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UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

A Place Called Home

By

Paul W. DePasquale

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

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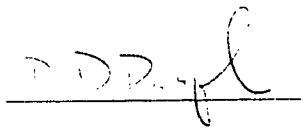

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FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH

The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled **A Place Called Home** submitted by **Paul W. DePasquale** in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of **Master of Arts**.

Dr. K. L. Stewart, Supervisor

Dr. C. J. Bullock

Dr. M. Chapman

Dr. A. G. Purdy, External Examiner

June 16, 1993

for Cynthia

Video meliora proboque; peiora facio.
(Ovid, *Metamorphoses*)

Abstract

This is the story of Jake, who recounts the time when he returned home to Ontario after his grandfather's severe heart attack. Jake's feelings toward grandpa Vic--the person who helped him 'overcome' his fear and confusion after being separated from his mother when he was a boy--makes Jake's relationship with his grandfather an especially close one.

Jake tells us at the beginning that he took his grandfather's life in the hospital, for reasons which he is not entirely sure. The guilt he feels as a result of his actions necessitates his 'confession'. As the story unfolds Jake is forced to assimilate information which complicates the rather idealistic impression he has long held of his grandfather. The fiction is thus an introspective quest; it is Jake's examination of the possible motives which led to his perhaps not entirely merciful actions.

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And finally, to Cynthia. I could never tell you how much.

Prologue

Grandpa Vic was a bootlegger in Brantford, Ontario for over forty years. Three years ago he had a heart attack, and father took over the business--perhaps not exactly what grandpa had intended. I heard everything he said before I put him to sleep that last night, so I have some idea what was in my grandfather's head. But I've been trying not to think about what happened in the hospital. There's nothing black or white about any of it, and the gray gets hard to look at, so you can't.

Two days after the funeral I flew back to Vancouver, bought a new Supra, and drove to Las Vegas for a week. When I returned from Vegas I took in a stray cat, thinking, I suppose, that this might be a start toward improving things with mom. But since grandpa died I've done nothing to be proud of, which disturbs me when I consider I'm only three years from my thirtieth birthday. I always imagined I'd be well on my way to an extraordinary life by now.

It seems like just yesterday when I was twelve, father began telling me how quickly time passes. "Whether you're doing something, or doing nothing, your life goes by in a wink. The secret, Jake, is to take advantage of your waking minutes. That way you'll have something to show at the end of it all." His words seemed ridiculous then because I had no doubt I'd make my great mark in the world. I chose thirty, father's age, as the time before which I'd achieve my fame and terrific fortune. I was going to be a brilliant writer.

I took first place in a small poetry competition in grade seven, think that's what got me started. Grandpa Vic attended Echo Place School's annual awards ceremony with me, told me after in his bark of a voice: "Twenty-one kids got awards tonight, and you were the one." I had no idea what he meant by this, but he looked out from under the brim of his ball cap with something of a proud look in his eyes, so I supposed he'd said something encouraging.

Two years later I began writing sonnets to mom, thinking I could persuade her to come round father's place to see me. For three years I sent them to our last address in Toronto. Three years is a long time to be writing in the dark, not knowing how you're doing. You start second-guessing your sonnets and you put it together that it's time to give up. I've written nothing serious since then, thought a good deal on the subject though.

I haven't seen mom since that summer afternoon she put me on the train to Brantford when I was eight. It occurred to me to look for her now and then in my youth, which I never did. I don't know, maybe I liked the dream of mom best. Maybe I was afraid of what I might find if I went looking.

She's written several times since I moved to Vancouver, to tell about a new boyfriend or about her blossoming singing career. Right now she lives in New York, and sings at jazz clubs around the city. A month before grandpa's heart attack she sent a long letter (to clear things up between us, she

said) and a copy of the demotape she sent George Gershwin's great-nephew on the west coast. She met him while performing a gig at a club on South Street in Philadelphia. He introduced himself after, bought her a drink, and asked her to send a demo. Mom didn't write to say how he liked it, but that doesn't matter. I know that one day I'll turn on the radio and her voice will be coming out. That's her calling, if you believe people are called, and I do.

Every day I listen for my calling. Maybe one day I'll go to college. Grandpa Vic would like that. He was mad as hell the day I told him I was finished with school. That was the day after grade twelve graduation. I told him what the principal said in my ear while shaking my hand on-stage: "Congratulations, Jake, the police haven't come looking for you all year, and you managed to pull up your grades a bit. But you were still damn lucky to make it, weren't you?" Grandpa got angry when I said I saw no point pushing my luck. He faced me, dropped his sledgehammer hands onto my shoulders, and said: "Son, you can do anything you want. No matter what anybody tells you. Fuck them if they try to make you think otherwise. Look them straight in the eye and tell 'em that."

But I wanted no more to do with school. Had it settled in my mind--I wanted to be like grandpa, the worthiest man I knew. Worthy as a bootlegger could get. If he borrowed something from you he'd keep his word and return it sharp the next day. But he never borrowed from you. Often he'd lend you what you needed. And if you were poor enough he'd give it to you. I wanted to be just like him.

I raised the issue of helping grandpa run the business. "Look what you were able to do without schooling," I said. "A man doesn't really need an education--you worked hard to get where you are." Then he gave me money and told me to go away a while. "I never worked a day in my life, only hustled. You want a life like that? Jesus, son, you got a good head. Told you that before. Spend some time away from Brantford. Get away for a spell. You're too young yet, that's what it is. You'll see it ain't no life without a proper adjudication."

So I moved to Vancouver and took out a comfortable basement flat. Got a job as a bartender in a nightclub. Fell in love once or twice. Did a little of this and a little of that. I tried my best to keep out of trouble, which I felt obliged to do, grandpa sending me a little money at the beginning of every month. He gave it to father to put in my account, not caring for the banks himself. And there was always a little extra in December, to fly home at Christmas.

Now, three years after his death, I can't help thinking of grandpa. Whenever I smell cigar or farm he comes bustling in. Whenever I hear Jimmy Hendrix or Sonny and Cher on the radio. Whenever I see a horse. Or an old Cadillac. Or an old man with a tattoo. Or whenever I take a good hard

look at my own two hands. Or whenever I have a drink. I can't even have a drink without thinking of my grandfather.

He's been appearing regularly in my dreams, too. It happened again last night and I've had more than enough of grandpa racing through me. I'm sitting by his bed in the hospital, holding his hand, and he's telling me things that just don't make sense. Then the coroner arrives, lifts the white sheet over his face. I wake up crying, sweating, and hot, so hot. I can't talk to anyone about it. I could probably be charged for what I've done. I can't pick up the phone and call father and tell him what I did, or the things grandpa said. I'm sure he has his own burden to carry around.

To be clear, exactly what is it I have done?

I took my grandfather's life.

Was it mostly out of love, or hurt, that I took his life?

I can't say for certain. This is what I must determine, here, by piecing together the scraps of memories I've gathered all my life; by giving what shape I can to these fragments, then try to set the whole dark thing behind me. Perhaps then I might find my way clear.

More than anything, I need to find my way clear.

Book 1

1

Three years ago, one Wednesday morning in late March, a seven o'clock arousal. The sun splashed through my window, making a warm orange island out of my bed. Not having to work the evening before, I had spent the night reading John Gardner's The Art of Fiction: Notes on Craft For Young Writers.

Warm, I threw off the comforter. I reached for a cigarette, noticed a forgotten girlfriend's magazine on the floor, and opened it to springing women...

It's ten-fifteen, there, in Ontario. They'd be long up by now, and dressed, and doing things.

I threw the magazine to the floor, got out of bed, did pushups and sit-ups till my body hurt. Then I returned to the bed, caught my breath, and opened Gardner's book. The phone on the night table rang suddenly, startling me.

It was father.

"Sorry to wake you."

"You didn't wake me."

"I have some bad news, son." Pause. "Grandpa Vic had a serious heart attack last night."

Silence.

"How serious?--he's going to be all right, right?"

"The doctors aren't making promises. They say he doesn't have long to live. Can you get away?"

"Of course."

"Good, son. Get a flight. Don't worry about the money. You still have that card, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Good. Charge everything. Get a flight as soon as you can. Get a car in Toronto. Meet us in the Coronary Care Unit at the Brantford General Hospital."

I put the phone down and called several travel agents. It was early, no answer. I dialled the airline, reached a ticket agent, and booked a seat on the next available flight, 12:05 that afternoon. Then I called home to Brantford, told the machine my itinerary. Remembering I was scheduled to work that night I called the club and left a message on the machine.

After showering and dressing, I threw some clothes into a suitcase, not sure what to take. Then I sat on the sofa and realized I'd been crying. Imagining grandpa dead already, watching me, I quickly wiped my face.

The doctors were wrong before, six years ago, when grandpa was in that auto accident while returning from Finger Lakes Racetrack in New York. They were certain then that he wouldn't live. There was nothing different about this business of grandpa's heart attack. You can't blame the doctors, really. They can only go by what they've seen in normal men.

And then I saw him again, watching me.

No. He couldn't die, wouldn't, not yet, not before telling me what happened, years ago. Pull yourself together. Put the letter out of your mind. Forget she'd sent the bloody thing. Go selflessly, or don't go at all. Go selflessly. I was mad at myself for needing to be told these things.

Dressed and packed, I had only to wait. I walked to the hall closet, took down a cardboard box, and removed the videotape.

2

It's the tape father shot Christmas Day, three months earlier, grandpa's first Christmas living in their new home. I watched it with my stepmother, Diana, the night before returning to Vancouver, while stroking reluctantly Misty on my lap, brushing Himalayan hair off my pants, damn cat. When the tape was over I asked Diana, president of every technical department in that house, to send me a copy.

"You won't forget?"

"Have I ever disappointed you?"

"No."

Wound round the new Sony camcorder, father taped the hell out of that Christmas. I was overwhelmed by the splendor of their new home. Father usually made good money, from one business or another, but I never saw it like I saw it that Christmas. They're all on tape, the things, and you have to strain your eyes to find the traces of grandpa Vic that father left behind.

He taped the dove-and-red-ribbon tilting tree, deep in a sea of colored waves. Then Katie, my twelve-year-old sister, in a Garfield nightgown, getting the sleep out of her eyes for the camera. Then Diana, crouched on the carpet in white silk pajamas, passing presents, saving bows and ribbons from the fire father had just built. The presents were spectacular. You can see the two-carat diamond sliding down my stepmother's right ring finger, size four. Honestly, you couldn't buy a ring too grand for her. And Katie made a killing. And Jake got more than he deserved. You can see me in the center of the screen, watching grandpa get the paper off his gift, a wooden box of La Palino cigars, his woolly green feet sneaking into the bottom right hand corner of the screen. Johnny Mathis sings 'Silent Night' on the stereo in the background.

Then you see forest green trim bordering the rich cranberry walls of the living room. Cut to the raging fire, feeding on cardboard and birch. The camera crawls up the ornamented mantel, zooms in on the ceramic nativity that Diana made ages ago, miniature chess-like pieces and a flat out king.

My stepmother takes you on a tour through her home. You get the feeling that they were on a film-shoot for *House and Garden*. Dining room, laundry room, garage, bedrooms, bathrooms. Everything but the unfinished basement. There's a concentration on the kitchen. Brand names are spoken. "It's a kitchen most women would die for," Diana says, smiling, her eyes twinkling emeralds.

The tour concludes in the living room, where you see me holding father's latest acquisition from the lucrative world of sports art originals: Tom Henke, dazzling in a water color pitch. Henke's head is half missing, the point when father looks up from behind the camera and declares: "Bought it for ten grand. Had to sign a release, in case they want to make prints. It'll be worth three times what I paid if the Jays ever clinch a World Series." I appear to be looking into the camera, but I'm staring at father, who's wearing dark sunglasses and a dark purple Polo robe.

I remember asking him that holiday where all the money came from.

"So that's what's been on your mind," he said, grinning, glancing at the TV. Father smoothed his right eyebrow with a finger, beginning above the nose, arching over to the small mole above the far corner of his eye. "I've been playing my cards the right way, Jake. Sports cards. You see, some sports are more popular in the States than in Canada, and vice versa. Baseball and basketball are the big sports there. Here we've got hockey. What you want to do is buy cards on the one side, sell them on the other. A fellow can do quite well for himself if he uses his head a little."

"You make this much money trading cards?" I asked, taking a quick look around the dark living room.

"You don't believe me? Let me give an example. A few months ago I was at a flea market in Toronto, and I saw the Picasso of the card business--Mickey Mantle's Topps 1952 rookie card, in mint condition. Any idea what that card's worth?"

"No."

"Take a guess."

"I don't know. Five hundred dollars?"

"Five hundred?" He shook his head. "Try again."

"I told you I didn't know."

"Forty grand."

"Forty thousand dollars?"

"Hard to believe, isn't it?" His black eyes held me. "Timing is the big thing in any business. I was there early on a Sunday. Always go on Sunday when you want to buy cards. A lot of these guys get together Saturday night,

to drink and play poker. Odds are good they'll need a few bucks come Sunday.

"So I asked the fellow what he wanted for the card, and he said he'd take twenty-four. It was a reasonable price, but I laughed, took out my checkbook, and wrote a check for eighteen." Father made sure I was listening. "Then I set it on the counter and told him: 'That's my only offer. You've got ten seconds to decide.'

"Oh, it was a beautiful card, Jake, nearly kept it for myself. But you train yourself not to be sentimental about things. Take dad. He can't separate the business from the pleasure. Hell, he'll keep boarding, training and betting on a horse no matter how many races it loses. He's always been like that. I tell him: 'Sure, keep a winner--but get rid of it the minute the thing stops paying its way.' I hate to think what we'd be worth today if he didn't blow it all on those bloody things. But you know what he's like--"

"What did you do with the card?"

"The following week I took it to a flea market in Buffalo. It was a busy Saturday afternoon. You'll always get a better price when the market's busy. Plus the Bills had just won a game, so the timing couldn't have been better. Guess what I got for that card?"

"How much, dad?"

"Twenty-nine grand, American! Not bad for a week's work, eh?"

"No," I said--"so you make good money with the cards?"

"Well, it's not the best business in town, that card's an exception. But my example should give you some indication of the kind of money we're talking. The main thing is everybody got what they wanted. The fellow in Toronto needed the money. The collector in Buffalo wanted Mantle's card. And I managed to slip a couple bucks into my pocket. Remember this, son, no matter what line of work you're in--you can get whatever you want, long as you help enough people get what they want."

After the painting of Henke, you see my family candle-lit round the dining room table. To test the tripod we taped grace. We're holding hands. Father asks Katie to say a prayer. He sits in the chair with arms, wearing a black silk shirt, watching us, pensively. Katie is seated to my right, Diana across from her. Their eyes are closed. Both are sequin-luminous, curled and lipsticked, like sisters. I sit on father's right, watching grandpa opposite me. His face is dark and the gray hair at the sides of his head is smoothed toward the back. He is thick-necked in a brown wool V-neck overtop a white T-shirt. He stares at his plate, tolerating grace, waiting to get at the food. For a gunshot second grandpa glares at father.

When grace is over father says: "In the name of the Father, Son, and the Holy Ghost, who eats the fastest gets the most." We laugh, pass food. When the bets are all in grandpa is the clear favorite. He will lift cases of beer all night as we sleep, so four plates to him is nothing.

After dinner and dessert I taped Katie and Diana doing dishes. It's eight o'clock. Grandpa and father are in the garage. Their voices are raised, but you can't hear the details over the dishwasher. And then grandpa drives off. Christmas and New Year's and Grey Cup weekend are the busiest times of the year for him. Father smiles at the camera as he walks calmly into the kitchen.

The dishes clean, the camera back on the tripod, we huddle round the big screen TV to watch the miracle of our Christmas Day unfold. We watch nearly to the end of the tape. Then father, the master of all our ceremonies, leans to the edge of the sofa and stares into the camera, a sliver of silver in his left eye: "Now it is finished. You look forward all year to spending this day with family, and then it is finished. Finished," he snaps the thumb and third finger of his right hand, "like that."

Let the tape run beyond father and you will see something not quite as glamorous. Diana filmed it on Boxing Day, while father was in Buffalo. Katie, grandpa and I are sitting at the kitchen table. Katie is wearing a Montreal Canadiens jersey, lipstick and dark eyeliner. Her hair is in a french braid. My sister is eating pretzels while dumping a large Planter's peanut jar filled with change onto the table. I'm drinking coffee from a white mug with #1 Mom on it in red.

Grandpa Vic is holding a large orange which looks small in his thick hands. He's wearing an Atlanta Braves ball cap and white T-shirt. My grandmother's name, Helen, is tattooed on his right forearm. His blue eyes smile, but he looks tired. "It's a young man's business," he says.

Katie smiles while counting change. Grandpa always gave her the change, and you'd be surprised how much he took in on a good night, sometimes more than a hundred dollars. He'd get a lot of old silver and rare coins, too, stuff people keep until they really need it. Father'd separate all that and add it to his collection. My sister would roll the rest and take it to the bank. Father often joked that she could soon quit school and retire.

The sun glares at grandpa through horizontal blinds and he squints at Katie.

"You should eat plenty of fruit, little lady. Helps clean out your system, helps purify you. Know what I mean?"

"Sure, grandpa Vic."

Then he looks at me, outside the picture.

"How're things out in Vancouver, son?"

"Fine."

He glances at Katie, then returns his eyes to me, lowering his gruff voice--

"When you get around to writin' that little story about your grandpa, call it 'A Liquor Glass, A Woman's Ass, A Horse That Ran Too Slow.'" His face is grinning and candy-caned in the horizontal sun.

Father even encouraged me to write grandpa's story once. Before he knew most of the ending. Said there'd be terrific money in it, and there'd be no need to change a thing. "Everyone would enjoy the real thing, the story of your grandpa Vic."

Katie leaves the kitchen suddenly, inexplicably, and a minute later you hear 'Like a Virgin' on the stereo in her room upstairs. Grandpa tilts his head as though he can see clear through the ceiling to her room.

"Never mind that nonsense about fruit I was tellin' the girl. It's alcohol that's the secret. I see many fellas three, sometimes four times each week. Some goin' on over forty years. Healthy as trees, Jake, I tell you. Never catch cold. You wanna live to be a hundred, drink whiskey regularly."

He is mostly joking. Drink was not a vice of grandpa Vic's. "If you want to drink," he told me once, "buy only the loveliest wines." But I never saw him purchase anything lovely for himself. Lovely things--unless they are spirited, willing, have strong legs, sinewy hips and thighs, and a good hock action--no longer impress him.

Nor is he any more impressed by extravagance. It's not on tape, but I heard him tell father plainly Christmas Day that he is a wasteful and foolish man. "Good for the country, ain't ya? Big house, fancy clothes, new car, big TV. What you got, son, that moths and rust can't touch?"

Sitting across from grandpa Vic on Boxing Day I longed to arrive at an age when lovely things could no longer impress me. Even now, three years later, ten thousand desires gallop in me.

Grandpa puts the orange peels on a paper towel, digs two large thumbs into the fruit, splitting it down the middle, spraying the gazing Himalayan in the face. He winks as he hands me half the orange. And then the tape ends, the image of my grandfather bursting into a hissing blur of black and white.

I returned the videotape to the carboard box and fixed myself a coffee. Then I drew back the yellow drapes and opened the window facing the park across the street. I watched a young woman running in the sun, string in hand, an orange kite a few feet off the ground, trailing. A blond boy ran wildly after, urging it into the air. The breeze wasn't warm. I shut the window and drank my coffee.

3

Around eight o'clock that evening I sat in the back seat of a limousine headed west on the Queen Elizabeth Highway, toward Brantford. I could smell the driver's cologne, and the faint body odor it tried to conceal. His

hand, dark and hairy, tapped the back of the passenger head rest in time to a soft Latino beat on the radio.

I was relaxing, enjoying my solitude, trying to stay calm, preparing myself for whatever lay ahead.

"Quite the city, Brantford," the driver said, smiling in the rearview, the smile of a salesman.

"Uh huh," I said, looking away.

"Folks around Toronto tend not to think much of it, but I tell them any town Wayne Gretzky's from can't be all bad." His eyes darted between me and the road. "My boy's a big fan of Wayne's. Ever meet him?"

"No."

"What about the rest of the family?"

"His brother and I went to the same high school, but I never knew him."

"That'd be Keith?"

"Uh huh."

"What was he like?--I'll tell the boy."

"I said I didn't know him."

"You must've heard something," he said, smiling.

"I minded my own business in high school."

It was quiet for a short time, peaceful.

"So, visiting family are you?"

"Yes." I glared in the mirror. "Look, I'd rather not talk, all right?"

His eyes caught me in the rearview, and held me for a moment in the dusk. Then they returned to the road and remained there.

I watched familiar landmarks pass--the Oakville Mall; James' Exotic Cars, just west of Burlington; and the Hamilton Spectator Building shortly after. As I watched signs, trees and buildings fly by my vision became blurry, and my thoughts drifted to that summer afternoon I came to stay in Brantford, when I was eight.

4

I climbed down from the train in ripped jeans, black sneakers, and a brand-new white T-shirt that said 'Center Island, Toronto' in yellow letters. The conductor stood with one arm extended, anticipating a fall.

"Careful, young man."

"Fuck off."

They were holding hands on the platform, smiling in my direction, so I figured it was them. She wore a yellow cotton dress, looked out of place on that asphalt platform, the smells of diesel, grease and cut grass all around her.

"Jake, my boy," he said, approaching.

He knelt, scratched my cheek with a sideburn, and squeezed me tightly. I looked across the platform, past her, watched all the scattered kisses, hugs, smiles. She moved closer. I winced as he held me in the staring sun and she put a hand on his shoulder. He jerked me away, took a good look at me.

"How are you? It sure is good to see you again."

I looked at the ground, feeling in a dream peopled with ugly strangers.

"I want you to meet someone. This is Diana."

She flashed green eyes. She had long, light-brown hair. She wasn't pretty like mom, too skinny, cheerful.

"We're so glad you'll be living with us," she said. "You'll like it here. Your room's all done up in blue. I hope you like blue."

"Blue's okay. Not gonna be around long, anyhow."

She glanced at father, who shrugged his shoulders and shaped his lips into a frown.

"And we have a dog. You *do* like dogs, don't you?"

"What kind of dog?"

She stared blankly at father.

"Part terrier and part spaniel, but he looks more spaniel."

"He's a friendly dog, and very smart," she said. "I think you two will get along wonderfully."

My eyes stretched far down the tracks, toward Toronto.

"Here, let me take your bag. No point standing around. Car's over there." He grabbed my bag in his right hand, put his left arm around her waist. I walked behind them, hating them, following a pleasant smell coming off her.

"Well, what do you think?" he asked, keys jingling. It was a new brown Ford station wagon with paneling.

"All right, I guess."

"You *guess*?...Power windows, air, eight-track." He opened the tailgate, pitched in my things. "Any idea what one of these is worth?"

"No."

"Plenty. Let me tell you that, Jake, plenty."

"Are you hungry?" she asked.

"No."

"Say, that's a handsome T-shirt, where'd you get it?"

"What's it say?" I asked, looking at her quite coldly.

She pinched my shirt at the bottoms, stretched the fabric. I twisted my torso, got her fingers off me.

"'Center Island, Toronto.' I suppose it was a silly question."

We drove through what I figured to be the downtown. Quiet, small, dull. Squashed buildings. We didn't have to slow down, stop for crowds. There were no streetcars, no tracks you bumped over. No dashing briefcases

or suits. No bare-chested, bearded men. No short skirts splayed out in the sun. No old men looking through trash cans. I couldn't see a McDonald's.

"Well, what do you think so far?" he asked, glancing toward the back.

Silence.

"You'll grow to like it, son. You'll see."

He played with the tailgate window, smiled at me in the mirror, all of which I ignored. Once we got out of the downtown I saw Pauline Johnson High School on the right, then the Mohawk Plaza, with a bowling alley and pharmacy. A few blocks further we turned right, Diana tapping her nails on the glass to father, something about a new subdivision going up. Then we continued down a long hill, past Mohawk Park thick with trees, leafy-dark. I noticed swings, and kids and dogs running loose.

In a dream I stood in the park, only the park was High Park, in Toronto, and it was winter, and mom and me were buying roasted chestnuts from a street vendor. We walk through the park for hours, mom humming blues, jazz and folk tunes while I tried naming them.

"Here we are, son."

The house reeked cigar.

"Now, if you need anything, just ask," she said. "Your bedroom's at the end of the hall, on the right. Make yourself at home, okay? Are you tired? Would you like to take a little nap before lunch?" The dog was jumping on me, sniffing.

"Nah," I sighed, pushing his flappy, black-brown head away.

"His name's Muddy."

I got excited by the sudden mention of the name.

"Muddy Waters?"

"Who?"

"Just 'Muddy', son, because that's what he always is. Give him a choice between a park and pond, and nine times out of ten he'll take the pond. Stupid dog's always dirty."

"Looks clean to me."

"He knew you were coming. Any other day he'd be out jumping in puddles and rolling in dirt."

"Why don't you wash up for lunch?" she said. "There's a clean face cloth and towel on the bathroom counter."

I walked away.

"Jake!" father called after me.

"What?"

"Your shoes, son, your shoes!"

"Yeah?"

"Leave them at the door!" Muddy ran toward me, dark eyes lowering.

"It's okay," Diana said, "it's his first day, he'll get used to it."

I kicked off my sneakers, picked them up, and brushed the dog away with my elbow. Then I carried my shoes to the door and dropped them on the rubber mat beside theirs.

We sat around a table of cold cuts, buns, pickles, potato salad, a pitcher of orange juice, and a bowl of fruit.

"It's like a little picnic," she said.

"It ain't no picnic."

"You're right, picnics are for out of doors. But we can pretend."

Under the table the dog rubbed against me and sat on my foot. I was about to kick him when Diana smiled in my direction. Father smacked his sandwich and bit into a pickle.

"We'll run by the barber's, tomorrow. See if he can do something with your hair. It looks like you're in a band."

"I like it how it is."

"Just a trim, son." He leaned toward her, mumbling--"Don't know how she could let him go around like that."

"Don't want no fuckin' haircut!"

"Jake," his voice hardened--"let's not say another word about it."

I gave Muddy a sharp tap with my foot and he squealed out from under the table.

"Take your lunch and go to your room."

"Leave him, honey. It's his first day."

"Did you hear what I said?"

I left my food on the table, went to the bedroom, and slammed the door. I noticed a radio on an embroidered cloth on the dresser, and I turned it on.

O, will you never let me be?
O, will you never set me free?
The ties that bound us
are still around us,
There's no escape that I can see...

I closed my eyes, imagined mom at George's Spaghetti House, singing in the warm yellow light, wearing a purple dress. She tilts her head. Straight dark hair falls down one side. She holds the microphone in both hands, closes her eyes, smiles in the light, swaying gently to the piano playing behind her in a shadow. Her voice rings out--deep, rich, a cross between Janis Joplin and Joni Mitchell. A small crowd of pedestrians on Dundas Street gather to look through the glass.

...A cigarette that bares a lipstick's traces,
An airline ticket to romantic places,
And still my heart has wings,
These foolish things
remind me of you...

Not able to stand the song any longer, I turned the radio off. I heard a scratch on the door, ignored it. Then I heard a knock, ignored that too. The knock got louder.

"What?"

"Can I come in?"

"No."

Father opened the door, searching me with his black eyes.

"Jake, I know this is difficult, but it's no reason to talk that way. Diana's been trying so hard to make everything perfect. Try to be a little nicer, for her sake."

Silence.

"And I don't know what kind of talk your mother let you get away with, but if I hear you using that sort of language again, I'll..."

"You'll what?--beat me?--think that scares me?"

"This is my house. You'll do as I say."

"Fuck off," I said, wondering that these two syllables could have such agency here in Brantford.

He lifted his hand, then reconsidered. With his back to the door father gazed out the window, blew air out his mouth, and ran a hand backward through thick, dark hair.

At that moment a large old man filled the doorway, scaring me. The brim of his ball cap made a shadow around his eyes. He wore a white T-shirt and maroon suspenders. Muddy followed him in, sniffing at his trousers.

"Good to have you, son! Sorry I couldn't get here sooner, I got held up with an ugly business matter. How's yer pecker hangin'?"

Father twisted to look. "Oh, hi dad. Didn't hear you come in."

"Not speakin' to you. Talkin' to the handsome one."

He brushed past father and grabbed me under the arms. As he swung me into the air his forearms bulged, and he smelled like cigar and barn, and I noticed a tattoo on his right forearm, 'Helen'. If he wasn't so pleased to see me I can't say I would have cared much for the old man.

"Remember me, son?"

Was he somebody I'd given change to on Yonge Street?

"I don't think so."

"What? Don't remember the most famous man in town?"

I shook my head.

"Jake, this is your grandpa Vic."

"Oh."

"'Oh'? That's what you say to the man everybody comes to see?"

"Hi."

"'Hi'? That's it? No kiss? No present? Just 'hi'? What sort of a greetin' is that?" He set me down, then removed his cap, exposing a dark, bald crown. "Of all the rotten things to happen today, this hurts most."

"Jake's having a bad day. He just wants to be left alone."

The old man turned to me with calm blue eyes--

"Who the hell wants company on such a miserable day as this, eh, son? Though I can't imagine how any man's day could be worse than mine."

He reached into his pocket, pulled out a roll of cash, and tugged out a five.

"Tell you what, son, here's five bucks says my day's worse than yours."

"Don't got five bucks."

"What do you got?"

"Don't got nothing."

"You got five bucks for the boy?"

"Here, Jake, I'll lend you five dollars." Father took out his wallet and handed me the money.

"Okay, son, you go first. Why you havin' such a lousy day?"

"No, it's stupid. It's a stupid bet."

"You took the five bucks from your old man, didn't you?"

"Yeah."

"Why'd you take it if you didn't want to bet? Way I see it, you agreed to the bet when you took the money."

"He's got a point," father said.

"'Course I got a point, wouldn't say it otherwise," he said. "Go ahead, son, tell me about your day. Don't be shy now, nothin's stupid."

I said the only thing I knew for certain. "I don't like it here. I want to go home."

"That's it, Jake." Grandpa knelt and held me. What was the use trying to fight him off? "Don't feel like home yet, does it? Anything else you'd care to get off your chest?"

"Why doesn't mom want me no more?"

He needed some time to consider.

"I don't think it's a case of her not wantin' you. But I can't say much else about it. A fella just ain't meant to understand some things, I guess. Best he can do is ask questions, do what he can to find answers, then realize even the best ones are riddled with holes, know what I mean?" He looked at father, rather affectionately all of a sudden, it seemed to me. "Your dad loves you. He's gonna see you're looked after."

"I don't love him and I don't want to stay here."

And then he motioned toward the window, eyes downcast.

"What's the matter, dad?" father asked, glancing at me.

"Never mind, it's nothin'. Don't imagine I could top the boy's miserable day, anyhow. Here, Jake," he handed me the money--"you win." I reached for the bill.

"Wait a minute," father said, "he has to keep his end of the deal."

"No point. It's the worst day I had in years. Just as soon forget it."

Grandpa let the money fall to the bed, then shuffled toward the door.

"Really sorry about your day, son, and I appreciate you sharin' it with me. Now I gotta go try to patch up this godforsaken one of mine. Maybe I'll see you another time, eh?"

I wouldn't have admitted it, but I suppose the old man was something of a spot of sun for me that afternoon.

"Wait a minute, we had a bet!"

"Forget it, son. Keep the money. I don't care to think on it no more."

"We had a bet. You can't just leave."

"Ah hell, all right. Ain't very pretty, though. Sure you wanna hear it?"

I nodded.

"And it might take some time to tell. Not in any rush are you?"

"No," I said, looking at father, who shook his head hesitantly, I thought.

The old man pulled the chair out from under the desk, lifted a heavy black boot to the seat, and leaned against his leg. Chips of dried mud and straw flaked off the bottom of his boot and fell to the carpet. It occurred to me to ask why he was allowed to wear footwear in the house, but I let it pass, and then prepared myself to hear a story I was sure would be well worth paying attention to.

