

5-16-2008

Canaan

Richard Nason Smith
University of New Orleans

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uno.edu/td>

Recommended Citation

Smith, Richard Nason, "Canaan" (2008). *University of New Orleans Theses and Dissertations*. 666.
<https://scholarworks.uno.edu/td/666>

This Thesis is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been brought to you by ScholarWorks@UNO with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this Thesis in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/or on the work itself.

This Thesis has been accepted for inclusion in University of New Orleans Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UNO. For more information, please contact scholarworks@uno.edu.

Canaan

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Film, Theatre, and Communication Arts

by

Nason Smith

B.A. Humboldt State University, 2004

May, 2008

© 2008, Nason Smith

For Lee Ali

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the thesis committee in the Creative Writing Workshop—Amanda Boyden, Randy Bates, and especially Joseph Boyden, who has been instrumental in my conversion from a graffiti artist to a writer. I would also like to thank Lee Ali, the chick from Princeton, and Ramble-on Rose. I would like thank anyone who can pull a juice card and use it to free The West Memphis Three.

Table of Contents

Lee Circle.....2
Old Friends.....23
Canaan.....36
Dogo.....51
The Grower.....66
Harbor Boulevard.....77
Breakaway Diver.....88
Vita.....103

Lee Circle

I saw her sitting in a booth at the Driver 8 Diner drinking coffee and staring out the window at the pools of rainwater in the parking lot. She lit a cigarette and turned her face and blew smoke out into the café. I knew she worked down the street at The Paradise Club as a pole dancer under the name of April or Amber or something like that. It seemed like she changed her name every once in a while.

Sometimes when I hung out there I watched her dance and leave with different men. A blind man who sat in the dark off to the side used to handle her affairs. People said he was able to tell the bills apart by feeling the paper, but then he had some kind of operation that gave him his sight back. The blind man wasn't a blind man anymore, and he could see the money. He still sat in the dark. I guess a person gets used to about anything.

I went over and sat in her booth by the window and ordered a cup of coffee. The waitress brought the coffee and cream, and I stirred in the cream with a spoon. I drank some coffee and set the cup down on the table. "Hi."

"Hi."

"I've seen you around," I told her.

She took a long drag on her cigarette. "I seen you around, too. I seen you at the apartments down the street and at the club a few times. What's your name?"

"Cole."

"I'm Jeri Lynn. How long you been in town?"

"About six months."

"You from Jackson?"

"No."

“Where were you living before?”

“Southern Mississippi Correctional Facility.”

“Yeah?”

I looked off across the empty booths in the diner. The cashier was a black girl who looked about twenty, and she was talking on her cell phone. “Yeah.”

“Did you get corrected?”

“Probably not.”

Jeri Lynn was in mourning over the blind man. When I’d gotten out of prison in the spring, I wound up in Jackson living at The Stargazer Apartments, and the blind man had a place on the second floor. I would hear him tapping his cane as he negotiated his way down the stairs and past the mailboxes to the sidewalk. One day, some people from the college in Oxford showed up and wanted to talk to him about his particular form of blindness. Doctors ran some tests. They claimed they could help the blind man get his sight back. The University offered to operate for free because the operation was an experimental thing. A driver even pulled up in a Lincoln Town Car to take him to the medical clinic. The blind man came home with both eyes working, and he saw things again. He saw a rope. He tied one end to the light fixture above the table in the kitchen.

The blind man put the other end of the rope around his neck and walked off the kitchen table.

“There was a note taped to his chest,” Jeri Lynn told me.

“What’d it say?”

“I don’t know what most of it said. He had one of those typewriters for blind people and wrote it in Braille. Some cop came in the Paradise Club real drunk. Said they sent the note to

Oxford and let them translate it. The cop couldn't remember what most of it said, but he remembered some of it."

I looked over and saw our reflections in the window. A pair of car headlights in the parking lot went past the newspaper machines and the light hit the glass. I watched our faces change, and things got distorted. "What'd the cop remember?"

Jeri Lynn put out her cigarette and looked out at the pools of rainwater. "The note said he saw too much."

A couple of weeks later, I packed my things and moved into Jeri Lynn's apartment. I stuffed everything I owned into a three-ply trash bag and emptied that bag onto the bed in another run-down shit-hole. The place had giant roaches living under the refrigerator, a television with three working channels, and an air conditioner that worked about half the time. Jeri Lynn brought two beers and sat beside me on the bed. She ran her fingers under my shirt and over the blue-green branches of the weeping willow tree tattooed across my entire back. The trunk started at the bottom of my spine and went all the way up to the base of my neck. The branches spread across my shoulder blades and down my rib cage, and there was a purple haze sunset behind the willow. Red and black coral snakes wrapped around roots that twisted around my thighs and calves to finally disappear between my toes.

"Cole, did you get this tattoo when you were locked up?"

"No. I got most of the work done in Memphis." I pointed to the green rats that ran up my legs, "I got those done in jail, but I still have some work to do on the branches. I want to try to get back up to Memphis and finish it, if I can stay out of trouble."

But I didn't stay out of trouble. I'd been swinging a hammer for a contractor building new homes. The job wasn't much. My parole officer had set it up while sitting at his desk

eating hot wings from Popeye's and watching highlights from a football game Ole Miss had played the year before. A ballplayer went down with an injury on the fifty-yard line. Different people worked on him. One man checked his pulse. Another guy took off the ballplayer's helmet.

The parole officer pointed a hot wing toward the T.V. "They'll need that son-of-a-bitch this season. You ever play football?"

"No," I told him.

"Why not?" The parole agent looked at some paper work on his desk and then up at me. "File says you're 6'6", two hundred and seventy pounds. You got defensive end written all over you."

"I wasn't very good at team sports."

He was a short, fat man who kept eating hot wings and watching the television. "Well, you'd better keep this job or you're gonna play some team sports," he said. "I'll put you on the state team. I'll put you right back in the joint, Son." He grabbed another hot wing as five or six people put the ballplayer on a stretcher. We watched them as they carried the ballplayer off the field.

I couldn't keep the job. The next time I went to see the parole agent four sheriff's deputies holding shotguns waited in his office. After the P.O. put on the handcuffs, the sheriffs walked me out to a squad car in the parking lot. I looked up and saw another sheriff holding a shotgun as he stood on the roof in the rain.

They put me in the back seat of the patrol car and the P.O. said, "I don't want you to make that team son, but it sure looks like you might."

I got locked up about two weeks before Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast, and most of the time I stayed inside a cell in a central Mississippi facility. I kept hearing some things about Katrina and kinda knew what was going on, but it was hard to believe everything I heard about the hurricane in jail. Things tended to get exaggerated out there in the yard.

Toward the end of September I was released from custody. Jeri Lynn sat in a cab waiting for me in the parking lot. I got in the cab and sat beside her. She was on the far side of thirty-five, and those stripping and whoring days were winding down. The woman still looked good, but real hard, like something got a hold of her and choked out the innocence. I knew about those choke holds because something had gotten a hold of me too and done the same thing.

We headed back to a different apartment where she'd moved to when I'd gone away. I sat on the edge of the bed with my feet out and stared at my shoes. In the cell I'd said it silently to the walls thousands of times, and in my sleep I said it out loud and woke up my cell mate who was never getting out of prison. And I said it one more time to her. "I'm not going back there again."

"You don't have to, Baby."

"I mean it. I'm not going back there."

"I know you mean it."

I went over and turned on the television. A news show about Hurricane Katrina came on the television with some man talking about how people had gone crazy down in New Orleans. They showed old news footage of different people looting things downtown.

"Is that still going on down there?" I asked her.

"No, they emptied the town and started pumping the flood water into the lake."

"People coming back yet?"

“Not very many. The place is pretty vacant.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, really.” Jeri Lynn took a long slug off her beer. “Let’s get on down there and get some of that stuff.” She said it just like that as we watched some black guy in knee-deep water trying to break into a bank with a sledge hammer.

“I can’t go down to New Orleans. I’ll be on the fly if I do that. We’re not talking about a month in custody. I’d violate my parole.”

“How much do you have left on your parole?”

“Three years.”

“Can you do straight time for three years?”

“I don’t think so.” I didn’t say anything else. I lit a cigarette and blew smoke rings across the bed. I’d never been good at being good and thought about that for a couple of minutes. I looked over at the T.V. The black guy was still trying to break into the bank with a sledgehammer.

I broke parole and headed down to New Orleans.

A guy Jeri Lynn knew had a bobtail truck he stole from somebody. He went down there with us. This guy also had a driver’s license with a New Orleans address, and the National Guard was letting people in by the zip codes on their license. He said his name on his license was Ray, and as he drove he wanted everyone to practice calling him Ray. Jeri Lynn thought that might be hard to do because his real name was Eddie. She was used to calling him that.

I didn’t care one way or the other. Eddie’s Louisiana license matched a zip code; otherwise I wouldn’t have wanted him to go. Eddie was a stone rat. I could see it in his face with his front teeth bunched together as he constantly wiped his runny nose on his sleeve. I’d

heard somewhere that if you threw a rat off the side of a boat in the ocean, the rat would sink to the bottom to drown. But if a rat got stuck in a bathtub full of water, the rat would spend a week scratching the sides of the bathtub trying to get out. I thought Eddie was probably like that.

I sat by the window smoking a Marlboro as the truck carried us down highway 55 out of Mississippi and into cloud-filtered light where blue tarps replaced the roofs of houses and torn trees covered the landscape. Dead cigarette smoke coated the cab as we drove past abandoned cars and piles of trash and broken houses. We hit the city limits, and it seemed like we were driving down into the heart of something that didn't have a heart anymore. There were just miles of dead streets.

"There's nobody here," I said to Eddie.

"Yeah, I know."

"Eddie," I said, "do you know this town?"

"A little," Eddie wiped his nose with his sleeve. "I was down here a few days ago, and I think I found a house."

"What do you mean you found a house?"

"There's hardly anyone living down here, Cole," Jeri Lynn said. "We're just gonna move into some empty house Eddie knows about and take it over."

"Why not," I told them.

A place was all we needed. Eddie drove down some deserted street until he found a two-story house. He parked the truck, and we unloaded the generators out of the back. The three of us spent a week clearing the place out, cleaning the mold off the walls and throwing the flooded furniture out on the street in a giant pile. No one else lived on the street. We just looked

like the first family on the block to come home. When we finished, Eddie took the downstairs, and we moved up to the second floor. Then we started stealing.

The next day, Eddie drove to a store that was open, and I got out of the truck and bought a pack of cigarettes. Then we drove through some neighborhoods that didn't get flooded, but where there were hardly any people around. I saw a Range Rover parked on the side of the road and told Eddie to stop. The entire street seemed deserted, so I got a screwdriver out of Eddie's tool box and used it to take the left headlight out of the Rover. I reached in through the hole where the headlight used to be and ripped the wires off the horn to kill the alarm. Then I broke out the window on the driver's side and opened the door. I reached in the glove box and found the vehicle registration. The address was about three houses down.

I went back to the truck. "Wait here for a minute," I told Eddie.

"Sure."

I found the address of the house on the registration and knocked on the front door. Nobody answered. I went over and told Eddie to come back in a half-hour and walked into the back yard. I broke out a window, got into the house, and went through the bedrooms. I found some money. Then I went through all the drawers in the kitchen and found the keys to the Rover.

I got behind the wheel and took off down the street and drove around what was left of the city. Wrecked buildings and piles of trash were everywhere. There wasn't much traffic, and it was hard to even find a working traffic signal. The city had set up stop signs at the intersections. I just drove through them. It was like that whenever I stole something. I got that adrenaline rush that came with doing something I wasn't supposed to do. Maybe that rush came from possibly

getting caught, maybe that rush came from getting away, or maybe that rush came from both of those things at the same time. I didn't know for sure. I just knew I had that rush going then.

The next day, the three of us started driving around in the Rover, casing two-story houses in broad daylight. We concentrated on a part of town called Lakeview near Lake Ponchartrain and drove up and down empty streets. All of the houses were empty. Most of the windows on the first floors were empty of glass. We passed alongside these places, and I saw that the walls were covered in silt. There were so many empty places that we had a hard time picking one to go inside. We finally decided to take the decision out of the process and found a vacant street that the three of us liked. We agreed to rip off every house on the street.

The first time we went inside a house, I figured we'd get caught, but it didn't happen. We waited until midnight and went back to the street. Somehow, the darkness made the street seem like a different place. Eddie parked the bobtail in the driveway. The three of us got out of the truck with our flashlights and pointed them toward the house.

“Are you sure this is the same place?” Eddie said.

“Yeah, it's the same place,” Jeri Lynn told him.

“It don't look like the same place.”

“Well it is.”

Eddie's question wasn't out of line. With only the flashlight beam to guide me, everything became a bunch of confusing images. The rest was a smothering darkness. It was a weird feeling being in a city buried in black. I walked around to the back of the house and broke out a window. I climbed in past the broken glass and moved the flashlight around. Inside my feet kicked up the silt and mold the flood left behind. I shined the flashlight on a water mark that settled on the walls about six feet above the floor. The ground floor was destroyed. I headed

through the house and opened the front door to let the others in. We ignored the flood-wrecked kitchen and living room and headed straight up the stairs. The rooms on the second were untouched with jewelry, money, electronic equipment, clothes, and even a couple of guns. We took everything that was worth stealing that night. When we went out the next night we did the same thing at another house, and even began stealing things that helped us steal more things—hand trucks, chain saws, and other tools. Every night after that was about the same. We went out to steal.

It happened gradually, but I grew tired of being a thief. Besides, the town got hot, and circumstances started to change. People came back to claim what was theirs. The National Guard settled in, and it looked like they weren't leaving. Down the street we even had neighbors who parked a trailer in front of their house. I guess I started to feel like I was being smothered. I knew before we even got here the stealing would eventually smother me. It was out of control like one of those broken levees. We stole stuff for the sake of stealing. Jeri Lynn didn't care about selling anything we ripped off. She got off on the action and wanted to house things like some sort of renegade collector. I'd been getting off on the action too, but I was burned out. I'd been tired for too long and jailed too much and was afraid of becoming another handcuffed failure. I poured endless cups of coffee into a stolen mug and stared out the window at the days that got shorter and darker faster.

"We've got to stop this," I told her. "We're going to get busted."

"No we won't, Cole. We won't get busted."

"Yes we will. Shit is piled to the ceiling. We need to sell it all and get out of here."

"No, I don't want to stop now."

“What you want doesn’t matter,” I said. “Sooner or later you’re not going to have much of a choice.”

She wouldn’t listen to me, and I wouldn’t listen to myself. I kept getting in the truck and going out there with them. It was another mistake on my part. We were coming down the stairs of some strange house we’d broken into when I heard the National Guard Hummers making their rounds. We killed the flash lights and waited it out in a suffocating void that was darker than any darkness I’d ever been in, except maybe a Mississippi prison cell.

“Don’t say anything,” I whispered. “I think they’re out there.”

“Who is out there?” Eddie asked me.

“National Guard—don’t say a word.”

The three of us moved down the stairs and got down on the living room floor in the mold. I heard voices out in the street and imagined all sorts of things happening. Most of those things centered on going back to prison, and I wasn’t going back there. I heard the soldiers walking around our truck, talking. When the voices faded and the Hummers took off, I pulled out a lighter and my hands were shaking so badly I could barely light a cigarette.

When we got back to the house, I knew things had changed. I stayed up with Jeri Lynn a little longer than usual and then we went to bed, but we didn’t say anything, and it wasn’t the same. There was a wide space between us—things had happened back there in the darkness. We didn’t talk or laugh, or even argue about it. We just smoked cigarettes in the dark, and when we went to sleep, I didn’t touch her. I never touched her in that way again. I rolled over on my side and forgot about her. We weren’t content to just steal from strangers anymore. We’d started robbing each other. Now I knew something was missing. I just wasn’t exactly sure what that was.

After the National Guard incident, I quit going out with them. I made excuses and hung around the house. They kept coming back with the truck loaded down with stolen things. They looked at each other like they shared some kind of secret joke. It was easy to see without looking very far what was going on between them. I didn't care. Eddie could have Jeri Lynn. I put a bedroom set together and moved it into a room down the hall. We never talked about it. I just let it happen.

I spent my time doing other things. I'd started to move stuff out of the house through a fence Jeri Lynn knew who paid ten to twenty cents on the dollar, depending on what he was buying. I didn't even know his name. He was a pale guy with dark circles under his eyes who always showed up wearing black clothes. He looked like he lived underground. The fence walked around piles of things to point out what he wanted. I stiffed Jeri Lynn and Eddie out of some of their cut, and they never said anything. Eddie was afraid of me, and Jeri Lynn didn't care. I made thousands of dollars.

I spent some time in the French Quarter where I found a guy who worked on my tattoo. He was this skinny dude with nose rings and tattoos all over his face, and he'd set up shop in a Creole cottage out on Bourbon Street. The electricity didn't work half the time, so he hooked up his needles to a marine battery. I lay down on a cold hardwood floor and told him what I wanted.

"Color all the weeping willow branches blue."

"And get all the green out, man?"

"Yeah, I want the weeping willow branches to be blue."

"That's gonna take a long time."

"I got nothing but time."

