To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by John Matthew Kinder entitled "Autobiography and Other Stories." I have examined the final copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

Allen Wier, Major Professor

We have read this thesis
and recommend its acceptance:

Accepted for the Council:

Associate Vice Chancellor
and Dean of The Graduate School

AUTOBIOGRAPHY

AND OTHER STORIES

A Thesis

Presented for the

Master of Arts

Degree

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

John Matthew Kinder

May 1998

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my best friend

Casey Althea Cothran.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my major professor, Allen Wier, for his insightful comments and helpful suggestions about each of the individual stories. I would also like to thank the other committee members, Dr. Charles Maland and Dr. Randi Voss, for their guidance and support over the past two years. I would especially like to thank Casey Cothran for her constant encouragement and love. Finally, I would like to acknowledge my parents, Jim and Deneshia Kinder; my friends in the English Department; Conley and Margaret Morris; and all of the writers and artists that have inspired me throughout my artistic career.

ABSTRACT

This thesis represents an experiment in fiction-writing techniques. Each chapter is designed in order to illuminate a different style of writing, drawn from extensive readings in classical, modern, and postmodern literature. Beginning with the self-referential fiction, "The Bowl of Cherries," the collection evolves through the juxtaposition of different fiction-writing techniques and forms, including fiction of the grotesque ("Strength"), erotic surrealism ("The Man in the White Suit"), the comedy of manners ("A Pleasant Winter Stroll"), the exotic parable ("A Hero To His People"), psychological horror ("To Build a Better Rat Trap"), Southern realism ("Miss Fannie's Funeral"), and symbolic realism ("Autobiography"). The stories are placed within the text in order to either 1) generate meaning through contrast or 2) comment upon the preceding fiction. In this sense, this thesis is not a traditional story-cycle or collection of short stories. Rather, this thesis catalogues, in microcosm, eight of the most important fiction-writing techniques and styles of the past two hundred years.

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INTRODUCTION

I don't think that I can introduce this collection of short stories without first telling you a little something about the author. When I was born, my parents gave me a Biblical name, John Matthew Kinder, which I'll probably abbreviate to John M. Kinder if I ever start publishing. I never particularly cared for the name John Matthew, although it appears quite often in my stories, usually attached to someone that bears a striking resemblance to either myself as a child or myself as a very old man. I like writing about myself in some shape or another; sometimes I think that I'm the only subject that really interests me artistically. Unfortunately, I'm not really sure that I'm that interesting! Right now I'm twenty-two years old, and soon I'll be getting out of school for the first time in five years. I'm pretty happy about it too, even though I don't have any job prospects: after a year of teaching college English, I'm probably going to be working the checkout line at the local Winn Dixie, or cutting rich people's lawns, or working as a janitor at some factory. If I had my choice, I would like to work as a night security guard at a warehouse or a shopping mall, although I'm not the kind of guy that would bother reporting on anybody if I caught them stealing. I'm not really a reliable worker, now that I think about it, and most businesses are probably making a mistake if they decide to take me on board. Anyway, all I'm looking for is a job that'll give me plenty of time to read and write--since that's about all I like to do with my spare time. Wherever I'm at, hopefully I won't have to work there too long. Right now, I'm planning on moving to Europe to live and write sometime next fall, and all I need to do is to save up a little money before I light out for the Continent just like Ernest Hemingway, e.e. cummings, Scott Fitzgerald and all of my other literary heroes. It seems like a cliché, I know, but some part of me still believes in the myth of the "experienced author;" some part of me still believes that there's something

over there that I can't find in the US. Maybe when I get back I'll have some adventures under my belt that I can write about. We can only wait and see.

All I can say is that I had a tough time writing this collection of stories. It was much harder than when I wrote my first novel three years ago...which isn't really surprising since I don't really care for the short story genre as a whole. When I walked into my first fiction writing class last year, I announced that I didn't like to read or write short stories. Of course, maybe I overstated myself a little. I *do* like some short stories, although I read only a handful of short story writers for pleasure. If you look closely, you can probably see the influence of my favorites in this collection. For example, I am fascinated by the grotesque and gothic tales of Edgar Allen Poe and Angela Carter. Their fiction is both timeless and profane, their subject matter exaggerated beyond the limits of reality, until, as Carter claims, "Character and events...become symbols, ideas, passions."[1] Although I don't have the vocabulary of either Poe or Carter, I try my best to recreate their ornate language and lush, often exotic, descriptions in stories like "The Man in the White Suit" and "Strength." You might even say that my love for Poe and Carter represents the Romantic side of my personality. Both artists are deeply concerned with the dark underbelly of the natural world, the sexually forbidden subject, the fantasies that draw us deeper into the caverns of the mind, as well as the ability of the artist to guide mankind out of history and into the world of imagination.

Another personal favorite is Franz Kafka. Just look at the dank, labyrinthine city of "Autobiography" or the suffocating office building in "To Build a Better Rat Trap," and you will see his influence. Sometimes I feel that I am trapped in a *Kafkan* world: a world where concentrated power is deified and petty bureaucracy transforms all institutions into boundless labyrinths, a world where the individual is depersonalized and alienated from the

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[1]Angela Carter. Afterword. *Fireworks: Nine Profane Pieces*. NY: Penguin, 1974.

rest of mankind.[2] Yet, at other times, I'm drawn toward that dreary environment of Kafka's fiction: I love cities with their high, imposing, impersonal towers; I love the shadow-darkened alleyways where you can disappear from the world. Often my fiction seems to revel in the bleakness of modern existence, the quiet horror that everyone must face in their lives. Perhaps that's why I love to torture my characters. I must get some kind of sadistic pleasure out of making them suffer. If not, then why did I give poor Tom such a horrible disease in "The Bowl of Cherries"? Why did I force Thomas to undergo such humiliation in "Strength"? Dr. Freud would probably say that I'm simply torturing myself--my death drive is really kicking in. Creative writing is a lot like day-dreaming, and it doesn't take a genius to read the tortured characters in these stories as manifestations of my own personality. How many of them are males? How many are little boys? And how many are named John?

From what I've read in his diaries, Kafka liked to torture himself as well. For him, writing itself was a form of torture; he talks about going days without typing a single word that satisfies him. In this respect, Kafka and I have a great deal in common. I've always found writing to be a laborious task. Often I sit before my computer for hours on end, barely writing a word, messing with the structure of a single sentence over and over again. Every once in a while I'll spit out a brief torrent of words, a few slack lines, but these are few and far between. The rest of the time, I stare at my computer screen in a daze, waiting, like the Hunger Artist in his cage, for something to pop into my brain. Unfortunately, I'm rarely, if ever, pleased with my efforts. Sometimes I'll find a phrase that's not too bad or a finely chiseled line that feels good in my stomach when I read it aloud. But most of the time, I feel anxious and dissatisfied when I finish a story. Like

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[2]Milan Kundera. "Somewhere Behind." *The Art of the Novel*. NY: Harper and Row, 1986.

Kafka, I constantly tinker with my work, so that no story is ever completely finished--it's just a work in progress.

I also have a debt to pay to the short stories of Anais Nin, D.H. Lawrence, and especially James Joyce. Although I haven't read a lot of erotica, much of my fiction has sensual, if not erotic, overtones. I love to write the human body: its movements, its smell, its taste, its texture. Life is an erotic experience; we are always coming into contact with other bodies, smelling them, feeling their presence when we enter room. In several stories, including "The Man in the White Suit" and "A Pleasant Winter's Stroll," I try to highlight the interplay of bodies; I want the reader to feel what the characters are feeling, sensually as well as emotionally. I'm especially concerned with the spatial aspects of the story: where a character is situated, how a character is holding his hand, how many beads of sweat have formed across his forehead. So much fiction allows the body to escape, to float away leaving only a name to signify the character. While such fiction forces the audience to use their imagination, to envision for themselves how a character looks and feels, it also reinforces a Puritanical separation of the mind and body, soul and flesh, that I consciously reject in my own writing. Like Whitman, I want to celebrate the body in all of its ugliness and beauty, from the running sores on Tom's face in "The Bowl of Cherries" to the Strongman's thick, beautiful muscles in "Strength." Of course, some of my stories are more erotic than others. "The Man in the White Suit," for example, is clearly influenced by the erotic surrealism of Anais Nin. As Raymond, the story's protagonist, slips in and out of narcissistic fantasy, ordinary objects like cigarette lighters and smoke-rings are invested with erotic significance. Other stories, including my favorite, "Autobiography," are far more subtle in terms of the character's sensuality: for these I owe a particular debt to the symbol-laden short stories of Lawrence and Joyce.

And then there's Hemingway. Sometimes I wonder how many young, male writers have chosen Hemingway as their hero. Again, it seems like a cliché, but I can't help but

feel that he is the greatest short story writer that I have ever read. Whenever I have writer's block, reading a few selections from *Men Without Women* or *Winner Take Nothing* always puts me back in front of my computer. I greatly admire his resistance to elaborate, unnecessary prose; his devotion to writing "serious" fiction; and his dedication to writing "without tricks and without cheating."[3] If I could write like anyone, I would like to write like Hemingway. His stories are both exciting and intellectually challenging, and he is able to shape seemingly plain sentences into beautiful short works of fiction. In one of my favorites, "A Canary for One," Hemingway holds the reader in suspense throughout the entire piece. When I first read the story, I didn't know what to think about the couple, nor the American lady with the birdcage that they meet on the train. But with the final sentence--only ten little words--Hemingway is able to transform the tone of the entire story, forcing me to reevaluate everything that I had read thus far. It's a skillful, almost magical, performance on the part of the author. And despite the "surprise ending" of the story, "A Canary for One" still allows for rereading. It's just too bad that, despite my every attempt, I cannot write stories like Hemingway's. Perhaps I admire Hemingway so much that I'm struck with what Harold Bloom calls "anxiety of influence."[4] Or maybe I'm just drawn to subject matter that doesn't suit Hemingway's terse, often journalistic, prose. In any case, even though I look to Hemingway when I need inspiration as a writer, his fingerprint is often missing from my work. Of the stories found in this collection perhaps "A Hero To His People" exhibits Hemingway's influence the most, especially in the opening description of Miguel riding his bicycle through the city. Yet, even this story deviates from Hemingway's models considerably. I hope that my deviation signifies some

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[3]Ernest Hemingway. *Green Hills of Africa*. NY: Scribners, 1935.
[4]Harold Bloom. *Poetry and Repression: Revisionism from Blake to Stevens*. New Haven, CN: Yale UP, 1976.

originality on the part of the author, possibly even the emergence of my own style of writing.

But despite all of these influences--all of these models to draw from--I still had a difficult time writing this collection. John Barth once said that "Writers tend by temperament to be either sprinters or marathoners,"[5] and I have to admit that I'm one of the latter. Even now, I find the short story format somewhat confining. It doesn't allow for the development of multiple characters; scenes have to be short and precise, the brevity of the work giving every detail added significance. Edgar Allen Poe thinks that the short prose narrative "affords unquestionably the fairest field for the exercise of the loftiest talent." Unlike the novel, which he finds objectionable because of its length, a short narrative can be read in one sitting; therefore, the reader is able to feel the "total effect" of the art.[6] However, it's been my observation that most short stories don't live up to Poe's high praise. They are over so quickly that I don't have time to learn much about the characters--I don't have time to care about the "total effect" produced by the text. Too many short stories read like synopses of longer works. Also, when I write short fiction, I feel rushed to put all of my ideas down on paper as soon as possible. It's a very exhausting process, because if I don't act quickly, I'll lose some important detail. That's why I much prefer to follow the lazy, often meandering, trek of a long novel, as meaning unravels slowly and characters develop at a leisurely pace. I always feel like I have accomplished something after reading a longer work. And I've never been more proud of myself than after I finished writing my first novel (even though it wasn't very good).

I only hope that this collection sustains some of the power of a longer work. If I had to write it all over again, I probably would have tried to connect the stories somehow.

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[5]John Barth. Foreward. *Lost in the Funhouse*. NY: Anchor, 1987.
[6]Edgar Allen Poe. "Review of Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales*. May, 1842." *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*. Ed. Nina Baym, *et al*. Vol. I. 3rd ed. NY: Norton, 1989. 1454-1458.

I've always admired short story cycles like *Winesburg, Ohio* or *In Our Time*, and perhaps I will explore this genre further in the future. However, this collection is the work of a student that hasn't quite found his own artistic identity. I consider each story an experiment in style and technique, from the self-reflexive metafiction of "The Bowl of Cherries" to the more traditional narrative structure of "Miss Fannie's Funeral." While the oldest stories ("To Build a Better Rat Trap," "The Man in the White Suit") lean toward fantasy and psychological horror, the more recent works ("A Hero To His People," "Autobiography," "Miss Fannie's Funeral") exhibit my shift toward realistic fiction. Now that the collection is complete, I'm still not sure which of these styles and techniques I will employ from now on. If anything, writing this collection has left me even more confused about my future as an artist. Which style, if any, can I call my own? How can I establish my own voice as a writer? I'm pretty sure that I could identify a Hemingway short story after reading a single sentence. The same goes for William Faulkner, Herman Melville, or many other great writers. You don't have to read much of their fiction before you recognize the writer's voice, their presence in the structure of the sentences, their personality in the choice of words. Of course, I probably shouldn't worry about establishing my own voice just yet. There's still plenty of time for me to experiment...and maybe I would be better off just playing it by ear. I'm too young to settle down into one *John M. Kinder, writer*. First, I want to explore all of the possibilities.

THE BOWL OF CHERRIES

This story is set in a square bed chamber about seven meters across, covered from ceiling to floor entirely in white. At the moment, the room contains a wooden table, two stuffed white chairs positioned on either side, and a canopy bed with white pillows, sheets, and rolls of hanging lace. A white porcelain bowl brimming over with cherries rests atop the table. It provides the chamber with its only hint of color. There are two entrances into the room--a pair of doors with crystal knobs located on opposite walls. Where they lead is of no importance here. All you need to know is that both doors are unlocked, and that the passageways are long and twisting with cold tile floors.

The story begins when a man pushes open one of the doors and steps into the room. He is holding a handkerchief in his right hand, and just inside the doorway, he pauses to cough into the fine white silk. The man is dressed in a white suit, with silver cufflinks and buttons and a silver clip for his tie. His polished shoes reflect the fluorescent light of the ceiling lamps. He slumps into one of the chairs, breathing heavily, then removes his fedora and places it upside down on the table.

The visitor (whom I will name Tom) is a tall man, with boney arms and fingers like stalks of white asparagus. His complexion is smooth and pale, his body as slim and straight as an icicle. I suppose that he shaves in the morning, because it is just after midday and his cheeks are without a hint of beard. The collar of his jacket is turned upward, concealing the back of his neck. His hair is dark and slicked down against his scalp.

I can tell that Tom is an impatient man. He shifts from side to side, uncrossing his legs only to cross them back a minute later. He raps his long white fingers against the edge of the table in a constant rhythm. Spotting the bowl--perhaps for the first time--Tom grabs at a handful of cherries. He manages to grasp two, and these only after much effort.

The others roll out of his hand, down the front of his suit. Whenever he tries to bring the cherries to his mouth, they slide through his fingers, bouncing like rubber balls to the floor. After several attempts, he manages to grasp one cherry by the stem, his fingers descending on it like open pinchers. But then his hand begins to shake. The cherry drops just inside the knot of his tie. 'God damn!' he yells, and grabbing as many as he can squeeze into his hands, he flings them against the wall. The cherries burst upon impact. A few leave dark red circles like little bloody pawprints; others stick to the paint for a moment, then slide down to the floor in pale red streaks.

The whole display seems silly to me, immature and melodramatic...though, most characters like to be melodramatic from time to time. I believe it makes them feel important, like they are *really* living and not just squandering their energy on long, drawn-out conversations, mimicking my every word. Perhaps this is how Tom is feeling, although he would never admit it. In any case, Tom won't have to clean up the mess. He can be melodramatic, cover the entire wall with cherry stains if he wants to, and then just hobble away. Men like *him* usually can.

Suddenly I can hear footsteps. A dog is yapping somewhere nearby, and I hear the faint sound of jingling keys. Tom must hear them too, because he straightens his jacket and eases back into his chair. He has to appear cool--his demeanor nonchalant--as if nothing has happened. Someone important might be coming. Perhaps someone unexpected. Tiny beads of sweat glisten across Tom's forehead as the footsteps grow louder. They are heavy and slow, and I cannot guess to whom they belong. Finally, there is a knock at one of the doors.

'Hello,' a voice calls. 'Is anybody there?' Before Tom has the time to respond, a woman twists the crystal knob and nudges the door ajar. A white Pomeranian is bouncing around her feet.

Now that I think about it, I really shouldn't be surprised. The woman's name is Susan. I have known her for years, but this is the first time she has ever appeared in one of my stories. She has mahogany hair that reaches to her shoulders. Her skin is dry, wrinkled and marked with dark patches around her eyelids. Her dress cannot hide her stomach and heavy arms. She stands bandy-legged, her feet pointed inward like those of a bird. And yet, I cannot help but notice the traces of a past beauty. The eyes like cut ebony, the smooth palms of her hands. Her voice has grown deeper with age, calmer, even more inviting. Susan's face swells red as she closes the door with her bottom; her lips curl upward into a thin, blithe smile.

She looks around at the walls, her smile fading, and then at Tom sitting quietly in his chair. 'Please God, not again,' she whispers. As if on command, the white Pomeranian leaps forward, its squat little body yanking Susan further into the room. A dark-red leather leash is tethered around the dog's neck, along with a pair of silver tags. It doesn't surprise me that the dog is with her. Susan takes it everywhere. She does not like to leave the house without it, and it can never sit still for more than a few minutes. Even now, Susan is attempting to tie it to one of the table legs, and the dog is barking and running and clicking its nails on the floor.

'Come on,' Susan cries. 'Heel now! Sit!' The dog continues to pace around her, the leash wrapping itself around one of Susan's calves. The Pomerani
an slips away as Susan tries to nudge it to the floor. It pauses only to bark and sniff the air, to untangle its face from the leash and snap at the tags jingling around its neck. The dog lifts its nose toward the electric lights above its head, then sprints between Susan's legs, hopping and snarling as if mad.

(I've seen the dog act this way before, many years back, when I would visit Susan late in the evenings. I don't know why, but the Pomeranian used to get so excited whenever I came around. It's like it couldn't wait to see me. I wonder if it still recognizes

my smell. It's been so long ago that I can't even remember the dog's name. Susan found it only a few weeks before we met. The dog was lying half-starved just off the side of the road; it was barely twitching when Susan reached down to pick it up. Nearly frozen, its hair natted with briars and ice, the dog's first instinct was to latch on to whatever was moving. It sunk its teeth into Susan's hand, biting down to the bone as Susan carried to Pomeranian to her car. When we were first introduced, her hand was still bandaged, and she had to take shots in the stomach just in case the dog was rabid. But even then, she loved that dog like a child.)

Nevertheless, at present the dog's is a dying fight. Pomeranians aren't known for their strength. It cannot hold out forever. Already, much of the bounce has left its step. Though still yapping, still twisting its leash into a knot, the dog is beginning to tire. Its reddish-black tongue waggles in and out of its mouth, its furry chest heaving for lack of air. All they have to do is give it time. Soon it will slump to the floor and sleep.

But Tom doesn't wait for the dog to relent on its own. Sitting motionless throughout the ordeal thus far, he pulls himself out of his seat. His body trembling, he limps around to the other side of the table. Tom yells something that I can't understand (perhaps I wasn't listening), and the dog barks even louder, its hair standing on end. Teetering around the Pomeranian as if drunk, Tom jerks up his pants-cuff to reveal the open face of his shoe. In one awkward motion he kicks the dog square in chest, then slips back against the surface of the table. The dog, charging forward at the time of the blow, flips backwards through the air as if a bomb has exploded underneath it. Its furry snout snaps downward as it reaches the end of the leash, and yelping and shaking its head from side to side, the dog falls to the floor with a *thud!* The Pomeranian is motionless, whimpering in a heap of white fur. Its tongue flashes out its mouth like a red worm.

The whole ordeal is over in less time than it takes me to write it down. It happens far too quickly for Susan to do anything but stare, her mouth hanging open, as her *baby*

lies panting on the white tile floor. She gawks at Tom, her face now puffy and red. Rushing over to the dog, she squats down and scoops it into her arms. The Pomeranian squeals again, clawing its way up the front of her dress and over the top of shoulders. Caught by its hind legs, it dangles headfirst over the ground as Susan tries keep it from falling. 'Give me a hand, here!' she yells, but the dog flops in a cartwheel to floor, its legs buckling upon impact. The dog's woolly head smacks the tiles with another hard *thump!* Susan's wrists and chest are ribboned with thin lines of blood. 'Come on, it's all right,' she says soothingly, her fingers wiggling like some sort of bait. 'Come to momma now.' She gives a slight tug on the leash, but the dog jerks it out of her hand and retreats to the far corner of the room.

Susan turns upon Tom, her body shaking more than ever. 'Do you see what you've done? He's afraid to come near me now. *God damn you!*'

'It's fine. It just needs to settle down for a minute.'

'You could have killed him! Do you know that? You could have killed him!'

'In a half hour that dog will have forgotten all about it. You'll have to beat it just to keep it off you.'

Shaking his head, Tom returns to his chair. For the first time since his arrival, he pulls a thin silver case and a metal lighter from his coat pocket. He fumbles with the case for a least a minute, unable to open it with his thumbs; they slide over the metal like it has been dipped in cooking grease. It's comical to see him struggling. His face looks like a white prune, his cheeks drawn upward, his eyes squinted shut. Covering my mouth with my hand, I try my best to stifle my laughter. *Hah hah hah, hah hah hah.* Tom slams the case down on the surface of the table.

'It's not funny!' he says, scowling at Susan.

'Oh for God's sake, give them here.'

Tom slides the lighter and the cigarette case across the table just a Susan slips into her chair, crossing her legs as she sits. Susan is wearing white stockings that reach to her thighs, and opentoed shoes. She opens the case and places two cigarettes in her mouth, then snaps open the lighter in one quick motion. She cups the flame in the palm of her hand, as if to protect it from the wind, and when both cigarettes are lit, Susan removes one and presses it between Tom's lips. His face is flushed as he smokes, and the glaze of sweat has returned to his forehead.

'So, do you think that you're a big man now? Am I supposed to be impressed? Huh? *Big strong man--*' Thin wisps of smoke trail from her lips.

'Susan!'

'*Big--Strong--Man--*'

'You're lucky that I don't have my old temper. At one time I could have done much worse.'

'Oh, meaning what, exactly? Are you going to kill him now? Is that it? Or is kicking him going to be enough this time? I'm surprised you had the strength to get up and do it yourself. *I* usually have to do everything for you.'

'*Thank you*, Susan. You know, sometimes I almost forget about it too. I'm just glad that I have you around to remind me,' he says snidely. Tom takes a long drag on his cigarette, coughing up phlegm as smoke funnels out of his nostrils. 'You never should have brought him,' he adds, once the fit has passed. 'You know how that dog acts when he's around me.'

'He acts like that around *everyone*.' Susan stares at her reflection in the surface of the table. Her cheeks are blazing from the white lights over her head. 'Besides, that gives you no right to lay into him like that. I had it under control.'

'That's not what it looked like to me. I could have sworn that the dog had *you* by the leash.'

Gripping the cigarette in a closed fist, Tom taps his ash on the rim of the porcelain bowl. In the corner of the room the Pomeranian has discovered a discarded cherry and is silently gnawing away. Burgundy juice drips from its long white hair. (I am afraid it will break a tooth, so I *erase* the cherry's pit.) Susan is whispering, as one might whisper to a baby half-asleep, and when she looks up, her lips look like pale slugs. She flicks her cigarette ash into the air, the flakes disappearing into the whiteness of the floor.

I have never seen her smoke before. She smokes far too elegantly for anyone in real life. I wonder if this is a new habit, one that she has taken up when around Tom, or if she has been smoking all along, hiding it from me, afraid of what I would think or say. Long threads of smoke seep from between her lips and rise in spirals toward the ceiling--it smells like cloves, like burning fruit.

So far, this story is not at all like I had expected. For one, the smoking is a surprise, as is the burgundy leather handbag that's sitting at Susan's feet--I have never seen it before. But these surprises are inconsequential when compared with the open hostility between the two central characters. They were *supposed* to be lovers. I had prepared myself for intimate affection, physical nakedness, garments strewn around the room as Tom and Susan stumbled blindly for the bed. I expected to be silently watching, describing the placement of hands and lips as I tried to restrain my frustration. However, it seems that my fears have been misguided. Susan and Tom have been at each other's throats from the very beginning. Even now, Susan continues to reprimand Tom about the dog, and for the first time, I am hopeful of a happy ending.

'Just look at him!' she rails. 'He's scared to death. His whole chest is bruised up, and I think you may have broken some of his ribs. How am I going to explain all of that?'

'Say that he fell. Say that he was run over by a bicycle. You're a smart girl, you can think up something.'

'I'm going to have to take him to the vet now. Do you know how much that is going to cost?'

