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IF ONLY I KNEW: THE STRANGER IN THE TWENTIETH-CENTURY SHORT STORY

A Thesis

Presented to

the Faculty of the Department of English

East Tennessee State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in English

by

Ryan S. Otto

August 2000

APPROVAL

This is to certify that the Graduate Committee of

Ryan S. Otto

met on the

9th day of May, 2000

The committee read and examined his thesis, supervised his defense of it in an oral examination, and decided to recommend that his study be submitted to the Graduate Council, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English.

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the Graduate Council

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ABSTRACT

IF ONLY I KNEW: THE STRANGER IN THE TWENTIETH-CENTURY SHORT STORY

by
Ryan S. Otto

The purpose of this study is to explore the variations of the stranger motif in American twentieth-century short fiction and to create five original works that represent my understanding of the genre. The appearance of the stranger is a common story structure found throughout the history of American literature and it continues to appear in contemporary American short stories. In his work Enter Mysterious Stranger: American Cloistral Fiction, Roy R. Male argues that a strain of the mysterious stranger genre is particularly indigenous to American society. He states: “it is probably true that our geography and history have made the choice between mobility and stability more available and thus more intense than it has been for Europeans” (7). Increasing developments in technology and social relations continue to allow Americans greater freedom and mobility, assuring the future significance of the mysterious stranger in American fiction as well. By examining the short works of Sherwood Anderson, Ernest Hemingway, Eudora Welty, Katherine Anne Porter, Flannery O’Connor, Raymond Carver, and David James Duncan, this study highlights the variations of the key aspects of the stranger genre and discusses the role the elements play in the construction of the story. Observations in this study fall into three basic categories: Character, Conflict, and Theme. The first chapter summarizes my general observations about the genre. The second chapter, “The Mysterious Stranger: Character,” discusses the symbolic nature of both the intruder and the fixed setting and the various ways the symbols are introduced in the story, while the third chapter, “The Tough Guy: Conflict,” focuses on the external form of the central conflict and the significance of its placement. The fourth chapter, “The Nature of Knowing: Theme,” explores the effects of the confrontation on the insider(s) and the role it plays in establishing the resolution and theme of the story. The fifth chapter, “The Character in Transition,” relates my observations in the critical study to the structure of my original fiction, while the sixth chapter presents five of my short stories. This exploration not only establishes a critical understanding of the essential elements involved in the story of the mysterious stranger, it also provides a context of evaluation for my short stories.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

While I wrote short stories as a graduate student, the similarities between the fiction I wrote and the fiction I studied became more and more apparent to me. For instance, after writing several stories during my first year, I recognized my attempt to mimic Ernest Hemingway's use of the outdoors, Flannery O'Connor's use of extreme violence, and Sherwood Anderson's use of isolated and desperate characters. But the technique I saw myself using more than any other was the insertion of the mysterious stranger as a tool to further the plot, action, conflict, climax, theme, and resolution of the story. In the past two years, my course work and personal interest repeatedly led me to the short stories of Sherwood Anderson, Ernest Hemingway, Eudora Welty, Katherine Anne Porter, Flannery O'Connor, Raymond Carver, and David James Duncan. In addition to recognizing the repeated use of the stranger in each of these author's work, I began to notice more subtle patterns of repetition in the themes, central conflicts, and character development within each mysterious stranger story. The following four chapters discuss these patterns and their relationships to my own efforts as a short story writer.

CHAPTER 2

THE MYSTERIOUS STRANGER: CHARACTER

Roy R. Male, in his book Enter Mysterious Stranger: American Cloistral Fiction, describes the mysterious stranger story as a type of reversal or “inside out” version of the quest story (9). Instead of the central character(s) going outside a familiar surrounding for experience and knowledge, something unfamiliar is brought to the central character(s) and some type of transaction takes place. Male argues that stories in this genre “share as their obvious subject the effect of intrusion upon an individual, a family, or a community” (9). According to Male, a metamorphosis takes place in one or more of the characters involved in the transaction and “then the stranger usually departs— sometimes from this world— leaving the insider(s) to ponder the significance of the experience” (10). Although Male limits his study to the stationary figure who encounters the stranger, this exploration includes the traveling figure as well. But regardless of where the encounter occurs, understanding the significance of the experience, or what “happens” in the story of the mysterious stranger (Warren 379), often begins with understanding the symbolic nature of the characters and the relationships that exist between them. Tracing the development of the central character and the stranger gives the reader insight into both the central conflict and the central truth that the author is attempting to convey through the story. Therefore, by examining the novella Noon Wine by Katherine Anne Porter, and the short stories “Good Country People” by Flannery O’Connor, and “A Piece of News” by Eudora Welty, I propose to trace the development of the insider and the stranger through the characters’ perceptions, the characters’ relationships to the setting, and the characters’ relationships to each other.

A Matter of Perception

Flannery O’Connor’s “Good Country People” is a story about three women whose familiar environment is intruded upon by a Bible salesman, Manley Pointer. The insiders, Mrs.

Hopewell, Joy/Hulga Hopewell, and Mrs. Freeman, live on a farm in the country and follow a daily routine where the “most important business” takes place in the kitchen (O’Connor 271). The outsider in this case comes from ““out in the country around Willohobie, not even from a place, just from near a place”” and is invited and accepted into the kitchen by Mrs. Hopewell under the pretense of being “good country people” (279). However, as O’Connor’s characters continue developing, each one establishes her own understanding of who “good country people” are. Throughout the story, Mrs. Hopewell’s and Mrs. Freeman’s perceptions of the salesman remain constant and serve as static reference points for the reader, while Joy/Hulga fluctuates between them. Structuring the characterization in this way allows O’Connor to highlight Joy’s enlightened shift from her mother’s naive perception to Mrs. Freeman’s awareness and comprehension of human nature.

Representing one extreme of Joy/Hulga, O’Connor characterizes Mrs. Hopewell’s static state as one of limited vision and understanding. Mrs. Hopewell is one who clings to pious naivete and idealism and has “no bad qualities of her own” (272). She is a “woman of great patience” (273) and argues that “people who looked on the bright side of things would be beautiful even if they were not” (275). One example of her limited vision is her inability to comprehend her daughter. After the Bible salesman appears and he and Hulga walk out to the gate, Mrs Hopewell “could not imagine what kind of a conversation she [Joy] could possibly have had with him” (277). But as Mrs. Freeman states, the reader knows that ““some people are more alike than others”” (282) and that Mrs. Hopewell’s understanding of her daughter is somewhat inaccurate. In another instance, Joy accuses Mrs. Hopewell of living an unexamined life and Mrs. Hopewell simply remarks, “hoping Joy would take it in, that a smile never hurt anyone” (276).

Mrs. Hopewell’s understanding of the Bible salesman, the stranger, is limited as well. The Bible salesman tells Mrs. Hopewell, who is at first eager for the boy to leave, that he is ““real simple”” and ““just a country boy”” or ““country people”” (278). Mrs. Hopewell immediately warms up to the salesman and proclaims that ““good country people are the salt of the earth”” (279). Although there is reason to believe otherwise, Mrs. Hopewell considers both the Bible salesman and Mrs. Freeman to be good country people.

The limited vision that Joy shares with her mother is disguised at the beginning of the story behind Joy/Hulga's ineffectual rebellion. In Frederick Asals' book Flannery O'Connor: The Imagination of Extremity, he argues that Joy's "changing her name to Hulga is a deliberate defiance of her mother, a self-definition that sets her against everything Mrs. Hopewell stands for" (103). But despite Hulga's attempt to rebel, Mrs. Hopewell continues "to call her Joy to which the girl responds" (O'Connor 274). Speaking to her mother, Joy says that if she were not ill, "she would be far from these red hills and good country people. She would be in a university lecturing to people who knew what she was talking about." Instead, she lives at home and parades around the house "in a six-year-old skirt and a yellow sweat shirt with a faded cowboy on a horse embossed on it." During a meal one day, Joy again verbalizes her contempt for her mother and yells "Woman! do you ever look inside? Do you ever look inside and see what you are not?" Later the narrator explains that "Mrs. Hopewell had no idea to this day" what sparked Joy's rebuke. In addition, the narrator says: "All day Joy sat on her neck in a deep chair, reading . . . She looked at nice young men as if she could smell their stupidity" (276). In fact, while the Bible salesman is visiting the Hopewell's house, Joy sarcastically tells her mother to "'Get rid of the salt of the earth . . . and let's eat'" (279). Asals argues that "Point by point, the girl has, she thinks, defined a self that is the antithesis of her mother's" (104). Hulga ridicules her mother's narrow-minded behavior but later confesses her own naive perception of the Bible salesman when she asks him "'Aren't you . . . aren't you just good country people?'" (O'Connor 290).

Mrs. Freeman, the wife of a hired hand at Mrs. Hopewell's farm, acts primarily as Mrs. Hopewell's counterpart and the symbol of Joy/Hulga's new perception of the world. Mrs. Hopewell and Mrs. Freeman exchange phrases like "'Everybody is different'" (273) and "'it takes all kinds of people to make the world go 'round'" (282) on a regular basis, illustrating that there is some degree of agreement and understanding between the two women. But unlike Mrs. Hopewell, Mrs. Freeman's "eyes never swerved to left or right but turned as the story turned as if they followed a yellow line down the center of it" (271). Her forward expression is "steady and driving like the advance of a heavy truck" (271). Because her judgement of Manley Pointer is accurate, her vision is presented as a reliable frame of reference for the reader, unlike that of Mrs. Hopewell. The two extremes these women represent embody the duality of Joy/Hulga who

is both naive and perceptive and struggling to recognize the “double figures” in herself and the Bible salesman (Asals 107).

Hulga’s perspective shifts in the story during her interaction with the Bible salesman in the loft of the barn. In The Art and Vision of Flannery O’Connor, Robert Brinkmeyer considers this aspect of the story “the conflict between the vernacular and the genteel, with the vernacular exposing the limits and pretensions of the genteel and learned” (147). Prior to their encounter, Hulga, like her mother, believes the Bible salesman to be simple, good country people and enjoys the thought of intimidating him and outwitting him with her superiority. She imagines dialogue between them that “reached below to depths that no Bible salesman would be aware of. Their conversation . . . had been of this kind” (O’Connor 283). She sees him as an inferior mind and imagines seducing him then changing his remorse into “a deeper understanding of life” (284). She even tells him that she doesn’t believe in God and states: “I don’t have illusions. I’m one of those people who see through to nothing” (287). But as the story progresses, Hulga’s ignorance of the Bible salesman’s true motives and characteristics surfaces. Her rebellious thoughts seem innocent and naive when compared to the behavior of the salesman whose “instincts are entirely predatory” (Westling 152). After unpacking an obscene deck of cards, a box of contraceptives, and a flask of whiskey from a hollowed-out Bible, the salesman argues: “I may sell Bibles but I know which end is up and I wasn’t born yesterday and I know where I’m going” (O’Connor 290). As he escapes down the ladder from the loft with Hulga’s artificial leg he says: “One time I got a woman’s glass eye this way . . . you ain’t so smart. I been believing in nothing ever since I was born” (291). Louise Westling argues that Manly Pointer, after his encounter with Hulga in the barn, is “disgusted to learn that she is as gullible and innocent as her mother” (152). But more importantly, as Asals states in his study, the confrontation “ironically reflects the other relationships in the story, that between the two older women, Mrs. Hopewell and Mrs. Freeman, and those of the girl with each of them” (102).

At the end of the story, Hulga moves away from her mother’s naive perception, but Mrs. Freeman and Mrs. Hopewell remain unchanged. Mrs. Hopewell sees the young man fleeing the barn and says: “Why, that looks like that nice dull young man that tried to sell me a Bible yesterday . . . He must have been selling them to the negroes back in there.” Then she says: “I

guess the world would be better off if we were all that simple.” Shortly after, “Mrs. Freeman’s gaze drove forward and just touched him before he disappeared under the hill. Then she returned her attention to the evil-smelling onion shoot she was lifting from the ground.” But Hulga, who is sitting in the “dusty sunlight” at the opening in the loft, sees with a new, but clouded vision, the Bible salesman’s “blue figure struggling successfully over the green speckled lake” (291).

A Matter of Place

In Eudora Welty’s “A Piece of News,” the contrast between the insider and the intruder develops primarily through the story’s sense of place. The two main characters, Clyde and Ruby Fisher, live in a small cabin in an isolated setting near the border of Tennessee. A significant portion of the story takes place while Ruby is alone in the cabin; and, with the exception of her husband, no other characters physically appear in the story, including the intruder, who only appears as a name in a newspaper article. This stranger, a woman also named Ruby Fisher but who lives in Tennessee, never appears in the story; she is the catalyst for the central character’s revelation. In the character development of the story, Clyde and Ruby Fisher partially define their relationship during a brief period of interaction in the cabin, but the central character, Ruby, is largely developed as a symbol through her interaction with the environment of the setting. Therefore, Ruby’s counterpart, the stranger, represents an aspect of her surroundings that she is unable to comprehend. Welty creates parallels between Ruby and her physical surroundings then repeats them in patterns to solidify the reader’s understanding of the conflict and ultimately of the discovery that Ruby makes about herself and her relationship to the stranger.

