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"People are no darn good."
—*The Cat That Hated People*

PROLOGUE

Look at Oberhausen on the floor of the dining room licking her paws as though she'd just made a kill. She doesn't care whether people will talk. Then there's Döenitz—pensive, righteous, handsome Döenitz, wincing from something Oberhausen has probably said. He can't think which way to move. *Gaudeamus, igitur* is all he can offer. Get happy, right? He's obviously in his own movie with his own Hume Cronyn, his own sour-grapes Professor Elwell, to assuage—only he's probably been Elwell all along.

"Shakespeare was not wrong," Döenitz would probably cry, given half the chance. He's closed his eyes, evincing some kind of pain, and is observing life through the tiny, straight, black penciled lines his shuttered eyelids have formed in exasperation. His tail is wrapped part way around him and poised as if a sash across his forepaw, hiding battle scars, I expect, or displaying the battle ribbons. He's obviously proud of what he has. He's, of course, keeping his distance from Oberhausen.

"But he had probably lied," he would continue in his own nonplussed fashion. "Yes. His name was probably Shakspur, and he had lied about it all along."

"And when had he not been wrong?"

Oberhausen doesn't crow about Döenitz's shrill admission. She doesn't even look up from what she is doing. Still, she speaks menacingly.

"Only when he had lied?"

"Pshaw, Oberhausen." Döenitz's gray haunch and back and neck grow taut as he turns his head away with a grimacing and skewed affect of disbelief. His nose twitches slightly and his whiskers are vibrating as the strings on a violin might from the course of a rough bow. We can only imagine their screech reverberating through Döenitz's soul, had a cat a soul.

"Life is not a stage?" He asks, incredulously. "It has not dimension like a stage? It has not substance? It is a movie? You would say it is a movie? Life is a movie? A flat object? There's nothing you can touch or feel. Your metaphor for life is a prescription to channel life through the rotating flange of an arcane projection. You would have life lived on a wall or across raster."

His back has arched and is slightly trembling, and the splay of his mouth reveals old teeth and a weak or timid jaw. "You are being smug. Very smug," he at last concludes, in a body wrought with tension. The screech of the bow lingers still.

"No," Oberhausen calmly replies. She is confident the matter is settled. Twisting slowly onto her side and raising her forepaw above her head, she begins stroking with her tongue the fur on her chest, interrupting her grooming only to say peaceably enough that "life is quite like a movie. It is much more imaginary and demanding than an Elizabethan stage. And if you don't trust me, then so be it. We'll forget about Shakspur.

"You'll agree that Plato was right. Or was it Socrates?"

Döenitz moves as if eddied from the agitation of unavoidable current and has taken to pacing in a circle. His tail is fanning the air behind him as much for balance, I suppose, as to suggest a curt dismissal of Oberhausen and such ideas. He, at last, stops, wearied, and steps toward the kitchen, then hesitates. He looks back at Oberhausen and begins scratching at their

empty bowls.

Of course, she pauses for the sound, then rolls herself onto her other side, patting her tail intermittently upon the floor.

"We live in a cave in awe of shadows, which are really lies. And the shadows don't make sense because, ultimately, a lie's not real. It can't make sense. But there you have it."

Döenitz is quiet now, and Oberhausen continues undaunted. He has walked off into the kitchen, but she doesn't bother to follow, not even with her eyes. She does raise her voice slightly:

"Whether you trust me or not," she hesitates, then pats the floor again with her tail. "Life is not a stage or staged. It is but a flicker."

LIE

START OF THE WHOLE DEPRENTIS DRAIN STORY

When my father would tell me that there was safety in numbers, I knew he meant people, not lies. Lies would have meant that he failed as a father. People would have meant some kind of acceptance, which was better. He meant people—people that didn't mean anything at all to him. Perhaps he didn't mean anything at all by the remark, but spoke of the safety because it seemed to have a moral sensibility. I'd dream he was teasing; he'd smile, making his meaning just right about people. His eyes would poke at me like a puppy's paw. He'd curl his lip and snarl like a puppy, too. He wouldn't touch me, but I'd dream what he meant. I suppose, maybe, he meant only my safety—hoping a crowd unlike the company my mother and he had become would be my only salvation. I think, really, he was a better man than he let on.

He was not himself given to warm up to crowds -- not like any of the people he seemed to mean I should know. Even the crowded buses that took him many places, most days to and from work, found him ignoring most everybody. He made certain each time he climbed onto the driver's landing and paid his fare that he grabbed a schedule. Then he sat or stood delicately wherever there was room with his face blinkered by a bus schedule. I dreamed again that he truly read them until his stop came and he squeezed himself tightly and, I'm sure, desperately out from wherever he was. He was not always that puppy, and, in the end, he was not especially warm.

He died bitter and cold, I suspect. But I still dream about him. A child's safety is a father's concern, and, from the number of people I could have had around me, my father culled for himself a sense that he had done his duty. He trusted in the people I had told him I knew, and the more there were, the more he trusted. And I let him know of many until I just couldn't love

him anymore than the people he'd thought I knew. In the end, I didn't love him at all.

My mother saw the lies. Amid swirling, rising streams of her cigarette's smoke, she saw the lies. She would sometimes puff in straight billowing plumes of exhaust while she spoke, giving her audience, which to the end was always Dad and I, a hair of the dog that she had been. And still she saw the lies. For her smoking was a kind of glass and she was like a flicker or prism painting colorless rainbows on a stained kitchen wall. She was better, too. But she herself was a lie and encouraged lies. She never let on about anything. I'm convinced she knew of the people around me and refrained from telling my father that they were not real. I could tell from the way she hugged me as if I were something new each time she touched me. She longed for something different, like a lie. She must have touched my father in the same way. And he must have known he could not squeeze out from where he was with her. So I know my father did not mean lies.

It was not that my father was only interested in what was trustworthy or true. He was interested in real people, truthful or not. Real people, my mother would laugh, winking, I recall, at me. He would have liked to have talked to anybody and to have found everybody interesting. He would have wanted that for me, too. How truly like a real person he was. How truly he would have liked to be among real people at real times, not like the bus, and to have taken great solace in their company.

He had only us. Outside of his work, he spent his time surrounded by only us. Funny. He did not intentionally surround himself in lies. Perhaps he knew his mistake. But I can't accept that he was lying, too.

I suspect I've become just like him, and just like my mother. I've surrounded me in lies, in stories from books and songs and from movies -- these kinds of lies. Kinds of wishes for real

people, too. I've become like the lies. I've become better. The people I know best and find most interesting are not really people. They're the lies. I've even gone so far as to write of some. Writing and working with writers has become my real job. My better-to-the-end job.

I've written of Betsy Pikes and Clabber Girls, Roderick and Myrna Fahey stuff. Mostly the scary stuff. Romances of a sort. But they never sell. Real people, I suppose, won't buy my kinds of lies. So, like an opiate Berlioz dream, maybe like dementia, an Edgar Allan Poe kind of soothing melancholy, the lie is safety for me. My father, you see, didn't know.

I told my father the people I knew were real. But real people are mostly the really scary stuff for me. I suppose they're romantic. I suppose my mother and father were. And like an epiphany of lies -- perhaps just a bitter pill -- thinking my parents romantic is scary. Only, I don't know why. I understand when the House of Usher finally falls or Vincent Price recoils in horror from a revelation about his sister's betrothal to someone not of his own blood line. And I remember that my father wouldn't understand about these kinds of people, and I have to lie that I don't understand either. He would be scared, I think, were he to know I was not. So I'd lie. I'd have to tell him I don't understand either. I don't either. I'd have to understand about him and Mom. I'd have to lie.

You see, I have to repeat the lie. Mom died early in life, so I don't have to repeat myself for her. I do have to repeat, however, because I've studied moral wounds in all of the movies I have seen, in all the stories I read, and the songs that I listen to -- it's a job now -- and I know I have to lie that I don't understand unreal people so that my father -- and not just my father -- will understand me. I have to lie over and over. It was never that way with Mom. I have to repeat the lie to prove it. My mother didn't need that kind of proof. She understood the lie. I think she understood me, or would have.

After she died, I grew up proving that I didn't understand. A few years ago I even wrote a book that I didn't understand. It got bought, but it, of course, was a different kind of lie from the ones I have surrounding me. I wrote as truthfully as I could about the lie, that nothing really fell, that Roderick could have been a fly as much as divesting of doom becomes a family line.

Funny. The different kind of lie is the real lie because it does real things. It got me a job at Santa Pate. I know it did. I lied to academes and got along, blinkered as I am in my own book now. But, even so, I still don't feel safe with real people. I'm all the time having to lie to them. It's as though my father were still here. I think that most of the time they know it's a lie, but most of the time they don't let on. It's as though my mother were still here, too. They're lying to me and encouraging I lie, too. And I'm all the time having to tell them things to make them glad they've listened to me. And it's always all a lie. The wrong kind of lie. Daddy's kind of people always buy the wrong kind of lie.

That's why I say the real lie does real things. So what do I care? What do I know? Even when the House falls and Roderick and Myrna are gone, when it's just that I'm alone, there is still safety in the numbers, whether the lie is real or not.

Believing in the safety and in the lie and in the safety of the lie has done more than get me my job; it has kept me my job at Santa Pate. It has kept me in with real people. And this, despite anything I know about what's true, is, I guess, what I want. I know. I'm *tenured*, a term from academe that sounds a little like the shadow of *tendered*—Softened or held out as if to make an offer, according to my *American Heritage*. I can't say whether my father would be proud. My mother would, of course, wink. She might even scratch and yawn to know her little girl is tendered. She'd know that everyone around here comes into my office expecting tendered. And she'd know, of course, it's always all a lie. Tendered.

She'd know that I've made up the softness, the sensitivity, one would expect from someone like me—someone with an third-floor office for people like me. She'd snarl, I think. She'd know that I have nothing to offer, that I'm not making up the tendered now. Her prism of smoke would be like a crystal ball and its rainbows clearly shadows. She'd not question why I was visited by someone tendered in the way I suppose I am. She'd know that kind of visitor was, of course, a lie. A nice, sensitive, white lie. Perhaps a moody raven. And perhaps she'd laugh.

But then I'd get a real visitor, a real person visiting—a really real person, which is to say, I guess, that my mother would be glad I was telling a really real lie. But I wouldn't be telling. I'd be listening, as I was the audience for so very long for my mother and father. My visitor would be a man. He'd be like Dad. He'd be all sadness, too. I mean that sad would, of course, explain him. It could, of course, explain a lot. But explanations are not what this visit is about. I am tendered, and he is seeking me out for perhaps the same reasons that I welcome him.

I can't even tell you what he wanted. More explanations that don't matter. I will only tell you that he was sad. He wasn't ever going to admit to it. People, like their lies, don't ever want to admit to anything—not the real people my dad would want to have known and liked. Not this real person. And they would never admit to being sad. People would rather be angry. He would, I'm sure. But he is most of all sad.

He is sad he is only a student probably, which is an easy diagnosis. He looks like a student. The eyes, I believe, are darkly ringed like sadness—granted, for want of sleep perhaps. But his are darkly colored a brown or some kind of hard blue, wanting of flash or gleam, which must be a contradiction, for he has a long face, made longer by the sunlight casting what in effect is a white mask across his face, punctuated by shadow-like spots for the eyes.

Maybe that wasn't it. This story is mostly me. Maybe I am only noticing my eyes. Maybe not. Still, I don't think what I saw was the lie. He is sad.

His eyes were blinking rapidly, but that could have been from something else, not necessarily sadness. My window blinds were open and he was, he truly was, facing the sunlight. Eventually, he narrowed his eyes a little as he blinked and bowed his head slightly, making his eyes appear even darker, as far as I could tell. Still, I'm certain he was blinking, despite all the contradictions of light and dark.

He was standing in my office, just inside the door. And that was it. That was what was as much light as dark. He was there to show me a letter he'd received and was telling me that he had rewritten it a little. He had made it kind of like a dialogue, kind of like a movie. It was supposed to be true. It could account for him in some way. I would understand it rewritten. He had unfolded it and moved closer to my desk, holding out his hand. I hesitated, but, at last, reached for it. I knew that, for all the contrast, there must be contradiction in what I was observing. It couldn't be that I was feeling sorry for him. I didn't want to. He was too real. But, naturally, I knew that he was black and white, and I accepted the letter, giving a student, a real one, the proverbial benefit of the doubt.

"It's from a ghost, I think," he offered with a laugh, the kind of laugh—well, I'm not sure anymore it was a laugh; it was just very, very unexpected and equally funny and embarrassing. It could have been flatulence, but I let it pass. "I'd like you to look. It's about the past. I'm not in it. So it's not my past. But maybe it's my first real good connection to it."

"Really good," I corrected, laughing, too, in much the same way as he had. I wasn't really uncomfortable yet, but I did want to know everything about him. And everything about him seemed questionable.

"Really good," I had said and pondered what I could encounter from agreeing to read this man's work. Of course, I could have not agreed. I could have come up with some excuse. Made up something. And he could have gone away, far away. Or he could have complained upstairs that I was unapproachable, in an academic sense. I think the dean would have sided with me in all things academic. And after a few weeks that would have been an end to the matter. But this is what I do. I read. I hypothesize. I interpret. I ask questions. It's a kind of mantra in the department.

I was, for instance, reading when he walked in—and pondering. I was looking for a movie and had open on my screen the *Netflix* browser. Well, maybe that's not true, and maybe that's really why I read the letter instead of putting it off. I should have been ensconced in real work on that screen.

He laughed again, this time with a surprising giddiness. I had stood up when he walked in. It's a kind of defensive reaction. I wasn't caught off guard. I guess I just wanted to make sure I wouldn't be. So when he laughed and handed me the letter, we were still standing. Concentrating on anything but this man and the letter that I now held in my hands, it suddenly struck me that he was holding out his hand again. I understandably was looking for anything else. At first, I believed that he was gesturing for me to sit; maybe it was to shake my hand, to take control of what was now an awkward moment. Not until I finally looked down at the letter did I also see over the top of my glasses that he was offering me a Twinkie. He had another Twinkie still wrapped in its cellophane in his other hand and one more bulging from his shirt pocket. I felt sure I had misunderstood the gesture until he pointed to what I presumed was the letter. It wasn't Twinkies he was offering me after all. That's the trouble with real people. Reading them, I mean.

"Go ahead," he urged me, his hands and face flushed in redness. I was now looking straight at him, examining him and quickly surmising that I was seeing nothing less than flashes of 80 proof. I was imagining, I finally assured myself, unless the Twinkies were spiked. I wanted it to be that way so I could explain what I was thinking. But his breath, alternating between the breathlessness of hurry and the torpidity of catching one's breath, smelled of nothing remotely akin to intoxication. It smelled of almonds or vanilla. The Twinkies could have been spiked.

On balance, Deprentis Drain seemed both relaxed and very excitable. I supposed I was somewhere in the middle and fearing I had become just like him. I was beginning to think as though I was just like him—addled and erudite and, apparently in a hurry. I was becoming agitated too, I think.

Whether he meant it for me or not, I waved off the Twinkie, hoping he'd just put it away. But, apparently, it didn't make any difference. Without as much as a shrug, he put it to his mouth and took a bite, then pushed what remained of the Twinkie all the way into his mouth and immediately began unwrapping the other one that he held in his other hand. His offer must have been something else I had also imagined. He was not unwrapping them for me. Perhaps it had been simply etiquette that prompted him to make the gesture. Yes. I like that. Having observed propriety, he was now free to eat the whole thing. I guess that is the rule. And as distasteful as I find such etiquette in real people, it makes sense. There would have been a time that it was a cigarette, and it would have been my mother. My father would have been here, too. So I tried not to watch; I tried not to let him see me watch, and, once he had peeled back the cellophane and started breaking off small pieces and, as if by nervous habit, placing them in his mouth, still busy chewing the first Twinkie, this, I realized, was not how I would have chosen to spend my

time with him.

I looked toward my computer and its blank screen.

Could I have eaten one of those cakes? Not until two o'clock could I lock the door. I may have had to find out what a spiked Twinkie was really like. So let's get on with this meeting.

The letter was brief. I struggled with it for an inordinately long time, but it was brief. I remember I dwelled on the salutation, silently repeating it. Several moments must have passed. I kept thinking that Deprentis Drain had me. He was still eating, and the letter, perhaps for the eating, kept drawing me to it. I was supposed to be here and he was here with me. I was beginning to feel nervous about the letter, which I was neglecting.

I cocked my head back and skewed my lips in serious musings. My brow, I suppose, furrowed involuntarily. I narrowed my eyes for, at last, contemplation of the letter. I was figuring on a scene from a forensics lab as though a mystery needed solving and here was the target on which not an answer twiddled on paper, but a storied solution to all the strangeness. I guess that is why I really laughed. I was in a mystery crime drama without the crime and not much drama, either. So Margaret Rutherford of Mrs. Marple fame had nothing on me. But only if it had been a letter of such repute. And that monkey she spoke of. Peter Lorre's Mr. Moto had said the same thing on another, much earlier screen. "Softly, Softly," the two might say together, lest some mythic, true ancient Greek slinging the infamous αμαρτία mysteriously befall and the monkey gets away. "Softly, softly catchee monkey?" My mind was truly wandering now. And Mr. Drain was there intent on looking to me for something. "Softly, Softly," indeed. His Twinkies were, I'm sure, nearly dissolved in his mouth and he was intent on me looking for something for me to dissolve, too. He was offering me a letter that I was—that could have been

poetic for all the mystery, if only I would look at it. What was I waiting for?

This was my office and it was my job, I suppose, to look for something in his letter. It was hard at first to know exactly what I was to be looking for. It was also hard to know why it was I who was looking, or hesitating to look. Why had I been here? Something more than poetic? Something proverbial, was it? But I was indeed supposed to be here. And now for the last time I would remind myself not to dwell on where I was or what I was. *Praeter itio*. But no matter. There we were on the second floor in the English department, one floor down from the top floor, in a building marshaled by people in and into writing, unfolding along with this man and his Twinkies a piece of stationery to read. Was there anything more profound? The event was indeed poetically proverbial.

The letter could have been just to read, and nothing more. I'm sometimes asked to write letters for students. I'm glad to do so. That's what I say: "I'm glad to do so." So, as methodically and as graciously as I could and should, I walked around him, contemplated running, but instead shut the door, nonchalantly returning to the other side of my desk, seating myself, and, with the letter still in my hand, began reading aloud.

It seemed to be what he wanted, still tearing at one of his Twinkies and cramming the pieces into what was becoming a quite crowded orifice—at least from where I sat. I shuddered to think.

"Dear Mr. Drain. Wilburt Stebby is no longer with me. That so and so passed last year. I don't think he ever mentioned you, but he knew your dad. Knew your mom, too. Pretended he did, if you know what I mean. I put a letter with this one that he must have meant to send a long time ago but forgotten to. I'm not sure why I kept it but glad to get rid of it. Hope it helps—Hevdy Stebby"

Drain—

Son of a buck I wrasslled with your dad when we was kids. you no—bout hundred times aweek. He got me inside a barn and wald tunder out a me once. Wed been like brothers. I knew your mother to. She wore butiful very much so! Sorry to know shes gone on. Never did wrassell her but man I could of. Looked at her alot. I know your dad were a lucky man. Hell she wore butiful and I wish Id sed anything but what it was bout that movie your dad was seeing the day he met her. It didnt seem to me no use what it was. Old John Purinee rushed right over there and fixed um up. Just had me a nuther beer and went fishing. I fish alot now. grow worms to. It helps make aliving. If your ever down here to fish I got worms you can catch with. Lots of worms.

I smiled. I nearly laughed. But then I noticed that, although I had not offered Mr. Drain a seat, he had nonetheless found his way into one next to the door. There he perched in a stiff, taut posture, having finished his desserts. The cellophane wrappers and the little narrow white cardboard platters slightly coated with what I'll call Twinkie detritus, looking like some handkerchief that might fashionably spill from the top of a coat pocket in some kind of other worldly, formal-dress scene, had been casually tucked into the shirt pocket that was also holding the last of his cakes. Louis Jordan' Gaston Laschaille he was not—though being Leslie Caron's Gigi, snipping at the ends of Gaston's expensive cigars in some kind of faux affectation, is appealing.

Now cradling his chin in the palms of his hands, his elbows on his knees, his back to the door, and pursing his lips tightly while inside his mouth he was busy swishing his tongue around to apparently complete his dessert, he was obviously intent on more. I almost felt as if he were attempting to romance me. Being Gigi is still attractive, despite Deprentis Drain, so I resigned

myself to settle back in my chair. It was still only the morning—11:23, in fact.

The letter was finished, and I looked at him—it was a perfunctory look, I admit—for more. Surely, there was more. "Yes," I even suggested in a pensive and distracted manner, wanting more, "an unusual statement." Several moments passed in which we found ourselves staring. Nothing was said. Once or twice I averted my eyes then drew them back to meet his. I was being as positive and as forthright, yet as businesslike, as I could possibly be. I was being really polite.

He is flirting? He doesn't immediately respond, just stares at me. And I am about to ask again for more.

"Well," he finally started, still swishing the last bits of Twinkie and making smacking sounds with his tongue against the inside of his mouth. I wanted to offer him something to drink. Some sherry, perhaps, would be a nice touch. "This is more than he wrote and maybe not as near as well, but, as far as I'm concerned, it's what he meant. I was hoping to get a movie out of him. That's why I've come to you. I guess it is what I should have expected. My dad had told me that Wilburt Stebby set out years ago for just fishing and can't do anything or think anything that hasn't got fishing in it. My mom thought that Wilburt was 'touched, you know, in the head.' That's what she'd say winking at me. She only mentioned him when they talked about the day they met. There was something fascinating about that day. Mom was in her car at a gas station; Dad was at a movie; Wilburt was in a bar down the street in this little town in Oregon. I wrote Wilburt a long time ago right after Dad died. I'd like to know what was so fascinating. Now, I'm stuck. You see, I want to make this into something. I'm not looking for an invitation to go fishing like—" He paused, then corrected himself. "—as the letter you've got there puts it."

I nodded, a phatic response, to be sure. I at least wanted to look moderately nonchalant

and gratified of the gesture. He obviously took it for more of approval, for his confidence at that moment swelled. His complaint grew. And this was indeed a complaint. Real people complain for more. So, as it grew in proportion to his confidence, he grew less taciturn, less mysterious. His eyes glimmered with complaint, after all. He relaxed in his chair, crossing his legs and leaning back. He crossed his arms behind his head and began speaking to the ceiling. He was after me. I saw that, at least. He was going to be talking without me for my benefit, and I leaned forward to listen. You see, he was comfortable enough or confident enough to be going to make something more than this letter happen—and happen just for me. I'm convinced of it.

LAY

"Where does he get off. He could've at least given me the title of the movie," he sighed. "I wasn't trying to catch a movie like a fish, however you want to make that a metaphor. I was speaking about a different kind of catch—the kind of catch you hold onto in your hands like a clump of that red clay of Tara, the kind without worms in it. Old Wilburt Stebby has dashed any hope of that. I'm left without a beginning. All I've got's this ending: worms and catching fish. And maybe he means something by that. Maybe I'm just getting it. Catching up, perhaps? Maybe it's just that kind of catch. You know, the play on the word."

He didn't stop as I had expected he should. I can't say I wasn't glad. I was letting his words begin to flow, the likes of a well-rehearsed and obliquely hushed monologue. I settled back in my chair and listened more intently for the end. I liked the play on words. I figured it out. It was romantic.

"We are, I suppose, talking about catching a disease."

I lost him.

"I'm at a stand-still, and something else like a disease is taking over. Where else can I go? The whole thing seems crazy. Well, if it's crazy, it's not supposed to make any sense, is it? We all get that. But it's not what I expected. Maybe I got flung something in my face like that Jonas Wilkerson at Tara—some of that red clay only with worms in it. What I expected is to get wore."

The reverie was dashed. I thought he said war and recoiled unavoidably in the way I'm supposed to from incongruence in the language. But I was delighted. This was a delicious lie. Unfortunately, he didn't say war and must have noticed that I jerked my face into a grimace upon

his saying the word. He must have also anticipated that I was preparing to repeat the word in the way of seeking reassurances, for he repeated the word for me.

"Wore. It doesn't make sense, does it?" he offered apologetically. "W-o-r-e. But I can't explain it. I mean wore. I don't mean more, certainly not the Johnny Rocco kind. And I don't mean worn. I guess it's the Wilburt Stebby in me. He would have said wore and meant it. And it would have meant something, I suppose, even if no one understood. I mean wore. It would have made someone cry or rage, perhaps."

How unlike someone real. I wanted to take over. And closed my eyes.

"All I can say is that I once saw this old lady eating pizza in one of those shopping-mall food courts, and she said that: 'I want wore.' And I think she meant it, because that's all she said. And she said it to herself, the Charles Foster Kane kind of all-by-yourself beginning. And that's all she had—a slice of pizza on a clean Styrofoam plate. She was hunched over the plate holding a slice of pizza near her mouth, not yet ready to take a bite. On her head was a purple scarf wrapped and tied up under her chin. She was all alone at one of those wooded tables shaped like a pizza. It even looked like a pizza: shellacked by some kind of worn-out polyurethane, chipped and pocked and ringed by some kind of clear, plastic bumper. She had a white, thick, perhaps corrugated, paper napkin, too, laying next to the plate and an unused white plastic knife on the side—the serrated kind. And it made me think that I should be crying. It was in a tear-jerker of a movie, in a close-up: 'I want wore.'

"That's what I wanted from Wilburt. That kind of close-up. Some kind of movie. Quiet and lonely on a backdrop of white sterility, with a sympathetic hush for a secret wanting to touch and be touched and used, and an audience dabbing its eyes and welling up with pride for its part in the solace and pining to be close enough to also touch, perhaps to kiss and hold on, the start of

that kind of wore. But damn if it's not what I git—get."

For a moment he hushed. I opened my eyes and noticed that he was looking out the window behind me. And I looked again at my watch. It wasn't too late. Then, turning around, I, too, looked out the window. I looked at the window's ledge, the black crusted and frayed remnants of threads and leaves and grass clippings that must have been woven once into a nest.

"You see," he started again, and I turned back around and closed my eyes, "all I get that I can figure is that somewhere in this world, I am positive someone has, say, a half dozen hex-shaped, flat tin cans. I'm not really sure of the number. Maybe nobody knows. They're not what you expect, either. They're old and stored together on racks that are likely in a vault with hundreds of others exactly like them, or pretty close to it. Again, I'm not really sure of the numbers. Consequently, they go unnoticed, wouldn't you think? Occasionally, whoever has them, dusts them off or has them dusted off with perhaps no idea what's really in them and certainly no idea that they mean something to someone, anyone.

"They're old. The labels may be chipped and yellowed, cracked and faded, peeling perhaps. Maybe they don't need dusting. Maybe they've been moved around a bit, fitted and filed with new labels and reshelved in another part of the vault. There must be records. Somebody must be taking care of them even when no one seems to care. But there they are just the same. Only, I wish I knew where.

"They are each probably no more than three inches deep and sixteen inches from top to bottom." His voice was rising and even began to crack from his excitement. And he was excited. With his two index fingers probing the air in front of him, he began to sketch out the dimensions for me.

"They're more than likely dented and scratched and warped slightly like old pink milk

pails from having a long time ago been thrown around almost daily in the hasty and often, I imagine, reckless urge to pop them open and get at what is inside. One would have needed to pull on them rather carelessly and forcefully, with a cigarette chomped and smoldering between the teeth, I think, and wrestle these cans from their shipping bundle in order to plop them noisily up onto a clean, but scratched and even gouged, wooden, waist-high table as if they were slabs of meat ready for carving, where they would be carved just like long strips of hot dogs. Can you imagine?"

I smiled and nodded yes. I imagined.

"Their leather straps would be unfastened and peeled away from their steel, I'm sure, slightly bent and rusted buckles. The lids, which slide over the entire box, like the square casts of butter or cheese, would be lifted off and probably plunked down upon a dark-stained hardwood floor where they would stay—provided they were not bumped or knocked around or, sometimes purposely, kicked out of the way—and, of course, endure alongside the bottom half, which most likely suffered similar treatment. No standing on ceremony or polite conversation at this meal."

The word took me by surprise. Mr. Drain had again surprised me by something he had said, by something he did. There was something to his curious depiction of a meal. I had become very interested, and was now pondering what part I was to play. It was not mysterious or romantic. I made his voice taut with emotion. And that surprised me, too.

"Inside each box is a metal reel, at first looking unmistakably like a mag wheel on a car, but, better yet, looking something like a tin compartment plate all neatly arranged by food dividers. Inside each reel are sixteen or so minutes of movie that get wound and unraveled like sinews of spaghetti in order to be any good.

"And a couple of lovers in the spring of 1948, having not seen these cans or their reels,

having not seen any of the way in which they were spun or how they were packaged, would hunker down dreamily on their own kind of dull table: a brambly-brown lacquered (sometimes sticky from spilled soda) wooden bench in the only movie theater Roads, Oregon, had. Well, perhaps it wasn't dreamily. But overhead in the darkness a funnel of lighted particles would transport for seventy or so minutes a movie from those cans to the large white screen. And that's all they would get. Dust and smoke and maybe even some kind of fragrance of popcorn would flit about in the light. All of this would mostly go unnoticed, like those cans of film. And the same thing would happen again and again. It could be evening; it could be in the middle of the day, and, despite everything that was happening, it would be just about right.

"And what do I get? It's a cynical question, I know. I'm left asking about the contents of those cans. About what was in them in 1948 in Roads. About what everybody saw or didn't bother to see. I'm even wondering about the particles of dust and smoke. About everything being just right. Jancee Brete says—I haven't told you about her yet. But she says I'm not supposed to know any more than anyone else, especially those that were there. And what if I knew? She says I suspect I would know exactly nothing. It's like a hunger. As soon as you're done eating what you think you know, it's not hunger anymore. So you can't know what hunger is unless you don't eat. I mean, she says that as soon as I know what it was in that theater I won't know why I even wanted to know. But I'm taking the chance that—I'm taking the chance that this is not about hunger. It's kind of like love, isn't it?—the pangs of it, I mean, because it could be all beaten up. Jancee says that, too. But that's only a chance because I can't seem to remember where any of this business about the movie takes up or lets off. My dad didn't finish the movie. He got pulled out. Or maybe he did the pulling and willingly walked out. Ran maybe. There was something better.

"You see, I wrote to Wilburt Stebby asking him about the movie. My parents couldn't remember what it was. My mom always said when my dad wasn't listening that she was sure Wilburt would remember. But he hardly mentions the movie—unless he's confusing the movie with what he remembers about my parents. Maybe he don't—doesn't really remember my parents. Of course, I don't really know him. I just know about him. So maybe that's how it's supposed to work out.

"Okay. What did Jancee Brete say? 'Reciprocity'? Yes. It all works out okay. Is it like a ride—that's what she had suggested—or is this business just six of one and half a dozen of another? Something else she likes to say. You know, kind of balanced out. I don't know nothing and he doesn't know nothing—anything. Is it anything at all? Of course, I certainly don't know what you know already. So I'm taking a chance in letting you know any of this. And, I guess, you're taking a chance. But it all works out.

"I mean there was this beginning. It was this movie. Then there was the first meeting, then a date or two, then love and happiness."

"Ouch," I heard myself say—to myself, I thought. I was beginning to feel I was watching a tennis match or ping-pong or something that had me bouncing with the motion of what I was witnessing. I at last had to open my eyes. I also lowered my head and with the fingers of my right hand began to gently massage my brow. Deprentis Drain had not moved.

He was looking directly at me, as though he had heard me.

"I live in a little room with a little 19-inch screen for a T.V. that sits on the crowded table beside my door. I'm on the ground floor of the building and my door opens, along with other rooms just like it, opens, if you can believe it, out—usually slowly because it is a heavy door—where everybody parks. Sometimes there's even a car in front of my door.

"I'm told it used to be a Catholic high school." He was beginning to slow down, as if for stealth. It was still only 11:43. I could see him eyeing me like a cat would eye dangerous prey. "Someone once told me Tom Mix went to school here. But I don't pay a lot. And the manager doesn't seem to give a shit about the door getting banged up when someone's car gets too close. Reciprocity? Why not.

"But, as for my T.V., I only use it to watch movies."

Where was this guy going?

"But that's not to say I'm never doing anywhere else. I am. I come here. I mean, I did. I do. Today, I mean. I was in class when I realized I could ask you for a favor."

I opened my mouth to respond, expecting I should. But, evidently suspecting that was what I was about to do, he made a wagging motion with his hands—apparently waving me off.

"That movie has fascinated me for always. Movies, in general, do that. There have been so many of them. And that's not even in my lifetime. But I shouldn't begin here. This one movie in particular was where it started for my parents. Maybe if I started there, too. I mean, this morning I was crying in the shower—again. I'm the only one who knows that I do it. Well, besides you—"

I smiled unobtrusively, I hoped, this time looking right at my watch.

"—unless the manager can hear me." He smiled, too.

"Her room is on the other side of my shower wall. The shower's about as big as a cupboard; I don't know how thick the wall is, and the hot water seems to last only a little longer than it takes to get wet; still, I was crying in there for a long time. I don't know why, but it helps, I guess, to draw the curtain closed as best as it will close while the water runs and to well up some real Dido tears. There's a kind of oblivion in a shower when the water runs. Maybe it's

just because I'm naked. Aeneas, right? He cried a lot, too. And he was naked a lot. I don't think ever for Dido, though. Well, maybe once. Did I say it was heroic what I do?"

He smiled again. I smiled again, too.

"But that's not where I want to begin either. My room is too cramped. I wish I could afford something bigger. That's hard. That's not why I'm here either. There's an old gangster movie somewhere about knowing one's limitations, and this place is one of mine. It's like storage wherever I look. There's a bed, a microwave—mostly take-out food heated up—and a couple of chairs; there's a desk and lots of boxes of books and notes for school, a lot of memorabilia, a lot of empties that I've been meaning to take out. And it works a little on me. But that's not why I cry. I've got all these Roman and Greek classics to study and, don't get me wrong, I'd like more than what I have. But all the boxes are stacked up and piled so I can make more floor space. And by making more floor space, I seem to have more room to put things, which seems to make more sense.

"I have old records that I can't play because I don't have a turntable, which is okay. The microwave and a lamp and the alarm and T.V. take up all the outlets. I have cassettes, but no player and certainly no CDs to listen to. I do have an old Walkman, but I can't find the headset in any of the boxes and piles of stuff. The headset's probably in Texas anyway. And anyway, I'm almost unable to move about for fear of knocking something over. And my mind, I guess, is a little cluttered right now, too, with remembering where everything is. But at least the plumping works in the bathroom."

I thought he would almost laugh. He seemed to bounce into his chair, almost as though he were getting playful. I checked my watch one more time.

"And, when I can close the door to my bathroom, I get some privacy from my apartment

and all the clutter it means to me. It seems to help. And I guess that's where I want to begin. At this point where it really seems to help. Crying in the shower.

"You see, I wasn't only thinking about Roads. I was thinking about Jancee Brete and everything she said. And that made me think of Espee, too."

I shot up from my seat. I thought he said "Espee." It was an uncanny mistake. But he took no notice of my surprise.

"I really miss my little girl," he continued. "She's nearly almost grown and with her mother. I guess I miss her more than I know. I guess I miss it being simple and safe. I guess there's always something to miss. It's like being about to open my front door, which opens the god damn wrong way and realizing you don't want to go. More than enough has happened already. But you said you would. And so, I will. I'll open the door and get, well, going."

As if on cue, he suddenly stopped and stood up. The story wasn't over, but he grabbed up the letter, folded it, and stuffed it into his back pocket. He said, "Thanks." And that surprised me most of all, for it was over. I could tell he had been crying or wanted to. My eyes were wide open. Closed, I was sure he had been flirting. So I stood up, too, and watched him do a complete about face—almost military style. He opened the door I had closed and walked out.

And there I stood. I miss Espee was all I could think. There was this rest of the story. I didn't bother to try to call him back. He had probably told everything he had had to tell. Besides, there was also the rest of the day to worry about. All of a sudden I remembered that I had completely forgotten about lunch, and I couldn't leave my office. Well, I could have, but I was supposed to be here until 2:00 p.m. I couldn't have consented to accept one of those Twinkies.

I confess that I was becoming a little sarcastic with myself and worried about those

Twinkies, too, noting, of course, that this Deprentis Drain business is just crazy. Just as I had thought. Just, I suppose, as it has to be, if I know anything about lies.

LYING

I miss Espee. When she was three, she used to give me these great, what I called, anyway, good-night kisses with ugga-mugga Daniel the Striped Tiger noser rubs that were really not rubs, but soft little taps of her nose onto mine. And we'd laugh. And I'd crunch her in my arms—softly, of course—and then, I guess, I'd cry a little bit inside because it was a little bit great and crying is the only way I know that measures up to a feeling of great. Then we'd stay up. She wouldn't go to bed, and I wouldn't make her either.

We'd stay up late telling stories to each other and watching movies—really her telling stories to me while I was watching movies and while she should have been in bed because her mother would get put out with me for keeping Espee up. The next day her mother would scowl. She scowled a lot, come to think of it, especially at dinner. Espee and I wouldn't see her until then; she usually left for work very early—earlier than we were up. Then she'd scowl when she saw us, telling me how ruinous these late nights were for Espee and how these movies weren't ever the movies she should have been watching. But they were okay, I'd repeat, because Espee always told me things until it got very late and she was very tired and I would have to carry her back to bed. She wasn't ever really watching. She was often asleep by the time I got her into bed.

I think her mother hated that most of all. Maybe she missed Espee then. Anyway, she made sure that these times were rare, and now I miss them most.