'Oh fine, fine. Here, you want money?' Tom is glaring at her from across the table. Reaching into his pocket, he removes a money clip, the initial *T.* carved neatly into the silver. When he is unable to remove any bills, he slides the clip across the table. It *clinks* against the bowl of cherries and clatters to the floor. 'There, have his teeth capped while you're at it!'

Susan does not move. 'You keep it. I don't need *your* money. If I have to, I can always get John to pay the bill.' She picks the money clip off the floor and returns it to his pocket.

'Susan,' Tom says slowly, 'I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt your dog. Just take the money. I can afford it, I swear.'

'No, you need it more than I do.'

'Please, Susan, I want you to take it. You know John doesn't have any extra money. If he did, he'd dress you a little better. I mean, look at that costume you're wearing. It's falling apart at the seams--'

'I don't want it!'

'*Susan!*'

'No!'

Lurching out of his seat, Tom grabs the money clip out of his pocket and hobbles around to Susan's side of the table. He snatches Susan's handbag, and after fumbling with the zipper, Tom rips apart the metal teeth and shoves the clip inside. 'There, was that *so* hard?' Tom yells, throwing the handbag to the ground. 'I don't know why you have to be so damn stubborn!' Tom's arms are clutched to his chest and his legs are trembling.

Susan looks down at the handbag.

'Oh no,' she says quietly. 'Oh, no no no....'

Tom is returning to his chair, bracing himself on the edge of the table as he walks. Once seated, he gazes into the porcelain bowl, picking at a cherry with the end of his cigarette; the fruit turns grey with fallen ash, and Tom drops his butt into the dish.

Susan reaches down and places the handbag in her lap, cuddling it to her soft stomach. The zipper is twisted and broken. On one side, the leather is torn in the shape of a smile. She strokes it with her fingertips, avoiding the tear, then lifts the handbag to her face. Dark threads jut out from the leather like hairs, and Susan follows the lines of stitching with her eyes. She rubs the smooth leather against her cheeks, and then down into the curve of her lower neck. She smiles faintly and places the handbag in the center of the table.

'It was so pretty, wasn't it? And the leather...the leather was *so* light, *so* smooth...like the skin of one of these cherries.' She picks one up by the stem and, without looking, places it in her mouth.

I believe that the taste hits her immediately--the light peppering of ash. She winces, her lips quivering, drawing together like those of an old woman, those of someone starved. Her face grows pale as the ash slides down her throat. Her eyes are wet with tears. I can't imagine the taste of it, nor what compels her to keep the cherry in her mouth, but for a long time she chews away, her teeth grinding against the pulp, her mouth half-open and moist with juice.

'Yes, it was *so* pretty,' Susan whispers, her hand clenching her throat as she swallows. 'It was *so* pretty, and it was *so*, *so* new. I got up early this morning and rushed down to the store right when it was opening up....' Susan wipes her eyes with her fingertips, her voice failing. 'Here, just try and touch it with your hand.'

Susan reaches forward and takes Tom by the wrist; he does not struggle or jerk away. She unbuttons Tom's shirt-cuff and rolls the sleeve up to his elbow. His pale

forearm is marked by sores, pustules split-open and leaking a whitish fluid on his shirt. Susan is careful to avoid them with her touch. 'No, Susan. Please, no,' he whimpers.

'Come on,' she says. 'It's easy. Just stretch out your arm.' She guides his fingertips to the handbag, moving them up and down against the leather in slow, lambent strokes. 'Doesn't that feel nice?'

Tom offers no response. He appears haggard, his face drooping and soft, as if twenty years have passed in a matter of seconds. The anger that once possessed him is gone. His chin rests on the surface of the table, his eyes glazed. A few tears roll down his cheeks and disappear beneath his shirt-collar, but he makes no effort to wipe them away. When he answers, it is with the voice of a tired old man.

'You must have been saving for weeks....'

'Don't think about that.' Susan turns the bag around so that the tear is facing her chest. 'Can you feel the grain of the leather?'

Tom's entire body shudders except for his outstretched arm. Tears are running in streams down his face, and his voice cracks as he speaks. 'I'm s-s-sorry...I...I couldn't help it...my hands...I...I couldn't help it.'

'It's okay.'

'It just came apart in my hands...I couldn't help it...I *swear!*'

'I can get another. There are thousands just like it.'

'But not like this one. You bought this one for me. It matches your dress.'

Susan pauses before she replies, her hand sandwiched between Tom's and the unspoiled side of the bag. I hadn't noticed, but her cigarette is now smoldering on the clean white floor. A mop of hair drapes over Tom's eyes like an oily rag. His breathing is heavy and slow. Susan folds the hair back behind Tom's ear, arching her body over the table until their faces are nearly touching. Her fingertips are white where they rubbed against his skin. She attempts a smile, but it only looks pitiful and false.

'It can be stitched up,' she says finally.

'Yes...good as new.' Tom retracts his arm as Susan leans back in her seat. He removes the stained handkerchief from his pants-pocket, then wipes the milkcolored tears from his eyes. 'I don't deserve you,' he says.

Tom's skin looks like it's melting. There are deep sores just above his eyelids, around his ears, down the front of his neck. It hurts me to look at them...and I close my eyes and try to remember his face when he first came into the room. Though always pale, there was something about him that impressed me--not any of his features, as such, but something about the way he stood just inside the doorway, all clean and pressed and confident, his face shining like the silver pin for his tie. I hated him for it! I hated the way he seemed to blend into the walls as he crossed the room, his suit and hat and shoes and, yes, even his skin, ebbing into the whiteness, until all that remained were his eyes. And *they* were like jewels, white with flecks of burgundy red. For some reason, it is less painful to think of him as beautiful, even though that it is when I loathed him most. But after a while, even that becomes impossible. All I can invision are the cherrycolored sores.

When I open my eyes, Susan is rummaging through her handbag, rattling it back and forth and holding it open to the light. 'Here, use this,' she says, pulling out a mirror compact. It is shaped like an oyster shell. Susan flips it open with her fingertip. 'I have some cotton balls if you need them.' Tom shakes his head, taking the compact into his open palm. He stares at his face in the mirror and wipes his skin with the rectangular cloth inside. His face is muddy, like a pit of white clay after a storm. Eventually, he gives up and sinks down his seat. His mouth is clenched shut. Resting his head against the back of the chair, Tom gazes upward into the white electric lights. His eyes are wet and lined with dark capillaries--I can feel them staring directly into my own.

What would Tom say if he knew that I was telling this story? How would that make him feel? I suddenly feel like an intruder, even though I was here first, waiting far

longer than Susan or Tom could ever imagine. I was watching when an old woman prepared the room--when she stripped the bed, scrubbed the floor with cleaning oil, and poured wet cherries into the bowl. I saw the carpenters measure the door frames and the painters whitewash the walls. I can even remember when the room was just a skeleton of planks and nails, and when there was nothing here at all. I was here from the very beginning...but now it's time for me to go. I'm feeling tired, and my hands have grown weak from writing. Besides, I can't bear to watch any longer. This is their story, not mine. Tom and Susan can get along well enough without me.

Still, I cannot end this story without one final glance...for the sake of closure if nothing else. Tom is leaning forward now, his elbows resting upon the white surface of the table. He is weeping again, but his mouth is no longer quivering, and his body is still. Susan is staring at his hands.

'Your nails need trimming,' she says. Susan extends her arm and takes one of Tom's hands in her own. 'They could be so lovely if you took proper care of them. They are so thin and precise. Your fingers are like those of a painter...or of a man that plays the harp. I think they are your handsomest feature.'

Lifting the hand carefully, Susan presses her lips to each one of his fingers. 'Can you feel anything when I touch them?'

'No, nothing but the heat.'

STRENGTH

His rump in the mud, Thomas quivered anxiously at the foot of the stage. The sun was dipping into the nest of trees and thick scrubs at the far end of the field, and Thomas saw the swollen legs of the villagers draw closer as the day ebbed toward darkness. He had been waiting for some time now--perhaps over an hour--as the charlatan from the previous show collected his bottles and elixirs from the stage and set up a booth just down the road. The boy's backside was covered in yellow muck, chilling him to the bone, and his entire body ached from sitting on the ground. But as the crowd pushed closer, Thomas' head settled on his shoulder, the low murmuring voices, the warm pungent smell of the villagers' clothes, luring him toward sleep.

He awoke to the sound of light footsteps on the stage. A carnival exhibitor was standing just above Thomas' head. The exhibitor's face was shaped like that of a shrew, his nose long and pointed, his eyes wedged like marbles into the base of his sloping forehead. A thin whisp of yellow beard sprouted from the end of his chin, and his tophat and black cape suffered from heavy wear. Thomas climbed to his feet, watching as the exhibitor's face twisted into a smile. Ushering the audience forward with his spindly arms, he erupted in a voice that could be heard over all of the carnival's attractions.

'Ladies and gentlemen, my name is Hugo Gentry,' he exclaimed, 'and I want you to step right up and witness the greatest feats of strength the world has ever seen. Marvel at the only man able to hold two tons straight over his head. Be the first in your town to watch a man break a fencepost right across his chest. He's fierce enough to bite the head off a cat while it's still alive, and he can lift cinder blocks with his earlobes. Come on, folks, gather round now. All I ask is a few minutes of your time, nothing else. There's now charge whatsoever. I only hope that by the end of the show, you'll find it in your

hearts to give a small donation. But let's not worry about that for the moment. Because right now I want to introduce Steven--the magnificent--the strongest man on earth!'

With a sweeping gesture, the exhibitor in the black hat and cape swiveled on his boot-heels and pointed toward the thick maroon curtains at the back of the stage. Emerging from underneath the threadworn velvet came a brutish hulk of a man, his fleshy arms hanging limp and heavy at his sides. From a distance, it would have been easy to mistake him for a bear walking on its hind legs. His face was long and covered in beard, and with the exception of piercing blue eyes, his features were dull and shapeless, as if molded by children out of clay. The Strongman wore leather boots that laced up to his calves, forest-green trousers muddied at the knees, and a tremendous black belt that looped around his belly like a manacle. Though the temperature was falling rapidly as dusk turned to dark, the Strongman was shirtless, and his chaffed, red nipples protruded from a forest of coarse and curling black hair. The aureola were the color of unripe strawberries--marbled light pink with white pimples and capillaries--about two inches in diameter. A golden ring dangled limply from the end of each nipple. As the audience approached the stage, their path lit by the dim firelight flickering down from the red and white lanterns that hung from poles all across the carnival-grounds, the Strongman cracked his thick fingers and scratched at a tuft of hair on his belly.

With Thomas gazing on in anticipation, the Strongman turned toward the back of the stage, parting the curtains to reveal an ancient leather trunk clasped shut with brass buckles and pasted on every side with multicolored stamps. A pair of enormous barbells--each labeled *One Ton* in large white letters--lay parallel on the ground nearby. Kneeling, his gargantuan frame covering the entire trunk in shadow, the Strongman unlocked each of the buckles with a key from his belt. The trunk opened with a whine, a belch of dust and stagnant air that reeked of tannin and mildewed wool. With surprising deftness, the Strongman removed an armful of red bricks, stacking them in a pile beside him on the

stage. He next produced an anvil; then a fence post; a sledge hammer; and finally, to the crowd's curiosity, a flaxen strap that looked like a hammock. The Strongman lined up the objects in a neat row at the front of the stage, rolling the barbells with his feet. Then he waited as the audience hushed and the exhibitor gave his signal to proceed.

In the front row, his meager frame wedged against the splintering wood planks of the stage, Thomas stretched forward and touched one of the barbells with his thumb. The painted black iron was icy and covered in tiny bumps like the goose-pimples on his arms. From Thomas' view--his neck crooked backward as he peered up into the soft hazy light of the lanterns--there seemed to be no end to the Strongman. On tip-toes, his face was level with the Strongman's boot-soles. And continuing up the Strongman's body, his eyes weaving their way through the clusters of hair that clung like black mold to the Strongman's chest and face, Thomas' vision was lost in the webs of gauzy shadows pendent over the stage. The Strongman was larger, both in height and mass, than any man Thomas had ever seen--tall enough that Thomas could only examine small portions of him at a time. He examined the Strongman's hands, which were bruised and cracked with sores from gripping the heavy weights. Fine needles of hair sprouted in clumps down each of his fingers, and the nails were yellow--jagged as if they had been chewed upon by an animal.

'And now, ladies and gentlemen,' announced the exhibitor, 'Steven will begin by lifting two thousand pounds with one hand!'

Hunched over until the hair on his chest pressed against his knees, the Strongman gripped one of the barbells in his left hand. His face was very near Thomas' own. Beads of sweat formed above the Strongman's bushy eyebrows, draining into his sea-blue eyes like tiny rivers. Despite a deep cut on his upper lip, the Strongman ground his teeth loudly. Then, for the first time, a sound rattled from the Strongman's throat--a loud howling moan--and in one motion he jerked the barbell upward and rose to a standing

position. For a moment the crowd was silent, stunned that even this giant of a man could perform such a feat. However, their silence soon turned into an explosion of cheers and clapping hands. Thomas smiled, and cheered the loudest of them all, his thin legs trembling with excitement.

Already, the wait had been worth it! For Thomas, such strength was unimaginable--or at least unreal. He knew of it only from the fairytales and legends his oldest sister would recount before putting him to bed. The youngest of six siblings, Thomas had nearly died with his mother at birth, and while his brothers and sisters grew up hardy and strong, Thomas' childhood was one of suffering and slow, lingering disease. He had lived longer than anyone had expected, though even at the peak of health, his body had a stark, ghostlike appearance, his face haggard beyond his years. Perhaps that was why he found the Strongman's performance so intoxicating. He could not comprehend the raw strength that flowed throughout the Strongman's limbs, through every sinew and muscle, squeezing through the smallest capillary and nerve until it saturated every fiber of his body.

When the crowd grew quiet once again, the Strongman bent over and replaced the barbell on the floor of the stage. His eyes were much darker when viewed up close--almost the color of a deep bruise--and there was something ominous about how they scanned across the audience. Fearing that their eyes would meet accidentally, Thomas quickly looked down at the ground. He could feel the heat from the Strongman's breath against his cheek. The Strongman's body emitted a sweet, gamy odor, unlike any Thomas had smelled on his own. Tilting his head to the side, Thomas sniffed his armpit, finding only the smell of dead skin and the yellow mud from the ground. Though he did not dare, he longed to rub his hand against the Strongman's skin, soaking up the odor. He wanted to grip the Strongman's flexed biceps and feel what thick muscle was like. But in the Strongman's presence--his body so near that Thomas thought he felt the brushlike hairs of

the Strongman's beard against his shoulder--the boy stood paralyzed, his gaze averted toward the soupy mix of grass and mud at his feet. It was like standing before some divine figure, one that could crush him without a second's thought. Thomas looked up only after the smell had dissipated, when the heat of the Strongman's breath was gone. Now standing, the Strongman held the fencepost in the crook of his outstretched limbs.

'But that's only the beginning, folks,' the carnival exhibitor proclaimed, his mouth twitching with every word. 'Watch closely as Steven breaks this eighty pound fencepost across his chest.' The Strongman grunted as he pulled the fencepost against his upper torso. A purple vein appeared across his forehead, and his chest rose like a firescorched plateau above the top of his ribs. Slowly the wooden fibers began to yield. After a series of loud cracks, the fencepost was bent around the Strongman's chest like an open mouth. And as the crowd cheered and applauded their approval, he twisted in half the few connecting sinews and dropped the broken fencepost to his feet. Pinned in by the surging mass of bodies, Thomas watched with horror as one of the pieces rolled off the edge of the stage. Unable to divert its path, he felt the broken fencepost drop heavily against his thigh. It landed upright in the yellow mud, then fell with a low crack across the top of his foot. Thomas gripped the stage to maintain balance, his leg now throbbing as the pain sunk deeper beneath his skin, through the slender bands of muscle and into the bone itself. His face grew flushed, and it took all of his strength just to keep from crying out for help. Unfortunately, he was not able to sustain the illusion for long. Hot tears welled up in his eyes and were soon flooding down his face in ugly streaks. Releasing the stage with both hands Thomas grabbed his thigh and slipped to the ground, his knees pressed to his throat as he rolled into a fetal ball.

Weeping openly, it was a minute before he noticed the ring of silent faces that peered down at him in the mud. Though they appeared concerned, they did not move or even ask his name, and for a second Thomas gathered that he had somehow died--that

these silent ghostly judges were waiting for him to rise and join his parents in death. But when he tried to move, another burst of pain ran through his thigh, and he fell back into the pit of mud at the front of the stage. The smell of the earth made him want to vomit. He covered his mouth with one hand, waiting for the sickness to come. Finally, an old man with a white beard pushed his way through the crowd.

'What's your name, son?' the old man asked.

The boy answered through a crack in his fingers. 'My name's Thomas,' he said quietly.

'Do you think that you can stand?' Thomas nodded his head, and cradling the boy in his arms the old man hoisted him to his feet.

'Is the child all right?' asked the carnival exhibitor nervously. He now teetered on the edge of the stage.

'Oh, I think he'll be fine,' the old man replied. He turned and wiped a streak of mud from Thomas' cheek.

The audience's attention had left the stage, and what felt like a thousand eyes were fixed directly on Thomas' face. Men and women stood on their tip-toes just to get a look at him, their children roosting on their parents' shoulders or hopping up and down, anxious for a view. Suddenly he had become a spectacle to be gawked at and pitied. The exhibitor's twitching shrew face loomed over him from the stage, and for the first time Thomas was conscious of the old man's hands on his shoulders. If nothing else, Thomas wanted to duck his head beneath the stage and disappear into the darkness. He was prisoner to the audience's gaze. Despite his every effort to restrain himself, once again Thomas was seized by a fit of loud, continuous weeping. He blubbered like an infant, wheezing whenever he tried to speak. The thought of the Strongman watching him filled Thomas with tremors. Though he did not dare turn around, Thomas' imagined an angry scowl across the Strongman's face, his dark eyes glaring with bitterness and disgust.

Thomas was delaying the Strongman's performance. The show's momentum was lost. Thomas retched into his hand, yellow vomit dribbling out of the corner of his mouth. The old man wiped Thomas' lips with a handkerchief as the boy's face burned red with shame.

'Let go of me!' Thomas cried, tearing himself out of the old man's grasp. His high voice was choked with sobs, and he snorted up a throatfull of phlegm. 'I...I can do that myself,' he said slowly.

The old man looked surprised. He released the boy's shoulder and stepped away as Thomas cleaned the vomit from his chin. Though his leg was still wobbly and uncertain, almost numbed with pain, Thomas maintained balance by resting his back against the stage. 'Let's see about that leg then,' the old man said kindly. 'Here, hold still so that I can roll up your pants.' Thomas' leg was swollen and already a deep purple bruise was spreading across the top of his thigh. 'That will turn green by tomorrow. You need to get off of it as soon as possible. If you like, I can take you home.'

Thomas shook his head, wishing that the old man would mind his own business and leave him alone. Thomas could hear footsteps on the stage behind him, and he hoped more than anything that the show would continue. He couldn't understand why they were taking so long. It was bad enough that everyone was watching, but to be coddled by this stranger was more than Thomas could endure. When the old man tried to brush the hair from Thomas' eyes, the boy shoved his wrinkled hand away and covered his head with his arms, cowering as if about to be struck. He moved like a wounded animal, his head in constant motion, darting from side to side, looking for a means of escape. But it was impossible. The faces were everywhere, the bodies slowly creeping closer until he would have no room to turn around. Voices merged into a thick droning wall of sound until Thomas could not distinguish one from another. The old man was speaking once again, his lips moving silently, forming words that Thomas could not hear. The pain in his leg seemed to echo throughout his entire body, surging through his middle torso until it

rumbled like a hailstorm into his brain. Staggering back against the stage, Thomas was on the verge of collapsing when a giant hand grasped the back of his shirt and lifted his squirming little body into the air.

Thomas came to rest in the center of the stage, his head propped up against the Strongman's enormous thigh. The crowd was spread out before him in a flood of human bodies, swallowing up every inch of space as it dipped and churned ever closer. The dim light from the lanterns gave the audience an ashen appearance, their faces blurring together into a pool of white skin and wide cavernous mouths. At his appearance on stage, the crowd roared their approval, whistling and clapping their palms together in mad excitement. Thomas could smell the Strongman's skin just over his shoulder; he could feel the hard thick muscle against his back, the flat boney knee just underneath his buttocks. He wanted to duck between the Strongman's thighs and stumble into the shadows behind him, though when he turned around Thomas found the passage was blocked. Staring into the belly of the giant, he stepped from side to side, unsure of which direction to take. The Strongman was so large that it seemed impossible to get around him. The crowd bellowed at the sight of Thomas' indecision, their voices growing louder with every passing second. Finally, the Strongman lifted an arm and Thomas slipped behind him, thin streams of sweat pouring down the boy's face as he gasped for air. His cheek dripped sweat against the Strongman's belt, and for the first time Thomas grew calm. From the shadows, he listened as the exhibitor tried to quiet the mob.

For Thomas, it was like the audience was on the other side of an impenetrable wall. Turning around and leaning his head to one side, he could watch them through a small crack between the Strongman's arm and his side, though he doubted they could see him in return. The carnival exhibitor was stalking across the front of the stage, smiling and waving hands back and forth above his head. His shrill voice cut through the sussuration of the crowd, and after a moment Thomas recognized that he was the subject

of the exhibitor's remarks. 'Let's see if we can get him to come out,' the exhibitor whispered loudly, hunching down toward the audience in a conspirator's pose. When he turned around, the exhibitor's face appeared gentle and reserved, his mouth twitching only slightly; his hands were entwined at his belt, and his steps were small and hesitant--almost as if he were going to slip to one knee in prayer. 'Oh little boy,' the exhibitor called. 'Are you all right back there?' The audience laughed quietly, then resumed their silence. When Thomas did not answer, the exhibitor began again. 'Are you sure that you want to stay back there? You won't have a very good view of the show. Why don't you have a seat up front? You would like that, wouldn't you?'

Thomas had not thought about the show for some time. Earlier he would have loved to sit on stage. And even now, part of him was thrilled just to feel the Strongman's massive frame against his own. Out of fear Thomas had grabbed the Strongman's waist, though he couldn't reach around it. The Strongman's lower body was like the trunk of a tree, his arms like thick vines hanging close to the ground. Thomas imagined what it would be like to climb to the top of him--to look out across the audience from the perspective of a giant. The world must appear different from up there, small and insignificant. From that height, nothing could harm him...or stand in his way. It seemed incredible that the Strongman would even notice a boy like him. What would he look like to such a man? He remembered a tiny grey worm that he once found in a mud puddle, and once again he began to cry.

Through his peephole, however, Thomas saw that the exhibitor was getting restless. He was only a few feet away now, his back toward the shuffling crowd. A single bead of sweat hung like a crystal ornament from the tip of his nose. Though he continued to speak softly, his voice was infused with a current of panic and frustration. 'Please son,' he said, 'why don't you come on out now? People are waiting.'

'No,' Thomas whimpered, still clutching the Strongman's leg. 'I'd rather wait back here.'

'Well you can't stay there forever. I've got a show to run.'

'*Please*--leave me alone,' Thomas answered. He buried his face into the smooth flesh of the Strongman's lower back, clenched his eyes shut, and mouthed a quiet prayer. Though he knew that he couldn't hide for long, the thought of walking about into the open seemed ridiculous. The exhibitor would have to drag him away. He was not going anywhere without a struggle. Suddenly he felt a tremor in the Strongman's body. Thomas eyes opened in a flash, and in one slow, clumsy movement the giant torso was wrenched from the boy's arms. Momentarily forgetting about the crowd, Thomas gaped in disbelief as the exhibitor led his act to the side of the stage. 'Just stay right there!' he growled, tugging on the Strongman's arm until he lumbered into place. 'Don't take another step!' He swatted the big man in the stomach, then turned and stalked back in Thomas' direction. After a few steps, the anger that consumed his face had all but disappeared. By the time he grabbed Thomas by the wrist, the exhibitor was actually smiling.

'Come on son, let's find you a seat,' the exhibitor said, his voice loud enough for everyone in the audience to hear. 'Why don't you sit next to me? How's that?' Everything happened so quickly that Thomas offered little resistance. Before he realized it he was sitting cross-legged on the hard wooden stage, the exhibitor's long fingernails nestled in his hair. 'I'll bet you never thought that you would be up here, did you?'

Without looking up, Thomas shook his head from side to side. He had barely heard the exhibitor's question. As the shock of the incident slowly faded, what felt like a trickle of ice water ran down the length of his spine, and he found that the slightest movement sent waves of invisible pain spiraling through his leg. Behind him, the crowd was clamoring for the show to begin again. Thomas was thankful that he did not have to face them, though he had caught a brief glimpse of their faces before sinking to the floor.

They looked like a band of corpses, smiling and baring their teeth. Crouching lower, he felt them staring at his back, and several times he could sense that they were looming over him--perhaps not even an inch away--waiting for the right moment to pull him down into their midst. Thomas was defenseless, yet he was too afraid to turn his head.