In the opening paragraph of the story, Welty begins to establish the indirect comparison between Ruby Fisher’s characteristics and those of the natural setting. Welty combines the imagery of the fire, the storm, and the house with direct authorial comment to draw symbolic links between the physical surroundings of the story and Ruby’s character traits. “She had been out in the rain” the narrator states, but now, at the beginning of the story, she is inside by the fire trying to dry out and get warm (21). According to the comparison, the events inside and outside

the cabin parallel what is happening to Ruby internally and externally. Authorial comment tells the reader that internally Ruby “must have been lonesome and slow all her life, the way things would take her by surprise” (22). Later, she spots her name in the newspaper and slowly spells out the words that follow it in a whisper, then says them out loud, slowly “like conversation.” “‘That’s me,’ she said softly” after realizing the paper says she has been shot by her husband. Immediately after Ruby makes this statement, the narrator says that “The fire slipped and suddenly roared in the house already deafening with the rain which beat upon the roof and hung full of lightning and thunder outside” (23). Or as critic Gail L. Mortimer says, Ruby was “jolted into an awareness” (66). By recognizing the story’s sense of place, the reader gains insight into Ruby’s character and the process of discovery she experiences. Having linked the images together, the reader can then look for significance in other descriptions of the fire, the storm and the house. In another section of the story, for example, Ruby is standing at the open door of the cabin looking for her husband. The narrator states that “There was a flash of lightning, and she stood waiting, as if she half thought that would bring him in” (Welty 24). A few sentences later, Ruby’s anger mimics the lightning and passes “like a remote flare of elation” (24). Later, after Ruby envisions Clyde’s repentance for the imaginary crime, “A whole tree of lightning stood in the sky” (27). These parallel comparisons are reinforced throughout the story until finally at the end the storm dies, and Ruby “stood stooping by the window until everything, outside and in, was quieted” (30-1).

Ruby’s revelation occurs when she learns that the name in the paper refers to a different Ruby Fisher. Her husband says: “‘It’s a Tennessee paper. See ‘Tennessee’? That wasn’t none of you it wrote about.’” Then he laughs, “to show that he had been right all the time” (30). Critic Peter Schmidt states that “the central incident of the story . . . shows Ruby to have a thoroughly naive understanding of who she is” (32). With the explanation of the name, Ruby’s isolation and her limited or “vague” ability to understand the possibilities of the world is highlighted in the final paragraphs through the descriptions of the place: “. . . It was dark and vague outside” (30-1).

A Matter of Parallels

At the beginning of Katherine Anne Porter's novella Noon Wine, a stranger from North Dakota arrives on the Thompson's deteriorating "small south Texas farm" looking for work. Royal Earle Thompson, the man of the farm, hires the Swedish stranger from North Dakota and puts him to work churning the butter that he "was tired of" churning (223). Throughout the story, Porter's plot repeatedly places the two men in similar situations and then reports their differing responses. The contrast between their responses distinguishes each one's symbolic nature. In her discussion "'Noon Wine': The Sources," Porter herself says: "It is only in the varying levels of quality in the individual nature that we are able finally more or less to measure the degree of virtue in each man" (360).

As the story begins, a contrast arises between the way the men handle the work on the farm. Both men have access to the same resources, but Helton is able to sustain a more lucrative and aesthetically appealing atmosphere on the farm than Thompson did. When Helton arrives at the farm the gate leading through the front entrance has swung back and "was now sunk so firmly on its broken hinges no one thought of trying to close it" (222). Thompson is lazy in his work around the dairy and considers many of the chores to be women's work. He is "fond of saying that he could plow a furrow, cut sorghum, shuck corn, handle a team . . . as well as any man," but in the end "'It don't look right,' was his final reason for not doing anything he did not wish to do" (233). As a result of his action, the Thompson farm suffers. Helton, on the other hand, scrubs and scalds the wooden molds and shallow pans "for the first time in who knows when" (227). The narrator says that "Mr. Helton knew how to save the scraps that Mr. Thompson had thrown away, and wasn't above scraping guts and filling them with sausages" (235). Even Mrs. Thompson says "'it's a mighty good change to have a man round the place who knows how to work and keep his mouth shut'" (232). In her work Truth and Vision in Katherine Anne Porter's Fiction, Darlene Harbour Unrue argues that "Helton is symbolically related to Thompson at a preconscious level, and that part of him which is 'forrin' to the Thompson farm is his diligence and 'good clean work'" (41).

In addition, Porter's plot places both men in situations where they feel the need to discipline the Thompson boys, Herbert and Arthur, but in different ways. When Thompson

disciplines the boys, he becomes “a hurricane of wrath” but simply yells at them to ““Get to bed, you two”” (231). Afterward, he is reprimanded by his wife who pleads for him to stop ““picking on them when they’re so young and tender”” (232). Helton on the other hand, responds differently to disciplining the boys. After discovering that the boys have bothered his harmonicas, Helton is seen “shaking Arthur by the shoulders, ferociously” (237). “[I]t was the silence” of the rebuke that strikes Mrs. Thompson as strange (237).

At another level of parallel development, both Thompson and Helton kill as a result of their limited vision. Thompson believes that “he saw [Hatch’s] blade going into Mr. Helton’s stomach” (255) and argues that he killed Hatch while defending Helton. Later, however, Thompson learns that Helton hadn’t been stabbed at all. The narrator says: “Thompson tried hard afterwards to piece together in his mind, and in fact it never did come straight” (255). Some ten years earlier, Helton drove a pitch fork through his brother for not returning a harmonica. Thompson describes Helton’s current attitude toward his harmonicas and claims that the only money he ever spends is to buy a new one now and then. Hatch then says that Helton ““musta been crazy to get all worked up over a little thing like that”” and kill his brother (251).

The final parallel occurs as the plot matures and both men die as a result of Hatch’s appearance. After the incident between Hatch, Thompson, and Helton, Helton runs off through the orchard and then dies in a jail cell from wounds that stem from the apprehension. The sheriff says: ““They had to be rough . . . he fought like a wildcat”” (259). Thompson commits suicide after failing to convince himself, his neighbors, and his family that he killed Hatch in self-defense.

More significant, however, is that both men seek redemption from their crime before they die. After killing his brother and escaping to Texas, for example, Helton takes a position on the Thomson farm and seeks redemption by living a “harmless and quiet” existence for nine years (247). Helton is diligent and fruitful in his labor and the Thomson farm flourishes economically. In addition, he is able, years after his departure from North Dakota, to send his mother a check for \$850 dollars. Thompson, on the other hand, seeks redemption through words. Once he has killed Hatch, he “can’t seem to rest unless he’s telling how it happened” (258). He is acquitted of murder by the courts, yet he journeys all over the area with his wife “to tell every

neighbor he had that he never killed Mr. Hatch on purpose” (262). Despite Thompson’s efforts, even the “Thompson boys believe the worst of their father” (Hendrick 90). Thompson eventually gives up and kills himself because “Nobody believed him” (Porter 262).

In each of these short stories by O’Connor, Porter, and Welty, the stranger, despite his/her ultimate role in the story, brings something new or unfamiliar to the familiar circumstances of the insider’s world. By recognizing the contrast between the new that the stranger brings and the old that exists in the insider, the reader can interpret the significance of the stranger’s appearance and its ultimate effect on the central figure.

CHAPTER 3

THE TOUGH GUY: CONFLICT

In his work The Basic Patterns of Plot, William Foster-Harris talks about transferring the inner, subjective struggle of man into an “objective fact or accomplishment” through storytelling, or more specifically— plotting (30). Although Foster-Harris acknowledges that “stories must be told externally, in terms of things and action,” he argues that “the story actually takes place inside the breast of the character . . . experiencing it. What he or she says and does are merely the symptoms, the effects of that inner conflict” (sic)(31). One inner conflict that appears frequently in the stranger genre is the conflict between pride and fear. In the stories that contain this conflict, the material or objective manifestation of the main character’s pride and fear must be recognized in order to understand the significance of the experience for the character. Foster-Harris later argues that the action of the characters, like a battlefield, “retains the signs of the struggle that took place on it” (76). In Raymond Carver’s “Why Don’t You Dance” and Ernest Hemingway’s “The Battler,” the central characters are living in defeat, but find a way, through their speech and action, to maintain a proud self-image despite their fears.

A Fear of Man

Ernest Hemingway’s “The Battler” materializes the internal conflict between pride and fear, and emphasizes the central character’s fear of man as a main idea. The story gives the account of young Nick Adam’s journey down railroad tracks to the town of Mancelona. As the story begins, Nick struggles to find pride in his situation— on his hands and knees on a railroad track in the tamarack swamp. His “pants were torn and the skin was barked. His hands were scraped and there were sand and cinders driven up under his nails” (53). The next passage in the story explains what has happened to Nick from his point of view. It begins with “That lousy crut of a brakeman,” ends with “That son of a crutting brakeman,” and recounts Nick’s experience of

being thrown from the moving train (53). “What a lousy kid thing to have done,” Nick thinks (53). Then he realizes that “there was a big bump coming up. He would have a black eye, all right” (53). Although Nick has been tricked by the brakeman and thrown from the train for being a stowaway, Nick’s reaction reveals one of his central characteristics— stubborn pride, even in the face of defeat. Nick vows to “get him some day” and looking into the swampy water, tries to see his black eye (53). His sense of pride increases after traveling up the track and meeting the first stranger in the story who greets him with the question ““Where did you get the shiner?”” (54). After Nick explains what has happened, the stranger says ““I saw the bastard . . . He went through here,”” and Nick boldly replies ““The bastard!”” (55).

Like Nick, the stranger, Ad Francis, is a proud man. The former prizefighter lives on the railroad tracks as a grotesque outcast of society. “His nose was sunken, his eyes were slits, he had queer-shaped lips . . . the man’s face was queerly formed and mutilated” (55). He married a woman that he claimed was his sister, and later she left him. He spent all his money and served time in jail for ““busting people”” (61). Ad explains to Nick that he’s ““not quite right”” and that he’s crazy but that he’s not sure why or how it happened (56). Despite all this, Ad manages to maintain a proud self-image through what he says and does. He explains that ““They all bust their hands on me . . . They couldn’t hurt me”” (56). ““I could take it,” the man said. ‘Don’t you think I could take it, kid?’” Nick replies, ““You bet!”” Nick and Ad become friends and engage in conversation that inflates both of their proud self-images.

But if pride drives the plot for both Nick and Ad, then fear is the counter force that creates their internal conflict. After establishing himself in his new surroundings by the campfire, Nick is physically confronted by Ad who has suddenly gone mad. Ad badgers Nick and asks ““Who the hell do you think you are? You’re a snotty bastard. You come in here where nobody asks you and eat a man’s food and when he asks to borrow a knife you get snotty”” (59). As Ad’s anger and irrationality increase, Nick’s fear of getting ““busted”” motivates him to act. Nick moves away from Ad, but Ad pursues him. Ad says ““Try and hit me”” but Nick is not interested (59). ““You won’t get out of it that way. You’re going to take a beating see? Come on and lead at me”” (59) Ad says. But Nick’s fear of the stranger is greater than his personal pride and he pleads with Ad to ““Cut it out”” (59).

In the same scene, Ad reveals his own fear and inner conflict by falsely accusing Nick of being snotty. Ad says: ““You come in here and act snotty about my face and smoke my cigars and drink my liquor and then talk snotty. Where the hell do you think you get off?”” (59). Ad’s obsessive fear of public ridicule and his pride in protecting his name, causes him to turn against Nick and attempt to beat him up. Ad is not afraid of Nick; he is afraid of what Nick represents—social judgement. And although Ad is mad for thinking this, to him, it is true, and his paranoid fear of ridicule motivates him to act against Nick.

A Fear of Isolation

In his short story “Why Don’t You Dance?” Raymond Carver works with the same internal, opposing forces of pride and fear, but chooses to focus upon man’s fear of isolation rather than man’s fear of man. Again, however, at the beginning of the story, the central character has a proud, false self-image. While looking out over his yard from the driveway, the man, who is never given a name, is pouring another glass of whiskey. He has removed everything from his house and has set it up in the front yard and driveway. The narrator says: “He had run an extension cord on out there and everything was connected. Things worked, no different from how it was when they were inside” (125). But despite the man’s failed relationship and his apparent irrationality, he still maintains a proud, defiant stance toward the ridicule of his neighbors. After the two young strangers arrive, the man suggests that the couple dance, but the boy refuses. The man says ““Go ahead . . . It’s my yard. You can dance if you want to”” (129). Later, when the man is dancing with the young girl, she points out that some of the neighbors are watching. The man replies: ““It’s okay . . . It’s my place . . . They thought they’d seen everything over here. But they haven’t seen this, have they?”” (129).

Ironically, while the man’s speech and action reveal his sense of pride, the man’s fear of isolation becomes apparent to the reader as well. In the third scene, the man returns from the market with “sandwiches, beer, whiskey” and is pleased to see the young couple at his house (127). After agreeing to sell the couple several pieces of furniture at a bargain, he says: ““You

kids, you'll want to have a drink'" (127). As the story continues, the man fills their glasses a few times and agrees to sell them more things from the house. He is in no hurry for the couple to leave and watches them curiously. After the man puts a record on, the young couple dances, but the boy is drunk and doesn't last long. "'Dance with me,' the girl said to the boy and then to the man, and when the man stood up, she came to him with her arms wide open" (129). Ultimately, however, the man's desire for companionship and fear of isolation is most poignant in the final scene in the yard when the girl verbalizes her judgement of the man's condition. As they dance, "The girl closed and then opened her eyes. She pushed her face into the man's shoulder. She pulled the man closer. 'You must be desperate or something,' she said" (130).

In both of these examples, Carver and Hemingway develop inner conflicts between pride and fear through the central characters' speech and action. And although this conflict can manifest itself in a variety of forms, in these particular stories, the writers are primarily concerned with situations in which man's fear wins the conflict.

