

The background of the book cover is dark, possibly black or dark brown. It is overlaid with a network of thin, light-colored (tan or brown) lines that intersect at various angles, creating a web-like or abstract geometric pattern. The lines vary in thickness and orientation, some running diagonally, others more horizontally or vertically.

**NEVER
THE
SAME
AGAIN**

A NOVEL

GERALD TESCH

Never the Same Again

By GERALD TESCH

In this first novel which breathes the spirit of adolescence in all its frustrations and uncertain joys, Gerald Tesch has created an unforgettable picture of innocence betrayed. Such realism in setting down on paper the thoughts and language and reactions of a boy of thirteen has seldom been found in an American novel. Johnny's family, his tortured friend Roy, the determined and evil boys' club leader, the judge, and the others involved in Johnny's "case" are all depicted with astonishing perception and maturity. This book reveals a fresh and important new talent.

Johnny Parish was an exceptionally bright boy at thirteen. True, his mother was divorced and his family life in a small midwestern town was far from ideal, but he had done well in school and his aunts and the neigh-

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bors liked him. Then came the summer when Roy Davies, who ran a gas station, befriended him and gave him a job. They were pals from the first and Roy got on all right with Johnny's mother Barbara. Evenings at the movies, fishing trips, week ends at the Lake, a thousand small jokes and bits of comradeship came to bind them together.

What Roy came to feel for Johnny was perhaps too intense, carried the small-boy adoration of the companionable older man too far. Yet it was the head of the boys' club, not Roy, who made the trouble in the fall when Johnny went back to school and to activities with those of his own age. A scandal of major proportions developed, tragic for Johnny and no less so for Roy.

THE AUTHOR

Gerald Tesch is twenty-three years old and his formal education extended only through the sixth grade. He worked on his novel at the famous Lowney Handy colony for writers, from which James Jones also emerged.

NEVER THE SAME AGAIN

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AGAIN

by Gerald Tesch



G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS
NEW YORK

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—Gerald Tesch

Alas! how easily things go
 wrong!
A sigh too much or a kiss
 too long,
And there follows a mist and
 a weeping rain,
And life is never the same again.

—George MacDonald

BOOK ONE

The Carnival

Chapter 1

JOHNNY PARISH opened the French doors and stepped down to the patio. He walked across the wide green back yard to the apple tree, ignoring the grass: it needed cutting and he felt that if he didn't notice it he wouldn't have to get out the old lawnmower. He hated putting things off because his Aunt Margaret always said to him, "When a fella says he's going to do this or that tomorrow, ask him what he did yesterday." Then she'd give him that knowing wink.

Anyway, it was going to get too hot today and the sun might burn out the grass. Yeah man, you have to be real careful about things like that.

It was a lazy June morning with a deep blue cloudless sky and the climbing sun in the east was warm and felt good on his bare arms. He could smell the winy apples in the blanket of grass basking in the sun. The shade of the apple tree was stretched across the lawn to the square-trimmed, dense shrubbery that inclosed Grandmother's property.

Johnny Parish was thirteen years old. He had a slender face with hollows beneath high cheekbones and flashing dark-brown eyes. His hair was black and slightly curly; cut short for the summer's vacation. His nose was long and narrow and his mouth small.

He and his mother and his younger brother Danny, who was nine, lived at Grandmother's house on Dobson Road, close to Chardin Heights: the residential section of Wilkinson City.

Johnny kicked awkwardly at a yellowjacket and ducked to one side, pressing his arms to his chest as the insect buzzed soaringly past him. He stood there alertly a few seconds to make sure the damndarn hairy old thing didn't come back to sting him as soon as his back was turned. They're tricky that way.

After a careful search through the apples on the ground he finally picked two off a low branch. He stood polishing the larger one on the front of his T-shirt, then bit into it. He sucked the warm sweet juice

into his watering mouth and walked back to the house, shoving the other apple into the front pocket of his Levis.

Grandma Kesler wasn't feeling too well and she seemed to get worse with each passing day. Most of the time she would sit in the living room on the edge of her favorite chair, her thin hands clasped in her lap and her light-blue eyes staring absently across the room. They dreaded leaving Grandma alone during the day because of her constant lapse of memory.

Barbara, Johnny's mother, worked as a waitress in the dining room at the Wilkinson Craven Hotel and seldom arrived home before six o'clock in the evening. Usually, if there was a convention or a party or a wedding reception, she wouldn't get home until quite late.

Aunt Margaret was thirty-six, unmarried and five years older than Barbara. Margaret was a practical nurse and worked for Doctor Richmond, who was an X-ray technician.

Johnny had a paper route for the *Wilkinson Independent*, and since school was out he was elected to stay home with Grandma during the day until Aunt Margaret came home at three o'clock.

Johnny and Danny had moved back to Wilkinson City four months ago when their mother received her divorce. Before that they had lived for five years in Cherokee Hills, a government project of red brick houses just outside Malvern, twenty miles west of Wilkinson City.

Johnny remembered the day they moved over. Aunt Irene, his mother's sister who was seven years older, drove them over to Malvern that sun-bright Sunday afternoon. Barbara switched on the radio to get some music and an excited announcer was talking about the Japanese sneak attack on Pearl Harbor.

Aunt Irene, who never swore, said, "Sonofabitch! Can you beat that!" out of the side of her mouth to Barbara seated beside her. Johnny and Danny who had been romping in the back seat stopped and began to laugh until Mother turned and said sharply to *shush-up*, that it wasn't a bit funny! Just think of all the Army and Navy boys the announcer said were probably killed. . . .

After five years of living in Malvern the boys were glad to be back, because all their relations lived in Wilkinson City. Johnny and Danny were born there and it was Hometown to them.

The boys' father, Jim, had decided to stay in Malvern because of his high-paying job as a crane operator. He had to fork out a lot of dough every two weeks or so, too. Almoneys, they called it.

It felt sort of strange not to have a father, but even when they

lived in Malvern Johnny hardly ever saw Jim because his father worked the night shift from three till eleven, and Johnny didn't get out of school until three-thirty. On weekends his father was always out drinking somewhere.

Barbara had told Johnny that was why she was divorcing his father.

It sure as heck was funny that old Mom could divorce old Dad for something that she was doing a lot of too. Once and a while he'd sit down and think about it, vaguely realizing that no one was to blame, but it was old Dad who ended up getting the dirty end of the stick. It was easy to cry when he thought about Dad. He even ached.

As Johnny approached the patio he glanced over to the Rodmans' red brick house. He could hear Polly banging pots and pans through the open kitchen window.

Polly Rodman, the woman next door, would drop over every now and then during the day to check on Grandmother, since most boys thirteen years old disliked the idea of staying indoors on nice days watching over an old grouchy person who always forgot things.

But not Johnny Parish. No sir! He loved his grandma very much. Sometimes he'd stand looking out the French doors that gave a wide commanding view of the back yard, seeing the neighborhood kids building a clubhouse or a tree hut in one of the empty lots that bordered the next street over, and he'd suddenly envy and hate them. But they didn't have a grandmother that loved them as much as his grandma loved him, even if she was loony.

And anyway, they were just bratkids and taking care of Grandma was a big responsibility and he had his paper route and made money where they didn't and they didn't have a good friend like old Roy Davies!

Johnny closed the screen door. Golly but it was cool in the dining room and for a moment everything was evening-dim. He walked around the dining-room table with his eyes squeezed shut and Grandma called from the living room:

"Johnny, where is the bathroom?" Grandma's German accent became perceptible when she got excited.

He had showed her twice yesterday where it was and she was there this morning and she's lived in this house for nine years, ever since it was built. Holy-jeez.

Johnny set the half-eaten apple on the table and went into the

living room. He looked over at Grandma sitting on the edge of her chair tugging nervously at the yellow woolen shawl around her slumped shoulders. Her pale gray eyes were those of a child lost in a rushing crowd, on the verge of panic, frantically looking for a familiar face of recognition.

Bitter tears swelled in Johnny's eyes and he went over and fell to his knees at her slippered feet and buried his head in her lap, sobbing. "You ain't sick, are ya, Gran'ma?"

"Why no, child," she answered soothingly. "Hush . . . hush."

Johnny cried, wrapping his arms around her narrow waist.

"You are a good boy, *mein Kind*," Grandma said, patting his small back. "I know you will *always* be a good boy."

By now she'd forgotten about the bathroom.

"They—they tol' me you was real si-sick," he sobbed.

"No, child. No. They are all *Dummköpfen*. You must not think that. Now all my girls are grown up and gone away." Grandma nodded with a trembling lower lip. "Always be good to your mother, *mein Kind*."

Her face had lost its full and wonderful beauty, as the studio photographs only a year and a half ago recorded. Her eyes and cheeks had become hollow and what remained of her straw-yellow hair was slowly fading, now mingled with silver. It was her eyes that hurt Johnny most because they didn't seem alive or seeing half the time. Afraid, strange and empty. Even forgetting her English momentarily was frightening: she'd talk to him rapidly in German just as if he understood it. Then she'd ramble on and on and on about her twin sons that died even before his mother was born. Most of all, she continued to talk about Keith:

"Just think, child: the war is over and our Keith will soon be home."

But Keith might never ever come home, Johnny thought, afraid to tell her that it was three years since he'd been missing in Italy. She knew it then when it happened but now he was alive again in her mind. Barbara and Margaret gave him fair warning never to let on that Keith was missing: he must not get Grandma hysterical. It could kill her.

"When he comes home he will sing 'Bless This House,'" Grandma told Johnny excitedly as he got up off the floor at her feet. "Then he will sing 'The Lord's Prayer.' He is such a wonderful singer."

"Yeah," Johnny agreed, getting to his feet. He flopped lazily on the davenport across from Grandma's chair. He was always a little jealous of Keith because Grandma praised him so much. After all, he was dead and gone. Maybe it made a difference because Keith had been her first grandson. Heck, he was her second . . . first, now.

"My oh my." Grandma sighed tiredly as she clasped her hands in her lap.

"What's the matter now, Grandma?"

"All my children are gone. . . . They never think of me now."

Here we go again with that same hairy old story.

"Sure they do," he hurriedly assured her. "Mom lives here with you an' so does Aunt Marg."

"No, *mein Kind* . . . you are wrong." Grandma sadly shook her head from side to side. "Even Edna comes up no more and she lives just down the street. Oh my, oh *my*. Even my only son Ralph—he comes no more."

He didn't want to go into that hairy old story again. It seemed that all through your life you go around telling hairy old stories.

Johnny went over to turn on the radio but heard the French doors open and close. Here she comes, he thought, the old bag had to come over to check things. If old Polly keeps doing things like this, she sure as hell's going to end up in heaven or the Salvation Army.

He hated Polly's loud cracking cheerful voice. She disturbed a peaceful softness in that yellow-painted house and the talks he would be having with Grandma. She couldn't have made more noise being quiet if she'd brought a brass band. There was something about Polly: an unrest, a feeling of hurry-scurry. Johnny Parish knew what a whore was, and their business, but he'd never seen one (outside of his old Aunt Blanche, his father's brother's wife, but she used to be a madam and they don't count) so he used Polly Rodman as a model. He'd look at her hard greasy flabby face, her cigarette-stained fingers, and think of a corny old whore.

"Johnny," Polly croaked, "come here a minute, will you, sweet?" And she made one of those secret nods toward the kitchen.

Don't call me sweet!

He grabbed the apple as he passed the table, and out in the kitchen Polly in her cracking voice said, "Has anything *strange* happened yet this morning?"

Just like the FBI or something like that, he thought, biting into the apple. Golly, but you make me sick.

"Naw—huh-uh, nothin' much 'is mornin'."

"I see," Polly murmured seriously as she scratched her double chin with her chipped red-painted fingernail. She glanced up at the calendar and paused thoughtfully.

Johnny took quick sneaking glances at her heavy sagging breasts, seeing her circular nipples boldly outlined beneath the thin and colorful fabric of the print housedress. It disgusted him then, at that particular moment, but a month ago when he and Charlie Myers (the boy who was going to take over Johnny's paper route) peeked under the blind to Polly's bedroom one night when she was undressing, as they hid excited and afraid in the bushes that surrounded the foundation of the red brick house, there had been no hatred or loathing: just a nervous and tense excitement. Seeing the woman-flesh, the bulge of her belly that hung down into a triangular maze of hair in rolls of drowsy fat, the large brown-nippled breasts that swung loosely, got the boys so confused and rattled they crept from the bushes, ran across the dark lawn and roared laughing running up Dobson Road, slapping each other on the back until they came to Jack Hunt's Drugstore where they giggled over puky cokes until they thought they'd die.

"Well," Polly lowered her eyes and gazed into his face, "ah . . . you're going to fix lunch, aren't you?"

"Sure," Johnny said, munching on the apple.

She nodded in approval. "Well now look, if you want some home-made chicken soup, you come on over and Ill give you enough for you and Grandma."

"Oh, I think we got enough here, Polly . . . thanks anyway, 'ough." Johnny was wishing the ice truck would pull crunchingly into the Rodman's gravel driveway so he could see her eyes light up.

The ice truck would usually be parked in her drive for about ten or fifteen minutes, continually dripping until there were big puddles behind the rusty blue truck, and when the tall gangling man left there would always be large gray islands in the white stone.

Boy, did he have *her* number! That iceman sure as heck wasn't drinking no cup of coffee! That's for sure, damn sure. He knew that much.

"If you want some soup," Polly told him raising her wrinkled brow, "be sure and come over. You folks are gladly *welcome* to it. There're some homemade noodles in it, too."

"Okay."

Then Polly, with her whole frame wobbling, left by the French doors and turned to her right and crossed the yard, going through the wide passage where the shrubbery had been cut out next to the Rodmans' white, paint-flaked garage.

Johnny took one last bite of the apple and tossed it across the kitchen to the wastebasket. He made a perfect shot. He could be a Star Basketball player if he really wanted to.

As soon as Aunt Margaret came home from work, Johnny was going over to the filling station that was owned and operated by Roy Davies. The *Wilkinson Independent* truck left his ninety-eight papers. While he waited for the truck he would shoot the crap with Roy, who gave him credit on pop until collection day and then he'd pay Roy what he owed him.

Johnny liked Roy Davies mainly because Roy didn't treat him like a corny kid but talked and laughed with him as if he were a grown-up man.

Roy Davies was thirty years old. He was a tall handsome man with broad straight shoulders, a round happy cheerful face, brown wavy hair and brown eyes. His firm deep voice was gentle. He seemed like a calm and easygoing man and Johnny noticed he never spoke loud or hard or bitter. Roy hardly ever said damn or hell, either. It relaxed Johnny to be near him, and he had never seen a pair of eyes that were as kind and soothing, and yet, too, sad and sympathetic. Roy had been discharged from the Navy three months ago, purchasing the lease for the Red Dot service station with his overseas pay and the money he'd saved.

Roy Davies had really proved himself a true friend one rainy Sunday morning as Johnny was about to deliver the thick Sunday editions. The truck had dumped the papers under the roof of the station that extended out over the two gas pumps. He was crouched next to the gas pump, twisting open the wires that bound the huge bundle, when a car drove up. It was Roy's black '41 Oldsmobile. Roy hopped out and ran under the protective roof.

"Hi, man!" Johnny shouted. "Ya gonna open up 'is early?"

"No." Roy laughed. "I woke up a little while ago and thought about you delivering all these papers in the rain . . . so I came down to help you."

"No foolin'?"

"Sure thing. Heck, I used to deliver them myself."

"Hotdog!" Johnny grinned.

"I'll bring the car under the port."

"Okay." He saluted.

Roy turned and Johnny caught the lipstick smear just behind his left ear above the turned-up brown leather collar of his jacket. Roy drove the car in under the roof and they flopped the stack of papers on the front seat between them.

"Big night, huh?" Johnny grinned as he pulled his door shut.

"What?" Roy asked, raising his brow.