'Now that everyone is settled again, let's get this show on the road,' proclaimed the exhibitor. 'Ladies and gentlemen, if you care to turn your attention toward the rear of the stage, you will see an anvil bought from a genuine blacksmith just last week. Steven, if you don't mind bringing it up here so the audience can inspect it for themselves. I want them to know that it's made from solid iron and that it has no distinguishable marks.' Out of the corner of his eye, Thomas watched as various hands reached up on stage, squeezing the anvil as if it was a piece of fruit. He could not concentrate on the rest of the show. Though the Strongman's feats were still impressive, they no longer filled him with the same excitement as before. There was something false, almost pitiful, about the entire display. The Strongman bit down into the anvil, leaving his teethmarks in the iron. A few minutes later he crushed a couple bricks with his bare hands, reducing them to dust in only a matter of seconds. The chalky red powder stuck to Thomas' skin like blown pollen, and it smeared when he tried to brush it away.

After another introduction, the Strongman allowed various members of the crowd to climb onstage and beat his stomach with the sledge hammer. He lay prostrate on the splintering wood--parallel to the audience--as a pack of young men scurried around him, heaving the sledge up to their shoulders then sending it down to the Strongman's gut with a dull *thump*. It was so crowded that they had to form a line, their shoes tracking muddy footprints across the floor. Whenever he looked up Thomas recognized several faces returning again and again--each time their eyes more focused and hard than the time before. But the Strongman did not move a muscle to stop them, even those that missed his stomach entirely. He lay there without a sound, tightening his belly whenever a

hammer began its descent. Finally, when the crowd was satisfied, the Strongman climbed to his feet.

'And now for the last of our amazing feats,' the exhibitor said, 'we will need a volunteer from the audience.' He scanned the crowd, his eyes meeting those of Thomas just a few feet away. 'You look about the right size. Here, let's get you up.' Too weak to protest, Thomas went limp as the exhibitor pulled him to his feet. His hand wedged inside the boy's trousers, the exhibitor dragged Thomas to the center of the stage, pausing once to catch his breath and get a better grip on the muddy fabric. The Strongman was attaching the little hammock to the rings in his nipples. The band of cloth looked like a crescent moon against the hairy backdrop of his chest. It hung below Strongman's navel, raising on one side as he scratched the back of his head.

'Your name is Thomas, right?' asked the exhibitor.

'Yes.'

'Well, Thomas, see if you can help me out. When I say 'Now,' I want you to boost up on your tip-toes.' The exhibitor turned him around until Thomas could feel the Strongman's boots against the back of his trousers. The audience stretched out into the darkness in front of the stage, their hungry faces leering toward him yet again. The old man was standing quietly in the front row, and from deep inside his belly Thomas felt a surge of hatred boiling toward his mouth. If only the old man hadn't made such a fuss. If only Thomas had been strong enough to pull away and immerse himself into the crowd. No one could have found him there. He could lose himself in the tangled web of legs and muck. If only he had the strength, he could run and hide forever.

The exhibitor wrapped his arms around Thomas' waist. 'Ready...*Now*!' he said, and with a loud groan he hoisted the boy into the hammock. Thomas' feet kicked frantically as they hung above the stage. Fearing that he would fall, he clutched the cloth with both hands until it was moist against his palms. When he slid his fingers upward, he could feel

where the cloth looped through the rings in the Strongman's nipples. The nipples were stretched to a length of two inches, and their holes were elongated and thin, like the eyes of sewing needles. The Strongman braced his hands on his knees and sucked in his belly. Leaning forward until Thomas' shoes could almost scrape the floor, the Strongman slung his chest back and forth until slowly Thomas began to swing. He moved little at first, but when he gained momentum Thomas closed his eyes...waiting for his feet to float higher in the air. Though he was barely moving, he imagined himself on the edge of a cliff, swinging in a high arch over the sea. The chanting of the crowd became like waves breaking against the shore, and Thomas thought he could feel the warm ocean breeze lifting his skyward, toward the luminous stars above his head. The Strongman grunted with every movement, his breathing quick and precise. Like a paint-soaked sponge, the hair on his belly dabbed splotches of sweat against Thomas' shoulders with every backwards swing.

Thomas opened his eyes when something cold bounced against his belly and rattled to the stage. A shower of dull silver coins dropped all around him. Some struck him in the face--glancing off his chin like flattened stones against a pond--although the most skipped across the floor or rolled under his feet. A wadded dollar bill stuck in Thomas' hair, and several others fell lightly against the stage. 'Thanks a lot, folks,' the exhibitor said as he gathered up the money in his tophat. 'Oh, you're too kind. All of you.' Thomas continued to swing until the last penny was plucked from the stage floor. When he slipped out of the hammock, the crowd laughed and cheered his name. The exhibitor bowed in his direction, and several members of the audience flung pennies at his feet. 'I think those are meant for you,' the exhibitor said. 'Go ahead, take them.' Thomas crammed the coins deep into his pockets. He tried to smile.

'That's our show for tonight,' announced the exhibitor. 'I hope that all of you will come out the next time we're in town.' After that, it only took a few minutes for the

crowd to disperse. A handful of young men trekked back down the path toward the rest of the exhibits, while the others stumbled across the freshly-plowed field toward home. Through the hazy light of the lanterns Thomas saw a cluster of stars glimmering above his head. He had not moved since picking up the pennies. When he finally turned around the Strongman was removing the rings from his nipples. He placed them in his belt, then began to return the various objects to the trunk. At the far end of the stage, the exhibitor counted the money from his tophat, spreading it out before him in little piles.

'You know, I think that this is the most we've ever made,' he said. 'Kid, you're a gold mine. I don't know what it was, but you killed them out there. We need to work that whole hide-and-seek routine into our act.' The exhibitor paused, tugging at the yellow scruff of his beard. 'Say, how'd you like to come along with us? Maybe you could be Steven's assistant, something like that--' His speech was interrupted by a loud crash on the other side of the stage. The Strongman stood above the overturned trunk, its lid crushed where the barbell had slipped from his hands. The exhibitor sprang to his feet and rushed toward him. 'Godammit,' he said, balling his hand into a fist. 'Look at what you've done, you stupid ape! Can't you do anything right?' He struck the Strongman in the face, then grabbed him by his ear, pulling his head down until their eyes were only a few inches apart. 'Look at the mess you've made! Get this cleaned up right immediately!' Incensed, the exhibitor marched back to the piles of loose change.

'Well kid, what'll it be? I don't have all night,' he said, once he had calmed down. 'Do you want to come along or not?'

Thomas continued to stare across the stage. The Strongman was sobbing softly, his face turned downward like that of an injured child. One of his cheeks was swollen and purple, and Thomas' eyes traced the deep scars that lined the Strongman's face. Raising his eyes, the Strongman slowly shook his head from side to side. A moment later he slumped to his knees and quietly returned to his work.

'So, what's your answer?'

'I need to go home,' Thomas said. 'My mother...she's probably worried sick.'

'Well then, you'd better go on, kid. You don't want to keep your momma waiting, now do you?'

'No.'

'But hey, don't cry,' the exhibiter laughed. 'Maybe I can use you in a few years. Once you put some meat on your bones.'

walked toward it, his heels clicking as they struck the cobblestone walk. He entered the club, placed a damp hat upon his head, and disappeared behind a table in the back corner of the room. His clothes were soaked from the rain that had been falling throughout the evening. The man's jacket, which he never removed, was double-breasted and woven from the finest Indian brilliantine, the left side tucked seamlessly beneath the right and held in place by two ivory buttons. The jacket covered a white long-sleeved shirt, embroidered around the cuffs. A small pocket was situated over the man's left breast, out of which protruded a silk handkerchief, so thin that it was almost transparent. The color of the handkerchief matched the man's tie, which he removed from a trouser pocket and knotted around his neck. When he was finished, it hung like a burgundy tongue down his chest. It matched the sicilienne laces that bound together his white leather shoes and the velvet band that circled his white fedora. Unfolding the handkerchief, the man drew it across his face, inhaling the scent that lingered there, then returned it to his pocket. He spotted Raymond who was watching from the end of the bar, and without saying a word, the man lifted his left hand to his lips, wet his index finger and thumb, and snapped three times.

As Raymond started toward him, the room began to vibrate with the low moan of a stringbass. Solid grunting tones echoed through the cramped chamber as the bassist's fingertips pinched and prodded the thick strings. The moan was soon joined by the soft whine of a trumpet, the instrument waving like a windblown flower rooted between the musician's lips. Shaking his head, as if he were swept into a dream, the musician puffed his cheeks and filled the empty horn. Useless air was compressed, dissolved, purified in valves and veins, then excreted in long vibrating tones, the notes rising through the

smokeperfumed air. Raymond nodded his head to the slow, throbbing rhythm of the bass. His eyes drew into slits as the trumpet began its painful cry.

When Raymond arrived at the corner table, the man said nothing. He withdrew from his left trouser pocket a silver cigarette-case, the inside of which was lined with the same burgundy as his hatband, laces, handkerchief, and tie. Three initials were carved in elaborate script across the top of the case, and when opened, it released a fragrance so delicious that Raymond found himself leaning slightly forward, intoxicated, his nostrils flaring as he inhaled the sweet tobacco smell. Using only his forefinger and thumb, the man removed one filterless cigarette from the case and placed it between his parted lips. For a second it dangled outside of his mouth, held by the beaded moisture that glistened on the burgundy surface of the lower lip. The man's tongue left a creamcolored ring on the dry white paper, and when it looked as if the cigarette was about to fall, the man sucked it inward, securing one end inside his left cheek. His teeth glowed in the grey light, the rest of his face masked by the shadow of his hat.

From his right trouser pocket he removed another case, also silver, which he snapped open with pressure from his thumb. Inside, wooden matches lay parallel in neat rows. The man paused, his fingertips moving slowly from one match to another. Biting his lower lip, he finally selected the match in the exact center of the case. For a few seconds, he held it between his fingers, its head and neck hidden beneath the man's pale white skin. Then the man replaced the match and chose another, identical except for its position within the case. He struck it against the table, a tiny yellow flame erupting at the end of his fingertips. Lifting it to his mouth, the man lit his cigarette, then waited until the flame was about to singe his skin before shaking it away. He placed the match into a glass ashtray as white smoke drifted toward the dark, mirrored ceiling of the room.

The glow from the cigarette cast a circle of orange light around the man's lips. The tobacco crackled when the man inhaled, and he held the smoke for several seconds,

gradually releasing it in thin rings--the largest slid over Raymond's head and down the length of his body.

'A glass of wine. Red, not white,' the man whispered. His voice was so deep that Raymond could not tell if he had really spoken...or if the words had somehow been planted into his mind. When he attempted to answer, Raymond felt like his mouth had been sewn shut; his tongue was useless, swollen and choking his words. The man began to strum his fingers across the table, his manicured nails clicking like miniature footsteps, and Raymond's senses began to drop away one by one. He could no longer hear the music of the band, or feel the hot smoke that drifted into his eyes. As Raymond stood paralyzed, a drop of sweat rose from beneath his hair; it crawled on tiny insect legs down the length of his smooth angular face, then dropped from his chin to the floor.

Never wavering, the man repeated his request:

'A glass of wine, please. Red, not white.' In the center of the orange circle of light, Raymond could see the man's pointed smile. The teeth parted, and Raymond returned to the world.

Turning as quickly as he could, Raymond hurried back to the bar. Ducking down so that no one would notice, he reached into a tiny icebox and pulled out the last two cubes. He stuffed one into his mouth, and the other he pressed against his face. Raymond sat behind the bar, panting, as the bass and trumpet reached their pitched crescendo. Finally, he pulled himself up from the floor and removed a bottle of wine from beneath the counter. The bottle was dark green and covered with pale dust, here and there smudged with fingerprints. Raymond opened it slowly, careful not to add any new stains to his apron. Pouring the wine into a clean glass, he picked up the bottle by its neck and started back to the corner table. All he could see of the man was the orange glow of the burning cigarette--the rest of him was cloaked in darkness. Even from a few feet away, the cigarette was the only trace of the man's existence...until it dropped into the glass tray, the

glow buried beneath a pile of ashes. The orange light disappeared, and when Raymond arrived, the table was empty, a wavering plume of smoke rising to his nose.

* * *

At five minutes after two, Raymond was sweeping up behind the bar. Near his feet, a phonograph sat among a pile of empty bottles. It was playing a warped 45 with visible scratches running diagonally across the grooves, the tired voice of a woman cooing through the woven cloth speaker. She was accompanied by a lone tenor saxophone, its squeals sputtering and repeating themselves whenever the needle jumped. Raymond had heard the same solo three times when, out of the corner of his eye, he spotted the man in the white suit enter the club and disappear behind a table in the back corner of the room. Leaning his broom against the bar, Raymond walked to the door, a cold wind pounding against it on the other side. Holding the knob with his left hand, Raymond motioned for the man to leave.

Across the room, a matchflame ignited against the side of the table. It hovered around the man's lips, then disappeared in a streak of yellow light. In its place, the orange glow of a burning cigarette lingered in the darkness. Its reflection bounced against the mirrored ceiling of the club, then down to the wooden surface of the table. A cloud of tobacco-smoke drifted slowly across the room, followed by three expanding rings. One wrapped itself around Raymond's little finger, its fragrance left on the inside of his palm. Raymond brought his hand up to his nose; his fingertips skimming across his parted lips. For a second he closed his eyes, his entire body quivering from the delicious smell.

'A glass of wine. Red, not white.'

The words seemed to have come straight from Raymond's open hand, as if the fragrance itself had spoken. Raymond opened his eyes and saw the glowing orange cigarette descend into the glass ashtray. The man flicked some ashes into the tray, then returned the cigarette to his lips. He inhaled and the cigarette glowed with greater

intensity, the circle of orange light expanding outward, turning red, and enveloping much of the man's nose. It was thin, triangular, and pointed on the end, and streams of orange smoke blew from each nostril. When the man exhaled, the light retreated, the nose fading into the dark pool that was his face.

Raymond locked the door behind him, sliding the heavy iron deadbolt into a circular hole in the doorframe. As he walked across the room, Raymond stared straight ahead, his eyes fixed on the cigarette. The corner in which the man sat was darker than the rest of the club; there was only one light nearby, a naked bulb that was swinging on the end of a string. The wind from a heating vent in the wall kept the bulb in constant motion, its radiance sliding like an apparition through the smoky air. Occasionally, it fell upon the brow of the man's fedora, his burgundy hatband illuminated to the color of congealed blood.

When he reached the man's table, Raymond smoothed back his hair with his left hand, his fingers spread apart like a wide-toothed comb. Raymond's hair was parted in the center of his head, the dirtyblond strands reaching the bottom of his nose before curving inward, meeting at a point just below his chin. Raymond's face was covered in a slight stubble, his eyes lined with dark circles. When he opened his mouth to speak, his lips stuck together. He loosened them with the tip of his tongue and pried his lips apart. Raymond heard the sound of tearing skin, and he reached up and dabbed away a drop of blood that had formed on his upper lip. He spread the drop across his left cheek like a blush.

The phonograph ground to the end of the disc, and for a few seconds the room was silent. The man inhaled his cigarette, the tiny shredded leaves of tobacco catching fire, glowing as the ash crept closer to his mouth. By the time he exhaled, the phonograph had restarted itself, the needle again in contact with the spinning plastic disc. The opening

chords of the first song rose from beneath the bar as the woman began to sing: *My man...he hits me...like a bomb....*

Raymond tried to make his voice sound deep, his tone threatening. 'It's time to leave,' he said. 'The bar is closed.'

The man extinguished his cigarette in the ashtray, twisting the butt into the small heap of ashes with his forefinger and thumb. He removed another cigarette from his silver case, this time tapping it several times against the surface of the table, smashing the end until the tobacco was about to split the white paper. The taps fell into rhythm with the woman's voice, like drumbeats, and for the first time Raymond noticed the dark blue veins that started at the man's knuckles and disappeared beneath his shirtsleeve. The sleeve was fastened with a round silver cufflink, convex on top with tiny grooves carved around its circumference. As the man raised his arm, sliding the cigarette into his mouth, Raymond saw his own face in the center of the cufflink. It was stretched beyond any human proportions--his nose gigantic and twisted, his eyes smoldering black pits. Raymond's cufflink-mouth could swallow the man whole. The man sat back in his chair and tilted his head upward, the sleeve, the cufflink, the brim of his hat, suddenly enveloped by the shadows. His lips and the unlit cigarette jutted out of the darkness, floating, as if there was nothing behind them but the wall. Raymond was gritting his teeth when the man spoke: 'Do you have a light?'

Raymond did not hear the words as much as he watched how they were formed: the puckering of the man's lips, the rise and fall of the cigarette. He patted the heavy cloth pouches on his apron, his hands running down to the top of his pants. In the left pocket, Raymond found a small square lighter; it was silver with three initials carved in elaborate script across the front. Flipping it open with pressure from his thumb, Raymond bent slightly forward, both of his arms outstretched before him. They disappeared just below his elbows, his pale white skin sliced clean by the darkness. The lips and cigarette had

receded into the shadows, and the man's skin brushed against Raymond's fingers. Placing his thumb on the grooved metal wheel at the back of the lighter, Raymond began to flick downward, the flint and steel grinding together as gas hissed in violet bursts. A series of white sparks flashed across the man's face, his nose wrinkling, mouth snarling, different in every blast of light. It was as if the man was being photographed in quick succession--Raymond's thumb continuing to beat down across the back of the lighter--until finally a purplish-blue flame rose above its lip. The tip of the flame turned orange and yellow as the blue retreated to the metal. Raymond cupped his right hand over the flame, and he could feel the suction as the man inhaled in short drags. In the firelight, the man's face was in constant motion, though after Raymond clapped the lighter shut, he saw nothing but the burning orange glow of the cigarette as it peered at him from the shadows. A ring of smoke drifted across his face, the sweet smell of tobacco soaking into his clothes.

When Raymond tried to close the lighter, the man grasped his left wrist. The man dug his fingernails into Raymond's skin, pulling him forward until he was covered from his waist to his head in shadows. The heat from the glowing orange cigarette made the stubble on Raymond's chin crackle, and the air was garnished with the scent of burning hair. Raymond remained completely still as the man slid his other hand around his shoulders and down his back. With his forefinger and thumb, the man untied the two cloth straps that were laced at Raymond's hips, and the front of his apron swung forward over the table. It covered the ashtray, the pile of smoking ash singeing the thick cotton. The man slipped the apron over the Raymond's head and placed it on the floor. Underneath, Raymond wore plain trousers and a sleeveless cotton shirt, one size too small. It clung to his chest, rippled over the grooves of Raymond's of lower torso.

The darkness that covered much of Raymond's body was periodically cut by light from the swinging bulb. Warm droplets of sweat beaded on the tops of Raymond's shoulders, and the man began to tug at his shirt, his fingers walking across Raymond's skin

like a spider. The record player continued to repeat the same bluesy refrain, the saxophone having slipped so far below the surface of the melody that it sounded like the woman was singing *a cappella*. The man removed the cigarette from his mouth with his left hand and tapped off a long ash. The burnt tobacco had separated into distinct piles, and following the motion of the man's hand, Raymond found two eyes staring up at him from the center of the ashtray. A similar pair was located only a few inches to the left, formed as the light from the embers traveled up to the contoured glass ceiling and bounced back down. More eyes were glowing down the length of the table, the final pair as dim as clouded suns. Raymond stared at the gallery of watching eyes. They never dilated or blinked.

The man slid his left hand beneath Raymond's shirt, his fingers climbing mechanically until they reached the center of his back. His nails carved circles between the thick muscular blades of Raymond's shoulders. Releasing his grip on Raymond's arm, the man took one last drag from the cigarette. As he inhaled, the glowing orange light illuminated his entire face, and for the first time Raymond saw the man's eyes. He gasped, and the man dropped his cigarette into the dusty glass tray.

'A glass of wine. Red, not white.'

Suddenly Raymond felt the hand on his back pulling him forward. Locking his knees, Raymond struggled to escape; he could not turn around, his body wedged against the side of the table. Both of his hands now free, he battered the darkness, searching for the man's head, his body, his chest. He could not find the arm that continued to pull him forward, the elbow that swept across the face of the table, sending the ashtray tumbling down to the wooden floor. It shattered into a hundred tiny shards, the embers flying upward in a glowing orange cloud. The needle on the phonograph skipped forward, and Raymond winced at the high, piercing notes of the saxophone. Raymond's hair, slick with sweat, hung in a oily slab across his face, and the man began to peel it away from

Raymond's forehead, his white fingers spread apart like a wide-toothed comb. The man wrapped his right hand around the back of Raymond's throat, the left still pressed firmly in his back. Raymond's mouth dropped open as he tried to speak--'*Please!*'--but was silenced by the pressure of the man's lips against his own.

Sweet tobacco smoke seeped into his throat. And Raymond could still feel the smooth surface of the man's lips, the caress of the man's breaths, even after his hands confirmed that the rest of him was gone.

* * *

Raymond pulled open the door to the club with his left hand and slammed it shut behind him. There was only one customer at the bar--an old man with a triangular nose drinking scotch from a shot-glass. The few remaining patrons were sitting at tables, watching a black man with manicured fingernails play upon a piano. He was smiling and nodding his head, his eyelids sewn shut with tiny black threads. As Raymond stamped his feet against the doormat, the audience began to clap and whistle, and when he looked up, the bartender was leading the piano player offstage. The lights in the club fell, leaving only a single spotlight in the center of the stage and a few naked bulbs scattered around the outskirts of the room.

As Raymond removed his apron from a hook on the back of the door, a greyfaced man clambered up to the stage, a yellow saxophone reed dangling from his lips. Sloshing the reed around in his mouth, the man bent it with his tongue, eventually removing it with his left hand. He held it in front of him, the wet reed shining in the spotlight, balanced between his forefinger and thumb. Just when it looked as if he was going fasten the reed to the horn, however, the greyfaced man retreated to his case which was laying open at the back of the stage. The case was lined with burgundy fur, illuminated to the color of congealed blood. He quickly chose another reed and, less than a minute later, began to play, the faint rumbling of the crowd displaced by the horn's song. Pushing his dripping

blond hair out of his face, Raymond started across the room, listening as he walked. On the bar Raymond found an order scratched on a lined white notepad:

A glass of wine

Red, not white.

He looked up and saw the man in the white suit sitting at a table in the back corner of the room.

The man was lighting a cigarette with a tiny wooden match, his white fedora pulled down over his eyes. He dropped the match into the ashtray, and leaning forward, his elbows resting like stilts on the smooth black surface of the table, he blew three rings of smoke in Raymond's direction. The first, caught in a sudden gust of wind as a customer entered the club, was blown into a nearby chair and quickly disappeared. The second drifted halfway across the bar, into an empty wineglass laying on its side. For a second the smoke filled the glass like a fizzy grey liquor, dissolving slowly. The last of the rings formed on the man's lips only after the second had faded from sight. It swelled in size as it stole across the room. Once again, Raymond felt like his legs had taken root in the wooden floor of the club. The light from the naked bulb, still swinging, cast a diagonal white streak across the top of the ring. And although it was now the size of a man, no one else seemed to notice it, nor did they respond to Raymond's cries.

'Oh God, please!' he said, his eyes fixed upon the ever-expanding ring. At its center was the end of the man's cigarette, glowing orange in the darkness. The ring enveloped everything that lay in its path, snuffing out the lights as it swallowed them whole. The swirling grey mouth closed over Raymond's entire body, and he was immersed in a darkness so complete, so whole, that he could feel its weight pressing against him, even from underneath. The orange light from the cigarette was gone, and all Raymond could hear was the sound of ashes being ground against glass.

A few seconds later seconds there was a hand against his chest.

It rested just above his heart, the fingers strumming at the base of Raymond's freshly shaven throat. His feet still rooted in the floor of the club, Raymond could not evade the hand's touch. When he attempted to remove it from his chest, his arms were useless; they fell limp against his sides. Sliding underneath his shirt, the hand was cool against Raymond's bare stomach; the fingernails left grooves in the shape of half-moons where they moved across his skin. For the fist time since he was consumed by the darkness, Raymond exhaled. The puff of air had barely left his lungs before he heard the sound of swallowing--a slight breeze tugged at his lips, and Raymond timidly withdrew his face, arching back his neck until he was looking directly behind him. Though he should have toppled to the floor, Raymond's curved frame was suspended by another hand that rested just at the base of his spine. Raymond's ears began to ring as blood rushed to his head, and after a few seconds, the hand began to pull his body upright.

'Please.'

Working together, both hands started to remove Raymond's clothing. His apron and undershirt slipped quietly to the floor, the hands pausing to stroll down his ribs before they settled upon Raymond's belt. It was brown leather, fastened with a silver buckle that was easily unlatched. The belt slid around his waist, catching slightly as it passed through several of the loops. As it dropped to the floor, Raymond's trousers began to sag; they rested on his hips, forming a small crevice between the cotton and his skin. The moist wisp of a tongue passed across his belly, and Raymond's hands, suddenly alive, moved down to the top of his trousers. With his fingertips Raymond began to touch those that were slowly undressing him. He felt the starched cuff of a shirtsleeve, fastened by a cold metal pin.