CHAPTER 4

THE NATURE OF KNOWING: THEME

In a chapter titled “I Gotta Use Words When I Talk to You: Theme,” Janet Burroway writes: “Whatever the idea and attitudes that underlie the theme of a story, that story will bring them into the realm of experience through its particular and unique pattern” (295). She elaborates later by stating: “It is in the different uses of the elements of fiction that each story makes unique what it has to say about, and what attitude it takes toward, the idea . . .” (295). One idea that is commonly explored through the stranger genre is man’s inability to completely know and understand his surroundings (Male 5). In Raymond Carver’s “Why Don’t You Dance?” David James Duncan’s “A Streetlamp in the Netherlands,” and Sherwood Anderson’s “Tandy” from Winesburg, Ohio, the appearance of the stranger addresses this idea and explores man’s need to acknowledge the unknown. In each story, the theme of “confronting and confessing the unknown” (Male 5) develops through patterns of action, dialogue, and narrative.

A Theme in Sherwood Anderson

In Sherwood Anderson’s “Tandy,” the narrator is a prominent force in the story and contributes to its theme of uncertainty. Anderson presents the narrative voice in a subjective pattern to highlight the reader’s ability and inability to understand the situation. Much of the information given to the reader in the story is directly from the narrator and establishes the tone or attitude toward the idea presented. In the first paragraph, the narrator explains that the father “was so absorbed in destroying the ideas of God that had crept into the minds of his neighbors that he never saw God manifesting himself in the little child that, half forgotten, lived here and there on the bounty of her dead mother’s relatives” (143). Here, the narrative voice introduces a seemingly subjective statement, the manifestation of God, as fact. The father, Tom Hard, is trying to destroy an idea that the narrator and Tom Hard’s neighbors readily accept. The narrator

continues to tell the story by introducing a stranger— a man who “saw in the child what the father did not see”— the manifestation of God (143). The stranger in the story is presented from the favorable, subjective position of the narrator. The narrator says that the stranger “gave a name rich with meaning to Tom Hard’s daughter” (144). But despite the stranger’s statement, ““Perhaps of all men I alone understand,”” the name Tandy represents something vague and ambiguous, ““something more than man or woman”” (145). The narrator presents the stranger’s words as words of wisdom and revelation, while the misunderstanding of the word Tandy is attributed to the girl’s youth, and not to the stranger’s drunkenness.

Like the stranger, the girl’s desire to know something is in conflict with her ability to understand it, and this conflict invokes similar actions in both characters. The narrator says that “the stranger became silent and seemed overcome with sadness” (144) and later that “the shoulders of the stranger shook violently, and when he tried to roll a cigarette the paper fell from his trembling fingers” (145). The girl’s action in the final scene mimics the stranger’s response. After the stranger tells the young girl what makes his “destruction inevitable” (144) and challenges her to ““dare to be strong and courageous”” (145), the narrator says that “she cried, shaking her head and sobbing as though her young strength were not enough to bear the vision the words of the drunkard had brought to her” (146).

Through dialogue, the stranger tells the girl to ““be brave enough to dare to be loved. Be something more than man or woman. Be Tandy”” (145). Perhaps the girl feels the stranger’s intense emotion, but ultimately she can not understand what he is talking about; she just wants to be Tandy, which is some abstract characteristic the stranger names. In the end, the girl “gives herself over to grief” and repeats in a desperate manner: ““I want to be Tandy. I want to be Tandy. I want to be Tandy Hard”” (146). The girl’s understanding of the word is uncertain and the story ends with the girl’s isolation.

A Theme in Raymond Carver

The characters in Raymond Carver's "Why Don't You Dance" illustrate similar patterns of development. As each character tries to understand his/her experience, the narrator's voice emphasizes the limitations of knowledge. After a brief introduction to the scene, the narrator meticulously proceeds to document the place and position of all the furniture in the yard. The narrator says: "A portable heater was next to the chiffonier. A rattan chair with a decorator pillow stood at the foot of the bed. The buffed aluminum kitchen set took up a part of the driveway" (125). This objective and empirical tone that dominates the first scene encourages the reader to question the contrasting elements in the rest of the story that are subjective and unmeasurable—or unknown. For instance, why would a man remove everything from his house and rearrange it perfectly in the front yard? Although a separation, break-up, or divorce is implied, the central character's ability to understand the situation is limited.

Later in the story, the narrator expresses the man's limited understanding of the nature of relationships. During the young couple's visit, the narrator says that the man "looked at them [the young couple] as they sat at the table. In the lamplight, there was something about their faces. It was nice or it was nasty. There was no telling" (128). The narrator's voice in the story establishes the man's limited ability to understand the experience. The man can not fully comprehend his past relationship, nor can he understand the true nature of the young couple's current relationship.

This theme develops in other parts of the story through the simple action and dialogue of each character. To the young couple, who have driven by the house and decided to stop, the situation seems odd, and the girl says: "It must be a yard sale" (126). Later, while she is sitting on the bed in the front yard, she tells the boy to haggle with the owners over buying the furniture. The boy wants to know "what things are going for" but is not certain about the situation (127). He feels "funny" (126) and laughs for "no good reason" (127). The girl says: "Ask them how much" (127). The boy says: "I'll see if anybody's home . . . I don't think anybody's home" (127). The girl replies: "Whatever they ask, offer ten dollars less. It's always a good idea" (127).

In the final two paragraphs of the story, the man's frustrated attitude transfers to the girl. In this section of the story, the girl is shown talking about the incident weeks after it has occurred. She has reduced the experience to simple facts and tries to be indifferent when telling it. She says: "All his things right there in his yard. No lie. We got real pissed and danced. In the driveway . . . Will you look at this shit?" (130). But ultimately, her attempt to understand the experience fails and she gives up. The narrator says: "She told everyone. There was more to it, and she was trying to get it talked out. After a time, she quit trying" (130). The girl's limited ability to understand the experience prevails and the girl, like the man, is driven to isolation and frustration.

A Theme in David James Duncan

Pacific Northwest regional writer David James Duncan often uses the appearance of the mysterious stranger in both his novels and short stories. In the fly-fishing cult favorite The River Why Duncan's main character, Gus Orviston, meets a number of strangers who mold and shape his understanding of himself and his environment. And although Duncan excludes the use of dialogue in his short story "A Streetlamp in the Netherlands," the development of the theme appears in the narrator's voice and the action of the story in much the same way it does in Carver and Anderson.

Throughout Duncan's story, the narrator's tendency to catalog empirical, objective observations, or what can readily be known and proven, dominates the reader's impression of the situation. The story begins: "Early August, 1969" (33). The narrator explains that the sidewalk he is standing on "outside the Delftware factory in Amsterdam" while smoking an "English Pall Mall," "bordered a two-lane, one-way street evenly lined with broad-leaf trees and enormous old wrought-iron streetlamps" (33). While the man is smoking, a lamp that "had survived two world wars . . . let out a groan, then fell with a crash to the pavement" (34). The narrator's constant focus on the factual evidence of the situation, placed next to the few, random statements of uncertainty, addresses mankind's inability to fully know and understand the human experience.

The narrator says: “Alone, I was having trouble believing what I’d seen. Yet there the lamp lay, blocking half the street, its glass panes shattered, its post badly twisted” (34).

The narrator’s understanding of the stranger in the Fiat contributes to the thematic development of the story as well. To the narrator, the stranger is a “silhouette in the backseat of a Fiat sedan, parked across the street” and the only one the narrator “could have shared an amazed laugh” with about the fallen lamp. But the “Fiat’s windows were closed; the silhouette seemed not to have noticed” (34). Like the appearance of the young couple on the scooter and the narrator’s sudden lust, the source of the silhouette’s decision to open the car door at the particular moment the scooter passes seems to be unknown. The result is that “The couple on the Vespa had no time to react” and the woman is mangled (34).

And while the narrator’s voice contributes to the development of the theme, the action of the story reinforces it. The couple on a “Vespa motor scooter” pass and swerve to miss the fallen lamp (33). As they do, “the silhouette in the Fiat at the left curb suddenly opened the door” and the young girl riding on the back of the scooter is thrown to the ground (33). During the experience the narrator tries to grasp what is happening but realizes that his senses are no longer reliable. The narrator describes his action as “veering like a drunk back to my original curb, the blood gone from my head” (35). The narrator is confused by the seemingly random action of the fallen lamp that caused the disaster. Immediately, the narrator finds himself in a state of isolation and despair. The narrator says: “I hunched like a gargoyle on my curb there, trapped between the remembered gleam of her legs and animal agony of her groans” (35). He is ultimately uncertain about the nature of the experience and says “I kept looking up the street at the preposterously fallen lamp that started the chain reaction, trying, like a gargoyle, to work out a way to hate it; trying to find a way to make it stand back up and pay” (35).

CHAPTER 5
THE CHARACTER IN TRANSITION

If Death Were Dead: A Discussion

In O'Connor's "Good Country People," the symbols of the stranger and the insider emerge primarily through each character's interpretation of the phrase "good country people." A similar technique is used to develop the banker, Will Williams, and his father Jeb Williams in my short story "If Death Were Dead." In this story, each character's understanding of life and death opens an avenue of comparison and character development in much the same way the phrase "good country people" does in O'Connor's work. And although O'Connor uses Mrs. Freeman and Mrs. Hopewell to represent the two static extremes that Joy/Hulga fluctuates between during her transition, Jeb and the banker are dynamic characters that foreshadow Will's confrontation with the unknown and transition into uncertainty.

At the beginning of the story, Jeb Williams takes pride in himself as a man who understands how to raise and kill pigs. Like the defeated man and girl in Carver's "Why Don't You Dance" and the defeated characters Ad, Bugs, and Nick in Hemingway's "The Battler," Jeb is a proud character living in a defeated state. Jeb's fear of isolation and his fear of man has kept him on the farm, despite his failure to earn a living as a farmer. Will and the house are in a dilapidated condition, but Jeb has earned a reputation as a good pig farmer and is proud that people from all over the county stop to buy meat when they see the smoke coming up from the hollow. The father's pride appears in his speech and his action as well as in Will's dialogue. Will repeats the words of his father to the other farmers who stop for sausage and ham. Will says: "Pure grain feed . . . Our hogs don't eat nothing but grain" (3). In Jeb's own mind, he not only knows how to feed and fatten the hogs for good meat, but he also knows how to carry out killing them as well. Jeb explains to Will, as they climb the hill to slaughter the pigs, that the trick to killing them "is in the aiming, lining up the sights" (5).

The banker's perspective toward his line of work is not much different. Although the

bank is an inanimate object, the banker personifies the institution and boasts of his ability to make one thrive as a living organism. The banker explains to Jeb that “the bank lives off payments from its borrowers” and since he “wasn’t sent to bumpkin county for vacation,” he intends to get the money (7). Despite the banker’s apparent demotion, the banker claims never to have “let a bank die.” The banker says he knows what keeps the bank alive and what kills it, and like Jeb, his confidence in his ability to control the factors of life and death sustains his proud self-image.

However, when the stranger enters the feed lot and is accidentally shot by Jeb, the latter must confront the possibility of his own death. Like the tone in Duncan’s “A Streetlamp in the Netherlands,” the banker’s fear of the unknown controls his action. This uncertainty that the stranger brings to the story serves as a catalyst for the transition that all three characters experience. As Jeb loads the wounded banker into the back seat of the shiny sedan, the banker asks: ““Am I going to die?”” When the banker expresses his own fear, Jeb begins to contemplate the repercussions of the accident and assumes the banker’s attitude toward his own future.

Like Tandy Hard in Anderson’s short story, who accepts the challenge of the stranger to ““Be Tandy”” (145), Will completes his transition by accepting his father’s challenge to shoot the pig. But killing the pig does not satisfy Will’s emptiness any more than drinking does for Anderson’s stranger or changing names does for Tandy and he finds himself in an isolated and frustrated state.

The Revolution: A Discussion

In David James Duncan’s “Streetlamp in the Netherlands,” the exploration of man’s limited capacity for knowledge develops primarily through the narrative voice. The empirical observations of the narrator establish a frame of reference for the action of the story and prepare the reader for the uncertainty that follows. In the opening scene of my short story “The Revolution,” the narrative voice plays a similar role. The descriptions of the ocean and the beach are based on concrete observations made by the central character Will Sesowski. These concrete

reference points, along with the scientific account of the ship that Will is waiting for, help establish the idea of man's limited capacity for knowledge. Following the empirical observations of his physical surroundings, Will begins to question the ship's absence, but he cannot know whether the ship has already landed or whether it has been delayed at sea. Will's imagination takes control of his reasoning and he envisions a disaster at sea and the sinking of the ship. Meanwhile, a baby octopus, "the size of an open golf umbrella" washes in with the winter tide. Although Will is seized with compassion for the stranded creature, he is unable to return it to the ocean. Like the narrator in Duncan's short story who cannot understand the action of the streetlamp, the overwhelming tide of the ocean and Will's inability to contemplate the behavior of the octopus contribute to the development of the theme.

This plot pattern of searching for significance, confronting the unknown, and then retreating into isolation repeats itself in Will's life in a circular pattern in much the same way that Ruby Fisher's predicament evolves. Like Welty's character from "A Piece of News," Will is ultimately unable to find significance in a vast, lonely world. This cycle is defined for both Will and Ruby by the relationships they have with their natural surroundings. At the beginning of the story, Will is alone at the beach waiting for something he can describe, but has never seen. While waiting for the ship to arrive, Will attempts to help a stranded octopus, and in doing so discovers a feeling of purpose that quickly dissolves when the creature repels him. Not only does Ruby seek significance in the story by wandering out to the road and hitching a ride with "the coffee man, with a Pontiac car," Ruby finds temporary significance by imagining her death and the remorse that her husband would feel for shooting her in the heart (25). Although the octopus is in fact afraid of Will and returns to the ocean with the next big wave without his help, Will reaches out, searching for meaning in the experience. Will, like Ruby, begins his story in isolation, attempts to find a significant place within the boundaries of his own world, then fails, and retreats into a state of isolation. The cycle is repeated later in the story when the reader learns that Will has left his pursuit of family law in Seattle and taken a job on the Oregon coast as a news reporter because he thinks that "here is a hotbed of environmental issues Something real to fight for" (4). But like Will's past experience in the big city and his experience on the beach, he is unable to find significance through his action and is isolated and

frustrated in the end by the knowledge he gains from the experience.