I spent hours on that floor with a tattoo needle in my back and got lost in the blue branches of the weeping willow. It helped me to forget that I was waiting around for the collapse with a resigned attitude. I was paralyzed and stoned by theft. When I got off the floor in that Creole cottage and went back to the house, I found other ways to lose myself. I hooked up video games and played Grand Theft Auto for hours on a big screen TV. I shot pool. I played the electric guitar. But I never got used to the overwhelming presence of things in the house. The stolen furniture piled on top of other stolen furniture. The ripped-off TV's stacked against the wall to the ceiling. Cardboard boxes filled with jewelry. Suitcases stuffed with laptop computers. Rooms crammed with furniture. I carved paths by putting things on top of each other. I stacked misery on top of more misery. I felt like I was lost in a maze. The whole scene gave me a terrible feeling of emptiness. I walked the rooms and moved through them without direction.

One day, Jeri Lynn came home with a parrot. It was red with blue wings. The bird got loose in the house. We chased the parrot through the rooms. The bird landed on a wide-screen TV. We couldn't catch it. The bird landed on the piano. It got away again.

The parrot kept saying, "Fuck you" and flapping its big blue wings as it flew across the living room. I finally opened the window and let the parrot fly away.

"What did you do that for?"

"You've got too many things."

"I wanted that parrot."

"I bet you wanted that parrot. You wanted it enough to go into somebody's house to get it."

"What are you talking about?"

“Parrots don’t live alone,” I told her. “You’re not breaking into empty houses anymore. You’re breaking into houses where people are living.”

And this parrot didn’t want to live alone either. It didn’t go very far. The bird flew up to the top of a palm tree in the yard where I couldn’t see it, only heard it yelling down “Fuck you.” I didn’t have anything to do, so I stacked a couple of mahogany dressers on top of each other in the yard and created a giant feeder for the parrot. I got up on a ladder to set out fruit, veggies, sunflower seeds, and water for it every day. The bird would fly down to its stand to eat and say “Fuck you” before it flew back up to the top of the palm tree.

A couple of weeks later, I was playing pool on the patio, and Jeri Lynn walked in the back yard. She came over to where I was and held out something rolled up in a blanket. I put down my pool stick.

“What do you have there? Did you steal somebody’s puppy?”

“No, I didn’t steal anything. I had a baby.”

“What?”

“Come look at my baby.”

I walked over and stared down into the little bundle Jeri Lynn held in her arms. I looked closer. Jeri Lynn was holding a newborn baby. The baby’s face was still dark red from the struggle of just being born. Little spots of dried blood and small pieces of the umbilical cord covered the blanket. “Jesus, what have you done?”

“I haven’t done anything except have a baby.”

“You didn’t have a baby. You stole a baby.”

“I didn’t steal a baby. It ain’t what you think.”

“No, it is what I think. You stole a baby. I don’t know where, but you stole it. You’re hanging both of us.”

I wanted to run away, but I was frozen by indifference—indifference brought me down here in the first place. There was indifference inside of me like some invisible man who called all the shots and never left the room. I just hung around waiting for the hammer to fall. I wanted to get in the Range Rover and drive all night, maybe find some place where nobody could find me. I had the money, but every time I closed my eyes, the world seemed like it was the size of a ping-pong ball.

Jeri Lynn took care of the baby for about a week and then forgot about it like she did everything else. She left the baby alone in a corner of the house in a crib with little pink things made for a miniature person. There was a note taped to the crib telling me to feed and watch the child while she went with Eddie to clean out another house. Until then I didn’t want to even believe that there was a baby in the house, and I didn’t want to deal with what would happen to the baby with Jeri Lynn posing as a fake mother. I’d told myself things would turn out all right and ignored the situation. Then I saw the child on her back in the corner alone with her frightened eyes and her tiny fingers placed on her lips. I needed to come to grips with it. I also started thinking that I’d stop hanging out in a house I had no business being in and maybe I’d get away and start all over, too.

I looked at the baby. The child’s dark eyes remained wide open as she looked at me with this curious expression. I picked her up and held her against my chest. I got a bottle that Jeri Lynn left behind and fed her for a few minutes. It seemed to soothe her, and I thought she smiled at me when she reached out to hold onto one of my fingers. She was so tiny, with little purple veins running across her fragile temples. I noticed that she was wet too. I put her back

down gently in the crib. I didn't know what I was doing, but I got out a damp cloth and a diaper. I took the old one off and put it in a trash bag. I wiped her little body down with the damp cloth and dried her off with a different one. I put the new diaper on her as fast as I could because I was ashamed to look at her when she was naked.

When Jeri Lynn came home, she walked to where I was sitting in a stolen chair with the baby on my lap.

"I knew you'd come around and start paying attention to the child."

"Yeah, I'm paying attention all right, and I want to talk about her." I got up and carefully put the little girl down in the crib.

"What do you want to talk about?"

"Tell me where you stole her."

"I didn't steal her."

I grabbed Jeri Lynn by her hair and dragged her down the hall. "I don't want to wake the baby," I told her.

"Let go of me, you motherfucker."

I ignored her and took her into another room. I used my open hand to slap her one time, and I probably hit her a little too hard because blood ran out of her mouth. "I'm not going to ask you again. I'm gonna hit you until you tell me where you got the baby." I hit her one more time, but not too hard because I knew I could kill her. She spit blood at me, and I hit her again.

"Eddie set it up," she said.

"Eddie?"

"Yeah, Eddie."

I hit her again because I felt like it. Jeri Lynn covered her mouth with both hands and then reached up and used both of them to wipe blood all over my shirt. “You bastard, it ain’t what you think.”

“It never is.” I went outside to the courtyard to talk to Eddie.

Eddie got pretty nervous whenever he saw me because he knew I was upset about the baby, and this time was no different. He was playing around with a laptop computer he’d ripped off from somebody. I stood over him and said, “Hey Eddie, I need to know where you got that baby.”

Eddie looked up and saw the blood all over my shirt. “You’re not gonna hurt me are you, Cole?”

“I don’t know.”

“Lee Circle.”

I lit a cigarette. “Lee Circle?”

“Yeah, some Mexican who hangs out at Lee Circle set it up.”

“Set up what?”

Eddie wiped his nose with his sleeve. “We bought the baby, Cole.”

“People don’t buy babies.”

“Yeah, they do.”

I threw the cigarette down. “Get me a pair of pliers, would you, Eddie?”

“Okay Cole.” Eddie got a pair of pliers off of his work bench and handed them to me.

“Thanks,” I told him.

“This wasn’t my idea,” he said. “You don’t need to hurt me. I’ll take you to where we got the baby. I’ll tell you anything you want to know.”

“You don’t have to tell me anything yet.” I put my hand on the back of Eddie’s neck and pushed him toward the ground. I got on top of Eddie and sat on his chest. Eddie tried to get away, but my weight kept him pinned down. I held him by his throat with one hand and got a hold of one of his front teeth with the pliers. I had to work the pliers back and forth to get the tooth loose. I jerked the pliers, but I lost the grip on the tooth and had to start all over. Eddie started crying and begged me to stop. I didn’t listen. This time I got a pretty good grip and pulled really hard and the tooth came right out. I held the pliers in front of Eddie’s face. He stared at his tooth. Blood ran out of his mouth and all over his shirt. His scream reminded me of this guy’s scream in prison. Some black guys got a hold of this Aryan and took him off to where nobody could see what they were doing to him. I never found out what they did, but I heard him screaming. Eddie sounded just like that guy. He sounded like prey.

“Let’s go to Lee Circle.” I went back into the house and told Jeri Lynn to get in the Rover. She was holding a bloody towel to her face, but she didn’t say anything. I put the baby on my lap and told Eddie to get in the back seat. He was holding a towel to his face too. I took the interstate and got off on St. Charles Avenue where Lee Circle was.

In the middle of Lee Circle there was a statue of Robert E. Lee on top of a pillar about a hundred feet high. General Lee had his arms folded, looking down on the traffic circle like he couldn’t believe what he saw. A couple dozen Mexicans stood under the General waiting for contractors to come by so they could pick up some work.

“Eddie, do you see the guy?”

“No.”

“Drive around the circle again.”

“I don’t see him, Cole.” Eddie spit some blood into the towel.

“Are you sure? If we can’t find the Mexican, I might have to pull some more teeth.”

“No, no, wait, I see him. There he is.”

“Get the Mexican.”

I parked the Rover near the curb and Eddie called the Mexican. He walked up to the Rover and stared at Eddie holding a bloody towel to his face. I thought he was going to run, but Eddie said something to him in Spanish. The Mexican got in the back seat, and directed us to some place in eastern New Orleans where probably only squatters lived. There were a couple of working cars on a mostly deserted street. The rest of the cars looked flood-wrecked with that thick film of gray silt all over them. The Mexican pointed to a house with a blue tarp for a roof, and I parked the Rover next to an uprooted tree.

“Is this it?”

“Yeah.”

“Tell the Mexican to get out of here.”

Eddie said something to the Mexican in Spanish, and the Mexican left in a hurry. I told Jeri Lynn to stay in the yard, and I wrapped the baby’s pink blanket a little tighter around her because I thought she might be getting cold. We walked up to the front door. Eddie knocked and before anybody answered, Eddie turned to look at me and said, “There ain’t nobody to return the baby to.”

“I don’t believe that.”

When the door opened, this older woman stood there, and I thought she’d gone into shock when she saw us. I held the baby and told Eddie, “Tell her it’s okay that I’m not going to hurt her. I just want to return the baby to her mother. Tell her we need to know where the

mother is, and we shouldn't have taken her child. Tell her it's okay to take the baby back, Eddie."

The woman said something in Spanish that I didn't understand and pointed at Jeri Lynn standing out in the yard.

"What did she say, Eddie?"

"She said she sold the baby to Jeri Lynn and doesn't want her back."

"Tell me that again."

"She said she sold the baby to Jeri Lynn and doesn't want her back."

"Where's the baby's mother?"

"She said she bought the baby from the mother, and the mother went back to Texas or Arizona, she's not really sure."

I walked down the porch steps and stood in front of Jeri Lynn. For a couple of long minutes I held the black market baby in my arms. I didn't say anything to Eddie or Jeri Lynn, and finally I walked away from them. I got in the Rover and took off with the baby. I looked up in the rearview mirror as I was driving away. I saw Eddie still holding the towel over his mouth, and Jeri Lynn was sitting on the curb with her hands covering her face.

About three months ago, I sold everything in the house to the fence and ditched the Rover somewhere in the Garden District. Then I moved out of there and rented a place above Igor's bar on St. Charles Avenue. The bar down below was filled with card carrying losers, so the place was noisier than the usual dive. But I figured that this place was only temporary.

Hot smells from the city drifted in through the open window, and the air burned, and the sounds of whores and drunks came up through the floor. Sometimes late at night when the baby

woke up crying, I'd sit in a thrift store rocking chair holding her in my arms and feeding her until she went back to sleep. Other times, I was afraid if I put her down in her crib, she'd wake up, so I'd just sit in that chair rocking it very gently until dawn. I was so afraid to disturb her that I didn't want to move. I'd told some people her name was Samantha, but I kinda liked the name Sammy, so I'd been calling her that for a few weeks now. I'd been saying go to sleep little Sammy, everything's all right, even though I knew everything wasn't.

Last night, I was up with the baby all night long, and nothing really seemed to settle her down. I got out of the chair and walked over to the window. It was almost dawn. I turned the baby around and cradled her in one of my arms, so she could look out the window too. We stared at an early morning sky that was painted in purple and blue streaks. I looked at her small face, and she stared at me, and she reached up with a tiny hand. I kissed her little fingers, and I told her I loved her, but Sammy kept crying and crying, and tears the size of tiny raindrops ran down the side of her face. She seemed real frustrated, like she didn't know what to do. I sat back down in that cheap rocking chair, holding her in my arms, and I started crying with her because sometimes I didn't know what to do either.

Old Friends

I was standing at the kitchen window eating cold pizza when Bobby pulled into the driveway in his one-headlight Porsche. He got out of the 911, rolled up his leather jacket to use as a pillow, and walked around to the shotgun side to get more leg room. I grabbed another piece of pizza and headed down the hall to sleep on the mattress I bought at a garage sale for twenty bucks.

I got out of bed some time in the late afternoon and walked out to the driveway with a breakfast burrito. The sun was blood-red. It looked like somebody rolled it between two houses and left it there. Bobby sat in the shotgun seat rubbing his bloodshot eyes and listening to the Grateful Dead. Dirty clothes infested the car, and it smelled real bad inside like alcohol, shitty breaks, and worn-out pussy.

Bobby lit a cigarette and looked up at me. “What happened to you?”

I walked around the car because the sun was in my eyes, and it made my brain hurt.

“Nothing.”

“You look like you gained a hundred pounds,” he said.

“Fifty.”

“Well, it looks like a fucking hundred.”

“No,” I told him, “I gained the other fifty the last time you were here. You want to come on in and get cleaned up?”

Bobby leaned his head back against the seat and closed his eyes. “Jesus, it’s so fucking hot. I think I’ll just stay right here. I can’t move anyway. Why don’t you just park the car in the shade, and maybe I’ll feel a little better.”

I got in the Porsche and put the burrito on the dashboard and started the engine. I pulled out of the driveway and backed the car on the lawn so it was under the elm tree. Bobby reached over and changed the Dead tape, and we listened to “Loser” in silence for a minute.

“You know Nick, I can’t believe Jerry’s dead,” Bobby said.

I looked in Bobby’s ashtray for a roach and found one mixed in with cigarette butts. “I can’t either.”

“You know how old he was?”

I lit the roach. “About our age.”

“People are jumping off the Golden Gate Bridge over this.”

“Over what?”

“Jerry,” he said, “the people who jumped told people they were going to find Jerry.”

I passed the roach to Bobby. “No shit?”

“No shit.”

I knew people were jumping off the Golden Gate Bridge to look for Jerry Garcia. Bobby had been calling me every day on a car phone some washed-up actress had left in his glove box to give me the news about the king of the hippies. Now he was here in person to tell me all about it. Bobby kept hearing about this Jerry Garcia Memorial show from different Deadheads making their way north. They made it sound like a giant funeral bash where the party never ended. Nothing but acid and music and teenage girls with dogs named Roach and Bummer wandering around the park.

“Nick, we need to go to Frisco,” Bobby kept saying. “This is going to be a big show with thousands of Deadheads in one place, a one day love festival with Dylan, Neil Young, Santana,

Dave Mathews, Bonnie Raitt, Gregg Allman, Widespread Panic, and even Phish is supposed to be there.”

“I don’t want to go to San Francisco.”

He started sharing some other things, too. Bobby was stone broke. His latest band had kicked him out because he was a burned-out drunk. He wanted to deal with that and start going to AA meetings again. But there was a problem with gas money. Besides, he was living in the car down in Newport Beach, and he didn’t want to give up a prime parking space near the pier. Bobby claimed it was sort of like owning beach front property. Now he was willing to move inland to deal with his troubles and wanted to know if I would put him up for a few months. I didn’t feel it would be any problem; my wife had moved out, and I was probably losing the house anyway. Then he mentioned that another friend of ours named Willy was dying from AIDS. Willy figured I probably had it too because we’d fucked the same whores and shared the same dirty needles.

“Willy has AIDS?”

“Yeah.”

“Where is Willy?” I asked him.

“Hospice in New Mexico. I’ll give you his number.”

“Jesus.” I looked up and stared into the rearview mirror. It occurred to me that for years I’d run around with Willy and the boys, and because of the fucked up moves we’d made together, like the hair I was running my fingers through, the future looked pretty thin.

“Go get a test after you get back from San Francisco,” Bobby said.

“I’m not going to Frisco.”

“You need to think about this, Nick. This will be like old times. Remember when we’d get the boys together and go to all those Dead shows?”

“Yeah.” It was hard to forget getting the boys together, Moose, Mike, Larry, Willy, heading out with Bobby and me and drugs and a revolving door of women to over three hundred Dead shows. But Bobby was remembering all of us when the boys were different people, and now I was a different man. I wasn’t that skinny white kid with a thousand records, a giant bong, a stash of Thai sticks, and rock-and-roll posters plastered all over the bedroom wall. Bobby saw the fat man, but he didn’t see the binge-eating former alcoholic who’d burned most of his time searching for that perfect love festival and never really found one. Losing that time was probably because I’d never believed in any of that shit anyway.

Sitting in the car under the elm tree, Bobby reached in and got the car phone out of the glove box. It was the size of a big shoe. He claimed talking on the car phone cost two bucks a minute. Bobby figured the woman who owned it would cut it off when she found out it was missing. He wanted to take advantage of the situation and call some people we knew to maybe say hello. We didn’t have anyone to call so I took the phone and ordered two large pizzas. When the delivery kid wearing baggie pants pulled up in the driveway, we called him over to pay for them.

The delivery kid drove away in a beat-up Honda, and we watched him disappear around the corner. “What do you think that kid weighed?” Bobby asked me.

“I don’t know. Maybe, a buck-twenty.”

“Can you believe how big his pants were? Those fucking pants would even fit you.”

I ignored Bobby and opened up a pizza box and pulled out a piece. “What makes you think the Porsche will make it?”