"It all started last night. I was down at the joint, gettin' ready to open--"

"What's the joint?" I asked, looking at father, who was exchanging a look with grandpa.

"Ain't central to the story, Jake. Listen up, okay?"

"Okay."

"After unloadin' the truck, I poured myself a glass of gingerale, and sat down to watch a bit of the ball game. Things were peaceful till about nine or so, and then I heard a knock at the door.

"It was Wally McNeil, chief of police. I was a bit surprised to see him, figured it must of been election time again. McNeil told me no, it was his night off, and he just thought he'd stop in, pick up a bottle for himself. He asked what I was chargin', and I said fifteen bucks. 'No, no,' he laughed, 'for me, Vic, for me. You know I can get it at the store for ten.' So I told him to go get it. 'You know the store's closed. Come on, ten bucks, whadda ya say?' I told him fifteen bucks, same as everybody else. Told him to fuck off if he couldn't pay what everybody else pays."

Father looked at grandpa sharply.

"You didn't say that to a cop!" I said, glancing at father, not a little surprised that he held his tongue at the old man's talk.

"Sure I did. When a man's in the right he can talk however he likes. What're they gonna do, lock him up? Beat him? Make him pay a fine? What's all that? Whatever price he pays don't mean a thing, long as a man's able to put things square."

"Go on, dad."

"Anyhow, to make a short story of it, McNeil, the hypochondriac, threatened--"

"The *what*?" father interrupted, his forehead tightening.

"Hypochondriac. A fella who parades around lettin' others think he stands for somethin' that he don't."

Father smiled at me.

"You mean hypocrite, don't you?"

"That's it, thanks. Good to know. Now, where were we? Oh, right. So McNeil threatened to arrest me if I didn't sell to him for ten bucks. I told him to go to hell, then I slammed the door on his face.

"He pounded for ten minutes, and I couldn't stand the racket no more so I grabbed the baseball bat, opened the door, and told him to get lost before I break his fuckin' head."

"Dad, please..."

"That's what I said. You want me to lie to the boy?" Grandpa leaned toward me, smiling--"So listen to this, son, McNeil said 'all right, Vic, fifteen bucks'!"

He squinted, and laughed hoarsely, deep from his enormous gut. I had no idea what was so funny, but he was laughing so hard that I couldn't keep from joining in.

"About one in the morning, just when things were about to get busy, two officers showed up at the door. 'Sorry, Vic. Just following orders.' It was nothin' I didn't expect. I told 'em 'that's all right, fellas. Just tell McNeil I'd better not see him around here again.'

"So the police took me to the court house, and locked me in a cell Generally speakin' that kind of thing only happens around election time. You spend a few hours in jail, pay the couple hundred bucks, and then you're back in business. But as it turned out my troubles were just startin'." Grandpa paused. "Say, Jake, you're lookin' a little weary. Would you like me to stop?"

"Yes, dad, I think that's enough for today."

"Was I lookin' at you? I was addressin' the other Jake, the smart lookin' one." The old man turned to me. "You had enough?--speak up."

"No, I'm okay. Go on."

"Go on, *what*?"

"Go on, *grandpaVic*."

"Go on, grandpa Vic, *what*?"

"Go on, grandpa Vic, *please*."

"More like it, son. Like I was sayin', things escalpaded from there. I shared the cell with two drunk fellas. One was a tall, lanky kid, mid-twenties I'd say. Leather jacket, jeans, long hair. The other was an old fella I recognized from around the track. Owned a couple trotters that couldn't run if you poked pitchforks under their tails.

"Anyhow, I was sittin' off to one side, thinkin' about all the money McNeil was costin' me. Had a feelin' those two were talkin' about me, but bein' the most famous man in town you adjust to that sort o' thing. All of a sudden the kid walked over and said 'so, you're Vic, eh? Heard you're quite the fighter. Heard there's not a man you can't take down.' I told him it was all lies, most fellas just don't know how to look after themselves. 'Bet you've never fought a black belt before,' he said. I told him I've taken on all kinds. Blacks, browns, whites, yellow ones, red. Colors don't mean much. Test is what a fella's got inside. And then he started kickin' me. Gave me three or four good blows in the gut before I could grab his one leg. Then I brought him in close, gave him a shot in the belly which put him on the ground."

To be sure, the old man was quite exciting to watch, especially as he related these last details. He grabbed an imaginary leg, twisted his upper body slightly, then delivered a powerful blow square to the stomach of the young tough.

"Wow, where'd you learn to fight like that?" I asked.

"You pick these things up, son. But never mind that. I felt a little bad for the the kid, seein' him lyin' on the ground like that. Looked like he'd make an all right fella if he could clean his act up a little.

I nodded briefly.

"I tried sleepin' after that. I was lyin' on the floor when the old fella sat down beside me, waved a deck of cards in my face, and asked if I was interested in a game. 'Heard you're a fine poker player, Vic. Name the stakes.' I told him I was in no mood to gamble. 'Don't trust me 'cause I'm drunk, eh?' I said Jesus, all right, one game, five bucks to make it interesting. I just wanted him off my back, see. 'Five bucks?' he asked--'how interesting could that be? Make it a thousand.' When I started laughing, he said 'don't trust me 'cause I'm drunk, eh? Come on, you'll see me 'round the track.' So I agreed to one game, five hundred bucks, one draw of three. He shuffled the cards, dealt us five each, and in the end I showed a pair of fives and the old fella, only a king. 'Good game,' he said. 'How about another? Double or nothin'?' I told him we'd agreed to one game. 'Now let a guy rest.'

"I slept after that, and when I woke up a few hours later I'd forgotten all about the bet. The old fella reminded me as we were walkin' out the cell.

Told me to come around the track about one, said he'd have the money ready. I told him to forget it, but he said bet's a bet, Vic.

"When I got to Flamborough Downs I saw him standin' near the canteen. I drove over and he told me that he'd had a little trouble gettin' the money together on such short notice. Said he'd give me something better than five hundred bucks. 'Finest creature you ever saw,' he said. 'Fifteen years old. Gentle. A sweetheart to saddle. Worth about fifteen hundred, and that's being conservative.' I said I didn't have room for another horse, and he looked at me like he'd just caught his wife with his brother. That's when I told him to bring her around the farm outside St. George, where I keep my horses."

"So did you get her?" I asked.

"Yeah, I got her. That's the reason I couldn't get here sooner. I stopped by the farm on the way. Never seen such a sorry lookin' creature in all my life. She's the greenest thing you'd ever find in a fifteen year old, obviously been neglected for some time. Don't remember she was halter-broke. Can't mind her P's and Q's, much less her A B C's. She's hipped to the hilt, got the glanders and the yellows. She's swaybacked like a politician, and she's got the staggers worse than any drunk in town. She's rotten icing, all right, on what's been one long and miserable cake of a day."

"What will you do with her, dad?"

"Only one thing to do. She can't race. Not sure her back will even stand a saddle. Besides, I don't really have the manpower to care for her. Not much choice in it."

"What do you think they'll give for her?"

"Fifty bucks at best, lookin' at her."

"Who?" I asked.

"Don't worry, son. They're pretty good, nowadays. I think they even put 'em to sleep first. Don't look at me like that. It's not like there's a pack of volunteers linin' up to care for the beast."

"I'll help for a bit," I said--"until I have to leave."

That was the first of many times my grandfather grabbed me, and lifted me out of my angry, withdrawn darkness. Looking back, I suppose it didn't matter that I never saw the horse, that she may not even have existed. The old man had given me something to look forward to, for a short time at least.

I looked out the limousine window, and saw the Dairy Queen on the right hand side of Colborne Street. The hospital was only ten minutes away. I felt suddenly anxious. I didn't want to be in Brantford now, either. And yet I needed to know what grandpa had to do with my coming here, all those years ago. I needed to understand it, put it behind me for good.

Pull yourself together. That's not why you are here, Jake. Set it aside.

I closed my eyes and breathed in and out slowly, hoping he was still alive.

5

Around ten o'clock I arrived at the hospital. On the seventh floor I hurried to the Coronary Care Unit. Diana sat in the dimly lit waiting room, sipping a 7-Up. There was a Tim Horton's donut box on the table beside her. My stepmother looked vibrant, composed, not the least bit fatigued.

"Jake, you made it!" She threw white silk sleeves around me and I held her, loosely. "Your father will be glad to see you. He was pleased you said you'd come."

"How's grandpa?"

"There's been no change from this morning. Three doctors were with him all day. They left around five."

"What did they say?"

Diana shook her head. "The heart attack was very severe. The doctors say Vic's heart is functioning only at a third of its capacity. They use a scale of some sort...oh, what's that thing called?" She puzzled a moment, picking a white thread off her navy skirt. "Anyways, the average heart attack measures four to six hundred on the scale, sometimes one thousand. Vic's measured four thousand. They've never seen anyone survive such a shock."

"He'll be the first."

"I hope you're right." She paused. "I'm so glad you're here, Jake. I think your father's nearly given up on Vic. Maybe your being here will help."

"Is he with grandpa?"

"Yes."

Diana's eyes were suddenly watery and I looked away.

"It was awful, Jake," she said, trying not to cry. "Your father and I were in Buffalo yesterday, and when we got home late last night Katie was shouting for us to come upstairs. I was terrified, I had no idea what might have happened. When we got to the top of the stairs Vic was lying face down. Katie was in tears, crying that he had just crawled out of his room and collapsed right there on the carpet.

"When we sat him up he looked horrible, all pale and clammy. Vic started complaining about pains in his chest, saying it was only the raspberry soda he'd had to drink before bed. We knew it had to be more than that, so we called for an ambulance."

She removed a tissue from her purse, fingered it gently to her eyes.

"Katie's in shock. She was here earlier, but this is too difficult for her."

"Where is she now?"

"At a friend's."

Diana's small body let out a little quiver and I put my arms around her, loosely. "I'm sorry," she said, "I've been so good all day. This is the first time I've cried."

"It's okay," I spoke softly, then firmly--"we know how strong he is. He'll be fine."

"I hope you're right," her voice broke. "I hope you're right."

When I entered the room father was sitting in an orange vinyl chair on the left side of the room, facing grandpa. He wore dark sunglasses. He smiled at me uneasily.

"Hello, son."

"Hi."

I stood next to grandpa, asleep on his back, three electrodes taped to his bare chest. Two plastic bags were suspended from the infusion pump behind father. A clear plastic tube ran from the bottom of each bag, wrapped around the railing, wound across the bed to grandpa's left wrist. There was an oxygen tube in his nostrils. White gauze covered his left wrist.

Father removed the glasses. He seemed agitated. I leaned over the chair and, rather ceremoniously, put my arms around father's dark leather jacket, smelling the leather.

"Thanks for coming. Any trouble getting here?"

"No."

We faced grandpa, sound asleep, his breathing like soft gurgles.

"The nurses couldn't calm dad down when we brought him in last night. He pulled the IV out of his wrist, and swung both legs over the rail. He kept yelling 'get me the fuck out! Get me the fuck out!' It took four nurses and me to hold him down. When the doctors got here they put him on the morphine drip, to let the heart rest." Father looked at me with tired, bloodshot eyes. "They asked about life support, but you know what dad would've said to that."

He pointed to the electrocardiograph. 120 beats.

"It reached 190 last night. The doctors said he wouldn't last the night."

"Why didn't you call?"

"There was no point worrying you. You wouldn't have been able to get a flight, anyways."

I looked at grandpa. His hair was neat, his skin had good color and he was clean shaven.

"He looks good," I said.

"The nurses are taking very good care of dad. Two come in often to change his linen and freshen him up. They keep him well groomed, that way he'll die with dignity."

"Don't talk like that. Look at him. He has plenty of life in him."

"The doctors say it's impossible."

"Fuck the doctors. They don't know him like we do." I watched grandpa make a fist with his right hand in his sleep.

"It's not good to hope too much. Better to see this realistically, Jake. He's seventy-six. The shock has done too much damage. His kidneys are failing. Dad hasn't pissed in twelve hours. The doctors say his lungs will fill slowly with fluid, and then it will be over."

"It's still better to hope."

"Hope only hurts. I just want him to die peacefully."

Father put his sunglasses back on.

"I just can't believe this has happened. I've never known anyone with dad's strength. I can't believe it," he shook his head. "Look at him. I'll bet he could do a hundred pushups right now, if he could just get out of that bed. He used to be a boxer, you know, and a gymnast. At one time he was the best at both in the entire city. Did you know that?"

"No."

"It just doesn't make sense. I tried talking to him, but you know how he'd get. I told him a man his age can't go on working sixteen, seventeen hours a day. Sooner or later something's got to give.

"He told me, 'it'll give later, son. I'm strong as a horse. What I gotta do to prove it? A cartwheel? Will a fuckin' cartwheel prove it?' And then he did one! Seventy-six years old, and he did a cartwheel right there on the kitchen floor! Except for the landing it was a pretty good cartwheel. And then he did twenty one-arm pushups with each arm, then got up, not the slightest bit winded.

"'No different than a horse,' he said. 'A horse can be pushed to run faster, but when it's time to quit, he knows it, and he quits. It's a feeling the animal gets. Got nothing to do with the head. 'Course a horse don't got much of a head, that's where he has us licked. It's a man's head, see, that makes him want to put his feet up. No lazier beast than a man. But it's in a horse to try to run faster. Whether he can do it or not, hell, that don't matter. Point is, it's in him to try. You never heard of a horse givin' up, not till the end. And then he knows, he just knows.'

"I said 'dad, you're not a horse, you're a man, and you do have a head, and your head must be telling you that enough is enough.'

"'Haven't heard a word I been sayin', have ya? You think I been standin' here, tryin' to convince you I'm a fuckin' horse? Of course I'm no horse. That's the whole point. Of course I got a fuckin' head. Of course, of course. A man's head is always tellin' him enough is enough. Hell, I'm no different. But I never listened to my head, not when I was thirty, and I sure as fuck won't start listenin' now. So why don't you mind your own business, and leave me to mine. You just wanna make yourself feel better, anyhow. Don't wanna hear another word about it. Not another word, you hear?'"

"That's the kind of stubborn man he was, Jake, and that's the reason he's lying there now."

"He'll be all right. He just needs a good rest."

Diana entered to say goodnight to father, and goodbye to grandpa Vic. She touched grandpa's left cheek with the back of her hand, kissed his forehead. Then she placed a hand on his chest and closed her eyes.

"Take her home, son."

"I want to stay."

"No, take her home. Pick up Katie. I'm sure she'd appreciate your company right now."

"I'd really like to stay."

"I know, Jake. But I'd prefer to be alone with dad. We have some time to make up."

6

As I unpacked in the guest room I could hear Diana in Katie's room, trying to comfort her daughter. For twenty minutes I heard sobs, sniffles, soft words, a few giggles. And then my stepmother left Katie, and said goodnight to me through the guest room door. I waited five minutes before approaching my sister's room.

"Just a sec." I heard Katie shuffling papers, and 'Let's Go Crazy' softening on her stereo. "Hi," she said softly, nervously, as she opened the door.

"Feeling better?"

"A little."

Katie sat on the bed, tucked a bra under her pillow, then curled her legs behind her. I sat beside my sister, noticing that I could see through her cotton nightgown. I turned my head quickly, looked at two posters of Dylan on her light purple walls.

"Do you like '90210'?" she asked.

"I've never seen it. I don't watch much TV."

I had said something that made her laugh.

"Too busy reading?"

"Not really. I don't read much."

Black smudges glistened in the corners of Katie's dark eyes. She wore gold hoop earrings. With a slender hand she swept long, auburn hair off her face and tilted her head. Her hair fell slightly, hiding her right eye. Bottom lip over the top, she blew at it, watched it fall again, then smiled at me. Katie had grown more lovely since Christmas.

"How was grandpa, tonight?"

"He looked good."

"Why's dad listening to the doctors? It's not like him, he's being a jerk."

I thought for a moment, feeling the thick white duvet.

"Maybe it's because he watched his mother suffer. He was about your age when she died. Maybe he hoped too much, then, and only got hurt."

"So he just gives up on grandpa Vic?"

"I don't think he's given up. I think he just wants to prepare us for the worst."

Katie looked away. "How did grandma die?"

"I don't know," I said. What point could there have been in telling Katie what I knew?

The phone rang and Katie answered it.

"Hello. Okay, I guess. Uh huh. I don't know. Can I call you back?--Jake's here..."

I picked up the CD case, removed the insert, and read the words as they came out the speakers:

How can u just leave me standing?
Alone in a world that's so cold
Maybe I'm just 2 demanding
Maybe I'm just like my father 2 bold
Maybe you're just like my mother
She's never satisfied
Why do we scream at each other
This is what it sounds like when doves cry.

"Sorry."

"Do you want me to go?" I asked, looking at the phone.

"No, I'll call her later. She just wants to know what I'm wearing tomorrow." Pause. "Do you like Prince?"

"Sure...You're going to school tomorrow?"

"Uh huh."

"How come?"

"I don't know. Dad's acting weird. He says he doesn't want any of this to mess me up in school. It's like he's pretending none of this is happening." A tear rolled down her cheek. "If I was the one in the hospital, grandpa'd be with me as much as he could."

Katie turned toward the brass makeup table beside her closet.

"It must've been frightening to find grandpa."

"It was. I didn't know what to do. I should've called 911 I guess. I just froze." Katie looked up at me. "Jake, before mom and dad got home, grandpa was asking for you."

"For me?"

"Yes. He said 'where's Jake?' I told him dad would be home soon, and then he said 'no, not him, your brother--where is he? Get him for me, will you, dear?'"

"Did he say anything else?"

"No, that's it. That's when mom and dad got home."

Katie picked up a large stuffed bear and squeezed it on her lap. "Is he gonna be all right?"

"Yes, he'll be fine."

She reached for a tissue on the makeup table.

"It's been so weird around here, lately," her face scrunched. "I wished you were home. They hardly talked to each other, and when they did they were always fighting. Dad was always in the States, and grandpa was always working. Grandpa Vic was acting funny, too."

"In what way?"

"Well, my birthday's not for two more months, but a week ago he gave me these hoops." Katie felt an earring. "He told me 'happy lated birthday,' whatever that means. What does 'lated' mean?"

"I don't know. Did you look it up?"

"I couldn't find it."

"It must've been one of his words."

We smiled to ourselves.

"He's never given me anything but money."

She picked up the remote, put on 'Purple Rain.'

"Why don't you try to sleep?"

"I'm not tired. I'll phone Karen."

I kissed Katie on the forehead goodnight. She followed me to the door and stood looking at grandpa's room across the dark hall.

"Everything will be all right," I said, "don't worry."

"I'll try not to. I'm glad you're home, Jake."

And then I walked quietly to the guest room, following the seashell night light at the end of the hall. Diana always left it on for grandpa, so he could find his way in the early morning hours.

7

All night I tossed, dreaming of mom and me, the beautiful, haunting images of my past. The dream begins with me as a baby in a crib in the center of a dark living room. Loud angry voices pound out their bedroom all night. I'm trembling inside a soiled sleeper, flailing, sweating, crying for her to come. Come for me, I'd like to say. Lift me in your arms. Hold me. Angry, hateful voices answer back in the dark.

Then, in an apartment in Toronto. I'm holding a black cat's front paws, swinging her around the floor. Black cat turns white, then gray, shakes herself loose, digs nails into my face. Mom carries her outside, returns to me, wipes blood off my cheeks. The cat doesn't return home the next morning, or the morning after. Mom holds me, explains that cats will only tolerate rough handling so long. I know you don't mean to, Jake, but you're too hard on them. Told you before. Don't worry, we'll get another. Don't bother, I say, don't like them anyways, dirty little fuckers.

Then in my dream mom and me sit cross-legged in the center of somebody's spacious, circular living room. Gold sun filters through the window, falls directly upon us. Three men take turns at a hose. Two shaved women in white listen to chanting on a turntable. A fat, shirtless, bearded man sleeps on the floor, a blue-faced baby climbing up him. A man sits in a red bean-bag chair, got a lady on his lap. He unbuttons her top, kisses tattooed breasts. A girl walks in carrying a plate of fruit. The lady stands, arranges herself, sits on the floor. The girl sits in the lady's place, feeds the man a piece of orange, drops the plate, sticks her tongue deep inside his mouth. The baby crawls toward the fruit. A dog barks in another room. I wonder what for. I look up at the window, see the light enter, a million tiny jewels floating and glistening between me and the sun. Slowly shifting clouds make dark animals.

Mom's got a job singing at George's Spaghetti House. Everybody's there. Moe Koffman is there. Daniel Montaré and John Hughes and Gordon Hawkings and Ron Nigrini and Michael Hassek. They're all there. Mom saw Bruce Cockburn one night. Where's dad? I ask, wanting to prick the bubble of her excitement. She says Brantford, how many times must you be told?

I'm watching 'Sesame Street' with a fat kid, got red blotches on his face. 'C' is for cows and we get talking meat. He can't believe mom won't let me eat hamburgers. Meat's bad, I tell him, but he won't listen--just keeps saying over and over that she doesn't know what she's talking about, that she's fuckin' crazy. I try killing the fat kid, with a fork. Then I'm waiting in the hall, listening to a deep voice tell mom get counseling for the boy. Our play school just can't accommodate a boy of Jake's temper.

One night at George's. I sit at my table left of the stage. Through the smoke I see beards, ponytails, red pouting lips. A waiter approaches my table, cutlery in hand, asks what I want to do when I grow up. It's a stupid question, I say, I'm only six. Pretend you're fifteen, what is it you want to do? Write songs, I tell him. I'll write them and mom will sing them. A songwriter, eh? You're a little poet? I had no idea. That's sure to make a hit with the ladies. Winks. You know, poetry's fine, but if you want to make a really good impression, try this on the girls sometime. He sets the cutlery on the table, makes a basketball hoop with his arms, a swing seat with his hands. He rocks the hoop toward himself and away, his face contorting for no reason I can see.

Mom walks on-stage right then, squints in the warm yellow light, smiles at me. The waiter winks she's a fine-looking woman, maybe you could put in a good word for me. I tell him fuck off. Patrons look over encouragingly. He puts a hand over my mouth. Easily I could reach the knife, but I refrain for mom's sake. I bite his hand, taste garlic, tobacco. You little shit! he says, wiping his hand down a leg. Mom glares at me to smarten up. Then I gaze up at her, feel the warm light. She throws her long, dark hair behind her, swings and flows, sings 'Cabaret' with a band, which I strain to see in the shadow behind her, can't.

Men in and out of our apartment, in and out. Miniature golf for mom, I feel, wishing she and I could walk the real eighteen holes. Many musicians. Long hair, tattoos. Some I recognize from around George's. Others, copies of ones I recognize. We sit on the living room floor, chat, listen to music. After she tucks me in I sometimes need to use the bathroom. I hold it till I can't stand it no more, tiptoe down the dark hall. Large shadows loom and shift on the wall opposite the living room. I peek in at the candle-lit hushed talk going on. Later, pillowed giggles escape her room, do a sprightly little dance down the hall, penetrate my walls.

I woke up sweating, not knowing where I was. I saw the orange glow of the seashell night light under my door. Katie made a long, loud animal cry in her sleep. Diana coughed. Then it was quiet. I closed my eyes, and willed myself to dream no more.

When you gonna take him to the old man?--you said you would. I'm tired of this game you play...Door closes, muffles it. Voices rise all night, the man's the rumble you hear when it wants to thunder. My name comes up often.

Mom's pulling weeds in a small garden. I can see the top of her head over the fence when she stands. I'm smoking a joint with a neighbor, Jeremy, a poet from Nebraska. Three women sit in the sunshine of his doorway. He reads a poem to us, something about an old leech gatherer on a lonely moor. What's a leech? What's he want them for? What's a moor? I ask, liking how the poem sounds, bothered because I don't know what it means. I ask mom for a tattoo that night, looking at the drooping rose above her left breast. Wait till you're older, Jake. Wait till you're older.

A man is asking if I'm staying for good, tells mom I'm messing things up for her. She says don't start, you'll wake Jake, just get out. You bitch, and there's a slap. Feeling stupid in Big Bird pajamas, wishing I've got on something more heroic, Superman, I jump out of bed, grab the heavy dictionary off my desk, rush into their room, and start smashing his head. Jake, stop, Jesus, you'll kill him! Fuck him, I say, meaning it, keeping it up, so what?

Next, mom and me are hitching a ride up Highway 11, to grandma and grandpa's cottage. She sticks out her thumb while I sit on a duffle bag, watching a soft breeze tickle her skirt. A pickup pulls over. A large, scruffy man opens the door, asks where we're headed, tells us hop in. Mom sits in the middle. There's a small photo of a woman and a child taped to the dash, and I look to see if it's a boy or girl.

He seems friendly, jokes, but I catch him now and then glancing at mom's slightly pale legs stretched out on my side of the hump. I feel in my pocket for my knife, in case there's trouble. After driving about an hour he turns to her, asks who's the lucky guy she's got up in Burke's Falls. Nothing like that, she smiles, just going to visit my parents. Good huntin' up there, he says, where'd you say you was from? Brantford. Mom says her dad built the cottage so the family would have a place to spend holidays. Big family? Two brothers, two sisters. He says big enough, how long you been in Toronto? Mom smiles at me seven years. What about the boy's old man? Oh, it's a long story, smiles, we're divorced. It's the picture on the dash that the man stares at for some time. So, whatcha got goin' in the big city? he asks. Not much, so far, trying to get my singing career off the ground. No kidding, eh? A singer, geez, how 'bout singing us a little number? No, I couldn't. Come on, sweetheart, puts a hand on her thigh. Bet you got a voice like a nightingale. I'm not up to it, pushes his hand away. Why're you so uptight? Just tryin' to have some fun. He slips an arm around mom, squeezes her into him. Please, you're hurting me.

Pulls to the gravel, puts fat arms around her. Rips mom's blouse down the middle, licks her neck. I tell him stop. What's that I heard? A little noise- a man or a mouse? He gets out, walks to my side. Mom rushes out, waving at cars. When he opens my door I've got the blade ready, slash him down the right side of his face, dark red squirting out. He wrestles the knife away, cuts my right forearm accidentally in the scuffle. I squirm out the driver's side, run toward mom and a car. She sees me, screams, shoves me in the back. As we speed away, I turn my head, see the truck disappearing south. Jake, where are you hurt? In the arm, nothin', most of it's his. Got him good. Let me see. Fusses. Fucker's got my knife. Forget the knife, she says, tying something tight around my arm, her bra I think.

I wake up on a cot in an Emergency corridor. Grandma and grandpa and mom are standing over me. Dark outside, moths' wings flap against the window. The blood's cleaned up and my right arm's bandaged. Where are we? Mom says Huntsville. What'd they do? Gave you stitches, we're lucky. You're lucky, girl, grandpa says, angrily. How many? Twenty-four, mom says. Make a dandy scar when it heals, it's grandpa, that's damn sure. They catch him? Not yet. Better catch him, fucker's got my knife. Never mind the knife, grandma says, just thank God you're alive. Grandma's right, he says, never mind the knife. Got a good one waitin' for you at the cottage.

The tossing woke me, the sweating. Katie cried out again. I walked into the hall and frightened Diana, who frightened me, white gowned in the dull light. She walked toward Katie's room. I splashed cold water on my face in the bathroom. I wanted to stay awake. No, you need your sleep, need your strength for the hospital. You can stop this dream. Or, if you must dream, you can change it by thinking something pleasant. I'm canoeing with grandma on Lake Bernard, the sun rising. Drifting over by the western bay, High Rock, we fish for an hour. The fish aren't taking worms this morning. Grandma slips a minnow on my hook. I cast carefully. A smallmouth bass takes the minnow, breaks water, flashes, and I fight him close to the boat. Grandma nets him, the largest smallmouth she's ever seen.

Mom packs a picnic, takes me by ferry to Center Island. We walk by the shore a while, watch sailboats in the sun drift through diamonds on Lake Ontario. Then we play I-spy. Then mom sings 'Dream a Little Dream of Me.' Two old men walk clapping by. Mom smiles for them. Then we hug a bit, mom and me, and nothing, nothing, nothing in the world could feel so forever.

After, we walk to where all the kids are. A man helps me get on a pony, leads us around a small corral. Mom leans against the fence, smiles at me each time I pass. When the ride's over I skip to her and she asks if I like them. Doesn't everybody?--why, thinking of buying me one? No, Jake, just wondering.

We walk to a grass hill just before the sand, find a picnic table in the shade. Mom's packed my favorite: tuna salad, with chopped onions and celery, on whole wheat. I see a duck behind her, crying, waddling toward us, crying. I tear off a chunk of crust, throw it. Mom turns to look. Something's dangling off his bill. What's that? I don't know, mom says, nibbling a carrot. When he's right beside us, looking right at us, I can see a barbed hook stuck through his beak. A long trail of fishing line drags through the grass when he moves. What should we do? Just ignore him, he'll be fine. I approach the duck slowly, offering my sandwich to him, careful not to step on the line. He hops out of reach each time I get close. I follow him to the shore and he flops in, paddles out. I throw crumbs out, thinking he'll come back. Come, Jake, there's nothing we can do. Come eat your lunch. I watch the last bit of fishing line slip in, vanish, then return to mom, having failed. He'll be all right. Let's not let it spoil a nice time, okay? I try, but can't eat. Hook's caught in my lips, ripping. How can I eat with a hook caught in my lips, ripping?

When the sun spreads pink all over downtown Toronto, we walk toward the dock, stop at the old man selling souvenirs. Mom says it was a splendid day, wasn't it, asks which T-shirt I like best. I point to the one with purple ducks. No, honey, pick something nice. I tell her I want the purple

ducks. Mom smiles at the old man, we'll take two of those, the ones with yellow letters.

Next in my dream mom's sitting at the kitchen table, staring at a piece of paper. She sees me enter, folds the paper, tucks it into her pocket. What was that? A letter from an old friend. Didn't look like no letter. She turns on the radio. Trumpet, trombone, sax, clarinet, piano, bass. Mom pulls me to the floor, swings me around the kitchen.

...Bessie had affection
One slip, one fall,
Ba da ba do be da da
Bessie couldn't help it
anymore than you could,
or I could...

When the song's over she pours two glasses of orange Kool-Aid, sits down beside me. She's smiling, talking about a trip to Greece with somebody she'd met at George's, a professor who teaches literary theory, quite different from the others, you'd like him. I imagine mom and me frolicking through some sun-scorched ruin while his long white fingers turn pages back at the hotel. You're not disappointed, are you? Why would I be disappointed? Then she explains father's going to watch me for a couple months. Oh, I say, forcing it down, the anger, hurt, or whatever it is, keeping it in the pit of my stomach, tightening it. Can't breathe too good. Please say something, Jake, do you think this is easy for me? Can't breathe too good.

If I could have picked the last scene of my dream, it wouldn't have been the one that follows. I might have preferred one of the times mom and me built sand castles up north. Or the summer night we sat on the porch at the cottage, listening to rain on the aluminum roof, watching the storm light and play with waves on Lake Bernard. Or one of the afternoons I sang a little impromptu lyric while mom played the electric piano in our apartment. It certainly wouldn't have been the last image I have of her in real life. I've tried for years to put that out of my head. I'm more than a little numb right now, from drink, having to write it.

We're standing, mom and me, in the center of the dark concrete platform of Union Station. I can see gray sky where the train comes in, sun where it will go out. The train's humid, greasy breath blows mom's hair behind her head. We're holding hands, got our matching T-shirts on. Mom's humming a little number, which I can hardly hear over the train's engine. I'll miss you, she says, staring at the side of the gray train like she's watching waves at the shore. It's not for long. The conductor looks at me,

cold eyes. Mom holds me a minute, and I squeeze myself into her, the side of my face pressing into her, she smells like sandalwood. Then I climb the black rubber steps, duffle bag over shoulder, find a good seat by the window. Mom and the conductor exchange smiles on the platform. The train jerks backward, then forward. She blows a kiss, then turns, and walks away.

Book 2

1

Tired, I dropped Katie off at school the following morning, and arrived at the Coronary Care Unit around nine. Father, pale and sipping coffee, was talking to a tall, gaunt priest in the waiting room.