"Oh, I know *all* about her."

"About who?" Roy half smiled.

"Oh, dat little black gal I saw y'awl wif las' night," Johnny deviled. He suddenly felt foolish: he was acting just like a *crummy* kid.

Roy frowned with pursed lips, his eyes puzzled.

"The one that put all that lipstick behind your ear."

"Well I'll be—"

"No," Johnny grinned, "the other one."

Roy made a swipe with his handkerchief and looked at the reddish smear. He laughed and continued to wipe it off. "I knew she was all over me, but not back there too." He winked secretly at Johnny and started the car.

"Golly-whiskers." Johnny sighed. "I'll pay you for the gas too, Roy."

"Don't be silly—I'm glad to help."

After the papers had been delivered Roy had suggested they stop at the Standard Dairy for a hot drink and Johnny said, "Keen, man!"

The Standard Dairy was a block up from Roy's service station on Elliott Avenue. The late spring rain had changed into a chilly, misty drizzle and Johnny said it sure was cold weather for the first of May.

They chose a booth in front of the wide, dairy-length window that looked out on the damp gray avenue. They both felt uncomfortable in their old clothes because the dairy was crowded with dressed-up people. A waitress came over and Johnny ordered a hot chocolate; Roy a cup of coffee with just a little cream.

"And about four of those glazed doughnuts, too," Roy added.

"Yes, sir."

"Well," Johnny said after the waitress departed, "I sure would like to thank you, Roy."

"That's okay, Johnny." He smiled.

"Not many guys'ud come out onna mornin' like this to help a guy deliver papers."

"Like I said: I used to carry them myself."

"Very many?"

"Oh . . . about fifty."

"You had it *made*, man."

"And I used to work in my father's store after I delivered them, too."

"You mean you had *two* jobs?"

"You see," Roy explained, "my father owned the grocery store and I just naturally helped out. I always thought it would be mine . . . someday."

"Uh-huh—does he still have it?"

"Nooooooooo. He sold out about two years ago and retired."

"Gee-whiz, I bet you got alla ice cream an' candy an' stuff you wanted, huh?"

"Just about." Roy laughed.

"You got any brothers er sisters?"

"I've got an older sister, Charlotte. . . . She's married and living in . . ." Roy hesitated, "Springfield."

"Oh." Johnny lifted his chin and nodded.

There came a series of clicks from the jukebox, followed by Perry Como singing:

*"Alone from night to night you'll find me. . . .
Too weak to break the chain that binds me
I need no shackles to remind me:
I'm just a Prisoner of Love. . . ."*

"Say Roy," Johnny suddenly exclaimed, "when school gets out can I work for you? I mean it!"

Roy's eyes searched Johnny's face and he took a pack of Chesterfields from his jacket pocket. He tapped the end of a cigarette on his watch crystal. "I don't know," he said slowly, "would you like to?"

"Holy-jeez, boy! *Would* I?"

"I couldn't pay you much—you know that business is pretty lousy."

"I don't need *money* that bad. And anyhow, I don't care."

"What about your paper route?"

"Aw I know a guy—Charlie Myers—an' he's just dyin' to get it."

"If your mother says it's okay," Roy gave a short nod, "it's all right with me."

"Honest?"

"Honest!"

Man-o-man and hot diggety doggone dog! Jeez, he'd wanted to ask Roy that ever since he met him.

*"What's the good of my caring, if someone
Is sharing their arms, with you. . . .
Although she has another, I have no other,
For I'm not free. . . ."*

The waitress brought the doughnuts and hot chocolate and coffee, and she had just placed the two cups on the table when from the kitchen there came a long series of loud shattering crashes.

"Oh—my goodness-gracious!" She smiled painfully in the hushed silence. "There go our dishes." She shook her head disgustedly, and leaving the check face down on the table, she hurried off toward the kitchen.

They both laughed and when they were finished eating, Roy placed a quarter on the table and picked up the check and paid the cashier; then drove Johnny two blocks over to Grandma's house.

Johnny tried to coax Roy to come in and meet his mother, but Roy said, "I can't, Johnny—I haven't time. I have to drive out and pick up my Uncle Harry. . . . He eats dinner with us every Sunday," he added almost sourly.

"Oh—okay. . . . An' thanks again for the hot chocolate."

"Perfectly all right." Roy smiled.

"'By." Johnny slammed the car door.

Roy raised his hand.

What a hell of a nice guy, Johnny was thinking as he walked up the gravel driveway, what a perfectly hell of a nice guy. I gotta get me that hairy old job. I just gotta. If Ma don't let me, I'll run away as sure as God made green apples.

Johnny went in through the side door and Barbara was too busy helping Margaret with the dinner to talk with her about the job then, so he went into the living room and stretched out on the floor to read the corny funnies.

Grandma came shuffling into the living room from the hallway and sat down in her chair: *Phissssssssst*.

Johnny looked up.

Grandma leaned forward. "Margaret would not let me help with dinner," she whispered tearfully with a trembling chin. "She told me to get out of the kitchen—my own kitchen."

"Don't pay no 'tention," he whispered back. "She can be mean—real mean if she wants to be. Don't let it worry ya, Gran'ma. . . . Don't let it make ya feel bad."

Grandma slowly straightened and sadly shook her head from side to side in utter bewilderment. Her eyes looked across the room and searchingly found the blank wall. She folded her thin fingers in her lap and sat and stared in silence.

The smells from the cooking dinner made his mouth water and finally Aunt Margaret called in her high-pitched but pleasant voice, "Come and get it."

Johnny took his seat at the table directly behind the French doors with Grandma on his left and Margaret beside her. Danny's seat, on Johnny's right, was empty because he was spending a couple of days out at Aunt Irene's house. Barbara sat in the chair across from Margaret.

Aunt Margaret had placed the golden brown, steaming chicken in the center of the table and it was so tender the meat fell from the bone. There was a rich dressing and a light smooth gravy, and a billowing bowl of mashed potatoes sprinkled over lightly with paprika, a big chunk of melting butter on the top, its golden yellow stream running down the snowy sides.

"*Heavenly-Father-we-thank-Thee-for-this-foodamen!*" Johnny hurriedly rattled off the same old prayer and he could hardly eat because he was so damndarn anxious to get Ma alone so he could tell her what Roy said about the job. It was hard to tell *what* Grandma would say when she was moody like this and she was a big influence with her two daughters. Well, more than most of the time, anyway.

Johnny took two slices of the banana-cream pie with the graham-cracker crust that his mother had made that morning.

Barbara helped Margaret clear the table and then she went upstairs to put up her hair. Johnny waited a few minutes, then opened the attic door to follow her, but Aunt Margaret called him back to help her with the dishes. *Sheeeeeeeze!*

After he dried the last pan and put it away, a heavy afternoon laziness settled over the house and the dreary gray weather didn't seem to help. Johnny could feel the drowsy atmosphere and yawned as he

opened the attic door and climbed the steps. He was going to call Roy later on to see if he was open. He walked briskly through the chilly gloomy attic to the two guestrooms, in the west end of the house that overlooked the Rodman home. The larger of the two beaverboard-paneled rooms, with a closet and dresser and vanity and double bed, belonged to his mother, and Danny slept with her. The small room, originally intended to be a bathroom with the half-moon window that looked down to the front yard and Dobson Road, belonged to Johnny mainly because he was older and had a desk with a lot of books. And then he had given Danny a cigar box full of marbles and a pearl-handled pocketknife and fifty cents not to put up a beef.

Johnny opened the bedroom door. Barbara was sitting at the dressing table in her white lacy slip, putting her hair up in bobbiepins.

"Close the door," she said without turning, "it's chilly."

"Hi, Ma, what'cha doin'?"

"I'm not your *Ma*—I'm your mother and what does it look like I'm doing?"

Johnny shrugged. "'At was a good pie."

"I'm glad you liked it. Is Aunt Margaret going to church this afternoon?"

"She's gonna take a nap." Johnny walked over to the bed and sat on the edge and said, "I wanted to ask you something. . . ."

"What?" Barbara said, winding a small twist of hair around her finger, then slipping in a bobbiepin.

"I gotta job."

"A *what*?" She turned to look at him. Barbara had a round soft-featured face with a clear complexion. Her eyes were as fair and as blue as her mother's. Her mouth was wide and her smile pleasant. Her neck was slim and graceful and her brown hair was cut short. Barbara was thirty-one.

"A job for when school's out," Johnny told her excitedly. "You know that Red Dot fillin' station over on the corner of Elliott an' State? The one that's got a *Chinese*-like roof. . . ." He waited.

"Yes, yes, yes." Barbara nodded.

"Well, that man—Roy Davies—the one I told you about who helped me deliver papers 'is mornin'—well anyway, he said I could work for him this summer. He said he'd give me first crack at it. He can't pay too much at first, but gee Mom, it'd be a *swell* job."

"Have you forgotten about Grandma?" Barbara reminded him with a raised brow.

"Oh." *Jesus, he forgot all about her.* Then his eyes flashed up from the floor. "The station's open until eight in the evening, an' I can go to work just as soon as Aunt Margaret comes home. Can I? Huh Mom? *Please*—can I?" Then after a brief pause he said, "'At old paper route's too heavy. Charlie's dyin' to get it."

Barbara sighed. "I don't know."

"I can go to work at noon," he said as Barbara turned back to the mirror. "Danny can stay here with Grandma for at least *two* hours, can't he?"

"No. It's your job to watch Grandma."

"Well then, can I go to work at three in the afternoon? Aunt Marg only works till noon on Saturdays. . . . Roy's been opening on Sundays, too. I'd be learnin' me a business an' it ain't as hard as carryin' papers, an' *that's* for sure."

"It *isn't* as hard. How many times do I have to tell you not to say *ain't*? And for one thing you don't know what the work is," Barbara said, looking at him in the mirror. "You just go to your room and write your father a letter."

"Okay. . . . But if I pass to the Seventh Grade, can I have the job?"

"We'll see," she told him. "Now go on, honey, do as I said—write your father."

He turned from Barbara and grinned, choking down a cry of victory because when she said *honey*, man! he knew the hairy old job was as good as his.

Johnny told Roy about it, and Roy said that it was okay with him if he worked from three to eight and half days on Saturdays, and Roy even gave him two bucks when he passed to the Seventh Grade, and Roy'd bought an old bicycle frame that they were going to fix up in their spare time and it was going to be better than new when finished.

Chapter 2

"WELL now," Margaret said, coming through the side door with a ton of groceries, "is our young man all set for work?"

"I shore am." Johnny smiled, taking the large brown sack. "I'm ready to go over right now."

Margaret went to the sink and ran a glass of cold water. After she drank it she turned and said, "Since this is your first day, I don't think that man will work you *too* hard."

"Who . . . Roy? Naw." He smiled.

"He seems like a nice man from what you say."

"He is—boy he really is."

Margaret sighed, brushing a wisp of hair up off her forehead. "How's Grandma been?"

"She's feelin' okay . . . I guess. 'Cept she thinks everyone's forgotten her: Aunt Edna an' Aunt Irene—everyone."

"Well, it's true they don't come very much . . . but," she nodded wisely, "there'll be a day."

Johnny nodded.

"You really can't blame them *too* much, you know. They have responsibilities themselves. But still, she's their mother and they should find time at last *twice* a week to see her."

Johnny pushed out his lower lip and nodded agreeingly.

"Of course Irene didn't *have* to get married," Margaret said with resentment, "leaving me here all alone with the responsibility of keeping up the house and working and watching over Mama."

Johnny looked at his Aunt Margaret: she was a nice-looking woman, smaller than Barbara, with brown slightly graying hair. She had bright brown eyes that wrinkled in the corners. Her nose was small and her mouth full and wide. Margaret seldom wore lipstick or rouge and never used nail polish. She never went to the movies or listened to crime programs over the radio, or read anything but *House Beautiful* or *Better Homes and Gardens*.

Sometimes Johnny would look at his Aunt Margaret secretly when

she wasn't aware of it, thinking wonderingly: *She was struck by lightning in a thunderstorm when she was a little girl.* It always gave him a strange feeling of fear when he thought about it, and he wanted to ask her how it felt, but Barbara warned him *never* to question her about it because she became very nervous. . . .

"I don't know what I'd do if it wasn't for your mother helping out all she can. You're a big help too." Margaret winked.

"Well I don't mind stayin' here. Heck, I love Gran'ma an' we get along good. I just have to agree on about everything she says though." Johnny kissed her on the cheek. "An' now I'd better get over to work. I don't wanna be too late on my first day."

"You do good now—you hear? Oh, I know you will." She smiled sadly. "What time will you be home for supper?"

"Hard to tell—I'll call you up."

"Okay, Johnny," she smiled warmly, "if you do your best you can't go wrong. Good luck."

"I'll need it." He grinned happily going out the side door.

Johnny walked down the gravel driveway in the bright hot sun to Dobson Road. He skipped happily over the hot tar circling the big holes. There was something said about paving Dobson, but they'd have to get up a petition first. After all, it was a pretty nice street, lined with recently built houses where important businessmen lived.

If they did pave it the noise of the goshdarn construction would only annoy Grandma. Just something more to crab about. Johnny hated Grandma at times, and then there were times he loved her so much he would've died for her if he had to.

He passed Rose Fuller's house, ignoring the weed-grown yard that almost covered the FOR SALE sign. Even though she had been an older woman and was dead and gone, he still loved her just about more than anyone else. Boy, Rose, he thought, kicking a tar-coated stone into a hole in the road, maybe someday when I'm older I'll tell someone, real secret like, all about me and you. Or maybe I'll just keep it all to myself as something wonderful. Sure. Heck man, ya gotta keep something good to yourself because if you tell it, it ain't yours no more. Johnny looked up to the sky where he often pretended she was watching over him like one of them Guardian Angels. He sort of straightened his shoulders and began to swagger.

He turned onto State Avenue, seeing the small filling station up on the intersection of State and Elliott, facing Elliott. The Red Dot station was a small square white brick building with a green tile roof,

the four corners curving up like a Chinese roof. All the lubrication work had to be done outside in the open, to the right of the building. There was a toolshed beside the lubrication platform where the battery-charger and other large tools were stored. There were two gas pumps, Regular and Ethyl, and just outside the door to the right stood a pop-cooler.

Johnny went around to the far side of the station because he wanted to pull a surprise on Roy. He had seen Roy through the two high open windows that faced the toolshed, concentrating on something on the desk.

He walked softly over the gravel past the women's restroom that faced the point, to the open door of the station, smelling the kerosene and oil and gas. Boy, gas was the best smell of all.

Johnny went in the open door. "Nar right, *buddy*," he said toughly, holding a make-believe .45. "'Is issa *stickup*!"

Roy slowly raised his arms above his head, turning in the swivel-chair with a wide grin on his handsome face. "I saw you coming up State."

"Oh," he chuckled, "but I had ya scared there for a second though, didn' I?"

Roy smiled and lowered his arms. "Nope. You wouldn't have gotten much if you *were* sticking me up. I knew you were up to some shenanigan when I saw you sneaking around the station."

"Oh, ya did, huh?" Johnny laughed happily. He walked around the glass case filled with car accessories and pulled himself up on the corner of the green metal desk, where he always sat. "Ain't business good?"

"No," Roy sighed shoving out his lower lip, "it isn't today."

"Wait till some of 'em rich dames up in Chardin Heights hear that *I'm* workin' here. Man, you'll have more business 'an you can handle."

"Oh? Don't you think they'd come because of me?"

Johnny looked into the warm handsome face, "Naw—you're too *old*."

"What's that I heard you say, young man?" He grinned slyly.

"You're too old."

Roy grabbed Johnny's knee and worked his thumb and middle finger in the tender flesh above the kneecap on both sides.

"I-take-it-back-I-take-it-back!" Johnny yelped, jumping down off

the desk and running farther up behind the counter. "No I don't." He grinned.

