you know he's got one in him. Sounded just like somebody real, swear. Frank's trying to shut him up and calling for the doc."

"Fuck's the doc gonna do?" Cartwright said, partly to rib Larry. They knew he'd been a platoon medic. He'd never told them, just as he'd never told them his nickname. He never told his own stories in group. It was not that his own were either special or dull or that he thought he would not do a good job of telling them, but that they were not all his to tell, though (and this they did not know, Vicki didn't know, even his father did not know) he was the only one left to tell them. And this was their time, not his. It was enough, Larry thought, that they knew he'd been in-country and seen some shit, but like Julian they were interested in him. They always wanted more.

"So the doc goes over and slaps a dressing on him and shoots him up and has me call for a dust-off, and by the time they come in there are tracers zipping all over the place—red, green, stop-go, all that shit. We get Toad in a poncho and up and in, and the door gunner is all bullshit that his WIA is a dog, and the pilot wants to toss him until Frank makes him understand, know what I'm saying? So Toad goes to some evac hospital and we bust caps at them for a while and that's that. Back at base they call in and tell me Toad's okay, but Frank can't sleep. Do a bone, I tell him, have a nice warm brew, but he can't fucking sleep. This goes on."

"I've seen it," Rinehart seconded.

"Three days, four days, and Frank's a fucking zombie. The lieutenant asks the doc to give him something, and it works, but it's not the same kind of sleep, it's like fake sleep, and Frank is just as messed up as before. Make a long story short, he steps on an unfriendly device and goes home in a jar."

"But the dog lives," Trayner said.

"Course the dog lives, Jughead," Mel White said. "That's what the story's going to be."

"Right. Cause when Toad comes back from the evac, his pal Frank's gone."

"So now the dog can't sleep," Meredith said.

"Or he barks all night," Cartwright said.

"Bingo," Sponge said, pointing. "We couldn't take him out anymore. We'd leave him back at base and he'd howl like a coyote—aahhoooooo and shit all night long. It was obnoxious. Finally someone in Bravo greased him while we were out. Tore half his fucking head off and burned him in a shit barrel. End of story."

"Damn," Cartwright said, and nodded.

Johnny Johnson giggled. Rinehart tapped his shoulder and held a finger up to stop him.

There was a silence, as if in honor of the dog or, more importantly, the moral truth of the story.

"A boy and his dog," Mel White said, "that's what we'll call that one."

"Bull . . . shit," Creeley squeezed out. It was an effort, as if he were dredging the words from his lungs, muscling them up and pushing them out. Sponge shrugged as if Creeley were nuts and it was impossible to take offense.

They waited for Creeley to go on.

"No . . . dog."

"What the fuck are you talking about?" Rinehart said.

"No dog. Bullshit."

"Were you there, mister?" Cartwright said. With his legs on he was half a head taller than Larry Markham; he squeezed a handball constantly, even while eating. His only problem was that from time to time he held hands with a friend he'd left behind, a guy from his hometown named Mobley. "Mobley's tired of five-card," he'd say after conferring with him, or "Mobley's got a case of the fuck-yous today."

"I was," Creeley said, "everywhere." He turned to Larry, pointed and said, "I know you."

"Listen to this shit," Mel White said. "Hey, Captain Motherfucking America, you got a story for us or you just wanna piss on our party?"

"Yeah," Meredith said. "Doc, make the newby tell us a story."

"His story," Cartwright said. "That's what I want to hear."

"Fair enough," Larry said. "Mr. Creeley, would you like to introduce yourself?"

"Fuck that," Creeley said. He stood and gave them the finger, turning so they all got it. Then he hobbled down the ward to his bed and drew the curtain violently about it, the rollers protesting.

“Yeah,” Sponge said reminiscently, and looked at the pencil, “Frank Something. Wish I could remember.”

“Fuck Frank and fuck his dog too,” Cartwright said, pointing to Creeley’s bed, “I’m putting his name on my list.”

“Fucking brain-damage two-tone Frankenstein piece of shit!” Mel White hollered at the curtain, and all but Johnny Johnson laughed.

“All right, gentlemen,” Larry said, “back to business. Whose turn?”

Before he could check his clipboard, Meredith said, “Okay, I got one,” and the group settled in to hear it. Meredith had been a lurp, and his stories always began a few weeks into the deep bush. The jungle’s triple canopy and birdless silence gave his tales a mystery the others couldn’t resist. Looking for lost choppers, his squad would stumble over an NVA base camp with the rice fires burning, or come across an underground hospital full of VC hooked to empty bottles of blood, their throats cut. He was also wholeheartedly born-again, and at some point in the story, by way of explanation, the Lord would be called in to set things right. It was an annoyance someone like Rinehart wouldn’t get away with. Tonight they were in the Arizona Territory, and Larry kicked back and listened. He remembered the jungle, the heavy air and smell of fungus, the dusk in the middle of the day. Meredith lead them in.