The things Espee used to tell me. She used to tell me about her sister who had everything. She had everything Espee didn't have and did everything Espee couldn't do. Only, I couldn't laugh about it—I found it wonderfully funny—because Espee insisted her sister was

real and was wanting so very much for Espee to visit her. It was a little bit sad, Espee would say, because she had everything and nobody knew where she lived. And it was a little bit annoying because we always said we would go visit her, but never did. Nobody could hurt her, and she was Espee's best friend, and Espee was hers.

They kept a pendant between them of a broken heart, half of which the sister had given to Espee so that, when they would be together, the heart was whole again. Espee would show me her half. It was that special kind of secret that she knew everyone could keep and everyone should know. For she was very proud of her sister's gift. How she loved to talk about it and grew wiley as she told me of all its power and mystery and charm.

"My sisser hass, uhm," she would ponder in the drunken-like hesitations of a three-year-old's vocabulary and grammar while she groped for more words to tell to a bigger person what more she knew about the pendant, "uhm, her wance she hass her a house with you," she was, after all, only three. And I loved her less that she had a sister than that she was three and telling me what being three was really like—really like for me.

What a thing to say: "Her nickliss isn't somewhere, an her wance she could find her nickliss—in her—an her told me, uhkay?"

"Necklace." I would say correcting her. But it didn't matter. I think I knew what she was trying to say. I think she knew I knew, too. Sometimes I'm not sure. But we could stay up looking for her necklace all night. We never did, but we could. Even so, I would pretend to look while still watching a movie and listening to Espee look for the pendant. She would explain things to me while she looked.

We lived in an apartment building off the Ocean Park Boulevard. It was roomy and bus routes were easy to get to. But Espee's sister lived in a big house with a pool and a tree she

could jump from into the pool. And she had a driver. Chauffeur was a big word that Espee didn't know. She really called him an "auto man." At first, I thought she meant his name was Otto. But she corrected me. He was an auto man and didn't have a name. She thought he was a woman, too. She could tell me all about her sister, that her sister's name was Ashley, most times, or Kimmerly, and sometimes Ashley or Kimmerly had a sister who had everything just as her big sister did. Usually, though, it was just Ashley who had everything, and her poor little sister simply did without. Her poor sister didn't have a pool or a house and usually had no pendant. And she never had any pets. And I don't know that Espee knew the difference. Ashley, as I recall, didn't have any pets, either.

But Espee would be looking very seriously by this part of the story; she knew what it was like to be without her pendant and spoke sadly of the poor sister who had to do without on those times when Espee was not finding her own pendant. I kept watching, occasionally needing to comfort her and wipe away some tears.

The tears and the losing the pendant were her own fault. She kept the pendant in no particular place and would often forget where it was; that's when we—I mean, she—would go looking. That was years ago, too. I don't know whether she still has it.

The chain on which the pendant hung was not a chain, but simply a red piece of string matching the shiny red vinyl of this right-sided lobe-shaped whorl. Written (I can't say inscribed because this was a plastic molded artifice) on her half of the heart were the letters

B-E

F-R-I.

Whenever it was lost for good, I wanted to laugh very hard because her reaction was so genuinely predictable; still, I couldn't. I also wanted to cry because Espee's sadness was also

very real. She would get physically introspective, masking her sadness in these funny downward-turned expressions of seriousness while she slowly searched her hands and her arms with her tearing eyes for what seemed like things to say. What should have marked cunning or the pensiveness of a good deal of concentration on a face pointed in the ways Espee had poised hers was for me a pickled and leafed and puckered and otherwise wrinkled and skewed fit of jutting lips and furrowing brow. It was like condiments of woe, and I wasn't being much help thinking this thing out with her. I was always ready to laugh or ready to cry. I guess it was tearing me apart, too. I don't know whether Espee ever knew that I was ready to cry. She seemed to.

She managed through the crises, though. Her sister had always lost her pendant at the same time. But her sister had always gotten another one. Espee hadn't yet gotten her other half. But sure enough it would turn up. Only, sometimes, when it would, the half of the heart was left-lobe shaped and the letters had changed to

S-T

E-N-D.

I couldn't watch anymore at those times; I had to laugh then, but, I mean, later. I'd cry, too. I was ready to, that is. I'd wait until Espee was asleep, so as not to let her see me. Of course, by that time, the jumble of laughing and crying was altogether inside, making me nervous and confused. Then I'd see her mother scowling and want to really do one or the other, not both. So I'd get angry and want to get out. Espee's mother, of course, would say nothing. By that time, crying or laughing out, I remember, wasn't what I'd do even had I wanted to.

These were all times I remember. Her mother dislikes me for them. She has disliked me especially for being emotional about Espee's lies; at least, I think that's why she still finds it in her to speak to me loudly and with remorse whenever she does say something to me. Maybe,

like me, she felt as she did back then because she couldn't ever see any emotion from me about anything else, especially about her. She liked the lies, too, I'm sure. Like me, she was always trying not to let anyone know: "You encourage her lies," she would hiss at me, her teeth clenched. In a funk, I would imagine them bared and her ready to snap me in two with them.

When I finally realized that she wasn't going to be grabbing onto me with those incisors—as if to take from me a bone or a steak or something of hers that I had tried to eat up and get away with—when I finally realized that she wasn't going to be using her teeth on me, I wish she had. Espee was mine, too, and had come to me on all of those nights as easily as she had returned to bed or to her mother. So Espee's mother fitted her words through her teeth as one scrapes a vegetable onto a grater. She could be quite restrained. More's the remedy for these moments of tension had she truly bitten me. I suspect she would have known what kind of emotion I had then, and I would have known of hers. But these moments like revelations were all the light I needed to know that perhaps she disliked me because I was emotional about something that was not her, but was something of hers, and of mine, too.

"It's those old movies," she would declaim loudly, an orator, an ancient Cato brandishing her voice and her eyes and her quivering head as a knife for cutting off or cutting out cruelty or some such other bane or poison—me, if you can believe it—and quitting her diatribe with me and threatening to impale what needed impaling in me. And she was probably set to do it with those teeth, too. I was dangerous to her and was really the one threatening with lies. I mean, I would think as a cartoon thinks, one of those single reelers where the teeth marks eventually pop back out, the knives to the chest are suddenly gone as though they had never been, and the head gets screwed back on straight just in time for the end. And Espee's mother couldn't take it. It was those old movies.

So this morning I was crying in the shower—I nearly said shadow—where I figure it's best for crying. At least, nobody would see me—least of all Espee's mother. I think of the dark when I think of her.

Espee's mother never really said anything to me about any of these things beyond those couple of whetted remarks about movies. Her discussions with me were always more like ends of discussions. That was her way. She eventually didn't have much to say to me, even about movies. Her moods were colorless, tasteless stabs at me. She had lots of things to say about me. And she usually said them. Espee always told me. But in the end she said very little. I don't recall that she even said goodbye. But, of course, she didn't have to. She hates what I am to her and was glad to go. I'm sure she was glad. I'm sure she still is.

When we were married and our apartment had become very crowded because we had become—well, Espee had begun calling us by our first names. I suspect she was making up for not ever hearing either of us address each other by name. Our apartment had become very crowded because Espee was insinuating too much endearment where little by little the amenities of first names were awkward and clumsy. Yes or no was usually all we had to say to one another. Eventually, we became taut with civility and even yes or no was not enough. Then Espee's mother took to wearing sweats to bed with heavy socks. She was beginning a mood. She wouldn't say I was to leave her alone. She wouldn't say anything at all. At first I thought it was some kind of prophylactic against the cold, not against me. But, hot or cold, I got the message these clothes were for me. I'm sure she knew that. And, in that way, I guess they were right for us. I said us. She didn't ever say that. I guess she left it to my imagination.

She was probably trying to get back at me for that imagination. If ever I lay there with her and touched her, I'm certain I could feel her trembling. It would, of course, be dark, too dark

to see, but if I would have sat up in bed and had leaned over her to look into the side she was facing—I mean look into her face—I would have noticed fear or disgust. Even though darkness concentrates the little light there is into two-dimensional shapes and glows in images without depth or feeling, I could close my eyes and know she was loath or afraid to lie beside me. I could have leaned over to look into her face—to be that close—and I would have probably not seen her at all.

There was the darkness by then and, of course, Espee, where I was always bright. I mean Espee was bright. So I didn't ever bother to look at her mother because I didn't ever stay long enough. I'd have to get up and leave. It was that same kind of funk—I couldn't fathom—no, that's not the word—I could stomach why the bra.

Under her sweatshirt, she wore a runner's bra, the kind that hugs the chest tightly and entirely. Espee's mother is what I should call thin, but not flat. She is rounded. Her shoulders are square and her arms extend lithely down to rounded hips. Her neck and head are long and narrow and dark, much like her personality. But her breasts are fully a thirty-three or thirty-four D. They sag now, I imagine, having had a baby and just being older. And, if she still has that bra or one just like it, her breasts are completely smothered. It is uncanny.

Running is one of her passions. Swimming is another. Taking deep breaths, distending the chest, and, of course, exhaling to drive me crazy with each supple gesture her breasts would make was once a great passion. I remember I could laugh whenever she exaggerated so. Soon, however, going to bed early became a third passion, which she also seemed to enjoy doing to drive me crazy. We had stopped kissing—even giving pecks. Then we stopped speaking. Or was it the other way around? Still, we had only one bed. Then came the bra, and sexual urges—I couldn't make a sound. She would insist she be let alone to sleep—I mean she'd go to bed

fully dressed. And I would wish the moments before falling asleep would be for fornicating as we had often agreed before we had started living together. So my hands pressed only their own clammy selves on top the bed covers or her clothing until I was exhausted and tired of imagining even Popeye and Olive Oyl could do it with clothes on. I'd once seen them that way in the navy on a poster.

Espee's mother hadn't had a clue what I was thinking. But she had the clothes and the gall to wear them. And I guess I got a little jealous then and decided that I couldn't compete. It was in that darkness that I best imagined what was wrong for us. I could see a smile playing on her lips as I lay there doing nothing. I could see this with my eyes closed. I knew I wasn't exaggerating again?

I would get up and stay up late and, sometimes, Espee would get up when she heard me moving around and follow me out to where I'd sit, snacking, watching T.V., eyes lit and glowing in the reflection of the raster on the screen—the only light.

Espee's mother didn't let Espee stay up with me for long—long enough to give us time to adjust our eyes to the light, to share our secrets and wangle out of each other favors. I once promised Espee during *The Captive Heart* that she could keep a light on in her room. I think she was a little afraid of the black and white glow from the set. She sometimes promised to walk on my back and to teach me how her sister had taught her about her toes, her sister's toes. They were curled for ballet and swimming. But Espee's mother would always get up, eventually, and, without a word, take Espee back to bed. They'd march, Espee sometimes on her toes.

When it really came time for bed even for us on those times Espee and I were up late, Espee would give me those great kisses, one of those taps on the nose, and be off with her mother. I could follow soon. As I recall, it was always Espee's decision to go to bed. She

would smile and her mother, for that moment, would truly light up. I'm convinced I was doing the right thing by staying up and watching T.V. Then Espee would go back into the bedroom and crawl into bed with her mother even though it were dark. And I would be so sure that I was right. I know I'd stay up even later and wish I had another story or were in a different movie. After awhile, I took to staying up quite late and to going out and staying out. When I came home only to see Espee's mother leave for work, we had all had enough. And everything stopped. I guess I mean I was finished with Espee and her mother.

So, as I was saying, I was crying in the shower again. Espee's mother would go to bed too early, and I would stay out too late. It was no one's fault. Just happened to happen that way. Espee was older by the time I had left for good. Actually, by the time they left for good. She was in school and going to bed all the time early, anyway. The light I had promised Espee wasn't needed anymore. Of that I'm sure. I'm sure of lots of things—sure that many times Espee would have rather been up late telling me about things. But her sister wasn't needed anymore, either. Espee didn't even remember that she had had one. I'd swear that I could sometimes hear her in her room talking till late. It may have been make-believe. Then I'd go out. I don't know. I don't ever think Espee hated me for things I had said I'd do and never did—like the light. She never did get it. I think she simply outgrew me.

LAIN

By this time, I was, well, staying out all night. I'd spend just about all of it with Michaelle Fressen—somebody who didn't seem to mind that I could watch movies till late. She had introduced me to dark beer and foreign cinema. Those were tell-tale signs that I should have recognized as too recognizable for everybody. Even Espee should have guessed that my repertoire had grown and that I was somewhere else at night. My tastes were noticeably changing. "More movies?" Espee's mother once inquired—through her teeth—and just to impugn nobody in particular. She knew the moment I was out. Nobody was supposed to know that I was with anybody. Sounds like Odysseus trying to escape Polyphemus. Everybody must have thought it was nobody, certainly made no sense. And nobody seemed to care. I didn't want anybody, not even Michaelle, to know that what I was doing was being out. But she knew, too.

Michaelle Fressen's lips were soft and young and moist and kissed in a way like fingers gently sculpting and molding. She nibbled a little with her lips, in that way pulling back on mine. I pulled back, too. We would often stay that way as long as such a moment could last.

"Nobody could stay that way," Jancee once said about kisses. It was almost as though she were imploring me to agree. But that was all she had said on the subject. I didn't agree. I had tried to explain what could last, what always lasts. Jancee walked away, as I remember.

Still, Michaelle Fressen wasn't bright in the way Espee's mother was bright. Michaelle Fressen was all lit up, like a blank movie screen wanting only the flicker of motion. I used to hold her that way, and like to think that there was a warmth of honey in Michaelle Fressen's voice. She had a whispering gleam of joy in her eyes. With these attributes and by repeated songs and storybook incantations she could have easily moved to sleep anybody who would not of his own will close his eyes and slumbered unless cajoled and otherwise soothed into thinking

that to do so may very well not interfere with, indeed, may very well be the very thing to secure some kind of that proverbial golden, heart-shaped, easy joy that seems to exist in the amorphous promises of any scene played out without children in the room. I used to think these things a lot about her and me when we kissed.

I liked to think that Michaelle Fressen was very soft, but that didn't last. And I suppose that had nothing to do with her. She was, after all, rather plain to look at. She had these unsightly freckles that dotted a broad, flat face. Her complexion was ruddy and robust, of course, blending with the kind of wide, blue eyes that are really much more grey close up, and she had a fair to auburn tone of red, stringy hair that she cropped, making it less stringy. She was not ungainly, but whenever sleeveless and in skirts or shorts—which was rare—she was really freckly and gangly. Fully dressed, she was skinny. Her voice, however, was golden. It felt round and full to hear it, and it felt good to be next to her and listen as she told, in what I can only describe as spherical tones, of her following a trail her father had made when he left her to—well, she never said. It, too, was kind of a movie without an end.

She had a son named Drall. He was older than Espee by at least a year and long used to going to bed early and in the dark and alone. He didn't ever seem to feel the need to stay up or ask to. Michaelle Fressen had made sure of Drall's habits from very early on. He would not stay up late talking to himself or watching T.V. with his mother and me. He stayed pretty much away from us, and we from him. I was prepared to think that Michaelle Fressen would have easily left him had I left Espee and her mother. But she was from Germany and eventually went back with Drall, forgetting about her father's trail and remembering a lover she had once had. All her softness went with her. I don't know why I had misunderstood, thinking everything we did was all for me. I watch these things closely. Maybe it was just those kisses and the similarities to all

the movies in between.

I met her at the pool where Espee took her swimming lessons. Drall was taking lessons, too. It had been an ordinary workout for Espee who was then six and, like her mother, loved to swim. I stood in what must have been by design a grassy plot that served as a hold for waiting, impatient parents. We were at the foot of an incline, a concrete assembly of steps that resembled a pyramid or temple atop which a pool had been settled into the ground. It was really more like a fence and was only about eight feet tall. But not being eight feet tall, nobody could see from where we waited what was happening in the water. Of course, nobody meant me. Some of the parents scaled the steps and eagerly watched their little ones in the water. I liked to stay at the base, on the other side, you might say, feeling a bit adrift and kept from seeing how the lessons were going. I suppose the regimen of lessons or the splashing or yelling that emanated like echoes from the water or concrete provided all I needed to know about what was going on. And that I was out of the way didn't seem to bother me, either. My job, I often told myself, was to wait out of sight, and waiting that way seemed reasonable to me.

We were at the Y in the only outdoor part of its much larger complex of indoor programs, none of which I bothered obviously about. Espee and I were there for swimming. I mean I was there to watch. I wasn't there for anything else. Getting up and getting out on these mornings were important milestones in my life.

So I was standing in the grass, which, on the other side from the pool, was bordered by a row of trees and shaded for most of the time I stayed there, it being morning and the sun just beginning to reach the tops of the smallest of the trees. And it was summer and I was, of course, out of work again. Summer having nothing to do with me being out of work, but that's the way it was, and Espee needed somebody to take her to her lessons. I went with her because Espee's

mother wasn't out of work and it was close enough that we could walk. Her mother probably hated me for that, too—those walks I took with Espee. At least, I think that really accounts for what she wore to bed—because it was summer and we didn't have air conditioning, as I recall, and our bedroom could get very stuffy and hot at night and that runner's bra thing.

Walking with Espee was an excuse to be out of work. Her mother was caught between the proverbial rock and a hard place. She wasn't bothered that it saved on bus fare or that Espee had someone to get her to her lessons. It bothered her that it was me. So I guess it didn't bother her either that she wore spring training clothes to bed because it was something that bothered me. She was letting me know I was on the way out. The bra thing was a little more than very convenient for her.

Now, I know—it being summer at the Y. The walks played right into her—I don't want to say hand. And what hard place? Everything seemed to work according to some, to her grand design. She probably choreographed these events to the last detail. That's what really bothers me.

Michaelle Fressen and I did not meet in that place where I would be waiting for while Espee was swimming. I had seen her there more than once standing away from everyone, far away, close to where the trees lined the edge of the lawn. And more than once she had shaded herself, as if hiding, even though she was already in the shadows, with a large white flap-brimmed hat. She was always in some kind of sweats, too, reading something like a book or a pamphlet. I couldn't tell whether she was seriously reading or merely bored.

The hat had attracted me, for, being as wide and large and as obvious as it was in an already shaded light, it obscured her face. I was curious about her face and frequently panned the faces of the other parents in a way of justifying, really concealing, the long glances I would

point in her direction. Not driven to know her face, but obsessed with curiosity about just what kind of face it was, after about the second or third time of standing there where I did (I was usually on the other edge of the grass), I started to wear sunglasses in order that I might genuinely stare without being found out. It didn't much help, though. The sunglasses only made the shadows around her darker, obscuring her face all the more from me.

I noticed, too, that she, like me, didn't speak with the other parents much. I was out of work and didn't want the subject to come up. It always does with parents. Parents can pry *ad nauseam* when they are involved with anything having to do with their kid's welfare. Well, perhaps the kids have nothing to do with it. They can be very snooty when they find out you're a father without a job. I suspect that's how Espee's mother would have been were she standing where I was. She might have been curious about what I saw, too, if it hadn't been planned, that is. She might have watched Michaelle Fressen, too.

Michaelle Fressen stayed by herself and I continued to stare. She was discrete. I was attempting to be discreet. I like the difference. I mean, who knows? It wasn't a perfect set up, but I like that it brings us together at least phonetically. And that's a start. I was attracted by what I couldn't see and fixed on what I could, impaired and all by what I know are lies.

I remember watching a squirrel in one of the trees bordering the grassy area where we stood. Like every squirrel I'd ever seen, this one was bushy and gray and quick, scratching the tree to which it clung in the ratchety sounds of the tiny arrhythmic, dactylic grasps it made each time it moved. I'd swear it were dancing a galliard—or just making it up.

The tree was some kind of evergreen, its bark a richly dark, coarse, crackled texture of jagged and arthritic-looking finger-like shapes that ran up and down the trunk. It was perhaps a pine, its needles fanning out like spray in thick clusters of dark green, bristling in the breeze and

the brightness of the sun. Come to think of it, all the trees looked pretty much the same.

When it paused, the squirrel clung easily to the side of the trunk about seven or eight feet from the ground. When first I noticed it, it seemed strangely taut, craning its little almond-shaped head and apparently staring at Michaelle Fressen—much in the same way I must have been staring. It had affixed itself to the opposite side of the tree nearest her. When she finally moved—for she was often like a statue herself—the squirrel in answer like the dance pressed its body flat against the tree and just as instantly scampered back around the tree and a foot or two farther up. Then I would see only its head pop out from behind the tree before it took up the dance again. Every so often it would appear to munch on some morsel it must have had stored in its cheeks, its jaws moving up and down noshing. Michaelle Fressen was strangely unaware.

She must have been eating something or offering or so it must have seemed to the squirrel. I must have wanted to be that squirrel and decided then and there that I'd like to meet her. Suddenly, however, another squirrel appeared. So the one near Michaelle Fressen went to meet the other, chattering in high-pitched, quick snapping sounds. The tree could have been on fire and its branches crackling in flames for how the one squirrel reacted and blurted out some kind of greeting. Nobody noticed, of course. Soon they were both chattering. And dancing. Choreographing a strategy or berating one another. It was difficult to tell. But it was engaging drama for someone out of work—"out of step," if I were to listen to Jancee Brete—and longing to be a squirrel.

The newcomer was larger than the other, but apparently more fearful or playful, for it took off running. The other fled after it, darting up and down the tree and onto the ground, up another tree in the chase. Now, they were hunting. And all the while they played a kind of tag, whirling around the trees and up the trunks onto the branches in a synchronous pattern. It didn't

seem to be a dance anymore as much as an aerial dogfight. They were mates, obviously.

Only after Michaelle Fressen had moved away from the tree and started up a path with other parents toward the pool where Drall would be waiting for her (the lessons by this time were over) did the first squirrel break from the other and visit the spot where Michaelle Fressen had been standing. Strangely, I felt moved to do the same. But I satisfied my urge by watching the squirrel discover whatever it was that had attracted it in the first place. Grasping in its mouth a wrapper of some sort, probably the discarded wrapper from someone's cookies or cake-like snack, the squirrel disappeared up the tree, most likely to share its find with its mate. I nodded as if I were agreeing, then turned and followed everyone else to the pool.

Then just out of nowhere Michaelle Fressen spoke to me: "Excuse me?" she began as I was about to take Espee through the door to the men's locker room. I didn't usually do take her into the men's and probably shouldn't have even tried. Espee was after all six and old enough to help herself out of her swimwear. But on this particular morning she wasn't going home with me; I was supposed to get her on the city bus and take her to her mother's office where she would have lunch at some kind of mother-daughter luncheon. I usually wrapped Espee in a towel and waited until we got home to help her out of her wet things. And Espee usually complained. On this day, I carried a little bundle of things for her to wear after the lesson and was heading into the men's room to help her change.

I guess I didn't really think about etiquette or propriety as I lead her from the side of the pool, where she always found me looking around for her, toward the men's locker room. I was actually a bit preoccupied with squirrels, having heard their chatter again and was looking around thinking that I might see them again. I was sensing that we shared something in common or that they had accomplished something I had wanted to do. Perhaps I really wanted only for

them to watch me or anybody to watch me, ask me what I was looking for. I could explain about the squirrels and me.

"I'm cold," Espee said, tapping on my arm and grasping my hand. She was shivering, such a skinny little girl, and I quickly unfolded the towel to wrap her in it. The bundle of clothes that the towel had been wrapped around fell to the ground, unloosing themselves from one another and spilling in colors and patterns similar, I suppose, to the puddle one might make in losing his or her lunch. Not that it was unsightly, my accident, but that it came unawares to Espee and may as well have been her lunch, for the spot where her clothes fell was a part of puddle of water from the pool.

Her clothes were now soaking up that puddle, Espee immediately complained, and she began to cry. Quickly, I gathered them up, bundling them again, really stuffing them back into her towel that had not yet completely wrapped Espee. I promised they would be okay. Then I nudged Espee in the direction of the locker room.

"Will you be in there for now? Drall, my boy here, will be shy about being in the shower room with you." Michaelle Fressen's voice purled of softness and ease. It was confident and directed at me, and I was instantly ready to be in love. The moment caught me unawares and I like that kind of feeling. Espee, on the other hand, stood there shivering and trying hard not to cry.

But I replied, "Not long," turning toward the voice and getting my first glimpse of Michaelle Fressen's face without the shadows. "Espee's good about changing quickly." I know I wasn't thinking. I should have said we could wait. I was lying, of course. Espee was very slow when it came to dressing, especially when it came to her shoes, especially when she was nearly in tears. She never got them on the right feet and always insisted she had. It was very trying.

And I wanted to get to the bus stop quickly, too. Espee was going to make us late. And, to top it off, her clothes were wet. But I lied because I could sense that I wasn't being asked as much a question as being requested to make a commitment to hurry up. And as my thoughts raced ahead of the lie, I told myself I could hurry now just for her. I was smiling and wanted to tell her that Espee would be out of her son's way, and we could talk, but, as it turned out, I was wrong about the question.

"Yes. Thank you. But do you know what? It's not your little girl that Drall is shy for." She seemed to be ready to laugh. And I was also instantly excited that her words came with a German accent. And do you know what? I was fascinated that in the shadows she was much prettier. "He does not like to go with -- what? -- big strangers," she was definitely not sounding American, "and he is too old for my shower room. He does not wish to be alone with a men only."

I wrapped Espee in a towel, dropping her clothes again. I laughed—all by myself, of course, and stooped to pick them up again. Espee was now definitely in tears. Drall went in by himself. He hadn't said a word or made a sound the entire time that his mother spoke to me. It was great. He simply went in by himself. I was perfectly willing to wait. Poor Espee was a mess. She was shivering and by then looking to Michaelle Fressen in probably much the same way as I was. Michaelle Fressen must have noticed; she took her by the hand into the women's locker room. I watched them go.

They quickly returned. Drall was still by himself in the men's locker room. Espee was dressed, and her shoes were on the right feet. Even her hair was straight and combed with two tiny pink barrettes holding it back from her face on either side of her head. I don't remember whether her clothes were still a little wet. Espee probably doesn't remember either. She looked

a little bit puzzled, but, at least, she wasn't upset.

"She is very sweet, would you say?" Michaelle Fressen offered with what I interpreted as a very knowing smile. Espee must have said something about me that Michaelle Fressen liked.

The next time we were waiting at the pool, we talked. She seemed interested in me. We were both married, but she seemed interested in me. There were times when telling me about herself she would press her hands together, fingers extended, as if poised for prayer. Her eyes would narrow, yet sparkle in the way she lifted her brow and could smile. But, of course, she was not in prayer. She brushed her hands, still fixed together, the finger tips, that is, back and forth sprightly through the air from her chin to my chest or whatever part of my shoulder I had at that moment turned to her. She was touching me, lightly tapping me this way as part of the point of the story she was telling about herself. And I was letting her do it. She was certainly interested in me. And I was letting her do it. I wanted to tell her about me and the squirrels I'd seen on the day we finally met, but was satisfied that she was touching me.

She told me that Drall's father was a man in Germany. He owned a bistro there. She had been born in the U.S., but had grown up in Europe with her mother who was still living in Germany. Her father was in the states, but she was not sure where, although it was to visit him that she had come here. She'd been looking for him for three years. Drall's father had given up on asking her to come back. And it was getting very lonely in this country. Drall did not remember Germany and couldn't remember that he had a father who was busy and unable to write or call. And it didn't help that he was a bastard just like her father.

Michaelle Fressen seethed with arms crossed and no touching when she told me these things. So we talked little of Germany and more of how it was that she would go back to school.

She hoped to become a surgeon. She was still young and willing to make that kind of commitment. Did movies interest her, I asked. And we both laughed. She had once thought to write screenplays. But that was when she was very young and still in Germany. Besides, American films are always wrong about everything, she once said.

When summer was over and the kids were in school, we began to meet at other places. I told her how I was graduated from college, an English minor, Latin was my major. Stories—literature and music and movies—were my passion.

Eventually, I would visit her late at her apartment. It was in the same building, as it turned out, and, as it turned out, it was here that I started to lose Espee. I was all alone going to see Michaelle Fressen.

Now, that I recall it, maybe being alone is why I am telling what happened—finally admitting that I started to lose Espee—that I miss Espee and how—that her mother finally takes her away.

Drall and Espee and anybody else would have long since gone to bed when I would tap on Michaelle Fressen's door. She would be up waiting and greet me in a nightdress that fell easily off her to the floor. Sometimes I would remove its straps and she would let it fall. Sometimes she tugged on the gown's sides and the straps would give way, letting the dress fall. We would kiss, still standing by the door, and I would listen for any sounds that could tell me we would be found out. Drall always slept soundly, though, or never let on that he didn't, and any sounds we would make were hushed and in low voices and whispers.

Soon, I would be naked, too, caressing her breasts and thighs and lying beside her on the couch or on the floor next to where we had let our clothes fall. Our late evenings together were always done in that order. She would be caressing me, and she would always want to know

things. Would I ever go back to school for an advanced degree? Her question, of course, was more about what I was going to do with my life. I supposed I would some day—go back to school, that is. There was no work for me anyway. I had been a salesman at the May Company before it was plain RobinsonMay, had almost made manager of my department. I knew quite a lot about furniture and fabric—fabriqué, we sometimes liked to say, although I don't know why. But I lost my job when the two stores combined and, then, would have made a go of working at home as an alarm systems multi-marketer. It was perfect for keeping an eye on Espee. Espee's mother hated me for it. She told me I spent all my savings on alarm systems for our apartment. Then she moved us, saying we needed to find something more affordable and secure.

That's when I put great store in the machinations of fate. And that's about the time Michaelle Fressen would suddenly stiffen her embrace around me then relax slowly, sighing and cooing for finally—well, finally. And I would hasten my thrust against her body so that I could also finally—before she had completely relaxed. Was it really fate? Yes. I guess there are always gods around keeping track of things like machinations. But it's not like setting a course or arriving at a destination. It's more like having a bus schedule. That's just the way it is, even when it's wrong and you get where you're going too early or too late. And, interestingly enough, Espee's mother moved us right into Michaelle Fressen's apartment building, making it extremely easy to spend an evening, even an entire night away from home.

Yes. I guessed I would go back to school, I would eventually tell her. Become a college instructor. An English composition instructor. That's a real passion for me, too. And Michaelle Fressen seemed please by my declaration. So we would stay up late pondering my options. She was four doors down from our apartment and knew Espee's mother in passing and Espee's mother knew her. When we weren't together, I was making plans. I would write more. I mean,

I never wrote at all, but started writing mostly sonnets for Michaelle Fressen. And when we were together, she would talk to me and ask me questions. She would talk to me about movies, German movies, mostly; she would talk to me about herself and sometimes about me. And I would try to watch what she would say to me as she was saying it. Sometimes it was like a movie. Sometimes it was as it was with Espee during a movie, when a good movie would be on.

Each time it would be great. Maybe that's why I was crying in the shower. Michaelle Fressen and I eventually sat side by side, still naked, on her couch watching; only, she always wanted to talk more. Talking and listening were always very easy for us. She could often lay her hand on my forearm and squeeze it in those times she was excited about something she was telling me. I turned my head toward her then and nodded, not so much in agreement with or acknowledgment of what she had told me, but in condoning the hand upon my arm and the squeeze she had just given it.

She seemed to like that I did that and always seemed to want to talk all the more. And I always wanted to watch. And so she did. And I did. And I found that I was there a lot and not even in very discreet ways any more.

Eventually, too, Espee's mother had had enough of me. I think that's what she said. She knew all about Michaelle Fressen, it seems. Then, Michaelle Fressen gave up on finding her father. I was moving out and getting a divorce. And Michaelle Fressen was going back to Germany. I wasn't going to be moving in with her and Drall.

I remember I had written her a sonnet or two, in the meantime, because I was in love. Well, she was, too, as it turns out. The poem was all about touching and being together forever. She was leaving because she was so in love, but I gave her the sonnets anyway. I figure I lied a little bit about them. They weren't very good. I read one to her the last night we spent with each

other. It said this:

There is in a house in which we love to live
Love in which therein resides a love I give.
Cover my art and break apart my spell
Mostly let me love you and never tell
How much thou art to me and in my soul
How oft I wilt never lover you the more.

I think I was still working on this one, but that's all I remember.

She's in Germany now with Drall. At least, that's where she was headed, where it turns out she had this lover she couldn't forget. She left me a letter to tell me.

"Dear Deprentis," she said, "I went in Germany now with Drall where I have this lover I couldn't forget. He is a old good man and patient for me. I love him and give you back your poems since your were kind and listened to me. Please tell Espee and her mama goodbye."

I hate telling these stories on other people, and perhaps it's best that Michaelle Fressen is in no position to know right now that I have shared something about her. Espee and her mamma don't have to know either.

LAIN

Wilburt Stebby had written to me, too. It was in response to one of my letters. I had asked him about the movie playing in town when my parents met. I would love to see it. I'd love to know more about it. How much of it does he remember? He had lived in the town where they met and was known by my mother, back then anyway, to be a shared-of-all-sorts kind of person. My father liked to refer to him, and always with a knowing wink, as real big on knowing—really big. So I wrote to him, figuring it couldn't hurt.

He called me a son of a buck. "Son of a buck," he wrote. "So your Chase Drain's boy. Named after him, too? Not what I expected from Chase." His letter wasn't very well written, but it was readable, short, some kind of answer, some kind of discourse with me—a kind of familiarity that I suppose I didn't expect either.

"Sore I ramember your daddy and your pritty momma," the letter actually began. As I said, it wasn't the most literate piece of writing, but I was strangely gratified by that fact. And before I showed it to anyone, I went ahead and fixed it up so that it appeared much more like the kind of letter it was. "I aint seen Roads since amost the time thed met. And don't realy see movies any. Thats what it is. Right. Your a proff a sir or somethink? You tech movies. May be asking a cloud as me. Thed now better. Dont think if I now one that long a go. And cant for the like think what it is your talken bout. Am mostly in worms thes days. But glad you droppped me all them lines. I'm kinda in that line too. Ha Ha. Droping lines is what I most hep do thees days. I mean I sale the thing. Dont see any movies tho. Dont realy. Kep me in mind. Same to yur pritty momma and daddy."

He signed, "Wil."

It was as if we were friends, and he didn't say there was no movie, just that he didn't

remember. So I dashed off another letter to him. A longer one this time. One he probably couldn't read or wouldn't even try to. I was going to try to jog his memory—maybe mine, too. Perhaps I could make one of us connect—I mean remember what it was I was asking.

"Dear Wil," I said, "I'm glad you remember Mom and Dad. They're dead, you know. I'm sorry about the movie. I thought for sure you would know. At least Mom always thought you would. It was perhaps a mistake asking you. But because you like worms, you say, I'm sorry I hadn't written earlier. You see, sometimes when I try to think about the movie I'm trying to think of, it's warm and wet regardless the place, and I become sluggish and stifled, making me aspire to abide by some other proverbial humor: a periphery void of substance, something amorphous, something a worm might aspire to go through. Like earth. Only, at best, it's probably only another shower. I won't say I cry, but will admit to steaming convulsions of a funk like the shaking of self-reflection. Certainly, I know I won't admit to this messy hollow I live in."

I was going to lose him right there. I was sure. I was losing myself. But I was remembering and perhaps he would, too.

"Yes. It is a movie," I go on, jutting out my jaw in one of those so-there postures while I imagine standing right up in front of Wilburt Stebby. I'm doing my best to make this only a conversation.

"A real movie. Well, it may as well be real; it may as well not be, but upon your suggestion I've begun to think in this cloud, of its sway, like the poet said, yet more frightfully, as I also once heard you'd also said, in the ground like a worm. How appropriate. I suppose, to the worm, a soil of clay and root must be little more than a cloud. It traverses so easily through earth, a course of least resistance. Is such a flat and indirect progression, the way it pushes and

pulls through everything, its whole existence, and perhaps an easy time of it to boot—the getting somewhere, that is? Getting put on a hook doesn't seem to be much of a departure.

"In the third grade, I got put on a kind of hook. About everything, at least. But that was a very long time ago. And I'm only reminded of it because of worms. You see, I was also very afraid. I thought like the worm I should lay hidden in shovelfuls of others like me while one Sister Mary Basil pushed and pulled us, sprinkling around catechism with clumps of us and a supposition that we didn't have much time. She was fixated on time. Alas, she was ministering to the soil, (you can appreciate this, Wil) making it seem rich and everlasting. I think now it was the soul she meant, a periphery of vapor as earth, what is a truly familiar view to worms. Vapor. People are always thinking of time that way. And beating one another over the head with it. You know, *it appeareth and it vanisheth*. And it works, too. What we were most familiar with was frightening.

"We were, after all, Sister Mary Basil's staid garden pests in a place where I was sure the worm would have it better, so I hid myself still deeper. You don't remember, do you? It was, of course, a different time in Roads. Well, Sister Mary Basil was gloriously cold. She was traditionally bespectacled in then-archaic small wire rims, which were squeezed as if sanguinely for God onto her pallid, bulbous face by the starched and stoic frill of her white Mother Seton bonnet, and she exhorted us—without ever blinking—to a timely and grave appreciation for being where we were. She could tell that we did not understand about time or any such earthly vapor; she could tell that we were sure third grade would last forever. She was sure she could frighten us forever. And we would shiver.

"She thought we weren't paying attention. Time was running out. *Jesus, Mary, and Joseph* was her cant and confirmation to our confusion, to our fear. It was often delivered in a

feint of softness and her best impersonation of something biblical and hoary. Her short fingers, fervently blanched for the wringing they endured, mimed her speech. We did understand the implication; despite any chill, Sister Mary Basil might explode into a fiery brimstone at any time because of where we were, and that would be our end. Of that we were certain. We were, after all, paying attention. She could punch and pull and throw anything fiercely, despite her tiny frame and convictions, and we would certainly want to miss any of that. So we thought and prayed like worms, calling Sister Mary Basil, in our dirty little ways, Sister Mary Battle Ax, but only in hiding, of course, lest we hasten our own doom. Our prayer for the time being was for summer.