"Pretty cocky, aren't you?" Roy said.

"Yeanh . . . an' if ya don't like it ya can cheese it." He came limping back, still grinning to show he was only kidding.

"Does it hurt?"

"Naw—I was only limpin' for the heck of it."

"I won't do it any more," Roy told him as he sat back up on the desk. "Okay, Johnny, do you think you'll be able to fill a tank . . . check oil . . . change oil . . . lubricate . . . fix a flat . . . charge a battery . . . find squeaks in doors . . . ring up a sale and sweep the floor? That's just a few of the things you'll be learning this summer."

"Well now, I'll tell ya, Mac: I'd be able to fill a tank, sweep the floor, show old ladies to the can and pocket what I shortchange the customers."

Roy leaned back in the swivelchair, his hands locked behind his head. "Of course we split all pocketings fifty-fifty."

"Sure."

"Let's just gyp every other customer."

"Noright," Johnny agreed.

"All good businessmen regard that as an unwritten rule."

"That'll be our motto."

"You're hired!" Roy winked with a wide warm grin. "Oh, by the way, I meant to tell you: I soaked the bike in paint remover about an hour ago, and in a little bit you can take a razor blade and peel off the old paint—it won't be anything to do. . . . Then I bought some special sandpaper that we can smooth the metal bars down with."

"Golly-gee."

"You know how I decided we're going to paint it?"

"Huh-uh: how?"

"With a spray gun. That way it'll have an even coat—a nice smooth finish."

"No *kiddin'*?"

"Absolutely."

"Jeeeeeze man, 'at old bike'll be better 'an new."

"The frame is good cast-steel because it was made before the war. . . . Everything before the war was made good. It only cost six dollars."

"Holy-cow," Johnny shook his head, "I'll be workin' for you the rest of my life."

"It isn't that bad." Roy smiled.

"I'm gonna pay you back anyway—every week I'll pay ya some-
thin'," Johnny said. There was something about Roy that made him
feel very humble. "You're a pal, ya know it? There ain't many guys
around that'd help me like you're doin', an'en givin' me a job an'
all."

"That's okay, Johnny," Roy said soberly. "I wouldn't do it if I
didn't like you."

Johnny looked over into the warm face. "I always wanted to be
our friend, Roy. An' not because of what you're doin' for me—but
because you're a nice guy."

"Why thanks, Johnny," Roy said softly, his eyes wrinkled in the
corners as he smiled. Then he became serious. "I'll tell you some-
thing, Johnny: you stand for something I can never have—a son.
Someone to be a pal to . . . like going fishing with up at the Lake,
or hunting with in the fall. I can't have any children, so I guess that's
why I take to you."

"Gee-whiz, 'at's too bad." Johnny frowned.

"It gives me a big kick to see you happy."

"You mean you can't have any kids, huh?"

"No . . . but I get just as much fun doing things for you though.
I guess a father-instinct is satisfied, and it makes me feel good. In a
pretending make-believe way I sometimes feel that I am your father.
Silly . . . isn't it?"

"No—huh-uh," Johnny answered, looking Roy in the eyes. "I pre-
tend a lot of things myself. I don't care if you want to pretend."

"Thanks." Roy winked and smiled.

He's thanking me because I said it was okay he could pretend to
be my father. Well I'll be darn!

Johnny looked at Roy and he felt as if his chest had been hollowed
out leaving an empty feeling that Roy filled. He cleared his throat:
"Why can't you have any kids?"

Roy looked away from Johnny and sighed. He licked his lips.
"When I was in high school I was working out in the gym—on the
bars. One afternoon I slipped and fell, straddling a bar. It ruptured
my scrotum."

"What?" Johnny grinned, puzzled.

"My balls."

"Oh," *don't grin*, "I didn't know what'cha meant there."

"Perhaps I was sterile before that. Anyway, I believed the rupture caused it."

"Sterile means you can't get that *sticky*-stuff, huh?" It was one of those things that isn't known being said until it's said. Johnny had told something he had never intended mentioning to anyone, least of all Roy. Golly-gee, he didn't want Roy thinking he did things like that. What would Roy think? Roy wasn't no damndarn dumb-bunny.

Well, he thought, you really cooked your goose this time. He didn't want Roy to know he Did It. It's bad as hell to Do It, but it only seemed bad if someone knew about it. Otherwise it's okay.

After the first time Johnny Did It, sex became a reality to him: something very real and important. Sex wasn't a bunch of four-letter words printed on restroom walls accompanied with awkward drawings of women with their breasts exaggerated to unbelievable proportions. Those drawings were funny then, but now sex didn't even come close to that. Johnny had found a whole new world before him. The vulgar terms he had used without really knowing their true meanings had been used only to show off his wonderful vocabulary. Everyone else said them. But now those words took meaning and shape. He knew what every goshdarn one of them meant.

Whenever It was over he promised himself he wasn't going to Do It for *one whole solid week*. But he usually lost that feeling after a short time, thinking one more time wouldn't hurt.

Johnny could feel Roy's eyes looking at him and boy was he burning all over! This was worse than having your corny old pants fall down in public.

"Oh, I still get that," Roy laughed, looking into Johnny's red flushed face, "but it has no embryo . . . no egg. How did you find out about that stuff?"

"Some kid tol' me," he answered lamely.

"Come on . . . 'fess up." Roy grinned.

"No *foolin'*," he snorted, looking down at the black, grease-smearred wooden floor.

"Be honest with me—I am with you."

"Well . . ." Johnny grinned lopsidedly, then turned to Roy. "You won't tell a livin' soul, will ya?"

"Why no."

"Cross your heart?"

Roy crossed his heart and raised his hand.

"You won't get mad at me, will ya?"

"Of course not."

"Well," Johnny was losing his shame but he still felt embarrassment, "I was inna bathroom one afternoon on the toilet—that same day you helped me with the papers, 'member . . . it was rainin'?"

Roy nodded.

"Everyone was takin' a nap an' after I was finished I began foolin' around—you know."

Roy nodded and Johnny looked away from his eyes.

"I knew I wouldn't be bothered by no one so I just kept on foolin' around, an'en I began to feel *real* funny . . . somethin' like I never felt before. Maybe somp'in like sinkin' down inna bathtub of nice warm water . . . an'en it just happened. It scared me at first . . . but that's all there was to it."

"Well," Roy smiled, "I guess you're a man now."

Roy said you're a man now. Well, that's all: nothing about not doing it again because it was bad or shameful.

"Was that your first time?"

"Yeanh." Johnny nodded.

"When were you thirteen?"

"February the eighteenth. But I'm not lyin' though. . . . I felt *waves* go through me an' everything."

"Did you tell your mother?"

"*Noooooooo*, 'er you *kiddin'*? I wasn't even gonna tell *you*."

"Why?"

"I didn't want'cha to think I was that kind of a guy."

"There wasn't anything bad in what you did." Roy held his lower lip between his teeth.

Johnny sat on the corner of the desk jiggling his foot. "I don't know." He was afraid he might bust out and cry. "I didn't wanna tell you because I thought you'd get mad." He clamped his mouth shut tight, looking at the open sliding door of the case before him.

"You shouldn't feel that way, Johnny. I've done it too . . . *all* men have. There isn't any shame involved. Why hell, Johnny, I'm not mad. Why should I be?"

"I don't know."

Roy reached in his workshirt pocket and took out a cigarette. He tapped it several times on his watch crystal. "Do you ever wonder about sex—the sexual act and girls?"

"Now an' then," Johnny said lightly.

Roy lit the cigarette, then said gravely, "Johnny, I'm going to tell you some things that a father should tell a son during the time he's maturing into manhood. I'll just sort of take your father's place."

"Okay, Roy."

"For one thing, you shouldn't feel ashamed for what you did. You're growing up. Now you can understand the relationship between a man and a woman."

"Yeanh . . . I know."

"It isn't vulgar, but normal. Not something to do and feel ashamed of afterward. Movies and books and cartoons have *cheapened* sex, made it into something shameful. It's really a development, a growth. Hell Johnny, even flies screw, so you can see it's no great accomplishment. Have you ever been with a girl?"

"Naw . . . some girl over in Malvern just *showed* it to me."

"Did you feel that was bad?"

"Huh-uh."

"See?" Roy raised his hand. "You were younger then and felt no guilt. Guilt's a strange and funny thing."

Johnny nodded.

"We'll talk about it sometime this week—when we go fishing."

"Okay. . . . Man I've been waitin' to go fishin' for a hell of a long time. Jeez, I've never been fishin' before in my life."

"We'll close up early some evening and go out to Jackson Dam. How does that sound?"

"That sounds"—he hesitated—"I ain't got no fishin' rod."

"I've got two."

"Can I use one?"

"I don't see why not."

"Really?"

"Of course you can."

"Gee, Roy, you're *swell*!" Johnny said happily as he slid off the edge of the desk. "I'll work for you for nothin'."

"No—can't do that, Sport."

"Sport?" He grinned. "Why'd ya call me that?"

"You're a good sport."

"I am?"

"Certainly." Roy took a deep drag from his cigarette, exhaled and said, "Don't you want me to call you Sport?"

"Yeah man, I shore do . . . that's sharp. It's a nickname, ain't it? Jeez, I never had a hairy old *nick*name. I like it—I really like it."

"Okay," Roy smiled, "that's fine 'cause you're stuck with it now."

Johnny hit Roy lightly on the arm with the back of his hand. Boy-o-boy, spray paintin' my bike: hotdog an' he's takin' me fishin' an' callin' me Sport. I never ever had a nickname: man-o-man.

He took up the broom and began sweeping the station floor. Roy was laboring over a group of figures on a sales-sheet. After he swept up he scrubbed the washbowl in the men's room with Old Dutch Cleanser until the bowl was shining white in the sunlight that slanted down through the high window above the toilet. The soap in the tray above the sink was just a thin sliver so Johnny tossed it in the basket, polished up the tray, and Roy told him there was a whole case of Lava under the workbench in the back room. Behind the partition in the small back room on the workbench lay his bike; and already the old red paint was beginning to wrinkle from the paint remover. He happily opened a box of Lava and put the fresh cake of gray soap in the tray, humming "Rum and Coca-Cola." He took the wastepaper basket out and emptied the contents in a wire burner behind the station. He didn't have a match so he went in and got Roy's Ronson lighter. It had J K engraved in the little silver box scroll on the lighter's face.

"It was Jack Karn's lighter," Roy told him, slipping the lighter into his watchpocket. "He was killed in the war . . . we were buddies."

"Oh," Johnny said softly, noting the solemnness in Roy's voice. He picked up the Cleanser and Sani-Flush and dragged the broom outside to the women's restroom. He knocked on the frosted glass window. "Anyone in 'ar?" he shouted.

There was no reply so he went in. It was dirty, more damn dirtier than the men's. Johnny set to work cleaning it up. In the washbowl was a piece of toilet paper with a pair of red wide lips imprinted on the paper so clearly he could see the wrinkles. He lifted it slowly from the washbowl and looked at it *go on* as he held it in his hands *go on go on* and he brought the lips up to his own. The paper was against his mouth *feel no shame* and the texture was smooth *don't ever feel ashamed* and there was no thrill or excitement, only loneliness. He threw the paper into the wastebasket and then took it out and dumped it on the fire.

Johnny watched a folded-over sanitary napkin wrapped in toilet paper suddenly catch fire and burn. He knew what they were for. The fire danced lickingly up and he had to take a step back. He put the basket in the restroom and closed the door and went into the sta-

tion saying "Them *wimmen!*" as he put the broom behind the oil stove.

"What's the matter, Sport?" Roy asked, looking up from the newspaper.

"They *shore* can dirty up a crapper."

Roy chuckled. "Do you know why?"

"Huh-uh."

"They get an enjoyment out of making a mess of things they don't have to clean up."

"Oh?"

"Sure—they spend a good deal of their life cleaning up, so they want to get even."

Johnny grinned and looked at the newspaper in Roy's lap. "Has Charlie Myers been here?"

"Yes, he just took off with the first load."

"Jesus he's late." Johnny looked up to the Coca-Cola clock above the door: it was eight after five. "I had almost all my papers delivered by *'is* time."

Johnny snapped into a boxing stance, hunched over with his arms in close to his ribs, his left fist out from his right. "Ca'mon you old *sonofabitch*," he grinned, "I'll take ya on a couple of rounds." He made a couple of short jabs with his left and Roy laughed, saying, "You want to get hurt, don't you?"

"You may be *big*, brother," Johnny growled, "but'cha ain't too big fer me."

Roy narrowed his eyes, taking a long slow drag from his cigarette. He closed his eyes and tilted his head back, blowing up a small stream of pale blue smoke.

Johnny relaxed and went over to the chair and put his hand on Roy's broad shoulder. "I'm sorry for callin' you a *sonofabitch*, Roy. . . ."

Roy smiled. "I wasn't mad."

"You weren't?"

"I was just being tolerant."

"Oh." Johnny broke into a wide ear-to-ear grin.

"Am I tired!" Roy yawned with his mouth open and Johnny could see the gold fillings in the back of his mouth.

Johnny sat up on the corner of the desk. "Did you open early 'is mornin'?"

"The usual time: eight."

"I'd of been over if it wasn't for Grandma."

"That's okay, Sport—you take care of her. She needs you. You're young and can be a great help to her. It's good for young people to help old folks when they're sick like your grandmother."

"I don't mind it too much." He yawned, then frowned and added, "But sometimes she *drives* me batty."

"Be tolerant."

Johnny nodded and bit his lip. "She's *awful* old an' sick. . . . I should be glad to help 'er."

"That's the spirit." Roy smiled warmly.

Johnny smiled too. Roy could make him smile and feel happy so easily.

Johnny looked up. "I was meanin' to ask you about supper."

Roy crushed out his cigarette in the ashtray. "I believe I'll go around six or six-thirty. I can bring back whatever you want."

"Well I'll be eatin' at home."

"Who's going to run the station?" Roy asked. "Can't you stay?"

"Sure . . . but . . . I—I guess I can call Aunt Marg an' tell 'er I'll be eatin' here."

"I don't see why you couldn't. The station's got to stay open . . . and you're my partner."

Johnny felt an impulse to walk over and take Roy's hand. Roy trusted him. When he had the paper route and was hanging around the station, he'd get in the cash register when Roy was outside. He'd never taken more than a quarter at a time, and he knew that Roy knew it too. Roy even showed him how to open the register by pushing the right corner of the drawer so it would slide open without the bell ringing.

"You'd leave *me* to run the station—all alone?"

"Certainly. Why not? I trust you . . . partner." Roy winked.

That *trust* and *partner* was like a stab.

"You can't." His face became hard and his eyes glistened.

"Why not?"

"'Cause I've been stealin' from ya."

"How do you mean?"

"The cash register." Johnny dropped down from the desk and stood in front of Roy, looking out the window past the toolshed to the edge of the lot where a large billboard showed a boy with huge bulging muscles—the result of eating Wonder Bread. "I took *money* out of your cash register."

"I knew that," Roy said matter-of-factly.

"Then why dint'cha calla cops?"

"What would that prove, Sport?"

"I don't know."

"I wanted you to tell me you took it."

"What made'cha think I would?"

"I knew you would. You're the kind of a boy that would eventually tell me. As I've said, I want to feel like a father to you, and one way to do that is to trust you—then you in turn would be honest with me. I'm very proud of you for telling me, Sport. It hurts to tell the truth, doesn't it?" Roy reached out and took Johnny's hand and gave it a firm confident squeeze.

"Yes," he said swallowing hard.

"I want you to grow up to be a fine man, so I can feel the pride a father has the right to feel . . . even though we aren't flesh and blood relations."

"You knew all along I was takin' money, an'en you'd still leave me here to run the station . . . even *hired* me. If it was anyone . . . anyone else, they'd of prob'ly called the cops."

"Perhaps. . . . But they wouldn't have the faith in you that *I* do." Roy let go of Johnny's hand. "Go out and open us a couple of cokes."

