ABSTRACT

ON FOUR MILE

by Todd R. Martin

Over the last two decades, the Midwest has experienced a dramatic metamorphosis from rural to suburban/urban cultures. This process has greatly affected rural communities and the individuals who work there. Agriculture as a tradition throughout the rural Midwest is quickly vanishing, along with the family structures that have enabled it to endure for decades. This novel captures the struggle of those individuals to hold onto that American culture and to portray the beauty and conflict of their way of life. Themes within the novel will compare the cycles of nature to those of the individuals who live and work within agricultural environments. The novel will also explore art, and some of the elements of art. It is one of the novel’s contentions that an individual’s nature is simplicity, and once realized, this nature, or simplicity of life, is part of art, just as art may be natural.
ON FOUR MILE

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In that year the house still sat in the center of the valley. It was a lovely old farmhouse not without its many faults. The house had white aluminum siding with green asphalt shingles and matching green shutters. In the summers tractors went by on the gravel driveway and powdered the leaves of the maple trees with dust and dust floated through the screened windows of the house coating the kitchen countertops and furniture. A set of old barns surrounded the house. The barns were painted white too, with green trim to match the house, though anymore you couldn’t tell.

Beside the house was an old road. The road ran west along the creek, following it curve for curve until the creek cut narrowly westward between the great hills of the valley and the road moved north through the fields. In the valley streams flowed between the fields. Along their banks grew sycamores, their bark white and chalky, and large oaks. Hedge roses grew along the fields and walled their borders, dividing the fencerows along with milkweed and Jerusalem’s artichoke and ragweed. Near the middle of the valley the soil was very rich and gumbo, and corn grew as tall as any man, and on the outer edges the soil was sandy and held many rocks, curling the corn over by mid-July.

In the spring the air blew cool and fresh across the fields, and you could breathe it in and
not cough. The days were warm and in the evenings dust hung over the fields as you worked them. You smelled the years in the air and felt the warmth from the tractor, and didn’t mind working so late in air so good. By evening you wore long sleeves against the cooling air as the sun sank over the western trees, their leaves new and lithe, and you went to the house with the your skin covered in the dust of the field. You were very tired, but the work was good, so you didn’t mind, and you ate and drank, deserving both. At night the sheets were cool and crisp as clean white paper and the cool air came in through the windows and you could hear the herons down along the creek. They built their nests high atop the sycamores and at night they screamed like women.

The hay was ready by mid-summer and the corn grew chest high in the dark soil and curled over in the sand. In the field the wheat was harvested and double crop soybeans were planted in the wheat stubble. The hay was cut while lush and green, and left to bake dry and brittle in the heat and rolled with tractors and rakes. You baled the hay and the heat and humidity were always very bad, and you hated the work, but somehow loved it too. At night you could not sleep with the heat coming in through the windows as the days grew shorter, and in the fall the corn turned drab and dead and the combines harvested in the fields raising great clouds of dust well into the cool evenings and everyone was paid and happy to rest for a time.

Then the winter came and snow covered the drab fields and everything was very quiet, and waiting for the sun. Soon the sun would come again and melt the snow and it would flow to the little creek, the little creek to the rivers, and the rivers to the sea.
The following spring it rained well into April and the wind came cold across the plowed fields. The creek ran brown and full and the late winter snow melted into the streams and lingered around the trunks of sycamores and tall oaks and down in the low spots. The trees were bare on the hills around the valley and their trunks black in the rain. The clouds hung low over the valley and there were tufts of clouds that hung below the main clouds that seemed to fall with the rain. Then one day in mid-April the clouds turned blue and it began to snow. It snowed for an afternoon which was rare in April and the snow stayed on the ground for two days. Then it warmed slowly and the snow melted and the creek ran very full.

Later, in May, sitting at my mother’s table with a cup of coffee and looking out at the brown drab fields, I thought what a fine thing it was that my prayers were answered and we were having such a late spring and no one had planted. Outside the wind blew chilly and the ground was too cold to plant, but there was still much to do and I thought about it as I sat across from Mother with her dog at my feet, staring out the window at trees with green skin still stretched very thin.

“I am not ready for hot weather, Will,” Mother said. She was paying bills.

“It is still quite cool.”
“It will be miserable before you know it.”
“You never know. It may stay cool all summer.”
“Doubtful. They say the weather patterns are changing. I swear I think we’re becoming a tropical climate.”
“It doesn’t feel tropical now.”
“I like this weather.”
“I wish it would get warm so we could work,” I said.
She stared at me. She looked very tired.
“Are you done with everything?”
“Until July,” I said.
“But you’re done teaching?”
“Yes. I turned in grades last week.”
“You don’t need to be down here if you’re not done,” she said very coldly. “This farm can wait.”
“I’m done,” I said. “Where’s Father?”
“Outside somewhere.” She leaned back in his chair. “You know how he is; you couldn’t keep him in if he were tied.”
“How is it?”
“Still sore. He cannot do as much and that frustrates him. He thinks he should be at a hundred percent.”
“He will never be at a hundred percent.”
“Everything is still stretching.”
“It’s only been five weeks.”
I leaned back and moved my leg. Mother’s dog growled. She was at my feet. She was a heeler and didn’t like feet. Most often she bit at Father’s. It was a terribly fun joke among us. She was awfully protective of Mother.
“Bite me and I’ll kick you through the door.”
“You better never,” Mother said.
“She’s a mean old bitch.”
“Sadie’s a good girl.” She reached under the table and patted the dog on the head. I looked under the table. “You’re a fat old bitch.”
“Like her owner.”
“Not at all.”
I stood and emptied my mug into the sink. Then I filled it with water and leaned against the counter drinking it. I stomped my foot and the bitch came out from under the table and growled.
“Will don’t tease her.”
The dog saw I wasn’t angry and wagged her tail. I scratched her on the head.
“Heard from Daniel?” I said.
“Yes. He said he may come up tonight. He’s always so busy.”
“He’s like the old man. He tries to do too much work and he worries about everything.”
“It’s okay to worry responsibly,” Mother said. “Sometimes I wish you would.”
“Not if it gets in the way,” I said.
“I do it for you.”
“But you shouldn’t. There is nothing to worry about.”
“But I do. I’m your mother.”
“And that’s why I love you.”
She shook her head.
“So Daniel is coming up?”
“Yes,” Mother said. “I may fix dinner.”
“Then we will all eat together?”
“I suppose.”
“Good,” I said. “I’m going to find Father.”
I gave the old bitch a pat on the head and walked outside.
The day was overcast and cool. It had not rained in a week. Small shoots grew on the tree limbs and in places in the fields. The fields and hills were still very brown and drab. I wore jeans and a flannel and a pair of old Red Wing boots as I walked to the barns. Four big barns grew successively smaller the farther you got from the house. Father was in the biggest barn working on the John Deere corn planter. It was an eight row and he had four of the seed boxes off looking at the distributors on the bottoms. Inside the distributors plastic belts traveled in a circular motion delivering seed from the box to the chute where they were dropped into the ground. The belts had plastic fingers on them. During the winter they had a tendency to dry and crack. If broken there would be an empty row for every seven in the field. This happened the year before. Father caught it after the first swipe down the field, but there was still one empty row and Grandfather had thrown a helluva tantrum about it.

“It’s about time,” Father said.

“It’s early. You’re lucky I’m here at all.”

“Making your crippled old dad do all this work.”

“Your ass ain’t ever been crippled,” I said. “And even if you were it wouldn’t stop you.” He smiled. There were sprigs of gray in his mustache and he’d taken to wearing his
glasses. They made him look like Grandfather.

“Where’s Avery?”

“Don’t know,” he said. He turned the gear on a distributor and watched the belt travel.

“He shows up late too. Everyone and everything is late this year.”

“Must be the weather.”

“Even the weather is late.”

“When are they predicting sun?”

“By the end of the week, but they don’t know anything. Even when it does show, it will be a good two or three days before the ground is warm.”

I got a box and oiled the gear, then turned it to watch the belt.

“How are you feeling?” I asked.

“Good. Healing.”

“You look tired.”

“I can’t go as hard as I used to.” He shook his head.

“You try to do too much.”

“There’s a lot to do.”

“Is it sore?”

“A little. It’s still stretching.”

“And the other, is it any better?”

“A little, but not much.”

“It’ll get better.”

He didn’t say anything.

“They have pills for that now, you know?”

He fell quiet and I thought that we were both thinking about it. A long purple scar ran from his belly button to public bone like a raised finger. They opened him up there and moved his guts around and afterward stapled him back up like two pieces of sown leather, and Father had been rather proud of it the way any man is proud of a hardship endured successfully. Now there was just the thick scar and other hardships not as easily recognizable or dealt with and the fatigue and worry.

The belt looked fine and I put the box back, and stood, then Father checked it. Across the barnyard stood another old barn. When I was young it had been a farrowing house for sows.
Boars bred the sows and after three months, three weeks, and three days we moved the sows to
the house into small metal crates. The sows bore their pigs and after a week or two we went in a
clipped teeth and cut tales with a hot blade. When they were twenty pounds Father castrated
them. Uncle Avery and I pulled the pigs from the crates and held them by jerking legs while
Father cut two slits between their legs and popped out the testicles that had not yet fallen. He
pulled them and then cut high and tossed them in the drain and then the dog came in from
outside and carried them to the yard and ate them. I thought it odd now how some of them
squealed awfully when cut and others never made a sound. That was when hogs were worth
something.

Now there was no money in it and the barn was empty except for an old haymow. The
mow was full of old hay. The hay had once been worth something too. The barn needed paint
and the shingles curled over terribly.

“The barns look awful,” I said, then regretted it.

“Along with a lot of other things,” Father said.

We finished with the boxes and they were all okay save one. New belts were fifteen
dollars apiece, so Father stole one from an old planter and called it even.

Mother fixed us bologna sandwiches for lunch, and we ate Mike Sell’s potato chips and
olives from the jar and drank iced tea at the kitchen table. Father slept for an hour afterward and
I was grateful, though I wished he would’ve slept longer as we were back working by 1:30. We
pulled the bi-fold disk from the barn and greased the bearings and checked the tires and
hydraulic hoses for leaks. Then we changed the engine and hydraulic oil in the big John Deere
6030 tractor, and in another smaller tractor, and did numerous other things that I could write
about but would be mundane and trivial and not much worth telling. Farming is a lot of the
mundane and I could make a great long list of things to be done in the spring and summer and in
the fall, and even a few in the winter, some of them interesting, but many of them not so.
CHAPTER IV

In the evening Father and I drove the truck down to Grandfather’s. He looked rather sore and tired. He never said so, but walked slowly and rather stoop-shouldered. We parked in the driveway and walked around the silo into the basement. The barn was a big bank barn built into the side of a hill. There was an upstairs loft and a concrete basement with two cattle mangers stretching two hundred feet on a side. The barn was book-ended by two concrete silos that stood tall and white in the evening.

Grandfather and Avery were inside. Avery was spreading straw behind the left manger. Young steers stood in the stall, fat for market. The stall was awfully soupy and smelled strong. Behind the other manger were thirty brude cows and a bull. Once the grass was tall and the ground hard they would be turned to pasture so as not to punch holes in the turf.

“Did you throw yet?” Father asked.

“No,” Avery said.

Father looked at him.

The three of them looked nothing alike. Avery was tall and thin, having to stoop as he spread straw to avoid hitting his head on the crossbeams. His hair was brown, thinning in the back and curly above a creased forehead and long face with a round nose and bright blue eyes.
He was younger than Father by five years, but the way he forked the straw, bending at the knees and rising stiffly made him look much older.

“What the hell have you been doing?” Father asked.

“Fixing his lawnmower,” Avery said. He nodded to Grandfather. He was snaking a hose through the manger into a steel tank.

Grandfather stood at middle height, thicker and more solid, hair once jet-black now beginning to silver with eyebrows still very dark beneath a hat always crooked on his head. His eyes were dark and held you. He and Grandmother wintered in Florida and I’d never known his skin, heavily wrinkled on his arms and deeply creased around his mouth, to be tender, but always dark and worn like the leather of an old boot. He had toothpick in his mouth and he wore his thin cotton shirt open to his breastbone as he always did when the weather turned warm.

In Florida Grandfather learned many new things. He liked to fish on the Gulf when the water was calm and the Red Tide had not come in and killed all the fish. But in Ohio there was farming and a crumbling empire, and he was always home in the spring to make sure his sons did it right. There were plenty of old farmers in the valley from the old generation who had farmed with sons who didn’t do it right, and none of them lasted. The old men built the farms from nothing when the money was decent, but now there was no money in it and the old men partly blamed their sons. Theirs was an empire of dirt. In the spring it was dead and they worked it and watched it grow as months passed like kings over kingdoms. They loved it as it was theirs and had been nothing before and they did as they only felt compelled to do. Then their sons made it too big and none of them did it right, and it was returning to nothing.

Now Father looked at him and shook his head. I got the silage cart and pushed it toward the far silo. Father walked behind me. He was mumbling. “Fixing the lawnmower. It’s fucking April and they’re worried about the grass.” He was awfully sore about it.

“You know how they are."

I stopped the cart short of the silo, and said, “I’ll throw.”

I slid into the silo. The silage was well below the floor where it should’ve been for May. It wasn’t as good so close to the ground and had a tendency to rot. You could smell the rot like urine, but you could also smell the good. The corn had been chopped last August when it was still green and blown into the silage. It fermented in the silo and now it smelled like wine. The silo was cool. I found a good spot and dug with the fork and began to toss it up. It was a hard
job pitching a fork full through the window to the floor and Father had the easier job of
shoveling it into the cart. You got winded quickly and your arms burned. You had to use your
legs and arms more than your back, especially if you were tall, or you would throw it out. That’s
what happened to Avery and I still thought it shitty that he’d not thrown and left Father to do it.