"No, Father, he's not a practicing Catholic, but I think it would still be a good idea."

"Well, he'll be one when I get through with him," the priest quipped.

Father laughed. "Sure. Watch yourself in there, though. Dad's been known to sell a thing or two to some pretty good men."

The priest laughed.

"Morning, Jake. I'd like you to meet Father Metcalfe."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, son," he said, shaking my hand.

After several minutes of small-talk, the priest excused himself, and walked toward grandpa's room.

"How's grandpa Vic?"

"Well, some good news, I guess. Dad's kidneys seem to be functioning again."

"Really?"

Father spoke in a tired, grave whisper. "Yes, but the prognosis hasn't changed. Keep that in mind. They're doing the best they can, but the doctors say it'll take a miracle before dad leaves this place. They've taken him off the morphine drip for now. He should start waking soon. They want to see if they can get dad sitting, maybe get a little liquid into him."

He leaned against the ledge, looked out the window, and scratched his stubbled chin. "Listen, I want you to know how much I appreciate you being here. It means everything to me, and I won't forget it. I want you to know that if there's ever anything I can--"

"Please, don't say it," I interrupted. Sure, lend a friend a couple of bucks, and you appreciate some kind word in return. Sure, if a friend offers to cook you dinner for helping move furniture across town, why not take her up on it? But, Jesus, at a time like this...it's something you give no thought. I sure didn't expect one scrap of thanks, and when it came--you could understand politeness from a stranger--the words seemed superfluous, ridiculous, hurtful. It was one of those moments when the smallest pool of

silence might have contained more than the widest sea where words float freely as weeds.

We walked into the hallway and waited for the elevator. Father set his tired, black eyes on me. "I won't forget it, son. Thanks. I can go home and sleep fine knowing you're with dad."

"Don't say another word. I'm not here for you."

Then the elevator doors closed and I watched the numbers descend rapidly from seven to one, and remain there.

From the waiting room window I watched father emerge below. He crossed Terrace Hill, walked toward the parking lot, and stopped at the pay phone. He talked five minutes, gesticulating calmly with his left hand, now and then pushing the bridge of his sunglasses toward his face. Then he walked to the car, and drove to the exit. I expected him to turn left at the corner, but he turned right, and one green light and two red lights north I watched father's new white Cadillac disappeared behind a row of oaks.

2

The door was slightly open and I looked in, not knowing if it was okay to enter.

"Come in, son. I'm almost finished."

Father Metcalfe's white hand rested on grandpa's dark left arm. If you could compare them side by side, oxygen, IV and electrocardiograph wired to the priest, you'd think grandpa Vic was healthier by two or three lengths. I walked to the opposite side of the bed, and placed my hand on my grandfather's right forearm.

"It's good that you're here," the priest said. "Don't be afraid to touch him. That way he'll know you're here, that way he won't die alone."

"Why would I be afraid to touch him?"

"Some people are, son. I'm sorry."

Father Metcalfe opened a small vial and began flicking water. A drop splashed grandpa's left cheek and he opened his eyes suddenly. Right away I could feel the warmth on me, in me, like when the sun pokes through clouds.

"Good to have you, son. Not livin' in town now, are ya?" He looked at the priest, trying to raise his right arm. "Don't think we've met."

"Just rest, my son. Everything's in God's hands." The priest touched grandpa's forehead with a white wet finger.

"What in hell?--do that again and I'll break your fuckin' head." The priest jumped slightly, then composed himself.

"Victor, look who's here. Look who came all the way from Vancouver to see you."

"Don't know nobody in Vancouver." He searched me, tried to place me.

"It's me," I said--"it's Jake."

"Know bloody well who you are, dummy. Now get the fuckin' door."

"Huh?"

"Got a business to run. Answer the door."

I walked to the door, opened it. There was no one there.

Grandpa turned to the priest. "Evenin'. You alone?"

"No man is ever truly alone, my son."

"None o' your fancy talk. Somebody drive you?"

"No. I drove myself. Why?" Father Metcalfe looked at me. I looked at grandpa Vic.

"What're you lookin' at? Don't stand there like a jackass. Get the man his goods...Thanks, Jake, thataboy." He turned to the priest. "Not drunk are you?"

"No. Of course not. Why?"

"None of your smart ass talk. Sure yain't drunk?"

"Certainly not!"

"Don't slam the door on your way out. Watch your step. Saw some cops around earlier." The priest looked at me. I looked at grandpa. Grandpa looked at the priest.

"Piss off! We got a business to run."

The priest told me he was sorry. He shook his head and my hand and said that these things sometimes happen. It would be best, though, if it were quick. It's hard on the family when it goes on a long time. He's seen it many times, the way it can go on a long time. He'll pray that it's over for us soon. Then he handed me his card and said to call on him when we needed.

"Thanks, I'm sure it won't be necessary."

"You two got nothin' to do but stand 'round chattin' like ladies at a social? We got a business to run. Fuck off!"

"Grandpa Vic, behave."

Teeth clenched, he wrapped his hands around the rails, and lifted himself halfway into sitting position. His body quivered, eyes closed, and he fell gently to the bed.

"Thank you, Father," I said, one eye on grandpa. "I'm sure everything will be fine." We shook hands and I said goodbye, the way you say goodbye to people you know you'll never see again.

Father Metcalfe took his leave, all politeness, saying God be with us, smiling, closing the door.

Grandpa opened his eyes. "Sorry to be so hard on ya, son. Guess it's Helen's death still got me shook up. I appreciate you comin' by, though. Know you mean well." He paused. "But listen, you gotta learn not to be too easy on people. Take that fella there. If I didn't say somethin', you'd still be

talkin' up a storm. Told you before, in...make the exchange...out. You wanna help, you gotta keep that in mind. Stay home otherwise. We can't have these fellas around all night. It's no good for business. And don't let 'em know you got a soft spot. Then we'll have every drunk in town hangin' about, thinkin' to get it for nothin'."

A nurse entered to sedate grandpa, and ten minutes later a little of the old snore came rumbling out.

"That should keep him comfortable for a while," she said.

3

That first summer I came to stay in Brantford I wanted to know all about this large, boisterous man who'd come bursting into the house every day, cigar in mouth. He'd come at different times, but always while father was at the Lynden Park Mall, running the hobby shop (located between the liquor store and K-Mart. "A man needs to know three things about business, Jake: location, location, location"). Grandpa would bathe, shave, and put on the fresh clothes that Diana had laid out on the bed in his room, where he never slept. Then he'd sit down to a tremendous meal, a thousand stories always rolling out of him.

I hated most everything that first summer. I hated Diana's tidy house. Hated her. Hated supper at six. Hated short hair. Months passed, no sign of mom. Hated that. Couldn't understand that. Nobody'd talk about that. Hated not knowing what she was doing, who she was with, where. Hated the dreams I kept having. Something large and dark tugging me, not trying to hurt me, just tugging. Diana would come into my room, stir me, hold me, tell me everything's okay. But a person can't do you much good when you hate them. I'd fall asleep and the dream would start all over. And when the sun came in my window the next morning I'd be crying and angry. I'd turn on the radio, listen for hours, nothing. That got me. I've never talked to anyone about it--except Julie. I haven't mentioned Julie yet--because I'm ashamed how much I cried back then.

You could never know where she was, or exactly why, but grandpa Vic, grandpa Vic, you could always see grandpa Vic. You could always make a little game out of him, try to figure out who he was. Nobody'd talk about that either, what he did, where he slept. But you could see the cracks and scars in his huge hands. And you could smell him. And you could listen to his stories. It's hard to put something together when you've got no pieces, but grandpa Vic...you could always listen patiently, collect the pieces, tuck them away. One day you'd be able to fit them in place, make a beginning, middle, and end out of them.

That first summer he was the reason I came out of my room, away from the radio. Sure, father tried. Diana tried, too, of course. But grandpa

Vic, who seemed to make no effort at all, could bring me out from the start. He'd never knock at your door with a plate of cookies, or tickets to a game. But you'd always hear him in the kitchen, laughing hard, pounding his fist on the table, and you'd have to go see for yourself. And when you did he'd never try to make you feel like he cared. You could have been a dog sitting there, and dogs, cats, horses, all animals, always liked to be near grandpa Vic. He never did anything to make you feel like a special case. He'd treat you same as anybody else. He'd cuss, he'd bark, he'd smoke, he'd never fuss. It didn't seem to matter whether you were in the room or not. That pulled you to him. But it was clear as day in his eyes that he cared. I was lucky to have him.

I figured he was a farmer. Under the smell of cigar I could always detect a barn. And he paid no attention to his dress, nothing like father. And he had the hands of a man who had worked outside his whole life. Even after a bath I could still see the dirt worked into the cracks in his hands, under his nails.

One morning, after he had just left us, Diana and I sat in the enormous emptiness of his absence.

"Is he a farmer?"

"No, he's not a farmer," she said, smiling.

"Well, what is he?"

"Told you before, you'll have to ask your father."

So I ruled that out, because I didn't have to like Diana to trust her. But there'd be other pieces and, like leaves in autumn, some days they'd fall all around me.

They called grandpa Vic the Veggie Man. Every Saturday morning he'd bring us a heaping bushel basket of fruit and vegetables, from Ford's Fruit Market. He'd fill a basket, then shoot craps with Charlie Ford. If grandpa lost, he'd pay double. He never lost, and father always went on about that, but you'd never hear grandpa say one word about his successes.

After breakfast one Saturday morning, against a wall in the kitchen, the old man showed me how it's all in the wrist. When we were finished he knocked an ash off his cigar, spit something I couldn't see, and told me I was ready for Vegas.

"What's Vegas?"

"Las Vegas? Las Vegas, Nebraska? Ain't you ever heard of it?"

"No. What's so big about it?"

"Everything, son! It's a huge place, a noisy place. Lots of raucous. It's a fast place that never sleeps; the kind of place where a man can get anything he desires. It's all lit up."

"They got music there?"

"You bet, son. All you hear is music. All the big names. Elvis. Sinatra. Sonny and Cher. Sammy Davis Jr. You name it, they're all there.

And you wouldn't believe the money folks got in Vegas. Everybody throwing chips on the table, rolling the dice like you just did, everybody trying to get a piece of the action."

"Sounds like a fun place. When you goin' next? Maybe I'll come along."

"Truth is, I ain't ever been. Besides, a man my age probably couldn't take all the excitement."

"But you talk like you've seen it," I said, feeling a little duped.

"I've known all sorts of fellas who've been to Vegas. Heard all their crazy stories. When you hear so much about a place, it puts a picture in your head. That's what I just described to you, the picture I got of it in my head."

"Well, why don't we go? The two of us could go."

"Ain't for me, son. You'll have to make the trip yourself, one day. I'm too old for it now. Besides, all the talk I've heard, it feels like I've already been. Don't feel the need to go no more. But don't let me talk you out of it. Go yourself. It just ain't somethin' I care to see."

Grandpa walked to the door, heavy black boots on the linoleum floor. He removed his Atlanta Braves ball cap from the door knob.

"Well, this afternoon's filled with a hundred appointments. Bankers, lawyers, accountants, stockbrokers, officials of the law. Got meetin's with 'em all. Then I'll stop by the farm, visit with my horses. Maybe I'll see you two again, sometime, eh?"

"Okay, Vic. Thanks again."

"Bye," I said, and then--"hey, how's that horse you won off that old guy?"

"Thought I told you, son, she's gone."

"Gone?"

"Yeah, the old fella missed her. Came around the farm one afternoon, offerin' to buy her back."

"Oh." Pause. "Well, if you ever need help with any of the other horses--"

"Thanks, son. I'll keep the offer in mind."

Back in the quiet kitchen I sat in grandpa's chair (which was really father's, but it felt more like grandpa's) staring at his empty plate: toast crumbs, hunks of dried orange cheese, dried ketchup with bits of egg and fried potato mixed in.

"What do you think, does he drive around telling stories all day?"

Diana laughed. "No, Jake, that isn't it."

"What's he got going with the horses?"

"He races them."

"Isn't he too big for a horse?"

"No, no. Someone rides them for him. A jockey, in a buggy."

"Is that what he does for a living?"

"Not really, it's more like a hobby."

"Well, what does he do?"

"Why are you so curious?"

"How am I gonna know if I don't ask?"

"I suppose that's true."

I took advantage of it. The talk about horses got me thinking about her.

"Did you know my mom?"

"No, but I've heard a great deal about her."

"Oh, what did you hear?"

"I heard she's a beautiful woman, with a very pretty voice."

"You heard that? From who?"

"Your father."

"He wouldn't say those things."

"It's true, he did. He loved her a great deal. It really hurt him when she left."

"He never cared about her."

"Yes he did, Jake. I wouldn't say it if it wasn't true."

I picked up grandpa's fork and dropped it on the plate.

"Come here," she said, trying to put her arms around me, but I got loose, and sprang to my room.

4

If ever I am a parent I'd like always to be straight with my children, no matter what. No matter if I am a murderer, a thief, or even a much smaller matter, like the son of a bootlegger. What great sin is that? Long as he's been a good father, and hasn't taken unnecessary swings at you, what great sin is that? If you are burying bitter nuts your children will find them out like hungry squirrels. Better to crack the ugly things open and look at them together. If you don't (it might take years, but count on it) they will dig them up. I might've understood father, maybe loved him, had he been straight with me from the start.

One fall Saturday when I was ten, father sent me to the Mohawk Plaza to pick up a prescription. The pharmacist called out my last name and I went to the counter to pay. As I was leaving an old man turned his head from the vitamin section. His black, sunken eyes frightened me a little.

"Are you Jacob _?"

"Who wants to know?"

"Are you the grandson of...Victor, son of Jacob?"

"Yes. Why? Who are you?"

"Finally we meet," he said, smiling a gold tooth smile. The old man held out his arms as if to embrace me, then clasped his fingers together at the

front of his dark wool cardigan. "You know, you look a lot like your father when he was your age." He put one arm around me, and led me down the center aisle toward the toiletries, slowly, because he walked with a limp. When we stopped walking the old man set his black eyes on me, and put frail hands on my shoulders.

"Do I know you?" I asked, eyeing him suspiciously, taking a backward step.

"My name's Tony." I didn't accept his hand. "I'm Victor's brother. Your...great-uncle."

The old man spoke feebly. His voice was nothing like grandpa Vic's thick, gruff bark. He looked about the same height, six feet or so, but Tony had nothing of grandpa's enormous frame. He had grandpa's dark complexion, but more gray hair on the crown of his head, which was thick, like father's. There was nothing vibrant about him, no tremendous vigor. He seemed to hang in front of me with languid stiffness.

"What do you want?" I asked.

"I want to tell you about a tragedy, but I'm afraid it isn't my place."

"What tragedy?"

"I think you should ask your father about it."

"About what?"

"It isn't right for me to say. Ask your father. It's a very sad story. Get him to tell you all about your grandfather."

"What does he do?" I asked, piqued.

"Believe me, young man, your grandfather isn't the man you think he is. Ask your father, okay?"

"I've tried. He won't say much, only that grandpa races horses."

"Tell your father that you ran into me today. That might help things along."

Tony took my hand in his and shook it lethargically. I didn't feel any cracks or calluses. His hands were clean, but there was nothing impressive about them. They told a story not of physical labors, but, I imagined, of pencils and calculators.

And then the old man bowed slightly, and limped away.

When I got home father was shifting papers on the kitchen table.

"Make out okay?"

"Yeah," I said, setting the prescription on the counter. "Got a minute?"

"Uh huh."

"I met a man at the drugstore..."

"Uh huh," his eyes flashed from the papers to me to the papers.

"Said his name's Tony." Father's eyes stayed up.

"And what did Tony have to say?"

"Said he's grandpa's brother."

"That's right, anything else?"

"He said I should ask you about grandpa Vic."

Father picked a paper off one pile, examined it, set it on top of another.

"A long time ago there was a small difference of opinion between Tony and your grandfather, that's all." Father looked at me and saw it wasn't enough. "The whole problem started when your great-grandfather ran into a little business trouble."

"What sort of trouble?"

"Nothing, really. He ran a fruit market. It was a good business till the Depression hit. He lost everything overnight. I think Tony was ashamed of his father's failure, and he started talking bad about him behind his back. Your grandpa used to beat Tony up over that, even though Tony was five years older. A few years ago, after I ran into Tony, I asked dad about some of the things he had told me. Grandpa Vic said: 'Your old man's your old man, and he's all you got, and you don't ever turn away.'

Father said all this very quickly, and I had to really pay attention to keep up.

"A few years after my grandparents died, Tony moved away, and started a trucking company. He left dad to care for himself. Your grandpa was only a boy at the time."

"What did grandpa do?"

"It doesn't matter now."

"What happened to Tony?"

"He ran the trucking company for a few years before it failed. Dad had his own business by then, and he offered Tony a job. Tony just screwed things up, made a mess out of things. Grandpa Vic wouldn't have anything to do with him after that."

Father scratched his armpit and looked out the window.

"If you see Tony again, just ignore him. He tried telling me a bunch of nonsense a few years ago, don't remember what any of it was about. He's a troublemaker, son, your grandfather told me that. It seems Tony was always a bit jealous of your grandfather's success. Don't pay any attention to him, he's just trying to stir up trouble. Besides, I think he's a little crazy upstairs," father said, tapping his head with a finger. "If you see him, it would be a good idea to keep clear."

Father probably imagined the whole thing would blow over, the way adults think children forget a scolding or a spanking when they pick up their playthings. But a year later I ran into the old man again. I was flipping through the *Auto Trader* in the same drugstore when he limped toward me. I pretended not to notice.

"Hello, young man. How are you?"

"Fine," I said, glancing up briefly.

"Say, did you have that little talk with your father?"

"Yeah," I said, not lifting my eyes.

"And what did he say?"

"He told me everything. Now why don't you leave me alone, old man."

"Sure, Jake. But first, tell me what your father said."

"He told me how my great-grandfather lost the fruit market in the Depression. And how you left grandpa all alone after your parents died. And how grandpa gave you a job later, and how you just screwed things up. You're just jealous of grandpa Vic."

"That's what your father told you?" he asked, shaking his head.

"Yeah," I said. "Now, leave me alone." I returned to the magazine.

"Son, your father hasn't been entirely on the level." I heard his feeble fingers scratch a cheek. "Ask him what really happened. Get him to tell you about your grandfather. He's not the man you think he is. Ask him about your grandmother, too. It's all a very sad story."

"My dad says you're crazy. Leave me alone or--" I took a quick look at the pharmacist--"or I'll tell him you're bothering me."

"Fine, Jake, fine," he smiled, the gold tooth flashing. "Best of luck to you, young man. But if I were in your shoes, I'd sure want to know the real story." Tony scratched his thick, gray hair and limped off.

5

"Victor sure has been sleeping soundly," a nurse said. "He's had plenty of morphine in his system the past couple of days, it's no wonder. Can I get you anything, a coffee?"

"Yes, thanks. Black."

I looked at grandpa, his back turned to me, wishing he'd stir, say something.

Father entered the room around two in the afternoon, carrying a Burger King bag. He looked worse than when he left that morning. He was still unshaven, still in the same clothes, a dark purple silk shirt and black trousers. He didn't remove his leather jacket. He seemed in a hurry.

"Hi, Jake. Brought you something to eat, figured you'd probably be hungry."

I set the bag on the counter, then returned to my chair. Father looked at me. What did he expect, did he expect me to open the bag and eat right then and there?

"You should eat. You need your strength." He opened the bag, tugged out a few fries, and threw them into his mouth. "How's dad?"

"He's been asleep since the priest left."

"He woke up?"

"Just for a few minutes."

"Did he say anything?"

"Nothing that made sense." I watched father carefully. "Did you sleep well?"

His eyes followed his hand into the bag, not noticing an inch of bright orange urine trickle down the catheter, and wind into the plastic bag at the side of the bed.

"Off and on. The phone kept ringing. Everybody's calling, worried about dad." Father tilted his head and rubbed his neck. "Word spreads fast. Everbody's wondering who's looking after things." Pause. "A gentleman came by the house this morning, Lafarge. He's in charge of security at all Ontario racetracks. Dad mentioned his name a few times, always spoke well of him. Anyways, Lafarge told me that two years ago he needed a quadruple bypass. When he got out of the hospital he wanted to take a vacation with his wife, but he didn't have the money. Dad gave him seven grand. When Lafarge tried to return the money a while later, dad refused." He looked at grandpa, shaking his head. "You know what he was like.

"Lafarge said he didn't feel good about not being able to return the money, but what could he do? And then he handed me a check, saying 'It's a lot of money, Jake. I want you to have it. I'm sure you could use it to help pay Vic's expenses.'" Father grabbed a fry. "He came for another reason, too. He wants to set up a meeting with a friend of his, Frank Delucci, a businessman from Toronto. Delucci's apparently interested in some sort of joint venture. I guess Lafarge had been trying for years to talk dad into meeting him. But you know dad was never interested in branching out. I told him I'd consider meeting Delucci after all this has blown over."

"Meaning grandpa?" I asked, glancing at the bed, looking sharply at father.

"Yes. One way or the other. Anyways, it sure was kind of him to stop by and pay off a debt to a dying man." Father looked at grandpa. "God only knows how many people owe him."

Father walked toward the window on the opposite side of the room, and put a finger between the beige horizontal blinds.

"It's finally warming up a little," he said. "Been a long winter." He paused, his back still turned to me. "Why don't you go outside and get some fresh air? I'll stay with dad."

"I'm all right." I kept my eye on father. "Where'd you go when you left the hospital this morning?"

He tilted his head and looked up Terrace Hill.

"Had a couple of errands to run. Why? Dad would be mad as hell if I let the business fall apart. Everything's a mess. I had to meet with one fellow, calls himself Taxi. Used to buy bulk from dad. Now he thinks he can walk in and take things over. Says he can buy the whiskey off some fellow on a reserve in Montreal. Says he'll do it only until dad's back on his feet. I told him not to do anything he'd regret. I said that Vic is recovering, and

everything will be back to normal soon. You should've seen his face. Scared the hell out of him. That's the only way, Jake, till I can figure this thing out."

Father stared blankly at the sink. Then he walked toward me slowly, hands at his waist, blowing air out his mouth, compressed and long.

"You all right, son?"

"Fine, why?"

"You don't look well. Try to eat something," he said, glancing at the bag. "Listen, I've got to go and look after a few things. I'll stop by later, okay? Keep an eye on dad."

What else would I do? I thought to myself as I watched father quit the room.

6

I dozed in the chair on the left side of the room, grandpa's liquid breathing lulling me to sleep. I woke occasionally, whenever a nurse entered to run tests, groom, or rotate him, ingeniously, all 270 pounds of him.

In a dream a phone kept ringing when grandpa's voice woke me.

"Get the fuckin' thing, will ya?" he said, lifting his large head.

"Jake, it's me." It was father. "How's everything?"

I watched grandpa's dark, ruffled head drop to the pillow.

"Okay."

"Didn't wake you, did I?"

"No."

"Listen, son, I won't be able to stop by tonight. I got held up with a few things...Why don't you go home?"

"No, I'm fine. Where are you?"

"Buffalo...Listen, it doesn't make any sense for you to stay. Go home and sleep. The nurses will take good care of dad."

"I want to stay."

"I don't think it's necessary, but do what you have to. Goodnight."

I put the phone down and watched grandpa lying on his back in the dull orange light of the lamp. The IV was attached to his right arm. His hands were crossed, resting on his stomach. The white sheet was folded over at his waist. I looked at the letters carved in his right forearm; and his large upper body, strong from years of bending and lifting.

I reached through the rail, felt the coarse skin on his hands, the calloused knuckles and thick fingers. I traced the rough scar down his right hand.

I once read in *Vogue*--or was it *Cosmopolitan*, or *Glamour*?--that ten is the size of the average man's ring finger. That's the size of my ring finger, ten. When I was nineteen, just before I left for Vancouver, grandpa gave me his wedding band. "There's a lot of gold there," he said. "You can have it

melted down, maybe make a nice ring out of it." I tried it on and it slid off my first three fingers. "Hard work, son. That's what gives a man strong hands." I try that ring on at least once a month. Still, not even my thumb will hold it.

I've heard men in bars say that they can do this and that with their hands, but listen to this: when I was twelve I watched grandpa put a horse down with one crack. He stopped by the house one summer afternoon, said he needed my help out on the farm. For fifteen minutes he sat behind the wheel of his old green Cadillac, while I kicked stones on the floor mat, listening to Jimmy Hendrix's 'Hey Joe' and then Sonny and Cher's 'I've Got You Babe.'

"Here's where I keep my horses," he said, turning off Powerline, driving down a long gravel drive. "I'm havin' a little trouble with that one." He pointed to a large black animal chewing grass in the shade of a willow. "Bought him for the harness, but he don't care for it. Maybe he'll take to the saddle a little better. Been workin' him several months now."

I stood on the wooden fence, smelling the hayfield across the drive, and the sun on my skin, while the horse walked in circles, grandpa now and then tapping him on the hocks with the lunge whip. Then grandpa approached him slowly, brushed the rope gently along the back and flank, readying him for the saddle. Suddenly the horse bucked, drove his fore feet into grandpa's chest. He got up slowly, and approached the horse again, not taking his eyes off the animal's.

"It's okay, fella, nobody's gonna hurt you."

I could see that the horse was angry, and when he tried to buck again, that's when grandpa drove his right fist into the side of the horse's head. The animal fell to the ground, and didn't get up.

Mrs. Bailey, the silver-haired lady who owned the farm where grandpa boarded his horses, had watched it all from her kitchen window. She ran outside because she couldn't believe what she had seen.

"Victor, are my eyes failing me? Did I see that right? Did that horse take a poke at you?"

"Yes, ma'am, he did."

"Is your hand sore? Let me see. You must have broken some bones! Now you wait here and I'll go get some ice."

Grandpa and I stood in silence. He made a fist, examined it, and shook his head.

"I'm sorry you saw it, son. Had me a little frightened, that's what it was. Should've given him more time yet, he's still too green. First and last time I ever hit an animal. A fella can act pretty stupid when he's afraid. Sorry you saw it."

Mrs. Bailey, who had returned and begun applying ice, said never you mind, the beast had it coming.

"They *always* listen to your grandfather, and they don't do it for the carrots or the apples." She shook her head at the horse. "He's a stubborn reprobate, that's what he is. He'll change his ways before long."

And when the horse got up early that night he and grandpa were like old friends. After that it didn't take long before the animal was the gentlest thing you'd ever want to ride--not that I got to ride him for long, grandpa trading him a short time later for a filly with good trotting potential.

My hands on my grandfather's, only when I heard his gurgled breathing, saw the oxygen tube in his nostrils, the electrodes on his chest, and the Vaseline smeared on his lips, did I remember who was comforting whom. But still, I thought to myself, trapped inside this plaything of a bed, grandpa Vic is strong enough to carry father and me for the rest of our lives.

7

"Jesus, where the hell am I?" grandpa's eyes blinked two or three times.

"You're in the hospital."

"Where?--the hospital?--get me the hell out!" He wrapped his hands around the rails and started lifting himself. "Help me, son. Grab me. Get me out!"

"Grandpa Vic, please relax. Everything'll be fine," I said, resting my hand on his shoulder."

"Okay, son," he grabbed my arm--"say, did you get the money?"

"Yes," I said, "at the beginning of the month."

"Good, good," he smiled. "What time is it?"

I looked at my watch. "One-fifteen."

"Who's driving?" he asked, pulling on the rails again. The oxygen tube tugged and three electrodes popped off his chest. He shook his head angrily, trying to get the rubber tube off him.

"Are you in any pain?" I asked, smoothing his hair, looking into the hall for a nurse.

"No, son. Who's driving?"

"I am."

"Good, good." He calmed down. A nurse entered, carrying two needles on a small plastic tray.

"What's going on in here?" she asked playfully.

"Oh, hi ya, baby."

"Hi, yourself." She turned to me. "Good morning. You must be Victor's grandson."

"I'm Jake." I looked at her silver BGH name tag. "Do you pronounce that like the car?"

"Yes, that's right. Mer-say-deez." She adjusted the oxygen tube in grandpa's nostrils and snapped the electrodes to the adhesives on the left side of his chest. "He seems relaxed right now. I think we'll leave him for the moment."

I was worried that he might hurt himself, and I wished she would administer the sedative. I was relieved when he struggled again.

"Get me out of here! Jake, what're you waitin' for? Give me a hand. Grab me. Get me the fuck out! Grab me. Or get a shovel and put me in the ground!"

"We'll give him a little morphine. That should make him comfortable."

Mercedes disconnected the IV and injected a needle into the line at the back of grandpa's hand. The fluid went in quickly, and I looked at her. "It's only saline. It clears the line." Then she injected the sedative slowly. "That should do the trick," she said. She adjusted the pillow under grandpa's head and walked toward the door. "Call if you need me."

8

I think the incident with Dale Lottner occurred when I was in grade seven, the year I won that little poetry competition, though my grab bag memory remembers that bleak, gray Monday afternoon in late autumn more precisely for taking place while father was in California, searching for a new product.

Father's hobby shop was the first store in Brantford to sell personalized T-shirts, which went over brilliantly with the public, father selling nearly two hundred in the first couple of days alone. ("They sell well because they're selling well, Jake.") Sometimes he'd bring home the defects for me to wear, and I remember one shirt in particular, a white one, had a small tear in the left sleeve. Diana stitched it, told me it looked striking on. The initials 'CGIT' were spread in bold red letters across the front. One day, after months of being seen in it around school, an old janitor took me aside and told me what the letters meant. "Who asked you?" I snapped--"Keep your fat nose out of my business. I know what it means, it means 'Canadian *Guys* In Training'!" And then I hurried home to change, threw the rotten thing in the trash, and cursed father, till he gave me a good knock on the head.

Father was in good spirits for a time, T-shirts selling like hula hoops, and then somebody opened a T-shirt kiosk smack dab in the middle of the mall. Father's sales quickly slumped; and he decided to take a trip to California, to find the next pearl with which to dazzle the frantic Christmas crowd, which had already begun trickling in.

Anyway, he wasn't home that afternoon I walked in with bloody nose and kicked in ribs. But grandpa Vic was. And he saw things for what they were, and squared them, with all the expediency and candor of a politician.

As I was walking home from school that dull afternoon Dale Lottner, an older boy from Pauline Johnson High, shouted to me across Echo Place Avenue. He crossed the street, workboots dragging.

"What do you want?" I asked.

"Your grandpa is Vic, right?" he asked, smoke in mouth, red scruff on face.

"What's it to you?"

"I was there Saturday night with friends, and he told me to piss off."

My curiosity was suddenly piqued, but I was careful not to reveal my ignorance.

"So what?"

Lottner drove his fist into my face. My nose cracked and I fell to the pavement.

"Tell Vic to look after me next time."

"Fuck off," I said, staring coldly. ("Don't ever take your eye off an angry dog.")

He kicked me in the ribs. I saw the green triangle, felt the steel-toe.

"Just tell him what I said."

"Fuck off."

He kicked me again, then slouched off, Greb Kodiaks dragging, a long tear at the back of his red and black checked jacket hanging.

"No, no, that ain't the way," grandpa instructed Diana as I entered the house, hand cupping my nose. She stood over the stove, frying something. I couldn't see him. "Just throw 'em in the sauce. They'll cook. That way you won't get all the grease, know what I mean?"

"Sure," she smiled, "but I'd like to see you make *perehe* or *holubsi*."

"Nothin' to those. It's all in how you wrap 'em."

Diana chuckled, then turned her head toward the hall.

"Hi, Jake. I didn't hear you come in. What's the matter?"

I walked into the bathroom, dabbed toilet paper to my face, held my nose in the air, and lifted my shirt to see if ribs poked through. Then I went to my room, shut the door, slammed Supertramp into the cassette deck--

So you think your schooling's phoney
I guess it's hard not to agree
You say it all depends on money
And who is in your family tree
Right, you're bloody well right
you know you got a right to say...

I heard a knock at the door.

"Want to talk?" Diana asked.

"No."

A minute later grandpa pounded the side of his fist.

"Open the door, son." Silence. "Give me a hand, will ya?"