"How appropriately it was the autumn—October 1962—and a time that another part of us, away from Sister Mary Basil and enjoined by a nation, desperately searched for missiles, the intercontinental kind. The Soviet menace had some somewhere, and the U.S.—I suppose that's us—wanted to know. We were a nation of worms, perhaps a world. Armageddon thought some—mostly the garden variety I listened to in school—was in the offing (and not just in the classroom), and a time for a desperate search for missals, the apocalyptical kind, was also at hand. The worm indeed had it better; time was running out, and soon the earth would be a vapor. Sister Mary Basil was right. Everyone was scared.

"How could it be real? Time had become a serious commodity for all the Sisters and parents and their offspring, and all the world was running out of it. We were to confront time, not court it. It has a maker, as do we, and a purpose, and we cannot make up the time now in this world or its purpose the Sisters, especially old Battle Ax, had us—I suppose that's U.S.—pray. Did you ever get that *ut non inveniat homo* growing up? It was not real.

"Time after time that October, in place of the crouch-and-cover drill we would kneel

beside our desks on the cold, smooth, chocolate-colored concrete of the classroom floor to make these very same prayers. My body always swayed this way and that as if rocked gently in a religious and rhythmic litany of devotion, belied to me only by the effort I was making to balance my frame on tender and unreliable knees. And because the time was spent in prayer, just like a prayer, I began then to make time up, which was an important distinction in the imagination. Real or not real. I was still the worm and getting hungry, and the Sisters had convinced me of the prayer and not the vapor, and since I was afraid I was unable to make up time, any time now, I aspired then not to make up time, but to make my own time up and anything else that seemed to help, my Maker notwithstanding. I didn't realize that there was no real difference and that like the adults I, too, would think it all the same one day.

"I thought only on making something up. Like the time my mom died. The time all the adults were crowded in the kitchen weeping and trying to get dinner ready for their kids, who were crowded in the living room with the T.V. on and not weeping until at last there wasn't enough time and dinner went unmade. I made dinner up then, too. Like the T.V. glow in an otherwise dark shadowland, it was a fabrication. I was still hungry. I had made the time up, and no one, it seems, noticed. It pretty much was all the same to them. Even though I should suppose that they were all running out of time, I was making it up. It could be anything.

"But that time occurred to me long before now, back when I was thinking like a worm in earth in the presence of others and, under the tutelage of prayer and those who would have me pray, presumably making things up. I look back now and can shrug. I'm not sure what I was thinking. And when, thirty-four and a half years later, Osgood finally crashed and died—it happened in a movie—it seemed that more than enough time had been made up. Now, we were really in the cold, wet periphery—that was not earth. We were in the clouds. It seemed that

perhaps I had been thinking in the clouds all along and that I'd not been making time up. For it seemed that nothing had changed. Time was still running out, dissipating perhaps. We don't make time in the clouds as I was wanting to do . . .

"I was going to tell Osgood's mother it'd been a long time, if only I could find her in the movie. I thought it would help. She was with him for at least forty-two years. But I decided not to tell her. In this case, it was not the time. I'm always trying to tell somebody these things about time in ways that don't mean anything, in ways they're things somebody has already heard or figured out and doesn't want to keep hearing or figuring out. What makes me think of time in only these ways? I'm not sure. Sister Mary Basil did it and made something out of it . . .

"Still, I'm now sure Sister Mary Basil was wrong. Time lasts too illogically long. It is never running out. It is always just running. It is not earth, and worms do not pass through it, but go along with it. And while that is not a profound discovery, please remember that I was afraid. I would be, of course, right. We don't really make time up because we spend too much of the wrong time on time. Like the poet said, we think in the clouds or clods, we think in the earth, and whenever we do think in these places, it's of the *funest pondering*: you know, diseases that linger or death or things that never really happen except with worms. Time after time after time, we end up pondering what didn't really ever happen to us. At least, not yet. It's as if time were running out, and we wouldn't get to where we are going before the end. And here I would like to make a change. I'd like to say with all due respect to you and Mom and Dad, Osgood and his mother, Sister Mary Basil et al., Soviet and U.S., 1962 and any year before or after, missiles and missals alike, that there was this one time that really did happened. It was a time that was not about time running out, and it had nothing to do with the end. Nor was it a time of thinking in the clouds or in earth. Here was none of the calamity of certainty or substance or vapor.

"Long before I had ever pondered making anything happen, making time up—you name it—long before anything had ever happened to me, before there were even worms perhaps, there was a time when being sure, in or out of the periphery, didn't seem to matter. It wasn't what anyone expected, but it may as well be real. It may as well be the name of that movie in Roads in the spring of 1948. But I can't seem to find it."

I signed, "Yours, Deprentis Charles Drain."

I didn't really dash it out. It took me several days. I talked to Wilburt often that way until I had gotten enough of him. But I haven't sent the letter. I might not either. The more I read it, the less I'm really reading it. I don't think the real Wilburt would read it, either. I don't think he would really talk to me. Maybe that's why I was crying in the shower. What did Jancee say?

Oh, yes. She wanted to know whether I knew how to talk to people. But it wasn't just about talking, was it? She had said, "Listen."

LAY

PART OF THE WHOLE DEPRENTIS DRAIN STORY

The phone rang a couple of times this afternoon while I was still here getting ready to go. I thought at first that the call might be about a job. I wasn't going to pick it up, but there was this job I needed. And I thought better about letting the answer machine get it.

"Deprentis Drain, please." It was Espee calling. She was in her business voice, which is funny. Whenever Espee is serious, she is funny. She is only seventeen and not a business person, not yet. Still, she can get very serious with me and was all the more amusing in requesting to speak to me because she must know that I am the only one who would answer a phone here. I'm always the only one here. But she was being serious, so I let her know it was Deprentis Drain speaking. I had to laugh, too. I really did.

"It's Espee, Dad." She was still very serious.

"Isn't your mom going to kill you for this?" I sounded serious. It was after 5:00 p.m., but I figured her minutes were still not cheap for a call Espee's mother would end up footing the bill, especially when that call was to me. I wanted to talk a long time. I figured we wouldn't.

"I didn't know if you would be at work or not." Espee almost never talked to me about her mother.

"Well, I'm glad you called. Is your mother at home?" I thought perhaps it would be all right if her mother were there and knew about the call.

"Soon. She had to work late, I think." I felt like being sad. Instead, I changed the subject.

"Sure. What time is it?"

"It's after five, I think. Oh—do you mean where you are? Where are you now?"

"I'm still in California. It's not quite 4:00. You didn't know that?"

"Yeah. I didn't know what you meant though. You're not being mad, are you?" A kind of urgency that kids get when they are in a hurry filtered through. A faint clicking could be heard as well. Changing the subject hadn't helped.

"I know that you're calling long distance, Dad. This won't take long."

Had she forgotten it was she who had called? I let it go. This sounded urgent.

"Well, I'm glad you called." I was tugging at the phone wire; I was about to give up pretending it was a wireless phone.

The phone had been on a chair by the bathroom door, and I had picked it up at the same time that I had lifted the receiver from its cradle. It was a standard desk phone, which I was presently holding in my arm and noticing its mounting cord was partially buried under a box of books on the floor that I only just remembered I could return to the library since I wasn't reading them anyway. Everything should be in it place. I was getting mad. But not about anything Espee has said. Damn, could I ever return those books right now. I could see that the cord was pulled and taut in the short length that extended from under the box.

"Can you talk long?" I asked as I toed and pushed at the box with my foot. I wanted to take the phone into the bathroom with me where I could shut the door and be alone with Espee, where I could block from view at least what kind of place I was living in now that Espee was growing up and could be embarrassed by my room. It was actually kind of embarrassing for me.

It is always torture for me whenever Espee calls. My place is always in a clutter of books and papers and clothes and scraps of food and all the things that I now try to make more meanful and sensible in my life. Not that I need to. And I'm always trying to hide it from her. Mostly, I suppose from her mother. I don't want her to know how I live. Espee obviously tells her

everything. The bathroom is at least clean. I make sure of that. The toilet at least flushes. I like to talk in there.

But the cord wouldn't reach and the box on top the courd wouldn't give. I pushed harder to no avail and was contemplating kicking it. Wouldn't you know it, I was barefoot and, for the force of pushing, my foot was beginning to give, not the other way around. I was pushing my foot and bending my toes directly into the side of the box. Soon my toes were blanched and buckled underneath themselves as if crimped in a vise between the box and my foot, and, with just a little more give, they were ready, I'm sure, to separate at the joints from the force of my push. It was torture.

Espee had said something.

"What!" I snapped, a little breathless and wanting her to repeat what she had said. I think I must have included "Dear," too. Probably not. I never call her "Dear." It must have been what I imagined.

"Uh—maybe not long. Please don't be mad, but I had to call to tell you about this thing I've wanted to do for a long ti—."

I gave up on the box. Crouching onto one knee, I lowered the phone to the floor, and, pushing it along the carpet as far as its cord would allow, I angled myself and the phone as close to the bathroom doorway as we could go. Then, still on one knee, clutching the receiver in my right hand and holding and feeding its spiral cord along the floor with my left hand, I hobbled and jerked in a kind of hand-over-hand motion half way into the bathroom. It was kind of like pulling a body out of a cave in.

"Yes," I at last managed to squeeze out of me, being quite winded and now somewhat as taut as the cord, folded as I was between the door and the door jamb. Espee had said something

else that I didn't hear, but I wanted her to know that I was listening while I was still unraveling the spiral cord, pushing it sideways under the door until, at last, I was able to fold enough of myself out of the doorway and into the bathroom. I shut the door nearly all the way closed; the cord was wedged between the door and the doorsill. It was all I could do, and there was just barely enough cord left over. I decided not to tug on it anymore. I was beginning to notice that clicking sound more and more. And, with my left hand freed from the cord, I pushed myself off the floor onto the toilet where I settled comfortably, at least satisfactorily, on the toilet seat cover. I was bent over, of course. My head was between my knees; the cord was that tight.

"I know I don't need your permission." Espee was talking very excitedly. "But I wanted you to know about it. Nobody's seen it saynce I did it." Once in a while a Texas accent, the kind that rides slowly in the voice and draws out the vowels in very long tones, finds its way into Espee's sentences. She's been in Houston for five years. Inevitably, I'll get used to it.

"I guess your the first—"

"I'm sorry, Espee." I was trying to listen carefully. "Saynce you did what?"

"Dad, listen!"

The clicking was louder.

"It's this connection." I growled; my teeth were grinding. I could feel my hand tighten its grip on the receiver. I was really getting mad. "It's getting really bad here, Dear. Can you hear that clicking?" I looked at the door and the spiral cord to see whether they were causing the problem—as if I would be able to tell by looking.

"Nuh-uh. Ith the thang umma thung."

I removed the receiver from my ear, and, while holding it closer to the doorsill, slapped it several times. Then, hoping I had jarred back into place whatever had come loose and was

responsible for the noise and interference on the line, I put the receiver back to my ear. Only this time I slid to the edge of the toilet and craned even closer to the floor in order that I relieve some of the tautness in the phone wire.

"Can you hear okay?" Espee didn't answer.

"Damn." I muttered into a now very empty place in my bathroom. I was angry, ready to explode, and considering my options. But everything was breakable in there; I thought it best not to get into a rage. I was holding the receiver in front of me, craning my body to the point of almost touching the floor with my forehead, my knees up around my ears, in what I supposed must have looked very much like a fetal position. I was after all talking to my only offspring. Any image having to do with that connection was certainly better than this phone connection. Given the setting, though, I was more than likely crumpled up like someone in the throes of constipation or diarrhea—it didn't see to matter which one.

"Dad?" A tiny, timid voice like a swath of air brushing on one's forehead emanated from the receiver. I think at that point my forehead was touching the floor. I felt very relieved and raised my head a little above my knees and quickly put the receiver to my ear again.

"Dad," Espee was saying, "are you angry?"

She always seemed to know these things.

"No." I told her. "I'm just glad you called. I'm sorry about the phone. I was trying to get in a good place for hearing when the phone started to act up. I was afraid I'd lost you."

"Me, too." She hesitated for a moment as if startled into silence. Perhaps she was only yawning. I could hear a gasp and another one of those clicks. I checked the line again and, suspecting it was not my phone after all, was about to tell Espee to do the same thing with hers.

"Lis--" I started to say.

"I knew you wouldn't mind," Espee interrupted. A kind of urgency was in her voice. She was speaking hurriedly, trying to outrun those clicks, I thought. I was going to laugh at such an image. Rocks were plinking all around and Espee wasn't bothered by any of this noise. She was running right through it.

"Thanks, Dad." She batted out. "I'd better go. I love you."

"I love you," I said, but she had hung up.

LAID

I met Jancee Brete like a hundred years ago. I know that's a puerile and poorly worded sentiment, and certainly not in keeping with my purpose here. But it makes me old to think about that first meeting. I've got to do something to make me young. I sometimes think of the velveteen rabbit and all those youthful transformations; I think of—who?—Marie Osmond and then, of course, Espee coming to life; then there's always that skinned horse. Toothless and hairless, weak in the joints. So, mostly, I think of that one hundred years ago when I was a student, and a good one, at Handley University—when I met Jancee Brete. That's worth a good cry.

The good students at Handley are on track to be scholars. Its specialty is scholarship. Across town, there is, of course, Hopely University. It caters to the researchers and scientists. The sages go there. Handley mostly keeps books and graying, fat students. Jancee Brete must have known that.

I was one of them; I wasn't graying yet. I wasn't getting big and round. I was twenty-seven and in my fourth year. And looking around, I realize that I was young. She must have known that, too. Not everybody was. But that was a very long time ago. Everybody there is probably all dead by now or living as I do or still very gray and getting still bigger. How should I know? Handley's still there, and it still caters to the graying or, should I say, the growing up of the population. I was a youngster, I guess, a classics major on a GI Bill grant, discovering new poetry and poems, and realizing how much about working with words I was new. Making it up was easy, though. Getting the right words—

I had started Handley while still in the navy, aboard the *Constantinople*. In the navy, I

wasn't quite the youngster. I'd given a lot of time to learning my ship. I was aboard for an entire year as the ship's librarian, learning to deliver books to almost anywhere and at anytime to the sailors and officers who would read them and had actually asked for them. For a lot of that year, I was working in dry dock and able to live ashore. In keeping with my job, I took a poetry writing class at Handley.

"I am an old salt of the sea," I used to recite on my rounds when I was sure no one was listening,

Sailing longingly
The old by and by
Of steady *Constantly*.

I thought of it as a theme. You see, I saw this movie. The *Constantinople* was the *Constantly*. Well, it was in my mind; it needed the rhyme. Poetry needed rhyme. Mostly, it needed more work, but I wasn't quite the youngster and was just beginning to try rhyming. Verse is a funny thing. It tears down walls, Jance Brete used to tell me. I thought it best I keep that sentiment and any other poems not about sailing or sailoring to myself.

I was also the projectionist; it was really the same job. The library was a storeroom where books and these 16mm projectors were kept. At first, I had gotten the job by default. The XO (our Executive Officer—I'm not sure why he wasn't our EO) felt the ship needed an LE (Library Engineer). It wasn't a job anyone applied for or trained for. The XO, as near as I could figure, had made it up. It was just that we had a storeroom stocked with about 500 books and nearly a dozen films that required attention. And, since it was not part of anyone's regular duties, why not make it up?

Why not make it up? About half of the books had been stacked on shelves, by one of the

earlier LEs, I imagine. Nobody cares. The other half lay on the floor in stacks that had once been neatly squared and secured, but that, by the time I had been assigned to them, had teetered and spilled in formations across the floor that resembled the geology of mass wasting—mudslides, avalanches, fluvial washes of one sort or another. And the films, mostly short films in small cans, rode the crest of these formations as they continued to spread across the floor until becoming insinuated at and around the casters at the bottom of the pushcarts on which the projectors were laying. Nature was beginning to take its toll. Our ship rocked violently sometimes at sea. And the books continued to spread out across the floor. Gradually sinking beneath the surface of the lighter paperbacks, the films would have become completely subsumed by the books and begun to fossilize had I not let it be known, in a round-about and unintentional way, that I knew about movies and very little about anything else. The one about the *Constantly* was a favorite. I would stem the tide of an encroaching natural process. Books and films would be stored together again off the floor in neatly squared piles. Those were my orders. Yeah. Why not make it up. Put it in heroic perspective.

My real job was in the kitchen scooping out side dishes for the lines of whole crew shifts. They would come in and always want to know what was playing, Sticky. Two guys did anyway. They called me Sticky. These big bleached hulks from one of the batteries, I think. They meant I was skinny or something. They told me they were marines on special assignment. They were dumb, too. I knew they weren't marines. But I had better sense than to let them know it.

They were always asking about the food, of course, the menu—too stupid to just look around and see. So I'd get a little perturbed and tell them when they would ask what was playing that it was this movie.

"Osgood Manly," I would say.

"Any lime jello?" one of them would say. It didn't seem to matter which one; they were two of a kind. Whichever one it was, when he talked, he opened and closed his mouth slowly, and his chin, jutting out, did this Mussolini looking goad, trying to be menacing, I guess. Upon each closing of the mouth, his big lower lip cuffed his upper lip the way some fish will do when they're yapping at something to eat. And, to get an answer to his question, they would both cup their ears with their hands in unison, in step, as if they had been practicing it in close-order drill.

Of course they were neat and trim—even shaved the pubic hairs growing on their ears they used to tell me. It made them men, I guess. I didn't take them seriously. I would say, "Osgood Manly." Then he would say, "Any lime jello, Sticky?" He usually repeated himself, too. I'd scoop him something to eat and say, "Osgood Manly." I guess I repeated myself. Then the line was supposed to move on. Not the line I was giving them, but the line they were in. I only clarify this point because I'd get the Chief angry if the line didn't move on, and these guys must have known this. They would stand there goading.

"Osgood Manly?" one of them would always say in a kind of slow querrulousness. I use the term only because he reminded me of a quail, looking back and forth at me and then his mate—smiling as though he were daring me. He would repeat me this way, you see, slowly. Everything about this quail had to be slow, of course.

"Yeah. It's a movie." I'd shake off my spoon on the next guy's plate, trying to get things going. By this time, these two guys were just staring at only me, in unison, as usual, and the line had stopped moving. Then everyone was staring, also in unison. It was a kitchen problem. And the Chief recommended me for discipline. You don't hold up food lines talking about movies, and you don't do disciplinary kitchen duty when you're already doing kitchen duty, so, since I was talking about movies and holding up lines, I was assigned to look after the library and the

projectors.

I was assigned to take care of whatever was there, which meant make sure it all got to the people who were supposed to get whatever there was to get whenever they wanted it, too. That's what I was ordered, anyway. That's how the navy ordered me around. Make it neat. Make it neat. Night and day.

Most of the books and films were about sailoring and training for sailoring in the navy. Some were about hygiene in the navy and technical procedures for training sailors for things other than sailoring. My Chief frequently asked for the book about food storaging—maybe it was foraging. I'm not sure I remember, but it sounded something like that. He showed us a film once, well, more than once, about sanitation in a ship's galley. Nothing was broken, as he used to say, meaning that we were doing an okay job in cleaning the kitchen, but the Chief was serious about showing us repairs for preparing and serving food.

He stood about eight feet tall; actually, he was probably 5' 7" and a bit pot-bellied, something worth mentioning only for the way he tied his apron around his hips. He was also puffy in the face—Pilsbury doughboy puffy—and bald except for one small, short patch of hair at the center his forehead. It made him look like a quail with jowls. But that's not worth mentioning. He didn't seem to mind whether someone should look the way he looked, but nobody else had better tie an apron around the hips. The Chief didn't like that. He must have thought it made him look fat should some skinny sailor, without much stomach to him, copy the Chief and tie his apron strings, even wrap them twice around, at the hips. The standing order was that everyone tied their apron around the waist—once around. To do otherwise risked the Chief's wrath. Of course, he may have thought that anything I did fit the wrath he could spew. And he did spew a lot at very little things and jump up from where he was often sitting whenever

there was a problem in his galley and make me jump up and keep standing for quite a long time.

During these movies, he always remained standing—ready for any kind of action. And he made me stand right along side of him. A fuzzy voice-over during the projection would get him going. It was the cause célèbre that must have reminded him of everything that he faulted me for. And it was on these occasions that he would he would swing his arms around like a crane and literally lift me away from the projector. The Chief would then, smacking his lips with each syllable, more like glasses of water clinking, fill in the words that were being muffled. I listened through the flickering of the screen and the droning vibrations and chattering clicks of the projector while the Chief echoed, sometimes bellowed, that hot water was the order of the day.

He would make me stand right next to him as he also vainly adjusting the projector's sound controls. Eventually, he would give up trying to control the sound and merely gesture wildly at the screen. I don't think anyone but me was aware of what was going on. Cold water was important, but hot water was best for keeping the kitchen sanitary. He made tight fists and pounded them into the air. He was crushing something. It was an operating table, damn it. Then relaxing and extending his fingers, he chopped the air. Hair nets, caps, and clean frocks were recommended, too—by the film, that is. The Chief spoke of mandatory, and chomped on that word.

His performance during the film was all choreographed and always the same. He sometimes would cross his tattooed arms like cravats or ribbons across his chest, but only momentarily, for he just as quickly flashed his hands outward, palms and fingers spread. Cellophane gloves, if available. And they had better be. But they were impractical around all that hot water. He wagged his index finger around in the spotted light coming from the

projector. Everyone usually turned around at this point to face the Chief and take notice. We were in the navy, remember. Be very careful and keep ourselves tidy. Use suds for cleansing pots and pans. A clean metal grate on the floor helps with grease spills. Above all else, prepare and serve it the way you would eat it. He usually dismissed us and walked off while the credits were still flickering on the screen and the music warbled and swelled. Usually nobody took notice, but that was my cue to kill the projector and hit the lights. The movie was over, and these were the Chief's golden rules.

I was the one who had really shown the film, not the Chief. He provided emotional filling. I set it up; I unraveled the screen and ran the projector. I took care of the lights. That was now part of my regular duties. And the Chief was a fair man. He never blamed me afterwards for the glitches in the showing—the muffled sound or the sputtering. When the film broke once, along with the projector, on or about the fourth or fifth showing of this particular movie, he blamed me only until he realized it was the projector. He told me to get the lights and see what was the matter. He even winked at me when I shrugged, signaling that I was hopeless.

"Let's get another one," he ordered.

That was part of my job. I was to fix broken film. And, if the projector broke down, that was my responsibility. I was to fix that, too. There was a manual in the library about film and projector maintenance.

The Chief had winked at me and had ordered another projector. He even offered to accompany me to the storeroom to retrieve it. On the landing on the main deck just outside the entry to the kitchen, he winked at me again. This violently flailing man had winked at me twice.

"Like help fixing this machine, Sticky?" The name had somehow caught on with everyone. He was asking, but, for the teeth he bared in what resembled a smile, he seemed to be

suggesting alternatives more than posing a question.

"Sir?" I responded. That wasn't part of my job. The Chief wasn't a *sir*. Captains and admirals are, but I responded *sir* just the same. That winking business was unsettling, especially that we were alone on our way to the storeroom and I didn't wish to be alone with someone who could wink at me just after having stormed in some kind of weird upper-body ballet while standing next to me without probably having to answer for it. Did I say I was unsettled?

He was smaller than most Chiefs, shorter and heavier, and he was quick. With his hands and arms, at least. A gruff exterior probably concealed a gruff interior. He was harder than other superiors. He wouldn't answer for anything. Not to a Sticky. When he watched his men, he pierced their sometimes inquiring glances with his stare. And when he spoke loudly to us, which was most of the time, he spoke in a deliberately shrill voice. He had to; the kitchen was always loud—lots of shouting— and his voice unlike the clanging of pots and pans was literally like fingernails on a chalkboard. It had no rhythm or beat. No resonance. But he always got our attention. You could almost feel it when you heard it.

This wink had a feeling to it. It wasn't nails; it was more like talons. This small little man was spreading his wings. I wasn't frightened, but I wasn't coming in either. (I think I heard that in a movie once.) I was coming unglued. I could have gone crazy or berserk or something very close to one of those outcomes had the Chief not so surprised me that I became just still.

At first, I had said "sir," hoping a modicum of respect may remind the Chief that I was acting respectably well for someone alone with him. I guess I'll never know what it reminded him of. For just as I was beginning to close my eyes and wait for the inevitable I don't know what or want to know, the Chief grabbed hold of the projector, lifted it off its push cart, and

jettisoned it over the rail and into the sea—all in good navy fashion, I suppose. Make it neat, indeed.

"That's repaired," he told me and winked again. "Let's see about the other one." He was strangely soft at that moment and a bit winded.

"Yes, sir." I responded, again working on that same modicum. I smiled. He helped me lift the cart through the portal. But there was no *Mr. Roberts* about it (I think that was the movie where I heard that line—or it was *Ensign Pulver*). He wasn't smiling. There was no flag waving. And no one ever seemed to miss or celebrate that poor hapless projector.

We had only one other projector on this voyage. Once, while still at sea for a small half of a thirty-day voyage through Panama, the Chief had thought to treat his staff to a late-night showing of a feature movie featuring the undercover heroics of SEALs. He had somehow learned the library had one feature-length movie. It was with Robert Culp of "I Spy" fame. We had swapped it in the Canal for a Disney film that had been on board for more than a year. Before I had come on board, at least.

The Chief probably overheard me talking about the Culp movie. He didn't particularly care for Robert Culp, so he wouldn't attend, but we were on the way home and departure from our routine would be nice for the crew, he thought. Let the crew enjoy a film. Anyone, in fact, was welcome to watch. Sticky Drain would set it up and be responsible. Those were the orders.

It was called *Sammy the Way-Out Seal*. I'd seen the film on *Walt Disney's Wonderful World of Color*. Walt Disney had lauded it as an action-packed story of a SEAL who came in from the cold. That's how I remember it. And that's how I explained it to anyone who asked. I didn't usually mention Disney, though, or that Walt Disney, of course, was smiling when he had described the film that way. But I knew the crew would be disappointed, now that they were

expecting some kind of *Mission Impossible* movie. I'd get the blame for their disappointment, too. What a lot of grief the Navy was.

While in the storeroom getting the film and projector, I was visited by those two Battery hulks and one of their pals. It turned out the pal's name was Steven Roberts, which is only interesting in that one of the hulk's name was Robert Stevens. I forget which one. They used to try to impress people, I think mostly women, with that coincidence. I suppose it worked; they continued to pal around together, especially on board ship.

"You seen this movie your Chief's showing?" Roberts or Stevens asked—I can't remember which.

"Yeah." I answered, stopping what I was doing. It occurred to me to extend them a special invitation to the movie. I might have been able to get them to want to see it. Roberts was just about as big as the other two and would have looked just like them, I expect, but he was native American. He was smarter, too. Seemed to care about more than his pals cared about. He hailed from some place in Arizona called Woolcotton or something. I heard once that Rex Allen was from there, too. "You know, he talks on all those Disney films about animals," someone once said. I think it was one of those hulks. It wasn't Roberts. Remember, he was smarter.

"They had a parade for him once during rodeo week. He came down there in a helicopter. Then left right after the parade. Roberts had seen him in person. He shook his hand or something. He actually knew what he looked like. After that, he never missed another Disney show. Only trouble was he was red-green color blind. He could only be certain," these hulks used to say, "whether someone was black or white. It kept him out of the SEALs. But he knew that Rex Allen was red-blooded Indian and talked like an Indian, too."

I don't think anyone ever argued. And I think they liked that idea. More than anything else about the Navy or Disney or SEALs, I think they liked the idea that Rex Allen was Indian like their pal, who knew a real celebrity. They used that news with the ladies.

"Is it a war movie?" They wanted to know.

"Well, there's conflict." I was making it interesting. "It's a Disney flick. You may have seen it on T.V."

"Disney? Which Disney?" Roberts piped in. He was instantly interested.

"Oh, let's see. An old one." I had to think carefully about this one. Like a fish yapping for food—really like one of his pals yapping in that Mussolini manner of theirs. Roberts was almost hooked. "I was a kid when I saw it. Must of been twelve years ago or so."

"We like war movies," the other two contributed.

"You mean the Osgood Manly type." I was hooked. I couldn't pass up the opportunity for a repartee with these guys. They were so dumb.

"Yeah. Like Manly. What is that? You keep saying that, man." I think that was Stevens.

"Yeah. You keep saying that." That was the other one.

Roberts had removed the lid from the can for the first reel and was holding it in his hands, reading the bookplate-like movie synopsis pasted on the inside. He seemed oblivious to his pals and me.

I shrugged. Maybe they'd like Osgood Manly. Maybe they'd go for this Disney movie, too. My head was swimming in genius. I could have winked at them, as the Chief had winked at me, for the plot I was weaving for them. But they would not have said "Sir?" as I had. No. I thought it best not to be so smart, so I started to tell them:

"It's a movie about what happens after a war is over. It's about a war and the end of the world where mankind has blown everything to smithereens."

"That's a Disney movie from T.V.?" Roberts broke in. He was listening, after all.

"No. That's not Disney," I responded, noting that Roberts was becoming less than excited. He was off the hook, so to speak. And I guess I knew right then and there that they wouldn't be helping with this movie. I guess I knew I wasn't going to be that smart. But why not? I kept going with the story.

"Osgood Manly's not Disney," I confessed.

"What're you talking about? Shit. What frigging movie you playing?" Not only was he less than excited, he was pshawing the whole thing.

"Hey, he's got this Manly guy on the brain," one of the hulks said.

"Yeah. You got frigging Manly on the brain," the other one added.

"We like a war movie." This expression was becoming their mantra. I was compelled to go on with the explanation if only to salvage any kind of half-way decent response from these goons.

"Osgood Manly is a war movie. He was serving on this ship called the *Constantly,* or something like that. There is a very big war in it, and all the cities and factories and civilization get turned to rubble, in some places a black foamy powder—kind of a dry, ashen sludge, I suppose. The rain was the only reminder of anything natural. Only, there aren't a lot of people who have been killed in this movie, just a lot of things have been destroyed. The people are by and large still left standing, kind of milling around, really, as if they haven't anything left to do."

"This ain't a war movie," they responded. "Shit."

"It's got war in it," I said, trying to hurry up the story. "Just listen. There's this one guy

by the name of Osgood Manly. He's Indian."

The two hulks perked up. Anything Indian like their pal naturally sparked their interest. Roberts returned to reading pensively from the inside of the lid.

"He was a machinist or something in the Navy, but always wanted to sing and dance for people—never got the chance, though."

"A musical." His alarm was more like a whine. "With singing?"

I ignored the comment. "And before anything really big happens, there's a war, and he's been assigned to an air squadron and begins to fly an airplane. It's not a true airplane; it's some kind of flying machine, which he helped to design and build because he's still a machinist, and he's suppose to carry things in it. Anyway, he's sitting in the charred sludge of what remains of what was probably once a city park next to this machine that's now a charred lump of mangled steel and smoldering gadgets and next to some kind of black statue. That's why I think it must have been a park. Like everything else, the park and the machine are covered in ash and now useless."

"Yeah. Well, where's the ship," they asked. They were really getting petty. But at least they were still with me. I think they were rolling their eyes at each other. One of them motioned with his had as if he were beating himself in the crotch. Roberts was still reading and stroking his chin. He was smart and must have been on to me.

"The *Constantly* was sunk on his last mission," I explained, eying Roberts very suspiciously. "It's okay, though. He wasn't on it."

I really couldn't remember, but I figured it would be all right to make that part up.

"So he's sitting there and wondering what is he going to do. Everything's gone. There is an eerie silence where he is, too."

I was going for affect, raising my eyebrows and drawing out the words slowly when I told them this part of the story. But I could see they were still rolling their eyes and beating themselves. I figured I'd better get it over with.

"So Osgood Manly begins to sing and dance." They turned and started to walk away, but stopped. Roberts was listening to me—intently. The hulks stayed.

"It's kind of funny to see it, too. His clothes are dirty and tattered and smoldering a bit, spotted a little with the blood that has trickled down the side of his face from a wound on his head. And he's kicking up more dust and smoldering ash each time he lifts and lands his feet into the ground which, as I've said, is this kind of foamy, smoky dust.

"And along with the hue of the blood—it's kind of dried and crusted, perhaps coated by the dust—his face is blackened and he doesn't look Indian any more than anyone else now that everybody else is black with smoke and ash; even his teeth for the few he seems to have are black. And he's smiling. He's happy to be alive or something."

"What everybody else?" Roberts asked. "I thought you said he was alone."

"Just wait. There are others." I wasn't about to let them stop me now. I picked up the pace. "On top of all this, he is awkward; his shoes are clumsy and heavy, and he stumbles and buckles in the knees a lot—the result, I imagine, from the loss of blood. And his voice is really bad. It's shaky and lisps (remember very few teeth); it cracks and screeches, too, whenever he tries to hit a high note and disappears altogether whenever he attempts the lows. In between, it's not so very good either. It kind of sputters; I think he's trying to sing falsetto or vibrato or something special, or perhaps it vibrates that way because he keeps jerking up and down—"

These two hulks weren't even listening. They were whispering to one another about something. Roberts was still holding the can and just kind of fidgeting with it in his hands,

impatiently. The can could have been a club the way he was fondling it, feeling it for the right grip. I think I rolled my eyes at that moment and swallowed and maybe even shuddered. They weren't going to help me with this movie. They were probably going to smash my face in. So I kept going. If I was going to pay the price, I guess I may as well finish the story.

"But Osgood draws a crowd all the same," I say, without anyone listening. I could have been Bob Dylan to these guys. "All those people who were just wandering around among other smoky, ashen remnants of whatever was before the war hear him and come around and stare. Here there are some close-ups. Some of them begin to laugh, some to cry, some begin to sway back and forth as if to the music Osgood is trying to make. They're all black. Everyone's black. Just the same as everyone else. All grouped together like that Coke commercial. In fact, you almost expect the scene to fade to a Coca-Cola or something; only, this movie was made long before that commercial.

"It's really kind of moving to see the people cluster around Osgood."

I'm talking maybe a mile a minute now. Roberts is thumping his fingers on the can. And I'm watching him very closely, watching the can, I mean. And my voice is getting a little shaky, too. I probably sound like Osgood.

"I forgot to mention that at this point Osgood is blind. The reason his flying machine is in the shape it is is because Osgood crashed. The fire and smoke of the crash, combined with the blow to the head when he went hurtling out from the contraption's cockpit, blinded him. He doesn't seem to mind because now he's dancing and singing, and this is all he ever wanted to do. People are all around, and he's singing and dancing and smiling. He has his audience, just can't see any of them. Pretty soon some of those who have gathered begin to sing with Osgood. Now, that's what's really moving. They're all right in there with him doing it with him.

"He's singing one of those songs that easily fits into a choir or something. I'm not sure of the name of the song, but it goes something like—"

I looked around to each of these guys and just closed my eyes. I was going to do this if it killed me. So I sing, making it all up as I go:

> "The littlest child in the littlest part of our little world
> is not the littlest bit afraid of anything big from the sea,
> when the waters and the brine and the spray of the thing
> are not as quite as big as the littlest something, something . . ."

"I may have forgotten some of the lyrics," I say, opening my eyes and realizing that they are still just looking at me or at each other or at the lid Roberts is holding. Maybe, I think, they are interested.

"But that's how I think it goes: the littlest something, something. I can't remember the rest."

The two hulks are smiling. They seem now to like it. Roberts is smiling, too, but his smile is different. He's still fingering the can, the lid of the can.

"So Osgood is singing this, and when he hears all the others begin to join in, he gets a very big smile on his face. He doesn't stop singing, but he's smiling as though the greatest thing on earth has just happened. Finally, when the song is over and the crowd is thick in smiles and exuding this smoky-ozone layer of happiness (I don't really know if there was a relationship, but the place sure was smoky), some guy in the crowd grabs hold of Osgood, clasping his hands onto Osgood's arm, as if to support him and maybe shake him, and while he's holding Osgood and Osgood is beaming with some sort of loving brotherhood for what he has done, Osgood tries to introduce himself: beaming—he looks very pleased with the results of all the singing—he keeps

saying, ‘Osgood. Osgood. Osgood. 'm—'m—'m Osgood.’

“The man, who is cautiously but real enthusiastically beaming right back at Osgood, just keeps refastening his hold on Osgood's arm every time Osgood sways—Osgood’s beginning to slump a little, too, from loss of blood. And the man is bobbing his head up and down, as though he can't even hear Osgood.

“He must be one of the deaf ones I didn't tell you about. It was kind of a big part of the war in this movie. But this guy finally says to Osgood, ‘I know. I know. You really are.’"

I was finished, and these two hulks were looking at me attentively waiting for more. Roberts was thumping on the can—the lid—and starts reading it again—looking as if he is, anyway.

“That’s it,” I said.

“Everyone was black in this movie?” one of them asked.

“In the end.” I said.

“Any blacks in this here movie?” They nodded toward Roberts, who was still holding the can.

“Yes.” I thought maybe I was wrong. They were going to help me after all. “There’s one.”

“This is Disney?” They asked again.

“This is Disney.” Roberts replied for me.

He set down the lid and started to pull on the cart.

“Let’s give this guy a hand with this, okay?” He looked at me and I let go of the cart, which I had been gradually positioning between me and them.

“Want a hand?” he asked. My sense was that he was being polite, not really looking for

my permission.

I said that I did, that they were welcome to join us for the movie. Roberts said nothing, merely grabbed the cart and started to tug on it. The other two joined him. I, in turn, grabbed the three cans of movie reels, closing up the can that Roberts had opened, and started to follow them.

As soon as we got outside and were at about the same spot where the Chief had plunged the other projector into the sea, Roberts let go of the cart and grasp the handle of the projector. We were aweather. A wind was blowing at us, and I at first thought he meant to steady the projector atop the cart. But, with a sudden, deep, loud grunt, he lifted it up and flung it out over the railing. It was deja vu. Stevens and his pal looked on in amazement, in awe. I guess I should have expected it.