The hands unbuttoned Raymond's trousers and pushed them to the floor. His legs suddenly free, Raymond pointed his toes and stepped out of the trousers, nudging them into the pile of clothes that had formed at his feet. His eyes clenched shut, warm breaths

caressed Raymond's navel, his undershorts sliding down to his ankles. The hands pulled at his shoelaces, nimble fingers unraveling the knotted strings. Raymond's arms were covered in a rash of goosepimples, and the light hair between his thighs curled upward as lips pressed against his flesh. Now panting, Raymond stood motionless as the lips proceeded up the whole of his body, hesitating at his belly, his chest, the slender curve of his neck, the cleft in his chin. As the lips moved closer to Raymond's own, the smell of sweet tobacco once again drifted into his nose. Raymond's entire body quivered as the hands clutched him behind the ears. When he attempted to speak, he was silenced: Raymond's lungs were filled with the breath of another.

Raymond discovered the man's body just inches from his own. Finding it solid, he latched his arms around the man's waist, easing him closer. The smooth cotton of the suit tickled Raymond's skin, and he began to laugh, his lips curling upward as they left those of the man. Loosening his grasp on the man's lower torso, Raymond started to strip him of his clothing. He quickly unknotted the man's tie, stuffing it into a trouser pocket, then turned his attention to the buttons that fastened his jacket and shirt, to the zipper on his trousers and the laces in his shoes. Raymond felt that the man's undershorts were made of silk, so delicate and smooth that he wanted a pair of his own. Soon the man's clothing formed a heap on the floor of the bar. The last to go was the man's fedora, which Raymond placed upon his own head, pulling it tight so as not to lose it in the darkness.

Breathing as if in sleep, Raymond reclined the man against the back of the bar. Their lips met once again, the man's sweet tobacco breath mixing with Raymond's own. Legs and arms entwined, their bodies flexed in unison, and Raymond's hands made frequent trips down the man's back, kneading the muscular flesh until his fingers ached. Slowly they slipped to the floor, the man's back resting in the scattered clothing. Raymond clambered to remain atop him, though he was soon wrestled over, the two rolling back and forth in the cramped space behind the bar. A pile of empty bottles rattled

as Raymond kicked them with his foot, sending a thin trickle of wine down the length of his leg. Sliding over Raymond's back the man began to lick the spilled liquor with his tongue. He planted a kiss behind Raymond's knee, his lips curling into a smile.

'Hmmm. Red, not white.'

When he awoke several hours later, Raymond unwrapped the arms from his chest and carefully searched for his clothing and shoes in the darkness. Gathering everything into a bundle, he felt his way to the end of the bar, then through the door of the club. Outside, the city was silent except for a flock of cooing pigeons that roosted somewhere in the labyrinth above Raymond's head. The streets were covered in orange and pink facets, the light from the neon signs reflected in every puddle. Above the tops of the buildings, clouds hung in the sky like puffs of cigarette smoke, and the wind was cool against Raymond's skin. The hair on his body danced back and forth in the breeze. He walked several blocks before remembering his nakedness--his eyes still not used to the yellow light from the streetlamps--then walked several more just to feel the wind. He did not care if someone was watching.

His heels soon tired from the cobblestones underfoot, and Raymond ducked into an alleyway and began to slip into his clothing. He was just beginning to dress when he made the discovery--the white silken undershorts, the white brilliantine jacket and long-sleeved shirt, the white trousers and white leather shoes. For a moment he was still, the shirt unbuttoned and flapping silently against his chest. Though stainless, the shirt smelled like wine and sweet tobacco. Raymond pulled the fabric to his nose, inhaling the scent that lingered on the collar.

As he dressed, a light patter of raindrops began to hit the sidewalk and the tin gutters that snaked around the lip of every building. The city streets were soon filled with a warm, moist fog, and as he left the alleyway, Raymond could not tell the direction from which he came. He walked through puddles as deep as his shins, the water seeping

between his toes. His closed eyelids were massaged by the falling rain, his mouth curled open and thirsty, welcoming every loose drop. Raymond removed the white fedora from his head and allowed the rain to smooth back his hair. He sent the hat sailing through air like a flying disk, its brim slicing through the yellow fog. It landed in front of a small, indistinguishable nightclub, and Raymond

A PLEASANT WINTER STROLL

From her bed, Helena Chattam scowled at the sunlight beaming in from the window. She sat up and pulled the sheets and bed covers to her chin. 'Oh Eleanor, do I have to go?' she asked, wrinkling her nose at the woman standing at her bedside. 'She bores me to death.'

'Mrs. Smith will be expecting all of us, especially you. She has doted on you since you were a baby, and it would spoil her day if you didn't visit for an hour or two. Your father has been promising her that you would stop by for some time now. Besides, she probably doesn't have many years left.'

'You know very well that Mrs. Smith is only fifty-four, and she's as fit as the day she was born.'

'Perhaps, but in any case, it's not polite to cancel on such short notice. Now come on, let's get going before the weather takes a turn for the worse. You remember what happened to Lucy Mapplethorpe. When she slipped on a patch of ice, she broke both of her legs, the poor girl. She never has walked correctly since.'

'That's because Lucy Mapplethorpe never watches where she is going. Anyway, if it hadn't been for that fall she would not have met Henry. You know that they are engaged to be married next summer?'

'Yes, I've heard talk of it; but you shouldn't believe everything that you hear.'

'Do you think we'll be going to the wedding?'

Eleanor paused, her face now somber. 'Well, I'll speak to your father about it,' she said slowly. 'But only if you get dressed this instant. Mrs. Smith is expecting us at 9:30 sharp.'

Reluctant to move, Helena Chattam watched as the nanny circled about the room, gathering together the girl's overcoat and rubber galoshes, her gloves and the charming

wool hat she had received for her birthday only two weeks earlier. Recently, as winter approached, Eleanor had grown quite frantic every time they left the house. She took so much care in dressing Helena that it became an ordeal just to go outside. She was never satisfied until the eldest of Mr. Chattam's daughters was carpeted from ankle to shoulder in heavy, grey wool. Rising from the bed, Helena stretched her arms up over her head as if reaching for the ceiling, then slowly stepped out of her nightgown. The wooden floor was icy against the soles of her feet. Helena's legs were long and lanky, although the rest of her body was already more developed than her nanny would have liked. However, beneath a slip, a long dress, and an overcoat, Helena assumed a uniformly sexless appearance (with the exception of her hands and face). When Eleanor was finished, the only tangible signs of her femininity were the few blond curls that squirmed out from underneath Helena's hat.

'And the your scarf, dear. I don't want you catching cold like you did last year.'

Helena grimaced as she wrapped a cranberry-colored scarf around her neck. 'It's absolutely hideous. It makes me look like my whole neck is covered in blood.'

'I'll have no more of your complaints this morning. I don't care what it looks like. If it keeps you warm, then you *are* going to wear it. Now, come on; cover up. We are late as it is. Martha? Sally? Are you girls ready?'

From the next room, Helena's younger sisters answered in affirmative. And taking Helena by the wrist--as if to prevent any further protest--Eleanor lead her out of the room, down the stairs, and out the front door, with Martha and Sally following silently in train. She locked the door behind them and replaced the key in her handbag. Though it had been snowing lightly for the last few days--the snow disappearing around mid-afternoon when Helena and her sisters returned from school--the blizzard that had been expected all season had not yet arrived. Eleanor felt it was only through God's providence that they were able to call upon Mrs. Smith one more time before spring. While they only lived a

few blocks away, Eleanor was always reluctant to venture out of the house during the winter months, especially with the girls. She had read about what happens to young women when they go out walking in poor weather--they come home shivering, their lips tinted blue, and always in the arms of a *well-intentioned* man. As the girls' nanny, Eleanor tried to protect Helena and her sisters from any such incident. She and Mr. Chattam decided a long time ago that the girls should spend the winter months in reading and contemplation. If they had to go out, it was best to dress with caution and reserve. A day might start off sunny and warm, but within a few minutes, stormclouds could roll in bringing ice and freezing rain. She had seen it happen many times, and Eleanor made sure to take every precaution, even on days like this one. While the street-cleaners that they passed went without coats, Eleanor and the girls waddled down the street like a flock of grey geese, their rubber galoshes squeaking on the dry sidewalk.

'It certainly is cool out here this morning, isn't it girls?' Eleanor began, less than a block from their home. 'It's not as cool as I had expected, but it is cool nonetheless. I would bet that you girls are thankful for those heavy jackets now. Young ladies always need to be prudent when they go out in this sort of weather. It's always best to cover up as much as possible. That's the only way that you can be safe.' Eleanor paused and looked back over her shoulder to see if the girls were listening. Though Martha and Sally appeared just as they had a few minutes earlier, Helena had removed her scarf and now carried it in her hand. The pale nape of her neck was left uncovered--exposed to the sun and snow and rain, if they should come unexpectedly.

'Helena! Put on your scarf this instant! I won't have you walking around like that,' Eleanor cried, her voice much louder than she had intended.

'But it's too warm for the scarf. I'm burning up in this coat as it is, and I can hardly breath.' Helena unbuttoned the top of her overcoat, exposing her neck even further. The

cool breeze blew against her throat, and lobes of her ears turned red from the cold. 'There, that's much better now,' she said.

Thankful that their older sister had established so bold a precedent, Martha and Sally were just beginning to remove their scarves as well, when they were frozen by Eleanor's glare. One quick look was all that was needed. Though she loved the children like a mother, Eleanor would not stand for a lapse in discipline, especially from the youngsters. She had been known to report their every foul-up to their father. Anxious to remain in good standing with both the nanny and her employer, Martha and Sally lowered their heads and stood silently on the sidewalk. 'Really, Helena,' Eleanor said, turning her attention toward the oldest daughter, 'you're acting like a spoiled child. Come here, let me help you.' When Helena did not respond, Eleanor stepped forward and snatched the scarf from Helena's hand.

'Hold still, before you get flushed,' she whispered loudly, attempting to loop the scarf around Helena's neck. 'What have I told you about going out without your scarf? That wind, it can get between your collar and neck; it will blow down the front of your dress if you're not careful. Your father would be furious to see you walking out like this. And on so short a journey. Why, we'd have been there already if it weren't for this delay.' Eleanor struggled to hold the girl still without attracting too much attention. A crowd of boys in brown jackets had stopped on the other side of the street, watching as Helena slipped from the nanny's grasp. She yanked the scarf off her neck just as soon as she was out of reach.

'Really, Eleanor. I'm seventeen years old. I think that I can dress myself for a change.'

'If you could, then we would not be having this conversation,' Eleanor said snippily. 'Now, mind me quickly before we have to turn around. I will not take another step further until you cover up your neck. It's indecent, a girl your age--'

'Then we won't go a step further,' Helena declared. '*I* never wanted to go visit Mrs. Smith in the first place. And I never wanted to wear this hideous old thing!' Balling up the scarf in one hand, Helena spotted the boys still staring from across the street. Gathered together like a flock of gangly brown storks, several of the boys were bent over with laughter. At most they were only a few years older than Helena, and from the looks of their stained white shirts and dull caps, Helena could tell that the boys were not neighbors. Looking out of her window in the mornings, she had seen droves of boys quite like them arriving early to trim her neighbors' lawns, repair their fences and scrub their steps. They always left around dusk. Helena would pass by them when riding home from school, their faces sallow, their footsteps heavy and slow as they paced down the sidewalks. '*They* look like they need this scarf far more than I do,' Helena said, pointing in their direction. When she held the scarf above her head, the boys whistled and cheered. Several gestured for her to cross the street.

'If you don't want that scarf, *I*'d sure like to have it!' one of the boys yelled. 'I sure am cold!'

'Me too!' another shouted, his entire frame suddenly struck with convulsions. 'I'm freezing to death out here. Why don't you come on over and let me try that pretty scarf of yours?'

Helena's face burned red in the chilly morning air, and she stepped down into the street. 'I'll show you what I think of this scarf, Eleanor.'

'Don't you take another step, young lady--or your father won't hear the end of it!' Eleanor shouted, her voice drowned out by the catcalls of the boys across the street. 'Come back here! That's an order!'

Dragging the cranberry scarf on the ground behind her, Helena started across the wide cobblestones toward the other side. Her progress was hampered by the length and sheer bulkiness of her attire, her heavy galoshes and thick overcoat weighing her down as

she broke into a run. Reaching the far side of the street, Helena tripped when stepping up onto the sidewalk. Cast forward, she barreled headfirst into the mass of boys, their outstretched arms preventing her from crashing down to the pavement. For a moment, she hung above the ground, the weight of her thin, insulated body resting in their hands.

Through her overcoat, her dress and thick cotton leggings, Helena could feel the boys' hands. They were everywhere, gripping her legs and shoulders, wiggling like hairy muscular spiders underneath her belly, and pulling tightly against her chest. The boy's clothes were ripe with the smell of cheap cologne, sweet pipe tobacco, and dried sweat from the day before. It was if a cloud had settled over her head, the heat of the boys pressing against her on all sides, their ruddy faces casting a gray shadow over her body. She had never been touched a man before--except for her father. And though she had often dreamt of what it would be like to carried away by a handsome stranger, never had her fantasies included so many men--and never men of the sort that held her now. Helena's heroes were clean-shaven and tall; they had impeccable manners and spoke in calm, foreign accents that would leave her mesmerized and willing. But suddenly those fantasies seemed prudish and utterly boring. There was something about this dark enclave of bodies that was alluring, almost intoxicating...and she was in no rush to quit its hold. Helena wanted to stretch out her arms and command the hands to strip her down and mingle over her naked skin. Closing her eyes, Helena felt a boy's fingertips on the back of her neck. Her entire body began to tingle, the hairs on her arms standing upright, ticklish against her dress.

'Are you all right, Miss? Did you hurt yourself?' asked one of the boys.

'Why...Yes, I'm fine,' Helena answered, her voice muffled by the cocoon of brown cotton shirts that seemed to envelope her face. Her lips were pressed hard against someone's stomach, slowly moving in and out as he breathed. 'I'm just a bit startled by the fall,' she said, turning her face to one side.

'That's okay. We've got you.' This time the voice was gentle, almost a whisper. 'Come on fellas, let's help her up.' As the boys lifted Helena to her feet, the bridge of her nose brushed softly against one of the boy's chest, her lip stumbling over every button of his shirt. For a moment, her head fell on his shoulder and a thin scruff of beard scratched against her face. When she reached her feet, Helena and the boy were standing only inches apart. They faced each other, staring silently, as the others stepped away from the couple and looked down at the sidewalk, their faces reddening.

'You can let go of my shoulders,' Helena said smartly. 'I think that I can stand on my own.'

'Oh, I'm sorry. Sure thing.' The closest boy had dark red hair, and his voice was choked with nervousness. 'My name's Conley, and these--these are my friends. I'm sorry to grab you like that, miss. I really am. I didn't mean to touch your...Well...We thought you were going to fall. Honest to God.' Still peering at the ground the rest of the boys nodded in agreement. 'Are you sure that you're all right?'

'I'm fine. *Really*,' Helena answered. 'Thank you for helping me.'

'Miss. Miss, you dropped your scarf,' one of the boys stammered. Helena took the cranberry-colored scarf from his shaking hand, brushed off a thin layer of dust, then wrapped it around her neck. 'It looks nice on you like that. Real pretty,' the boy said, after she was finished.

'Do you really like it?' she cooed, turning around so that all of the boys could judge for themselves. Not that she really cared about the boys' answers. In her heart, she knew that they would love it--every last one of them. If she threw it into the air, they would probably fight over it, strangle each other with their warm strong hands just to wear around their own throats. She almost wished that the one boy, Conley, had not told her his name. It ruined the anonymity. He was no longer quite as mysterious as others, which was a pity because he was by far the most handsome of the lot. The others, Helena

noticed, were not as good-looking as she had imagined. She liked them better when they were holding her in her arms, when she didn't have to look them in the face--or listen to their chatter.

Helena had just finished flaunting her scarf when Eleanor arrived from across the street. 'Helena! Helena, it's all right now,' she shouted, catching her breath. 'I'm here. Eleanor's here.' She wrapped her arms around Helena's chest, nearly toppling the girl with her weight.

'Please, Eleanor, let go,' she said brusquely, attempting to squeeze through the nanny's arms. 'You're causing a scene.'

But Eleanor would not stop until Helena was out of danger. Already, she had let matters get out of hand. She shuttered to think about the boys with their hard grimy paws all over Helena's body, groping her like they would a common shopgirl or some grocer's daughter. She was probably crawling with lice and disease now. Helena would need to be stripped and washed from head to toe. She imagined the girl's clean body powered white like when she was a baby. Helena was so much easier to manage back then. Nowadays, Eleanor had to be on constant patrol just to keep her out of trouble. And if it weren't for her quick arrival who knows what the boys could have done to her? Eleanor seized the cranberry-colored scarf from around Helena's neck and flung it into the gutter. 'It's swimming with the plague, for all you know,' she said, as Helena tried to pull away. 'Now come on dear, let's go home this instant.'

By that time, however, Helena was getting bored with struggling. It did not really seem worth it. 'Very well,' she conceded. 'Let's hurry up then. I'd like to get out of these clothes as soon as possible.'

'Girls, we're heading back,' Eleanor called to Sally and Martha, watching from across the street. 'We'll have to visit Mrs. Smith another time. Helena...Helena has fallen ill.' In one final gesture, Eleanor turned back toward the group of boys, still staring from

the sidewalk. Throughout the whole ordeal, the boys had stood motionless, their hands thrust awkwardly into their pockets. 'Get out of here. *Now!*,' Eleanor hissed slowly. 'Before I send for the police.' Without a protest, the boys backed away from the street, then bolted away. Their heavy leather boots clomped on the sidewalk as they disappeared around the corner.

Though she would never admit it, Helena was saddened to watch them go. They had been quite endearing for a moment there, and already she missed their attention. There were so many of them, she could have picked and chosen among them according to her fancy. And in everything, Helena had always liked variety. Smiling secretly, she crossed back across the street with Eleanor on her arm. 'I suppose that I'll need a bath when we get home,' she began after several minutes of silence. 'Who knows what those hooligans gave me?'

'Yes, dear. I'll run a bath just as soon as we reach the house,' Eleanor answered pleasantly. 'Then we can get you straight into the bed. You don't need to be up walking around after what you've been through. I'll bring your lunch up when you are ready. Would you like a piece of chocolate cake?'

'Yes, if it's no trouble.'

'Not at all,' she replied, quickening her pace. 'I think I'll call Doctor Morris as well. We can't be too careful about these matters.' Eleanor was so pleased with herself that she could not help but smile. Though they were heading home early, the day had not been a total loss. She predicted that things would be different from now on. It had been a trial, but Eleanor recognized that this morning's stroll would be beneficial in the long run. She was thankful that Sally and Martha were present to witness it for themselves. 'And I hope you've learned your lesson today, Helena. This will teach you about taking off your scarf from now on. You're just lucky I got there on time.'

'What do you think they would have done?'

'Ravished you, of course. They always do.'

'Oh.' Helena squeezed Eleanor's arm lovingly and thought of the boy's hands as they grasped her body. She remembered the taste of the button against her lip, the smell of the cologne that drenched the boy's clothes. 'Eleanor,' she said.

'Yes dear.'

'I'm cold.'

Eleanor paused and stroked the girl's cool white face with the back of her hand. 'Of course you are, dear.' And unwrapping the navy blue scarf from around her neck, she looped it around the back of Helena's head, tying the scarf snugly at the nape of her neck. 'There, that's better,' ~~she~~ said. 'I'm too old to wear it anyhow.'

A HERO TO HIS PEOPLE

Just before dawn Miguel closed the gate behind him and pedaled away from his home. During the night a rainstorm had washed topsoil down from the mountains, and the smooth cobblestone streets were slippery and covered in chunks of thick green turf. The city was silent except for a car-horn honking somewhere in the distance and the quiet chatter of green and yellow birds. As he dipped from one side of the street to another, the tires of Miguel's bicycle left curving grooves in the mud. He steered the bike with one hand, the other rising and falling like the wing of a jet plane. Miguel shivered as he sliced through patches of cool air. Palm trees hung over the sidewalks like tall greenheaded ladies, waving farewell as they shifted in the breeze. Turning a corner Miguel splashed through a purple mirror of rainwater that had pooled in the street. The spokes of his tires sprayed his legs and feet with a fine warm mist, and Miguel turned around and rode through several times until his shorts were dripping wet.

A few minutes later he passed through the tall stone archway that led into the marketplace. It was empty except for a few pressboard booths that sat like grey skulls on the periphery of the plaza. Here and there rotten bananas were smashed into the concrete, and the air was pungent with the smell of wetness and decay. Already Miguel could feel the tropical heat seeping up from the ground below him. He peddled languidly, his wet legs bathed in warmth. A crescent moon continued to glimmer softly in the distance, lighting his path through the labyrinth of alleys and sidestreets that spiraled out from the center of town. He emerged in a corridor of small homes, laundromats, and saloons, stopping in front of a two-storied *posada* with yellowed sandstone walls and dark wooden doors. Dismounting, he wheeled his bicycle around to the back of the building, then climbed the flight of stairs that led directly to the second floor, carrying the bicycle on his back. Miguel leaned the bicycle against the guard-rail. He could smell the cooking fires

of the houses nearby, and suddenly he longed for the taste of coffee and sweet corn cakes in his mouth. After several minutes of waiting, he knocked on the door. He heard the sound of feet shuffling toward the doorway.

'Miguel, is that you?' a voice asked.

'Yes, uncle.' The door swung open, and Miguel was ushered into the cramped, candlelit room. His uncle was barefoot, his sparse grey hair stuffed beneath a baseball cap. He wore faded beige trousers and a white shirt unbuttoned to his stomach. Flecked with silver, his beard and mustache covered thin lips and the heavy pockmarks on his cheeks. The inside of the room was sparsely decorated, the floor lined with a rough maroon carpet, the walls bare except for a tattered calendar and a small framed photo of Miguel hanging from a nail above his uncle's desk. Miguel boosted himself up onto the edge of the bed while his uncle paced pack and forth across the wooden floor.

'You are late,' his uncle scolded. 'You were supposed to be here before sunrise.'

'I'm sorry. It took me a long time to get here. The roads were very slippery, and the tires on my bicycle are not very good.'

'Then you should have left earlier. The stars were bright last night. You didn't have to wait until dawn.'

'I'm sorry, uncle. I should have thought ahead.'

'Timing is crucial in all that we do, Miguel. You should know that by now. Or have you forgotten everything that I have told you?'

Miguel lower his eyes; a look of deep humiliation fell across his face. 'Oh, no uncle,' he said slowly. 'I haven't forgotten.'

'Then what about your parents? Did they wake up when you left?'

'No, I was very quiet. I never went to sleep last night. I could not stop thinking. And when Papa and Mama fell asleep, I sneaked past them and spent the night in the garden so they wouldn't hear me leave.'

'That was smart of you, Miguel. You have always been a very smart boy. I have always taught you to do the right thing.'

'Yes, uncle, you have.'

'You need to remember that today. When you do the right thing, people will remember you as a hero. And that's the greatest thing a man can be: a hero to his people. Do you understand what I mean, Miguel?'

'Yes, uncle, I think I understand.'

'It's very important to understand why you do something. If not, then we merely squander the lives God has given us--and that's the greatest sin a man can commit.' Scratching his rough beard, his uncle turned and crossed the room. An electric icebox rested on the floor between the sink and the rack of shelves that served as his uncle's cupboard. 'Have you eaten anything?' he asked kindly.

'No.'

Miguel's uncle removed a plate of shredded chicken and a pitcher of water from the icebox. 'I'm sorry, but this is all I have,' he said, pouring the water into a clean glass. Miguel devoured the chicken, twisting the moist strands of flesh between his fingers. He was so hungry that he did not consider the significance of the meal. His uncle sat beside him on the bed, close enough that Miguel could taste his heavy cologne with every bite. 'You know, I'm getting too old to continue the fight for long. My arms are thin and frail now. I no longer have the vigor of my youth. But it will be men like you, Miguel, that will champion our cause once I have gone. You are the future. Only you can make our country free again.' For a moment his uncle was silent, his dry fingers perched on Miguel's shoulder like lizards warming themselves in the sun. 'But we must hurry. The sun is already breaking the mountaintops and soon the city will be awake.'

'Won't you go with me, uncle?' Miguel asked, setting the empty plate beside him. 'At least part of the way?'

'No, it will be too suspicious. I need to be at home. Besides, you won't have time to keep company with an old man. You are running late as it is. Now, lift up your camise.' Bending over him, his uncle wrapped the belt around the boy's waist, attaching it with grey masking tape. It was heavy, and the metal felt cold and smooth against Miguel's skin. 'Keep your fingers away from these!' his uncle said. 'Do you remember what I told you to say?'

'Yes, uncle. I practiced it all last night.'

