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Abstract

FAULT LINES

By Robert C. Schnelle, Jr.

Loosely structured as a *bildungsroman*, this collection of four short stories was originally written over a period of about two years, from 1997 to 1999. Each story has, at its heart, a highly-fictionalized recounting of an event in my lifetime, beginning from the time I was a teenager, to a time some twelve years or so later. As the manuscript progresses, the main character at first finds some redemption in family, then because of various flaws in his character, he begins to move along *fault lines* that are determined by the choices he's made; choices which eventually lead him down a path of remembrance, regret, and adultery. Still, he learns things--the hard way--and in the future, beyond the time frame of the fourth story, those lessons will serve to guide him in positive directions.

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Denny's Island

"Bang, bang, Maxwell's silver hammer beat down on his head!" Three lusty, male adolescent voices, in no particular key, belt out the John Lennon lyrics. An AM radio is blaring out all four open windows of a black and white, '53 Olds Eighty-Eight, with its small-block V-8 rumbling smoothly. The three boys mumble through the rest of the tune as they tool along Route 50, through Milford. They laugh, because nobody remembers the rest of the song, but they all jump in at the chorus.

The driver, his small, round, yellow-lensed glasses perched on the end of his freckled nose, reaches over and turns down the radio.

"Hey, man, what happened to the radio?" An pudgy boy yells from the back seat, his cheeks flushed as if he'd just walked up several flights of stairs.

The curly, red-haired boy driving the car raises his right hand to signal for silence. His prominent Adam's apple bobbing dramatically as he swallows the remains of a

stick pretzel. Feigning difficulty in swallowing, he pounds his chest, thumping it the middle of a large blue peace sign silk-screened on a tie-dyed tee-shirt.

"I got it, I got it!" His mouth twists in a silly grin, dimples puckering an already drawn face, concentrating the numerous freckles there. "Bang, bang, Maxwell's silver hammer beat down on his head. Bang, bang Maxwell's silver hammer made sure Paul was dead!" He nods his head, signifying obvious satisfaction with his humor.

"Hey, Mike!" The fat boy pokes the front passenger in the middle of his back. "You hear that? Larry here says Paul McCartney's dead, just like you was tellin' me."

The boy sitting in the front passenger seat, who up until now, had been leaning his head out the window, enjoying the early August sun and the hot breeze blowing at thirty miles an hour through his shoulder-length, wavy black hair. He straightened in his seat. He looked older than his fifteen years and often got away with being served draft beer at a few places outside his own neighborhood. Bobby, the chubby boy, was his brother and junior by eighteen months.

Mike and Bobby were the younger of three brothers that had been raised by their mother, alone since their alcoholic father died three years ago. He had been only forty-one and Mike remembered how his father had looked so much older,

ravaged by years of hard drinking. The oldest boy, Billy-- or Will, as he'd gone to calling himself after graduating from high school and signing up with the Army--had always been more like a father to Mike.

Even though they were only four years apart, it had been Will that Mike confided in and idolized, not his father, who was as likely to be in the neighborhood tavern down the street, as he would be at work, or home. Mike missed his father far less than he did Will, who was killed in action near DaNang during the Tet offensive, just a year after the boys' father died.

Mike felt cast off, afraid of not having anybody to talk to, but he was even more afraid of being responsible for himself. His family status as the middle child had carried a certain anonymity with it. Sheltered from most chores by Will and from the scrutiny directed toward Bobby as "the baby of the family," he'd enjoyed the freedom thus afforded him, with few responsibilities beyond making his bed and doing his homework each day.

Mike and Bobby saw little of their mother, who always seemed exhausted and often slept when she was home in the evenings. The life had been drained from her by nearly twenty years of stultifying co-dependence, followed by her husband's lingering, bloated death. Then the hammer-blow telegram a year later, delivered by a pimple-faced

Lieutenant who saluted woodenly when she'd answered the door and again when he left, took what life force had remained.

Baby-sitting duties had been thrust upon Mike since his father's death and Will's departure for Basic Training at Fort Leonard Wood. His mother began working full-time hours at the Kroger's in College Hill, often staying late into the evening. Now Mike was expected to fix supper and clean up after himself and Bobby, then a baby-faced eleven-year-old, who was beginning to gain weight rapidly from an overeating habit he'd developed. Mike had grown to resent his younger brother.

Larry, Mike's best friend since third grade at Winton Place Elementary School, resented Bobby's intrusion into the close friendship Mike and he shared. He teased Bobby relentlessly and often complained about him being in the way and said he held them back, especially since he was heavy and slow. Larry also said he whined too much.

Mike's left hand fished out a Viceroy from the pocket of his camouflage-patterned tee-shirt, his right hand stuffed in his cutoff jeans, digging for his *trusty Zippo*, as he called it. Tossing his head to keep his hair out of the way, he flicked the lighter to life and lit the cigarette. Inhaling deeply, then slowly exhaling billowing

clouds of acrid blue smoke through his nose and mouth, he leaned his head back on the top of the seat and said, "Naw, man. That's bullshit."

"Bullshit?" Larry spun the suicide knob and eased the heavy sedan around a tight curve. "What bullshit? It was in the news, man. I saw Walter fucking Cronkite on Channel Nine last week, talkin' about it."

"Bullshit." Now it was Bobby's turn. He clutched a sixteen ounce bottle of Dr. Pepper in his pudgy fist, his thumb pressed tightly on the open top. "Walter friggin' Cronkite ain't even on Channel Nine!" He shook the bottle of soda up and down a few times, then fitting half his fist and the top of the bottle into his mouth, he began slurping the cold foam, spritzing a little at a time.

"Shut up, tubby, or I'll kick your ass out of the car and make you walk home," threatened Larry, "and you better not get any of that shit on my upholstery." He jerked the steering wheel hard to the left, swerving across the road, into oncoming traffic, then sharply back to the right again, polyester blend tires squealing in protest, the Olds narrowly missing a white panel truck.

"Hey!"

Larry looked in the rear-view mirror and Mike turned to look over his shoulder. A brown stain was spreading down Bobby's chest and stomach, coloring the olive green fleur-

de-lis outlined on his tan Boy Scout tee-shirt, stretched to the limit over his ample torso. His thumb was again pressed over top of the bottle, now only about a third full.

"You got my favorite shirt dirty." Bobby's lower lip pooched out slightly.

"Quit your whining!" Larry chided.

"That shirt hasn't fit since you joined the Scouts last year and it was too small then." Mike pointed his cigarette at Bobby, each phrase emphasized by a flick of ashes at the brown stain on Bobby's stomach. "Now you'll have to get rid of it for sure. If Mom sees it, she'll throw it out anyway, because that stain won't come out." He turned to Larry and, pointing the glowing tip of the stubby Viceroy at his face, continued, "And you know if that'd been my shirt, me and you would be hookin' and jabbin' about now. And I told you before to leave him alone, even if he is a pain in the ass. You just take care of yourself and I'll take care of Bobby."

"Yeah, yeah, I hear you." Larry crossed his arms over the steering wheel and leaned forward, steering the car with his entire upper body. "All I gotta say is you better pack your lunch, 'cause it'll be an all-day job."

The two of them laughed at the old line, a familiar retort between them. Bobby still pouted in the back seat, drinking the syrupy soda, made more so by the recent off-gassing.

Denny's Island was little more than a gas station and bait shop, with a gravel parking lot hugging the west bank of the Little Miami River. The store's survival had been maintained throughout the years by its proximity to the only bridge across the river for twenty miles in either direction. It made for a convenient stop, ever since the bridge was built in the 1920's, linking the growing community of Milford, Ohio, with Camp Dennison to the north. The camp was built as a training base during the Civil War and had housed a battalion of National Guardsmen during World War II and the Korean War, but had stood empty for a decade, the bridge left to rust, fenced off on both sides of the river.

The eight-foot chainlink fence, topped with three strands of barbed wire, had since fallen into disrepair. When the camp first closed, a guard shack had been occupied by solitary soldiers, working eight hour shifts. A handful of Military Police maintained security for just over a year, while whatever salvageable equipment, mostly pre-war furniture, was methodically removed and shipped to training bases like Fort Campbell and Fort Dix. Once there, the obsolete material would again be utilized by troops training

to fight and die in the fetid jungles of Vietnam and Cambodia.

When all the equipment was gone, the MPs closed access to the bridge. Latching a huge brass padlock on the newly-erected fencing and gate, they abandoned the camp. Brave and foolhardy youths had, during the 1960s, found ways to get over or under the fence and gain access to the bridge and the camp beyond.

Those youths gained a certain notoriety by having jumped off the bridge into the dangerous current thirty feet below. A few had even attempted it in the dark, or while inebriated, stoned, or some combination thereof. A few had died. The current was tricky at best, when the water was low in late summer. It was dangerous most of the year, with the rain-swollen river rushing over the rocks and often undercutting the banks. It was deadly in winter, when the freezing water swirled black and deep.

Frequent parties at the camp had resulted in arrests for public intoxication, but other than a night in the local drunk tank, there was little to discourage the kids. Eventually, rumblings in the village council were supported by petitions and funding from such groups as the PTA, the VFW, and the Rotary Club. The camp was finally donated to the village and converted into a park and campground. The bridge was stripped of rust, re-painted, then re-opened.

The area came back to life, especially the newly-remodeled Denny's Island Gas and Bait.

Near the parkside shore, in the widest part of the river, was the island that bore the area's nickname. It was little more than a sandbar, a few trees clinging tenaciously to the sandy soil deposited there by the river. A concrete spillway had been constructed just downstream, in an effort to control the erosion and stem the undercutting of base property.

Muddy cliffs, too steep and too slippery to scale or descend, lined the river's edge by the park. The only way to reach the island was to swim across a two-hundred-yard stretch of deep river, with treacherous undercurrents.

Other than the recreation facilities, the only other attraction was a break in the old spillway, where ice and partially submerged trees had breached the twelve-inch-thick concrete in the winter of 'sixty three, only a year after the park had opened. Here, the swift current exploded through an eight by four-foot wide gap in the wall. The water shot almost ten feet horizontally, before gushing into the shallow river six feet below the surface of the water behind the wall. While there was still an occasional bridge jumper, the ride in the island's gigantic water cannon had become the area's main attraction for young daredevils.