I rushed to the rail and watched the projector sail, as if in slow motion, downward into the sea and disappear beneath the water. There was no plume or spray, no splash where it landed. It just disappeared. I had wanted, I guess, to see something striking in this latest debacle, to catch if only an ephemeral glimpse of the splash of the thing as it descended into a sea rushing in on top and around it. Instead, I saw it disappear. It was merely swallowed. All the while, my mouth was open and the wind and salt spray were washing in. I soon closed my mouth and wanted to spit, but didn't dare. We were aweather. I couldn't expect my spit to follow the projector down. So I swallowed it. It was ghastly. I wanted to cry. I knew right then and there that I didn't want to be the LE.

Roberts and the other two were laughing. I couldn't say anything. I was still swallowing.

"No good, Osgood," Roberts at last said. "We like war movies."

The other two gestured at me with that same little bit of Mussolini jaw I was used to seeing from them whenever they triumphed over me, this time flinging their protruding middle finger at me, then laughing. They seemed to be imitating Roberts. They all took a turn at slapping me on the back—Roberts first. I coughed. I choked. Some of what I was swallowing went down the wrong way. My eyes became watery and I continued coughing and tried vainly to expectorate into the wind. The three of them were off, down the plank, so to speak, dancing and singing, it seemed to me. The wind and the salt and the spray, then the spit of my own making, were chilling my face. I plopped the canisters of film onto the rubber mat atop the cart where the projector had been and pushed what was left back to the library.

Make it neat is all I could think and reported the projector had malfunctioned. We would need a replacement now for two. I think the XO winked at me when I reported it. What'd you expect.

LAYING

At last Jancee Brete had asked me what kind of rapport I might have with students desperate for help.

I had met Jancee Brete after the Navy when I was looking for a job. You remember. A hundred years ago. The GI bill wasn't enough, and another grant, some work-study money, had come to me. I could get it if I could get a job. So I was speaking to Jancee on the phone arranging an interview. Her voice was quite distinct, very matter-of-fact sounding, as if she herself were desperate or in trouble or just wanting to be sure I understood. It was almost like a whisper, yet very clear.

She had an English tutoring position open, and I had, in as disinterested a way as I could possibly muster, shooed away a fly circling in fanciful gyrations about my face while I talked to her and listened for her voice and shared in a matter-of-fact voice, also as best as I could muster, that standing in the commons—university talk—and observing closely and so on and so on. . . .

All she had asked me about was rapport. Rapport? I knew absolutely that I was not underprepared. Even over the phone, especially in the kind of voice I was using, I knew this stuff about students. I was a product of it. It was all part of a career: the humanism and that measure of man (woman was, of course, included, and I told her so, flatly) in all things. And I knew all about things. I was not only a student and a good one—granted, an undergraduate student—but I could edify and I did edify. I edified about projectors and movies in the Navy when I finally had a replacement LE to train. So I knew and was confident of knowing I could help Jancee Brete with her tutoring program. LEs are difficult students. They're not seeking training in library engineering. They have a penalty to work out. They're perhaps not as

desperate as college students, but desperation does enter into it. They want to know how much and for how long this job will last. Rapport? I was the Navy's best LE. And still am. I could meet her that afternoon, I pleaded. She had said she would be at her desk. She was desperate, too.

What kind of rapport, indeed. And I shooed away another fly, though it may have been the same one. Then, I hung up.

I'm not attracted to flies, but it does seem that on that day one followed me to the bus. A gadfly? A fury? I shooed it away again. It darted into the shadows once we got inside and disappeared. It wasn't The Fly, was it, the one in the movie? White haired from the fright for its horrific and hapless anatomic refiguring? I began to look for it. It could have been looking for help. It could have been looking for me. Attracted to me. And I'd help it had I known how. I had that kind of rapport, too.

A fly without white hair was alit on the gripping rail attached to the back of the seat in front of me. It had little green speckles across its black raisin-like body and seemed to enjoy basking in the sun that, through the sliding window, drew wide swaths of light across the seats and on that spot of rail where the fly had chosen to settle. Now and then it stretched ever so gracelessly as a dog might stretch and yawn and scratch, or an unkempt, unshaven man just rising from some gloomy sleep, and, in so doing, grotesquely unfurl tiny transparent foils for wings shaped in the form of deltas.

Have you ever noticed that? A fly's wings are like the rivulets of deltas and all their connecting bayous—it could be the Mississippi—as may be seen in topographical or satellite pictures.

Perhaps my viewpoint is too much like the judgment one of those nasty-faced

marionettes, the kinds that get those somber brows and leering smiles permanently painted on. Perhaps I got strings to make me fret and frown (no kindly Geppetto or Blue Fairy in this movie), and I was looking too closely at this fly who had none—just these wiry little rivulets formed like the bayous of a delta on its cellophane wings. But I saw what I saw.

Only, it wasn't the dog or the unkempt man that caught my eye. I was, after all, making that up. And it wasn't really the strings or lack thereof that meant something to me. It was, in hindsight, the nasty look I would be giving the bayou. I can tell now that in looking I was like that marionette and something menacing was tugging at me. I could tell years later why these deltas mean as much as they do now; they were that kind of movie, flickering.

Espee and her mother had been in the bayou. Not the Mississippi. It was Texas. But bayou is bayou. They had called me from there. Espee was probably nine and just beginning to acquire her accent. I don't know how they came to be in a Texas bayou, but they were. I didn't pick it up. I let the machine get the call.

"Mom said it would be okay," Espee's voice crackled a bit; it was fuzzy, and I thought of T.V. and a bad recording, "to try out her new phone. It's a sma—" There was that little girl's giggle still in her voice. And I half expected to hear a word about her sister. I could hear Espee's mother say something in the background, correcting Espee.

"It's a smart seller pho—sell-u-lair phone. Mom wanted it for the trip." She giggled again. "Where in the bayou," Espee hastened to add. It took me a moment to understand. Her accent. "And do you know what? We got a bijou from the Bayeux." There was that giggle again. "That's what Mom said. B-A-" She paused and Espee's mother said something else. "Oh, yes. B-A-Y-E-U-X. That's in France. We were shopping and Mom found a little what'm you call bijou." There was more coaching in the background, and Espee slowed her words

down. “We found a bijou from the Bayeux in the bayou. Mom said you’d—might like that. I’m going to make it into studs. That’s what Mom says. See ya.” And that was that.

“Mom says we’ll be in Hooston in a day,” she hastened to add. Then there was the click and the dial tone before the machine shut off.

I played back the message several times until I got it. Bayou is bayou, the Bayeux the Bayeux, and bijou is bijou in all its intricacies, whether on a map or from a satellite, and you can see how it goes. I thought they were talking about a movie, a theater, anyway. What do I know or care about golden earrings. I thought the call had been about a movie, maybe that Roads, Oregon, movie. I didn’t know it was about studs for earrings until I looked it up. I guess the call was really only about the phone call and its peculiarity. So it turned out to be just a cellular call connected by satellite, not by movie, to what’m you call bijou. I really did have to look it up. I had always thought bijou was for a movie. I can always find a movie if there’s enough of a connection, and I expect there’s always enough, though this fly was evidently not from a movie. And I was getting anxious.

As soon as its wings unfurled, unloosed and slipped off the fly’s back, perhaps as if to disrobe by some egregious oversight—thinking it were alone maybe and a decent sort—the fly quickly, in a panic, I suppose to manage better its modesty, tucked its wings back into place. But, before this happened, it briefly sparkled in the sunlight as its wings spread out that way, and I peered closely, garnering for myself the satisfaction of knowing a lot about this one fly as opposed to all others.

I wondered whether it was the same fly that had gotten on the bus with me, and I wished that I had examined that one just as closely. I could feel my teeth grinding in the emotion of not knowing. There went my satisfaction. Then I swatted at the fly and it leaped and dashed away,

disappearing into the light at the front of the bus.

What rot. You know, I once discovered from a similar kind of close examination and, I suppose, a similar kind of satisfaction that from 1927 to 1953 fourteen thousand six hundred fifty-seven motion pictures were released to American theaters. If I were to metamorphose, I could claim it was an image of rivulets in a delta, too, all those movies stemming from one source leading to one vast end. The camera to me like streams in motion, flickering—no, sparkling. The wings on this fly had at least as many veins. I had once determined to see them all, but stopped trying at two hundred thirty-six. At least, I stopped counting. Movies, that is. It was an awful lot of late-night T.V. Besides, many of the pictures were lost, irretrievable, just plain unavailable. And they were mostly black and white; they weren't sparkling. I had ground my teeth in the face of this disappointment, too, and had probably swatted at another fly or something. I decided to pursue classical literature instead.

"You're a classicist," Jancee Brete had suggested quite early in our romance. I wasn't. The term was strange to me. But I let her suggest it anyway. I had not really decided to pursue classical studies. I wasn't really disappointed about the movies either. I just say these things. They seem to fit the way I expect it will go. I think Jancee found that out.

Frankly, I gave up looking for fourteen thousand movies and in college turned to the Roman classics because I had done well with Latin in high school. "Amo, amat, amas," right? I found Latin tedious, but there isn't a lot to it. I mean, it's pretty repetitious and there aren't as many pages to it. LE duty and Latin are alike that way. There aren't any latrines to clean or decks to swab. Latin's got its declensions and conjugations, lots of endings to memorize, a few insultingly long passages, most short quips. LE's have projectors and inventories to manage. I didn't view any of it as different, even though I started losing projectors. And then the XO found

another LE, who really did hate the job. But you don't really have to be neat so long as you can find what you're supposed to find. Know the vocabulary, and everything's all right there in a small place. No vast halls; no running; no great tomes, if you don't want to have to have anything to do with them.

So to follow naked Aeneas around is not much different from keeping track of and making accounts for disappearing projectors. Querulous and jilting like Aeneas? I'd be doing pretty much what I trained for. I guess that's why I did well. I haven't yet had to read a work over a couple of hundred pages. Even the epics are short by comparison with, say, *Moby Dick.* But, of course, I'm lying. I'm not after anything. I'm laying in wait. But that's wrong, isn't it? I'm lying in wait?

I went for the classics only after Jancee had called me a classicist. I guess I gauge my life according to what anyone calls me, afterward longing to know is it true. I've been gauging my life according to the plots and dramas of all these ancient works, manuscripts and movies that had come before me. I've lumped them like rivulets in a delta, I assume—works that I could get a hold of, that is. My successes are relative to all the tragedies and comedies of the ages. And there aren't many. Consequently, I hold a special fascination for things that are over, things that are still around, but before my time. These things are easy. Some of them are people; some of them are just things. But all of these are people or things in stories: movies and memories and manuscripts. What I have always heard about and remember. And, like all these movies or manuscripts or memories, like all of these stories with endings, many just aren't around enough. And that's only some of it. Most of what was here is completely gone forever. I won't ever get to get through it all ever again. And I can feel my teeth grinding, clenching and grinding, as if I really care and have become anxious or angry about a little fly that I chased away.

These things are really not what's got me here. A brightness in the aisle of the bus where the sunlight swallowed up the fly, which narrowly escaped me, has caught my eye. It flickers slightly, sweeping rapidly back and forth across the nondescript shapes of the backs of people's heads in the intermittence of movie projection as the bo—I almost said boat—as the bus moves along. I'm reminded that I'm not in that movie now, that I won't have to get through it because it's not there. And maybe this is why I was crying in the shower. The lost works of, say, Gaius Cornelius Gallus could have been illuminated in some kind of flicker and piled atop all the other works I would have had to read and perhaps watch someday. But he self-destructed, didn't he? Leaving his works to suffer a similar fate? One small fragment of a much larger work is all that's left. Is that what happened to that movie from Roads? It, too, suffers the same fate as a flicker? What a boon of wishful thinking. What a mess to have to ply through everything over and over.

But these works are not to be had, and, from what I am told, never will be. They're gone. And that's why I can be a classicist. Really. Now, I don't even know where these flies have gone or whether I could have done anything about them or why. I seriously doubt whether I could have counted all the veins on the one I had continued to gaze upon and finally flushed. But it seems that I tried, at least part way. Of course, I'm making that up. I didn't count at all. But I did see them all. That I did.

It's just this bayou thing. Why were they in the bayou? Two years earlier they were in an apartment with me, moving out. Michaela Fressen with Drall was gone, and they were going, too. Espee's mother had left a note. I guess I knew what was coming.

"We're on the road right now," it began. It was a typed note, of course, and had been affixed to the screen on the T.V. by Scotch tape. "I've decided to take the job in San Antonio.

Some movers will be here for the furniture. You may keep the T.V. You may keep the apartment if you like. I've spoken to the manager. She's willing to give it a try. Find a real job, Deprentis. Get a real life while you're at it. Espee's okay. She's actually looking forward to the change. We'll be in touch. I'm divorcing you. Don't try to contact us. I'm sure you won't. Goodbye."

There was a P.S. that had been scratched out. It looked like something Espee had typed. Below it was the word "nothing" written in long hand.

I had gauged my life by movies and manuscripts. I had counted two and a half decades of old moving pictures and two thousand years of books that I had not seen or read. Can something I need to find be dormant and latent, too? Can it still be alive and livable? I was not alive yet when that movie first appeared in Roads. It is ancient to me, and I need only find someone or someway to know what it was about that movie that worked to make a couple want to make me. I mean that's how it came out; my mother and father made me and, as far as I know, that movie made them—a couple, that is.

Well, no great hurry about it. Especially now. This quest, this measure of myself includes all the cries that I could have had and all the laughs I would and all the *arma virumque* with music swilling for the sometimes sailor in the background. There is adventure. "Will you ever get enough, Johnny?" old Frank McCloud says in the soporific voice of a Humphrey Bogart. "I never have," Johnny Rocco responds as only you can imagine the purrs of an Edward G. Robinson clenched-tooth repartee. "No. I guess I never will." There was real passion in a compassionate sort of way that I would not have experienced but for these movies and ancient texts. They're my memories. And I'm adding to the passion this fly and parts of the fly and another movie of its making that shouldn't mean anything at all to me. But it does. And I added

to it this note and all the conversations I'd had with Espee and her mother, all the old literature that I wouldn't ever read or have to, the movies I would never see. That one movie in particular. That movie in Roads, Oregon, in the spring of 1948. It was all added in together in one small, swilling, fast pace. Wilburt Stebby might liken it to the workings of a worm. He might say wore. I am seeing rivulets in a wing. It is all making me up and getting me into a lot of trouble. I didn't expect that.

I was on the bus for more than a fly and a fly in a movie and now all this obsessiveness of deltoid wings of rivulets. I was trying to add up to more than that. Damn, I was probably the one who was following the fly. I thought I was on the bus going for a job—go figure—for a career. I was alone in that spot on the bus, save for the fly that I had lately chased away, and, at forty-two, slightly balding, slightly graying, slightly big around the waist and hips, I am remembering that I had been crying in the shower on the morning I met Jancee Brete.

I had introduced myself to her as Chase. It seemed an appropriately quaint, quick name, especially that I was after something other than anything in a movie or ancient text. Quaint and quick had a freshness to it that ancient texts and old movies musted over by time lacked. I was breaking out of a mold, by gum. Yes, I was.

My father had been called Chase. I'm, after all a product of my father, who is, after all, a product of that Roads, Oregon, movie—at least, as he relates to me—making me, I suppose, a product of that same movie, making my name, his name, as musty as it gets. It really is all quite mathematical, geometric, or something like a circle, this must. I'm just not getting anywhere, am I? I rather expect there's a Marlon Brando in this movie, some Delphic oracle handing out names like Bud to strong people, who, for the names, were not strong. But then, Marlon Brando wasn't alive back then either, was he? I mean alive in movies.

Still, I had asked Jancee Brete to call me Chase Drain. She said she kind of liked Deprentis and, if it was okay, she'd like to call me that. Of course, it was okay. Maybe I was getting somewhere.

I even told her the story about my father, the real Chase Drain, and my mother Robin, whom my father called Bob, and this movie that brought them together. I was, of course, making it up about the name. If ever my father called my mother by name it was always Babe.

"Babe," he'd say.

I didn't even know her given name until after she had died. I think I first heard it or maybe read it on the death announcement—Constance. I don't recall ever hearing it from anyone until after she was dead. Then it was Connie this and Connie that from everybody. Everybody knew her name.

But Jancee had something to tell me first, something about her that I can see now was really about us. My mother and father's names would have to wait. And I don't suppose it's because I am sitting in the bus that goes out to the College that I am remembering this part of the story. The bus isn't here because of me. I know that. I know also that a common measure of myself has put me here and made me squirm to know that by hurrying I am doing what I once did to meet Jancee Brete. Hurrying, I mean. And it wasn't what I wore then, either. Jancee had thought I was underdressed when we first met. Still does, I imagine. She told me so. That's about all she had to tell me that very first time.

Jancee Brete also told me—really told me first—that her work was like a railroad song: a busy, cadent lyric, which meant that little rattles and clacking, plenty of milling around and shuffling off accompanied the ubiquitous scratching of writing notes and the occasional glum of reading tome after tome. But it was more like an old platform at some point of departure,

wooden and musty if not for the people always arriving. It was even a little like a proverb on the matter of time and destination. It was really only a corner, and Jancee Brete was there like a dispatcher linking freight and traffic. And there, too, any comparisons were not likely to last. For despite whatever else there was, Jancee had a job to do. And that, metaphorically speaking, was all. She was careful to tell me that much. There really were no trains or songs about trains. And it didn't matter whether one came by bus or what one wore. She said that, too. I think it reminded me of that brambly-brown sticky bench of a theater in Roads, though I could be wrong.

She also said that from the beginning from behind her old desk in this corner—the library's Learning Resource station—she was responsible for scheduling appointments, signing time sheets, collecting and collating personal information, sometimes tutoring, and most of all arranging meetings for students. She was a dispatcher of sorts. And she said that she did these tasks like clockwork. She liked, of course, to think of her job in simpler terms and liked to say simply that she attended the student, not the College. It was a play on words and always required explanation, but she liked to say this because she was on the other end of things, education things. She was in a place or paradox where an exact dichotomy of unequal distances existed: students on the one side, teachers on the other. The *paradox* admitted no difference between the two; the *place* stood as a breech in need of a bridge. But these were Jancee Brete's salad days (another phrase she liked), a time in her life when the days were one of many, when she could make a difference, when she could stand for a little while to be a bridge. For she was on the staff at a college, a tiny old college on the coast in California. And like the place and the paradox, she said she was neither pupil nor faculty; she was a coordinator. By that it was meant that Jancee Brete was to make a difference by being a bridge. And so she did not teach students; she attended to them. She tutored. And that was the bridge, the linking in the paradox. She did not

just tutor students; she tutored tutors who tutored students. And that was the difference.

The students that came to her or her tutors were often desperate, sometimes wild-eyed, sometimes teary-eyed for the failure to grasp whatever it was the professors had for them to grasp. Sometimes they came only for the grade that they were not getting. And Jancee attended to them. She met with them. And spent the time. Some of them were always hurting for learning. Jancee called it smarting, and they were the ones who could laugh at the inconsistencies of higher learning, at the irony of Jancee's remark—some of them. They were eager and grateful. And Jancee was grateful, too, and kind. Mostly, any others were simply in a hurry. Jobs awaited them and whole careers; Jancee and her desk prove to be not much more than just a watering tower in a noisy, crowded, cutthroat, perhaps frightening race to finish school with a marketable grade. These other students were not grateful and unable to really laugh. Jancee's desk was an obstacle, really, for them. Jancee counseled them then less kindly from across her old desk. They were the ones who could wait, so she set them down opposite her and read them poetry, her poetry (for Jancee Brete was always also a poet). They were beset, she liked to say. Jancee would fix that.

Beset, too, is her old desk: a scuffed and scratched oak that, having long since lost one or more of the floor tabs on one of its legs or perhaps had just plain been made that way (Jancee didn't know), had wobbled the very she first time she sat at it. And Jancee had fixed that. Now, the wobble is only slight. For to one side and especially on one corner of her desk, Jancee stacks all the scraps of her work, all the weight: a smattering of textbooks, journals, answer sheets, the occasional pen or pencil, small piles of various forms and charts, and her handwritten memos. And her brainchild, little yellow Post-its, tag everything and are inscribed with tiny, urgent messages, which, for the content, surely, and the article on which Jancee has affixed them, curl

slightly upward from the jumbled surface of overlapping books and papers and look like a sea welling up, especially when the desk wobbles, but do put everything in its proper place. In this, Jancee Brete, the poet, is meticulous. On the other side of her desk, she spreads her blotter and keeps it clear and, of course, light.

The students, the ones in a hurry, mostly sit crouching forward in a chair on the unencumbered side of Jancee's old desk, one of their elbows naturally resting on the books or pack of books that lay in their lap. On their faces, she had once remarked, crinkled at the mouth by the hand that invariably cradled the head, they keep the pace of her impatience and importunity by strongly averting their eyes from hers and, if at all, only occasionally dashing a glance at the sea between them and Jancee's. But this sea does not undulate; it stiffens. Finally, they stiffen. Nor is the sea churning succor; there is only Jancee. In their voices—really only in the fatuous sounds they make while clearing their throat or grunting in acknowledgment of something Jancee has said or read—inevitably, in the suffering for the long time she is taking, they usually betray their own impatience to Jancee, and, a fate would have it, she become even less kind. For Jancee Brete was a poet and trades in telling her audience mostly what would he—mostly.

But, even though these were still her salad days, it is evident to Jancee that, at these times, she was not making a bridge, mostly, and that in the end it mostly made no difference. In time, she was sure she was not kind at all. There are indeed no trains, no train songs, and that is all. Jancee was sure these students are going nowhere. The students frequently sigh and slump and are soon on their way, returning only when they'd forgotten to have Jancee sign their tutoring card for proof that they'd even been there at all.

LAID

I had told her over the phone I would be arriving by city bus. I naturally wonder whether it was not also all part of lust—the interview, this job, my haste, and consequential diffidence—and not the prospect of working. Culled by the impatience of an alone, beginning to bald, slightly graying, getting fat forty-two-year-old man, who has been often, but not successfully, romantic and yearning for a stab at any passion beyond what was real and thereby plausible, in semblance at least, in faith and hope, the events leading to where I'm headed, I can now insist, hurry on lust. I indeed need this job, but I also find myself earnestly wanting a meeting with a woman in the same way that on that same day I had wanted a meeting with Jancee Brete, a woman, not a man, and a woman I hoped, too, who would be just like me. Hurried along by lust, I suppose. What'd you expect?

What is the measure of that? I had at first mistaken Jancee Brete for a man. I knew her only by her voice on the phone and her signature on the University's placement card advertising the job.

I had quite by accident noticed the advertisement. It was posted outside the Financial Aids Office door, a door I was used to frequenting—for being alone and imagining myself then twenty-seven and only slightly balding. You know. I rely upon the GI bill and, of course, other financial aid to see me through. On this particular day, I had just been informed by Ms. Joi of the Financial Aids Office that I had received a grant, but I would need to find a job. The money was only available through working. Get a job here at school, she told me. It has to be a school-related job.

Whatever Ms. Joi told me sounded reasonable and lovely. She was older. She must have

been fifty and extremely attractive, and I rather enjoyed my times across the counter from her at her particular booth in the Aids office. A welling up of excitement, excitement in me, always accompanied her explanations and prescriptions for aid programs. I could tell that others were excited, too. For Ms. Joi's office was awash with life. All kinds of life: the needy, the greedy, the curious, the shy, and types like me who were all of these things while standing opposite Mary-Peter Joi at her counter and perching ourselves by our elbows and leaning slightly forward, stretched and cocked sideways in order to read the instruction and application forms she liked to explain to us.

She would point and peck at the paper with her ballpoint pen as she explained the form. We examined her pen—usually a long, rounded cylindrical pen, slender like her, white with a blue, sometimes green cap at the end. We examined her pen and her advisements in word and form in much the same way as we examined her eyes and her full lips, her tiny, olive-colored hands and slender fingers that wore all kinds of rings—nondescript rings of paste or diamonds, I don't know, stones of all colors, gold or silver or tin rings that did not, any of them, for their style or number stand out to mark her as spoken for in marriage or betrothal or any use at all. And we examined all the rest of her and all her tiny movements as she spoke and leaned toward us warmly and frequently laughed, our eyes sometimes meeting hers. But then I was alone and also imagining I wasn't slightly graying, and I always laughed when Mary-Peter Joi laughed, especially when my eyes met hers.

On that particular day my spirit swelled with Ms. Joi, for she had also touched me. She had not leaned over enough to brush my shoulder as I perched cockeyed toward her. It was not subtle, as I often imagined it would be. She reached out with what seemed like only her rings—things that would sparkle, you know—and with the tips of her fingernails lightly pecked me on

the arm I had rested beside the form she was explaining. Aeneas might have said what I wanted this moment to be, or Dido, but it was one of those maladies of not marking—Shakespeare, you know, had said it first. Even so, the moment was a rather big one for me until I got outside.

I stood by the door examining the form that decreed I needed a job, as Ms. Joi had told me I would. I think that accounts for the touch—a bit of sympathy for someone she had just touched. Like her rings, these forms have no particular distinction except from one another. That was part of the accident that occurred. While standing there, deflating, I suppose, I noticed an advertisement for a job. I had looked up from the form and there it was, sparkling, too, which was strange because everything else seemed dull, like lead, at that same moment.

You see, like the University as a whole, its business offices are compartmentalized. Bureaus of all sizes and diversity are clustered in one place so that the serendipity of accidents like mine—it must be by design—will happen. I wasn't regretting that Ms. Joi had only touched me. I was facing the prospect of needing a job and looking for one where feelings or color or bounce or anything that smacked of life was now very dull.

I was in the corridor where Placement is. And, where one department in the University is awash with real touches of life and lines, real university hubbub, I believe Jancee would say, to whatever purpose, Mary-Peter Joi's office is just next door. And so it was for the Placement Office, which is not even an office, but a window in the hallway outside and to the left of Mary-Peter Joi's.

Here I was standing still. I needed a job, and for the stillness I paused. There were no lines; there were no people. Just me. Real people did not work there; this I know, for no one bothered them for placement, at least not this early in the semester. The place was, to my way of seeing it, lifeless. Still, they had their bulletin board upon which eleven uniform rows of 3 x 5

cards formed tidy, yet slightly skewed columns of job announcements.

How like earth, I thought, these little rows and columns appeared. I would say graveyard-like rows of tombstones because no one was ever seen changing them. But they did change, just not noticeably so. A real geological study. This I know; I was there next door often and witnessed little that I would describe as movement, just change. How very like geology. Only, what I noticed this time had real sparkle to it. It moved or made me move.

Jonce Brete was hiring tutors at nearby Santa Pate Community College. I had made a mistake. And after having reached him by phone the mistake was very apparent. It was not Jonce; it was Jancee, and Jancee was not him—not he. She was a woman. But that she was a woman on the phone and not a man on the card, as I had supposed when at first I read the card, misread the signature and merely wanted the job, added to the allure of meeting a woman whose signature I had learned in talking to Jancee was not Jonce. What did I know after all? My mistake was perhaps provident, the revelation of her true sex perhaps promising. Now, I did not just merely want the job.

I was alone, all alone in that still hallway outside Mary-Peter Joi's door—touched, you see—and on the phone, a pay phone, to another woman. And so, I had hurried. I had hurried everything.

It was not only that; it was the surprise and embarrassment for the error of my supposition that I so readily and eagerly sought a meeting with Jancee. But her voice was firm and deep and resonated in softness that was not like a man's. I needed (well, I desired anyway) to know the face that went with the voice; it was at least a little faith and hope. A little lust. Would it matter, I had asked her, whether I came by bus? It didn't, of course, but Jancee, I could tell, had wondered why I had asked.

I'm beginning to wonder why I had asked, too. Would it have mattered if I had come by my own car, which, of course, I didn't have? I had worried about having the meeting, how the meeting would go. I remembered that in *Sitting Pretty*, Lynn Belvedere was mistaken for a woman, and he still got the job. It was different, though; it always is in the movies, especially old movies. He didn't get the girl. But he wasn't after the girl; he was just after the job. He was confident of securing employment. He was a genius. And it was his employer who had mistaken him for a woman, not the other way around. I knew that. It was the other way around now. Would he get the girl being a poor, older undergraduate student and getting around by bus. Lynn came by train. He didn't have a car either. Here I was ending our first conversation on the phone, hoping for more in person, and remembering an old movie from 1948 and unable to make it worth remembering.

Mary-Peter Joi might have understood this. She may even have known the name of a movie befitting my predicament. I had never thought to ask. Of course, I had never thought to tell her, either. She had real laughter, even though at times it seemed to be nervous laughter. She may have known exactly what I was talking about. Brambly-brown. Her countertop was, I swear, a brambly-brown veneer. But then I didn't ever attempt to speak to her about movies or anything real outside of financial aid. We were always all business. I knew this, too, even when she touched me. She sparkled on her side of the counter, I on mine. Occasionally, we touched. Nothing ever came of it. Then it was all over until I saw her the next time.

Jancee Brete? I wondered. Would she understand that Hollywood had experienced a schism that didn't last? Would she care that the two camps in moviedom were once split: sound versus silent? Or that Al Jolson, a singer, was in the vanguard of sound? That he starred in the first talking picture, which was really the first singing picture because it was a silent picture

whenever talking occurred; the only recorded sound in the show was singing—Jolson's singing? I wondered. I eventually did tell her about Roads, Oregon, and what that movie meant to me.

But that was years ago. Would she care now, I wonder. That was a long time ago. I got started on it because, you won't believe it, she knew all about Osgood Manly. She had seen that movie. It was our first movie. It wasn't in a theater. It was on T.V. for her. We hadn't ever seen it together. But it was our first movie ever that we shared.

"Wasn't that sad," I suggested, "he wanted to sing like Jolson?"

Jancee thought it was Jolson.

It must have been different in the movies. No matter. I could launch the story about how my mother and father met. Jancee Brete would want to tell me something first. She always had something to tell me first. When we first met, she had something to tell me first. And that could be the end of the movie. It could be an old one and a bit sappy. And Jancee Brete would forever accuse me of watching too many of these old movies and forcing my child to watch them with me. Of course, I wouldn't force her. She would always be able go to bed. So I would now be able to tell that story I mentioned. It would have to do with the movie from 1948 in Roads, Oregon's; it would have to do with bijou and, I suppose, movies in general. It would give me an excuse for recounting the story with this movie while Jancee was still in the audience.

It would be like old times. And it would be, as I said, a kind of a sappy story that has to do with movies, and there's a kind of justice with this movie in the story. Justice—I almost said Jancee—is after all a prerequisite of any purpose, and if I can justify a movie and my story together, reason with my audience for a purpose for my obsession with both the moving picture and the story, then perhaps any prolonging of one singular event into a story will be all the more necessary.

Taken by themselves, Jancee might say, these forums of entertainment are okay. But entertainment. What are you trying to do? Nobody listens to stories about movies. Nobody listens to stories that are movies. And she is quite right.

But, Jancee, I want to tell a story not about a movie or one that is a movie; I want to tell a story that has to do with a movie. I only mentioned the movie we had both watched because it reminds me of this story. And I have this story with a movie in it, but it's only in there as a means of getting to the story. Okay? That's the purpose. I want to get just to the story, but I can't just do it. There has to be a purpose first. Purpose first. Purpose first. Okay?

I'm trying to be as Ciceronian as I can possibly be. That's what Jancee would say. She always knows everything about me. She's a goddamn know-all. She's always telling everyone what's what, what to expect, where they are. Lay bare the cosmos. She can be very neat and prim about it, too. She's the real Ciceronian. She'd say she was a conductor in the rhetorical sense. She'd say it was poetic. It could be a metaphor for what she does. A *cicero* with her little red flanged flashlight pointing out the way in the dark among the brambly brown benches. She would really be an usher, a know-it-all usher, always watching out for things spilt and getting out of hand. I guess that's how she always knows.

Before I could say any of this—I mean, prior to this realization, from behind her old desk in the corner of the library, we had to meet. It was there, too, that on our first meeting Jancee Brete abruptly announced that she had not grown up. By that she meant I was underdressed. At least, that is what I remembered she had told me. I remember that I was not underprepared. I had come to Santa Pate Community College unable to make ends meet. I was poor. Mary-Peter Joi understood this. So, being an undergraduate student of English and classical literature at the University and, like many of my even poorer classmates, I needed a job. Jancee Brete would be

my bridge now that I knew who she was and that it was a job of hers that I was after.

She would be my supervisor. She already supervised twenty-two humanities tutors at the college and was becoming, as I remember her saying, overtaxed. She had put in for and had recently received partial funding for a part-time assistant: financial aid for Jancee, which in turn would be for me. She must have recognized the fuss—I almost said lust—I was making in my bearing toward her. I could help Jancee Brete and so was applying that very day.

On the phone earlier in the day I had impressed her with my credentials amply enough to earn this interview. I spoke of rhetoric: I thought it a forté of mine. Blast! It was a forté. I had certainly trained long enough in the importance of speaking well. I elaborated on a Ciceronian point about the period and triads of speech. And Jancee chuckled. Was I losing her? I was going to tell her about the *Constantinople* if I needed to. I knew the importance of a story for students' learning. I knew it was a tool for algorithms of communicating about learning. Her eyes narrowed and focused sharply on her hands. I could tell she was listening. I was sure it was an appropriate topic for a tutoring program. After all, what does it mean to learn, and then what role does the tutor play in that model? Rhetoric. Speaking. Speech. Telling something to someone and doing it well enough that it makes more than just good sense. It's worth something. We have to know how to convince them and convince them to convince us. I was showing some of that Mary-Peter Joi sparkle and I could tell. Jancee Brete was obviously aglow. Our eyes met and I clinched it. In many ways, I told her, we must become their peers as they strive to become ours.

And since I was interviewing to assist Jancee supervise some of her tutors, I knew that I would have to look helpful and ask helpful questions. Discovering she was a woman had evoked other kinds of questions, but I wasn't about to let Jancee know that I was also curious about her.

I wanted this job. I could tell her that much about myself and had rehearsed asking only helpful-looking questions. The one on the phone about the bus I had hoped had been my first helpful question, insightful perhaps, but regretted having asked it, especially now.

Jancee was seated at her desk with a student when I approached.

"If it will help, you may keep it," Jancee offered, holding a white and black, otherwise nondescript pamphlet out to the student. There was no pleasure in her manner. It was all very business-like.

"The test isn't till next week." The student, a younger man, spoke with hesitation. A reluctance was showing, and he did not immediately take the pamphlet from Jancee. "I might have it a while."

"You may have it, period." Jancee responded, setting the pamphlet down as if to dismiss it atop a pile of similar-looking and unused pamphlets on her old desk.

I stopped and stood several feet away from the desk as if waiting in a line for my turn. Had there been ropes cordoning off lanes for that purpose, I would have felt very much at ease. As it was, I guess I stood out just standing there in the middle of the room. Still, I observed that Jancee was just about my age. Not that I can really observe such things, but I figured she was. She was slender in her arms and shoulders. Her blouse was plain and loosely fitted, as if a size too big. She was slender in the waist. This I guessed. I couldn't see that part of her. I could see that she was not buxom, nor was she skinny. A runner perhaps. Again, I was only guessing at the legs. Her brown hair was light for the occasional bits of insinuating grey and in the style of a crop, but thick enough and long enough for waves to give it shape. I noted her brown eyes, her olive complexion. If she would smile, it would be bright.

The student rose from his seat, lifting and holding one of the straps from his backpack up

over his shoulder. The pack itself he cradled between his elbow and a very square and muscular flank, the tanned flesh of which he exposed from what was perhaps a football jersey netted and cut off across the middle His whole body was square and muscular, even his face. Now, there was real strength; he was a good looking young man. Aeneas could have had him on board. Of course, he could have been a marine. He could have easily lifted a 16mm projector and chucked it into the sea. Perhaps he was just a history major. I wasn't really interested in finding out.

Jancee was grim. I think this was only noticeable to me. This young man was carefree, cock-sure carefree. With his free hand, the student snatched up the pamphlet from where Jancee had laid it and slipped it into an opening in his pack. "Thanks," he volunteered without much sincerity. "I'll let you know about the test."

He turned to walk away and I was about to step toward the desk when the student abruptly stopped and swung back around facing the desk and Jancee once more. It was a surprise and I reflexively leaned backward as if to avoid a blow. I felt a little bit like the LE back on the *Constantinople*. I nearly ducked for cover. Jancee was unalarmed and noted both the young man's return and my reaction with a relaxed cock of her head upward and a quizzical lifting of her eyebrows, a shifting of her eyes to me then him, expressing, yet not voicing, a perfunctory *may I help you* to both of us simultaneously. This marine didn't miss a beat.

"If I have a question . . .," he blurted out in as much the same square, muscular voice as his body's complement could muster. I think he was posturing. He ignored me. If I were to see anything, it was only over his shoulder, which I couldn't see over. But then, for the moment the place was indeed his, ". . . before the test, can I come in and see you?" he said.

Jancee must have looked over to me, pausing momentarily before speaking, seeking it seemed some coinciding question from me, perhaps in order that she might for expediency's sake

handle each request with a single response. I was watching this young man. His remark sounded more like a proposal to me, a proposition, a request for trysts, and I strained for the inspiration of some action or tact that would at least neutralize this hulk's advance. But instead of allowing from me an opportunity for any utterance, I imagine Jancee quickly turned her eyes back to the young man and offered in a deliberate and quiet voice:

"If you have a question that I can answer, by all means come and see me."

The guy smiled and was once again walking away, this time faster and rumbling. Jancee was now looking only at me, who by now was standing at her desk, doing a little posturing of my own.