I worked straight through until Father called and then leaned the fork against the wall and
climbed out. Father had piled it high in the cart, brown and rich, and I had managed to avoid a
lot of the rot in the dark silo, and I was pleased.

We pushed the cart back down to the aisle to the far end. I was winded and sweating.
Father smiled but didn’t say anything. Using the shovel he spread the silage in the manger. It
wasn’t hard and I stood and rested. Grandfather came over and looked over the silage and
picked any rot I’d forked tossing it in the aisle. He ran his hands over the silage. Avery had
gone up for more straw.

“Did anyone call the Co-op about that grain drill?” Grandfather asked.
“I called them the other day.”
“When is it coming?”
“We’re on the list. Whenever they get to us, I guess.”
“You guess? By God the weather’s gonna turn warm and we’re not gonna have a bean
drill.” His eyes were dark and cross.

Father frowned. “We’ll wait like everyone else.”
“Well I guess you shoulda called sooner.”
“Goddamn-it Dad it’ll get to us when it gets here. If there are other people ahead of us
then we’ll have to wait.”

“Ah, hell. With as much business as we’ve given them, they can get us first.”
“We don’t do that much business with them anymore, and that’s not how it works
anyway. You know better.”

“Ah, hell.”
“Get off my case.”

“There’s no excuse in it,” Grandfather said. He walked over and threw hay in the
manger. He was looking at Father.

Father was sore again, and I thought he should tell the old man to go to hell, but he
didn’t.
We finished without talking, and afterward, rode home in the truck. The road was rough and potholed, and we drove along the pasture laid out beyond the barn where the cows would be when the rain quit. Beyond that was a sparse wood, the grass and trees still thin. The road followed the creek nearly turn for turn. On the left was a short screen of wood and then the creek, muddy and full, and beyond that a great dense wood that rose up the hills up and out of the valley. We turned a curve and skirted the sparse woods on the right and then broke from them and there was a fifty-five acre field and straight ahead was the house white in the distance.

Father stopped the truck halfway down the field and left the engine running and got out. He was quiet and still sore. I got out and walked around the truck. Father was ten paces into the field, down on one knee. He took out a pocketknife and dug a small trench as thick and deep and long as his finger, and then felt the soil in the bottom.

“Still pretty cool,” he said. “Work it over and get some sun on it and it may be ready in a few days.”

I felt the soil. It was cool and moist, and you could smell it rich and sweet. “Nothing will grow in that.”

“It’ll grow, just not now,” he said. He was looking out over the field.

Then we got back in the truck and drove to the house. Daniel was there and Mother had supper waiting on the stove.

Father kicked his boots off. “I’m going to shower first.”

“What’s wrong?” Mother asked.

“What?”

“What’s the matter?”

“Nothing.”

“You act like something’s wrong.”

“Did I Goddamn say anything?” He went and showered.

I sat and took my boots off.

“What’s the matter with him?” Daniel asked.

“Grandfather got on him about the grain drill not being here.”

“Can they even run yet?”

“Not for another couple of days.”

“That’s worth it.”

12
“Isn’t it?” I said.
Mother sighed. “I wish they would quit and move away.”
“Maybe you should quit and move away,” Daniel said.
“I could never get him to do it.”

Mother was setting the table and she had a big meal laid out. There were pork chops and fried potatoes and green beans, and it all smelled wonderful. We waited on Father.
“Is he trying to do too much?” Daniel asked.
“I’m trying to help as much as I can.”
“But is he doing too much?”
“I’m trying,” I said.

Father was better after his shower, though moving slow. We all sat at the kitchen table and ate. Daniel was very talkative. He had much to say about the public education system and how terrible it was because the voters failed to pass a levy. He worked as a teacher in one of the schools and he said the poor, inner-city kids were suffering, having to read twenty year old text books and all the well-to-do kids were sent to the best private schools and their folks didn’t want to waste tax money when there was so much tuition to pay. It all made perfect sense and it was a shame to hear that Ohio had one of the worst public education systems in the States considering there were so many fine colleges and universities. Daniel was political and awfully hot about it and Father, in a better mood now, said he ought to run for office.
“I don’t want any of my family in office,” Mother said.
“He can run if he wants to, Kay,” Father said.
“I know he can, but I won’t like it.”
“I’m going to run for president and then they’ll interview you on TV and you can cause a national stir by telling them how you hate all the Asians in the country.”
“I don’t hate the Asians,” Mother said.
“The Jews then?”
“I don’t hate the Jews. You’re making things up.”
Daniel was grinning. “Well I’m not going to run for office anyway, so you don’t have to worry.”
“How are classes going?” I asked.
“I’ve determined that in order to get your doctorate you have to be an ignorant asshole.”
“Daniel, I’m sure that’s not true,” Mother said.

“Your department and mine must be one in the same,” I said. “It’s so bad that I’ve stopped going to class.”

“Really?”

“Yes, I see no need.”

Mother stopped eating. Father smiled.

“I’m going to make them come to me.”

“Do you think it will work?” Daniel asked.

“Eventually.”

“I don’t know where you boys get your arrogance,” Mother said.

“From Father.”

“Don’t drag me into this. I’ve been eating quietly, listening to you idiots.”

“It’s always about him. First he gets sick and we have to wait for him to get better before we plant, and then we have to wait for him to shower before we eat dinner. He thinks the world is on his schedule.”

“That sounds about right,” Mother said.

“I hope your next is better,” Father said.

“There will be no next, Jerald. I only sacrifice for you.”

It was very good and we laughed at Mother and Father’s expense. We finished dinner and I drove home afterward. I had softened some in college and was tired from the long day. I drove through the night along the old roads with the window cracked, up the great shoulders of the valley through the low fog to the small university town. At home I drank a beer and bathed and fell into bed, and did not awake until the next morning.
The morning was bright with a warm sun and a good drying wind from the west. I drove down into the valley and skirted the farm, past a sparse wood that opened to a dogleg field. The field was seeded in timothy hay and very green in the warm sun. A wooded streambed made its southern border and then opened up to a small five-acre field fitting comfortably into the ankle of the dogleg and then another wooded streambed and beyond that three great square fields in the center of the valley. Far across those sat my grandfather’s small white house and the rose roof of the big bank barn sitting just below the hill with the white clapboard shining bright and the tall white silos. Then they were gone behind a tree line and there was just the road, gray and cracked, with a deep ditch line running beside growing thick with Jerusalem’s artichoke and field grass. The road teed into the old road that ran along the creek. The old road made an s-curve and then you were beside the creek, running full and brown. The trees on the left broke and the big bank barn was there and then the grass pasture with the sickle moon hill skirting its western edge and then you were in the sparse woods again with the fifty-five acres opening beyond and Mother’s house very white in the distance.

Father was in the barnyard. He’d pulled the field sprayer from the barn and parked it near the faucet. The sprayer held an eight hundred gallon tank and we washed it thoroughly to
rid it of last year’s chemicals and then washed the outside of the winter’s dust. In the back were two big spray booms, each folded over. We unfolded them completely and one had a bad spring so we replaced that, and then cleaned all the spray nozzles as they could clog with rust and dirt, and before putting them back on flushed the hoses. Near the front of the sprayer were boom controls and we cleaned those, flushed all the hose running through, and replaced another spring, this one much smaller than the first.

Then it was lunch and more sandwiches. There were no naps afterward as a truck from the Co-op pulled in with a trailer. The trailer carried a blue, plastic bulk tank. The tank held six thousand gallons and was taller than two men. Father had them pull to the back pasture and we helped them roll it off the trailer. It was very light with nothing in it and we walked it with our hands on its edge until it was in a good level spot with no rocks underneath and let it drop. Then another truck came pulling a large applicator. The applicator had a blue tank on it too, this one eight hundred gallons, and they unhooked it in the pasture near the bulk tank.

Avery had arrived by then and we stood talking. He asked me if I was done with classes and I said yes, for this year at least.

“Did you learn anything?”

“Not a damn thing,” I said.

“You paid all that money and didn’t learn anything, huh?”

“Nothing worth telling.”

He smiled at the fact that I’d not learned anything. Avery had always been damned mechanical. He’d gone to a trade school for a short period of time that I don’t know the name of, nor do I know what he studied or whether he ever finished. Afterward he drove a truck and then came home to farm with Father and Grandfather. It was a helluva thing to never leave home. He’d left, but then he’d returned and forgotten everything he’d ever known outside. Farming was all he knew now, and at times, I wondered how much of that he really knew well. He’d left and been afraid to pay and had come back. You had to pay to receive back and Avery had been afraid or ashamed to pay so he thought everyone who had ignorant. He probably thought me ignorant for having paid and not learned anything, though one day it would pay me back. Father understood that you had to pay and that’s why he’d talked them into buying so much land and taking on so much debt; one day it would pay, but first you had to plant the seed and let it grow a little.
One of the drivers came over and spoke to Father. He was fat and had a thick dark beard.

“The tanker should be on its way.”

“All right,” Father said. “Any idea when that grain drill is going to get here?”

“How the hell should I know?”

“You work there, don’t you? Or do you ever get the hell out of the truck?”

The driver realized he’d been short and was apologetic. “They’re pretty backed up. It’ll be here whenever the person ahead is done.”

“Understandable,” Father said.

“Need anything else?”

“Not if the tanker comes.”

“Should be here in a few,” the driver said. He climbed back into the truck and left.

“I wouldn’t want him to work,” I said.

“Probably pissed he had to get out of his truck,” Father said.

“What the hell did you ask him about it for? He don’t know anything,” Avery said. His face was cross.

“Have you asked anybody about it?”

“No, but Goddamn.”

“Then shut the hell up,” Father said.

Avery shook his head and walked over to the applicator.

“Everyone seems to be in a fine mood today,” I said.

“That’s no shit,” Father said. “Must be the heat.”

We heard the loud brake of the semi and walked to the barnyard near the house to direct him in. The truck was silver and pulled a long silver tanker trailer. The driveway was narrow at its entrance with a large maple tree to one side and a small hill on the other where the drive sunk to meet the road. It was an obstacle for truck drivers and I’d only known of a handful that had ever gotten it down. They’d managed it by driving into the yard a ways before cutting back. When the ground was wet this left big ruts in the yard which pissed Mother off terribly, but there was really no other way. This driver was new and when he hesitated Father ran over and climbed up to the side window and told him to angle it into the yard. He did so and cut three deep ruts in the yard, but made it clearly.

He pulled around to the bulk tank and climbed down. The driver was thin, had a
wonderfully big smile, and his Co-op hat sat crooked on his head.

“You fellas are making me work today,” he said.

“It’s warm; everyone works today,” Father said.

The driver pulled a hose from beneath the trailer. I grabbed one end and connected it to the empty bulk tank and opened the valve. The driver connected the other to a valve on the trailer and started the pump motor. Then he opened the valve and the motor bucked and slowed and 28% nitrogen, green and thick, splashed across the bottom of the tank and began to rise.

We filled the bulk tank just shy of the top. Avery hooked the big 6030 John Deere to the applicator and pulled it close. When the bulk tank was full, I disconnected the hose and hooked it to the tank on the applicator. Once full the driver slid the hose back beneath the trailer, waved, and drove off. It all took close to two hours.

Still in the pasture Father and Avery adjusted the applicator to put on fifty pounds to the acre. This would feed the corn over the summer. Then Avery drove to the field and lowered the booms. He started off and the blades cut thin slits into the soil and the nozzles sprayed the nitrogen into the slits. We watched Avery make a round, up to the far tree line and back again, and then walked to the barnyard.

It was late in the afternoon, so Father and I drove down to Grandfather’s and did chores. Grandfather was not there. I threw silage and my arms and legs were sore, but warmed and felt good, though I knew I’d pay for it in the morning.

We drove home after feeding. It was still warm and a soft warm wind blew. The clouds were high and thin.

“If it is warm again tomorrow, we may be able to go,” Father said.

“Isn’t the ground too cold?”

“It should be okay. I’m more worried about getting it in. It’s awfully late in the season.”

“I think you’re fine.”

“We may be able to get some no-till in.” He was very eager. “I’ll see what your grandfather thinks in the morning.”

“Why do you have to ask him?” I said.

“I’ll see what he thinks.”

“I think you’ve been doing it long enough that you can decide. You know more than him anyway.”
We pulled into the driveway.
“Your grandfather is smart.”
“But you’re smarter and know just as well.”
“I’ll run it by him,” Father said.
“I think that’s bullshit.”
We got out of the truck. Out in the field Avery was halfway across. He would run close
to dark and then quit as the lights on the tractor had not worked for some time.
“Are you going to have dinner?” Father asked.
“No. I’m going home. I’ll be here early.”
I got in the car and drove out of the valley. At home I ate and showered and then lay in
bed. My muscles were sore and loose from the shower and I felt them tighten as I lay there in
the dark and I knew I’d be sore in the morning.
In the dark I thought about all the things I should have said and should have done, and all
the things Father should have said and done. In the dark you are all the things you are not in the
light. You are brave and frightened or you are completely in love or completely out of love. I
felt bad for how poorly I’d acted toward Father. But that was bullshit and I regretted his
dependency on work and Avery and Grandfather. Then I thought that we are all dependent upon
something, so what does it matter, and what is the point in trying to change it.
I did not remember falling asleep and woke up the next morning feeling very sore, but good. The day was already warm, though not even 8:00 a.m. and I knew right away upon smelling it that spring had arrived and would stay. The air was fresh and cool and sweet and held the earth. I was sure that Father was already in the field and I drove down into the valley, parked near the barn, hearing the tractor in the field behind the barn. I walked to the house and looked out at the field. Father was far off and small with the yard markers standing tall on the planter.