"With what?"

"No time to talk. Get your shoes."

He spoke with such urgency that, automatically, despite the confusion and anger I was feeling toward him, I rolled off the bed, and opened the door.

"What in hell happened to you?"

"Nothin'."

He held my cheeks. "You missed a little blood, but it don't look broke." He searched my face from another angle. "You all right?"

"Yeah."

"Come on, then, get your jacket."

The inside of grandpa's old green Cadillac was littered with paper bags, cigar wrappers, newspapers. Ragged forest green upholstery shredded in places, and I pinched off a small chunk of orange foam, rolled it into a ball with my fingertips. The car reeked of cigar, and thick dustballs swirled on the dash as we drove down Collingdon Drive.

We passed the Lottner's front yard on the right and I saw Dale tossing a football with his brother. Their old man sat on the porch behind the paper. Dale eyed me and I scowled back, banged my middle finger hard against the glass.

Grandpa saw it out of the corner of his eye.

We drove north and turned left at Powerline Road. Change jingled in his pocket as he reached in, pulled out a thick roll of cash, wrapped in a fat elastic.

"Make sure there's six grand there, will you?"

I was shocked and thrilled by the weight of all the money.

"What's it for?"

"Need to settle an account."

"What account?"

There was six grand. I returned the money to grandpa and he stuffed it in a paper bag. At King George Road he entered the north-west corner of the Brantford Mall and parked in front of the Brewer's Retail.

"Back in a minute," he said, easing his bulk out the door, the paper bag tucked under his left arm.

I looked through the window, past my reflection. There were no customers inside, and three employees smiled when he entered. Grandpa underhanded the bag to the giant behind the register, then leaned against the counter, right hand on hip, and talked for a couple minutes. Everybody laughed. He said a few words more and they laughed even harder. And then

he spoke one word, dropped his fist on the counter, and they were all wide-mouthed with laughter, rubbing their eyes, holding their bellies. When they had calmed down grandpa said goodbye, then walked toward the door, his face deeper than mine in the glass. As he returned to the car I watched them inside: still laughing, looking at one another, shaking their heads, still laughing.

"What in hell's so funny?" grandpa eyed me.

"I don't know. What were you saying to them?"

"Nothin' much. Don't take a whole lot to get those clowns goin'. Bunch of jokers, always horsin' around."

"Why did you give that man the money?"

"Told you, son, had to settle an account."

We drove the same way home, which was the long way.

"Grandpa Vic?"

"What?"

It took a moment to find the words, and then--

"What do you do for a living?"

"Long as I'm doin' it for myself, most anything. Know what I mean?"

He spoke with an enthusiasm that made me have to work to keep from nodding yes, dropping the matter altogether. I spoke hesitantly:

"Not really, what...*type* of work do you do?"

"Work?" he asked incredulously, his brow straining and eyes squinting. "It ain't work. Hell, I never worked a day in my life, only hustled."

His gruff voice rang with such sincerity and conviction that I was completely swept along with him. I decided to drop the matter for now.

Grandpa Vic passed Collingdon, and I thought he'd turn left on Hickory, but he drove down the gravel road which led to Mohawk Park. He parked at the spot (it wasn't really a dump, signs being posted all over) where folks pitched their garbage at night. On Sundays me and friends would sometimes pack sandwiches, spend the day looking for arrowheads. We'd dig at the dirt underneath empty mickeys, tires, old toys, brush trimmings, broken beer bottles; but still, we never found a single arrowhead.

"Come on, I'll show you what I mean."

He walked to the trunk, opened it, and unsealed one of three large boxes, which contained smaller boxes. He dug one out with thick fingers.

"Here's an example of the sorts of things I deal in. Go ahead, open it."

I examined the heavy plastic yo-yo curiously.

"What's it do?"

"When you let her out she lights up. Go ahead, give it a try."

I played with the yo-yo, letting it fall, watching the colors flash.

"I pick these things up at flea markets, sell 'em to friends around the track. A fella might take a dozen off me, or a hundred, to sell to his friends. The more he buys, the better price you give him."

I continued playing with the yo-yo.

"It's really somethin' to see in the dark. Still a little too light out yet. Try it in a dark room when you get home. Something, ain't it? You can keep it."

"Thanks," I said. "What do you pay for a thing like this?"

"Pick 'em up pretty cheap. Not much. Couple bucks." He lit a cigar. "I'll make a few off every one," he said, spewing smoke. "I expect these yo-yos'll do quite well. Don't care much for 'em myself, these trifles, but others seem to like 'em. They're a novelty. Folks are always lookin' for somethin' new." He paused. "Your old man thinks he's gotta fly across the land to find it."

Grandpa turned his head toward Mohawk River. I followed his eyes downhill, saw the river through gray maples, withered sycamores, and the paper birches with their ugly black scars.

"Your grandma and me used to swim down there with your dad, when he was a boy. Used to be a beach right down there," he pointed. "Helen wasn't much of a swimmer, had to keep my eye on her all the time." Pause. "Now you wouldn't wanna swim in that water. Used to be salmon and trout in there. Now all you got is carp. Chief Joseph Brant paddled his canoe up that river, long ago, did you know that?"

"No."

"Either that river or the Grand, I forget." He scratched his stubbled cheek and faced me. "Maybe it was the Grand. That's where the name 'Brantford' comes from. Brant's ford. Your grandma told me that Brant dragged his canoe to the bank, settled a community along the Grand River. That's right, son, it was the Grand. The entire city used to belong to Indians at one time. I'm pretty sure of it, but you might wanna check in a book at school, for the facts."

"What happened to grandma?"

He removed his Habs ball cap, smoothed his gray hair, and put the cap back on. Smoke swirled about his dark face as he faced the river.

"She was sick, son," he spoke softly. "Nothin' anybody could do for her."

How did she die?"

"Doctors were never certain."

I looked at my grandfather's face. Serene, like he'd felt no pain all his life. No guilt, no anger, no doubt, no fear had ever remained there long enough to carve.

"Let's go, Jake. Better get you home."

"Can't we stay a bit longer?"

"Not today, son. Diana'll be worried."

We drove up Collingdon. Dale and his old man stood on the lawn. Grandpa Vic pulled up in front of the Lottners'.

"What are you doing?"

"Tell me if I'm wrong." He looked out the window. "That's the boy who beat you, isn't it?"

I couldn't deny it.

He got out of the car and walked across the lawn. Dale's old man looked mildly surprised, but he seemed to know grandpa and he greeted him cordially. I couldn't see grandpa's face, only Dale's, which appeared worried as his eyes darted between the two men. I felt an immediate sense of pleasure, seeing the anxiety on Dale's face, and I was hoping that grandpa would strike him. Dale listened while grandpa spoke, then he shook his head no, vigorously. And then Grandpa Vic returned to the car, not looking at me, just looking straight ahead.

"What was it about?" I asked.

"Oh, the boy came by my place a couple days ago, wantin' to buy somethin' I couldn't sell him."

"Like what?"

"Doesn't matter, son. Point is, it was wrong to hurt you like he did."

"What did you tell him?"

"Don't matter. The boy won't cause you no more trouble."

Grandpa smiled as we pulled into the drive. "Thanks for the nice time, son."

His face appeared suddenly sullen. He stared blankly over the dash as he waited for me to leave the car. There could've been ten thousand things running through grandpa's mind at that moment, and, although I felt nagged by a need to identify one, I had no idea where to begin my search.

9

"Jake, wake up." Father touched my foot. "Sorry to startle you. It's six-thirty. I'm on duty. Can I buy you breakfast?"

I looked at grandpa, stirring, and suddenly remembered where I was.

"Breakfast?" grandpa smacked his lips.

He lifted his head and opened his eyes slowly, adjusting to the light peeping through cracks in the blinds. His eyes were dull, clouded with a viscous fluid. His hair stood erect, his face, stubbled gray. There was a terrific odor about him, coming I think from grandpa's mouth.

"Morning, dad. How're you feeling?"

"How do I look?"

Father wiped grandpa's eyes with a tissue.

"Good, dad, good."

"Trick to wearin' a cloth coat, son, is to carry yourself as if it's cashmere."

Father smiled at me.

"Do you know where you are, dad?"

"Sure I do. The fuckin' hospital."

"Do you remember what happened?"

"Everything. Got a memory like a steel trap, you know. Old age is twenty years older than me."

"Did I hear you say you're hungry?"

The day nurse entered. "Good morning, Victor. How are you feeling this morning?"

"How do I look?"

"Like a million dollars."

"Then I feel like two million. What's on the menu?" Grandpa Vic turned to me. "Hi ya, Jake. Whadda ya say? Not livin' in town now, are ya?"

"I'm home for a while, grandpa."

"Good to have you, son."

Father and I stood on opposite sides of the bed, supporting grandpa while the nurse raised the bed slowly.

"Now don't let him fall over," she spoke pleasantly. "I'll be right back with a little juice."

"Bacon and eggs. Over easy," he grunted after her. "Water," he turned to father on his left. "Fuckin' mouth's dry." I held grandpa steady as father stretched to the sink, filled a plastic cup halfway.

"Here, dad."

Father put the cup to his bottom lip, and tilted it, water dribbling down grandpa's chin.

"Get a straw, dummy," grandpa looked at father. I reached across the counter. "That's it, son," he said, feeling the plastic in his lips. "That's it."

"Suck, dad."

"I know how to use a fuckin' straw."

"Well, you're not sucking." Grandpa drank the water. "That's good, dad."

"Listen to how he talks, 'that's good, dad.'"

"More?" I asked.

"No, Jake, I'm fine." He turned to father. "Musta figured I was finished, eh?"

"What?"

"Don't play dumb. I can't blame you, haven't been much of a father, have I?"

"Let's not get into it."

"Why not?" Grandpa grabbed father's wrist. "Why not, son?"

"Dad, please calm down."

Grandpa looked at me. "'Calm down,' he says. Listen to him."

Father shook his head, smiling tolerantly, begging me to overlook the old man's delirium.

The nurse entered. "Here's a little juice, Victor."

"I'm not thirsty, miss, thanks the same."

"He just drank some water," I said.

"Good. That's good, Victor." She looked at me. "How much did he drink?"

"Half a glass."

"Will he drink more?"

"I can speak for myself. No, I don't want no more fuckin' water." He turned to father. "Get me out of this fuckin' place. Take me home. We'll forget the whole thing."

They faced each other bitterly, two rivals about to confront the lifelong dispute between them. Tears swelled in grandpa's eyes and father's face tensed. He fidgeted with the white sheet which had fallen to grandpa's thighs. He pulled it evenly to his waist, folded the sheet over, smoothed it, like Diana making a bed.

"Say, son, did I ever tell you the one about little Johnny?"

"No, I don't think you have," father said, his face relaxing into a smile.

"Well, little Johnny got up one night, having to pee in the worst way. As he walked to the toilet he noticed his mother's door open a crack, so he looked in. There was his mom: lyin' on the bed with nothin' on, touchin' her upper parts, wrigglin', sayin': 'I need a man, I need a man.'"

My grandfather's blue eyes shone majestically as the nurse and father chuckled. He waited a minute for them to settle.

"Next night, same thing. Johnny had to pee again, and on the way to the toilet he looked in on mom, lyin' naked on the bed, massagin' herself, moanin': 'I need a man. I need a man.'"

More laughter.

"On the third night, Johnny peeked in again. This time she had a fella in there, and they were goin' about you know what. Won't say it 'cause there's a lady present. Afterwards, Johnny's mom got a bit worried that the noise might've disturbed the boy, so she went down the hall to check. She nudged the door open a wink, and looked in." Grandpa paused, smiling at us. "There he was: lyin' buck naked on the bed, rubbin' his chest, sayin': 'I need a bike. I need a bike.'"

Grandpa's eyes flashed as the laughter rose. The nurse rubbed her eye with one hand, chuckled behind the other.

"That was cute, Victor. I'm glad to see you have a sense of humor. You need that around here."

Grandpa looked at me, his eyes downcast.

"Why you lookin' so glum? Didn't you like that joke? I'll tell another, got a bag of 'em, you know."

"No, grandpa. It was a good joke. But you should try to rest."

"I'm sorry, son. It was a stupid joke. I'm sorry I told it."

"Your grandson is right, Victor, you really must try and rest."

And then he grabbed father's arm, pulled him close, the IV tearing at grandpa's wrist.

"Get me the fuck out, son. Take me home. Don't let me die in this place."

"Don't talk that way, dad."

"That's what you want, isn't it?"

Father glanced at me quickly. "Why would I want that?"

Grandpa looked at me. "Bring the car around, son. We'll be down in a minute. I'll put on something nice, fix my hair a little, and we'll be right down. Get the car."

"Victor, please," the nurse said, "you'll have to calm down. You're in no condition to leave the hospital."

"Look, lady, this ain't none of your affair. It concerns the three of us. Get the car, son."

"No, you look. I suggest you behave yourself, and enjoy every moment you have with your son and grandson. If you can't, I'll have to sedate you. I don't want to do that, so please cooperate."

"He's fine, ma'am. He's under control," father assured her.

"Fuck you two. Fuck you both. Couple o' fuckheads. Jake, you'll help me out. I can count on you, eh, son?"

I looked at father. The nurse lowered the bed and turned off the infusion pump.

"What're you doin'? Don't want no more of that."

Father and I held grandpa's arms while the nurse administered diazepam. After a moment he calmed down, and the nurse left the room.

"This is what it comes to, eh?" grandpa lifted his head. "Seventy-six, and this. Doctors and nurses. Tubes and wires. Gauzes and needles. A thing in my dick. Proddings."

Father placed his hand on his head, smoothed his hair, and then grandpa slept.

"I gave him a strong dose," the nurse said, returning. "He'll be all right for a little while. You both look like you could use a break."

10

Father rolled into the parking lot at Domenic's Restaurant, opposite the train station. He pointed to the pay phone.

"I need to make a call. Go in and get a seat, I'll only be a minute."

I sat at the counter. The Coca Cola clock buzzed on the wall. The sign beneath it said: 'Good Food, Fast Service, Low Prices.' An old painting of the Queen hung far over to the right. Six years had passed since I was last in Domenic's. In six years the city's two large factories could close, housing prices could plummet, thousands of people from sky-high Toronto could decide the hour-and-a-half commute advantageous, housing prices could rebound, they could even soar, developers could transform the north-east section of the city from farmland to fashionable, upscale housing, and a huge new mall could be constructed downtown. In six years all this could happen. But Domenic's would remain much as I remember it that Friday afternoon grandpa and I stopped in for a bite, his two-ton truck loaded with six hundred cases of beer from the Brewer's Retail sitting in the parking lot, where father's Cadillac is parked now. Only the clock and the sign had changed, a shade more yellow, from kitchen exhaust.

"Hello, stranger."

"Hi, Paula. How are you?"

She poured my coffee. She looked tired, attractive. Father once told me she has a sister in Milan who requires expensive treatments to stay alive. That's the reason she works twelve-hour shifts, six days a week. "There aren't many people like Paula," he said.

"How you been? You live in Vancouver, eh?"

"Yes."

"So far from home, but the experience is good for you. You work?"

"Yes, in a nightclub. I'm training for a managerial position."

"Good, son. Handsome, and smart, too. Married?"

"No."

"One day you have beautiful wife, eh?" Pause. "You must be in town to be with family?"

"Yes." I didn't tell her about grandpa, thinking it might make her feel awkward.

"I hear your grandfather is in the hospital. How is he?"

"You know about him?"

"Yes, I read it in the paper."

"It was in the paper?"

"Several days ago. I was very sorry to hear."

"He's a tough old man. We're not giving up."

"Good. If anybody deserves a long life, it is Victor. Where's papa?"

I pointed out the window.

"I hardly recognize him. He put on weight, eh?" She set another coffee cup on the counter.

Father entered. "Morning, Paula."

"Morning. I hardly recognize you. Sorry to hear about your father. I pray for him." She paused, and looked at us with tender, tired eyes.

"Peameal and eggies for you men...scrambled, over easy, right?" she asked, looking first at father.

We nodded. Paula walked to the kitchen and shouted the order to Domenic, a bald, stocky man of about sixty. He wore a crisp, white chef's uniform, sleeves rolled to the elbows, forearms covered with faded, obscure tattoos.

"This place never changes, does it?" father asked.

Domenic emerged from the kitchen, wiping hands on apron.

"Jacob, sorry to hear about Victor. How is he?"

"Well, he was joking around with us just a few minutes ago, so who knows?"

"I can tell you it was quite a shock. I had to read it again. But I've known Victor thirty years, and I've never known a man with his strength. He'll come out of it. I can tell you that."

When Domenic had returned to the kitchen, I asked father, "Why didn't you tell me it was in the paper?"

"Didn't think of it, son. We cut it out. It was in the Sports section. Dad's quite the sports figure in the city. He's a lifetime member of the Ontario Harness Association. Many people in town know him." Father shifted to face me. "How was he last night?"

"Restless. He woke several times."

"Did he say anything?"

"He wasn't very coherent."

"Dad's not himself. You could see that. He doesn't know what he's saying. He'd be mad as hell if he knew I let him live like that."

Paula set plates in front of us. Father had a terrific appetite. I was tired and cold and trembling inside, and the coffee didn't help. I wasn't hungry, but I tried to eat. There was an inch-long hair fried into my peameal. I picked it out, but couldn't forget it. I nibbled from the other side of the plate. Father swallowed a mouthful of coffee.

"He'd be mad as hell," he said, rolling a potato onto the fork with his thumb. He stabbed the last piece of peameal, dragged it through ketchup. "Something wrong? You're not eating."

"I'm not hungry."

"Finished?"

I nodded and father shoved his plate to the edge of the counter, slid mine in its place.

I asked father why he was in Buffalo last night. He set his cutlery down.

"To be truthful, son," he leaned toward me and spoke in a low tone, "I've been trying to pull contacts together these past couple days. Everything's a mess. This Taxi prick thinks he can walk in and take over. Dad wouldn't forgive me if I let that happen. That's why I'm trying to piece it

together. Dad didn't make it easy for me, though. Kept everything in his head. Even his closest friends don't know the extent of it. I have to talk with everyone he dealt with, piece it together on my own."

Father didn't finish the food. He set the plate on top of mine.

"I'm concerned about something, Jake. Maybe you can help."

"What is it?"

"Well, before the heart attack I was doing a little work for dad."

"What kind of work?"

"A little arranging. Nothing much. Just enough to help with the mortgage. You see, I knew people in Buffalo who were willing to bring the whiskey over. It made good sense. Dad didn't like it. At first he said no. Said he never wanted me involved. But I offered him a good price, and I think he saw it made sense."

Paula walked by with coffee. Father pointed to his cup, and waited for her to finish pouring and walk off.

"That was a couple months before Christmas. I know how much I made in that time, and dad should've made at least double. But I went through his things after we took him to the hospital, and there was nothing."

"How much money are we talking?"

"Plenty, Jake. It's well in the thousands."

"Where do you think it went?"

"I have a few ideas, nothing definite. I've been to Flamborough, to speak with dad's friends around the track, but no one seems to know too much. All they'll tell me is that dad owns seven horses. I don't know anything about horses, but I know it doesn't cost *that* much to board seven horses! And they say he hardly bet at all these past several months."

His black eyes searched me. I had no reason to feel guilty, but I did.

"Didn't grandpa keep records?" I asked.

"Records? He never kept a bank account in his life. You know he never believed in the banks. Everything was cash. And he kept all business transactions in his head. Everything. Contacts, phone numbers, orders, inventories, accounts receivable, payable. Everything. That's what makes this thing so damn difficult. Even his closest friends don't know much about dad's operations. He kept people apart, that way nobody could see the entire picture." Father threw back his coffee. "He was smart that way."

Father stood, removed a roll of cash from his pocket, yanked out a twenty, and put it on the counter.

"Thanks, Paula. You take care."

Back at the parking lot opposite the hospital, father parked next to the Cressida he had given me to use while in Brantford.

"Jake, I want to thank you again for being here. Now, go home and sleep. And don't take this the wrong way, but I don't think it's a good idea to spend evenings with dad. I don't want you making sacrifices. Dad wouldn't

want that either. You've got to put yourself first." He paused. "It's too difficult, seeing dad like this. Just stop by tonight for a while, spend some time with him. Then we'll go home together. There's nothing we can do, and the nurses are pretty good."

"I want to stay with him."

"Just think about what I've said. I'm worried about you, that's all. You don't look well." I was about to close the door. "Oh," he said, "I left the money for the flight on your dresser."

I started the car and let the engine warm, looking at my pale reflection in the rearview. The radio didn't work. Shivering, I lit a cigarette. And then I saw grandpa Vic dying, alone.

Fuck father for talking to me like that. A sacrifice, he calls it. That's the deep gash. He knew nothing about it, or he wouldn't have gone on like that. That's the part that stings, and it is iodine. Fuck father for not seeing that, when there was nothing else you could do, you could sit beside grandpa, and wait.

That last paragraph is quite strong, I realize, reading it over. But I was feeling precisely *that* angry toward father in my desire to be with grandpa Vic. Looking back, though, I have to wonder--was it partly selfishness, my need to resolve my past, that led me to return to grandpa's dark room later that same night?

Book 3

1

The air was frigid, and the Cressida's heater didn't work very well. Sunshine through the windows gradually warmed me. I was too tired to sleep, too disturbed, and, reluctantly, I drove through our old neighborhood, Wyndham Hills. I drove once around the two semi-circular roads, Summerhayes Crescent and Lakeside Drive, past familiar houses, then parked on Lakeside Drive. From there I could see, several houses up on the left, the old black pickup parked in Julie's drive.

I felt mostly glad for her.

And as I looked toward the right, beyond the frost-tinged sycamores, toward the Northridge Golf Course, my thoughts were carried back to the horrible things I did in those days.

Father's hobby shop had grown into a most lucrative business and, yielding to Diana's opinion that the house on Hickory was now too small for a family of four, father sold it, and purchased a place on Summerhayes Crescent, in what was then the wealthiest neighborhood in town. I was not a little disgruntled that Katie got a large bedroom on the top floor while I was

stuck in a crowded space at the back, on ground level. It was a very big home, Diana said, trying to console me, and they needed to have the baby close to their room should she cry during the night.

I liked the neighborhood more than the house. There was a forest for me to play in right behind our home; plenty of pine, birch, maple, sycamore, and oak trees scattered throughout the neighbourhood; a pond where I could fish all summer, play hockey all winter; and lots of kids, mostly older than myself, which often worried father and Diana.

I met Ben that first [illegible]. He was two years older than me, tall, and slightly pale looking. He [illegible] lawns in the neighborhood.

"Ben will be a good [illegible]on the boy," I heard father talking in the kitchen one night. "He [illegible]prising. Hell, you can't drive through the neighborhood and not s[illegible]m cutting somebody's lawn, or painting somebody's fence. The kid's always got something on the go." Diana agreed that Ben was certainly better than some of the other older boys in Wyndham Hills, whose names appeared in the *Expositor* from time to time. Nobody considered the influence that I might have on him.

Ben asked if I'd like to make a little money helping him cut grass, and I jumped at the opportunity. After we had moved to Wyndham Hills, grandpa Vic only came round Saturdays, with that heaping bushel basket of produce, so there was no good reason to hang about any other day. Besides, Diana's fussing over Katie made me feel a bit sick inside, and I was generally glad to get away from the two of them.

We'd cut grass every morning after most of the dew had dried. At noon Ben's mother would let us take her car up King George Road, to McDonald's. Then we'd return to Ben's place, sit in the damp, cool basement eating our lunch, watching 'All My Children.' That was the summer Jesse, our favorite character on the show, got into all kinds of trouble. Broken family, and all that. Ben figured that Jesse got into trouble only to hide his confusion and the fear confusion causes. People can't hurt you as much if you get them first. Jason, who was Ben's older brother by a year, would sometimes watch with us. He was the one who said that deep down Jesse was a good kid.

After our show we'd return to work, cutting grass often into the night. After the sun went down we still had a good hour. And then a lamppost at the end of a drive threw a good light. We made decent money that way, working long hours, and father and Diana didn't mind long as I'd returned from work by ten o'clock.

That summer several neighbors started leaving Ben and me the keys to their homes while on vacation, to care for plants and pets. The Johansens were vacationing in the Rockies for two weeks. We were cutting their lawn one humid July night when the sun was setting. Each time I looked it got lower and lower, and as I pushed my mower over the last strip of grass its

rose-petal face was tucked in almost all the way. I could just see the tip of one cheek and the blush that had smudged off, reddish pink, through the birches behind the Summerhayes' pool.

We met in the drive when finished, our running shoes stained green, cut grass wedged into eyelets. We were sweating, stinking like gas, and small bugs buzzed in our faces. Ben suggested that we go in and get a drink of water and, after taking turns at the kitchen tap, I got an idea.

"What sorts of things do you suppose they got around here?"

"What?"

"Come on, haven't you ever wanted to snoop through somebody's house? What's it gonna hurt?" I pulled out a cutlery drawer. "Not afraid are you?"

After searching the kitchen, hall closets, and basement, we crept into the master bedroom and began looking through the dresser with the jewelry box on top.

"Hey, look at this!" Ben shouted, removing a red garment from the top drawer. He held it to him, and we got a good laugh out of that. "And look here!" he exclaimed, his hand on something else.

Next I began to browse through Mrs. Johansen's closet, looking in shoe boxes and such, while Ben inspected Mr. Johansen's things.

"Jake, come here a minute!"

"What?"

He handed me an envelope. "It was under the socks."

The envelope wasn't sealed, and I could tell there'd be money inside. I opened it and read the brief note:

> *Dear Vanessa,*
> *I want to give you this before we go away. I don't know when I'll be able to see you again. Sorry I can't help more. Hope things are well. Love John.*

I handed the note to Ben and counted the money quickly, like father, licking my fingers from time to time.

"There's two hundred and fifty bucks here! That's a lot of lawns!"

"Vanessa, who?" Ben asked. "Vanessa Furlow?"

"What would he be doing giving her money?"

"It's somebody else?"

"Sure."

"What do you think it's for?" Ben thought for a moment. "Is he foolin' around on his wife?" he asked, face contorting.

"Probably."

"Sure," Ben pieced it together, "he wanted to give her the money so she'd keep quiet about the whole thing."

We looked at each other.

"It'd serve him right if we gave the money to Mrs. Johansen," I said.

"What if the girl's in some sort of trouble?"

"Maybe she's pregnant. I should've thought of that."

We sat on the bed, deciding what to do.

"Mrs. Johansen should get half," I said, after some consideration.

"That's fair," he agreed. We divided it, but it was all tens. We decided the extra five bucks should go to Mrs. Johansen.

One drizzling afternoon after the Johansens had returned we sat in the basement, watching our program, deliberating.

"We could put it in an envelope with her name on it, and stick it in their mailbox at night," Ben suggested.

"No. You don't just get a hundred and thirty bucks for no reason! She'll tell Johansen, and he'll put it together. He'll figure that we stole the money and felt bad about it afterwards. No, that won't do any good."

"Then we'll write her a letter, explaining why we took it."

"Are you nuts? Then they'll have a confession in our own writing! Do you wanna go to jail? Besides, if we tell her her husband's foolin' around, it'll only upset her. She'll probably leave him. And they have a little boy, too. You want him to have to go through all that?"

"No," he said. "Well, what do you suggest?"

I could see he was exasperated.

"I don't see any choice, I say we keep it. That way Mrs. Johansen and the boy won't get hurt, and we won't get caught. Besides, maybe the missing money'll teach Johansen a lesson."

Ben didn't like it. We argued during commercials and by the end of our story we'd resolved to divide the money between us, say no more about it.

It got easier after that. Of course we never took anything close to that amount again. We didn't get greedy. We picked only small pears off trees thick with fruit. Mostly loose change, ones, twos, fives, the odd ten. Loose stuff filling up old jars. "They'll never miss it," I told Ben. And depending on whose house we were in I'd remind him that Mr. So-and-So was a lawyer, accountant, dentist, doctor, or whatever he happened to be. "Who's gonna miss it? And besides, we don't charge extra to run the mowers. We're good that way. Most guys charge extra for the gas. We don't. It all evens out in the end."

On rainy days we'd slip over to the Big Chief Arcade at the Brantford Mall, across the street from Wyndham Hills. Father didn't like me hanging around the mall, but he was always working at the other mall across town, so,

provided Diana was home watching Katie, there wasn't much chance of getting caught.

Ben liked the video games, 'Space Invaders' and 'Galaxians,' and I liked pinball machines. My favorite was 'The Joker's Wild,' where you tried making four of a kind or a royal flush by knocking down targets. I got good at it, which made me want to keep playing. I'd beat all records, winning free game after free game, which sometimes made it difficult to spend all the money I couldn't account for.

There were several boys who hung around the arcade all day, watching others play. I'd sometimes feel bad for them, knowing they had no money, and I'd occasionally hand it out like grandpa Vic at Christmas. There was generally a great throng of kids around me, playing machines near me, or watching as I set new records.

One afternoon Ben and I sat near the Butts and Bows Smoke Shop, watching cashiers in Woolco.

"Why do you give away so much money?" he asked.

"I don't give much away."

"You do so. I see it all the time."

"You're just jealous 'cause everybody pays more attention to me. Besides, what else am I gonna do with it? It's like mayonnaise, Ben. It's no good in one glob, you gotta spread it around."

"I think it's stupid."

"I think you're stupid."

2

That September I started grade eight at Greenbrier, which I loathed miserably at first, not knowing a soul. Ben was in grade ten at Brantford Collegiate (the high school everybody said was better than North Park Vocational, the one I'd be attending next fall) and I missed his company a lot, since we'd been together much of the summer.

Eventually I fell in with a group of boys I recognized from around the mall. I'd meet them at the baseball diamond during recess, sometimes join in as they roughed up smaller boys, and teased young girls skipping rope.

During one recess in October a boy with glasses had a ball glove we wanted. We circled him, tried to take the glove, and he started hugging it, whimpering: no, you can't have it, my dad gave it to me, you'll have to kill me first. Rob, who was in grade eight a second time, whose younger brother played football for North Park, said okay, and he took out a pretty sharp knife, meaning to scare the kid, whose face was already flushed with fright. The kid was curled on the grass, glasses bent, squeezing his glove, looking up at us all around him. Rob poked the knife, not close to his face, but he poked the knife.

I couldn't stand it. I grabbed the knife, told Rob and the others that what we were doing wasn't right. Look at him, I said. They told me to fuck off, and then a couple teachers pranced over, broke things up.

They ignored me after that, saying go read your bible, calling me names they called smaller boys. And I hated not being liked. There wasn't anybody else I cared for at school. Didn't belong with any other group, not being very smart, so I'd spend recesses indoors, carving the inside of my desk when the teacher was out; sometimes writing imaginary letters to mom, sometimes reading imaginary ones I'd received from her.

The Brantford Mall was a short walk away and that winter I started going over at lunch, ripping off cassette tapes from the record shop. Tapes were too expensive for most boys in the group, so maybe I supposed it was a good way to fit in, without having to hurt anybody. Of course I knew it was wrong, but the store was always busy and I felt certain nobody would miss my small pickings.

I remember most the satisfaction of leaving the mall doors, gulping in air, walking down Tranquillity Drive toward Greenbrier, toward that crowd of waiting, watching boys in the school-yard. They'd follow me to the back of the school, where there were no windows, and I'd sell tapes for a couple bucks each, offering deals if they bought more than three. I'd hear loud voices shouting all around me: "Jake, can you get me *Back in Black* tomorrow?" or some other tape by AC/DC, or something by Nazareth, Yes, The Stones, Cheap Trick, Black Sabbath, Rush, Van Halen, Led Zeppelin...

"Jake, can you get that? Can you?" they'd ask in a frenzy.

"Yes," I'd tell them. "I can get that."

3

I spent most evenings with Ben, sometimes listening as he talked about his classes, wishing I could be in high school with him. Other nights we'd sit at the Woolco cafeteria, talking, watching people. Some nights we'd sit in his basement, listening to music or watching TV. Before dark we'd sometimes take his .22 into the forest behind my house, shoot at cans and things.