'Good, let me hear it.' Slowly, Miguel recited the oration word for word. His uncle made him repeat it several times as they walked to the doorway. Outside, people were scurrying from their homes. Miguel's uncle shook the boy's hand roughly. 'All right, you need to get going. Remember, if anything goes wrong, I'll be waiting at Palacio's at the end of the bar. You can meet me there.'

'Thank you, uncle. Good bye.' Miguel wheeled his bicycle down the stairs. By the time he reached the bottom, the door was closed. He walked around the side of the building, then mounted the bike and pedaled down the street. The city had undergone a incredible transformation in the few minutes Miguel had been inside his uncle's room. The streets were teeming with motorbikes, fleets of shining bicycles, and day-laborers trudging toward the square downtown where they hoped to find work. Artisans and peddlers were setting-up stands along the sidewalks, positioning themselves to intercept the surge of pedestrians that would soon engulf the city. The air was filled with the smell of burning petrol, cigarette smoke, and the aroma of stale coffee. Shop-owners, emerging from their stores, called from one side of the street to another. Like a snake weaving through a cluster of thick reeds, Miguel eased his way past the sleeping bodies of vagrants. He pedaled through swarms of begging children, their bellies swollen, their thin brown fingers pulling at his shirt.

'No, get away,' he told them, slapping at their hands. 'I'm sorry. I don't have anything to give. Leave me alone.' He pedaled until they couldn't keep up any longer, then slowed his pace, turning onto an empty avenue lined with trimmed bushes and flowerbeds, rows of tight green buds.

The houses were far nicer here than just one street over. Nearly impenetrable from the street, they resembled miniature fortresses. The largest were partitioned by stone walls several stories high. Iron gates enclosed fountains, garages, neat gardens, and thick sea-green lawns. To Miguel's left, one of the gates opened automatically, and he saw a blond man in a black sedan pull out of the driveway and accelerate down the avenue. For a minute Miguel chased after him, his loose camise whipping across his body, his lean thighs pumping downward against the pedals. When the sedan finally pulled away, Miguel's face was covered in a glaze of sweat. He laughed, wiping his face with shirtsleeve, and slowly coasted down the hill.

At the end of the avenue, the American embassy was barely distinguishable from the native architecture--its tall sandcolored walls could have belonged to any of the houses nearby. An American flag, motionless for the lack of wind, dangled from a silver pole in the center of the enclosed yard. Someone had spraypainted various slogans on the sidewalk just out front, and part of the building was crumbling where a hurricane from the coast had torn at the eaves. Two soldiers in black plastic sunglasses were relaxing and smoking cigarettes on opposite sides of the open gate, their rifles leaning against their legs. Their eyes looked tired, almost on the verge of closing. About twenty feet away, Miguel slipped off his bicycle, his bare feet tracking footprints through the mud. His heartbeat seemed to grow louder with every step, and fresh beads of sweat rolled down his face. Though he felt the urge to jump back on his bicycle and ride away, Miguel's thin legs propelled him forward, each step measured by the cobblestones under his toes. Before he realized it, he stood in the mouth of the gate. Pausing to clear his throat, he

lowered his head and started down the long brick walk to the embassy door. He hadn't taken three steps before drawing one of the guards' attention.

'Where do you think you're going?' the guard asked casually.

'I've been sent to give a message to my father. He works as a janitor inside.'

'What's his name?'

'Pa-Pablo Morillo, sir,' Miguel stammered.

'I've never heard of him.' The guard turned to his partner. 'Hey Pete, do you know a janitor named Morillo?' The other guard shook his head nonchalantly, pulling another cigarette out of his pocket.

'He hasn't been working here long,' Miguel explained. 'He was hired only last week.'

'Well what's the message, kid?' the guard sighed. 'I'll get it to him.'

Miguel's stomach felt as if it was twisting into a knot, and his camise was dotted with perspiration. 'No, please. It's very important that I give it to him myself. My mother will whip me if I don't. And she always knows when I am telling a lie.'

The guard glanced over at his partner, then flicked his cigarette toward the embassy door. 'All right, fine. Just down the hall you'll find a lady sitting behind a large desk. You ask her about your father.'

'Thank you, sir.'

'Just hurry up, now. And make sure you wipe your feet before going inside.'

'Yes sir. Yes.'

Without looking back, Miguel wheeled his bicycle down the walk. He left muddy footprints on the warm red bricks. Reaching the door, he leaned his bicycle against the stoop then stepped into the grass and wiped his feet, the wet blades tickling his insteps, washing his toes. The door of the embassy was covered in ornate carvings, the doorknob in heavy brass that reflected the sun. It opened easily, and Miguel walked inside, closing

the door behind him. He found himself in the center of an empty foyer. Somewhere in the distance an air-conditioner was humming. White marble tiles covered the floors; drab watercolor landscapes hung on the walls. A long white hallway stretched out in front of him. Miguel crept forward, his eyes scanning the clean wallpaper that lined the corridor.

At the end of the hall, Miguel saw a large mahogany desk, bordered on either side with potted plants. A beautiful lady with long brown hair and dark eyes was sitting in a leather chair, her white dress flowing down to the floor. She wore red lipstick and matching red polish on her nails. In one hand she held a paperback novel, its cover torn, its binding patched with yellow tape. The woman yawned, then glanced up at Miguel in surprise, her lips forming a wide smile. 'Why, hello there,' she said. 'You're sure up early this morning.' Miguel scratched at his hair, his face turning a deep coppery red. He glanced down at the floor, then took at step backward, as if on the verge of running away. 'It's all right, honey,' she drawled softly. 'There's no need to be nervous. What's your name?'

'Mi-Miguel,' he whispered.

'What's that? I could hardly hear you.'

'Miguel.' His fingers slid to the bottom of his camise. *'My name is Miguel Ibarra--'*

At that moment two men appeared from around the corner. One was dressed like an army officer, his dull uniform lined with metal pins on his shoulders. The other wore a black suit and tie, a few grey hairs combed over his balding head. 'Judy, has Mr. Ivarez stopped by yet?' the man in the suit asked. 'He was supposed to drop off a package by seven.'

'Not yet sir. So far, *he*'s our only visitor.' Smiling, she pointed at Miguel with her free hand. The two men stared at the boy inquisitively. Miguel's knees buckled beneath him, and for a second it looked as if he would wilt to the floor. He caught himself on the

edge of the desk, bracing his arms against it for support. The man in the suit squatted on his haunches beside him.

'Whoa, are you okay, son?' he asked. 'You're not going to faint are you?' Miguel shook his head slowly, his eyes burning red with tears. 'Judy, what's this all about? How long has he been here?'

'He arrived just before you did. I think his name is Miguel.'

'Miguel, huh? Well Miguel, my name is Mr. Robinson. I work as an ambassador for the United States of America. You might say that I'm in charge here.' Miguel looked up at the ambassador's dark, liverspotted face. Up close, his eyes appeared kind, and his voice was rasping and pleasant. 'What can I help you with today?' he said.

'My name is Miguel Ibarra...and...and--'

'Yes, go on son. We're all friends here.' The ambassador wrapped his arm around Miguel's waist and pulled him close. He ran his fingers down the boy's ribcage to his gut. 'Say, what's this?' he asked. Miguel stood silently as the ambassador lifted up his camise. A row of hand-grenades were strapped to his stomach with grey masking tape. At the sound of the ambassador's gasp, Miguel wrenched his body free and stumbled backward to the floor. The hand-grenades clanged against the white marble tile, the sound echoing down the hallway. One of the grenades rolled loose, and the ambassador snatched it up and held it to his chest. His eyes flashed madly from side to side. When Miguel looked up, the officer and the beautiful lady had taken refuge behind the desk.

'Please don't hurt us! Please, leave us alone!' the beautiful lady screamed.

The ambassador shuffled closer, his leather shoes squeaking on the floor. His lips quivered, straining for a smile. 'Now hold on there, son,' he said. 'I think we can work all of this out. Let's take it easy now.'

Miguel retreated on his hands and knees. His eyes darted back and forth between the ambassador and the grenades taped to his belly. '*My name is Miguel Ibarra*,' he mumbled, '*and I demand...the release of...*uhhh...*the release of--*'

'Just slow down,' the ambassador said, barely an arm's length away. 'I'll listen to everything you say if you just let go of those grenades for a moment.'

Miguel gulped at the air, his fingers sliding down to his bare stomach. He concentrated on the slow rhythm of the words. Over the past month he had recited them for hours on end. His uncle had drilled him every day, and up until now Miguel had performed with the precision of a marksman. If only he could block out the ambassador's face, perhaps he could get through the entire speech. Miguel squinted his eyelids as if reading from a projection on the far wall; he clutched one of the grenades, wrapping a stray finger around the pin. '*My name is Miguel Ibarra*,' he began mechanically, '*and I demand the release of-- I demand the release of all of my country-men held in American jail cells...and the end of the U-nited States in-ter-vention in...in our policies both at home and over the seas--*'

He was interrupted by the ambassador's hand on his shoulder. Startled, Miguel jerked out the pin, cupping it in his palm. The beautiful woman continued to scream from behind the desk, and he stared absently at a hairy mole just above the ambassador's mouth. Miguel was anxious to leave, even though his message was incomplete. Somewhere across town his uncle was waiting patiently at the end of a bar, and Miguel dreaded the moment when he would have to explain his failure.

TO BUILD A BETTER RAT TRAP

Conley bounced down the street like a tottering marionette, slipsliding over the ashcolored snow. Sockless, trousers riding on his bony hips, he carried a brief-case and brass-buckled suspenders, a grey-green tie bulging from his coat pocket. Conley thought himself lucky, in that the tram stopped less than half a block from his workplace. The brief stretch of sidewalk in between was lined with black iron streetlamps, the flame lights quivering like faint yellow birds. If he hurried, Conley could hobble from the tram-stop, through the foyer of Longstreet and Weiss, and down the fourth row to his desk, in less than a minute. Those employees arriving later in motorcars--the unpredictable machines that they were--would have to park several blocks away. Every morning, bands of motorists trekked through the cold city streets, their boots muddied brown from running sewers and garbage, while Conley was neatly delivered just outside the office doors. 'More bother than they are worth,' he told himself, watching topless Fords chug past, their passengers cloaked in red and green shawls that whipped like flags behind them. Conley had taken the tram to work for twenty-five years. And unless he did something soon, he would be a tram-rider for the remainder of his life.

When he arrived, the office was filled with a sweet pineflavored fog, the entire room smothered with the tang of wet plasterboard and shellac varnish. A street lamp's furry light slipped in through one of the room's two windows. Conley switched on his desk-lamp and stared at a cluttered mass of papers, mimeographs, and forms. Gone were the neat piles that Conley had arranged the night before--alphabetized stacks of letters, graphs, balance sheets, and interoffice memos, stock reports, lists of clientele, manila folders stuffed with pink transparents, now jumbled in a useless mass, some wrinkled, others gnawed upon and torn. 'Damn!' Conley yelled, his mind filled with visions of the *dirty yellow-toothed yellow-eyed fleacrawling ratty culprits* that had rifled through his

files, shredding documents with their teeth and claws. Though they had fooled him in the past--they made mockery of his attempts to fry their brains on electric wires or squash them flat as paper between wood and stone--Conley did not mistake this spectacle as coincidence. Somehow they knew...and this was their way of getting revenge. Not even the remnants of a ham and cheese sandwich, which he had mistakenly left there on the evening before, could deter Conley from his suspicions. This clutter was a warning: the pungent squirts of urine left in his chair, the fuzzy belly-down clinging to the base of his lamp.

Oh, we're so sorry...Did we make a mess? Tee hee hee....

Conley's desk was just one of twenty-five that were arranged in groomed rows throughout the room, each nearly identical in size, content, and occupant. The only exception was that of Oskar Weiss, the grandson of one of the firm's founding fathers, who had a large Spanish vargueno and occupied a frosted-glass cube nestled into the far corner of the room. His desk was mahogany, with carved figures that looked like angels and devils battling on each of its four legs. From its top was draped a piece of black velvet that hung within an inch of the floor, an easy target for nibbling and claws. But when Conley rose and walked across the room, he saw that Weiss' desk had been left undisturbed. There were no clawmarks, no scratches or jumbled envelopes, no brown pellets left resting in his chair. As he looked around the office, Conley noticed that all of the others were the same, all arranged with that sort of anal tidiness one would expect in an accounting firm: papers left in taut stacks, not one corner jutting out from the others; pencils sharpened, at least five per desk, standing upright in glass jars. Only Conley's had sustained an attack.... Somehow they knew it was him.

It would take Conley several hours to rearrange the mess. Certain papers might be wiped clean with a solution of lemon-soap and water, while others, those doused in urine,

would have to be thrown away. He was behind schedule for the rest of the day, even though Weiss and the remainder of the firm's employees arrived at least an hour and a half later, sometimes after 7:30 if the weather was especially severe. Of all the firm's employees, Conley was the only one that arrived early or stayed late; the poverty of the firm's surroundings sent most scurrying home before sundown. Christmas, Thanksgiving, even Easter Sunday--Conley was always willing to come into the office if needed.

His nights were spent alone in a crumbling loft he had rented for several decades, reading or preparing for the day ahead, conjuring new ideas that up until recently had been rejected without consideration. The loft itself consisted of one room with a small shower-bath; a bed lined in blue linens; two bookshelves, both crammed with yellowed newspapers, business journals, and serial paperbacks; a chest of drawers; and a window that opened outward. The window was a favorite perch for Conley's only companion, a blimp Manx named Karl, who loved to stare at the shadows of greying brick outside their home. Conley had always had a keen eye for design, and under his bed were stored the results of countless hours of idle sketching: blueprints for electronic toaster ovens, children's toys, and other gizmos; charts and graphs exhibiting the firm's future profits; and even the occasional charcoal lithograph. Conley enjoyed drawing his cat. If one were to ever explore the tiny loft, they would stumble upon hundreds of portraits, the Karl posed in about every position imaginable.

Beyond these few distractions, however, Longstreet and Weiss was Conley's entire life. Most of his days were spent within the firm's walls, prying through balance sheets with mechanized precision. The firm was undistinguished and shabbily run, just one of perhaps thirty that lined the congested streets of the city's economic hub. It dealt mainly with the accounts of dry goods wholesalers, and the entire firm was located on the basement floor of an old brick tower, not quite tall enough to be called a skyscraper.

During the day the office itself was cramped; it shriveled with the rising of the sun, drawing inward until Conley couldn't stand without brushing against one of his comrades. By noon it stank of aftershave, fresh sheets of paper, rancid ink and lubricating oils. Yet for Conley it had a warm coziness about it that he had grown to relish. He enjoyed being underground; he could smell the soil through cracks in the floor, pits of earthy wash seeping up during floods. Before the others arrived, Conley often observed shoes and trouser-cuffs shuffling past the window nearest to his desk. It was his favorite part of the day--his mornings, tranquil and solitary, watching loafers and boots deteriorate over time, aging like those who wore them. They came to have personalities of their own, and Conley could easily recognize each pair (one scuff was all he needed), even if it flashed by the window for only a second. Sometimes he wondered if he had even met them on the street--the owners of the shoes--if he had bumped into them in the marketplace or squeezed past them on the tram. He never knew.

But lately he had been too busy for any such nonsense, in his mind at least. Conley had acquired a new position at the firm--an 'advancement' some might call it--though just as many might refer to it in less optimistic terms. As of four weeks earlier Conley had been given the duty of catching, and thereby disposing of, a small colony of rats that had taken refuge within the firm's walls. The position brought with it a modest increase in pay, plus an allowance for the materials needed to rid the office of infestation. It was the first raise Conley had received in seven years. Only a few days after his promotion--after making brief excursions to a chocolatier and an *all-night* picture-show--Conley invested most of his new fortune in a suit. Having scoured much of the city's clothing district for the 'right sort of store,' Conley decided upon a small clothier called *Troudeau's*, which, from what he could gather from its name and the fact that all of the store's employees wore tuxedoes (even the wrinkled man who ran the cash register), seemed to be the very

sort of place a distinguished, recently promoted man like himself would procure a set of clothes.

Even so, Conley was nervous about the purchase. *High-fashion*, with all of its subtle twists and exaggerated turns, was something of an enigma for him. He wore the same two suits every day--one cinnamon, the other a dark green--and had never thought much about his appearance before. Yet, things were different now. He was an executive, and he had read in *The Better Businessman* that executives needed to dress the part:

> **One of the best ways for the new executive to distance himself from the lower employees is through his dress. An executive's suit is his calling card to the world.**

So when greeted at the door by one of the store's employees--a thin, mustached, waxy-faced salesman named Raymond--Conley was quick to respond, trying his best to describe just exactly what he was looking for.

'I want to buy a suit,' he squeaked, his voice not quite used to addressing strangers.

'Yes sir, and what sort of suit will you be needing?'

'I want a suit that says something.' Conley paused, just *knowing* that Raymond could read his mind. He was dwarfed by the swollen room, a forest of mirrors, rising tiers, long cutting tables, and rolls of cloth. Patrons, standing motionless on round scaffolds, were measured and pinned, tailors dashing like frightened beetles over their shoulders and between their legs. The inside of the store was lined with oak paneling, the floor buried under pineneedle-green rugs. Beyond the buzz of voices, Conley could make out the faint purr of sewing machines, and the air, steamy and thick, smelled of sweet cigars.

'Ehh...Yes sir, and just what do you want your suit to say?'

'I want a suit that says *sophistication*. I want the suit of a man who's moving up in the world.'

At this point Conley removed from his pocket a ragged advertisement torn from that Sunday's newspaper. The clipping showed three men, all of similar heights, standing before a cluttered shop-window. Above their heads **SHKLOVSKY BROTHERS' HARDWARE** was printed in bold letters, with their slogan pasted just underneath: **HOME OF THE SHKLOVSKY SAW**. Conley had circled the gentleman on the far left--the youngest and most dapper of the three brothers--with a felt-tipped pen. He handed the clipping to Raymond. The circled brother was wearing a cheap tweed suit with black buttons the size of half-dollars, straight cuffs, and a V-shaped vest that plunged from his shirt-collar before meeting at the intersection of breast and belly. Though the photo was printed in black and white, the suit would look the same if the brother were standing there before them: a dull, greenish-grey flecked with dirty specks of tan.

'I want a suit *exactly* like that one,' Conley told him, at which point he was prodded to the very back of the store, to a closet in which hung a few mothballstinking racks of clothes.

'I believe we have what *you* are looking for in here,' smiled Raymond, rummaging through the bundles of flannel and tweed. After a few minutes he produced a suit nearly identical to that found in the newspaper. **Clearance: 30% off** was stickered to the lapel. 'This one would look perfect on you,' he said. As Conley dressed, Raymond walked to the front of the store, pulling a sun-bleached straw-hat from the window and a knotted, hickory cane from beneath the counter.

'And no well-dressed man is without his hat and cane,' called Raymond from across the room. Conley grinned when he saw them in the mirror: the cane, hard as polished stone, tucked smartly under his arm; the hat cuddling his sleek crown. Conley flashed his wide yellow teeth at his reflection, his eyes small and black as rat pellets, shrunken beneath his thick glasses. His mustache twitched insistently; he turned in circles, fascinated by the

view. Conley had never seen himself look better. He smiled at his own image, rolling his shoulders and running his hands over the well-creased fabric.

'Yes sir, this suit looks *perfect* on you,' Raymond said. 'Would you like to wear it out of the store?'

Conley nodded, his eyes never leaving the mirror. Suddenly he was a man with a mission, the type of man that lined the pages of *The Better Businessman* every week. Conley envisioned himself at board meetings, lunching with the upper echelon of society. 'After the rats are gone, I need to take up golfing and billiards,' he thought. For if he wanted to retain his new lifestyle--suits and chocolates and picture-shows included--Conley knew that he *must* become as successful as he looked.

He wasted little time in getting started. He spent his first Sunday after learning of his commission under the sweaty lights of the city library's fifth floor. Conley gathered about him two large stacks of volumes, the first composed of books concerning the rats themselves (their life span and length of gestation, their eating habits and tendency to spread disease), while the second contained mainly *How-to* books about capturing the rodents: how to trap them under buckets; how to lace innocent-looking ratbait with arsenic, drain-cleaner, or other exotic poisons. They were omnivorous, aggressive animals, constantly jostling for food and mates. In harsh conditions, the elders ate their young, and they had the habit of gnawing off their own limbs if tangled in a snare. Much to his surprise he discovered that there were many varieties of rats: roof rats, black rats, Alexandrine rats, barn rats, corn rats, even bushy Norway rats that grew to the size of house cats and could often be spotted swimming under the city docks.

Conley had seen rats in the office on several occasions, usually after hours when the aria of adding-machines and stomping feet had faded into the walls. The rats were small--not much larger than house-mice--and relatively tame. They all had coats of the

same brownish-black veneer, all slick and stinking like they had just emerged from a sewer. Conley thought they came from beneath the floorboard, arising from holes in the rotted wood. They tiptoed about the room and then vanished before dawn, returning to their homes with fat bellyfuls of crumbs. He never considered them to be much of a nuisance. And once, in a series of events that later won him much acclaim throughout the office, Conley came within inches of a rat's snout, close enough to see its burnished gold teeth.

It was nearly midnight and Conley was still at the office, reading his logbook of that day's transactions. The book was heavy and leather-bound, frayed at the corners, and scripted in a fine black scribble. (Conley had made it purposely illegible, fearing the eyes of his co-workers.) He stretched sleepily, propping his feet upon the desk and leaning back in his chair. For snatches of five minutes or less, Conley dozed, nodding himself awake, his eyes already gummed yellowy-brown with sleep. By midnight the book was closed, resting face-down in Conley's lap; he no longer had the strength to hold it in his hands. 'Perhaps I will just spend the night here,' he thought, his eyelids teetering upon final closure. But then he spotted a shadow and heard nails tapping against the office floor. The shadow was about the size of a fist, and the sight of its animation--the rat's silhouette bobbing slowly across the wall, pausing and shivering--startled Conley awake. Its movement frightened him...the manner in which the shadow seemed to expand, swelling like a grey phantom, as the rat stepped closer to the wall. Conley was used to nights of silence, the only motion or sound stemming from the pages he rustled in his hands. But when he saw the shadow twitch and then dwarf the wall in black, it was more than his tired nerves could handle. Shrieking, Conley flipped backward in his chair, his knees rising as his head fell. He toppled to the floor, dousing the surrounding furniture with coffee. Green-papered graphs and spreadsheets, taxforms, index cards, and the

evening's paper, floated to ground beside him. For a few seconds, Conley could not recall what had happened. The last thing he remembered was taking a sip of his coffee, when.... Conley began to panic, wheezing as tried to scramble to his feet. He had just managed to turn himself over when he spotted the rat. It was standing opposite him on its back feet, no more than an arm's length away. The *beast*--for that was Conley called it when Weiss asked about the coffee stains on the paperwork--could not have stood more than five inches from nose to claw, excluding its nubbed tail, which rested upon a manila envelope. It was silent, barely breathing. It twitched its nose and stared at the wall, wringing its little rat claws as if telling a lie. In that moment, a horrible vision formed in Conley's mind. He imagined the rat plunging upon his neck--in the vision, it had grown to the size of a small dog--gnashing at his eyes, tearing at his face with razor-tipped claws, until his entire body was sticky with blood. Shaking, Conley slid on his belly and inched away, his eyes never losing contact with those of his foe. Once he reached a safe distance, he removed from his pocket a sugared orange-wedge, a rare treat for him. He tossed the wedge across the room, hoping that the rat might follow in close pursuit. Instead, it sat for several seconds, watching, before it raised its nose and waddled off in the opposite direction, seemingly unaware of the flustered man sprawled across the floor beside it. The rat squeaked as it wiggled past, as if snickering at him.

Hee hee hee...Oh Conley!

It disappeared behind a desk, and Conley rose, wet trousers pasted to his thighs.

Of course Conley's versions of the encounter were much more exciting--tales of courage and survival akin to those found in cheap paperbacks about Amazon explorers. They involved hordes of rodents, gritting their teeth and swarming upon him from all directions, their numbers ranging from ten to one hundred depending upon Conley's audience. In some versions, the floor was 'liquid with moving bodies,' forever churning in

a constant, hypnotizing squirm. In others, there were only a few choice rodents, 'the biggest rats you've ever seen,' that charged him as if on command, gnawing at his arms, legs, face, and belly until he could wring 'every hairy throat!' As time passed and Conley's reputation grew, the occasional rat-spotting became more frequent. No longer appearing only at night, the rats were seen at noon and just before dusk, scuttling between the feet of clients and leaving their droppings in every place imaginable...even in coffee cups. Their squeals could be heard within the walls, their scratching from underneath the floor. And it was not long before Weiss turned to Conley as a solution.

Having told his boss about his earlier confrontation, Conley was seen as the ideal man for the job. He had experience, and Conley was the only employee that showed any interest in the work. On the first time Weiss mentioned that such a position might be available, Conley cornered him in his office, bombarding his employer with qualifications. 'I have a feel for the beasts,' he said. 'I know their nature. I have stared them in their eyes and have seen what lurks inside them. I understand them and can predict their moves. That day I was attacked an entire swarm of them flowed from beneath the floor, leaving me only a broom handle to hack them away--'

'So you think you are up to the task?' Weiss interrupted. 'It would mean extra work, and we can't give you much of a raise.'