Mother was in the kitchen washing breakfast dishes.
“Did you save me any?” I asked.
“No. You should’ve been here earlier.”
“I always knew you didn’t love me.”
“You really have it tough, don’t you?”
“Very.”
She wiped the countertop. She looked very tired. “Your father is already in the field.”
“I know. I saw him.”
“I had dinner last night. Why didn’t you stay?”
“I wanted to go home,” I said.
“Your father was in one of his moods.”
“I know.”
“He didn’t seem angry.”
“No, not angry. Just seeking approval.”
Mother nodded. “I hate this time of year.” She paused then said, “He’ll always be a little boy to your grandpa.”
I got a glass of water from the tap and ate a strip of leftover bacon.
“He doesn’t have to be,” I said.
“I know,” she said. “He’s smarter than all of them. He could leave and farm on his own if he wanted. I wouldn’t mind that at all. I never begrudge anyone for doing what they love. I just wish he wouldn’t do it with them.”
She wiped her forehead with her sleeve. It was very hot in the kitchen with the windows open.
I often forgot that Mother had lost her father at an age much younger than I was now. When you’re young, death is seen as a thing to be dealt with in middle age and often not thought about. Mother had dealt with it at the age of twenty-one. That was the same age she married Father and moved to Four Mile. Then she was pregnant, so poor they couldn’t afford a six-pack of RC Cola with the return bottles, belonging to a family she did not want or love. Father loved them for whatever reason blood loves blood. He also loved the land and spent long hours nurturing an affair with it. Then Mother was pregnant again, bell-bottomed with long blond hair, face longing and beautifully unassuming, holding two toe-headed, corduroyed boys in old photos turned orange by years of light and dust. In the summer she made ham sandwiches with chips in brown paper bags and rushed them to the fields so he could eat and in the evenings there were always ten foiled covered dinners in the stove waiting for him to quit. She watched while Daniel and I grew and left for places she would never see all while dusty summer winds blew through the kitchen windows and coated her countertops and lace curtains in Father’s lover.
She often said that she still dreamed about her father early in the spring. It was all very depressing and made me miserable to think about, so I left the kitchen and walked out into the sun, past the old barns and beyond the grain bin with the Jerusalem’s artichoke growing thick around its base. Father was in the center of the thirty-two acres, halfway down. The tractor was loud and it carried across the field and sounded very small by the time it reached me. He made
little dust as it was no-till and occasionally I could hear the timbre of a rock scraping a blade of
the corn planter. I was sure that the ground was still a little cold, but it was no matter. Father
was right; better to have it in the ground than not at all. He was no-tilling because the field was
very flat and still smooth. The rain had not made many gullies through the soil over the year and
the ground was hard and solid. It had held corn the year before and would be in corn again.
Corn takes nitrogen from the soil and Avery had put it back in the day before. We could’ve
easily worked the ground to soften it up, but that takes time and money in fuel. Also, to work the
ground soft and then plant it and then have a good rain often makes the soil crust over and the
corn will not break through. Better to plant in the hard ground and take the chance.

Father reached the end of the field and braked. With his right hand he raised the planter,
turning with his left. The yard marker sprung up. Father watched the right back wheel as he
turned sharply, making sure the wheel would not rub the hitch. The tractor swung quickly, the
planter trailing, and he hit the lever again, lowering it, the yard marker falling to the ground.
This was all done smoothly, without halt or fault, made so by years of repetition. It was Father’s
art and was all very fundamental and simple, and to a man who knew and understood what he
was looking at, very beautiful.

He stopped the tractor and stepped down. He moved stiffly. I lifted the lid on one of the
seed boxes. It was half full.

“You started early,” I said.

“I was up with the sun,” Father said. His skin already had a fine layer of dirt.

“I had him leave a message.”

“That’s what I figured.”

“Are you good for a few hours?”

He looked out across the field. At its edge was a broken dirt lane and beyond that
another, smaller twenty-seven acre field.

“Should be good till I get to the twenty-seven acres. I’ll need some after that though.
Couple a hours maybe.”

“What brand?” I asked.

“Co-op,” he said, then told me the number. I repeated it in my head four times so as not
to forget.

“I’ll bring eight bags in a couple of hours then.”
“It’s down at Grandpa’s in the loft.”
“I know.”
He lifted the lids on all eight seed boxes. One was low and he took a plastic scoop and stole from another.
“I don’t know why that damn thing is putting it on so heavy. It’s set right.”
“It’s old,” I said. “You of all people ought to know why.”
“Thanks,” he said. “Take that 6030 down and work that fifty-five acres. I’ll go there after.”
I told him I would and he walked to the tractor. He stopped and said, “Have you seen Avery or your grandpa this morning?”
I said no I had not, and also that I had not looked. He shook his head and looked at the ground.
“How about the grain drill? Has it come?”
I said that I had not seen that either, and that I had not looked. He looked equally disappointed.
“Why don’t you take a ride down there and see what you can find.”
I walked back to the barnyard, got in the truck, and drove down the road to Grandfather’s. No one was in the barnyard, nor was there a grain drill, or any other vehicles for that matter. I drove back. Father was at the other end and had made his turn and was heading back.

The big John Deere 6030 was in the back pasture where Avery had left it the night before. It was a big, squatty piece of machinery, very wide with thick bulky tires and when I climbed up and sat down it felt large and cumbersome beneath me, and I very small. Driving was second hand for all of us. We were all very good drivers and we often poked fun at those who struggled to back a trailer or other piece of equipment. It was a mean and selective thing to do but it was ours to smile at and be secretive with and it made us feel as if we belonged to a small, elite group. We had all learned to drive at a young age and we were very skilled at maneuvering heavy machinery. I had not driven the big tractor in a year, but knew that my hands and feet would remember to work the peddles and gears without so much help from my mind.

I unhooked the nitrogen applicator and started the tractor. Smoke flowed from the
muffler the color of dirt in the field. I hooked the tractor to the disk and pulled to the fuel tank. It was awkward beneath me and I wished that I did not have to think about it so much. I filled the tractor with diesel and checked the tires on the disk, then drove down the old road.

The sun was getting high and hot. It was warm. To the left the bank sloped away from the road. The trees along the bank were tall with white bark. Their shoots looked darker than the day before, and fuller. To the right the fifty-five acres laid flat across the open valley. The field rose up a small hill at its far end and leveled off again at an old barb fence. Beyond that was a larger field, wide and flat. Small plants had begun to grow across both and there was a haze of green.

Halfway down the road a gate led into the sparse woods. I stopped, opened it, and drove through. The gate was narrow, the tractor and disk very wide, and I had to reverse once to get the right angle and even then one of the disks still scraped the post as it went through. The path through the woods was overgrown with grass. I drove along it, around an old oak tree with an abscessed bottom big enough to picnic on, and up a small hill. A second gate was open at the top of the hill and I drove through it slowly and cleanly, and felt more confident.

Inside the gate I stopped and looked out over the field. It was a long field, very narrow at this end and grew wider the farther it ran. Its left side ran at an angle along an old streambed. A rusted wire fence divided the field from the bank of the stream. In the summer, cows would graze in the woods beyond the fence and they would drink from the streambed. Large oaks and maples grew along the stream. The field had been in soybeans the year before and only the gray stubble remained. The soil was very flat and hard. The top was dry but I knew that it was moist underneath and would work up to a fine powder. This end of the field always worked up to a fine powder as it was close to the creek and held much sand. It wasn’t until the middle of the field that the soil turned dark and gumbo. The corn always grew tall and strong there. Then at the far end the soil turned red and held many rocks and was thick with clay. The corn never grew well there on the hillside in the sun and clay, and you had to work it light to keep from bringing up too much mud.

I pulled the hydraulic lever, unfolding the disk, then geared the tractor and throttled it full. The engine was very loud. I lowered the disk and felt it pull against the tractor. The smoke from the muffler turned very black and then lightened as the tractor gained speed. I drove into the middle of the field until my confidence was up. The disk cut a dark wake through the earth.
I started with the disk very shallow in the soil. In working ground there was not always simplicity. You never wanted the blades to dig too deep into moist soil. You wanted to keep the moisture in the ground where it was needed. Otherwise the soil worked up too chunky and rough in planting. All you wanted was the surface dry and powdered a couple of inches deep. I measured this by the center wheels on the disk. The wheels rode lightly over the soil. Above them two hydraulic hoses ran across the disk frame. I lowered the disk until two inches separated the wheel from the hoses. This was a depth that had worked perfectly in the past.

The soil worked up very nicely. It was smooth and you could hear the low bass of the disk ripping the earth like a great ship at sea. You could smell it strong and the green plants that had started to sprout too. You could feel the warmth of the engine and the spring breeze that came across the field. Then the breeze died and the dust from the disk came forward on you. You were in the middle of a great cloud of dust that moved with you. It was a thick and swirling cloud and you wondered if it looked like a great whirlwind from a distance moving swiftly across the field. The dust coated your skin and hair. You breathed it in and could taste its particles grinding in you teeth. For a moment you were it and it was you and you swirled about each other as parts of a greater thing. You did not know who you were or what you thought, only that you were of the dust and the dust was of you. There was nothing else and you forgot about Grandfather and Avery and the shitty way they treated Father and the burdens he carried and how he never treated Mother as she deserved and how they were all the result of one another. There was only the heat and the dust and the noise.

Then the wind came and reminded you who you were again. It carried the dust away and you could see the green trees and the white barns in the distance and the rest of the far off valley.

I reached the end of the field, raised the disk, and turned. I’d found my confidence by then. It all had to do with rhythm and the memory of your hands and feet. I made that swipe down the center of the field and then two around the outside along the fencerows. Then I began to work my way across the field.

By then it was nearly noon. I folded the disk and drove down the road. I parked the tractor in the barnyard and drove down to Grandfather’s, up the hill around the big bank barn and into the loft. In the loft bags of soybeans and corn were stacked on pallets. Mothballs had been scattered around to keep the rats away. You could smell the Menthol strong.

I found the right number and loaded eight bags onto the tailgate. As I finished
Grandfather came down the hill. His hat was cockeyed on his head and one pant leg clung to the top of a boot. His thin cotton shirt was unbuttoned below his breastbone. He walked slowly.

“Is Jerald planting?” he asked.

“Yes. Behind the barn.”

He looked over the bags and checked the number.

“Did you write this down?”

“No,” I said.

Grandfather kept track of the seed numbers and where they were planted and how they produced. He found a pencil nub in a box and scratched the number and where it was going on an old seed bag.

“Did the grain drill come?” I asked.

“Haven’t seen it. Didn’t he call?”

“He asked about it. It’s not his damn fault.”

“Never said it was.”

“Didn’t have to say it.”

He was looking out at the fields. “They’re backed up, I guess. Goddamn weather’s right and we can’t get in the field.”

“Where the hell’s Avery?”

“Don’t know,” he said. He didn’t seem concerned.

I got in the truck and drove home through the barnyard back to the field. Father was at the far end. He had one or two swipes left. I parked and waited on the tailgate. It was very warm and the sky was a clear blue. A soft wind blew and you could smell the afternoon’s work.

Father reached the end and raised the planter, turned, and sat it back down. I removed the lids of all the boxes. They were nearly empty. Father came around the planter.

“Find anything out about the drill?”

“Not yet.”

“Goddamn it,” he said.

I ripped off the top of a bag and carried it to the planter. I poured it in and Father did the same.

“Did you see Avery?”

“No one’s seen him,” I said.
“Goddamn it.”
We filled all eight boxes, a bag per box. Then Father dumped in the small packages of kernel guard, a purple sulfur smelling powder, a bag per two boxes.
“This should get me close,” he said. “But check on me in a few hours. It’ll be close.”
“Do you want a sandwich?”
“I’ll run in and get something. “Go ahead and eat.”
He was on the tractor and started down the field. He was in a great race against the sun and time.
I drove back to the barnyard and went to the house. Mother was nowhere downstairs, so I took off my boots to avoid tracking dirt and went upstairs. She was in the bedroom. She’d stripped the sheets for wash. She sat on the edge of the bed with a small wooden box on her lap. When her father had died she’d placed everything she had of his in the box. There was an old pocket watch, unwound, and a Swiss Army knife and another foldout knife, this one with a marble cover and a larger blade, and several service medals from the war, and a black and white picture of him standing on some street corner in Europe in his army browns. He had served in communications and strung telegraph wire over half of Europe during the war, following just behind the front lines. Mother often told about how he’d sat atop the telegraph poles outside of Rome and watched the bombs fall on the city and how in the morning they’d gone to town and seen the Catholics walk out of church and spit in the faces of American soldiers. He’d hated Catholics since then and had not liked Grandfather for his arrogance and he’d refused to come to the wedding if it were strictly Catholic, so Mother had gotten a minister to perform half of the service. He’d liked Father very much and thought him smarter than he ever knew, but understood that he would never leave the farm, having belonged to it and it to him for so long, nor would he ever gain Grandfather’s approval and for that reason he would forever try. He’d
feared Mother would have a lonely life, but death saw that he would not prevent it. The cancer
was well on him before it was found and Mother told of a young doctor sliding a long needle into
his chest to drain the fluid from his heart sac so he could live a little longer. He was dead and
now there were only black and white pictures and Mother’s loneliness and a young son who she
said always looked like him in a certain light.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

The red bitch was on the floor at her feet. She thumped her tail into the carpet.