Bobby felt like the Porsche was good for one more road trip, but I wasn't sure if that was true. The four tires were bald; the frame was bent from a car wreck; the gauges on the dashboard broke down a long time ago. The Porsche used to be black; now it was primer gray. Two years ago, after we got loaded on some dope Bobby brought back from Humboldt, we went to Wal-Mart to buy cans of primer and painted the Porsche primer gray in the garage. We burned out some brain cells doing that job.

Bobby paid cash for the car in '75 when he was making big money working as a professional studio musician. The 911 had suffered through twenty years of wrecks, rock and roll, divorces, poverty, drugs, and served as a mobile home when he was broke. But he believed the car was still road-worthy and told me, "I think it'll make it to San Francisco easy, but we're not taking the Porsche anyway. We'll go in Moose's Land Cruiser."

I reached for another piece of pizza on the dirty dashboard and said, "I don't want to go up there in Moose's Land Cruiser. Why are you bothering to go to San Francisco?"

"Because Jerry's dead, man. Besides, it ain't just me, my friend. We're going to San Francisco."

"No, we ain't going to San Francisco. I'm getting too old for that kind of shit."

"You've gotta go, Nick. Even Moose is showing up for this one."

"I know Moose is going. He won't leave me alone about it either. But that's not changing my mind. I don't want to go up there."

"Don't you want to hang out with Moose?"

"When you guys come back, we'll hang out together here. It's not like you have jobs or something."

"When was the last time you saw Moose?"

“You know when I saw him last.” I didn’t really want to talk about the last time I saw Moose, so I took two pieces of pizza out of the box and made a meat lover’s sandwich out of them.

The last time I’d been around Moose was at his place outside of Santa Fe, New Mexico. He was almost sixty. His gray hair was down to his waist and probably hadn’t been combed since 1975. He used to go barefoot for most of the year, but he got caught in a freak snow storm in the Idaho panhandle and a case of frostbite cost him three toes. This forced Moose to break down and buy a pair of boots at an Army surplus store.

Moose lived in an underground shelter that he dug out with a shovel and a backhoe. Mike, who was one of the boys, left L.A. and moved out to New Mexico to get his head straight. They decided to use shovels to dig out a room addition in the underground shelter. There was a cave-in, and Mike got killed. Moose put his shovel down and used the backhoe to dig Mike out. Then Moose used the backhoe to dig Mike’s grave.

We dozed off after the pizza and pot. The sound of dogs barking woke us up. Bobby and I watched Moose park his beat-up Land Cruiser in the driveway. He got three big black dogs out of the back and put chains on them. Moose limped over to the Porsche and chained the dogs to the elm tree.

“Hey, Moose,” Bobby said.

“Hey, boys.”

“Still got those dogs, huh?” I asked him.

“They’re my babies.”

I got out of the Porsche and petted the dogs for a minute. “How was the trip, Moose?”

“Not bad.”

“What kind of dogs are those?” Bobby asked him.

“They got some ridgeback in them, and I don’t know what other kind of shit they got in them.”

“They look like they got Uncle Ray in them,” Bobby told him. “Those are some big fucking dogs. Are they friendly?”

“They’re all right.”

Moose reached over and grabbed the last piece of pizza. “House still looks the same.”

Moose hadn’t been to the house since he showed up about a year ago, and my wife barbequed ribs in the back yard. He’d been dropping pills, and he was pretty fucked up. Moose put the dogs in the yard, and one of them jumped the fence and didn’t come back for two days. He sat at the kitchen table, scratching his head and eating ribs while he talked about life in an underground shelter.

My wife noticed some movement on Moose’s head, and she walked around to the back of his chair as she wiped her hands on her apron. Moose had barbeque sauce all over his face. Looking a little closer at the top of Moose’s head, my wife gasped and said, “Sweet Jesus, Moose has lice.”

Running his filthy sauce-stained fingers through his hair, as only God knows what hit the table, Moose looked up, and calmly told my wife, “That ain’t lice, its moveable salt.” He continued to eat more ribs while my wife threw up in the kitchen sink.

I used to blame Moose and the boys for wrecking my marriage. I’d always looked at the lice incident as some sort of the turning point when things began to really fall apart. But the walls were already crashing down. I’d ruined the marriage mostly because of my drinking and fucking anything that would let me. She hung on longer than most women would before she

moved out. Now, as I saw Moose standing around the Porsche on his seven remaining toes, the only thing I wanted to ask him was how he got so old and beat-up. But I was afraid that he might ask me the same thing.

“You got anymore pizza?” Moose wanted to know.

“We can call and get some,” I told him.

“Maybe I should just get some pizza,” Moose said. “You look like you’ve had enough. You’re fucking fat, man.” Moose pulled out a joint and signaled for a light. “You didn’t get that way from drinking, did you? The last I heard, you got out of rehab and finally got on the wagon.”

“Yeah, he’s on the wagon,” Bobby said. “Nick’s on the fuckin’ chuck wagon.”

The three of us laughed. It was good to be around them again. The night was starting to fall from the sky. Different sets of headlights came down the street and pulled into different driveways. Bobby got out of the Porsche, looked up at Moose and said, “I don’t think Nick is going to go on our little road trip.”

“Why not? You told me he was going.”

“I thought he would.”

“Come on Nick,” Moose said, “come to San Francisco.”

“I can’t go up there.”

“Why not?”

“I just can’t, man.”

“You need to go, Nick,” Bobby said. “We’re all that’s left of the old gang. Mike is dead and Willy is dying and Larry isn’t around.”

Talking about Mike or Willy or Larry made me nervous, and I grabbed the car phone and ordered more pizza. Bobby and Moose had lost track of Larry, but I'd kept in touch with him. He was easy to find. Larry had probably spent as much time in prison as he spent on the streets.

When Larry was in the joint, I'd go see him every three or four months and bring him cartons of cigarettes and food. I went to see him at Corcoran State Prison, and he'd gotten his head shaved and had a tattoo of spider web across his entire skull. The spider web was purple. There was a giant black widow on his forehead. Big black flies with gray wings and naked women with flaming red hair were caught in the purple web. I wanted to know what he did that for, and Larry explained he was adapting to his natural environment. When Larry got out of prison, he had some trouble adapting to his new natural environment. Larry put his head in a cement mixer.

The three of us stood on the driveway waiting for the pizza and talking about the road trip to San Francisco. They wanted to sleep outside because they couldn't afford a room. Sleeping outside always made me feel broke and hungry. It brought back memories of those nights when Bobby, Moose, Mike, Willy, Larry, and I crashed on the strand at Venice Beach. We slept in drunken stupors near the gutter punks, drifters, gang bangers, vagrants, faggots, and freaks that infested the shore line.

"I can't sleep on the ground," I told them.

"Why not?" Moose wanted to know. "It'll be just like old times."

"Those times are gone."

"It'll only be for a day or so," Bobby said.

"What do you plan to do with the dogs?" I asked Moose.

"I'll leave them here. They'll be all right."

“You’re just going to throw them in the back yard with a big bucket of water and expect them to wait like Lassie or something,” I said.

“They’ll be all right.”

“Those fuckin’ dogs will eat every cat in the neighborhood before we get to the freeway. I’m not going up there. I don’t know why you’re heading up there either. I’ll take care of the dogs, and you guys can go in the Porsche, and I’ll see you when you get back.” I unhooked the chains around the elm tree and watched Bobby’s Porsche until it disappeared down the street. Then I took the dogs into the house.

That night I made some chili and was eating at the kitchen table when I got a phone call from the California Highway Patrol. Bobby had used my address on his driver’s license, and they were looking for next of kin. I told the cops I was Bobby’s brother. The cop on the phone told me Bobby and his passenger had been killed in a car accident somewhere near Salinas. They were still in the process of identifying the passenger in the car. He wasn’t carrying any identification. I told the cop on the line that I knew who the passenger was, too. Then I sort of blanked out and couldn’t remember Moose’s real name. I was ashamed that I didn’t know his real name, but I guess it didn’t matter. I gave the cops Willy’s number at the hospice in New Mexico because I was sure he would know. I hung up the phone and went back into the kitchen. I made more chili and ate it out of the pot and watched old movies until dawn.

Four days later, I loaded up the dogs and drove Moose’s Land Cruiser to his place in New Mexico. When I pulled up, Willy was already at the grave site. He made the burial arrangements from his hospice bed. I got out of the Land Cruiser and cut the dogs loose. The desert sun was

beating down, and I wanted to shoot it out of the sky. Willy had a nurse with him who stood by his wheelchair and studied his oxygen tank. Willy looked like he was down to about ninety pounds. When I called him to say I was headed out to New Mexico, he told me over the phone that I would be shocked when I saw him. Willy was right. Standing waist-deep in the grave on top of Bobby's coffin, with black rings under his eyes and most of his hair gone, Willy looked like some sort of starving prophet. I stood around the partially dug grave and didn't say anything.

Willy looked up at me and said, "Can you run a fucking backhoe? The Mexican I hired finished Bobby's grave, but he got too drunk to finish Moose's grave. It's too late to find another one who runs a backhoe. I need to get back to my AIDS condo to finish dying."

I didn't say anything. I climbed into the seat and used the backhoe to finish digging Moose's grave. I cut the engine.

"You might as well dig one more for me," Willy said. "Hell, you might want to think about digging one for yourself."

I thought about it for a few minutes. The sun was finally going down as I started the engine. I dug Willy's grave. I started to cut the engine, but thought better of it, and then I dug my own grave. When I finished, I killed the engine and climbed down from the backhoe and stood around Bobby's grave.

Willy had a handful of dirt in each hand and threw the dirt on the coffin and screamed, "What the fuck happened to us!"

I didn't know. I didn't think I would ever know, so I didn't say anything. We both started crying. The nurse Willy brought along pulled him out of the grave and helped him get into his wheelchair. Then the nurse helped me lower Moose's coffin into his grave, and it started

to slide off the stretcher and land on its side. We got in the grave though, and I told him thanks for the help. Then I grabbed a shovel and buried Moose and Bobby.

When I finished, I sat down next to Willy and said, “You know it’s too bad we couldn’t bury Larry out here.”

“There wasn’t much left of him anyway,” Willy said. “Besides, that bastard would rob the dead. We’d always have to watch him.”

“Yeah, I guess we would, wouldn’t we? But there isn’t much left to really watch, is there?”

“No, there isn’t.” Willy was wrapped in a blanket because he was cold all the time, and he pulled it tighter in the desert heat around his shoulders. “You know a fucking cold will kill me.”

I thought something had already killed him and got up to leave. I called the dogs and walked toward the Land Cruiser. About halfway to the Cruiser, I turned around to look at Willy and the graves one more time.

Willy had his hands on the wheels of his wheelchair. “Guess, I’ll see you on the way down,” he said.

“Yeah, I guess you probably will.”

I drove all night long and only stopped for cigarettes, gasoline, hamburgers, and to weep by the side of the road. I hit L.A. as the sun was coming up in one those perfect purple toxic dawns. I put the dogs in the back yard and stood in the driveway eating a taco and waited for Bobby’s car. A flatbed wrecker came around the corner hauling the Porsche and pulled into the driveway.

The guy got out and said, “You want me to back in so I can unload near the garage? Maybe you can get it in there later.”

“No.”

“Well, where do you want me to put it then?”

“Park it under the elm tree in the shade.”

“You can’t leave a wrecked car out in the yard,” the guy said. “You’ll get a ticket for that.”

“Just park the Porsche in the fucking shade.”

The guy backed up on the lawn and unloaded Bobby’s Porsche under the elm tree. I wrote him a bad check to pay for it. I walked around the Porsche and wanted to sit in it, but the metal was so mangled, and I was so fat, that I couldn’t fit behind the steering wheel. I stared at the blood on the dashboard and heard the dogs barking behind the house. I stood in the shade and listened for a minute.

I finally went into the house and got some things out of the refrigerator. I put some tomatoes in a pot and boiled them in water. I took my time cutting up onions and mushrooms and garlic and sautéed them in olive oil. I pulled out some fine china that my ex-wife forgot to take, and I set some plates on the table. Then I went into the kitchen, and finished making spaghetti for six.

Canaan

I stared out the window at Billy Austin and some kid pulling up on the driveway in a bass boat that Austin had probably ripped off from somebody. When the kid jumped out into waist-deep water to tie the bass boat to the front grill of a flooded Chevy, this speed freak from the French Quarter was rowing past them in a Coleman raft. The French Quarter guy was spun and wanted to find somebody in Orleans Parish who would chop his lover in half. The boys were kinda relieved when he left because he'd walked around the place holding a machete and said if he couldn't find anybody to off her, he'd do the job himself.

I was holed up with Chef and his posse and some other tweakers I didn't know on the second floor of Chef's house that was pretty close to Lake Pontchartrain. The first floor of the house was filled with flood water. Chef and the boys had been smoking shit since the day Katrina hit the coast, but none of them could figure out what day that was. I'd been smoking shit too, but I'd only been there for about a day because some junkie stole my boat, and I was stranded with the pack.

Billy Austin walked in the room carrying a .12 gauge shotgun and wearing clothes that looked like they belonged to his old man, and his old man died a long time ago. He ran his hands through his dirty red hair and stared at us with those pale blue convict eyes.

"Did you get the shit I wanted?" Chef asked him.

"Yeah, I got it." Austin told him.

Austin said something to the kid who showed up with him, and the kid opened his backpack and pulled things out and set them on the floor: a gallon of distilled water, a gallon of muriatic acid, a gallon of white gas, a gallon of acetone, a quart of brake fluid, a bottle of rubbing alcohol, and a can of lye.

“The speed cook’s back in business,” I said.

“I ain’t a speed cook,” Chef said. “I’m a fucking chef.”

I looked around the room. Chef had covered the windows with blankets. The place was like a drunken boat; we were the shipmates who refused to abandon ship as we started to go down with the flooded wreckage. Most of these people had escaped the deluge from somewhere else. There was some cracker with an Orleans Parish Prison bracelet on his wrist. Another guy had an electronic monitor on his ankle and said there was no one left to track him down. This other weirdo walked around the house in a dress and kept putting on lipstick he said was waterproof. A skinny woman stood in the corner with blood with all over her hands. The rest of the crowd was a collection of speed freaks that came and went in Coleman rafts or showed up rowing an air mattress with a fan blade. The worst ones were missing most of their teeth and picking at the scabs on their faces as they kept trying to dig the spiders out.

Billy Austin leaned the .12 gauge up against the wall and whispered something to the kid, and the kid whispered something back. Apparently Austin had finally been released from the Delta Regional Correctional Facility in Arkansas after doing about ten years for manslaughter. This set Billy Austin apart from the rest of us because he’d killed somebody. He’d probably made his required appearance at his parole agent’s office in Pine Bluff, Arkansas, where they looked across the desk at each other and silently agreed that Billy would experience a very short stay outside the walls.

“What are you doing here?” Austin asked me.

“Transportation problems,” I told him.

I didn’t know Billy Austin was going to show up at Chef’s place. I figured it was some sort of speed freak secret that Austin had been released from the house of corrections. But it

surprised me that Chef's spineless band was able to keep their mouths shut and didn't feel it was necessary to tell me about Austin.

The guy with the Orleans Parish Prison bracelet on his wrist gave the pipe to Austin as he congratulated him on his release from that Arkansas prison. I was torn between these feelings about Austin running the streets or staying in prison forever, but I said something about the old days to him anyway.

"That happened a long time ago," Austin said.

"But why did you do it? Why did you leave me hanging?"

"That was over ten years ago. It seems like another lifetime to me," Austin said. "I can hardly remember that night." He laughed in this embarrassed kind of way.

"Well, I remember that night," I told him.

"Who'd you leave hanging, Austin?" somebody else asked.

"Fuck that shit, I don't want to talk about it." Then he turned away and wanted to know if anyone had seen his girlfriend Cindy. Austin had heard a rumor from a tweaker that rowed by him on a rubber raft that she was here. The rumor had been true, but it wasn't now. Cindy took off with a Mexican who barely spoke English and wore a torn t-shirt that said "I Love NOLA." I saw them on a homemade raft using one of those fan blades to row away toward City Park, where alligators were supposedly eating dead bodies out in front of the museum. In a room full of sleazy lies and secrets, nobody wanted to tell him the truth.

"Nope," Chef said. "Nobody's seen her around here. Jesus only knows where she is, but I heard she holed up in Mid-City."

"When did you hear that?"

"I don't know," Chef told him. "I think I'm holding old information."

“I hope she’s all right,” Billy said. “It’s real bad out there. Ain’t nobody left in New Orleans but fools and National Guard. I heard they took all the brothers and shipped them to Texas, like they were fucking Indians or something.”

Chef passed the pipe to me and said, “Yeah, yeah, that’s too bad about the niggers. You know if you drink milk, you can smoke as much of this shit as you want. Something in meth robs your body of calcium; maybe it’s the Acetone or the Coleman’s fuel, I don’t really know, but before Katrina I was drinking a lot of milk, and since the flood I’ve lost two or three teeth, so I know it’s the fuckin’ milk.” Chef reached up and started working on one of his front teeth. “I got one right now that I’m about to lose.”

I passed the pipe to the kid, and the kid took a hit and gave the pipe to Austin. The kid got excited and told me about their plans. Austin was down to his last wasted dream, and the kid reached into Billy’s pocket and pulled it out. The kid unfolded an old newspaper clipping.