'Don't worry, I can do this job. I know I can.' Conley juggled Weiss' hand in his own, shaking with excitement. After all of his years of plodding through the same routine, finally he had a chance to prove himself. He would *make* his story true. 'I will not rest until every one of the rodents is disposed of,' he said dramatically for all to hear. 'Until every one has been driven from the hall!'

When Conley left Weiss' office, he was beaming. For the next few days, the sallow green of his face disappeared entirely; his entire outlook on life seemed to change. At the library he struck up a conversation with a round, whited-haired woman that was stacking

books, wheeling them around the fifth floor on a wooden cart. Ordinarily, Conley was reluctant to petition strangers for advice; he usually shirked away, diverting his eyes or breaking off in mid-sentence, finding himself unable to speak. Yet on this day Conley was quite chatty; the two rattled on and on until finally turning their attention to Conley's new career.

'Yes sir,' the librarian told him. 'When my sister and I had rats, we killed them off with an old dust broom. Whenever one would come traipsing around the house, we'd just sweep it on out the front door.'

'And they never returned?'

'Oh, every once in a while we'd see one--loners that just happened to be passing through. But we never had much of a problem in the first place.'

'Thank you,' he smiled, the librarian hovering above him. 'And just one more thing. When will the library be closing this evening?'

'At 9:30.'

'And there is no way that I could stay any longer?' Conley was surprised to hear the words; he had never been so bold with a woman.

'Well, since you look like a decent sort of man--you'd never believe some of the types we get in here--I guess I can let you stay. But you're gonna have to keep quiet. If the watchman gets a hold of us, then it will be both of our hides!'

After the library, Conley's next stop was Shklovsky Brothers hardware, where upon entering he was complemented on his stylish attire. He was lured there by the store's wide variety of rodent-catching devices. Shklovsky Brothers had an entire corner devoted to the craft, with jagged iron jaws hanging from pegs, and poisons, baits, and lures, stacked in drab rows from the floor to Conley's waist. His first choice was the conventional rat trap--wooden and steel, able to snap a rat's spine or a man's finger in one

quarter of a second. They ranged in size from three inches to nearly two feet long, the largest sounding like a gunshot when sprung. His 'twin' from the news clipping quickly joined him, pointing out the latest models.

'Get yourself an armful of Victor's and spread them out across the room,' Conley was told. 'And forget about cheese--it hardens too fast and loses its scent. What you need is some bacon...That's what will do the trick.'

When he left, Conley had spent almost all of his allowance: $13.46 for twelve traps, four cans of Reynolds Rat-Lure, two fishnets, and a handful of roofing tacks. For the first few days, it appeared that his shopping was complete. Conley arrived in the mornings, finding several of his traps sprung. After killing those still alive with the heel of his shoe, he scooped the corpses into a bucket, spreading them across Weiss' mahogany vargueno like miniature trophies. When Weiss arrived, Conley paraded his prizes before him, lifting each by its tail and swinging them in his boss's direction until Weiss insisted that the furry lumps be thrown away. Conley then walked proudly across the room, tilting the bucket so that all could glimpse at that night's success. He devoured the recognition, his co-workers' faint smiles when he told them of his kills. 'Last night I trapped seven,' he said. Or 'nine' or 'twelve' or 'fourteen'--the number seemed to rise with every evening passed. Conley listed the number of rats killed on a great cardboard chart, plastering it to the front of his desk for all to see.

But then the numbers began to drop: seven...five...four...one. The rats were no longer fooled by the deadly platters. They dragged bits of garbage across the bait, the snares springing into the air, bouncing to chest-height without the rat's weight to pin them to the ground. The rats taunted the springs with discarded pencils and wads of paper--the mighty Victors snapping harmlessly shut--before feasting on strips of bacon and fat-swabbed bread. Soon Conley experimented with other, less conventional, techniques, using personal funds to finance his lack of success. His first idea was much like a common

fish-trap--a funnel that gradually narrowed before emptying into a square cage. It was made of chicken wire and was lined with sharp barbs that pointed inward, so that the rat might enter and then find itself unable to escape. In theory, it should have worked. Though when Conley arrived one morning, finding the chicken-wire gnawed apart and the bait stolen, he had to explore other options.

As time wore on, his concoctions became more elaborate and less effective. He built crude networks of baits, cages, levers, and gears that stretched nearly to the ceiling; clumsy springs that released boxes from overhead; and simple labyrinths of barbed wire, all of which were destroyed with little effort. He worked only at night, and the contraptions had to be gone by morning. Weiss did not want the office littered with Conley's experiments, and most nights, Conley gave up on going home entirely. Packing a fresh set of clothes in his bag, Conley spent the night at the office, building and dismantling the traps in a exhaustive cycle. He devised a pendulums--razor blades glued to paper weights, suspended on twine, and triggered by tripwires on the ground--designed to slice the rats as they crossed through doorways. Conley built miniature catapults that flung them into nets and scabrous metal gates that only the most ignorant rodent would have entered. He even brought his cat from home in order to patrol the office when he was not there...But the Karl ate some arsenic-laced sausage and died on its first night of duty.

If one of his co-workers had ever returned to the office after hours, they would have found Conley conversing with the rodents, sharing his frustrations while running through his various schemes. He needed them to understand what they should be doing. He needed to make himself perfectly clear. 'Okay rats, when you climb up here, you will spring this latch,' he told them, pointing to a manmade pitfall. 'This will cause the floor to collapse, and you will fall, one by one, into this cage. Do you understand?'

Oh, we understand, Conley...We know what to do.

'Good. Because tonight you are going to have to do it on your own. I'm depending on you.' Conley sprinkled pieces of fat and dried ham across the floor, chumming the surrounding area.

Don't worry, Conley, you can depend on us...Hee hee hee....

'Yes, well, let's hope so. This trap is simple really, but you need to pay attention all the same. I can't afford to lose this promotion.'

No, no, of course not.

'And don't you worry, I promise that I'll be merciful. Are we agreed?' Every night he heard their tinny squeak voices respond in unison.

Don't worry Conley, we won't let you down....

But for one reason or another, the rats always failed to keep their end of the bargain. They gnawed through Conley's rope-nets and ignored his poisoned baits; they left their droppings around his tripwires, upsetting all of his traps without the slightest injury. They were mocking him, Conley just knew it. They did not want him to succeed. The rats began to appear in the daylight again, always around Weiss' office, squeaking and scratching loudly as if to make sure they drew the boss's attention. Conley could hear their whispered taunts from across the room.

Hey look at us! Conley couldn't kill us! He doesn't deserve that raise! Look at that suit of his! Look at that new hat! He's all dressed up and we're still here! We're still here!

It got to the point that Conley could no longer concentrate on his work. Files were misplaced, figures miscalculated. He tried stuffing his ears with cotton balls but he could still hear their raspy voices in his head. They were trying to confuse him; they wanted him out of the way.

Eventually, Conley slipped so far behind his co-workers that he gave up on his 'regular' work altogether. The rats became the top priority, at the office and at home. All he could think about was devising new schemes to drive them away--colder, baser techniques that he would have never thought possible before. He spent entire nights poised upon his desktop, clad in his greenish-grey tweed suit and sun-bleached hat, holding a cement block in his lap and waiting for a rat to pass nearby. He chased them around the room with his tack-hammer until he slumped to the ground in exhaustion, the giggling rats eyeing him from just out of reach.

Hee hee hee...Oh Conley, will you never learn?

In Conley's dreams, he was even more brutal. He tied rodents to motorcars and dragging them through the city streets like tin cans. Conley walked through the office in boots the size of sitting-chairs, crushing hundreds of them underfoot. Their hollow rodent bones crunched like cockroach shells. 'How do like that?' he bellowed, stomping upon every rat he could find. 'Who's laughing now?'

Lately, though, his dreams had taken a turn for the worse. Conley was often the victim, shrunken to the size of a shoe and squiggling through an exaggerated maze. He was chased around the office by man-sized rodents, while Weiss and the others watched with somber faces.

'Come on Conley,' Weiss would call. 'Can't you do something? I'm not paying to run around like this.'

'Yes sir, I can handle it,' Conley answered, ducking under a desk before scurrying across the room. 'Don't worry, I won't let you down.'

'Well let's get on it then. I expect immediate results.'

'Yes sir, yes sir. I have got the situation under control.'

At that point Conley was usually snatched off the ground and quickly swallowed.

The worst dream occurred on the morning they attacked his desk. In the dream, Conley was sitting alone in the office, an umbrella of yellow light spouting from his desk-top. The room was the size of a warehouse--desks, chairs, drawers and doors, all looming like fractured towers above his head. The air was blurred with waves of heat, and the entire cavern rang with footsteps, pounding somewhere in the distance. As the steps grew closer, sweat dribbled down Conley's face; it clung to his eyelids and bubbled from the tip of his nose. Removing his coat, he noticed bulges in each of his pockets, weightless, like he was carrying nothing at all. When he reached into the cavities, Conley's fingers were sucked downward, gripped in vices of clamping pushpins. Suddenly two rats emerged from within his jacket, both gnawing upon his hands. As Conley leaped to his feet, he saw two more burst through each of his pant's pockets, clawing their way down his trousers before dropping to the floor. Appearing from underneath his hat, a grey skull-sized rat tore at Conley's hair; it bolted down his back and lodged itself between his shirt and flesh. In the distance he spotted waves of writhing black hair racing toward him. Wolves with rat faces surfaced from underneath the floor, rising like a thick fluid around his ankles and up to his waist. Desk drawers sprang open, exposing vast stores of squirming brown fur; filing cabinets crashed to the ground, splitting down the middle, innards spilling out in squealing curls. The rodents flowed in black streams from cracks in the walls; they dripped in brown, screeching gobs from the ceiling overhead. Within seconds Conley was submerged up to his neck in a pool of natty hair. His feet lost all contact with the floor. He was lifted into the air, the rats gnawing at his ears and poking wet snouts up his nostrils. Urine and rat droppings seeped into his mouth, sour rodent-stench choking his every breath.

When Conley awoke, he could still feel the rats clawing their way down his throat. He was panting and soaked with sweat, his hair pressed against his scalp in a thin, wet

slab. Before he knew it, Conley vomited all over his bed sheets; he lapsed into convulsions, churning up milky fluid until collapsing to the floor. It was then that he noticed the sunlight funneling through his bedroom window. The alarm clock clanged excitedly next to his bed. By this time Conley was usually dismantling that night's traps, sweeping up rat bodies and tossing them out with the trash. Unless he hurried Conley wouldn't be finished before Weiss and the others arrived. But that's just what the rats wanted. They wanted him to fail!

What's wrong Conley?...Aren't we running a tad late this morning...Weiss isn't going to like this one bit.

'Shut up!'

Now, now, Conley, you can't really blame us for your incompetence...Hee hee hee....

Conley pulled on a pair of trousers, grabbed his briefcase and a bundle of wrinkled clothes, and headed out the door.

When Weiss and the others arrived Conley was still rearranging the mess, sweeping up torn documents with a dust broom. Weiss groaned as he passed, shaking his head. He called Conley into his office. 'I've asked you here because there is something on my mind,' he said. 'I've been watching you, and I know that you've been working hard at this rat thing, but your other work has been suffering. You've been falling behind, and beyond that, just yesterday I saw two rats creeping around my door.'

Oh no, Conley, this doesn't sound good....

'But I've been working on it. I know that if I had just a little more time--'

'Now I know this is tough, but the way you've been putting on airs around here has got to stop. I want you to go back to desk and resume your old duties. I've found another man for the job.'

Conley's eyes dropped to his chest. His body seemed to crumple, his bones silently dissolving beneath his skin. Though Weiss continued to speak, explaining in full detail the motivation for his decision, Conley was unable to hear anything but the rats--their laughter and grating squeals, their claws tapping across the wooden floor. He couldn't get them out of his mind. Every moment he saw their pointy faces pressed against his own. Their naked tails dragged over his neck; their tick-lined hair covered his hands like heavy gloves.

'Conley? Are you listening to me?' If Weiss had not reached forward, grabbing him by his shirt collar, Conley would have slumped to the floor. He was lost in his thoughts. 'Now, take it easy,' Weiss said. 'Look at yourself. You're a mess. You can hardly sit upright in your chair.'

'I'll be fine...just...just give me one more chance!' Conley said, his lower lip fluttering. 'You *must* give me one more chance! I promise that I can get rid of them by Monday! Just give me until Monday! I can't be dismissed like this!'

Oh Conley, when will you ever learn?...Save yourself some dignity....

'We've been through this already. Now I appreciate your effort, but I really think that you have done your best.'

You heard the man, Conley...You've failed...You'll never get us now...

'Shut up!'

'Excuse me, what did you say?' Weiss raised up in his desk.

Oh no, now you've done it....

'I'm sorry sir, I didn't mean that. I was talking to the....'

'To the what, Conley?'

Yeah, to the what, Conley?

'Will you please hush?' Conley said, his voice directed to the floor.

'No, I will not hush! In fact, I think that you had better leave this office immediately!' At the sound of Weiss' voice, Conley stumbled backwards, knocking over

his chair. His back slapped against the wall and the entire frosted glass cube rattled loudly.

Hee hee hee...Hee hee hee...

'Please!' Conley yelled. 'Please, I'm trying to think!'

You'll have plenty of time to think at home...Without this job you'll never have to leave the apartment...

'Shut up! *Shut up!*'

When Conley looked up, Weiss grabbed him by the shoulders, locking his big bear arms around Conley's entire chest. 'Come on,' he said. 'Let's sit you down for a second. I think you're getting yourself a bit confused.'

'No, just listen! Can't you hear them?'

La la la la la lee, Conley couldn't harm a flea...La la la la la lee, Conley couldn't harm a flea....

'They're laughing at me! Look, I'll show you!' Conley tried to wiggle out of Weiss' grasp; they wrestled across the prized vargueno before slipping to the ground.

'Jameson, O'Brien, get in here!' Weiss yelled from the floor. After a few seconds, Conley sank his teeth into his boss's hand, the toothmarks filling with purplish blood. Conley ripped free and tumbled past his unsuspecting co-workers.

Yes Conley, you show them...You show them all!

Rushing into the main room, Conley yanked out desk drawers and flipped over a cabinet near the window. Papers and files dropped across the floor like blown leaves. He raced across the room upsetting wastebaskets and crawling beneath tables, while his co-workers backed away in fear. One was silently dialing the police.

'Listen, listen, can't you hear them?' Conley shouted. 'They're everywhere! Look, just look for yourselves!' He motioned for the others to help him with his search.

We are over here, beneath this desk...Hee hee...No, now we are over here, in the walls, under your feet...Your colleagues are standing on us, Conley....

Conley shoved the bystanders aside, his eyes darting across every inch of the floor. 'I'm going to kill every last one of you! I swear it!' With his chair he began to puncture the wall, ducking his head inside each crumbling hole. The rats' voices echoed in the darkness.

Getting warmer...You're getting warmer....

Conley could barely hear the blaring sirens of the approaching cars. When the police arrived they cornered him between two overturned cabinets; avalanches of manila envelopes piled up all around him. Their nightsticks drawn, the officers moved slowly forward, attempting to coax Conley into submission as they went. 'Take it easy now, it's going to be all right!' they said.

That's right, Conley...Take it easy now...It's going to be all right, from now on....

When Conley looked up, the last thing he saw were their whiskers, their glowing red eyes as the clubs began to fall.

MISS FANNIE'S FUNERAL

I was sitting on my father's lime-green recliner, watching *The Jetsons* on TV, when I found out that Miss Fannie was dead. 'It was another stroke,' Momma said, 'it hit her when she was sleeping; she didn't feel any pain. The funeral's going to be Saturday afternoon at 2:00; if you feel like going. I'm not going to force you or anything; although, I think Miss Fannie would have liked it if you were there. You were always one of her favorites, you know?'

'Saturday...*This* Saturday?'

'Yes, at Mission Oaks cemetery. Why, do you have plans? Do you have a hot date that afternoon?'

'No ma'am.'

'Then I don't see why you'd want to disappoint Miss Fannie on her funeral day. This is the last time you'll get to see her. Of course, I'm not going to force you to do anything--I think that you're old enough to make this decision on your own. But I *do* think that you need to figure out your priorities here. Why don't you ask the Lord about it? When you've made your decision, come talk to me.'

'Yes ma'am.'

After that, I could hardly concentrate on the TV. Why did she have to die now? If she had only waited until the weekend to die, I could have missed a day of school for the funeral, maybe two or three if I acted particularly distraught about her death. Then I wouldn't have minded attending the funeral--it would've been the least I could do. But she had to keel over on a Wednesday evening, which meant that my one free day of the week was gone, pulled out from underneath me like a rug. (Sundays don't count because between morning service--which ends at 12:00--and youth leadership training--which begins at 4:30--you don't have time to do much of anything that will get you dirty.)

Momma wasn't about to let me stay home on my own, either. She told me that I had a choice in the matter, but the both of us knew from the very beginning where I'd be spending my Saturday. Still, it was inconsiderate of Miss Fannie to die so unexpectedly. If only she had thought about the rest of us--about the burdens she was leaving behind--before she decided to have another stroke! I was so angry that tears welled up in my eyes. Momma, who must have poked her head in from the kitchen, brought me a box of Kleenex to wipe my face: 'That's all right,' she said, 'I know how you're feeling. It's tough on all of us.'

I skipped supper and spent the rest of the night up in my room. Looking out my bedside window, I could see Miss Fannie's old white house just next door. In the moonlight, the exterior of the house seemed to be slowly decaying. There were long onion-yellow strips on the sides where the paint had been chipped away; wisteria climbed the walls nearly to the tile roof, and the backyard was covered in brambles and weeds and kudzu that snaked up from the field in back of her home. Miss Fannie only cared about how the house looked from out front, since that was what faced the road. The front lawn, which Miss Fannie sometimes paid me $5.00 to mow, was covered with plum trees that used to blossom into white flowers in the spring. Flat grey shale formed a path between the driveway and the front steps. The steps led to a large shaded deck lined with yellow rose bushes. In the late afternoons, Miss Fannie used to sit in her porch-swing, smoking long cigarettes and watching the cars on the street. She usually wore a bright red muumuu or green jogging pants and ratty yellow house-slippers that she'd had before I was born. She held her cigarette-holder like a conductor's baton, sometimes twirling about her head to music that only she could hear. Momma told me that it was all right for Miss Fannie to smoke her cigarettes because she was the oldest and the most Christian woman in town. 'Everyone's got to have some little sin that they enjoy,' she said. 'And more than anyone I know, Miss Fannie has sure earned hers. But that doesn't give you an excuse to take up

after her. Maybe when you get to be as old and as godly as Miss Fannie I'll let you take up smoking, but not a second before then.' Of course, she *had* to be pretty godly to account for all the cigarettes she smoked. Miss Fannie liked to tip her ash into an old Coca-Cola jug with the top cut off; when it was full up, I emptied the jug onto a mountain of ash around the back of the house. By the time she died, the ash-heap was about as high as my waist.

Around 9:30, after everyone in the house was asleep, I snuck downstairs to the kitchen. I rummaged through the leftovers in the refrigerator, selecting a jar of spiced apples and a tub of whipped cream. Standing at the counter, I stabbed an apple ring with a fork and dunked it in the cream. Miss Fannie must've thought that Momma starved me, because she was always offering me something to eat. Whenever she spotted me playing in the yard, she'd lean over the porch railing and yell in her loud raspy voice, 'Hey John! How'd you like a pizza?' Then, despite my every complaint, she'd scoot inside, only to emerge 30 minutes later with the remnants of a frozen pizza--the crust scorched with black stripes from the oven, the cheese melted into brown leather. She never liked to leave the front porch, so I always had to walk next door to pick up my prize. 'Looks like I left this one in there too long,' she inevitably said. 'Do you think you could eat it?' The one time I answered 'No,' she wrinkled up her face sadly and carried the pizza back inside; thirty minutes later she appeared with another one, just as scorched and leathery as before. 'What about this one? *Will this one suit your majesty*?' she said.

'It looks...delicious. Thank you very much.'

'Good. Well I've got a whole freezer full of them if you ever get hungry. You want some fudge to go along with it?'

'No ma'am.'

'Hold on while I'll go get some.' I waited just outside the screen door, the hot pizza burning my palms, as Miss Fannie marched down the hallway to her kitchen. It was

impossible to leave. When she returned, she gave me a block of peanut-butter fudge wrapped in aluminum foil. 'There's plenty more where that came from,' she assured me, 'just make sure to bring back the foil when you're done with it.' She tucked the fudge beneath my arm and stalked back inside the house.

I pinned the aluminum foil inside her screen door early the next morning, then ran back to my house before she could give me some more.

After Miss Fannie's death, unfamiliar cars appeared next door. They crowded the front yard, leaving deep muddy tire-tracks across the lawn. On Thursday afternoon, men in white masks came to spray the bedroom where Miss Fannie had died. A group of deacons from the First Baptist Church dropped off flowers, and an old woman in a Lincoln Continental--probably one of Miss Fannie's friends stopping by to bid farewell to the house--knocked over a plum tree when backing out driveway. The only car I recognized belonged to Miss Fannie's nephew, a baldheaded lay preacher named Harry Smith, who had driven up from North Carolina after Miss Fannie's last stroke. He must have been collecting her valuables, because a couple hours after his arrival he came out of the house dragging a wooden trunk. 'Hey kid, can you come give me a hand with this?' he yelled. I dropped my rubber football and crossed into Miss Fannie's yard. When I got up close, I saw that the trunk was stuffed to the gills with clothes and yellowed movie magazines and dusty grey snapshots. 'Just grab hold of the handle there while I ease it down the steps.' Together we managed to get the trunk into the back of Harry Smiths' station wagon without scuffing up the bottom.

'Where are you going to take all this stuff?' I asked him. Harry Smith picked up an orange feather-boa that had fallen on the driveway and tossed it into the back seat.

'Well, Miss Fannie's got a sister Althea that's coming in from Louisville. She don't get out much after her surgery, but I'm thinking that she might want some of the old

pictures. The rest of this junk I'll haul up to the Goodwill next week. Maybe they'll give me something for it.'

I stared at a photograph wedged into the mouth of the trunk. It showed a young woman wearing undershorts and a blouse unbuttoned to her navel. She had long dark hair that draped across her shoulders, and she was standing on a boat-dock just before sunset. 'Can I get that picture?' I asked.

Harry Smith pulled out the photograph and looked it over. 'Now what would a boy your age do with a photo like this?'

'I don't know...I guess it will remind me of Miss Fannie.'

'Well I don't think that you need this kind of reminding.' He folded up the picture neatly and slid it into his shirt-pocket. 'I think that you need to get on home now. This is no place for you to be messing around. A woman's dead, after all.' Shaking his head, Harry Smith climbed into his station wagon, then eased it out of the driveway. 'Thanks for your help kid,' he said, 'maybe I'll see you at the funeral.' I waved lazily as he disappeared down the street.

By sundown, the only vehicle left was Miss Fannie's maroon Chrysler, which had been parked in the backyard since before I was born. The paint on its hood had faded into a dull silver; its vinyl roof had bleached into a pale pink, and both of the rear tires were covered with blue sealant where they had been patched over the years. The car was always breaking down, although Miss Fannie didn't see the point in buying a new one. 'Sure, I could get a new car if I wanted one,' she once explained, 'but with my luck I'd drop dead driving it out of the parking lot. Something like that happened to my cousin. She put $500 down on a Buick then died of pneumonia after two payments. It's just a whole lot of money to spend on two months of use.'

Instead, Miss Fannie's neighbors would drive her wherever she needed to go. They never seem to mind, especially when Miss Fannie would remind them of her age and

recent stroke. 'I just can't get along very well since my illness,' she'd say, and after a few minutes someone would arrive to take her to the grocery store or out to the farmer's co-op to buy feed for her squirrels. Miss Fannie only liked to take her own car once a week--on Tuesday afternoons when she crossed the state line to buy her lottery tickets. She used to bribe me with a share of the winnings if I would go along for the twenty mile ride. 'I need you to be my lookout while I'm driving,' Miss Fannie told me. 'My eyesight's gotten pretty poorly, so if you see something coming, just give a holler. And if I slump over like I'm having a heart attack, don't be afraid to grab the wheel and ease it over to the curb.' We never won much, so my cut was always small. But I liked to go along all the same...on the off chance that I'd get to drive home. The inside of her car always smelled like smoke and boiled peanuts; the ashtrays were overflowing with crushed cigarette butts. My seat was missing a shoulder strap, and every time we'd slow down Miss Fannie would throw out a shriveled arm as if to keep me from flying through the windshield. During the summer we'd stop off at the Dairy Queen on the way home, and Miss Fannie would buy us cherry sundaes with extra whipped cream. We'd sit in the parking lot with the car windows rolled down, eating our sundaes and talking about what we'd do with our winnings. By the time we were done, my head would be pounding from the ice cream. 'That's what you get when you eat too fast!' she'd snap, and tossing her empty cup out the window, Miss Fannie'd start up the car and carry us home.