“Just looking,” she said. The drawer to the bureau was open. She kept the box far in the
back under old clothes. “I think about him a lot this time of year. He died in May.”

“I know.”

The windows were open and the wind blew the lace curtains. You could hear Father’s
tractor sounding far off and very small. Mother must have heard it.

“Is your father coming in for lunch?”

“Said he would, but I doubt it.”

“Dad hated your grandpa. He hated him for thinking so much of the farm and so little of
his sons. He said your grandpa would always treat him like a little boy. He was right.”

I looked out the window. “Father loves the work though too. I think he would do it
without Grandfather.”

“No,” she said. “I know. He loves he work. It’s good honest work and I know why he
loves it, but he could do it without them.”

“Could he?”

“I don’t see why not.”

I knew the answer to that and that it was something about blood and what it carried. It
was for the same reason that I had risen early every morning and driven down to help. It was
something like obligation.

I turned from the window. “Is there food in the fridge?”

“Yes.”

“I’m going to eat,” I said. I did not feel like talking.

“I’ll fix you something.”

“I’ll get it.”

I went downstairs and fixed a sandwich and ate it at the kitchen table. Mother came
downstairs with the red bitch following. She fixed a sandwich and we ate together with the dog
begging at our knees.

Afterward I drove the tractor down to the field. It was mid-day with the sun high all hot
and I worked westward toward the trees with the wind blowing back east. It was good to work
with the tractor riding over the field. The dust came in great clouds and you breathed it in and it
was a part of you, that which you’d once belonged to, and it was like being brought home. There
was much to think about and I thought about it all on some level, lost in the dust and noise, and
you could never remember it all afterward. It was like being stuck on the edge of a great notion
without being able to realize it. Such notions could often not be completely realized as they
could not be put into thoughts and had nothing to do with words, but were all about feeling and
place and time. It was for that reason that Father loved it, and I thought it all very natural and
simple in feeling.

I worked all but a fourth of the field and by that time it was late in the afternoon. It had
been a long day and I was very tired, but it was not over and I didn’t mind. My skin was red and
raw from the sun. I folded up the disk and drove down the road. I parked in the barnyard, got a
drink from the house, then drove to truck to the field.

Father had crossed over the lane and was in the smaller field on the other side. I drove
across the rows and parked near the end and waited. I’d taken my flannel off long ago. My skin
was layered with the field and I used the sleeve to wipe dirt from my eyes. It came away brown.

Far down the field Father was standing up. He sometimes did this when his back grew
sore. I knew that he was probably sore other places and maybe hurting, but would never show it.
The field was no-till and every now and then an errant cornhusk would blow up in the soft wind.
You could smell the dirt and the water of the nearby stream and all of the green plants in it.

He reached the end of the field and climbed down from the tractor. He moved a little
slowly.

“It’s about damn time,” he said. He was in a fine mood.

“I’ve been busy.”

“Busy my ass.”

“Somebody has to work around here.”

We checked the boxes. They were all nearly empty. He still had three or four passes left
in the field. We took all the lids off the boxes.
“You see Avery?”
“No,” I said. “I’ve been in the field. Haven’t you seen the dust?”
He shook his head.
“So you don’t know if the drill came?”
“No.”
“Ride on the back. I’m gonna try and run it out.” He started for the tractor.
“Did you eat yet?”
He shook his head.
I climbed up on the planter and leaned against the empty fertilizer tanks ahead of the boxes. Father started off down the field. It was dusty and uncomfortable and if you were not careful, very dangerous. He went up and back and by the end of it the seed was okay, but on the way back up it ran very low. I walked from arm to arm behind the boxes and knocked what seed was left down into the distributors until the end of the field. It was all very close and by the end of the field the boxes were completely empty, though there was still a little seed left in the distributors. I slid my finger across my throat and Father turned and stopped the tractor. There were two passes left.
“Goddamn-it,” he said. “Run down to Grandpa’s and get another bag.” He told me the number again.
“I think I took the last eight. But I’ll check.”
“If so, run to the Co-op and see if they have a bag.”
“Are they still open?”
“Spring hours,” he said.
I got in the truck and pulled around. Father shut off the tractor and got in. He held out his hand. It shook terribly.
“Guess I should’ve ate something.”
“I don’t want to hear it.”
“Ask them where the hell the drill is too.”
I dropped him off at the house and drove down to Grandfather’s. There were no other bags of that number so I drove over to the Co-op. The sun was still high but falling and it was a nice time in the afternoon, not too hot but cooling, and you knew that the day was ending and that you’d worked hard.
CHAPTER VIII

The road to the mill ran along the northern edge of the farm. It split the valley and then slowly climbed up and out. There were farms along both sides. Then the road climbed a small hill. Over the hill there were houses on both sides, ugly ranch houses built on five-acre plots. The houses ended at the top of the hill and the road sunk into a stream valley. The valley was thick with walnut trees and old oaks. Their shoots were still very young. Then there were farms again on both sides and the road began to climb a much larger hill. This hill was the valley wall. There were fields on the side of the hill, tabled to prevent runoff and brown where worked and then green and brown again. The soil was not very good there and chunky with the roots of sod and other plants. At the top of the hill you could see all the valley behind you and the house and barns far off and gleaming white. On the other side of the hill the fields were tabled again and untilled, growing thick with green grass. The road dropped down the hill into a much larger, flatter valley. To the north you could see more green hills and they flattened out as they ran southward. There was a small creek at this end of the valley. It ran south and eventually joined Four Mile and together they flowed to the Miami River. You could not see the river, but you were close to it now and this new valley was a large floodplain of the river and the soil there was soft and sandy.
There were more houses on the left and then the road dropped very suddenly to the creek, over an old iron bridge and then a set of railroad tracks. Looking right I could see the Co-op along the tracks in the distance, but there was no direct route there and then it disappeared behind the small town of Seven Mile.

I drove to the center of town. Seven Mile had no stoplights. There was a small market on the corner and an elementary school across the street. There was a Post Office, and a volunteer fire and police department, and three churches: a Methodist, Baptist, and Presbyterian. On the east side of town there were many houses being built in fields that had once grown corn, and I wondered how long it would be before there was a stoplight and a supermarket and enough damn religion to choke a horse.

I turned right at the school and drove out of town back over the tracks. The Co-op was just over the tracks. A half a dozen tall concrete grain silos stood to the left. Several years before the concrete began to crack and now white sealer ran arbitrarily up the sides like veins in an arm. There were a couple of very large barns and the mill beneath the silos with its tall grain tables reaching high to the top. The mill was very old and the barns in the back newer along with the office that stood separate by itself and was much newer. Behind the office were white cylindrical anhydrous ammonia tanks.

Our grandfathers formed the Co-op in the 50’s as a cooperative effort to supply agricultural necessities to local farmers at a reduced rate. Our grandfathers built it and then handed it over to their sons and then their sons let the corporations in. The corporations were in it for money and soon the Co-op was no cheaper than anywhere else. Now few farmers did business with the Co-op.

I walked to the office and held the door open for a man dressed in shorts.

“Helluva day, isn’t it?” he said. He was carrying a bag of dog food.

“Yes. Doesn’t get much better,” I said.

I went in. There were pallets of dog food and grass seed. There was a wall full of rakes and yard tools. I looked around for someone I knew. There were many young kids there. They sat on the seed bags. They wore Co-op shirts but they were not working.

A woman I recognized was working behind the counter. I did not know her name but knew that she’d been there for a long time and knew Father well. She smiled as I approached the counter. Her teeth were very gapped.
“I was wondering when I’d see a Burns.”
“Lucky you got me.”
“How’s your dad?”
“Ornery as shit.”
“He’s not working too hard, is he?” She was looking out from behind her glasses.
I laughed.
“Should’ve known better. Is he feeling okay?”
“A little sore.”
“I’m sure.”
The boys on the sacks were talking about football, and then girls. They were drinking pop and looked no older than high school.
“I’m sure they got work for you boys outside,” the woman said.
“They sent us in here for a break.”
“Half hour’s a mighty long break.”
“They don’t have anything for us to do.”
“I got two orders right here that need filled.”
One of the boys stood up and walked outside. He was grumbling. The others followed. They did not take the orders. The woman shook her head. “They’ll just find a place to sit outside.”
“Who the hell’s doing the hiring around here?”
“Hell, I don’t know. They can’t find anybody to hire and those they do won’t work anyway.”
“Helluva system.”
“You said it.”
“No wonder you’re getting undersold all over the county.”
She didn’t say anything. She was looking through a pile of receipts. When she found what she was looking for she said, “What do you need?”
I told her the seed and the number.
“Not sure we have any. Check the back. There might be a random bag in there. Just stop and let me know on your way out.”
I started out and then went back to the counter.
“Any idea where the drill’s at?”

“Hold on,” she said. She flipped through a binder and found the schedule. “Should be at Baker’s. I can’t imagine they’d have it long though. Tomorrow maybe.”

“Can’t do any better.”

“No one tells me anything.”

“We need it.”

“Lots of people do.” She flipped through more invoices. “Tell your father he has an overdue bill too.”

“The farm you mean?”

“Yes, the farm, for feed bought last winter.”

“I didn’t think they bought feed here anymore. They shouldn’t.”

“Someone did last winter,” she said.

“I’ll tell him.”

I drove over to one of the large barns in back and parked near the loading dock. It was long with white aluminum siding. There was a cubicle outside. An old man, thin and dusty, came out as I climbed the steps.

“Whatya need?” he asked.

I told him.

“Don’t know that we got any,” he said. He walked toward the back of the barn. There was a pallet there with a bag on it. The bag was ripped and corn had spilled on the floor. “Got that one. Looks like the rats got in it. You can take it if you want.”

“That should do,” I said.

I bent down and picked it up so the corn wouldn’t spill.

“Need help?”

“No.”

We walked back to the loading dock.

“How are things going out at your place?”

“Good considering.”

“Hasn’t really been an ideal spring.”

“Never is anymore.”

“Not that these people care. They’re more worried about selling dog food and lawn
fertilizer.”

“Seems to be the trend.”

I put the bag in the back of the truck, tight against the wheel well so that it would not spill anymore.

“No need to stop and tell Barb about that one,” the old man said. “They didn’t know it was here in the first place, so they won’t miss it.” He smiled.

“Guess not,” I said.

I waved and drove past the office to the road. Father was still eating when I got back. I parked the truck and went inside. Father and Mother were at the table. The red bitch laid at Mother’s feet between them. I got a glass of iced tea and drank deeply. My throat was very dry. The tea was cold and made my headache.

“Take it there wasn’t any at Grandpa’s?” Father said.

“No.” I sat down on the step.

“Did you get a bag at the Co-op?”

“One. It’s torn open but most of it’s there. It’s enough.”

“Was Barb there?”

“Yes, she was there.”

“What did she charge you?”

“Nothing. She didn’t even know I took it.”

Father looked at me.

“The old guy working the barn said I could have it.”

“Who was he?”

“Hell if I know.”

He shrugged. “No sense paying for a ripped bag.”

“That’s what I figured.” I drank my tea. “Barb also said you had an overdue bill.”

“Bullshit.”

“Did you not pay one?” Mother asked.

“I paid them, Kay.”

“She said something about feed over the winter,” I said.

“She’s full of shit. I haven’t bought feed from them in damn near a year.”

“Avery and your dad probably bought it and forgot to tell you,” Mother said.
“What in the hell would they buy feed for?” He stumped his foot. The red bitch yelped and bit at his boot.

“What the hell away from me, bitch.”

“Come here, Sadie.”

The dog went to Mother and laid her muzzle in her lap. Mother scratched her head.

“I’m just the messenger,” I said.

“You better call them.”

“Goddamn-it,” Father said. He ran his fingers through his hair. It was dusty and the dust floated down to Mother’s table in the sunlight. His hand had stopped shaking.

“I can’t believe you went without eating,” Mother said.

“How long have you known me, Kay?”

“You’d think you’d get smarter.”

Father finished his sandwich.

“I’ve never understood farmers. They wait around all year and do nothing and then as soon as it’s warm they go like hell until it’s done.”

“If it rains then there is nothing. Would you rather that?”

“I’m sure God will assure you something.”

“He hasn’t before.”

“It’s not like it’s getting you rich anyway,” Mother said.

“Damn-it, Kay.”

“I’ll never understand it. You never see Avery and your dad working so hard.”

“I don’t give a fuck what Avery and Dad do.”

“If only that were true.”

I finished my tea and put the glass in the sink. Father stood and the red bitch growled.

“Shut the hell up.”

“Perhaps you should retire and be a shit manager,” I said. “You’ve always been good at that.”

“Yes, I have always been good at that.”

We went outside in the late afternoon sun. In the field we divided the bag up among the boxes. It was just enough to fill the bottoms.

“Are you going to run anymore tonight?”
“I may start the sixty-five acres.”
“I’ll go get more seed.”

I drove back past the house. Mother was inside. She’d asked the questions she’d always asked of Father and she’d gotten the same answers. They were always the wrong answers and I wished that someday they would be right.

Avery’s truck was at Grandfather’s. The barn lights were on and he and Grandfather were feeding. I loaded eight bags onto the tailgate and thought about Grandfather and Avery and how they could be real sons-a-bitches and how I wished like hell that Father would leave and be rid of them. It all centered around family and I often wondered why Father chose Grandfather’s family over his own. It all had to do with men and respect and I thought a man could not respect another man truly until he’d told that man to kiss his ass. Otherwise he was just a boy to that man and would forever remain a boy.

Once, when I was very young, we’d had a litter of pups. The pups were from an old stray bitch that had wandered onto the farm and dropped her litter, and then wandered off again. Mother had raised the pups, all six, and they’d been very different in size and color and shape. There was a small black and white pup who’d taken much abuse from the others. He took a lot from a bigger pup and then one day he bit the bigger pup’s neck, and shaking it viciously, wrestled the bigger pup to the ground. The bigger pup squalled and afterward never bothered the little pup anymore and everyone followed the little pup. I often thought it right that the little pup had asserted himself physically and that he’d not taken from family what he would not take from common strangers.

I drove back to the field. Father had finished and crossed to the sixty-five acres. I drove up the dirt lane. The sixty-five acres laid on the other side of the small stream. There was a narrow concrete bridge crossing from bank to bank. I drove over the bridge and skirted the eastern edge of the field and found Father at the northern side near the road.

Father had been walking stiffly after lunch, but now he was lose again and moving in a great hurry. We loaded the eight bags into the boxes and dropped on the lids.

“I’m going to do the ends and call it a day,” Father said.

I sat in the truck and watched the dust rise slowly off the planter. The sun was low in the west. The air was growing thick and moist and you could smell the dust in it. I pulled on my flannel against the cooling air. It was a good time of evening and you knew that work was done
for the day and that you’d worked hard and deserved a rest. You did not mind that you had to do it again tomorrow or the next day as long as the work was good and you got a good rest first.

Father made two passes around the sixty-five acres and by the time he finished the sun was very low in the west and the evening cool. He parked the tractor at the southern end and I drove to meet him. He wore his flannel. We drove down the lane and swung east over the concrete bridge.

“There are some gullies I want you to come up and work tomorrow,” he said. “How did the fifty-five acres come up?”

“Good,” I said.

We drove east then turned south toward the barns. At the top of the lane we saw Grandfather’s truck at the far end. He’d parked and was out in the planted field. He stood with his hands on his hips. He overlooked the field as a general reviewed soldiers in rank. Then he got in his truck and drove back through the barnyard.

“Did Avery ever show up?”

“They were doing chores when I went for seed.”

Father was quiet.

We ate dinner at Mother’s table. No one spoke much and afterward I drove home in the dark. At home I showered and the field came off in muddy layers. Then I laid in bed with the cool evening coming in through the window. I could hear the cars pass on the street and then a train on the other side of town. Someone was having a party and I could hear the drunk voices of college students not yet gone for the summer. It all seemed very far from Four Mile and I far from it though I’d only been working on the farm for three days. The university seemed distant and I thought how easy it was to get lost within each and forget the other entirely. Then there was only that one thing and all other things seemed unimportant and you were lost within the desire to make it work. I thought of Mother and Grandfather screaming at her, calling her a high-class whore, and Father watching and saying nothing. That had happened when I was very young and I wished that the old man would try it again so I could put him on his ass. I felt ashamed of Father for not standing up for Mother and I hated the shame as I hated the hot sun in July and I laid there wishing it would go away. Then I fell asleep.
The morning was bright and hot. The humidity was thick and it took a long time to burn the moisture from the grass. It was too humid and I knew that in the evening it would rain even though there were no clouds in the west. The trees were very green and had come out of themselves very fast in the last two days with the heat and humidity. With the heat the corn would sprout if it didn’t rain and seal the ground over.

Father was already in the field. I drove the tractor and disk up and worked the gullies that water had washed through the field over the winter, being sure to stay far from the end rows Father had already planted.

Afterward I checked with Father who was fine and then finished the fifty-five acres from the day before. There was dust and noise, and more of the same. I finished by noon and parked the tractor in the barnyard. Then drove to Grandfather’s. The grain drill had arrived and was backed up to the loft. Grandfather and Avery were there and had started loading bags of beans into the drill.

“Is Jerald planting?” Grandfather asked.

“He’s in the sixty-five acres.”

I grabbed a bag. The drill held fifty bags each weighing fifty pounds. Avery was on the
deck of the drill and I hoisted them up to him. Then he poured them into the drill. It was all
hard work.

“Did you finish the fifty-five acres?” Avery asked.
“This morning.”
“How was it?”
“Good,” I said. “What’s the weather supposed to do?”
“They’re saying rain tonight. I don’t know where it’s gonna come from, but they’re
saying it.”
“Goddamn-it, we should’ve been planting beans yesterday,” Grandfather said. “Isn’t no
reason Bakers should’ve ever had this drill before us.”
“Their name was on the list first.”
“Ah, bullshit.”
Grandfather’s brow was very furrowed. His hands were on his hips.
“I can’t believe this.”
“Don’t bitch at me,” Avery said.
Grandfather looked at him. “Goddamn time to plant and the drill isn’t here.”
“It’s here now.”
“It should’ve been here yesterday. Now it’s gonna rain and we’re not gonna have any
beans planted.”
“We’ll have more than we had yesterday.”
“We should have twice that much.”
“It’s not my fault.”
“Well whose fault is it?”
“Jerald’s the one who called.”
“Ah, horseshit,” I said.
Grandfather looked off toward the fields. His face was red and cross.
We filled the drill full and then Avery dumped on the guard, a black liquid that smelled a
little like licorice. He stirred the beans with a stick to mix it in good and the closed the lid.
“Are you making sure your dad has corn?” Avery asked.
I looked at him.
He got on the tractor and drove toward the field. Grandfather followed in his truck. I
loaded eight bags of seed into the truck and drove to the sixty-five acres. Father was halfway across. We filled the planter with the bags.

“What time is it?”
“One,” I said.
“Did the drill come?”
“We just filled it.”
“Good,” Father said. “Are you going to eat?”
“Yes. I’ll bring you something.”

I ate and took Father a sandwich. That afternoon was more of the same and by late evening he’d finished the sixty-five acres and moved across the road to a thirty-two acre field. By dark that field was done, the dirt packed into solid, organized rows, and total we’d done one hundred and fifty-six acres in two days.

That evening I drove home in the dark and you could see heat lightning flashing pink far off in the western sky. That night it rained. I awoke in the night and heard it pouring hard against the roof. It ran hard in the gutters and it was nice to lay in the cool bed listening to the rain. My body was sore and ached from lifting the bags and riding the tractor. It was good to lay there late in the morning after the rain had passed and the sun was out, and I remembered the university for a time and then it was noon before I was dressed and going. I showered and my muscles loosened up and felt good. I shaved then pulled on a pair of jeans and cooked eggs on the stove with toast and hot coffee. I ate and then sat in a chair and drank coffee and read the paper.
CHAPTER X

It was noon before I left. The day was already hot, and humid with the rain. On Four Mile the landscape was very lush, green, and wet. The creek was running full and brown. Above the sky was blue and an occasional thick, dark cloud would float over and drop rain.

Father’s truck was at Grandfather’s. I parked at the top of the hill and walked down to the barn. Father and Uncle Avery stood inside the door. Grandfather sat on a bale of hay. His clothes were wrinkled and his hat sat cockeyed on his head. As soon as I was inside a cloud came over and it rained briefly, then the sun came out bright and hot. Far across the field a rainbow was following the cloud.

“Did you finally get up?” Father said.
“He doesn’t start until noon,” Avery said.
“He’s on university time.”
“Kiss my ass,” I said. “What the hell have you done this morning?”
“I could take a piss and already it would be more than you,” Avery said.
“I’d talk. You didn’t even show up until yesterday.”
“Hey.”
“If all of you worked half as much as you talked, you might get something done,”
Grandfather said. He picked his teeth with a toothpick. It was good to see everyone being cordial.

“How much did you get done yesterday?” I asked.

“About thirty acres,” Avery said. “I couldn’t get the damn drill adjusted.”

“Should’ve been twice that much,” Grandfather said.

Father rolled his eyes. His arms were folded across his chest. “How much were you putting on?”

“Bakers had it before us and they had it set on seventy pounds per acre.”

“Christ, Avery. You should’ve checked it before going to the field.”

“Well who the hell would’ve thought it,” Avery said. “They’ll be lucky if it produces anything.”

“You’ll be lucky too,” Father said.

“Who the hell would’ve thought it?” He was becoming defensive. His face was sallow and he hung his head.

“I came out mid-afternoon and he asked me why he was using so much seed, and here he had it set on seventy-four pounds. I couldn’t believe it,” Grandfather said. He shook his head.

“You’ll be lucky if it produces,” Father said.

“Hell with it.”

“That’s what your insurance and subsidies are for,” I said. “You damn farmers with your insurance and farmer welfare are bleeding us taxpayers dry.”

“Bullshit.”

We all laughed.

This was a good joke between us. Only certain people could say it around certain other people and have it be funny. You had to understand and say it to other people who knew and understood, or else it was offensive and would cause one hell of an uproar. I understood and everyone knew it, but since I had left the farm and was no longer a part, I felt as though one day I would not be able to make the joke without causing offense, as some folks might think I’d gone away and become “snotty.” But now I understood, as I always would, and was still close enough that I could make it without offense.

I once knew a girl who’d said it and had meant it. She was a friend of Rose’s and was very book smart. She was from Michigan, which made her an automatic son-of-a-bitch to those
of us from Ohio, but I had overlooked that for Rose and had come to regret it later. She had a good job with a large pharmaceutical company in Indianapolis and she made very good money and complained about not having enough work to do at her job in a way that only those who make very good money and do very little work can. She didn’t think at all when she said it and had she stopped and thought about it, she may not have said it, but she didn’t. She said that farmers were the cause of high taxes and that they were the biggest recipients of government welfare. I told her that she shouldn’t have said it and explained to her how she didn’t understand. When she disagreed, I told her what a stupid, Michigan bitch she was. This upset Rose and I told her not to bring the girl around me anymore as she was a stupid bitch.

Those who understood knew of the loopholes and how anyone who owned ten acres or made $2,500 dollars from their land a year could apply from subsidies. Those folks raped the system, as they didn’t need it, and it was a major loophole that the politicians were too stupid and fearful to fix. The big corporations took small farms in under contract and then they raped the system too. They were already making millions and they controlled the politicians. The system was bad and there were no good politicians to fix it, nor any willing enough to try as that would be committing political suicide and attempting to pull everyone away from a tit that was eventually going to run dry.

The farmers did only as farmers know how to do. They produced. The business of farming had not changed, it had only gotten bigger. Farmers produced more in order to make more, and by doing so they killed their market and killed themselves. They did not make money because they were killing themselves and they produced more the next year and continued to kill themselves and only the very stubborn survived. The power lay with them and all they had to do was not produce, and when food ran short the prices would rise and they could make a decent living. Of course, farmers would never do that, as that meant killing many of themselves, and they were too independent. They loved the work and did not want to be bothered by the politics of it. Farming was a business like any other and no one knew that more than the farmer, but he never wanted to think of it like that, as it would ruin it. They wanted only to do the work, as that was all they knew, and to be left alone while they did, and they wanted to be paid, as they deserved to, with no questions.

Farming, I’d come to understand, was men talking about things they knew and didn’t know, and women who wished their men would talk to them. It was men who talked of change
and the necessity for it, yet who continued on as if change were implausible. Farming was comfort for those who did not want to leave home. It was independence and dependency.

“Are you going to cut those calves?” Avery asked.

“I think it’s too early,” Father said.

Grandfather was leaning on his elbows. His hands were up. “I don’t see any reason why we can’t cut them today, damn-it.”

“Because they’re not even four months yet, that’s why.” Father’s face was red and his eyes were tight.

“Ah, bullshit.”

“Goddamn-it, Dad, you know better than that shit. When have we ever cut them this early?”

“If you have a day to do something, you might as well use it. I don’t wanna have to worry about it in July when they’re too damn big anyway.”

“I think we should,” Avery said.

Father threw up his hands and walked to the back of the loft. He was shaking his head. I wished he would tell them no. “If we lose one, it’s not my fault,” he said.

He started the Ford 8N and pulled it to the front of the barn. Then backed it over to the chute. The chute was on jacks with two wheels beneath. I stood on the back to balance it out and raise the hitch in front. The hitch came up. Father hooked it to the back of the Ford, then pulled it from the barn. Overhead the sun disappeared behind a dark cloud and it looked as if it might shower again.

“Let’s hurry and get those cattle in so we don’t get our asses soaked,” Father said.

Avery had walked ahead. He opened the gate to the back lot and waited for Father to pull through, then closed it. The lot was dotted with shit and very muddy. Our boots grew heavy. The tractor slid, but the ground was relatively flat so there was nowhere for it to go. Avery and I trudged ahead and around the end of the barn where the tall, white silo stood bright against the dark cloud. The cowherd was in the front feed lot. There were thirty brude cows and a bull, and all except for a half dozen had young calves. There was a hay cart in the front lot and in-between showers the cows would come out and eat. Many were eating now and several stood along the fence looking rather somber.

We came around the barn and they saw us. The older cows began to move into the barn.
The others stood and looked dumb. We moved forward, Avery and I, arms out and soon they all began to move. Most of the cows went in, and the bull. It was relatively easy, except for the young calves who were playful and full of energy. A few ran past us, but we managed to get around them, sliding in the mud and shit, and they joined their mothers in the barn. Avery untied a metal gate leading to the pasture and we lifted it from the hinges and fastened it halfway down the manger so they could not pass.

A long time ago, there had been a fine chute outside of the barn with a nice holding pin. It made everything much easier, but the boards had rotted and fallen, and the chute rusted. No one kept it up and now we were doing it the hard way.