Early one night I was aiming at a sycamore branch on which a mourning dove sat, thinking only to startle him. I pulled the trigger and then, horrified, I watched him fall to the ground.

"It was an accident, Jake. Don't worry about it," Ben said, nudging the bird with his foot.

I saw the red pin prick where I'd plugged him in the breast, and I handed the gun to Ben, dug a small hole.

"It's only a bird. What's the big deal? Why are you crying?"

"Fuck off," I said, rolling the bird into the hole with a twig, covering him with dirt.

Later we sat in his basement listening to John Lennon, who'd made somebody cry, on the stereo.

"You wanna go home?"

"No." I looked at Ben. "You ever hurt anything?"

"You mean an animal?"

"An animal, or a person?"

"I think so."

"How?"

"I was twelve when my dad left. I heard him tell mom the night before he cleared his stuff out that I was an asshole."

"Why'd he say that?"

"I don't know. He was moody. He'd been working all night on a case of beer." Ben laughed to himself, blew smoke rings for a moment. "Forget the bird, Jake. It was an accident. What about you? Ever hurt someone?"

Through the basement window I watched a gray cat creeping in the tall grass by the bird feeder.

"Huh?"

"Ever hurt someone?"

"I don't know. I think so. I'm not sure."

"Who?"

"Let's drop it, all right? Can we just listen to the music?"

"Sure."

When I walked in the back door that night around eleven father was taking his shoes off at the front door and I made it to my room without attracting his attention. Shortly after I heard his heavy footsteps descend the stairs. Then my door opened, and he approached.

"Where've you been?" he asked, black eyes probing--"been smoking, haven't you?"

"Yes."

"Tomorrow's a school night, and you're out smoking, doing God knows what, when you should be home in bed." Then he started hitting me, saying: "You smell like an ashtray. How many cigarettes did you have, tonight?" Diana burst in and tried to hold his arms down. "Can't you see the boy's had enough?" And then he walked off, cutting me with a look, saying: "You deserve what you got."

Father knew nothing of it yet, how really rotten I was, but I knew he was right. Every time I did something wrong I knew it was wrong, and I'd feel bad after, and then I'd go do it again. I had no excuse. It's true I missed mom, but that was no reason. Diana was always good to me. I didn't make it easy for her, and still she was good to me. And I had Katie, who I loved deep down, even though she needed a lot of attention. And I had grandpa Vic,

who wasn't around much after we moved, but you'd still see him on Saturdays, lugging in that bushel basket. And father was good to me. He worked hard to give us nice things and take us places. Not many kids had what I had.

But I couldn't stop myself from behaving the way I did. And all the guilt I felt, and all the thinking about that guilt, kept me awake for a long time that night.

4

It's impossible to recount my years at North Park without feeling ashamed, without wishing I could go back, be a different person.

In grade nine I shoplifted almost daily from the record store. And early that year I started watching friends stealing cartons of smokes behind cashiers' backs in the Big V across Fairview Drive, and I soon got good at it. I'd sell tapes and cigarettes around the smoking area, keep the money I made in a locker outside home room.

And in class I got no satisfaction sitting quiet and docile like some of the other kids. I hated most classes--business, history, science, math, all the shops--and I was always honest in class about hating them. I could stand gym. English was really the only class I liked, partly because the teacher regularly made us recite things, and she'd let us present them however we liked. One time I got the class roaring with a melodramatic performance of 'Sonnet 60,' wearing a gray wig, rouge, and a kitchen apron. (This sonnet served as a kind of model for the sonnets I started writing to mom in grade nine. The lack of response my scribblings drew should in no way reflect poorly of Shakespeare.) Another time I had even the teacher in stitches after singing a punk rock version of 'Stopping By Woods On a Snowy Evening.'

But the truth is I liked many of the things we read. Most kids hated 'Twelfth Night,' and I didn't let on that I didn't, but I didn't. And I liked Poe, except 'The Black Cat,' which we didn't have to read, which I shouldn't have read--not being able to sleep afterward, worrying about damn cats all night. And I read Lady Chatterley's Lover, and another story I can't remember, I think Daisy Miller. I'd read them in my room, and sometimes they'd take my mind off things. Sometimes they'd make me think of things even more, and then I'd get angry. I'd walk to Ben's, or I'd take Muddy for a walk, or I'd sit in the forest out back, smoking, throwing rocks at trees.

Outside English, I could tolerate class only when I had everybody's attention, usually by pulling pranks, like drinking flower water when the teacher stepped out, or by telling jokes. One morning our math teacher was late. I walked to the front of the room, hushed everybody with my hands.

"What do you get when you cross a math teacher, a lemonade, and a can of beans?"

"What?" they asked in one excited, curious voice.

"Take a seat, Jake," the teacher sighed, entering briskly.

"Hang on, I'm almost done."

"Sit down, now!"

"You sour, miserable old fart," I murmured. There were a few chuckles.

"What did you say?"

"I said 'you sour, miserable old fart.'"

The class was in hysterics. I flushed with excitement.

"Go to the principal's, now!"

"Go to hell."

The class fell silent.

"Get out." He grabbed the back of my neck and pushed me into the hall. "This is the last time, Jake."

So I'd get suspended for jokes like that, but it wasn't a problem because I got good at father's signature. Then I'd just spend the week in Bob's Pool Hall across the street, shooting snooker, hustling some, getting hustled by others.

5

Murmurs of grandpa Vic blew around me in grade nine and the years after, some days like I was a whirlwind. I'd hear the Monday morning smoking area chit chat about So-and-So going down to Vic's on Saturday night, picking up a two-four. And the older kids would regularly ask questions like: "Jake, is your grandfather really Vic, the bootlegger?" or "Can you get us a deal?" or "How come he won't serve us?"

I pieced most of it together that first year, and let me make this clear: it wasn't at all the fact of it that bothered me. I knew that grandpa had good reason for doing what he did. It was the warm air that blew around father that bothered me, whenever I'd ask him about grandpa Vic, like a warm breeze in April dizzies you, makes you think there's no chance it'll snow again. We'd be running to a hockey game, McDonald's, or some such place. The sun'd always be shining and melting. There'd be lots of smiles, and lots of nice things. Sometimes it was enough to make me forget how grandpa earned his living, until the next day, or the next month, or however long it took the snow to creep up and remind me.

6

As I sat in father's Cressida I thought of the regrets I collected during my high school years, years of report card comments like: 'Underachiever,' 'Discipline required,' 'Jake should participate less in class,' 'Hostile, but not

stupid,' etc. If I had time to recount those years in full I'd write about the time in grade nine I got nabbed by security in Woolco, stealing a deck of cards; what the police officer told me on the drive home; the way father handled it, and how Diana couldn't get him to stop.

And I'd mention grade ten, which I went on to fail, the year the RCMP officer took me home from school because of drugs. And I'd admit the long list of charges for possession and breaking and entering, which I accumulated in my second year of grade ten, and in grade eleven. And I'd mention taking money from father; and how he found out; and the way he dragged me out of Bob's in the middle of a snooker tournament; and what he said afterward (his face is still so clear): "Forgive, but never, never forget."

But of all the dreadful memories Wyndham Hills evoked that day, parked on Lakeside, the worst was a time I wasn't in trouble. It was the Friday night I learned about grandpa Vic, firsthand. It was the night Reg got killed.

During our third summer in Wyndham Hills I started leaving the house late at night. After everyone had fallen asleep I'd slip quietly out my window and walk up Summerhayes Crescent to Ben's. I remember that vaporous July night clearly. There were no street lights, so I had only the moon through the trees. Soon after I got out of the air conditioning the dampness crawled into my shirt, down my back, into my armpits; it made my jeans stick to my thighs, sag in the seat. And the thick smell of moss hung in the damp air, mixed with pine.

After collecting Ben, the two of us walked up Summerhayes, then cut through houses toward the Thompsons'. The moon was directly behind us, and it was dark in Sharon's room, so it was a good idea not to stand there. Her brother's light was on and I don't know what got into us, but we walked over and looked through cracks in the blind. David was lying on the bed and there was a reading lamp on the desk behind him, directed over him. What he was doing under the light made me jump back from the window.

"Do you believe it?" I was laughing hard, and I couldn't control it.

"We'd better go," Ben said in a whisper.

"Can you believe it?"

Ben pulled me to the road and led me down Lakeside, the dark woods on our left. The air was heavy and still. I could hear our running shoes grabbing and throwing stones, and crickets all around us. Neither of us spoke, but we were both looking out for Samson, the black Lab the Spurrays kept chained to their garage. Most times he'd only tug and bark, but one night he got loose, and we had to throw rocks to keep him away.

But when the garage came out of the pines on the right, and we saw the light on inside, we knew it meant Mrs. Spurray.

(Now it's strange to call her that. Two years later I called her Julie. When she became Julie I became a young boy, younger than the boy I was when she was Mrs. Spurray. There are still some dreams I am having.)

Her husband was a psychiatrist and we figured he looked after patients some nights. Sometimes we'd see her in the garage as late as three in the morning. Tonight it was only twelve, and there she was: sweeping the garage in a swimsuit and high heels. Samson lay on the floor, watching her. Ben and I quietly pushed back the branches in the woods opposite the end of their drive. We dug ourselves in and made a nice little spot.

Mrs. Spurray swept angrily. She looked lovely in that swimsuit. Sometimes she'd stop to put a finger inside, stretch the fabric over flesh poking out. She swept close to Samson's tail, startling him. Then she swatted his rear-end with the broom. Ben and I got a little pleasure out of this, and we egged her on in whispers from the woods: "Get him! Serves the bad dog right!" But we were horrified when she raised the broom in both hands, brought it down on his back.

Samson ran down the drive, toward us, Mrs. Spurray swatting after him. When he had the chain right out she hit him again and again. "Jesus, lady, what are you doing?" Ben whispered. Then she stopped, returned to the garage, and continued sweeping, angrily.

It took Samson ten minutes to trust her. Then he wearily dragged the chain up the drive, into the garage. She smiled at him. She said something, but you couldn't hear it. She was smiling and speaking to him like the dog was a child. She bent down, stroked his head, tickled him where the tail started. Then she swept the dust into a pile while Samson watched, neck stretched-out on the cement floor.

She gave the broom a sudden flick and the dust blew into Samson's face. He started sneezing, and then she started beating him again. I could hear his nails sliding on the cement, and Mrs. Spurray shouting. "Liar! That's what you get, you you fucking liar!"

Then it was calm. She swept the dust back into a pile while Samson sat outside the garage staring at her. She reached down, gathered the dust, and banged the dustpan inside the rubber trash can. Then she turned out the light and pressed the button to make the garage door go down. Samson bolted inside, and soon I could see Mrs. Spurray's legs going up into the light of the house, Samson's four legs trailing. Just before the garage door crashed to the bottom I could see her feet and his paws together in the sliver of light under the door. We waited for a couple of minutes and then we heard Mrs. Spurray dive into the pool out back, inside the glass.

And if we walked back there, toward the Furlows', we'd see her swimming laps. Some nights there'd be an orange space between Vanessa Furlow's drapes, and we'd have to choose between Vanessa and Mrs. Spurray. Ben always chose Vanessa, not that it wasn't good to watch Mrs. Spurray. But right now it was lit like a department store at the back of both homes, so we crawled out of the woods and continued down Lakeside.

And as we walked off the thought of Mrs. Spurray eased out of me, again, the way a sunrise dallies then disappears on a cold spring morning.

7

We crossed the old wooden bridge which led to the shelter by the third hole. I could hear our feet on the planks, the water trickling, and the toads. Then Ben and I sat on the bench, smoking, surveying the dark golf course and the speckled black dome. I enjoyed the silence for a time, then it began to feel awkward.

"What do you suppose got into Mrs. Spurray?" I asked.

"Who knows? It's none of our business, anyways. We shouldn't have been watching." Ben sometimes had an annoying way of ending things with the feeling that there was nothing left to say. There was another long pause.

"Did you ever think David would do something like *that*?"

"Let's not talk about it. It was dumb of us to look in. Besides, everybody does it." He put his watch into the moonlight. "Why don't we watch the sky for a bit, then we'll walk to Reg's. I told him you wanted to come, tonight."

At the top of the hill that rolled down to the third green we lay on our backs. The fat moon hung directly over us. Ben pointed to Venus. With the backwards L of his right hand he framed for me the Big Dipper and the Milky Way.

"Whenever I start thinking I know a whole lot," he said, "I come out here to watch the sky. It sure kills that feeling."

We lit cigarettes.

"Why on earth would you want to do that?"

"Well, if a person thinks he's got all the answers, then he's bound to miss out on a few things."

"Like what?"

"Well, suppose I asked if you knew where Venus is, and you were the type of person to say yes when you really had no idea. You'd never find out where Venus is, would you?

"No."

"That doesn't just go for stuff up there. It goes for things down here, too. Suppose you ran into some fellow, and he asked you about David. What would you say?"

"Well, I wouldn't tell him *that*!"

"Good. Some guys would, you know. It's good you wouldn't, because everybody does it."

"Everybody?" I asked. I had done it a million times.

"I think so. Guys at least. Can't speak for girls. Imagine they do their thing, too." He paused. "Same thing goes for Mrs. Spurray. You wouldn't go

round telling people it's in her to hurt dogs. We don't know why she beat up Samson tonight, but she must've had a reason."

"We've never seen her treat him that way before. He must've done something awfully rotten to piss her off."

"Or she's upset over something else. In either case, it's no good reason to pick on a dog. But we only saw her do it once, and it'd be wrong to say she'd do it again." He grinned. "She is a pretty weird lady, though, isn't she?"

"Yes," I said, watching something crawl across the sky, a satellite I think.

8

The wind picked up after we crossed the bridge. Leaves rustled, and I could feel a storm approaching. I was hot and the breeze felt good at first. But then the trees shook violently, and I became a bit frightened. Walking between the houses opposite my place, I looked over and saw the lamp at the end of the drive. For a second I wished I was home in bed.

I looked up at Ben.

"It'll be okay," he said. "It won't be that bad."

Soon I could see two figures standing in Reg's drive beside Jason's Camaro. The crab apple tree tossed back and forth and the figures were now in shadow, now in moonlight, now in shadow. When we got closer I could make out Jason and Reg. I was glad it was just them. 'Dust in the Wind' floated toward us out the open trunk, a little louder than the rustling leaves.

We walked up the drive, feet crunching gravel.

"Sure as hell's gonna rain," Jason said.

"No doubt. Listen to that wind," Ben said. He turned to Reg. "When're your aunt and uncle coming back?"

"Sunday."

The four of us stood in the drive, with hands in the pockets of our jeans, and lighthearted hair. The flame of Reg's Zippo tried to lick his face as he lit a cigarette.

"Ready to see your grandpa in action?" he asked.

"Uh huh," I said, feeling quite ill.

"We'd better motor. Told those guys we'd be back around one thirty."

I was glad it was only the four of us going. Jason and Reg wouldn't make a big deal out of this. Craig and Todd would. They were always working out together, fixing cars, and picking on everybody except Reg, and Jason, who was Reg's best friend. Craig and Todd would probably start shooting off: "Why doesn't Jake just go up? He can probably get it for us free." Jason and Reg weren't like that. They didn't go around pushing people to do things, treat them like girls if they didn't want to. They were mostly

quiet, and they only swore when they had to. I liked being with them. They would treat this like any other Friday night.

The wind gripped the car, played with us. A couple of hailstones bounced off the roof, and then fat drops splashed on the windshield, one after another. Reg found 'Even in the Quietest Moments' on the tape and turned up the volume. Ben sat behind Jason, staring out the window. Jason was a little taller than his brother, had the same short, light-brown hair, and pale complexion. He downshifted on West Street hill, swung left on Clarence, shifted easily into third, then fourth. The song was so beautiful, so calming, that I felt my eyes water, but I wasn't crying.

We turned left on Murray Street and drove down the dark industrial road slowly. Reg lowered the volume. Jason parked just past the run-down warehouse, which looked more like a shack. Out the back of the Camaro I could see the warehouse windows boarded with plywood, covered with thick steel mesh. Cracks of light shone through the sides, where the wood wasn't flush. I recognized the large green car parked in the mud drive.

Reg approached the building, side-stepped a puddle, then knocked on the heavy wooden door. In the light of the doorway I saw the ball cap and the cigar before the face. My grandfather looked toward the car, and I shifted down slightly. He said something. Reg shook his head no. Then he disappeared while Reg dug money out of his pockets. Grandpa returned, set two cases of beer on the floor. Then he took Reg's money, made sure it was all there, and handed him the cases.

"It was easy, tonight," Jason said, driving away.

"Vic was in a good mood. Didn't even ask for ID."

"What'd he say?" I asked.

"He said, 'tell Jake hi'." A pause, then everybody laughed. Reg lit a cigarette. "The usual. Vic alway checks you out to make sure you're not drunk."

Reg slid Kansas into the deck and we listened to 'Carry On My Wayward Son' as we returned to Wyndham Hills, fist-sized drops splattering the windshield from time to time.

"You okay?" Ben asked.

"Fine, thanks. And you?" Reg asked.

"Not too bad at all. Thank you for asking," Jason said.

"Go to hell. I'm talking to Jake."

"Yes," I said. "I'm okay."

And I was. After thinking about grandpa for all those years I felt relieved that I'd seen it myself, satisfied that all the pieces fit.

Craig and Todd stood on Reg's front steps as we pulled into the drive. Craig looked like a heavy Jim Morrison. Todd was short, thin, blond, with fair complexion. His silver Datsun 280ZX was parked in front of the house.

"No luck," Jason said to Craig as he stepped out of the car.

"That fuckin' asshole. Didn't you tell him Jake was with you?"

"Why would we do that?" Reg asked.

"I say we drive over and kick the shit out of him." It was Todd.

Reg smiled at me.

"You guys just don't like Vic 'cause he won't sell to you," Ben said.

"He won't sell to any of us, except Reg, only because of that fake ID," Craig whined.

Reg was eighteen, same age as Jason, Craig and Todd. But he wore sideburns, which made him look a bit older than the others.

"I'm with Todd. Let's drive over and--"

"Sure, Craig," Reg said--"you guys go do that."

"Vic's a fuckin'--"

"Shut up," Reg said, glancing at me.

Jason opened the trunk and produced beer.

"You assholes," Craig said.

We'd been sitting in Reg's basement for over an hour. I was feeling a little uneasy, a bit short of breath, a feeling I sometimes got in a group. Whenever this mood snuck up on me I'd sometimes try to fight it by joking around, pretending it wasn't there. Other times, like tonight, I'd get really quiet and withdrawn. I'd put myself into a kind of dream, where I wasn't participating, merely recording details, taking mental notes of images, sounds and smells. Sometimes, like tonight, this mood kept me outside, distant, and I'd get the feeling that others were aware of it. I was drinking heavily that night.

I sat on the sofa watching Reg pass out beer, smoke in mouth, swinging his head to throw long hair behind him. He wore a white T-shirt, and he had the initials 'FTW' carved in his right bicep. He put 'Beast of Burden' on the stereo, which is one of my favorite songs. Then the pizza arrived. We were digging into our pockets when Reg said to forget it, he'd get it.

After we'd finished eating the doorbell rang. Reg turned the volume down. Ben went upstairs to answer it, stooping. The screen door opened, slammed shut, and then I heard soft laughter. Ben returned to the basement, Vanessa following slowly, wearing a white cotton dress, descending slightly sideways, holding hair back from her face.

Reg turned to Jason. "What's she doing here?"

"What do you think?" Jason said, looking over at Todd.

"Christ."

Reg was Vanessa's last boyfriend. She had also dated Craig, for a camping weekend; and Jason, after he got the Camaro. She'd been seeing Todd about a week.

Vanessa placed small hands on Todd's knees, bent over, kissed him on the mouth. Her dark hair fell in soft curls down the back of her white dress. She was attractive and, like most boys in the neighborhood, I'd seen every white inch of her through her bedroom window. But I couldn't think about Vanessa the way others seemed to. One night, after Mrs. Spurray had finished toweling off, I was cutting up the hill to my house when I noticed Vanessa's light on, the drapes opened slightly. I was shocked at what I saw inside.

Her stepfather sat on the bed, legs crossed, watching her undress. She was crying, and he was sitting there, watching. He had a grotesque look on his face that reminded me of that waiter at George's, years ago. After that night, whenever colors of Vanessa flashed in my mind in the dark, I'd see her crying, and I'd see her stepfather's face, and then I'd feel rotten doing what I was doing.

"Hi, Reg," she spoke softly.

Reg looked away.

"Hi, Jason. Hi, Craig. Hi, Jake," she said in a soft, slow, sing-song.

Everything was different after she arrived. The reek of the damp basement, the smoke, the beer, and the lingering smell of pizza couldn't subdue the pleasant scent of her dangling all night.

Jason and Reg spent most of the night upstairs talking. Ben, Craig and I sat on metal fold-out chairs in the laundry room, playing poker for a couple hours, a cloud of hash smoke swirling above us, underneath the fluorescent light. I was up twenty bucks, and Craig accused me of cheating.

"I saw you lookin' at the bottom card."

"Don't be an asshole, Craig," Ben said.

"Didn't you see him?"

"You're drunk."

"Not *that* drunk." Craig stood.

"Don't be an asshole," Ben said.

"I want my fuckin' money. Give it back, you little faggot."

"Fuck off."

"Come on, Craig. Don't start."

"Just like your fuckin' grandfather, aren't you?" Craig stared at me. "Fuckin' hustler."

"Cut it out," Ben said.

Craig reached across the table for my money.

Ben told me later that he didn't even see it. There was an ironing board on my right, and I grabbed the iron, slammed the plastic side of it into Craig's head. Ben watched Craig fall to the floor, then looked at me, horrified.

"Whadjya do?" he asked, knocking over a chair as he rushed to the floor. "He's out cold. I think you killed him. He's breathing. For fucksakes, Jake, whadjya do?"

I took my beer into the dark den where Vanessa and Todd lay twisted and motionless on the sofa. I flipped through albums in the light coming from the laundry room. I removed a Stones album, wanting to hear 'Angie,' but decided against it, not wanting to wake them. Then Todd's hand crawled up Vanessa's leg.

"Not now. Not with everybody here."

I coughed.

"Jake?" Vanessa asked, looking in my direction. "That you?"

"Sorry. Thought you guys were sleeping."

"It's okay," she said. "What was all the noise?"

"Nothing."

Ben dragged Craig into the den and lifted him into a chair.

"What's with him?" Todd asked, in a shadow.

"Passed out," Ben said, glaring at me, returning to the laundry room.

"He's always passing out," Vanessa said, almost apologetically.

Reg and Jason came downstairs. Reg threw on the light and Vanessa sat up, blocked it with her hands. Her lipstick was ruined.

"Turn it off, Reg."

"Why don't you, madam?" he asked, removing an imaginary hat from his head, making a slow sweeping gesture in a drunk and elegant manner. "Isn't it time you snuck back into your room?"

"Cut it out, Reg," Todd said, his thin white arm around her, his face in a shadow.

"You're drunk," she said.

"What do you care?"

"I care, okay? I thought we were still friends. Why don't you go outside for a bit. The fresh air will do you good."

"Good idea. I'll do that." He staggered toward the steps.

Ben was in the bathroom so I helped Reg upstairs myself, got him outside. The wind had settled. The sky flashed in the north and there was no thunder right now. The fresh air felt good. A soft rain fell.

"Todd's an asshole," I said, after we'd been standing in the gravel drive about ten minutes. "I'd never do that to a friend."

"I'm gonna puke," Reg groaned.

"Wanna go in?"

"No, I'm all right," he said, swaying, trying to focus.

I asked Reg if he was okay for a minute. I wanted to go get Ben. Reg said he was all right.

Ben was sitting on the carpet, listening to 'Beast of Burden.' I got a beer from the fridge and sat beside him for a moment. The song was just about over.

....There's one thing baby
That I don't understand
You keep on telling me
I ain't your kind of man
Ain't I rough enough
Ain't I tough enough
Ain't I rich enough...

Just then I heard the garage door open, and Reg's bike start. Ben and I looked at each other, then ran upstairs and outside, but we were too late; Reg was gone.

An hour later he still hadn't returned. Jason shook Craig, who woke slowly, feeling his head.

"Ow! What the fuck happened?"

"You passed out, Craig," Vanessa said, looking at us, grinning, shaking her head.

Outside, it was blowing again, drizzling, trying hard to storm. Craig leaned against the Camaro, threw up on the gravel.

"Watch the car," I said.

"Don't worry 'bout the fuckin' car," Craig glared. He swept dripping hair off his face, wiped his mouth down his arm.

"Where the fuck's Reg?" Ben asked.

"Should be back by now," Jason said, glancing at his watch.

"Why don't we go look for him?" I suggested.

"It'd serve him right to get killed," Craig said. "Fuckin' idiot."

"He's upset, that's all," Jason said. "He'll be back soon."

"Fuckin' idiot. Slut's not worth it."

I felt like hitting Craig again, but I looked at Jason instead.

"You all right to get home?"

"Yeah, I'm all right to get home. *Are you*?" Craig snarled, animal-like, staggering off to the right, toward Lakeside.

"What a fuckin' asshole," I said, as the three of us walked down Summerhayes.

Ben threw me an abrupt glare. I wasn't sure if it was because I'd hit Craig with the iron, or because I'd left Reg outside alone.

Under the oak tree out front their place we said goodnight. Then I walked home slowly, not minding the rain, a little worried for Reg.

Wind slapping rain against my window woke me in the morning. I dozed, and the phone in the den was a snooze alarm. The phone stopped ringing, and Diana upstairs yelled that it was for me. I slumped into the den.

It was Ben. His voice was unsettlingly calm.

He asked if I'd heard the news yet. What news? Last night Reg took his bike west on Powerline, near Highway Two, where it curves. He was in

the wrong lane, and a car hit him head on. Reg was thrown off the bike and his head hit the windshield of the car, which was filled with Chinese. Reg died instantly. It was a large Oldsmobile, so none of the Chinese got too hurt.

"Christ," I said--"you're not serious?"

"Yes, I am. It's all Vanessa's fault," was how he ended it.

Three days after the funeral we pushed our mowers past Reg's place. His uncle stood in the garage, looking at the broken bike. We left our machines at the end of the drive and walked toward him. There were two cases of empties in the corner of the floor and pizza boxes sitting on an old stack of papers. Reg's uncle looked at us. You could see the sorrow on him, worked into his face, and you wanted to say something. We stood there, looking at Reg's broken bike.

9

Nobody talked much about Reg's death. There were a few kind words spoken at the funeral, about what a senseless tragedy the accident was; about what a polite, good-natured, nice-looking boy Reg was, who had everything in the world to look forward to; and then, finally, the minister said that the accident provided us with some very valuable lessons. Father and Diana, thankful that their son wasn't there, wasn't part of that horrible night, drove the lessons home all the way from the chapel, father concluding with a brief and eloquent oration on the evils of drink. And that was that. Nothing else was ever made of it. The accident was a sore that stung Wyndham Hills, but everybody--including those who were with Reg that night--seemed content to live with the skin-tone bandage that got stuck over it.

For my part, I was sleepless and moody for a long long time. Kept seeing Reg's uncle's face, and that crushed bike. Kept having the same bad dream. Reg standing at that door, digging money out of his pocket, and grandpa Vic taking it from him, counting it. Just that, over and over.

Diana was pretty good to have around in those days, bringing snacks to my room, telling me things would soon be all right. But my sister, who was only two at the time, was the greatest comfort, even though I'd sometimes get upset at all the attention Diana paid her. Sometimes when I sat alone with Katie, holding her, she'd look up at me with eyes that made me think she understood. Of course she couldn't, being only two, but she never wore that stymied look of somebody at a loss to find the right word. And there was Muddy, too, who had sad dark eyes like Katie, who was always pushing into my room, jumping on the bed, rubbing against me.

Father had been having some financial troubles recently, bankruptcy I think, and grandpa Vic--the last person I wanted to see--began dropping by more than just Saturdays. I'd often hear him in the kitchen: "Sure there's

nothin' you need, dear? Make sure to tell me if you think of anything." Sometimes he'd ask Diana where's Jake? and she'd come tap her nails on my door. Then I'd fake some illness, listen for his reaction upstairs. "How come the kid don't like me no more?" he'd ask. "He hasn't been himself, Vic, not since that boy died." "Well, you tell him I said to take care, okay?" he'd say in a sincere tone that made me sometimes feel bad avoiding him.

Sometimes I'd slip out the back door when he arrived, go as deep as possible into the woods behind our house before seeing the concrete back of Consumer's Distributing. Or I'd walk over to the mall, play a little pinball at the arcade.

One such afternoon, a month or so after Reg died, I was waiting in line at the Butts and Bows Smoke Shop when I saw the old man, my great-uncle, leaving the pharmacy across the bustling aisle. Not wanting to approach Tony directly, I followed him to where he sat on a bench plastic jungle threatening to swallow him. I walked right by him, but he took no notice, and I had to turn round, pass the old man again.

"Jake!" he exclaimed, hobbling after me, grabbing my arm.

"What are you doing here?" I asked, trying to appear surprised, noticing that he'd aged considerably since our last run-in.

"Oh, I needed a couple things," he said. "How've you been?"

"Couldn't be better."

"That's nice to hear," he said, gold tooth glittering. "Sure is a pleasant day for a stroll, isn't it?" he asked, squinting toward the mall entrance.

"You don't live around here, do you?"

"No, no. I live in Eagle Place, don't worry."

"Eagle Place? You couldn't have walked all the way from there?" My eyes glanced down as I spoke, a little habit of mine, and it occurred to me that the old man may have misunderstood. "I didn't mean it like that," I said. "I meant that Eagle Place is on the other side of town. Too far for anybody to walk."

"You're absolutely right. You have to drive a distance like that. But you have to walk from the apartment building to the car, from the parking lot to the mall, then around the mall a little. So you end up putting in a good stroll." He used the tooth again. "How's everyone at home?"

"Fine."

"I'm glad for it." His black, sunken eyes lit up. "Say, speaking of family, have you gotten around to learning about your grandfather yet?"

"Uh huh," I said glumly, eyes downcast.

"You have?" he asked, surprised. "You must've been shocked by the whole affair."

"Yeah."

"Hard to believe, isn't it, what happened to your grandmother?"

"Huh?"

What's the matter? Didn't your father tell you?"

"What happened to her?" I asked, horrified at what I didn't know.

"Your father didn't tell you?"

"No."

"I thought you said you knew?"

"I thought you were talking about something else."

"What did you think I was talking about?"

"About the beer, you know?"

"Oh, that. That's only the half of it." He paused. "So you've talked with your father since I last saw you?"

"I've tried to."

"But you know about the bootlegging?" he asked, scratching thick, gray hair, his brow straining.

"I found out myself. From friends...at school." It wasn't untrue.

"I see. Jake, I think you should try talking to your father again."

"I've tried. He won't say anything."

We looked at one another. There was such sadness and loneliness on the old man's face, like he'd been walking around Brantford a long time, searching for something he'd misplaced long ago. And the walking didn't seem to have hardened him, or made him bitter. My great-uncle's eyes searched mine with a tenderness that reminded me of my grandfather, in the days I could face him.

"You're straight with me? You've tried talking to your father?"

"Yes," I said, looking at him, pleadingly.

"No, I don't feel good about it. There are some things--"

"Please," I interrupted--"tell me what you know."

"There are some things that--"

"Tell me what you can."

Tony took a quick, almost furtive glance around us.

"Let's go out to my car," he said. "We'll talk there."

10

We sat inside Tony's old Buick, parked at the south-east corner of the mall, by the Right House. We rolled the windows down, because of the heat. The interior of his car was spotless. I asked if I could smoke and he said it was okay. I fidgeted a while, blowing smoke out the window, and then the old man broke the silence.

"Let's start with your great-grandparents, okay?"

I nodded.

"Giovanni and Rosemary. They immigrated from Italy in the early 1900's, a few years before I was born. Your great-grandfather ran a fruit

market here in town, it was a very good business. Ever heard of Ford's Fruit Market?"

I nodded, thinking of the Veggie Man.