The boys had talked about the water cannon all summer and even before school was out for the year. They'd recently heard about it from an old-timer in their neighborhood, who claimed he'd been stationed at the camp and still went back once in a while to fish and drink beer. He even told the boys he bought his bait right there at the shop. He didn't go back much after the park opened and more people began flocking to the area, but he related to the boys as how *juvenile delinquents* were swimming out to the island and jumping into a hole in the dam and "was poppin' through like they was shot through a cannon."

Now, just fifteen minutes off the highway, they came upon the bridge. There were several cars parked at the Gas and Bait and as Larry eased the Olds off the pavement and onto gravel, the boys could see the island and just beyond, the huge cylinder of water blasting through the spillway. When the sounds of crunching gravel and the rumbling V-8 were silenced, they could hear the roar, echoing off the steep banks across the river. There were several people standing on the bridge, a few hundred yards upstream of the island and a middle-aged couple stood in the parking lot, well back from the water's edge.

"Wow! Will you look at that!" Bobby hung out the window and stared wide-eyed.

"C'mon, let's go!" Larry grabbed a towel from the seat beside him and began rolling up his window. "Get those back windows, Tubby, and don't take all day, the water's callin' my name."

Mike glared at Larry, but said nothing. He plucked his towel off the seat and turned to look at Bobby, who had one window up and was working furiously on the other, his face reddening with the effort.

"Don't pay any attention to him," Mike said, hooking his thumb in Larry's direction, "he's an asshole. But look, you better stay close to the shore while me and Larry check out this water cannon."

"I wanna go, too."

"No." Mike hissed at Bobby, his jaw clenched, teeth gritting. "I said stay close to the shore. This thing's too dangerous for you. Now shut up about it."

Bobby dragged himself out of the car and ambled behind his brother, scuffing at pebbles and raising small clouds of dust with each step, trying to appear disinterested in the whole scene.

Larry was already on the dock, kicking off his shoes and peeling out of his shirt before Mike and Bobby crossed the lot. They watched as Larry rocked back on his heels a few times, then ran, whooping and laughing as he jumped out over the blue-gray water, tucking his knees into his chest

and hugging them tightly, cannonball-style. The resulting splash threw droplets of water into the air, glittering in the sun like tiny diamonds against a backdrop of the roaring water shrouded in mist.

Without looking back, Larry began to swim across the river, the current angling him toward the island and spillway downstream. Mike and Bobby reached the dock and began stripping shoes and shirts. Mike stepped to the edge of the dock and looked to where Larry was slowly making his way across, his long arms reaching and pulling smoothly through the water.

Turning to face his brother, Mike said, "I'm serious. You keep by the shore and don't be trying anything. Got it?"

"I got it." Bobby stared unblinking at his brother, defiant.

"You'd better." Mike turned and dove, arching shallowly to avoid the muddy bottom as he knifed into the water and glided back to the surface. He felt the tug of the current as he began stroking along the surface, establishing a steady rhythm in his breathing, pacing himself for the arduous swim.

Finally, his fingers scraped bottom on a downstroke and he stopped swimming. He let his knees sink into the coarse sand, the water swirling around his waist. He shook water

from his hair and stood, chest heaving in and out, tired legs steadying him against the swift current rushing past the tiny island.

"It's about time." Larry stood on the crest of the sandbar, arms akimbo, freckled face stretched by a wide, toothy grin. "I was beginning to wonder if you chickened out." He was almost yelling, his voice just audible over the roaring water cannon, now just twenty yards away.

"No way, man." Mike's breathing had already slowed enough to allow short sentences. "Just give me a minute...to finish catching my breath...and I'll be ready to go."

"Okay, catch you on the flip side." Larry stepped into the water and headed for the spillway. The river poured over the edge of the wall, only inches deep, except where it burst through the semicircular breach.

Mike watched as Larry climbed on top of the wall, then stood, current breaking around his ankles, making it seem as if he was skiing barefoot behind an invisible boat. He inched along, turning to face the cannon, now just a few feet from his spot on the wall.

Glancing toward the dock, it took Mike a few seconds before he located Bobby wading near the shore, his pudgy white torso still visible above the water.

"Geronimo!"

Mike heard Larry yell. He turned back around just in time to see him disappear into the jet of water. Larry's head bobbed above the surface about ten seconds later and a hundred yards downstream. Still standing in the water by the island, Mike headed toward the wall. Wading through the shallow water, he stepped onto the concrete ledge, the rushing water making footing precarious.

Larry was standing now, jumping up and down, cavorting wildly with his arms waving over his head. Mike watched him briefly, his mouth dry and his heart thumping in his chest. The water cannon crashed through the wall just a step away. He stole another quick look toward the dock, making a last check on Bobby, but also making sure his little brother was watching his daring stunt--the way Mike had, so many times past, with Will.

"Bobby, no!" The words exploded out of his mouth, forced from him in a rush that Mike felt from his chest upward, nearly losing his balance in the process.

About halfway across from the dock, arms causing too much splashing, incorrectly trying to keep his face out of the water, swam Bobby. Mike could see his gaping mouth and bulging eyes, looking like some bloated fish struggling on the surface, hook relentlessly tugging toward some gasping fate in a fisherman's creel. Mike knew Bobby wasn't going to make it to the island.

Forcing back his growing panic, Mike looked for help from somewhere; downstream, Larry was already swimming back across the river, too far. Nobody was on the dock. A few people stood on the bridge upstream. There was nobody else.

"Goddamnit, Bobby!" He swore aloud, thinking about how they'd driven all this way just to ride the cannon and Bobby had chosen this exact same moment to do something so stupid as to require, no, demand that somebody get him out of trouble. Mike backed off the wall to shallow water, waded in, began swimming upstream, all the while noting Bobby's position, calculating the heading necessary to intercept his brother.

Ten yards from reaching him, he heard Bobby scream. Looking up, Mike saw him floundering in the water, sputtering and coughing, splashing wildly in an vain attempt to keep his head above water.

He saw him go under, arms still flailing. He reached him in three powerful strokes, lunging for a hand, an arm, anything he could grab on to. His fingers closed around a wrist. Immediately, he found himself fighting to keep his own head above water, as Bobby grabbed Mike with both arms and pulled, attempting to climb out of the water, into the air, to breathe again.

Swallowing air and water together, Mike shoved Bobby away, hard. He kicked free and broke through the surface,

gasping and coughing. Through stinging tears, he saw Bobby's arms splashing again a few yards downstream. He caught up with him again, this time locking his arm around his brother's neck from behind and pinning an arm to his side. A couple strong frog kicks brought them both above the surface.

"I've got you, Bobby!" Mike yelled in his ear. "Calm down, or you'll drown both of us." Bobby caught Mike's hair with his free hand and pulled, still struggling to stay afloat. Mike increased the pressure around Bobby's neck. "Dammit, Bobby, hold still or I'll drown you my fucking self!"

He felt Bobby go limp and thought for a moment that he had in fact choked him, but he heard him cough some more and knew he was at least alive. Rolling onto his side, keeping his brother at his hip, Mike began a one-handed sidestroke. He kept his arm locked around Bobby, but re-positioned it under his arms and around his chest.

"Hang on, Bobby, you're gonna be alright."

Mike had let his brother go when they were about fifty yards from shore, being too tired to swim for both of them any longer and feeling that Bobby ought to do *something* to help himself. Now, they sat in the muddy sand by the dock,

both exhausted, Bobby crying quietly. Mike heard him sniffing.

"What the hell are you crying for?" It sounded harsher than Mike had meant for it to. "You had me worried there, for a minute, you know."

Bobby looked up at his older brother, tears streaking his face. "I really thought I could make it." He sniffed. "I was gonna wait until you went through the cannon, but I didn't want you guys to have to wait on me after."

"It's a damn good thing you didn't wait. We'd be dragging the river for your ass about now."

"I'm sorry you missed your cannon ride." Bobby smeared the tears off his face with the back of his hand. "I'm sorry I'm too little and too fat and too slow. And I'm sorry that I wanna hang out with you all the time. I guess me and you ain't like you and Will was."

You and Will. How many times had Mike heard his mother say that phrase? *You and Will.* 'Don't you and Will get into anything while I'm gone' she would say. 'There's supper in the fridge for you and Will when you get hungry,' She would say. 'You mind your brother now, you hear?'

Mike remembered the times he and Will had shared, the times he'd bragged about Will to Larry and his other friends. Bragged about his athletic prowess, his knack with "chicks," the fact he'd volunteered for 'Nam. He began to

feel small, like he had around Will. He wanted his big brother with him again. *You and Will*.

His anger dissipated. He reached and placed his hand on Bobby's shoulder, patted it twice, then tousled his matted hair, the way Will used to do him not so many years ago.

"Come on, let's get this mud rinsed off and I'll buy you another Dr. Pepper."

Larry came around the corner of the little bait shop, stepping gingerly through the gravel in the lot, just as Mike and Bobby walked outside, laughing and jostling one another, sweating bottles of soda pop in their hands.

"Hey, what the fuck happened to you?" Larry stuck an accusing finger in Mike's chest. "I waited for you downstream, but I didn't see you anywhere. "You pussy out or something?"

Mike looked at Bobby, who met his gaze for a moment, then dropped his head and stared at the ground.

"Yeah, I guess I pussied out."

"Mike?" Bobby's eyes went saucer-wide, his mouth agape.

"It figures, Larry snorted. "Did you behave like a good little boy too, Tubby?"

"Tubby?" Mike put his hand on his brother's shoulder again and glared fiercely at Larry. "His name's Bob, not Tubby anymore. Got it?"

"Sure, whatever you say." Larry held his hands up, as if surrendering. "Man, you're just like Tub-, er, Bob here, you know that? Two peas in a fucking pod."

Mike grinned at his brother and tousled his hair. "Yeah, I guess we are at that. Me and Bob, just like that. Two peas in a pod."