"I'm the one who comes by bus," I announced, affecting a broad smile in order to underscore the jest. My leg brushed up against the desk and set it quivering. The desk, I mean. I wasn't sure why I was resorting to reminding Jancee of the bus, unless it was to tell her something she had already heard, marking me with some kind of familiarity for her. I knew that I was good at repeating things. I could say I was trying to tell her something useful about me. Rhetoric was my forté. I liked to dwell on telling people things. I was sure that a good tutor would be one who liked to tell people things, and there is lots to tell about a ride on the city bus. Maybe I was just trying to lighten things up, in that way vindicate me of any blame for the uneasy situation I now found myself experiencing.

That desk. I stepped away from it. And it continued to rock until Jancee steadied it by nonchalantly pressing her hands down on it. I was comfortable, trying to be—trying to smile. I was embarrassed. I felt awkward and strange. That Adonis before me had not rocked her desk. Perhaps I didn't belong there after all. Jancee, you see, was not smiling when at last we met, and I was trying to elicit a smile.

Having found her at her desk and having observed a part of what happens at her desk, I sensed a chill, that ubiquitous and amorphous quality of conflict. And I did not want it to be our conflict. Jancee was rather attractive. No panache, but neat and confident in her appearance. I wanted her to give me the job. So I hoped she would smile.

She did not. She had responded quizzically when we greeted each other; an indifference mulled in her reaction. Then she slightly cocked her head to one side and narrowed the eyes as if all of a sudden something was just not right.

"Yes. The bus," she at last said, coolly.

It was then that we shook hands, and she glanced at my fingers for the moment they were folding over the back of her palm. She, naturally, noticed my nails were trimmed and clean. I know about that. Then quickly, purposefully, her eyes shifted focus from the hand upward to my sleeve, then along the shoulder to the neck, to my chin and finally fixed on my eyes. She noticed that I was wearing a pullover sweater, a tightly fitted knitted purple v-neck. At the collar I sported the green pin stripes of the button-down shirt I wore under the sweater. Jancee did not, however, note the color of my eyes, I suspect. She was probably looking for redness or dilation, signs of who I was and what I had been doing. And I saw that she had to take another look, for having at first fixed her stare on the eyes she had fixed to stare through them, searching at first the clothes and the body of the man. He would have to dress suitably, she had once said to me. It was litany for her and she often reminded me of it. His hair should be neat, his eyes clear. He should be almost right in every detail of his attire. I suppose it was at this point in the litany that she would notice his pants and shoes, and, while she had been reasonably impressed with me on the phone, she had expected slacks and the kind of shoes one polishes and polishes well upon getting a job interview. So that grimace usually reserved for the students in a hurry began to take

form and meaning for me.

At the moment, I wasn't sure what it meant or why it was, exactly. Jancee told me later about her concerns. But I worried just the same. I had on a pair of blue jeans and running shoes, expensive ones, I might add, and in pretty good shape, too. I was no runner. But I was no slouch. Still, it seemed Jancee worried, too, and became pensive and at first made only small talk.

"Where are you from, Deprentis?" she eventually asked.

"I was born in Oregon." I thought I had already told her that. So I repeated myself. Then she asked me where I had grown up. I said Oregon, of course, wary of having to repeat myself again.

"Then you did grow up?" This was bold, but Jancee Brete said it without being bold. She smiled and reached over her desk, letting it rock slightly, to touch the arm I had rested on the edge. As lightly as the desk rocked, she tapped my arm with her finger tips, then quickly withdrew her touch to steady the desk with her hands in the same way as she had when I had rocked the desk. She nearly laughed. Her mouth opened to laugh. She covered it, though, and cleared her throat. But she had touched me.

"I don't mean to be bold," she said. "I'm not trying to pry."

A smile continued to shape and brighten her face. I tried to mimic her. I smiled, too.

"Please forgive me. I sometimes think that I haven't grown up. And when I think that way, it's good to be a little mischievous. I do hope you have grown up, Deprentis."

Jancee did not tell me all of this. Later, I learned what she meant by growing up or not to have grown up and have filled in some of the gaps. It makes more sense of what she meant in suggesting to be always a child or never to have been one. I was not from California, I had

volunteered. And I was becoming confused because I did not know where she was leading this conversation. Jancee had not grown up at all, she had insisted, and she was watching for my reaction. Of course, I smiled uneasily, cautiously, averting my eyes from hers. She readily noticed; she stiffened, and I remember that I searched with my eyes, as if by impulse, all around us for something of wit to say.

She may have followed my eyes with hers—oh, let's say she did.

Jancee had not grown up. I wasn't sure what that meant for me. I remembered a movie I had once seen. Spencer Tracy and Katharine Hepburn were meeting for the first time. He noticed her legs as she adjusted her stockings; then they shook hands and became friends; soon they were married.

"I'm sorry. You what?" I asked, unsure of the humor in Jancee's pronouncement.

Jancee in turn also grew uneasy. She did not mind, I know, that people on campus shunned ties and other trappings of formality and donned casual, often unkempt-looking clothes. Blue jeans, in fact, were a standard. They were practical garb. Like campus attitudes, one's wardrobe naturally included new or faded, bleached, cut-off , pocked denim, even torn with holes in them. On this particular day and on just about any other day, Jancee, too, was in jeans which were slightly faded. Mine, on the other hand, were new and clean, but I was there to impress her. And, on this score, at least, I had not—nor would I ever.

"I get very serious often," Jancee made the excuse. "It's a practical habit of mine. I don't think I was ever a child." She must have felt that she had successfully resisted childhood and adolescence and knew, as she had always known, that when someone was underdressed it was not a mark so much of that person's slattern habits as it was a sign of Jancee's propriety about resisting such things.

So I was not unprepared, just underdressed because I was not sporting a tie and was in blue jeans. When Jancee finally told me about her initial reaction and why, my feelings were at first hurt. Even then, however, I laughed. Only on our first meeting did I returned a quizzical look to her puzzling statements, and again reminded Jancee of the bus. I've tried not to remind her of the bus since. It didn't seem to matter to her that I had a story to tell about a bus. She would listen anyway.

"That could be my purpose," she said. It must have been part of the interview.

"I've got some time," she added.

We had already touched. Jancee's hand on my arm, you remember. She wore no rings. It was a sober meeting. It was dark. And in her sober form, she clasp in her hands a file folder of papers and planted it open like a book atop her desk and poised herself ready to read from it or write down passages in it while I spoke. I could see her hands in the sea of Post-Its and wanted to think of a movie. That could be my purpose: to know it all and why, for all the dark and smoke of the theater to know the way to everybody's seat and what everyone was doing. Just like Jancee. That could have been my purpose. I would have known. I was in love with her by then. I rested my arm on a little empty space at the edge of her desk and looked on, at last beginning to really smile.

She looked at me and I pretended her eyelashes fluttered and flashed. A smile had formed and began to shape her whole face in a kind of bright, eager waiting. But it was a sober meeting, I recall. And, as she looked on me, I heard her hush. "I've got some time." It was a whisper. She had become slow and relaxed, and my heart, as near as I could tell, was beating fast, worrying me that I could not know about first meetings. I thought again about a movie and that, had it not been for one particular movie playing in the little logging town of Roads, Oregon,

in the spring of 1948, I might have known it all about meeting for the first time. I might have known the whole story instead of spending so much time wanting to get it all—had it not been that I didn't know the movie in the story.

But there is little truth in that, this hush business. Jancee Brete was the *cicero*. And I should be going to Roads, not Rome, not ancient Rome. I am not a Cicero. My life is not on the line here. I am no keeper of the cosmos or State or vault wherein stories are stored. I don't expect that my tongue will be impaled by nails as Cicero's was. Besides, Aeneas is my hero. I am under no threat to know it all or not to. It's just that had it not been for this one particular movie—well, the story I want to get to would not even have been possible. I suppose that is why I even mention Cicero. I suppose that's what's to be expected. Cicero has nothing at all to do with this, and yet, for the moment, Cicero seems very prominent—I almost said promising, and I don't know which one fits.

It's like that in the movies, the movie houses, that is. Had it not been for this particular one in Roads, Oregon, I would know which one fits. A funnel of light cutting through the swaths of smoke and particles of dust, occasionally the path of a moth or two as it or they fluttered—Jancee might say danced—for the amazement of their shadows against the flickering wall of mostly black and white motion would be like a press rapidly fitting the right page after the right page. Promising, then prominent. And do it all again. At least, that is what I mostly like to think.

Getting the right one to promising or prominent in story would not have been possible, even without me. For one, without me, Jancee would not have had the time. For another, what I really like to think is that had it not been for a movie, in general, this first meeting or any meeting at all would not have occurred. Me or the meeting. Promising or prominent. And that's

big, I think. I like to think that there is just some justice in using too many old movies, old stories—Jancee would say too much, period—and a bijou, because we never know what important event may come of them or because of them. We just never know. That's even bigger.

LIE

HEART OF THE WHOLE DEPTRENTIS DRAIN STROY

Now, it has always been my considered opinion, and I say this with as much familiarity as I can imagine, that, because of a movie, my mother and father were the happiest two people. My mother loved to giggle and my father tickled her often in the beginning. In the beginning, they loved each other's company, each other's touch. At dinner time, they sat side by side on a bench, and I sat beside them at a table that faced a kitchen wall dotted with the tiny daisy-print of very yellow faded wallpaper. But the setting didn't much matter. They were their happiest at dinner time. They could talk of the food, which was always in plentiful helpings—potatoes and greens, beefs and venisons of meatloafs, roasts, and various other cuts of meat. The trout was, of course, on Fridays. Or they talked about our dishes, plumbing our spring for water, or television for the evening. The name of Wilburt Stebby might come up and they'd laugh. Dad would put his arm around Mom and ask whether he should go get him. Mom would laugh—it was like a scream.

"Poor John," she'd eventually say; "it was a lucky thing you were at that movie."

Then they'd kiss.

I would be eating, watching them, spooning helpings of peas or corn or buttering a biscuit, and chewing pensively through it all, until their talk was at the point in the story of that movie, at which point I would ask them what they meant, and they would wink—Dad would, anyway. And they'd say I'd best ask Wilburt Stebby. He'd remember. He seems to know it all. They'd laugh again. I'd laugh, too, trying not to choke on a mouthful of something and trying hard to understand what the movie was. I knew they were making sport of Wilburt. But all along I suspected Wilburt really did know what they were laughing at and would probably laugh,

too, at what made them so happy. I suspected all along that they were laughing at that movie. Because there was that movie. And all along I've wanted to know.

You see, in the beginning there was this happiness that I don't necessarily attribute to a movie or anything in particular—perhaps the laughter I do, because I grew up loving old movies and remembering how my mother and father watched them with me frequently. My mother mostly. And I grew up with them. We'd sit in the living room where my father had put the biggest Zenith television that he could buy and where, on Saturday nights especially, we'd roll up side by side. If it were very late, I would settle my head upon my mother's lap, and she would stroke it. If she were worn out from the day or sad—sometimes the movies were extremely sad—she would similarly lean and settle her head and body upon my father's flank as he would extend his arm over her and hook his hand beneath her thigh in what seemed to me a desire to gather her up and wrap her around him like a blanket.

And it was the biggest television I ever remember. But I was not yet nine, when all things seem gigantic. It sat in the corner, its screen enveloped in a white (really, it was vanilla) oaken console, nestled, if you will, as we were nestled side by side on the couch. Opposite it stood the Franklin stove that my father had mounted on red bricks so that its heat would not burn holes in the floor. The legs of the T.V. had been propped up by bricks, too.

My father was like that—careful about fires in the woods, where he worked and had put our home. We lived in a white single-wide trailer on the north side of the mountain not far from where he logged. The house always showed for miles as we climbed the mountain road whenever on our way to it. For it was always the only white on the mountain. You see, even in winter it never snowed in these mountains. They were always too close to the sea and too much in the rain. So our house stuck out among the evergreens. A cracker box, my mother and father

used to call it. And though it was white and was always the only white I could see and had been bought brand new when my father hauled it up to where he decided we would live, I'm mindful mostly of the yellow.

My father had cleared a spot in the brush and trees for our trailer with his yellow McCullough chain saw. With his yellow Cat, he had cut into the mountain and filled a landing large enough for our house and a little bit of yard where I could play. Yellow bricks and stumps and other kinds of yellow blocks of wood were the piles upon which our eight-by-forty-foot trailer sat. Inside, the ceilings and walls were yellowed by the smoke and heat emanating always from the Franklin stove. Or it was my mother's cigarettes. And the television, a black-and-white, often showed a picture of pasty yellow. The result of some bad reception, I suspect.

It was always a temporary arrangement. This was understood and often mentioned at dinner. We could be having the dessert, and, and I'd be listening, carefully balancing on my spoon a large bite of the lemon Jell-O. My mother and my father would be watching, anxiously tilting their heads first to the left and then the right and then the left again and so on, as if they were part of the same spirit that wiggled the Jell-O as it moved closer and closer to my mouth. My father could say in a moment of distraction that we were there only so long as it would take us to build a real house. But the trailer turned out to be permanent enough and we were high enough up on the mountain that the ingenuity of a generator and an antenna atop our roof would get the kind of yellow reception we needed from the Eugene transmitter forty miles away. The arrangement never changed, and, as far as I know, the trailer and its antenna are still there. I imagine it so. It was that permanent. Perhaps it's also all yellow by now.

And, though it was as an adult that I managed to watch a lot of movies, full well knowing, I guess, that I never would see everything, it was as a child that I decided there was just

one thing that I needed to see. Just one. The movie that brought my mother and father together, and, for that meeting, brought about for a while the greatest happiness of any two people who ever met in Roads, Oregon. My mother's health and habits notwithstanding, in the beginning they were happy. And not because of a movie, but because there was a movie, a movie I wanted to see. How else would it go for me?

That's what it was. My mother and father didn't simply meet at a movie and fall in love during the movie. That's not what it was. I don't want to mislead you. I don't know that after meeting they even went to movies that much. They were not especially drawn to the theater. Even after it had burned down and those brambly brown benches were eventually replaced by the cushioned toggle-seated chairs of a new theater, they took me to only one movie—*The Shaggy Dog*. And it wasn't as comfortable as all that. There was no more smoking. My mother was not allowed. It was against the law. So we watched a lot of T.V. I'd like to think that it was some other way, that I had been primmed and propered by what my mother and father did to meet someone as they had met each other and, because of a car, a bar, and a movie, I had been destined to become very happy.

Well, the car and the bar are gone—forever—the movie is only forgotten. But that's not how movies or movie houses come into this story. My mother and father met not because there was a movie. There were a lot of other things, too. But it was so like a movie that I'm surprised the movie is forgotten. At that time, in the spring of 1948, my father was again a logger back two or three years from the service and the war with Japan. That was the Second World War. I told Jancee the War was over before anything about movies had been said or done in this story. She would hope I were lying. It is so much less dramatic in postwar times, she would tell me. Then she would note for me that the war on Grenada was not quite finished when I met Espee's

mother. Your father was dead not quite two or three years. I think it was more like four. All that war and dying seemed to make a story, she'd say.

So my father was a marine and had enlisted because the war had already started, and he figured it had to be fought and may as well be fought by him. He also knew it could very well be the last thing he did: fight, that is. But he did it anyway. I suppose I'd like to think that he felt he especially had to do it, that that usual sense of duty grabbed even a tree-topper's son—even grabbed the tree-topper, for Grandpa enlisted, too, and would have made it to the war had not a stomach ulcer waylaid him in a Navy hospital and earned him an early discharge. I'd like to think that, so, in that sense, Dad could say he didn't choose to enlist; he was, son of a buck, drafted into it. Had no choice. Had no choice. *Semper Fi*, and all that, you see.

But he did choose to enlist on his seventeenth birthday with his own dad's blessing—a glad-to-see-you-getting-out-on-your-own-and-away-from-me kind of blessing—a year before he even graduated from high school. Such a strong sense of duty and at such an early time in one's life might have merited a medal or something had the real motivation been duty instead of, much like his father's blessing, little more than a way to deal with something that's been bothering you. To skip school, to leave home, to see the world when it was a world war. But there was never any pretense, especially in the joke that he was drafted. He used to say that he and Wilburt had been called up, for they were both compelled one way or another into joining up. Wilburt got a letter from Uncle Sam when he left high school and went to the army, a little kicking at the dirt along the way. My father got the calling early, having gotten the boot from Grandpa. More than likely that same kind of boot that Wilburt was like to use to kick up dirt.

"Took his ol' cork boot and kicked him up some dirt a couple of times, too," my father often said.

My mother would laugh to hear him say it.

"Wilburt would tell it some other way, you know," she would remind my father.

My father would then, of course, give that knowing wink. And then, they both would laugh again. But when they had had their laugh and breathed what seemed a sigh and closed their eyes as if to pray in sober and serious ways about the war, they used to say with great bravado that "when the Marine Corps offered to let your old dad keep up his schooling so he could get finished and get his high school diploma, he didn't think much of the idea; he didn't think he was coming back from that war." Working to get a diploma while training for a fight would only be a distraction. His eyes usually twinkled a bit whenever he retold that part of his service record; my mother's definitely misted. They hugged, sitting side by side on that kitchen bench. Dinner would usually come to a halt for a moment or two. It was great bravado. I wanted to cheer, to say something. I choked a little, of course, needing to first gulp down the mash of greens and meats and potatoes I was chewing.

My father, of course, returned from the fight—never did finish high school. And then dinner would continue.

So in the spring of 1948, my father was logging. No high school diploma required. The end of the war was then almost three years old. Everyone who wanted to be anyone in Roads, Oregon, was pretty much just standing around wondering what next. War with Russia? or what? And given that it was early spring, the skies were yet gray and the ground was probably wet; the grasses green again, not pale; the morning cold and still a bit icy. Kind of like Russia?

And their arms were straight running down their sides, their hands as likely as anywhere to be stuffed into their dungarees as they stood shaking off the rain, handless, clamping and puffing cigarettes between their teeth as they talked, occasionally stamping the mud from their

caulk boots and with one unloosed hand flicking their spent cigarettes across the road as if there were a competition for how far the butts would travel through a light drizzle while these loggers waited, sometimes for a week when jobs were scarce, for a crummie to pick them up and take them to the woods.

I would say to myself right about now in the story that I may lose them—anyone who would listen to me, when and for as long as I had them settled restlessly beside me, if they had settled at all. When it was Espee's mother, a visit to the kitchen to shave and slice carrots would happen about now. That was her habit, her wont for something to munch. Espee would want to go for ice cream when it was just the two of us. I'd help her to some right about now, and that was always part of the bargain. The story needed to wait. All part of it was the waiting for the gnawing on finger-length cuts of raw carrots or, better yet, the quiet spooning daintily of little tipfuls—so the ice cream would last just long enough—of vanilla—Espee's favorite—into the mouth and then her nodding in agreement that this does indeed sound loosely familiar. I don't think it would be the story I'm telling without any of this. Raw vegetables fit, you see. Ice cream. Espee. Her mother. Me. Anything loosely familiar.

Like everyone else standing there, my father stood around waiting, too. Sometimes he would chew tobacco. It was *chaw*. And flicks of the cigarette would be replaced by expectorating streams of chawed juice. That way he wouldn't need to take his hands out of his dungarees, unless he missed a bit and dribbled some down from the lip that bulged with chaw, whereupon he'd draw his cuff across his chin. And, like everyone else, when not out there in the woods, and even, when in the woods, perhaps especially when in the woods, he was often in the habit of mu—I almost said muscling—to muse with everyone else on the what-next part of life. It wasn't any great philosophical exercise in profundity, and the woods or the waiting weren't

especially inspiring to one who had to mostly slosh around in the rain and mud of a sloping-forest clear-cut, grappling with chokers and the pliant contortions of myriad limbs that in apparent vengeance, at least indifference, bucked the saw that felled the log more readily and easily than the saw bucked the felled log the limbs were on. For this was logging. Felling and bucking limbs and logs. And thinking things was mostly a reaction to boredom and frustration and to the little defeats that confronted loggers smack in the face or on the shins until they almost cried tears. Caulk boots and tin hats protected the feet and scalp, but were not much good against rough occurrences to other bodily or mental quadrants. Such occurrences sparked an interest in these contemplations on some vague afterwards of one's outcome for life. Such occurrences always mattered for pointing out that some afterward, no matter how amorphous, was entirely desirable. Even Russia, perhaps.

Usually, however, these contemplations amounted to no more than reflections on the potableness—they'd say that or use the term *potance*—of the next Lucky Lager. In the late afternoon, after the crummie would return them to town, or on the weekends or after dinner in the evenings or just about any time it was open and they were nowhere else, my father and his cronies liked to drink beer, and many times a lot, at the Dippinn Tavern while speculating on the number of timber feet someone would have to buck in order to buy that 1948 Roadmaster parked over at Hoymle’s Texaco service station across the street.

After the war, a new car or newly used car could always be seen for sale at Hoymle's. Cars were becoming increasingly important to Roads. It was a mill town now at a crossroads. Travel and transportation were something of an earmark for the town. Roads was after all mostly at a juncture of three roads. There was the new Highway 99, north and south, and the newly paved Coast Pass, at its origin, meeting just outside Roads. Tourist and trade and a lot of

timber on its way to becoming lumber and then something else were always going through. Roads was connected that way to all the something else timber and trade and tourist became. Roads was a suitable name.

There was Smite River Road, which really had nothing to do with the Smite River, except that it too went to the sea and was there just the same as every road, winding its way away from town, only slowly up into the mountains west and out to the Pacific Ocean from then on. For it wound a hundred miles to the ocean and to a mill on the coast. The loggers on the mountain west of Roads had made the road go that far from Roads when the only mill was as far away as the ocean.

Until after the war Smite River Road was unpaved. In many of its parts it was one way, a trail of two parallel lines of wooden planks giving right of way to only one direction—the way the logging trucks were going. If perchance a hapless traveler should meet head on one of these trucks, there was never a challenge. And many times such a meeting occurred. The hapless traveler by and by, unable to back away, would stick his car or her car—there was no discrimination of the sexes either—like a pounded spike into the brush and mud of the mountain side. Later, trucks going the other way winched the car free and righted it onto the road. Nothing was ever said. That was just the way it was.

After the war, after pavement, Smite River Road became more of a challenge as it still went out to the ocean and to the mill on the coast. For Roads now had a mill and traffic and timber went both ways down both sides of the mountain all the time.

So north and south and west and even parts east were connected at Roads. Buses and cars and trucks were always coming and going, meeting briefly in the turns and stops they encountered or daily sought at Roads. Even trains ran passengers and freight, going north or

south on a railroad through the center of town. To it all, people generally waved as the train passed or waited till it finished at its stops. For Roads was busy, but not yet out of wont to lie closely by, sometimes shoulder to shoulder, like the tracks and roads it connected and see all the traffic go closely by. To it all, Roads had little to do that was better in its way.

Nor was Roads out of wont to be like its oldest ways of all: its confluence of streams that, on their way to the Pacific Ocean, were connecting at Roads and becoming a river. Pike creek, for one, snaked its shallow, narrow way from the north off Gunter Mountain. It broke quickly into little falls and bounding, rolling purls most of its way down. Then four or five miles from its juncture with another creek it slowly cut its way straight along the west end of the small valley Roads was in. For part of this distance, Highway 99 followed the river's path on into town. So, too, did the railroad go along this path. It was a path from which a traveler could see the squares and rectangles and rows of berry and bean farming in the flats of this small valley. From the south of town, down from Wooley Mountain, Paint Creek traversed more easternly than Pike the remaining length of the valley and marked for 99 and the railroad the path on which they simultaneously entered and departed Roads. Another creek cut straight across from the east, meeting up with Pike and Paint at the northern outskirts of town, whereupon they emerged as the Smite River. Along this river, you could travel to the coast on what else but the Coast Pass, a road constructed and paved during the war. War materiel for ocean defenses required it. And Roads was there connecting the rails and roads and streams to one another. It connected other roads to other ways, too.

But it was not always so. And it is not Roads, Oregon, because of these ways of connecting roads and streams and rails. It was always called Roads, of course. I mean, its founder gave the place this name, but not the name it has. You see, a hundred years before my

mother and father met, two others met in the same spot. It is Roads, Oregon, because of them. And much to their surprise and disappointment, I expect, it is Roads, Oregon, in spite of them.

In 1848, the year Oregon became a territory, a seemingly wealthy Lemuel Pyke, originally of somewhere East, acquired—how is not certain, for he came to be there from having spent some time in California—the track of land that has become Roads. He brought with him several oxen and four Conestogas laden with tools for cutting, a salt box of beef and several tubs of California-made Dutch cheese, and he wished to build a town; why is not certain. There were no roads to speak of, just some wagon trails. Perhaps it was to get some roads that he wanted a town.

He lobbied hard the three families of squatters living nearby in the valley and expanded upon the trails that joined them one to the other. Then he put up a small building for a school and announced that he had been corresponding for a school teacher, certain that this would make a town. He'd be preacher if one were needed, for he'd had bible learning, he exclaimed with a bit of fire and brimstone in his voice. A church could come later. But a school was the thing that would make the town. I don't know whether the squatters believed him. I don't even know whether they hung around long enough to find out. More than likely, they pulled up stakes as soon as he informed them that this was his land and he was going to make it a town.

Anna Payne must have believed him, though. She was the one he was writing, who he said was from Maine. She was young and strong, learned of letters and adventurous enough to want to establish a school out West. Lemuel had already sent her fare for the voyage around South America, having admonished her to come immediately. It was the summer and after harvest the school would be ready to begin.

When she came, she was beautiful. It was November and sunny, and Lemuel decided to

name the town Rhodes, for he professed that Anna was truly the daughter of the sun—it being November in Oregon. Forever, Helios would shine upon this spot of earth so long as Anna was there. And so it might have been.

They, of course, married, Anna professing that Lemuel was a kind benefactor. The small building at first became their home and the school did not really open until after 1851. There was too much else to do to build a town. And Lemuel didn't end up preaching after all. It seems Anna did some of that, too, until, that is, Rhodes became a real town and real preachers arrived with their congregations in tow.

Still, it was Anna and Lemuel's town, in ways their family, and for twenty-four years they reigned childless in Rhodes while there was a statehood achieved for Oregon and a town grown up around them. Even Lemuel's roads—for he had completed expansion upon the trails, even some deer trails, in and out of the area—became the conduits in an out of Rhodes.

Then in 1872, the Oregon-California Railroad came through, a certain boon for any town except Lemuel and Anna's Rhodes. Not that the town couldn't or wouldn't prosper, just that in Lemuel's enthusiastic pace to hurry up and build a town, marry, and let it grow and be grown he had neglected, it seems, to proof some seemingly unimportant and tedious documents he had filed away in 1857. That was the year Oregon had become a state and begun the process of finding and registering all its towns and townships into its new system of state government. For Lemuel that meant a bothersome thirty-five mile trip to the county seat and an interview with the newly appointed county clerk, whom he did not know and, at last, came to loath. Nor, apparently, did the clerk know Lemuel Pyke or his town and, when told its name, said nothing at all, but scribbled something down in the large book that was always opened the span of the clerk's entire desktop.

The desk was a typical clerk's desk, sloped and angled for the best possible attitude for writing things down. It served as counter, too, and at its edge facing the door bore a flat, level surface over which visits from those like Lemuel Pyke could be conducted. The man Lemuel Pyke met that day, apparently always seated on a stool, was also sloped and angled for the best possible attitude for writing things down. He was a big man and hovered over his book in agitation as he scribbled into it. If you can imagine it, his pen seemed to screech, but softly, as he scratch the tip of his quill across the page. Very little in the way of noise or conversation came from him.

Lemuel was not as big as the clerk and was civil and willing, even wishing, to exchange amenities, though he wished to growl for the tediousness of this task and the displeasing loam-like smell and color and overall disposition of this worm charged with the upkeep of the county's record book. It apparently was the registry where the names of all the county's towns became official. Lemuel stood throughout the session without a thought to the man's accuracy, only to his inadequacy and, of course, to his size and demeanor.

The clerk finally scribbled some more on a form he pitched without ceremony to Lemuel and bid—I almost said bit—him a good day, eager to move on, I suppose, to the next applicant for his services. It may as well have been, as it turns out, goodbye.

The Oregon-California Railroad went by the book—the county clerk's book—and, in lying down track in Rhodes, in 1872, declared that the town was Roads, the official records say it's so, and their schedules and station markers would do likewise. In a panic, Anna and Lemuel found the form the clerk had fifteen years earlier made for them and realized the Railroad was right. It said Roads. That's how it had been written. The panic was over. It was, of course, November and rainy.

So the wheels of a carriage sloshed through the gravel that had been laid close by and around the depot and, in its uneven grade, sopped with puddles of rain. The noise of the wheels in the gravel competed with the noise of the rain as it splattered and crashed, splintering, on the ground nearby. Anna and Lemuel climbed out of the carriage and into the waiting train. They had only that morning sold everything, the carriage included, to a burly railroad man who liked the idea of the town's new name. They were boarding the first train to run the rails since the Oregon-California had completed lying them down. And they were on their way to nowhere it seems. Some say they went to California or back to Anna's Maine. No matter. They waved goodbye to no one in particular—perhaps even meant to say it—and were gone.

So Roads it was and not quite eighty years later, when after two big wars, after pavement, even after a few beers at the Dippinn Tavern, maybe after thumbing through and shelling a fistful of those roasted, salted peanuts kept in a bowl on the counter just for talking and eating, maybe after all that was said and done, gasoline was more and more important to everyone at Roads than its founders disappointment. In fact, gasoline was very nearly reverent.

Whenever anyone spoke of it or said, "Seems like we wouldn't have got far without a can of gas now and then," everyone would always quietly agree, hunched and bowed at the shoulders, nodding their heads, almost nervously chipping away at peanut shells with their fingers, as if Dippinn were a church and they were there for some good, resourceful prayer. For, by now, everyone had a story from this war or the last—sometimes even from the next war. They weren't stories about the wars, but about gasoline. They were either running out of it or scrambling somewhere to get it. Devoting themselves to a week of walking and hitching rides when they had only a little gas in order to have enough to make that trip to the coast on that new highway. They were even wont to bringing out a mule from somebody's farm to skit logs or

even haul them to the mill and maybe also tow somebody whose car had finally run out of gas.

My favorite has always been the Boddie Saylor story. Dad used to tell it to Mom; Mom used to scream, and Dad would laugh a little, too, in the telling of it.

"Boddie Saylor wasn't old, but he wasn't young. He was just somewhere in the middle, and, whenever he did something, he did it kind of smart like he was old and kind of dumb like he was young. He had him a bit of land up on Gunter and traded in timber rights. So he had him a bit of money, too. Cut him a landing for a house on the side of the mountain by the road. Only, he wasn't smart about it. He cut his landing below the road and had his drive down from the road. It was a steep drive, too, and narrow.

"And he had an old Chevrolet, a four-door, that got him around fine. A 1935 sedan that managed that narrow drive. With the war he couldn't get as much gas as he'd like. Had him a A-sticker on his windshield, though. Trading timber rights didn't get no better gasoline. One day he run out up on the Smite River Road on his way into town. There weren't no mule goin' pull him, either. And he didn't have rations for more, so he walked down on into town and caught a the train to Eugene. There he bought another car from this car lot that always promised to sell its cars with a full tank of gas. Had a C-sticker, too. Must of been some kind of black market. I dunno. The car must of cost him more than it costs when it was new. It was a clunker, though. It was a Packard, a four-door.

"Well, Boddie drove it home. Went right on past the Chevrolet he had left on the road where it'd run out of gas. The next week, he run that Packard into a hole, and snap went the shaft right at the U-joint. It was right there on that narrow drive of his.

"He walked on down to town. Twelve miles down that mountain. He walked right past that old Chevrolet of his, still setting right where he had run out of gas. He was cussing a little

when he got me and Wilburt Stebby. We were set in under that big old tree ‘cross the tracks from school having our lunch and wondering if we should go on back to school. I kind of thought it wouldn’t hurt, this being Wilburt’s last year.

“But Boddie came walking up to us and says, ‘You got your car, Boys.’

“‘What’s up, Boddie?’ Wilburt ask. We was still setting, still mulling about school.

“‘I got five dollars for you if you got a car to get up on my place and move an old Packard piece of shit off my road’ was all he had to say.

“‘We got John Purinee’s Chrysler,’ Wilburt said. We were up on our feet brushing ourself from the grass and gravel we’d been setting on. ‘It runs rough up on the mountain,’ Wilburt was explaining. Had that big smile on his face, too. ‘But it’ll get there. Sure enough for five dollars.’

“John was away in Europe or Italy or something, driving that army jeep he used to tell about. He’d been gone for nearly a year. Left his mother’s old ‘31 Chrysler at Hoymle’s and said it’d be okay to run it once in a while. Only, look out that its carburetor don’t start on fire, especially out in the woods. It was running kind of funny and firing a bit. Said his mother wouldn’t drive it no more. That was when he left—she being dead by the time we was talking to Boddie.

“Boddie didn’t care. Told us he’d be at Hoymle’s waiting. He needed a can of gas, and we could drop him at his Chevrolet on the way up. He gave us the five dollars and we beat it over to that Chrysler. Didn’t even give school another thought. Grabbed the rest of our lunch, though. Thought we could eat going to Boddie’s place.

“‘Just anywhere down the mountain,’ Boddie said getting out of the car with his can of gas when he got up to his Chevrolet. It was still right where he’d left it. He handed us another

five dollars and patted the top of that Chrysler. It was just like he was giving us the final go. He was grinning like he'd just won something. 'Just anywhere, Boys. I don't care.'

"We pushed that old Packard off the drive and watched it slide until it stuck between some alders. It wasn't very far down, but it was just anywhere like Boddie said. So we went on back to Hoymle's. Boddie was there getting his Chevrolet fixed up with more gasoline. He gave us another five dollars when he seen us and told us he wished that he'd saved that gas out of the Packard. It was the only thing he bought the thing for.

"When he'd got his ration full of gas, he took his Chevrolet and, I guess, went after the gasoline in the Packard. Crashed him and that Chevrolet down beside it trying to back up as close as he could to the edge of his drive. Made it up to the road, but not much farther. The crash had cut his head open. Bled down on the road walking toward town until he'd bled everything out. Ran out of his own gas that time. Had nearly a full tank of gas in that Chevrolet. Someone finally did get that out. Next to nothing was left in the Packard when it went over the ledge. Wilburt and I were sure of that. Don't know why he was after it. Someone, too, got that sticker on the window. Got its whole windshield. I don't know what else.

"Both cars might still be down there. The brush is so thick you wouldn't see 'em. And wouldn't neither of 'em be, had old Boddie been smarter."

"Maybe," my mother would say. "Boddie's sister lives in that house now and all by herself and doesn't ever have any trouble on that drive. Must have just been the war."

"The drive's been graveled all the way to the house," my father would agree, grabbing at my mother's arm or sleeve with what must have been an attempt at friendliness and fondness.

They would laugh and sometimes I would get a friendly pat on the head, as if I were that Chrysler and Dad were that old Boddie Saylor commissioning me for some kind of go.

Espee would get a little pat on the head, too. I acted out that part of the story. It went over pretty well with her. Sometimes, as if on cue, she would run off excitedly and get her half of the pendant heart before the rest of the story was over and would want to tell me something about Boddie Saylor and Ashley. I'd always pat her on the head again and go on. Ashley understood.

With Espee's mother, it was asinine.

"Why are you acting this way?" she would say.

"Then, forget about Boddie Saylor," I'd go on, Espee's mother shrugging or Espee ogling the pendant as she rolled it in an imaginary weaving through her fingers.

LIED

The red and blue cardboard nickel and dime tokens of war rationing would still show up each time the radio's coin box at the Dippinn was emptied. Their dull, almost silent, tap against the crystalline plink of the real coins spilled across the countertop of the bar was unmistakable. They didn't buy any radio time or anything at all anymore. They especially didn't buy gasoline, if they ever did. People didn't understand about those tokens, not even during the war. They bartered for this and that, not understanding about those things. They understood about that radio in the Dippinn, though. It needed coins to operate—metal coins, not cardboard. No amount of bartering could make it so. Even so, the tokens found their way into the box.

Many in Roads, I guess, would not let go of a last rolls of tokens—not easily, not consciously. Even years after the war, they were mindful of how important these tokens had been and the gasoline they had got—they had gotten—or tried to get. The tokens were, of course, useless in 1948, but must have been collectable. They must have been buried as keepsakes in somebody's dungarees pocket. Only, when fumbling with one hand through the coins in the pocket while clutching a bottle of Lucky Lager in the other hand—many in Roads were mindful of spilling their beer, too—a token would be mistaken for a dime or nickel and slid into the slot for the twenty minutes of radio. I suppose the thoughts were often on something else, not really understanding about these tokens. And I suppose the slot was a kind of offertory, a money plate, the Dippinn being for many their only church.

The music, though, never played, and some kind of mantra of gnashed expletives would take its place until somebody would realize a real coin would have to be dug up if there were going to be music. The token, were it a token, was simply wrong. Still, there was no mistaking it. Tokens were gotten like the gasoline during the war and, even after the war, like the gasoline,

not let go of easily, the occasional mistake notwithstanding.

But unlike the gasoline, I suppose one would have to admit that the tokens were becoming less and less important to Road. Maybe a few of those tokens got in that radio box not by mistake. And one would have to admit that Hoymle's Texaco gasoline was just as important as it had always been—maybe more so because by then it was easier to get and to get to. It fueled the car without rationing. A car needs fuel with or without rationing. Boddie Saylor obviously knew that. And there was no rationing anymore. No stickers. No waiting. It was very easy to get in and out. The war was over.

I guess it was really the car that was more and more important. Hoylme's Texaco was a good car place. It was right across the street from the Dippinn, which was right there on the corner, which was right there by the bridge that went across the Smite River to hook up with the Coastal Pass and the way south down the 99. The Dippinn was, of course, right there on the corner of the way 99 went north. Hoymle's was there, too, across the street and could take care of a car. And taking care of the car was often just about the most important subject of conversation and the object of concern to be found in the Dippinn on any day. Just about. So it was very important that the ancillary Holyme's Texaco would be right across from the Dippinn Cathedral.