It was here, among the other men, that Larry most felt himself. He felt welcome, he felt understood without having to explain. He could rest, stand down, as he did now, barely marking Meredith’s progress into the foothills of the Que Son Mountains. The thought of Vicki and Scott, of riding home with his father, no longer bothered him, and though he knew that would change when he left the ward, that the world would come flooding back with all its problems, he would not let it intrude and ruin this quiet time. It reminded him of his mother’s radio, how those afternoons alone he didn’t want the music to end. Now he wanted the stories to go on and on.

But like every Monday, they ended when Shaun the orderly came in to give night meds. It was past eight but he waited a minute by the swinging doors for Meredith to finish. It was a tiger story, how both sides stopped in the middle of a firefight to watch it lope through, how no one dared shoot.

“Cause, dig, the animal was majestic,” Meredith preached. “It was better than us and we knew it. It was purer. We knew we didn’t have no right so we just let it

walk on by. See, I didn’t know it at the time, but I see now that that was a holy experience.”

“Fuck,” Mel White said. “You should of lit his stringy ass up.”

“A tiger,” Johnny Johnson said, awed like a child.

“Musta been something,” Trayner said.

“It was okay,” Sponge complained. “Not a lot of action.”

“No . . . tiger,” Cartwright stuttered, mocking Creeley. “Bull . . . shit.”

Larry looked to Shaun and nodded.

“Okay, guys,” Shaun said, tapping his watch, and they muttered and swore.

Mel White started to roll away.

Larry checked his clipboard. “Next week we’ve got Cartwright and an open spot. Who wants it?”

“Anybody but Rinehart,” Mel White tossed over his shoulder.

“Eat shit,” Rinehart said, but didn’t volunteer.

“Come on,” Larry prompted, standing now. They were scattering to their beds. The World Series was on in twenty minutes. “Train, you haven’t been up in a while.”

“You tell one,” Trayner said.

“Yeah,” Meredith seconded.

“Yeah, c’mon, Larry,” Shaun pitched in.

“You owe us, Doc,” Sponge said.

They all looked at him hopefully, and he wondered which one he would tell first if he were going to. His own, or just the beginning of his. Getting there. And then who? Fred the Head and the little girl? The day Nate tried to fly. The first and then the second. He’d have to put them in order. It was hard to remember exactly but he’d have to do it. Because once started he would have to tell them all.

When Larry didn’t answer, Cartwright said, “Okay, then the new guy.”

“Jesus,” Mel White said, “it’ll take all fucking night.”

They looked to the curtains around Creeley’s bed as if he might answer.

“I’ll just leave it open,” Larry said.

He always had trouble leaving. Often he wished he could stay, bring a case of beer and watch TV with them till lights out. He stowed his clipboard and papers in the one drawer the hospital gave him and locked up. Later in the week Dr. Jefferies would open it and look at his notes; once a month they had a meeting in her office. She was interested in the men, but she was Chinese, and they distrusted her.

Shaun rolled the meds cart between beds, handing out pleated paper cups and, for a few, shooting prepared syringes into their IV drips. The drips hung from wheeled stands so they could roll them down to the lounge to watch the game. Trayner was helping Cartwright with his legs.

Larry put his jacket on. "I'll see you in a week," he announced, and waved to both sides of the aisle. He was always tempted at this point to salute, but as usual fought it off. He made for the doors, not looking at anyone. Good men. It was not bullshit.

He thought of stopping to look in on Creeley, then decided against it. Give him time, room to move. It wasn't like they were going anywhere.

* * *

His father was not waiting for him in the lobby, as he'd promised. Larry checked the clock behind emergency admitting, then went outside to see if his Imperial was in the lot. His father was the first person in in the mornings, and parked nearest the doors. And there the big Chrysler sat in the rain, waxed and sleek as a speedboat, its windows dark. Last week Larry had seen a similarly big Oldsmobile south of town with former prisoner of war plates, and thought maliciously that his father would never advertise, never admit that fact to the world. Why did Larry want him to?

He retreated inside, and as he watched the Brewers bat, the day returned, as he knew it would. He thought of calling Vicki's mother again, and only pride and not wanting his father to know yet kept him from doing it.