Have Clothes--Will Travel

It was dark when we landed in San Francisco. Not having a window seat, I could catch only brief, street-lit glimpses of the city when the Boeing 707 banked on final approach. I still got excited traveling, loved flying, even if it was just to another duty station, like now. I mean, here I am in Frisco, the West Coast, land of all the hippies and faggots, free love, Berkeley, earthquakes, cable cars, Rice-a-roni the San Francisco treat. Oh well, fat lot of that I'd see.

I had to catch a Military Airlift Command flight out of Oakland Army Base at oh-five hundred and the powers that be expected me to report two hours prior, for processing. Always the paperwork. Always the wait. Hurry up and wait was the Army way. Double-time to the mess hall, then wait in line for chow. Be at the base early, then wait around the airport, a military one at that--mostly GIs, the only women around would be dikes in uniform and half of them

likely to be officers--nothing to look at, nobody to talk to, and me with no money, as usual.

It was already twelve-thirty (oh-oh-thirty just doesn't sound right) by the time I found my bags. I still had to locate the military information desk somewhere in the airport, find the shuttle, get to OAB before I could process through all the paperwork: travel orders, medical records, baggage check, the usual Army crap. Not having all my baggage was certainly a blessing of sorts, because I didn't have to lug my duffel bag along with the two suitcases I was already dragging around. My duffel bag, with nearly all my uniforms, was still sitting in a warehouse at Lexington Army Depot, so I was traveling in civilian clothes and that was something you just didn't do, especially when flying Military Standby, or a MAC flight. The people working the ticket counters at Greater Cincinnati Airport didn't care if I had on a uniform or not, but it wouldn't be the same at OAB.

It was only an hour wait for the bus and I managed to kill most of it by reading a copy of yesterday's *Examiner* somebody had left behind. When I finished reading it, I left it, too. Now, the Greyhound to OAB dieselied across the Oakland Bay Bridge, the bay noticeable only as an immense darkness below, black and foreboding between the glowing banks of the two cities. It was disappointing that we

didn't take the Golden Gate Bridge, but I probably wouldn't have seen much in the dark anyway. As it was, I saw but flickering glimpses of illuminated scenery outside the window as girders flashed by at sixty-five miles per hour.

The clerk behind the ticket counter at OAB was a pimple-faced Seaman First Class, dressed in summer whites. Good, I outranked him. It always seemed to me that military clerks were a bunch of self-righteous assholes, smug in the knowledge that nothing gets done without paperwork and no matter what rank you were, a mis-filed form could screw you good. Since I didn't have the proper orders to travel in civilian clothes, I'd have to finesse my way through and hope for the best. Failing that, I could try to pull rank. I clumped down my bags and handed him my stapled sheaf of assorted Department of the Army and Department of Defense forms.

"PCS or TDY?" He was asking if I was traveling to a new duty station, a Permanent Change of Station, or on Temporary Duty. Acronyms. The Army loved them. He wasn't even looking at me, hadn't, since the papers had been in his hand.

"PCS."

Seaman First Class Pimple--his name tag read "Harding"--initialed and stamped forms in rapid succession as he continued grunting questions.

"Personal baggage?"

"Two...suitcases." I stepped aside and nudged one with my foot. It was still roped shut, my father's knots holding up well. The other suitcase, the blue plastic Samsonite, seemed like it belonged to someone else, someone that didn't have to tie up a borrowed suitcase with a broken latch. My face began to flush. I turned to hide my embarrassment from Harding.

Initial, stamp. Initial, stamp. If he noticed, it didn't interrupt his work. He initialed and stamped his way through the stack, carefully separating a copy of each form as he did. Finally, he was done.

"All set, Specialist..."

I'd made it!

"...except..."

Shit, here it comes! I took a deep breath, steeling myself against the inevitable.

"...I need to see Special Orders authorizing travel in civilian clothes." Harding held out the stack of papers, now properly initialed and stamped.

He wanted me to show him orders I didn't have. What I did have were the requisite numbers memorized, from the two pages of small print defining all possible Special Orders, attached to the last copy of my travel orders, buried in the middle of the stack. I'd read everything very carefully on

the four-hour-plus flight to Frisco. There were two numbers designating travel in civilian clothes, for officers.

"Special Orders Fifty-Eight and Fifty-Nine," I flipped to the small print, pointed them out to Seaman Harding only long enough for him to see the numbers, then stood at attention and began reading aloud in my best impression of a Drill Instructor, "Travel in civilian clothing is specifically authorized for all personnel returning from more than fourteen days leave in the Continental U. S., prior to assignment of Permanent Change of Station..." I paused for a breath and Pimple-Face practically snatched the papers from me.

"Okay, that's enough." Initial, stamp. Three times. "MAC to Osan Air Force Base leaves at oh-five-hundred, Flight Line East." He handed them back to me, looking over my shoulder at the line behind me. Next!"

Now it was official--civvies all the way to Korea. And I had enough copies to show anybody who asked.

I'd never been on such a long, boring trip. In over eighteen hours, we'd made just two stops: about forty-five minutes in some air base in Anchorage and about twice that in Yokohama and I ran out of cigarettes somewhere over the Aleutians. I tried sleeping, but I've never been able to sleep very well on a plane, or a bus, either. Too much jostling, from the other passengers, the bumps in the road

or jet stream, and the cramped seats never had enough leg room. Even when I managed to get some time in a window seat, most of the trip was over ocean and there was nothing to see except the vast expanse of white-capped waves, looking like pieces of white lint scattered on a god-sized azure blanket.

I pissed in Anchorage and shit in Yokohama and bummed smokes in between. Not much else. Killing time during the exchange of passengers and cargo at each stop, I stared through double-paned, polarized glass at the available view. Scenery on an Air Force base was fairly standard: huge hangers, commercial and military aircraft all over the place, some painted in camouflage, some sleek silver, lots of olive drab jeeps and trucks maneuvering between phalanxes of Huey gunships, looking deadly even parked, and giant C5-A Galaxies, with their house-sized engines and cavernous cargo bays. I was fascinated with all the aviation hardware and the bustling efficiency, my reverie punctuated from time to time by the thundering roar of a large, slower aircraft, or the crackling scream of an F-4 Phantom on full afterburners, leaping skyward at an impossibly steep angle.

There were mountains in the distance at both air bases, the peaks barely visible through the crush of buildings surrounding the base in Yokohama. But in Anchorage, the view was unobstructed. Across the tarmac, the forested

slopes appeared as massive, verdant guardians on the horizon. The snow-capped peaks seemed severed from their bases, inverted snow cones hanging in the sky, the bare granite between the tree line and peaks rendered invisible by the distance and the shimmering waves of heat rising from the flight line. It reminded me of the eye on top of the pyramid on the back of dollar bills, like the eye of God, staring down at the multitudes from on high.

Osan was alien, something *other*. I glimpsed acres of terraced rice paddies, flashing silver-green in the reflected sun, on the descent. What few villages I could see were scattered about numerous green hills dotting the paddied landscape and a sparse network of roads seemed to converge just outside the air base. But it was the smell that hit me as soon as I stepped off the plane into the midday summer sun of South Korea. I remember smelling the air of farms in Ohio on day-trips I took with my family as a child, the stench of manure assaulting my nostrils. The smell of earth and animals. Here, mixed with the smell of jet fuel and diesel fumes in the incredibly humid air, was that same animal smell, but deeper, more pervasive, and wafting through the atmospheric soup, detectable only after I hid my nose in my hands or under my shirt for a few seconds to rid my nostrils of the clinging odor, were other smells: smells like rotting garbage and dog shit, and

something that reminded me of the putrid stench that came from Proctor and Gamble's Ivorydale plant, those summers we'd lived in the upwind housing project.

All the passengers deplaned and were herded into a Quonset hut that housed the in-processing center. It was a low-key operation, with two NCOs at folding tables, complete with rubber stamps and ink pads, roped off from an open floor space where folding metal chairs were lined up. The only other things contained in the building were two latrines, one for each gender. But these latrines were a sort of sanctuary, where military personnel and their dependents could get rid of any contraband they might have brought with them, no questions asked. Each contained a simple, locked wooden box, labeled an amnesty box, with a metal gizmo mounted on top that prevented anybody from retrieving anything that might be deposited inside. A hand-lettered wooden sign, hanging above the box, informed potential criminals that they could leave anything here that would be considered illegal, such as weapons or ammunition, alcohol, or drugs, the import of which would be a prosecutable offense.

Drugs. Like the few grams of Panama Red I had stashed in a plastic cigarette case, tucked into my shaving kit bag, in my roped-shut suitcase. I had visions of opening my luggage and being immediately arrested for smuggling drugs

into a country where such a charge might be punishable by public flogging, or twenty years in a bamboo "tiger" cage, like American POWs in Vietnam. I began sweating profusely as the NCOs at the tables called for all personnel returning from leave or TDY to retrieve their luggage and report to one of the tables for customs check. As they began rifling through baggage, I resolved that, when my turn came, I would suddenly yell "Sanctuary!" like Quasimodo hanging from the bell tower at Notre Dame, and run for the latrine to dump my dope in the amnesty box. But what if they grabbed me before I made it? What if, once you were in line, it was too late? What then? As the line grew shorter, I made ready for my "amnesty dash."

"All personnel reporting for PCS, form up outside, single file on the yellow line. Army personnel on the green bus, Air Force on the blue. You've got five minutes. Move out!"

A mad scramble ensued. I shoved my way through the crowd, trying to be small and inconspicuous--I'd forgotten about being in pastel double-knit pants and a golf shirt, surrounded by a sea of green. It didn't matter, there was no customs check, no amnesty dash. Sanctuary was an olive drab bus, rumbling through the filthy streets of South Korea.

The farther we got from Osan, the worse the roads became, until we were bouncing over nothing but dirt and rocks, on what looked to be little more than a cattle trail. In fact, we occasionally had to dodge some peasant, farmer, peasant-farmer, whatever they were, driving an ox or two down the narrow lanes. Dust came roiling into the bus, along with the ever-present smell, but it was too hot to close the windows, so we coughed and sneezed and tolerated it.