"That used to be your great-grandfather's. Charlie Ford runs it now. His father ran it before him. Joseph, if I remember."

"What happened to it?" I asked.

"It had nothing to do with the Depression, like your father told you."

The old man's eyes asked if I understood, and I nodded hesitantly, slumped in my seat.

"I remember that cold night clearly. February, 1923. Papa wasn't home yet. He liked to stay out some nights, playing poker, drinking with friends. I couldn't sleep that night, cripes it was bitter. Victor and I had our door open, and I could feel a little heat coming from the stove in the kitchen. My brother was sound asleep. The cold never seemed to bother him."

"How old were you and grandpa?"

"Let me see. 1923...I would've been fifteen. Victor's five years younger, so he must've been ten." Tony paused. "I don't know what time papa came in, but I could hear him rustling in the room beside ours, undressing, slipping into bed. He woke mama. 'What you want, Giovanni? It's late, you crazy?' Papa started laughing and she told him to go to sleep, it was too late for such nonsense. Their room was quiet for a moment, and then papa announced that he had just lost the fruit market, and the house, in a game of poker. 'What sort of joke is this, Giovanni?'

"'Four kings, Rosa, four kings! How can a man go wrong when he has four kings? I would have wagered more, had more to wager. I'd be stupid not to. Four kings! Think of it! How many times will that happen in a man's life? I suggest not many, not with six men at the table. Four kings!' Mama said 'you're a fool, Giovanni. A drunken fool. It's a good joke. *Bello scherzo.* Now, goodnight.'

"I looked at Victor, surprised he could sleep through all the noise, and then papa spoke again. 'It's no joke, Rosa. Four kings! No man in his right mind would blame me. Impossible to lose. But Rosa, my dear, we must move in one week. We will start anew. I have already begun to formulate a plan.'"

"So he wasn't joking?"

The old man looked out the window, at a group of women leaving the Right House, carrying bags, chatting, throwing back their heads, laughing.

"No. We moved one week later, to a small apartment in West Brant."

"What did Giovanni do after that?"

"His drinking got worse. And he continued to play poker, I don't know what with, there wasn't much money. Maybe he just went to watch. Victor and I had to quit school and take jobs, to help out. Mama soon grew ill. Tired all the time, I remember, depressed. Brantford was very small in

those days, and the whole town knew about papa's crazy loss. I think she was too ashamed to leave the apartment. Mama lived like that for two years, growing more and more depressed every day, and then she passed away. It was horrible to watch. You grow up wishing that you had done something to help her. That feeling never left me, Jake." Tony turned away, looked out the window.

"Are you okay?" I asked. "You can stop if you want."

"I'm sorry, Jake. There's no reason to be sad after all this time. The past is the past, and you get over. I'm sorry."

"It's okay," I said, "I'm glad you're telling me these things."

He smiled and set his trembling hand on my left leg. I tensed slightly, and Tony removed it.

"I think it can do a young person a world of good, knowing the people he comes from. That way he might avoid making the same mistakes. And it's no use chopping the tree down to get a look. You have to yank it out of the ground, roots and all."

I didn't really understand, but I nodded, anxious for him to continue.

"After mama died, you'd think papa would have shown a little remorse. He loved her, I'm sure of that. But his drinking got worse, and soon he wouldn't leave the apartment, not even for poker. He just sat on the chesterfield, day and night, drinking. He passed away six months after our mother. He was drinking whiskey on the chesterfield when his heart stopped. Victor and I were alone with him at the time."

"How did you and grandpa survive?" I asked, a little abruptly, and I had to wait for the old man to collect himself.

"I was employed in a bakery. Victor was between jobs, and Mr. Ford felt bad about everything that had happened, offered him a job. My brother and I managed to make ends meet.

"Victor started hearing the stories about papa and, one night when he was about your age, he asked if I knew what had happened. I told him exactly what I'd heard that cold night in February, and why I thought our mother grew ill afterwards. My brother wouldn't hear any of it. He said I was no different than anyone else in town--listening to stories, believing them because they were believed. I think deep down he knew I was right. But we were very different, Victor and me. I wanted to accept things, move on. I suppose he wanted to idealize our father. I think Victor always held it against me that I wouldn't do that.

"We were different in other ways, too. Victor was a strong young man. Handsome. Fearless. After working at the fruit market for a few years, he fell in with a group of men who were running whiskey across the border. Victor started making good money, wearing expensive suits, driving a new car, that sort of thing. He kept encouraging me to join him, saying it was the quickest

way to earn good money. But I didn't want that kind of life. I just wanted to keep my act clean, you know, lead a respectable life.

"I started a small trucking company when I was twenty-five. Nothing fancy, just a small rented truck. I figured if I worked hard I could make a go of it."

I nodded briefly. "So how long was grandpa in that line of work?"

"Running the whiskey? Oh, a few years. Then he opened a gambling operation here in Brantford. Despite the hard times, Victor's business prospered. Victor kept telling me to come join him. He could see I was having a hard time starting out. I think some of it had to do with my name. Some folks were reluctant to do business with me because they thought Victor belonged to the mob."

"Did he?"

Tony turned away abruptly, replied in a low, soft murmur. "Victor belonged to himself." He paused, and then continued in a lighter tone. "But he was very generous, I'll give him that. He'd often say: 'Why you so stubborn, Anthony? Let me take care of you. What good is all this money if I can't help my brother?' Anyone who really knew Victor will tell you the same thing. He gave lots of money to charities. And every Monday he'd offer a free hot meal to anyone who needed it. I think that's the reason the police let him stay in business. He was a very generous man."

"Why didn't you accept his help?"

"I guess I was stubborn, like he said. I wanted to prove that I could succeed on my own. I was stupid. I probably should have."

"That's what I would've done," I said. The old man smiled.

"Victor ran that operation for ten years or so. Then a few church groups started complaining, and the police asked him to make things less conspicuous. That's when he bought the warehouse over on Murray Street, started selling liquor after hours. He's still doing that today. Guess you know about that already."

I nodded, remembering Reg.

"Around that time Victor met Helen, who lived on the Six Nations Reserve, just outside Brantford. They dated for a while, then married. My brother bought a house over by Mohawk Park."

"On Hickory?"

"Yes, that's it. You lived there, didn't you?"

"Uh huh."

"Your grandmother was a beautiful woman, Jake. Reminded me a little of my mother. She led a very difficult life. Don't get me wrong, Victor loved her dearly, much as any man ever loved. But he worked every night at the joint--that's what he called the warehouse--and it was a tough way to earn a living. Folks from around town never caused much trouble. Everyone knew Victor was a man you didn't cross. But he had a couple fellas come

down from Hamilton one night, try to rob him. Victor put them both in the hospital, nearly killed the one."

"Really?"

Tony looked at me sternly.

"Yes. Some will say he later died in the hospital, but there was never any truth to that rumor." The old man paused, remembering the point he wanted to make. "Anyways, you can imagine how difficult it must've been for your grandmother, spending nights alone, married to a man involved in that line of work. I suppose she liked all the comforts he could offer. Her family was very poor, farmers on the reserve. Victor drove a new car. And he was very handsome, always well dressed. Had a real way with the ladies." The old man smiled to himself, shook his head. "I was always a little jealous of my brother. He had everything.

"Victor soon fell in with the horses. He bought a couple of standardbreds, started racing. He was never a drinker, mind you, but he loved the track. One night I warned him he'd end up just like papa. He clipped me for that--'Don't wanna hear no more o' that. No more, you hear?'

"Oh, Victor was stubborn. Had his own way of doing things. I tried to suggest it wasn't right to leave Helen alone the way he did. But he had a mind of his own. I suppose that's another reason people were always drawn to him. Whenever he said he'd do something, no matter what it was, you knew he'd make good. And like I said, he was always generous.

"I remember he started getting involved in sports in the town. He ran the Junior 'A' ball club, the Red Sox, for a number of years, and he worked hard to encourage young athletes in the city. He bought a bus so he could drive twenty-five or thirty kids to Detroit, to play at the ball tournaments some summer weekends." Tony chuckled. "There were weekends when you couldn't buy beer, because Victor had shut the joint down to take those kids to the States. And then he paid all their expenses--meals, lodging, everything. He'd even make sure they each had a couple bucks spending money in their pockets."

I began to suspect that the old man was avoiding something.

"What about grandma? What happened to her?"

The old man's black eyes looked out over the dash.

"I think her life was much the same as your great-grandmother's. After your father was born, somewhere around '45 if I remember, Helen grew very depressed. She didn't have many friends in town, and her family had little to do with her since she left the reserve. I tried mentioning it to Victor again, but he still wouldn't listen. 'Anthony,' he said, 'do I ever come 'round tellin' you how to run your affairs?' I told him no. 'Then what gives you the right to come round my business, tellin' me how to lead my life?' I told him I was just afraid to see it happen all over again.

"Oh, I knew I'd made a mistake soon as I had said it," Tony smiled. "I've never seen Victor upset like he was that day. He grabbed the baseball bat from behind the door, held it in both hands, and clobbered my right leg--'Shoulda broke your fuckin' head long ago, but I didn't, did I? No, I couldn't do that to my brother. And now, after everything...Anthony, get the fuck out while you can. And keep the fuck away. Keep away from me, from Helen, and the boy."

"He said that to you?"

"Oh yes," the old man gave a quick nod with his slightly tilted head, the gold tooth aflame for an instant. "But I can't blame Victor. He'd warned me before not to mention the past. I should've known not to provoke him."

"And you haven't talked with him since?"

"No," he said. The old man winced as he massaged his right knee, as though feeling the blow of the bat again.

"Is that why you walk with a limp?"

"No, no," he laughed. "That's from years of sitting behind a desk. After I got out of the trucking business, I studied accounting at college, eventually got my papers. I worked for a small firm in town," he sighed, "retired several years ago."

He stopped talking, looked at me, and I could sense that our conversation had nearly drawn to an end. I looked out the window, thinking what to ask, wanting to learn as much as possible before I left the old man, not knowing when I'd see him again.

"When did grandma die?"

"Your father must have been around thirteen at the time. I went to the funeral. Largest one I've ever seen." The old man's eyes lit up and seemed to survey the crowded chapel. "Victor had a great many friends. There were people around him the whole time, so I never got the chance to offer my sympathies."

"How did she die?"

The old man looked away for a long time before searching me with his black, sunken eyes. I looked at him boldly, without flinching, noticing a dark mole above his right eye, in the same place as father's. Finally Tony spoke:

"Helen called me that Saturday night, to say goodbye. She told me she couldn't stand to live like that anymore. She and Victor had just had a fight, and he stormed off to the joint. Helen said she was packing her things, and Jacob's, and going to live with her family on the reserve. I told her she could leave the boy with me for a while, if it would help."

With that the old man stared out the windshield, choosing his words carefully. I watched his eyes, which seemed to trace the circles of black tire marks in front of us. I imagined that it was there, on the gray parking lot, where the old man found his words scrolled out.

"But Helen wasn't going to live with her family on the reserve. And believe me, Jake, if I had any idea what was going to happen that night, I'd have gone over and done something to stop her."

"Why, what happened?"

He hesitated, and spoke softly--

"A fisherman found her the next morning, washed up along the shore of the Mohawk River." Tony looked at me. "There was a witness who saw her standing alone on the bank of the river, shortly after calling me. The police figured that Helen had walked to the river, to calm down after the fight, and that she slipped off the bank. They determined that her death was accidental. I never told the police about her phone call. I figured her death was best left that way, accidental. But I'm certain she took her own life."

I stared blankly out the window, feeling numb. I was sitting here with Tony needing to hear something that would help me forgive grandpa for Reg's death. Everything seemed too complicated now, and I was suddenly angry at him for telling me this. I remembered father's warning to avoid Tony, and I suspected that my great-uncle was only trying to stir up trouble. Did the old man himself not admit that he was jealous of grandpa Vic?

I faced him angrily. "Why are you telling me all this, old man?"

"Well, I'm sorry your father couldn't have been the one to set you clear on all of it. I tried to tell him everything several years ago, but he wouldn't believe any of it."

"No, why are you telling me, *period*?"

"I don't really know. I was hoping your father would've listened to me. I guess I've been feeling guilty about the whole thing. It makes you feel horrible inside, knowing you might've done something to prevent a tragedy."

Of course I could understand how Tony might be feeling, if what he'd said were true. I searched his face, looking for evidence that it wasn't, but found none. He looked tired, pale, and his face seemed lined with years of care and remorse. I believed that the old man was sincere about everything he had told me.

"Don't blame Victor, though, eh? He always loved your grandmother. I'm sure he would've helped her, had he known just how lonely she was. Victor simply put work ahead of most things. I think a lot of that had to do with the memory of our father sitting around the apartment all day. You can't blame Victor. There's no doubt in my mind that he loved her."

Tony seemed very affected by these last words. He blew his nose, then dried his eyes with the back of his hand. His feeble hand trembled on his right knee. It occurred to me that I'd kept him long enough, and that it was time to take my leave. But I still hadn't heard what I needed to hear.

"What do you think of grandpa Vic?"

"In what way, Jake?"

"You know, how he makes his living?"

"Well, I wouldn't hold that against him. Sure, what he does is against the law, but I'm not sure that that makes it wrong. Folks are always going to drink, and they'll always need someone who'll provide it. I'm sure the police would rather have Victor selling it, than some others. He doesn't attract much attention to himself. Heck, I've seen him around town. I've seen the kind of car he drives, his clothes. People say he stopped caring about all that after Helen died. More than anything else, though, Victor has always had a reputation as a man of great integrity."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, to give one example, it's a policy of his never to sell liquor to folks who are drunk, or minors. Everybody knows it."

"Really?"

"Never heard otherwise. Some guys will sell alcohol to a twelve year old and think nothing of it. Victor's not like that, he won't take money anywhere he can get it."

The old man took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. There were no more questions I could think to ask. I stared out the window, going over everything he'd told me, trying to find gaps so I could fill them, now.

"Did you know my mother?"

"No, Jake, never had the pleasure. I'm afraid I can't help you there," he spoke cordially, hiding a yawn.

It felt a little awkward, leaving. We shook hands. I thanked my great-uncle, and he said the pleasure was his: he was pleased to see I was such a sensible young man. He wished me well. I rolled the window up and closed the heavy door behind me.

There was a long stretch of lilac bushes on the other side of the steel fence, ten feet to my left. Brown bunches of shriveled flowers, once white and purple, quivered in the late afternoon breeze. As I walked toward Wyndham Hills I could smell them, and I wondered that so much of their fragrance remained.

I felt glad that I'd had this little talk with my great-uncle. The story about my grandmother certainly came as a shock to me, but that happened ages ago, and I was certain it had nothing to do with my present, or my future. And the reassuring words Tony said about my grandfather seemed so providential, coming out of the blue the way they did. Of course I'd been trying to believe that the accident was Reg's own fault, for being dumb enough to ride his motorbike in that condition. And then for a time it was Vanessa's fault, for putting the idea to go outside in Reg's head. And then it was Todd's fault, for inviting her over in the first place. And, of course, I shared in all the blame, for leaving Reg outside, alone. But really, I knew grandpa was responsible in the end. Tony's words helped me to settle the

matter. That night was an anomaly, a once in a lifetime oversight on the part of grandpa Vic, who never sold liquor to minors. And you couldn't hold one mistake against a man forever, no matter how serious the mistake.

Three weeks later my great-uncle passed away, likely from some heart-related illness, the obituary requesting donations to the Heart and Stroke Foundation in lieu of flowers. I was saddened by Tony's death, but I couldn't let on that I cared about him like I did, having met the old man, as far as father knew, only that time I was ten.

Father and grandpa attended the funeral, father later chuckling that they were the only non-accountants in the place. He added that he'd struck up a conversation with one fellow who, after hearing about father's business troubles, suggested he incorporate as quickly as possible to avoid loss of personal assets. Father showed me the fellow's card, then turned to me, a Zig Zieglar smile shadowing any doubt.

"No need to appear so blue, Jake. The banks'll always try knocking the little guys down. But you've got to be able to take the punches, shake them off, and smile about 'em after. Hell sometimes I pray for troubles like these. After all, what's the loss of a business even a house, long as I've got health and family? Nothing else counts if I've got those. So cheer up. Any successful person will tell you--you enjoy the price, Jake, you don't pay it."

Book 4

1

After sitting parked in Wyndham Hills I arrived home late that morning, feeling exhausted, but much too agitated to sleep. Diana led me through the basement, outlining her decorating plans as she walked carefully in white silk pajamas across the cold, wood chipped, drywall-dusted floor. And then we climbed the stairs to the kitchen, where we sat drinking coffee.

"Yes, he called about thirty minutes before Katie left for school, asking if you got home all right. He was a little worried."

"I guess I lost track of the time."

"Where'd you go?" she asked, curious.

"I drove through Wyndham Hills. I was feeling a bit nostalgic."

Diana smiled, lifted her #1 Mom mug from lap to table, and slid her chair toward me slightly.

"We had some nice times there, didn't we?"

I nodded briefly and leaned back, away from the sun pouring through the sliding door.

She felt the long green blades of the spider plant arching out the red ceramic planter on the floor. She tilted her head, looked at it from this angle,

that. My stepmother appeared a little older right now, pale in the sun's stare, without makeup.

"Something the matter?" she asked. "You're awfully quiet."

"Just tired."

"Why don't you go upstairs and sleep?"

"In a while."

Diana eased away from the table, walked gracefully to the dining room, and returned with two thick binders of sample carpet patterns. She flipped through them, asking my opinion on three.

"We need to decide soon," she said, left elbow on table, chin resting on the back of her hand, a diamond winking. "The carpet needs to be laid before the pool table arrives next month."

"Pool table?"

"Didn't I mention it when we were downstairs?"

"No."

"Oh. Yes, it'll go along that far wall." She drew it out with a fingernail on the table. "It was your dad's idea. He thought it would be nice if the two of them had something to do together. I guess Vic was quite the pool player in his time."

Diana picked a small splinter from the bottom of her purple slip-on, examined it, flicked it in the trash.

"You know," she said, her enthusiasm waning as a cloud blocked the sun, "the tragic part of this whole thing is that the two of them were just starting to get along."

"They'd been getting along?" I asked, recalling the conversation I had had with Katie the first night I arrived in Brantford.

"Yes. Oh, I felt so happy for your father. He never had the nicest childhood, you know. After Helen died Vic spent a lot of time at the joint. Jacob was only a boy at the time. He had to go down there himself, some nights, just to spend time with his dad. And then he could never do anything to please him. I don't know why Vic was always so hard on your father.

"But they'd been spending a lot of time together these past few months, since Vic moved in. Your father was really making an effort to get along with Vic. He's trying hard not to show how much this is upsetting him, but the other night he told me that seeing his dad in the hospital hurt, like when he lost his mother, and when he lost you."

Misty let out a weak, plaintive cry outside the sliding door and Diana let her in, poured milk into a bowl in the laundry room, then returned to the table.

"Last night was the first night he's been able to sleep since this whole thing began. I think he was glad you were with Vic. I know he's very proud of you. He told me: 'We did something right raising our son, didn't we?'"

The Himalayan strolled elegantly out the laundry room, her brown-black tail splashing in the air. She hopped on the chair between Diana and me, washed herself, arched her back, then sat tall in the sun. She looked at us with brown-black face, white whiskers, and almost angry gray-blue eyes.

"Was that good?" Diana asked. The cat blinked slowly, purring as my stepmother rubbed under her chin. "You like that, don't you?"

Diana stroked Misty several minutes as I watched cat hair floating in the spotlight of sun. I was reluctant to ask it. I spoke softly--

"When did you first meet dad?"

Did she hesitate, falter, or was Diana simply startled by the question?

"A little while after your mother left...why?"

"So you didn't know him before that?"

"No. We met at the Mohawk Bowlerama." Diana turned her head away, smiled to herself, blushed. "I was working at the snack bar and he came in one night with a few of his hockey friends. Your father and I became close friends." She took a quick look at me. "Not that close. We were just friends till the divorce went through. He was going through a very difficult time, losing his wife, not knowing where you were. Your mother never called, and her family up north wouldn't talk to him. He eventually hired an investigator who found you both living in Toronto. I think you were about four at the time. Jacob took her to court, but didn't win custody. We were with him after the hearing. I've never seen your father as upset as he was that day."

"You and grandpa Vic?" I asked.

"Yes. And then one night, out of the blue, she called to ask if he'd watch you for a while. She said she wanted to take a trip, to Greece I think. Your father was so pleased to have you, even if it wasn't permanent. We expected her to come get you after a while, but she never did."

"Do you know why?"

"No I don't, Jake. She was young, maybe not very mature. Maybe she figured you were better off with us. We had a home, a family life. Maybe she thought it was a better environment for you. I don't know. Does she still write?"

"Yes. I got her last letter about a month ago."

"Well, why don't you ask her?--I'm sure she'll give you a good explanation. I really can't tell you anymore about it."

I was about to go upstairs to the guest room when Diana returned to the subject of the basement, her eyes suddenly zealous.

"There are *so* many decisions to make. Do you want to panel, paint, or paper the walls? Do you want shag rug, or carpet? A sofa, or love seat? A fireplace, or an insert? What sort of lighting do you want? What kinds of art would best set it all off? Should a piece go here, there, or--" Diana flung her arm, the cat bolting away--"would it look better over there?"

My head was spinning. "Sounds very complicated."

"Oh, it is," she said--"it is."

Diana glanced at the stove, pushed short dark hair behind her left ear.

"Sure I can't fix you something?"

"No," I said languidly.

She looked at the clock. "You must be exhausted. And here I am keeping you awake with all this nonsense."

"It's okay." I stood, kissed the top of her head. "Goodnight," I said--"or good morning."

"Yes," she smiled. "Good morning."

When I entered the guest room Misty lay on the bed cleaning herself, and I gave the cat a shove, closed the door after her. Then I counted the money on the dresser, fifteen hundred dollars. The money for my flight, and a little extra for expenses. Twenty-four, and not able to pay my own way home at a time like this. I laughed at myself with some disgust.

I got under the covers, closed my eyes, thought about mom's letter, and then wondered if Diana was telling the truth about her and father. I quickly pushed that thought away. Be here selflessly, I told myself, angry that I needed to be told again. Then I imagined how good the basement will look when finished, wondered what it would all cost father.

I tossed for a long while, the draped sun still drenching my lids.

2

Sluggish, I lifted myself out of bed around four that afternoon. The house was quiet. I went downstairs and read a note on the kitchen counter:

> *Jake,*
> *Good morning (ha! ha!). Hope you slept well. Gone to get Katie at school, then to pick up a few things at the mall. We'll pop by the hospital later, to see the Veggie Man. Dad called and said we'll go for dinner, tonight. We'll call you, and you can meet us. Love Diana.*

The phone rang, startling me.

"Hello, Jake."

"Hi," I answered, thinking it was father.

"This is all bullshit. I've always been on the level with Vic, and I wouldn't fuck you guys around now. I'll have your money ready for the next delivery, but that's it."

"What?--who's this?" I asked, suspecting it was Taxi.

"Young Jake? Sorry, thought you were the old man." Pause. "How's Vic?"

"Good."

"Back to the track soon, eh?"

"Yeah," I said--"who's this?"

"Where's the old man?"

"At the hospital."

"I've tried the hospital."

"He wasn't there?"

"No. Tell him Taxi called, all right?" He hung up.

My mind flashed back six years, and I started worrying for father's sake, Diana's, Kate's. What's the use worrying, Jake, you can't change a thing. Return to Vancouver when this hospital business is over, resume your own responsibilities. What responsibilities? You have your job at the nightclub. You're training for a managerial position. You have responsibilities. Ice dropped on the freezer side of the fridge, and I opened the door, knocking off a duck-shaped magnet, and saw a tub of ice cream. I spooned out a bowlful twice, ate slowly.

Upstairs in the guest room I exercised for thirty minutes, trying to throw off my tiredness. And then I went into the bathroom to shower, pausing to look at my reflection in the mirror: unshaven, black eyes, short dark hair, white body, a rosebud tattooed above my left bicep. I was suddenly reminded of Joseph Bowers, the first man to attempt an escape from Alcatraz. When I was eighteen father told me I looked a good deal like him.

A picture of Bowers appears in a book father bought me while touring Alcatraz Island, during his trip to California when I was twelve. Warden James A. Johnston called Bowers--who died violently attempting to escape a twenty-five year prison sentence for robbing a store of sixteen dollars and sixty-three cents--a "weak-minded man with a strong back, who would get peace of mind by exercising his body."

Forgetting my shower, I walked down the white carpet to grandpa's room. Not at all religious, I'm not sure what led me to open his door, and walk toward the thick bible I remembered seeing on his dresser at Christmas.

I felt the cover of the old, cracked, leather-bound bible; opened it carefully, reverently, because it was his. Inside the front cover grandpa'd scribbled the names and dates of the important events in our family's history, beginning with Giovanni and Rosemary: marriages, births, father's divorce, deaths, father's remarriage. Anthony's death was the final entry.

Never having thought of grandpa as the least bit sentimental, hearing him speak of the past only when he talked about his wife that time in Mohawk Park when I was twelve, I was surprised to learn he'd recorded these details. Except one entry none appeared strange to me, since I'd already heard

my great-uncle's partial history up to the time of Helen's death. But one record, this, struck me as a little unusual as it was the only one grandpa had put a star beside:

Jake, Jr came to stay in Brantford on July 17, 1973, age 8.

I heard a car pull into the drive. I flipped the thin pages quickly, noticing a piece of paper tucked inside, two-thirds through *Leviticus*. It was a yellow receipt for a bank draft drawn on the Permanent, dated July 16, 1973. My hands shook as I removed the receipt. And then I hurried out of the room, closing the door after me.

"You're awake," father said, slamming the front door.

I was midway down the stairs in a Ramada Inn towel.

"Yeah, I'm awake," I said--"how's grandpa?"

I watched father's face, felt the cool air he'd brought in with him.

"Much the same," father said, smiling hopelessly. "They're trying to keep dad comfortable, but he gets agitated whenever he comes off the sedative. He's already ripped the IV out of his wrist twice today."

"Weren't you with him?"

"You can't have your eye on him all the time."

"Isn't there anything they can do?"

"They won't sedate him any more than necessary. I've told the doctors to put dad back on the morphine drip, but they insist this is the best way."

Father hung his dark leather jacket in the hall closet.

"I don't feel good about those fucking doctors. I don't think they're doing all they can. I'm thinking of transferring dad to Hamilton."

"Why did you leave the hospital?" I asked suddenly, coldly.

"I can't stand to see him like that, or hear the things he's saying. He's not himself. The doctors say that not enough oxygen's circulating to the brain, that's the reason. They figure it's only a matter of time before it shuts down completely."

Father walked to the kitchen, heavy black shoes, dropped keys on the counter. He read Diana's note, then checked for messages on the machine.

"No calls?"

"Taxi phoned."

"Taxi? That prick, told him not to call here."

"He said he tried you at the hospital."

"What else did he say?"

"Just to tell you that he called."

"I must've just left," he said, twisting his head in my direction. "Jake, did you give any thought to what we talked about in the car?"

"No."

"I don't want you staying there, tonight. It's too difficult to see dad like this."

"I don't want to discuss it."

Father's black eyes searched me briefly, then he threw open the sliding door behind him. He surveyed the cedar deck through the screen, hands on waist, gray breath dissipating into the early evening air [illegible] slammed the door, then turned around, his face suddenly anxious.

"They did a nice job on the deck, didn't they?"

I stared at him. "What's bothering you?"

Father sat at the table, eyes asking me to sit with him. I remained standing in my towel, put my hands on my waist, looked at the clock.

"I used to be trim and in shape like you."

He scratched his stubbled shadow, ran a gold hand through thick, dark hair.

"When your mother and I met I was playing all kinds of sports. I wanted to go to college, be a gym teacher."

"Why didn't you?"

"We got married, had you."

"Are you sorry?"

"No." He paused, reached under his black V-neck sweater, scratched his left armpit, then leaned against the table. "Things don't turn out the way you expect, do they, son?"

I wasn't in the mood for sentimental conversation. I wanted to shower and get to the hospital soon as possible.

"Is there something you want to say?"

Father surveyed the dim kitchen.

"I blame myself for what's happened."

"What?"

"I don't think dad wanted me involved. The more I think about it, the more I think he figured I'd get out only if I got caught. He kept saying 'get as much as you can get, I will sell what you can get.' He kept pushing me like that, since before Christmas. I don't think he had any idea how much I could get. I think he thought he could break me.

"He left the house most mornings at eight. He'd spend a couple hours with the horses. In the afternoon he'd meet with buyers from Hamilton and Toronto, and then he'd manage the joint all night. Some nights he didn't come home till four in the morning. At seventy-six he was working those kinds of hours. He had to work hard to sell the quantities I was shipping, and I think he had difficulty keeping up. But he wouldn't let on, just kept telling me to get it, saying that he could get rid of it. It was a game between us."

Father shook his head, looked at me, wanting me to say something. A long, awkward moment passed that way, me glancing at father's expectant

eyes, till I could no longer face him. He rose from the table and checked his watch.

"What time did Taxi call?"

"About an hour before you got home."

"That prick," he murmured.

"What's he got to do with all this?"

Father looked out the kitchen window, touched the purple stained-glass unicorn hanging from an adhesive hook.

"Taxi was one of dad's main buyers. And dad's not like me. I expect cash on delivery, from everyone--including my own father. In this business you always get the money up front. Dad wasn't smart that way.

"I don't think dad could sell at the rate I was delivering, either through the wholesale buyers, or the joint. I think he was giving stock to the bulk purchasers on account. That Taxi prick's denying it of course. There's a lot of money involved."

"Are you dealing with Taxi in any way?"

"Apart from wanting the money back?"

"Yes."

"No."

Something inside me sank, and I needed to sit.

After a moment I looked at father: cold black eyes, a stern, savage look upon his face.

"I'll kill that asshole before I let him keep dad's money."

3

I took a hot shower, shaved, put on fresh clothes, tucked the bank receipt into my jacket, then waved to father, who was speaking harshly into the phone. He put his hand over the receiver--

"Meet us for dinner at eight. We'll be at the Sherwood."

"I'll see you in the morning."

I arrived at the CCU shortly before seven, after making a quick stop at a Canada Trust branch to deposit the money father had given me. Grandpa's forearms were strapped to the rails of the bed and a nurse tapped his left wrist with her first two fingers. I was about to tell her to untie him when grandpa opened his eyes.

"The table could use a little more of that roast beef, miss. And bring us another round of drinks."

"At least he's hungry, that's a good sign," she said.

We exchanged smiles across grandpa's waist. I introduced myself.

"I'm Joanne, from IV."

"What happened?" I asked, looking at the white sheet covering his legs, splattered with blood.

"Victor pulled out his IV again."

"Wasn't anyone in the room with him?"

"Apparently not. Sara was here when I came in. She said he got a little upset, so she called an orderly to secure his arms. He's still very strong. It's a surprise considering his condition." Joanne smoothed grandpa's left hand.

After several minutes she managed to locate a thin vein on his left wrist.

"It's getting more difficult to find a good vein. I'll have to use the smallest needle. It should work, but it won't be strong."

She taped the needle in place, reconnected the IV, wrapped gauze around grandpa's wrist, then made sure the infusion worked properly.

"I'll keep my fingers crossed," she said, leaving the room.

Grandpa opened his eyes a short time after.

"Sure do lay out a nice spread in this place, eh, Jake?"

"Huh?"

"Thought you could out eat the old man, didn't you?"

"Grandpa Vic, it's me, it's Jake Junior."

"Listen to me, son: you're better off lettin' others fill their plates ahead of you. Let them clear away the old stuff. That way the fresh goods'll be comin' out the kitchen, for you."

Sara looked in to see if everything was all right.

"We're having a little talk," I said. "Would you mind untying him?"

She walked briskly across the room and went to work on the straps. "We don't normally tie a patient this way, unless he gets violent. It's for his safety, as well as ours."

"Why wasn't someone in the room?"

"Your dad was here until four or so, and then your mom and sister came about thirty minutes later. You must've just missed them." Sara turned toward the bed. "This happened shortly after they left."

"Why weren't you with him?"

"I'm responsible for three patients. Obviously I can't be everywhere at once."

She glanced at the clipboard officiously, checked her watch.

"In another fifteen minutes it'll be two hours, and then I'll give him another dose of diazepam."

"Fine."

"Oh, they were fuckin' beauties," grandpa smiled and looked at me with wide, wet eyes. "Jake, they were beauties, weren't they?"

Sara quit the room, shaking her head.

In an instant I recalled reading an article in a women's magazine, stating that the average North American male thinks about sex six times each hour, and--who could explain such a thought?--I wondered if the same applied to grandpa this hour.

"Weren't they beauties, Jake?"

"Who?"

"You saw them, remember? I pointed them out at the fair that night. You liked them, too, remember? What I'd give to see them again."

"Who were they?"

"Bred 'em myself. One was Grace Abounding. Can't remember the name of the other. Oh, they were fuckin' beauties!"

"Horses?"

"Of course, horses!" he spat. "You were with me, can't you remember? Are you stupid?" He laughed to himself. "Now there's a question requires no answer."

He reached for my left hand and held it tight as his taut legs pushed upward, his back sliding and face straining. I adjusted the pillow and tried to shift him into a more comfortable position.

"Get me the fuck outta here! Help me to the track, will you? Miles to go. Got people waitin' for me."

I talked softly, tried to soothe him, asked if he was in any pain.

"Not too bad, thanks." His eyes blinked. "Oh, hi ya, Jake." He looked around the room, almost apologetic that I had to see him like this.

"Do you know where you are, grandpa?"

"Sure, son, the fuckin' hospital. Say, you're not livin' in town, now, are you?"

"No. I'm just home for a while."

"Well, it sure is good to have you. Thanks for droppin' by. Stay as long as you like." He paused. "Listen, can ya spring me? Don't much care for the place. Who's watchin' the joint?"

"Try to relax, grandpa. Everybody's taking care of you."

"Who's watchin' the joint? They'll be expectin' me at the door. You gotta get me out. Who's lookin' after things while I'm lyin' here, useless?"

"Dad's got everything under control."

"Oh, Christ!" He struggled, tried to raise himself, but the rock of his drugged body pulled him slowly to the bed, arms twitching.

Sara entered hastily, carrying the tray with the sedative like a waiter bringing the check. She shut off the infusion pump and injected the sedative into grandpa's left arm. He coughed up phlegm and she reached for a tissue.

"Spit."

"I'll spit when I'm goddamn ready."

Grandpa faced me, eyes straining. "Is he really watchin' things?"

"Yes."

"Tell him not to fuck up like last time, okay?" he said, spitting, closing his eyes.

I leaned back in the chair and watched him sleep, listening to his slow, broken, liquid breathing.

4

Father lost the hobby shop when I was fifteen. Shortly after, somehow, he got the funds together to open a barbeque chicken operation--like Swiss Chalet, only two years before Swiss Chalet came to Brantford. "People always need to eat, Jake. Besides, everyone I talk to thinks this town could use an alternative to Kentucky Fried Chicken."

He spearheaded a massive advertising campaign prior to opening, taking out full page spreads in the *Expositor*, running thrice-daily radio ads, even appearing himself in TV commercials aired during the supper hour. And the grand opening was truly something to see--balloons, posters, people from the media, and a large yellow chicken dancing and waving at cars on Charing Cross.

And the food was good, which made the monumental grand opening crowd want to return, spread the word. And in the course of a year the business grew into a breathtaking, fabulous success--father purchasing a new Cadillac, taking us to Disney World, building a pool, and talking about franchising the operation soon, retiring to the Caribbean.

Grandpa Vic was hardly around to see the growing splendor, stopping by only briefly on Saturdays with that basket of produce, which was now like a burden to us. "Does he really think we eat all this in a week?" I once asked Diana. "And how come he just pops in and out? Why doesn't he stay longer, anymore?" "I don't know. He's busy, I guess, like your father," she sighed, continuing to sponge Katie in the bath. "Now can't you find something to do?"

One blazing afternoon two years after Reg died I sat smoking at the shelter by the third hole, smelling the damp woods to my right, looking at the Northridge Golf Course laid out in green, and the blue arch that held it, clear like grandpa's eyes. Then I counted the umbrellad golf carts whirring up and down hills, compared that number to the men pulling and carrying clubs.

Behind me suddenly, on the old wooden bridge, I heard the excited clamor of a large dog, followed by the sound of running shoes shuffling in a frenzied pace.

"Slow down you silly, naughty beast," a woman's voice rang.

I twisted my neck to look, saw Samson pulling Mrs. Spurray toward the golf course. It was the first time I had observed her outside garage or pool, and, slightly ashamed, I returned my gaze toward machines and men.

They walked directly in front of me. Samson had put on weight since the last time I saw him and he panted and drooled in his wrinkled black coat. He tugged toward me, eyed me with a choked stare. Mrs. Spurray gave a quick jerk on the chain, brought him into line, then smiled at me rather curtly. Then I watched her fit, not quite pale legs frolic into the distance,

following Samson down the straight edge of the dark, sprawling forest, which seemed to tease the very green, immaculate fairway.

A herd of golf carts sped past them--men waving, smiling, honking their stupid hollow horns, one even figure eighting to impress her. But Mrs. Spurray ignored it all, carried herself with as much dignity as a petite woman struggling to keep a hefty, squirrel-smelling black Lab in line could.

And as the men stretched out their long, grotesque parade before her, I felt a deep, primal anger stir inside, mixed with horrible longing. Not knowing why, I waited forty-five minutes hoping they'd return. And when they did I showed no sign that I felt her approach.

"Why do you sit out here all alone, young man?" she asked in a dark, stirring contralto.

"Wh--?" I said, as if startled from a dream. "Oh, hi."

I held out my hand to Samson, who was now tired, let his damp, black nose sniff and lick me.

"Why do you sit here, all alone?"

"Got tired of playing."

"I see," she mused. "And where are your clubs?"

"Had the boy take them to the clubhouse."

"But don't you find it so horribly hot? Truly, if Samson didn't insist we take these walks, I don't think I should ever come out at this time of day."

"It's not so bad when you're in the shade."

She supposed it an invitation, and moved toward me, eyeing the bench like she thought I'd move over, make room. But the shelter was quite small and I felt crowded enough, the woman standing only six feet away.

"Don't worry, I won't bite. What's your name?"

"Jake."

"Ah, Jake, the Successor."

"Huh?"

"That's what your name means in Hebrew."

"Really?"

"Really," she nodded.

"It means I'll be a success?"

"In a way, yes. It means that you will succeed," she spoke firmly.

Mrs. Spurray removed dark glasses, examined me a moment, eyes remaining fixed as she turned her head slightly, startling a fly on the brim of her straw hat. She had soft lips, pale complexion, chestnut hair tucked into a soft, low bun at the back of her head, and large dark eyes that made me sad gazing into them.

"You're the young man I always see walking his dog, aren't you?"

"Uh huh," I nodded, eyes downcast.

"Your father is the barbeque chicken magnate, isn't he?"

"Yeah."

"I've seen him on TV. He's very handsome."

With her left thumb Mrs. Spurray adjusted the strap of her red tank top, which had slipped off her shoulder. Then she knelt to fasten a tennis shoe, the red strap slipping again.

"What are you listening to?" she asked, glancing at my Walkman on the bench.

"Muddy Waters."

"Oh, really? Which album?"

"It's a greatest hits collection." I named a few songs: 'Southbound Train,' 'I'm Ready,' 'Forty Days and Forty Nights.'

"Are you a big fan?"

"Not really. I take him out from time to time."

She eyed me sideways: "McKinley Morganfield."

"You know his real name?"

"Of course," she said, smiling haughtily.

"Okay, what artists did he influence?"

"That's a silly question. We don't have all day. Chuck Berry, the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, to name a few."

"Who was his half brother?"

"Otis Spann," she eyed me--"keyboards."

Mrs. Spurray adjusted her shoulder strap again. "So you like blues, do you? How about jazz?"

"Not really."

"You won't know who this is, then," she said, clearing her throat, singing in a stirring contralto, snapping her fingers, adding big band flourishes here and there:

Darling, I guess
my mind's more at ease,
But nevertheless
why stir up memories?

Been invited on dates
might have gone but what for?
Awfully different without you
don't get around much any more.

I snapped out of a brief, pleasant dream. Samson, lying beside my feet in a thick shade of grass, looked up at her tiredly, but also, it seemed to me, approvingly.

"That's easy," I said, pausing, needing a minute to consider. "Duke Ellington." I hoped it didn't sound too much like a question.

"And Bob Russell--don't forget Bob Russell. I'm impressed, Jake. Let's try another"--

You say eether and I say eyether,
You say neether and I say neyether,
Eether eyether, neether neyether,
Let's call the whole thing off!

"No problem. George Gershwin." She prompted me with her eyes. "And Ira."

"Very, very impressive. But where did you learn all this? I mean these aren't exactly the kinds of songs young men your age listen to."

I shrugged.

Suddenly Samson yawned, grew restless.

"What's the matter with you?" Mrs. Spurray asked, frowning down. They exchanged looks. "He reminds me that we must get home for Nathan."

"Who's Nathan?"

"My son. The sitter's with him now, but it's almost time for her to leave." She glanced at her watch. "He's such a sweet boy, four years old, no trouble at all."

Mrs. Spurray checked her watch again, frowned.

"Samson is quite right, we really must go. But why not drop by my home some evening. We'll carry on there." She pointed beyond the bridge. "That's it there, the lovely place with the turret." She spoke solemnly--"Come at night, though, okay?--I'm not one for days." Mrs. Spurray looked down at Samson--"I'm out now only for his sake. He's a most troublesome, tiresome creature."

"But aren't you married?" I asked.

"I was. Why, do I look married?"

"No."

"Oh, thank God. There's something so tiring about the whole thing. Truly, I've never felt more refreshed now that Winfred's out of my life. I suppose it's my own fault. I should've suspected no man could ever fulfill such a lofty name." She grinned--"Old English for 'friend of peace'"--then coughed out a quick little "ha!"

"My name is Julie," she said, offering her hand, which was small, warm, moist. "Will you come, then? Promise that you will."

I promised.

Samson, stood, shook himself, and sealed the oath with a flurry of rather extravagant barks. And then the two of them dashed off through the thick grass, toward the trickling water and the bridge.

That summer dragged endlessly. Ben took an evening job stocking shelves at Loblaw's--all the neighbors, as in conspiracy, having hired

landscapers to tend their lawns. He slept days, worked nights, made new friends, and the two of us soon lost touch. And I'd have to work at father's restaurant occasionally, halving and quartering chickens whenever a cook got sick, which I hated, father never paying me for my labors. And grandpa Vic was hardly around to blotch the dull canvas with a little of his color.

Despite the tedium of that summer, despite thinking of her frequently, I delayed visiting Julie till the holiday had stretched a week short of its end. And then only because I could no longer suppress the curiosity which had roused and plagued me since meeting her that afternoon.

I left my room one humid night, approached the corner of the Spurray garage, listening cautiously for Samson at his post. There was no sign of him.

Julie answered the door, her face a shadow in the luminous, candle-lit backdrop. She wore a dark kimono and held a glass of red wine in her hand.

"Jake! I was just thinking of you today."

"Sorry I didn't come sooner. I've been busy," I said, hands in pockets.

"No need to explain. We are quite used to this sort of thing. Please, come in."

I entered hesitantly, shyly.

"Where's your dog?"

"I'm afraid he's no longer with us."

"What happened?"

"It's a long story, the poor thing. He had a weak heart. But we needn't fuss. Samson wouldn't have wanted it that way. What's done, you know."

Julie's flippant manner surprised me, and then I gazed around her vast, dark living room.

"What do you do?" I asked.

"So, it's my money you're after!" She hmmed, searched me suspiciously, playfully. "Do you like it? It was a little going away present from my ex-husband." She moved out of the foyer and into the candlelight, her face more visible. "Did I tell you he's living in Bermuda with Miss Arkansas?"

"No"

"Yes. The pretty, silly thing. She should have phoned. I could have set her quite clear of him," she smiled, and motioned toward me, touching my arm. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to startle you." Pause. "I'm glad you came."

I moved away from her and continued searching the dim room.

"What do you do?"

"Not any one thing in particular," her rich voice spoke slowly. "I swim, shop, read, listen to music."

"What else?"

"Quite persistent, aren't you? I do admire that in a man. Well, I have a grand video collection. All the classics. 'Casablanca,' 'Gone With the Wind,' 'To Kill a Mockingbird.' I just love Gregory Peck, don't you?"

"Don't know him."

"You don't know Gregory Peck? Oh, he's wonderful, you'll have to see for yourself. He has such a noble presence, such integrity." She smiled. "But I could go on and on and on, listing titles, and talking about movies, till you begin suspecting I'm a tiddly short of a wink."

Julie paused, and it was a long, peaceful pause. I gazed at the shadow of her profile flickering against the far wall, stretching up into the tall, ominous ceiling.

"And of course I have Nathan, my little gift. He keeps me quite busy. He's a very sweet child."

"Is he sleeping, now?"

"Oh, yes. He sleeps like a dream."

Julie swept long chestnut hair off her face, took a sip of wine.

"I was just about to watch 'Citizen Kane.' Will you join me?"

"Sure."

"But what are you doing out so late? Don't your parents worry?"

"No," I said, "they don't mind."

"Good," she smiled. "It's such a beautiful, haunting story. I must have watched it a dozen times already, but there's something so delightfully sad and tragic about the whole thing. I'll pour you a glass of wine, then we'll go downstairs."

5

"Get the fuckin' phone, will ya?" grandpa snarled, startling me.

"Huh? Oh--" I lifted the receiver.

"Hi, Jake."

"Hi, Katie."

"How's the Veggie Man?"

"Don't call him that, okay?"

"Sorry."

"He's resting. Where are you?"

"At a pay phone at the Sherwood. Dad told me to call. He wants to know if you'll come have dinner with us."

"No."

"He's worried about you."

"Tell him there's nothing to worry about."

"I'm glad you're there, Jake. I don't know what dad's problem is."

"He's under a lot of pressure, Katie. This is all very hard for him."

"I guess." She paused. "Jake?--"

"Yes?"

"When we were at the hospital tonight, grandpa kept asking for you."

"Are you sure it was me, and not dad?"

"I'm pretty sure it was you."

Silence.

"Katie?"

"Uh huh?"

"I want you to know that if you ever want to get away from Brantford for a bit, you can always come stay with me, okay?"

"Why, is something going to happen?"

"I'm not saying it for any particular reason. Just keep it in mind for the future. If you want to come for a holiday, or whatever, you can stay as long as you like, okay? Promise me you'll remember."

"I promise."

"For fucksakes, let a guy rest, will ya?" grandpa grunted.

"I'd better go, grandpa's calling."

"I heard," she laughed. "Tell grandpa I love him."

"Uuh!" he coughed, face in a grimace. "What's a fella supposed to do?"

6

I saw a great deal of Julie throughout autumn, winter, spring--visiting usually two nights a week, from the time she put Nathan to bed around eight, staying no later than midnight, because of school the next morning, or rather, because of father who made sure I at least went in that direction.

"I hope it isn't that Vanessa character you're spending all this time with," he said one night as I was about to leave the house. "I've heard all the stories about her. One of the cooks knows her from school. He told me that there was a rumor she'd had an abortion a few years back."

"An abortion?--I doubt it."

"Well, I don't know if it's true or not, but the point is I've seen her running around with all kinds of guys. That sort of girl's fun for a bit, but she'll end up doing you more harm than good.

"Just concentrate on your education, Jake. Straighten out your act. Think about your future. Make a success of yourself, then you'll have them all in line. Hell, I know what you're thinking, I can see it on your face. Think it's all crap, don't you, everything I'm saying? My dad gave me the same advice when I was your age, and do you think I listened? But I'll tell you this, Jake, give me another crack, and I'd do things a bit different."

"I'll keep it in mind, dad," I said, walking out, handing the screen door over to the wind.

Julie and I would swim, listen to music, watch movies, talk. Sometimes she'd tell me about her ex-husband, who was once her best friend. Or she'd talk about some of the men who came after. Then sometimes she'd raise the issue of girls, and I'd say I preferred listening to her. And then she'd go on longer, and longer, and we'd drink more wine, and by the end of it all she'd sometimes get depressed, sometimes crack a joke.

"Why do men name their penises?" she asked one cold January night, Andrés Segovia playing softly on the stereo.

"I don't know, why?" I asked, watching her lips--sad, soft, forbidden to me.

"Because they can't stand to let a stranger make ninety-five percent of their decisions."

She laughed, filled our glasses on the carpet, caught my eyes on her mouth, traced her top lip with her tongue, and touched the back of her wrist to glistening pools of black mascara.

She blew her nose, then faced me--

"I'm twice your age, and I don't get it."

"Get what?"

"I don't know. You're the only one to come around, not needing something out of me. I don't know what to make of it. You say you're this rotten kid who steals, fails school, and yet you treat me this way?"

Drunk, she looked at me, eyes glazed, black tears trickling down pale cheeks.

"Can't you be an asshole from time to time? You know, leave the toilet seat up once in a while?" Julie laughed to herself. "No, don't, that might make it worse."

"Make what worse?"

She looked slightly embarrassed, tried to hide a nervous smile.

"Nothing," she said, looking away, "nothing."

One frigid night in February Julie put Louis Armstrong on the turntable and led me (reluctantly) around the kitchen in a little fox-trot.

...There must be a star in the skies
that isn't reflectin' your eyes,
I just don't know how to disguise
how much I miss you.

There must be a song
that doesn't remind me of you,
There must be a kiss to thrill me
like yours used to do...

After, we watched *Taming of the Shrew* in her dark basement while the gray, snow-lit woods prattled outside the window behind us. The fire raged, and the orange sparks started us from time to time.

I could feel Julie, restless in purple silk, sipping wine, curled in a cream-colored afghan, watching me. She pressed pause.

"Do you like the way I look?"

"Huh?"

"Don't you find me attractive?"

"Sure," I said, staring at Petruchio frozen on his afflicted horse.

"How come you never show it?"

Julie turned toward me, touched my hair, my cheeks.

"Why are you so timid?"

I felt immediately compelled to prove I was not. I sat still as she unbuttoned my shirt, yanked the tails out of my jeans, and kissed me on the mouth. She told me to close my eyes, and I did. Julie ran fingertips down my arm.

"What happened here?" she asked, feeling the scar on my right forearm.

"Nothing," I said, covering myself, rolling down my sleeves.

"Come on, what happened?"

"Nothing," I said, moving to the other side of the sofa.

Just then the door at the top of the stairs opened, and Nathan bumped down the steps, caught us. He shuffled to his mother, nuzzled her, and looked at me from behind her, through blond locks.

"What are you doing out of bed, my sweet?"

"I'm thirsty."

She held her son's hand, smiling at me as she followed him upstairs.

"Who's that man?"

"That's my friend. His name's Jake. Come, let's get some milk."

"What's he doing here?"

While they were in the kitchen I grabbed my coat and left, trudged home through blowing snow and sleeping sycamores, toward the gray, sulking moon hung in the muddled sky behind my house.

I'd see Julie again, never explaining why I left that night, never needing to explain. Of all the shelters on all the golf courses in all the world. I don't know what attracted me to her. Nearly each time I visited she had a new story to tell--a musician, policeman, biker, lawyer, a bartender--and there seemed to be something so sad beneath the flicker in her eyes as she told of her experiences. Still, with horrible longing I was drawn to Julie.

Around the time Nathan jolted me, the winter I was in grade eleven, a somber mood began sweeping through our house. Father tried keeping calm of course, whatever it was about, but something was irritating him, festering,

and it was more than a post-Christmas slump in restaurant sales, combined with the news that Swiss Chalet would be ready to open by summer.

"Christ, I've done it now," I heard him tell Diana in a low whisper as I pretended to read *Fortune* magazine in the next room, Katie coloring in a book beside me.

"Why do I get involved? What does it matter to me that some prick owes him money? Why am I always trying to please him?"

"Because you have a good heart, dear. Why are you so hard on yourself?" My stepmother paused. "I'm sure everything will be fine. It's really only a matter for Small Claims. I'm sure they'll see it that way."

Despite his efforts to remain calm, I could feel the tension around father. Sometimes he was quite kind, spending Sundays around the house, helping Diana in the kitchen, playing with Katie more than normal. All that scared the hell out of me. Or sometimes he'd speak in quick, short sentences, hardly noticing you, not taking his eyes off the paper or the TV. Or sometimes he'd yell at Muddy, Katie or me for stupid things, tracking a little mud into the house.

Even Katie started noticing it, that something you couldn't see, only feel. "What's wrong with dad, why's he acting weird?" "I don't know." "Is something the matter, or am I making it up?" "I don't know, Katie." Then I'd take her over to the mall, see a movie, grab a couple tapes behind her back as we passed the record shop on our way out the mall. Or we'd pass the time sitting on stools at the round hot-dog stand out front the cinema, eating warm pretzels and drinking orange julep.

When I wasn't in school, or with Katie, or listening to music or reading, or at the mall, I was with Julie. I remember one visit toward the end of February in particular. We swam a few laps, dressed, then sat by the fire in the basement, continuing the discussion we'd started in the pool.

"Look, Jake, if I want a lecture on proper behavior I'll call my parents, okay? You're hardly one to speak of moral issues," she smiled, tried to make light of it, but I could sense her hostility.

"I'm not lecturing. I'm just wondering how you can do it, that's all. You don't have to answer."

"Well you say it like I'm a slut."

"That's not how I meant it. I just thought I could talk to you. Do you want me to go?"

"Stop sulking," she said, reaching for my arm. "Don't you think I'd like a kind man around longer than a night or two?"

"I don't know."

"Of course I would. I mean, we're happy on our own, but it would be nice to share our lives with someone decent. I don't intend these guys to end up as sport, they just turn out that way. It's not harming Nathan."

I threw another log on the fire.

"Do you ever wish you didn't have him?"

"Why would you ask such a stupid question? Of course not."

"What if you felt you had to choose between your happiness and his?"

"There's no question, my happiness is my son's. That's only natural."

I turned my head toward the fire.

"Did I say something to upset you?"

"No."

"You look troubled."

"I'm not."

"Why do you always hide your feelings, Jake? Whenever we're together I always sense that you're trying to get to the bottom of something. If I'm right, then you need to make it clear what you're trying to get to the bottom of. You're very ambiguous."

"I'm not much of a talker," I said.

"I know, and you're a wonderful listener. But I spend a lot of time discussing my problems, why don't you tell me what's bothering you. You've been very selfish in your selflessness."

"Huh?"

"Friends share their problems. Why are you so afraid to share? I'm not going to laugh. I'm not going to throw you out. Probably not, at least." She smiled, and then I smiled back.

Slowly, over the next couple of hours, I told Julie what I could remember about my time with mom.

"I don't know what to say," she said afterward. "It's no wonder you ask so many questions. But I don't know your mother, so I can't speak for her. I only know that it must have been very difficult for her to give you up. There's no doubt she loved you, she wouldn't have wanted you with her when she left your dad otherwise. Maybe she just thought it would be best for you. Your dad obviously has some money; she probably imagined you'd have a better life with him. I'm very fortunate, you know, not having any money worries. I'm sure it would make a big difference if I did. I might want Nathan with his father, for my son's sake."

"But why wouldn't she at least come around?"

"I don't know. Maybe she feels bad about everything. Maybe it's easier for her to avoid you. But it doesn't mean she doesn't love you, or that you're responsible in any way. She'll get in touch, one day. I promise you she will. She doesn't sound like the type of person who'd forget about her son."

"I hate her," I said. "I fucking hate her."

"Don't hate her, Jake. I feel sorry for her. Think of everything she's missed since you've been apart. She's missed the colds, the kisses, the talks with your teachers. She's missed baking you cookies, doing your laundry, taking you tobogganing, reading you bedtime stories, holding you when

you're sad. But most of all," Julie smiled, "she's missed the police bringing you to her front door."

I laughed, and after the past couple hours it felt good to laugh.

"Really, Jake, I feel sorry for her."

"I won't ever feel sorry. I hate her."

"You don't mean that."

"Oh, yes I do."

"No you don't. Come here," she said, holding out her arms.

7

"You're losin' it, Jake," grandpa snapped. "Ain't that bad, is it? Jesus, don't come as any surprise, does it? I'm an old man, for fucksakes. Did you think I could keep that up forever? Wipe your face. Told ya before, I can't blame you. Forgive and forget. Now look like a man, for christsakes."

"Grandpa, it's me, Jake Junior."

"'Oh, son, was wonderin' if you'd drop by. Didjya see Diana and Katie?"

"No."

"What about that fucker, Tony? He was here a minute ago. See him?"

"No."

"If you do, tell him not to come by again, otherwise I'll smash his fuckin' skull. Make sure you tell him."

"I'll tell him."

"Thanks, Jake. Say, did you get the numbers?"

"What numbers?"

"Any numbers. Doesn't matter. Threes and fives are good. Pick a twelve. You pick the numbers."

"I'll get the numbers."

"Ataboy. And who won the game?"

"What game?" I asked, and then--"Montreal."

"Good, good," he smiled. "When they playin' next?"

"Saturday."

"What day is it now?"

"Friday."

"Who they up against?"

"Boston."

"Get the numbers and put fifty on the Habs."

"All right," I said.

"And did you tell the old man not to fuck up again?"

"I'll mention it the next time I see him."

"Good, son. Keep an eye."

8

The spring when I was eighteen grandpa was returning one evening from Finger Lakes Racetrack in New York when his car was broadsided by a drunk driver. Both legs got broken, he was cut and bruised top to bottom, unconscious for a week, and he suffered plenty internal damage. Doctors were perplexed that he had survived the accident. "It must have been his weight that saved him," one doctor said, shaking his baffled head. "I can see no other logical answer."

Father took me out of school occasionally, and the two of us would drive to Buffalo Memorial where grandpa'd been admitted. One bright, warming afternoon we looked on as he woke slowly, grumbling, his face bruised and gashed.

"How long I been in this rat hole?"

"Two weeks," father said.

"Two weeks? What kinda man needs that long a holiday?"

"You're not ready to leave yet, dad. Just keep still."

"People need me. Got to get to work."

"I'll make sure things are looked after, dad."

"Don't you touch a fuckin' thing! You done enough, already. I'll be out of this shit hole, soon," grandpa snarled, shook his ruffled head.

He convalesced at our place a short time later, still not well enough to live on his own, not strong enough to return to work. And I'm sure he would have kept the joint closed till he'd recovered completely, had the chief of police not kept calling our place, asking grandpa to open soon.

"Why would the police want that?" I asked as we sat alone in the rec-room one afternoon.

Grandpa shifted in the black leather recliner, set the crossword puzzle aside, waved the remote, and flicked the channel to 'Let's Make a Deal.'

"Pretty simple, son," he faced me, still bruised, a long cut jutting down the left side of his dark face. "Too much crime in Brantford, see. Each night I'm closed there's a break in at a bar or two around town. People tryin' to get at the stuff. Cops see it as a way of keepin' things under control to some degree. Now if folks were wise, they'd let the all-night variety stores handle it."

"But then you wouldn't have a job."

"Sure I would. Always somethin' folks need. Hell, I make two hundred a day just hustlin' the cigarettes I get off the reserve. At least another hundred from the novelties I pick up at the markets. Just gotta use your head a little."

"Three hundred bucks! And how much do you make at the joint?"

"A tidy sum, Jake. Never mind that. It ain't the money. Spoils things if you're in it for money. Secret is to find somethin' you can look forward to, aim your sight on that, stick to it--"

"So what're you gonna do?"

"About what, son?"

"About the joint, you know?"

"Can't afford the cops on my bad side, can I? Besides, I can keep an eye on your old man. It's only for a bit, we'll manage. I'm feelin' mostly fair to good."

And then he told me to look up the number for City Taxi, dial it.

"Yeah, Gerry? Vic. Not too bad. Listen, tell the fellas I'll be open Friday night, all right?"

He handed me the receiver. Then grandpa watched the TV, waiting with Monty Hall for the woman in a cat costume to decide.

"No, no, not the curtain, lady," he growled. "Take the damn door, the door! Been nothin' good behind any o' the doors all week."

After a lull in our conversation grandpa turned to me--

"Do somethin' legible in life, will you, son? That'd be a real comfort."

Father would leave the restaurant around eight each night, come get grandpa, waiting in the drive, cigar in mouth, knocking stones with a crutch. Then they'd disappear, tend to business, and return home early in the morning, quiet as mice.

Everything seemed to run like clockwork, till early summer, and then father was no longer free to help weekends. I learned the news from Julie, the night word appeared in print.

I was restless that evening from sitting around the house--father and grandpa both working, Diana and Katie out shopping, nothing but a 'Brady Bunch' rerun on TV. Once the June bugs had tucked in for the night I decided to go visit Julie.

"Nathan in bed?" I asked at her door.

"Yes."

Her face was flushed pink.

"Jake, I'm so sorry."

I glared at her. "Again? Fine, see you some other time."

"No, no, not that," she said, reaching for my hand. There were tears in her eyes. "I just read the paper."

"Read what?"

"About your father, you know."

"I don't know what you're talking about, get to the point."

Julie led me into the kitchen and showed me the reverse side of the front page of the *Expositor*. I saw my name in print.

The paper reported that father was convicted of attempting to extort $7200 from the owner of King's Convenience in late November. He had apparently phoned the owner, told him to have the money ready by such and such a day, or he'd be killed. Father received a six-month sentence, this being his first offence.

"I thought you knew, Jake. I'm sorry."

I sat at the table, speechless, lit a smoke. While Julie fixed coffee it occurred to me that the population of the Six Nations Indian Reserve outside Brantford was 7200, and I wondered, in a stupid dream, if there was some connection.

When I got home the house was empty. I went to my room, slammed the door, listened to the stereo. Thirty minutes later Diana and Katie rustled bags into the front door, giggling, and I kept to my room, staring at black a long time before I could sleep.

I didn't get out of bed for school the next day, told Diana I felt ill. Father woke around ten, walked into my room.

"Heard you're sick."

"Yeah."

He approached me, put a cold hand on my forehead. "You don't seem to have a fever."

I jerked my head away. "Get your fuckin' hand off me!"

Father glared at me. My body tightened and I made fists under the covers.

"You got something to say, say it."

"All right, what's this about you going to jail?"

He was instantly calm, so calm.

"You saw the paper?"

"Yeah."

"The owner of that variety store is a prick. He owed grandpa Vic some money and he refused to pay, that's all. Lots of guys in town owe dad. It makes him look bad. I was trying to do him a favor."

"A favor? You threatened to kill a man!"

"The paper exaggerated things."

"Why didn't you tell me about it?"

"We didn't want to worry you. It was my idea. We didn't think it'd appear in the news, and when it did, we figured you might not see."

Father looked on the bright side.

"It's not as bad as the paper makes out. I don't have to serve the six months all at once. They've worked it so I can serve time on weekends, Friday night till Sunday morning. Dad's mad at me, though. It means he'll have to close the joint for a couple weekends, until he's better."

9

"Jake, help me to the men's room, I have to piss."

"It's okay, you can go."

I watched the clear rubber tube winding down to the plastic bag attached to the side of grandpa's bed.

"No I can't, I'll piss my fuckin' pants."

"You're not wearing any."

"Sure as hell am. What's wrong with you?"

I thought for a moment, then reached to the sink and ran the tap.

"Grandpa Vic, you're in the washroom. You can go now."

"Ain't no washroom! Always hidin' an ace, eh, son? You want me to piss my pants?"

"Victor, sweetheart, do you have to urinate?" It was Mercedes. She put her hand on his forearm, caressed it.

"Yeah. And this fuckin' mope won't help me to the toilet."

"That's no way to talk about your grandson."

"Who? Why you so bloody nosey? Mind your business, leave me to mine. Who invited you in, anyhow?"

He tugged the IV with his right hand, and I wrestled his arm down. Then he let out a loud guttural sound, and closed his eyes tight.

"Now just relax, sweetheart," she said. "I'll get something to make you more comfortable."

Grandpa calmed down and faced me.

"Howdeedoo, Jake. Good to see you. Let's see what you've learned out in...watchya call it?"

"Vancouver?"

"No, no, son. Call it home, all right? Now, what's three times three?"

"Nine."

"What's nine times three?"

"Twenty-seven."

"What's twenty-seven times three?"

I thought for a moment. "Eighty-two."

"Is it a math test? Should I get a calculator?" Mercedes asked, entering, setting the tray on the counter, leaving again.

"Never mind yer fancy talk," he barked after her, and then turned to me--"haven't learned much, have you? Why would you waste yer time with stupid questions like those? Now let's try somethin' else, and this is very serious, son. Add these three numbers: seven, seventeen, seventy-three. Give me the sum in Italian."

"I can't."

"You can't add three numbers?"

"I can't speak Italian."

"Mohawk?"

"No."

"That's a shame, son."

"What are you two up to?" Mercedes asked, returning to the room.

"Can you speak Italian?"

"I'm afraid not."

He made a spitting noise. "Then you're no use to us."

Grandpa watched Mercedes' face as she administered the sedative.

"Where'd you get your lovely eyes?"

"From my mother."

"She must be very beautiful."

"Yes, she was. She passed away."

"Oh, I'm sorry. Was she Indian?"

"Bajan."

"Don't look too Asian to me."

"No, no, Victor, *Bajan*. My mother was from Barbados."

"Never heard of it. Near Italy?"

"No, no," she laughed. "It's in the Caribbean."

"Oh, down there near Lake Erie. Used to take Helen there for perch," grandpa said, smiling at the memory.

Mercedes looked at me kindly through thick glasses. She scratched the back of her graying head with a little finger.

"She must of been a beautiful woman," grandpa said.

"She was. Thank you."

Grandpa twisted his neck toward me.

"Fifty cases."

"Huh?"

"Get fifty cases."

"It should only take a minute," Mercedes whispered.

"Don't got a minute," he eyed me--"get 'em, now. Now, son, now."

"Fifty cases of what?"

"Don't play dumb. We don't talk business over the phone. Get fifty fuckin' cases!"

"We have the cases, Victor," Mercedes said, then softly to me--"it should only take a minute."

"Get twenty-five more."

"All right," I said.

"Don't give me your lip. Get twenty-five more fuckin' cases!"

"Do you want the cases, or not?" I asked.

"Told you, already!"

"Then you'll have to keep quiet. The other patients will complain."

"I gotta be quiet, do I, to stay in business? Well, fuck 'em! Ain't none o' their goddamn affair."

Grandpa pulled at the IV and we wrestled again. My arms grew more and more tired after each of these battles. We continued to struggle.

"Cut it out, the two of you. Are you in any pain, Victor?" Mercedes asked.

"Nothin' much. Thing in my dick's a bit bothersome."

Mercedes dipped rubber fingers into the jar of Vaseline, put her hand below the sheet. "The penis gets a little dry and irritated," she said, looking up at me. "Now, Victor, please try to get some rest."

"Don't know what's wrong with me. Haven't been myself, sorry for the trouble."

"Oh, you've been no trouble."

Mercedes held his right hand, examined grandpa's fingers. "I think he's hypoxic. Look at his hands." She lifted his left hand, dark purple past the knuckles. "We'll freshen him up, change the sheets, and then I'll run a pulse ox."

10

I left the room and walked the dim orange halls of the CCU. There were seven beds, two empty. I talked to a nurse filling out forms. She told me that two men were admitted that morning, both under forty-five. The youngest patient on record was twenty-four, she said. He didn't survive the first week. "The first week is the most critical." My grandfather shared the floor with a sixty-six year old woman, a fifty-eight year old man, and the two men under forty-five. Each patient requires twenty-four hour supervision. Two nurses work nights. "It's a question of money," the nurse spoke softly, solemnly. "It's good that you're here."

I walked out to the main corridor, down the hall to the washroom, and splashed cold water on my face. Then I stretched in the waiting room, remembering Taxi's phone call earlier that day. And then I recalled how quickly Diana and Katie adjusted to father spending weekends at the Burtch Correctional Facility. They'd spend Saturday afternoons at the mall, catch a matinee, then they'd have dinner at the Sherwood. It was their time to be together. After a month Diana started joking about how hard it would be to get used to having him around again, once the last few months were over.

Sunday mornings she'd prepare a huge welcome home brunch: sausages, pancakes, bacon, scrambled eggs, fried potatoes. Father'd sip coffee, glad to be home, talk in whispers around elated Katie, about how fast his time at Burtch was passing; saying he didn't mind it at all, that it gave him a chance to do a little reading, catch up on sleep.

And grandpa Vic would keep to the rec-room the whole time, sitting in his black leather recliner, playing Word Search in the paper while watching Billy Graham.

Clearing it with father first, grandpa asked if I'd help out for a couple of weekends till he had fully recovered, and I retired to my room pretending to think it over.

Early Friday afternoon we'd back his two-ton truck to the rear of the Brewer's Retail at the Brantford Mall. I'd climb into the huge black mouth and stack the cases that rolled out the warehouse quickly, while grandpa looked on, making sure I didn't stack them too high.

"See you Monday, Vic," the fellow in the warehouse waved once all the cases had been loaded.

Then we'd drive to Domenic's, eat, relax, talk a while.

"And I was wondering something else--"

"What is it, son?"

"Don't you have to pay for the beer right away?"

"Only place in town that'll give me credit," he winked, shoveled a forkful of roast beef and peas into his mouth.

"What about the whiskey, where does that come from?"

"From the States. Got some fellas bring it over. Cheaper that way. Beer's cheap there too, but it's bulky. Try gettin' all that across the border," he said, huddled over his plate, pointing a fork at the truck outside the window. "Why so full of questions, anyhow?"

"I'm just wondering how it all works."

"For your book, eh?" he smiled.

I shrugged not really.

"Well, you should know most things about most things by now. Let's get back to work, before you yack my ear off."

At the warehouse on Murray Street it'd take me a couple of hours to unload all the cases, and stack them against the wall next to the whiskey, near the door leading to the joint. After unloading the truck my back, arms, and shoulders ached horribly. How could he do all that on his own?

"Feels good in an odd sort of way, don't it?" he asked, draping the thick canvas over the cases.

"Yeah," I said, sitting on a bench, wiping my forehead.

"Takes a little gettin' used to, but after a while it ain't no trouble."

Throughout the night I'd do most of the legwork, fetching beer from the warehouse while grandpa answered the door, took money. Business didn't really start till the beer and liquor stores closed, although he had several regulars who'd knock on his door while they were still open, not minding the premium he charged.

Grandpa wound up a joke early that first Saturday evening--

"So the kid looks at the manager and says 'only two kinds of people come from Brantford, sir, hockey players and hookers.' 'Oh, is that right?' the manager says--'my wife's from Brantford.' 'No kidding?' the kid says--'what team did she play for?'"

The customer laughed for a long time, tears rolling down his cheeks, and then he turned to me. "You're grandpa's a real character, son. Look at all the entertainment I get for only a couple bucks. Try gettin' that outta those gray government faces."

Before the bars let out, before business got really hectic, grandpa and I would sit and chat between customers. The last Saturday before he was able to mind things on his own grandpa made a fist with his right hand, twisted his hard, dark forearm, staring at the tattoo.

"Hard to believe I've called this place home since Helen died."

As he continued to twist his forearm I surveyed the two-room shack, which could easily fit inside Diana's kitchen. I sat on a brown chair opposite grandpa on an old green chesterfield. On the cement floor between us lay a large, orange circular rug. On my left a small black-and-white TV rested precariously on a vinyl fruit-patterned kitchen chair. There was a baseball bat behind the door, to the left of the chesterfield. To the right, a small bathroom; sink and toilet rusted, but clean. Further right, the room where he slept, with cot, wood burning stove, and a small pile of dusty, webbed kindling. I looked at the nude calendar tacked to the particleboard above grandpa's head, compliments of Rinaldo's Plumbing.

"You like that?"

"Sure."

"Gives the fellas who come in somethin' to look at."

There was a knock at the door. Grandpa rose slowly and opened the door a crack.

"How ya doin', Vic?"

"Not bad. What'll ya have?"

"Twelve. Blue, if you got it."

I walked to the back, returned with the bottles, and handed them to grandpa.

"Thanks, Vic. Got a helper tonight, eh?"

"Yeah, he's trainin' to take over my lethargy. Take care, saw some cops around earlier."

We returned to our seats. Grandpa lit a cigar.

"How you makin' out in school, son?"

"Okay."

"Got a year left, eh?"

"Yeah."

"Any plans after that?"

"I have a few ideas. Maybe start a business."

"What sorta business?" he asked, searching me almost sternly.

"I don't know."

"Well, nothing's easy about runnin' a business. I keep tellin' your old man that, he thinks it's a fuckin' picnic. He don't think things through.

Wants the quick bucks, know what I mean? But he don't listen. Figures I'm preachin'."

Grandpa laughed to himself, knocking a thick ash to the floor. He flattened it into the cement with a red plaid slipper.

"Who the fuck am I to preach? Look at me, son, I'm no model. I can only tell you what's worked for me all these years. A man's gotta have discipline. Your old man don't have that. Afraid of the legwork. Wants to be driven around, when his own two legs'd do. He's reclined that way, see. That's why he ran into that trouble with the hobby shop, and it don't look any better for the chicken outfit. I can't stand seein' the way he throws his money around.

"In prosperous times you can have everything--money, friends, cars, homes, clothes. I've had 'em all, Jake, learned my lessons the hard way. If you're puttin' all your stock in those things, see what you got when your fortune turns.

"Hell, everybody's got rains to walk through. Maybe you're parents weren't good to you. You could find your wife with some fella. People you care about could die. You might lose your job. The bank could take your house, your car. Ten thousand things can happen. But you gotta get through it all, not rely on anybody, anything, but yourself.

"I see it all the time, guys turnin' to liquor. What's the use? That's the easy way, son. When you see two roads, ask yourself: what one's gonna be hardest on the legs? That's the road to take. It's a test, see. If you can get to the end of that road, you can walk on any."

We were interrupted by another knock at the door.

"Beat it, son," grandpa said through the crack.

"Come on, Vic."

"Piss off."

Grandpa closed the door. "Damn kids."

He returned to the chesterfield and sat slowly.

"I been watchin' you, Jake, you got a good head. What are ya, eighteen?"

"Uh huh."

"That's nothin'. Sure, you got some difficulties, but nothin' you can't turn round. Forget about money for now. If your old man listened to me long ago, he might not be sittin' where he is right now."

"What would you do if you were me?" I asked.

"Things were different when I was a boy. School's the thing now, I guess. I'd discipline myself if I was you. Exercise your body, pay attention in school. Maybe go to college."

"My grades aren't good enough."

"You got a year left. Forget what you done till now. Today's the thing. Hard work, son."

"I'm not smart enough. I just want my own business, make good money, drive a nice car."

"All that comes, goes. It's a big ferris wheel, and it's a lovely ride, and there's always a seat waitin' if you choose to get on." Grandpa looked at me, the calm in his blue eyes hardening. "I have the discipline to keep clear."

And then his eyes relaxed. "But that's only what I make of this grand adventurousity, you may not see it the same. You're always free to take a seat, and let yer ass be still."

11

Mercedes had turned grandpa onto his right side, propped him with pillows. I sat on the chair facing him, looking at his purple lips. There was a clip attached to the first finger of his right hand. She watched the pulse oximeter carefully, shaking her head.

"Eighty percent saturation level. That's not good." She pulled back the white sheet, exposing grandpa's blue, mottled legs. "I'm surprised he's still so strong, but it's the brain that counts, Jake." She looked at me to see if I understood. "I've seen patients go on like this a long time."

Mercedes unclipped his finger, wrapped the black cord around the monitor, and rolled the pulse oximeter toward the door.

"The best we can do is try to keep him comfortable."

I reached through the rail, put my right hand on grandpa's forearm, and closed my eyes.

12

Midway through grade twelve I fumbled through my math homework, took Muddy for a walk along the woods bordering the golf course, then decided to go see Julie, whom I hadn't seen in a while.

There was a large black pickup in the drive. A large, dark, toweled man answered her door.

"Can I help you, son?"

Through the triangle of his thick arm I saw Julie in scarlet sitting at the bottom of the stairs, Nathan crouched beside her.

"Would you like something?"

"It's okay," Julie said, "he's a friend."

She slipped past him, stepped out into the cold dark, leaving the door open an orange sliver. Julie pulled her silk robe tight about her neck.

"Hi," she said, arms crossed, bouncing lightly on slippered toes. "Oh, stop it, don't look at me like that." She took a quick look at the sky.

I heard laughter inside. Through the rose-tinted stained glass I watched the toweled man raise giggling Nathan in his arms. I motioned toward the drive, wishing Julie to stop me.

She reached for my hand.

"Look at me, Jake. Tell me you're all right."

I was about to. "Are you?" I asked.

Julie glanced behind her, beyond the glass.

"Yes. He's very kind and considerate. And Nathan adores him. I think we have something good between us." She paused, eyes twinkling moonlight through the pines. "Plus he's a fireman. He put in a couple smoke detectors for us."

I let out a spontaneous little laugh, wished it could have sounded more masculine.

Julie looked at me with lovely, cheerful eyes.

"Say something, Jake."

"I'm all right."

Julie held me. I felt the warmth through her silk robe, her soft, warm flesh. In Julie's arms I dreamt that I had thrown open the door, struck him down with violent blows, won her, made Julie mine. And then I left, never to see her again.

13

"What in hell's that noise?" grandpa asked, suddenly stirring.

"What noise?"

"That noise in my head, make it stop! Who's there?" he asked, eyes opened wide.

"It's me, it's Jake."

"Oh, son, what in God's name have I done?"

"What did you do?"

"Tell that nurse to bring me more juice."

"Are you in any pain?"

"No."

"What did you do?"

"More juice, I said! More juice, juice, juice! Tell the nurse twenty-six ounces. Straight-up. Right in me. Tell her, son."

I left the room to call Mercedes. When we returned grandpa was asleep. She checked her watch.

"Still thirty minutes to go. Call if he wakes again."

Grandpa opened his eyes and spoke in a tired whisper. "Didjya get the money, son?"

"Yes."

"Good," he smiled, pausing briefly. "Juice, more juice! Gettin' to be like those drunks, eh? Can't go a day without it, can I? Not a day! More juice. Get it. I'll sell it. How much? Can't you do it any less? All right then, get it. Watch yourself. Authorities everywhere."

"Try to rest. Please, grandpa, try to rest."

"Ain't no life for a man with family. You'll learn the hard way. Oh, they'll give you a time, all right. Wake you, son, from your dream. And it'll be one hole I won't be able to dig you out."

He tugged at the IV while I fought his arms. He held my hands tight, squeezed hard, my fingers turning blue, beginning to hurt. I glanced into the hall for Mercedes. He continued squeezing, and I dug a thumbnail into the soft skin under his cuticles. That had no effect, and I stopped when I saw blood.

His hands relaxed. The room was quiet, not even the sound of his gurgling, only the sound of the infusion pump humming beside me. I looked at his chest to see if he was breathing. Then his blue eyes searched me, clouded, troubled.

"Guess I deserve this, eh, after everything I put you through. Can you forgive me, son?"

"For what, grandpa?"

"Your mother...long time ago," he said, eyes twitching closed.

Mercedes entered and gave grandpa another dose of diazepam. She smoothed his purple hand, shaking her head as she waited for the sedative to enter.

14

I wanted to fight the thought off, avoid it, but I couldn't, still tried. He was the reason, and it was difficult to be angry with grandpa Vic, looking at him, listening to the fluid building in his lungs. As he slept I removed the bank draft receipt from my pocket, examined the thing in the dull orange light. Drawn on the Permanent. Dated July 16, 1973. Ten thousand dollars. I put my face in my hands and wept, thinking about mom's last letter.

> *It's impossible, son, to explain everything in a letter. I really had hoped you would come to New York, so we could talk in person, but I understand why you don't feel quite ready for that just yet.*
>
> *Three months ago I visited a very good seer in New York. I asked her why my life has been an endless series of bad choices. She told me that in a past life I*

was an old black blues musician who lost himself in cocaine and women.

I know this sounds a little silly, but when I think back I can see my tendency to run from anything difficult. The seer has helped me to understand my past with greater clarity; her words explain the many mistakes I've made.

Please understand that my past was no picnic, either. I still keep having horrible dreams. Things you push down scream for help in dreams, the seer said. Here's one I keep having: I'm six-years-old, the youngest of three daughters, walking down into the dark basement. I can smell the rotting flesh. I see dad, drinking, cleaning his gun. There are five ducks hanging on the clothes line between us. He glares at me between two ducks and says: 'Ugly, ain't it? There's what happens to little girls who don't watch their step.'

I grew up afraid I'd become one of those ducks. I am still afraid.

Two boys were born after me. They both had names: 'Michael, Dan, did you change the oil in the car?' Lynn, Trish, and I didn't have names, at least it hardly seemed we did: 'Girls, aren't the dishes done, yet?' And it wasn't only dad who talked that way.

We were poor, always poor, and when we were old enough, mom encouraged her daughters to find a rich man, and get out.

I met your father when I was in grade ten. He was in grade twelve. He drove a new car, played hockey and baseball. He was very charming.

We went to a couple of dances together and, eventually (I almost said stupidly), I got pregnant. Jake, please understand, I was only fifteen at the time. Your father wanted to get married but, as

much as I wanted to escape my parents, I didn't want to do it in such a shameful way. This is difficult to say, and I know it will hurt you to hear, but I tried taking several things. I was frightened, and I couldn't imagine having a child at such a young age.

God's will, nothing worked, and we decided to get married. You were born four months later, October 31, 1964.

A year after our marriage, I found out that your father had had several affairs. When I confronted him, he told me he was in love with someone else. I don't know who she was, but I'm sure it wasn't Diana. I fell apart after learning this. While he was at work one afternoon I packed our things and called a taxi. The taxi took us to the train station, and we boarded a train bound for Toronto.

I am ashamed whenever I recall my life in Toronto, and the things I put you through. I was young and immature--hardly fit to take care of myself, never mind a child. I hate myself everyday for what I put you through.

I also asked the seer about you, worried that your past may have harmed you in some way. She assured me that you're fine. She said that in a past life you were a wise old man--a cleric, she said--who knew this life would be one of great trial and hardship. The seer told me that you understood your passage through this world would yield a more resolute spirit, and that you accepted the journey, fully aware of its conditions. That made me feel a little easier. But still, I worry. What kind of a mother...

God, where was my head?

Pull yourself together, I told myself, weeping like a coward behind my damp palms. You are here with your grandfather, who needs you, who lifted

you out of your darkness many times. Don't let the past cloud what is the real issue. I lifted my head.

Grandpa Vic was thrashing and sweating in his sleep.

"It's all right, sweetheart, it's all right."

Mercedes sat at the edge of the bed watching a thermometer tucked in the fold of flesh under his left arm, the back of one hand smoothing his face. The thermometer sounded, and she looked at it, then turned to me.

"At this point it's normal for him to have a fever."

She removed a white rubber glove from the Body Substance Precautions dispenser, slipped it over her right hand. Holding a suppository between thumb and first finger Mercedes reached under the white sheet.

"You don't look well--something the matter?" she asked, looking up from under the sheet.

"No, I'm fine."

She wiped sweat off grandpa's brow with a damp cloth, rinsed it at the sink.

"Wait a minute, don't leave. Stick around, have a drink with us after the show."

Grandpa faced me, waving thick paws at flies.

"What in hell you starin' at? Don't come as any shock, does it? Think you can live with it?"

"With what?"

"Cut the crap, son. I can't blame you."

"Blame me for what? What do you mean?"

"Don't talk stupid." He stared beyond Mercedes. "It's only you and me here." He held my hands and cried. "Son, get me out. Take me home. We'll make it up."

"Victor, please try to rest," Mercedes said.

When he had calmed down she set a yellow plastic bag on the bed. As Mercedes worked below the sheet I read the side of the bag:

Extra Absorbent Adult Briefs
12 Large - Fits Hips or Waist Sizes 38" - 48"
AT EASE PREMIUM PLUS DISPOSABLE ADULT BRIEFS
complete personal confidence you can depend on

Then she reached into a bag on the table to grandpa's left and removed a pink lollipop. She filled a plastic cup halfway with green mouthwash. Mercedes dipped the lollipop, which was a star-shaped sponge, into the cup. Then she pried open his mouth with her thumb, brushed his gums, caught small chunks of brown phlegm dripping down grandpa's chin with a tissue. She placed an empty cup against his bottom lip, told him spit, and it came out

anyway. Mercedes continued washing his mouth, until the liquid coming out was the color of the liquid going in, green as grass in May.

"Why don't you take a break?" she said. "We'll be fine."

15

In the basement I squinted slowly down the long fluorescent hall, looking at the tiny, blue, incandescent specks on the white ceramic floor. I turned the corner, walked toward a native man waxing floors. He raised his head, nodded, told me watch my step.

In the lunch room I clinked three quarters into a vending machine, pressed 'K' and '10', watched a bag of hickory sticks fall. A clock hummed on the wall. The lunch room was white, empty, crumbs littered tables. When I opened the bag several hickory sticks fell to the floor. I watched them scatter, wondering what they might say. It looked as if they were trying to form a circle. Then I sat at a table, folded my arms on the coffee-stained arborite, put my head down, and cried, thinking about the anguish on grandpa's face as he apologized.

Depleted, my head feeling not quite right, I walked up one flight of stairs to Emergency, went through the sliding doors, and lit a cigarette. As I smoked in the early spring air two pregnant women arrived. The first in a pickup with large tires, driven by a gray-faced man. She climbed down frantically, right hand on stomach. A security guard came out to lend a hand. The driver tossed the guard her bag, wished the woman luck, watched her to the front desk. Then he reached for the Tim Horton's cup on the dash, bit back a chunk of the lid, spit it out the window, and drove toward the parking lot.

The second was a very calm native woman by taxi, asked me for a smoke before entering.

"What are you in for?" she asked.

"My grandfather's in Coronary Care."

"I'm sorry. He gonna live?"

"I don't think so."

She looked at the dark sky, which threatened rain or snow.

"It's nice that you're with him," she said, dark eyes watching the sky.

"He was a remarkable man."

"What did he do?" she faced me.

"He was a bootlegger."

"Vic?"

I nodded.

"No, Vic's in Coronary Care?"

I nodded.

"I'm sorry. He was a very kind man."

She felt a sharp, sudden pain, figured she should go inside. I wished her well.

"You, too," she said, holding her stomach, entering the hospital calmly.

16

While I was away from the room Mercedes had shaved grandpa's face with the electric razor, wet his gray hair back, and smeared Vaseline on his cracked lips. His fever had broken. He slept noisily on his back. I rubbed his purple hands, looked at the tattoo on his forearm, and kissed my grandfather's forehead. And then I sat staring at the yolk-colored walls.

"Can you forgive me, son?" he asked, turning slowly to me on his right.

Forget it, Jake, I told myself. And then I took out the receipt, held it in front of grandpa.

"Why?" I asked. "Why?"

"Nothing, son. What is it, a couple hundred bucks? Slap on the wrist. Just pay it. Get 'em off your ass. What do I look like, a fuckin' lawyer?" he asked, eyes twitching, closing, grandpa's body trembling.

> *It serves me right that the trip to Greece turned out such a disaster. During the last weekend of our three-month holiday, the English professor told me he needed to give his marriage another try. I guess I had hoped he would have forgotten all about her by the end of our stay.*
>
> *I should have known never to trust a Scorpio again. Your father was a Scorpio. Most men I've been with have been Scorpios. What's wrong with me?*
>
> *You must think I'm horribly selfish--sending you to Brantford, knowing what it would mean. At first I thought it was your father's idea, so I wanted no part of it. But he insisted that your father knew nothing about it, that it was something he wanted to do for him. He promised that he would see you always received the things I wasn't in a position to give. I trusted him, and I knew he always kept his word.*

And that was our arrangement. And Vic wouldn't give me the money unless I promised to stay away till you were older. I truly thought it was in your best interest. My head was a mess. I knew your father's world--or Vic's, if that one fell apart--was more stable. Don't be upset with him. He only did it out of love.

Please believe I never meant to hurt you. It was a very bad time in my life. I hope you can find it in your heart to forgive me. Write me when you can. Love Mom.

On an astrological note, Scorpios are ruthless people, not entirely trustworthy. One need only skim pages 129 through 136 in Frombard's Horoscope Guide to 1989 to see that, if you are a husband or father, you will want your wife or daughter to avoid them; and, if you are a wife or daughter, you may wish to approach Scorpios with a certain degree of caution. I don't place much faith in astrology, but then, the joke goes, Scorpios never do.

Leave the room, go, if you're going to be like this. I left the CCU, splashed cold water on my face in the washroom. And then I returned, ashamed of myself, saying: forget it, Jake, forgive.

Oxygen whispered through the rubber tube in grandpa's nostrils. On the wall slightly left of grandpa's head the Puritan-Bennett oxygen machine was set to five liters per minute. I read the clear bag of liquid suspended at the top of the infusion pump behind me:

Squeeze and inspect bag. Discard if leaking. Must not be used in serious connections.

I listened to the gentle, insistent humming of the Flo-Guard 2000, watched the fluid trickle down the thin tube at the bottom of the bag. Tiny liquid beads ballooned, grew heavy, fell, joined other beads in a small reservoir which trickled down the clear rubber tube, and into grandpa's arm.

A blue sticker on the side of the infusion pump said 'BGH Asset no. 12480.' Below that sticker, a silver one:

Certified to the requirements of the Canadian Electrical Code. The CSA has not investigated other physiological effects. For 24-hour help call 1-800-323-9098.

I pushed the door to a crack, then picked up the phone and dialled. It was not a number available within my calling area.

The clear bag at the side of the bed contained 40 milliliters of apple-cider-colored urine. On top of the Hewlett-Packard 73738, which measured grandpa's sinus and heart rhythm, I noticed an orange flyer:

> ***Headset Special $3.50***
>
> *The headset is yours for $3.50, plus applicable tax, when you rent entertainment television from Hospital Services Ltd. Since a headset of this quality has a retail value of up to $11.99, that's a savings of 71%! Please Note: When used with stereo equipment, your headset will provide full stereo sound.*

I laughed. It was the first of April, and this was no joke.

And then I waited, breathing in and out with grandpa while the oxygen hissed and the infusion pump hummed and the fluid gurgled in grandpa's chest. I held his right hand, stared at the ceiling, wondering what it would look like, sound like, looking down at us, listening.

Around four in the morning grandpa woke suddenly, crying, eyes bolting toward the door--"Tony, you cocksucker! I'll break every one of yer achin' bones!"

I watched his vacant, glazed eyes. He held loose fists in the air, elbows bent, arms trembling. Drops of sweat glistened on his forehead, broken crystals in the lamplight.

"Helen, sweetheart, why?"

"What's the matter, grandpa?"

"Oh, Jesus, I'm fuckin' crazy."

"Everything's all right. It's okay. I'll get the nurse."

"No, son, don't leave," he cried. "Oh, son, I can't stand to see."

"See what?"

He closed his eyes, coughed up phlegm, turned his head, spit thick brown. I wiped it off his cheek with a tissue.

I held grandpa, kissed him, smelled the warm air from his mouth, a mixture of barn, horse and cigar, as though his body was letting go the smells it had taken in. It was not unpleasant, the smell of my grandfather dying.

"Real race, ain't it, Jake? Say you forgive me, will ya?"

"For what, grandpa?"

"Your mother...long time ago. Just like Tony told you."

"I forgive you," I said, not myself, weeping, not myself, still meaning it.

"Horse's a vain thing. All comes to nothing. Shoulda known, shoulda seen it comin'. I'm sorry, son."

"It's okay," I said, wiping his forehead. "It's okay."

"Get me the fuck out, will you? Got to get to the joint. Don't fuck up, all right? Told Jake to keep an eye. All my fault, horses and chariots. Vain things. Good to have him, eh? Least I could do. Hurry, son."

I understood that he didn't wish to live any longer. I turned my head toward the door, saw light shining through the crack. I took a pillow in both hands.

"I love you," I said.

I hesitated, waiting for some sign that what I was about to do was right. The room lay still, silent. There was no hand on my shoulder. I waited and waited. And then, resolved suddenly to put it to a close, I covered his face, and pressed firmly. He grabbed my hands, tried to fight them away. His hard, dirt-cracked thumbnails dug into my hands. I pressed with all my strength, muffling his sputtered sounds, pressed harder, still harder, angrily, crying for him, enduring grandpa Vic.

And then, wonderfully, he fought no more.

17

Mercedes came in a short time after, checked for a pulse, and turned off the infusion pump.

"Are you all right, young man?"

"Yes."

And then she left the room, closing the door after her.

I watched grandpa for a long time in the dim light, watched him move slightly from time to time in the shadows. I kissed my bluing grandfather on the forehead, surprised how easy it was to be alone in the room with him now. My eyes closed, his warm right hand in mine, I said a prayer, wondering why I said it, not believing in God.

Then I called home. Diana answered.

"Put dad on."

"Jake?" he asked.

"Yes." Pause. "Grandpa just passed away."

Silence.

"I'm alone with him, now. Do you want to come over?"

"No, son...How was it?"

"Peaceful. I was alone with him. It was peaceful."

"Thank God." He paused for a moment. "You okay to drive home?"

"Yes. I want to stay a little longer."

"Okay, son. No hurry. Tell them Hill and Robinson, okay? Everything's looked after." Pause. "I'm glad you were with him."

And then the gray-faced coroner arrived, pronounced him dead, and covered grandpa's face with the starched white sheet.

I left shortly after the coroner, thanked Mercedes for all her help.

"Sure we can't have someone drive you home?"

"No, I'm all right."

"I'm glad it was so peaceful," she said--"and that Victor had you with him. He was a very fortunate man."

After quitting the CCU I stopped by the washroom, lit the bank receipt in the sink, watched it burn, shed a tear for them both, then rinsed the black down the drain.

Outside, a fine snow had fallen, like dust. In a dream I stood motionless, taking deep breaths in the lukewarm stillness, watching diamonds sprinkle underneath the orange streetlamps reaching up Terrace Hill.

I drove home, the long way. North on King George Road, past the Brantford Mall on my right, past Wyndham Hills on my left. Driving east on Powerline I looked at the white, unbroken quiet sprawled out in front of me, and the sun, a faint rose-colored crack far up the horizon, somewhere around St. George.

And in the rearview I watched the tire tracks stretching out behind, stretching out.

Epilogue

Like I said at the beginning, I returned home to Vancouver two days after grandpa's funeral, bought a car, drove to Vegas for a week, and took in a stray cat after I got back. Also, when I updated my bankbook and realized the missing money was in my account, I called father, hoping to keep him from doing something rash. I didn't tell him the things grandpa said, or the fact that I put him to sleep. It's better to let everyone go on believing he died peacefully. And he did die peacefully in a way, believing it was his son who forgave him (for exactly what I'm not sure), and his son who took his life. I am thankful that it was me there to give grandpa the illusion.

I suppose that, thinking everything over, wanting to put it all behind me, I profited by my experience in the hospital. My recollection of that last night makes it clear that it was only out of love for me that grandpa arranged it so I would live in Brantford all those years ago, just like mom wrote in her letter. I have to look at his intention. And so, of course I forgave him that last night. What else could I have done?

Still, I guess I'm a little disappointed. I had hoped for more resolution than this. In a way I feel like I'm back where I started, still not settled in what I'll do next. I could always return to Ontario. Father calls often to say that business is more than he can handle. He assures me I could make more in a month than I do now in a year. That would be the easiest thing, I suppose. Oh, sure, I've thought about it. I'd be stupid not to. But something inside tells me no.

No Jake, I hear in something of a gruff whisper, that's not the answer.

I pour the cat a bowl of milk, look over these pages one last time, consider sending them to mom. Then I light a cigarette, draw back the yellow drapes in my small basement apartment, and watch the orange half-sun settling into the sea, behind the park across the street.