"I doan *wan'* any." Johnny sat back up on the desk. He leaned over with his elbows on his knees. Boy-o-boy.

"You haven't looked at me in the eyes once since you told me."

"How can I?" A tear fell to his wrist and rolled warmly down the inside and hung there, above the dirty floor.

Roy tossed the folded paper to the desk and stood beside him with his arm around Johnny's shoulder. He lifted Johnny's chin with his forefinger so that their eyes met and locked. Shame and disgust clashed and were destroyed by love and forgiveness.

"Don't feel bad, Sport," Roy told him kindly.

"I can't help it." Johnny's chin quivered. "Here you go givin' me everything, bein' nice an' all an' alla time you knew I was a dirty fuckin' crook."

"No you're not."

"The hell if I ain't."

"The slate's clean, Sport."

"No it's not."

"Why?"

"I was kicked outa Jack Hunt's place downa street." Johnny

twisted his neck and tore his eyes from Roy and looked at the floor.

"You mean Hunt's Drugstore?"

"Yeanh."

"Why?"

"He caught me with a couple of goddamn lousy comic books under my shirt, 'at's why. I'm nothin' but a goddamn crook."

Roy squeezed Johnny's shoulder. "Don't go talking like that."

"Well?" He sniffled.

"You're a boy growing up. All children pick up things at your age. It's just a habit you have to break like any other habit. You can go from bad to worse or bad to good. I want to help you go from bad to good."

"I *wanna* be good—jus' bein' near you makes me wanna be good . . . jus' so I can be your friend. I doan have *any* friends. None. I can jus' see myself out at the lousy goddamn reformatory jus' like my ol'—" Johnny hesitated, catching his breath. The name was formed on his lips and the thought of saying it made his bowels sink.

Even though he found out about Uncle Cliff, Aunt Edna's husband, being in the reformatory, from Aunt Blanche about three weeks after coming back from Malvern, it didn't make too much difference to him except he'd like to have a talk with Cliff about it. He was real interested in prisons and stuff like that. But he knew that his old Aunt Blanche, who used to be a crummy old madam, figured that no one in the world was good, and she told him only out of spite of hating someone who could have once made a mistake, paid for it and turned out fine and didn't do any more bad things. That was important: being bad and becoming good. Johnny wanted to be so darn good but different things just led him to do bad things, and man, now he'd just got to be good because of this filling-station job and all.

Johnny turned from Roy and glanced out the window. Old Aunt Blanche don't want no one to go straight, because she's been so wrong and still whores and knows that ain't good. It's like swiping comic books: you always want someone with you so in case you get caught you don't get *all* the putrid blame and take the rap alone. Man, that's the hairy old truth. Or something like that.

Johnny rubbed his eye with his knuckles and turned to Roy. He suddenly felt desperate and wanted to scream out his fear about ending up in jail like his uncle, but then he found a calm reassurance in

Roy's eyes. Everything in him relaxed and he wasn't afraid any more. Roy was going to teach him Right.

Now, watching Roy, he suddenly felt like telling him about Uncle Cliff because it would, in some way, show he was a true pal. But nothing about Uncle Cliff would interest Roy, he probably didn't even know his uncle. Johnny shrugged. "And I don't care if I go to the reformatory or not."

"Take it easy, old bub—don't go talking like that." Roy squeezed his shoulder. "You and me can be buddies and trust each other."

Roy glanced out the door as tires squealed for a red light. He turned back to Johnny: "And if there's anything you want—no matter what it is—come to me. I'll get it for you. But please don't steal, Sport."

"Okay."

"Come to me . . . I'll help you. I *want* to help you. Do you believe me?"

"Sure, Roy." Johnny looked up into the warm brown eyes.

"I want you to believe me."

"I do, Roy. . . . I'll be good. . . . I won't steal."

Roy slapped him confidently on the back and sat back down in the swivelchair. He lit a cigarette and said, "If Jack Hunt told me you took some funnybooks I wouldn't believe him until I asked you first. If you told me you didn't—I'd go over and punch him in the nose, because I have faith in you to tell me the truth at all times . . . and I'm going to believe everything you tell me, Sport. Never lie to me. No matter how bad it is. I won't give you hell. I just want you to always tell me the truth."

They looked into each other's eyes and Johnny felt clean and good. "I'll never lie to you, Roy. I really won't."

"Okay, Partner." Roy winked.

"Okay, Partner." Johnny smiled, jumping down off the desk.

"Would you like Coneys and chili for supper?" Roy slapped him lightly on the rear as he passed.

"Yeah, man." Johnny jumped.

"You call home while I wash up." Roy stretched and went to the restroom and closed the door.

Johnny sat down in the warm chair chewing his lip, hearing the water tap running. It didn't hurt to tell the truth. He swung around in the chair and shoved aside the newspaper, pulling the telephone toward him.

Roy brought back four Coney's and a pint of chili in a white cardboard container. There was a spoon at the station because sometimes Roy ran down to the grocery store next to Hunt's for a small can of fruit cocktail.

"No cars came," Johnny said glumly as he twisted off the lid of the container.

Roy was leaning in the doorway smoking and watching the cars speed by, unaware for a moment that Johnny had spoken.

"What did you say, Sport?"

"Say? Oh—I said no cars came." Johnny chewed hungrily, his cheek bulging.

"They've been avoiding me today," Roy said with a half-smile.

A '41 Buick pulled in under the roof and Roy dropped his half-smoked cigarette, grinding it out with his toe. He went around to the open window.

"Shoot me a buck's worth, Mac," the man said.

"Yes, sir," Roy smiled politely, "Regular or Ethyl?"

"Regular."

Roy ran a dollar's worth of gas into the tank, noticing the Florida license plate. A pang of lonesomeness settled over him like a cold wet spray. It was a depressing flood of nostalgia for Jacksonville and the air base. Like tumblers falling into place he had a quick flashing of the bars, the whores, the palms and the moon and the beaches and the fishing, a rapid jumble slipping into his consciousness and fleeing. The bell on the pump brought him back.

Roy let the nozzle drip and slammed it into the side of the pump and screwed on the gas cap. He went smiling up to the open window and the man extended a bill between his index and middle fingers.

"Check your oil, sir?"

"Naw, it's okay."

Roy wiped off the windshield. He stood back as the Buick pulled away, then went into the station to ring up the sale. Johnny was scraping the last of the chili from the container.

"Good?" Roy smiled, putting the dollar in the drawer.

"Damn right—is chili's always good."

Roy smiled warmly, licking his lips. They were as dry as paper.

Johnny gathered the debris and wrappers from the desk, sweeping a few crumbs to the floor.

"I've gotta build me a house." Johnny grinned as he went to the restroom.

"Build a—oh, yeah." Roy smiled.

Before Johnny closed the door he shook the dirty spoon in Roy's direction: "You're not on your toes."

"I know it . . . but wash that spoon and bring it back before you contaminate it." He raised his brow.

"Awwwwwwwww," Johnny said sadly, "I won't have nothin' ta play inna sand with."

"I'll *sand* you—right where it hurts." Roy laughed.

Johnny grinned and closed the door and Roy heard the bolt slide and click. "I *dare* ya," Johnny shouted, "I *double* dare ya."

Roy reached in the bottom drawer and took a fresh package of Chesterfields from the white and green carton.

It was a couple of hours later and Johnny was back in the rest-room when Roy's mother called.

"Roy?" she said.

"Yes."

"Are you going to close soon?"

"Yes."

"Coming right home?"

"Yes."

"I want to talk with you."

"Yes."

"Roy . . ."

"I'm still here."

"Uncle Harry and I drove by a short while ago. . . ."

"Harry's a goddamn sneak," he told her venomously. "Won't you get it in that head of yours that I'm thirty years old?" Then he whispered, "Don't you think it's about time you began minding your *own* business?"

"What?"

"I want you to shut up and leave my life alone."

"Oh, Baby . . . you hurt me so. My heart's just heavy with pain. I'm your *mother*—I so want to help you. That's what mothers are for."

"Don't meddle," he warned her through clenched teeth. That dull aching throb above his right eye caused him to squint. Dammit after all.

"Don't you love me, Baby?"

Tell her the truth. Go on . . . for once in your life, tell her. Roy

ran his moist tongue over his lips. "That has nothing to do with it."

"My Baby, my lovely Baby."

"Please—for *Christ's sake*, Mother, this is a party line."

"Oh, Roy—"

He slammed the black plastic receiver into the cradle and stared out the window into the purple dusk. She'd done it again. All through his life she'd done nothing except be nice and kind and sweet to shame him into being ashamed of the way he treated her. The billboard lights were on. *Wonder Bread*. Eat eight goddamn slices a day and grow up to be big and strong. Sure.

Roy's right eyelid was twitching and he placed his elbows on the desk and rested his aching head in his moist palms.

Chapter 3

I SHOULD never have let Jean go, Roy thought wildly: as he often thought above the wide blue-green Pacific where it was cold flying through the misty clouds with the heavy droning of the engines of the PBV pushing his eardrums into his head, and through the rushing vortex of swimming thoughts always came the heavy masculine voice of Lieutenant Commander Turner through the cracking intercom saying Zeros coming in from one o'clock *i love you jean* the stiff swelling in the back of the neck and the hard tight drop of the gut with the sexless hollow of the throat closing up and he would see the bright and flashing glint of silver banking in the sun *jean jean darling remember me when i die because i love you jesus i love you* and he was sure that he was going to die just like Johnson did when the wing guns of a Zero caught him in the chest throwing him back against the fuselage wall with a surprised *oh* and he lay writhing convulsively on the floor with his chest ripped and torn drawing his knee up and down *oh jesus christ not me fellas* Johnson said and a foamy trickle of crimson ran out of his mouth down into his ear and the blood matting on his chest and his urine-stained trousers steamed in the coldness and no man should die in the cold but Johnson did and so was Roy and he could always smell the death *im*

going to die jean i love you because it was sharper and stronger than it was when you were cleaning a rabbit *i love jean i love you jean* and the odor lodged up in the membranes of his nose to recall whenever he wanted to smell his fate and a lot of times when he didn't. I should have held on and fought, I should have never given up my Jean. But I can never tell Johnny about her even though I love him as a son. I can never tell him, ever.

It was the uttered name of Charlotte that I groaned while caught in the hot twisting tightness of Jean in the heavy sultry darkness that ended it all, for then she knew it was my sister I was thinking of. Because I said her name.

What made you say that? Jean asked.

I don't know, I just don't know.

Yes you do.

She lay on the bed crying in the darkness while I smoked in silence looking down to the pale moonlit beach. The water was inky and far out on the lake there were two small lights of a vessel. Whenever I took a drag the tobacco crackled and the firetip illuminated the frame of the window and the rusty screen. The lighthouse out on the Pie Pier burned bright and gave way to darkness and burned bright again.

Jean soon stopped sobbing and not long after that she wanted to go home and there was no scene, no begging of forgiveness because there was nothing I could say or do.

She dressed in the dark and her bag was packed.

The cement road home was like an unwinding white ribbon and I clenched the wheel with trembling hands. It was sixty miles back to Wilkinson City but in the obvious and strained silence it seemed closer to two hundred and sixty.

Every time I started to say something she would say

Shut-up.

Then she said

Quit your bawling.

And I did while she sat on the far side of the seat huddled against the door. I was suddenly very repulsive. I wanted to murder her but I loved her and wanted someone else to have and love her if I couldn't.

That wasn't the first time, Jean said, but it was the last. So go on home to her, little boy.

Far to my left I saw a star fall, leaving a dying trail of white and to me that was a symbol. All through your life you gather symbols that mean nothing to the immediate present.

The sky was becoming a dull gray on my left in the east over the rise of hills bathed in a morning mist.

We were both twenty-one and had gone to school and graduated together and were to be married on November the first.

The trees were like ghosts above the glare of my headlights as the full branches hung over the road which began to blur too often.

I don't remember how many times I had said Charlotte but I guess Jean could take just so much. I always pretended it was Charlotte. I couldn't help it. I'd never admitted it before.

The eastern horizon was blazing under the dawn clouds and the aurora on her profile couldn't cover her drained pale cheeks. Maybe she was sorry, but it was too late to begin over. Once you have chopped down a tree there is no putting it back: just rake up the scattered chips and if you don't like the look of the stump you can take a saw and cut it off even with the ground, burn out the root and fill the hole with earth and seed. It would be very easy to connect a hose to the exhaust out on some country road.

We were passing through Liberty on Route 40 and I knew this would be the last time Jean would ever be so close. It was twenty miles to Wilkinson City. Twenty miles down the road there was a concrete underpass above the highway for the railroad, with wide thick concrete pillars dividing the two lanes, and it would be very easy to push the accelerator to the floor one block from the underpass to see how big a dent I could make in the first pillar, grabbing her at the last moment to hold her close. I had to think.

I'm tired of playing a part, Roy, Jean said. You were always with *her*, never with me, me: Jean Keller. I was someone to brag *her* off to, someone you could compare *her* with. *She* said this, *she* said that. Everything I ever wore *she* had something like it.

Jean was crying with dry sobs. No more tears. You can run out of them just like any other thing.

I'm fed up to here, Jean sobbed. Tonight you cinched it good. I'm me and not *her*. I intend to stay that way. Am I as good as *she* was? Oh, but that was one thing you forgot to tell me. Oh I wish I were a man—I bet you do too. It must be thrilling to be a man. But we'll never know, will we?

They were razor words slashing me up inside. Her voice became flat and dull without emotion. Like it could have been a confession brought about through a tired feeling of guilt. I started to say something.

Shut-up, Jean pleaded, mouse, mouse, mouse. Go tell it to your mama. You disgust me. All I can hear is your filthy obscene language and hear *her* name and feel you weight me down when I'm not there and neither are you. I always knew how you peeked in the open bathroom door, standing way far back so I couldn't see you. That's why I never looked toward the door and never closed it all the way. I knew you were watching me. I just didn't want any embarrassment between us because I loved you with all my heart. Oh I felt so much a woman. Just please shut-up, Roy. I can't stand it. *loved*: that's past tense.

Earlier this evening: we were on the beach roasting frankfurters and drinking ice-cold beer, watching the brilliant sunset. Then it got dark and the fire died to soft glowing embers. Jean lay back in my arms on the blanket and we stared up to the heavens, to the millions of stars, and I asked her which one she wanted and Jean stroked my cheek and whispered the one beside her and I'm not going to hear things like that any more.

I knew it was coming all along, maybe even knew it when I was grunted out of my mother and held up by my feet as the Breath of Life was slapped into me:

Ever since I can remember, Mother's called me Baby. I objected when I grew older so she called me Baby when we were alone and Roy in front of people.

I can always remember Charlotte giving me baths. She was my big sister, almost five years older than me. There was that burning feeling all over when she washed me good down there with the soapy washcloth. She always washed that real good and it made her laugh.

Charlotte said I pissed from my peter and Mother said I weeweewed from my baboo.

I was Charlotte's sweet Doll,
Mother's lovey Baby,
and Father's fine Son.

I was ashamed of my father because he never stood up to Mother to tell her what was on his mind. People laugh when they listen to

the radio and hear husbands say *Yes dear* meekly and *No dear* meekly and *Of course dear* meekly: it always embarrassed me because that was Father.

Charlotte would sit on the davenport with her arm around me, reading about Uncle Remus and Br'er Rabbit and Br'er Fox. I would laugh and Charlotte would kiss me on the forehead and say that I wasn't a dirty old Tar Baby. I was a Honey Baby. Br'er Rabbit brought the Easter Eggs too. I just thought it was any old bunny, but it wasn't.

Charlotte would have me dress in her old clothes. It always made me wonder why she had pink silky pants when I had white cloth ones. Her pants didn't have holes in front like mine did. It impressed me greatly.

When I was nine I told her I wouldn't dress for her any more. She slapped my face.