“Billy’s taking me to Canaan tonight.”

“Taking you where?” I asked the kid.

“Canaan.”

“Where’s Canaan?”

“The Ozarks,” the kid said.

“Yeah, we’re heading out there tomorrow,” Austin said. He took the newspaper clipping from the kid. “Mama sent this to me when I was in the joint.” Austin slowly waved it back and forth like a magician about to do a card trick. He passed the clipping to Chef, and Chef held it at arms length like he was inspecting a map.

“Mama lives in Canaan, Arkansas?” Chef asked him.

“She don’t live there anymore. She had a little house out there and wanted me to come on up and start all over.”

But the old lady wouldn’t be starting over with Austin because she came down with Alzheimer’s and forgot that she ever lived in Canaan or that she even had a son. The old woman died in a Berryville rest home while Austin still had four years left before he was eligible for parole. Austin got the clipping back from Chef and folded his yellowed, torn, dream and put it back in his pocket.

“Those bastards wouldn’t even let me go to her funeral,” Austin said. “But I’m gonna go see her grave now. Plus I got the house in Canaan. But first I’m gonna find Cindy, and then I’m gonna take her and the kid out there.”

“You’re not taking anybody to Canaan. He’ll let you down, kid, just like he let me down. Billy Austin is a walking fucking Judas.”

“Who the fuck are you?” Austin wanted to know.

“I’m the guy you left hanging,” I told him.

I stepped back into the darkness. I’d pushed Austin about as far as I wanted to push him. Bad blood ran between us. I knew Billy Austin even before he wound up in Little Rock where he used a bicycle chain to beat a man to death. Years ago, we’d burglarized a house in the French Quarter. The job went bad, and Austin had left me out in the cold. I hid in a strange closet for six hours and under a Suburban for another three. A police dog finally drove me out from underneath the Suburban. I did a couple of months in the Orleans Parish Prison until the D.A. threw the case out of court on a technicality. I beat the charge, but still, this sort of thing mattered. Even though Austin had taken me under his crooked criminal wing when I was a kid, the fucked-up burglary led me to talk shit about him while he was in prison. In fact, the whole

scene left me somewhat disturbed with Billy Austin being paroled from the joint, and the boys deciding to keep his arrival a private affair. This only reinforced the feeling that it was impossible to trust any of these people.

I looked up at the flashlight that someone had duct taped above the doorway, so we could see what we were smoking. When one of the generators quit working, Chef and the guy wearing the dress took the engine of the generator completely apart to figure out what was wrong with it. They discovered that the generator was out of gasoline, but they forgot how to put it back together again. The two of them just left the pieces scattered on the floor. The room stank of gas fumes, urine, dope, drano, and rotten food. Every time someone passed me the pipe, I was certain the house would blow up. Whenever someone passed the pipe to some guy we called T.S. because he had Tourettes Syndrome, he shouted out, "Fuck God." I knew that we were so far from God that God would never hear us.

I stared at Austin after I passed the pipe to the woman who had blood all over her hands. Billy Austin had pissed away fifty years. He was covered in prison yard tattoos. He would probably die in prison chains. Austin always gave me the impression that he might pull out a gun and start shooting people to death. I couldn't remember ever meeting anyone who'd actually lived long enough to piss away that much time. My folks came pretty close when they made the decision to wreck their lives by marrying each other, but they died when they were in their forties. I'd only pissed away thirty years. I watched Austin put the newspaper clipping back into his pocket. With a role model like Billy Austin in the room, I had this awful feeling that I could smoke speed and piss away time forever.

"I'm going to Canaan," he said.

Later that night, I watched Billy Austin take a hit of speed. He blew some smoke into the room, and his hands started shaking. Austin lost his grip on the pipe. He began to juggle it, and the pipe rolled across the top of his right hand and down his arm. Austin's head started shaking too, and it snapped back a couple of times, and then it looked like God jerked him off the face of the earth. He fell down, and his head and his feet and his hands were beating the floor in some bizarre dance. White foam came out of Billy Austin's mouth. The kid kept yelling, "Help him, help him," but we just stared at him until he quit moving, and, to everyone there, Austin looked real dead. T.S. walked over to try and pick up the pieces of the broken pipe. The speed had spilled on the floor, and he said, "Fuck God."

Chef squatted and took a real long look at Austin. "Yeah, he's dead."

"Oh my God," the kid said. "Are you sure he's dead?"

"I know a dead man when I see one," Chef told him, "and this is a dead man."

"What are we gonna do, Chef?" the guy with the ankle monitor wanted to know.

"There's nothing we can do. He's dead."

"Well, we can't just leave him here."

"Why can't we? Listen we gotta stick together on this. If we take him outside, somebody might see us. Besides, he ain't going any place." Chef reached into his mouth and worked on his loose tooth.

When Billy Austin died, he broke the last speed pipe, and we started smoking meth out of light bulbs. This guy with tattoos all over his face went around the house pulling the light bulbs out of all the fixtures. Holding the base of a bulb with a pair of needle-nose pliers, he used a Wal-Mart butane torch to heat the glass. Then he made a small incision with a box cutter around the bulb where the metal met the glass, and he broke off the metal base. The tattooed guy doled

out speed down the soft glass into the belly of the bulb like he was pouring frankincense down a porcelain oil burner. He put the stem of a pen in his mouth and buried it down the neck of the light bulb. The guy slowly ran the flame around the bottom of the bulb until the meth bubbled and formed speed clouds. He sucked up a hit, and the tattoos all over his face disappeared in the smoke, and then he passed it around the room. We didn't need the light bulbs anyway since there wasn't any electricity in the house. Besides, smoking speed filled our lungs with light.

The guy in the dress looked over at Billy Austin lying in the corner of the room. "This is fuckin' bullshit," he said. "They're starting to get rid of the water and pumping that shit into Lake Pontchartrain. We can drop Austin in the water, and he'll get sucked out into the Gulf of Mexico."

"That's bullshit," Chef said. "They'll pump the water out, and he'll be on the fucking driveway. We gotta leave him right there."

"Let's at least move him into a corner."

"I guess we can do that," Chef said. The two of them grabbed Billy by each arm and dragged him over to the corner of the room and propped him up against the wall. The guy in the dress bent over and went through Austin's pockets. He was wearing purple panties.

I thought the guy in the dress didn't know what he was talking about when he said the water was going down. I thought the water was rising again. It looked like it was coming up the stairs. But the guy picked some lint off of his mini-skirt and claimed he knew what it was doing, but he'd been acting pretty weird anyway. We'd stopped paying attention to him. He'd walked around the house holding hands with the guy who had tattoos all over his face and telling everybody he wanted to go down to the French Quarter to party.

"How do you plan to get to the French Quarter?" I asked him.

“I’m gonna take a raft.”

“You ain’t taking the fuckin’ raft,” Chef told him. “We only got one left, and I don’t see your name on it.”

The guy wearing the dress walked over to a mirror and put on some more lipstick. “I’m getting out of here,” he said.

“Then get the fuck out of here,” Chef told him.

The guy started to climb out the window, but his dress got caught on something. It took him a few seconds to get loose and out onto the roof. He waved goodbye to everybody and jumped into water filled with cancer and shit and metal and poison and snakes and dead bodies. We watched him swimming away, and Chef said to me, “I guess the fuckin’ faggot snapped.”

“I guess he did.”

“What do you think made him do something like that?”

“I don’t know. I guess sometimes the mind can only handle so much.”

“I guess that’s true,” Chef said. He looked down at the stone black water. “What do you think is in that water?”

“Corruption.”

“Besides that, what do you think is in there?”

“Isn’t that enough?”

Chef reached into his mouth and started working on his front tooth again. “It’s fucking loose,” he told me. “I know I’m about to lose another one.” We looked across the water, and there were only rooftops as far as either one of us could see. “I need some fucking milk,” Chef said.

Some time before dawn I sat on the floor across from the kid, holding the shotgun across my lap. The man with the electronic monitor on his ankle was in the corner taking apart a lamp even though the electricity was out.

“Where are you from?” I asked the kid.

“California.” The kid claimed he was fifteen, and he’d hitchhiked out of California. He’d hustled his way across the country. People walked in and out of the room. Chef was cooking speed down the hall. The smell of chemicals invaded the room. The kid’s smooth skin was pale even for someone who was a night time toy in Los Angeles. I noticed the kid spoke in two different voices. He had one voice that made him sound like a homesick child at summer camp. “What’s going to happen to Billy Austin?” he asked me. “He was my best friend in the whole world.”

“It already happened to him,” I told the kid. “Billy Austin is dead.”

His other voice had a world-weary runaway quality that came from giving too many blow jobs in cheap rooms on Santa Monica Boulevard. “This sure fucks things up for me.”

We listened to the Black Hawk helicopters circling New Orleans to rescue stranded people off the roof tops. The helicopters made people in the room paranoid that someone was coming for them. The woman who had blood all over her hands hid in a closet. She didn’t want to be rescued; we heard her screaming all night long. None of them wanted to be rescued. I decided it was too late for most of us to be rescued anyway. I stared at the people hanging around the room. They made it easy to believe that some things are probably too wounded to save.

“Are you from here?” the kid asked me in his homesick voice.

“Yeah.”

“What’s your name?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“How long have you lived here?”

I took another hit. “Long enough to get a habit in New Orleans.”

“What kind of habit?”

“The bad one.”

I’d been here long enough to get other things too. I lost my job in New Orleans. I got busted for dope in New Orleans. I broke parole in New Orleans. The cops pinned me face down in the Rock & Bowl parking lot and treated me like I was some sort of asphalt leper. Like the others, I couldn’t stay away from places like this one. Every time I walked into one of these black holes, I saw the same wasted faces that kept hitting the speed pipe. We were so busy staying wide awake that we had the time to keep making the same shitty mistakes over and over again. There were so many days and nights like this where I lost track of things, and everything became blurred and time ran together.

The kid and I looked over at Billy Austin propped up in the corner. The kid switched to his jaded hustler voice. “Before I met Billy Austin, I was going to New York City. I’ve never been there. I just like the way it sounds.”

“I’ve never been there either,” I told him. “I’ve only been as far as Mississippi.”

I passed the kid the burning light bulb filled with meth as he told me how a lawyer driving a black Mercedes gave him a ride out of L.A.

“Where did you meet him?”

“I met him on Hollywood Boulevard.” The kid said they fed each other pills the lawyer kept in his briefcase until the xanax and valium and oxycontin made his stomach feel like a pill box. The kid passed out somewhere in New Mexico, and when he woke up in a narcotic haze,

the kid believed that he was every single suicidal insect that smashed itself against the windshield. The lawyer kept one hand down the kid's pants, while he steered the car with the other and went on and on about his beautiful family and about the expensive things he owned. "We spent three days together in some crummy room and split up at a truck stop." The kid told me he hung out in the truck stop bathroom where he'd probably washed the cum off his face and washed down more pills and counted his money on a dirty sink.

The kid and I looked at Billy Austin. We watched Chef and some other guy drag him to our side of the room. They had Billy by each hand and his arms were spread straight out like he was being crucified. I guess he was in a way. I saw the small scar on his left cheekbone, where a bullet had entered his face fifteen years ago, and the larger jagged scar on his cheek, where the slug had come out and gone on its way into a wall.

"I was there when he got that scar."

"What happened to him?"

"Cindy shot him. I had to dive behind a couch, or she would have shot me too."

"Why did she shoot him?"

"She loved him."

I remembered how Cindy dropped the gun and said love made her pull the trigger. I believed that. Their love was so destructive that they were like some kind of malignant tumor that grew on the outside of each other's bodies. It tore me apart, watching that kind of love because I wanted that same sort of terminal disease. I kept searching for the woman I knew was out there, the woman who'd love me forever.

The kid went back to talking about his trip south. "It started raining at the truck stop. I knew what was going to happen before it ever happened. I've been through this shit before. I

knew some trucker in a big rig would give me a ride, and I met one in the diner. He bought me pancakes. We cut a deal in the parking lot and pulled off the interstate to fuck in the sleeper cab at different truck stops all the way to Okalahoma City.”

Somewhere downtown the trucker zipped up the fly of his Wrangler jeans and dropped the kid off at a Greyhound bus terminal. The fifteen-year-old boy wanted to turn another trick there. He trolled all night at the candy machines for a pedophile with a fistful of fifties, but nothing showed up. The kid decided Oklahoma City was a dead town and caught the last bus to Tulsa.

The kid was vague about how he wound up in Memphis waiting at the head of the entrance ramp for a ride. Some dreadlocked couple traveling in a van down to New Orleans picked him up. They’d been to the Bonnaroo festival in Tennessee and were taking the long way home to their organic farm and trust funds. The kid didn’t have much to say to them because they didn’t want anything from him. He was used to being used. The couple fed him veggie burgers they made on a propane stove outside of Vicksburg.

“I’m a teenage hustler,” he told them. “I fuck men for money.”

They were shocked. “We love you,” they told the kid. They offered to contact people in California. Somewhere along the line they drank too much wine and fell asleep in the van. The kid robbed them. He made his way down to New Orleans and met Billy Austin in the Quarter. The kid wound up here helping Chef cook up a batch speed before the hurricane hit.

The guy with the tattoos walked in the room and stood over Austin’s body. “What are we gonna do with him?” he asked.

“What do you want to do?” Chef asked him. “We just moved him.”

“Well, we just can’t leave him here.”

“No, I guess we can’t just leave him here. He’ll start to rot.”

“Maybe we can leave him on a neutral ground someplace.”

“Where would that someplace be? There ain’t no neutral ground. Everything is under water. We could just put him in the water and let the National Guard find him.”

I walked over and took down one of the blankets that covered the window. I opened the window. “Let’s get him out of here,” I said.

The boys carried him to the window, and one of them climbed out onto the roof to lift Austin’s dead body out on the shingles. Chef got out onto the roof with the guy with a tattooed face, and they dragged Billy’s body to the edge of the roof. I climbed through the window and watched as they pushed Billy Austin into the water. He floated for a minute or two and then he disappeared. We stood on the edge of the roof. There was filthy water as far we could see, and still only the rooftops of houses were visible. I kept waiting for things to change. I looked over at Chef who had reached inside of his mouth and was pulling out the bad front tooth. He held a rotten piece of calcium in his hand and said, “You see, I told you, it’s the fucking milk.”

We went back inside eventually, and we lost interest in Billy; everyone simply forgot about him. He went down in the flood and didn’t matter anymore, so we went back to smoking speed. At some point, I looked over at the kid who was still sitting against the wall. The kid was crying. He put the ten-year-old newspaper on the floor, and he kept staring at it.

“What’s the matter, kid?”

The kid looked up at me with his tear-stained face and said, “I want out of New Orleans real bad. I thought I could get Billy to take me to that place he keeps calling Canaan.”

“You can still go to Canaan; you don’t need Austin to take you there. Just take off.”

“No. I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“I just can’t.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know,” the kid told me in his hustler’s voice.

“Just go right now and take the bass boat and get the fuck out of New Orleans.”

The kid thought about it for a minute and got up to leave the room.

“You ain’t taking the bass boat,” Chef told him. “That bass boat is mine.”

I pointed the shotgun at Chef. “The bass boat is mine.”

Chef didn’t say anything and watched as I followed the kid out of the room. We walked down the stairs and waded in shit they claimed was water to get to the bass boat. The kid untied the rope from the bumper of the flooded Chevrolet. We climbed into the boat, and I started the engine. I turned around, and saw Chef pulling back the blanket and staring out of the window. When we were about fifty yards away, I turned around again, and Chef had let go of the blanket. I thought about the boys smoking speed and standing around the generator they’d taken apart. I thought about dead Billy Austin. I thought I heard the woman with blood on her hands screaming from inside the closet, but I didn’t really hear anything. Then I went back to steering the boat toward the French Quarter. I figured once we got to the Quarter, the kid would head out for his Canaan, and I’d head out for mine.

Dogo

I stood on the side of the road and waited for the wrecker. I gave Tyson a shot of water out of a jug that was on the back seat. The '82 Beamer had died in heavy traffic, and I'd pushed it to the curb. I thought I was in Anaheim, but maybe I was still in Fullerton. I really didn't know for sure. It didn't matter that much anyway. The car was still dead.

When the wrecker pulled up, this guy jumped out of the cab and said he needed the title before he would haul it away. The guy wore a name tag that said Ray, and Ray had tattoos all over his arms. Traffic blasted by in lines of organized chaos. I told Tyson to stay where he was and went over to the car. I got the title out of the glove box and grabbed a book by Foucault called *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. I'd been reading Foucault mostly when I was stoned, but I understood that he was writing about different theaters of punishment. Stranded in L.A. without a car, I felt like I was in one of those theaters, and the audience moved fast, talked fast, lived fast, and nobody in this city had the time to care about who was tied to the whipping post.

I handed Ray what he needed, and he gave me a check for fifty bucks. While I signed a form, I asked Ray, "What's the date today?"

"March 13th."

"Thanks."

"What kind of dog is that?"

"A Dogo."

"Never heard of one."

"Yeah, most people haven't."

“Is he friendly?”

I finished signing the release form and gave it back to Ray. “No.”

“He doesn’t look friendly.”

“No, he doesn’t, does he?”

“No, he sure doesn’t. Where’d you get that dog?”