Feed it and find it shelter was a litany in the Dippinn. They were praying at the bar. It was that kind of service for the soul that steadies a body for things like the car. For things they could see. And they could see Holyme's and all the ways to go and ways of going just right out the window. An old pale-green Chevy pickup would go by or stop for gas and water. And that was normal. It would have dinks and rusted wrinkles that looked like scabs in its fenders and doors and displays of mud and greasy black crusts of some kind of labor splattered and smeared

on the hood and on the gangly spouted drums of oil in its bed. It would sometimes have somebody sitting in the back and hanging over its dented tailgate. And that was normal. Two loggers, wearing fresh caps to match their clean denim coats and dungarees, sporting new caulk boots that they stamped and scraped onto the wooden platform holding the gas pumps, would have jumped out of another, newer truck to hurry up and help themselves. It was spring and it would be raining. And that was normal. They would, of course, just stand there fidgeting, muddled by the kinds of pumps they couldn't figure out until help arrived.

You could see this through the window or from the sidewalk just outside the Dippinn. A figure in an army-green poncho might stand up from where he was sitting in the doorway of Holyme's garage and walk out to the men and their truck. By that time, the two were probably clutching the nozzles in their hands and tugging at the hoses to get the things to go. John Purinee would crank the crank for the gas pump, filling it up, and turn the spigot on for the water.

"She's all yours," he'd tell the two men.

And they would hurry up and go, settling on John what they owed. They would be across the bridge before John had settled down again, or, maybe, had sauntered through the rain for the service in the church that was on the other side of the window in the Dippinn Tavern. That was normal, too.

Heavy trucks passed and sometimes a Pontiac sedan or a Town & Country pulled up to use the restroom. Somebody or somebody's kids would run around to the back of Hoylme's where restrooms were. John would surely make his way across the street then, having always left the restrooms unlocked. And that was normal.

Normal, too, was the parked car for sale that John was supposed to talk about, or the wash that Hoymle's could give your car. Everybody my father knew washed his car every

spring. They talked about getting it a mate. That Roadmaster John could say this and that about, and would, too. But mostly they talked about getting their cars clean, for the war had changed a lot for quite a few in Roads, and, every spring since the war, washing the car now took on a certain prominence and promise in the minds of everybody, especially everybody at the Dippinn. Like the spring's rich green contrast from the winter's pale of the fields and forests around Roads, a washed car was a necessary part of outcomes, especially in the spring when coming and going was easier—the weather permitting, my father would say. If you had a car, that is, in the spring you could make it sparkle. John Purinee used to say that.

And if you had your own car, not like that Roadmaster you were always spying, that new one out the door and across the street that you were always wishing for and dreaming of, if you had your own car, you also wanted another. It would have to be a V-8, lots of chrome, a radio, tuck and roll on the seats. It could sure get you where you're going, and fast. You could see the whitewalls. So you washed yours and you fed it. You made it sparkle, especially when it was raining and the sun was shining, and you cared for it and got it where you were going. And still you looked at that new one, which was, after all, just that other one. If you could afford it, you could take it as a mate for the one you had. You wouldn't use it but just for Sunday driving, mind you. You could have it washed and waxed for you for the spring, if you felt like paying for the service. That is, if you could pay for it. You could look at that other one across the street for free, though.

"The boss won't allow any testing driving," John tells his listeners at the bar, "less you put down somethin'. He says you'll knowd without driving if you want it."

With enough Lucky Lagers, it could be had easy. A couple of times somebody did go over there and kick those tires and swing open that door and fit right into the Roadmaster that

Hoymle's had parked across the street from the Dippinn. Easy.

Only, getting a mate was never that easy. And, now, we're not talking just about cars. Lucky Lagers and peanuts, shelling and chomping, cracking bits of the shell between the index finger and thumb of one hand, swigging and leaning and sometimes rocking where one set the beer down after slaking what was always a fresh idea were the mainstays of talking about that other car and talking about looking that other one over the way John said.

Seldom did the eyes meet. They were usually looking off out the Dippinn's dark window or paying mind to what was swirling around inside. And only ever were clinking bottles and peanut shells and cigarettes and smoke, I guess, and bits of snapping sounds from the pool table or the buzzing music from the Dippinn's radio swirling around. There was talk, of course, but it mostly wasn't real. And there was laughter and coins spilling on the counter. And there was always that dark window to see when John Purinee would come in and make it all seem so real. He was, after all, a great fixer upper.

John Purinee's boss was Ben Hoymle, the owner and most times chief mechanic at the Texaco service station. John was supposed to be his chief mechanic. Hoymle had hired John to pump gas in 1942. Contrary to anyone's sensibilities about rationing, the war effort in Roads was actually keeping the Texaco pretty busy. Fuel was scarce, of course, but there was no shortage of people looking for it. Cars and chainsaws, pickups and chainsaws, and once in a while a kerosene lamp waited in line for Texaco's gasoline, and Ben Hoymle sought out John for the job of helping with all the extra business. He knew John's mother or something like that. She was always parking her car at Hoymle's. Anyway, it seemed that, now that there was less gasoline to be had, more people wanted more gasoline than had ever needed it, and Ben Hoymle needed couldn't be bothered.

He was a tall man, probably no taller than 5'9", but liked to wear boots with heavy, thick soles. Because of his baldness he also liked to wear big hats with rounded crowns and wide brims, making him look as though he were a six-footer. For his crook nose and pince-nez, he looked a little like Woodrow Wilson in the face, something he attributed to his Indian heritage, for he claimed to be one of the last of the Kalapuya Indians. Why, even his name derived from the Kalapuyan word for today or thereabouts. He exchanged the pince-nez for more traditional wire-rims when Truman became president.

John Purinee was seventeen and still in high school when his mother recommended him to Hoymle for a job. It seemed a perfect fit; Hoymle needed someone and John Purinee could sneak a little gas here and there. He could get to use his mother's car that way. Sometimes all the way to Portland where he knew a girl who had once come through Roads with her family and had stopped for gas. A little gas always remained in the hoses after a customer had left, and John had a tin can beneath a loose board at the base of the pumps where he could pour out and keep that extra gas until he needed it. Hoymle never seemed to catch on what John was doing, or didn't seem to mind. He liked Mrs. Purinee a lot, I guess. He caught on though after John was drafted in his eighteenth year. Ben Hoymle then used John's can to keep gas that he could sell later on to other customers, the ones that were especially desperate, I suspect. Boddie Saylor should have known about that.

And Holyme kept John's job for him until after the war was over. He must have liked his mother an awful lot. He grieved the same as John when she died not three months after John had left for army training. He was the one who cabled the boy to come home. Of course, it was in requesting leave for coming back for the funeral that John had let it slip that he had worked in a garage and would be going back to it after the war, that he was going to this garage to see about

some of his mother's things, his dad having been dead many years. Without that slip, who knows. It could be that that movie would have gone right on playing and my mother and father would never have met, their meeting having never been thought out for happening in any other way.

"It could be that they would have met anyway," Jancee was always quick to point out, chomping on carrot sticks by now.

Still, on his return to base he was immediately shipped off to Europe, getting for himself a sergeant's stripes and a jeep to ferry brass around.

"There was a need for that," he used to say.

Sitting around a jeep most every day of the war, he had matured his fancy for cars and engines and the gasoline to run them into a skill for repairing all kinds of mechanical things. When Ben Hoymle found this out, he not only gave John back his old job, but he pronounced him general, presenting him with a little bit of fanfare, a great big handshake, and a green envelope-shaped service cap with a star—a Texaco star—on it. John was to be the new chief mechanic.

He thanked Ben Hoymle and fixed up his mother's old car. Then went off to a vacation in Portland where he traded for another car and married another girl he'd met there. It was a girl Ben Hoymle didn't much take to. And things got only worse for John Purinee thereafter.

It could be that he had always wanted to be somewhere else or that the coming changes came too fast. It was probably that he just liked to fix things up, that he liked it when things could be fixed up. And there seemed to be no way he was going to fix up the problem that now presented itself between his wife and Ben Hoymle. She wouldn't park her car at the service station ever, wouldn't even buy her gasoline there. She'd drive to Eugene, sometimes as far

away as Portland, it seemed, for her car. John would shrug.

"She's got a Buick dealer up there in Eugene that knows her car," he'd tell Ben.

Ben Hoymle knew the dealer, too, told him he had a garage for cars in Roads. Then he made some kind of arrangement of his own with this car dealership to park one of a new line of cars out in front of his garage. Maybe that'd get John's wife down to park her car in Roads where she belonged. Ben Holyme's expression was just a figure of speech; the idea wasn't new or wild or to be taken for any kind of offense, but John knew what he meant.

That Hoymle operated an auto-repair shop had little to do with the car dealer's consignment of cars. Where John Purinee's wife parked her car seemed to have little to do with it either. It seems the dealer had noticed the Dippinn across the street once while filling up on his way through town, talked it over with John's wife, and felt that there was no better place to advertise a new car than in plain sight of those whose pockets may be as proportionally empty as their bladders are full, but whose desires and passions do the talking and the buying (albeit on credit) when properly stimulated and otherwise egged on by similarly inebriated companions.

In short, the war had changed a lot and almost nothing. There was no amount of money could buy a new car during the war. They couldn't be had. Not even through rationing. They weren't being made. Used cars were scarce as well or untrustworthy. People didn't generally let go of a car unless it was worthless or out of gas. And, then, they cost a lot. Boddie Saylor should have known that. Now, there was still no amount of money could buy a new car—not here in Roads, not with prices the way they were. But it was very easy to get a car. A person didn't need the money; needed only the will and a place like Roads where the Dippinn Tavern set across from a place like Hoymle's. The dealer recognized that, and knew all about credit. And he must have been on to something. A couple of new Roadmasters went around in town,

stopping occasionally at Hoymle's where they had been first spotted.

Holyme eventually asserted his own advantage and opportunity for selling cars and by 1952 had turned his service station into a car lot, giving up selling gasoline. Seven years later, he tried his hand at selling hamburgers. But not giving up on cars altogether, he called them Pontiac hamburgers. Then he died. His stand eventually became a 7-11, which started selling gasoline again. Mom and Dad, however they liked Hoymle, never got over John Purinee.

"Poor John," my mother would always say. "Sad he didn't get more."

"Poof," my father would respond and not another word.

They went up the street to the other corner at the end of town for their cars, for their gasoline, for their groceries, where, having been displaced by Hoymle, John Purinee's wife and the dealer from Eugene had turned one of the town's other gas stations into a supermarket that sold Fords. But that was a long ways off from 1948 and John Purinee and his army-green poncho working their way across the road to the Dippinn Tavern.

After the decision about the brand of beer he'd have was settled and the kind of car you could see through the tavern window or out the doorway always propped open in the spring, the conversation at the Dippinn would inevitably get past cars. It would get past everything. It could have been about movies, maybe even the one that got my mother and father together, but more than likely it was kind of like the plumes of smoke these men would blow across the bar as they talked and exhaled the Camels and other, different cigarettes with filters. It wrapped around a body carrying one topic or another until everything melded into the noise of one conversation about food or fuel, searching or driving, putting up to rest or repair. And it was, of course, about getting mates. More or different mates for some of them.

They knew who was having trouble, who wasn't, who never has trouble, who always

does. And they knew about last Saturday night and how they had followed him drunk and this girl drunk going out of town. They recalled loudly how they went up Gunter on the Smite River Road and weaved as he had weaved very close to the edge of that mountain road and laughed out loud that he'd taken all those chances trying to find a spot to put up for a while and still didn't get her. The car got stuck, not on the edge, but in the ditch on the other side of the road close by where Boddie Saylor had been found bleeding to death. Had they not followed, he and his girl would have walked down the mountain that night, probably weaving at first in each other's arms, then snarling and finally mewling and caterwauling like hungry cats as they grew more and more sober for the walk and weaving a few fists at each other.

Everybody laughed how somebody else got her that night, all the more drunk just off the Coastal Pass in a pasture. And how she threw up all that beer in the back seat of a Roadmaster that old Wilburt lately got for himself at Holyme's garage. A pubic hair, they were told, got stuck in a part of her throat. Gonna see her again, even though old Wilburt was.

My mother didn't know any of these kinds of men. She didn't know that any of these kinds of men or women did these kinds of things until my father told her about them. And she'd, of course, scream.

"It could of been old Wilburt telling you, you know," my father would laugh, then squeeze her arm by the shoulder to tickle her with the hand he'd strung around her backside.

She had never been to the Dippinn Tavern before she'd met my father, and, come to think of it, never did go. My father stopped going soon after meeting her and wasn't about to ever take her there.

"Too many loggers for one lady," he would say.

"Too many Lagers!" my mother would correct him and, in what could be feigned

umbrage, wriggle a little bit as if to escape his grasp. But, I suppose, she was really nestling herself closer into his embrace, getting a little bit more of that tickle. I could tell it was fun for them. And I would laugh a little bit, too. I maybe even wriggled closer myself.

"Your mother must have been a real wit," Jancee would eventually contribute to this part of the story. I guess she had had enough of it by now and was making me feel self-conscious of this wriggling. Jancee, of course, was on the other side of the couch—once it was the bed. I'd get angry, but not enough to stop. I generally wriggled away from her, in as much as I was not already away. Eventually, I didn't have to move at all; she would be gone.

But as long as she was there, she would say again: "A real wit."

"Mom was not from around Roads or Oregon." I couldn't think of any other retort. She had grown up in several parts of Montana, the youngest of a widowed school teacher. As for Roads, Oregon, it was just one more small town way out in the middle of somewhere that needed that widowed school teacher. My grandmother was fifty-five in 1948 and had come to Roads only that winter. A replacement in home economics was needed at the high school.

Like so many others during the war, she had uprooted her home and what was left of her family—meaning my mother—and had come west to Oregon's shipyards and the promise of a good-paying job. It wasn't really like uprooting. For the fifteen years prior to this move, she and her family lived in one place never longer than thirteen months. Planting roots somewhere didn't actually ever happen, and, consequently, neither did their uprooting.

Teaching jobs were hard to come by for my grandmother in Montana, and hard to keep. All things being equal, she hadn't any real degree, just a need to get whatever work she could get. And, having had more schooling than a lot of the widows in Montana, teaching was what she could get most of. So she usually took those teaching jobs that didn't require a real degree,

but needed temporarily and desperately someone perhaps a little more willing than others to set up house out back behind the school in a tiny, one room, but pleasant and cozy shack—somebody who wouldn't mind lighting the stove in the school in the morning and sweeping it out at week's end, maybe even wash the floor and the windows once in a while.

The war had changed these conditions a little. My grandmother found that she could garner bigger salaries and bigger, warmer housing in 1942. She even found that by 1944 her correspondence lessons in education with the University of Montana had resulted in a real teaching credential in home economics—a real degree to come after several more years of study. She was fifty-one by then, and a better-paying job, better paying than she had ever dreamed, lured her to the coast. It was in the shipyards in assembly. She could even put my mother in college and keep her there until, that is, the war finally ended and all that assembly of ships ended and she was looking for somewhere to teach, if only temporarily.

And it was all temporarily. At fifty-three she was teaching at Alsea and coaching girls basketball besides. It was an okay season. At fifty-four, she and my mother, when my mother was home from school and not looking for temporary work herself, were at Siletz and staying in a camping trailer the high school had at its disposal. Roads beckoned when its high school principal realized in January that from as long ago as the previous September his home economics teacher was not just getting fat, and had little prospect, although—as he saw it, a great need—for getting a husband. It could have been she would have married well had he let her stay and would have raised a fine son or daughter, but not in 1948 and not in Roads. Those kinds of movies weren't out yet.

By that time, my mother was twenty-one. It was her fourth year in college, and she wanted to drop out. She had studied pharmacy, then teaching. In her last semester, she enrolled

in only music classes. The move to Roads had settled it. She couldn't teach, wouldn't be a teacher, she had told my grandmother. She couldn't keep coming back on weekends. Besides, she had gotten a line on a job typing letters and logging records of student enrollment and achievement for one of the professors of medicine at the University in Eugene. It would be all she could do. College had become too expensive and, if her mother hadn't noticed, she was becoming idle, taking up smoking on weekends and nail polishing, going on drives in my grandmother's car. She couldn't even cook; the room was so small wherever they were. And her mother did want her to cook. At last, my mother, or maybe it was her mother, was pondering what it would take to become a nun. This she especially remembers talking about with my grandmother and remembers her mother told her in a rather supercilious way to take the job in Eugene. She remembers she told her to get a place up there close to work and to give her own self plenty of time to look.

You see, my mother's mother was churlish, having been widowed and put on hard in life for being a widow in all the places she'd been in the eighteen years since her husband's death. But she was a Catholic, a good Catholic, which meant she had found her a cross to bear, and was careful that offertories of pain and suffering not be observed only for the amorphous sounds that tapped ever so softly, yet inexorably, from the beads of the rosaries she was just as careful to hold in tight, crooked fists whenever she prayed. She was sure her hands and fingers were always in the shape of her rounded, wrinkled face, her knuckles reflecting the shock of white hair that prematurely, she insisted, had come to color her head. And just as insistent she claimed all these things of her life were inevitable and looked down upon her daughter with steel eyes. My grandmother stood upright, accordingly, and didn't pray for much for herself. Aside from better wages and hours and sleeping conditions, she sought little promise in this life. She used to say it

was nothing if not Irish to pray and live this way. But she had married English, uttering the word in her own kind of Irish to pray and to mean that, in those days, a body went where his own self could get work. So she rarely, if ever, prayed about her own self. And going thirty or forty miles a day was something a body could be glad to do, Irish or English.

By this she meant, of course, my mother, who was, of all things, Irish and English. And Eugene was thirty or forty miles away. So my mother should be in no hurry to find a place close by the University, working as a secretary for a college professor. She should be glad to take the Greyhound that stopped every morning going north through Roads and returning every evening going south. She should be glad, that is, to stay that close to her mother—that is, until my Irish Catholic grandmother realized that the bus stopped in Roads at Hoymle's service station.

Hoymle had made another deal, it seems. This time with Greyhound. He sold regular fares during the day to anywhere Greyhounds go. He also sold discounts to regulars whenever he could and the opposite to anyone else whenever he could. By regulars he meant, of course, anyone he knew and was owed for something else. He almost never meant anyone who loved and knew him and he loved. Ben Hoymle didn't mix business with the heart that way. It was too easy not to make money. It all worked out his way, and at 5:25 every weekday morning before the station had opened the bus would roll into Hoymle's lot and stop between the pumps and the street to gather up what passengers were standing under the eaves at the Texaco. There were usually two or three, ever so often more when there were regulars to get on board on their way to Eugene, usually, or as far as Salem.

Anybody to, say, as far as Portland didn't bother with a bus, not usually. Anyone going that far or for that reason had a car or knew how to get one or just took the train for such trips out of Roads. The bus was good for coming back, though, from anywhere. And at 6:55 in the

evening it did just that.

So waiting for the bus at the service station was always a student on his way to classes at the University. There were sometimes shoppers or visitors, and there was my mother on her way to work in an office. It could be that, when there were three, all three would smoke, although they were icy forms of steel and other kinds of still pictures. Smoking would have seemed natural, especially for my mother, because, however many there were, they were usually frozen. Alone and combating elements of typical predawn mornings. Alone. Except for the gray clouds of slow, laden plumes of air that they exhaled constantly from their lips and nostrils in great puffs, they would have been perfectly still. I imagine they were like statues formed in the haze of the dissipating swaths of their own breath. But, of course, it was that they were only becoming cold and frosted and kept an arm folded across the breast to cinch the lapels of their raincoats closed with one cold hand. They were fighting those elements. And, with the other hand, they grasped an item of their personal effects to steady it on its mound of other baggage or to keep it close by were it the only item they would carry. And they kept it out of the rain, and, most of all, kept it ready as they kept ready and quite still. For their part, they were always silent until they could settle into the bus and out from under the eaves and the dank, dark, cold place they had had to wait in. They were fighting those elements, too.

The loggers who always also waited at Hoylme's for their crummie to pull up stood away from the eaves and by the pumps where it was colder and joked and laughed in stiff peristaltic motions of real smoking or chewing and spitting tobacco juice or phlegm into the rain. They were always moving and wet, and there was usually a half a dozen or so of them, fighting only boredom, I suppose. In those days, my mother used to tell me, you went where you could get work and commuting thirty miles or more past a few wet, rude loggers was something she was

glad to do. She didn't mind the wait or the loggers. She didn't really notice, come to think of it. The loggers didn't ever pay her any attention. Perhaps they didn't notice each other.

Only, a few weeks prior to meeting my father, she had given notice to her mother that she was moving completely to Eugene where she could live closer to her work, way past those loggers she claims she never noticed. Her mother, I recall being told, agreed that Roads was, after all, no place to keep a young single woman, especially since the bus on which my mother rode to Eugene made its stops at Hoymle's Texaco right across the street from that bar frequented by the same loggers who frequented Hoymle's service station every morning just before six o'clock. Everything in Roads seemed to revolve around Holyme's Texaco service station, my grandmother seemed to think. And Holyme's seemed to revolve around that bar. Even that movie or that movie house, neither of which my mother or father seemed to remember noticing at the time, for my grandmother's sake I now imagine, revolved around that bar.

My grandmother was an Irish widow of a Montana wheat farmer, who in addition to farming had also been known, while he was still alive, to drive a truck for a living, hauling grain or coal or whatever was needed and profitable. Her own Irish father, chased out of his native Ireland by the law because he and another youth had robbed a grave, had been a sometimes sailor and a sometimes tarrier on the railroad before settling down to his own farming in North Dakota. So it was not without reason that my grandmother frequently admonished my mother against cavorting with railroad men, sailors, loggers, and farmhands (truck drivers were probably included in there just to be safe). They were nasty sorts and crass, too, not to mention the profanity and, of course, the wiggling and expectorating they could do when just idling. My mother and father weren't quite sure what that was, but they were sure my grandmother was sure, so they didn't work too hard to find out.

I guess they knew what my grandmother thought about working too hard. Sailors, railroaders, loggers, even farmhands all worked too hard and had lost sight of moral values, grandma believed. She believed this because she had been told as much by her father, at last a romantic Irishman, who regretted finally having left too much behind in tarrying as far as he had come in life in all the categories of employment he would admonished his own daughter to avoid.

This was perhaps my mother's favorite part of the story. She would reach into my father's shirt pocket and help herself to a slightly bent Camel. Both ends of the cigarette looked the same, for it had no filter, and for years I puzzled over how she knew which end to light. She had a method, though. Rolling it between the table and her fingers, she would straighten it out and smooth the wrinkles in the paper. Then, before she placed it between her lips to light it and draw a breath, she would tap one end, the end she put into her mouth, on her wrist. I suppose she was combating some kind of elements there, too. She would look dreamily off in no particular direction or at any particular thing, then roll her head, rocking it slightly as she did this, over toward my father. Gradually, she would laugh and cough in rasps of exhaling smoke and gurgling phlegm and say nothing for an awfully long time. She would keep still dreamily. Often, her eyes would water.

"Your grandma," she would eventually admit with the smoke she was exhaling, "passed on to me what grandpa passed on to her, but then he had also warned her about the company of Englishmen and their independence."

I think somewhere along the way the story changed from "descendants" to "dependants." My mother's take on it changed it even further from "dependence" to "independence." For Grandma went right out and married a Bradley Brewster. Brigid Beeney and Bradley Brewster.

She was of the Beeney's that came from County Roscommon in Ireland. He was from a long line vaguely, but definitely, connected to the Separatist Brewsters of Scrooby, England.

"Saw her father only once more. After Daddy died. Grandpa forgave her, too. Then he died. It's about all I remember of the man."

Usually, Jancee Brete isn't very impressed by this information. She's heard this part of the story in a different story, and I suspect that she is having trouble grasping its relevance for this story. But, at least, she would still be with me for a little longer. Espee, on the other hand, used to think this notion about independence was pretty funny and would laugh, kind of the way my mother used to laugh. At the mention of Scrooby she'd tug on my sleave and whisper that Drall liked to watch that cartoon on T.V.

"Daddy," she would interrupt, at first being very serious, her eyes narrowed, staring at nothing, and her brow furrowed affectionately. "He thinks it's so funny. And it scares him. He's not supposed to watch it."

"He likes it so much." Now, she's looking right at me, wide eyed and giggling. "Says so. You know what? Drall always watches it." she adds. "And is always saying 'Scrooby Doo', 'Scrooby Doo' to me. Yuk." Maybe she was just feigning a laugh the way kids will sometimes do.

"Scooby Doo," I corrected her. Then, we both laughed. I didn't have the heart not to. Espee's mother stared at the wall. She knew all about Drall and his mother.

LYING

My mother was beautiful. In pictures I have of her from her college days, she had thick, wavy light brown hair that fell evenly in a single curl along her shoulders and back. When she and Dad met, she was buxom and very slender, about a half a foot shorter than Dad, with a honey complexion. High pronounced cheek bones and an almost straight, slightly Romanesque nose complemented her chameleon-like hazel eyes, which were sometimes green, sometimes brown, but always bright and seemed to have smiled with sparkle when she smiled. Moonlight and my mother's glow emulated one another; she was that beautiful to me. Even though I wished a soft voice had caressed me whenever she spoke, especially in telling me stories, she was that beautiful to me.

But, when I knew her, she smoked one cigarette after another. Her fingers were stained with tobacco, the skin often chafed and cracked at the finger tips. And often her hands were cold and calloused with burns. She was overweight. She was pale and rounded in folds of skin everywhere on her. She was haggard in the face and at thirty-three became toothless. But she could laugh and would decorate a room with her laughter, hiding her fat, though it could jiggle, and hiding the pallor of her face and the smoke of her cigarettes, though both, I suspect, could irritate the eyes. Like her laugh, she wore bright flowers. They decorated the moo-moos she usually wore for the ease with which they would slide over her entire body, popping out from behind the fabric only those parts of her that needed to be seen. Eventually, whenever she smoked, she coughed in what I recall were jags and thrusts of weighty booms and crashes. She frequently coughed from the smoking. Dad and I sometimes coughed from her smoking, too. I remember my eyes burned. Dad generally laughed at these times, hoping, I suspect, to get my mother to laugh, which she usually tried to do. And from all the coughing her voice was often

hoarse until finally her throat made only the sounds of someone walking heavily and slowly on gravel. It was then that she cackled when she laughed. It was then that I heard alder trees in the woods could snap in half with much the same kind of muffled sound. And it was then that I could always hear her breathing.

My mother's maiden name was Connie Brewster. I guess it still is her maiden name. Jancee reminded me of that. It's funny how she is always right. I reminded her right back, however, that my father, Charles Deprentis Drain, exacted a change in my mother's name.

Jancee said, of course, "Of course," and she was right, too.

In the spring of 1948 my mother was ready for a change. Jancee is always right. My mother had had a long-distance romance with an Oscar Owens that, for the train ride clear up to Portland, which was always about 150 miles from Roads, was over. He wasn't serious enough for her, anyway. He was studying law or something, but seemed to care for nothing so great as fly casting.

"What was he doing in a city?" Jancee would complain. "Fly fishing in a city? Are you sure your mother was right about that?"

I think this is where Jancee really begins to lose interest. She is always so goddamn right.

My mother may not have been right about Oscar Owen. She hadn't yet met my father, but she was going to settle then in Eugene and pursue her own career. She couldn't be lonely. Perhaps she could eventually become a nun, as her mother had supposed she herself would do when she had gone against her own father, my great-grandfather, and had gone out and gotten married in 1917 to a Protestant truck-driving English-descent farmhand Bradley Brewster.

You see, my grandmother was so flustered about the consequences of her mating

someone of English Separatists stock that she had assured her husband the threat of being a nun would calm her father and calm her, too. My grandfather, it seems, had to calm her. He pointed out, I'm told, that her father was being calm and rational. Had not the English Cromwell and his Separatists ravished Ireland? Her father, he told her, was disappointed and disdainful, perhaps, but calm. He had good reason to be. My grandfather offered to become Catholic, if it could help ease the tension and dislike. He couldn't or wouldn't do anything about the English heritage or his trade. He also offered that it was a bit difficult to take somebody serious about nunnery when that somebody, meaning my grandmother, of course, was not due to have a divorce anytime soon from him or her Church and would more than likely start having children in just about nine months. It was a Brewster tradition. The rationale just wasn't there for being a nun. My grandmother calmed down, but persisted, and eventually won over her husband. He became Catholic. They lasted twelve years and had only one child. My mother had come not in the first nine months as my grandfather had predicted, but after eight years of trying. No more came, however, as, I suppose, my grandmother had suggested in the way of being as close to nunnery as possible. It was a little like being married to a nun for Grandpa. He died after twelve years, in bed at home, I'm told, from meningitis. He was delirious at the end, too. My mother was only four.

She was probably thinking all these things in the spring of 1948 and that, what with all these things to consider, the prospect of being a nun seemed very logical. She felt she was right about that. In her holiest ways, she could assume the appellation Molly Brigitte, the name of somebody she had played as a child and a name she had always known to be a very suitable name for her, prefaced, of course, by Sister were she really to become a nun.

She always used to play nuns as a girl, dressing up in her mother's clothes that were too

big and perfectly suited to the style of habits—pinafores and sack, plainly stitched button-down denim dresses that could drag across the floor with her in them revealing nothing. She would wear her mother's laced boots from Sears, and bandanas and scarfs to cover the head and sometimes even the face. Her mother used to let her, patiently. Used to play along sometimes, I'm told. And when my mother had wanted to be a pharmacist, too—a fantasy her father had once had for himself—she used to play it in much the same clothes. And that was that. For whatever the fate, Connie Brewster was certain to leave her mother and not dally in Roads, Oregon, with loggers. Not logically.

And she probably would have done so in 1948 had Hoymle's Texaco gas station on Route 99 across from the Dippinn Tavern not employed John Purinee. In the spring of 1948, John Purinee was still pumping gasoline for a living: "Temporary," he was by now always quick to say. He wiped windshields, too, and checked crankcase oil levels, radiators and tires. Occasionally, he changed fan belts and serviced air filters, but more than anything at Hoymle's he pumped gas.

In Europe, in 1945, he served in a different theater of operation. It's funny how soldiers and war aficionados always refer to these times and events as a theater or staging areas, as if it were a play. Come to think of it, it wasn't funny. John Purinee never even cracked a smile after the war, my father said. He'd faced the enemy in little more than a marginal way, but it must have done something to him.

Maybe it was the woman he had seen in Frankfurt. He talked about her. She had been alone kneeling on her two knees and hunched over like a dog, busily scratching at a pile of rubble from a crumpled, bombed-out building when he approached in his jeep. It was morning, probably around eight o'clock. The war was nearly over. It was over just right there. He was

alone, too, and had been on his way to return his jeep to the motor pool, having safely delivered some kind of brass to some kind of meeting. Frankfurt had been destroyed for all he could see, and no one was left in the world in this immensely spoiled spot except for him and this woman.

He immediately stopped, cautious at first, then curious, clearly noting to my mother and father that the world was occupied in other bombed-out spots. Far overhead, a stream of bombers could be heard, the noise of their engines competing with the shoveling this woman was doing with her hands. He looked up for only a moment, uninterested that these noisy formations stretched as far as the horizon toward England or other points west. Then he fixed a long look upon the woman.

It was as if he had fixed desire, too. A yearning after something, perhaps after the same thing the woman scratched for in the pile, perhaps to be that something, both unsettled him and settled on him, as one might imagine an epiphany settles down to hopelessness. It was as if just he and she were left on that spot on the ground. He couldn't have been more than fifteen feet away from her and could barely hear her or hear anything else. But he could see her and could remember things about her vividly all these many years later. He would remember that, but for the matted and frayed white scarf upon her head—a head that could have been shaven or bald for the way the scarf seemed to be stretched smooth and tight against her head—he would have mistaken the woman for a man. She appeared to be a middle-aged woman and wore what appeared to be a soldier's green trench coat; only, it was patched in several places with woolly pieces of the same color cloth as the scarf. The coat had obviously been torn from too much use and resembled, John once said, a stuffing doll coming apart at the seams. For all the patches, it was not readily apparent from which army she had gotten the coat, neither was it apparent that the coat was not hers. The boots on her feet were also shabby and from a soldier, obviously, and

too large and unloosed without laces, revealing bare feet.

She looked up from the pile at John Purinee, cautious perhaps at first, but certainly not curious. Their eyes met only briefly—another one of those ephemeral splashes, I imagine. For, as John Purinee would tell it, she paused just long enough from her digging for him to see her face. It was blackened and slightly streaked in what must have been blood from a wound on her right cheek. Her eyes were wide—perhaps he had said wild—and white with excitement. Then she returned to unearthing something in the pile.

They had met for long enough, John guessed, and he drove on, noticing in his rear view mirror another man approaching, this one on foot and limping. He seemed to know the woman and, after laboriously crawling on his hands and knees up the pile, joined her dig. John could not tell in which army the man belonged or that he was army, and he gradually lost sight of them both as the road turned and they and their pile were no longer in the mirror. But that was war and John Purinee was a sergeant, an NCO charged with driving under all kinds of conditions. My mother smiled. I could tell she was proud.

Before he was sergeant, before he was in the theater of war, he was a corporal. He was training to deliver fuel—to Patton's tanks, he presumed. Then his mother died and Hoymle had written his commander. He wasn't going to be pumping fuel after all. He was going to be driving a jeep. His theater of operations—I guess he even called it that—was mostly around Paris and then some in Frankfurt until he mustered out. He did come under fire once or twice, as he used to recall, but one of those times the fire came from his own side. It was a drunken brawl; he could have meant ball, but he didn't ever elaborate. He didn't ever really talk much about the war except for the one time he mentioned that woman. He did do a lot of driving, he would say, and when not behind the wheel of his jeep or napping, he was in the rear having a drink or

looking for one.

"Paris didn't count for much," he once told my father. "Frankfurt was loaded. Buildings were blasted everywhere and everyone was drinking. Lots of drink."

My mother always noted in a kind of sad way that "that was too bad. Poor John," she would say.

He always saw the war after all the warring, trying to find his way through places on maps that were different from the real place, different from before the war, though John didn't know it. He only knew that markers on the roads were changed or blown up. Crag-like hills that had been towns needed new roads through them, roads the maps didn't show. John saw it as that kind of war, that kind of fight. Drinking seemed to help whenever he had to look up from the road he was driving and check how long it could take to get the nurse or surgeon or chaplain or adjutant or some such other officer to the right location—staging area. He had to make sure he had enough fuel. And he was good. Although John Purinee never said it, Hoymle often spoke of a citation John had earned for all that driving.

"The war made a difference for John Purinee," Mom spoke warily and resolutely of him while Dad nodded his head in apparent agreement, neither of whom at this point would raise their eyes from the table or look on each other or anything really. Dad sometimes tugged at his chin pensively with his thumb and index finger, pinching and rolling the skin.

"Made him an awful big drinker," Mom would add, snapping her head in one quick jerk like a hammer rendering one final and probably unnecessary tap on the nail it was driving, as if to say that was that.

After the war he had gravitated back to Roads and back to what he had done before the war. He wasn't looking for anything different, and it wasn't very different except that before too

long he had gotten him a wife. And Hoymle had begun to give up on him.

So, in the spring of 1948, John was married and still pumping gas. Hoymle was busy making deals, too busy to pump any gas or fool around with anyone's break downs. That was John's department—opening up the place at eight o'clock in the morning and closing it twelve hours later, everyday. And so, everyday he was there or across the street all day long. He had been married now nearly three years, and sometimes he would drive his wife's car into the station to fill the tank, leaving it for her to get later on. Sometimes you would see her drive it in. Other times you would only see her drive it out. Most times you would only see her drive it by. Other than that, you didn't see much of John's wife around Roads. She spent a lot of time in Eugene. He always said that he aspired to a different, more elevated livelihood and that his wife did, too, and that's why you wouldn't see much of her around ever.

A few years later, when John began to sell cars at the new dealership—Holyme having forsaken his gas station and John for a dealership of his own—his wife frequented the place. Then you saw her often. She began, in fact, to sell cars, too. Being a pretty woman with a Gene Tierney kind of overbite and gracefulness in her eyes and a Rosiland Russell kind of penchant for strong arming customers, even arm wrestling them sometimes, she did well selling cars, even better than her husband. I suspect she did well to figure that she was even better than her husband. Eventually, she divorced John Purinee and married the dealer who had coincidentally divorced his wife. John continued to sell cars; a lot of his business, though, was getting done at the Dippinn. Actually, none of his business was getting done at the Dippinn, but John ended up spending most of his time there trying to drum up business just the same.

In the spring of 1948, John Purinee was still married and still only servicing cars at the Texaco across the street from the bar. It was in this gas station that my mother and father met.

First, my mother met John. She used to remember that John was a likable man. He was heavier than when he was in the war, and he was dark. I think that my mother meant that he was serious or kind of sad.

A burgundy stain of no particular shape, at best resembling a cloud or a skewed patch perhaps, a birth mark everyone presumed, including John Purinee, covered the front part of his neck all the way up to the rim of his jaw and chin. With his left hand, he was in the habit of stroking and massaging it where it touched the chin. If ever he was asked, he claimed he didn't think about it, even when he stroked it. It was just a habit. It was as if he were grooming it or pinching it and rolling it like clay to a point, and sometimes, depending how he stroked it, pushed it into a cleft at the center and bottom of his chin—contributing, I suppose, to his being dark, at least being perceived that way. Even his eyes shown in a glimmer of burgundy, though they were rarely clear, my mother recalled. Maybe she was sad that he had that spot and was, well, "getting stretched out and kind of sunburnt looking under the chin. We knew him before he became all bloated on that barstool," she said.