While fluctuating between what he knows and what he can not know, the same conflict that controls the action of Carver's main character in "Why Don't You Dance" controls Will. Like the narrator in Carver's story who moves all his furniture into the yard and sets it up exactly the way it had been in his house, Will's obsession with protecting the rights of the news reporters illustrates the desire for sympathy and companionship. Defeated in the big city in his attempts to obtain a family law degree, Will assumes an adolescent pride in his past accomplishments. Like Hemingway's Ad Francis, who shows Nick the stump where his ear should have been and brags "Ever seen one like that?" Will attempts to win the favor of the sports reporter by exhibiting his debate trophies. Will hopes to gain the respect and friendship of his fellow reporters by undermining the editor of the paper. This desperate search for significance is developed through the narrative voice in "The Revolution."

CHAPTER 6
THE SHORT STORIES

If Death Were Dead

From the pit in the hollow where Will had built a fire under the metal trough of water, he sat restlessly sharpening a knife. Up on the hill, the silhouette of the barn looked mysterious against the blue-black sky of the early morning. Steam rose from the water that was slowly heating up in the trough. Will watched the figure of his father, Jeb, moving in the shadows around the barn and in the pig lot, getting things ready. While faint patches of light began to collect around the barn, Will waited and sharpened the knife. Jeb went into the barn through a small door. Will got some more wood from a pile at the edge of the woods and shoved it under the trough into the accumulating coals. Junk was piled beside the road that ran down the hollow and into town. Will pulled a long metal bar from the inside of a rusted vending machine. In the distance he heard a tractor start. He walked back to the trough and circled around it to approach it from the coolest side. He stuck a metal thermometer into the water and turned its head around to read it. The red line was 150 degrees and the needle was getting closer. It's almost time, Will thought. He threw the bar down and picked up a long stick he saw lying in the pile of dead wood and used it to stir the water.

At the barn, the large door that let out into the pig lot swung open on a broken hinge and hung sideways with the sagging end stuck in the mud. Jeb stepped out with a cluster of pigs at his feet. The barn needed painting and the pig lot needed cleaning, but Jeb had no intention of doing either. The ground in the pig lot was uneven and covered with corn cobs that had been cleaned and scattered evenly over the years by the pigs. The cobs were three inches thick in the lot, but Jeb said he was leaving them. Jeb said it was a reminder to the neighbors, that his hogs were grain fed and worth every penny they spent on the meat. Across the road from the barn sat the William's house. It needed painting as well.

"Pure grain feed," Will boasted to the men who stopped at the barn when they saw smoke

and steam rising up from the trough in the hollow. “Our hogs don’t eat nothing but grain. Ain’t that right Pa?” Will said.

And then Jeb said humbly that the men knew that, but he was always glad that the boy had mentioned it. He took orders from the men without writing them down or calculating how much meat there was. He’s just stayed quiet and serious like he always was and said things like, “Charley’s got the last ham,” or, “there’s only half a rib left,” as if the meat had already been cut and distributed. They always came and they always took what they could get and were happy about it. They patted Will on the head before leaving and Will was glad he was getting older and able to move up from the hollow and work with Jeb in the pen.

“We’ll see ya soon,” they’d say.

And when they did, Will was proud of raising and killing the pigs, even though he hated watching them die and had never killed one himself.

Jeb loped down the hill from the barn and went down through the field to the edge of the woods by the trough.

“150 degrees, Pa,” Will said.

“All right then, are you ready?”

Will looked at his father but didn’t answer.

“You’ll have to do it sooner or later.”

Will half nodded and followed Jeb reluctantly up to the field where the donkeys were waiting. They were ready to go. Jeb slid his hand under the straps of the harness, gave them a quick pull, then went on up toward the barn. He didn’t say anything at first. Will didn’t like helping and Jeb knew it. He waited for Will. They walked over the cobs and up the bank to the barn together.

“If you hit them square between the eyes, and don’t shoot down on them, they’ll die quick, and it don’t bother them none,” Jeb explained. “Get down on one knee and line up the sights. Look down the barrel, through the bead, and into the pigs eyes, he said. “You got to be on their level. Find the bead, find the eyes. Don’t shoot down, they’ll squeal every time.”

Will half nodded.

“I’ll kill the first two,” Jeb said. “You can kill the last one.”

Will and his father reached the top of the hill and stood over the pen. The pigs dug and grunted through the cobs. Will climbed the iron gate beside the pen and balanced himself near the top.

“Which one?” he asked dangling over the pen.

“Better get that one there, she’s the biggest.”

Will took a deep breath and dropped down into the pen. The pigs tighten into a corner. Jeb unlatched the bolt and slid a shell into the chamber of the .22. The pigs hardly ever looked up. They were pushing through the cobs and through each other for a place to eat. Then the biggest one look up at Jeb who was on his knee in the mud looking down the barrel of the rifle. Jeb pulled the trigger and the gun popped. The pig dropped with a sudden thump and jerked its legs like it was running and fighting and giving up all at the same time. Then it stopped. Jeb nudged the sow with his boot and urine flowed from the pig and out into the mud.

“Even pigs have a pecking order,” Jeb told Will as they climbed the hill for the second time that morning. They were done with the first one and were heading toward the pen to look for another. The sun was beginning to hit the far corners of the lot and Will had spotted one of the new pigs hiding in a shaded corner of the yard. There was a scratch underneath its neck and a piece of hide torn from its ear where it was bleeding. Will felt sorry for it and herded it into the top corner to be shot. But Jeb had other plans and waved him over to a different pig.

“Get that one there. She’s bigger,” he said.

Will made his way through the herd and nudged one’s head with a stick.

“That one there,” Jeb said.

Will swatted at the pig’s hide.

“Come-on, you’re next,” he said, but the pig was in a group that was backed against the gate and weren’t moving.

Will slapped at the hides and waited for the herd to break up. Will and Jeb heard a car at the same time and turned to see the black sedan roll slowly up the hill out of the hollow and stop in front of their house.

“Who’s that, Pa?” Will asked.

A trail of dust settled and a man in a dark tailored suit stepped out of the car. He stepped to the porch of the house without seeing Jeb and Will beside the barn.

“Who is that, Pa? We don’t know him.”

“I don’t know, Will. Just get her outta there and don’t worry about it none.”

Will climbed along the top of the gate. He dropped in the lot from above the pigs and drove the big one back to the corner. Then he saw his mother pointing toward the barn and talking to the man on the porch. Jeb pulled the bolt back on the Winchester and loaded another bullet. But he didn’t take aim. He was watching the man now too.

“Mr Williams?” the man said as he crossed the dirt road and walked toward the pig lot. “My name is Joe Creede. I’m with the First Trust Bank. I’m the new manager of the bank, and I’m out meeting some of our account holders.”

“Mr. Creed,” Jeb nodded. “It’s nice to meet you, but if you don’t mind excusing us, we got pigs to kill.”

The man stood in the road outside the barbed wire fence. They looked confused and out of place.

“Well, actually, I do mind. I need to talk to you for a minute, Mr. Williams.”

“What do you want?” Jeb asked.

“Just to chat with you for a minute.”

“Like I said, we’re killing pigs, you’ll have to come back,” Jeb said.

“Yes, I can see that. Looks like a messy job.”

Jeb turned back to the sow. Will had her waiting in the corner.

“It seems that your account has had some oversights in the past, Mr. Williams,” the banker continued persistently.

Jeb turned back to the banker.

“That’s fine, Mr. Williams,” the banker said. He shrugged his shoulders. “I’m not here to talk about that. I’m here to discuss our future relationship.”

Jeb turned away from the road that led to town and moved around in front of the sow. He raised the rifle, took aim and shot down on top of the pig. It squealed and romped around the pen. Will looked up in surprise. Jeb got in front of the wounded pig. The sow stumbled a little.

Jeb took a step sideways in the mud. From a standing position, he raised the butt of the rifle to his shoulder. He grunted and stomped his foot once. The pig looked up and Jeb shot down on it again. It squealed and ran toward Will. Jeb reloaded the rifle.

“Ah, Mr. Williams,” the banker said. “It won’t take but a minute of your time.”

Jeb looked at the banker then back to the pig. He cornered it again. He raised the rifle, but the pig swung its head to watch the banker who was moving closer to the fence.

“Mr. Williams, I drove all the way out here as a courtesy to you. I just need a minute of your time and I’ll move on.”

Jeb lost interest in the dying pig and turned to the banker.

“Mr. Williams, I’ll get right to the point . . .”

“Mr. Creed? Do I kill pigs in your bank lobby?”

The banker didn’t respond.

“Do I?”

“This is hardly a matter of killing pigs, Mr. Williams.”

“Well, I’ve got pigs to kill. If you want to talk to me, I’ll come down to the bank.”

“Mr. Williams, what I have to say will just take a minute. There’s no need for you to come down to the bank. We came on this call as a courtesy to you.”

“There’s no need for you to come out here.”

Jeb turned back to the wounded pig who was standing steady. The banker crossed the barbed-wire fence and started across the pen toward Jeb and Will. As the banker stepped slowly across the lot, looking down as he walked over the cobs, he said, “Mr. Williams, the bank lives off payments from its borrowers.”

The banker stopped.

“We’re killing pigs,” Jeb said.

“Well, Mr. Williams, then, I’ll be brief and honest with you. I’ve never let a bank die,” the banker started up the slope to the barn. “I’ve never let a bank die, and I don’t intend to start by letting a bunch of washed out farmers avoid payments. I wasn’t sent to bumpkin county for vacation, and I plan to straighten this bank up quick, so I can get out of here. Now I’ve tried to be polite with you . . .”

Jeb started down toward the banker and mumbled something about there being a time and a place, but as he started down the slope, he slipped on the corn cobs and the uneven ground and the gun fired when it hit the ground and shot the banker in the leg. The banker made a noise Will thought was worse than the pigs. The banker reached for his leg and fell on his side in the mud. No one moved at first except the banker. He was hysterical. He yelled and pulled at the leg that had been shot.

“You fucking red neck. You think by shooting me you can get out of this . . .”

Will looked from Jeb to the banker. The man sat up in the mud and vomited from the shock. Jeb walked toward the banker and tried to help him up, but the man was upset and he would not cooperate.

“Go in the house, Will.”

Jeb tried to help the banker up again. The banker mumbled something about a law suit. His face flushed and his eyes rolled in their sockets.

“We’ve got to get you back to town and to the hospital,” Jeb told the banker and started helping him toward the car, but they fell several times the first couple of feet.

“Will come help me,” Jeb said.

By the time they got the banker to the road, they were all covered in mud. Will heard the sow behind him squeal as they loaded the banker into the back of the sedan. The banker grabbed Jeb by the collar. Half covered in mud, his face looked like it was getting whiter.

“Am I going to die?” he asked.

Jeb shook his head. “Just relax. You’re fine.”

“Tell me,” the banker said. He shook his fist at Jeb. “Tell me the truth.”

“Just keep quiet. You’re not going to die,” Jeb said and slammed the door. “Relax.”

Will followed Jeb around to the driver side of the car.

“Are you in trouble?”

“Tell your mamma I went to town with the banker,” Jeb said and opened the car door.

“Are you in trouble, Pa?”

Will saw the fear in his father’s eyes as he climbed into the driver seat.

“Just go tell your mamma, Will.”

As the black sedan drove away, Will walked to where Jeb had fallen and picked up the gun. The wounded pig hung her head and staggered to the corner of the barn where they had left her. Will walked around and dropped to his knee in front of the sow. He raised the rifle to his shoulder as the sow's face turned up. He found the bead, then the eyes and pulled the trigger. She fell without a sound and Will stood over her as she jerked and kicked silently. He forgot about the banker. His heart raced as he cut the pig's neck and saw the blood flow from the pig onto his hands. It ran out onto the mud. He wanted the killing to stop. He wanted the blood to stop. He wanted to somehow undo what had been done. He was suddenly aware of his heavy breathing. His heart raced. It raced and Will felt it would pump the blood out of his body.

Will sat motionless in the light that had crept over the barn and into the pig lot through the smoke and the dust. He watched the smoke and the steam rise from the trough at the bottom of the hill. He looked down, past the junk piled at end of their property, past the edge of the woods where the dead wood was piled, and followed the sedan winding its way down the hollow. His eyes combed the landscape, lined up the sites, and again settled on the shiny sedan. He looked down at the pig. He knew the meat would rot from the heat in the guts if he didn't get them out soon, but it was a long time before Will got up and tried to finish the job.

The Revolution

Will Sesowski stood at the edge of the parking lot above the sandy stretch of land that appeared then disappeared as the winter tide rose and fell. It was early in the morning but late at night for Will. Will swayed with the gust that came off the ocean's surface and several times had to remove his hands from his pockets to cling to a nearby lamp pole. The light flickered when he grabbed the post and sometimes went out when a heavy gust came. Will felt the camera inside his coat to see if it was wet yet and then continued to scan the horizon. The NOAA government research ship was already late and there was no sign of it in the foggy distance. No one from the paper had sent Will out, but he wanted a picture of the ship entering the bay. He knew it would run front page if he could get a good one. Will watched the winter waves beat against the shoreline then retreat. The shoreline disappeared as high tide approached and the waves, no longer satisfied with rolling just the sandy grains back underneath themselves, rose and drove into the rocky cliff walls, scattering themselves through the air in white, misty explosions, then returning moments later as a whole, digging deeper into the walls of the cliffs, wanting more, as if satisfaction would come only when every piece of land was ground into a fine grain and forced under.