“I stole him down in Chinatown.” I turned around and didn’t look back at the car. It was like I was walking away from some sort of Biblical plague where a black sky rained snakes and frogs in vain.

When we’d walked a couple of blocks, I realized I hadn’t thought about Chinatown in years, and I wasn’t really sure why I’d said that I stole the dog from there. It was true, but it wasn’t the kind of thing I usually said to people.

Back in the eighties, I had a friend named Rodney who lived in Chinatown, above Hop Luie’s, in a little apartment near Alpine and Broadway. At night, Rodney worked the door of Hop Luie’s underground club that catered to gangsters and thugs and the occasional college kid looking for heroin.

Rodney was about ten years older than me, came from somewhere in Arkansas, and had dreadlocks that went past his waist. He owned a purple macaw named Frederick Douglass that he claimed was a hundred years old. A Kung Fu Master who kept a Bible and a loaded .9 millimeter Beretta under his pillow, Rodney traced his roots back to Africa and said he came from a long line of chieftains and kings and warriors and medicine men. Slavery had changed the direction of the family ancestry, though, and now the family tree was littered with former slaves, alcoholics, convicts, whores, illiterates, broken down women, and hard-luck gamblers. Somehow Rodney had escaped that nightmare and gone to an elite private college in Claremont

and, as he'd put it, been expelled with a great sense of honor and dignity. I never knew what he'd been expelled for and never asked him because Rodney's handle on reality was rather loose, and he believed in covert conspiracies. Rodney claimed the FBI killed Jimi Hendrix because Hendrix knew too much.

One night, I went to Rodney's apartment in Chinatown. It was way past midnight when I showed up at the door. We sat in the kitchen smoking hashish and feeding the ancient macaw slices of mango. Rodney passed me the pipe and said, "You want to go on a rescue mission?"

"Maybe. What kind of rescue mission?"

"Steal a dog."

"That doesn't sound like a rescue mission, Rodney."

"But it is, my friend. This kid who lives around the corner, on Spring, has been fighting his dog behind his uncle's liquor store. His dog is chained to the dumpster behind the liquor store right now."

"This dog's a pit-bull?"

"No, it's not a full pit-bull. I think the dog is a Dogo."

"What's a Dogo?"

"They're a hunting dog from Argentina. This one's about one hundred and thirty pounds, and he's all white. Looks like two pit bulls glued together."

"How do you know this kid is fighting him?"

"I watched this dog fight a pit-bull about two weeks ago."

"You went to the dog fights?"

"No, I watched through the fence. These kids were holding dog fights behind the liquor store. They don't give a shit who watches."

“What happened?”

“This dog killed the pit-bull.”

“Jesus. And now you want to go steal him? Tonight?”

“Yes.”

“How do we pull this off?”

Rodney went into his bedroom and came back with a rifle and a pair of wire cutters.

“Why do we need a rifle?”

“It’s a tranquillizer gun.”

“What will happen to this dog if we leave things alone?”

“It will die. The kid will keep fighting it until another dog kills him. This is very simple, my friend. This is a rescue mission.”

I got up and walked over to the window. I took another hit off the pipe and looked down into the empty streets. “Let’s go steal a dog.”

Tyson and I walked down Imperial Highway until we got to Placentia Boulevard and headed up to where I worked. I had a job on a landscaping crew at an auto auction lot that sold cars to dealers on Tuesdays and Saturdays. I’d only been there two weeks, and the place wasn’t in my future. The death of the old BMW only confirmed it. I had other plans. I’d been in California for only about six weeks, staying at a Tyson-friendly motel at sixty bucks a day, searching for a decent job and looking for a permanent place to live. I was hemorrhaging money. If I hung around here much longer things would head past disintegration.

Coming back here wasn’t such a great idea: L.A. simply wasn’t working out. I didn’t really know anyone here. I had some Mormon relatives who lived a few blocks away from

where I worked, but I wasn't sure they counted as people I knew. I hadn't seen them in years. They kept a two-year food supply in the garage while they waited for the world to end. According to the Book of Mormon, the entire earth would be consumed by an out-of-control fire. Sometimes I thought I smelled the smoke of eucalyptus trees burning in the distance. I needed to buy another car to avoid the firestorm, get out of L.A., and head out to Colorado.

I went through the back entrance and looked through the window at Fat Tom sitting in his office. He was sitting in his swivel chair with a cigarette burning on the edge of his desk and eating a double cheeseburger he'd grabbed out of a fast food bag. Fat Tom bought cigarettes by the carton and smoked five packs a day. He weighed about three hundred and fifty pounds. I'd heard some things about him, that he was wanted in New York, played around with satanic religions, was covering up a crack problem and a sleazy past. It was probably just stories. He seemed too lazy to be involved with much. I thought Fat Tom was just a slow-walking heart attack.

I tied Tyson to the trunk of a tree before I went inside to talk to Tom. I pulled a wooden bowl out of my backpack and poured him some water. Tyson got a drink and curled up in the shade. He was used to being restrained.

A few days after Rodney and I stole the Dogo, the first person I called was Mike who was a big time dog trainer in West L.A. His specialty was Rottweilers. Mike sold two Rotts to a big movie star in Hollywood for fifteen grand. Mike knew what he was doing. He owed me some money and we worked a deal out. We started immediately. Mike came over to the house, and we put the Dogo on a program. For a couple of weeks, we went through basic training using hand signs, motion signs, and verbal commands to teach it how to sit, go down, get up, heel,

stay, come, and the okay command which meant he could do whatever he wanted to, within reason. The Dogo seemed to pick most of this stuff up all right, but he wasn't exactly ready for the Westminster dog show. The third week Mike went to his car and brought back a padded sleeve. His assistant put the sleeve on.

"Let's get to the fun stuff," he said.

"What do you mean?"

"Let's do some protection training."

"I don't know, Mike," I said. "Shouldn't we stick to the fundamentals—like he should come every time I call him before we teach him to attack?"

"He's right there, six feet away. He'll always be six feet away. Watch this," Mike tugged on the leash. "You have to understand this dog's not a pet. He'll be loyal and devoted, but he'll never be a pet. They put dogs like this down. He got lucky. What I'm trying to tell you is that he already knows this trick. We're just going to give it a word."

Mike was right. It took about fifteen minutes to teach Tyson to attack a man.

There was nothing upscale about Fat Tom's office, no oak desk or big area or anything, but it was always filled with members of his maintenance crew and a couple of people blocking the doorway, some people sitting in crummy chairs, some standing and others leaned up against the bare drywall with pipes exposed. There were always so many people smoking inside that it was hard to breathe. I didn't know how many people the office could hold, but it seemed like ten or maybe more constantly hung around there. They didn't work very much. Different half-stoned sloths came in and held up the wall. A crew of drug addicts punching a time clock. I got the feeling that someone would walk in there one day with a fire hose and wash away the failure.

I told Tom I was packing it in. I wanted to hang around long enough to buy another car then I was gone.

“Going back to Texas?”

“No, I’m heading for Colorado.”

Fat Tom took a bite out of his hamburger. He had mustard on his shirt. “How long will it take you to get another car?”

“I don’t know. I’m not worried about that right now. I need another place to stay.”

“You can stay for twenty bucks a night on the lot for a week or so. Then I’ve got an empty trailer in Baldwin Park. You can stay there for a few days for the same deal.”

“Where on the lot?”

“There’s a limousine in Lot D that you crash in.”

“I’ll take the limo.”

I went back to the tree and sat down next to Tyson to tell him about going back on the road to Colorado. We’d traveled quite a bit in the past seven or eight years, and he understood the word road. I scratched the scar that started from the top of his head. The scar ran down his face between his eyes and ended somewhere by his upper lip. He thumped his tail on the grass and stretched out all four legs in a lazy way. His muscles rippled because even though he was eleven and a half, maybe closer to twelve, I still ran him two or three miles a day.

It was probably about seventy degrees. I smoked a cigarette and stayed outside to work. I didn’t like spending too much time in the office because it was too crowded and depressing. I’d overheard somebody saying the employee of the month got busted for selling speed out of his tow truck. Besides, I wanted out on the grounds surrounding the lot, planting tuberous begonias or lavender or roses or sitting under a eucalyptus tree. It was a beautiful day. The landscaped

flower beds gave the place a look of deception. Beyond the greenery, there was a ten-foot chain link fence topped with razor wire that made the lot seem like a minimum security prison with even men on parole and guard shacks. I untied Tyson from the tree and figured if I drove fifteen hundred miles to get stuck down here with this crowd then I was probably washed up.

After dark, I walked over to Lot D, and we moved into a black limousine. I had a battery charger that was on wheels and about two-hundred feet of extension cords that I got out of the maintenance shed. I walked over with Tyson to the closest guard shack with the extension cord trailing behind us and gave the old man inside a pint of Jim Beam. He had a bright red nose with broken purple veins running through it. I knew he'd appreciate the pint. The old man plugged in the extension cord so I could keep the refrigerator cold in the limo. He was watching the news. The anchor was talking about how some lunatic in Scotland took over a school in Dublin and killed a roomful of children. Then he shot himself. The old man said the fucking world was coming apart at the seams. I found it hard to disagree with him.

I left the guard shack and looked out over unbroken asphalt at acres and acres of cars and trucks and SUV's. They arrived on flatbeds or tow trucks, or somebody just drove a car onto the lot and drove off in another one to drop off some place else. They arrived in different ways: broken leases, repossessions, fleet sales, or bulk buys. When the dealers showed up with briefcases filled with cash on Tuesdays, the auction house looked like the tote windows at a race track.

Around midnight, I was curled up on the velvet couch in the limo drinking beers and smoking cigarettes and reading *A Woman Named Solitude*. I put the book down, and I opened the sun roof. I stood on the couch and stared across the lots. The place had six or seven huge car lots, with all of the cars in each lot parked in a circular pattern. The asphalt descended toward

the middle where there was a giant grated drain. When somebody hosed down the pavement, dirt, oil, gas, anti-freeze, trash, insects, cigarette butts, and whatever kind of shit that was out there went down the slow drain.

I looked up in the sky and tried to find Venus and Mars. I thought I saw both of them, but I didn't know for sure. I'd read somewhere in a magazine that some scientist believed that Venus was made out of a giant diamond. I looked over the tops of the cars and watched a golf cart that was headed my way. The guards usually drove them around because the lots were so big, but it wasn't a guard. It was Fat Tom, and he probably wanted his twenty bucks.

Fat Tom sat on the couch in the limo. The dog was curled up between us and ignored Fat Tom. I didn't like Fat Tom very much, and I figured the dog had a sixth sense about it. I knew what he was doing out here—he was bored. Fat Tom lived with his wife and kid in a trailer around the side of the maintenance department.

“Did you get a car yet?”

“Yeah.” I'd actually looked at an inventory list during my lunch break for a used Subaru or BMW and found three or four that fit my budget. I walked out on the lot and looked at them. I was sure I could get one of them. They were a lot nicer than the car I'd been driving. I'd called a car dealer I knew and offered him a hundred bucks to bid on them. I'd have a car on Tuesday and figured I'd hit road by the weekend.

“Going back to Colorado, huh?”

“Yeah, I'll get the few things I have in storage and load up the car. I think L.A. got the best of me this time.”

“I wish I could get outta here myself.”

“Yeah, we all do sometimes.”

“Can I trust you?”

“I don’t know. Maybe you shouldn’t trust anybody these days.”

“Can you keep a secret?”

“Yeah,” and that was partially the truth. I just knew I wouldn’t bother keeping a secret for Fat Tom.

“I’m not Fat Tom.”

“Huh?”

“I’m not Fat Tom.”

“Who are you then?”

“I’m Fat Don.”

“Then who is Fat Tom.”

“Fat Tom is my brother.”

Fat Don was running from the law for reasons he never made clear. His brother, Fat Tom, lived with his wife and kid somewhere in upstate New York. His thing was Satanism, and he hung out with other Satanists he met around town. Fat Tom, or whoever he claimed he was said this without looking at me. He had an odd way of talking that made me feel like he’d strolled inside my head and wanted to keep something.

“You know, my brother convinced himself that he was possessed by demons. Maybe, he was—I didn’t know. Anyway, he decided to perform an exorcism on himself. My brother got some razor blades, sat down in the bathtub, and tried to bleed out the demons. My brother bled to death. I took over his identity. I moved in with his wife and kid. The kid was just a baby then, and he still doesn’t know.”

I didn't have to work it out with myself to know it was time to leave California. There was something disconcerting about listening to Fat Tom. He painted a dark world of paranoia, guilt, and instability. I tried to forget every mind-infecting word. Fat Tom was trying to send me a message up through the cesspool, and I didn't want to read it. I knew we'd never see each other again. He was the passenger who rode in coach, spilling his guts to the stranger next to him. Our trains ran on different tracks. I was getting off at the next stop. Every once in a while, someone on the lot would move a car around, and the headlights shot through the open windows like blinding diamonds from Venus blasting out of a dark sky.

It started to rain, and I closed the sunroof. Fat Tom and I sat on the velvet couch, not talking. I heard the light drizzle as it softly hit the metal roof. Colorado was beginning to pull on me, and I felt the weight of the chain. I looked through the window past the rows and rows of cars and trucks, tried to see beyond the lots as I stared out at the sky. Part of the sky was dark with invisible clouds, but the light of Mars still had a reddish glow at the edges.

“Want another beer?” Fat Tom asked.

I told Fat Tom I wasn't really in the mood for another beer. I was afraid he might tell me what the wife thought about this arrangement.

Fat Tom looked over at the dog. “Why don't you get rid of that dog? It'd make traveling a lot easier.”

“I don't think I can do that. He's way too old now to be worth any money.”

Over the years, I had a few chances to get rid of Tyson. One time, we were at a laundromat in Las Vegas, New Mexico. This guy pulled in the parking lot where I was putting clothes in the trunk. He looked at Tyson while sitting in his car. We talked for a minute or two about dogs.

“I know you probably wouldn’t want to sell your dog,” he said. “But if you did, how much would you want?”

“I got about three grand wrapped up in him, but he’s not for sale.”

The guy left in his black Thunderbird and came back a few minutes later while I was sitting on the trunk reading the newspaper. He pulled out three thousand dollars. I had about two hundred bucks to my name.

“That dog is my friend. I can’t sell him. Besides, he’s about the only thing I’ve got left.” I lied to the man. I still had some clothes in the dryer.

The next day, I climbed out of the limousine and bought an old BMW for fifteen hundred dollars at the auction. I didn’t tell anyone goodbye, and I never went back. Instead, I got a different place in Anaheim and spent the next few days pulling it together. I got my things out of storage and loaded up the car. I took Tyson on some long walks, and one of them went bad.

The day I planned to leave, a pit-bull weighing between eighty and ninety pounds came running up the street and attacked Tyson from behind. I dropped the leash to let Tyson defend himself. Traffic stopped. People got out of their cars to stand on the sidewalk and watch a dog fight. I looked around for the owner, and there was a kid, about twenty years old, standing in front of an open gate. I motioned for him to come over and help me break this up, but he never made a move.

The pit-bull latched onto the back of Tyson’s neck, reared back on two legs, lifted Tyson off the ground, and shook him like he was a cat. The pit-bull lost his grip. It was horrible to watch. I grabbed the back of the pit-bull’s neck to help Tyson. The dog turned his head, bit my arm, and put me on my knees in the street.

The pit-bull went back to killing Tyson. Everything happened so fast with teeth slashing, blood flying, and the sounds of dogs trying to kill each other. I watched the other dog bite off half of Tyson's right ear, and blood seemed to be running everywhere. People on the sidewalk stared. Nobody offered to help. I wanted a gun. I wanted to blow the other dog's brains out and save my friend.

Then things changed. Tyson got a hold on the back of the pit-bull's neck and paralyzed it for a second or two, and this gave Tyson time to slip underneath the dog and lock onto his stomach. Suddenly the dog fight was over. The pit-bull was suddenly on its back and Tyson was killing him. I looked over at the crowd of people on the sidewalk, and I thought there were about twenty people milling about. They started to wander back to cars to go wherever they were going. I saw a man with a video camera. He was filming everything.

I ordered Tyson to release the other dog, and he stepped back. Tyson was covered in blood, mostly his own blood. I walked over and stared at the dead pit. The dog didn't have much blood on him. I saw the kid down the street go back in his yard. The kid in the yard looked shocked.

Blood rolled down my arm and started dripping from my elbow onto the sidewalk. I took off my shirt and tried to soak up the blood on Tyson. He wasn't bleeding to death, but he was ripped and mangled to the bone, and blood was turning black on the asphalt. I needed to find a vet. We walked around the corner to the room where I was staying, and I found a vet in the yellow pages. Tyson got fifty stitches, and I got ten, and we got out of L.A.

I figured Big Sur would be clean and healing. I knew some people up there and tried to pass through Big Sur whenever I could. Bobby's place was on the west slope of the Santa Lucia Mountains facing the Pacific Ocean. I drove up a quiet mountain road through a hardwood

forest of redwoods and firs. I parked the car in maple leaves piled in the driveway. The air was damp and intoxicating. I walked across a small footbridge leading to a wood-shaded cabin where Bobby lived. He opened the door before I reached the porch.

Bobby had lived in Big Sur most of his life, and it turned him into some kind of a hermit. I'd never been inside of his house. He was about eighty-years-old and told me once that he hung around Jack Kerouac when he lived around there and wrote *Big Sur*. He said Kerouac was scared to death of the waves and never went outside. That was a long time ago though, and Bobby didn't get out anymore either.

"I thought you went back to L.A." he said.

"I did, but L.A. got the best of me." I told him what happened. We walked over to the car, and Bobby looked at Tyson, reached his hand in the window to pet him, and shook his head.

"What's going on down there?"

"I don't know, Bobby."

"Gonna camp?"

"Yeah, I figure we'll stay or month or so and head back to Colorado."

"Well, go ahead and come on up to the house and get some breakfast," he said. We both knew I never would. Some people don't like to feel crowded, and Bobby was one of those people.

I drove the car up a dirt road about a mile into the woods, and I set up camp in the forest, pitching a big military tent I bought at a surplus store outside of Taos. I took Tyson's leash off and put it in the car. There was nobody out here except Bobby, and Tyson liked Bobby.

We did the same thing every day. At about ten in the morning, I woke up, and one side of the earth was red with the sun rolling over us to burn off a layer of fog that hid a vista of hills

with a thousand shades of green and brown and purple. I thought Big Sur was the most beautiful place on the planet. It was holy land to me. I made coffee over the fire, and then we walked a mile or so down the winding trail through the redwoods and ferns. Tyson limped, and strangled cries of gulls whipped through the wind. I caught a glimpse of the ocean through a field of milkweed and poppies and even though the ocean wasn't that close, I felt the power beneath its colors. Seemed like a spider web had fallen over me in L.A., and I'd broken free. My arm had been bitten by a beast. Tyson had been torn up by violence and sewn back together again. We were healing though. He'd be the same again and the sooner I believed it—the better. Tyson was pretty indestructible anyway. I watched him recovering day by day and decided I didn't have to worry about it.

When we got to the bluff, I would spread out his Indian blanket that I picked up in the Four Corners. I used a pair of binoculars to scan the water for gray whales. They were migrating up the coast to feed in Alaskan waters. Mothers swam close to the shore with their babies to protect them from sharks. The whales breached and broke thorough the surface covered in barnacles and sea lice. One time, I sat on the blanket with him and used a pair of hemostats to pull his stitches. I cleaned his wounds with some anti-biotic salve the vet gave me and picked off the last of the stitching with my fingers. I took off my sunglasses and wiped them with the end of my shirt. I looked at the lens and saw a miniature version of my face. I moved the lens around and saw a miniature version of Tyson's face. I couldn't help thinking how small we'd become.

The Grower

When the fish started dying in the Klamath River, I was passed out on pills and never noticed anything until about twenty thousand salmon rotted on the rocks. I woke up to the sound of the dog barking next door and stared at water-stained walls. It was Saturday, but it seemed like Sunday because I had that burned-out feeling again, and sometimes Sunday did that to me. I lit a cigarette and got some change off the nightstand so I could get some coffee across the street.

I stared out the window into the fog and tried to shake off this weird dream I'd had about collecting sand dollars on the strand. I'd saved a giant pile of them so I could buy a train ticket and get off the beach. But I'd kept spending them on black tar heroin and smoking the black tar out of a purple sea shell. Cinda walked up, took the sand dollars, put them in her purse, and disappeared down along the cove. She came back with two train tickets, and we got out of there.

I went outside where the fog wouldn't let me breathe in the drizzling rain. The fog was like wet pieces of a moving sponge, and I got the feeling it might smother me right there on the asphalt covered with sea gull shit and thousand dollar cars. I looked across the valley at the redwoods coming up through the fog. I'd been staying at a place in Orick called The Redwood Valley. Once in a while, tourists found the motel and spent the night before they toured Redwood National Park or headed out for places like San Francisco or Napa Valley. The place was mostly overrun with hard-core travelers, Deadheads, Phish-heads, junkies, speed freaks, and the occasional trust fund kid who went off the meds in Santa Cruz and wound up here. I'd holed up at the place after Cinda threw me out for my oxycontin problem. I didn't even go back for my things and was going to take off for Seattle or maybe Eugene. Instead, I wound up scoring more oxycontin and ended up about forty miles from home.

I'd been living with Cinda on the outskirts of a little town called Blue Lake. We'd moved up there after her brother offered me a job growing herb in one of his houses in Humboldt County. We took over the place, and it was the most money I'd ever made doing anything. The brother took off with his girlfriend and built some sort of a custom-made tree house in Belize. At one point, we were going to visit them. Cinda backed out, though, because the brother told her they had poisonous tree frogs the size of chairs down there.

The whole thing with Cinda got pretty bitter. She'd driven up here the week before because she said she wanted to talk it over and maybe finish it. She'd sipped the hot chocolate she made in the microwave and said, "It doesn't look like this is going to change. Unless it does, I think I'm going to have to get out. You can come back and dry out for a couple of weeks, but you need to make some plans and figure this thing out because I can't keep living like this. I won't live like this." She put her cup of hot chocolate down and lit one of those long skinny menthol cigarettes as she stared out the window into the fog and mentioned something about getting home.

"Be careful driving back," I told her. "It's a real fucking mess out there."

Cinda picked up her purse and opened the door and stood in the doorway. "Jesus, it's a real fucking mess in here, too."

I listened to her start her car and waited until I couldn't hear the engine anymore. Then I got two forty-milligram pills out of a shoe in the closet and crushed them on the table with a quarter to get rid of the timed-release coating. I tore apart a pen and snorted a couple of lines. The dope sent waves of pain-killing agents rolling down my spine. I felt paralyzed and forgot where I was. Then I guess I must have passed out.

I walked around to the side of the motel and saw Tina, the motel manager, putting boxes in the back of her worn-out pickup truck. Tina had black hair, dark eyes, nails painted black, and a crooked smile because she'd lost most of her front teeth from probably doing too many drugs. She had her own Indian way of looking at things, always said stuff that sounded kind of mystical. Tina had told me that I should go see Leonard Crow Dog for a healing because he could do that. She claimed that Leonard Crow Dog even made it rain in Minnesota. I'd started to ask Tina what kind of healing, but I guess I already knew the answer.

"Where you going, Tina?" I asked her.

"I quit last night. I'm moving back to the reservation."

I lit another cigarette. "Hoopa?"

"Yeah."

"Why?" I asked her.

Tina ran her black fingernails through her hair. "The salmon are dying."

"Don't the salmon die every year when they spawn?"

"Not like this."

I threw my cigarette down and stepped on it. "Why are they dying?"

"Fucking government lowered the river, and it's killing the fish."

"That's why you're leaving?"

"That's not the only reason."

Tina claimed she'd taken the old lady who lived in 109 to the river. I'd never laid eyes on her. I'd only heard stories. The old lady was some sort of recluse, and I wondered sometimes if she even existed. They'd walked down to the river's edge and stared at thousands of dying and dead fish that had washed ashore. The old lady had dropped a tape recorder in the water,

and they left the recorder in the river overnight. The next morning, Tina and the old lady drove back to the river and got the recorder out of the water.

Tina lit a cigarette. Her hands were shaking. “We played the tape,” she said.

“What did it sound like?”

“Thousands of suffering souls.”

“I need to get a cup of coffee,” I told her.

I walked across the highway and got a cup of coffee at the diner. I wanted to tell Tina she’d been smoking too much speed, and she needed to lay off that shit. The meth was getting to her head. Besides, I already knew what suffering souls sounded like, some of them anyway.

I got back with the coffee and saw Sage changing one of the tires on his Subaru. I walked over to where he was working and set the coffee on the hood of his car so I could light another cigarette. I heard sea lions barking on the shoreline and watched crows take off from the telephone wires. They disappeared into a bleached sky. Jasmine came out with two cups of herbal tea and said hello. She wore a dress made out of hemp and smoked American Spirits because they’re organic. She was seven months pregnant. She’d told me she was due in a couple of months when I traded her eight .40 milligram oxycontin for an ounce of Train Wreck.

This pregnancy was changing their lives. Sage was thinking about cutting off his dreads and getting a straight job with a paycheck, but he said all he was qualified to do was dig holes. They lived in the next room, where the two of them stayed up all night fighting and dealing cocaine and hashish. The dog they called Marley barked all night as cars rolled in after dark with headlights coming through the beat-up shades, casting bizarre shadows on the ceiling in patterns of darkness that scared me.

Sage got up, and Jasmine handed him a cup of tea. He wrapped one of his dreads around his little finger. "Hear about the fish?"

I took a packet of sugar out of my top pocket and mixed it in the coffee. "Yeah, I heard about the fish."

Sage accidentally kicked a lug nut, and it disappeared under the car. "Do you still want to do that tonight?"

"I don't know," I told him.

"Why not?"

"I've never robbed anybody before."

"It's pretty easy. We'll just go in there and take his shit."

"I don't know about that."

Sage nodded and got down on his knees. He reached under the car for the lug nut and got up and put it on the hood of the car. "Did you see his new wheelchair?"

"I hadn't noticed." I looked at the worn out spare tire. "What's wrong with him anyway?"

"Nothing."

"There must be something wrong. He's riding around in a wheelchair."

"No," Sage told me, "he just don't like to walk. He goes down to the flea market and buys one like it's a new car or something. The last one he bought was defective and he had to take it back." Sage paused for a few seconds. "You know, even the flea markets around here are getting kinda sleazy."

"I guess they are."

Sage looked over at Jasmine and told her, “You shouldn’t be smoking cigarettes. It ain’t good for the baby.”

“They’re fucking organic, you idiot,” Jasmine said.

Sage walked over to the wooden sidewalk surrounding the motel, and they told each other to fuck off. They liked to straighten out their private matters in public. I started walking back to my room because I’d watched them fight before, and this time it was hitting close to home. I turned around when I heard Jasmine say, “Watch the door Sage, Marley’s gonna get out.”

But it was too late, and the dog got out the door. They tried to call him, but Marley ran around the parking lot pissing on car tires. Sage chased him and the dog stayed out of range. Then Marley disappeared behind the motel, and they called him again. The dog came back around the side of the motel and for about a minute, it hung out near the Subaru. Sage called him again, but Marley didn’t listen. The dog took off for the highway, ran into the fog, and a car killed him.

They ran out to the highway, and I went back inside the room. I got another pill out of the shoe in the closet and crushed it on the table with the same quarter. I snorted a line as I heard Jasmine screaming in the fog, “You’ve killed Marley, you son of a bitch! You’ve killed Marley.”

I heard someone pounding on the door, and I woke up in the chair by the window. I’d had bizarre dream that I was on fire. I looked down and saw another burned hole in the carpet. There were cigarette butts on the floor. I had trouble counting them. I kept dropping cigarettes and burning holes in things. Once, I even burned a hole in the mattress. I had to pour water down a smoldering depression the size of a grapefruit. I finally answered the door to let Sage in.

He looked sad. I told him how sorry I was about Marley. He talked for a minute about what a great dog Marley was, and how they'd had him for so long that they couldn't remember where they got him. Sage thought they got the dog at the last Dead show in Chicago, but Jasmine was sure they found him in a parking lot in West Memphis. That didn't matter anymore because they needed to bury him. I pulled out a few lines of oxycontin to make Sage feel better. I felt better too.

"You want to go set this up now?" he asked.

"Yeah."

We left the room and walked across the parking lot. I didn't really know the man. We went inside a room that smelled of decay and burned heroin. Snake was a shriveled-up junkie with a tattoo of a hanged man on his left forearm. He was sitting in the wheelchair he bought at the flea market. Sage told me that Snake did so much coke he had burned a hole in his nose. This forced him to do coke directly into his mouth. That move bought him a hole in his tongue. Sage claimed the guy went to heroin because he said he thought it was safer. Jasmine and Sage called him Snake behind his back because of the way he talked. Snake told us to "sssit down."

I pulled out some oxycontin and told him I had one hundred one-sixties.

"One-sssixtiesss?" he asked.

"Yeah, one-sixties."

"Where do you find one-sssixtiesss?"

"Doesn't matter."

"You got canssers?"

Sage lit a cigarette. "Everybody's got cancer," he said. "I saw this documentary on PBS, and this dude said everybody's got cancer inside them from the cradle to the grave. Some people

fight it off, and some people let it invade their lives. But no matter what, there's cancer everywhere. You can't escape it."

"Yeah," I shrugged. Then I lit a cigarette and told Snake I wanted forty bucks apiece for the Oxycontin.

"Ssseemsss high. Fortiesss are only fifteen a piece."

I looked around the room and told him. "The forties are for fucking kids. Look. I want four grand for them. If you don't want to pay the money, I'll take them myself."

"Come back tonight and we'll do it."

We got outside in the fog. "I'm fucked up," Sage said.

"I am too."

We walked over to the Subaru and Sage asked me, "Where do you think he keeps his stash?"

"I don't know." Then I said to him, "Where do you meet these fucking people?"

Sage looked around like he was gauging the distance between the rooms. "I'm surprised you've never met him. He lives closer to you than he does to me."

I walked around the car and started to go back to my room. Marley was in the back of the Subaru with his intestines and his tongue hanging out.

Sage brought a gun when we went back later that night. The gun made me nervous. Snake answered the door and had to back up his wheelchair, so we could get in the room. I pulled out the stash of oxycontin and Snake got out this redwood box he kept on the side of his wheelchair. He opened the box to pull out some money. After he counted the cash, he handed it to me, and I counted the money twice. I gave him the oxycontin, and Snake put the oxy into the

redwood box. He loaded the pipe. Sage wanted to know if this was the “Vietnam shit,” and Snake nodded his head.

We passed the pipe around a couple of times, and I wanted to get out of the room. The whole scene was starting to bother me as I watched Snake roll his wheel chair over to a trashed loveseat he kept in the corner. He asked Sage to help him get out of the wheelchair and onto the loveseat. Sage went over and put his hands under Snake’s armpits, and it looked like he was moving a bag of human sand. Snake sort of collapsed onto the torn cushions and asked Sage to reload the pipe. Sage did what he was told, and he passed it over to Snake. We never touched the pipe again. Snake took four or five hits and set the pipe on the floor. There were holes burned in the carpet. I watched Snake go on the nod. He came out of it once to say, “If Jesus saves, then he better save himself.”

I knew what Sage was thinking, but I looked over at him just to be sure. He nodded. I got the redwood box and opened it up. There was probably a quarter pound of heroin in there and four or five thousand dollars in cash. I thought about taking it, I really did, but I closed the lid on the box. It would have been the end of my already damaged life. I didn’t know what I wanted, but I didn’t want that. I could have taken the box and headed out for some place like Seattle or Portland, but I knew I would be leaving nowhere to end up in another nowhere. Those places were easy to find, and I already knew how to get to one. I put the redwood box back on the table, turned to Sage, and said, “I can’t do this. Let’s get out of here before things get more out of control than they already are.”

The next morning Cinda showed up with her brother. He was back from Belize to oversee the grow operation that I’d abandoned in Blue Lake. Her brother was nervous. He didn’t like to get in the middle of our problems and always wanted to stay on the outside of

whatever side there was. Cinda took my car keys, gave them to him, and her brother said something about meeting us back at the house. Then he got in the car and drove away.

“I thought maybe my brother should drive your car, and we could ride back home together.”

“That sounds all right.” I said.

“Do you need to pack anything?”

“No.”

“Did you get rid of your stash?”

“Most of it.”

“Do you want me to hold your money?”

“You probably should.” I pulled out the money I had on me and gave it to her.

“How many pills do you have left?”

“I’ve got twenty-five for the come down.”

“Do you want me to hold those too?”

“You probably should.”

Cinda put the pills and the money in her purse. “How bad is this?”

“It’s pretty bad.”

“My sister is staying at the house,” she said. “She can stay in the room with me and you can have the guest room for a while and maybe we can work this out. Do you know how long it’s going to take?”

“I’ll probably be sick for a couple of weeks.”

“Let’s go home,” she said.

We went outside and got in the car. Cinda drove across the Redwood Highway and parked next to a pickup truck. She went inside the diner and bought some coffee. I was real quiet as she pulled out on the road and put some sugar in the coffee. The car made the curve and headed for Big Lagoon, and I stared out the window. I saw another dog waiting in the fog for a car to kill him. I looked over at Cinda, and she saw the dog too. It was Cinda's eyes that got me. I turned off the radio, and I told her what my life was like.

Harbor Boulevard

The three of us split a room on Harbor Boulevard for a hundred and fifty bucks a week. We stayed at a dive in Anaheim called the Covered Wagon Motel. The hundred and fifty bucks bought us a couple of beds and barely enough room to stack some cardboard boxes filled with junk Debbie couldn't pawn. She used to keep a cat around until the cat got tired of eating Spam and ran away. I was supposed to be out of the room by Friday, and I guess that meant Debbie wanted me to run away too.

I'd been going halves on the rent with John for the last few weeks. Debbie didn't work or really do much of anything, except drugs. Sometimes Debbie would wash the dishes in the bathtub. She scraped left-over food off thrift store plates into the toilet and flushed the toilet like she was turning on some sort of a white trash garbage disposal. The bathroom smelled like shit, piss, and Spaghettio's.