"Might of killed him. Who knows," my father would say in a whisper, looking at me, a bit sad himself.

They weren't, of course, talking about the burgundy skin. And I, of course, wanted to know whether Dad knew something he wanted to reveal, but couldn't. My father's suggestion, were it about the skin, would be something, were that true. In any case, my father wasn't ever very mysterious. Maybe he was just pretending to be sad because my mother was. Mom, on the other hand, was always quick to point out that John Purinee was neat and his hands were usually clean.

"Used to wash his hands in some of the gasoline he kept in a can. He always removed his

cap, talking to me," she would explain. "It was a grease-stained and tattered red Phillies cap that he must have preferred to Ben Hoylme's service cap. I guess Ben didn't mind, either. And even though it shaded his face when there was shade, he removed it around me."

"Stuck his head right inside that old Plymouth. Kept it out the rain, at any rate," my father muttered. "Must of brought in a lot a rain with him."

"He sure liked to talk. And I think he liked to laugh, too," my mother would add, remarking on her first encounter with John Purinee. Dad would nod in agreement. There was much less laughter in their description of John Purinee and their telling of the story at this point. They both were becoming somber and more and more quiet in this part of the telling.

Fuck Jancee. She doesn't know. She couldn't have lasted this far into the story.

"He sure was a talkative fellow," Mom would always say, then say again that "he liked to talk."

She was also sure he had no amorous designs on my mother, being that he was already married. These, I presume, were her nun instincts. But he did like to chat with her whenever she would bring her mother's two-door Plymouth into the station and query her about her social engagements and entanglements. He must have liked to think of life that way. Naturally, my mother was generally coy about her social life, but liked John's inoffensive and unobtrusive way. Those are her words. I suspect she really liked to flirt with him and would, consequently, share with John what she would doubtless have rebuffed from another less amicable or pleasant sort as no one's business but her own. Those nun instincts, of course.

Of course, John Purinee did have a very winning nature and my mother frequently remarks that he might have done quite well at any business had he stuck to pumping gas or, I suppose she means, had Ben Hoymle stuck to selling gas or maybe opened that hamburger place

sooner.

Cigarettes helped him cope, Mom would insist. He could lean in to visit with my mother through the passenger-side window of her mother's Plymouth, grinning and dangling an unlit cigarette on his lower lip. Sometimes the cigarette was even wet from the rain. Sometimes my mother could even ask him for a cigarette—a dry one, of course. And he'd give her one. Unlit. It was a kind of dance, my mother mused. It was nice.

"Seems like we never said goodbye," she once remarked.

My father rejoined in just about the sternest words I recall him ever using: "Seems like we always are."

The change from servicing cars and the people in them to selling them, well, it should have been a way out for John Purinee. That's what Mom thought. It got him only across the street. He eventually settled his life in Roads on a Dippinn barstool and in drinks entirely—what was left of his life.

"He was getting bloated and was all puffed up the very last time I can recall seeing him," Mom told me.

"He was getting to look a lot like that stain on his neck, weren't he?" Dad always added.

There was the Dippinn Tavern men's room, too. He also spent his time in there. And only after a few years from the time that my mother and father met did John Purinee just disappear all of a sudden.

I remember how Espee reacted. It could be very sad. She could get very blue. For a while her sister would have nothing at all to say to her. Espee had nothing at all to report. And when her sister was finally gone, Espee herself would get very quiet. The mystique and all of John Purinee's disappearance would really get her.

"But this isn't about John Purinee," I would tell her, earnestly. That only seemed to make her sadder. When she watched *Lassie, Come Home,* I remember she cried. I had to take her on my lap and calm her. I couldn't explain it to her so that she wouldn't cry, so I held her until she stopped crying. She began crying for John Purinee, and, at last, I had to brush over this part with her. The story wasn't about John.

"He eventually grew smaller and smaller," I would say, making it all seem magical to Espee, not sadder. When she was old enough, it worked. It wasn't sadder.

In fact, as a part of the life in and around Roads, one day someone noticed that John Purinee was not in the bar and had not been for some time. And that was that for him. Nothing spectacular about it. Speculation, in general, on his fate or whereabouts went no further than to remark that someone else was sitting in the stool John had frequented. My father, for some reason, once commented on John Purinee's ability to sleep for days on end like some old badger or something in hibernation. He'd go without food, even though he could still get fatter. And this was even before he was a drunk. But no one much bothered themselves that there was anything spectacular in those feats.

"Once, as kids," my father would begin. He was often just about ready to scrape a second helping of some peas from the serving dish onto his plate where his potatoes had been. He was very careful, I remember. I remember that Mom would always watch him with even more careful eyes, her lips pursed as she did. You could tell she was concerned. But Dad didn't stop. Never needed to:

"We used to play around climbing on the sawdust piles," he would say, speaking slowly and deliberately while he held the dish and scraped out the peas, "out at the CCC mill. It weren't really a mill, but the CCC had camped there and done a lot of sawyering and left this one big

pile."

He'd put the dish down and the story would pick up momentum. "Maybe they trucked it in like a dump. Well, when it was closed no one was there to tell us we couldn't play on it. It was just there in this clearing where the CCC had camped. So we'd sneak off from home. Sometimes we'd even ditch from school the way they do in them movies about kids. John sometimes came along. He was older, of course. We must of been just ten or eleven, maybe younger. We liked to dig. It was sawdust that'd been piled up for years. In one spot a tree was beginning to grow up. That was on the edge. We'd get way up on top. Green ferns were all around, and that one tree. Seemed like a big hill when we was that age. Seemed a lot bigger.

"Wilburt usually brought along a shovel and some old saw blade he'd taken from his old man's shed so we could dig and saw up things. Used to bury things on top the pile of sawdust. Dug down once and found a stump buried. And buried those tools once and couldn't find 'em again. Wilburt didn't seem to care. I kinda didn't care either, 'cept we didn't have nothing to work with now. But, boy, John was rooster mad. Weren't his tools, either. But he was really cussin' at Wilburt.

"'Shoot, Wilburt. You dame fool. They're gonna rust in this sawdust, if we cain't find 'em,' he was saying.

"No. He was yelling." My father showed a puzzled look and set down his fork for a moment in the way of gathering his thoughts.

"Well, we went on home. Wilburt didn't care. Would have got hell from his old man only nobody 'cept John ever did miss them tools, and Wilburt didn't ever tell anyhow they was missing. Of course, the next time we were at the pile—could of been two days later—we found lots of little holes dug here and there and a big hole right in the middle of it going straight down

about what could have been eight or ten feet. And poor old John was right there in the bottom, sleeping. He'd scraped himself out a bed in the bottom of this hole and was sleeping.

"I was thinking he was dead. He'd be my first dead body. And I was getting kinda excited. Wilburt was, too. It was a kind of troubled exciting, the kind that ya don't never think about if it's sad or awful or maybe just what makes the stomach feel like it's right then and there been punched, and you're gonna get sick. I think we was kinda glad right then that we'd found it. We weren't even thinking 'bout what to do—just 'bout what we was gonna say when people wanted to know what it were like.

"It were like he'd dug his grave, and he couldn't of been dead more'n just a little while. So we were the first, the very first people to find it, lying there on his back with his eyes closed and his face pointed up at us, but not looking.

"'John,' we finally called out. Likely we was getting scared by then. And them hills around us echoed us, we were calling so loud. And think that more'n anything was scaring.

"Well, John, of course, opens his eyes and raises his head a little. Then when his eyes are wide open he bolts like he'd been kicked and finally seen us.

"'Son of a buck, Wilburt,' he says, still acting mad the way he was before. But we could tell he was a little scared, too. 'I cain't find no blame blade.'

"By then, me and Wilburt had slid ourselves down into the hole, kinda caving its sides in, too. And we was standing in there next to John with sawdust near up to our knees when we noticed that he was holding the shovel. He'd dug himself that hole with that shovel trying to find that blade. Been searching the sawdust pile a whole day. Then he just natural-like fell asleep. Slept there all night. He weren't even hungry when we found him."

Even though I was there, I still feel as though my father didn't ever tell me this story. I'd

hear it when he was telling it. But mostly he seemed to be telling it to my mother or maybe to himself, not to me. He spoke with a kind of wariness. And his voice would now and then trail off as if he were nodding off. Maybe it was weariness I was thinking of. He wasn't tired, though. And then my mother would say something about John. She would fill in something where Dad had stopped or slowed down in his story. And I still don't know why they would say these things or to whom they were talking because they weren't talking to me or, as I recall, to each other. They put the words up and they stayed their floating until they were the same as the amorphous shapes of my mother's unfurling smoke. And there they stayed like smoke.

My father would end by reminding himself that no one ever did miss those tools.

"We'd just gone and left that shovel where John had found it buried, so's we'd have it. Didn't never tell John that. He went off home and never came back, never said another word to us about the sawdust pile and those holes or that blade. One day, he was set to kick one of us that those two things'd rust and be useless. Then it's like he didn't care. And the shovel did rust. He was right about that. We just left it there. Never found the saw blade. It must of rusted clean away."

Usually Mom would say, "In the end, he was like a ghost. It was very eerie."

Of course, she meant John. And that would be the end of John. Roads would go on without him.

Now, John Purinee didn't know that my mother didn't own her own car. She used to drive an old 1938 two-door Plymouth sedan into the service station, and he knew what it could do and what it couldn't. And that was basically all he knew about her car. He evidently didn't stop to think that it didn't belong to my mother. He probably didn't care. He'd top off the tank for her, and he'd check under the hood. That is what he would do for any car. Between doing

that and washing the windows when it wasn't raining, he'd pop his head in through the passenger side—open the door if the window happened to be rolled up—and say something to make my mother laugh.

"You're still ain't married, heh?" would usually do it. My mother, I think, would scream.

At last, he'd test the tires for wear and air pressure, scraping the mud from them when he needed to. These were the formalities. Then, cap in hand, it was back to the passenger side for a report on the car and anything else that came to mind. These were the amenities. All of this, of course, was the etiquette—and strictly to be applied. He had, therefore, quickly dipped his hands in a pail of gasoline that, like a finger bowl, he had kept at the island for those occasions, like the courses in a meal, that required his hands get a good rinse before he was finished with one dish and able to proceed to the next. A gleam must have flashed in his eyes—maybe only in mine—at the prospect of going on to the next dish.

Having also then dried his hands with the same rag he had wiped down engine parts and oil cans, the red rag that dangled like a tail from his back pocket, John Purinee settled down to the next course, metaphorically speaking. He would fish in his shirt pocket for a Camel, catch hold of one from the pack he kept there, then lift it into his mouth, where it hung unlit between his lips while he leaned inside the car and dined, as it were, on my mother's company. He would mumble things to her through that unlit cigarette. My mother would always laugh,

Jancee hasn't ever heard this part of the story. My mother would always laugh.

"It's not my fault, John," she might say playfully, gleaming herself in one eye, winking with the other.

Pushing and pulling and rolling and all around kneeding his chin with his fingers, John would have told her that she drives what "must be 'bout the tidiest old car in Roads. Can't get a

dirty rag on it. I'd give you gold, but for that mud." Flopping up and down as he spoke, the cigarette would be in the cradle of his lower lip, off to one side. He would appear pensive until he stretched the other side of his mouth into a tight smile. He knew he was teasing. The sounds of the words emanated like the puff he could have made were the cigarette lit and forming his breath in smoke, muffled and twanging through the nose. And that was the routine: my mother at the steering wheel while John Purinee fidgeted all about to do for her what she needed and everything he could.

It doesn't make any difference to the story, but, for the first half a year that my grandmother lived in Roads, she never brought her Plymouth into Hoymle's service station. She, of course, called it a filling station. And, for the whole of her stay in Roads, she probably drove her car no more than three times in the town. My grandmother had spent most of her adult life on a sojourn from one small community to another wherever she could find teaching. In the spring of 1948, she hadn't yet graduated from college; that was something she was working on through correspondence and would eventually earn her diploma in 1950. She would be fifty-seven. But up until that time teaching jobs were hard to find and not always so easy to keep, times being what they were and a mere credential not always enough anymore. In any event, she kept a car because she knew she would probably need one once she found herself relocating. Her nun instincts.

When my mother was old enough to drive and my grandmother's sojourn was, I suppose, growing tiresome, it seemed an easy matter for my mother to parlay the bothersome job of maintenance on the car for the opportunity to get around in the car. Perhaps it was my grandmother who did the parlaying of opportunities. Still, my mother found that, while she was staying in Roads with her mother, she could drive the car—even as far as Eugene on weekends.

On this one particular Saturday in spring, after having gotten a late start, my mother found herself in need of gasoline to make the trek in her mother's car to Eugene to start looking for a place to live. It was on this singular visit to the gas station that John Purinee came again to the passenger side of the car and opened the door. It was raining, of course, and John wedged his face into the narrow opening he had made. He seemed to be in a hurry. He was still wiping his hands and the cigarette was missing. A penchant of more than a his usual care to keep the rain out of the car seemed to be inspiring tension. He squeezed into the narrow opening he had made with the door with an urgency my mother had not seen before in John Purinee. She was immediately surprised.

"He looked," I remember her saying, "like a piece of bologna looks in a sandwich without his cigarette. I almost cried for the way he looked. He was bursting to get something out, and I was getting kind of nervous. He hadn't said anything to make me laugh."

Through an unusually taut smile he asked, almost in the way of declaring, "Say, Constance girl, you got a kinda boyfriend?"

Mom heard his words first as a declaration and with a jerk pointed her face away from John to stare out the windshield and at the narrow streaming and constant splashing of raindrops on the glass. What was that supposed to mean? She had narrowed her eyes and shivered from a chill. The opening of the door, it could have been. My mother didn't know. This, of course, was at first. She was reacting, I'm sure, with her nun instincts. But soon looking again to John, she laughed. He had in waiting for her to respond fished a cigarette, after all, from his pocket and squeezed and skewed his neck and shoulders up until the cigarette was in his mouth. My mother reached over and plucked it from him.

"Got another one of these," she teased.

Then, sure enough, with a deliberateness and concentration of mind over matter, he fished another one out of his pocket and squeezed himself up again until he managed to land it in his mouth.

"Got a boyfriend fer ya," he mumbled, his cigarette playfully wagging at her. "If yer lookin'."

She reached over and playfully grabbed this cigarette, too.

"You're married, John," my mother suggested, hoping he was getting at something by which she could abide. Those nun instincts, you know.

My mother was now a secretary, which has nothing to do with anything except that she still wasn't making very much money, especially being a secretary, and she was now naturally wondering aloud to John Purinee whether he was leading up to something in the way of a free night on the town, but to keep in mind that he was married. She wanted that free night on the town.

"Tired of living like a nun, I guess," Mom used to say. "I learned that in Roads."

But John Purinee wasn't talking about him. "I got another, if yer lookin'." He wasn't talking about cigarettes, either. "Whatcha say? I'll fix it"

He wasn't smiling. He was anxious. His whole face was now taut.

"Okay," my mother told him.

They both laughed.

"Okay," John responded, then bolted. He ran back to the cover of the eaves just outside the station office. Turning, he waved to my mother, then quickly fished another cigarette from his pocket, this time lighting it before he disappeared through the doorway.

My mother waved back, then started the car. She, too, lit up a cigarette –one she'd pulled

from John Purinee's lips—and put the car in gear. In a moment, she was on her way to Eugene in her mother's car. She had on the seat beside a folder containing a list of addresses of rooming houses that she would be calling on. She was really leaving Roads.

It seemed John Purinee had a friend he knew, one of these loggers that he had grown up with. "He was a nice sort. A real genteel fella who don't have girlfriends, right now. A good looker, too," John had said he wanted to tell my mother, but didn't get the chance.

"It was a fact," my father abruptly cut into the story, "that John Purinee didn't have no one in particular in mind for you."

My mother nodded, as much to ponder silently what my father had said as to offer some kind of assent to his words. Her cigarette went to her lips, and she drew a long breath through it, skewing her face in a tight clasp of the unfiltered end and making a smack like a kiss when she finished sucking in the air. Then withdrawing her cigarette, she exhaled slowly, more slowly than she had breathed in the smoke. It splayed from her mouth in a cone of blue and gray mist-like spray. With her free hand, she picked at her lip and tongue in what was surely an unconscious effort to remove, I suppose, a left-over particle of food or tobacco.

At last, she spoke more seriously than I can recall ever hearing seriousness. She spoke in a kind of motionless voice. Her whole body stiffened. I remember just the sound of the words. My father must have seen it that way, too. He stiffened as well.

"He had taken a real sympathetic liking to me."

For a moment, a long moment, there were no other sounds. I played with my potato, crumbling and mashing it on my plate with my fork, making straight, neat little rivulets with the tines.

"When you first got sick," my father eventually said, "and was in the hospital, my mother

visited you ‘most every day. She couldn't stand to see that nice looking young doctor who was working on you go on about his doctoring without a wife. She determined there and then that her true purpose in life, at least as long as you was in that hospital, was to find for him a wife. Don’t know what got into her. But as soon as he known what she was doin’, he got himself cut of Ma and got out and got himself a wife on his own. Had one all lined up, I think. Ma must of scared him into it a bit.”

“Scared him plenty if he was thinking she was setting her sights on him.”

They both smiled and looked again at each other. I put down my fork. What looked like tears were turning my mother’s eyes glassy. My father put his arm around her once more.

“John Purinee kinda treated you like my Ma did that doc.” Dad was kind of sad. “Didn’t he?” he said.

Mom just kind of looked at Dad for long time, then looked at me, still playing with my potato. Finally, she looked away and drew another breath from her cigarette.

John Purinee had hurriedly filled the car's gas tank and whisked my mother on her way, promising—

That was the trouble with promising to fix her up. He’d have to find guys who weren’t doing anything about getting fixed up. But he knew where he could find them—leave it to him. They would be waiting for the opportunity to meet someone like my mother. She had laughed at first, obviously a little embarrassed from the compliment and a little flattered, too, that John Purinee would even pay her much mind. But she didn't think much about it again once on the highway and wondering whether it wasn't too late in the day to start looking for a place to live once she got to Eugene.

John Purinee had not thought to ask my mother where she was going on this particular

Saturday and was quite unaware that he may not be seeing her anymore. But he had promised he would fix it. So, as soon as my mother had left, off he went to fix it.

With an uncustomary buoyancy in his step, with all kinds of ideas about living in Roads and promising young women just like my mother—maybe only ideas about my mother—with a sense of a mission, the sense for a mission, he strode out to the island and rechecked that he had hung the gas hose nozzle back on its hook. He had been, after all, distracted, and he needed to reflect. He reflected on whether he had squared it with my mother. You know—had he gotten her to sign for the fill up? Ben Hoymle would need to know that she had. He double checked his shirt pocket for the receipt and found that she had. He had since donned his cap again and was dripping from the rain. Instinctively, he glanced across the street where he was sure to find someone able to help him fix it up for this young beauty not just on her way out of town, but, goddamn, on her way to where he was going to take her. He was confident of this place.

Well, the Dippinn Tavern wasn't a big place. Confidence doesn't require that in a place. In the winter, it was usually crowded. On Saturday nights, it could be overflowing. On Sundays in the afternoon in the winter, it could be packed. During the week, it could be filled. Twenty or so loggers without work and their pals could do it. Loggers' wives and their pals were often included. In the spring, it would be less so. But it would never be empty. Weekends were still busy. Most other times in the spring, the Dippinn was visited by the pensioners in Roads and occasionally a straggler or two missing on a day of work or just plain out of work. But, for whoever was there and for however many, the Dippinn was always the same. It was dark, making everything in it the same. Confidence requires that.

Aside from its dozen or so red wooden barstools and its red-oak counter, it had just enough room for four wooden booths, which were also painted red, a kind of dull lacquer.

Between the rows of booths and barstools, was enough floor to hold a single pool table, the wood frame of which was also painted very neatly red. It could have looked like Christmas because the felt in the bed of the table was a bright green, but the Dippinn's red paint was as dull as the felt was bright, and the lighting throughout especially in the daytime was always dimmed, making everything, even the bright green, seem dull. There was a glow in the colors, and I guess that's why it could have been Christmas. The glow was hot or harsh, however, and not much more than a glow like embers struggling to stay lit in a dying fire, so that it could never have been a real Christmas in the Dippinn. At best, it was after Christmas or any other season you could think of. But that was okay. The Dippinn was not the place for celebrations or seasons. Mostly the place for afterthoughts. And confidence didn't require that, either.

The single incandescent light bulb on the ceiling directly over the center of the pool table and a lamp beside the cash register, the kind of lamp you would expect to find in a bedroom on a night stand beside a bed, giving off mostly red hues from its red translucent shade, cone-shaped, of course, provided the only convincing illumination, but not blithely, and only just to the pool table and the cash register. Everything else was the same, and you would be inclined to avert your eyes from these kinds of light. They were not relaxing. But, at least, in the Dippinn, if you were dark before you came in, you stayed dark. Otherwise, you became dark. Even in its light. You didn't relax in the Dippinn, either. But you could hang. Those are my words. You could hang onto something, and you could mostly stay away from everything else.

And there was music. The Dippinn kept its large console radio on the floor against the wall where the entrance was. It was also the exit, for the Dippinn had only one way in and one way out. Above the radio, which stood about four feet high, was a small window, the glass of which had been tinged a dark grey or yellow on the inside—the result of too much dust and

nicotine in the air for too many years. The effect was to prevent too much light from outside from coming in and, I suppose, to keep an inquiring passerby from peering in. It was better dark, for you would have to come in were you wont to satisfy a curiosity about the place. Not that you would, of course. Being darkened on one side, the window became a mirror on the other side. It wasn't purposeful, so no one much bothered about it. Still, you could see reflections, which were really silhouettes of reflections, it always being very dark inside. Day or night, you could see out, just not in.

The radio by contrast was lighted from inside its box, backlighting the convex glass face of its rectangular tuning grid and casting approximating shadows of anyone or anything nearby. Unlike most every other wooden structure or frame in the Dippinn, the wooden box the radio was in retained its original stain. It was dark, of course, but it was not red, and its tiny bit of light shone indiscriminately around. From its speaker at the bottom of the box, the radio, of course, broadcast only AM, which was to be expected; it was an old, dark radio. The music could vary, depending on what was tuned in, but the shape and form of the Dippinn being just the Dippinn seemed unaffected from this singularly contrasting fixture, for the Dippinn's approximation to anything other than what it was tended to fade as did the brightness of any radio signal broadcast here, until ultimately the music scratched through the air at its listeners, making everything in the Dippinn ultimately the same, and making, confidentially, the Dippinn always the same.

So John Purinee crossed the street to find my father and Wilburt Stebby, as he thought he might, playing pool.

"Wilburt'd been cruising timber all morning," my father put in. "Counting bushes and trees was more to his liking. Though he didn't never like it for long."

I would look up from beside my dad and could see that he was still serious. His arms and

his shoulders would be stiff, and his eyes would be fixed, looking straight out. His head and his neck, like one tight fast, were also stiff so that his face and all of him, I guess, would be pointed at the wall, more than likely staring through the wall or really not staring at all. He was frozen. It was as if he were under some restraint like a leash. It wasn't funny anymore. It seemed he couldn't see and couldn't go further. My mother, I think, was looking at me. She must have been telling me it was all right, which I knew. She and Dad weren't laughing, but it was all right. We were side by side, and Mom was looking at me looking at Dad, who for a long time was looking toward our wall and saying nothing.

At one point, I thought I heard him whisper in the way one could move the lips and say a prayer so that no one should hear: "I want war." But I didn't see him move. His eyes by this time were closed. Mother was blowing out her smoke and sputtering in a slow staccato of soft, genteel coughs until father at last opened his eyes and said that "that carburetor needs adjusting."

He smiled and turned to my mother who, still coughing, attempted a smile, nodding in agreement. I smiled, too.

"I'd been busheling and ready for a little pool," he'd continue. "Wilburt comes in and says, 'Rack 'em up, Chase.' 'Course, I do. I'm rackin' the balls, and old Wilburt, he's got himself over at the radio. He loved it when nobody weren't there. Loved it crowded, too. But mostly seemed he liked fiddlin' with them radio nobs. Could do it when nobody weren't there. When John Purinee weren't there. That's how I remember. Old Wilburt's messin' with that radio and old John walks int' the place."

My father paused again, reflecting on something. He was looking down at his dinner this time; then he swore. "Shit," he said in a long, weary breath.

He must not have known he had said it, for he didn't move as I thought he should have.

My eyes and mouth opened wide, a reflex, I suppose, to my father's first expletive. I jerked myself in the direction of Mama, even though Dad was between us. Funny how these things happen. I had heard, by this time, lots of swearing, but not from him, and I looked at my mother who was also looking at me again. Her eyes were nearly closed and her face pinched in some kind of pain. She quickly put her cigarette to her mouth, a reflex for her, I suppose. She seemed to be pleading for a kind of understanding for my father. Had she been looking at him, I would have supposed she was pleading for understanding from him. It was all that much the same.

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My father had especially liked Roly-Poly fiddling and train songs. I'd never hear him swear, especially when it came to music. I guess he wasn't a fanatic. But Bob Wills and Roy Akins were among his favorites. They didn't play much Jimmy Rodgers, but he would have liked that, too. Most everyone in Roads was the same way about it. The radio in the Dippinn would, of course, be tuned to a station where that kind of music would broadcast. The transmitter on Gunter Mountain relayed the signals for radio from a Eugene station. Hank Williams was becoming popular, too, around Roads, and my father would listen to him. And, if there were ever any Ray Whitley—well, that was Wilburt's kind of music. And he'd go searching for it back and forth on the tuning dial whenever he had the chance. He was a fanatic.

Wilburt and my father must have had an understanding about the radio in the Dippinn. My father didn't much bother about it, and Wilburt did. My father listened to pretty much whatever was on at the time; Wilburt was particular. He'd play with the tuning knob and its vernier until he found something that interested him. Then he'd play some more to get it just right.

He and John Purinee, on the other hand, didn't have an understanding. Put another way, they had an understanding that Wilburt wasn't to touch the radio, at least when John was around. These were terms Wilburt Stebby and John Purinee negotiated one night after the war in the Dippinn.

Right after the war, before my father or Wilburt or John or any of the other locals had begun thinking about after the war, to wonder, that is, what was coming, everyone was speaking of what had been, mostly what had been of the war. It was a vague time. In typical John Wayne or John Garfield fashion, there were those in Roads who were pawing at the ground with one

foot, trying to get some kind of traction from where they stood while sporting intense looking furrowed brows on grave expressions, yet very reticent of the military exploits that brought them there. These were usually the dark ones. Others were brighter and crowed of glory. Some of them still wore their uniforms. None of them, of course, was still serving in the military. And it was right after the war that most of these types weren't doing anything at all. They had nothing coming. Still, everyone in Roads—everyone in the Dippinn in Roads—was thinking about war. And it was then that Wilburt and John Purinee had come to their understanding.

You see, Wilburt Stebby was bright, one of those who liked to crow. He was "a blusterous sort," my father used to say. "Always has one thing to say about t'other. He likes to bloat a story real loud like whenever he's talkin' to his buddies, 'specially after the war. It was like cards or something he weren't going to lose at. When the room was crowded when it was like in the war at some saloon overseas full up of wall t'wall Joes who was making it real loud with their talkin' and laughin' and music was playin' out on its jukebox or radio, Wilburt used t' like to exclaim:

"'Hey, now,' he'd say real slow and loud even when I could hear him fine. I could tell he weren't really talkin' to me. Just making a story so everyone could of heard.

"'That'd be worse than I had, Chase, but it got me like a shot and I ain't never seen how. Just knowd it did when it happened. Got some buddies, too.'

"O'course it didn't matter his perdicament. The dangerouser sounding the better. This one time he was shoutin' 'bout diggin' himself out o' a foxhole he'd dug. It'd been rained on with some sand and gravel from a couple of explosions. Japanese grenades or mortars. It didn't matter. The bombs hit close by enough that Wilburt been sprayed with all the dirt. Them explosions could be like rain showers. Weren't gonna hurt ya, but it weren't gonna get ya glad

you was there. And a foxhole weren't no protection from the rain, neether."

"With a long 'i', Honey. Neither—long 'i'," my mother interrupted, looking at me and speaking in a hush. I smiled and mouthed to her that "I know." I presume it was for my benefit. My mother nodded in approval. Dad must have seen where she was looking and presumed the same as I, for he kept on talking, undisturbed.

"Old Wilburt wanted to make it sound like it were more than it were. Shouts that he did more diggin' than shootin' in that war. Got pretty good at it. Nobody was listenin' to him, but I seen John Purinee kind of perk up when Wilburt says what he did 'bout diggin'. He begun watching Wilburt real close. But he don't say nothin'. Just watches and pullin' on his chin the way he did. He's thinkin' something I could tell.

"Well, Wilburt's over t' the radio now crouchin' down and fiddlin'. They was playing some kind of Opry tune and Wilburt changes it tryin', I guess, to get a Ray Whitley if it's got it. All o'sudden, John jumps up and kicks 'm one."

"'I wore listenin' to that, you blankety-blank,' he shouts.

"It weren't no soft kick, neether," Dad winked at me, then puckered and smacked a kiss through the air at my mother. I could see from her grimace that she wouldn't be bothered by my father's teasing, and thumped him in the shoulder with the heel of her palm. Dad winked again at me.

"And Old Wilburt's on the floor—flat out," he continued, a bit hurried now. "The radio's o'course cracklin' like a cedar log's on fire. Wilburt bumped it hard when he gets kicked and goes fallin'. It ain't tuned to nothin' but static noise. John's got a fist clenched ready t'clobber the guy. But Wilburt just kinda lied there kinda rubbin' himself where he got kicked and lookin' real wide-eyed at John, but not real scared, more'n like he's supprised more'n anything.

Everyone in the Dippinn's stopped talkin' and it's quiet. And we're like statues.

"John starts rubbin' his chin again. He's got no more fist, but you c'n tell he's mad and says—he don't have to shout now and I guess he known it—'Goll dang it, Wilburt. Leave the blame radio alone.'

"He goes back and sits down. And the Dippinn kinda goes back the way it was. We weren't no statues anymore, and Old Wilburt gets up and moves on t' a stool next to mine kinda tryin' to shrug off being on the floor. He starts in again with that foxhole and tells me and the other'n' on his other side about how it weren't a shootin' war for him. There's o'course lots a laughin' again and the place is kinda the same, only the radio ain't been touched. It keeps on cracklin' and snappin' out noises all night till the timer box quits. Then, o'course, it's quiet."

So as soon as John Purinee walked into the Dippinn that Saturday afternoon in the spring of 1948 ready to fix it for my mother, Wilburt bolts upright away from the radio and dashes across to the closest stool at the counter. Realizing he'd left his Lucky Lager and Camels atop the radio, he dashes back and snatches them, upturning the bottle sloshing most of the beer down the side of his shirt and pants. Still, some remained in bottle, and he stood there, momentarily oblivious to John Purinee, twisting his body in the contortions of salvaging his remaining beer and cigarettes by clutching them at shoulder height away from the spill—as though he were an archer readying to release an arrow—while brushing the sopping parts of his shirt and pants with his free hand and shaking off the droplets he'd managed to sweep out of his clothes into the puddle at his feet. Seeing what had occurred to Wilburt, John Purinee shrugs, then ducks slightly and playfully, as if to avoid the arrow Wilburt is aiming. He glanced at the radio and smiled. It didn't seem to matter at the moment. He wasn't there about the radio.

I recall that when I was perhaps four years old John Purinee used to come to our house

just for visits. It was close to dinner time, I remember, and he would usually leave before we sat down to eat. Dad would not yet be home, but was expected soon, and Mom would be in the kitchen hurrying up the cooking. That didn't seem to matter, either. John Purinee had driven up the mountain to our house as a kind of retreat, my mother once explained, and wasn't there to eat. He would help himself to our phonograph, putting on a stack of Dad's 78s. Dad once told me that John Purinee had loaned the phonograph to my mother just before she and Dad married and let her keep it as a wedding gift.

At the time I was noticing John was visiting us an awful lot. It must have been 1957 or '58 and my father had begun listening mostly to Johnny Cash. That record changer was one of Dad's favorite entertainments and John's, too, it seemed. Dad, of course, hadn't been to the Dippinn in nearly ten years, but somehow knew that Johnny Cash was popular there. John Purinee had told him, I suspect. So we had a couple of Johnny Cash records—long-playing records.

We had our own T.V., and a clock radio was in Mom and Dad's bedroom. We were high enough up on the mountain that Eugene stations tuned in well. But when John Purinee would visit, it was only the phonograph that he turned on. He'd mostly put on those 78s from my mother's old albums. "Elmer and the Bear" is the song I remember best. It was a song about an outhouse or getting to and from one.

John Purinee would lay himself down on the couch opposite the console and attempt to nap to the music playing. He would, of course, have his bottle of beer sitting on a T.V. tray that my mother set in the living room as an end table for the couch, maybe for just these kinds of visits. The bottle would be open and he would have had a few sips from it, but mostly while he was listening to the records, he wouldn't be reaching for any beer. I would frequently take that

as a cue to climb and wrassle and otherwise tumble all over him. He in turn would throw and bounce and jostle me about. It was a kind of game we played, and John Purinee did not seem to mind the intrusion upon his retreat. Even when once I bumped the tray that held the beer and caused the bottle to tumble onto the floor, unloosing its contents across my mother's rug, he did not seem to mind. It was when once I bumped the record changer that John Purinee got up and left. The stylus screeched across the platter, abruptly ending a kind of country rag, as I recall. Hearing all the commotion, my mother poked her head in from the kitchen to find that I was crying and that John had leapt up from the couch and shouted out a quick goodbye. The tone arm on the phonograph returned to its cradle, and another 78 plopped itself down. I can't recall that it was anything, but know it must have been a country song. I was still crying. John Purinee was already gone. And I sensed that even my mother had been unnerved and tisk-tisked the incident away, stroking my forehead to calm me and telling me that I shouldn't let on what had happened. I don't recall that John Purinee ever came back.

But what does it matter? He was there in 1948, crossing the street on his way into the Dippinn where it really did matter.

"I'm gonna need a date from one of you," he had called out even before he was through the door. Once inside, he realized who he was speaking to. There was Wilburt dripping with beer spilled all up and down his clothes, and there was my father, who was meticulously setting up one of his shots at the pool table. John Purinee was anxious not to be away from the station for more than a moment, and eager to locate one of these eligible loggers for my mother.

So he passed on by Wilburt, probably smirking with a smugness of wanting to tell secrets—as my father tells it. Dad didn't notice John Purinee at first, but was soon and unavoidably conscious of his presence when John made his pronouncement and snatched up

from the table the cue ball over which my father had for some good deal of time, as was his custom, been crouched. Dad was marking his sights for his shot by lightly poking red chalk marks on the white ball with the tip of his stick.

"Either you two had a date lately?" John Purinee asked.

Wilburt by this time had set himself on a stool at the counter and was dabbing his side with the bar towel that was had been wadded up and lying on the edge of the pool table, where it usually served to wipe off cue sticks and any hands stained by chalk. He was looking quizzically at John Purinee all the while. He grinned from embarrassment, perhaps dismay, raising his eyebrows and repeatedly shifting his eyes from my father to John Purinee and back again.

"What fer?" he asked.

"It may be I c'n help ya out. Int'rested?"

John Purinee was rolling the cue ball in his hand and my father was watching it, listening for more explanation. Dad wasn't about to overlook the manner of the interruption, but, given the circumstances and the reason, he was ready to listen. Without speaking, he walked away to the booth behind him where he had put his own beer. It was also a bottle of Lucky Lager. Wilburt and John Purinee were both watching as Dad swallowed nearly half of what was there then placed the bottle back where he had picked it up and stepped behind the booth to lean a shoulder onto the wall.

"It ain't no date with you, is it, John?" my father finally said, opening his mouth wide with a smile, perhaps holding back a laugh, whereupon Wilburt let out a laugh of his own, a blast like a horn that he quickly checked when John Purinee threw what could only be a dangerous look at him.

"'Course not, ya fool," he replied, almost muttered, putting the cue ball back onto the

table. "I got a real nice girl, a high school teacher's daughter, what's got an idea she'd like t' have herself a date."

"That'd be now, John?" Dad remembers asking.

"I can fix it for real soon," he replied.

Wilburt was watching the two of them, turning his head and following them back and forth as one, then the other, spoke. He was still dabbing himself with the towel.

"I ain't seen Connie Bess in pretty much three weeks," Wilburt joined in, apparently feeling it was safe. "Ain't talked to her even longer then that."

"Well, it ain't her, Wilburt. You c'n forgit it."

"Anne Mosher ain't back, is she? 'Course her Pa's no teacher. Who you got, John?"

"It ain't none of them, Wilburt." John was becoming anxious that this was taking too long. He slapped a quarter onto the counter and took back a bottle of beer. "Ain't you birds int'rested?"

"Wilburt there's int'rested, John," my father nodded his head to point to Wilburt, who had stopped dabbing himself and was now pulling at his clothes and examining the red chalk he had rubbed from the towel into his shirt and pants.

"I guess I am, too," my father added.

John quickly laughed, nearly burst out giggling. He was that excited. "Okay," he exclaimed. "Won't see her agin today, but stay on hand. She's pretty and I c'n fix ya up when she's back."

He then tightened his grip on his beer, self-assured, and passed out the door back to Hoymle's.

Wilbur was on his stool scratching a match stick on his thigh to light it and dangling an

unlit Camel from his pursed lips. The chalk had spread to his fingers and had left smudges on the paper of his cigarette, which in turn was spotting his upper lip red. My father motioned to him to continue the game and crouched down again at the pool table after having lit his own cigarette, dangling it, too, from his own unadorned lips.