—You sonofabitch, you do as I say.

—I don't want to.

—Why?

—Because why. . . .

—Tell me.

—Because other boys don't. They call me a sissy.

Then she kissed me. My face still stung.

—You are a sissy. You are my little sissy.

—I'm no sissy.

—Yes you are.

—I am not. I am not. I am not not *not*.

—My sweet little sissy honeybunch, Charlotte would say, taking me in her arms kissing me wetly on the mouth. I can remember when she took my hand that first time and put it up against her dress so I could feel she didn't have what I had. She made me keep my hand down there on her by holding my wrist. She did that a lot. She wouldn't let me see where it was. Girls were made a lot different from boys.

Mother was always at the grocery store during the week and on Saturday I would help Father. I was ashamed to work at the store because I was ashamed of my father.

I always liked school and it embarrassed me when Mother would come so often to see Miss Campbell. At first I was real proud that the whole class could see my mother; but I became ashamed of her fatness and her twice-a-month visits. Mother had huge loose breasts

that wobbled and I knew the boys in the class were giggling and snickering to themselves. I hated her for being so careless about her appearance. I hated her breasts.

I made good grades in school and I tried awfully hard to be smart and do just what Miss Campbell told me.

She bought all her groceries at Father's store, and if I was working I would hear Mother say, That's perfectly all right, Miss Campbell. Yes. Yes. Oh, think nothing of it, really.

I made good grades in school.

Mother started making Charlotte come to the store to work after school and made me stay home to do my homework. I missed Charlotte, and kissing her.

I believe I was eleven when Charlotte began sneaking into my room. I remember the first time because I was sleeping and she scared me when she shook me.

—What do you want?

—I want to talk, Charlotte said getting under the covers.

—What about? I whispered.

—Oh, different things, she said. She was moving around like she was trying to get comfortable, and then she said:

—Do you love me?

—Why sure I do.

Charlotte kissed me and took my hand from under my pillow and put it down on her. The moving around was getting her nightgown up.

—That's where I pee from and that's where the babies come out at. My ears were burning in the warm darkness.

—Do you know how babies get there, Roy? she whispered hard. Her breath was warm in my face.

—God. He puts them there.

With this, Charlotte reached in my pajamas.

—Don't do that! I whispered, drawing myself back.

—Keep your hand there, she said in a harsh hiss against my face.

—Why?

—Because I said so.

—Why?

—Keep your mouth shut, can't you? Charlotte said and she didn't sound as cross. I didn't want her mad at me.

She kissed me hard and lay back breathing heavily.

—You'll do anything I say, won't you?

- Yes, I said.
- You can drive Father's car?
- Yes. You know that.
- Good!
- Why?
- Saturday night. We're going to run away.
- Run away?
- Yes. We're going to go out West.
- Who?
- You and I. We're going to get married.
- You're my sister. I can't marry you.
- We'll go to Mexico to live.
- We'll get caught.
- Not if you grow a mustache.
- I didn't even have fuzz on my face.
- I can't go with you.
- Why?
- You're my sister.
- What difference does that make?
- I don't know, I just can't.
- You don't love me. Charlotte began to cry.
- Yes I do. Yes I do.
- No one loves me.
- I love you with all my heart.
- Do you really?
- Yes. A whole bushel.
- Oh, sweetheart! Charlotte kissed me and wet tears fell on my face. Now we'll leave Saturday night when they're both asleep.
- No. I can't go and I won't go.
- Don't you want to put this up in me?
- No.
- Why?
- I don't want to hurt you.
- She giggled and it sounded like she was sucking spit in the back of her throat.
- You'll do anything I say or I'll kill you, she said in a funny voice. I've got a man locked up in my dresser drawer.
- Go to bed, I told her.
- He doesn't hurt me one bit.

—Go to bed.

—He's a bastard like you.

—Please go to bed. Mother and Father will hear us. *Please* go to bed.

—I *hate* them. I *hate* them. Oh Roy, I *hate* them!

—Why do you hate them?

—I'll tell you someday after I kill them.

—Don't talk like that!

—They don't love me. Only you. You are my little brother. I *love* you so.

—Go to bed.

—Shut-up. Yes, we have no bananas, we have no bananas today.

She began to hum, then giggled like a little girl.

I was wishing I was dead or something.

Then she reached down and took my hand away and got up without a word, went silently to the door and opened it and closed it behind her. I turned on the light and sat there with the pillows behind me. Finally I got up and went to the bathroom to wash. I could see the light in Charlotte's room creasing out from under the door. I peeked in the keyhole but couldn't see anything. I went back to my room and cried because I knew she wasn't well in the head.

The light was still on when I woke up in the morning. My room was filled with bright sunlight, sort of making the dirty horror of last night more unreal.

When I came down for breakfast she was happy and cheerful, acting like nothing had happened, and she was the same lovely Charlotte but different to me because behind that beauty and cheerfulness everything was a mixed jumble and she was crazy. Last night was no dream.

I was sick at school that morning with a bad cramp in my stomach. I couldn't straighten up and Mother had to leave the store to come and take me home. She called the doctor and he came and listened to my heart, felt around my stomach and left some medicine.

When Charlotte arrived home from school she came up to my room and said:

—How are you?

—Okay, I guess.

She placed her cool hand on my warm forehead.

—You have a little fever.

—A little.

—Please take care of yourself. Charlotte bent over, putting her soft lips to my cheek, and left without another word.

Mother brought up my supper that night and I didn't eat very much, and what I didn't eat I flushed down the toilet. I didn't want Mother to worry.

When everyone went to bed that night I waited for Charlotte but she didn't come.

Mother made me stay home the next day and the following day I returned to school.

Nothing was ever said again about Saturday and running away to get married.

I never knew what nights she was going to come. I waited silently, fighting sleep, wanting her to come in and take off her nightgown so we could get under the covers and pull them over our heads. I was the Sheik of Araby and we were in our tent of Love.

We would kiss, any time, anywhere, as long as no one saw. Hungry kisses.

Then Charlotte didn't come in for a whole week.

—What's the matter? I asked her one evening in the upstairs hall. She gave me a dirty look that made me shrink all over.

—Did I make you mad?

—Be quiet, you *whoreboy* pimp.

—What is it? What's the matter?

She turned and walked away, laughing musically.

And it was over.

I knew that but I didn't want to admit it, and I cried and thought I'd go crazy because I needed and loved her very much.

Father gave me a Model-T Ford for my fourteenth birthday. I would go out driving in the country when I wasn't delivering groceries in Father's truck.

Then she began going with this fellow from Indiana. She would look at me as if she were saying *well what of it little boy?*

Then one evening in the hallway she yanked her skirt up and hooked her thumb under her step-ins, pulling them down. I could smell whisky fumes. Charlotte shoved herself out and I looked down at her and up to her face.

—Go ahead, she said.

I drew back my arm and smashed my fist into her mouth. She fell

to her knees and laughed through cut and bleeding lips. She put her hand to her mouth and took it away bloody. I stood above her and if she opened her mouth to say anything I was ready to kick in her face. She just looked blankly into her bloody hand. Everything in me suddenly broke and dissolved. I got down to my knees in front of her and put my hands on her shoulders.

—I'm sorry.

She stared at the blood in stunned silence.

—*I'm* hurt too.

I helped her up and led her to the bathroom. She said nothing and held her bloodstained hand away at arm's length. I washed her hand and her mouth and her chin. Blood had dripped down on her white silk blouse. It was the blouse I had given her last year for Christmas.

—You hit your mouth on the bedpost.

—Yes.

—I'm sorry.

—You hit me.

—I'm sorry I hit you.

Her lips were puffy and she lisped. One of her teeth was chipped and her eyes were blank, looking but not seeing. She was in a state of shock.

—I did it on the bedpost, Charlotte said dully, I hit my mouth on the bedpost.

—Yes. I'm sorry.

—But you really did it.

—Yes. I really did it.

—Poor you and poor me.

—I'll never hurt you again.

Then I got to my knees and buried my head in her skirt between her warm thighs. I kept whispering I was sorry. Charlotte's long cool fingers caressed the back of my neck. I lifted my face up and she was just staring blankly at the wall, saying:

—Poor you and poor me. . . .

Charlotte stood up and tried to open the door. I unlocked it and stood there watching her go the length of the hall to her room. She walked slowly, shuffling her feet like an old woman.

That night while the family was asleep I went down to the basement and got out Father's twelve-gauge shotgun. But Charlotte's

door was locked and I could hear her making the noises. I don't know what on earth stopped me from shooting the door open and killing her then and there.

I was awake the rest of the night reading W. H. Hudson's *Green Mansions*. Each time I liked it better. I went with Rima into a far and different but wonderful world. It was cool and clean and shadowy. I could smell the forest green, and the birdcall of the Giselle rang in my ears, and the haunting strains floated between the avenues of trees.

In the morning I left for school without breakfast. I couldn't explain my swollen fist and I kept my hand thrust deep in my pocket. Charlotte was drinking tea and nibbling on toast. Her mouth was puffy and colored a bluish-purple. Her eyes evaded mine and her hands trembled.

—Just look at your sister, Mother told me. See what happens when you drink?

—She's twenty-one, Father said.

—Oh, you *shut-up*, Will, Mother said, then turned to me:

—Please eat something, Baby.

—I'm not hungry.

—You don't go to speakeasies, do you?

—No.

—Heavens to Betsy, Clara, he's only fifteen.

Mother ignored him.

—Come and kiss me before you go.

I kissed her and as I went out the door I heard Mother say:

—A speakeasy brawl—that's what it was. I know that much.

Jesus I was tired and upset.

When school was out that afternoon I went down to the locker-room and rummaged through some junk until I found what I was looking for. I made sure the locker-room was deserted, then placed my right hand flat on the sitting bench that ran down between a row of lockers, turned my head aside and slammed the spikes of a football shoe down on the back of my hand. It hurt like holy hell.

I didn't eat home that night.

I told Mother and Father I hurt my hand in a football scrimmage. Mother about fainted and Father wanted to know if my team won.

—We lost, I told him.

I was coming in one night from one of my long country drives. I

was almost involved in two wrecks but I was not very lucky. I walked around the side of the house to the front porch when I happened to glance in the living room through the side window. Charlotte and Vance Ross (the fellow from Indiana) were necking on the davenport. Charlotte had her arms wrapped tightly around him and his hand was under her dress. Her eyes opened while they were still kissing and Charlotte twisted around so that her hateful eyes gazed directly into mine, as if she might have known I would be standing there, and I couldn't move a muscle. I was petrified. Charlotte's eyes became narrow and she opened her legs lying back. Vance fumbled with the lamp on the end table.

Darkness bathed my face.

I staggered back from the window with my hands over my face, my guts busting to scream.

When I came down for breakfast the following morning, I seemed to sense a quality of suspense in the air, and it didn't take me long to find out what it was:

—You were left out of the news, Charlotte said, taking a dainty corner bite of toast.

I unwrapped Mother's fat arm from around me and sat down at my place, asking what news.

—Vance and I are going to be married in a few weeks.

—That's fine, I said.

—I'm losing my little girl, Mother sighed listlessly as she poured my coffee.

—Vance may not know it but he has all his meals planned, I said to no one in particular.

—Charlotte isn't a bad cook, Mother said, she won't always be opening a can.

—Yes, I said ignoring Mother pouring milk into my coffee, just the same *old* meal every night on the same *old* platter.

—Your big sister will learn to cook, Mother said.

—She'd better, I said.

—You won't ever leave me, will you, Baby?

—No, Mother, Charlotte answered looking deep into my eyes, he'll never leave you.

I made myself eat the tasteless breakfast. I knew as I have always known: *I'm going to be something evil and nasty in her eyes, always.*

She did it to me.

I did it to me.

Damned if we both didn't do it. No one can point an accusing finger at any certain person and say: *You are to blame.*

I looked around the breakfast table and knew that. . . .

I began smoking a month before I graduated.

Charlotte and Vance were married the summer I finished school. I was overjoyed when Vance flatly refused the offer my father made him for a part-interest in our store. They moved to Indianapolis where Vance was offered a partnership in his father's housepainting business.

I thought Charlotte getting away would do me good, and that it would stop her from putting her brassières and panties and hosiery under my pillow. But it didn't. She came home for a visit about once every two weeks.

Charlotte became pregnant.

The child was only two months old when it fell from the cradle and broke its neck. I was glad, but only glad to spite her and I think it was useless. I've always held my own opinion and kept the suspicion to myself:

It was a boy and Mother had made her call it Roy.

I made myself go out with girls and made myself fall in love with Jean Keller, which was a very easy thing to do. I had dated her several times while we were in school and I thought she was a wonderful girl.

We were both nineteen the summer we began going steady. It was early fall before I told her that Charlotte was being committed to a mental institution. It didn't seem to faze her in the least. So then I asked her to marry me, was accepted and we became engaged.

I had to get married because that was the only thing I felt could save me and snap me back into reality. I needed Jean more than anything else in my life. I should have married her right off the bat. I shouldn't have kept putting off the marriage like Mother advised, but I listened, and look at me now.

The sky was bright. It seemed very high and a pale powder-blue with a few small clouds to the south.

But I love you, I pleaded. Honest, Jean, I *swear* I love you with all my heart.

Then why have we waited all these years to be married? Her voice was dry.

Because . . . because . . . I wanted to have a secure income.

I've heard that before.

God how I love you.

I thought maybe you did, but I really didn't catch on. You love only three things: Yourself, your sister, *and using that!* She was screaming the last three words with tears running down her face.

The whole world seemed to sink like an airplane hitting an air pocket. I started to say something again, anything, just to snap out of this dream, but she shook her head saying

Shut-up, shut-up, shut-up! *Pl-eease* . . . Roy, will you *please* shut-up. Give me peace. Just give me a little peace. Don't *make* me hate you any more than I already do.

I'll give her all the peace she wants when we get to the underpass. Jean lowered her face into her hands and cried.

My eyes burned and my mouth was dry. I hadn't had a cigarette since we left the cabin at the Lake. I was afraid to release the tight grip I had on the wheel to light one. I wasn't there: I wasn't any place except perhaps in a universe. It was just a sinking blackness of sensation of spinning down to Charlotte's face and her open mouth. I had every right in the world to hate her, and I couldn't hate her, I couldn't.

I can't hate Jean.

I just can't hate.

I can't hate.

I've got no guts: look at me sail through the underpass.

I've got no guts and I can't hate.

mouse mouse mouse mouse.

If I could hate I could feel better.

Jesus God I wish I could hate.

Why. . .

This is your destiny.

Roy didn't hear Johnny come out of the restroom and he was startled when the boy put his hand on his shoulder.

"What's the matter, Roy?" Johnny asked, frowning. "You gotta headache?"

"Ohhhhhhhh, no, Sport . . . I'm just tired." Roy smiled wearily.

"You hurt someplace?"

"No—why?"

"Your eyes are fulla tears."

"Strain."

Johnny put his cool hand on Roy's forehead. "I think ya gotta god-damn hairy old fever."

"It's okay, old bub." Roy smiled. "Everything is fine."

"Man, I know it is."

Chapter 4

THE room was dark and Barbara lay in the oppressive heat sleeplessly. Danny's steady breathing was rhythmic and heavy. The sheet had been kicked to the foot of the bed and she raised the hem of her nightgown above her knees and placed her forearm over her eyes.

At least she had one consolation in that Johnny had started working today. He'd waited so long for that job at the station. Well, at least he'd be off the street nights. Where did he say Roy took him after work . . . oh yes, out to the root-beer stand for sloppy-joes.

She sighed wearily, feeling sticky all over. Although the window was open it afforded no breeze. The night hung still and she could hear the distant roaring trucks on Elliott Avenue.