I rolled over and saw that both of them were wide awake. Nobody said a word. I knew they wanted me to get out. Debbie had that stupid expression on her face like she did when she killed cockroaches with one of her flip-flops. John wiped his nicotine-stained hands on the bedspread and looked like he'd already gotten over my eviction. I figured I'd probably get over it too. I still had a '91 Taurus that ran most of the time, even though it needed some decent brakes. I got another beer and decided to load up the Taurus and get out of there, although this time I began to wonder if even decent brakes would keep me from hitting the skids.

I went outside to the parking lot and put the beer on the hood of the car. Trash littered the asphalt. John followed me out the door. I finished the rest of the beer and stared at the sky. The moon looked like a rotten banana.

“You know Pike, you still owe me fifty bucks.”

I threw a cigarette butt on the asphalt and stepped on it. “I don’t owe you fifty fucking bucks.”

“Well, Debbie says you do.”

“I’ve got to get to work, man.”

“You’re going to Labor Ready?”

“Yeah, I’ll just sign in early.”

“Mind if I go with you?”

“Yeah, I do mind.”

I started the car and pulled out of the parking lot. I drove down Harbor Boulevard with only one working headlight. The dead headlight bothered me. The car was already a rolling bust: a suspended license, traffic tickets gone to warrant, stolen tags, leaky exhaust, bald tires, and those shitty brakes. I knew it wasn’t luck that kept me in the car and out of the Orange County Jail. It was simply circumstances.

I stopped at the red light at Harbor and Lincoln Avenue and saw two urban skeletons at the bus stop smoking cigarettes while they stood around where the Fifty-nine stopped. I didn’t know where the Fifty-nine went, and those urban skeletons probably didn’t either. Their pale faces argued about something. The skeleton man drank out of a brown paper bag. The woman skeleton was bleeding, holding a bloody towel over her left eye with one hand and smoking a cigarette with the other. I stared at them and hoped the light would hurry up and change. Then I looked away because I didn’t want to see them anymore. Besides, there were other things to stare at on Harbor Boulevard at four-thirty in the morning: dirty neon, cops, whores, junkies, drunks, transients and runaway Goths wearing makeup who were still making a choice about being any of those things, besides a cop. The woman skeleton had seen me staring at them,

though, and yelled, “What the fuck are you looking at?” I didn’t say anything because I didn’t really know and drove on through when the traffic light turned green.

I drove a couple of blocks and parked outside the Tiki Room. I slept in the car for about an hour until the place opened, and then went inside and sat at the end of the bar. I got a bowl of bad clam chowder that I knew they poured out of a can, but I ordered it anyway. The guy sitting on my left was in a wheelchair that had some spokes missing. Otherwise, the chair was in pretty good shape. He reached up between the barstools and grabbed his beer off the bar. I knew he’d been homeless for about twenty years, and he lived wherever he could park his chair.

“Morning, Pike,” he said.

“Morning.”

He stared at his beer mug. “Still down the street at the Covered Wagon?”

“No. Debbie and John threw me out.”

“Too bad. Those lovebirds can be rough.”

I put the spoon down. “Yeah.”

“Still got the car though?”

“Barely.”

“Well, barely is how it goes, and then barely breaks down. You’re probably just a dental crisis away from winding up like me anyway.”

“What did you say?”

Before he could answer me, he started to laugh real hard. I glanced over at the man and remembered that he didn’t have any teeth. There was just a hole in his face that he poured alcohol down. I looked way down in the hole and thought I saw all the way to the bad parts of

infinity. I watched the man in the wheelchair laugh until his face turned purple. I decided to leave the rest of the soup and got out of the bar.

It took me about five minutes to find the little neighborhood park that was just off of Harbor Boulevard. Dawn broke with the sun invading a smog-filled sky. I pulled into the parking lot near the bathrooms, and flashed the lone headlight a couple of times to signal Greg, who slept in the park. Sometimes he crashed on somebody's couch when he knew somebody who had a couch. Usually, though, Greg fell asleep on the grass near the kiddie pond. I finally saw him come out from behind the building, zipping up his fly. For a minute, he stood in front of the swings to get his bearings. Greg used to work the graveyard shift on the maintenance crew at Disneyland. They fired him for drinking on the job, but Greg didn't care. He claimed the Magic Kingdom had rats the size of raccoons living inside of the fake treasure chests on The Pirates of the Caribbean ride. "I'm afraid of rats," he confided, "and those goddamn things eat the eyes right out of the pirates. The eyes are made of silicone, you know, and rats like that shit. You know a fucking rat will eat anything."

Greg walked over and climbed in the car wearing wet clothes. Greg got wet every morning. Automatic sprinklers went on at about five and woke him up. Once I wanted to know why he didn't move to another part of the park where the sprinklers went on later. Greg told me he used the sprinklers for his alarm clock. He leaned back in the seat and said, "I don't know if I can deal with Labor Ready today."

"Why not?"

He lit a cigarette. "I'm still fucked up."

"All you have to do is sweep. You can handle pushing a fucking broom, can't you?"

"I suppose."

I drove back to Harbor Boulevard, and we pulled into a Dunkin' Donuts to get a cup of coffee. A cop sat in the parking lot writing a report. He gave us a funny look and went back to whatever he was doing. I knew that look meant trouble and didn't want the coffee anymore. I wanted out of there but went inside the donut shop anyway. When we got in the car and pulled out, we noticed the cop pulled out too and got right behind me. The cop waited about a block before he turned on his cruiser lights. I pulled over to the side of the road and figured I was going to jail.

"This is it. He's going to hook me up." I slapped the steering wheel. "God damn it, I'm going to lose my fucking car and all my stuff's in the trunk."

"I'm going, too," Greg said. "I've got warrants."

"For what?"

"I pissed in a parking lot and got busted for indecent exposure. I never showed up to court, though."

For a couple of minutes, the cop stayed in his car, and it made both of us pretty nervous. When he finally got out of the squad car, I looked up in the rearview mirror and noticed the cop didn't even bother to bring his ticket book. The cop probably figured he'd just write the arrest report later. Then he heard something on his radio and got back in the squad car. The cop hit his siren and took off. He gave us a dirty look when he drove by, and we watched his taillights disappear.

"Jesus, that was close." I lit a cigarette and passed one to Greg.

Greg lit his cigarette. "Sure was," he said.

"Dodged a real fucking bullet there."

"A big fucking bullet."

About ten minutes later, we made it to Labor Ready, and I parked next to Carl's old Lincoln Continental. He was sleeping behind the wheel again. I always liked Carl. We had some things in common. Carl used to be a family man in the suburbs with a wife, a couple of kids, and a regular job as a school teacher in Orange County. His wife divorced him because of his drinking. The kids went to UCLA. They'd cut off contact with him when he started sleeping in a Wal-Mart parking lot with a fifth of Wild Turkey riding shotgun in an ice chest.

We got out of the Taurus and went inside the building. Probably around forty defective men sat in cheap plastic chairs in a room that Greg claimed would make a great holding cell. It was kinda like a holding cell or at least filled with people who felt comfortable in one: alcoholics, parolees, junkies, speed freaks, crazies, transients, and even a couple of professional hobos who just wanted to stay out of the cold. A hard- looking fifty-something woman named Lydia sat behind a big counter chain smoking, handling the phone, and giving out day jobs. Her sidekick was a guy named Steve who passed out gloves and hardhats. That was the entire organization. We put our names down on the list, and if we were still around when Lydia called them, Labor Ready would send a couple of malfunctioning men out to dig a hole somewhere in Orange County for eight bucks an hour.

Greg and I sat there for a few minutes drinking bad coffee and watched a couple of parole agents walk through the door. They knew who they were looking for and went straight to him. The two agents identified themselves as they drew their guns and said, "Charlie Stubbs, get on the fuckin' floor."

Charlie got on the floor, and one of the parole agents handcuffed him. I heard Charlie say, "I can't do three fucking years, man," as they were taking him out the door.

Lydia went over to the clipboard with a pen in her hand and a cigarette hanging from her mouth. She looked at the list and crossed Charlie's name out. This sort of thing happened fairly often, and when cops, parole agents, U.S. Marshals or even bounty hunters removed a man hiding out in this lost crowd, everybody moved up in line a notch and got that much closer to a shovel.

Apparently, Charlie was serious about not being able to do the time. I heard that Charlie made trustee and picked up trash on an inmate work crew near Lake Irvine. One day, Charlie slipped away and nobody ever saw him again.

Lydia called our names. Steve gave us each a pair of gloves and a hard hat. I got directions to a construction site in Costa Mesa. It probably cost five bucks in gas to get there. We worked on a crew that was building a skate board park in a high-end mall near the beach. They'd dug out giant holes and poured concrete, so rich kids with five-hundred dollar skate boards and knee pads and crash helmets could skate around having a good time. A guy named Rick was the boss, and Rick looked kinda disgusted that they'd sent us out there for the second day in a row. Greg's shirt was still wet, and I was pretty sure Rick knew we were drunk. He gave us a couple of brooms anyway, sorta pointed to the pools made out of concrete and the giant wooden ramps, and said, "Start sweeping shit up."

There were three skate pools in the building with different shapes and sizes. They looked like giant empty swimming pools that were built on a slant. We swept around the construction crew and stayed away from them. I walked over to one side of the skate park and swept the dust off a wooden ramp some rich kid would be using in about a month. The ramp curved up about twenty feet on both sides, until it was almost a vertical climb. I fell twice trying to negotiate those sides.

I finally finished and saw Greg standing in a giant empty pool that would never be filled with water. I walked over there and started sweeping at one end. Greg was sweating pretty hard because he hadn't had a drink since dawn. I saw him bend over and throw up on the concrete. He looked around to see if anybody saw him and then he poured some dust out of the trash can on his puke pile before he swept that up, too.

I didn't feel real well, either. The lower right side of my face ached. I kept rolling my tongue between my cheek and gums. This low throbbing pain kept shooting up from the bottom of my jaw, and I thought I was going to throw up a couple of times, but I fought it off and counted the minutes until lunch. I counted about a million minutes.

When we broke for lunch, I'd worked up a sweat, too, so I bought a pint of Ten High at a liquor store, and we drank our lunch in the Taurus.

"I don't feel so good," I told Greg.

"I don't either," he said.

"I think I feel worse than you do."

"I don't know about that," Greg said.

He gave me a piece of gum as we walked back to the skate park. The gum was stale because he'd probably been carrying it around in his pocket for a long time. I swept for another four hours, and they were four long ones. I counted another million minutes and felt kinda glad that I had paid a couple of bucks to wear a hard hat. I knew if I ever fell and split my head open, the things that would spill out on that smooth concrete would make a rich white kid sick to his stomach.

We got off at five and walked over to Rick so he could sign our work tickets. Rick had the same disgusted look on his face that he had earlier that morning. He pulled out a pen and signed the work tickets.

“Do you need us tomorrow?” Greg asked.

“Unfortunately, I do,” Rick said.

We split a half-pint in heavy traffic, and my headache went away. It took us an hour to get back to Labor Ready to pick up our paychecks. They printed up our checks behind the counter and said if we showed up early, we could go back tomorrow. I drove to a liquor store where I knew we could cash our checks. I still had some money left over from the day before, so I had about seventy-five bucks on me. We got back in the car, and Greg asked me if I was still staying at the Covered Wagon.

“No,” I answered.

“Why not?”

“Debbie and John threw me out.”

“Tough break,” he told me. “You can always move into the park. I’ve got plenty of room.”

“No thanks. I’ll get a room tonight.”

“Change your mind, you know where to find me.” When we got to the park, Greg got out of the car and walked away. I never saw him again. Some teenagers found him passed out by the barbeque pits. The animals poured lighter fluid on Greg and set him on fire. Greg dived into the kiddie’s pool, but it was empty. He staggered around trying to put the flames out. A guy walking his dog found Greg unconscious and called an ambulance. Paramedics took him to the hospital. About a week later, Greg died in the St. Jude burn ward. Every time I drove by that

park and saw those sprinklers running I couldn't help thinking about poor Greg. And I couldn't help thinking about myself either—it could have been me burning in that barbeque pit.

After I dropped off Greg for the last time, I bought a pint and checked into a room at The Oasis that set me back about fifty-three dollars. I didn't want to spend the money, but I didn't want to sleep in the car either. The close call with the cop shook me up. The room was upstairs. I opened the blinds and stared out at Harbor Boulevard. Traffic was heavy, and I watched some people waiting for the light to change so they could walk across the street.

I couldn't sleep. A door slammed, and some guy in the next room started bouncing his old lady around. I heard the sounds of a dull thump every time she hit the wall. I listened to them fight until the sirens came and took the guy away. Then I went back to watching the news: Marines held guns on Arabs who had their heads in a sack, the Angels lost for the sixth straight time, somebody got murdered in Santa Ana, and it was going to be hot again.

I poured a drink around midnight because my mouth and even the side of my face hurt. My head started throbbing, and I swished whisky around between my gums and teeth. I decided to get dressed and walk over to an all-night market to get some aspirin. I went down the stairs and crossed Harbor Boulevard. I paid for the aspirin and realized I was down to twenty three dollars and some change.

I went back to the room and into the bathroom. I stood over the sink and turned on the faucet. I washed down five or six aspirin and looked at myself in the mirror. The entire right side of my face was swollen. I listened to the sound of the water hitting the porcelain. Red streaks started from the bottom of my jaw line and ran up like a glove across my face. It looked like a red hand was trying to tear my face off. The pain seemed to run in throbbing streaks that even made my eyes hurt. The aspirin didn't do anything so I took another shot of whiskey. I

knew what was wrong. I'd known all day what was wrong. I had a toothache, and I was probably septic. I turned the water off and went back into the room. I started to pull the blinds down, but I saw a man who was standing on the corner. He was holding a bottle and staring at the traffic light. I stared at the traffic light too. I figured we were both waiting for the same thing. At least, I knew what I was waiting for. I wanted the light to change.

Breakaway Diver

I got out of the pool at about five in the morning and looked around for a towel. I was covered in a thin film of wet, gray ash from the fires that had gone out of control in San Diego County. The air burned. I found a beach towel and wiped off the gray ash with it. I looked around for the trowel I'd been using to mix an epoxy paste in a blue bucket. The trowel was on the diving board, and I went over and grabbed it.

I got the blue bucket and went back down into the water. I'd been working underwater since June, trying to repair the endless structural damage in the pool's plaster foundation. I watched the epoxy in the bucket turn gray, and I swam around the things decaying on the bottom and started fixing a crack near the drain.

I'd been marking the months by the big-ticket items Pam threw in the pool. In July, the TV hit the water. In the middle of August, she threw the speakers in. I watched the books drown toward the end of September. Last week, she threw a used two-hundred buck tower computer in the pool. I swam around the shit lying on the bottom like I was exploring a white trash ship wreck. I looked at CD's and magazines and pieces of broken glass underwater. I salvaged a few pairs of jeans and brought them to the surface to dry. I didn't do anything about the rest of my material world though. I told Pam I'd just as soon leave the things there because I spent so much time in the water anyway. I had my valuables close by in case I ever needed them.

When I finished putting plaster on the crack, I got out to dry off and went in the house to get another beer. I saw Pam lifting the couch cushions in a search for signs of smoke, running her fingers down into the upholstery, pulling out broken cigarettes and some old coins.

“Jack, do you smell smoke?”

“Been down to Orange County again?”

“Yeah, want a line?”

“No, I’ll stick to alcoholism.”

“Suit yourself, Jack.” She walked over to the counter and bent over to do a line on a mirror. Pam ran her finger across the mirror and then across her gums like she was brushing them. “I’m running out, so I’m probably going back there later to get some more.”

“Sounds like that’s what you need to do. Did Bobby replace his caiman yet?”

“No. I don’t think he will either. Doesn’t want to wind up like that freak next door.”

“Terry’s not a freak. He just doesn’t have any hands.”

“Whatever. He’s like a goddamn robot.”

“Terry’s not like a robot, and I don’t want to hear you talk about him like that.”

A few years ago, Terry was involved in an accident. Something went terribly wrong with a machine Terry was operating. He lost both hands. Gears chewed up tissue and bone and the machine ate the hands like some kind of predator. A prosthetics company sold him a pair of bionic hands made out of plastic and metal for about forty thousand bucks. These hands gave Terry this sci-fi android look, and he controlled them by the electrical muscle signals generated in his arms and chest. He used the fake hands to turn the key in the lock or hold a fork or chain smoke or drink beer. He was still learning to handle them, and sometimes the hands ran wild and crushed a plastic cup or his sandwich. Terry wore these semi-transparent cosmetic gloves that fit right over his bionic hands. He told me that for a little extra money, the gloves came with hair on them, real human hair that came straight out of China and made the fake hands look real.

Pam left the room for a minute and came back with a comb stuck in the brown roots of her tangled bleach blond hair, “You sure you don’t smell any smoke, Jack?”

“Yes,” I told her, “I smell some fucking smoke. San Diego County is on fire.”

“I think there’s smoke in the house.” Pam went around the room moving the drapes, moving chairs, moving tables, looking behind the furniture, and probably wondering if she needed to move the refrigerator again. The last time she looked for signs of smoke behind the refrigerator, she spent a half-hour pulling it out from the wall and then unplugged the box because she became convinced there was an electrical short. Even though there wasn’t much, the food rotted.

When the cat walked down the hall, Pam said, “I think the cat’s on fire.”