Their apparent indifference about the whole thing did not bother John Purinee. He was satisfied that they were hard up, and he'd fix 'em up. My mother, he thought, was probably going to be in at the station in a couple of days, and he'd get a hold of one of them then. He'd fix it somehow.

But my mother did not return to the station in a couple of days. It was, in fact, three weeks before John Purinee would see my mother again. She had found a furnished room in Eugene in a house not far from the campus where she worked.

The house was owned and run by a Mabe (short for Mabel) White. She was old and in need of roomers. She couldn't keep up the house without taking in somebody. Her husband was "lost during the war," she was quick to point out, "not because of the war, but coincidental to it." He had been old, too. She was perhaps in her eighties, my mother only guessed. Her face was pale and wrinkled, though frequently carried a smile. It was dotted with those brown blemishes of age—liver spots, my mother used to call them—and her arthritic-looking hands, themselves discolored and unsteady in their small motions, complicated a resolve to still keep a kitchen and provide and prepare an evening meal for her paying guests. Eventually, Mom remembered, suppers were no longer part of the deal and the rent was reduced until kitchen privileges were added on. But even so, Mrs. White was careful that only responsible young ladies roomed in her house.

You see, she was a tiny woman in stature and frail, physical attributes which were readily

apparent to anyone who bothered to look on her. Her brittle bones had bowed and shrunken her, and this she could not hide. If you got to know her, you would also find that her body seemed, you might politely say, to carry a lot of weight. But this aspect of her was not as easily discovered because of how she dressed. She liked her gowns at ankle length and loosely fitted around the bust. The sleeves were always puffed and the length of her arms. Scrutiny would also reveal that she liked a wig and wore a crop of thick synthetic curls that, except for the auburn color, closely resembled, my mother used to say in a bemused effort to be kind to Mrs. White, the head of Harpo Marx.

These idiosyncracies my mother got to know as Mabe White's routine and became assured of the value of her routine. For Mrs. White was able to conceal that her hair was chalk white and grew in thin patches on a pink and spotted scalp, that all the rest of her flesh bulged or drooped in white rolls of skin, that her hips and thighs were fat, that her breast had shriveled and hung flat against her chest like pocket flaps. The movie was routine, which you always saw except on those times in the morning when you might be running behind schedule. Mind you, it was important that you only might be late and only occasionally. Definitely late and often was as good as an admission of a habit that Mrs. White did not allow. Granted, habit bespeaks routine, but it was not that Mrs. White was modeling punctuality for morality or etiquette's sake. Nor was she advocating paradigms of a work ethic. It was not routine for routine's sake. She was simply insistent upon the dependability of routine. And late departures in the morning by her roomers were disruptive of routine. For Mrs. White was never out of her bedroom any earlier than nine o'clock, a time she supposed was well past the starting point of any responsible young lady's workday. And remember Mrs. White was careful that only responsible young ladies roomed with her. Respectful young ladies. She supposed only those kinds of young ladies

were careful not to upset routine.

Concealment was in the first reel and every reel thereafter. It could be in a dash from your room to the stairs, were it nine o'clock, so as not to be any later than necessary or, most importantly for my mother, so as not to upset Mrs. White's routine or yourself with the surprised and awkward, yet necessary salutations on the landing outside her bedroom door. It could be that you might catch a glimpse of the old woman as she, confident of her solitude at nine o'clock, gingerly shuffled and grunted from an apparent morning stiffness out from her room down the hallway toward who knew what, clinging loosely and unwrapped in a robe that was perhaps as old as she was for its unraveling seams and fabric disintegration, especially at the hips and hem. It could be that was your movie, which you didn't want to see. So my mother was never late and always met Mrs. White downstairs.

This is, of course, all according to my mother who liked to talk with affection about old Mrs. White. She even took me to visit her once. I was perhaps five years old at the time and Mrs. White was at least ninety, maybe more, because, if memory serves me correctly, she was ancient, living now by herself and only in the downstairs of that same house where my mother had roomed. I don't remember what I truly thought about all of it at the time, but I certainly recall how splotched and white everything about her seemed to be. Her back was bent and her shoulders stooped when she stood, leaning heavily and unsteadily on a cane. I was nearly as tall as she. She must have been a hundred. Even the candy cane she gave to me—Christmas had been a week or so before—tasted of age and ammonia of moth balls, much as I imagined she was. There's a line from some other movie where a character is served a friend's experimental pastries and upon tasting one exclaims that it's not bad: a bit nostalgic; "it reminds me of the smell of my grandmother's sofa especially after something that's been dying for a long time has

been on it." That's how I remember those candy canes tasting.

Nevertheless, old Mabe White lived in a house that had to be as comfortably lived in and certainly as old as her robe had been and nearly as big as all the houses my mother had ever lived in put together. My mother had lived in many houses: granted, sometimes not much bigger than a tool shed. That's my mother talking again. You remember her mother moved my mother and her around quite a lot. My mother liked to talk about that, too. There are some good lessons in there.

So Mabe White's house had at least three bedrooms and a bath, inside plumbing, too. I'm sure my mother would want me to remind you of that point. She used one of the bedrooms for herself and rented out the other two, and it was one of those two rooms that my mother was able to rent based upon the letter of introduction and recommendation she was able to obtain on short notice from the professor who employed her. Mrs. White, it seems, required references before she deigned to rent a room to just anyone. That routine of hers, you know.

After having committed on the spot to the room and to her permanent departure from the small room she would have had to share with her mother in Roads, my mother settled in as best she could that weekend with what little she had had the foresight to bring with her in a suitcase. On the following weekend, she returned to her mother's to take the remainder of her clothes and the trunk that had been serving as her closet for the many years she and her mother had been together. Of course, her mother was sad to see her go, but glad to have gotten rid of the trunk that blocked access to one of the two windows in my grandmother's room. She helped my mother load it into the back seat and instructed her not to worry about returning the car until the following weekend. Standing beside the car, they hugged softly for a moment.

"What will you do?" my mother had wanted to ask her mother.

Now, although my mother in the spring of 1948 viewed the car in practical ways and usually concerned herself with it for only the dear aspects of its utility—whether the thing would get her over a hill, out of the mud, or simply where she was going—my mother also relented now and again to a certain religious commotion about cars. There was speed and momentum connected to them, and the wheels spun in a whining rotation of clipping sounds. It was a mantra on the road outside the city, although my mother did not quite see it that way. But, given enough freedom from concern, there was always a phantasmagoric splendor—Pentecostally bright in breadth and demeanor—to be had in a car traveling through any wooded spots of road. And between Roads and Eugene there were many. When it was not raining and the sunlight shown intermittently as bifurcated flashes on the blacktop of the highway at 45 miles per hour and sometimes more, the effect was quietly explosive for the flashes of light that passed before and over and behind my mother as she drove along. Were she going fast enough, it could flicker from scene to scene in a romance continuously reminding her that she was alone, until finally she recalled the sentiment of a proverb she knew and enjoyed remembering. It was of serendipity and went something like this: *God also waits on those who are the least to expect it.* These were not her nun instincts. On one of the first sunny days of spring, she was ready to be in love and had suddenly remembered what John Purinee had wanted to do.

In that way, I suppose, my mother was altogether one of the regulars in her generation who had the experience of many great trials—wars, economic turmoil, and the like—and had the will-'o-the-wisp to thank God or the government or a responsible party that in 1948 they were finally free from problems, but, more importantly, had the wherewithal to know that in their freedom they also wanted real mates.

By accident on the road to Eugene, she had discovered that she was no longer worried

about a room or a closet or her mother's window and was very grateful for the favor of the use of her mother's car. There was, of course, Mabe White and the professor. And, while she was ready to do what she could to pay them all back, she was eager to see whether John was serious about a date. It all being the same, she was ready to stop at Holyme's gas station and, out of her own pocket, fill up the car's tank and have the tires and oil checked. That would do for her mother. It would do for her, too. It would do for now.

It had been three weeks and John Purinee could have forgotten all about her. After all, she had only recalled it by accident. So upon driving up to the pumps, my mother momentarily despaired of the outcome of her good intention. The place was empty. She would have to honk the horn.

John Purinee was across the street just inside the tavern's doorway, sitting atop a stool, which he was tilting on only two of its four legs while supporting his neck and shoulder in a skewed angle against the jamb of the opened door. He sat there motionless, cradling in his lap another bottle of beer. The light from the sun was warm and bright. It was sharp and fell directly across his lap and seemed to cut him in half. From where he was, it shone an illumination into the Dippinn that was not usual. So he had closed his eyes and waited to hear a horn.

He recognized the Plymouth immediately and nervously stiffened, jumped off the stool, and began hurriedly tucking in his shirt with one hand while holding on to his beer with the other. He was wearing suspenders that day and had no cap, completely out of uniform.

"Shoot," he said a couple of times under his breath as he raced to the counter to dispose of his beer, "Shoot." With one quick gulp, it was gone. He then plunked the empty bottle down on the counter top, and still struggling with just one hand to tuck his shirt into his pants, he began

to straighten his hair with the hand that had held the beer. His hand was wet, he was glad, from the condensation that had formed on the outside of the bottle and worked well as a comb as he patted down and tried to straighten his hair. He wished he had had his cap, though. He was wearing glasses on that day, some steel wire-rims that he had only within the month acquired and only within the last few days felt the need to use. He glanced at his reflection in the window above the radio and adjusted his glasses squarely on his face, raking his hair one last time with his hand.

All of his primping could have taken but an instant and could have been accomplished on a slow pace across the street. More to the point, it could have been dispensed with altogether, but John Purinee was in a panic, going over in his mind how best to represent to my mother his three-week-old undertaking on her behalf. So he stalled, temporarily in a sudden want of direction. His pace, instead of slow and across the street, was hurried and rolled back and forth with his head in the doorway of the Dippinn as he poked in and out to make sure my mother was still there. Where was my father, he needed to know.

"Shoot," he said again, this time out loud. He was now pacing back and forth a the doorway. "Where's Chase? You seen Chase, Wilburt?"

Wilburt Stebby was in the bar sitting at the counter next to Paul Finch, an old pensioner from wounds he'd gotten in the First World War. He was lame and able to sometimes volunteer fire watch, but mostly he was just a hanger on who could sit and listen to anyone tell him about the way it used to be. Wilburt was explaining just how many miles he'd have to go to find a shootable deer when it was deer season, of course.

"It weren't like it was 'fore the war," Wilburt and Paul Finch agreed. They had not noticed that John Purinee was in a panic. They had, for that matter, not noticed him at all. They

had certainly not noticed that he had stopped pacing and had stepped just behind them.

John Purinee had decided, probably without much thinking about it, either, that it would be my father that my mother should meet, not Wilburt Stebby. John Purinee didn't like Wilburt. Besides, Wilburt was stuck on Connie Bess. And there was always Anne Mosher, if she ever returned. He had assured himself that Wilburt had no need to meet my mother. He wouldn't bother Wilburt about it. But dang it if John Purinee didn't need Wilburt at the very moment he didn't want him to be there. He needed Wilburt to tell him where my father was.

"Dang it, Wilburt, you seen Chase?" he thundered.

Wilburt and Paul Finch lurched forward as if suddenly and violently struck, knocking over their beers and spilling them across the counter top.

"Ain't seen 'm, John," Wilburt complained, grabbing up his bottle and salvaging, again, his cigarettes from another spill. "Jesus! He got somethin'?"

John Purinee shook his head. "Hehhh," he growled. At the same time, he made a swiping motion through the air in front of him with his hand. It could have been to diffuse a thickening fog. He probably meant it as disgust. He must have been grateful, too, that he was sure he had made the right decision and, of course, that he didn't need Wilburt after all. Then he turned toward the door and started out. He heard the horn again. My mother was still waiting.

"Seen he was at that picture," Paul Finch remarked, having uprighted his bottle. John Purinee slowed his step, then grinned. He began to rush. "Outside it least ways, lookin' like he just been or just goin'. Just a while 'go, too. Gotten some kids with—"

Whatever else Paul Finch could tell, John Purinee couldn't hear. He had bounded out the door in the middle of it, smiling with that same confidence that took him to the Dippinn this very same time of day three weeks before. Perhaps he never meant to get any of the particulars of my

mother's three-week absence from Roads. He certainly did not mean to get them at that particular moment. Just as soon as he had reached the car, he was quickly off again in the direction of the movie theater, having in his unceremonious way and without explanation popped his head in through the passenger window that my mother had rolled down. She had anticipated his usual quip to her and was surprised at his abruptness.

"Hang on," he urged. "Gonna fix things," is all that he said.

My mother had not uttered a word, but nodded in ascent, watching him scurry off down the street and over the Smite River Bridge. In no hurry, she would hang on; she was quite interested to know what could possibly be the matter. Besides, while waiting, she remembered thinking of using the ladies' room and only reconsidered upon realizing that John Purinee had headed off down the street in a very big hurry, nearly in a panic. She didn't dare follow him.

"I didn't know what he was going to use that bridge for—having lavatories at the station and all." She was lighting another cigarette, shaking out the match, when she told us this. I think she had wanted me to laugh, but her comment wasn't funny to me then. I couldn't have been more than eight. Mom only shrugged. "And I didn't want to find out," she added, tossing away her match.

She would wait, of course, for John and wait on using the facilities, as well. The way John Purinee had lit out she was having some doubts about the condition of the station's lavatories.

"Poor John. I thought sure he was off to do something about the toilets. I could wait."

John Purinee, on the other hand, was not going to wait. And it wasn't, of course, the lavatories he had taken off to do anything about. Disappointed that my mother had not returned within a few days of their last meeting, he had spent more than a week brooding over the

opportunity he had lost not getting her fixed up with someone he knew. And that was it, wasn't it? Someone he knew could fix it. He could make it so. And it had almost not happened. My mother had disappeared and only just returned, perhaps to disappear again. Perhaps he didn't believe in prayers or miracles. Coincidence was difficult enough to explain, difficult enough to ask for. He perhaps knew that he had to fix it or not get it fixed at all. So a sense of urgency and a desperate foreboding that each moment from that point on marked the difference between seizing the opportunity and losing it again hastened his step. He did believe in hesitation and all it could do. He had put off and waited on much. The waiting was a kind of war. It didn't budge or move anything, yet everything moved to it and through it and away from it. There had been that woman in Frankfurt and now there was my mother. The waiting was like Roads. But Roads was different. He was the woman on the pile of rubble, and it was all he could do to make it so. So he hurried his step faster across the bridge over the Smite River.

The Smite was shallow and limped on in the spring. It seemed hobbled on this particular day where it passed under the bridge in Roads, pacing itself as little more than a brook. On sunny days it could be especially lame, garnering little notice for its babbling clarity. Winter storms could make it swell and race with furry, turbid and butting a wide concourse, its water resembling a scratched and squiggly ribbon of black and white celluloid film as it rolls in intermittent bounds from its reel to its sprocket. And the function of the bridge in Roads took all of this into account, spanning year round a much larger vein for the river than was ever required by the languid purling of the stream in the spring. When the sun shone and the waters had long receded to a narrow tract, shadows pressed everywhere on its steep, darkly verdant banks and would flash or flutter from between the bridge's rails as a car or truck passed over the Smite. Were a young boy on that day to stand at the water's edge and poke a long stick intermittently

into one of the river's clear, shallow pools, making it muddy with every jab, he would seem to flicker as if his movements were framed in the chattering and exaggerated movie projection of an otherwise silent film.

By comparison, John Purinee's shadow could hardly have so much as flashed even though he hurried along. It must have stroked the water and either strand lightly, as a black cloth could be drawn evenly across a hand, rising and falling smoothly in fractured shapes. On the other hand, it could have bounced, sprightly, and John Purinee's shadow would have bounded in his haste, becoming all too much a flash or flutter atop the water in the stream. And in that way, the comparison of John Purinee's shadow to any other would have been all the same.

He was, don't forget, on his way to the theater, which shouldn't take all that long. Roads was a small town, and whether one was looking for a pharmacist, a drink, some gasoline, a new or used car, or just a bite to eat, there was only one street one needed look on. The theater was on that one street, next to the drug store, which was across from the only bank, which was adjacent to a grocery and on the other side of the Smite River Clubs & Claws, a purposeful store—guns and saws, seed and feed could be found there—which, but for the river, was next to the bar. The town was that small. John Purinee may have reached the theater sooner than Paul Finch had realized he could stop talking to no one listening. The town was that small, too.

But most of all, John Purinee could depend upon finding my father there. That was really how small a town it was. Paul Finch may have not yet stopped telling what he'd seen, but it would not alter that my father would be where Paul said he was. It was all the same, of course, that my father may not have been at all sure being at the movies on a Saturday afternoon could be much fun. It could come out later that he had been felling and bucking and skitting logs for Connie Bess's dad all of the last weekend, all of the morning on that day, and all of each of the

intervening days, and he was ready to just sit and slump a little without a saw or a cat. Maybe it didn't matter. Why bring it up except that in Roads to be without a job or to be in between jobs or in between shifts of one job or another and waiting until it wasn't so should have meant finding your own place on a stool at the counter of the Dippinn Tavern while parked over a couple of its Lucky Lagers and some cigarettes. It would have been that way, my father insisted, had it been that Wilburt Stebby was not already at the Dippinn. My father tolerated Wilburt well enough, liked him perhaps even more than he tolerated him.

"Been up a mountain fer more 'n' one thing or 'nother with 'm. Cain't help but to give 'm that," so Dad would often say about Wilburt, sounding more and more as I supposed Wilburt sounded. But, as my father also said, putting it delicately, only when Wilburt "weren't there could a man just sit. He's got too many stories to listen to 'bout gettin' himself in trouble. Generally, gets a man in trouble just hearin' 'em." Roads could be that small.

John Purinee must have suspected my father's reasoning, maybe even anticipated it, and did not hesitate to take Paul Finch at his word and immediately go looking for Dad at the movies.

"It were a war movie, I guess," my father once confessed. Long after Mom had died. He wasn't really interested in talking about it. But he let me know that much. "I dunno," he mused, smoking a cigarette the way Mom used to. "It weren't no war in it before I left, though. Maybe shoulda had me stay to find out. I dunno."

So my father says that, after coming into town on that Saturday, he passed up the bar and Hoymle's and all the usual company he could keep and headed instead for the Norway Movie Palace.

I imagine the Palace was styled on an ancient mead hall. Barmecide Roebleman would have done it that way. Dad would have told me so. He would have told me that Barmecide

Roebleman was an old Viking from Norway. He'd wink because he meant Norway, Oregon, then tell me how it had once been just a barn. Blacksmiths had kept shop in it. It had been a stable. Even Lemuel Pyke had kept horses there before he and Anna had set out for other parts. And Loggers in the old days had stored tools and machinery in the place and would have congregated in it on those days when the machinery needed repair or just a good talking to. Others kept other things in it, and groups of men could be found there standing around or sitting on bales of hay or anything else that comfortably rested them while they traded horse stories about logging and farming and sipped on somebody's whiskey.

So it had been a kind of mead hall until it fell into disuse. Cars were mostly to blame. Ben Hoymle, too, I suspect. Mom and Dad would never say. Nobody would ever say. Hoymle had built his filling station across the river. Built up his trade there and gave rise for a reason to have the Dippinn on that side of town, too. This was in the '20s. Blacksmiths became welders and horses disappeared altogether. So the barn was destined for extinction until it was cleaned out and stood as an empty hull like an old Viking ship in disrepair, needing only a whitewash to make it mead again—useful mead to an old Viking used to trading whiskey for a good story. With a little fixing up, it could be useful or so Barmecide Roebleman decided. And he was close enough to being that Viking.

"Must of been in '26, when I was born, that the old guy decided he'd had 'bout all the loggin' he wanted. Came inside that old abandoned barn, I guess, looking for stray cats. Hired himself to the town to catch cats. Seemed like someone in town had raised near'n' a hundred cats then went 'n' died. They was nestin' by the stream and in that old barn, I guess. Barmecide Roebleman got himself the job roundin' 'em up.

"So when he seen how the light come in from the cracks in the haydoors, he was

reminded of how a movie he'd seen looked and decided right then and there that he'd give up chasing cats, too. Built in some bleachers and got himself a second-hand movie projector. Painted a white screen 'tween the dormers on one wall and was all set. Showed movies that way till the place burnt down. He fixed it up to make it nice, o'course. Shoot, it was just a couple nickels to see what he showed.

"O'course, it burned down and old Barmecide weren't never found. The new Norway got built then on t'other side of Smite."

I imagined Barmecide as a kind of Kirk Douglas Einar to hear my father remark on his demise. It would be fitting that he and that barn went up in flames—a kind of they-died-with-their-sword-in-their-hand scenario. But I know that old Mr. Roebleman was quite old by the time of the fire and maybe inadvertently set his own place to burn, being feeble and old and still in a barn that was older still. It doesn't seem to matter. It was the town's only movie theater in the spring of 1948.

My father was just in time for the second half of a double feature on that Saturday afternoon. He would have selected for him a bench in front, having decided, like the two kids who had come in at the same time as he, a seat up front to allow for leaning their elbows on the bench behind them and stretching their legs ahead—the way you couldn't even watch a basketball game in the gym at the high school without someone coming along and kicking your feet out of the way where he'd be walking. It was, of course, always a he who'd be doing the kicking and a he getting kicked. Men are like that, especially he-men.

After settling in with a box of popcorn that he could get for another nickel at the ticket booth outside, Dad would have heard his name being called. It would be John Purinee shouting through the curtain at the entrance from the outside.

"Chase, you in there?" he would be yelling. "Gotta see ya, Chase."

Inside his booth, which was really a wood shed cut out and conformed to look like a booth—fixed up with a counter and a cookie-shaped hole in a plate glass window just above the counter—old Barmecide Roebleman would be writing something, probably trying to make sense of the receipts he'd taken in for the show. Disturbed by the yelling, he'd look up and tap on his window to get John Purinee's attention. Maybe he was only inquiring whether John wanted admission. But John Purinee would ignore the old man and continue shouting. Mr. Roebleman would probably shrug and go on writing—having had some experience with caterwauling pests and not up to a confrontation when he had box-office figures with which to contend. Besides, there weren't but three or four people in attendance. It couldn't possibly make much difference what John Purinee was up to.

So John Purinee would say again through the curtain, this time cracking it a bit, "Chase?"

"'Scuse me, boys," my Dad would say to the kids, kind of laughing. They'd laugh, too, as he stepped over their feet on his way out through the curtain. It wouldn't be but four or five steps and Dad would be outside and on his way with John Purinee back over the bridge to Hoylme's gas station where my mother stood patiently waiting, as requested, for John Purinee to return.

"Here's that fella I'd told you about," was the gist of the introduction. My mother then remembered that she had consented to meet a friend. She must have smiled, but said nothing, not sure whether she should shake my father's hand. She hadn't ever shaken John Purinee's hand and worried, too, if perhaps she should now also shake his hand. But her nun instincts counseled against touching. Besides, she quickly reasoned, she was holding an unlit cigarette and becoming eager to finish the introduction so that she could have her smoke.

My father smiled in return or simultaneously; they couldn't be sure of the order. They knew that neither one had yet uttered a word, for John Purinee was doing all the talking. He was at first asking my father whether he'd like my mother's address, perhaps to call her. But it was a new address, and my father said at last that he would, and my mother told John and my father about moving to Eugene.

Another car pulled into the gas station, travelers just asking for the shortest route to the Coast. John was glad to direct them. My mother and father looked on, silently. Mom tapped the unlit cigarette in her one hand on the palm of her other, smiling occasionally in my father's direction. Dad smiled to and toed at the gravel on the ground.

And across the bridge the movie was getting out. Had my mother come but ten or fifteen minutes later or had John Purinee not hurried as he did, had he remained to visit with Mom longer, then sought out my father, my father might have seen the entire movie. He might have finally seen whether it was war. He would not have returned to a later show to see what he had missed. Nor would he have bothered to notice the marquee to know which movie exactly it was that he'd been watching that Saturday afternoon.

If I really wanted to know, he used to tell me, I could go ask Wilburt Stebby; he'd know.

Incidentally, Jancee left me long since before my mother and father met and around the time I first mentioned Wilburt Stebby. This is usually about the time I notice again that Espee is gone, too. She quit the story. Come to think of it, I guess I only sat through it once, myself—though it seems we always sat with it at dinner. Mom and Dad never revisited the story after that one time. I can't remember how many times I tried it out on Espee and her mother. I suspect no one enjoys hearing or talking about Wilburt in the end. He eventually married Constance Bess and raises and sells earthworms, I'm told, in Apache Junction, Arizona, where he's become quite

an authority on fishing and its paraphernalia. But, you see, nobody knows what the movie was. Nobody's even sure it was.

And who knows where John Purinee is. He might know something about a movie. Maybe not. Still, I hope there was a movie. Who knows what my father would have done that afternoon had there been no movie, or, for that matter, what John Purinee would have done, or my mother. Who knows what the story would be were there no movie, were it just a war. Perhaps we'd only know about Wilburt and how he got to be so knowledgeable.

We sure wouldn't known about me or that my mother and father wanted twelve children and had only one. We wouldn't have known that it wasn't a disappointment because I don't think they ever gave up hope. At least, only in the end do I think they despaired and the laughter in their lives stopped. That's about when my mother died. I was nine. Dad said she smoked too much and ate too much. I'd never heard him say that before. She was fat and out of breath all the time, he would add, and it was a wonder she lived till you were nine. But boy would she ever laugh and make me laugh.

My father, I guess, thought it prudent to let her be. He died eleven years later Cat-skinning in the woods, pushing brush and refuse from a clear cut into piles. Loggers always tidied up after the timber for the mill had been removed. A sixteen-foot piece of alder tree as narrow and as straight as a javelin sprung up over the blade of his Cat and launched itself like a javelin into his chest. I heard he died instantly.

I was already in the navy aboard the *Constantinople* and got leave to bury him—which I did right next to Mom. But we wouldn't have known that or even done that were it not for that movie.

EPILOGUE

ART OF THE WHOLE DEPRENTIS DRAIN STORY

I saw Deprentis Drain only one other time this semester. We occasioned to meet on the city bus. I was sure he recognized me. I imagine he must have had other things on his mind.

I'd happened to have my car in the shop for servicing and decided to take the bus home from campus that day.

Now the city bus is not a meeting place—because it is not much better than inconvenience and expediency. It is, after all, just a ride and its riders vary; its rides vary, and in the variety Deprentis Drain, I noticed, will settle in the back, hunkered in a seat behind the rear exit. On a typical ride, his thoughts must deliberately meld with the sights along the road. He seems so very pensive and withdrawn even while looking around. On this particular ride from the college, I imagine he could have started out wishing to think only about getting somewhere, about asking the right questions, and applying what he knew. And he knew he could talk to someone about his work and interests at the University. I could see on his face that he knew about buses, even when he was in my office.

Up until a short time ago that day he might have been obsessed by university interests. But he had decided on the ride to meet, let's say, another Jancee Brete, the Learning Resource Center's new tutoring coordinator. She had a job for him. Yes. A job. It was best he not be obsessed with meeting her, though. He had best become distracted by irrelevant concerns.

But that was on the ride to college. On the ride back, he was similarly persuaded. Think insignificantly. Think of someone else he didn't know and hadn't met and think of nothing at all because Deprentis Drain was thinking too much about how he could have been so stupid to think that Jonce was a real name? He pointed his face in a direction away from the inside of the bus.

Like the wafting (was it modest?) shape of the smoke a small motor scooter had left as it putted and pulled its rider beneath the window where he had sat, he drifted amorously. His attention shifted to the scooter's rider. She is a college student, even without the backpack, he could speculate. And an attractive young woman, too, beneath the helmet, he imagined. Ask helpful-looking questions.

Think about the bus. This was a meeting and not yet a job. The bus was on San Marino Way, the College route, and there were plenty of students about, plenty of distractions. Deprentis was newly obsessed. The college was still near. His university thoughts were fading. He could notice that only on the cross streets were the roads and sidewalks not crowded. Her name is definitely not Jonce. That part of the day he would have to forget. So he decides he must get this job, for he would like to work with Jancee Brete.

Another passenger, a woman, got on the bus. She was older, wearing a slim business suit and clutching a brown envelope in her hand. She was a lot like me, and I temporarily forgot about Deprentis. On climbing up the stepwell to the landing by the driver, she slipped and nearly fell. The driver pretended not to notice. The woman pretended not to notice likewise, and quickly made her way to the back to the seat in front of Deprentis. Deprentis, of course, thought she looked worried. He thought that was common, for worried riders are common. They think that a city bus has not a conscience or a friend. They are the ones who are truly alone on the bus, who are strangers when they meet their own kind and strangers when they depart, and all the while in each other's presence on the bus they rarely speak even though they touch and are touched. Consequently, they silently yet visibly complain of abstract offenses and muse about their ride and the sums of calumny—or, worse, indifference—a crowded city bus has to offer.

Deprentis was staring at the back of the woman's head, which appeared to be nodding. I

think she was reading from the contents of her envelope. She seemed very business-like. And I could swear Deprentis was leering at her. Perhaps she was worried. She was sitting as close to the door as possible.

Like her, the worried riders get on and get off in their turns without eagerness. And they do this quickly, anxiously. They do everything quickly and anxiously while they are still on the bus. But there are also the indifferent riders. They enjoy the bus much the same as the worried ones and under their breath blame the driver, but without the passion in their faces for alarming anyone to their side. Maybe Deprentis only felt sorry for the woman, who could have been completely indifferent.

Even so, lingering smells of spent Diesel fuel filtered into the bus through the windows and Deprentis looked outside again. He must have know that for him and all the riders, whether getting on or off the bus or staying put, another stop must occur and a lesson learned before they are through. They are quicker to the doors each time, though all the more worried. And they are riders again and again, though the driver thinks they are all idiots. Next time they had better be quicker up the steps or down.

Yes. Deprentis felt sorry for the woman and most of the other riders. He had looked around smug and content. He surely considered himself a careful rider, one who generally avoids all blame and is relaxed—his thoughts on other business. He would be deliberately distracted. Yes. The careful rider usually sits in the back with papers or books or companions with whom to talk. Deprentis let show the suppression of a smile. He pursed his lips and looked again outside.

It was then that the rear tire, over which his seat on the bus rode, bounced in and out of a large pothole and that Deprentis bounced with it. A canvas pack of books and papers in his lap

bounced too and slammed into the back of the seat in front of him. He had become a trajection and had felt himself lunging from his place at the window. He was pointed toward the aisle. His shoulder very nearly collided with the head of a woman sitting beside him. I, too, had bounced with the tire and had abruptly lurched forward, but had also managed to cling to my seat.

Running interference, as it were, by becoming his own point of impact in place of the woman's head in front of him, he managed to smack chest just below his neck directly into the canvas pack that had bounced with him, thus preventing an embarrassing mishap—but not a collision and not at all silently. The sound of the canvas pack against the aluminum back of the seat in front of him, following almost instantly Deprentis into the pack, seemed to echo the thud and crack of the tire as it passed through the pothole.

Jolted by the staccato-like sequence of the sounds and bumps the tire, Deprentis, and the canvas pack had made, the woman in the seat in front of him quickly jumped up and turned instinctively toward Deprentis. He looked into her eyes as if to acknowledge their mutual complaint. Surely, he knew who I was. But he must have also known immediately he was not going to get me to blame the driver or the bus.

Then just as quickly he noticed something else. The prisms from the Disney movie *Pollyanna* came to mind, and he smiled glad of something irrelevant. He smiled at me. In the aisle where I had landed when I jumped, I had wrapped myself in an embrace around the support beam next to my seat, clutching my envelope in one hand and the pole in the other.

The smaller, usual bumps and wobbles of a bus ride were jiggling me in the way the prisms in the movie had jiggled and shaken the spots of refracted light on Mr. Pendergast's sturdy wall. It had made everyone glad of the light and the jiggling colors of a rainbow. Still, Deprentis thought, Pollyanna was wrong to claim that the prisms painted rainbows on the wall.

Had they been painted, surely they would have been fixed on the wall, and these rainbows were not fixed; they jiggled. The wall did not move; they jiggled. Pollyanna had simplified the entire process so that everyone would understand, but she had gotten it wrong. I noticed he began to frown. Expecting me, still holding tightly the pole, understand about Pollyanna would be like asking one of those rainbows to avoid the sun and stop jiggling. I did not want to smile either; I glared at him. I was just like Pollyanna to him, only I was glaringly red—no rainbow about it.

Ask only helpful-looking questions. Deprentis knew it would be right to say something helpful: He was unharmed? The whole thing is silly? Are you okay? Instead, he pushed himself back into his seat and with the supposed deftness of a limp contortionist boastfully crouched forward pressing his chest between his knees and clumsily reached down to the floor under the seat in front of him to retrieve the canvas pack from where it had ultimately landed. His face was well hidden. "Ooowp!" is all he managed to utter.

Giving Deprentis plenty of room, the woman sitting beside him rigidly pressed herself like a recoiled spring to the edge of the seat. Then like a spring suddenly released, she abandoned her place and bounded to a vacant seat on the other side of the bus. Moving more slowly and carefully, and still clinging to the support beam, I joined Deprentis's ex-seatmate. I did let go of the beam with one of my hands—the hand still grasping the envelope—and towed myself safely across the aisle. Once settled, I think I exchanged a repartee of knowing looks with the other woman. The glare was exchanged for a quizzical expression, and the urge for unkindness dissolved into disgust.

This bus, thought only Deprentis. He was still folded over at the waist and digging unsuccessfully with his hand under the seat for the canvas pack when he looked up to see that I had moved, and again "Ooowp!" is all he managed to utter. Supercilious. He was glad of the

word and pleased that he had managed to think it. How else do I explain him. The women were now completely ignoring him.

At last he retrieved the pack of books and raised it onto his lap. He unfolded its flap so that he could reach inside and pull from the pack a notebook fastened to a clipboard. Opening the clip, he pulled out a loose page. On it I imagine was a poem. It is a translation of a Latin poem attributed most likely to Gaius Cornelius Gallus. Gallus would have a translated it from an ancient Median poem. The Medes most likely would have revered it. So Deprentis mulled over his translation and, with his pen, inserted the phrase "after all" at the end. It would go something like this:

It is for the banquet that I like sitting.
I am alive with it. Fantasy races with winds afire—
But no winds are here.
Fantasy wells into a silent glow. I am alive in it.
Fantastic flowers of elegant foolishness adorn it.
I am alive. I am speaking to hew each sound.
To be clear and sated. To leave without wanting to come back.
Pining for what I had said.
Eating doesn't work. A banquet won't grow.
My fantasy is too large and looks dull.
I will look around again. This time
I may see what I need and desire to see.
Perhaps I will need nothing more.
I have seen so much I've done that this kind

of food before is me. It is always the same.

I am such a fool. But so I am. What I am

a fool for, I *am*. Bigger tunes play on my foot

as I tap for wining. I tap for saying and do not

wish to blame anyone for the speaking. It is simply

what I speak for. All my life I have said

what I say now. I am impatient.

I have always been able to hide it.

Impatient. I have lost my motive for bleating.

I must go back to the way it was. I have

lost my patience for what I have been doing.

Dispetior—Mewling—I will not speak again.

When one hundred thousand times

are lost on one hundred, hew speaking nonsense.

I am speaking without having a sword to speak.

How I fell better on the sword for not getting over the feast,

for simply getting around it.

I can get it. God is not Mansoureh.

She is not coming. I wish her well.

Will I ever see her again? Perhaps not.

Will we read our poems? Who can know.

Tonight I am going away without her.

I am without her. I regret it. I said it already.

I said I will have had a part of my life with her.
I continue to look up when I hew the things I hope
are sounds of Mansoureh coming and imagine she has.
I will not be without her. Her smile trails among
the stars like the comet. I was afraid to lose her.
But she is with me for now. One day I will not
remember what I said. One day I will not remember you.
Tunes will not play. Words will not sound long
and doleful tones on the planks outside that part of me
that I had given to you, that I had let hear you as I sit.
I will not hear music either. Music
will not quicken any breast. One day I will not
remember you. Clouds will no longer speak
of you, going away to who knows what.
One day I will not remember you. I have grown
unused to you, unloosed from you. Sacred speak
is you. Grow tall. Grow clear. God grows and
shades the clouds above me. Do it without
crying. No one's songs are that important. No
one's footsteps that simple. You are not
coming. The air was empty of sound.
It had been turned over like a pot of clay
and lay still and quiet, save the bleating

thud and grump in my breast. No
growing. I am going away. I need to eat.
Ave atque vale. Let me seize
the day as the least of all days
believing as I do in the after all.

Deprentis picked up the notebook and buried the paper back inside it. Then, sliding the notebook into his pack, he glanced again at the two women across the aisle. How like geology or evolution or agony he must have thought. The bus trip had taken much too long.

Upon getting back to his room, he would noticed his answering machine was blinking. If it were I, I would suppose it was about my car. It wasn't. It would be from Texas again.

"Damn it! You're not there!" a voice would say. There would be such a sharpness in the tone, and anger, that Deprentis would know immediately he was being baited, that he had been right all along. He was a worm. "This is Jancee. Espee's gone and pierced her tongue," the voice would continue. "I've got the thing right here in my hand. She's in her room right now crying. Crying about this." She stretched out her last three words making them each longer than the preceding one. She wasn't going to repeat herself, but she was going to make sure Deprentis dwelled on that part of her message.

"She says you knew about it. Wonderful, Deprentis. Wonderful. She clicks when she talks. It happens when she eats, too. How could you say it was okay? My daughter's not going to be a freak. I don't need you encouraging her. You're—You're—I can't say it. There's reciprocity in this, Deprentis. I wish you didn't have a—"

There was another one of those clicks. My machine limits its messages and her thirty-five seconds were evidently up. She didn't call back, either. I decided to go on into the

bathroom and take another shower. It was there that I thought about sending my letter to Wilburt Stebby just as I had written it. And, suddenly, I was glad that I had put Jancee Brete in Texas.

THE END