Just after suppertime, I asked Momma if could go over and see the inside of Miss Fannie's house for one last time. 'Please,' I said, 'there's no one over there right now. I won't make a mess. I promise.'

'What do you want to go sneaking over there for?' she asked. 'Haven't you troubled Miss Fannie enough? Now you've got to go troubling her after she's dead?'

'I won't be troubling her. I just want to see it the way she left it. I don't want to forget about it when I'll older.'

'How are you going to get in there? I'm sure it's all locked up by now.'

'I can get in through the cellar door. Miss Fannie could never get it to lock right.'

'I don't want you breaking in to Miss Fannie's house just so you can snoop around. You need to respect the dead.'

'I promise it's not breaking in. Miss Fannie's the one that told me about it. I know that she wouldn't mind. *Come on, Momma.* I won't be gone long.'

Momma could never resist me for very long, and after a few more minutes of pleading she let me have my way. 'All right,' she said, gathering up the dishes from the table, 'you can go on over there. But I want you back here in a half-hour--and you *don't* want me to come looking for you.'

'Yes ma'am.' I scraped my plate into the garbage disposal and ran out the back door. The sun had set while we were eating supper, and the sky was purple with streaks of pink and yellow just above the horizon. The weeds in the backyard were rustling back and forth in the breeze; the long blades of grass whipped against my knees. Picking my way across the backyard, I felt the kudzu moving under my feet, slowly curling around my ankles. When I reached the backdoor, my shoelaces were covered in burrs. The odor of Miss Fannie's ash-heap, still damp from a recent shower, filled the evening air. I peered through the back window...just to make sure the coast was clear.

I stepped into the house. I could barely make out the faint outline of Miss Fannie's washer and dryer just inside the doorway. The room smelled like wet towels, ammonia, and bleach. I flipped on a lightswitch and passed from the laundryroom into the kitchen. I had never seen it this clean before. When Miss Fannie was alive, the sinks were always clogged with dishes--pots and pans covered every burner on the stove; half-eaten pies,

wrapped in aluminum foil, lined the countertops. The refrigerator was empty except for a yellow box of baking soda, and the brown tile floor had been recently waxed.

The living room, which Miss Fannie always kept neat in case of company, looked about the same, except for a large bouquet of flowers sitting on the coffee table. If Miss Fannie was still alive, she would have kept her flowers in the kitchen or upstairs in her bedroom--never where they'd block the TV. During the summertime, when she'd have me over to watch Braves games on TBS, Miss Fannie wouldn't even let me go to the bathroom until commercials. 'Can't you hold it until the end of the inning?' she'd scold me, '*I'm* an old woman. You don't see *me* jumping up every ten minutes!' Before the start of the game, Miss Fannie would unplug her telephone to make sure that she wasn't interrupted; then she'd settle back on the couch with a bag of popcorn and turn down the volume so she couldn't hear the announcers. We used to watch the games for hours, the only noise coming from Miss Fannie's teeth grinding against the dry popcorn. When the Braves finally won the Series, Miss Fannie told me it was the happiest day of her life.

Crossing the living room, I climbed into the leather seat at the bottom of the stairwell and pressed the button to carry me to the second floor. The electric motor whirred, and I was jolted sideways, my outstretched toes slowly dragging over the steps. The chairlift was my favorite part of the entire house. Miss Fannie had it installed about three years earlier, when she was having trouble climbing the steps on her own. She used to get on to me about riding it so much, but I don't think that she really minded, just as long as I didn't burn out the engine or stand up in the seat.

At the top of the stairs, I poked my head inside the tiny guest bedroom on the left side of the hallway. The walls were covered in flowery green wallpaper, and when a guest needed to stay over, Miss Fannie would unfold a military cot that she kept in the hall closet and set it up on the floor. After my daddy had died, I spent two weeks in that room while my mother attended the funeral then drove away to spend time by herself. She

wanted me to stay with Miss Fannie since I was too young to understand death and because she needed to be alone with her thoughts. 'I know this is hard on you,' she told me, 'but I can't be around anyone right now...especially you. It just brings back to many memories. It's not fair.' She was crying at the time, and she wrapped her arms around me and told me that God and Miss Fannie would be watching over me while she was away. For next two weeks Miss Fannie brought me breakfast in bed, which made me feel better even though her cooking wasn't much to brag about. We watched Braves games in the afternoons, and at night we'd sit out on the front porch together: Miss Fannie smoking her cigarettes while I talked about my Daddy's death.

As far as I can remember, we had the same conversation every evening.

'So what happens to you when you die?' I asked.

'Oh, your body just shuts itself down, that's all,' Miss Fannie said. 'It's like when you turn off a car's engine and everything goes quiet...except, when you're dead, you can never crank it up again. You just stay quiet forever.'

'But my daddy's gone to heaven, right?'

'I expect so.'

'So it's a good thing that he died, then?'

'It's a good thing if you're a believer,' she answered slowly, 'and your daddy seemed to be a good enough man. But you shouldn't be worrying about that. You just need to stay alive as long as possible, John. You've got plenty of time to be dead.'

When the sun went down, we'd come inside, and I'd chairlift myself to the top of the stairs then send it down for Miss Fannie. We'd sit together on my cot reading stories until it was time to go to bed. Then Miss Fannie would call me into the bathroom to check my stitches; she cleaned the cuts on my forehead where I'd hit the windshield of my daddy's car. After the lights were out, I could hear Miss Fannie shuffling back to her bedroom at the end of the hall. She kept her bedroom locked whenever I was around, and

Miss Fannie often warned me about the dire consequences I'd face if she ever caught me inside. 'Oh, you don't want to go in there,' she once told me, 'not if you value your life. A woman's bedroom is a sacred place. It's not a place for little boys,' she laughed. 'Most men don't belong there either!' For years afterward, I was always on the lookout for the day when Miss Fannie would let down her guard. I tested the doorknob whenever she wasn't around. Eventually she'd forget to lock-up. All I had to do was be patient and avoid unnecessary risks.

Of course, now that Miss Fanny was dead, I finally had a chance to solve the mystery for myself.

I slowly crept to the end of the hall, the dark wooden floorboards groaning under my feet. Twisting the doorknob, I thought about what Miss Fannie'd say if she could see me. What if she was looking down from heaven, following my every move through her thick plastic glasses? I don't think that even death could stop her from getting back at me, not if she put her mind to it. She'd find a way...even if she had to wait till I was dead myself. But I figured my intrusion was all right just as long as I didn't step inside the room itself. Miss Fannie had warned about messing around inside, but she'd never said anything about standing in the open doorway.

When I cracked open the door, I was startled by my own reflection. A large mirror was poised on the far wall. Hazy light seeped into the room through small windows, and the air smelled like antiseptic and the yellow lotion Miss Fannie used to smooth on her hands. The walls were bare except for an old poster for *The Water Nymphs*, and a large hologram of Jesus which was hung just above Miss Fannie's bed. It looked like Jesus was knocking on someone's door, only his head was turned slightly to the side where he could keep me in his sight. I wasn't used to him watching me so attentively. When I shifted my eyes Jesus disappeared inside the house, and 'God Bless This Home' suddenly appeared at the top of the frame. Her closet was open, its shelves

littered with countless old dresses and scarves, far too many for Harry Smith to haul away in just one trip. A small chest of drawers was wedged against the far wall--its empty drawers stacked up neatly on the floor beside it--and a wicker basket full of paperback westerns sat on the floor beside Miss Fannie's bed. I couldn't understand what Miss Fannie had been trying to hide! There was nothing *sacred* about the place! But then, Miss Fannie always told me that I'd understand things better once I'd grown up a bit. Maybe all the clues were there...and I was too young to read them.

I was still standing in the doorway when I heard Momma's voice calling from somewhere outside. 'John, are you in there?' she yelled, 'come on out before you break something!' Neglecting to shut the door, I hurried down the stairs and met Momma on the back step of the house. Her thin frame was hardly visible in the shadows. She didn't seem angry, and her voice was soft and reserved. 'It's getting late,' she said, 'and I need you to be at home.' Taking my hand, she led me across the backyard, stomping down the weeds so that my path was clear. When reached the house, Momma let go of my hand and sat down on the step. She nudged off her sandals and buried her toes in the cool grass. 'You go on inside. I think I'll set out here for a while.'

'You want me to keep you company?' I asked.

'No, I'll be fine by myself.' I was opening the screen door when she caught me by the hem of my shirt. Her face was pale, and for the first time I can remember, Momma looked like an old-woman. 'Miss Fannie, she was a good friend to you, wasn't she? I hope you realize how much she worried about you after your father...passed on. Miss Fannie was a fine, fine woman. I don't think you'll ever know.'

Even after seeing her bedroom, it was still hard to imagine that Miss Fannie was dead. It didn't really sink in until the Friday before the funeral, when a beige Cadillac pulled up in the driveway with a short, heavy woman inside. Stormclouds had gathered

overhead, and the air was warm and smelled like rain. I watched curiously from my open window as she removed a yellow realtor's sign and hammered it into the thick green turf. Despite the woman's efforts, the warped sign would hardly stand on its own. Minutes after the realtor left, raindrops were pecking at the bright metallic paint. The sign rocked back and forth with every gust of wind. When I awoke around midnight, the sign had fallen over on its side, its legs uprooting little tufts of grass. Its wet surface sparkled in the moonlight. Before I knew it, I was crouched down in Miss Fannie's yard, sliding my fingertips over the cool metal. The grass tickled my bare knees. Wiping off the mud with my shirtsleeve, I carried the sign back to my room and slid it under my bed. There would be time enough to sell the house after the funeral, and I wasn't ready for new neighbors anyway. Besides, I was doing that realtor a favor--it was better to get the dead-lady smell out of the house before you show it off to strangers and their kids.

On Saturday, I didn't bother arguing with Momma about the funeral. I was dressed and ready to go before she was even awake.

We arrived at the chapel about a half-hour before the funeral was set to begin. All of the storm clouds had blown away during the night, and the sun was shining brightly overhead. Bouquets of soggy flowers littered the white gravestones, and the cemetery lawn was covered in red and orange leaves scattered by the wind. Momma parked in the back of the lot--where it was shaded by a clump of ash-trees--then leaned over in front of the rear-view mirror to touch up her face. Her red lipstick was mushy from the heat, and it smeared when she pressed it to her mouth. 'Son of a bitch,' she mumbled, fishing around in her purse for a Kleenex. I opened the car door and stepped out onto the soft asphalt. The shade didn't do much to relieve the heat.

'I think I'll go on ahead.'

'You'll wait for your mother,' Momma said, licking the Kleenex and smudging it across her lips, 'Miss Fannie's not going anywhere. Here, take these; you'll need them.' Momma handed me some wadded tissues, then slid out of her side of the car. The tissues were dusty from the crushed aspirins in the bottom of her purse, and they smelled faintly of Momma's perfume.

Harry Smith's station wagon was parked only a few spaces away, with Miss Fannie's wooden trunk clearly visible behind the back seat. It didn't seem fair that he got to haul off whatever he wanted just because he was Miss Fannie's relation. At the very least, he should've let the rest of us take a peak before he packed up her valuables for good. I couldn't understand why Miss Fannie's sister wanted old clothes and photographs anyway. By all counts, she was going to die pretty soon herself...and then what would happen to Miss Fannie's stuff? If Harry Smith was smarter--if he really cared about Miss Fannie at all--he'd want to make sure that her belongings were in safer hands--younger hands, to say the least. It just seemed strange that he never asked us if we wanted any of it. After all, me and Momma had been Miss Fannie's neighbors for as long as I could remember.

Momma took me by the hand and we started across the parking lot, weaving between the hot bumpers on our way to the front door. I couldn't help but notice that it was a perfect day for playing outside. 'The funeral should have been held yesterday,' I said, 'when it was still cloudy and dark. It's too nice out today. The weather's not right for funerals.'

'There's no right weather for funerals,' Momma said, 'this weather's as good as any.'

'It just seems strange, that's all. I don't know if I can feel sad about Miss Fannie when the sun's shining. I don't think she'd like it.'

'If you really cared about Miss Fannie, you'd talk with a little more respect. It sounds like you'd take away her last day on Earth just because the weather doesn't suit you. If thought you were that immature, I would've left you home like last time.'

'Well, who would watch me *now*?'

She dropped my hand, and we walked the rest of the way in silence.

When Momma opened up the door, I could hear organ music and the sound of droning voices. The inside of the funeral chapel was air-conditioned, which was good since Miss Fannie would probably start to smell if they held the service outside. At least, that's what I'd been taught at school: When somebody dies, their body starts to decay, and they stink really bad until all of muscle rots off and there's nothing left but your bones. Then the sun bleaches you out and you get all hard and white like the skeletons you see on TV. I didn't know how long all that would take, but I was glad the chapel was air-conditioned--just in case Miss Fannie had started to spoil already. Besides, it felt good to get out of the heat. My tie was so tight that I could hardly breathe, and my underarms were damp and itching with sweat. Momma seemed to relax once she was inside as well. We hadn't strayed two feet from the door before she took my hand again, squeezing it gently and rubbing my palm with her thumb. 'It's going to be all right,' she whispered, 'you just hang on to Momma for support.'

The funeral chapel looked a lot like the inside of a church, except for the shiny metal drawers built into the walls. Momma explained that dead bodies were kept inside the drawers, and that certain families--if they were rich enough--could reserve a whole wall for themselves. Together we scanned the various tombs, searching for interesting names. Momma seemed to admire anyone that had died with age. 'Here's an eighty-seven,' she said, 'and look, this one was ninety-four. That's...fifty-eight years more than your father.' Tapping my fingertips against the cold metal, I couldn't believe that somebody was just lying there, dead, only a few inches away.

'What about Miss Fannie?' I asked. 'Does she have to stay in here forever?'

'No, Miss Fannie will be outside,' Momma said. 'I don't think she had enough money to be buried in here, the poor thing. It's a shame, really. A fine Christian woman like Miss Fannie doesn't deserve to spend her eternity out there in the mud.'

Momma and I sat down in the front pew and waited for the service to begin. The chapel was soon crowded as old men and women--some of them weeping openly--slouched down the aisles to their seats. There were a few people about Momma's age in the congregation, but most of the mourners appeared to be on the verge of death themselves. They rolled across the plush maroon carpeting in wheel-chairs or hobbled on wooden canes; their bodies emitted a strange medicinal smell. Miss Fannie had never seemed *that* old--not even after her first stroke left her paralyzed and she had to be fed through a tube in her belly. Her speech was slurred for a while, and she was always drooling because her face muscles were weak and she couldn't keep her mouth closed. But even then Miss Fannie seemed more alive than most of the people that outlived her.

Harry Smith, now wearing a preaching robe, strutted back and forth in front of Miss Fannie's casket, shaking hands with anyone that decided to take a closer look at the body. I was glad that we were sitting near the front, because I could see Miss Fannie fine without having to get up and lean over the coffin. She looked pinker in the face than I'd ever seen her, and her white hair was poofed up and hairsprayed like a wad of cotton on top of her head. She was wearing a yellow church dress with white checks that looked like flower petals, dark brown hose, and yellow dress shoes that showed her toes. Her eyes were closed, and her hands were folded over in her lap. I imagined someone fixing Miss Fannie's hair, painting her eyebrows, holding her dead legs in their arms as they tried to pull on the pantyhose. Whoever picked out her clothes didn't do a very good job--or else, they didn't know Miss Fannie beforehand. It was like they were trying to make her look as dead as possible.

'Doesn't she look stunning?' Momma leaned over and whispered.

'It doesn't look like her.'

'Sure it does; she just looks like she's asleep.'

'Miss Fannie would never wear shoes like that,' I said, 'not even to church.'

'Well, she couldn't be buried in her sneakers, now could she?' Flushed, Momma turned away and started up a conversation with Harry Smith, who had given up his post at Miss Fannie's casket until the service would begin.

Led by an usher, a grey-haired woman with a metal walker slumped down on the pew beside me. She was wearing a black wool shawl over her shoulders, and her body wasn't much larger than my own. She smiled at me kindly, then stretched out her arms and gave me a weak hug. 'You must be Paul,' she said, 'I'm your great aunt Althea. I haven't seen you since you were born. But then, I don't get about like I used to. I broke my hip, you know.'

'I'm sorry, ma'am; you're thinking of someone else,' I said politely. 'My name's John. I don't have a great aunt Althea, at least not that I know of.'

'You're not Susan's boy?'

'No ma'am.'

'Then who are you? What are you doing here?'

'Momma and I lived next door to Miss Fannie for as long as I can remember.'

'So you're not relations then?'

'No ma'am. Miss Fannie and I, we were...neighbors.'

'Well, I'm sorry then child, but this pew is reserved for relations only. I'm afraid you'll have to take another seat. You'd better be quick about it too; the service is set to begin any minute now.'

When I told Momma, she leaned over me and apologized to the old woman for sitting on the family pew. The organist played 'Blessed Be The Tie That Binds' as we

hunted for new seats. It didn't seem right that we had to move. *We*'d been living next door to Miss Fannie for all those years--that should've counted for something! When it came to holidays and Christmases, Miss Fannie would always celebrate with us, not with any of her relations. And from the way she talked, I figured that Miss Fannie didn't think much of her family anyway. Except for Harry Smith, who was required by profession to act kindly, not one of them had dropped in to visit after her first stroke. They hadn't been around when Miss Fannie needed company...or when she needed to be changed. Sure, they'd sent a few cards and letters, and Miss Fannie would get teary-eyed whenever I read them aloud. But afterwards, she always had me throw them into the trashcan.

The only seats we could find were in the back corner of the chapel. A rush of hot air hit my neck every time someone stepped inside the door. I couldn't see a thing except for the back of some man's head that was sitting in front of me. When I tried to prop myself up in the pew, Momma yanked me down and pinched my arm muscle through my jacket. 'Sit still,' she whispered harshly, 'I don't want to have to tell you again!' Whichever way I twisted in my seat, I couldn't make out anything until Harry Smith announced that we would all sing 'Amazing Grace,' which he said was Miss Fannie's favorite song. That seemed strange, since Miss Fannie was always singing Johnny Cash when she was around me. But I was just glad to be standing up where I could lean out into the aisle and get better view. When 'Amazing Grace' was over, we sang 'Bringing in the Sheaves' and 'The Old Rugged Cross,' and then everyone sat down as Harry Smith started with the eulogy.

And that was the last I ever saw of Miss Fannie. Once I sat back down, all I could do was listen to the voices coming from the front of the room. When the time came, I probably could've walked down the aisle and given my own speech about Miss Fannie, just like every one else. But by then I just wanted to go home; the speeches were so boring that I could barely keep myself awake. Harry Smith, who had replaced Miss Fannie's real preacher, read a few Bible verses about death and Jesus, and then talked on

and on about how Miss Fannie was a fine Christian woman and about how we should all thank God that we got to know Miss Fannie while she was still alive. When he was finished, his voice was choked with sobbing; the microphone on the pulpit picked up every time he blew snot into his handkerchief.

I recognized the next voice as that of Miss Fannie's sister, who had kicked Momma and me out of the front pew after all the good seats were gone. She breathed heavily into the microphone, grinding her dentures together and grunting with every other word. The microphone crackled and popped every time she spoke too loud, and she seemed to whisper whenever she said Miss Fannie's real name.

'Well, I'm happy to see that Frances had so many friends that would come out on a Saturday afternoon to wish her farewell,' she proclaimed, 'I only hope that I have half as many when the Lord calls me home. But I shouldn't be thinking of myself on this day--this is Frances's day, and I'm just glad to be alive so that I can say good-bye to the old girl. For those of you that don't know it, my name is Althea. Frances was my older sister, and let me tell you--I couldn't have had a better sister in the world. Whenever I had troubles growing up, Frances was always there to lend me advice. Of course, she was kind of a scamp in those days. More often than not, you'd have thought that *I* was the eldest. One time she even run all the way off to California, and we didn't see her for three whole years. But as she grew older and finally settled down, Frances learned the errors of her ways. From what you folks have told me, she found the peace of devotion and fellowship with her fellow Christians...and that's what we wanted for Frances all along.'

Althea paused as the microphone sputtered and rang. 'Over the past few years, I believe that I've grown closer to Frances than ever before. Though I didn't get to see her that often because of my accident, Frances was always in my heart. That's why it hurt me so much when she had that terrible stroke a few years back. At the time, the whole family thought that we'd lost her for good. And if it wasn't for the constant attention given her

by my son, Harry, there's not a doubt in my mind that Frances would have been ripped away when some of us needed her the most. Luckily, the Lord spared her for a few years. And for that I thank Him every day....' At that point her voice finally cracked. 'Oh Frances! Frances!' she wept into the microphone. 'If you could only hear my voice!'

Harry Smith must have stumbled up to the pulpit, because his voice soon joined that of his mother, her moans echoing against the chapel walls. 'It's all right Momma,' he said, 'Come on now. She's in a better place. I know she is.'

Even though someone else started up another speech, I could still hear Miss Fannie's sister bawling in the background. Pretty soon it seemed like the whole place was crying. When I looked over, Momma's face was covered in tears, and next to her, an old man was wiping his eyes with his coat sleeve. I didn't realize it at the time, but I hadn't shed a single tear since the night I first found out that Miss Fannie was dead and that my weekend was ruined. I guess it never occurred to me that I was supposed to cry when attending a funeral--the whole funeral experience was still new to me. Momma tried to stuff some more tissues in my hand as if to egg me on, but I just settled back into the pew and shut my eyes.

I didn't really hear much of anything after that. Before I knew it, we were singing more Bible hymns, and the service was over. Momma had stopped her crying. I could tell that she was more angry than sad. 'Sometimes you really disappoint me,' she whispered, 'You couldn't keep your eyes open for thirty minutes--not even at Miss Fannie's funeral.' I looked at the unused tissues crumpled up on the pew, but I didn't feel too bad about it at the time. Miss Fannie wouldn't have wanted me to boo-hoo about her anyway, especially now that she was about to be put into the ground. If there was anything that she taught me it was that once you're gone, there's no coming back. So there's no real use in fretting over it. Besides, Miss Fannie had taken my afternoon. And I wasn't about to forgive her just because she was dead.

Everyone in the chapel linked hands across the aisles as Harry Smith prayed, and a bunch of tired old men hauled Miss Fannie's casket out the door and over the shiny black asphalt of the parking lot. Even though Miss Fannie was to be buried at the bottom of the hill, they loaded her into the back of black hearse station wagon and slammed to door shut behind her. The pallbearers, already sweating from their brief walk, lined up behind the car like dominos, their white hands folded at their waists. The rest of the mourners slowly crowded in behind them; their voices grew louder as one of the funeral ushers started up the engine of the car. I shaded my eyes from the bright sunlight that cut its way through the drifting black clouds. Just then, Momma took up my hand. She pulled me over to where she and Harry Smith had been standing together at the back of the line.

'Let's go now,' she said, 'You don't want the funeral train to leave without you.'

'I don't want to see Miss Fannie buried. I'm tired of funerals.'

'But this is the most important part. This'll be your last chance to say good-bye.'

'Please, Momma, I've said good-bye enough for today. Can't I just stay here?'

Harry Smith, who had been listening all along, interrupted our conversation. 'Come on, Margaret, why don't you let him wait up at the car until the burial is over? It's been a tough day on the boy. Hasn't it champ?' He rustled my hair with his hand, then slapped me once on the back for good measure. 'He looks like he needs a good long nap.'

Momma looked up at Harry Smith's pinched, sunburned face. 'All right, if you don't think he needs to be there,' she said cautiously. 'John, you go sit in the car till we get back. It shouldn't take long to get Miss Fannie into the ground.' Trying her best to smile, Momma wrapped her arms around my neck and gave me an enormous hug. 'That's my big boy. Be strong now.'

'Glory! Hallelujah! Amen!' said Harry Smith, clasping his black leather Bible to his chest. 'There's nothing finer than family love! Sister Margaret, if you'll do me the

honor?' As Momma waived good-bye, Harry Smith slipped his arm around her, and they proudly joined the funeral march as it limped down the hill to Miss Fannie's grave.

AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Kinder woke to the sound of a thunderclap. When he opened his eyes, he was blinded by the unnatural light of his reading lamp, flickering on and off from his bed-table. An old edition of *Cosmopolitan* magazine was resting open on his chest, and his sheets were damp where he slept during the night. 'I must have drifted off when reading again,' he thought ascetically. The lamplight faded with the next bolt of lightning. His mini-refrigerator droned slowly into silence. Although it was still early, Kinder found it impossible to fall back asleep with the storm raging outside. Escaping from his cot, he waded through women's catalogs and serious novels tossed at random onto the floor. Reaching the bathroom, Kinder felt around for the soap to wash his hands. For several minutes he scrubbed the creases between each finger before wandering back into the room. The cold rain had fogged the windowpane, so that everything outside took on a somber, ashen appearance. As far as he could tell, the storm had not done much damage thus far. Most of the neighborhood appeared intact, except for a few clogged gutters--now sagging from the weight of the rain--and a pair of fallen treelimbs from an old ash-tree across the street. White hailstones were bouncing down the sidewalk, rattling against the metal canopy of a bus-stop just down the road. Above his head, torrents of water rushed down the rooftop, sweeping away the oak and maple leaves blown over from the park. The water from the gutters surged out into the street, and the leaves joined a parade of leaflets and handbills; orange peels; old newspapers; and a child's toy dragon, its green paper head and red paper tongue bobbing through the white foam. Slowly the parade floated over the smooth concrete toward the center of town.