Will left the wooden staircase that led down to the beach, crossed the sand and approached the retreating water slowly. An octopus, the size of an open golf umbrella, had washed onto the beach and Will wanted to see it up close. The force of the water came in unpredictable pulses and sometimes it didn't push all the way to the cliff wall. Then it only rose a little but held back as if saving its energy, building for the next big attack. Will paid close attention to the pattern of the waves and the lack of movement from the octopus. Its indifference to its marooned state intrigued Will and he wondered if the animal might be dead. It made no movement. As Will got closer, a wave crept up on him and he ran suddenly away. The animal floated further onto the shore with the incoming tide. As the water retreated, it left the octopus stranded again. Then the octopus began moving. An arm lift up slightly then rolled out and down in a wave of its own. Another moved slowly away from its body as if reaching for something or trying to crawl back into the safety of the water. Will left the steps and walked

back across the sand. The water retreated further out. The octopus began to struggle more. Will approached and reached for one of the tentacles. He was going to drag the animal back into the water, but as soon as his hand touched the slick skin, an arm wrapped around Will's. Will felt the suction on the back of his wet hand and he was pulled down slightly by it. Will stood up. He dug his heels into the sand and leaned back to drag the octopus into the ocean. But it didn't budge. He recoiled and tried again, but nothing happened. He started to step back for more leverage but got tripped up and fell to the sand. Will saw the tentacle wrapped around his ankle and reached to unwrap it. He shook his hand loose and reached down but was suddenly surrounded by water. It sent a chill through Will and he heard it rushing in around him. He jumped free from the animal and stepped high through the rising water. Will retreated across the beach and up the cliff wall. The water clapped below against the rocks and scattered and splashed up over his back. He reached inside his coat; the camera was wet. Will clung to the wall shivering and watched over his shoulder as the water retreated and carried the octopus back into the ocean.

Will held a single sheet of paper in one hand and shook the stranger's hand with the other. The stranger was bald and overweight, but wore a dark tailored suit and set an expensive black hat on his head while they shook hands. The man stood next to Will outside the open conference room door in the light that fell into the darkness of the newsroom. His black hat and the dark, tailored suit made him look powerful. It was late in the day and most of the offices were emptied and the lights were out. Will lead the man through the circulation department and to the front door to let him out. They had not been friends before today, and at the door, Will thanked the man again and the man said, "No, thank you, Sir," and they shook hands again.

"I'm glad you'll be a part of this," Will said.

"Well, this kind of thing should not go unchecked."

Will had been anxious all day about it, but now that it was over and he had a signed statement from the man in his hand, he felt better about everything. He watched the man hold his hat down and cross the gusty parking lot, then Will straightened the clip underneath his tie in the reflection of the glass. "Everything is falling into place," he said out loud. He turned to admire

his profile. He was thin and had on gray polyester pants and blue running shoes. His face was flushed and there were dark circles under his eyes from working long hours, but now, Will felt rejuvenated. He thought about the meeting that was planned for the evening and admired his appearance in the reflection. While Will pushed a piece of hair from his face the wind picked up outside, and the sound of it coming through the cracks gave him a chill.

He left the glass door and went to the archive room, where he found the article he had written involving the stranger's business and made a copy of it. Back at his desk, he stapled the article and the piece of paper together, put them in a file folder that said "Disputed" across the top, and put the file folder in the brown leather file bag that he had used in law school. He picked the file bag up by a loosely attached handle and went out by the delivery dock where Joel, the paper's sports writer, and Jon, the business and lifestyle writer, were standing by an open bay smoking cigarettes. They looked up when Will came out.

"Well, if it isn't the politician," Jon said.

"Hey, Willy. What's with this meeting tonight?"

Will slid a worn grey coat over his arms as he walked across the warehouse toward them. He pulled the thin hood of the coat over his head.

"Be there. You'll see."

"You got food?" Joel asked.

"Of course, I've got food. You Neanderthal."

Will pulled a nasal inhaler from his coat pocket and used it. Jon and Joel turned to the open bay door and watched a sea gull that had blown off a nearby roof frantically beat its wings into the wind to cross the parking lot. It landed near a dumpster on the edge of the property and scampered to some scraps that had fallen out.

"You guys know where I live?"

"Yeah."

"Will the boss be there?" Jon asked.

"Nope."

Will used the nasal inhaler again then stuck his head outside the bay door and looked the clouds over.

“Damn this weather,” he said.

“What about Steve?” Jon asked.

“He’ll be there.”

“What’s it about, Will?”

He shook his head. He wanted to wait, and spring it all on them at once.

“What kind of food you got?”

“I got plenty of food,” Will said. “Just be there.”

He jumped down from the bay door into the wind and rain and stumbled when he hit the slippery pavement.

“Careful, Tarzan,” Joel said.

Will picked the wet file bag up from the ground. “Just be there,” he said.

He stopped at the grocery store on the way home and bought another bag of chips and two more six-packs of beer which he put on the kitchen table with the rest of the chips and dip and deserts he had bought the day before. In his bedroom, he turned the desk-lamp on and sat down with the file bag. The rain tapped lightly on the window. He removed the folder and laid the material out on the desk, then he read through it and made some notes on a legal pad while he waited.

“This trophy is for debating,” Joel said. He had arrived at Will’s apartment first and was walking around the living room picking things up and reading them while he waited for Will to bring him a beer. It had stopped raining outside.

“Lincoln-Douglas Distinguished Participant? What is this, Will?”

“It’s for debating too. They’re all for debating.”

“They give trophies for debating?”

“There’s more to competition than jock straps.”

“Why’d you quit law school if you’re so good at arguing?”

“I didn’t quit arguing. I just quit law school.”

Then Will gave Joel the explanation. He gave it to him like he had given it a thousand times. It was his father, Will said, that made him go to law school in the first place. He had

endured the schedule at first because he thought he could believe in justice for a family ideal and practice family law, but in the end, after books piled up, and test were failed, Will said he saw the system for what it was really worth. "It's all a farce anyway," Will said. He explained that if he'd have stayed in, he just would have ended up winning child visitation rights for idiots who probably deserved to be without a family anyway. So he left Seattle and moved to the Oregon coast.

"And here," he would say, and this too was rehearsed, "here is a hotbed of environmental issues. Right here. Something real, to fight for."

The doorbell rang.

"Hey, Will," Joel said and set a plaque down that he had been reading. "Do you care if I watch TV?"

"Make yourself at home."

Jon walked in when the door opened and was happy to see that Joel had already arrived. Will gave him a beer.

"You guys make yourselves at home," Will said and left the room.

Jon picked up some dip from the table and sat down next to Joel on the couch.

"What's up?"

"Nothing."

"Who's the guy with the green cape?"

"That's Vanity Crusher. He's the arch enemy of Gorgeous Jimmy."

Jon looked at Joel and nodded politely when he realized Joel was serious.

"He's a killer," Joel said.

"A killer?" Jon repeated seriously. He laughed, though, when the man took his green cape off and danced around the ring taunting his opponent. "Is he for real?"

Joel stopped eating and turned to Jon.

"You know it's not real?" Jon said. "Wrestling, I mean. It's not real."

"You think I'm stupid? I know that."

Jon picked up a photo album from a small table at the end of the couch. The doorbell rang and Will came back in the room to let Steve in.

“Hello guys,” Steve said.

“Hey,” Jon said from the couch. “Come look at this picture.”

Steve sat down on the couch and took the album. He had never been a commercial fisherman like most of the men in town, but his face was leathered from the weather anyway. He was the photographer for the newspaper and went to school board meetings and wrote school district features. He made the paper himself at least once a year when he won the “Harbor Fleet 5K” each spring.

“That one there,” Jon said.

The caption read “San Francisco 1973,” then listed the names of the people in the picture and Steve laughed when he recognized Will.

“Groovy, man,” Steve said. “A real hippie.”

“Let me see,” Will took the album. “Ah, yes. I was 17 in that picture.”

Will flipped a few pages ahead and handed the album back.

“That’s me in ‘76 at the Dylan show in Fort Collins.”

Steve held the album while Jon and Joel leaned in to see. They all looked at the picture and nodded, but nobody said anything. Steve turned the page then shut the book.

“So what’s this all about?” he asked.

“In time. In time. Let me get you a beer.”

“I don’t want a beer.”

“Chips, cake? There’s stuff on the table,” Will said as he walked out of the room.

“I’m not hungry. Thanks anyway.”

Steve turned to Jon, who shrugged. He was watching the wrestling match again.

“I left my son’s game to come to this,” Steve said.

“Joel, remember how Cathy added that section to your piece about the girls away game?” Will asked.

“Yeah.” He was watching the match on TV.

“Is that what this is about?” Steve asked.

“Partially. It’s also about your last school board piece and Jon’s last feature on the commercial fishing fleet.”

“What about my last feature?”

“Didn’t you say Cathy cut it up? And Steve, you’ve said that more than once. I’ve heard you complain about her editing.”

“She’s the editor of the paper,” Jon said, still watching the match.

“Yes, but she doesn’t have a right to edit out what we say. Listen, you guys have all said something to me about this, and now’s our chance to do something. I’ve got some real proof.”

“Is that what this is about?” Steve asked.

“Just hear me out.”

Will opened the file folder and removed a stack of papers. He thumbed through the copies of articles and stories he had written for the paper since he had arrived a month earlier. There was one article for every week, and for each article, there were two copies: the one he had submitted to Cathy and the one that was printed in the paper. Will had highlighted all the information that had been added or deleted from both copies. He began handing them out and explaining the significance of the stories. Steve interrupted.

“What is this, Will?” he asked.

“I’m telling you. All the information that was added or deleted from these articles alters them. It alters the slant I was putting on it. It alters the issue I was reporting.”

“Will, you’re talking about very minor details.”

“No, this is serious. Look at the difference in these Morton Shipyard articles.”

“It’s not serious, Will.” Steve said.

“Just humor me. Look at all the evidence,” Will said.

Nobody said anything. Steve took the article and began reading a highlighted paragraph.

“You know the owner of the Morton Shipyard,” Will said finally. “He signed this.”

Will handed Steve the signed statement from the wealthy business man. He read it.

“I showed him the article I wrote about their paint toxins,” Will continued, but Jon and Joel were watching TV and Steve was reading the statement. “Of course he had seen it, but I showed him the before article. I showed him the highlighted areas and the things Cathy took out and added before print. I showed him and he agreed with me. She’s exercising too much power.”

“You’re not serious are you, Will?” Jon asked.

“Of course I am. She’s controlling our opinions. Look. Look at this.”

Jon took the piece of paper from Will but he didn’t read it.

“So, what if she is?”

“We should threaten to boycott tomorrow’s deadline.”

“What?”

“Something’s got to change and this will get her attention.”

“Boycott the deadline?”

“He signed this today?” Steve asked when he finished reading the statement.

“He came to the paper and signed it today,” Will said. “He was mad about that article.”

“Will, this is a bad idea.” Steve said. He got up. “I can’t be a part of this.” He started for the door.

“Oh, man. Come on.”

“No. I’m leaving, Will.”

“Don’t leave, man. Come on, you believe in this stuff.” Will was on his feet and at the door.

Steve stopped with his hand on the knob.

“You’re right, Will. I do. But not like this. I don’t believe in it that much. Think about what you’re saying. I’ve had this job for ten years. I’ve got a family, I’ve got a house, I’ve got responsibilities.”

Nobody said anything.

“Besides,” Steve said, “Cathy’s my friend. You know that. Our kids are on the same basketball team, for Christ sake, Will. She knows I’m here. She knows about this meeting.”

“You told her about the meeting?” Jon asked.

“She asked. She knew something was up. I’m not going to lie.” Steve opened the door. “I’m out of this one Will,” he said and shut the door as he left.

Will walked back to the couch.

“I’m out too, Will,” Jon said and stood up as Will sat down. “I’m no politician, but I know a good way to get fired when I see one. Anyway, I’m up for a raise soon and I don’t want

any trouble.”

“Come on Jon,” Will pleaded. He followed him to the door. “Use this to bargain with.”

“I’m out Will.” he said and shut the door.

Will turned back to the couch in the living room where Joel was eating chips and watching the wrestling match. Will wasn’t sure Joel had heard any of it. He sat down next to him just in time to see the man in the green suit get hit in the head with a chair.

“Oh!” Joel said.

Will took a hand full of chips from the bag. Joel looked up from the wrestling match.

“I better go too,” he said but he didn’t get up.

“You’re leaving?”

“I’m out too, Will. If that’s what this is all about, I’m out too.”

“But what about it? You said it made you mad. Come on, we can do it. Me and you.”

Joel set the chips down and made like he was getting up.

“It did. I mean it does. I mean, I was having a bad day when I said all that stuff. Hell, the truth is, I wish she’d add stuff more often. I hate writing those damn articles.”

He stood up to leave but hesitated.

“Hey, Will?”

“What?”

“Do you care if I take the chips?”

Will locked the door and turned off the stereo and the television. He gathered the papers from the table and took them to his room. At his desk, under the light of the single bulb, he filed all the papers back into the leather file bag, then set it on the floor. He turned the desk-lamp off and sat still, in the dark, for a long time listening to the rain beat against the window.

The Girls Next Door

There was a knock at the door. Simon folded the cover over last month's sales quotes and stared at the door with disgust. Sales had been worse than expected for the summer and Simon was very drunk. He sat on the dirty linoleum of his small apartment kitchen and wished he was back in Michigan at headquarters where he could blend in and not be responsible for anything.

He tried to be quiet. He wanted whoever it was to go away. The refrigerator behind him hummed and its green enamel cooled his back. Simon thought New Mexico was a very hot and irritating place. He fixed his eyes on the door and waited for the person knocking to leave.