School children, in their white shirts and either plaid skirts or black pants, walked down the road, bookbags swinging. Some waved, smiling. I and one or two others waved back. Some gave us the finger, smiling. Somewhat annoyed, but puzzled, I turned to look at my fellow passengers for some clue, when I saw a couple of them, including the driver, smiling and flipping off the kids, too. The one I'd pegged to have been here a while, a big farm-boy type, a corporal with a large, square head, thick arms that drew his rolled-up sleeves taut, and a laugh that sounded like Goofy, was really into it.

"Hey, lookit them lil sumbitches!" He grinned stupidly, half leaning out the window, filling it. "They think we're wavin." He stretched out his arms, middle fingers raised on both hands. "Fuck you! Fuck you!" He waved his arms, yelling, laughing.

Like he thinks we're the first to ever give a Korean kid the finger! I could hear distant *Fuck yous* and echoes of laughter, as we left the children behind in a cloud of dust. Women with oversized baskets of laundry or vegetables on their head also shared the road, some wearing pants and shirt, some in a kimono-looking outfit, but more loose-fitting and tied with a bow at the breast.

"Will ya look at that!"

We'd almost stopped to let a farmer and his team of oxen pass. Just ahead on the road, a woman was squatting, her dress brushing the ground. A rivulet could be seen forming from under her, darkening the dirt in a muddy squiggle. Passersby ignored her. She stood and resumed walking and left a small puddle where she'd squatted. It's obvious we're not in Kansas anymore, Toto.

After about an hour of eating dust, we came to a village where the main road was paved. Most of the shops and what I could see of the houses were framed in wood and sheet metal or corrugated steel. A lot of the signage was in English and there was an air of commerce about the place, with Toyota Corolla taxis zipping back and forth, weaving their way through the maze of pedestrians, and bicycles loaded down with baskets of vegetables, laundry, or furniture, even one that had a small pig strapped across the rear fender. The pig was squealing and thrashing violently,

making it difficult for the old man pedaling this porcine commodity to keep his bicycle upright and out of the way of the prowling taxis.

The bus turned a corner and the street widened to four lanes. About three blocks ahead, I could see a chain-link fence topped with barbed wire, stretching into the distance on either side of the road. There were a lot of GIs, in uniform and out, walking along the street, some with Korean women and mixed children by their side. As we drew closer to the fence, I could see the writing on the metal banner spanning the road; "Welcome to Camp Casey: Home of the 52nd Air Defense Artillery." A huge red shield with yellow lightning bolts flanking a missile silhouette hung from the fence on both sides of the double gate, which were beginning to swing open for the bus.

Camp Casey, on the outskirts of Seoul, was a large collection of Quonset huts serving as temporary barracks for all the newly-arrived troops, or "turtles," as we were referred to by those permanently stationed there. We milled around while the Army pencil-pushers cut new sets of orders for each turtle, all our old stacks of initialed and stamped papers now useless. After traveling for two days, I was at least glad for the chance to shower and change clothes.

Still without uniforms, I faced the problem of getting chow--only officers were permitted to wear civvies in the

mess hall. I figured I'd just play dumb. The Spec Four on headcount duty, responsible for ensuring every troop signed the correct sheet on the correct clipboard, must have seen me signing the sheet for enlisted men.

"Excuse me."

A tap on my shoulder. I'd be denied access to chow and left to starve. I turned to face the music.

"Officers sign this sheet, sir." A clipboard was extended toward me, the Spec Four smiling, full of his sense of duty.

"Oh, sorry." I scribbled. Today, I was *First Lieutenant* Michael Sanders, though I'd defy anybody to read the signature.

"You don't have to wait in line, sir. From now on, just come up and sign the sheet." He was downright friendly about it.

"Okay, thanks." I flashed a grin at my fellow turtles and went in to chow. Nobody said a word. I could tell, though, that they all envied how easily I was "getting over."

The usual base amenities, like a movie theater, the Commissary, and PX were available to us, but venturing off base was strictly forbidden. Besides, you couldn't get back on base without a pass--kind of like a hall pass in school--which I didn't have and besides, I wouldn't get paid, even

though payday had been three days ago, until I got to my permanent duty station, wherever that was. So, I laid around the barracks, reading *Stars and Stripes*, or whatever materials I could find, and rolled joints in toilet paper while I sat on the crapper. Apparently, cigarette papers were scarce in Korea and nobody I'd ventured to talk to had any, but they were glad to share my custom-rolled smokes just the same.

We ended up spending the night, twenty-three turtles in Camp Casey. Sounds like a nursery rhyme. Just before Taps, some Staff Sergeant stuck his head in our hut doorway and bellowed, "All turtles report to Battalion HQ at oh-seven-hundred hours! Y'all got orders." He spat and left.

After morning chow, we wandered over as a group and hung out near the Admin hut, but far enough from the entrance, so we wouldn't have to salute all the officers coming and going. Although, being in civvies, I didn't have to salute anybody. We just had time for a cigarette before the Staff Sergeant from last night came marching out the front door.

"Stub those butts and field strip 'em," he snarled, then spat, a stream of brown goo arcing from his lips, "unless you wanna police up the whole battalion area before you get your orders."

I was the only one of the twenty-three turtles assigned to Bravo Battery, 2nd Battalion, 52nd Air Defense Artillery, B-2-52. One other guy, Specialist Four Gary Siber from White Plains, New York, was assigned to D-2-52. Neither one of us knew where the hell either place was, but we'd both be on the bus to Camp Humphries, Battalion HQ for all the Nike-Hercules missile Batteries, somewhere about an hour's ride south. We had ten minutes to grab our gear and be on the bus.

Siber and I stood in front of the barracks waiting, Siber in fatigues, I in my civvies. The bus arrived a few minutes later in a swirl of dust and when the door opened, I could see it was the tobacco-chewing Staff Sergeant sitting in the driver's seat. We grabbed our bags and boarded the bus.

"Where's your uniform, troop?" Sergeant Mail Pouch squinted from under his cap, his jaws working a fresh chew. "You ain't getting on my bus in them clothes."

"I got orders to travel in civilian clothes."

"Not any more you don't. This here is a military bus," he turned and spat out the window, narrowly missing a passing jeep, "and nobody rides on a military vehicle without a uniform on."

"C'mon Sarge. I came all the way here on a MAC flight in civilian clothes and I'm not on duty now, so what's the big deal?"

"I don't give a shit if you flew in on Air Force fucking One!" A dribble of brown spit gathered at the corner of his mouth and I thought for a minute he'd choke on his chaw. His face was livid. "Nobody, I repeat, nobody rides my bus without a uniform on." He spat again and wiped his mouth on his sleeve. "Now get your ass off my bus, troop. Next one leaves at fourteen-hundred. In the meantime, I suggest you find a uniform."

Any more argument and he'd probably have my ass on insubordination, so I dragged my bags back down the steps and watched as the bus rolled away, rear wheels squishing through a puddle of tobacco juice that stained the concrete. Spittoon-Mouth had called my bluff. I'd bullshitted my way around half the world, only to be called on the carpet by a fucking glorified bus driver with an attitude. This was serious--I'd have to go over his head.

The grizzled Brigade First Sergeant, square-jawed and crewcut, listened to me complain about being broke and about the Army's incompetence at misplacing my duffel bag and how I was just trying to report for duty, the same story I'd told a dozen times since Frisco. He just smiled. It was as

if he knew I was full of shit and had heard it all before, but forgave me anyway.

"Don't worry son, I'll make sure you get paid." His voice belied his appearance. The word, but not the vision of, *fatherly* came to mind. "Go over to Finance, just across the quad here, and they'll give you a pay voucher. Use that at the PX to get some fatigues and whatever else you need right now. They'll deduct it from your next pay. Will that take care of it?"

"Definitely." Now I could even buy my own smokes. "Thanks, Top."

"Shitcan it, troop!" The smile was gone, his jaw set, stone-faced. "I've been in this man's army long enough to know bullshit when I smell it and you reek of it. You'd best get squared away in a proper uniform and get your ass on the next bus, or I'll personally see to it you're busted for being AWOL."

Now *that* was the fatherly I was used to. Fifteen minutes later, I was on my way to the Post Exchange with an Advance Pay Voucher in my hand and at fourteen-hundred, I was getting on the bus again. Thankfully, there was a different driver behind the wheel this time and only six other passengers, all in fatigue uniforms. From the looks of the assorted baggage the others had with them, I was

guessing that only the driver and one of the passengers
wasn't a turtle.

Hero

Half-naked maples and oaks lined the twisting two-lane road to Providence Hospital. Mark guided the heavy sedan almost absentmindedly, his thoughts dark and grim, like the storm front rolling in from the northwest, visible between the stark branches. He reached in his shirt pocket, fumbling for a cigarette before remembering he'd quit a few weeks ago.

The driveway to the visitors' parking lot curved around a three story brick and stone house, the main residence for nuns who served at Providence in every capacity from clinical psychologist to receptionist. Mark wondered how many of those nuns were helping George.

George Barton, star quarterback for the Jackson Senators, Vietnam war veteran, was Mark's best friend. He and George had known each other since grade school, when Mark's family moved to Jackson, Kentucky from Campton, an even smaller town about thirty miles east of Jackson. Mark's father had accepted a promotion to lead dispatcher

for Hatfield Coal, after ten years as tippie operator for Peabody Mines, primary source of the high-sulfur, bituminous Hatfield fuel. The promotion meant relocation for the family and a different school for Mark.

At Wolverine Elementary, George Barton was class clown of the fifth grade and already one of the tallest kids in the school. He and his friends had teased Mark in the beginning, until Mark punched one of them in the nose, sending the boy home bleeding. The teasing stopped and George began treating Mark with a little more respect.

They both played knothole baseball and pee-wee football, with George's athletic ability always landing him the glory positions on the team, like starting pitcher or quarterback, while Mark, with his thicker legs and heavier frame, played in more complementary roles, such as catcher or tight end. George threw the ball and Mark caught it. At board games like chess or Stratego, Mark held the upper hand, but at physical sports, George was clearly the better athlete. They became almost inseparable. There was always competition and mutual respect between the two boys, even though Mark always felt a little intimidated by George's athletic abilities and his family's wealth.