Barbara swung her legs over the side of the bed and fumbled for her cigarettes and matches on the night table. The sudden flare of the match blinded her momentarily. She took the ashtray and moved from the bed to the window and sat on the cushion on the floor, leaning against the window sill. She stared up at the million twinkling stars scattered across the dark heaven, thinking how lucky her kid sister Edna was. She and Cliff had quit drinking in time; that was what Barbara had tried to get Jim to do. Oh, it was a lousy lonely life. Things had been fine before the war. It was the war that had made everything lousy.

Maybe a drink would relax her. Yes, maybe it would. In the bottom dresser drawer beneath some slips and blouses she kept a fifth of Gordon's gin. She had to sneak it into the house just like a damn alcoholic. With her thumbnail she lifted the catch on the cap and poured a large amount into a waterglass. She replaced the fifth and sat back down on the cushion.

She quickly set the glass on the window in a jerking motion *damn damn damn*: she winced, drawing up her leg and rubbed the painful cramp in the arch of her right foot. The muscle relaxed and the pain left. Maybe she should get a job where she wasn't on her feet so much. She could brush up on her typing and shorthand and get a secretarial job.

She took a drink, then a drag on the cigarette, closing her eyes tight so she wouldn't cry, shaking her head in denial: things were never this awful before.

With her eyes closed it seemed just like she had somehow touched all the fun of yesterday. It was all there still, only slightly remote, but strangely clear after fourteen years. And now she began to remember back to that Friday evening, in the early spring of nineteen thirty-two.

Ralph, Barbara's older brother, was mad; pushing her down the hall because she had come in late. Ten-thirty was too late in the Kesler home for a seventeen-year-old girl.

"Leave me go!" Barbara cried angrily.

"Smoking!" he shouted. "You're a disgrace to the family!" Ralph, who was twenty, stood there in his slippers, trousers and undershirt.

"Leave me go!" Barbara cried out with hot tears streaming down her face. Ralph was pushing her close to the landing.

"Ralph! You stop this nonsense this very instant!" spoke Irene's firm voice of authority as she came into the hallway.

"Get out of here you—you prostitute!" Ralph shouted, red-faced. "That's all you are . . . you're a disgrace to our name. Get out of this house!"

Margaret, who came into the hallway behind Irene, was calling for Mama. Edna was beside Margaret, crying out for the big bully to stop. Both of them were wearing long cotton nightgowns.

Then Barbara was given one last shove throwing her off balance and she would have fallen down the stairs if she hadn't grabbed the banister.

"I'll *never* come back if that's what you want!" She stopped and screamed from the bottom of the stairs with her fists clenched at her sides, "I've always hated this family! Every one of you! Go ahead and sleep your lives away if you want to—I don't care! I'm grown up and I don't feel like going to bed at nine o'clock . . . so there! I hate you all!"

Mama came to the head of the landing and shoved Ralph to one

side, saying in German, "You take too much responsibility upon yourself in my house! I do not like it and you are to stop it now!" Mama's nightcap was pulled far down over her forehead and she turned to Barbara. "Come, my daughter. Come back." She held her arms out in an open embrace.

"No! No! You all hate me, I know it—I'm a lot different than the rest of you and that's why none of you like me . . . always *picking* on me . . . so I'm going and I'll never come back to your door again!"

Mama turned to Ralph, who stood there pouting with his hands in his pockets. "See what you do? See? See?" She shook her finger in his thin red face. "*Ach! You Dummkopf!*" Mama began to descend the stairs but Barbara turned and ran to the front door. "Wait, daughter! Wait, *mein Kind!*"

Barbara threw the bolt and opened the door and ran across the wooden porch and down the steps to the walk. She ran up Elliott Avenue until she couldn't hear Mama calling her and there was a sharp stabbing pain in her side and her lungs ached. She leaned against a telephone pole crying with her face buried in her hands. She didn't have a red cent and didn't know where in the world to go until she remembered Alice Borden.

It was chilly and she shivered, then began walking in long, hurried strides. The hurt indignation flashed to angry determination. Ralph hadn't believed she was making fudge at Martha Gangle's house. Probably he'd blown a tube in his short-wave set and was taking it out on her. Let him and all the rest of them think as they damn well please!

It was six blocks to Alice Borden's house and by the time Barbara got there she could see that Alice was having a party. She passed several cars in the driveway going around to the back. She didn't feel like meeting a bunch of people by going to the front door, and she'd simply die if she didn't talk Alice into putting her up for the night.

Barbara passed under the grape arbor smelling the sharp green sourness of the young grapes, and it made her mouth water tartly as lemons did.

She walked lightly up the wooden steps and almost kicked over a milk bottle and continued silently across the porch to the lighted window. The table was cluttered with home-brew bottles and booze. Alice had just come into the kitchen laughing at something Jim Par-

ish was telling her. Barbara felt her heart flutter just like it did every time she saw him.

Alice's eyes swept across the window, catching the figure of someone standing there. She let out an ear-shattering scream, clutching at her breast with one hand and grabbing Jim's arm with the other. "Jesus God!" she cried out. "A Peeping Tom!"

Jim shook off her grip and ran to the back door, flinging it open. Barbara stepped into the light from the door.

"For chrissake! Barb! What the hell, kid? Why didn't you come in? I was ready to slug you one."

"My *Gawd!*" Alice sighed, fluttering her eyelashes in rapid astonishment as Barbara came shaking in, eyes lowered, avoiding the stares of the couples who had run into the kitchen when Alice had screamed. "You sure gave me a scare . . . *wow!* Say, what's the matter, honey?"

Barbara collapsed weakly in a kitchen chair and laid her head on the oilcloth-covered table and began to cry. Jim cleared the kitchen and the others looked from Alice to Barbara to Jim, laughing they went back into the living room where a Victrola was playing some tinny-sounding music.

Alice Borden was a slender attractive woman of thirty-three with long, bleached hair. One afternoon Barbara had gone to the Haycox Drugstore on Third Avenue and applied for a job, and that's where she met Alice, who managed the store. Since Mr. Haycox had been hitting the prescription bourbon in the back room, he was in a rare glowing mood and laughingly hired her on the spot. Barbara obtained special permission to work in the afternoons, attending school in the morning. Barbara and Alice became close friends; but during working hours only, because each led different existences when leaving the store.

Barbara told them her story. "So," she concluded, "can I stay here, Alice? For several days—at least until I can find a place?"

"Sure, honey," she replied, smiling sympathetically, "You stay here as long as you want. Now come on in and join the party—forget that damn old brother of yours and everything."

"Okay." She smiled. "Thanks a lot, Alice."

"Don't thank me," Alice grinned and nodded toward Jim who was sitting on the edge of the table, "thank him, baby. He's been asking all about you." Alice patted Barbara's shoulder warmly and left the kitchen.

Barbara blushed up at Jim, who held out his cigarettes.

"Thank you," she said taking one.

Jim held a light for her. "Like a drink?"

"Yes . . . I believe I would."

"It's good stuff," Jim grinned slyly. "I know where it comes from—it's the last of the best hooch in the state."

Barbara smiled, watching him making two drinks. She had never had a drink before except the light wine Mama gave everyone during the Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners.

He's very handsome, she was thinking.

"He's the guy," Alice had whispered to Barbara one afternoon, "that I used to buy my bootleg liquor from. He was in business with his brother Hiram, but Hiram quit bootlegging a couple weeks ago and bought the Red Streak Cab Company. Jim's driving a cab for him now."

Barbara had always been bashful and shy whenever Jim came into the drugstore. She thought he was a gigolo with that easy romantic manner and cute little mustache above his lopsided smile. His eyes were dark-brown and his black hair always neatly combed.

"I guess you have to start sometime," Barbara said.

Jim lifted his head and grinned. "What?"

"Drinking."

"Nothing to it." He shrugged, handing her a glass.

Barbara sniffed at it. "What is it?"

"Just a little mountain dew and ginger ale."

Barbara tasted it. "It isn't too bad." She laughed.

"Come on in . . . meet the bunch." Jim took her arm and they went into the living room. The room was smoky and warm and the lights were low and cosy.

Barbara and Jim danced to the soft sax music from the Victrola. The drink made her feel warm inside and Jim held her close. She could smell his fragrant shaving lotion and she let herself go up against him and she told herself she was in love with him. The party broke up around twelve-thirty and Jim asked if she'd take a ride in the cab with him the following day.

"I can't go down to the store," Barbara frowned, "because that's the first place my family'll look. I just don't want to see or talk with any of them."

"I don't blame you one bit, kid."

"I'd love to go with you tomorrow, Jim."

"Hey, fine." He grinned. "I'll call you up tomorrow morning . . . around ten. That way you can get your beauty rest."

"That's impossible," she laughed.

Then Jim turned and took her face in his hands and kissed her lightly on the mouth, and without a word he walked down off the porch to the taxicab parked across the street.

When Barbara returned to the kitchen, Raymond Garner was making Alice a drink. He was a short handsome man with blond wavy hair, blue squinting eyes, a blond mustache and a large belligerent jutting jaw. Alice was nuts about him. She was nuts about a new boy friend every week.

"Jim goes for you," Alice said as she and Barbara were carrying empty glasses into the kitchen.

"Was he *really* asking about me?" she said excitedly.

"Why sure, honey."

Barbara could still feel Jim's lips upon hers.

"Awwwwww, piss on him," Raymond Garner bellowed.

"Ah, shut-up, you big lug!" Alice said.

Garner roared out laughing, throwing his head over the back of the kitchen chair. "You'd better be careful, baby . . . I'll bruise you one."

"Yeah?" Alice laughed mockingly. "You and who else?"

Raymond Garner stood up and pulled out his shirt and stuck out his belly. "Hit me—go on an' hit me . . . as hard as you can!"

"You're fer the birds."

Garner turned to Barbara, sticking out his belly. "Hit me, Margie! Hit me as hard as you can."

"Her name is Barbara, lover boy, and I'd lay off the booze if I were you."

"Oh, yeah?" Garner said with his jaw sticking out.

Then he grabbed Alice and pulled her to him, crushing his mouth against hers. Barbara felt a little embarrassed standing there watching them moving against each other.

Alice broke away. "Jesus!" she said brushing her hair up off her forehead.

"Baby, where'd ya learn to kiss like that?" Garner grinned.

"*My cousin from Milwaukee taught me how,*" Alice sang, winking at Barbara.

"You don't say!" he sneered and poured himself a drink, humming the tune.

Alice gave Barbara a silk nightgown and let her have the guest room. As Barbara was undressing she heard Alice and Raymond going down the hall. He was still singing.

The silk felt cool against her nakedness and Barbara stood before the full-length mirror, turning around, looking at herself from all angles. It was the first time she'd ever worn a silk nightgown. There had been times when she sneaked into Irene's room just to feel the silk underwear that Mama let Irene have only because she was next to the oldest, and because she worked in the bank where Mama had all her money.

Barbara lay in the darkness with her arms wrapped around the pillow thinking of what Alice and Raymond were probably doing by now. Alice had never told her what kind of work Raymond did. She was thinking of Jim and then of Mama and she cried because her life was so doggone miserable.

The following morning Barbara woke with a start and for a moment she didn't know where she was. Then it all came to her with a great soaring rush. It was Saturday and the bright warm sun fell through the window and crept across the gray carpet to the edge of the bed. It must be early to have such a long slant. Jim was going to call at ten o'clock. She threw back the sheet and hopped out of bed.

She dressed, hoping Raymond Garner wasn't there because she didn't want to be alone with him. She peeked into Alice's room and the unmade bed was empty and she went to the bathroom and washed her face. She had a bad taste in her mouth and she didn't have a toothbrush so she squeezed some Ipana on her tongue and swished it around. She combed her hair and used some of Alice's makeup. Downstairs in the kitchen there was a note on the table:

Honey

Drive around with Jim & be a good girl. If your folks come in I will tell them that you called me up on the phone from a girl friend's house where you are staying & you told me you were not coming to work. I hope to God I am doing the right thing

A

Barbara threw the note in the wastebasket and lit the burner under the coffeepot. She opened the back door and the warm spring morning smells drifted into the stale-smelling kitchen.

Barbara took the empty bottles and jugs and put them in the cupboard beneath the sink. She poured herself a cup of coffee, realizing she still didn't know what time it was. The clock in the living room read nine-six.

Barbara drank coffee as she washed up the glasses and ashtrays in the sink. She simply had to call Mama because no matter what she did she couldn't forget last night.

"Now don't go worrying, Mama," she said into the mouthpiece, "I'm fine. I'm with a girl friend so don't you worry. They don't want me to come back there, Mama—so I'm not coming back. I'm sorry about last night. . . ." Barbara hung up because she couldn't stand to hear Mama crying.

Jim called at ten-thirty and said he would stop at noon. Barbara straightened up the living room and went upstairs to make the beds. She turned red when she saw it laying on the floor by Alice's bed and she wrapped it in toilet paper and flushed it down the toilet and washed her hands good.

Jim stopped at noon and they went down to a Greek joint in the Flats where they ordered spaghetti and were served spiked grapejuice in waterglasses.

Barbara rode around with Jim the rest of the afternoon. At six o'clock Jim went to a store and bought a couple of T-bones and they headed back to Alice's place.

Barbara made coleslaw and fried the steaks in one skillet with potatoes frying in the other. She opened a can of string beans and put them on the back burner. Jim made the drinks. After the dishes were washed and put away they went to the living room and danced. They played cardboard plastic-coated records and Jim was always having to crank up the Victrola.

"Goodnight, Sweetheart" was so sad she cried on Jim's shoulder and he held her close, smelling her hair, feeling her young mature body against him.

Jim was kissing her on the mouth and Barbara was as limp as a dishrag and giddy and happy and she took his hand out from under her dress.

"Don't, Jim," she whispered.

"Ah, Barb—don't be that way."

"Not now, Jimmy . . . please, not now."

"I'm nuts about you, kid."

"I like you too. Very much."

They were dancing when Alice and Raymond came in a few minutes later.

"How goes it, James?" Garner said, squinting. "Any hooch left?"

"Hell yeah." Jim followed Garner into the kitchen and Barbara watched him. She could tell that he was a little peeved because she wouldn't go upstairs.

"If we're going out tonight," Alice warned Raymond, "you lay off the booze."

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhh," Garner shouted back.

Alice flopped in a large green chair kicking off her high-heels, spreading her legs, sinking her neck into her shoulders. She folded her hands across her stomach and closed her eyes. "I'm pooped!"

"No one came in, huh?" Barbara asked.

Alice opened her right eye. "That one sister of yours."

"Which one?"

"The one that works at the bank."

"Irene."

"Yeah. Her. Well, she came in and I told her you called and said you was stayin' with a girl friend. I didn't know *who* and she seemed worried."

Jim and Raymond were laughing in the kitchen and Barbara was wondering if Jim was telling him that he had had his hand under her dress and Alice shouted, "One of you bums make me a drink!"

"I didn't want to worry *her*—not Irene."

"Jesus, honey, don't *ever* say you were here. They'd put me in jail for something or one thing or one thing or another." Then she closed her eyes and shouted: "Make it a stiff one, boys!"

"Ah, quit your bitchin'," Garner said, coming in behind Jim. "If we're going to the Thompsons', you better get upstairs and get dressed."

"Let me get my breath first, will ya?" She took the drink and sipped at it and nodded. "If that Haycox don't sober up by Monday, I'm *quitting*."

"I've got to go to school Monday," Barbara said regretfully.

"Why?" Jim asked as he handed her a drink.

"I've got to take tests—I'm graduating in a few months."

"Don't worry, kid," Jim said cheerfully. "It'll work out for the best."

Barbara sipped her drink. "I hadn't thought about school. So many

other things have happened." She ran her finger along the rim of the glass.

"Aw, don't let it get you, honey," Alice said.

"Come on, Alice," Garner said impatiently, "let's go. Christ, we ain't got all night."

Alice went upstairs to change and Garner followed her. After they left, Jim and Barbara danced a little but he had to go early because he went to work at five in the morning.

"I'll be up around one-thirty, honey."

"Okay—I'll be waiting."

"We'll go out to dinner and take in a show."

"That'll be wonderful."

"Barbara?"

"Yes?"

"I . . . er . . . well I . . ."

"Jimmy . . . I think I'm in love with you."

He took her in his arms and kissed her and when he took his mouth from hers, she whispered, "Please don't be mad, Jimmy. You know . . . because I wouldn't. . . ."

"Sure, kid." He kissed her again and she watched him walk to the taxicab and back down the drive and he blew the horn as he drove down the street.

She opened a box and ate a chocolate. She was seventeen, almost eighteen, and so much in love she could hardly breathe. She went upstairs to the guest room humming "Goodnight, Sweetheart."

The next afternoon Alice let Barbara wear her black satin dress and her black suede pumps. Barbara turned from the mirror to Alice, who was sitting on the edge of the bed smoking. "Ohhhhhh, Alice!" she exclaimed.

Alice got up and went to her jewelbox and took out a string of pearls. She put them around Barbara's neck and snapped the clasp, saying, "There now . . . look!"

Barbara turned to the mirror and the pearls seemed to set the whole outfit off. Alice said, "Be careful, honey—they ain't from Woolworth."

Barbara turned and kissed Alice on the cheek whispering thanks and ran from the room.

When Jim came they went to a little speakeasy and had some fried

chicken in a small cozy back room and she got a little tipsy on wine. The sun was bright and the air was warm and they walked arm in arm up to the Cameo Theatre and saw *Grand Hotel* and Barbara was simply nuts over Greta Garbo.

The following morning Barbara was called out of Second Period Biology to come down to the principal's office. Mama met her crying at the door and Mr. February, the principal, excused himself and left his office, closing the door after him.

Mama looked Barbara over from head to foot and her eyes finally settled on the flashy Mexican print dress Alice had given her. "Where did you get that dress?" was the first thing she asked with her fingers against her lips.

"Oh, Mama." Barbara sighed wearily.

"Yaw," Mama said and sat down heavily in the brown leather chair facing Mr. February's paper-cluttered desk, crying, "But where were you? We all prayed and I was so sick."

"I was staying with a girl friend," Barbara said distantly.

"Come home, *mein Kind*. Oh," she sobbed with her white lace-bordered handkerchief before her mouth, "I have been so sick at heart."

"It's been no picnic for me."

"Ralph is in his place—he is going to say nothing to no one any more." Mama nodded firmly. She stood up and kissed Barbara wetly, holding the girl's face with both hands. "Mama loves her daughter so very much and please don't hurt Mama any more. Mama is so worried for her flock of *Kinder*. Please come home after work and where did you get such a dress as that?"

Barbara left for her class feeling very depressed. She was hoping no one would find out about her being away from home over the weekend. She didn't want anyone to get the wrong idea. When she returned to Biology class she took her seat under the I-wonder-what-that-was-about stare from a few of the students. Forget them, she thought.

Barbara sat there and could clearly remember back to last fall when Eleanor Fields, a girl in her English class, ran away from home over the weekend because of an argument with her father, Mr. Horace Fields, who owned the Fields Department Store. Mr. Fields called in the police and the story reached the newspapers, and late

Sunday night Eleanor returned home but would give no explanation as to where she had spent the weekend.

Rumors began spreading through school that Eleanor had been with three men in a hotel room down in the Flats. Barbara later realized that if it had been any other girl, there would have been a scandal shrugged off with a few snide remarks, and the girl would have been a joke to the males of the town. But Eleanor was the daughter of rich Mr. Fields, and the less fortunate students strove through jealousy to keep the talk alive. They appeared very shocked at Eleanor's private life. Although nothing had been proven, Barbara found herself believing all she was told about the girl.

There continued a persistence in tormenting Eleanor: sly glances from the boys; girls talking in groups who suddenly became silent when she approached. Eleanor went to and from her classes with her eyes directly on the floor in front of her, looking neither right nor left.

One afternoon in English class she received a note, read it and ran from the room. No one seemed to know what was in it, but Barbara's neighbor told her that the boys had cooked it all up.

Early that night some boys who were taking a shortcut home discovered Eleanor's body in an empty creek bed beneath the railroad viaduct. No one had seen her leap. She had died instantly. Nothing was ever said about a note being found.

Everyone wondered why she did it.

Barbara glanced casually around at the students in Biology class. She assured herself that no one knew anything regarding her weekend, but she was terrified at the thought of having anyone at school talk about her that way.

That same evening when she had finished work at six o'clock, Jim met her and drove her home in his cab. In front of the house he kissed her and asked for a date that Saturday.

"Sure, Jimmy," Barbara said, running her fingers down his face. "But please don't have anything to drink before you come—Mama can't stand liquor."

"I won't, kid. I'll pick you up tomorrow night after work."

Barbara got out of the car and before she closed the door Jim said, "Remember when we walked up to the show yesterday?"

Barbara nodded.

"I was proud to be seen walking with you—I mean it."

They looked at each other silently for a moment and Barbara blew him a kiss and ran into the house.

Margaret and Edna cried and Irene was sweet. Mother had told them to act as though she had never been away, but Margaret was just too sentimental and whenever she began to bawl, Edna always did the same.

Barbara was in the living room looking out to the highway when her brother Ralph came in.

"I'm sorry," he said meekly.

"That's all right."

"I was angry because Bertha and I had an argument."

"Oh, I understand." Barbara turned from the window.

"I didn't mean to blow my top with you, though."

"Ah, that's okay, Ralph." She wrinkled her nose.

Barbara turned back to the window, telling herself she loved Jimmy and why didn't he marry her so he could take her away from *here* and they could live together and she'd love him, love him hard with all her heart and the next time he wanted to do anything to her she was going to let him.

Jim took Barbara home every evening in a taxi and on Thursday Mama said, "Still the taxicab man yet?"

"Yes. . . ." Barbara answered cautiously. "I like him a lot." She had mentioned Jim only briefly the night before.

Ralph looked up from his plate. "How old is he?"

"Twenty-two."

"That is too old," Mama said.

"Oh, for heaven's sake, Mama," Irene said, "leave the child alone. After all, he's only about four years older—this family just *can't* leave anyone's business to themselves."

"Mama's only looking out for our own good," Ralph said, helping himself to more mashed potatoes.

"Barb's gotta *boy* friend," giggled Edna.

"Pssssssssssss," Mama hissed and Edna lowered her eyes. "A man has ideas when he is twenty-two."

"Ralph's twenty," Irene said. "Ask him his ideas when he's out with Bertha."

"He is different," Mama said.

"Sure," Irene said, "he's your son."

"I'm working," Barbara said, "and almost out of school. It's all right for me to have a boy friend."

"But a taxi driver." Mama sighed.

"There's a depression," Irene said. "He's lucky he can work. Any man is lucky if he can get work."

"His brother *owns* the company," Barbara said proudly, "and Jimmy has an interest in the place."

"Is this so?"

"Yes."

"What's his last name?" Margaret asked.

"Parish. James Parish."

"Is he from Wilkinson City?" Irene asked, taking another slice of meatloaf.

"No. He's from a small town down on the Ohio River somewhere—across from West Virginia."

"A hillbilly." Mama smiled. "With guitar and singing too?"

"He *isn't* a hillbilly," Barbara defended.

"Well," Mama nodded, "I want to meet him."

"Mama," Ralph said, tapping his plate with his fork.

"What?"

"I was listening to Havana on my short-wave set last night."

Barbara began going steady with Jim, and they went to Alice's parties and had a grand ball every time. And she did what Jim wanted—what she had told herself she would let him do.

Barbara Kesler graduated pregnant. She was really in a mess because Jim had been married before: when he was sixteen. He told her the whole story about how Kay, his first wife, was drunk one night and knifed him, took off, and he hadn't seen or heard from her since. Before they could get married, Jim had to locate her and get a divorce. With Hiram chipping in, Jim hired an investigator to help find Kay. She was nothing but a drifting old drunken whore who took off for the hills after knifing him: they couldn't find her.

Things were getting worse for Barbara and she had to tell Irene, and Irene asked, "Does he love you?"

"Yes," Barbara answered. "We were going to be married even before this happened." Then Barbara sat down on Irene's bed and told her about *that* Kay and how Jim has been looking for her.

When Barbara finished her story Irene nodded and said, "Now I

don't want you to go worrying a bit more . . . hear? I'll handle everything. If the family finds out, just leave everything to me."

Kay couldn't be found and Barbara got so big the whole family discovered her condition. They were in the living room and Mama cried and cried about sinning and shame.

Irene told them to be calm and sensible about the whole thing. "There's no use crying over spilled milk," she told them. "Everyone makes mistakes. But they do love each other, and what's happened happened, that's all there is to it. They couldn't have gotten married anyway, not until Jim divorced this other woman. . . . He was young and foolish when he married her. I know Jim. . . . He's a nice man and he loves Barbara. Don't look so *damn* disgusted, Ralph! Quit crying, Margaret! Put yourself in Barbara's shoes and quit worrying about *yourselves*! Can't you think of someone else once in a while? You all think you're so damn pure and clean! All you're worrying about is the family name. . . . Well, I happen to be proud of it, but I'm not on any *highhorse*! If my sister's in trouble, I'll try to help her. . . . I won't wallow in disgust and tears!"

Irene walked over to the chair where Barbara was sitting. She turned around and said, "If God wanted us to be saints we would have been born with halos—not wearing the ones *we* manufacture after *we* learn there's such things in the world as good and bad."

Barbara and Irene went upstairs.

A few minutes later Mama called Jim and he drove right up. She led Barbara and Jim into the living room and slid the doors shut and turned around. She folded her hands in front of her and said, "Do you love-my daughter?"

"Very much," Jim answered solemnly.

"And do you love James?" Mama's blue eyes were swelling with tears.

"Yes, Mama."

Mama nodded and took their hands in hers. "My blessings to you both."

Barbara hugged Mama and began to cry.

"Thank you, Mrs. Kesler."

"No—*Mama*." She smiled, squeezing his hand.

Barbara and Jim didn't go to Alice's house any more. They usually stayed at Hiram's place. Barbara disliked Blanche from the moment she saw her, but thought Hiram was a swell person.

Jim drove a cab that fall until early in December when he got a job as a crane operator at United Steel. Barbara's baby was born on February eighteenth and she named the little boy John, after Jim's father.

Barbara and Jim were married a month after the birth of the child and they couldn't take a honeymoon because of so many bills.

Barbara had been glad when they found out that Kay was dead, even if she did freeze to death in a doorway up in Buffalo. Every time she saw the scar on Jim's back she damned Kay deeper and deeper into hell.

Margaret had insisted that Kesler be placed on the birth certificate instead of Parish, and Doctor Mills had to comply with her almost hysterical demands. When Jim found out what Margaret had done it made him steaming mad. He finally cooled down but he didn't have any use for Margaret again.

It didn't matter to Barbara what anyone thought as long as she had Jimmy and her little John. . . .

Barbara raised her head from her folded arms on the window sill, listening to the loud annoying car horn down on Tweed Street. It stopped. A smile crossed her lips in the peaceful silence.

Danny mumbled and tossed restlessly. Barbara got up off the cushion and refilled her glass and put the bottle back in the bottom drawer. She sat back down at the window thinking those were the fine years even though they were a bit rough at times. But then they were all young and sure of themselves, fighting back with a rich vigor because life was worth a lot. Now most of them were going into new phases of life, and they were all growing older. You lost a lot of that vigor and fight if you let yourself. But I'm not. I've not given up that fight. I've got two boys and I love a man that was not as guilty as I was, but I'm paying for it too.

Tomorrow was Friday and there was a luncheon scheduled for Rotary—oh I'll let the fat old men pinch my ass for a fifty-cent tip, and I'll smile like I'm getting a big bang out of it. That'll thrill 'em to their toenails. Smile at the fat man when he feels my leg and winks behind a stinking cigar. It's all in the game. It's all in the cards, and sometimes the cards aren't shuffled well enough, or the deck's stacked, and sister do you get a lousy hand. I've got plenty of chips on the table. Everyone's got another guess coming if they think that

Old Barbara's out of the game. She put her hand over her eyes.
Everything's rotten.

Oh, Jimmy, I love you so. She had to keep going. She wasn't
whipped and she wasn't old.

She was going to brush up on her typing and shorthand, she
thought before she went to sleep.

BOOK TWO

The Lake

Chapter 5

IT WAS early Friday morning. Johnny thrust the remaining piece of soggy crust into his mouth and swallowed it with the last of his chocolate. He yawned sitting at the head of the dining-room table, looking out to the back yard. He sure hadn't done much yesterday except sweep and clean up. You can't learn everything on the first day. Johnny took his cup to the kitchen, wrung out the dishcloth and wiped up the crumbs and the dunking-drips. Maybe business would pick up today.

He washed the dishes and put them away. The morning sunlight slanted in the kitchen window, falling to the yellow painted wall, streaking to the floor. The air was fresh and cool and he could smell mint from one of the vacant lots the next street over. As Johnny was about to open the attic door Grandma came out from the hallway in a blue and white print dress, her hands clinging to a shawl around her shoulders.

"Will you run the sweeper for me, child? I am so tired."

"Sure." He sighed.

Grandma went to her chair beside the red brick fireplace. "Why weren't you to supper last night?"

"I was workin' then, Gran'ma. Roy—that's the guy I work for—he brought me my supper."

"Working?" she inquired dumbly. "What is this? What do you mean?"

"At the filling station."

"*Mein Gott!*" she exclaimed, raising her arms out before her, closing her eyes. "A mere child working!"

Only yesterday she said it was a good thing that he had a job. If he was nice to her she'd forget all about it by the time Mom came home.

"It isn't hard, Grandma," he said, "Roy's a *real* nice man an' he don't let me work hard at all." Johnny laughed and added, "An' I'll still be able to get you those mints ya like so well."

"What will your mother say . . . for working?"

"Mom knows it—she says it's okay 'cause she knows I don't work hard at all. . . . Well, I better run the sweeper now."

"Wait a minute. I want to tell you. When I was a girl in Germany"—Johnny sighed because boy he knew how Grandma could go on and on about how putrid things used to be—"they waited until they were men, and then they went out and worked. A boy should study to be a smart student in school, then he gets a job to help his mother." Grandma nodded her head, leaning forward, her delicately thin fingers entwined peacefully in her lap. She smiled wisely; then turned sad. "No, child, never forget your mother. It is a sin. They will pay when I die and be buried—yaw, they will pay. I am not long for being here. . . ." Her small chin began quivering and her pale blue eyes filled with tears.

"Come on, Gran'ma, don't go cryin'." Johnny turned away to get the sweeper but he could still hear the gasping sobs of the old woman.

He looked at Grandma closely: sure he loved her. Why not? He'd always loved her like he'd always loved his mother. Then he suddenly thought of Grandma saying something to Barbara that evening at the supper table—about him being too young to work. Grandma could very easily have his job taken away. *He didn't want to hate her.* At times she was so sweet and kind and loving, he actually worshipped her. Then again, he would watch how she would pick and needle Margaret with little corny digs until she would become hysterical and scream, "For the love of God, Mother! Will you please, *please* leave me alone! *I'll* pay the light bill! *I'll* pay the light bill! Isn't it enough that—" Then she would slam her cup into the saucer, sloshing coffee to the plastic protector over the tablecloth, and run to her room. Grandma would smile tenderly-hurtly saying, "See how I am treated? See? See?" Barbara wouldn't say anything. Johnny and Danny would continue to eat, forcing down the laughter they were ashamed of having. It was funny and yet it wasn't funny. Johnny really didn't know who to feel sorry for.

"I'll run the sweeper now," Johnny said.

"No," Grandma dabbed at her eyes, "Wait a while."

"Okay," he shrugged his shoulders, "I'm goin' upstairs an' make the beds. If you need me, call."