Father backed the chute into the barn and dropped it along the south wall. We let the jacks down and the chute sat flat against the floor in the shit. Avery and I found another gate and tied it at a forty-five degree angle running from the back corner of the chute to the manger. We then took the gate we left halfway down and brought it closer, tying it perpendicular to the south wall acting as a push.

It was all more difficult than it should’ve been, and we were all soaking wet with sweat by the time it was already. Outside another shower fell and then the hot sun. It was very humid.

“Are you ready?” Avery asked.

“Will you hold on,” Father said. He was dripping with sweat and in a foul mood. He was arranging the inoculation gun and scalpel, the ear tags and punch.

“I’d like to get this done, Goddamn-it.”

“Well you’re gonna have to wait,” Father said.

No one was cheery.

“Now I’m ready. Try and bring the old cows first.”

I held the push gate and Avery walked back into the herd. He broke loose a couple of old cows whose heads hung low. They had seen it all before and were used to the routine. They came all too willingly. The first one walked into the chute with little encouragement and Father locked her head. She stood calmly with her head down. Father inoculated her with Ivomec to kill parasites, just below the ear in the neck, and clipped an orange fly tag through her ear. Then he sprinkled fly powder on her back. The old cow took it all well and without notice. Father opened the chute and she trotted out into the lot with her full utter jostling between her legs. The next one was just as easy, and so were a half dozen others.
The younger cows did not go so willingly. They huddled in the back of the manger and watched big-eyed. Avery broke one of the young cows loose and she got to the chute and tried to turn. I pushed hard with the gate and pinned her forward. She tried to back and Avery came in behind her and twisted her tail up. He smacked her hard on the rump and told the bitch to move. She moved slowly and stubbornly into the chute. Father locked her head and then slid a metal bar behind her legs to keep her from backing out. He shot and tagged her, and she bawled at the tag.

Then the big bull came forward. He was a big boy, black Simmental, muscular with a big, bulging neck and head. He was too big for the chute, so Avery and I pushed hard and held him between the gates. He was a good boy and very gentle. He hardly moved when Father shot and tagged him. He could’ve easily thrown the gate and crushed us both, but he was a good-natured boy and we opened the gate and let him on through.

It was a funny thing to watch the cows huddled in the back. Their fear of the chute was only overcome by their fear of us. They were very much like people in their fear, and also in their social order. There was a pecking order among them, starting with the eldest females, who it seemed, even outranked the big boy, and ending with the very youngest. When feeding you could place a number on each cow as they passed through the gate to the feedlot and the next day they would pass through in that same order. Here it was different, as fear had persuaded some of them out of their order, but even then many of the older ones stuck with it.

The first calf went in rather easily as she was new to it all and very scared. Father caught her in the chute. She jerked backwards. The bars held her at the neck. She twisted her head and shot mucus from her nostrils trying to get loose. She was a heifer, so Father shot her and tagged her, then let her go. The next was a young bull, and Father caught his neck up near the shoulder and pushed in the sides of the chute to hold him still. He did not place the bar behind his legs. There was no danger of the calf backing out with the sides in. He could still kick. Horses kicked back and cattle to the side and out as they did not have the mobility in their hips that horses did. Father approached the calf cautiously, patting his hand on its back, above the tail, and working his way down to the inner thigh. The calf’s scrotum was small and shriveled very close to the body. Father pinched it and pulled it clear. With the scalpel he cut the tip, quick and gruff, and tossed it aside. There had once been a joke about a nose warmer. There had been many jokes that were crude and fitting for the occasion.
As I watched I thought it a very strange thing. The change was immediately evident. Mostly this occurred in the eyes, but also in the manner by which the body moved afterward. The eyes were already very big and scared, but afterward they were empty. You did not know if the new steer felt emotion or the extent of the pain, but what remained in the eyes was something very close to shame and humiliation. You had only seen that one other time before and you did not care to see it again. Afterward, the steer walked gingerly with its head down, and it cowered around the bull and did not play much. It was really an awful thing when you thought about it, but necessary, and I hated it so and began to hate the old jokes too.

Father did not joke anymore, but worked quickly and deliberately. He pulled the skin of the scrotum up, revealing the testicles, white and bloodied, and cupping one, pulled. There was a sucking sound as it tore loose far up inside and then came free. The bull, as it would only remain for a few more seconds, bawled deep and throaty, and shifted its weight. Blood dropped down onto the chute bottom. Father did this again and it was over. He shot it against infection and parasites, and tagged the ear. Then he opened the chute and the calf walked off slowly with its head down. Father tossed the testicles through the window into the grass below where they would rot and bake in the sun.

He did this seventeen more times, and inoculated all of the cows and the remaining heifers, and by the last one it was well into the afternoon. Everyone was hungry and sour. We’d skipped lunch and it was very hot. Grandfather had come and stood in the alleyway on the other side of the manger, watching.

There was one cow left. She was an older cow, big with a large brown body and white face. She should’ve known better. She stood at the back of the manger and watched us wearily, her eyes big. Avery got around her and moved her forward, arms out. She got to the gates then turned quickly on him and ran along the wall to the back of the pin. Avery got behind her and moved her forward again. She went left this time, and then back right and Avery slapped at her and missed.

“Goddamn bitch” Avery said.

“You gotta stay behind her,” Grandfather said.

Avery looked at him. Father stood behind the gate, one leg up, his arms lip over the top. Avery got behind her and again she cut back, this time nearly running him over.

“Goddamn-it!” His face was tight and cross.
He walked out of the manger and came back with a small metal pipe.

“That’ll do you a helluva lot of good,” Father said.

Avery got behind the old cow and moved her up close. She swung away from the chute, her heavy utter jostling, and darted along the wall. Avery lunged at her. The metal pipe was in his right hand. He swung hard and wide across his side and hit the old cow across the bridge of the nose. There was the hollow sound of metal on bone. The old cow swung her head back, laying it against her side like a great, long-necked bird does when at rest. Her knees buckled and she went down hard, skidding on concrete soupy with straw and shit, and then lay still, breathing hard, her ribs swelling out against her thin brown coat. Blood trailed from her nostrils.

“Is she out?” I asked. I was sure she was.

The old cows eyes were squeezed shut and bled tears.

“She ain’t out,” Avery said. He was breathing hard. “Goddamn-it.”

Father leaned on the gate. “Like I said, helluva lot of good that did.”

“It’ll teach her to run by me again.”

“I’m sure it will.”

“You wanna do it?”

Father looked at him. Then turned and prepared a syringe of Ivomec. He climbed over the gate and shot and tagged her. The old cow was still breathing hard. Her eyes were open and red. Avery stood along the wall looking sore and ignorant. Father pushed her hindquarters with his boot. The old cow stood. Her legs were very shaky. I opened the gate and she walked through, shivering on weak legs.

We took down the gates and didn’t speak. The cowherd had moved out into the pasture. The pasture was very green and lush as it curved along the creek. The sky was blue and full of thick white clouds, and it looked as if the rain was done. Father pulled the chute back to the barn and then we all left without speaking. I rode home with Father. I pulled my jeans off on the porch and had Mother wash them. They were very shitty. Then sat in shorts at the table.

“Sometimes Avery is very ignorant,” I said to Father. I knew we were both thinking about it.

“He does not think sometimes.”

“He hardly ever thinks. He’s stupid,” Mother said. She was making sandwiches at the counter.
Father looked at her. Then we all sat at the table together and ate lunch.
I went home in the early evening feeling good, having only worked the half-day, but still tired. I felt stronger than I had in a while, my muscles no longer sore, but used to the work. The night was humid and I laid in the bed under the hot sheets and could not sleep. I thought about Father and Avery and Grandfather. They were good honest people, Avery and Grandfather, but they were also ignorant. They knew only farming and that was a fine thing, but not for everyone. Father knew farming and more, but he loved farming and I thought what a fine thing it was to be doing something you loved and were meant to do, and that was all anyone could ever ask. Father had always loved the farm and I believe that was all he ever wanted to do, but I also knew there were other things. I had seen those things and so had he. I had loved them and knew that he would as well. I loved and had loved many things and had let many of them go and I wondered if it was possible for a person to love many things while loving one truly and completely. My father loved farming and he loved my mother, though he wasn’t one to show it, and I believe he loved us boys. But it was farming that he loved truly and completely.

I thought of these things and sometime in the night I fell asleep. The next day was sunny and bright and a humid wind blew from the west. It was still too wet to work in the field so I stayed home, and then woke early the next morning and drove to the farm.
Father had not started yet and sat at the kitchen table drinking instant coffee. The day was bright and warm. The humidity had left and was replaced by hot dry air. I did not see Avery or Grandfather.

“There is coffee,” Father said.
I poured a cup and sat across from him. He was reading the morning paper.

“Where’s Mother?”

“She’s upstairs. She says she’s depressed.”

“She is?”

“Yes. She always says she’s depressed about something.”

“It’s the time of year, and you’re not around much.”

“I have to work,” Father said.

“You are also not around a lot in the summer and fall.”

“Those are all very busy seasons.”

“You should talk to her more.”

He drank his coffee and read the paper. I leaned back and looked out the window. The breeze coming there was warm and good. It smelled of honeysuckle and carried the plant’s cottony seed in it.

“I’m going to plant that fifty-five acres this afternoon,” Father said. “I’ll need you to work some of it this morning.”

“The clay on the hillside?”

“And some of that gumbo on the point where it is low. I probably won’t start until this afternoon.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Try and spray if the wind dies down.”

I finished my coffee and went outside. The rain had washed a lot of the dust from the tractor. The disks shiny two days ago were rusted. I started the tractor and filled it at the diesel tank. Father came out and began mixing chemicals in the big sprayer. The chemicals had a fetid odor and I could smell it over the fuel.

I drove the tractor down the road through the woods gate and up to the fifty-five acres. The breeze was very soft and the day warm. The field was flat and clean like I’d left it. The rain had made a fine crust over the top of the soil. The sun had bleached the soil white. I drove the
tractor into the field and lowered the disk. The smoke from the tractor floated eastward across the field and mixed with the dust from the disk and together they made a great dissolving cloud. The tractor was loud and warm. The soft soil made the earth feel like driving over a great plain of thick rubber. I worked along the fencerow close to the stream and back up to the point. The point was the lowest part of the field very close to the streambed. The soil there was black gumbo and very moist. I raised the disk out of the ground a little to work up the crust and avoid any mud. It worked up into fine moist powder and I was very pleased. I worked eastward, beginning at the wettest part of the point. Father would plant westward, so the point would have the longest to dry. I worked until the soil became light brown again and not so wet, then moved east along the hill down the northern fence line. The soil there was red clay and very wet. There were many rocks and the timbres from the disks were very sharp. The clay came up in thick red chunks and I feared I was only making matters worse. Halfway across the field the hill dipped. The rain had washed a gully, so I turned southward, running the outside disk along the edge of the gully, filing it in, then turned back north on the other side. Then I drove back and forth, east to west, west to east over the clay until the clods were broken into small bits.

When I felt it good I drove back south down the center of the field. My skin was covered in much of the field and I could taste it in my mouth. It felt good to be in the center of the field where the soil was soft and there were no rocks. There was only feeling and not thoughts to get in the way and it was just you and the field and complete understanding of purpose.

At the end I raised the disk and drove out onto the road. Father was coming with the planter and we met in the center of the road halfway.

“How’d it work up?” he asked. He was shouting over the noise of the engines.

“Gumbo came up fine. Hillside’s a little rough.”

“Always is.”

“I worked out a gully too,” I said.

“Good.” He was nodding his head. “I’ll need seed sometime later.”

I nodded.

He drove off to the field. I went to the barnyard. It was nearly noon and I was hungry. Mother was in the side yard working in her garden. When I was younger mother had always kept a very large garden. Then she had given it up completely and now she had a very small one. She planted tomato plants and rows of onions, green peppers, cucumbers, and summer squash.
There was a young maple tree nearby. It had seeded very heavily and Mother’s garden was sprouting with small trees. Mother was working out the trees with a hoe. Her dog sat in the middle of the garden. She wagged her tail when she saw me.

“Where have you been?” Mother asked.

“Working ground. Are you growing trees?”

“These damn maples are taking over.”

“Looks nice nonetheless.”

“I suppose,” she said. “Sadie get out of there.”

The dog wagged her tail, but did not move otherwise. Mother leaned on the hoe and wiped her forehead on her sleeve.

“How long did you have to ask Father before he cut this for you?”

“About five years,” she said.

I laughed.

“If it doesn’t have to do with the farm, he doesn’t want to do it,” she said. “He has been getting better since you boys left though.”

“Has he?”

“Yes. He does a few more things around here, though you can’t tell by looking at it.”

She was looking at the barns. “We’ve let things go around here. I’ve let my garden go. Look at the trees.”

“That can be fixed. Everything can be fixed.”

“I suppose.”

The red bitch came up to me. She wagged her tail and I kneeled down and scratched her head.

“I think when he found out that he couldn’t control you boys, he let you both go. You’ve been better for it. My boys are both strong men.”

“We pretend to be.”

“I’ve never understood why he has had such a hard time letting go of your grandpa. He’s never stopped listening like you boys have.”

“I’ve never stopped listening,” I said. “Just lead my own life.”

Mother nodded.

“I wish he would lead his own life. He has never stood up to your grandpa. Not even
when he called me a whore. I’ve only seen him stand up against him once, and that was for you boys. Remember?