George's father had been mayor of Jackson for a couple of terms and had always held some form of local political post. His family owned one of the largest homes in the

county, overlooking town and built with profits made from his mother's family business, handed down to her by her father and run by her husband. George's father was president of Hatfield Coal.

Their friendship became strained during high school, when a lot of the strip mines in the area began to be mined out. With environmental concerns forcing closure of more mines, Hatfield Coal verged on bankruptcy. Mark's father, along with most of the other employees in the business, was laid off. It was the winter of 'seventy one and Mark and George were juniors at Jackson High. Mark's college hopes disappeared with his father's job prospects.

He began thinking about military service as a way out of Jackson and its depressing economic decline. A stint in the military would earn education benefits after discharge and looked to be the only way Mark could afford to go to college. George talked about joining with him, trading a potential football scholarship and his academic exemption for combat boots and a chance to "kick some Commie ass." The closer they got to graduation, the more George talked about the war and wanting to "do his part." Like a lot of the kids at school, Mark thought his friend was stupid to throw away a college education, let alone think about going to Vietnam. He figured it was just another way for George to try and be in the spotlight, to be the hero of the game.

George kept arguing that it wasn't fair for people to get out of fighting because their parents had money and could afford to send them to school.

Two weeks after their high school graduation, Mark and George both joined the Army and after completing Basic Training together, George volunteered for the Infantry. Mark signed up for Missile Radar Crewman in the North American Air Defense Command, an assignment guaranteed to keep him from going to Vietnam. He spent almost two years in a Los Angeles Metropolitan Air Defense unit, before getting sent to South Korea for a twelve-month tour.

George had shipped out for 'Nam after just six weeks of Advanced Infantry Training and twenty days' leave. He survived his first year of combat, taking only a small piece of shrapnel in his right shoulder. After thirty days of R&R in the Philippines, he volunteered for another tour. After being wounded in combat again, George was sent home several months before Mark was discharged.

Mark was at work, loading semi-trailers with long, heavy boxes of .024 gauge aluminum siding along with lighter loads of downspouts and gutters, the afternoon he first heard about George's accident. Like always, the klaxon of the loading dock phone had made Mark flinch. For twelve

months, a similar sound had forewarned of North Korean aircraft approaching the 38th parallel, a 300-yard wide no-man's land that straddled the demilitarized zone between North and South Korea. Identifying the telltale blips on a radar screen several miles to the south was as close as Mark had ever been to combat and yet, even months after his discharge from the Army, the sound still raised the hairs on his neck.

"Mark Neuman, line two!" Personal phone calls were almost unheard of, one of the warehouse foreman's pet peeves. Mark's hands were clammy when he picked up the phone and his *hello* was almost a croak.

"Mark, it's Karen." The voice was flat, metallic, completely lacking the singsong quality that had always stirred butterflies in Mark's stomach. Both he and George had dated Karen Sanders in high school and had written her during their respective tours of duty. She and Mark had been lovers briefly during their senior year and he had almost professed his desire to marry her in the last letter he'd written while still serving in Korea. George and Karen had gotten engaged shortly afterward and neither had let Mark know anything at the time.

"Karen, how come you're calling me at work?"

"It's George." There was a deep sigh. "He's been in an accident."

"Sonofabitch!"

George had gotten a bronze star and a purple heart in Vietnam when his chopper got shot down and he saved two of his buddies. The only reason he said he did it was because he was too stoned to think about getting killed. He dragged two guys from the crash before it blew up, just like in the movies. Mark thought his friend had everything going for him when he got out of the service: a good job, a house, and a fine girl. Now this.

Butterflies gave way to a knot in his stomach that tightened and threatened to cut off his breathing. "What happened? Is he okay?"

"He's alive, but he's been hurt bad. We were helping a friend of mine move up here. George was in the back of the pickup truck holding some furniture and he fell out. He fractured his skull." Her voice was beginning to crack.

"He fell out of a truck? Ain't that a bitch!" Mark tried to imagine such a scene but couldn't bring himself to think of it. "Where are you?"

"Cincinnati. Providence Hospital, in Mount Airy. You know where it is?"

"Yeah, I know." He glanced at his watch. Two fifteen. "I'll be there by five, so you hang in there, George will be okay. He's been through worse shit than this."

"Mark, please hurry." Karen was crying now. "I don't know if George is going to make it."

He made the hundred sixty mile trip from Jackson to Cincinnati in just over two hours.

Mark parked the car and stepped onto the blacktop, watching his breath condense as he exhaled. Adjusting his silver wire-rimmed glasses, he squinted against the bright sun that hung on the horizon and threw deep shadows across the landscape.

Walking into the hulking edifice of the hospital, Mark felt a momentary chill before the automatic doors sighed open, offering warmth and light within the antiseptic confines beyond. "God damn hospitals," Mark muttered, "they all smell the same, like disinfectant and body odor." He set off to find the Intensive Care Unit.

ICU was sealed off from the rest of the hospital by heavy double doors. Just beyond them, separated from the hum and bustle of the ICU by another, single door, was a short section of corridor, containing only a stark chrome and vinyl sofa and a plain oak end table with a large sculptured lamp on it. Sitting alone on the sofa was Karen.

Seeing Karen reminded him of the night he found out about the engagement. It was at a party at George's house a

few months ago, just after Mark's return home. George had certainly been easy to spot that night, even in the noisy crowd gathered in the cavernous living room of his ten-room house, the house he grew up in. Mark could see at least two dozen people, a third of who looked familiar, and George's head above most of them.

He was obviously spinning one of his yarns, his narrow face animated and excitement showing in his dark eyes. Arms extended above his head, his long hands exaggerated the size of some foe or obstacle he'd no doubt faced single-handedly. His rapt audience included a couple Mark didn't recognize and a striking brunette--Karen still looked the same.

"I see you're still piling on the same old bullshit." Mark stood accusingly, arms akimbo.

George checked himself in mid sentence and turned, his arms still held high. Recognition brightened his already illuminated features. His hands clamped down hard on Mark's shoulders.

"You old combat-boot-wearin', dogface motherfucker!" He squeezed Mark in a bear hug, his wiry strength surprising Mark as always. "How the hell are you?"

"I don't wear combat boots any more, but your mom does."

"Yeah, but she can still whip your mom's ass!"

Mark and the others laughed at the old shared joke. Karen's laughter brought to Mark's mind memories of a carefree dinner date and the one time he and Karen had made love afterward. She smiled at Mark, showing perfectly even, white teeth. The bulk of her sweatshirt only hinted at the swell of breasts, but her tight, faded blue jeans hugged a near perfect ass. Without taking her eyes off Mark, she strolled over to George and put her arm around his waist. Mark noticed the glitter of a huge diamond coming from the hand resting on George's hip.

"Well I'll be damned! You guys are engaged?"

"That's right. She's my fiancée now. Karen, you remember Mark, don't you?" Again, an iron hand grasped Mark's shoulder, as George practically shoved his friend and his fiancée together. Mark took her hand and shook it briefly, lightly.

"Congratulations." He managed a weak smile.

"Thanks, I guess." She had a mischievous grin on her face. "George was just telling us about some shit you guys pulled that even I hadn't heard yet. Did you really dump a bag of snakes in the old Greek's ice cream shop on the corner?"

"It was George's idea."

"Bullshit, man!" George took a step back, waving his arms as if clearing the air. "Mark's the one who dumped the

bag, I just held the door open. You shoulda seen it, old Bill running around with a broom, trying to sweep the snakes out from behind the booths and the jukebox, sayin,' 'Goddamn snakes! Out of here! Outside you go!' I never saw that old fat ass move so quick!"

Karen's laughter and dimpled smile warmed Mark and he felt himself responding to her. He turned and faked a cough, moving away from her as he did.

She went to give George a quick peck on the cheek, then turned away. They both watched her walk back to her chair, George catching the look in Mark's eyes. He grinned.

"Ain't she fine?"

"She's a stone fox, man. Why would she want to marry your ugly ass?"

"'Cause I'm cool." George did a little shuffle and came to attention, executing a snappy salute, palm out, like the British.

"Always a comedian." Mark shook his head, then poked an index finger hard in George's chest. "You better take care of Karen, you lucky bastard." Then he grinned.

"Because if you don't, I sure as hell will."

A slight frown crossed George's face for a second, then was gone just as quickly. Clapping Mark on the back and laughing, he said, "Don't worry, old buddy, I plan on taking care of her for a long time, but if the day ever

comes where I can't handle it anymore, I'm sure you'll be the first to know. Besides, you had your chance already and she still chose me."

"Mark?"

Without being conscious of the fact, Mark had walked through the double doors and stood dumbly, staring at Karen. A different Karen faced him now. Her hair hung limp and she kept dragging her hands through it. She looked pale, with dark circles under reddened and puffy eyes. There were large blood stains on her tee shirt and jeans. He wanted to comfort her, hold her, but the blood repulsed him. Karen came over to him and laid her head on his chest, wrapping her arms around him. He tried to step back, but she held on tightly. The wonderful feeling of her pressed against him overcame his initial disgust and he finally hugged her back. After a moment, she stepped away, dabbing at her eyes with a wadded-up handkerchief.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I thought I was done crying for now." She stuffed the handkerchief in a pocket and combed her hair with her fingers. "I'm glad you're here. George's parents came this morning and my friends, Vickie and Joe, were here a little earlier, but I've been alone since about one o'clock."

Taking a deep breath and exhaling noisily, she took Mark's hand and led him to the inner door of ICU. "Come on. I'll take you in to see George." She whispered, sounding conspiratorial, "It's only supposed to be family in here, but they won't say anything if you're with me."

She was already pushing through the door, tugging at his hand. Mark hesitated. Without seeing it with his own eyes, he would never be truly convinced that such a freakish, stupid thing could happen to his friend, or that the big war hero could be taken out so easily. He thought about George being so helpless and a slight smirk curled his upper lip. Immediately, he clenched his fist and gritted his teeth in an effort to bury those thoughts.