All summer, Simon had been bothered by neighbors. Next week, I'll be back in Michigan, Simon thought. Jobless maybe, but out of the heat. There was a second knock. Then a third. Simon took a sip of whiskey from the bottle and sighed at the thought of having to get up and answer the door. But the knocking persisted and became louder and more frequent so that it banged in his head and seemed it would never end. Simon finally relented. He recognized the woman through the peephole. He had given her a cigarette in the courtyard a week ago and she had not waited to light it, but instead stood staring over her shoulder nervously and as soon as he pulled it from the pack, she snatched it from him and ran. She was a short, Native American woman who through the fish-eye peephole and the whiskey and the darkness, now appeared round and slightly invisible around the edges. Her left forearm rested across her forehead and her right arm clung to her waist. After several more knocks, he realized that through the black hair, her head was bleeding from the temple.

"We're sending you down to Albuquerque for the summer, Simon," his boss had said early in the spring. "We want you to head up our sales department down there."

But I don't want to go to Albuquerque, Simon had thought, and was reluctant to agree. The pay they offered was generous and Simon thought he could save some money up if he

accepted the offer and lived tight. Besides, Simon knew that declining the offer would be a slap in the face of a promotion, regardless of how poor a promotion it was. So he waited the summer heat out while the sales and the heat and the drinking got worse.

“Yes?” Simon said through the door. She continued looking back and forth over her shoulder.

“I need your help,” she said. “Please open the door.”

Simon waited and didn’t respond. It was late and he was very drunk.

“Please!” She knocked again. “I need your help.”

During his three months in the Albuquerque, it had only rained once, late in July, and even then the sun’s heat had not disappeared entirely. He waited and watched the Indian woman and finally opened the door. She entered the apartment forcefully and closed and locked the door behind her without haste. She stood on her tiptoes and peered through the peep hole. “Thank you,” she said and turned toward Simon. The poor had found haven in the dingy apartment complex. Simon’s neighbors were fatherless children, teenage drug dealers, and mothers who were overweight and reluctant to clean themselves or change diapers. The apartments were cheap though, so Simon stayed and kept his door locked and tried not to talk to anyone. But all summer, women of the complex had come to Simon for help. One woman wanted to use the phone, one wanted a ride to the pharmacy, one wanted him to watch her two-year-old while she walked to the grocery store. And on and on.

Some days Simon thought they were lined up outside his door taking numbers. Trashy women who couldn’t help themselves. He had consented to some of them but despised kids and refused to watch anyone’s child. The one needing the phone called her mother in Detroit and talked for 20 minutes. She was heavy and sweating and smoked a cigarette while she talked without asking if Simon cared.

“Honey do you have an ashtray,” she said holding the phone and a half-burned cigarette away from her.

Simon got up and retrieved a paper plate from the pantry with disgust.

“My name is Simon, not honey,” he had said.

“Well, Simon, I appreciate you letting me use the phone,” she said after hanging up. “I get paid on Friday. I’ll bring you some money for the call.”

“That’s fine,” Simon said, but he never saw her again and later wondered if she even lived in the complex.

The one needing a ride to the drug store had seemed uncertain about her prescription and had convinced Simon to stop at three different ones. By the third his patience grew thin and he got out of the car to get a paper. While sitting on a curb at the edge of the parking lot reading the company’s stock quotes, two police cars pulled into the lot with their lights flashing but their sirens silent. Two officers went inside while a third stayed near the door and talked into a radio. After several minutes, Simon stood up and walked back toward his car. Intending to leave the woman, Simon was surprised to meet her sad face coming out of the store with two officers leading her by handcuffs. She turned to look at Simon as she passed. “I’m sorry,” she said. The trio halted and both officers turned toward Simon quickly with their hands laid across the butts of their pistols. The third officer came up from behind and patted his pockets.

“Hey, what’s the idea?” Simon said, and reeled into the officers arms. They threw him to the building and began searching him.

“I don’t know her, I was just giving her a ride,” Simon said.

“Place your hands behind your head,” the officers said calmly with one hand resting on the butt of his gun.

“Damn bitch,” Simon said.

But they cuffed him and took him to the station and charged them both with forgery, theft, and felony possession of a controlled substance.

There was another knock at the door. The Indian woman motioned for Simon to be quiet. The knock came again but harder. Then silence.

“I know you’re in there,” the man’s voice said. “I saw you go in.”

Simon looked at the woman, but they kept quiet.

“There is no use running away now. . . .” he knocked again. “. . . .dear . . . We have to settle this thing out you know.” Then more knocking.

“I’m not coming out.” the woman shouted through the bolted door suddenly. “I’ll stay

here forever.”

“Keep quiet!” Simon whispered harshly. “I don’t even know you.”

“My name is Jamie. Jamie Caiche,” she replied in a whisper. “Please don’t let him in. He’ll kill me.”

Simon noticed then, for the first time, that her eyes were crossed and wondered how the detail got past him before.

“Jamie honey,” the voice came again from outside, “let’s not do this in front of other people, please.”

Simon looked at the girl and tried to think. He tried to think hard. But the woman was in his apartment and Simon knew he was too drunk to open the door.

“Please,” she whispered to Simon.

They waited in silence until the man left.

“Do you want to call the police?”

She nodded “yes” but Simon couldn’t tell if she was looking at him. He shouldn’t be this involved, he thought.

“I’ll call them,” he said. “But you better wait outside. They’ll get here quick.”

“Please,” she said. “I’ll keep quiet.”

“Just wait outside. They’ll get here quick.”

“Please.”

Simon moved toward the door. He reached for the door handle and the woman’s arm at the same time.

“Look, you’re going to have to wait outside. I shouldn’t have let you in in the first place.”

The woman’s face was twisted and Simon thought she looked confused. He picked a pack of cigarettes off the kitchen floor and gave one to the woman.

“Take this and wait outside,” he said. He gave her a book of matches. When she went out, Simon made the call.

“There’s a woman in my apartment building who has been beaten,” Simon told the operator.

“Where do you live sir,” the operator asked.

Simon gave her the address and started to hang up.

“Where is the woman?” the voice at the other end asked. “Is the woman in danger right now?”

“She’s outside. She’s O.K.”

“She’s outside your apartment?” the woman asked.

“Yeah, in the courtyard,” Simon said.

“Where is the attacker?”

“He left.”

“Did this take place at your apartment?”

“No. She showed up here all beat up.”

“What type of injuries does she have?”

Simon looked through the blinds at the woman. She was sitting on the sidewalk with her feet in the grass smoking the cigarette.

“I don’t know. Her head is cut.”

Simon’s head was spinning and he wanted to hang up.

“Can you tell us anything about what happened to her?” the woman operator asked.

“Look, I don’t know. She just showed up here a couple of minutes ago and asked for my help. Then some guy came to the door trying to get her to come out. I don’t know what to do with her. But she can’t stay here.”

“Do you know what the woman’s name is?”

“I don’t know, Janet or Janice or something.”

“What did the man look like?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t see him. We just waited for him to leave.”

“Where is he now?”

“I don’t know, just send someone over,” Simon said and hung up the phone.

Simon walked back to the window. The woman was still smoking the cigarette on the sidewalk. He opened the door.

“They’re on their way,” Simon said to her.

“Can I wait inside?”

Simon looked around the courtyard. It spun violently and Simon grabbed the door frame thinking he would throw up any minute from moving around too much.

Simon started to shut the door, but the woman jumped up and moved to stop it.

“Please,” the woman said. “He’ll kill me.”

Simon looked across the courtyard and back at the woman. He pushed her hand away from the door.

“Just wait out here, you’ll be all right,” he said and shut the door.

Simon walked to the small bathroom at the back of the bedroom and threw up for several minutes. The water ran in the sink as Simon hugged the toilet. His head pounded and knocked inside his skull till he couldn’t stand it and heaved white and brown bile into the toilet. The living room was silent when he returned. The whiskey sat on the kitchen counter but Simon thought he better not since the police were coming. He walked to the window to look for the woman but she was gone. The courtyard seemed to darken as he looked across the grass and noticed the two figures walking away. Simon ran to the door.

“Hey.” he yelled.

The two people stopped and turned slowly back to face Simon’s apartment.

The man wrapped his arm around the woman’s head and turned around.

Simon saw the bat and the Indian woman tucked tight under his arm in a head lock. He froze.

“Are you the son of a bitch?” the man said and started back toward Simon. He dragged her as he came.

“No, I’m not,” Simon said.

The man stopped.

“Mind your own business, then,” he said. “This has nothing to do with you.”

Simon and the man stood facing each other across the courtyard lawn. Simon tried to think. He was trying to think about what to do when the man let out a sharp yell and released the woman. He pulled the bat from under his arm and rapped the woman quickly on the head with it. She hunched over and staggered and the man grabbed his breast. It was bleeding from where she

had bitten him.

“Damn bitch,” he said and looked down at his chest. The white t-shirt turned red and stuck to his chest. Simon started across the courtyard slowly and unresolved, but the man had lost interest in Simon.

“Fucking bitch,” he yelled and put his hand over the bite.

Simon moved slowly toward the man, but two officers appeared in the corner of the courtyard. The Indian woman staggered and started to bend again at the waist. The officers came quickly with their hands on the butts of their guns but the man didn't see them. He raised the bat above his head and cracked it down on the woman's head. Her legs collapsed instantly and she fell to the courtyard grass. He started to hit her again, but the flashlights and the yelling and the blood flowing from the Indian woman's head seemed to wake him from something. He dropped the bat and stared at the woman. Both policeman drew their guns and Simon dropped to the grass to heave what little was left inside.

To the Canyon

We were out of the high mountains then and the weather was warmer. The trip had been long. I sat in the shade of the gas pump while Jason filled the extra tanks for the jeep. “Thompson’s,” the sign said. Small, just the owner working probably, I thought. Display stands with hooks and fishing line and a glass case near the register. Packed with flies. Artificial flies, tied with elk hair and duck feathers and thread. There was bread, peanut butter, and batteries. Some other groceries, but short aisles and not much space. Thompson’s, Abe’s, Rusty’s— they were all the same— and all over the Rockies. Small, expensive, and not really worth the stop except that we needed things. Some things were too expensive and not worth looking for out there, but food and gas and flies, we needed them. We went in to pay and look around. An old man was sitting behind a small counter boxed in by a wall of cigarettes and little bottles of whiskey and a rack of magazines with the covers hidden and only the titles showing. He sat on a stool behind the register with his arms crossed and eyes half open. He looked dead.

“Hello,” Jason said when we walked in.

The old man didn’t respond. We walked around the store and after a while took caddis and mayflies from the case next to the register and a spool of tippet from a display and set them all on the counter. The old man didn’t move. Jason set the line on the counter.

“Hello?” he said again. Jason moved his hand slowly near the old man’s face and then back to see if his eyes moved.

“You don’t want to buy them flies,” the old man said abruptly and wiggled slightly on the stool. Jason jerked his hand back from the old man’s face and knocked over a stack of lighters with naked women on them. “Not for around here.”

The old man’s voice was gruff and heavy and loud. It startled us.

“Where are you going fishing?” he asked

“We’re not sure,” Jason said picking up the lighters. “Maybe the Platte if we can get up there.”

“Well, these aren’t right if you’re planning to fish around here,” he repeated and started to ring them up.

“What’s good for around here?” I heard Jason ask as I walked off to look for Gatorade. He was still fumbling with the lighters.

“The #16 Blue Dun. The #12 Irresistible. The #14 Grey Fox.”

Every fly-fisherman has a favorite. Some believe in their favorite. That it will work anywhere, under any circumstance I mean. But realistically, a good fly-fisherman knows that’s not true.

“The river that runs down by the Anderson place,” one would say. Or “the creek that comes out by the old mill.” Or “the pond that sits up by Cottonwood pass.” “There’s good fishing there,” they would say.

But these places were fished out. We had been fools to waste our time finding any of them. Good fishing spots, we had learned the hard way, were hard to find and only stayed good fishing spots because they were hard to find. The people who knew didn’t tell. I don’t blame them. We didn’t tell anyone about the ladder falls in Maine where we caught steelhead in the winter. Why would we?

I stood in front of the cooler a long time. All those flavors. Glacier. Cool Mint. Citrus. I thought about yesterday’s fishing. It was cool in the high mountains. Crisp. Light. “Finish, old man; we’re hungry,” I thought. I’d rather fish than talk about it.

“Now if you want big fish,” he continued to say as I walked up, “Go on out, across to the canyon.”

“What canyon?” Jason asked as he fumbled through wadded bills and paid for the flies and the gas and a lighter.

“Cheeseman Canyon. If you want big fish, you’ll have to go there.”

“Cheeseman Canyon?” Jason asked. “How far is that?”

I set two bottles of Gatorade on the counter.

“You boys ain’t heard of Cheeseman Canyon yet?”

“I guess not,” Jason said and looked at me. I shrugged and shook my head.

“Hmm,” the old man said and put the flies in one sack and got out another one for the Gatorade. “I guess not many people go down there to fish really.”

“What do they go down there for?” I asked.

“Wild hog.”

We looked at each other.

“You been down there this year?” Jason asked.

“For wild hog?”

“For trout.”

“This year?” He shook his head and stopped ringing up the Gatorade. “No. I ain’t been down to the canyon in twenty years.” He set the drinks down and rose from the stool. He walked over behind the glass case where the flies and tippet were next to the counter and pointed to a picture on the wall. “There I am.”

We stepped closer to look. It was the younger old man and there was a big trout, but it was crooked and out of focus and there was no canyon or river in the frame. Just the old man and a trout.

It was the summer I turned twenty-two then and Jason Williams and I had traveled almost eighty miles down through the Tipany Gorge and up across the Rocky Mountains to the town of North Fork. We caught all kinds of trout along the way. Brooks and rainbows and cut-throats. We had fished early in the morning and late in the afternoon when the mayflies hatched and in between times ate light and traveled by foot or by jeep to the next stream or the next river or the next pond that we could find on the forestry maps and then we’d fish some more.