I remembered Grandfather standing in the barnyard yelling at Daniel because a water tank had overflowed onto some baby pigs. The pigs had been dead, lying in the mud, but Grandfather had not known that and he thought them drowned. Daniel had been watching the tank and Grandfather yelled at him. Then Father heard about it and they had a helluva fight in the barnyard. Father yelled at him and told him he better never catch him yelling at his boys again.

“I remember,” I said.

Mother was working again. I’d stopped petting the red bitch and she nuzzled my hand, so I started petting her again.

“It has always been about pleasing your grandpa, and this goddamn farm. For a while it was about you boys and now that you’re gone it’s about the farm again. I’m wondering when it’s going to come to me.”

She stopped working.

“I never used to cuss before I met your father,” she said. “Living with you father taught me how to cuss. Living with them all, I suppose.”

“You’re getting good at it.”

“Lots of practice.”

I stood and pulled a couple of tall weeds from the edge of the garden.

“If Dad hadn’t died I probably would’ve never learned. Sometimes I think he got sick just so I could learn how to cuss. With him alive I may have packed you boys up long ago and left.”

“I’m glad you didn’t,” I said.

She smiled. Her eyes were tired.

“Did I tell you I dreamed about him?”

“No.”

“Yes. I dreamt we were on a boat crossing a wide lake. Dad was steering and I was in the front. There was an old dog with us.”

“Was it Sadie.”

The red bitch wagged her tail at her name. Mother laughed.
“No, it was just any old dog.”
“Where were you going?”
“I don’t know,” Mother said. “I just know that it was someplace very important. Dad looked so young.”
“What do you think it means?”
“I don’t know,” she said. “I think it means I have maples in my garden.”
She began to work again.
“Are you wanting lunch?” she asked.
“Yes.”
“I’ll fix you something.”
“No, I’ll get it. Work in your garden.”
Then I walked to the house.
CHAPTER XII

Afterward I drove down to the field. Father had done quite a bit, but there was still much to go and he was far from needing seed. I drove down to Grandfather’s and loaded eight bags onto the tailgate. I did not see Avery or Grandfather. I drove back down to the field and parked in the shade. The day was very hot and dry. Father was far across the field. Dust blew eastward in a thin, long cloud.

The cab of the truck got hot even in the shade and I had some time, so I went for a walk. I walked down the woods lane. The tree with the abscessed trunk stood on the right. I sat on the truck. The grass in the woods was growing tall and thick. It had not yet gone to seed and I thought the cows would have a fine feast when let in.

The trunk was uncomfortable so I continued to walk. I walked down the lane to the road. The creek was brown from the rain the day before, but not very full. You could hear it running over the rocks. I crossed the road and walked down through the trees on the other side. There was an old deer trail and I followed it through the trees to the creek. Along the bank was a large sycamore. The tree had grown crooked and leaned nearly horizontal out from the bank over the creek. I walked up the trunk until I was well over the water and sat down, leaning against a limb. The water was swirling brown beneath and smelled heavily of fish. The rocks along the bank
were covered in white mud. The trees along the bank were a deep green.

It was a good spot and I lay back on the trunk and enjoyed the sun. Small green sunfish jumped in the creek. I could hear Father far off in the distance. He drew close and then far and then close again. It was good to be alone in the sunlight along the creek bank with no one to bother you and lying there I thought of Mother and her loneliness. It was a loneliness that I had never known or understood when I was younger, and now that I was old enough, did not understand completely.

She had never woke early in the morning with the summer air coming in through the window smelling of hay while out in the field the tractors rolled the hay in tidy rows through heat waves with the cicadas pulsing in the trees knowing of the work ahead. Father always called early before the sun grew too hot and you rolled out of bed feeling the night before and wishing you hadn’t drank so much. The elevator was already running to the loft when you got there and the wagons from the day before were lined up in the drive with one in the barn. The hay had been sown in the early spring the year before with field oats. The oats had matured and been harvested mid-summer and left over the winter, and the hay had come in full the following spring. Now Father was waiting, leaning on the elevator with canvas gloves in his hand. You felt guilty for the night before and for dragging so, but he was gracious never to say anything.

So you volunteered for the loft though you knew it was ten degrees hotter up there. There were no roof vents in the old barn and it held in heat like an old wood stove. You climbed up the elevator, head pounding, feeling weak, and plugged in the cord if Father was clear. The bales started coming and you stacked them feeling very weak and unable to sweat despite the heat. The dust hung in the loft and you would come down afterward with dust black in your ears and nose, and you’d cough for two days. The bales came faster and you wished they would end, but the wagon was only half empty and you hated the work with the dust and heat, feeling so poorly.

Then you broke a sweat and all the alcohol came out through the pores. It was a good sweat and you were glad it came. You felt better for it and the work wasn’t so bad anymore. They hay came until it was stacked to the roof and all the wagons were empty. You ate lunch and afterward went to the field and baled the wagons full again. In the evening you were ragged and dragging as you had in the morning, skin raw from sweat and dust and burnt from the sun, and your back sore, and you wanted nothing more to do with it as you knew it would start all
over again in the morning.

In the barn the hay cured for thirty days and then the men showed up in trucks. They loaded semi beds full and hauled it south to horse farms in Kentucky. It was good hay and the horse farms paid well. It was profitable and well worth the work at $4.00 a bale and sometimes $4.25 if they hay was very good, as it nearly always was. But it never lasted and the next year everyone sowed hay, even the folks with ten acres. It was not very good hay but there was lots of it so that you could barely get $3.00 for the good and the men seldom came in trucks anymore. The work was no longer there and you missed it as it had somehow become a part of you and the life you knew, and lying on the tree trunk with the creek running beneath I felt awful for Mother’s loneliness but knew that I would never understand as she could never understand the work and how it held.

Lying there I heard a heron call and turned in time to see one glide down behind me and land gracefully in the center of the creek. It was a beautiful bird in flight, long and very graceful, with its neck curled back in an s and its great wingspan spread wide. Its feathers were ash colored and it stood atop one tall, skinny leg, yellow to match its sharp beak with a string of black feathers trailing in a tufted line down the center of the back of the head and neck. It was a very majestic bird and it stood beautifully in the center of the creek against the strong current. I had seen many of them before up close and from far away, and I knew they spooked easily. I rolled over on the trunk very slowly. The bird did not see me and stood very still in the center of the creek. When it moved it was graceful and I imagined it feeling the rocks on the bottom of the creek with its foot before placing it as not to scare off fish.

The herons came to Four Mile many years ago and built a rookery across the creek high up in the bows of the sycamores. I could not see it from where I was, but knew it was there a hundred yards or so off the bank. They flew out over the fields daily, slow and graceful heading northward. I did not know where they went. There were many other creeks north and I assumed that they went there to fish, but never knew for sure. They flew year round and I do not recall a day before leaving that I did not see one high over the fields, and once I’d seen one standing tall upon the peak of the barn roof. The rookery was very large and several years after its construction men from the university came to the farm and asked Father if he would donate the land the trees stood upon. Father laughed and quoted them a price of $5,000 an acre, and the men laughed and went back to the university. Does it look like I’m rich enough to donate land,
Father had said and I’d been embarrassed of the university then and that I’d been a part of it. Later we heard that the men started a trust to help preserve the creek bottom and took donations, but where the money went no one ever heard and they never came to Four Mile again. Then there were the old men at the Co-op who said we should run the herons off or kill them, as nothing good ever came of them. According to the old men the herons polluted the creek with their shit and ate all the fish and then left having taken without replacing.

I thought this all a curious thing as I laid there and soon I was asleep in the sun with the herons long forgotten.

I woke up to the sound of the tractor and walked back to the field. Father was halfway down moving away. He’d planted nearly half of the field. The day was still hot but waning. I sat on the tailgate in the shade and waited by watching buzzards fly high up over the center of the field. There were four of them and they circled ever higher. I thought that Father must have killed something small with the planter, but none of them ever came down so I assumed they were sailing for fun. Then I saw the sky in the west. It was a very deep blue at the horizon and I knew that if it did not rain that day it was certainly going to in the night. The buzzards were riding the early drafts upward. I was glad they were so high. They were ugly, nasty birds up close with their bald pink heads and it was common to see them perched on the fences near some mess in the road with their great wings hunched like shoulders. They were a terrible bird and I thought how curious it was that a thing could look so simple and graceful at a distance and so awful up close, and I thought that there were many things in life that were like that.

Father reached the end of the field.

“Where have you been?”

“Hiding.”

“It’s a little wet up there.”

“You want me to work it over again?” I asked. We took the lids off the boxes.

“I don’t think it’ll do any good.”

“Me neither.”

“Seen Avery or anybody?”

“No.”

We loaded corn into the planter.

“There he is,” I said. I heard Avery’s truck on the road. It sounded very fast. Father
poured a bag into a seed box.

“Goddamn-it, it’s gonna rain on us.”

“Maybe this evening.”

“Maybe sooner. I was hoping to get this field done.”

“You still have a little time,” I said.

Avery drove up through the woods. He was still coming very fast. Father put the empty bag in the bed of the truck. There was a great pile of them in there from the past week. Later I would take them behind the barn and burn them. He was watching Avery.

“What the hell’s he doing?”

Avery came into the field very fast. He turned and drove across the planted rows, the old truck bouncing. When he got to us he turned sharply, throwing dirt and dust. The truck rocked to a stop. Father and I turned away from the dust.

“What the hell are you doing?” Father said.

Avery was leaning out the window. His face was red and cross. He had his hat off and his hair had blown messy in the wind.

“Next time you decide not to pay the goddamn bills you better tell somebody.” He was very loud.

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“Can’t even get any damn credit because you won’t pay the bills.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“If you can’t pay the goddamn bills, I’ll find somebody who will.”

“You shut the hell up. I got more important things to do.”

“I’ve had about enough of this shit.”

“You get the hell out of here.”

“I won’t put up with this much longer,” he shouted. He was pointing. “I’ll find something else to do.”

“You goddamn do that and get the hell out of here. I got work to do.”

“I’ve had about enough.”

“You get the hell out of here.” Father walked toward him.

Avery’s Adams apple moved up and down like he wanted to say more. Then he put the truck in gear and drove off, throwing dirt.
Father turned away. His face was red and his brow furrowed deeply. “Goddamn tearing up the field.”

Avery turned out on the road. The tires squealed dryly. Father turned that way. “Sit on your ass and bitch about the bills. I’m sick of goddamn taking care of everybody.”

He turned back to the planter. His face looked very hurt. I poured the last bag of corn into the planter and put the lid on the box. Father got on the tractor and started off down the field. It was all over very fast.
I drove back to the house and thought what a son-of-a-bitch Avery was. I liked Avery and thought him an alright person, but when it came to running things I thought him a son-of-a-bitch. I thought what a poor business farming was that allowed men to stay home under their fathers and never learn how to run things. Avery had worked hard and now he was tired. He always did the hard, undesirable work and he never made a venture to do anything else and now he was done in. He never took on any responsibility and didn’t know what it was like to have it, and I thought that anyone who never took on responsibility and then complained about those things was a son-of-a-bitch.

Once in the city I saw a musician on stage complain about the politicians and how they ran things. I remember thinking what a fine position it was to be a musician on stage complaining about politics with no political responsibility and I thought how humorous it would be to drop them in that position and see how they handled it.

At the house Mother was unpacking groceries. I came in and got a glass of ice water, then sat at the kitchen table. The red bitch was there and she came up and rested her head on my knee. I scratched her head and she wagged her tail.

“Is your father planting?”
“Yes,” I said.
She wiped sweat from her forehead.
The heat came predatorily in through the window. Then it began to rain much sooner
than anyone had thought. It showered heavily as I sat there, long enough to bring Father in from
the field. Then it stopped and the sun came out and the humidity was much worse.
“It’s like August already,” Mother said. She hated the humidity.
“Yes, there are no springs here anymore.”
Father parked the tractor in the barnyard and came into the house. He wore a white tee
shirt and his shoulders were covered with dust. The dust was spotted with rain. On the porch he
took his boots off and jeans, and removed his shirt. His face was still sore.
“What’s the matter with you?” Mother asked.
“What?”
“What’s the matter?”
“Goddamn Avery,” he said. He went to the bathroom to shower.
“What happened?”
I drank my water. “Avery jumped on him about not paying a bill.”
“The one from the Co-op?”
“I guess. He said he wasn’t able to get any credit.”
Mother shook her head. “Why the hell didn’t he pay the bill?”
“What the hell is Avery buying on credit?”
“I wish they would leave,” Mother said. “I wish they would pack up all their shit and
leave. I would gladly give over my part of the farm if they did.”
I heard Grandfather coming up the road. He pulled into the driveway very fast.
“What the hell does he want?” Mother said. She was looking out the window.
Grandfather came into the house. His face was red and terse. “Where the hell’s Jerald?”
“He’s in the shower. What do you want?”
“Why the hell aren’t the bills being paid, goddamn-it?” His voice was deafening in the
small kitchen.
The red bitch stood up and growled. Her hair was up. Father came out of the bathroom,
wet with a towel wrapped around him.
“What the hell’s going on?”
“Why the hell aren’t the bills being paid? What the hell are you doing?”
Father came toward him. The red bitch was barking and Mother telling her to shut up.
“I’ll take care of it, goddamnit. You and Avery just worry about what you got to do.”
“Ah, bullshit,” Grandfather yelled. He and Father were very close. “You pay the goddamned bills.”
“I’ll pay them when I’m ready. Goddamn-it, I got more important things to do.”
“Can’t even get any credit. Avery says he’s gonna quit.”
“Let him quit. I’m sick of babying his ass.”
“Everybody in the county thinking we’re in the poorhouse cause we can’t get any credit.”
“Let them think it, by-God.”
“Ah, that’s goddamn brilliant.”
“You get the hell out of this house.”
“Don’t you order me out of this house.”
“Shut-up and get the hell out of here.”
“You remember who put your ass here,” Grandfather shouted.
“You didn’t give me shit.”
“Goddamn-it, I hope Avery quits. Then where will you be?”
“I hope he quits too. I hope you all quit and leave,” Mother said.
Grandfather went through the door.
“Goddamn-it,” Father said. The red bitch was still barking, showing her teeth. “Tell that bitch to shut-up.”
“Sadie,” Mother said. “Damn them, I wish they would leave.”
Father went back to shower. “Can’t believe this shit,” he said.
It was quiet afterward, the way it is after a big snow. Mother went upstairs. Father finished his shower and then sat in the living room. He did not speak to anyone. Mother came down and spoke to him once. “I think it’s time we look into dividing up these farms,” she said. “I’ve had enough of this.” Then she went back upstairs.
Father didn’t say anything.
I drove home and left Mother and Father with their anger. It was late afternoon. There were many clouds in the sky, thick with dark bottoms, and I knew the rain was not through. I knew that Father was upset about the rain. The maturity rate of corn is around 110 days and it
was already well into May and he feared a late harvest. The weather went in cycles and years
before, when Father was younger, the weather had been very good and the corn was always
planted by mid-April and harvested in late September and the prices were good. They’d built
upon that and bought land and then the prices dropped and the weather changed and it was all a
struggle. The weather was a struggle and it was a struggle with Grandfather and Avery, and with
Mother. It was a great mental struggle and I thought that no one should have to struggle so much
for so little.
It rained that evening and the next morning was hot and bright. The sky was blue with a cool wind in the morning and dew sparkled on the grass. Mother was in the house. She looked tired and I knew she was worrying a great deal.