He forced himself to look around and focus on minute details, like the tiny, peaked trace of a heart monitor, the flashing yellow light that noted each drop of fluid through an I.V. tube, the charge nurse eating Chee-tos at her desk in the corner. Refusing to look at Karen, or straight ahead to where George lay, kept alive by machinery and electronics, he was able to fend off, for a few moments longer, the ridiculous notion that George would have allowed this to happen to himself. When Mark finally looked down at his friend, a deep frown creased his face.

George looked skeletal. His already deep-set eyes were sunken and dark, the skin on his face ashen. His cheeks

were concave, the jawbones protruding. Mark saw a space between George's hollow cheeks and the elastic strap holding a large breathing tube in place. He heard the soft hiss of oxygen, along with the beeping, whirring, and clicking sounds coming from all the equipment surrounding his friend. And as always, there was that pervasive smell of antiseptic, intensified by the intimate confines and proximity to death.

Mark felt heat welling up from his throat, the burning in his nose and the pressure behind his eyes threatening to burst forth. He couldn't speak, afraid of crying. Wanting to console his friend, then ask him why he would do something so stupid, he started to reach out to him, but stopped.

He swallowed hard, forcing down the heat and bile. Again, reaching out with his free hand, he finally laid it on George's shoulder. A tear gathered and rolled down the side of his nose, wetting his tightly-pressed lips. Karen pulled out her handkerchief and brought it up to dab gently at Mark's face. Embarrassed, he let his hand slip from George's shoulder.

"Is he going to be okay?" Mark still stared down at George.

There was a moment of silence before she answered. "When George's mom and dad were at the hospital earlier, we all talked to the doctor. He said it didn't look too good.

There was a lot of damage to the soft tissue under the skull. They were able to close the wound, but the swelling is putting too much pressure on his brain. They may have to open his skull again, to relieve the pressure. Even so, there's a good chance of permanent brain damage."

Mark began nodding. The nodding led to rocking, his upper body rhythmically bobbing back and forth, almost imperceptible. The image of George's ashen face swam before his eyes. He became aware of Karen, tugging his hand.

"Can we go for a while? I've been here all day and I'm starting to get hungry." Her voice sounded far away.

"There's a place up on Colerain, about two miles from here, called the Black Forest Inn. George and I still have a room reserved there. We were gonna stay there tonight before driving back to Jackson tomorrow. My car's there, too, with all our stuff in it." She looked down at herself. "I need to change clothes."

Mark was silent on the drive from the hospital. His white-knuckled grip on the steering wheel helped keep him focused on the road while ghostly images of George, lying pale and unconscious between white, sterilized sheets and of Karen, pitiful and bloody, haunted his imagination. The smell of the hospital still lingered in his nostrils. He

looked over at Karen, who sat staring out the window. The blue-white light from the mercury-vapor street lamps flashing by illuminated Karen's bloody tee shirt, creating a scene like in a cheap horror movie, when lightning flashes reveal the grisly remains of some unfortunate victim of a psychotic serial killer.

When they pulled up next to Karen's car, she said, "You might as well come in and wait. I could be a while and it's starting to sleet." He simply nodded and followed her into the motel room. A queen-size bed took up most of the floor space in the dingy room. A beige overnight bag lay open on the bed and Mark had a glimpse of filmy, feminine things. There was a single, overstuffed chair in one corner, into which Karen flung her jacket. Mark straddled the corner of the bed closest to the door and noticed another bag, what GIs called an AWOL bag, sitting on the floor under the nightstand. An unopened bottle of Jack Daniel's stood next to the lamp on the small stand.

Karen gathered some things from her bag and ducked into the bathroom, calling behind her, "Have a drink. I'm gonna want some after I get cleaned up."

"Yeah, I could use one about now, myself." Mark reached for the bottle and twisted open the seal. He could hear the shower running as he took a big swallow, the whiskey burning his throat on the way down and the warmth

spreading quickly through him. He tried not to think of Karen standing wet and soapy in the shower and took another drink. Memories of their past lovemaking reeled through his consciousness. He put his fists to his eyes and, still clutching the bottle, pressed so hard he saw stars. *I should've sent that letter the way I'd planned. Then maybe things would be different. Karen and I could be together, and none this bullshit would have happened!*

He felt a hand on his shoulder as Karen sat down on the bed next to him. He opened his eyes. She wore a clean tee shirt, a different pair of jeans, and had a towel wrapped around her head. Mark smelled the freshness of soap and shampoo. She held a plastic glass in one hand.

"You going to share some of that?" She tapped the glass against the bottle and held it out, waiting, her hand trembling slightly.

Mark poured her a couple ounces and she drank the whiskey in one gulp. Mark poured more, nearly filling the glass. She took a slow, deep draught, holding the glass with both hands, as if to derive strength from the warm, aromatic liquor. Her actions were slow and deliberate, appearing almost ceremonial.

Grimacing, she said, "This was all my fault. He told me the stuff would be okay in the back of the truck, but I was worried about Vickie's antique dresser." She yanked the

towel off her head and threw it in the corner. "We were supposed to be married next year! It's not fair!"

Mark grinned stupidly. "It'll be all right," he said. But he didn't really believe it.

"Yeah, right." Karen tossed her head back, draining her glass. She reached for the bottle. "Things will never be the same again, I made damn sure of that. I fucked everything up!"

Mark noticed she was already beginning to slur her words. She poured another drink and he reached to retrieve the bottle. His arm brushed lightly against her and he felt her breasts through the fabric of her tee shirt. She seemed not to notice.

"Stop blaming yourself like that, it's nobody's fault." As he took another drink, he began to feel a little fuzzy-headed. "Hell, I could have been there to help. It could've been me lying there in the hospital, instead of George."

"Don't say that. I wouldn't want to lose you, either." Karen looked a little bleary-eyed.

"You haven't lost anybody yet. George isn't dead, you know!" Mark was surprised at the anger in his voice.

Karen looked stung. "I wasn't saying..."

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to yell, okay?" Gulping down more liquor, he almost choked. He leaned over

and set the bottle, now nearly half empty, on the floor between them. "Look, forget it. It doesn't matter anymore. When you guys got engaged, I knew I was too late, so I stayed out of the way." He looked down at his shoes. His palms felt clammy and his face began to flush.

"What are you talking about, Mark? Are you okay?"

He looked up at her. Concern wrinkled the bridge of her nose. Her eyes, tinged with red around the edges, begged for an answer. They were sitting close to one another, almost touching. Mark wanted to take her into his arms and tell her he still loved her.

"You were right," he said, "it's not fair. It's never been fair. George always got everything. Money, cars, fame and glory...you."

Karen still looked confused.

"Oh shit, Karen!" Mark stood up suddenly, his back toward her. "I wanted to let you know how I felt when I was still in Korea, but I thought I'd wait 'til I got home. Then I get back and find out you and George are already engaged. Damn it, I still loved you, but I was too late. George beat me again. Now look what's happened to him!"

Karen got up, walked around and stood in front of him, swaying slightly. "Mark, I'm sorry. I had no way of knowing." She reached and took his hand.

He stared at her and seeing the pain in her eyes, immediately regretted telling her what he had. "No, I'm the one who's sorry. I should have kept my mouth shut."

"It's okay, really." She stepped closer, nodding, and put her arms around him.

The smell of her was overwhelming. Her closeness and the booze made him feel light-headed. A familiar sensation was radiating outward from his crotch and he tried to step back, but she held him tightly. When he started to protest, she shushed him with a finger on his lips, then kissed him. Lightly at first, then, responding to each other, the kiss grew deeper. Their tongues flicked and darted, his arms tightened around her and she sighed. They stumbled to the bed, falling on it.

Their foreplay was awkward and rushed, her soft moans urging him on. She laid back, reaching for him. The stark white sheets and her pale skin brought images of George to mind. A wave of nausea suddenly washed over him.

"No!" He rolled away from her and jumped up from the bed, staggering, his passion deflated. "What are we doing?" He began grabbing up his clothes. "Oh, God, I gotta get out of here, I can't do this!"

"Mark, I'm so sorry," Karen pulled the sheet up to cover herself, "about everything."

"So am I, Karen." He opened the door. "I'm sorry for what happened to George and I'm sorry I ever loved you." With his shirt unbuttoned and his jacket in hand, he walked out into the freezing rain, slamming the door behind him.

George came out of the coma a few days later. He would always limp, listing toward the right. He mumbled constantly and appeared not to recognize anybody, but grinned at nearly everybody that bothered to talk to him. When the doctors felt they could do no more for him, Karen brought him back to Jackson. Then, without even her parents knowing, she loaded her belongings into her car and quietly left town. She returned the engagement ring, wrapped up in an apologetic letter and mailed to George's parents. Nobody had heard from her since.

Mark didn't go back to the hospital after that night, but he saw George almost every day after his release. George still had a room in his parent's house on the hill. He'd limp down to the corner and back, regardless of the weather, and spend hours sitting on the church steps across the street from the old Greek's place, mumbling and smoking cigarettes, always with that lopsided smile. Mark had started smoking again and he stopped to talk and have a smoke with George every now and then, but after a couple

months and no apparent recognition from George, his stops grew less frequent.

About six months after the accident, Mark was driving home from work and saw George, as usual, sitting on the steps. He was petting a collie tethered to a short blond, teenage girl. Mark parked his car and walked over to them. The girl smiled and said hello. Mark simply nodded.

"Hey, George. How's it going?" Mark watched for signs of recognition, but saw none. George just grinned.

"He can't talk, you know."

"Oh, I know. I was just saying 'Hi' to him." Mark looked around at the familiar buildings. "Would you mind letting me talk in private here?"

The girl showed no signs of leaving. "You can talk all you want, but he won't understand." She twirled chewing gum around a finger. "He just sits there all day, smokin' cigarettes and grinnin' like an old fool."

"For your information, he's my best friend. He was even a hero in Viet-fucking-nam!" Mark snarled at her.