In North Fork, we walked across the street to the Hungry Logger for a late breakfast and then drove to Carver’s Bluff from which the old man said we could see the canyon.

“Damn, it is far,” Jason said and stepped out of the jeep onto the bluff.

We stood where the old man had told us to go— on the bluff that overlooks the desert.

“Where do you think the dirt road comes out.”

“I don’t know,” I said. I thought about how far it was and wondered what the water was like in the canyon.

We studied the landscape and tried to spot the cement road the old man had told us about but couldn’t judge the distance. The cement road, he said, ran north and south and cut the canyon in half. You had to get to it first and then follow another dirt road out to the canyon

beyond the cement road. From the bluff, we could see the desert above the canyon spread out flat in every direction just like the old man said. "It's like a big hole in the ground right in the middle of the desert. You can't miss it. Just like a giant hole," he had said as we left the store.

The thin line of the river's ravine was barely visible from the bluff but ran out west from the mountains and down across the valley before it turned north and then south and then to the middle of the valley and to the hole. It was there, the old man said, in the heart of a giant sheet of limestone that the ravine opened wide and became a canyon like a giant hole and the walls sloped and the river could be fished.

"Well, it's there or the Platte, I guess," Jason said.

"Yeah."

We knew the Platte. Had read about it. Had seen pictures of it. Had the gear to fish it. All we knew about the Canyon was what the old man at Thompson's and the picture had told us. We looked out across the desert for a long time. Dry, waterless and flat. A waveless sea of sand. A long way to the canyon, and no way to tell how far it really was.

"We could leave at sunset," I said, "and drive all night till we find it."

"Yeah."

The air was cooler on the bluff than in town. We stood and looked out into the desert.

"What time is it?" I asked.

"One-thirty. Suppose we go down to that Wilson place and fill up on water. Then we can drive down and wait for the sun to set."

We stood for a long time on the bluff and didn't leave. We looked. But it wasn't just the canyon. It was the end of the summer and afterward we would go home. We drove down a dirt road from the bluff and headed down the mountain toward the Wilson ranch.

"Are you Mr. Wilson?" I hollered, rolling down the window and pulling off to the side of the dirt road by the ranch.

"Yeah," he said and walked cautiously from the porch to where the driveway met the dirt road.

"Fellow in town told us this was the way down to Cheeseman Canyon."

"Yeah. You just go on down this road." He motioned toward the dusty path that led

around a bend and continued down the mountain.

“How far is it?” I asked.

“Oh, I don’t know,” he said and relaxed a little and walked closer to the jeep. “It’s a pretty good ways.”

His face was thin and brown and wrinkled with large waves of skin that stretched tight around the edges. He pulled a flask from the back pocket of his dusty overalls and unscrewed the cap.

“Take you a couple of hours at least,” he said.

The flat part of the Wilson ranch sat between two sloping hillsides and looked small next to its backdrop. Most of the space in the ravine was taken up by two red barns that had been built for the cows and a smaller tool shed. Black cows spotted the barren hillside.

“What do you boys want to go out to the canyon for?”

“To fish,” I said.

“To fish?” The flask stopped short of his mouth. “Out there?”

He scratched the butt of his overalls with his free hand and looked out toward the desert. “I don’t know much about fishing out there.”

He turned back toward the jeep and pulled hard on the whiskey, swallowing it like water. “Would you boys like a nip?” he offered me the flask. I drank a little and passed it to Jason.

“Have you been down to the canyon?”

“Not since I went to get Gully Johnson’s body out,” Mr. Wilson said. “That was years ago.”

I looked at Jason and he handed the flask back.

“Who’s Gully Johnson,” Jason asked.

“He’s a fellow that lived around here a long time ago. But he’s dead now.”

“Did he die in the canyon?” I asked.

“I guess,” Wilson said. “In it, or somewheres near it. He was down there huntin hogs at night with a bunch of fellows and drove his truck off a cliff and into the canyon.”

“Suicide?”

“Well, no. We thought that at first, seeing how Gully didn’t ever really seem too happy

about much. But considerin how we found him though, we thought different. He just must not have known how close he was to the edge.”

He passed the flask back and it started another round. We waited for him to finish.

“It was me and Jack Thompson that found him. Jack’s probably the one that told you boys how to get down here.” He wiped his mouth on the sleeve of his shirt and continued. “We found him two weeks after he went missing on the bank of the river in the canyon. Found him and a whole pile of hogs. Gully was all bloated and tor’d up . . . vultures and buzzards were everywhere. Thicker’n bats in a cave. There must of been thirty dead hogs.” He looked at the ground and shook his head. “Never seen anything like it.”

He looked back down across the desert.

“Wouldn’t have known where he was if we hadn’t of seen all them buzzards.”

He stopped and looked down at his feet shuffling in the dust. He looked uncomfortable again.

“There’s lots of hogs down there,” he said, “but I don’t know about fishing though.” We looked across the desert where Mr. Wilson was staring. “How much gas and water you boys have?” he asked suddenly.

“We’ve got plenty of gas,” I said, “but we could use some water.”

“Well, you’ll need plenty. Come on. Pull around back and we’ll get you some.”

He put the flask back in his pocket and walked down a thin driveway between a barn and the Wilson’s house. We drove next to him in the jeep. A woman stood on the front porch wiping her hands on her apron. Her neck and head stuck out from her rounded shoulders like a turtle. Her face was tired and expressionless. I waved as we passed the house but she seemed not to see us. The jeep rolled to a stop past the house and beside the barn where Mr. Wilson had stopped walking.

I got out and filled the jugs with water at a well pump while Jason went around the barn to pee. The cows in the pen watched me and Mr. Wilson, who was then standing listlessly by a section of split rail fence that needed mending.

“Is the canyon hard to find?” I asked and looked at the broken section of fence.

“Not really. But it’s been a long time since I’ve been down there and my memory’s not

so good,” he said while examining a broken rail.

At noon the next day, we ate lunch beside the cement road and tried to decide what to do next. We had driven all night in the cool desert and hadn't seen a soul. The mountains were far away then in the east and we hadn't been able to find the canyon. We had found the cement road easily at about midnight and had followed the first dirt road on the other side of it for an hour. But it forked into three smaller roads and they all dead-ended at an abandoned farm house.

“What the heck?” Jason said at the farm house. “What is this?”

We had gotten out of the jeep and had stood next to the three roads in front of the house and the headlights of the jeep and afterward had gone inside with a flashlight and had tried to see the canyon from the second floor window, but it was black and useless.

We had followed the second dirt road we found too, but it had forked and veined and looped so that we got frustrated and turned around and I had taken one of the veins back to the cement road. I started to think that the canyon with the giant rainbows that Gully had died in didn't really exist and that the hole we had seen from the Bluff hadn't really been a canyon cut through limestone but something else.

“It couldn't have been a lie,” Jason said when the sun started to come up. “Not the both of them, and that story about Golly or whatever his name was.”

“We'll find the right road,” I said. “We just gotta keep looking.”

We drove on up north as the sun rose.

“If we go far enough we'll cross the river's ravine eventually,” Jason said after breakfast. “We could just follow the ravine out to the canyon.”

“Yeah” I said. “We've just about used half the gas though. We should head back to the first dirt road and try south from there.”

“All right,” Jason agreed. But we were losing hope and the desert was hot and getting hotter.

The heat oppressed conversation and the calm, warm wind filtered through the jeep as we fled south. Lizards, field mice, and tarantulas were crossing the road. Other things I had never seen were squashed to decay. The cement road glistened ahead on the horizon like a mirage and

always looked like it ended in the ocean no matter how fast or far we drove. At about two o'clock I noticed something different really far down on the side of the road that looked like the setting sun but wasn't sure it was a car until we got really close and then saw it was a yellow station wagon.

A woman with a red face and a stumpy figure stood beside the wagon and the cement road with a young girl and watched the jeep get closer. They watched us get closer and watched us pass them. Their bodies turned as we passed and they watched us drive off down the road.

"Good grief," Jason said. "What are they doing out here?"

"Looks like they're stuck," I said and stopped the jeep in the middle of the road. I looked over the camping and fishing gear in the rear and backed toward the station wagon. I put the jeep in park and turned off the engine.

"Let's make it quick, its getting late," Jason said and climbed out.

"Hello," I said. "Is everything ok?"

"He looks like Jackson dudn't he Mae?" the lady said looking at Jason. She smiled and stood still in the heat.

"Yes he does," Mae agreed.

"Jackson's my nephew," the woman added.

We stood in the heat by the station wagon.

"Are you stranded?" Jason said.

"Well, huh, it's kind of funny actually. Idn't it Mae?"

"Kind of," she said but smiled like it wasn't. Her face was soft and young and pretty and her pale arms and slender shoulders were red on the top and around the straps of her tank top from the sun.

"We had a flat," the lady began to explain, "but then we lost track of time and couldn't find the spare and waited for someone to come by and the wagon overheated. Now we're almost out of gas."

The four of us stood in the heat by the station wagon.

"For real?" Jason said.

"I'm afraid so."

Mae hadn't said anything else but looked us over curiously. We were dressed poorly and hadn't bathed in a week.

"Why'd you leave the wagon running?" Jason asked. I walked to the front and opened the hood. The water that ran from the radiator had dried on the cement and left the outline of a large puddle there.

"Mom thought it would be better that way," Mae explained.

Jason glanced at the woman sideways and didn't ask anything else. The wagon was pale yellow—a Pontiac station wagon, probably from the late '70s. The wood paneling around the exterior was cracked and I thought as I opened the hood that the eight cylinder engine must drink like Mr. Wilson. The bottom hose had cracked hours earlier. The station wagon had no water and very little gas. As I stood there a horrible smell washed over me.

"Well, we'll start by changing the tire, I guess," I said suddenly and moved, thinking the smell would go away. I shut the hood not knowing what to do, but not seeing how we could just leave them there, I started for the spare.

Jason shook his head. He knew what I was thinking and stood in the heat with Mae and the lady and was still. The lady's face was dry and wrinkled from too much sun and worry, and her body was sagging. She looked Jason over while I walked to the back of the wagon. His shirt and shorts were full of holes and neither of us had shaved this week. Jason watched Mae watch me and I noticed the woman was watching us both. She suddenly looked concerned.

"Where are you going?" Mae asked in a bluntly and condescending tone.

"We're not sure," Jason said not looking away from Mae. "We're kind of lost right now."

"What are you looking for?" she asked less forcefully.

"Fish," Jason said and turned to the lady.

"Fish?" she said and scanned the horizon. "Out here?"

It sounded so unreasonable now I looked at Jason to see if he was smiling. They stared at Jason and stood in the heat. I grabbed the back bumper for balance and knelt down to look for the spare underneath. Mae laughed nervously and scanned the desert too.

"Sure is a strange place to look for fish," she said. "It doesn't seem like there is anything

out here.”

“There’s no tire under here,” I said and stood up and looked at Jason. “Do you think there might be one in the back?”

Take plenty of gas, the old man had said; there ain’t nothing out there except that cement road.

They walked to me at the back of the wagon.

“Maybe,” Jason said. “Did you look back there?” he asked the lady and pointed through the window and the clutter in the back.

“Oh there’s no need, we know what’s back there.”

“Is there a tire?”

“A tire.” She paused, “Oh. A tire.” She turned to Mae. “We didn’t think to look back there for the tire.”

We stood still in the heat and stared through the back window of the wagon.

“That’s probably where it is,” Jason said finally.

Neither of them moved.

“We’ll have to move all that stuff out to get at the tire,” I said to the lady thinking she didn’t understand.

She looked at Mae.

“You might as well tell them if they’re going to help,” she said to the lady but looked at me the whole time.

“They wanted 2,000 dollars,” she said absently as if she wasn’t speaking to anyone in particular. “2,000 dollars.”

She looked at Jason then at me. We waited by the wagon in the heat for her to finish.

“2,000 dollars for what?” Jason asked. “Is there something else wrong with the car?”

“No. 2,000 dollars to take the body to California,” she said.

Jason looked at me and I looked at Mae.

“What body?” he said.

My eyebrows raised and Mae shook her head.

“My stepfather’s,” she said plainly.

“We couldn’t afford it,” her mother said. “But James grew up in California and that’s where we got married and he said he wants to be buried there.” Her face changed and thought she was going to cry. “How can I let him down?”

“He’s back there?” Jason asked pointing through the glass the clutter.

“Yes,” the lady said and moved toward the back gate. She turned the key and opened the door. A smell poured out like poison.

“Good God,” Jason said and stepped back pinching his nose. “Oh!”

Mae stared at me expressionless and the lady started to bawl.

“Where is he?” I asked her.

“He’s in a pine box underneath all that stuff.”

Mae and I unloaded the sacks and bags and carry-ons and everything else except the pine box while Jason puked and the lady sat by the cement road bawling and I thought I saw buzzards begin to circle. We piled the stuff on the shoulder of the road. The pine box was long and stretched toward the front of the station wagon where the middle seat folded down.

Mae and I stood still and stared at the box.

“Where do you think the tire is?” she asked.

“It’s inside that side wall probably,” I said.

The lady came over to the wagon and stood still in the heat, looking at the box.

The lady insisted that she and Mae move the box and sniffled and I argued with her about it but she insisted and then didn’t move it but only slid the coffin to the other side so that when I leaned in to lift the tire out, I got a good whiff of the body and almost puked myself. I changed the tire and afterward stood in front of the jeep by the extra gas cans and water with Jason where Mae and the lady couldn’t hear us. Jason was pale and weak looking. I raised the hood and pretended to check the jeep for water.

“What are we going to do now?” I asked. “I can cut the hose and reattach it, but they’ve got no water.”

“Somebody else might come along,” he said, knowing it wasn’t true.

I shut the hood and looked back at Jason.

“All right,” he said. “We’ve got to go back now anyway, I guess.”

“Yeah. If we give them water, we’ll have to for sure.”

“Just don’t give them too much. There’s no need to run out because of them.”

I cut their radiator hose and gave them some gas and almost all the water. We’ll be back by the Wilson place in a couple of hours I thought.

But I knew as we turned on the dirt road that would take us back east and to the mountains that I’d given them too much gas, but didn’t say anything and only hoped we could make it back. And when the jeep did stop Jason cursed me out and we sat staring at the dash board for a long time before setting up the tent for shade. We decided to wait until sunset and drank some water and tried to sleep in the shade before we set out.

At sundown we began walking along the dusty road. We walked steadily and only rested for short periods. Around 2 a.m. we grew weary and heard things grunting and running around the brush beside the road. We talked to keep our minds off the desert and the heat and the day tomorrow if we didn’t make it to the mountains by morning.

But the next morning as the sun came up, we saw the mountains and realized how much farther it really was and there was no forgetting. With little water the heat came fast and I fainted once early in the morning and once around noon and fell the second time over a rock and onto a cactus that stuck in my shoulder. Jason didn’t do much better in the heat and had already lost too much water from throwing up, so that when I was fainting and falling he was trying to carry all the weight and it only made him worse. So we stopped and set up the tent again for shade. I sat on a rock and Jason pulled the needles from my shoulder. I looked at the dry desert and the green cactus and the shifting air and thought the only explanation to be that I was dreaming. I closed my eyes and imagined the mayflies hatching above large trout in the cool clear water that must be in the canyon. But the cactus holes stung from the sweat and had bled enough to soak the shoulder of my shirt and I knew I wasn’t dreaming or in the canyon. I thought I saw buzzards begin to circle. Jason held up the twenty dollar bill Mae gave us and stared at it a long time. He wadded it up and threw it at the rock and sat still in the heat. I hated the lady for taking Mae and her dead husband and our gas and our water and killing us all. But I was delusional.

We passed out in the tent and didn’t stir until after it was dark. At about four a.m. I crawled out of the tent to see how much farther the mountains were but it was still dark and

useless. I felt weak and wondered if Mae had made it out of the desert. I went back to the tent.

“We’re completely out of water,” I said when I woke Jason up. “We should keep moving. It’s only going to get worse.”

“Yeah,” he said and sat up slowly.

But we didn’t make it far and Jason passed out. I set the tent back up and put Jason in it and watched the buzzards circle overhead. I waited and wandered in my mind. I tried to figure out what to do, but grew weary and found it easier to lay blame than to keep struggling. I second guessed the decisions that had landed me in my predicament and found some comfort in the complexity of pinpointing only one to blame. I thought about how I should’ve brought more gas, and how I should’ve brought more water, and how I should’ve The sun beat down and I thought I smelled the dead man’s body on my clothes. The light from the sun grew bright and all I could see after some time was the pulse of light and then dark and then light and then dark, with the rhythm of my heart pumping boiling blood through me. Light and then dark and then brown and wrinkles and the shadow of the face of Mr. Wilson.

Gone

She met Will in her high school art class and only knew him for a little while, but she let him hold her hand while they sat on a bench in front of the public library one day waiting for a parent to pick them up and decided she liked him. She was small and her face was pleasant and she had smiled at Will in class every day until one day, after art, when she casually mentioned a biography project she was working on for her English class, Will took it as a subtle hint and volunteered to draw a picture of Chaplin to go with the project. Will drew better than anyone in class and Alice was flattered. So on Saturday, they had gone early to the library, where Will had neatly drawn a sketch of Chaplin's body at a table near the newspaper rack while Alice had gathered books from the biography section. Afterward, they had sat together and filled in the sketch with pieces of charcoal and Alice liked it.

"It'll add a lot to the display, I think," she said to Will when they were finished. "Don't you think?"

He nodded while admiring the picture.

"Whose car is that?" Will asked and nodded to the red '89 convertible Mustang parked at the end of the Holiday's driveway.

"It's mine," she said.

She thanked Will's father for giving them a ride home and shut the door carefully.

"That's not really your car, is it?" Will asked as they walked toward the house

"It is," she said

She set the library books down in the driveway and pulled a set of keys from her pocket. Will followed her to the car. She opened the door and stepped back to let him look inside. Her father had bought the car along with a repair manual when she was fifteen and for a year they had worked on it together in his spare time. He taught her how to use the manual and change a flat and jump-start a battery and at night when she couldn't sleep she would go downstairs and sit in the car and imagine driving long distances and not ever having to stop long because she could fix anything.

“It’s mine, but I can’t have it till my birthday next month,” she said.

She moved Will out of the way and got in and shut the door. The window rolled down. Will stepped back and the sun glared from the wax and the chrome around the windows and inside the tires and on the bumper and he had to squint to see her. She had one hand on the wheel and the other resting on the window ledge. Her head was tilted sideways.

“Hey, good looking,” she said playfully. “Need a lift?”

“Hell yeah!” he said and ran to squeeze between the fence and the front bumper of the car.

Alice bent her eyebrows together as she watched Will. She unlocked the latch and he got in and shut the door.

“I was just kidding,” she said.

“I know.”

“We can’t really go anywhere,” she said.

“I know.”

“My mother won’t let me drive it,” she said after some thought.

“Does the radio work?” Will asked and slid over closer to Alice to fool with some nobs on the dash. She looked over her shoulder at the kitchen window. Then she told Will that it worked but that you had to use the key and it wore the batteries down. She felt stupid for saying it, but her mother could see the car and she was sorry they had gotten in. She got out and rolled up the window with the door open.

“Where you going?”

The door shut.

“We better get to work,” she said to Will as he got out of the car. “Make sure you lock it.”

In the afternoon, the cement on the driveway where they were working got hot on Alice’s legs and the glare from the white pieces of paper gave her a headache. They were trying to make the project all fit onto a large piece of cardboard that her father had painted blue, but it wasn’t working. The title of the project, “The Life and Times of Charlie Chaplin,” was written on a white piece of paper and matted on black construction paper along with the rest of the pieces.

There were small ones that had titles like “Born 1889” and “Died 1977” above typed paragraphs and there were medium ones that said things like “The Movies” and “The Women.” She pushed the main title to the very top edge of the display board and told Will that they’d try again. He nodded and shrugged his shoulders.

Earlier, inside the house, Will had helped her look up information, and type it, and glue it, and Rose Holiday had made them lunch but afterward when they had gone outside he had grown impatient and had given up and now she was doing most of the work herself. She spread the pieces of information out then picked them up one by one and laid them on the board with careful consideration. For Alice, the problem was the biggest piece, the silhouette of Chaplin standing in the doorway with his hat and cane and baggy pants.

“We need a bigger piece of cardboard,” Will said as Alice continued to rearrange the pieces. He picked up a small piece that said “Branded and Exiled” across the top and set it on the edge of the board.

“Maybe you’re right,” she said. She stopped moving the pieces around. Then she threw the piece in her hand down and said she couldn’t do it anymore, it was too hot, and Will noticed that her cheeks were red and that small drops of sweat were beading at the base of her hair and running onto her neck. She was tired of trying to figure it out. They picked up the pieces, set them in the shade of the garage overhang and sat under a tree near the house. Will reached over to hold Alice’s hand, but she pulled it away.

She went slowly toward the house thumbing through the pieces of mailing. There was a lottery entry, something from the power company, something from the phone company. She stopped at a letter that had Ms. Alice Holiday handwritten across the front in red ink and eyed it curiously. There was no return address but a Georgia postmark. Alice opened the envelope and removed a letter and a picture that was folded in half of a young girl holding an infant. She stood still in the driveway and began reading:

Dear Allison,

My name is Maybell. I have some thing to tell you. You might not want to hear it. You might

not believe it at first either. But I have to tell you. So read this hole letter. It is the truth. I am your Aunt. Will calls me May. Will is your brother. He is 17 now. Rose is not your real mother. Flo is. But Flo is dead. So is Billy. He is your father. Flo died when you were one and they killed Billy at the state pen when you were three. I know you don't remember. But I was there. It is the truth. I did not know you long but in my heart I always loved you. That is true. So please listen.

Your real name is not Holiday. It is Waddel, cause Flo married Jimmy Waddel when she got pregnant. But he isn't your father. Billy Hopkins is. Billy killed Jimmy and Flo. He was a drunk and Flo would not have him any more. They put him in jail and later they killed him too. All this is true. Me and Will are your kin.

Rose Holiday used to be Rose Waddel. She is Jimmys sister. She took you to live with her when Jimmy got killed. We all thought it was best. Maybe in Texas you could have a better life, I thought. This is hard to believe. But it is true. I promised Rose and the lawyers I would not ever tell. But now I am dying and I don't care if I tell. You should know. Rose might say it is not true. But it is.

Alice looked at the picture. The color was faded and the baby's face was turned away from the lens. She continued reading:

When we were teenagers, our parents died and me and Flo got tattoos. They match and they are on our heels. Just like yours. Me and Flo promised to look out for each other. I always wanted to tell you. But they made me promise. I did the best I could. I did not know you long but I always have loved you.

Maybell

Alice read the letter two more times, folded it and put it and the picture in her back pocket, then started for the house. When she got to Will, she saw the charcoal, and sketch pad

out and stopped.

“I guess I better redraw Chaplin,” he said and threw her a broken piece of charcoal.

“Wanna help?”

“You don’t have to do that,” she said. She walked closer and set the charcoal down.

“I don’t mind.”

Alice didn’t say anything.

“You got any coke?” Will asked as she walked off.

“I’ll see.”

Inside, at the island in the middle of the kitchen, Rose Holiday had been mixing a cake, but two eggs had rolled off the counter and when Alice walked in Rose was on her knees wiping the pieces of shell up with a paper napkin and repeating “Dear Lord what a mess,” over and over. Alice set the mail down and helped Rose up.

“Thank you honey,” she said and sighed, as if it had been a great effort to get back up.

“How’s the project?” she asked while brushing off the front of her apron.

“It’s going all right, I guess. I don’t know, we’re kind of having trouble.”

“What kind of trouble, dear?”

“I don’t know,” she said and stuck her finger in the cake batter. “Did you ever have any brothers or sisters?” she asked.

Rose slapped Alice’s hand for putting it in the batter. “Honey, you know mamma didn’t,” she answered without looking at Alice. “Why do you ask?”

She went about busily mixing and stirring.

“Did you ever wish you did?”

“I don’t know? Why? What’s the matter?”

“Nothing. It’s just that sometimes I wonder what it would be like to have a brother or a sister.”

“It might have been nice, honey, but you don’t, and there’s no point wasting time thinking about it.”

She watched Rose carefully measure scoops of flour into a new bowl.

“Honey, I’m out of eggs now,” she said. “Will you go to the corner and get more?”

“Can I take the car?”

Rose quit measuring

“Is that boy still here?”

“Yes.”

“Well, ok, but you come right back. My purse is in the hall. Allison, I mean it. Come right back. Five minutes.”

But Alice had gone and wasn’t listening. She took a small wallet from her mother’s purse in the hall and went outside.

Will had almost finished sketching the new silhouette of Chaplin. Alice sat down next to him in the shade. She took her right shoe and sock off.

“What’s up?” Will asked.

“Don’t watch. My feet stink.”

She lifted her right foot, examining the scar that wrapped around her heel like a horse shoe. She tried to see the underside of it.

“What’s the matter?” Will asked.

She leaned back, lifted the photo and the letter from her back pocket and handed the picture to Will.

“I got this letter.” She opened it. “It’s from a woman who says she’s my aunt.”

She waited while he looked at the picture.

“She says that’s me and my mom and that I’m really an orphan. She says that the Holidays aren’t my real family. She says my real mother was shot by my real father.”

She looked down and scanned over the letter.

Will pushed his eyebrows together and watched Alice.

“How could that be true?” he asked

“That’s crazy,” he said. “There’s no way that could be true.”

“I don’t know. But it says it here.”

“Let me see,” he said and reached for the letter, but she pulled it back.

“You’re just kidding, right? It doesn’t say that.”

“It does.” She nodded her head slowly.

“We’ll it’s crazy,” Will said and returned to the sketch of Chaplin. He erased part of a line he had been working on then sketched it again.

“They couldn’t keep something like that from you for this long,” he said.

But Alice wasn’t listening. She got up and went to kneel in the sunlight that was falling on the driveway. She twisted her right foot out from under her leg and examined the scar again. Her eyes narrowed and focused as if she were trying to decide something but couldn’t and kept twisting and contorting her foot to get a better angle. She pressed around the edges of the mark with her thumb and it left black smudges from the charcoal. She looked over her shoulder and saw Rose Holiday in the kitchen window washing dishes. She put her sock and shoe back on.

“We have to go to the store,” she said to Will. “But we can take the car.”

Will looked up from the drawing.

Alice waved to Rose who was waving goodbye from the kitchen window and walked to the driver side of the car without answering.

Later, when Rose Holiday was on the brink of a nervous breakdown and it had been two days since Alice had left for eggs, she called from a cheap hotel outside of Atlanta.

“She’s in Georgia,” Rose said to her husband in a quivering voice.

Alice told Rose about the letter from Maybell and the article she had found at the Atlanta library about the man named William and the two people he had killed. Alice thought she heard the phone drop and asked if it were true but there was no answer. She said she was tired and that she wanted to come home, but Rose had fainted and dropped the phone and no one was listening on the other end.

“Is it true?” she kept asking into the receiver. “Is it true?” and she became frantic.

She heard her father’s voice in the background faintly.

He picked up the phone and told Alice to buy two plane tickets and come home right away, but Alice had stopped listening.

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