“Is he in a foul mood still?” I asked.

“Yes, but at least he’s talking to me.” She flipped through the morning paper. “We talked a long time last night.”

“Where is he?”

“In the barn, I think. We had a good talk. He said he wants to meet with a lawyer and talk about dividing up the land. It would take some time and I’m sure your uncle and grandpa would make it a damn mess, but he seems to really want to.”

“What would he do then?”

“He says he would just like to keep this farm. He would farm it alone. He doesn’t make any money from the operation now, so if he made any by himself, it would be a plus.”

“Has he made an appointment?” I asked.

“Not yet, but he says he will. We’ll see.” Her eyes were very bright.

I walked to the barn. Father was inside working on an old bush hog. One of the gears
was bad and he had the PTO off and was taking apart the gearbox. He was sweating and his hands were very greasy. His face looked swollen.

“If it would stop raining maybe we’d get some work done,” he said.

“It will soon enough.”

“Rains just enough to keep us out of the field.” He shook his head.

“You’ll have a long, warm fall.”

“My luck it will snow the first of October.”

He wiped his hands on his jeans.

“Seen Avery or Grandfather?” I asked.

“No,” he said. “And I don’t plan to. I tell you I’ve had about enough of all of it.”

He took the top of the gearbox off. Inside one of the gears had split down the center. I lay in two pieces at the bottom of the box amidst grease and oil.

“Do you have another?”

“Not around here,” Father said.

“Do they still make them?”

“Probably not for this old son-of-a-bitch.”

“I’m sure they do.”

He took the pieces and tossed them aside.

“Mother says you are going to talk to a lawyer.”

“I just have to call them.”

“Is that what you want?”

“I’m tired of taking care of everyone. I have taken care of them for as long as I can. It is time for them to take care of themselves.”

He stood and found a rag and began wiping his hands.

“We’ve worked all this time trying to get somewhere and when we finally begin to arrive, everyone jumps off the wagon. I’ve worked too hard already to carry everyone. I’m done with them.”

“Mother seems glad.”

“It is time for your mother and I to start worrying about ourselves,” he said.

We walked back to the house. Father’s face was very sallow. In a catalog we found the part he needed and he ordered it by telephone. Afterward we ate lunch, the three of us around
the table. It was nice eating lunch, just the three of us, and I wished Daniel could be there like the old days. In the old days there had never just been the four of us and there wouldn’t be the four of us now. Mother had her loneliness in the old days, and perhaps she still did, and now Father had his loneliness and his anger, and there were not enough seats at the table.

In the afternoon I left and drove home. Before leaving I told Father he should call the lawyer.

“I will call tomorrow,” he said.

I drove home, showered, the lay in bed with the windows open, sweating, and remembered what it was like to be in the old house with the heat coming in through the windows and being unable to sleep. I knew that there would be no sleep in the afternoon and I laid there thinking what a hot, wonderful afternoon it was and how I wished I was outside. I missed the work already and wished it had not rained. So I laid there feeling restless and tried to think about how it would all work out and everyone would be happy. Mother would not be happy without Father and without Avery and Grandfather gone, and Father would not be happy without the work and in order to have the work he would have to remain or let them go completely. When I could think of nothing I tried to work, but nothing was any good, so I drank a beer sitting out in the hot sun. The sun felt good and one beer was no good so I had another, then one more, and I felt happy and went in and lay down and was able to sleep.
In the morning Daniel called and said that Mother’s dog had been killed so I rose and drove down to the valley expecting nothing. Mother was outside on the front porch. She sat alone on the steps. I sat down next to her. The day was warm with a slight wind. Mother’s face was red and swollen.

“All I was doing was taking out the trash,” she said. “I had let her out just after dark and no more than an hour later I took the trash to the dumpster. I was wondering where she was.”

She started to cry.

“I heard her crying before I even got there, and when I opened it up there was a feed sack. I could see it in the light and I could see her red hair and knew it was her. I had to scream for your father to pull her out. I tried, but she was too heavy. And when we had her out on the ground she could not move. She hurt so bad and I knew she had been hit or something and she was hurt on the inside. Then she was very still and died. He’d tossed her in there like trash and she died.”

“Who?” I asked.

“Avery. I know it was him. He was the only one who drove through. Who else would put her in a feed sack and throw her away? He thought I wouldn’t find her.”
She was crying very hard.

“Did you tell Father?”

“Yes,” she said. “He yelled at me and said it wasn’t true. He said that anyone could have driven in and done it. He stuck up for Avery even after he’d yelled at him, after he’d killed her and tossed her away like trash.”

I said I was sorry.

“I shouldn’t get so upset. I just wish he would stand up for me once.”

“Where is he?”

“I don’t know. He left angry this morning and I haven’t seen him.”

“I am going to talk with him,” I said. “I am going to talk with them all.”

I sat on the porch with my crying mother and looked out beneath the shade of the trees at the open fields. I wanted to be in the fields away from the sorrow and anger, and I knew then that no one would be happy. I knew that it was not a good thing to act when angry, but I also knew that not acting would give the anger time to flee and so too the moment. You had to act while the moment was there or else you would not act at all, and then there would be nothing.

I left Mother on the porch—she’d stopped crying by then—and drove out to look for Father. He was not at Grandfather’s, nor was Avery or Grandfather, so I drove out to the fields. I did not see anyone in the fields or along the road or anywhere in the woods, so I drove home, knowing that the moment would pass and that I would not have it back.

When I was home I called Daniel to tell him how Mother was.

“Did you talk to Dad?” he asked.

“No, I did not see anyone.”

“I’m going to have a talk with him. I would like to talk with Avery and Grandpa too.”

“I’m planning on it too,” I said.

“I wish he would talk to the lawyer and get out,” Daniel said.

I thought of the moment and how it had passed and wondered if it had not passed for everything. Mother’s dog was deep in the ground and would never bite at Father anymore, and I thought of my grandfather who’d died of cancer long before I was born. When I was younger I had believed that he had died so that he might watch over me. That was a very arrogant thought and I laughed at it now and thought how much more convenient it would be if God allowed those he took to watch over us here rather than wherever the hell else.
The next morning I awoke and did not want to go to Four Mile. The day was very warm and it was finally dry enough to be in the field. I imagined Father was already in the field. I sat at the kitchen table and felt bad, and then drove down and found Father in the field. He was oiling the drive chains on the planter when I pulled up. He looked over and then back at his work. His face was slack.

“I did not think you would come today,” he said.

“Neither did I.”

He oiled the last chain and dropped the oil in the box on the tractor. We were in the fifty-five acres. The corn Father had planted earlier in the week had sprouted through the surface and stretched in long thin rows down the field.

“The corn is growing good,” I said.

Father looked out at it. “If the weather lets, it will grow fine.”

“You’d think these fields would get tired after a while.”

“That is all they do,” he said. “That is all they have ever done.”

We checked the corn in the seed boxes. They were half full. “You may need to work that point again,” Father said.

“I will,” I said.

He got on the tractor and started down the field. The moment had truly passed and there was only the thin trail of dust crossing the field and the work ahead. I drove down to the house and got the tractor and disk, then drove back to the field. The day grew moist and when I got back to the field I saw clouds building high in the west. I drove along the edge of the field, careful to avoid Father’s planted rows, down to the point with the dark gumbo and watched the clouds. They were building quickly and I knew that Father would not finish the field. There was no use in me working the ground if it rained, but I did it anyway, as there was always the chance that the rain would pass. The ground was very dark and wet. It worked up chunky and I raised the disk high so as to take off the top. It worked up finer, but still very wet. I worked the entire point and then started back down the fencerow toward the road.

I looked to the west and saw that the great blue cloud had turned black. The daylight was being slowly shrouded and the wind licked the treetops, carrying away some of the new leaves before their time. The wind blew stiff across the field. Father was at the far end and I saw how small men and their machines looked compared to the black cloud.
I raised the disk and drove to the road. Halfway home I looked back and saw Father had neared the end of the field. Behind him the cloud was laying a gray sheet of water over the hills northwest of the farm. I parked the tractor in the barnyard and walked to the barn. I found a tarp there and dragged it to the door. I knew Father would be close to beat the rain.

Inside the door I waited for the rain. In the valley the wind came first in strong unbalanced gusts that took dust across the barnyard in circular waves. Sometimes the rain came with the wind, but almost always there was a pause between the two and then the rain came straight down.

The wind came as I stood there and swept across the barnyard, coating the side of Mother’s house in dust. Down the road I heard the tractor. Farther off I heard the rain coming across the field like stomping hooves and I knew that Father was attempting to outrun God.

He pulled into the barnyard just as the first big drops of rain began to smack into the ground. The planter was too wide for the barn so he backed it into the grass and let it down. He ran in and together we carried the tarp out and covered the planter to keep moisture out of the seed boxes. We made it back to the barn and behind us the rain fell in a moving wall of water dancing across the barnyard in a gray mist, each wave merging and tumbling into each other and around each other turning the dirt to mud, shedding off the tarp in hard flowing streams, and overflowing the gutters until a separate wall of water divided Father and me from the rest of the world.

We stood in this new place and listened to the noise outside and watched, both of us breathing hard. I knew that there was no better feeling than having been in the field all morning and beaten God’s rain, and knowing that work was done for the day and you could wash the earth from your body and rest.

“It almost got me,” Father said.

“Yes. Another second or so.”

“ Wouldn’t be the first time. And sure as hell won’t be the last.”

“No,” I said.

I stood and looked at Father and thought about his flaws and misgivings. There are men in this world, both good and troubled, for which change is necessary and the result of which is improvement. But there are also men, neither good nor troubled, for which change would be criminal, and the result of which would be the theft of a part of the whole that made them
perfect. Men whose flaws completed the puzzle of perfection and are driven only by honesty and an understanding of purpose.

That was to be the last good rain of the season, and the summer saw hardly any rain at all. The sun baked the ground hard and cracked it and curled the corn over. By fall it was clear that the harvest was a complete loss, and when the combines roared through there was only dust and corn that was very small and held no weight. By then Father had all but written off the year and wished only for it to end.

That fall, during a visit, Daniel asked him again what he thought of selling the farm. Since then things had been relatively peaceful, though Mother had not spoken to Avery or Grandfather, and Father had all but forgiven them.

“You should take what you can get, and you and Mother should move on,” Daniel said.

My mother waited for an answer. She had learned never to expect too much in life, but she still had hope.

“Maybe someday,” Father said, “but not yet. We’re bound for a good year. I feel the next year will be a good one.”

And when my brother stopped by the following March and said that our Father’s cancer had returned, I knew that it would not be a good year for anyone. And when Father died the following fall I knew for sure that the years had been too short and cruel.

Afterward my brother and I seldom talked about our father. Thought I knew he troubled us both. Mostly we told stories. We would remember and talk of a moment and laugh, long laughs. They were always followed by longer silences. Then Daniel would say, “He was a good man, wasn’t he?”

And I would say, “Yes, sometimes he was a fine man.”

One day, unexpectedly, Daniel said, “You understood him, didn’t you?”

“Yes. I understood him completely without understanding him at all.”

This troubled Daniel.

“And he did what he loved, and he didn’t mean to hurt anyone? Even Mother?”

I nodded. “He was doing what he loved and didn’t mean to hurt anyone. Especially Mother.”

Now I farm Four Mile alone. In the spring that wind comes warm through the valley and wakes the earth and you can smell the years in it. I work the ground and in the swirls of dust and
heat and noise, I remember. The valley was made 20,000 years ago by the great glaciers. The glaciers receded leaving a great rift filled in by sand and water. The melt water formed a timeless underground river. In the deposits above the river trees grew. Men cut the trees and the soil beneath was good in some spots and not so good in others, and the men dealt with it then just as they deal with it today.

There I will find them.