“The cat’s not on fire,” I told her. “Why don’t you go to bed?”

Pam ignored me and tried to call the cat, but the cat knew something was up and slipped away down the hall into a bedroom. I heard her call the cat a couple of times and she said, “The cat’s under the bed, and I think she’s on fire.”

“The cat’s not on fucking fire. The rest of the world’s on fire, but not the fucking cat. Why don’t you leave the fucking cat alone?” I wasn’t worried, though, because the cat had suffered through this maniac bullshit before and proved it could take care of itself. Pam finally got a hold of the cat and ran into the kitchen. I watched her put the cat in the sink and turn on the water. The cat got pissed off, and Pam had to let go. Blood ran down from her elbows all the way to her fingertips.

I got another beer. “I heard a rumor that cats don’t like water. You need to lay off that shit.”

“I thought I smelled smoke.”

“You do smell smoke. Southern California’s on fire.”

“I know something’s on fire because I can smell the smoke.” She went into the living room to check the coffee table where the dead Boston fern was. It was possible the fern was capable of catching on fire. Nobody had watered the thing in six months.

I gave up trying to explain anything to her and went outside to sit at the table out by the pool. A few minutes later, I heard Pam start the car and pull out of the driveway to head back to Bobby’s place in Orange County. I knew she would come home with fire alarms going off inside her head. Bobby was this high-rolling white gangster who drove a Hummer and used to keep a six-foot caiman in his Laguna Beach living room. The caiman floated around in a giant aquarium, but still, it was sorta weird.

One time, I’d gone out there with Pam to score some white, and Bobby entertained his posse by feeding the caiman live chickens he bought at a feed store. He held a live chicken over the aquarium, teasing the caiman until it came out of the water and took the chicken out of Bobby’s hand. When we drove home, Pam told me that it seemed kinda sick that those people cheered and laughed as they watched the caiman swallow a live chicken. I noticed that she had watched the caiman eat the chicken anyway. I noticed that I had watched it too, but there was nothing to watch anymore. One day, Bobby had teased the caiman with a live chicken, and the caiman came out of the water and bit off a couple of Bobby’s fingers. Bobby took out his .45 and shot the caiman.

The sun tried to come up in colors of orange and purple and black, but the fires in the hills smothered the sun. I kept staring at the black sky. The Santa Ana winds had spilled down out of the Rocky Mountains, passed through the Mojave, and blew the fires and its black clouds toward the Pacific Ocean. I cupped my hands to light another cigarette in the hard winds and

stared out at the flecks of gray ash falling like dying moths on the overgrown St. Augustine grass. Ash covered everything in the disordered yard: the broken bike in the bushes, the weight set nobody used, the dog chain that belonged to the dog that ran away. Even the dead rose bushes looked like somebody painted them gray.

I tried to straighten out the things on the table and finally abandoned it. Fire reports blasted through the radio: San Diego County was burning. Orange County was burning. Los Angeles County was burning. Ventura County was burning. Santa Barbara County was burning. Riverside County was burning. I turned the radio off and tried to ignore the fires.

For almost an hour I sat at the patio table and read an old issue of *The New Yorker* that I picked up off the ground. I focused on the story of some old guy in Manhattan who seemed like he owned about half the world. The man appeared to have found some meaning in his life and made solid decisions and stuck by them. He made money. He built things. He fed the poor. He loved his wife. I studied his photograph and hoped that I might find some sort of clue or key that would open things up for me. I dropped hot cigarette ashes on the man's face and wiped them off with my wrist because I wanted to be able to see him. I burned a hole in his face and finally threw the magazine down on the patio and gave up trying to find the key.

The neighbor, Terry, walked into the back yard with his fake hands shoved in his pockets. He was probably close to fifty, with long thinning hair tied up in a pony tail. The long sleeve shirts he constantly wore made it impossible to tell he had fake hands until he pulled them out of his pockets. We walked around the pool, and I pointed out the new fissures in the plaster that I'd just discovered that morning.

"That one's new," I pointed out as we walked around. "I think that's a new one too."

"Still working on those cracks?"

“Yeah.”

“You’ll never fix them all, you know.” Terry pulled his fake hands out of his pockets and rested them on his belt buckle.

“I know.”

“Where’s Pam?”

“Getting more coke.”

“We’ve all got our priorities.”

“Yeah, we do,” I told him.

“You do know that the county is on fire, right?”

“I know there’s a fire, Terry. I can smell it. It smells like the world is burning. Besides, I’ve been listening to the radio.”

“Well, I wasn’t sure.” He pointed toward the bottom of the pool where the TV sat by the drain. “You’re a little out of touch these days.”

“That’s because I’ve got Pam.”

Terry took a cigarette out of his top pocket and slowly lit it with a lighter. “She finally got her smoke wish huh?”

“Pam thought the fucking cat was on fire again.”

“Jesus, the entire county is burning, and your girlfriend is chasing the cat.”

“Yeah.”

“While you’ve been on the bottom of the pool, they’ve evacuated half the town.”

“La Mesa?” I told him to hold a minute and went out to the garage and looked for a rope. I threw the rope over the house and tied off a safety line. I didn’t want to get hurt with fifty-mile-per-hour winds blowing. I got on a ladder and climbed on top of the roof. The wind was

dry, burning black smoke clouds drifted by, and then sometimes it was so clear that I saw the hills burning in orange waves of flame and the bulldozed furrows of firebreaks on the south side of Lake Hodges.

Then the wind gusts started again and seemed to rob everything of its perspective, seemed to alter shapes and depth. I held the safety rope in one hand and leaned against the chimney. I felt like I was swimming underwater in a sea storm. Water planes jumped out at me. Miles away, I saw military helicopters weaving in and out of sight in the harsh smoke of the morning sky. I got off the roof.

“It’s fucking bad out there,” I told Terry.

“I should probably load the truck and call my daughter. If the ride gets too rough, I’ll have her come and get me.” He scratched his head with a plastic finger.

“I’ll help you in a little bit.”

“Yeah.” Terry pointed with a plastic finger toward the pool. “Your things should be safe in there.”

“Want a beer?”

“Might as well, it’s gonna be a long day.”

“Grab a couple out of the ice chest.”

“Can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Short out my hands.” Terry reached up and scratched one of his ears.

“Sorry about that.”

“That’s all right. Wish I could grab a beer out of an ice chest. I kinda miss doing that sort of stuff.”

“What? Grabbing beers? You can still hold a beer.”

“I know that. I mean touching things. I miss touching things.”

I walked over and grabbed a couple of beers. I understood what he meant about touching things. I missed touching things too. We had a beer, and Terry went home to decide what he wanted to load in his truck. I wanted to go back down into the water.

For these the last six months, I'd been living here with Pam on the outskirts of Escondido, about twenty minutes from San Diego. I met her at the Belly-Up Tavern in Solana Beach when I was on the tail end of a week-long drunk. She told me her aunt had left her the house in her will. The aunt had driven all the way up to San Francisco so she could jump off the Transamerica Pyramid building on Montgomery Street. Pam said she wasn't close to the aunt, that the aunt simply hated everyone else in the family. It was inheritance by default. Pam had a job doling out bad coke-fueled haircuts at Fantastic Sam's in Chula Vista. She was barely able to pay the property taxes, but her folks usually picked up the tab. Regardless, I moved in without hesitation. It was a mistake on my part. I'd made a few of those before.

The two of us had walked around the pool holding hands, and then Pam went over to the faucet and turned it on full blast. She grabbed one end of the hose and put it in the pool. “It keeps losing water,” she said.

I looked down at the water with black algae growing wild on the sides and bottom of the plaster. “I'll check it out, Baby,” I told her.

The next day I'd gone down to the pool store and bought some pool cleaning supplies: a stiff pool brush, chlorine tablets, and algaecide. I spent three days smoking cigarettes, drinking beer, scrubbing algae, treating the water, and vacuuming the pool. When I'd finished, I saw a thousand cracks in the plaster running wild like fissures on an aerial map. I explained to Pam

that this was where the water was going: under the house, under the lot next door, under something. The water was going under something. I knew that much.

A couple of weeks later, I pulled my dive gear out of a storage unit in San Diego. I'd been a master diver working on a dive boat out of Catalina Island. It was hard to say what went wrong, but mostly it centered on the drinking and dope problems I had. I'd been able to narrow the problem down to just drinking, but it was still a problem.

I'd been on my way to Florida to work on a commercial dive boat. I figured I'd pay my dues tending the oxygen lines for a couple of years before they'd cut me loose and make me a breakaway diver. That's what the commercial boats called guys who had served their apprenticeships and finally made the water. The bottom fell out though, and I never made it to Jacksonville.

When I moved in with Pam, I'd started fixing the cracks in the plaster with some epoxy paste that dried under water. That was almost five months ago when I'd begun to repair the damage. I'd probably fixed three quarters of the original fissures, but I still had a ways to go. Every time the pool lost water underneath the plaster floor, the surface area shifted and created new cracks.

Every day I'd put on a pair of force fins, a mask, a snorkel, and went down to the bottom of the pool with a trowel and a bucket of epoxy paste. The pool had become a second home and a place to avoid Pam. I'd gotten into a slow rhythm of laying the epoxy with the trowel, hitting the surface for air, and going back down to the bottom to finish the job. Sometimes I filled up the tanks and stayed below for an hour or so. Under the water I thought constantly about where my body stopped and the water began, about that precise point in space that was the difference between me and something else. I wanted to find that spot. For months I'd felt the power of the

water surging through my body. I was sunk in a world where water escaped through broken veined fissures in the plaster, disappearing into the bowels of the earth. I wanted to seal the cracks and stop the water from escaping. I wanted to make myself one with it. I kept getting the feeling that if I could figure all this out in my mind and hold it somewhere down the hallways of my memory, I'd would find whatever I was looking for.

When Pam finally came home, I'd lost track of time. I'd been in the pool all day under the falling ash and black fire clouds headed toward the ocean. I looked up at her. I heard sirens in the distance. Pam was dressed in black. The sky was black. Everything was black. I never thought coke freaks aged well. Pam was no exception. Standing on the pool deck, she seemed a more subterranean creature than the woman I'd moved in with. I was waist deep in the water. At twenty-six, with pale skin and black circles under her bloodshot eyes, she was waist deep in coke.

"Jack, are you going to get out of the pool?"

"No, I think I'll stay out here a while longer."

Pam walked over to the table and grabbed the radio. She threw it in the pool. I watched it sink to the bottom. "You might want to listen to music while you're out there."

"Well, a king needs his music."

Pam went back inside the house, came out with a bowling ball, raised the purple orb over her head, and threw it in the water. The ball went straight down and cracked the plaster.

"You're the king, all right. The king of fucking nothing. You got no cigarettes. You got no money. You got no job. You got no future. You're the king of fucking nothing."

"The bowling ball isn't mine," I told her. "I don't like you mixing your stuff with my stuff."

I went back down under the water and when I surfaced for air, I saw Pam going back inside the house. I got out of the pool and dried off with a towel hanging over the diving board. I looked at my hands, and my fingertips were shriveled up. I wanted to get some cigarettes and beer and went out through the gate. Terry's pickup truck was parked in his driveway. The engine was running, and Terry was sitting behind the wheel. Sometimes, I noticed, he sat out there with the engine running and the windows rolled down and the radio playing. I guess he pretended that he was driving somewhere. I walked over, opened the passenger door, and got inside the truck. Terry had his fake hands wrapped around the steering wheel. I sat there quietly in the darkness staring at those green dashboard lights.

"Ever feel like just getting in and driving all night?" he asked.

"Yeah."

"Then why don't you?"

"I don't know."

"You don't love that woman, do you?"

"No. I don't love her. I don't even know her. She's gone coke crazy."

"That should make you want to run even faster. Get out of here and run off to Florida. They got room for another breakaway diver, you know."

"Yeah, I guess they would."

"Well, we can go to the liquor store," he said. "You can pretend you're running away at least for a few blocks and then we'll come back and you can help me load the truck."

Terry reached down with one of his fake hands and opened the door. I got out and traded sides with him and drove to the liquor store. "I'll get the beer," he said. Terry got out of the truck and disappeared through the doors of the liquor store. He came out carrying a six-pack in each

fake hand and placed them on the hood of the truck. He opened the truck door, passed the beer to me, and I put it between us on the seat. I drove back to his house and pulled into the driveway and killed the engine and turned the radio down real low.

I opened a beer for Terry, and then I grabbed one. "Let's go check out the fire and drink a couple of beers," I said.

"Where?"

"Up the hill past the high school." I got out of the truck.

"What are you doing?" he asked me.

"You drive," I told him.

"I can't drive."

"Why not?"

"I don't have any hands."

"You got those. Besides, it isn't very far up the hill. Just go real slow and if anything happens, I'll take over the wheel."

Terry thought about it and got in on the driver's side and looked at the steering wheel for a long time. He reached down and started the engine. For a while, he let the engine idle, and we listened to the country music station. Terry used a fake hand to shift the truck into reverse. The Ford slowly backed out of the driveway, and he turned the wheel. Terry drove about ten miles an hour toward Division Street, made a left onto Gamble Drive, and we started up the hill to the high school. Gray ash fell like dirty snow and started to cover the windshield. Terry turned on the wipers, and the truck started to swerve toward the curb. I took the wheel for a second and straightened the Ford out.

Terry talked while we headed up the hill. “I haven’t driven a car since my accident. I thought I was going to die, you know, just bleed to death. Blood was all over the place. I went into shock. There were all kinds of people around, but I couldn’t hear anybody. I only heard this beating sound. I thought it was the sound of blood running out in spurts because I was sure I was bleeding to death, and I was. But that wasn’t what I heard. That beating sound was my heart. I heard my heart beating—that’s what that sound was, my own heartbeat. That’s how I knew I was still alive.” Terry looked embarrassed for talking so much. He reached up and scratched the side of his head with a fake finger. “Now I’m hearing that heartbeat again for the first time in a long time.”

We made it to the top of the hill and got out of the truck. I grabbed a couple of beers, and we stared out toward Ramona where the fire was burning out of control. The next hill over looked like a volcano with rivers of fire pouring down it. We watched the fire and drank the beers.

“It looks like the whole world is on fire,” I said.

“I think it is.”

Terry drove back down the hill, and I told him I’d be back in a few minutes to help him load up his truck. I walked away from Terry’s house and went back out to the pool. Hot midnight winds kept blowing and dead leaves scraped the screen door. The concrete around the swimming pool was littered with torn palm fronds. Somewhere, out in the night, other palm fronds burned like out-of-control sparklers. The city was a living, breathing fire tonight. I walked back inside the house and stood in the doorway of the bedroom. I saw Pam’s pale outline on the bed, and I could hardly look at her.

“I’m leaving,” I told her.

“Where are you going?”

“Florida.”

“Why?”

“It would be hard to explain. I’m not sure you’d understand. I’m not sure if I understand either. I just know I’ve got to go. I’m going to get a commercial diving job and try to get a breakaway diver gig. You should get out of here, too. You need to go to your folks’ place or something.”

“I don’t know,” she said. “There’s so much smoke here that I’m afraid to move.”

“You probably need to go.”

“I might. I think the washing machine is broken. Why don’t you roll a joint and come to bed?”

“I don’t think you understand. I’m leaving for Florida now.”

“I’m so tired of things being broken.”

“I guess you finally got to that place.”

“What place?”

“The place where I am.”

I went back outside and packed my dive gear into a beat-up suitcase. I walked over to Terry’s house and went up to the door carrying it. Terry let me in.

“I believe you’re heading to Florida tonight,” he said.

“Yeah, I’m heading to Florida, but I figured I’d help you load your truck, so when your daughter came the two of you could just take off and maybe give me a ride to the closest Greyhound station.”

“Well,” Terry said, “I’m going to wait for the word to go, and my daughter and her husband will come out to get me.”

“I don’t want to bother anybody, so I’ll just wait it out too.”

“No, I don’t think you should wait anything out. I think we need to get you on your way. You’re ready.”

I lit a cigarette. “Yeah, I’m ready.”

“Then, you need to get in that truck and head for Florida.”

“I can’t take your truck, man.”

“Listen, son, I never thought I’d drive that truck again and tonight I got my shot and I drove it and driving up that hill was good enough for me. You take that truck and get out of here.”

“Thank you.”

We walked out to Terry’s truck and he gave me the keys. Ash kept falling from the sky and covered everything. I threw my dive gear in the back and got in the truck. I started the engine and rolled down the window. The country music station played and Terry stood on the driveway. He reached in through the open window with one of his hands and put his plastic fingers on my chest.

“Do you feel that son?”

I felt it. I was pretty sure I’d heard it too. I’d be lying if I said I didn’t.

Vita

Nason Smith born and raised in Los Angeles, California, but has lived all over the country from the Mojave Desert to Boulder to Taos to Austin to the Ozarks in Arkansas. Lately, he's been calling New Orleans home and will probably continue to do so unless something weird happens. Nason went back to school at a rather late stage in life at Humboldt State University, and they gave him a B.A. in English for his effort. A few years ago, he moved from Redwood National Park to New Orleans so he could write stories in a city; little did he know that he would go down in a flood and wash-up somewhere in Texas with a rock-and-roll band and have to slowly make his way back. Nason likes dogs, but he doesn't have one.