"Fine!" The girl tugged at the dog's leash. "I was only saying it won't matter to him if I'm here or not, or you either." She turned away, tossing her hair to one side and storming off across the street, disappearing around the corner.

Mark felt something tapping his side. George had stood up and was trying to get his attention. He stared as George shuffled through the old routine and threw the British salute. George stood still with difficulty, holding the salute only momentarily, before dropping his arm. The lopsided grin faded from his face and what, for just a moment, had passed for recognition faded with it.

Through No Fault of His Own

The evening had started pleasantly enough. It was a Tuesday, Mike's only day off and he and his wife Teri were sipping frozen margaritas by the fireplace at Tee-Jay's, their favorite Mexican place. Piped-in mariachi tunes filtered through the din of rattling plates and glasses. Artificial parrots swung from vinyl perches, scattered about the riotous interior.

Mike had spent the last year working as assistant manager at a rundown Big Boy on Dixie Highway in Hamilton, the last four months riding herd on a mostly young, undisciplined night crew. The pay was barely enough to take care of all their bills, even when combined with Teri's meager baby-sitting money. Mike figured if he put in his time and learned the ropes, he'd get promoted and be able to write his own schedule. Then he and Teri could spend more time together and have the things they wanted, like a decent car.

"What's up with the parrots?" Mike waved a half-eaten tortilla chip in a broad arc. "Do they even have parrots in Mexico?"

"Sure they do. Mexico's got lots of tropical forests in the southern part and throughout the Yucatan peninsula." Teri's voice had a condescending tone to it. As recently as three years ago, she used it to mock their high school teachers. Mike thought the voice was funny, back then.

"Thanks, Teach." Mike dragged another tortilla chip through the salsa.

"Tomorrow's lesson will be on reptiles and amphibians."

"Oh goodie." He picked up his drink, rotating the glass slightly, to get a little bit of salt with his tequila.

Teri's margarita was strawberry-flavored, with sugar on the rim. She sipped it slowly, just a little, dabbing at her mouth with a corner of a burgundy linen napkin each time. And each time, she smoothed the napkin over her knees, now clamped together under the table.

Trying not to look annoyed, Mike grinned at her over the rim of his glass. She saw him and smiled, flashing perfectly even, white teeth--the result of nearly three years in braces and fastidious oral hygiene. She looked just like she did on their wedding day, two weeks after they graduated from high school. Then, with auburn hair in waves

and ringlets cascading around her shoulders and those big brown doe-eyes of hers gazing up at him, Mike would gladly have died for her. And he thought she had the nicest tits in the entire school.

His grin stretched into a leer. "You look good tonight, babe. Good enough to eat."

"Don't be gross." Teri's immediate frown told Mike he'd pushed the wrong buttons, again.

"It's just an expression."

"Don't try that. I know you."

"Who, me?" He turned and looked at the wall next to their booth on the left, then back around to the right, at the nearly full dining room. "You talkin' to me?"

Teri giggled and shook her head. "Robert DeNiro you're not." She winked at him. "But you'll do, I suppose."

"A compliment!" He raised his glass. "Okay, then. Here's to the lady with a great smile, a kind heart, and the greatest rack I've ever seen!"

"Mike, hush!" Teri glanced around, her face beginning to flush. "People can hear you." She sat up, stiff against the back of the booth. "Just how many *breasts* have you seen, anyway?"

"Come on. You know I haven't seen anybody else's since we started dating, except in the movies...and that time at the gravel pit."

"Yeah, and you got an eyeful that night, didn't you?"

He had. Senior skip day, half the class in various stages of undress, swimming in the deep, cold water. More naked female flesh than Mike would ever see again and Teri, splendid in panties, joining him in the water, splashing with the rest.

Mike's adolescent libido had often been frustrated by her stubbornness. Although they had on occasion "played around," as she called it, Teri steadfastly refused to let things go any further until they were married. She'd remained adamant through high school and he became resolute, often fantasizing about the day he would finally have her.

Then Teri began talking about leaving home and possibly working her way through college somewhere after graduation and Mike felt desperation for the first time. His parents, like Teri's, couldn't afford to send him to college and his grades prevented any hope of a scholarship--he feared losing her. He proposed to her that night at the gravel pit.

Now, as then, he longed for her. The excitement of being newlyweds had worn off quickly. Their lovemaking had been tentative from the beginning and Teri was unwilling to try much of anything. His working eleven and twelve hours a night, six days a week, was to blame for their lack of intimacy lately, but even before he'd started working nights she'd shown little interest in sex. She seemed not to enjoy

herself very much and their furtive couplings grew less frequent, then stopped altogether. They hadn't made love in nearly three months.

Mike persevered. "Even surrounded by all those naked girls, I wanted you and nobody else."

"Yeah, right."

"I'm serious."

Dinner arrived. Mike ordered another margarita, catching the frown on Teri's face.

"It's only my second one."

"I didn't say anything."

"It's my night off. What else have I got to do?"

"I thought you might want to spend some time with me. I hardly ever see you anymore."

"It's not my fault. Besides, you'll just fall asleep, so what do I have to look forward to later?" Teri remained silent. "Nothing, that's what. Just like always. I might as well get drunk."

They completed dinner in relative silence, speaking only enough to accomplish the logistics of civilly dining together in public. Teri just picked at her enchiladas and rice, so Mike finished her dinner, too, after practically inhaling his fajitas.

The drive home afterward was quiet and tense and when Mike parked in back of their apartment building, she was yawning.

Later, sitting next to her on the lumpy sofa--she wearing an oversized tee shirt and Mike in just his pajama bottoms--he leaned over and kissed her neck. Teri pushed him away. "Mike, please, I'm tired."

He knew the signals. "Tired, my ass! I think you ought to go see a doctor or something. There's nothing wrong with having sex, fucking, you know!"

"You don't need to be so vulgar about it." Teri curled her lip, frowning. "And there's nothing wrong with me."

"Everything's vulgar to you!" Mike was yelling now. You never want to have sex! There's gotta be something wrong. It ain't normal!"

"Don't get started, Mike." Teri's voice was flat, icy. "You know I don't like talking about it."

"That's the fucking problem." A sneer creased his face. "Or not fucking, as the case may be."

"You can just--kiss my ass! I'm going to bed." Teri got up from the couch.

"Fine, go ahead." Mike reached for the TV remote. "I'm used to doing things without you."

"You make me sick." Teri disappeared around the corner and down the hall. Mike pounded the sofa with both fists.

"Frigid bitch!"

"Aw, man." Beer dribbled down Mike's chin. He was negotiating an exit west onto Route 4 from Monroe when his old pickup banged over a pothole. Wiping his chin on his jacket sleeve, he slowed the lurching truck.

He'd left Teri sleeping. Sneaking out, he bought a six-pack and drove toward Hamilton. Leaving her like that made him feel guilty, but he told himself that if Teri would only show interest *sometimes*, he wouldn't be out driving half-drunk, in the middle of nowhere, pissed off and horny.

Gulping the rest of the beer, he rolled down the window and tossed out the empty can, reaching for another as he did. There were still three cans ringed together, sweating on the seat next to him. His truck rumbled over a small rise and Mike saw the orange, high-pressure sodium glow flooding the landscape where Route 4 fed into the heart of Hamilton. Flickering blue and yellow neon signaled *Fred's Place* a few hundred yards ahead on the right. Mike swung into the gravel parking lot. It was just an hour since Teri had fallen asleep.

Fred's Place was about a mile from the Big Boy where Mike worked. Some of the older employees that made up his closing crew occasionally went there for beers after work. They asked Mike to join them one night and he had been stopping in there once or twice a week ever since. Teri was usually sound asleep when he got home anyway, so he figured she'd never know.

There were a dozen or so cars in the lot, about average for a weeknight. Through the diamond-shaped window in the front door, Mike could see Fred behind the bar, washing glasses. Stepping inside, the familiar acrid mix of cigarette smoke and stale beer, tinged with the smell of urinal blocks, assaulted his nostrils. Mike grimaced and headed straight for the bar, not bothering to look around the small, rectangular room with cheap pedestal tables and vinyl-covered chairs scattered about a bare wooden floor.

"Hey, Fred." Mike put a twenty dollar bill on the bar. "I'll take a frosted mug. Anybody here tonight?"

The bar's chunky owner hooked a thumb in the direction of a dim corner table near the jukebox. Mike chugged half his beer before turning around, checking out the other customers as he did. There was a middle-aged couple in one corner, farthest from the jukebox, some regulars Mike recognized were having their usual game of gin rummy at another table and Mike could see six or seven guys playing

pool in the back room. He nodded at two old geezers sitting at the end of the bar. The usual crowd.

Brenda Anderson grinned at him from across the room. She was one of Mike's closing crew members and lately had been accompanying him to the bar. She always seemed amused at Mike's "pissing and moaning," as she called it, but never passed judgment on him. Mike had hoped, when he left home earlier, that Brenda would be here. He could talk to her.

She raised her nearly empty glass in mock salute, then finished the beer, pointed to the glass, and stuck out her lower lip. Mike bought another draft and strolled over to her table. When he placed the chilled mug in front of her, she thanked him and took his hand in a brief and delicate handshake that seemed to linger for just a moment.

Brenda's cheeks were flushed and tiny red lines crept across her eyes. The times Mike saw her at work, wearing her hair pulled into a ponytail and just a touch of makeup on her face, smelling like she'd just stepped out of the shower, he thought she was attractive. In the dim light of the little wall lamp, her pale, plain face and limp, shoulder-length hair suggested to him a certain homeliness. Still, she made him feel appreciated and he felt comfortable confiding in her. She was the only one at work that knew about his problems with Teri.

"So, what are you doing here tonight?" Mike pulled up a chair and sat next to her.

"I'd ask you the same question, but the fact that you're here tells me what you're doing, or aren't doing, I should say." She picked up her beer and drank about half of it before putting the mug back down. She belched loudly. "I had a feeling you might show up here tonight. I guess your big romantic dinner idea didn't work out so well, huh?"

Mike winced. "That's hitting below the belt."

"Yep, that's me--a real ball-buster." She laughed and smiled at him, her dimples just visible in the dim light. Mike thought he detected the barest hint of a wink in her eye. And he liked her dimples.

"Anyway, you're right," Mike admitted. "She got pissed off because I had two margaritas with dinner. Then I got mad when she pushed me away later. Same old story."

"Poor thing. Your wife doesn't understand you and you're not getting any, so you drive all the way out here on your only night off to talk to me." She drank more of her beer. "Ain't that sweet."

"What's the matter with you, now?" Mike was beginning to wonder if his coming here was a mistake.

"Don't get all huffy. I was just teasing." She grinned at him again. "Why don't you get us a couple more cold ones? I'm gonna play some tunes."

She was hovering over the jukebox when he returned. The opening measure of *Tracks of my Tears* drowned out the clacking billiard balls and the frequent shouts coming from the back room. Brenda began swaying. The music, and Brenda's skinny ass, attracted the attention of the grizzled regulars at the end of the bar. They grinned toothlessly and nodded, winking at Mike.

He chuckled to himself and walked to where Brenda stood peering at the selections displayed behind smudged glass. He leaned over her, quietly breathing in her perfume.

"You like that? It's *Jessica McClintock*."

"Smells great."

She turned. Mike felt her breasts brush against him and he took a half-step back.

"Let's dance." Brenda put her arms around him.

"I, I don't dance."

"Come on, everybody knows how to slow dance. Just hold me and rock back and forth, then take a step every now and then, like this." And she began to lead him. Around the small dance floor they moved, he awkwardly trying to follow her lead before he stopped moving.

"At least let me lead." He rearranged his arms and they danced again, more smoothly this time.

"I knew you could dance." She held him close and laid her head lightly on his shoulder.

After a few moments, the song ended. Mike was relieved--it felt awkward being so close to another woman. But he was disappointed, too. And slightly aroused.

"Our beers are gonna get warm." Mike turned and started heading for their table. She tugged at his hand, briefly, then relented and walked back across the room, still holding his hand. He wanted to get back to the table in the corner, somewhere less exposed, away from the leering drunks at the bar. Brenda's aggressiveness was disconcerting--he was intrigued, but she scared him.

They sat down and Mike took a long drink. He stretched and began cracking his neck, when Brenda said, "You look tense," then scooted her chair next to his. "How about a shoulder rub?"

Without waiting for an answer, she reached over and began working her fingers over the tendons at the base of his neck. She had a firm strength in her hands and knew where to apply pressure. Mike tensed at first, then as she continued to work her fingers, he relaxed and closed his eyes, enjoying the massage.

He imagined himself with Teri, the two of them naked. He felt himself responding, the familiar tingling in his crotch and the tightness of his jeans increasing the tension. Brenda dug hard, her fingers on a pressure point.

"Ouch, that hurt!"

"Hush now, quit your whining." Brenda shook him gently, then began again. "This is supposed to feel good. I can tell you like it."

Mike didn't complain again, too embarrassed to tell her when she was being rough. A minute or so passed, the massaging stopped and Brenda's hand dropped to his upper thigh and patted it gently before she reached for her beer. She was smiling.

Mike felt too warm and his thigh burned from Brenda's touch. She was sitting even closer to him, pressing her thigh against his. He could smell her perfume, the scent now linked inextricably to the memory of their dance and the feeling of the massage. Concentration was difficult and there was a buzzing in his ears.

"Last call!" Fred bellowed as he flipped on the overhead fluorescent lights. Mike and Brenda squinted under the cool-white glare. The old geezers began shuffling toward the door and they smiled at the two of them as they left. Mike's tongue felt thick and his stomach felt queasy from the nearness of Brenda. He began to think about returning home to his apathetic, sleeping wife. Some of the warmth drained away.

"Brenda," he began. He coughed, unsure of what to say. "Brenda, thanks for being here tonight. I've really enjoyed

myself. I wish it wasn't so late--I hate the thought of going home."

"Then don't." Brenda stood up and put on a knee-length, heavy sweater. "Walk me to my car?"

"Uh, sure." Mike grabbed his jacket and followed her into the cool night. Only four cars remained in the lot. He felt a sense of finality, of reaching a singular moment that could change forever the way he would live his life. He felt disembodied.

They walked slowly, the only sound coming from the gravel crunching under their feet. He thought about Teri, asleep at home, alone and oblivious. He shook his head, clearing the vision and pushing the thought back.

Brenda had a new Firebird and he stood by, admiring the sleek car while she unlocked it and slid behind the wheel, letting her window down before closing the door.

"It was really nice talking to you." She flashed that dimpled smile. He placed both hands on her car door and leaned forward, wanting to hold onto the moment a bit longer. She fumbled with the mirrors.

"It was great talking to you, too," he said. "Thanks for the massage."

She reached over and patted his hand. Again, those dimples! "It was my pleasure," hesitating a bit, then, "you wanna come over to my place for a while?"

Mike didn't answer. The buzzing in his ears grew louder and when she smiled at him again, he leaned toward her and stopped. Her eyes closed and her lips parted. A single car droned by on the highway and faded in the dark. They kissed.

Nearing home, Mike tried not to think of Teri, instead reliving the night, remembering how Brenda's earlier aggression persisted in their frenzied lovemaking, her intensity exhilarating. She bit him when she came and he thrust fiercely, almost cruelly, into her. Her legs tightened around him and she rode out his shuddering orgasm, cooing softly in his ear. He remembered thinking Teri could never be that liberated.

When Mike turned into the driveway leading to his apartment building, it was nearly daylight. His shoulder throbbed, still bearing the impression of Brenda's teeth. Her scent lingered on him. He noticed a light in his window and an icy lump formed in his stomach. He coasted to a stop in a parking spot and slumped over the wheel. A shudder passed through him and he sat still, afraid to move.

Forehead resting on the steering wheel and hands folded in his lap, he stayed for several minutes. Breathing slowly, calming himself, he tried to think of what he could

say, what her reaction might be, before he finally slid down from the truck and quietly closed the door. He looked up at the sky, millions of pinpricks of light winking overhead in the still predawn--no answers came, no absolution from the heavens. With a deep sigh, he headed for their apartment.

He opened the door, expecting to see Teri standing there in the living room, screaming, accusing him of everything he was guilty of. Instead, the light coming from the kitchen told him where she was waiting. Turning, he closed the door with the slightest click of the latch. When he turned again and looked toward the kitchen, she stepped into the light.

He stared at her dumbly. She was dressed in blue jeans and a tan pullover sweater. She held a steaming cup of coffee, cradling it with both hands and blowing on it lightly.

"That smells good." In fact it smelled delicious--so much so, it almost made his mouth water. He wished it would, because his voice was dried to a whisper.

She sipped her coffee. Mike saw she'd been crying. Her hands trembled. "I'm leaving you. A taxi will be here in a little while."

"Teri, please." He stepped toward her, reaching out.

She brushed past him and went to sit on the couch.

"Mike, there's something you need to understand." She

hesitated for just a moment and a frown creased her forehead. "You know my father was a drunk, you've seen how he is."

Mike only nodded.

"He used to come home at night, reeking of booze and I'd see the look in his eye, that certain way he used to look at Mom. Then he'd look at me that way, too, and wink. It scared me, Mike. I'd go to bed and hear them in the next room and it always sounded like he was hurting her and sometimes, I even heard her sobbing later. She wouldn't talk to me about it, but I knew I never wanted to be like her."

He sat next to her, numb. He'd lost control and at the time, it had felt great. Now, he just felt small and empty. Now, he felt like crying. Still, he said nothing.

"I know you've been going out after work," she began again. "Don't you think I knew when you weren't in bed with me? Sometimes I'd wake up in the middle of the night with such a feeling of loneliness and when you weren't next to me, I used to think something terrible had happened to you and I'd be scared."

She'd been staring blankly, as if recalling each night spent alone, but Mike watched as she clenched her jaw, her eyes narrowing. She turned and faced him--her lips were a tight, thin line.

"Then you'd sneak in, crawling in bed, smelling like beer and perfume and cigarette smoke." Her lip curled in disgust. Mike thought she was going to spit.

"It's not like that," he started, "I'm not..."

"What is it, then? You always said I should see a doctor, that something was wrong with me. 'You're not normal,' you'd say. Remember?"

"I didn't mean it," he lied.

"Yes you did. And maybe you're right. But I think you need help and that doesn't give you the right to go out, *fucking around*, either!" She trembled, fighting to maintain control. Tears streamed down her cheeks, dripped from her chin, and were quickly absorbed by the nap of her sweater.

"What am I supposed to do?" He threw his hands up, then pointed at her. "I'm not getting anything from you!"

She flinched, but quickly regained composure. "Look, I understand why you did what you did, really. But you need to understand my side, too. Did you ever stop to think what it was doing to me, how I felt when you didn't come home, wondering where you were and who you were with?" She still stared at him, unwavering, searching his eyes. "You did fuck her, didn't you? What's her name, anyway--no, don't tell me," she put a hand up between them and turned her head, "I don't want to know."

Mike couldn't answer. He turned away.

She stood up. "That's what I thought. In a way, I'm glad, because it makes leaving easier, but you hurt me more than I can tell you right now. And because I understand, I might even forgive you."

Mike glanced up, mouth agape.

"But until then, I can't stay here with you."

He slumped back on the couch, his chin lying on his chest.

"I don't know if I could never trust you again, Mike."

Teri's voice seemed muffled, the words barely registering. Mike began shaking his head.

"You were the first man I ever loved and I pledged my heart and soul to you because I thought we could have a decent life together. Boy was I wrong! And I'm sorry I couldn't be the woman you wanted me to be."

Mike watched, his breath fogging the window, as the taxi pulled away from the curb and headed down the street, Teri and his past with it. As it turned the corner and disappeared, he thought of her--and Brenda--and about his uncertain future. He still loved Teri, but was afraid it was over between them. He turned from the window.

The sun broke over the rooftops across the street and flooded the apartment with brilliant white light, glaring

off the wedding picture hanging on the opposite wall. Mike took the picture and laid it face down on the coffee table, then turned and faced the silent apartment.