Across from him, leaning forward and staring at the floor as if she'd been benched, sat a teenaged girl in a basketball uniform, glumly holding a plastic bag of ice to her wrist. Beside her a friend was filling out her paperwork, and though the girl did not seem to be in any real pain, Larry turned away. There were no outs and the Brewers had already scored four runs. Someone had liked baseball a lot. Nate, maybe. Stars and Stripes had the box scores a week late.

"Are you allergic to anything?" the friend asked, and Larry had to get up and move to the other side of the room.

It was one of those days nothing was safe. The first magazine he picked up had a picture of British soldiers patrolling the streets of Belfast, the second a model with an elaborate version of Vicki's perm. He moved to

the back part of the hallway, where there was nothing but aerial photos of the new wing being built, and at the far end, a rain-lashed window looking out on the night and the cold lake, the shivering lights of Ithaca. He paced and thought of the Wall, how they would make him go. He supposed he owed it to them. He would have to make his own list. Look up their names, take pictures. He almost wanted to. It would be simple. The hard part would be the bus.

Behind him, farther up the hall, the elevator rolled open. His father got out first, already wearing his hat, and turned for the lobby without noticing Larry. Behind him came a pair of families exhausted with visiting; the children spread across the hallway, and Larry had to tag along behind. His father walked purposefully, as if in a hurry, outstripping them. He had his keys out, jingling, and carried nothing but a pair of gloves. The tasseled end of his white scarf flopped rhythmically against his back. He had no reason to look behind him and see Larry, but when they got to the lobby, he didn't stop or even hesitate, only waved to the uniformed guard, drove straight for the automatic doors, hit the mat which made them fly open and marched off into the dripping night, still in stride.

Larry caught him before he opened the driver's side door.

"Hey," he called across the roof.

His father looked at him quizzically, surprised to see him but pleased.

"We were supposed to meet in the lobby?" Larry said. "I needed a ride."

"Right," his father said, still catching up to it. He pointed to show he did remember. "Sorry."

He opened the door and reached across the seat to lift the knob, and Larry got in.

"Sorry," his father said, "I've been dealing with Margaret Cushing all day—Mrs. Cushing who used to live on Linn Street? She went around dinnertime and it's been crazy. So where do you need to go?"

"Just home."

"Can do," his father said.

As they exited the lot, an ambulance pulled in. Its lights weren't strobing, but the back compartment was lit, and Larry could see a blue-shirted EMT moving within. She wore rubber gloves and had a ponytail. He concentrated on the ridged knobs of the radio, making the orange line slide across the dial, but couldn't stop the vision of Nate from coming—his own hands pushed into Nate's chest, the lung wound bubbling with every breath, hissing and sighing, almost squeaking like a leaky

tire.

“Truth, Skull.”

“Don’t mean nothing, man.”

“Shit,” the Martian said, staring at the hole where Larry’s hands disappeared, shaking his head. “There it is, man.”

“Get him the fuck away from me,” Larry told Bogut, and he did.

“Don’t mean a thing, Nate babe,” Larry whispered.

“Truth.”

“Truth, bro. All right?”

“All right, man.”

“All right, man, you’re gonna fly them friendly skies, all right? This is gonna pinch a little.”

“S’all right, I can’t feel shit anyway.”

“You’re all right, man.”

“M’ all right.”

Larry rubbed his eyes as if he were tired, and it disappeared, replaced by the glare of oncoming traffic. His father leaned back in the seat, steering with his gloved hands resting near the bottom of the wheel, a mannerism he and Larry shared. His chin was lined with a white stubble, his neck a soft, wrinkled wattle disappearing into the debonair scarf. The news was on—another flood in the Midwest—and Larry wondered if the prison camp came back to him every time the Japanese were mentioned. The wire, the mealy rice, the friends who didn’t survive—where did all of that go?

They’d never talked about it; his mother wasn’t allowed.

“He will tell you,” she’d say when pressed, “when he thinks you need to know those things.”

It was too late now, Larry thought, though he couldn’t pinpoint when he could have used his father’s wisdom. Before he signed up for the fucking medical corps and Fort Sam Houston. But that wouldn’t have stopped him, only made him want to go more. He sat back in the seat and watched the dark farms slide by, the lights of oncoming cars mimicking the firefly wobble of an RPG round.

“Car trouble?” his father asked nonchalantly.

“Oh yeah.”

“Bad?”

“Don’t know yet.”

“How old is that thing anyway?”

“Ten years, same as this,” Larry said, and then regretted comparing the two.

“Just tuned her up,” his father boasted.

“She sounds good.”

It was a lesson, like everything between them. He thought if they made it to the Octopus without his father asking after Scott that he’d be all right. They coasted down the hill toward town; below, a string of lights described the jetty running out into the black lake. Probably rain again tomorrow.

“So how is everyone?” his father tried.

“Okay,” Larry said. “How’s Mrs. R.?”

“As usual. She keeps trying to get me to retire. Hates the weather, you know.”

Larry half-ignored his answer. He had asked after her only to change the subject. He did not need to imagine their life together in the old house; besides a few new appliances, everything was the same—the paintings in their heavy gilt frames, his mother’s furniture, the color of the walls. And for his father the days were the same. Mrs. Railsbeck laid out his clothes and made his breakfast—as his mother once had—and while he was at the hospital, did the laundry and the cleaning and the food shopping. His father had bought her a Volkswagen Rabbit, and occasionally Larry would see her around town, squinting at the traffic, her chin almost touching the steering wheel. Back home she watched the little TV while preparing dinner, and when his father came home, ate with him, cleaned up and sat reading magazines before the console in the living room while he retired to the den. They slept in separate rooms, just as his mother and father had, though everyone in town presumed to know.

“She says we ought to have you folks over soon. It’s been a while.”

“Tell her to give us a call,” Larry bluffed, knowing he was just being polite. It was one reason Vicki hated him, the endless courtesy. “Why doesn’t he just say it to my face?” she’d complain. “I don’t understand all this pussyfooting around. He doesn’t like me. That’s okay, I don’t mind, I just wish he’d be upfront about it.”

They breezed through the green of the Octopus, and Larry tried to imagine riding with him every Monday.

He’d call Vicki’s mother when he got home. Maybe they could work something out with the car.

Downtown, his father missed the turn to take him up the hill.

“Do you mind taking me home?” Larry asked. “Or you can just drop me at the stop up here.”

“Sorry,” his father said, “woolgathering,” and tapped the brim of his hat. He changed lanes and made a quick left to get back to where they’d been. Still, he did not seem to be all there, staring over the wheel like a

trucker too long on the road. He'd had a patient die today. Larry thought it was foolish to worry about him; it was the last thing his father would want. He was tempted to think that after so many years you got used to losing people, but Larry knew that each one—and especially the ones he'd had for years—bothered his father, even if he would never admit it.

“Who was it today?” Larry asked gently.

“Mrs. Cushing—Anne Cushing's mother. Anne was there.”

“She was in Susan's class.”

“Nice girl. She's with Pfizer now.”

“How was it?”

“Oh,” his father said, perking up, “it went well.”

“Good,” Larry said, equally cheerful, but his father was done talking.

They cruised up the hill, past the students' ramshackle houses with overstuffed chairs and hibachis perched on their porch roofs, the gutters stuffed with beer cans. The Imperial climbed easily, shifting into low for more torque. They hit the long level and the streetlights gave way to fields and woods, night. The road was shiny and pasted with leaves. They sped through the black, wipers lashing.

His father slowed to read the mailbox numbers. It was a guess.

“Another mile or so,” Larry corrected him.

The house was dark. His father pulled into the empty drive.

“So,” his father asked, drawing it out, making Larry tense up, “more car trouble, huh?”

The way he said it, it was not an accusation. Larry looked to him to see if he was yanking his chain. He didn't seem to be.

“It's in the shop,” Larry said.

“How old's that thing again?”

“Ten years. Same as this.”

“Just tuned her up,” his father said, and patted the dash.

“She sounds good,” Larry said, as if following a script. He opened the door, but paused. He wanted to ask his father if he was all right, then decided he was just tired, and got out.

“Let me know if you need a ride tomorrow,” his father offered.

“That's okay,” Larry said, “thanks,” and clunked the door shut. He got the mail, watching his father reverse out of the drive and tool away, then walked toward the porch, digging for his keys. Next door Donna Burns's windows were lit.

Inside, before he even turned the lights on, he saw the red flicker of the answering machine. Once, twice, three times. At least one of them would be her. He'd call her, and then they could start working to fix it. He hung his jacket up, went into the kitchen and sat down at the table to go through the mail.

First he tore the pre-approved credit card applications and children's book club offers in half and tossed them in the garbage; then he opened the bills and wrote the date they were due on the return envelopes. He piled her catalogs to one side, and the Pennysaver, which she liked to look through. All he'd gotten was a postcard from Wade. It showed a green trout dwarfing a railroad flatcar. ‘They grow ‘em big out here!’ it said. Wade said hi. The kids were healthy, he was doing well, and he'd send an address as soon as he had one. He was thinking of Ithaca. Larry stuck it to the fridge with a magnet.