By the time he dressed, the worst part of the storm was over. He had intended to spend the morning at his desk, reading and sorting through the musty stacks of legal documents that he hoped someday to include in his memoirs. But even with candlelight,

the print was too small and too faint for his eyes. The room was filled with the odor of soured milk from an empty carton sitting beside his bed. The heat and humidity of his room were already unbearable; slicking back his hair with a wet comb, his only impulse was to leave before he broke a sweat. Kinder cracked open a window, then pulled on his greased black rain-slicker and black rubber galoshes. He emerged from his apartment a few minutes after seven.

Outside, the sky was now blanketed with thick grey clouds. Rain sifted to the ground in a refreshing drizzle. It was the time of day when many people ate their breakfasts in the small taverns and two-room bistros that lined the streets around his home. On fairer days they spilled out onto the sidewalks, feasting on hot rolls and milksweetened coffee, licking their buttery fingertips, as they conversed about the events of the evening before. During inclement weather, however, most patrons sought refuge inside, squeezing into the cramped cafes until the windows steamed with their breath. Kinder glanced at them as he trudged by, their mouths opening and closing in dumb conversation. Although he was hungry, it looked like getting breakfast would be a real bother; he would have to push his way into one of the shops, weave his meager frame through the latticework of arms and legs, and shout his order over the droning voices of those inside. And a breakfast roll, he assured himself, was not worth that sort of effort! Besides, he so deplored the company of his neighbors that he was willing to forego a meal rather than endure such intimacy. The mere thought of it made him queasy, and it was with little regret that Kinder left the crowded shops behind and turned down a narrow alleyway less than a few blocks from his home.

He took this route often when heading downtown. It was more direct than using the main streets, and Kinder enjoyed its comfortable seclusion and its shade on sunnydays. The alley was formed by two block apartment complexes, constructed only twelve feet apart. It was crisscrossed with flapping clotheslines, one above another like the rungs of a

ladder that extended into the mist. Children's voices, perhaps a hundred feet above his head, called to each other like whispering ghosts. Motor traffic was impossible in the alley because of a huge garbage bin that rested along one wall. The ground all around it was littered with scraps of paper and food, stinking diapers, and broken milkbottles, where residents had tossed refuse out of their windows and missed. The bin itself was nearly filled with rain from leaking gutters overhead. When Kinder glanced inside, a pair of black rats were floating on a rancid melon raft, waves of green water rolling off their coats; a rusty baby-carriage rose like an island from one side of the bin; potato peels bobbed up and down in the surf. He paused to watch the drama taking place inside. Besides the rats, other vermin had managed to crawl aboard floating bits of garbage. Fat black ants clung to soggy biscuits, a swarm of cockroaches were huddled on the edge of a discarded icebox, while thousands of white maggots squirmed just below the surface of the water. That would be me, he thought sadly, recalling that he had never learned to swim. In one corner of the bin, a lone brown-spider was attempting to climb up the slick metal wall to safety. Repeatedly it tumbled back into the water, its legs weaker and less agile after each excursion, until soon it could barely crawl an inch above the water's surface. Kinder wondered if he should interfere. Perhaps he should let nature take its course, he thought, although looking around him he saw very little to convince him that *this* was nature's domain. He grabbed a moldy sardine-tin from the ground and tapped out its contents against the wall. Bracing himself against the trash bin with one hand, Kinder leaned over the water and carefully scooped up the spider. Once free the spider hopped on the sleeve of Kinder's rainslicker, causing him to jump backwards and stumble into the pile of garbage at his feet. His free hand landed in soft remains of a loaf of bread, the other clanged against the asphalt. The spider was lost in the fall. Kinder imagined it crawling over his leg, though he didn't move for fear of crushing it or provoking an attack. After a few minutes, however, he was on the verge of retching from the smell. He could taste the

rank flavor of decay on the back of his tongue, and pulling himself to his feet, he splashed upstream through the tiny rivulets that poured down the center of the alley.

Kinder exited the alleyway and turned left down the sidewalk of a wide avenue. He found this part of the city exceedingly dull, and it was with no pleasure that he strolled past the anonymous brick buildings. Luckily, the sidewalk was empty, except for two strangers approaching quickly from up the street. The man and woman wore yellow rainjackets, their linked hands forming a barrier across the middle of the sidewalk. Kinder marched across the street and slipped behind one of the two stone lions that guarded the entrance to the city park, their massive paws stained white from the pigeons that liked to roost on their heads. He waited until the couple were out of sight--peering out from underneath the lion's cold wet tail--then hurried up the street toward his destination. It was better to play it safe, he thought, rather than risk the slightest annoyance. Who knows what those two would have wanted? Directions, no doubt, which he always loathed to provide. After a few more blocks he turned right, crossing a footbridge under which a shallow canal flowed lazily between concrete banks. Kinder's shadow raced across the dark green surface of the water.

By the time he arrived at the city library, his chest was burning from the jog. Situated in the center of a small cobblestone plaza, the city library looked more like a tree nursery than anything else. Architecturally, it seemed out of place against the backdrop of crude stone and faded brick that formed the walls of nearly every building downtown. Except for the small bathrooms located in the corners of each floor, its walls, floors, and roof were made entirely out of thick sheets of glass, held in place by perpendicular steel girders and the sheer weight of the glass itself. It was designed to save energy by maximizing the use of natural sunlight. Even when the electricity failed, the crystal walls allowed enough light for reading. On sunnydays, Kinder found the library stuffy and intolerably bright. Once he was actually sunburned while perusing the shelves, and since

then he only visited the library during rainstorms or at night, when the librarians would light the entire building using long halogen lamps on the top floor.

Facing the street, the library's main entrance was flanked by ash-trees planted in round plots of dirt just inside the sidewalk. It was under these that Kinder found himself standing after he unsuccessfully tugged at the door. For some reason it hadn't occurred to him that it was only seven-thirty in the morning. Though the ash-trees formed adequate shelter from the rain, Kinder did not relish the thought of waiting for another hour and a half. Already his legs shivered from the cold. His wet fingertips felt heavy and numb, and his stomach was growling repeatedly. If only the cafes hadn't been so packed, he thought, I wouldn't be so miserable now. The library had a small counter in the basement--the only floor not made out of glass--that sold sandwiches wrapped in waxed paper and cups of coffee. He had planned to visit there before exploring the aisles. Kinder fingered his rainslicker on the off-chance that an old candybar or wrapped chocolate might be wedged in a pocket. He found a crumpled wedding invitation, its dull gold script smeared from years of moisture. He recognized the name of the groom as his own.

Within a few minutes, Kinder spotted a shrunken old man swishing about on the other side of the glass. It looked as if his face had been formed from the scraps of others. His chin was long and oily, his cheeks brown and covered in stubble. Though his eyes were squinting--almost like those of a blindman--the old man had a large inquisitive nose that jutted out at least three inches from his face. His was spine bowed from years of staring downward, and clutched in his hands, the long handle of a pushbroom completed a triangle with its reflection on the floor. The old man was making slow concentric circles around the library foyer, his broom stirring up a cloud of pale dust wherever he stepped. Kinder pressed his face to the door and rapped his knuckle against the glass until the old man looked up from his sweeping. 'Please sir, could you come and let me in?' he said weakly.

'We open at nine,' the old man answered, pushing the dust into a pile. 'Come back later.'

'Yes, I know,' Kinder said, 'but it's raining and I've got nowhere to go.' The old man stared at him, his chin resting on the end of the broom. His mirror image was formed on the glassy floor just in front of him. From Kinder's perspective he looked like a carnival target: if shot, the old man would spin backwards, swinging around the mustache-shaped broomhead, as his duplicate rose from the floor. The old man coughed twice into his hand, then smoothed his fingers through his hair until it lay flat against his scalp in an oily slab. Slowly he approached the doorway, his dusty iron-grey shoes shuffling across the glass.

'I'm not supposed to be doing this,' he said, his hand resting on the deadbolt. 'No one's allowed in here except me.'

'Please, sir. I promise I won't be a bother. You won't even know that I'm here.' The old man studied him from the other side of the glass. Kinder hated to attract this sort of scrutiny--and perhaps more than anything, he hated to beg. Under different circumstances he would have ducked out of sight at the old man's first appearance. He rarely called out to strangers, unless in an emergency, and even then he preferred as little help as possible. Unfortunately, the weather left him with little choice but to try the old man's sympathies. The rain had picked up considerably in the few minutes he had been waiting under the ash-trees. Rainwater, sweeping in a wide stream down the sidewalk, crept over the tops of his galoshes, and his ankles were muddy and cold. I must look like a vagrant, he thought shamefully, out here peeping through the glass. When the old man opened the door, Kinder tried to convince himself that he would have done the same.

'All right, come on in,' the old man said. 'But take off your shoes once you get in. I'm trying to sweep up.' A quick rush of water entered with Kinder and rippled across the floor. Just inside the doorway he removed his galoshes and shoes. He emptied them in a

nearby drinking fountain, the rainwater tinted black from his woolen socks. Through the glass floor under his feet he saw the silver coffee machine resting on the far end of the counter. His shadow was invisible against the red shag carpeting that lined the basement. Kinder wondered if he could just go down help himself to some coffee, but he decided that was asking too much. The old man gazed at him unhappily, and looking over his shoulder Kinder saw a trail of wet footprints leading through the dust.

'I'm going upstairs for a while,' he said, heading toward the elevator.

'Wait now, you didn't say anything about going nowhere,' the old man said. 'You asked to come inside, and I let you. But I don't want you traipsing around here by yourself.'

'But I'll only be in the way if I remain down here. Besides, you can keep an eye on me the whole time, if you like.' Kinder pointed toward the glass ceiling over his head. The shelves were lined up directly on top of one another, so that every aisle could be clearly distinguished all the way to the top floor. It looked like a maze placed against a backdrop of dark grey clouds. A bolt of lightning flashed overhead, and the entire library seemed to pulse in its wake. 'You see, there's nowhere I can go. There's nothing I can do without you observing it.'

The old man shook his head and resumed his sweeping. It was obvious that he felt defeated; his favor had turned into an unnecessary burden. 'Fine, fine, go on upstairs then,' he said, looking up from his work. 'What do I care anyway?...I just got to clean up after you.'

Kinder thanked him quickly and pressed the button for the elevator. When it opened, he stepped inside and mashed the button for the fourth floor with his thumb. The old man watched him the entire time, and Kinder could not help but look up and smile awkwardly in his direction. The door seemed to take an eternity to close, and all the while he continued to tap the button for the fourth floor. However, Kinder found none of the

usual satisfaction when the door finally slid to a close. For the old man was still there, his tired body magnified through the plate of thick glass. They watched each other as the elevator crawled up the wall. Raindrops beat against the glass behind Kinder's head. When he reached the fourth floor, he could still see the old man staring upward just inside the doorway, his image warped from the drops of water on the elevator floor. Kinder waved his hand, and the old man returned to his work.

Kinder hung his rainslicker on a hook just outside the elevator, and placed his wet shoes and galoshes on the ground. He unrolled his socks on the floor beside them. It will not take long for them to dry, he thought, despite the lack of sunshine. Though it was still raining outside--hailstones clacked against the transparent roof two stories overhead--the upper floors were always warm, perhaps even a bit musty, because of the thick insulating walls. Any other time Kinder would have been embarrassed to reveal his feet in public; his toenails were yellow and unkempt, his soles thick and hard from years of plodding around his office. Nevertheless, the dry glass underneath felt smooth beneath his bare feet. He rocked back and forth on his heels, then stepped away from the elevator and headed toward the far end of the floor.

Though the floor was really just one giant room, it felt as if he was making his way through a network of shady hallways, lined from the floor to above his head with books of all sizes. The fourth floor housed the library's fiction collection, and it was far more crowded than any other. Immediately located near the elevator, the contemporary fiction gleamed with its sleek plastic book-jackets, still untarnished by fingerprints or years of wear and tear. The covers of the books were often multicolored, fluorescent yellow or pink, so that it hurt one's eyes just to browse the shelves. They seemed to be engaged in a constant battle for a attention, and Kinder felt like he was bombarded whenever he paused in the aisle. The morning had been so taxing that he didn't have the energy to wade his way through the neon-colored stacks. Instead, he was looking for something a

bit more quiet, more reserved, that would last for the duration of the storm. He passed into a long corridor from which many shorter aisles spouted on either side; occasionally he glanced down at the floor to see if the old man was watching.

Turning at random down an aisle near the end, Kinder was immediately surrounded by the faint smell of aged leather. Stacked haphazardly on the shelves were thousands of decrepit volumes, their bindings split from years of mishandling and abuse. He was in the library's 'graveyard'--the small nook where the oldest books were placed once they became too fragile for the main shelves. No longer available to borrow, most of the works hadn't been read in years. A few books were warped by the heat, their pages tinged yellow and brown. The sticky leather glued their covers together until it was nearly impossible to remove one without taking an entire row down with it. In some places cheap paperbacks were crammed into every inch of available space, their covers permanently bent as a result. 'At one time, all of these were new,' Kinder mumbled quietly, running his fingertips over the dusty leather. He peeled an edition of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* from the top of a pile, stroking its white cover. 'It's a shame that we don't take better care of these.' Kinder tucked the Bunyan under his arm and continued down the aisle, casually scanning the titles for something else of interest. It wasn't long before he discovered a slim, familiar volume on the top shelf, wedged between a pair of fat romances. Its bleached purple cover was torn nearly in two, its pages dog-eared and frayed from many readings. Satisfied with his selections, Kinder strolled to the end of the aisle and settled into a soft grey armchair, gathering his feet beneath him like a child. He unbuttoned the top of his pants to make himself more comfortable. After a few pages of reading, he was fast asleep.

Kinder woke to the clap of heavy books falling to the floor. A yellow crust matted together his eyelids, and for a moment he was blinded by the bright sunlight radiating through the walls. Still tucked underneath him, his legs were numb below his

knees. Kinder's collar and undershirt were sticky with sweat, and his pants were unzipped several inches beneath his belt. He stretched with little modesty, flexing his yellow toes as the blood returned to his feet. His belly sagging against his shirt, Kinder scratched at his thighs, unaware that someone was watching his every move. He adjusted himself carefully, then zipped up his pants and fell back into the chair with a moan. He wondered about the time--how long had he been asleep? Already the library was unbearably hot, and Kinder made up his mind to leave immediately. Perhaps my electricity will be restored by the time I get home, he thought, and even if it hasn't, I can always open a window, now that the storm is over. When rising to leave, however, he spotted a pale woman crouching just a few feet away. A red leather book slipped from her arms and tumbled to the ground, its dusty wake visible in the sunlight.

The woman wore men's thick leather sandals with no socks and a long blue sundress that hung to her ankles. A white sweater was draped over most of her pretty chest, and her blond hair was cut short--cropped off just a few inches from her scalp--like that of Kinder's own when he was a boy. Sliding back into the armchair, he couldn't understand how he had missed her before. How long has she been watching? he thought suddenly. How much has she seen? What if she stood over me while I slept? The mere image of it made him nauseous. Sweat from his armpits streamed down the sides of his chest, and his head pounded from napping in the sunlight. Kinder stuffed his left hand deep into the armchair, wiggling his fingers as if searching for lost nickels. After a few seconds of silence, the woman couldn't contain herself any longer.

'Excuse me,' she said, setting the remainder of her books on the floor. 'I'm so, so sorry to wake you. I was reaching for that great big purple book up there on the top shelf, but it looks like I brought down half of the shelf in the process. I was trying my best not to wake you, really I was... I guess I failed at that, huh?' She laughed and shrugged her shoulders comically. Kinder wasn't sure how to respond to her question, if she even

wanted a response. Normally he would have been curt with the woman; she deserved chiding for making such a racket--especially in a library, one of his few sanctuaries away from human interaction. Unfortunately, he felt that he was in no position to lecture her now. The woman stepped around her pile of books, her blue dress clinging to her hips and legs like a sheath.

'Yes...well...it's all right, really,' he said, as he squirmed upright in his seat. 'I needed to get up anyway. So thank you, and good--'

'My name's Margaret, by the way.'

'Oh...I'm John.'

'It's nice to meet you, John, although it's too bad that it happened under these circumstances.' Margaret lifted up the her skirt and sat down in the armchair opposite Kinder's own. 'They sure are soft, aren't they? It's no wonder you fell asleep. Just feeling that sunlight against my skin makes me drowsy. The warmth just seeps right into you, right into your bones. It's like smoking opium,' she said, closing her eyes, 'or so I've read. I wouldn't know. The strongest thing I've ever taken was an aspirin.' The woman slipped the white sweater off of her shoulders, now moist with perspiration.

Kinder nodded in agreement, even though the woman couldn't see him. Why is she doing this? he thought. I didn't ask her to join me. Didn't she hear me say good-bye? It wasn't often that Kinder allowed himself to become trapped in these situations. He generally avoided dead-end streets, long lines, and public toilets, and he always made sure to leave himself an exit to any conversation. But this woman didn't seem to care whether or not he wanted a companion. Surely, it was obvious that he was in no mood for talking! Kinder imagined his toenails getting yellower and yellower by the second. For a moment, he contemplated leaping from his seat and disappearing into the maze of shelves. She won't follow me, he thought, his eyes flashing cautiously between the woman's body

and his own. Why would she? She barely even knows my name-- Nearly crying out, Kinder quickly folded both hands over his lap.

'Not that I sanction drug use, of course,' the woman continued sleepily. 'I'm just saying that it would be nice to have this feeling...at least some of the time. I get so tired of dealing with the world that sometimes I feel like stretching out like this forever.'

Kinder felt that he should respond. 'Yes,' he said, after a few seconds.

'Oh, then you know what I mean?' Margaret shot up in her seat, as if suddenly brought back to life. 'For some reason, I knew that you would. From the moment I first laid eyes on you. You just looked so comfortable, all curled up there without your shoes on....' The leather soles of her sandals tapped rhythmically against the glass floor. Kinder curled his feet into white crescents, realizing that he had chosen the wrong response.

'I like to be alone sometimes, if that's what you mean,' he answered quietly.

'No, it's more than that. Sometimes I just get tired of living my day to day life. Not that it's terribly bad, mind you. I'm not dying of cancer or anything like that, if you were wondering. I share a flat with my father on the edge of town, but he's away so often that I have the place to myself most of the time. I think that I prefer it that way, I really do.' She turned her head toward the bookshelves, then glanced momentarily at her pile of books on the floor. 'Besides, I always have my poetry to keep me company,' she sighed.

'You're a writer then?'

'Oh, no,' she replied sadly. 'I just like to read...poetry and old Victorian novels mostly. I often come here to look through these old editions because I like the old pictures--most new books don't have them. My favorite is *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. Tess was a hero of mine when I was a girl. If I'd ever had a daughter, that's what I wanted to name her. I must have read the book at least twenty times by now. Have you read it?'

'No,' Kinder lied.

'Then you must make time in your schedule to read it one day. It will change your life, I believe. It certainly changed mine....' Balanced on the edge of her seat, Margaret chatted for some time about a recent illness, her father's career, the colors of the season. Her pale freckled skin revealed her age. Tiny capillaries flecked out from around her eyelids; fine lines ran from the corners of her mouth. Kinder tried to respond, though after a while, he simple nodded whenever it seemed appropriate. Finally, Margaret leaned forward and lifted the slim, purple volume from Kinder's chair. 'What's this?' she asked, rubbing the cracked spine with her thumb.

'Oh, I don't know,' he answered quickly. 'It was here when I sat down. I was going to return it to the librarian when I was done. I expect that some twelve-year-old left it out.'

Examining the cover, she opened to a crumpled slip of paper inserted near the beginning of the book. Transferring the bookmark to her thigh, she scanned the dense lines of print. Her voice was curious and soft as she read: '*I lay then all tame and passive as she could wish, whilst her freedom raised no other emotion but those of a strange, and till then unfelt, pleasure: every part of me was open and exposed to the licentious courses of her hands which, like a lambent fire, ran over my whole body and thawed all coldness as they went.*' Margaret paused, holding the slim volume open to her chest. 'It's sounds so beautiful, doesn't it? So exciting. *My breasts, if it is not too bold a figure to call so two hard, firm rising hillocks--*'

'I find that sort of thing difficult to read for very long,' interrupted Kinder. 'It would have to get dull after a while, I'm sure. All of it runs together so that you don't remember who's doing what to whom anymore. After that, I think that it would be quite boring...If that's what you like to read, I mean.'

'Yes, you're probably right. I don't think a book could do it for me unless I knew a lot about the characters themselves. Unless I really knew what they were feeling on the

inside. If not, it's like...you know...reading about people *f-fucking*.' She stared at Kinder's shiny face, then snapped the book closed, replacing it on the armchair where she had found it. The bookmark fluttered to the ground, just beneath the edge of her chair. Margaret's sundress, perfumed with the scent of orange and nectarine soap, rubbed lightly over the top of his feet. 'I'm sorry,' she began, her voice on the verge of cracking. 'I don't know why I said that. Sometimes I just like to hear myself say it. I usually feel ashamed afterwards, and I've been trying to stop it, really I have...But not then.'

'That's all right. It happens to everyone--it doesn't bother me that much.'

She pointed to the copy of *Pilgrim's Progress*, its yellowed pages as thin as razors, laying half-open on the floor. 'But aren't you a Christian?'

'At times,' he said, his voice growing fainter with every word. 'In the mornings, mostly. Or whenever I'm feeling especially weak.'

'That's too bad...It's just that you look like a Christian, you know? Not like a preacher on TV or anything like that,' she tried to explain. 'But like an *original* Christian, like the kinds that were thrown to the lions, eaten while still alive...You have a Christian's eyes.' Margaret peeled a warm, doughy hand off of his lap and slipped it into her own. Her fingertips felt as cool and smooth as a mushroom's skin.

'Yes, I know. They scare me sometimes. I've noticed them when staring in the mirror.'

'I...I think they're lovely.'

For a long while they sat in silence. Again, Margaret stretched back in her armchair, slowly drawing away her hand. The sunlight luxuriously drowned her body in warmth; it glinted off the fine yellow hairs on her toes. Kinder imagined what it would be like to rub his hands over her bare shoulders. He shifted uncomfortably in his seat, the back of his shirt transparent with sweat. He glanced down at the bookmark, now half-

covered in shadow. Acid from his stomach burned the back of his throat, and Kinder covered his mouth as he choked it down.

Finally, Margaret shifted upright in her chair. She rubbed her palm against her chin, rolling her head back as she wiped away the glaze of moisture from her neck. 'I don't think I can stay up here much longer. This heat is exhausting. If you like, we could go downstairs and get something to cool us off. I'll treat you to an iced tea. It's the least I can do for disturbing you--' Startled, she broke off in mid-sentence, her eyes fixed upon Kinder's left leg. He couldn't move; his face flushed a deep red. 'You have something on your thigh there,' she said. 'Hold still, I'll get it for you.' Margaret reached down and pulled the crushed body of a brown-spider from Kinder's pants-leg. A moist brown stain remained.

'Thank you.'

Margaret smiled shyly, then wiped her fingers against her sundress. She looked over to the pile of books on the floor. 'Don't worry, I can come back later and clean up the mess. Come on, John--it will be fun.'

Kinder's eyes dropped to the floor. The copy of *Pilgrim's Progress* felt warm against the side of his foot. 'I'd like to finish a bit more reading first,' he said weakly. 'Perhaps...perhaps I'll meet you down there in a few minutes.'

'Oh...all right. In a few minutes then?'

'Yes. In a few minutes.'

Leaving her white sweater behind, Margaret slumped into the maze of shelves, her thick men's sandals sticking to the glass floor. As soon as she was out of sight, Kinder stooped over and placed the bookmark safely in his pocket. He gathered up her sweater, sniffing the sweet orange and tangerine smell that grew stronger in the heat. Then, his eyes burning, he plodded to the nearest bathroom and washed his hands, thoroughly, beneath a cool spray of water.

VITA

John Matthew Kinder was born in East Ridge, Tennessee on May 26, 1975. After moving frequently as a youth, he attended high school in both La Grange, Georgia and Andalusia, Alabama, where he started writing poetry and fiction on a regular basis. He graduated with honors from Andalusia High School in May of 1993, and he entered the Honors Program of the University of Alabama at Birmingham in August of 1993. He graduated from U.A.B. in August of 1996 with a double major in History and English. For his honor's thesis, he wrote his first novel, *On Earth As It Is In Heaven*. In August of 1996, he entered the graduate school of University of Tennessee, Knoxville. In May, 1998 he received a Master of Arts degree in English. At present, he teaches English 102 classes at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville.