The Cupola

The knock on the door was so tentative that Jake didn't believe it was a knock. He'd been living in the top floor apartment for a month, and no one had knocked on his door so far. The building was run-down, in a run-down part of town. He took the apartment because it was cheap. And because it had a staircase in the middle of the room, leading to a rooftop cupola.

The building was an elegant home, back when Rock Island was a thriving, prosperous river town and rail-center. Rock Island had once been called Sin City. His great-uncle Errol was City Controller, until the day he dropped dead in front of the Fort Armstrong Hotel. No romance, there, he just dropped dead.

That was a long time ago. The city had become poor and run-down, including his new home. His room was on the third floor. The building had been subdivided into small apartments with pasteboard walls. His front door, however, was original. It was actually two narrow doors that opened to a small room at the foot of a curved staircase, up to a square cupola, with windows all around. There was a bench seat at the top of the stairs, from which he could see the neighborhood, and if he positioned himself right, the Mississippi River in the distance.

He liked his new apartment. It was a surprise and a delight, every day, when he came home from working at the Iowa-Illinois Gas and Electric Company, to climb the stairs, open his quaint and original door, and come upon his very own curved stairs and his very own cupola. He had a tiny kitchen. He had a bed set up against a porthole window that opened out, above the main door, onto the street below.

It was his first apartment since graduating from college, since dropping out of art school, the previous fall, since being fired from his factory job thanks to a gut-wrenching ulcer, and the first apartment he'd had since leaving his parents' house.

He got a job as a ditch-digger, assistant, flunky for the Gas Company, in April. The work was simple, and it was a great relief. He began to live stupid again. It was the only way to live. There was a secret to living stupid. It meant not thinking about everything. It meant not worrying about everything. It meant trusting that you probably can't do much about anything, anyway. It meant letting things come, come what may.

But it was a tough neighborhood. He heard there was a knifing on the block, and one night, he heard a loud argument, between a drunk man and his drunk wife that made him apprehensive. He was a white guy, from a nice, middle-class family, and maybe some

precautions were in order. He wanted people to know who he was, but he didn't want them to get the wrong idea, so he taped a small card on his door that read:

JAKE AXENE ~ INSTRUCTOR
OF POETRY AND KARATE

He'd just begun to write poetry, and he knew nothing about karate, but they formed a balance, each one gracing the other. The neighbors would think twice about judging him. It was a kind of ideal, a stamp of approval for his new life, a scheme to dream on. It was early June. Summer was coming in. And he got in good shape working his portable backhoe. Or shovel. It was a standing joke at the gas company. So was he, standing there. Ha, ha. He had his supper, and he was settling down, on a magnolia and mint julep evening, with a glass of gin and tonic, his new summertime favorite, when he heard the knock.

Knock. Knock. Ever so lightly. He put down the copy of the Rock Island Argus, for June 5, 1965, and he went to the door. He opened it with a twinge of fear and a flash of excitement. It was his first contact with anyone in the building, other than occasional nods between strangers, but this was a visitor, come to his door. He opened the only half of the double doors that he used, and he looked out to see who it was. His eyes crossed the hall to the door of the communal bathroom. Then he looked down. There was a small Black boy, about eight years old, looking up at him.

"S'cuse, me, Mister, but can you teach me karate?"

He looked into the wide eyes of the boy's innocence. He was confused. He forgot he'd put the sign on the door. He stammered for a second, and then he remembered. He looked at the boy.

"I'm sorry, but I'm not teaching karate, right now."

"Oh," the kid said.

"I'm sorry," Jake said, "Maybe later in the summer, OK?"

"OK," the kid said, and he turned around and went back down the main stairs.

Jake stood at his door for a minute. He felt terrible. If only he knew something about karate. Maybe he should have lied and taken the kid on as a student. Maybe he could have learned karate, a day ahead of each lesson, like Fred W. DeMara, the Great Impostor. He pulled the card off the door and tore it up. Damn! The kid was neat. He was sweet and eager and polite, and he had really wanted Jake to teach him karate. It

ruined his night. If he'd just said yes, he could have taught the kid karate and maybe even slipped in a little poetry, too.

It was no good pretending to the world you could do something you couldn't do. Somebody might believe you. Somebody might take you at your word. Some great kid might trust you, and believe in you, and then where would you be? He wasn't ready to teach anyone karate, or poetry, for that matter. Pretending he could was even more foolish. He went back into his room and lay down on his small bed. He couldn't get the kid out of his head. He kept feeling like he was the kid, and how disappointed he was that this guy didn't want to take him on as a student. In his mind, he kept going away from this guy's new apartment, feeling let down. He kept wishing he could have come by, once a week, and started learning something from the guy he called Mister. Maybe the kid just forgot about it, but it ruined Jake's night. All night, he felt like a small boy, full of hope and desire, and he felt like a big guy who couldn't help him out.

"I'm sorry, kid. I'm not teaching, right now."

That part was true. It wasn't time to teach. He was still a kid himself, in a lot of ways. He had a lot to learn. Maybe he could be a teacher later, but not right then. Sorry, kid.

Marshall Dillon

Jake's crew leader at the Gas Company was a teacher. His name was Dill or Dillon McElroy, but everyone called him Marshall, or Marshall Dillon, or even Chester, because he was a hillbilly from Missouri, and he had an accent. He'd been a semi-pro baseball player, he could sing country songs beautifully, and his sister was a Ph.D. at the Menninger Clinic in Kansas City.

Dill McElroy never got past the Eighth Grade, but he had the kind of smarts that made everyone deferential. He was the best welder at the company, and he had a house on the Rock River, a wife, and a couple of grown kids. His son, Darnell, worked at the Gas Company, but he was a hot-rodder, a ne'er-do-much, and a poor successor to Marshall. Jake admired Marshall. Marshall was laconic. He chewed tobacco. He did things quietly, forcefully, and sometimes dramatically. Once, he came into the workers' lounge, at 8:15 in the morning, when work was supposed to start, stood looking over the two dozen men who were laughing, talking, drinking coffee, smoking cigarettes, killing time, and he said, to no one in particular, "As a rule, a man's a fool."

He turned to Jake and Jerry Waffle (his name actually was Waffle) and he said, "Let's go to work."

Jerry was Dill's assistant, and Jake was the grunt. It was three men to a pickup truck. They were matched with another crew, and the two yellow trucks headed out of the shed first. Marshall drove, Waffle rode shotgun, and Jake sat in the middle. They were subject to the 'three men in a pickup truck rule'. That is, the one in the middle is the butt of all the jokes. Generally speaking, under this cardinal rule, men would bang on the doors and shout idiotic remarks or mild obscenities at women they passed, but once outside the truck, they would act foolish and shy and would withdraw any advances they might have proposed. Marshall didn't participate in such things, Jerry was a quiet, diligent, married man, and Jake was incapable. As they pulled out into the warm June morning, Marshall turned to his right, only enough to address the rear view mirror and said, "Let's go to breakfast."

Marshall liked breakfast, on company time. The Gas Company was a public utility, after all, and Marshall had seniority. And something more; he was the best. The Gas Company had to rush into some ticklish situations, and Marshall was the best man to have around. He'd been the best for twenty years. Marshall was the king of the welders, and Jake worked for Marshall. Working for a living, it didn't get any better, he

thought. Six months before, when he worked at the John Deere Harvester Works, in East Moline, he went to work in the cold and the dark, he came home in the cold and the dark, and the life of the factory was cold and dark. The same sort of men worked for the Gas Company, by background, but not by temperament. He figured it must be working outdoors that made the difference. Working for the Gas Company was like working for saints, compared to the factory. He felt as if he'd fallen among higher companions.

They drove to breakfast, with Marshall singing snatches of hillbilly songs, country, and even some blues. It was Jake's favorite kind of music. Country Black and Country White, and Marshall was a good singer. They had breakfast, and they drove to the job. Jake would get his portable backhoe out of the truck and go to work uncovering the leak. Always betrayed by the smell of sulfur, He had learned that gas had no smell. Sulfur was added to it, so that it could, easily, if unpleasantly, be detected.

Jerry Waffle would help dig, sometimes, or he'd go back to the truck and work on his tools, and Marshall would talk over the job with Walt Meyers, the other crew leader, or he'd crawl back in the truck and pull his cap down over his eyes and sleep. Or he'd take the truck and be gone, until after lunch. Whenever anyone would ask where Marshall was, Jake learned to say, "He's doing gummint work," meaning he was home, working on his boat. Jake, Jerry and the other crew would dig around, clean, and prepare the pipe. Marshall would show up, after lunch, and he'd go down the hole. In a few minutes, torch in hand, his half-mask down, he'd create welding magic. Jerry would wrap the pipe, and Jake would fill the hole, and Marshall would say, "Let's go home."

They'd climb in the truck, head back to the shop, and Marshall would sing. He'd sing, 'Lonesome Pines', 'Uncle Pen', 'You Got to Walk that Lonesome Valley', 'Diving Duck', 'Any Old Time'. Jake would grin, inside, like the luckiest little kid in the whole damn world.

Marshall seemed to like him. He'd look at him for a split second, once in a while, and offer him a pinch of Copenhagen. Jake would say no thanks, and feel like a real pussy, but he was sure he'd get sick all over the cab of the truck, and that would seal his fate, 'fer damn sure, as Marshall would say. Jake would've given anything to be able to sing along with Marshall, and sometimes, when he was alone in the truck with Marshall, he'd turn his head toward the open window and sing into the wind, or he'd hold his hand

up by his mouth, like it was a natural gesture, and sing loud enough to hear his own voice. He couldn't tell if it was purely awful or only painfully mediocre.

Jake's dad was a hillbilly, too, but his dad hated being a hillbilly. His dad had moved from Oklahoma to Illinois, when he was eighteen, back in 1930, and he'd worked hard to get rid of his accent and hide his background. He would revert occasionally, and it was the part of his dad that Jake loved the most. Marshall was an unrepentant hillbilly, and Jake could admire him without equivocation. Marshall treated Jake's admiration with the benign disdain of a great baseball player, which he believed Marshall could have been, if it weren't for the tragedy of his sister being a psychiatrist. Or something like that. He didn't know enough to solve that riddle. It was The Riddle of Greatness.

How could a man, as obviously destined for greatness as Marshall was, as Dillon McElroy was, not be in a position of greatness? Jake believed destiny was absolute. No other factors could be counted into the ultimate equation. How could a man, who affected awe and respect in everyone around him, be a welder for the Gas Company? And if so, what was that all about? It was an imponderable, so, of course, Jake pondered on it.

The Big Jump

It was the summer he was to be married. It was a sweet, sad summer of fading youth and the uncertain commitment to adulthood. The commitments he was making were seemingly inevitable, as if adulthood was the next stage in a nonstop drive across the map of life. The details of the drive were unclear, but its general characteristics were laid out. He accepted them, generally, without argument or alternative. His girlfriend, now his fiancé, Jenny McGregor, had come to visit him when he was still living at his parents' house. She was in her senior year at college. They talked about the future, and they agreed to be married. No one proposed. It was an agreement made by two young people who didn't know what else to do.

It was as if they were still children, getting ready to jump off a cliff into a raging river, and one of them said, "I'll go, if you'll go." And the other said, "I'll go, if you'll go."

"OK, you go first."

"No, you first."

"OK, let's go together."

"Let's go."

They held hands and jumped. They went to the local jewelry store, and they bought gold bands. They took the gold bands to his parents' house, and they told his parents of their engagement, and his parents stared at them, and then, finally, they said, in a united voice of resignation, "Well, congratulations. We hope you'll be very happy."

They might as well have added, "Fat chance."

Without any well-formed alternative, they decided to continue together. They held hands and jumped. They decided to jump into the river of adulthood later that summer at her parents' house in Iowa. They had talked, the year before, about him going to Chicago to be a painter. Jenny said she'd stretch his canvas for him, but he dropped out of graduate school in art at the University of Iowa, and now he was working for the Gas Company, digging ditches.

Jenny's mother refused to put the wedding notice in the paper, until Jake found a proper occupation. He went on the lookout for a teaching job. He was best man at his friend Bob Hesket's wedding in Chicago. Bob's mother said there was a school he could teach at, in California, where she lived. He told her to check it out for him. She did, and her persuasive manner convinced the headmaster, and he was hired to start, in the fall.

The non-choices of his adulthood; marriage and work, loomed large, but less terrifying than the alternative. At least, as far as he could imagine the alternative. The alternative would have been to follow his heart and his instincts. The avenues to his heart and instincts were anything but a clear passage. His heart and instincts were strong, and he knew their value and virtue, but they were in Africa, and his road map read USA. There were big X's in Iowa and California, and a yellow magic marker colored the route between. This is no tragedy. This is merely the catastrophe of now knowing what to do, and not being told, or shown, how to do it. If this is tragedy, it's a nearly universal tragedy.

For a few months, Jake lived in a pre-married state, a pre-committed state, a preoccupied state, a premature state. In that state, all the wonders of his African home were revealed. The cupola on top of his room was a treetop aerie. It was Tarzan's home before Jane. Cheetah was there, screeching gleefully. For a few months, he nearly lived his dream. It was a kind of warm-up; a sensibility to keep for later, like a memory map of a more sensate, richer, more permanent abode in his own private reality.

The Mississippi River Valley is lush. In early summer, the heat is still bearable, and the humidity makes the air seem tangible. Weather isn't merely a statistical report on the evening news, it's the blood of the blooming, burgeoning, pregnant earth. The air is thick with life. It teems with creative vitality. The borders of the skin are lost in a tropical blurring of distinctions. Everything is alive, and everything is connected to everything else. It wouldn't be surprising for entire crops to grow on one's arm, overnight. It wouldn't shock anyone for animals and plants to exchange parts, or for inanimate objects to mutate, or blend with the rest of the garden jungle savanna menagerie.

He was in the prime of his sensual life. And, he had discovered alcohol, less than two years earlier. His body was strong, and alcohol cleared away the last briars of intellect that might have blocked his summer of sensuality. He was not yet weakened by alcohol to the point of losing its encouragement. Alcohol helps to break one's feelings free from the cage of controls. Eventually, it dulls feelings, but in the beginning, it feels like a healthy winnowing of useless chaff. Alcohol is like a razor, capable of making the skin feel clean and sensitive, but just as capable of opening the jugular. Do I exaggerate? Is life dangerous? Between his innate bestial enthusiasm and his fear of embracing his passion, a little gin and tonic after supper enhanced and reinforced the glow of being that put him in harmony with the Summer of the Mississippi River.

Jake Axene was an innocent of sensuality. He was an innocent at home in a magic kingdom without borders. He had a degree in Intellect, and a family history of Fear, and the summer conspired to pull the plug, before he rejoined the ruse of civilized choice, a choice that his entire generation was just beginning to reject.

Holy Rollers

Jake cherished his cupola apartment. In the first month he lived there, he touched, with his hands, or with his eyes, every square inch of it. It was his own place, and not just an adjunct to being a college student. He was a workingman, and he returned home each day, at 5PM, give or take, to cherish it some more. When he pulled the door shut behind him, he felt the sanctity of having a room of his own, of having a life of his own.

It was an idiosyncratic, peculiar, surprising, unique apartment. It was barely more than the landing for a staircase. The front doors were under the stairs. There was another door at the foot of the stairs. It was the door to the tiny kitchen. In the kitchen, there was a small table and a single chair, a small stove, a small refrigerator, and above the table, a small window to the treetops.

He could put his single bed at the foot of the stairs, parallel to the porthole window, or he could turn it and put it against the wall, with the head at the window. No other arrangement was possible. The space under the stairs was only good for storage. In his childlike dreams, it could become the darkest corner of monster hell. His ability to imagine the ogres of the unknown, populated any sparse environment he might've inhabited.

He had neighbors, beyond the thin wall by the bed. In his first month, they were a mother and son who spoke in tongues. It took little imagination to appreciate who they were. They were skinny, and they were from that part of the South that seems to be no particular region. They had the kind of religion that seemed to be the same as being possessed. It seemed to drain them of any resemblance to other humans. They seemed to exist on whatever they had available. One week it might be a box of Cheerios, the next week a box of instant potatoes, the next a package of macaroni and a bag of semi-sweet chocolate. Jake imagined them ecstatic with a quart of milk and two slices of bread.

They were unfailingly polite. They made eye contact without focusing any look of communication. They were ageless, the mother thirty to sixty, the son twenty to thirty. He could see the son's age a bit, but the mother's age was lost. She had slipped outside the normal passage of time. Her apparent malnourishment gave her a translucent, ephemeral look. They lived in the nearly vacant apartment on the southeast corner of the building. Whenever they returned from wherever it was they went, after they pulled

their door shut, they found some source of energy to fuel their highly vocal praying. They prayed long and hard, in tongues.

"FUNdala, BUNdala, Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty, SHOCKala, MOCKala, BOCKala," on and on, into the night.

It was not unpleasant to his ear. They were too weak to be raucous. They were too pure to be violent. They were tuneful, by an accident of grace. He listened to them eagerly. He wanted to hear more, not less, of their otherworldly chanting. They were melodious, in a harpsichordy, tambourine and pennywhistle kind of way.

He took odd comfort in having neighbors so devoutly engrossed. They were polite to a fault, and their music, once accepted, was like the familiar back-alley radio sounds in Singapore, the Kasbah, Atlantis, or the other side of the tracks on Venus.

"BOOdala, COOdala, FOOdala, MOOdala."

What a way to go. Wasting away, like the air squeezed out of a giant beach ball.

Then one day, probably at the end of the month, they were gone, and a married couple moved in. The new pair watched television, and Jake took his ear away from the thin wall. He looked around at the apartment he loved, with the stairs in the middle and a little room around the stairs. He lived at the foot of the stairs. The stairs climbed halfway to the stars. He could lie on his bed, look up the stairs, and see the stars. The stars at night were big and bright, deep in the heart of his cupola apartment.

"FUNdala, BUNdala, Holy, Holy, Lord God All Nightly, all night long. SHOCKala, MOCKala, o'er the land of the free and the home of the brave. Amen and amen. Goodnight, everybody."

Sanctified Sensuality

He was a Methodist, in the same way he was an Illinoist, by way of being a Nebraskite. The Methodist Church was a place where he'd spent time, and it colored his experience, but its colors weren't primary. He found a way to climb up the brick wall at the back of the Methodist Church in McCook, Nebraska, when he was nine. There was an old pump organ to play with, in the basement, and the large, curved balcony of the sanctuary was stirringly dramatic to him.

One Sunday morning, in Nebraska, at home, his youngest brother struck his middle brother on the head with a hand drill and drew blood. Jake called the church to report the news. They made an announcement, during the service, and his parents rushed home. That was good. He imagined the preacher saying, in a big voice, in front of the congregation, "Mr. and Mrs. Axene, your sons are murdering each other. Please hurry home." Like a nursery rhyme from the Brothers Grim, with one m.

At the Methodist Church, in Moline, Illinois, things really got good. He was elected president of the Junior Methodist Youth Fellowship. On a church retreat hayride, while pretending to be asleep, he laid his head on an older girl's chest and rolled it around as if restlessly dreaming, squeezing and pressing her breast with the side of his skull. She comforted him in a nurturing kind of way, much to his surprise and pleasure.

Church, on Sunday evening, was conducive to erotic sensations, so to speak. He went to the morning service and identified with the preacher. It looked good to be standing up there, with a captive audience, telling stories. Then he went to Sunday school, then to Sunday dinner at some restaurant or at home, then he goofed around all afternoon, then back to the church for games, food, a little MYF meeting, running around the empty church, and girls. Something about the spiritual life inside the church sanctified his sensuality. On the team bus, at school, they talked about making out, but on the church bus, going to some church function, they actually did make out. By the time he was in 9th Grade, his sexuality was a drug, coursing his veins and arteries, and every place he went became sexual, but, somehow, it was especially true at church. Maybe, since everyone in church was talking about Jesus, no one was thinking about what Jake was thinking about, and therefore, he felt free.

More directly responsible was his mother. She told him something, one day, as she often did, addressing him and his brother as if she was the preacher. She admonished them with stern good nature about the true meaning of life.

"Boys," she said, turning her head to the side but keeping her eyes riveted on them, "Boys," she repeated, "Sex between a man and a woman is…" She paused dramatically, and then continued, "…spiritual."

There it was. She said it. Sex was spiritual. Then, content with her succinct sermonette, she left the two of them puzzling, then smirking to each other, then heading off in their separate directions to play out their lives. He believed his mother. He would say he never believed his mother, and he was convinced he didn't, but her words were etched on the granite of his brain, at least that part of it made granite for permanent scarring; those stone tablets we carry forward in our lives like millstones, to be called on whenever we need to ruin our lives or keep them from any intuitive fulfillment.

They are also the source of reference for direction and guidance in times of fear and confusion. If chosen and chiseled well, they may serve us, but if one's early nurturers were not Hammurabi or Moses, or even a well-adjusted pair of primates, the frozen messages of time can be deadening, instead of life affirming. The message, that sex was spiritual, set him up well for loving the church as a place where the spirit and the body might meet as friends. And if sex was spiritual, then spirituality was sexual. He seemed to believe, from early on, that spirit seeks to come into the body. At least, his did. The constipated message that the best life in God, so to speak, was to get out of the body as soon as possible, made no sense at all, and, in fact, seemed blasphemous.

His poor mother had no idea how her instructive advice had laid the groundwork for Jake's future life, as the spirit-being looking to live as a man, true to the flesh, and true to the spirit. Both, spirit and flesh, true, together, in one life.

It was at church, in church, on church buses and hayracks, on the church basketball court, at church camp, at vespers, in Sunday school, that he felt appreciated as a sexual being, never knowing why, but always grateful. How lucky can you get? If God didn't condemn him, then the condemnation so generously distributed among his followers could be overlooked, and he overlooked it. What may have been more responsible for his passion was that powerful drug of youth, among boys and men, testosterone, and its gang of hormonally delinquent pals. Either God didn't mind his perpetual erection, or God was helpless to control it. Anyway, he had only girls to

contend with in the equation, and he had the permanent words of his mother, however misguided or misinterpreted, to bolster him.

He knew very little about girls or women. They seemed to be reluctant to join him and God. He'd had sex with his fiancée, and he was soon to be a married man, but his fiancée was an atheist, and her sexuality seemed agnostic, at best. He lay on his bed, often wrestling with himself over these questions. One point for a takedown. Three points for a pin.

The Spyhole

Living next door to a married couple other than his parents aroused his curiosity. His parents were an institution of no relevance to the idea of marriage, couples, love, or people living together. They seemed an entity of unique character, not a model for emulation or an example for study. They were an aberration, as if God had put them together to give birth to him and keep him isolated from normal human behavior, as if they were the last two souls left in the barrel in Heaven, and God had no choice but to link them, like the last two kids chosen up for kick-ball.

The four years he spent at college had "ruined" him, according to his mother. College had broken him out of the claustrophobic, hermetically sealed mold of his family. Once away from them, breathing other air than the recycled, stale, pseudo-intimacy at home, he thought he was separate and free. He began to see himself as a private being, away from the closed world of his parents. The way he saw ity, it was their influence that had been ruined. He was free, to a degree, but the mold was set, the die was cast, the frame of reference had been in place for many years.

Youth has the virtue of creating the illusion of renewal coming almost at will. A new idea could remake his life. He could chameleon his nature to the colors of a better model, as soon as he could find one. He didn't believe he was petrified by his parents' influence. He thought he could escape their influence. Because the character he developed to please the bulls in the Big House of his youth did not seem genuine, he thought he could adopt another set of characteristics, more suitable to his virtuous ruination. The accusation of having been ruined pleased him. The phoenix could rise from the ashes, and it needed ashes, in order to rise. He had time yet, before he became a married man himself.

With a little effort, he could hear the married couple next door. When he moved in, he found a busted hole in the wall, two feet off the floor, opposite the foot of the stairs, exposing the 2x4's behind his wall, exposing the back of the flimsy wall of the apartment rented by the couple whose name was Tully. They were in their late twenties or early thirties, and he got the sense they hadn't been married very long, maybe a year. They didn't have any kids. Any couple, in that neck of the woods, who didn't have kids, probably hadn't been married very long.

He put a calendar over the hole, so his wall wouldn't have a big hole in it. Somebody, once upon a time, must have kicked it in, or bumped into it with a piece of

furniture. He didn't think much about it. He just covered it up. But when his curiosity about Mr. and Mrs. Tully flared up, he thought about the hole in the wall.

One night, when his bed was set up against the porthole window, he pulled the calendar off the wall, he sat down on the floor, he put his head in the gaping hole, and he put his ear up against the Tully's wall. He was half an inch from their lives. He could hear them talking. He listened to them talk. He sat on the floor, drinking his gin and tonic, in the tropical night, with his radio playing in the background, and he listened, like he listened to the radio when he was a kid in Nebraska.

They didn't seem to be saying much about anything.

"What's this?" "Where's that?" "Did you see where I put the whatchamacallit?" "How's your back?" "Did you like the pork chops?" "Where's the TV Guide?" "It's on top of the TV."

The longer he sat there, on the floor, drinking, with his head in the wall, the more the separation between them seemed artificial. He expanded the hole in the wall like turning up the sound on the radio. He broke off small chunks of the pasteboard until finally he could get his ear flush against the Tullys' wall. He got up and walked around his small apartment until he found a nail he could work loose. He took it back to the hole, and he put it in the seam where the wall tiles were joined. Slowly, carefully, gradually, like the movements of the guy in 'The Tell-Tale Heart' by Edgar Allen Poe, he made a tiny hole.

His heart was beating faster. He could look into their apartment, barely, if he twisted his head and neck uncomfortably and then put his eye against the hole in their wall. He could hardly see anything. He carefully opened the hole larger and larger, until it was the size of a ten-penny nail.

He worried the hole might be seen from the other side, but his goal had become a mission. He was a spy in the house of love. It was the first time he'd ever been able to see what went on between two people in the privacy of their lives. He was on the verge of a great discovery. He was uncovering a tiny shaft of light to the inner sanctum of an ancient pyramid. He was about to learn some great truth. He worked and worked the tiny spy hole. He broke more pieces away from the entryway. Finally, he could see the Tullys and most of the room. Mr. Tully was working on the back of his console TV, on the far side of the room. Very near to Jake's eye, on the Tullys' bed, lay Mrs. Tully, propped up, her back against pillows, the sheet across her waist, her bare breasts exposed. Her arms were at her side, her hands were folded in her lap.

His heart pounded so hard, he was afraid he'd be overheard by the beating. He'd seen a naked model in an art class at the University of Iowa, and he'd seen his fiancée partially naked, or parts of her naked, when they made love in the dark or nearly in the dark, but he'd never seen a woman naked in bed, like Mrs. Tully was. She had nice, firm breasts. They weren't like Playmate breasts. They had a shape that wasn't round and perfect. They seemed to be normal, real breasts. She had a scar on each breast, just above the nipple, as if she'd had an operation of some sort. They were small, normal scars. He felt embarrassed to see her scars, even more embarrassed than he felt seeing her bare breasts.

Mrs. Tully spoke. She said, to her husband, in a soft voice, "Are you going to come to bed, soon?"

"Yeah, sure," he said, "as soon as I finish this."

He sounded angry and a little impatient. She didn't say anything, and then she did, "Sometimes, I think you love tinkering with things more than you love me."

She slid down and pulled the sheet up under her neck.

"What?" her husband said, "What a stupid idea. I just have to get it fixed, that's all. Otherwise, it'll never get done, if I don't do it." He redoubled his anxious efforts, hunching over and concentrating on his repair job.

Jake pulled his head out of the hole in the wall. He felt deeply embarrassed, not exactly for what he'd done, but for what he'd seen. It felt wrong to be so far into these other people's lives. It felt as if he'd seen something he wasn't meant to see. It was out of joint, like knowing too much, like time traveling with information that should belong only to the future. He felt like an invader from outer space, exposing, by his presence, the pitiful weakness of humanity. He vowed he'd never again pretend to be part of peoples' lives that he wasn't truly part of. It was a vow that would stay with him, to keep him from advising others or meddling in the affairs of others. The appearance of a couple meant nothing. He could never judge what occurred between a man and a woman in the privacy of their lives together.

He got a role of tape, and he taped over the spy-hole. He cut a grocery bag in the shape of a patch and covered up the hole in his wall, taped it solidly in place, covered the patch with his calendar, put the box he had his radio on, in front of the hole, until it was completely obscured. He sat on his bed and looked up the stairs at the stars.

He felt like he'd stolen something that didn't belong to him. It made him shy to eavesdrop, from then on. He would glance at people, who aroused his curiosity, to clear with them, in some way, by some gesture, if it was acceptable, for him to be a witness. He wanted to witness the lives of others, and instead, he'd become a voyeur, a spy, a thief. It was a peculiar shift. He felt intimate with the lives of the Tullys, as if there were no boundaries, but he'd crossed a boundary that shocked him. He carried a sense of living a life without real depth, that every wall was gauze, every remark the line from a play, and then something would happen to show him that the reality he sought to understand was greater, more incomprehensible, than the empty illusion he knew.

He was a hopeless amateur at living. Everything was made out of gossamer. He could keep on inventing life, he was capable of that, but every once in a while he caught a glimpse behind the scenery, and it terrified him. It was terrifying when the illusory world cracked open, and he caught a glimpse of some other version of reality than the one he had learned and assumed to be real.

The Crescent Wrench

He lived in three skins. As a young man, a young animal, he had one skin, feeling alive in the body and the flesh. When his young life surged physically, as it did often, in many ways, in the nature of his being young, he felt true and whole. It was like the water pressure in a hose, filling him with purpose. It could be sexual, or it could be the life of a young man, and it felt good. Another skin was his talent to learn quickly and act out the roles of living he saw around him, like a real life actor. It was his skill to imitate the lives of others. It was fun and exciting to learn the ways of others, to be able to act like them, to become different people so easily, and when he did, he felt whole and happy.

He could be anything he wanted, and when he was, he was bigger than usual. He could surge alive with enthusiasm. He could take on the feelings of others. It made him feel the feelings he couldn't or didn't feel in himself, alone. And there was another skin. It was the skin of his heart. It was the feelings of the child he'd been born to be. It was who he was, and it was who he could become. It was the empty vessel of his being. It was the part of his life he wanted to know. It was the part he seldom knew. Whenever he felt closest to his true self, he became the most fearful.

He was capable of fun and imagination, adapting, learning, taking on, and becoming a new self. Emotionally, he was, if not autistic, then a child in a man's body. He wasn't without feeling. He seemed to live in a tangled morass of feeling, but it was a great confusion without guidance. He ought to have conquered his confusion by then. As if it was conquerable. His only recourse was to stumble forward. Gin and tonic seemed to ease the fit in his three skins, but it didn't solve the riddle of the way to become a man. It helped him do things he thought might help, like spy on his neighbors, but that had turned out to be a miscalculation. He chalked it up to life lessons and made up some new rules to justify the fiasco.

It was better when he forgot about it. He would struggle with his confusion, especially the collapse of a particular moment like a house of cards. But without answers, it was a hopeless struggle. He would resign from the struggle and forget about it. That was better, especially if he could flex his muscles or pick up a mask. He was on a course of wanting to learn from experience, hoping that experience would teach him what he needed to learn. He thought there was a single piece missing. If he could learn the secret, he could be free. It was a gamble. You try this door and that door. You try them all. One was the door to real life. The others had tigers behind them.

He woke up the next morning with a start of fear. A little scare in the morning, not knowing who he was or where he was. He took quick stock and became the guy who went to work at the Gas Company. He couldn't shake the nagging ghost of another life. He tried to joke with the boys, but he couldn't crank up an attitude. At the job site, Waffle sent him back to the truck for a crescent wrench. He went to the truck, dropped the bin on the side, and stared, dumbfounded. He could not, for the life of him, remember what it was he was looking for. He went back to the hole, and he said to Waffle, "What's a crescent wrench?"

Jerry Waffle looked at him, and he knew, finally, that it was true; college boys really were as stupid as they said.

"It's shaped like a crescent, and it has CRESCENT written on it."

"Oh, yeah, sure," he said.

Jake went to the truck, grabbed a crescent wrench, and brought it back in a flash. The rest of the day, Jerry looked at him like he wasn't sure he was for real. It was a good concern. He had lost his place, in the line of life. He kept trying, all day, to find his place, bumping into everyone else, who knew their place just fine. Marshall called him over at the end of the day.

"Don't let this monkey business get you down. Just put one foot in front of the other. OK, podna?"

"OK, Marshall," Jake said, a little sheepishly.

"Listen, Jake, they call me Marshall, and that's fine. They don't know their ass from a bag of marbles, so why shouldn't they call me by the wrong name? And you can call me Marshall, too. It's my name around here. It's OK, but just remember, it aint my name. Alright, kid?"

"Alright, Marshall."

"Now you're catching on. You have a good night, and I'll see you in the morning."

"See you in the morning, Marshall." "Jake the Great." Marshall winked.

He turned and walked off, singing to himself, "When it's peach pickin' time in Georgia, apple pickin' time in Tennessee, cotton pickin' time in Mississippi, everybody picks on me…."

Jake felt better. He felt a lot better.

The Porch Swing

When he got home that night, he was content to let the world be. He walked slowly up the steps of his apartment building. He thought about the neighborhood he was living in. He was only two blocks from the house his grandparents lived in, when they moved up from Oklahoma, in the same year that Woody Guthrie headed out for California. Jake's father and Woody were born twelve miles apart, in the same year. His dad loved the hill country of east Oklahoma. He was odd man out in Illinois, when he was eighteen, but he was tall and handsome, and a real charmer, so he managed a kind of popularity in his new hometown.

The extended family had lived in Rock Island for a long time. They had been a poor man's aristocracy of doctors, lawyers, and businessmen, but Jake's grandfather was only the husband of one of five sisters, and he'd struck out, during the Depression. He was tall and white-haired, he was a born patriarch, and his retirement resolved his dignity among the relatives. He had ended his work life as a stock clerk in a farm implement factory, long after his early success as a railroad agent, riding herd over unruly gangs of teamsters, loading and unloading the trains.

His great grandfather had driven a twenty-mule team between Dallas and Denver. Jake's dad drove a Chevy wagon between Peoria and Davenport. The dynasty never got off the ground, but the old family house meant a lot to Jake. Living two blocks away felt significant, even though he never went by the place. That wasn't important. It was the old family home, and it was nearby. That was what mattered.

The spot of greatest magic in that house was the front porch swing, suspended from the porch ceiling. When he was a kid, he got to sit on the swing with his grandpa, while the men smoked cigars and talked. It was the nearness of them that he soaked up. They didn't talk to him, and they talked about subjects for which he had no reckoning, but sitting on the swing, next to his dad and his grandpa, next to his dad's uncles, and listen to the soothing chatter, was storing up riches in heaven. To be near that house, even thought strangers lived there, was to feel the presence of the legacy. Even if the legacy had been squandered, it existed in the buried treasure of his heart.

Marshall's hillbilly wisdom touched him in the memory banks of his heritage. It was funny how that worked. Marshall's son was a beery, car-obsessed womanizer, who neglected his wife and kids and treated Marshall like a punishment. Jake's dad treated Jake like an annoying case of the clap, an unfortuJake side-effect of a necessary evil,

marriage, like a baby-sitting chore on a rain-soaked camping trip, or as the potential insurance for his retirement. Marshall and Jake had an understanding that jumped the separations and made them both feel recognized. It was funny how that sort of thing came alive, at the least likely times, and how those times proved to be the right times. Jake had a spotty history of those times; the right times. He didn't count on it happening or even recognize it when it did happen, but he carried the gift of Marshall's inJake kinship up the steps to his apartment.

He looked at the Tully's door, and he put an invisible seal on it. Once inside his own door, he felt the renewed sanctity of his apartment, all without knowledge or thought. He looked at the taped-over hole in the wall, and he thought about the Colt Malt Liquor Bull. The night before, he'd had a couple of them under his belt, before he finished his gin and tonic. He thought about the dangers of mixing his liquor.

"Yeah," he said inside his head," You can't mix liquor and life."

He wouldn't take his own advice for a long time to come.

The Wrong Side of the Bed

It wasn't for lack of trying that he couldn't stay lighthearted. He tried. His sense of humor had never failed him, but his own personal barnyard seemed to have a hole in it, a well, a cesspool, a bottomless pit, a rent in the surface, a crack in the earth's crust, like Alice's doorway to Wonderland, or Orpheus' entry to the Underworld. When he was a kid, he imagined that the space between his bed and the wall was an endless shaft to the Pit of Hell. That's one word for it. It seemed so simple to roll off the bed in the middle of the night and be swallowed up by the Guts of the Universe, never to be seen again. And it wasn't anything you could prevent.

> *Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the lord my soul to go looking for… I hope.*

To die seemed nice and simple. But what about the hole next to the bed? "There's something peculiar about my life," Jake kept thinking. When he was in Sunday school, during high school, he began to think about the ineffable. He wondered, "If God made the Universe, who made God? If the Universe continues forever, what's on the other side of it? What comes after Eternity?"

And he thought, "If I'm the same as everybody else, how come my mind is in this body, in this head, behind these eyes? If the whole world exists only in my perception of it, why doesn't everyone else feel the same way I do? And, if they do, why doesn't anyone else talk about it? I can understand that everybody thinks they're the Center of the Universe, so why don't we just agree we're all simultaneously the Center of the Universe? When Jesus performed a miracle, why didn't he show the apostles how he did it? Why all the secrecy?"

That was the big one for Jake. Why all the secrecy? If life was so wonderful, as everybody claimed, and it was certainly awe-inspiring to him, why bother with any secrets? Life was truly amazing. He wanted to share his sense of amazement with other people, but nobody seemed to want to play. Everyone was always pretending life wasn't amazing, that it was more important to worry about the rules, than it was to play. If you jumped into life and got lost in it, it seemed there were too many people who wanted to beat you up for it, or take advantage, or laugh at you.

Take parents, for example, or even the man on the street, or the man in the drugstore. There was a drugstore on the corner, three blocks from his apartment. It seemed to be the quintessential drugstore of life. It was between WHBF, the TV and radio station, and the Rocket movie theater. It was catty-corner from the Fort Armstrong Hotel, where his dad's uncle dropped dead, and it was across the street from the Fort Theater.

Rock Island was his dad's hometown, but it wasn't Jake's hometown. Jake had never lived in Rock Island. Moline was his hometown. It was only a few miles from downtown Moline to downtown Rock Island. They were adjoining towns. They might as well have been the same town, but they weren't. It was part of Jake's simple-minded and simple-hearted amazement to see how two towns, right next to each other, like Siamese twins, could be nearly identical and completely different. They each acted like they were the only town in the world that counted. Whenever Moline and Rock Island played each other in basketball or football, half the arena, field house, or stadium, would act as if the other half was worthless, bad, stupid, and scary, if not downright evil.

If a guy from Moline met a guy from Rock Island in a bar in Istanbul, they'd act like they were long lost brothers for about two minutes. Then they start getting weird on each other, just like always. They'd re-enact some game that proved their town was the best, and the other town was in the Guinness Book of World Record for Assholes and Bastards. Jake's dad lived in Moline, but he was from Rock Island, but not really. Jake lived in Rock Island, but he was from Moline, but not really, because he grew up in Nebraska. It was like being in a movie. It really meant a lot to everyone around him, or so it seemed, but it didn't mean that much to him.

He loved it all, but the details were confusing. Where did he get this weird perspective? Maybe he was from some distant galaxy, where this planet was really funny, and the joke was on him. Maybe they sent him to Planet Earth as a practical joke. And that was another thing. Any planet named EARTH had to be taken with a grain of salt, like being a planet called HERE. He had a perspective that kept him an outsider everywhere he went, and yet he longed to be a part of it. He seemed like a tourist in his own life, and yet he seemed to be the only one who was aware of it, like being in an episode of 'The Twilight Zone', where a guy drives into a town full of humanoid zombies, so real you can't tell the difference, until you ask them a question, and they go, "Gurgle, gurgle, beep, beep," or you cut one of them, and they bleed green slime.

Sometimes, he was the alien, afraid to cut himself, for fear of bleeding pea soup. Sometimes, when he talked, it came out, "Gurgle, gurgle, beep, beep," or just, "Gurg, gurg, bee, bee," or even, "Guh, guh, buh, buh."

He muddled through and did what he did, and when he was in college, he thought he might learn something. He thought the people there knew something he didn't, but if they did, they kept it a secret. It was the same damned secret society again. Now, here he was, on his own, with no stamp on him. College had turned out to have been great but nearly useless. At least he knew Marshall, and Marshall said, "Don't let it get you down. Put one foot in front of the other."

And watch out for the hole in the middle of the barnyard. And pray you don't roll out of bed the wrong way.

"Jake. Jake. It's time to get up. Jake? Jake? That's funny. He was here a minute ago."

Half Past Kissing Time

Once, when he was a kid, he said to his dad, "Hey, Dad, what time is it?" and his dad said, "It's half past kissing time, time to kiss again."

He loved that. He loved it that it was time to kiss, even when it wasn't kissing time. It was even time to kiss, when it was only half past kissing time. He wondered what happened when it was kissing time. Half past kissing time was like a reminder to kiss. It had been kissing time a while ago, and it would be kissing time again, and lest we forget, it's now half past kissing time. And you don't have to wait for kissing time to come around again, you can just go ahead and kiss. He didn't ask what it meant. He didn't find out what time it was. It was typical of his life. Maybe it was typical of all life. It wasn't important what clock-time it was. It was important what other time it was.

His dad didn't tell Jake what was going on, but he left a trail of crumbs. He dropped hints like a broken piece of mirror, a torn page from a book, a part of a scribbled list, a piece of a map, a faded photograph, a phone number with no name attached, a box of broken car parts, half of a hundred dollar bill, a swat on the butt that was almost a pat on the back, a grin that could be interpreted several ways, and advice that was drowned out by the passing traffic. He kept waiting for the rest of the sentence. Then, it was too late. It was time to head, on his own. The wagon train was leaving. His dad was nowhere in sight. At the last minute, his dad leaned out of the upstairs window of the saloon and shouted something.

"What? What did he say?"

There was too much commotion. His old man's head had disappeared. It was time to go. On the long trip west, he thought about his father's words. What did he say exactly?

"I love you, my boy, you'll do well," or was it, "I know you're a fool, I'll see you in hell."

As time passed, he wondered if he'd said anything at all. Maybe he was just laughing. It was great, heading out west. It was new and exciting, but he was going to have to learn it as he went along. Oh, well, jump in the horseshit and try to find the pony. No time like the present. It was like a scavenger hunt. Shake the tree and see what falls out. When he was a boy, his father took him out to the end of the dock and threw him in. He learned how to swim, but he also learned not to trust his father. He was a good swimmer, but there were a few coaches he wasn't too fond of. And sometimes, the water

had a bitter taste he could choke on. He was a good swimmer, and his strokes were strong and smooth, but he had mixed feelings about water. Swimming pools had become like race tracks. Lakes and rivers felt like the home of snakes and fish with teeth. He was born on the Mississippi River, but the river towns had their industrial backs to the river, squatting down, shitting in the river, and looking the other way.

His dad told him he tried to swim across the Mississippi when he was young, but halfway across, he got tired, so he turned around and swam back. Jake laughed at the story, but he believed it, nonetheless. If he could imagine it, it seemed to stay in his mental picture gallery. When Jake was a kid, there had been a nickel ferry across the river from Rock Island to Davenport, Iowa and back again. For that same nickel, you could ride free all day, if you didn't get off. He didn't do that. He could have, and that was almost the same thing. By the time he was twenty, the river was banked in cement. It was a commercial highway for barges, and the levee in downtown Rock Island had become one huge parking lot. The Huck Finn in him was outraged, but it was no use arguing. The deed was done.

Still, at night, by the locks between Arsenal Island (the original Rock island) and Davenport, Iowa, he could watch one section of the railroad/ highway bridge turn parallel to the river. He could listen to the horns and bells. He could look at the lights glistening on the water. He could smell and taste the night. He could walk across the river at the Arsenal Bridge. At the edge of the locks, stood the original Fort Armstrong, or a reasonable facsimile of a small guardhouse. The river was still the Mississippi. The Missus Sloppy, as his dad called it. It was one of the Great Rivers of the World, and it barely tolerated the dams and levees. If it got to feeling like it, it could rise up and wipe out all the weak attempts to control it. The Army Corps of Engineers, the Chamber of Commerce, and the National Guard would have a helluva time putting Humpty-Dumpty back together again. Maybe that was why you had better kiss again, even though it was only half past. You never know what's going to happen. You could get so busy worrying about everything, you'd forget to kiss, and then where would you be?

The Round Lady

Jenny McGregor graduated from college, but Jake didn't attend the ceremonies, for several reasons, none of which were spoken. The previous fall, when he was in graduate school, only sixty miles from her, he'd gone back to visit her on weekends. The weekend visits followed a pattern. They'd get used to each other on Saturday, have a fight that night, make love on Sunday afternoon, and he'd travel back to Iowa City, that night. He'd never been steady with anyone, in the way he was with her, so he assumed he was learning a universal pattern of pre-married couples.

Every difficulty with her added to, rather than detracted from, his determination to solve the riddle of relationships. But it took a toll to wrangle with her. One night, visiting his old campus, where he spent four years, and which he left for other climes, a girl in Jenny's class mistook him for a senior. It was the excuse he needed. He stopped visiting. He believed he stopped visiting his old college out of embarrassment, but the scene with Jenny had not changed or improved.

It was his pattern, in any situation, to struggle, until the struggle proved fruitless. Then, without resolution, he would resolutely separate himself from the struggle. She didn't ask him to come to her graduation, and he didn't volunteer. Marriage was only three months away, and that would be ceremony enough for one summer. His old college roommate, Jim Malone, or Jim Alone, as Jake called him, graduated at the same time. Jake's brother Mike came home from school, and his old buddy Andy came home from college, too. Jim stopped in Rock Island, on his way to Chicago, and the four of them met at Jake's new cupola apartment, and they got juiced.

It was a gorgeous summer Saturday night. The next night, a policeman came to Jake's door and registered a complaint that a neighbor had seen someone masturbating in the cupola the night before. Jake pled innocent, and the cop went away. Jake never figured out who it was who slapped the sausage in the moonlight. He had been known to whack his wang on occasion, but discretion was the extent of his valor. He suspected his brother, but then, don't we all? And, maybe, it was no one.

One of the sights from his cupola had been the 'round lady' in the apartment next door, across the wide lawn between the buildings. He was sitting in the cupola one night after dark. He looked across the open yard, and he saw a heavy-set woman undressing. She took off her dress, then her slip, then her industrial strength bra, and then her voluminous panties. To him, it was more remarkable than erotic. She was as

fully round as a Henry Moore statue or a Brancusi floating woman. Everything about her was round. The most remarkable line ran from the small of her back, over and around her giant buttocks, between her legs, across and over her great belly to her rib-cage, buried and overlaid by massive breasts. She stood in the window, sideways. To his painter's eye, it was a perfect vision of curve and line. It had been a moment, never duplicated, that caught his breath. It couldn't have been interrupted by anything as frantic or as mundane as masturbation. Perhaps what she'd seen, or wished she'd seen, was what her own exhibition demanded as compensation.

There's a certain kind of shortsightedness in youth that focuses energy well, when it's focused, that is. It ignores what it doesn't care to dwell on. He thought little of the round lady except as an event in his sight. Because he didn't believe it was true that he'd been masturbating in his cupola that Saturday night, he easily convinced the cop and promptly forgot the whole business.

It was a night for the four of them. They laughed and schemed, they told stories and jokes, they compared college experiences, they made up stupid shit, they drank, and they smoked cigarettes. Jake, at 23, was the oldest. Jim was 22, Andy was 21, and Mike was 20. At one point in the evening, Andy and Jake were pissing in the tiny bathroom across the hall. Jake was stopped by a wave of sobriety. He invited Andy to the wedding, and then he said, "I'm supposed to get married in August, and I don't know…"

"Jeez, Jake, do you love her?"

"I don't know. I guess so. I guess I do. I guess I love her."

"If you love her, then great."

"Yeah, I guess so."

He felt better. To come that close to admitting love was energizing. It was startling. It opened a tiny door in his heart, just a crack, and he felt a lot better. He went back to the party with renewed fervor. That night they decided to become a famous rock and roll band. They could see the tower of the TV/radio station from the cupola. It had its name emblazoned in giant, vertical red letters. **W H B F**. Mike said they could name themselves **WHBF** and get some free advertising. They could call themselves **W**alter, **H**arry, **B**ob, and **F**red.

Then Jake came up with the name, *Garter Snake and the Sidewinders*. They liked that name. Jake would be Garter Snake. It seemed appropriate. He'd been frightened by a garter snake, when he was two years old, so adopting the name felt like the perfect

irony. They decided to head out. A famous rock and roll band has to eat. They would do everything a rock and roll band did, except play music. They tried out a couple of songs, and Mike, Andy, and Jim were all decent musicians, but Jake was sure he couldn't sing, so it was best to keep the fantasy from slipping dangerously close to reality. They tripped downtown to Ricardo's Taco House. Ricardo's tacos were becoming as famous as Garter Snake and the Sidewinders pretended to be. The four boisterous young men piled into a booth and prepared to consume some tacos, burritos, and enchiladas. The waitress who appeared was strikingly attractive. She was a teenage Chicana of high energy and dark beauty. She readily told them her name was Rosa, but everyone called her Rosie. She asked them what their names were.

"Walter, Harry, Bob, and Fred," they said.

Then Jake said, "I'm Garter Snake and these are the Sidewinders. Actually, that's Mike, Andy, Jim, and I'm Jake."

Jake was in love. He was infatuated. He was gaga. She was as perfect a foil for his fiancée's All-American whiteness as he could have found if he was looking for it. His dad loved all things Mexican. He loved Mexican food, and he could even pronounce a few words in Spanish. His dad took the family to Ricardo's, back when it seemed only Mexicans ate Mexican food. There was a large Mexican-American population in East Moline, where Ricardo got his start in the taco business. Jake's dad had a history fraught with romance, when it came to things Mexican.

He was the strapping young driver on a bus tour of Mexico, taken by the Black Hawk Hiking Club of Rock Island, back in the early 30s. He once had dreams of being a geologist in South America. For Jake to take up with a Chicana (or Mexican, as they were called) would have fulfilled his father's fantasy. To take up with a Chicana and then marry a hard edge white girl would be to carry on the family tradition. Legend had it his father, driving the tour bus, (like the big wooden bus in 'It Happened One Night') picked up a Mexican girl in one town and took her to another town, along with a busload of hearty, overweight, semi-wealthy American tourists. The girl had a baby with her. She was in flight, or so it seemed. Jake's dad had rescued her and delivered her to her people. He'd fallen hard for the girl, but of course he did nothing about it, and soon, he was buried in a life of expectations and obligations, surfacing occasionally with a taco in his hand, the hottest hot sauce, and the Spanish word for fork on his lips.

Rosie had eyes for Jake, but she had eyes for all the guys, and they all had eyes for her. It was that kind of overheated night. The guys clowned, and she went about her

work under the scolding eyes of the other workers. He took pleasure in watching her work. It helped him judge her, better than it would if he saw her on the street or at a party. It proved she was real, in some way that reassured him. Rosie had flirty eyes, and her flirtations ran through him like electricity.

Something was up. He knew where she worked. She had paid attention to him. It was *The Summer Before The Rest of His Life*. Sometimes, the things we end up regretting may not be the things we imagine them to be. The boys cranked up the fantasy machine and busted out of Ricardo's laughing about their libidos. Libidos on Parade. They wandered across the Arsenal Bridge, all the way to the Iowa side. They closed out the evening's festivities standing in a row on the bridge approach, welcoming the oncoming traffic. They posed like introducers on a stage. First, one would bow and execute a wide sweep with one arm. Then the other one would repeat the gesture. Then, the next. Then, the last. The drivers in the cars looked at the four playful boys on the verge of manhood, and shook their heads. The times they were a-changin'. Such lighthearted frivolity was due for a comeuppance, a rude awakening, or a day in court.

It was a bachelor party, sort of. It was the last meeting of The Boy's Club. It was fast approaching time to put away childish things, which is when childish things take on renewed luster. He was going through the toys in his drawer, before packing them away. He was holding some things up to the light, and some he was locking away. Childlike and childish aren't the same, and the baby and the bathwater aren't the same. Maybe he was getting ready to throw out the baby and keep the bathwater. The bathwater had its virtues. It was warm and it wasn't too dirty. The baby had its drawbacks, too. It was demanding. It required attention and love. Ah, love. It was The Summer of Love. It came two years early, according to Time Magazine. Right on time, for Jake Axene.

The Big River

Monday morning it drizzled, after 24 hours of heavy rain. Several crews were dispatched to the street sloping west from the East Moline State Hospital. When Marshall pulled up at the job site, Harold Widmer was already busy opening up the hole with his backhoe. Harold was an artist with a backhoe. He could untie your shoelaces with it. He could peel back layers of an onion. It was a pleasure to watch him work. For most of an hour, nine guys stood by and watched him work. The rain came down, lightly and slowly, like a heavy, sporadic mist. It felt peaceful. It reminded Jake of going to visit his Grandma's house in Illinois, when he was a kid in Nebraska.

Grandma's house was where he felt the most peaceful. She doted on him, as she did on everyone else. She saved pennies in a jar for him and Mike. There was a grocery store on the corner to spend the pennies in, and a snack-bar around the corner with a pinball machine, and there was a Dairy Queen only a block and a half away. There was a guy who lived across the street from Grandma's who worked as the night manager at the Illini Theater. He brought home cardboard boxes full of popcorn. It was the popcorn left at the end of the night, every night. He stacked the boxes in his basement, and he gave some to Jake and Mike.

"Here, boys, take all you want," he said.

It was a popcorn goldmine, an endless supply, and it was good popcorn, even if it wasn't hot, but the boys didn't care. They sat in front of the TV, with a cardboard box full of popcorn, and Grandma made sure they were happy. Their mother had no power in Grandma's house. That little old woman, cooking and cleaning all day, made life feel good. It was easy to run errands for her and help her around the house.

It rains a lot in the early summer in the Mississippi River Valley, and his memories of visiting Grandma were linked to the rain. Her house was warm and nurturing, and it rained, warm and nurturing. The rain that fell on the Gas Company crews, that Monday morning, made him feel peaceful, like a happy child. It was a wonderful feeling. Whenever such a feeling would come to him, he would search around for the reason for it. He thought about the girl he met. He thought about his friends. He thought about his marriage and teaching school in California. He thought about not living at home, and he thought about his own apartment. He thought about the rain, and he looked off down the street. It was a half a dozen blocks to the Big River.

Where they were, out at the end of East Moline, where the river first curves west on its way south, there were no levees. The shoreline was fluid and swampy, and the old river showed its true character. In the great long ago, it was the land the river crossed when it flooded, before the dams were built to control its path. Instead of turning west, it would flood the land and run due south, until it connected with the Rock River that ran back to the old Mississippi River bed. In the old days, when the river flooded, it ran over, around, and past the cities, to the south, before there were any cities, back when Chief Blackhawk stood on the bluffs and blessed all he surveyed. Jake looked up the hill to the state hospital, where they locked up all the local loonies. It was rumored that the best marijuana in six states grew wild behind the State Hospital.

What a great job. Nine guys standing around a hole, while one guy tried to uncover a gas leak. Harold had opened a hole, six feet across, six feet wide, and six feet deep. What he had uncovered, in the search for gas pipes or a gas main, was an ancient line of sewer pipes. They were terra cotta sections, fitted one over the next, many, many years before. Harold was stripping layers of soil from the bottom of the hole, like pulling back blankets from a bed. Then, the tip of one of the prongs on his scoop caught the lip of one of the overlapping sewer sections, and all of a sudden there was a hole in the earth. Ten men saw a tiny River Styx and a rushing flow of sewage. Harold lifted the top off the sewer, like the lid off a coffin, like the top off a shoebox, like a geologist's cross-sectional drawing in the National Geographic Magazine.

"Oh, fuck," Harold said.

He shut off the motor on his backhoe. Without the motor running, and with no one talking, the rushing of the underground river was a noisy proclamation of Harold's error. Now they were in for it. Harold sat on his backhoe and stared. Nine men stood around the hole and stared. Finally, Walt Meyer said something.

"She shot her wad," he said.

Don Benzing said, "She shot her wad, all right."

Byron Smoot said, softly, "She sure shot her wad, this time."

Walt turned to Delbert Cleary, his assistant, and said, "Better go call Trackenburg. Tell him she shot her wad."

It was a moment as pure as any he had ever witnessed, a moment of sweet joy. Ten helpless men were in total union, in as simple a world as he could imagine. It was a world at peace. The shit flowed relentlessly in its terra cotta riverbanks. Harold couldn't stop it. Marshall couldn't stop it. Jake couldn't stop it and didn't want to.

They went back to the shop. It was up to the Water Department to fix the mess. Marshall sang.

You got to walk that lonesome valley.
You got to walk it by yourself.
Aint nobody here can walk it for you.
You got to walk that lonesome valley by yourself.

He let Jake sing along. Even Jerry Waffle sang a little, scraping and scratching along, a sound like a kid dragging a wooden duck across a cement floor on its side. The same kind of wooden duck Jake played with at his Grandma's house, in the rain, when he was real little and real happy.

The addiction to love is like the weather. Everybody talks about it, including the music, book, movie, TV, and deodorant industries, but nobody does anything about it, except the advice industry, but that's just more talk. Addictions are simple. One tries to fill a vacuum. Unfortunately, vacuums are like black holes. They consume the object intended to fill them. And they grow, like an insatiable beast, demanding more and more. He needed to be loved. He mistook his need to be loved for the need to love. More precisely, the compulsion seems to satisfy the hunger, as if wanting to eat was somehow filling. Once the compulsion is triggered, it feeds on itself and everything around it. He seemed to be just fine by himself, in himself, but let one drop of desire cross his thoughts, and he was off to the races.

The feelings he had for Jenny were tempered, or mixed, or muddled, by the unconscious need for a wife, to fulfill his social contract, signed in the dark, many years before he knew anything about anything. Social contracts are like movie contracts offered to beautiful girls by sleazy men pretending to be producers. They're like professional sports contracts, offered with a tempting amount of cash, up front, and a lifetime of obligation in the small print. It was the contract offered him when he was a child.

"Here, boy, sign this. It's the best thing you'll ever do. Do what this contract requires, and you'll receive success and happiness beyond your wildest dreams. Everything will be taken care of, and you'll never have to think of a thing again."

Even when he didn't do what he was told, he was still under contract. Without breaking the contract and creating a new one, he was only squabbling over the details. The contract was an agreement that he would be the pursuer, and the prize would always be out of his reach. He would be given pieces of the prize, or copies of the prize, or substitutes for the prize. It was always exciting but never fulfilling. He would believe it was always possible, if only he tried harder, or tried another way, to get the prize. The prize was called love, and it meant acceptance.

When he thought about Jenny, he didn't think about love. He thought about sex, sometimes, because she had the most beautiful breasts he'd ever seen, but his brain went into automatic social contract. He had agreed to become married, as part of his duties. He had agreed to take a socially acceptable job, as part of his duties. He had agreed to the terms of adulthood. Adulthood was an ocean to cross, marriage was the

boat, and a job was the motor. He had signed the papers. His name was on the dotted line, written about the time he learned to say his name.

When he thought about Rosie, he became excited. It was, or it seemed to be, the excitement of passion. It was, instead, the passion of excitement. It seemed like an alternative to the passionless social contract, but it wasn't. It was the carrot, held out as an alternative to the stick. It didn't un-harness the cart. It was a good-looking carrot, and every nibble he had of the carrot of passion convinced him of the need for more carrots in this carrot-poor world. He was a painter of carrots, a carrot poet, a carrot dramatist, a singer of *The Lost Carrot Blues*. In college, there was one question on the standard personality profile that pertained to God. It read, "Do you believe that a power greater than yourself is controlling your life?" If he said, "God," he passed the test. But if he said, "Roger the Carrot," he was certifiably insane, and he couldn't drive heavy equipment for the state.

It was another of those moments of true insight that went a-glimmering. He laughed as he hung up his carrot poster and recited his carrot prayers. He thought the personality profile was a tool of oppression, when it had been a gift of wisdom. The secret to his dilemma was not in the choices but in the chooser. He thought he was the driver of the cart when he was the horse, and even horses know a bad carrot when they taste one.

Mr. Snake

A strong young man, with a bottle in his hand, is doubly dangerous to his own best interest in his own best life. When Jake climbed the stairs to his cupola nest, he entered it as an unconscious spiritual transmitter. When he came back down again, he was another kind of being. He went aloft like a bird and descended like a reptile. By the time he descended, he'd forgotten his ascent. He would sit quietly and breathe deeply. He would begin whatever drinking he had chosen. The pure surge of sense and feeling was sweet. It would surge in him, deepen in his body, and his eyes would become hooded. He would gradually lose the sense of the world outside him and take up the sense of the world within, now colored and scented by alcohol. He was delightfully poisoned.

It was a tricked drop from spirit to the body, but it was magical to him. The lesson he wanted it to teach him was to let spirit into the body. It was a clever ruse that nearly managed the trick. It was alchemy meant to turn his leaden body to golden spirit, but the fool's gold of his nights was more than he expected.

It was Wednesday night. He decided to go see Rosa. He strode out the door of his apartment, a walking whirlwind of energies, with a calm eye at the center, born from the neutral state of his numbed expectations. He took a booth in Ricardo's and ordered. She waited on him. She smiled.

"Where are your friends?" she asked.

"One went to Chicago, one was my brother, and the other one, I don't know, he's around, I suppose. How are you doin', tonight?"

"I'm doing better. Hey, you guys were pretty crazy the other night."

"We were celebrating Jim's graduation. Are you in school?"

"I'm going to Western, next fall, I hope."

"What're you going to study?"

"I don't know. Not tacos and burritos, that's for sure."

She laughed at her joke. He smiled and looked in her eyes. She was shy. He could see it. Even though her manner was bold. She strutted and posed, stuck out her tongue, shrugged, waved her hands, and she was loud. He gave Rosa his order. She turned and yelled it at the cook. Jake enjoyed watching a beautiful girl act so ordinary. There were only a few customers in the place on a weeknight. He figured he was five years older than she was, but the energy he felt seemed to bond him with her, or with anything else

he turned toward. She picked up the combo plate and delivered it to him. She left him to eat. He looked embraces at her, while he ate, while she worked. She came back to the table.

"Hey, you want hot sauce? I can get you all the hot sauce you want."

"I have enough hot sauce, already, but I'm gonna need a doggie bag for these beans."

He was kidding. He smiled at the image, and he smiled at her. She started away and then turned back.

"That's a load of shit," she said.

"Exactly," he said and then he got the joke.

Then, she got her own accidental joke and started laughing, loud and girlish. She waved at him and ran back to tell her joke to the cook. The cook laughed and started saying it over and over.

"Yeah, that's a load of shit. *A Doggie Bag of Beans*. That's a shit-load of beans." The cook was amusing himself with the image.

Rosie brought Jake the check.

"Here's your check," she said. "You can pay here or the register."

"I'll pay here," he said, and he gave her a five for a $2.65 meal.

"Keep the change," he said.

It was a good tip and she was impressed. He probably doubled her hourly wage.

"Come back, again," she said, and her eyes got real specific.

"Rosa, if I may be so bold, would you like to come to a party at my place on Saturday night?"

"Is your band going to play?"

"We don't play. We're an air band. Like air guitar. We're an air band. But we're hot. We're a hot air band."

"Is your 'air band' going to be there?"

"Some of it, yeah. Bring a friend."

"I will, if my 'friend' feels like it."

"Here's the address."

"Thanks, Mr. Snake. Maybe me and my friend will be there."

"Oh, please, call me Garter."

He left. He got out on the street. He felt like Mr. Snake. In the Grass. He felt great. When he got home, he went up in the cupola. It was cold. He pulled the windows

shut. A wind had come up off the river. He got in bed and pulled the covers up. He thought about Jenny in her parents' house in Iowa. He couldn't get a feeling about it. It was a mild disturbance on the distant horizon.

Best Shoes in the World

Friday night, the day before the party, he went across the river to Andy's place. Andy lived in a mostly empty section of a downtown building, above a department store in Davenport. There were rooms for rent on the second and third floors, and there was an elevator that still had an operator. He was an old man who seemed to have been left behind when the previous tenants had vacated. Andy was a painter. He took the space as a live-in studio. That weekend, he arranged to get some grass, marijuana, weed. It was his first, but there was a problem. The guy who promised it to him never showed up. A couple of other guys and a girl were coming to join them for their first smoke-in. Andy was barefoot. It was a prerequisite for him. It was the badge of the Mississippi River Artist.

The old man, who sat in the elevator and passed for a night watchman, said, "Howdy, boys."

"How'ya doin', Nate? This is my friend Jake."

"Howdy, Jake."

"Howdy, Nate."

Nate looked down at both sets of their bare feet.

"Ah," he said, "bare feet, the best shoes in the world, never wear out."

He laughed. Jake and Andy smiled. It was so perfectly picturesque. Jake couldn't believe his life. His friend was an artist who lived in a bohemian loft above a department store, with an elevator and an old guy named Nate, who made jokes about bare feet.

They went into Andy's apartment, if you could call it that. It was post-Beatnik, pre-Hippie, artist pad. Jake sat in the window at the corner above the neon sign that blinked the store's name. MODE-O-DAY MODE-O-DAY MODE-O-DAY MODE-O-DAY MODE-O-DAY. He watched the traffic and the people walking the wide streets of George Babbitt's America. He felt the hot, warm, cool, summertime, downtown, riverside air. They were two blocks from the river, on the Iowa side.

"I've got an idea," Andy said.

He took out a pack of unfiltered Camels and began breaking open the cigarettes. He dumped the tobacco onto a tray he got from Frank's Italian Pizza Parlor in East Moline. They amassed a pile of tobacco. They laid Andy's pack of rolling papers and a box of matches alongside the pile.

When the three younger felons arrived, Andy told them he didn't know how good the weed was, but he hoped it was high grade. The air hung thick with anticipation. They rolled fat joints, lit them, and passed them around the closed circle of criminal conspirators. Everybody got high. Probably from deep inhaling unfiltered Camel tobacco and the power of suggestion.

"This is good shit, man."

"Oh, man, I'm flyin'."

They said stupid things and laughed themselves silly. Even Jake got high. But Jake was born high. The wine that Andy poured didn't hurt the illusion, either. In the course of it, a friend of Andy's showed up, a guy who'd been to school with Andy and Mike. Dave Sturvald had just come home, on leave, from a tour of duty in Vietnam. It was 1965, and Vietnam was still a dirty little war being fought between strangers, a long way away. Dave had volunteered. Andy was deferred, as a student, and he was anti-war by nature. Jake was scheduled to get married and teach. Both conditions were solid deferments, but right then, he was vulnerable. He was between the deferment he had as a student in Art School and the ones he would qualify for, in a few months. It hadn't occurred to him to notify anyone of his naked ass hanging out in the wind.

He thought seriously about the Peace Corps, to the point of being accepted for service in Chile and Cameroon. He considered moving to Canada in protest. He thought about joining the Marines, just to show those bastards he was as much a hardass as they were. He thought about the potential experience fighting in a war, ala Ernest Hemingway, but Peace and War were remote choices, beyond the immediate and the necessary. He tried to become clear about his opinions as an opponent of the war, but it wasn't easy, until he realized, one day, it wasn't his job, as potential cannon fodder, to convince President Johnson of the virtues of war. It was LBJ's job to convince him, and the president never sealed the deal. He didn't feel any prejudice toward Dave Sturvald. Dave's life was his, and Jake was curious about his experience. It was worth listening, and almost fun, as Dave told his story.

It was a circle of talk, pro and con, about the war. Dave was surprised anyone was against it. Dave knew Andy was an oddball, so his pacifism didn't surprise him. Helped by the wine, he plunged ahead, as a man who'd been adventuring, telling tales of his remarkable adventures.

"It's great," he said to the serious faces looking at him. "We play games. We have a great game. Say we don't engage enemy fire. So we circle, until we find a farmer with

his water buffalo, and we scare off the farmer with a little close range fire. Then we take turns hitting the buffalo, trying to see how many hits he'll take, before he goes down. It's great, man. Those fucking water buffaloes are tough, man. Sometimes, one of them will take a dozen hits before his knees buckle, and then they fall over, splat. Shit, they hit the rice paddy, and the farmer runs around screaming about his damn water buffalo. Then, maybe, one of the gunners will pop the old man. You know, take him out. It's incredible. Jesus, it's fucking incredible."

Dave was gone, off in a thick fantastical goo of his own romantic beliefs. He looked up, and everyone was quiet.

"Holy shit, Dave," Jake said.

"That's fucking disgusting, Dave," Andy said. "Jesus Christ."

The three younger ones just sat and stared. They were in the presence of their elders.

"They're just gooks, man, that's all," Dave said, incredulous.

"Gooks?" Andy said, "There's no gooks. You're talking about people. How'd you like a helicopter gunship flying around your backyard shooting up your old man and laughing about it?"

"Well, shit, I don't know. That's just what we do. It's a war."

"It sucks, Dave," said Jake, "It's a damn, fucking, stupid war."

"Well, shit, I never thought about it. It's just what we do, that's all."

Blind Street

Saturday morning, he and Andy went scouting locations for Blind Street. It was the name for the coffee house, gallery, nightclub, theater, dance hall they had dreamed up. They wanted to find a place where they could put on plays, feature singers and bands, have dancing, do readings, show paintings, sell and drink beer and wine. They wanted an all-purpose space they could use for all the things they enjoyed. Moline was no good as a location. It was hopelessly middle-class. Davenport was too big. Rock Island seemed to make sense, because it was rundown and funky. And, the previous summer, Jerry Lee Lewis had played the Red Rooster, downtown. They drove to a favorite spot of theirs, a tiny music store in the ghetto, the so-called ghetto, or as Daryll Winters called it, the Grotto. Daryll was a black guy Jake knew when he worked in the factory. Daryll said he didn't get what all the talk about grottos was. He said he didn't live in no damn grotto.

The ghetto in Rock Island consisted of a small part of the west end of town, residential streets and a few corner stores. One store was a record shop called 'The Record Shop'. All the music in The Record Shop was Black. Negro. Colored. What had been called Race Records. It was an orgy of blues, black country, rhythm and blues, soul, gospel, and jazz. It was still amazing to Jake and Andy that so much music could exist that nobody knew about. Nobody who was white, that is. Andy picked up an album by the Preservation Hall Jazz Band and an album of Jelly Roll Morton's early piano blues. Jake got a Blind Willie McTell album and one of Snooks Eaglin that he'd been looking for. Going back to Jake's place, they passed a corner building that made them both shout.

"Stop! That's it!

"Yeah, let's check it out."

They checked it out. They looked in the dusty windows the best they could, and they went around back. It looked good. It was a long, fairly wide, commercial space. It had hardwood floors, great for dancing, and high walls, great for hanging pictures. There wasn't any 'For Rent' sign, but there was a phone number and a name.

FOR INFORMATION
PLEASE CALL SHELDON McHUGH
ATTORNEY AT LAW 285-5004

They went to the nearest phone and called. They got a secretary, who went away and came back. "Are you free this afternoon? Mr. McHugh will see you at 1:15."

"Sure, that'd be fine. What's the address?"

The secretary gave Andy the address. It was almost magical. At 1:15, the two of them were standing in the outer office of Sheldon McHugh, attorney at law. At 1:20, he opened his door, took a look at them, and said, "Come on in, boys."

It was a plain, square room with several tables covered with papers, walls lined with book shelves, and a big desk, with a big man sitting behind it. Sheldon McHugh was a big man who got that way by his own efforts.

"My secretary tells me you're interested in renting the property at 7th and 4th. Is that right?"

"Yes, sir, we are," said Andy.

"Yes, sir, that's right," said Jake.

The word 'sir' came easily to both of them. They were excited. It was an idea they both loved. They really and truly wanted to rent the space at the corner of 7th Street and 4th Avenue.

"Well, I've spoken to the owner, and he can meet us there for a little con-fab. Is that all right with you boys?"

"Sure."

"You bet."

"Before we go over there, let me ask you, what exactly do you want to use the space for?"

They eagerly told him their plan. They were convinced it was a good plan. It was easy to be enthusiastic about it. They thought they needed to tone themselves down and appear more businesslike, but they were young longhairs in jeans, and McHugh was a lawyer in a suit, even if it was a suit that had taken on a life of its own.

"That's a pretty ambitious idea you have there. What kind of clientele are you thinking about."

"We expect, uh, I don't know for sure," Andy stammered.

"It'd be people who like what we have to offer," Jake jumped in. "It'd be people who like poetry and the arts. People who go out to see plays."

"Hmmm," McHugh swiveled in his swivel chair and mused, with the tip of his pen at his lips. "And people who like music and dancing."

"And chess, too," Andy said. "We're going to have chess boards, and magazines and books, too."

"Well, let's get on over there. You don't mind following me, do you?" It was only a few blocks from McHugh's downtown office to the building. When they got there, there was a man waiting. He and McHugh went off to the side and talked. Andy and Jake went in the open door. They were right. It was perfect. They found a kitchen, restrooms, back door, and there was a bar against one wall. They could paint the place and fix it up. Andy was a pretty fair carpenter. They could do it.

Sheldon McHugh introduced them to Orvid Johannson, the owner, who was a decidedly sullen and grumpy man. He didn't seem very interested, for a man who had a rundown building in a rundown town on the edge of the grotto, who was about to rent it to a couple of fairly clean-cut, intelligent, and semi-upstanding white guys, and start making money off it. It was obvious it had been sitting idle for a long time. They went to the basement to check it out. Then the story turned. McHugh and Orvid Johannson went over to the side and came back.

"Listen, boys," McHugh said, "This place isn't going to work out for you. It's just not built for your needs. The joists are too far apart, for example. The building wouldn't be able to support the weight. It probably wouldn't pass the inspection."

"What?" Andy said, startled. "What are you talking about? The joists are eighteen inches apart. That's closer than standard. They're not too far apart."

Orvid Johannson broke in. "The damn joists are too far apart. That's all there is to it. Forget it. Just forget it."

"What's the problem?" Jake asked. "It's obvious this place used to be a bar. It must have been OK, then. Why isn't it OK, now?"

McHugh was becoming impatient.

"Take my word for it. The kind of crowd you're talking about, well, the floor wouldn't take it. It's all over, boys. I'm real sorry. You got a nice idea there. I'm afraid this isn't the building you're looking for. I'm real sorry. I tell you what. If I hear of a better place, I'll let you know. Is that all right with you boys?"

"But this place is perfect," Andy said. "And there's nothing wrong with the damn joists."

"I'm leaving. I've got work to do," Orvid Johannson said.

He seemed disappointed, like a guy who just turned down free money, for no good reason. Everything seemed out of sync. It didn't make any sense. But there was

nothing they could do about it. Later, in the cupola, they were still trying to figure out what had just happened.

"It's fishy," Andy said. "Something stinks about this whole thing. They were going to go for it, and then they came up with the bit about the fucking joists."

"Shit. Jesus, Andy. We'll keep looking. It's only one building."

"I don't know, Jake. I got the feeling it wouldn't matter what we found. They'd make sure we didn't get it."

"How could they do that? They don't own every building in Rock Island."

"They don't, but somebody does. I swear there's something fishy going on."

They were quiet for a time. All of a sudden, it felt hopeless. The big plans seemed to evaporate before their eyes.

"Anyway," Jake said, "Why don't you come over tonight? That waitress, Rosie, is coming over with a friend. We could hang out and have some fun."

"Yeah," Andy added, sardonically, "a couple of big time coffee house owners, entertaining guests in their penthouse, overlooking the bustling city."

"Blind Street lives!" Jake declared.

"Blind Street lives!!" Andy echoed, with more energy than conviction.

A Can of Worms

Why was he pulling this little charade of a party? He had a fin-ancy, sitting up in Waterloo, waiting for him at the alter-ation, and here he was flinging open the door to romance and danger with a hot tamale from souse of ze border.

Let's analyze that paragraph, so full of Jakeese. One route to the truth is through the stream of unconsciousness that reveals those who use humor as camouflage with holes in it.

Take fin-ancy. Besides being a nervous fish, his future wife was financially of another species than he was. Not that he expected to come into any of it, but he liked basking into the aura of their wealth. They had a big house and an airplane, they owned farms and businesses, and they had access to the experiences that money provides. He didn't know any of that when he met her, but the more he learned, the more he liked it. He enjoyed the ambiance of their ease, as if it came naturally to him. He liked their big Chrysler inboard motorboat on the Cedar River that ran by their cabin. He liked the bounty of their kitchen and the books, the stacks of magazines, and the rooms full of any kind of chair you might imagine. It was a world of ease, in which you could indulge your thoughts and curiosities without demand or threat.

His future father-in-law had given him the use of his darkroom, and he jumped at the opportunity to explore the art of developing. It was a gift of opportunity to be in the world of people for whom money was not a weapon of control and punishment, or a tool of persuasion and reward, at least as far as he was concerned. Both of his parents had come from near poverty, through the Depression, and even though they were doing very well, their attitude about money was oppressive.

Back to the opening paragraph. His sense of Jenny coming from the city of Waterloo was appropriate. Waterloo meant downfall for Napoleon, and alteration meant forced change. The attractions of his future wife were not enough to keep away the fears he had about marriage. His sense of his parents' marriage was of dreaded compromise, in which both of them gave themselves up and became less. Their marriage was less than the sum of its parts. Despite his future in-law's affluence, or because of it, or irrelevant to it, Jenny's parents were just as disturbing. Jenny's mother seemed to live in bed, with a back brace, a stack of old Saturday Reviews, a bottle of vodka, and a tray full of pills. Her father was the nicest, dullest man he'd ever met. No longer afraid of his

wife, he must have gone to a do-it-yourself lobotomy clinic. On the other hand, he was a lawyer, a pilot, and a musician. Very confusing; the whole bunch.

Jake had written a good-natured letter to Jenny's brother, Daniel, in which he said their mother was 'crazy'. Her mother opened the letter, and she was outraged. It was odd that she could open her son's mail, but it was odder that she was still civil to Jake, afterward. He had a lot to learn about tight-knit circles of insanity, but he was game to play. It was a great adventure to be drawn into a Eugene O'Neill kind of family, right out of the world of Classical American Literary Madness. They were a long day's journey into the pit of raw material, for whatever it was he was becoming. His family seemed tame by comparison. His family's insanity was suppressed and insidious. It was less accessible, less comprehensible. Jenny's family was volatile and dramatic. Her father was dull, but he'd been a drunk for years, and Jake sensed there was depth to the still waters of his sobriety. Her mother was like the hostess of a Great Gatsby party gone sour. When she was encased in her shrine of a bedroom, she was like the ancient bride in Dickens' Great Expectations.

Back to the opening paragraph. There was a certain kind of romance in being caught up by Jenny and her family, but it wasn't the romance that Rosa represented. Rosa was dark and exotic, the flirtation of a flight to adventure; a flight from the intriguing entanglement of marriage to Jenny and the McGregor clan. 'Souse' is a dead giveaway. On one hand, he was preparing to dive deeper into the morass of external life, the world of marriage, in-laws, jobs, and family. But his gut and his genitals had obsessions of their own.

Rosa engaged one set of attractions, as much as Jenny engaged another set. When he was drunk, he was pulled in the direction of certain obsessive wants, needs, and desires. When he was sober, that is to say, when he was drunk on social obligation, he was pulled in that direction. The twin dogs at the gate were obligation and obsession. They were equally powerful. Meant to guard his estate, they were both facing toward the house.

Rosa was an exotic beauty, and Jenny had beautifully pristine breasts. These objective appreciations were not merely superficial. His desire for the two women, or girls, since Jenny was barely 21, and Rosa was, maybe, 18, was not merely some male character flaw, but a way for him to come close to something he feared more deeply than anything, and at the same time, remain distant from it. How often he watched his actions, trying to learn from them, when the lesson was not in the details but in the

choice he made before he began the investigation. Still, there was much to learn, and great satisfaction in the details. Even if he was nuts to be flirting with Rosa, it was a perfect night for it.

The Breakfast Nook

He looked up at his mother, who was sitting across from him in the kitchen breakfast nook. It was before he went to school, and in that moment of ancient and eternal memory, he was afraid and alone. He looked at his kid brother, Mickey, and he was afraid for the little kid. He was overcome with a feeling of coldness, of being cold and alone, for a very long time. His mother looked at him, and she said, good-naturedly, "Jake, what's that look all about?"

Inside him, he knew he couldn't tell her he was afraid of her, and that he was afraid he would always feel that way, and that it would never change. So he changed. His face brightened, his eyes widened, and he smiled, a big, gentle, sweet smile, almost broad enough to squeeze out the terror of being a child alone with a terrible awareness of being a child alone.

"There. That's better," his mother said. "You better run along to school. The bell's going to ring soon. Have a good day and do what the teacher tells you. You better take that toast with you. You don't want it to go to waste. Run along. That's a good boy."

All through high school and college, his focus had been male play. He'd been in the world as a male, playing in his life the way boys and men play. His relations with girls had been as a male exploring his male sexuality. He had female friends with whom he shared another side of himself, but he wasn't romantic toward them. They were companions of like, and not of love, as he saw it. In the middle of his senior year in college, he chose a wife, and the safety of his play was shattered. His boundaries were lost.

When he introduced Jenny to his mother, it seemed like he was mixing water and oil. And Rosa was vinegar. They seemed so different, but they made a familiar salad. He was enlisted to solve and placate, to understand and appreciate, to lessen and ameliorate, their fear of men, to be the object of their expectations and their fears, to feel responsible, without ever knowing why. He felt old, guilty, and responsible. The brief freedom of his adolescence was at an end.

By the time Rosa and her friend Beth arrived, he wasn't in a party mood, but he was getting in a mood to party. He blamed the pall that had fallen over him on the failure of Blind Street to materialize. For a few hours, the free male Jake had exulted with dreams of play in the world. His buddy Andy was like an army of reinforcements to his victory, but they had both been disappointed. They lost the battle.

Andy was younger than Jake, and Jake could see in him the younger self in himself. It was the replay of his little brother Mickey. He could see in Mickey what he didn't believe he could have for himself. When Mickey would sit in front of the TV and laugh uproariously at Bugs Bunny and the Little Rascals, Jake would feel better. Sometimes, he'd laugh too, but it had become his habit to cheer up others and wear a mask of serenity. He sat in his cupola apartment and drank his mask. He could shake his sobriety easily. He knew to become the proper host.

Beth was sweet. She was a white girl, almost tiny, who followed the lead of her boisterous friend, Rosa. He invited them in and treated them somewhat formally.

"Good evening, ladies. Welcome to my chateau."

"Thank you," said Beth.

"My God," Rosa said, "What a screwy apartment. Jesus, you got a stairs in the middle of your apartment. God, it's almost all you got. Do you have any wine? Beth and I don't drink no beer."

That was enough for him, "…don't drink no beer."

"Don't talk so good, neither," he thought.

All bets were off. It was time to get stupid. Andy came to the door, right behind them, with a half-gallon of Dago red. It was fun to call it 'Dago red'. He felt guilty in the presence of a Mexican girl, saying Dago, but when he drank, he enjoyed saying the things that made him feel guilty.

"Ah, here's Andy with the Dago red. Ladies, would you care for a glass of fresh I-talian red wine, made fresh daily on our very own premises by genuine I-talians with no better way to wash their feet?"

He stood at the bottom of the stairs, while the two girls sat on the bed. Andy poured the wine. He took them on a finger-pointing tour of his apartment. "Now, there you have, over there, by the wall, in fact, right up against the wall, in fact, flush against the wall, your bookshelf, complete with your various books. And up there is your magic kingdom of looking out and looking down on the world."

"Thanks for the wine," Beth said to Andy.

"The nectar of the gods," Andy said to Beth.

Such was the tenor of the evening, the alto, the bass, and the soprano. They were silly in the kitchen, goofy in the cupola, crazy with music, and nuts on the bed. Then, Andy said, out of the blue, "Hey, let's go up to Black Hawk State Park. Whaddya say?"

By that time, they were all old-timers in Jake's Cloud Room Bar. It was a warm night. They'd been clowning and dancing and making faces. They squeezed into Andy's VW bug. They turned up the radio and let the Beatles fill out the few remaining gaps in their familiarity. Andy drove, and Beth sat up front, Jake and Rosa rode in the tiny back seat, crowded together by a pile of Andy's sculpting materials.

It was hot, and they rubbed against each other. They were flirting, rubbing, and sweating. He was Mr. Snake and Rosa was an eager Eve, taking pretend bites out of his arm and laughing.

"You're too old for me," she said, flashing her eyes, and poking her friend.

"These guys are too old for us, Bethy. They're practically ancient."

He took up an accent," By cracky, Grandpa, we better get these young-uns home, before their mommas git after us."

In a terrible accent, Andy said, "Yo said they wuz young, but yo dint say we wuz robbin' the cradle!" And everybody laughed and passed the bottle around.

Howling in the Night

Black Hawk State Park was named for Chief Black Hawk of the Sac and Fox tribes, who lived in the Mississippi River Valley, before the French trappers showed up, back when Rock Island was called Saukenuk. The park was on the high bluffs overlooking the Rock River to the south. It was a magnificent vantage point. It had come to be a view of a gravel pit and a trailer park, but if you held your hand over part of the view, you could still catch sight of Black Hawk's domain. There was a lodge at the top and a small museum. Jake loved the museum. It held a reconstructed Indian Village scene, and he felt at home there. He connected with it, as a boy with imagination and the desire to belong to some society or other, but also from a peculiar lifelong sense of communion with those indigenous people. More so than any other way, he felt some sort of spirituality among the artifacts of Native Americans. When other kids made fun of the Indian powwows that were held each summer in the park, he felt like part of it.

When Andy pulled up the hill to the parking lot next to the lodge and lookout point, Jake slipped unawares into a state of near reverence. He'd been the witty antagonist, and then he was quiet. They were walking up the path, when Andy, who had become playful with Beth, turned to look at Jake.

"Hey, Jake, where'd you go? You fall asleep back there?"

"Yeah, I'm dreamin'. Don't wake me up."

"He's sleepwalking," Rosa said, "If you wake him up, he'll go crazy."

He felt like he was climbing the hill barefoot, with an Indian maid, to perform an ancient, sacred rite.

"It's kinda scary up here," Beth said.

Andy put his arm around her, and she snuggled close. It was amazing how Andy could have fun with a girl, not make a big deal out of it, and get on with his life. Jake could only stare and be amazed. It was a three-quarter moon, a clear and starry night, 70 degrees, with a slight breeze. They were alone at the top. There was a low stone wall. On the other side of the wall, there were steep clay cliffs, down through trees, to the bank of the dark, running waters of the river. He stopped joking. Rosa didn't know how to relate to the change. He took her hand as they stood at the top and said, "I love it, up here."

She pulled her hand free and said, "I don't know. It's kind of spooky, like Beth was saying."

"It's not spooky. It's just crowded."

"There's no one here but us."

"I mean crowded with Indians."

"Dead Indians. I don't like Indians."

"How can you not like Indians? You're half-Mexican, aren't you?"

"I hate it. I hate being a Mexican."

"You don't like being a Mexican?"

He would have given anything to be part something other than what he was.

"My real father's a Mexican. That doesn't mean I have to be one."

"Tell you what. Let's trade. You be part Swede, and I'll be part Mexican."

"Swede? God no. I don't want to be a dumb Swede."

He kissed her. He pulled her close, and he kissed her. It was a big surprise to her. She returned the kiss with her lips full, and then she stopped and pulled back.

"Wait a minute, Mr. Snake, the Swede," and she danced away.

He looked at the moon, walked to the stonewall, and sat on it, facing away. She came over and sat down beside him.

"You're a pretty good kisser," she said and leaned into him. He put his arm around her and kissed her again. Once again, she was halfway in and jumped out. She got up fast and started laughing. He got up and moved toward her. She turned to Andy and Beth, who were nearby, whispering to each other, cooing and wooing.

"Bethy, if this guy rapes me, you call the cops on him. OK?"

He let it go and started walking toward the lodge, to look in the windows. She was instantly at his side. He stopped and looked at her. She ran back to Beth and Andy.

"Jesus," he thought, "If I kiss her, she runs away. If I back off, she's all over me."

Beth and Andy were kissing, and they were having fun. They seemed to like each other. Why did he get the queasy types? And why did he get so caught up in it?

"Andy, let's blow this pop stand."

His interest had waned. At first, it had John Wayne'd. He was the big cowboy in his cowboy boots, and she was the tantalizing senorita. Then he was the Indian chief, and she was the wagon train girl. Then the whole thing seemed like a bum idea. He got back to the car first, took a long pull off the bottle, and howled at the moon. Like Tarzan, like a coyote, like a train in the night, like quitting time at the factory.

Maybe it was time for a trip to Waterloo. He mustn't lose track of his future, even if he had come close to reconnecting with some undefined, distant past, some distant future. He drove off down the road, singing.

"I'm an old cowhand, from the Rio Grande."

Coming Home

He was twenty-three years old, and his dick had been getting big for years. It never ceased to amaze him that he had a dick, and that it got big. It felt good to have a dick. It was like suddenly remembering he had a million dollars in a role in his pocket. The Million Dollar Dick. He was Jack and the Beanstalk. He traded his mother's cow for a few beans, he planted them, and one day he had a beanstalk in his front yard, growing straight up to the sky. It was the biggest beanstalk a boy ever had or ever dreamed of having. There was an angry giant at the top of his beanstalk and a goose that laid golden eggs. It was a dangerous beanstalk, and it was a rewarding beanstalk.

He had a cock. His dick became a cock. A cock is different from a dick. A cock has a life of its own. He would be exhausted, but it would be raring to go. He'd be thinking about one thing, and it would throw a tantrum, just to get his attention. It was the one part of him he must never reveal in public. He couldn't mention he had one. That was odd. It was one more interesting secret. Lenny Bruce was famous for admitting he had one.

Jenny's mother told her that every man had a black snake in his pants and only one thought in his head, "…to stick it in you." Ugh. She told her daughters that no woman had ever enjoyed sex. Jenny's sister had laughed out loud, when she heard that and told her she was wrong, but she remained unshakable in her conviction. Her daughters couldn't convince her. They were wrong, she said.

When his dick got big, with or without his help, and when he held it in his hand, it was always a marvel to him. Being what it was, was marvel enough, but by fingering it a little, it would expand and contract, pulsate, and squirt a stream of creamy white semen that was icing on the cake, so to speak. In addition to that, if that wasn't enough, the ejaculation (what a great word, he thought) would be accompanied by a series of benign convulsions, like safe earthquakes, or a surge of power in one part of town, or all over town. All the lights got brighter and the radios blared, the horns honked, and there was a brownout in the city hall. His head would lose power and fade out, like a limp muscle, while all the other muscles went manic.

As a surprise bonus, he could do it any place he wanted, as long as nobody saw him do it. He tried it in various locales; in bathrooms and vehicles, behind trees, and under water. It was exciting to think someone might catch him doing it, but the idea of actually being caught was not exciting. He liked it that it was a private act he could risk in

public places, but if anyone caught him jacking off, it would be extremely embarrassing. At that point, in his imagination, he became a figure of ridicule. He thought if he ever saw a man and a woman engaged in intercourse, it would be a scene of worshipful sanctity, like coming upon St. Francis at his prayers, but he couldn't grant the same divinity to pulling his crank.

Having a dick was a gift. Having a cock was magical. He felt like a little boy holding the reins of Pegasus, the Winged Horse. Except, he wasn't a little boy, anymore, and he was attached to it. It was part of him, and sometimes they were the same, and sometimes, he was it. He'd feel so much sexual energy, he was sure it was obvious to everyone that he was a big, fat, pulsating, six-foot cock with a stupid smile on his face. He was without base motive. He was a non-threatening lover. He asked little of himself. It didn't take much to turn him on, and he had no fears of performance. At his age, his sensory perception in masturbation was inclined to be from the perspective of the cock and not the hand. He would lie down, so he could leave his body at rest, but once in a while he would stand or sit. He entered a pleasant, meditative state, before he began the serious business of arousal. It was a pattern he learned as a swimmer.

Before a race, he and his teammates would almost fall asleep, lying about on the pool deck, as if they were completely disinterested in the excitement to come. His thinking would go dumb. His mind would slow to a crawl. When he was called to the starting block, he'd move gracefully, effortlessly, take his position, breathe deeply, let his arms and legs relax completely and wait for the gun. Then, in a sudden and dramatic uncoiling, he'd burst from the starting block and cut the surface of the water at full strength, pulling and driving his way through the water, surging in water like water itself. In the last lap, he would drive to the finish with all the power at his disposal, spend it to the last, and touch the wall at the farthest reach of his final stroke. Coming home, it was called. He was a great finisher, the sort you'd want for your anchor leg, coming home. It felt a bit like swimming a victory lap, when he lay exhausted on his bed, his cock slipping back into its dickness, drifting in the water, at peace, at ease, content with the nature of his nature.

Alone Together

"It isn't that I want to *make love* to you. It isn't that I want you to *make love* to me. It's that **I** want to make love to *you*, and I want **you** to make love to *me*." He wasn't talking to anyone. He wasn't thinking of anyone. He couldn't imagine who anyone was. But the feeling, out of the blue, was genuine. He knew what it was to make love, and he knew, or he could imagine, that some woman might want to make love to him, but it was a new thought, a new idea, that he might want to make love to a particular person, specifically and above all others, or at least, different from all others.

It wasn't that all women were the same; it was that his sexuality was undiscriminating. It was hard for him to distinguish his feelings for anyone, when they were blotted out by his sexuality, like the sun's total eclipse of the moon as a daily occurrence. He felt at the mercy of his solar energy. He chose Jenny for conscious and unconscious reasons that didn't include this new sense of love, for lack of any other word. He felt love in the same largely indiscriminate way he felt his sexuality. Specific love for any specific human was not confident grounds for his feelings. He felt lust, desire, appreciation, admiration, loyalty, friendship, camaraderie, conspiracy, complicity, and agreement, but he didn't know how to feel any specific love.

Aloneness was what he knew. The sense of being alone in the universe, that others philosophized about, was the single treasure in his estate. He knew he was alone, even if he didn't think about it. It was the coloration of his living in the world. He'd come in alone, he lived alone, and he would go out alone. His aloneness had a familiarity that seemed either unavailable or unwelcome to others. He had no difficulty being alone, going to movies alone, eating alone. His sense of loving intimacy with others, and any feelings of closeness, ran only so deep, and his feelings, in himself, stopped at a certain depth. This isn't terribly unusual in the young. It could have been that he hadn't lived long enough, yet. It could have been, also, that he was only a shallow person.

He was disturbed by a gnawing absence in his life. The little boy who sat across from his mother in the breakfast nook was aware of the absence. Because he couldn't speak his feelings; because of his need for loving acceptance, and because those feelings were never acknowledged or met, he learned to live in the absence. His capacity to love was unknown, and he filled the absence with as much as he could accept. There's a lot to learn in the world besides intimate acceptance, but it's an absence that eats away at the heart. It creates a seeking. He had become a seeker for what was absent.

He sought to fill that absence in the same way he sought to have it filled in the beginning, with a woman, from a woman, in a woman, in an imagined female ideal. He sought to find what was missing, in himself, in someone or something outside himself. A seeker can't create, simply by seeking, his fulfillment. Short of fulfillment, seekers remain seekers, often finding refuge among other seekers. Mutual need is a bond that recognizes the absence and supports the search. It isn't just misery that loves company. The refugees from misery also love the company of their kind.

Jenny was a comrade for Jake, as he was for her. They were scared kids, together. They put on brave masks and danced, together, an old dance to a distant and unseen god, singing a prayer that they be able to live their lives without harm, and with good fortune, in a vast and lonely universe.

On Sunday, he called Jenny, and they talked. He said he wanted to see her. She said the house was a huge mess; it was being completely redone, with the wedding as the excuse, and her mother was going nuts, as usual, but yes, he should come the next weekend. She wanted to see him, too. The phone connection helped. He went back to work, the next week, calmer and more focused. There was a connection between them that was supportive. It was getting pretty obvious that Jake alone was Jake adrift. Jenny had calmed down as she spoke to him, too. It was as if they were Hansel and Gretel, raised separately by strange forest people, and they had found each other wandering in the woods. Not wanting to face the wicked witch alone, they joined forces. At least they joined hands. They pooled their breadcrumbs.

The wedding was a few weeks away. When he thought about getting married, he got crazy, but when he thought about going through it with Jenny, it was OK. It wasn't that he was marrying Jenny. It was that they were going to get through it together. It was a ritual they could survive, if they stuck together. It might not be true love, but it was an improvement over the troublesome aloneness they felt. They had made a mutual choice, and they were determined to carry through.

One of the secrets he had about his affection for Jenny was the way she seemed so unselfconscious about being a girl. She didn't lord it over him that she was female, that she had breasts and a vagina. She seemed to be just as overwhelmed about it as he was. He assumed, in his adolescence, that women and girls were completely confident about their inherent majesty. He figured all girls and women knew he was a jerk and no big deal, so to be planning marriage with a girl was a little out of his league of comprehension.

He thought he had a great dick, but somehow he assumed it wasn't that impressive to a girl. He assumed they were impressed by what truly impressed him, that is; themselves. If he was a girl, he figured, he'd never leave the house, he be so busy enjoying his own body. It was constantly amazing to him that women, or girls, could spend their time doing anything else and not be thinking all the time, about their incredible and wonderful bodies. He'd heard girls put themselves down and make fun of their looks, but he didn't believe them. He thought it was something like false humility or fishing for a compliment.

Even past adolescence, he could find something about almost any girl that was beautiful. He had a theory that even the plainest of the plain, even the homely and the unattractive, even the ugly girls, had something about them that was beautiful. It was a pleasure to know that it was true. Whenever he looked at girls and women, he could easily find some line, curve, color, movement, some part of them that was beautiful. It wasn't a way of pretending anything. It was true. He could see the beauty that was there. He thought about the secret beauty of their actions. A plain girl, who might go unnoticed, could be a wonderful lover. It would become the incredible secret of the man who discovered that about her.

He never said such things to anyone. He was sure he would have to play the game like everyone else. When he drank, he became bolder, and he told some women of the things he'd seen in them, but their reactions weren't always reassuring. When he stepped outside the supposed rules, it was as surprising to them as it was to him. When Jenny was a little girl, the family dentist mistakenly removed two teeth, thinking they were baby teeth. They weren't, and it left her with a gap between her front teeth. It was very appealing, but it was the colors of her teeth, the shadings of blue and red and a little yellowing in the white that struck his eye. It was the same as the blood in the skin,

the shadings in the hair, the aquarium depth of her blue eyes. To have a lover was a feasting for his eyes. To be able to look at another human being for longer than a few seconds was a gift. And then there was the touching. To hold and touch and caress her body was endlessly pleasurable. Her breasts had a quality that astounded him. He thought of breasts as transcendent flesh. It was flesh without bones. Flesh that was only flesh and way more than flesh.

He loved that her ribs were faintly clear beneath her skin. Her ribs changed the color of the skin they pushed against. He could lay his face against her flat, soft belly and dream, without images, the dreams of peace in the body. Her shoulder blades fascinated him. They were like twins to the twins of her breasts, but they moved under the flesh. He was glad he didn't know too much about anatomy. He could watch her shoulder blades move, like friendly animals under their blanket of skin. Her pubic hair was like a tiny, soft forest, springy and deep, hiding the entrance to a magic cave.

When he kissed her full lips, felt her breasts against his chest, held her buttocks in his hands and felt her legs against his legs, he was overcome with sensation. It was too much. His poor brain raced to record all the sensations at once. His cock would fill and rise and dominate, and for a few moments, it was a crisis of feeling, to let go of the many sensations and give in to the one. He would spread her wet, slick lips, slide his cock between them, and no matter how shallow or deep it went, it was a feeling like no other. It was right. It felt right. It felt good. It all felt wonderful, but to be big and inside her, was another kind of feeling. It was a kind of belonging. It felt right to him. His cock belonged inside her vagina. It wasn't an idea. It was a knowing. It wasn't a knowing anyone had ever told him about. It was a knowing that came from within, up from inside him, a knowing that made all the locker room talk sound like barnyard clatter.

It was a knowledge that was simply true. Anyone who denied it, or talked foolishly about it, must never have experienced it. It was a wonder to know anything, but to know the feeling of belonging inside a woman was more. It made him quiet to think of it. There was no reason to talk about it.

Marital Blisters

He remembered the day his parents met. He was lying on his bed, after a hard day at the gas leak factory, and his body was tired from creating holes and then making them disappear. It'd been a hot day. He needed the rest. He'd been thinking about marriage. He looked at the guys at work and wondered about their marriages.

He remembered a scene at the tractor factory, six months before. The foreman in charge of the maintenance crews, sat inside a glass office by himself, all day long. He ate lunch alone, while the men, all twelve of them, ate lunch at a long table outside the glass. Jake felt harsh pains in his gut, every day, since he moved back into his parents' house and began to work in the factory. He didn't understand it, but it doubled him over. The foreman was beginning to think he was a loafer. During lunch, one day, Jake hung around outside the door to the foreman's office, hoping to try to explain himself.

One of the crew leaders was an old friend of the foreman. They'd been workers together, before the foreman was promoted. Now he was with management. It was a stain on their friendship. Jake heard the crew leader, Richie Waller, say to the foreman, "I like having lunch with you, Tom, but the men are starting to give me shit for kissing up to management."

The foreman replied, "They can kiss my management ass. Yeah, OK, we'll cool it for a while. How you doin', otherwise?"

Jake went away, ate his sandwich, and came back. He heard the two, deep in conversation. It was the week between Christmas and New Year's Eve. He heard the crew leader ask the boss, "How's Margie?"

The foreman hung his head and said, "Oh, she's all right." He paused. "You know something? She promised me we'd do it; you know, get it on. She said she'd give me a little piece for Christmas, and then Christmas came and went. Nothin'. She said she wasn't feeling right, whatever that means. Anyway, I'm holding out for New Year's."

"Yeah," said Richie, "I know what you mean, Tom. Karen's the same way, sometimes. I guess, but then again, I aint no Robert Redford."

It was sad and pathetic. The two lonely men, who felt guilty having lunch together, couldn't even get laid. He heard other stories, listening to married men talk.

One guy said that he came home from work, to the trailer where he lived, and his wife gave him a beer, like always. She fixed dinner, while he watched a little TV. (It was strange. Nobody ever watched a lot of TV.) Anyway, the guy and his wife had dinner,

they finished, and the wife said, for the first time, that she'd like it, sometimes, maybe, if he'd help her, just a little, once in a while, with the dishes, if it was OK with him, but it wasn't important, she was just wondering.

The guy said, "Sure, honey, I'll help you out."

He told her to get a beer and go watch TV; he'd take care of the dishes. She was thrilled. She couldn't believe it. She was in shock. He insisted. She went over and sat down. He went back to the table and, very nicely, very calmly, picked up the four corners of the tablecloth, hauled the dishes down to the river next to the trailer court, and dumped the whole load in the water.

Another guy said he came home from work, one Friday night, and his wife complained that she forgot to pick up a loaf of bread on her way home. Could he go to the store and get it for her? It was just one thing she forgot.

The guy said, "No problem."

He put his coat back on, went out, got in his car, drove to Peoria, and went on a three-day drunk. Sunday night, he came home, went in the front door, threw a loaf of bread on the table, and said, "There's your damn bread."

They were miserable stories, the kind he heard over and over in the factory. He admired the bravado of the men in the stories, but it was empty bravado that earned them a grudging respect from other miserable men. Soon after that, Jake was demoted to a lower circle of hell, stacking farrow blades, eight hours a day, and then, finally, he was let go. His failure as a factory worker was complete.

He heard one story of hope and love. One guy would leave work on Friday afternoon, walk to the parking lot, climb in the back of his camper, while his wife drove, and by the time he was showered and changed, eaten, and had a beer, they were at their cabin in Wisconsin, where they'd spend the weekend, together, fishing, and then they'd drive home on Sunday night. They did that every weekend, all summer long. So married life wasn't all bad, he thought.

He was lying on his bed, relaxing from a good day, thinking about going to visit Jenny, thinking about marriage, when he began to think and then half-dream about the day his parents met. He knew that mutual friends had introduced them, at an arranged dinner, one night. His dad played basketball with his mother's brother, and she'd seen him and wanted to meet him. She asked Carl and Marion Schiller to set it up.

They invited his dad, and as Jake imagined it, he could see the two of them, standing there, in the middle of the Schiller's living room, being introduced. He felt like

he was in the room with them. They were 26 and 24, tall, attractive, charming, intelligent people. They had a lot going for them. He felt wonderful, as he saw them come together. He imagined the possibilities of two such interesting people, joining forces.

Then something happened. He said to himself, out loud, "Oh, no!"

He saw what they were thinking and feeling. Both were getting too old to be single. They'd held out as long as they could. They looked at each other, and instead of embracing the possibilities; they gave in to the inevitable.

"I'll take this. This is good enough," they said to themselves.

He was horrified to see the scene, so bright, go dark before his eyes, in his mind's eye. He didn't think he had the same feeling about Jenny, and his parents would have vehemently denied his vision about them. There was no way of knowing if he was going to be married in the bright light of the possibilities or the darkening shadows of compromise. He was sure he was nothing like his father. He could see, in his vision, that his mother and father, when they were Jim and Corliss, had every good reason to be attracted to each other. If they had only thought differently about it, it would have been good. And if only Adolf Hitler had sold a painting, World War II would never have happened. And if a pig had wings, it'd be a serious problem for the rest of us.

Up On Rush Street

Living without a girlfriend or a wife wasn't just hard to imagine, it was inconceivable. There was no room in his thinking for such a concept, so it went unconceived. He was in the throes of discovery, but the notion of discovering himself, by himself, was not in the cards he'd been dealt. To put it another way, Jake's dick pointed away from himself toward a world of others. One of his frustrations was that, other than with Jenny, he was a virgin. It didn't seem right that he get married to the only woman he had ever porked, been intimate with, made love to, got it on with, shot his jism into, planked, or whatever inadequate cliché he might come up with. It was embarrassing. It needed to be rectified, somehow, and soon.

Then the opportunity presented itself. Jenny called and said she was going with her mother to Chicago to pick out new curtains for the wedding. The selection in the State of Iowa was woefully inadequate. She invited him to join them, for lunch on Sunday, if he wanted to drive all the way up. He said he might, and she told him what hotel they were staying at, where it was, and when. Coincidentally, he got, via his parents, a card saying that his first girlfriend, from kindergarten in Nebraska, Nancy Bresky, was living in a hotel for stewardesses in Chicago, not far from the hotel of his fiancée. Oh, the drama of it all. The plan hatched in his mind to go up on Friday night, stay over with Jim Malone, go out with Nancy on Saturday, sleep with her, and then go see his fiancée as a man of experience, no longer a boy beholden to her for popping his cherry.

He couldn't call ahead. That would be too calculating. Besides, he might find out Nancy wasn't there, and the plan would fizzle, before it got a chance to fly. (If he could tell what kind of plan was hatched, and then either fizzles or flies, he'd have a better grasp of mixed metaphors. His sense of metaphors was, 'the more the merrier'. The more allusions he could throw into the metaphorical stew, the better. The more rapid and obscure the connections, the better. The less chance there was of saying simple and unavoidable truths.)

The other player that entered his plot was Suzanne Berkman, who lived near Jim in Elmhurst, and might, in a pinch, do the beast with two backs with Jake. She was a friend from college, and she graduated with Jim and Jenny. Maybe it wouldn't be the best plan to give up his virginal sanctity to a buddy-type girlfriend, but Suzanne was attractive, and there had always been something slightly sexual between them.

Trying to sleep with Rosa was out. It felt like a Garter-snake-pit of unknown dangers. He and Nancy had a crush on each other since they were four years old, and she was a stewardess and a virtual stranger. He hadn't seen her since they were eleven, and he had only two memories of when they were kids. When they were five, his dad had brought home a walky-talky. Jake and Nancy Ann took the microphone-receiver down to the basement, and they sat, side by side, on a wooden box, waiting for a message from the spy boss, who was upstairs in the kitchen. They saw a big, black cricket on the wall and Nancy got scared. Jake kissed her, and then his dad spoke on the squawk-box, as his dad called it, and they ran upstairs.

Another time, all the families had gone on a picnic by a river. The kids had to put their suits on behind a tree. Jake looked out from behind his tree, and he saw Nancy's little, bare bottom, as she was putting on her suit, behind her tree.

He called Jimalone, and Jim said, "Sure, c'mon up."

Friday night, they went down to Rush Street and listened to some blues. Rush Street was in its renaissance. The street was jammed with happy summer nighttime revelers. It was Bourbon Street North. They caught a set of Howlin' Wolf. It made the weekend a success without further ado. Jim played blues harp, and he had a leather sash made up as a holder for his harmonicas. Jake got to blow a little harp with Jim, and it was fun.

He called Nancy from a phone booth. Her roommate answered and said Nancy would be in from a flight to LA at midnight. He said, could she take a message, and she said, yeah. He left his name and Jim's number and said he'd call back in the morning. She said she'd give Nancy the message, that Nancy probably had the weekend off, or at least Saturday, so she'd probably be free, and it'd be neat to meet him, if he was to come by, only don't call too early, OK? He said he wouldn't, don't worry, and they both said good-bye.

He turned to Jim and said, "It looks like I'm going to a reunion."

"Cool!" said Jim, "Let's see if we can see Sonny Boy Williamson before the last set."

"Cool!" said Jake, "Let's go."

Toddling Town

'Chicago, Chicago, that toddling town'. Like a toddler. More like a loud, obnoxious teenager. Half mature, half childish. It was big, like a teenager, overgrown from its youth, not yet at ease with its size. A Baby Huey kind of city. It was corrupt and self-righteous, at the same time. It was moral on Sunday, but hard-nosed, parading its fledgling sophistication the rest of the week. It was like a teenager who goes to a whorehouse, half drunk, and then cries for its mommy in the piss-stink toilet.

The disturbing side of Chicago came to him when he'd come to visit, a couple of years before. He stayed with a college buddy who lived near the University of Chicago, in Hyde Park, on the South Side. They went to the Folk Music Festival and listened to some of the all-time greats of the blues, Mississippi John Hurt, Fred McDowell, Snooks Eaglin, Brownie McGee and Sonny Terry, John Lee Hooker, and several others. It was a worship service of black music. At the end of the weekend, he drove home, and he decided, that one time, to drive straight west on the city streets of the South Side, instead of taking the freeways.

He started out in the genteel streets of Hyde Park, where ghetto was an almost charming word. He thought about slums, deprivation, ghettos, and discrimination, but it had a faintly unreal quality to it, like stories of starving children in China. As he drove west, he passed through mile after mile of near total desolation. He was stunned by the vastness of the poverty. It wasn't the poverty he imagined, where poor people lived with less. It was an underworld, unseen and un-admitted, where nothing was recognizable, at least, in his experience.

He became disoriented by the magnitude of the destruction. He drove for many miles in a war zone of poverty and neglect. Neglect is a polite word, as if a little spit and polish could shape things up. He drove for nearly an hour, and not slowly, before he finally emerged from that other America, where capitalism is betrayed and the Judeo-Christian work ethic is a mockery. Where hope is a whisper in a windstorm.

It made him feel like a walking insult to the truth. He began to feel the way he loved the blues was different from the way the black citizens of Chicago might love the blues. He referred to Furry Lewis as Fuzzy Lewis, one time, and Jon Taylor roared with laughter at his mistake. He thought the Civil Rights movement applied to him. He thought it was 'his' naive bigotry that needed changing. It was 'his' whiteness that needed

roughing up. He didn't want his love of the blues to be like the plantation whites 'love' of the way the little pickaninnies danced.

He needn't have been so hard on himself. His love of the blues was a real identification in the blood. He didn't think that the blues, or the people singing them, or the people living them, were cute and adorable. Despite his appearance, he felt the blues, and he understood, somehow, the seemingly endless abandonment they expressed, and this feeling was also unacknowledged by his own conscious mind. That was the feeling in the slums of Chicago. He felt how hopeless it was. It seemed as if the world had deliberately abandoned its own, and the abandonment felt unending and insurmountable.

When he walked down busy, noisy, boisterous Rush Street, or any other street, he couldn't help but look down the dark alleys and up the side streets, into the doorways and down the half-lit hallways. They were the dark passages he couldn't forget, once he'd been reminded of their existence.

The overriding call, in Mid-Western White America, was for niceness. If you couldn't say something nice, you weren't supposed to say anything at all. It was a joke that people laughed about, but didn't challenge. It was the kind of ruse that might elevate a man to stardom, even to the presidency.

He talked to Sue, Nancy's roommate, while he waited for Nancy to finish dressing. They were going out to a movie. Nancy looked good. She had been a cute little girl, and she'd become an attractive twenty-two-year old. She had curly hair and an off-hand manner that belied her position as a stewardess, given the current stereotype of "Coffee, Tea, or Me".

The roommate, on the other hand, was typecast. She was perky, solicitous, and busily vacuous. And she was nice. She bounced along, making sure he was entertained and comfortable. She thought it was great that Nancy and Jake had been little kids together. It was great that Jake had come to visit. It was really great that they were going to a movie. And it was really, really great that she got to meet him. While he was waiting, a guy came to the door. Sue let him in and introduced them. His name was William, and he lived in the same hotel. She was nice to him. Then, she told him she was going out, so was Nancy. He could be a real dear and call them in a week or two, and he went away.

When he was gone, she turned to Jake and said, "William is all right, I guess. I mean he's a real nice guy, and he's got a good job and everything, but he's too lonely."

"Too lonely?" he said.

"Yeah, I mean its fine to be lonely. I mean, everybody's lonely, but William is too lonely."

"Huh," thought Jake, and right then, he vowed never, never, never, ever, would he show anyone that he was too lonely. The only way to guarantee that you didn't appear to be too lonely was to never appear even slightly lonely, certainly never to admit loneliness. He had recognized the look in William's eyes when William had gazed polite rapture at the self-contained blondness of Sue Carlson from Minneapolis.

By the time Nancy came out to join them, the face of the little boy who once kissed the little girl, in the basement with the walky-talky, was replaced by the slightly bemused, erotically and intellectually sophisticated face of Hugh Hefner Junior. The Playboy mansion was mere blocks away, and it was the Vatican of Jake's erotic education. He could disparage everything about the Playboy philosophy, but he couldn't deny its success. Willy Sutton robbed banks, because that's where the money was. The Playboy mansion was where the girls were. It was where the cream of American pulchritude gathered. They went there, of their own volition, or so it seemed. They

weren't dragged. Jake had a notion that someday a beautiful young woman might talk persuasively about the bankruptcy of the Playboy philosophy, but he'd yet to hear it.

It was the only source available, when it came time to see what girls looked like, without their clothes on. He'd been mentally undressing girls, for years, but only his brief and scattered experience had given him any real models to apply to his fantasies. He knew the centerfolds were airbrushed, he knew they were posed, he knew they were chosen for specific attributes, but it gave him some clues, he thought, to the great mystery of women who are naked.

These things spiraled in him. At that point in his life, in his personal, private, secret Summer of Love, as he was about to spend time with someone who opened his heart to his earliest times, after a night touched by the deepest song of pain and salvation, the over-riding message came, once again, "Don't feel, and especially, don't reveal the feeling." The same truth was absent from the playboy philosophy. Playboy was purchased by lonely men who jerked off by themselves to pacify the loneliness the philosophy could never admit.

Jake and Nancy sat in the movie theater, just off Michigan Avenue, like two young people who just met. There was a sweet bond between them that had more to do with puppies and kittens than ever occurred between playboys and playmates. They had been true playmates, and despite their attempted sophistication, they couldn't overcome the simple attraction they'd known, as five-year-olds who played together.

When they were four, they declared to Mrs. Bresky that they were married. They decided to take the train to Illinois. They sat, side by side, on two dining room chairs, riding across the imaginary countryside on the California Zephyr. Jake told Nancy Ann that they had to stop and get off, because it was nighttime on the train, and the train had to stop at night. They went to the couch and pretended to sleep, lying side by side.

Jake put his arm around Nancy Ann in the movie theater in Chicago, and it felt good. When they walked on the street, after the movie, he put his arm around her, like guys in movies did with their sweethearts. He didn't hold hands with her, because they may have begun skipping. Back at her place, she pulled down the Murphy bed, and they undressed. They kissed, and he held her small breasts and pulled gingerly at her large nipples. He ran his hand the length of her wire-stubble legs, and she apologized for not shaving. She didn't take off her panties, because she was on her period, and he kept his shorts on.

It was confusing. He thought he was going to get laid, like it said in the Playboy philosophy. He thought he was going to lose his exclusive virginity, like it said in some faded codicil of the book of his brain. Instead, he felt like a fake adult, a pretend playboy, an ill-fated lothario, and a little kid who still didn't know what girls looked like between their legs. His heart was spinning. Nancy Bresky knew something about the real Jake Axene, but she wasn't talking. She seemed every bit as confused as he was.

His heart was pounding, and his dick was straining in his cotton shorts, and little Jake loved little Nancy Ann, but they weren't allowed to come out and play. He couldn't have sex with her, and he didn't know how to have anything else.

The next morning, Nancy said she had a flight, and Jake said he had to go. They told each other about their parents, their siblings, their colleges, they said it was great to see each other, and he said, "Let's do this every ten or twenty years." She said it was a wonderful idea, and they stopped talking for fifteen seconds. Their eyes went to the tabletop in the kitchen with a view of Lake Michigan. He stood up, and so did she. They walked to the door. Sue was already up and gone, and they were alone.

"I wonder what would have happened if I never left McCook," said Jake.

"You'd have left, anyway, only later."

"No, I mean like between you and me."

"Oh, well, we'll never know that. We were in different schools, anyway."

"Yeah, we were," he said, relieved to have a way out of the speculation. "When we moved to North Ward, it was like moving to another state."

"It was good to see you, Jake," she said, sincerely, "Good luck in California. I hope you're happy."

"You, too. Send me a card when you take over the airline."

"I will."

"Bye."

They kissed. It was a tender kiss. Like little kids who knew they had to grow up. Somehow. On the street, he felt happy sad. It was a good sad. Like the French were good at, in the movies. He was part French. It was July 14th, Bastille Day. He strolled the streets like a free Frenchman, his heart reeling with the torment of life's daily defeats and love's great victory.

Noblesse oblige. If he must feel these tortures of the heart, then perhaps he might be an artist. And if he might be an artist, then certainly he must experience life in all its tortures. It would be cowardly not to enmesh himself in the labyrinth of tangled passions. Oh, what a tangled web we jump into, when first we accept the obligation of tangled passions.

He called Jenny at her hotel. She named a restaurant and the time for them to meet. It was to be a strained forty-five minutes of eggs benedict, about which Ardith McGregor would grouse. Jake and Mrs. McG kissed, like lawyers shake hands, and he kissed Jenny, like they were secret lovers in the presence of the town censor. Marriage would give them the protective umbrella they needed to feel at ease with their urge to

fondle each other. He remembered quickly the erotic tension that accompanied their negotiations for adulthood. Erotic sexuality was addictive, and marriage was like being granted a liquor license. In the meantime, they must keep up the appearance of their entrepreneurial professionalism. They were setting up housekeeping, like launching a small business, and Mrs. McG was a harsh critic of get-rich-quick schemes.

Ardith Swinton Henke McGregor was twice married. She was a young society journalist in Chicago in her early twenties, during the actual Twenties. She met and married a man who went on to become quite rich in Oklahoma oil. She divorced him and married the alcoholic lawyer back home in Iowa, who hung out with the town drunk. He sobered up and began to make money, too. She became twice bitter, claiming he'd stolen her money to build his truck-leasing business. That was all thirty years in the past. It was an old argument based on a verbal contract no one could prove or disprove. All seemed resigned to the argument. It was a red flag kept in the hall closet and dragged out to be waved on occasions more ceremonial than sacred.

Her life was a litany. She had a chapter to explain all situations. He took a perverse pleasure in facing Ardith McGregor. It was applying the education he'd gotten at his mother's knee, learning his mother's ways, without the emotional hook his mother had in him. He tried to give the hook back to his mother, but when he pulled it out of his gut, or his back, it dug into his hands. Ardith had no such hook for him. He was enamored with the game of sparring with her. He did it in a way that perplexed her. When she talked, he listened to her words, not her meaning, and then did word plays off the language. It was a game of seeming to pay close attention to her talk while ignoring her intended meaning. Since her meaning was patently unacceptable, if not downright insane, or so he thought, it seemed to work, and it seemed to be justified.

"How are your eggs, Jake?" she said, hoping they were as detestable and improperly prepared, as hers were.

"Wait a minute, I'll ask," he replied.

"I mean, is your hollandaise rancid."

"In Holland, the days were a bit ripe, but it was summertime, after all," he said, smiling at the twist in logic. Jenny kicked him and jabbed him in the arm, but her eyes were not displeased. She was scared of her mother, and here was a guy who stuck it in her face. It was exciting and dangerous to play mocking games with Ardith McGregor, the terror of several generations.

"This restaurant," she said, "is in decline, I'm sorry to say. There was a time when I would have been proud to come here, but anymore, I'm nearly ashamed to be seen. Not to mention, the clientele has slipped."

"I'm sure we're not helping the standards," he said.

"This country is going to hell in a hand basket," Ardith said. "You can laugh about it, all you want, but there was a time when low standards weren't tolerated."

"What time? Like during the Twenties?" he offered.

Ardith had been speaking fondly of her young adulthood in the windy city.

"As far as I can tell, everyone was either drunk or ripping off the stock market."

"That was the fault of Prohibition. Once we got rid of Prohibition, sanity returned," she replied.

"Like the ghost of Christmas past," he said.

The jokes were wearing thin, all around. Even he grew tired of them. He overheard a conversation, nearby, that was getting heated. It was the kind of argument that married people seemed to have, quietly at first, then louder, then ignoring the rest of the world. It had the sound of an old argument, worn regularly; beat up, but durable.

He looked around to see. It was two middle-aged gay guys. "It's the same, everywhere," he thought, "nobody's immune."

Then Ardith saved the day.

"Listen Jenny, we better get back, we're not finished, and I refuse to stay another day. You do your newlywed nonsense with this future husband of yours, and I'll meet you at the hotel, in fifteen minutes. Do you hear me?"

"Yeah, Ma, I hear you."

"Jake, I'm paying for this. I'm sure you don't have the wherewithal, and despite your obnoxious manner, it was nice to see you."

She put out her hand. Jake looked into her eyes.

"Me, too," he said, and their hands did a quick touch and release.

When she was all the way out the door, Jake and Jenny turned to each other and laughed. They kissed, and it was a big kiss. A big, all grown up, teenage kiss.

"I've got to go, too, Jake. I wish I could stay."

"I wish that hotel room was ours."

"Pretty soon, now. Do you want to come out to Waterloo, next weekend?"

"What, and play footsy with your mother?"

"Listen, you're lucky she's going through with this wedding."

"Hey, I'm not marrying her, for Chrissake."

"Yeah, but it's her house."

"And her daughter."

"Yes, and you better be nice to her daughter."

"I'd like to be real nice to her daughter," he said and put his hand on her breast, cupping it from below.

She let him hold her for a second of true bliss, and then she shoved his arm down onto her lap, where he slid his hand to her thigh, and she stood up real fast.

"Later… later…." she said, half-smiling. He left the restaurant on air. He approved of his upcoming marriage. But he still had a priority to be dealt with. He found a pay phone and called Suzanne.

Suzanne was surprised to hear from him. She said, sure, she'd like to see him. They could go for a ride. He found her house in Elmhurst, and they drove in Jake's VW for a look at Lake Michigan, where it was bound to be cooler, she said. She told him how hard it was getting to be, at home. It seemed the older she got, the harder it was. She fought with her mom all the time.

"Finally, last night," she said, "my mom looked at me real hard, with furrows in her brow, and she said, 'Suzanne Elizabeth Berkman, you are one tough cookie.' So what does that mean? Actually, I kind of like it. I think I like being a tough cookie."

"It's true," he said, "it's a great description. You're tough, but you're still a cookie, or you could say you're a cookie, but you're tough. I like it, too. It's great. Your mom must have some grudging respect for you."

"Yeah, I guess she does." They drove down to the lake, they got out of the VW, they walked along the beach, a storm came up, they ran for the car, and they started back for Suzanne's house.

"Suzanne, I got to ask you a real strange favor."

"What's that? What do you mean?"

"Well, you know I'm getting married, next month."

"Yeah. I like Jenny. I think it's great."

"So do I, but there's a problem with all this."

"What's the problem?"

"The problem is, except for Jenny, I'm a virgin, and I hate it that I'm a virgin. The woman I'm going to be married to will be the only woman I've ever slept with, and I was hoping I could ask you if you'd like to help me out of this situation by us making love together."

"Jeez, Jake, I don't know."

"If you don't want to, then you don't want to."

"No, I mean, it's sort of sudden."

"I know. I know it is."

Even as he talked, he was getting excited. He got an erection, and he became flushed. Suzanne was starting to twist around in her seat.

"I don't know where we could go," she said, "there's no place to go."

He pulled the car over and turned onto the road to a tree-lined city park. It was still raining, and the park was empty. He stopped the car, he turned to Suzanne, and she was red. Then, the red suffused to a summer glow, and she said, "Jake, I've thought about this before. I mean, I think it's fine, if you really want to."

"I do want to, and I'm starting to forget why." He lifted her hand and let go of it millimeters above his erection. Her hand floated onto his crotch, and she held it. Then she squeezed it, and they kissed. It was a good kiss, full of pleasure and surprise. The problem was the Volkswagen. It was tiny. He was big, in more ways than one, and she wasn't small, either. They managed, in a comic opera frenzy to get their clothes out of the way, to get her on top of him on the passenger seat. He was hard, and she was wet, and they were almost naked and getting sweaty in the summer rain. They came together like they'd been thinking about it for a long time. When they slowed from panting and humping and kissing, and had pulled apart, Suzanne into the driver's seat, they rolled the windows down and rubbed rainwater on their faces.

He put a rain-wet hand on Suzanne's breast and said, "Thank you, Suzanne, thank you. That was great. That was just great."

"I thought it could be, for a long time, but I never thought we'd actually do it."

"What are friends for, anyway?" he said, and took deep breaths and let out long sighs looking at her, as she looked at him. When they came out of the trance, they looked at each other and laughed.

"Jeez, Jake, what a deal."

"Yeah, I wish I had a movie camera."

"We must have looked like a couple of idiots."

"You're the most gorgeous idiot I ever saw."

He pulled her blouse open one more time, kissed both breasts above the nipples, and kissed her belly. He felt like a free man. Free to be Jake. Free to be married Jake.

"Thanks for being my friend, Suzanne."

"Any time, Jake. Well, maybe not any time."

"You're not such a tough cookie, after all."

She grinned. He grinned. The rain let up.

Go Paint Trees

The wedding was getting close. It was all set. They would spend their honeymoon on the way to California. Jake bought a blue VW with a sunroof, two years old, in great shape, and he had a job waiting for him in Pebble Beach, one of the garden spots of the planet. They figured they'd drive through Montana, into Canada, then down the coast. What could be better? That was as far into the future as he could see or imagine. Marriage was like signing up for college without knowing what his major might be.

One night, after the trip to Chicago, he went to the student union at Augustana College, in Rock Island, the closest thing to an energy center he could find in the Quad-Cities. It had become his habit to look for a public place, a marketplace of energy, a cafe, or coffee place, to find some kind of contemplation, amid the crosscurrents of activity.

And he could look at the girls. He was able to manage a kind of meditation in a crowded place, and he could enjoy his imagination, as it played with the sexual possibilities. But always, there was a nagging set of emotional complications that kept infiltrating his fantasies. The previous weekend proved to him there was no free lunch when it came to sex. No matter how hard he tried, and he didn't have to try to be hard, it always ended up being complicated by emotions he couldn't control or predict.

He sat in the busy student union, watching the flow of Scandinavians. (The area was Little Scandinavia, and Augustana was a Lutheran school.) He tried to create a way of being with people, without the emotional entrapment. One thing he wished, above all else, was to draw and paint nudes. When he was at Iowa, in the graduate school of art, he had his first experience with a nude model. It was the first week in a life drawing class, and it was almost overwhelming. He had taken his place at a large table with chalk and paper, and in came the model, a nondescript woman wearing a brown robe. She stood on the podium, and his heart pounded.

The professor, a woman, said, "Let's begin," and the model dropped her robe and stood naked in front of the class. He didn't think he was going to survive the experience. He was in shock. And he was oddly disappointed. The model was saggy, wrinkled, and had stretch marks in parts of her body he never imagined anyone could have stretch marks. The teacher called for timed poses, and he drew. It was exciting beyond his imagination. He drew in a blind frenzy. When the class was over, the teacher praised the model and remarked on her great beauty.

"Beauty?" he thought, "She's homely as a stick, and her body's in ruins."

He knew the art professor was talking about a different kind of beauty, and as he looked over his drawings, he began to get an idea what she meant. The shock of her nakedness, and the force of the energy, recognized, absorbed, and transposed another kind of beauty, from the model, onto the paper.

A life force of energy was tapped, in the presence of the exposed, vulnerable, and unadorned human body, especially a female human body, and that energy superseded his embarrassment and his sexuality. As he wandered the halls of the art school, he looked for other bold women who consented to that process.

After a life drawing session that he had stumbled into, he approached one of his other professors, looking for advice and help in dealing with his loss of inspiration. As the fleshy, freckled, redheaded model left the posing stand, he asked the teacher what he could do, since his painting had lost its spontaneity. Back in his college days, he was used to painting for hours, with no lack of energy or inspiration, but in his time in Iowa City, it had stopped. "Go paint trees," the guy said.

It sealed his decision to quit school. If the man had said, "Go paint naked women," or if Jake had taken the man's advice for true and not as a casual dismissal, he might have graduated magna cum laude. He was a good painter. He won the prize in college. He went to one of the best art schools in America, and yet he couldn't believe he had the right to ask a woman to model for him. He was sure his only motive was lust. And what if it was? Where was the crime in that? The correlation between lust and art was plain enough. The life force was similar, if not identical. Lust becomes love. Lust becomes art. Lust becomes life. Lust can be very becoming. He was short-circuiting another impulse, because it might be mixed with venality. Might be.

A rather heavyset Black girl came into the room where he sat, making butter of his milky thoughts. He looked at her for a long time. She was beautiful, in a way the art professor had meant. Her lines, her features, her shapes could practically draw themselves. He became excited with the idea of asking her to become his model. Instead, he looked like a man who was trying to remember where he left his shoes. He didn't move. She got her coffee and left.

Another possibility entered the equation. How could he ask a woman to model for him if he didn't have sexual designs on her? Would she be insulted? What if he chose a model for strictly visual motives? No, that would never do. He needed to find someone who excited his libido enough to tap the energy in it, but not enough to divert him from

its eventual purpose as fuel for the drawing. Inspiration. It was a delicate equation, and it needed the will of the art to decide it, certainly not the will of the dick-brained artist.

His brother, Mike, bought a motorcycle; a Yamaha 350. It looked huge to Jake, even though it wasn't. He took it for a ride, one day. It was exciting. Mickey's roommate from college, Billy Spanger, came to Moline on his new, used bike, and the two of them took off for parts unknown, heading west toward the open road. They would be back for the wedding, but it made him jealous to see his brother ride off, his new bike loaded with gear and provisions. It made their mother furious that Mickey would ignore her advice, buy the bike, and then, to add insult to injury, take it on a road trip, when, "Any fool could tell, it's just insane."

Jake was getting married. He was the responsible one. He was older. He'd always been older. The impulse toward adventure was in him, but it was superseded by his dutiful nature, his so-called maturity.

"Well, Jake, at least *you* never did anything as foolhardy as this."

"I know," Jake thought. "Dammit!"

He wasn't foolhardy, and he hadn't done anything he'd regret for the rest of his life, either. The fears of his parents were safe with him. So far. He might want to get his own motorcycle, paint naked women, live alone, run a coffeehouse, theater, dance hall, art gallery, have affairs with beautiful women, write poetry and teach karate to little kids, but that wasn't in his 'nature'. It wasn't 'like him'. He was the responsible one.

The family, i.e., his mother and her assistant coach, his ol' pappy, held Mickey in low regard. He had a stammer, and he wasn't up to their unspoken standards, what they thought were the simple standards for social acceptance. Mickey was tolerated, like a foundling forced upon a household of 'charitable' people. In a sense, he was free to fuck up, goof off, be an idiot, go nuts, and be a fool; all the things Jake wasn't supposed to be or do.

Mike couldn't do anything right, and Jake wasn't supposed to do anything wrong. Mike took a motorcycle trip and was dismissed. Jake would be married and praised for it, even though his choice of a wife was a clear disappointment to his parents, that is, his mother. As were his friends, his jobs, his apartment, his haircut, ad infinitum.

His mother asked Jenny why she didn't wear makeup. She said it would be nice if Jenny pulled the hair back from her face. Jenny made a valiant attempt to get along.

"I don't know what to call you," she said, "Should I call you Mrs. Axene, Mom, Mother, Corliss, or what?"

His mother thought for a moment and said, with a cold delight, "Call me Ducky."

She was being funny, in her way. If Jenny had tossed it back, it might have broken the ice, but that would be like breaking the ice alongside the Titanic. Nice try, but no cigar.

His dad came to him, just before he moved out, and said, "I've got to talk to you. Let's go for a ride."

They got in his Chevy wagon, and even before they were out of the driveway, he said, "Jake, you have to get a haircut. Your mother is driving me crazy. I don't care, myself. You can look like Tarzan, for all I care, but she's making my life miserable. Listen, I'll pay for it, just get it cut, so I can get some peace."

He looked at his dad and thought, "This guy is totally pussy-whipped."

"Sure, dad," he said, "I'll ask them to take a little off my dick, too."

"Listen, there's no reason to get nasty about it."

He liked his parents. Jake was the sort of fellow who would find virtue in a sinner and magic in a marshmallow. He figured God dropped souls out of the sky, and they lived where they landed. If he didn't like the view out the window, he faced the wall, and he made up a view. Having been told it was his nature to be responsible, and not being able to remember any contrary nature, or any deeper nature, he assumed it was true.

And yet there was a contrary streak in him that he cherished. He began to associate his contrary nature with drinking. It was surely a case of no harm, no foul. As if a tribe of aborigines lived their entire existence without kissing, caressing, or hugging. Then, such shows of affection were introduced into their lives by an explorer who ate jelly beans, and affection became associated with eating *jelly beans*. What did it matter if he ate too many *jelly beans*? What's a few *jelly beans*, on the side, if you're happy?

To Be Or To Be

It's no small adventure to get married. Being common doesn't change the fact that it's a considerable and adventurous undertaking. Millions of people are married, have married, and will marry, in the future. Jake had never been married, before, but he was about to become married.

Marshall was out of sorts. He'd gotten quieter, and he was already a quiet man. He seemed occupied by some private torment, like there was a thorn in his paw. The leonine presence of his observant eye was missing. He seemed to disappear. The days passed like ordinary workdays. The lesser beasts around the watering hole, took to fussing and quarreling. It was the middle of the long hot summer. Things went into a lull. A dead calm. Jake loved it. It was the quiet time before the storm, during which his brain went into neutral. His body took over. He worked and sweated copiously, and that was always a pleasure.

He got good and dirty, and he took great showers in the small, round, yellow-walled shower, across the hall from his cupola apartment door. He got more muscular. He loved his youthful manliness. Everything he ate and drank tasted good. And more, it felt good in a healthy body.

He'd done all the things necessary to prepare himself for the future, as far as he could tell, knowing as much as he did, as little as he did, and guessing at the rest. But the lull was also dangerous. It was a time of accidental openness. Any stray bird of thought or feeling might enter. Occasionally, a thought or feeling would come into his awareness, like a mirage, like a sudden ship sailing across the desert heat. If he blinked and ignored it, it dissolved to nothing. If he gave it credence, and accepted it, it docked, and he mingled with the crew and took tea with the captain.

These appearances had a life of their own. They were as compatible, or as foreign, as people were. He wasn't prejudiced for or against them, as long as he had a response to them. Some appearances weren't as easy to accept. They were the feelings that come up from below, from within, from deep inside his gut, his belly, his heart. Those occurrences were upsetting, like the onset of an illness, an imbalance, like an alien growth in a sensitive system.

He was willing to welcome into his life almost anything from the outside, but whatever came from the inside was not so welcome. It seemed as if he'd been burned, by the fire inside. A sudden flare could scorch his skin; an open burning could consume him. The same fire, that was the source of his passion, felt uncontrollable. He was grateful for the ways he found to control his passion. Sometimes, however, he felt like he'd put a buffalo in a burlap bag and then sat on it, like a baby strapped to a Brahma

bull. It would help to be married, to teach school, to cut his hair, and shelve his dreams of art and adventure.

But Marshall was acting strange. He was doing a lot of government work, and he wasn't singing.

One day, he said, "God damn it," popped his torch, and had to re-weld a joint. Marshall was a first-time-perfect welder. He never had to re-weld a joint.

Then, on the following Friday, Jerry was sick, or his kid was, and it was only Jake and Marshall in the truck, going back to the shed at 4:30. Marshall was quiet on the long drive in from Green Rock, out by Coal Valley, all the way in to the shed in Rock Island. It made Jake nervous. He didn't know what to say to Marshall anyway, and the awkwardness was compounded. He tried to talk.

"How's your boat, Marshall?" He felt stupid, as soon as he said it.

"What? How's my boat?"

"Yeah, how's it coming? You been working on it, right?"

"A boat's a boat. You wanna know how my boat is? My boat is a boat."

"I'll try and remember that," Jake said.

They drove in silence. Marshall looked over at Jake, once. They drove a while longer. He began to listen to the suspension bounce, to the motor rumble, to the wind around the cab.

"I'll tell you something, Jake," Marshall said, softly and quietly, in an uncharacteristically plain voice, "They say your hobby is the thing you love the most. Golf is my hobby. And I hate golf."

It wasn't funny. It wasn't meant to be funny. Ironic, perhaps, but not funny. Marshall wasn't trying to be funny, and Jake didn't laugh. Halfway back, after a long pause, Marshall spoke.

"The doctors tell me I got cancer. It's kinda slowed my interest in boats." He said the last word with emphatic scorn.

"Cancer?" Jake said.

"Maybe I do. Maybe I don't. I'm forty-seven years old, and I guess I got the cancer."

They rode in silence. And then Marshall began to sing. Jake sang along, and he didn't try to cover up his singing. Marshall grinned a gap-tooth tobacco-stained grin in Jake's direction.

"What'd you do with that fifty bucks, Jake?" he said.

"What fifty bucks, Marshall?"

"The fifty bucks your momma gave you for singing lessons."

Jake had heard the joke before, and he heard it coming, but he didn't care. He sang louder, and Marshall let his own voice carry the day. They bounced into the Gas Company shed, singing like a couple of fools. As a rule, a man's a fool. But there are exceptions.

He didn't believe there was anything really wrong with Marshall. It didn't make any sense. Marshall was the ace of the bullpen. He could go the full nine innings, without breaking a sweat. He didn't say he had cancer. He said he might have cancer. Cancer of the what? They'd probably just cut it out, over the weekend, like removing a wart.

When Jake was a senior in college, he had some warts burned off his right hand by Francis Talberg, the family doctor. While he was searing Jake's corrupt flesh, Talberg told Jake his pants were too tight. Just like that, "You're pants are too tight."

Talberg had sawed off his grandma's legs, when Jake was in high school. His grandma was a sweet old lady who watched 'Love of Life' and cut newspapers into strips with a scissors. She'd been a farm wife, a city wife, and the diligent mother of five. She wound up in the back room at her daughter Corliss's house, praying to God to take her home. God didn't take her home for a few more years. Her prayers became loud and long laments, as she gently but forcefully pleaded for her life to end. She contracted phlebitis in her legs, and Talberg cut them off above the knees. It became Jake's job to lift his grandma out of bed and into bed, each day, every day. Such intimacy was a little scary for a fifteen-year-old boy, but he became glad for the chance to help her. When he lifted the eighty-year-old woman with no legs, her gentle helplessness filled him with an ageless sense of union, like a baby holding the baby that had held the baby that had held him.

He remembered the death of his dad's father, also named Jake. Everybody called him Uncle Jake. When Jake was a kid, he thought it was weird that Grandpa Jake could be called Uncle Jake. It didn't make any sense. The summer after his freshman year in college, his grandpa died, and Jake went to the funeral. There was an open casket at the end of a long room, and all the relatives paraded by. He saw his dad cry, and it moved him to see his dad cry, especially, in public. Later, he and Mickey, fifteen at the time, were looking at the caskets on display in another room of the mortuary, when a dark, funereal figure approached them. In a solemn voice, the man in the black suit said, "May I help you?"

Mickey turned to the man and said, "No, thanks. We're just browsing."

One Saturday afternoon, he went with his dad to the Three Sisters Cafe, in downtown Moline, and he watched his dad flirt with the old ladies who ran the place. He asked one of them if she had a hot date, that night, and they both giggled. They asked

him who the handsome young man was, and Jim Axene told them he was his son. The ladies oohed and aahed, and he told them Jake was about to be married, sorry, he wasn't available, and they giggled some more.

His dad was great with waitresses, and Jake got a big kick out of watching it happen. They had pie a la mode and coffee, and he thought, "This is my father's true profession. This is what he's really good at, talking to people over pie and coffee. He'd have been a big hit in Paris in the Twenties in the coffeehouses on the Rue de la Femme Fatale."

He was thinking about his grandfather. Jake had never asked his dad about him, so he did. "Tell me about your father, about grandpa. I'd like to know more about him, like when you were growing up."

Jim Axene put his fork down. He looked down at the dish of his half-eaten pie. He didn't say anything. Jake felt a little awkward. A second before, his dad was joking, but all of a sudden, he was different. He took off his glasses, adjusted his baseball cap, and wiped his eyes with his big knuckles. His dad was crying, and he used the paper napkins from the holder to dry his tears, and then he blew his nose.

"I'm sorry, Jake, I can't talk about him, right now."

His voice was shaking, and his big hands looked helpless. Once again, Jake was struck by the emotion he didn't know his father felt.

"I loved him a lot," his dad said, finally, and he got up to go, a huge man in a small, fragile world. He nearly crashed out of the Three Sisters Cafe. Jake followed him, like the attendant to a king. He wished he loved his mother the way he loved his father, but he didn't.

The Meaning of Life

Being with Marshall, working at the Gas Company, digging holes for pipes, living in his cupola apartment, running around with Andy, flirting with Rosa, fantasizing about painting and motorcycles, it'd all been part of an oasis in time, a safe haven. Marshall's cancer broke the feeling of safety. He'd been living in the time of desire, and it was fast becoming the time of action. It was getting close to time for him to be married for real, to take a profession for real, and maybe even to create a family of his own, for real. For real, in what's called Reality.

What alternative did he have? Perhaps if he'd been raised by wolves, or tribal Indians, or by an intervening god, he'd have been able to pick up the threads of his true desire, but his true desires were, as yet, mere wisps of the will. He was at the fish end of a fishing line, and if he'd bitten down hard, he might have found the line progressively stronger, strong enough to reel himself in. For those who find fault with missed opportunity, and for those who dream of the life of the artist or the adventurer, these things are not necessarily attained in one bold action, or rewarded with complete bliss.

His truth lay within him, obscured by habitual years of life, for just cause. For those who are not gifted with encouragement in the discovery of their own inJake truth, it requires time and effort to uncover the way to that truth. Some seeds, when sown, survive in a kind of dormancy. Others fall among the rocks and wither. Some end up in the cuff of someone's pants. Some carry on the wind as far away as California.

In August, he and Jenny were married. Mike was his best man. The ceremony was held in the cleared-out living room of the big McGregor house in Waterloo. The ceremony was conducted by a friend of the family; Judge Corcoran. Jake gave the judge a bottle of fancy wine, as prescribed by Ardith McGregor. John McGregor, also called Dub, played the guitar at the reception, along with the judge, on piano, and a lawyer friend, on percussion.

Jenny nearly fell down the curved staircase. They fumbled with the rings. They got cake all over each other. It was a beautiful ceremony. Jake's little brother, Danny, fifteen years old and already 6'2", got drunk on champagne with the neighbor girl. Danny and the girl drank from the champagne bottles like it was soda pop. Danny got drunk, threw up on the patio, and Corliss Axene blamed Jake for not watching out for Danny, and she blamed Ardith McGregor for ". . . leaving champagne out where young children could 'accidentally' drink it."

Jake hadn't slept with Jenny for months, and he was looking forward to his wedding night. He went to a lingerie shop in Davenport and bought two black teddies as a gift for Jenny. They spent their wedding night at a Travelodge in downtown Waterloo. They were scheduled to leave on their honeymoon the next morning. He gave her his gift. She opened it, and began sobbing. That was the second time she'd done that. The first time they made love, she burst into tears, and here she'd done it again, on their wedding night.

He had a lot to learn about his new wife and a lifetime to learn it. Maybe. His experience with women was limited by the narrow scope of his limited experiences, a mother who showed him bad pictures, and a father who showed him next to nothing. He was playing hockey blindfolded. He was swimming with lead boots. He was dancing with crutches. He felt like an idiot. He thought he was dealing with some universal truths. "Life is impossible, and besides that, it can't be done."

It was a line from an old movie he didn't remember but had taken for direction. He was trying to find out the meaning of life, even though, among the wise, trying to find out the meaning of life was a joke. As if he could, by being persistent, learn the hidden secret that would unlock the mystery. He was reading the dictionary upside down. Occasionally, it made sense, so he worked harder. On no page in the book of his life did it say, "You're holding the book upside down," so his efforts to find the answers to his limitations were doomed, by the haphazard method of his scientific research, and his slipshod education.

Play Ball

There was, in Jake, a particular and rare moment, when the sham and the glitter, all the foolishness and melodrama dropped away. It was when a sensation would seep upwards in him, until his head cleared, as if from below, the veil was lifted, and the shared camaraderie of mutual misery and false enthusiasm fell away. For the briefest of times, he understood and accepted the world exactly as it was, in that moment, without expectation or adjustment. It was a tiny, enormous gift, born of itself, that appeared in him, for no apparent reason, with no precursor, and no obvious successor.

One day, a week before his wedding, working alongside Marshall, whose cancer had apparently gone into remission, judging by his spirits, a whole and entire concept came into his consciousness. Two words came to him, like a message floating to the surface of a Magic 8 Ball. The words were **FIRST TYPE.** Then the definition came to him, "Any idea, thought, or feeling, that, when it first appears, types itself."

He'd never thought such a thing. He had no idea where it came from, and the feeling was unique. Any idea that types itself can't be all bad. Or, it was advice, for him to be a writer. Before you do other stuff, before you think about it, first, type."

He liked the first idea, better. An original idea would be a first type, like an archetype. How would an archetype introduced itself? It would just appear. Amazing. Where did it come from? Where does any archetype come from? He put down the shovel. Actually, he held it out and flipped the off switch on the handle. It was a joke he made up to amuse his co-workers. This time, he did it deliberately, not as a joke, but as a statement.

Marshall looked at him, climbed out of the hole, and came over to him. He walked up to Jake, like a baseball manager about to send his star pitcher to the showers. He kicked the dirt, looked up, looked down, stepped close, and spoke.

"Jake, I can see that you're done here. This aint no life for you. Time for you to move on. Go write a book or something. Leave the gas leaks to these guys."

He gestured around, as if it was a minor league club, and he was sending Jake up to the Bigs.

"Don't wait any longer. Don't waste your time here. You've got other fish to fry."

"Thanks, Marshall."

"And don't let the bastards get you down."

There was pain and pleasure, and there was confusion, and there were moments. There were moments from without, and there were moments from within. It all opened up like a marigold volcano. The 'first type' thing that popped into his head was a reminder of the function of his being that had nothing to do with his personal drama. In playing sports, you learn all you can about the game, and for a while, it seems as if you've lost the childlike joy of the game. You practice, practice, practice. Then you forget about it, and you just play. It's hardest when you're playing without a manager you can trust, especially if you think the owner you do have is out to get you. You're on the field by yourself, the manager's an jerk, the owner's talking trade or worse, you've lost the joy, and the other players are just as messed up. That's one way to find out if you truly love the game. Jake's club was in a pennant race. It was the heart of the season. It was time to play ball. Jake got married.

Enough Rope

His mother and Jenny's mother were a match made somewhere other than heaven. The compressed energy of their negated power pitted them together. They locked horns in silent conflict, like two bulls, eyeball to eyeball, snorting and stirring the dirt between their cloven hooves. They so equally occupied each other, that their presence at the union of Jake and Jenny was effectively neutralized. Jake and Jenny were able to get married in an almost playful atmosphere of relaxation.

Both mothers were married to seemingly sweet, gentle, innocuous men, whose geniality was set free by the mutual distraction of their spouses. Dub McGregor was a delight, taking pictures of everyone, playing the guitar, and dancing with almost courtly charm. Jim Axene was his big, cuddly, teddybear self, dancing and hugging, making silly puns and flirting. Corliss and Ardith seemed almost invisible. The gathering blessed the pact between Jenny and Jake.

They were like teenagers with fake IDs, as they loaded up their VW, the first morning of their marriage. They were going to take about as much stuff with them, as they'd taken to college, plus a tent and a cook-stove for camping. They didn't have sleeping bags. It was a hot summer, and they thought they'd buy them later if they needed them. Mike gave them a fifty-foot rope for a wedding gift, without any explanation. Maybe it was 'enough rope'. Jake tied it to the back of the car. It hung decoratively in thick loops behind them, as they set off on the Sea of Matrimony, or the Great Plains of Matrimony, as it were.

There was, between them, a sense of hopeful complicity. Despite the tears and fears, they reinforced in each other the simple courage to head out, like pioneers at the railhead, across the Great Plains, toward the Far Horizon. One blessing of their youth was benign ignorance. The things that mitigated against the full freedom of their spirits were in abeyance. It was time to try wings that could spread, another day, and the wedding was a blessing of the innocents on their way.

Crossing northern Wyoming, on their way to Montana, they came on a stretch of highway under repair. It was a two-lane road being resurfaced. Jenny was driving. The highway seemed clear for a long stretch ahead. Coming over a small rise, without warning, their car struck the beginning of a long pile of gravel directly in their lane. Jenny was flying along, and suddenly, she was atop the gravel mound.

She held the wheel, guided the car, and brought it to a safe stop, finally leading it off the hazard. In a split second, she had contained the threat. He knew immediately, and perfectly, that the wife he'd chosen was to be trusted. A feeling came up in him he hadn't known was important. She was a true partner. He could rely on her in the doing of important things, even if those important things were unknown and unpredictable. The first night they camped, they were in Canada, and it was much colder than they imagined. They had a couple of blankets but no sleeping bags. They curled up around each other. He nearly engulfed her with his big body. She warmed him from within their enclosed circle. The feeling of holding her, protectively, warmed him.

Rolling the highways, the late summer of 1965, playing Rock 'n' Roll and singing along, they began to recognize the first giddy feelings of adult freedom. Their pact had broken them free from their youth. And yet they were still young. They were Mr. and Mrs., on their way to their new home in California, on their honeymoon, on their way to his first job as an adult. Bombs were falling in Vietnam. Lyndon Johnson was president less than two years, since Kennedy was shot, the elected president less than nine months. President Johnson had proclaimed The Great Society. Martin Luther King, Jr. was stirring the oppressed with a message of possibility. Innocence was abroad in the land, with a feeling of apprehension and hope. Jake was going to teach at the Robert Louis Stevenson School for Boys. Stevenson was the man who said, "Times are changed, with him who marries. There are no more by-path meadows, where you may innocently linger, but the road lies long and straight and dusty to the grave."

What about Jake? Did he show himself to be a partner to be trusted? When they were camped in the Canadian woods, albeit in a campground, just off the highway, they heard a noise. They heard many noises. Jake, by himself, might have been cowering in the tent and thinking about sleeping in the car. Instead, with a wife to look out for, he rose boldly from their makeshift bed and ventured into the night, to secure the perimeter. That is, he went out, and he looked around. As he stood, half-dressed, in the Canadian night, scanning the 360 degrees of shadow and sound, he felt proud. He felt actively engaged. He felt married. He felt a quiet, primal responsibility. He almost wished there was a bear. With a wife to protect, anything was possible. It was funny how that worked. When she was just Jenny, he was a little afraid of her. Now that she was his wife, he wasn't scared of anything. He probably couldn't stop a bear any better than she could, and it wasn't exactly Jenny he felt called upon to protect. It was something else. It was the fact of their marriage. It was the fire. It was the home-fire. He stood on top of the picnic table, listening to the distant howl of wolves. Or something. He raised his hands to the bright, starry night. He took and released a deep lung full of air. Jenny stuck her head out of the tent.

"Jake, what are you doing? Come back in the tent. I'm getting cold."

He jumped off the table and flew to the waiting arms of his young wife. Her hands were cold as ice on his back. His hands were cold as ice on her back, her ass, her breasts.

"Is that all you ever think about?"

"Yes, it's all I ever think about," he said and kissed her.

"If we turn around, right now," she said, "and go back to the Judge, we can cancel this whole thing, as if it never happened. My mother said I could come home, if this didn't work out."

"Ridiculous. She wouldn't take you back, in a million years."

"I know. I'm stuck. Go to sleep, and stop pestering me."

"You're my wife. I can pester you all I want."

"You do, and you can go and live with the bears."

"I was just talking to the bears, and they told me to come in here. Between your mother and the bears, I'm your only choice."

"I chose you, and you chose me. Now let's get some sleep."

They survived the night and made it all the way to the rocky coast of California, to the school named after the writer, adventurer, Robert Louis Stevenson. Stevenson said, among many things, "To be what we are, and to become what we are capable of becoming, is the only end of life."

Jake and Jenny were on their way to becoming what they were, and to becoming what they were capable of becoming, but they were not even close to the end.