He looked in the refrigerator and then in the cupboard. He ate a few of the chocolate chip cookies he packed as part of Scott's lunch, washing them down with a beer. He got another handful and went into the living room and stood above the answering machine, eating.

He punched the play button and the machine whirred, reversing the tape. The cookies and beer made a thin, sweet gruel going down his throat.

The beep beeped.

“Vicki,” a woman said. “This is Cheryl. Ronnie wants to know if you're coming in or not, so call, okay? Bye.”

It gave the time and beeped again.

“Vic,” Vicki's mother said, and he leaned closer to the machine and turned the volume up, stopped chewing. “This is Mom. I thought you might be trying to call me. Nothing new, just wanted to talk.”

That had been five-thirty, late enough for her to pick up Scott and make it to Trumansburg. The machine clicked complicatedly. He took a slug of beer to brace himself; it gave him a chill, the fine hairline beginning of a headache.

“Larry,” a woman said, “I was wondering how you're doing.” It took him a minute to figure out it was Donna. She went on talking, concerned; he turned the volume down and went into the kitchen.

He sat and rested his arms and hands flat on the table, palms down, and looked at the space between them.

“Goddammit,” he said, and tilted his head up and eyed the tile ceiling as if it were a sky full of answers. He sighed and picked up the beer can and took it to the sink and rinsed it out.

He called her mother and stood there listening to it ring, wondering what he would say to her. The truth, it occurred to him. If they'd really taken off, she'd want to know.

"Larry," she said, surprised.

"Are Vicki and Scott there?"

"No." She made the question sound absurd. "They're not there?"

"No," he admitted. He told her about finding them gone, about Vicki missing work, Scott not showing up for school.

"I'm sorry, Larry, but I honestly haven't seen them. I wish I had. Now you've got me worried."

"I'm sure they're okay. I thought she'd call is all."

"You let me know if she does," her mother said.

"Same here."

After he'd hung up, he wanted her to have been more concerned, and not only her but himself. The way they talked about it was too routine, as if Vicki's leaving had been expected, or worse, that it had lost the power to hurt him. He hoped it hadn't.

He didn't feel like eating, which he thought was a good sign. The World Series was on, and though the score was 10-0, he watched for another beer, from time to time glancing over at the phone.

As he was cleaning up and turning everything off, it rang. He flew across the room and picked it up before the second ring.

"There you are," Donna said, and he hated himself for hoping. "I was wondering if you'd pick up. How are you doing?"

"Okay."

She waited for him to say more. He waited.

"Have you heard anything?"

"No," he said, "nothing."

"She said she'd call you."

"She didn't," Larry said, and wondered why he was so angry with her.

Again, they waited.

"Hey," she said, "do you want me to come over, just to talk?"

"No," he said, "I'm going to bed," and then felt guilty for being short with her. "Thanks."

"That's all right," Donna said.

He had almost put the phone down when he remembered he needed a ride.

"Sure," she said, relieved, and they agreed on a time.

When he hung up he stood there a second as if it would ring again, and when it didn't, went upstairs. In the dark of Scott's room the power indicator of the radio threw a weak red sheen over the world. He thought of how far they could have gotten. Sixteen, seventeen hours. He missed them, but not enough, he thought. He could see himself living like this, eating alone at the kitchen table, seeing no one. In the bathroom mirror he was surprised he didn't look any different, and shrugged.

He turned on the bedroom light before clicking off the one in the hall and undressed in the yellow glow. The hamper was empty; she'd done the laundry. Small favors, he thought, and got into bed, the covers snagging his new foot. On the dresser stood their pictures; he rolled over so he wouldn't have to look at them. Tomorrow was Tuesday. He had no idea what he'd do. Call her work, drive by Scott's school, talk to Donna. He lay there looking at the bright leaves and flowers of the wallpaper, tracing the vines' false progress toward the ceiling as if reading a map.

She was the one who turned out the light every night, and now, without her, he thought it fitting that he leave it on. When they came to him later—when Pony came, or Bogut, or Carl Metcalf, and he woke up with his hands miraculously cleansed of blood, when he missed his dead so much that he wanted to be alone with them, if only in sleep—he would need the light. To remind him that there was another world. To remind him that he was alive. And deep in the night, he did.

Stewart O'Nan is a writer living in Ithaca, New York. His first collection of short stories, In the Walled City, is currently available from University of Pittsburgh Press. His first novel, Snow Angels, will be published by Doubleday in November. He is the recipient of the thirteenth Drue Heinz Literature Prize.

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Further Questions

If you have any more questions, you can reach us at sw17@cornell.edu.

Whirlwind apologizes for any errors in this issue -- if we have made any, please don't hesitate to correct us.