Johnny left the attic door open so he could hear if Grandma called, climbed the steps and crossed the attic to the bedroom. Danny was

already down at Aunt Edna and Uncle Cliff's house playing with their eight-year-old son Walt. Johnny made the big double bed and took the black vase they leaked in at night and set it outside the door to take down and empty.

He went into his own room and looked out his half-moon window to the street. He could hear the clacking blades of a lawnmower. After he made his bed he sat at his desk and thought about writing Dad a letter, and stared out at the half-circle of blue sky.

My father, he thought, is a short man with brown eyes and a mustache and black hair sort of thinning out on top that looks like Tyrone Power without the mustache and something like Douglas Fairbanks Junior with it. But I can't seem to get a clear picture of him. Maybe he'll get married again. He's forgot all about Danny and me already. Sure, he never writes or comes over.

Only once, that one Sunday night, was Johnny ever mad at Jim.

He could remember those nights up at Cherokee Hill when Danny would sleep with Barbara and Jim would sleep in Danny's bed in their room. His mother and father never slept together when they were mad and they were mad most of the time.

Sometimes Johnny would wake up when his father came home from work smelling of whisky, climbing into Danny's bed with the *Malvern Examiner* to read the news before going to sleep. If he was awake he'd wait until the light was out and his father would take a last drag on the cigarette, then clip it in the ashtray on the chair between the two twin beds. Johnny would watch the burning coal grow smaller and smaller and smaller until everything was dark and quiet. Sometimes he pretended he was a Royal Mounted Police Officer and the glowing coal from the cigarette tip would be the campfire of some bandits he was looking for. Sometimes he was an Indian Scout and the campfire belonged to a dozen braves he was tracking to kill because they scalped his brother. Not Danny: another brother. But he could only play that game a few minutes, because that's how long the burning lasted. Then he'd have to close his eyes and finish the game in his forehead above his eyes where everything was clear as day. He wondered why the burning coal didn't burn all night. It was there, whole, not crushed or ground out, but it died. He wondered about that like he wondered if a cowboy could hang on the edge of a cliff by his spurs.

On that particular Sunday night, Johnny was in bed half asleep when he heard his mother come in. Jim was in Danny's bed reading

the *Sanderson Journal's* funnypaper. He'd been working all day and drinking before coming home.

"Don't forget to put the garbage can out, Jim," Barbara said.

"Put the goddamn thing out yourself," he said bored, not looking up from the funnies.

Everyone up at Cherokee Hills kept their garbage can in the utility room. Every Monday morning, very early, men came around and collected the garbage if the can was sitting at the bottom of the front steps.

"You put it out," Barbara whined. "It's too heavy for me."

"Jesus Christ! I'm in bed already."

"What are you anyway: a man or a mouse?"

"Pass the goddamn cheese!"

Johnny felt like snickering and buried his face deeper into the pillow, with his left eye open a crack making everything fuzzy. Boy, he liked being in on secret things like this; hearing grownups talk when they thought he was not around or wasn't listening.

"You heard me," Barbara said.

"I'll rot in hell first," Jim shouted. "I'll rot in hell."

"You'll rot in hell, that's for damn sure!" Barbara shouted back. "But you're going to take out that goddamn rottin' stinkin' garbage can, you no-good lazy drunk sonofabitch!"

There followed an enormous crack and a sighing moan. Johnny sat up to see his father draw back his hand. Barbara began to cry, holding the side of her head.

"Don't fight," Johnny pleaded, "please don't fight."

"See what you've done in front of your son?" Barbara sobbed. Jim sat on his knees on the bed in his shorts, dumbfoundedly shaking his hand.

"See, Jim? See? Even your own son knows what a drunken cruel man you are! Oh, why did you have to hit me?" Barbara began crying brokenly.

"Why'd ya hit'er, Dad, huh? Why'd ya hit'er?"

"Go to bed and keep quiet."

"Why'd ya hit'er?"

"Did you hear me?"

"You jus' don't have ta put no more nickels under my pilla any more, either," Johnny murmured, hugging Barbara who was sitting on the edge of his bed.

"You'll pay for that, Jim." Barbara sniffled.

Jim said nothing and pulled the sheet up and rolled over, facing the wall.

"Go to bed, honey." Barbara kissed him.

Johnny crawled under the covers and Barbara switched off the light and closed the door. Jim didn't light a cigarette. Johnny could hear Barbara moving the garbage can.

Boy, he just wished Dad'd ask him to come over an' rub his back. Man-o-man. Then he felt awful sorry for his father: so big it filled his chest and he hurt to cry but didn't. Dad must feel pretty alone laying there, he thought, then wondered if Mom's head still hurt.

He found himself shaking and it took a long time to fall asleep.

I'm not mad at him now, Johnny thought as he turned from the window to his desk, that was a long time ago. But he should come over to see me and Danny once and awhile.

Tears came to his eyes. Maybe he's going to marry some other woman: some old bitch that'll be called Parish then and Mom and me and Danny'll have to be called Kesler. Gee it'd be funny to change your puky name just because your dad got remarried.

Johnny heard footsteps in the attic.

"Grandma," he called out, "is 'at you?"

"Naw, it's me," Danny said, sauntering into Johnny's room. Danny, who was nine, was a shy boy with wild uncombed hair, a round cheerful face with big brown eyes and a small pug nose. He was wearing a pair of faded denim pants and a yellow Captain Marvel sweatshirt. Pulled down on the top of his head he wore a brown felt beanie covered with a cluster of comic character pins that he got out of boxes of Pep.

Danny didn't stutter: it was more of a hesitant formation of the first letter of the word he was trying to say, which he would blindly stumble over, drawing out the first letter until what he was going to say was completely formed in his mind.

"W-wa-what'cha doin'?"

"Thinkin' about the Old Man," Johnny told him, lying down on the bed. "Scratch my back."

"Ahhhhhhh, cripe."

"Ca'mon."

Danny started scratching Johnny's back.

"What'cha doin' back up here so early?"

"That s-s-sonamabitch *Walt* . . . h-he makes me mad."

"What'd he do?" Johnny murmured.

"All'e wants ta do is be b-b-boss."

"Bossin' ya around, huh?"

"Naw—the *stand*."

Johnny shook his shoulders with the side of his head in the pillow, half asleep. Danny's hand moved faster.

"What stand?" Johnny asked sleepily.

"The K-K-K-Kool-Aid *stand* we built."

"When'd you guys make that?"

"Yy-Yy-Yesterday."

"No foolin'? Where's it at?"

"'Cross the street."

"What'cha sellin', jus' Kool-Aid?"

"Naw—some ol' comic b-b-books too."

"Any of mine?"

"No."

"You'd better not take any of my books'er I'll knock the shit outta ya."

"Ahhhhh . . . I ain't t-t-takin' any of your damn books." Danny took his hand off Johnny's back.

"Ca'mon," Johnny shook his shoulders with his eyes closed, "I was only kiddin'."

Danny started rubbing Johnny's back again.

"Ain't you goin' down there 'is afternoon?"

"H-H-Hell naw I ain't goin' down there."

"Yeah," Johnny agreed.

"A-A-Always wantin' ta b-be *boss*."

"Take your time, take your time, take your time. If you'd talk slow an' thinka what you're gonna say 'fore ya say it, ya won't stutter."

"Yeanh."

"I wonder if Dad'll be over 'is weekend?" Johnny opened one eye.

"I doan know."

"Say," Johnny said sitting up, "if you're gonna be here 'is afternoon, you can stay with Gran'ma while I go ta work early."

"I'm goin' up inna w-w-woods."

"Aw," Johnny frowned, "ya can stay till three, can't'cha?"

"Huh-uh, boy." Danny got up and went to the door, "I m-m-mowed the damn lawn for ya the other day—I wasn't s-s's'posed ta either. Both of 'em's your jobs."

"Okay, buddy—thanks!"

"Y-Y-You're welcome." Danny left the room.

"An' don't ask me for no money on payday either. Hear?" Johnny shouted after him.

Danny's imp face peeked around the corner. "*Frig* you too."

Johnny threw his pillow, but by the time it hit the door frame Danny's feet were running toward the attic steps.

Little bastard. He'll be coming around on payday, all right. I'll fix the squirt. I won't give'im that quarter I promised for mowing the lawn: then he knew he'd give him the quarter and maybe more. There was something about Danny that he loved very much, and it was embarrassing to show it, so he continued to keep it hidden behind a mask of toughness.

On payday he'd go to the five-and-ten and buy a few more Big Little Books. There was a new Tarzan one he'd seen a few days ago and he would've swiped it but the sharp-nosed old lady behind the counter was watching him too close. Johnny was proud of his collection of Big Little Books, and like all the other kids, he loved Tarzan. Johnny had about six Tarzan Big Little Books that he read and re-read, over and over again. He owned two hard-cover editions of Tarzan that stood on his desk with his other books. He was saving them for when he was older and could understand them better. He liked Big Little Books because they were a lot easier to read and there was a full-length picture on every right page. The latest editions of the Big Little Books had small pictures up in the corner of the picture page, and when the pictures were flipped in rapid succession they formed a moving picture. The one he had of *Tarzan and the Ant Men* had hairy old Tarzan swinging from vine to vine through the jungle and he never got tired of watching it. Johnny thought it was a clever invention and what won't they think of next and boy when he grew up and got married and had kids he was gonna buy'em all the doggone Big Little Books they wanted. Aunt Irene always bought him books and gave him a lot out of her own collection. He was going to read them sometime but he hadn't got around to it yet. They were a little deep.

When Johnny went downstairs, Grandma was laughing at Danny who was explaining all about the Kool-Aid stand.

"He . . . he is a big man now." Grandma slapped her hands together. "He has a biiig pop soda stand."

"Yeah."

"And Walter, too. Ha, ha, two big businessmen we have in the family." Grandma turned to Danny who was looking out the window. "Where is Walter?"

"He's down r-r-runnin' the stan'."

"You tell him to come up and see his Grandmother—it has been a very long time."

"H-H-He was up *Tuesday*."

"Oh, no," Grandma said disbelievingly, "it is been so long ago."

"He'll tell Walt, Grandma," Johnny said.

"Will you?"

"He'll even bring you some Kool-Aid back," Johnny said.

"Sure." Danny grinned.

"Good." Grandma beamed. "What kind do you have?"

"P-P-Purple," Danny said.

"*Purple!*" Grandma laughed, clapping her hands.

"I bet it tastes like grape." Johnny grinned.

"It s-s-sure does."

"Purple." Grandma laughed.

Johnny turned and went smiling out to the kitchen to open a coke. There weren't any so he poured himself a tall glass of chocolate milk. Maybe when he went over to the station at three Roy'd have a grease job to do. Boy, he'd sure like to learn how to do that: most people thought it was easy being a filling-station worker but it wasn't. It had responsibilities by golly and even Roy said he had a lot to learn.

He drank down the milk and rinsed out the glass.

Chapter 6

WHEN Johnny went over to the station Monday afternoon at three o'clock, Roy said to him, "Well, Sport, how would you like to go fishing this afternoon?"

"Really?"

"Sure. We can close up about five and go out to Jackson Dam."

"Jeez," Johnny exclaimed, smacking his fist into the palm of his hand, "that's swell."

Roy smiled moving from the door to the desk. He took a cigarette and said, "I've got both rods oiled and ready to go."

"Hotdamn!" Johnny beamed. "Think we can go swimming, too?"

"No," Roy frowned, shaking his head, "it wouldn't be wise, Sport. Jackson's not a very good place to swim—but I'll tell you what we can do."

"What's that?"

"Go up to the Lake this coming Sunday." Roy blew a stream of smoke to the ceiling. "We can fish and swim all day. How's that?"

"Boy," he grinned, "'at's wonderful."

"Think your mother would let you go?"

"Hell yeah." Johnny hit Roy on the arm. "Man! I ain't been to the Lake in years. Jeez, I like it up there, don't you?"

"Yes," Roy answered slowly, "I do."

"Think we'll catch anything big tonight?"

"Never can tell."

"We can get big ones up at the Lake, can't we?"

"Fairly big."

Johnny shoved out his lower lip and wrinkled his nose, shaking his head. "Not shark big, though."

"No," Roy laughed, "not shark big. Maybe nine or ten inches—if you're lucky."

A car drove in and Johnny said he'd get it.

"Fill'er up, son," the man said, opening his door.

Johnny filled the tank remembering to keep his ear down by the spout so he could hear the gurgling rush when the tank filled. He wiped the windshield clean from splattered insects, then turned to the man, who was finishing a coke: "Oil checked, sir?"

"No. It's okay."

"Fine. That'll be—" Impossible. Johnny looked at the meter on the pump. It read six dollars and twenty-three cents.

"Something must be the matter, son." The man half smiled stiffly. "My tank won't hold over three and a half dollars' worth, four at the most."

"Yeah," Johnny said weakly, "I forgot ta turn the handle back ta *no-sale*."

Johnny went into the station. Roy was fixing a patch on an inner tube. "I forgot to turn the handle again," he said lamely with his hands on his hips. Everything went slick Friday. Saturday afternoon he forgot to crank the pump back to *no-sale* and yesterday a

customer had to come back for the gas cap he had absently left in his back pocket.

Roy smiled sadly, shaking his head. He went to the door and looked at the meter and the man said, "It doesn't hold much more than three dollars' worth, and I was about empty."

"My boy here," Roy explained with a smile, "is just starting and sometimes he gets excited."

The man glanced down at Johnny and turned to Roy. "Does two and a half sound reasonable?"

Roy accepted two and a half. The man gave Johnny a five and he rang up two dollars and fifty-five cents. He'd be damned if he'd forget the coke.

As the man drove off Roy burst out laughing. "Oh, Sport," he slapped his thigh, "if it isn't forgetting to wind the handle back, it's trying to make off with their gas caps."

"Well," Johnny said cocking his head, "it's your fault. You had me all excited about fishin'."

"I know I shouldn't laugh—but you look so funny when you're mad at yourself."

"This is only my fifth day"—he grinned—"what'cha expect: miracles?"

"You'll learn, Sport—it takes time." Roy put his hand on Johnny's shoulder.

"I'm goin' back an' look at the bike," Johnny said and went behind the partition. After they had closed the station Saturday night, Roy and Johnny stayed a few minutes longer to sand down the frame because Johnny had taken off all the old paint. When they were finished sanding, Roy reached under the bench and brought out two new chrome-finished fenders. Johnny was so happy he threw his arms around Roy and hugged him. It was wonderful to be a secret adopted son!

"Gee-whiz, Roy," Johnny had exclaimed, "you're *swell*!" He took a step back and looked up into Roy's face. Roy's eyes filled with happiness or sadness: he couldn't quite tell.

"I bought you these fenders, Sport, because you've been honest with me. You took money from me and comic books from Hunt's. It hurt you to tell me but you did. There's just one more thing, and that is that I don't want you to think you'll always get something for telling the truth—to me or anyone else. That would be bribing honesty, and in due course it would be just as bad as lying." Roy reached

out and put his hand on Johnny's shoulder. "Never tell the truth because of the reward, but tell it to be honest. Being honest is giving yourself a reward."

"I told'cha I'd never lie to ya."

Roy patted Johnny's shoulder. "How would you like a big glass of root beer and a couple of sloppy-joes?"

"If you're buying—lead the way, *kind* sir." Johnny laughed. They locked the station and drove off.

The bars of the bike were smooth under his fingers. He'd have the best hairy old bike in Wilkinson City, he thought, looking at the two shining fenders.

"Roy?" he called out.

"Yes?"

"I've decided on blue paint," Johnny said, returning to the front of the station. He leaned his elbows on the glass-topped counter, closing his eyes. "I want a dark-blue frame . . . with white stripes onna bars . . . a headlight anna speedometer . . . mudflaps with 'em green an' red studs anna seat cover with 'at lambwool stuff . . . a taillight an' jeez, I don't know." Johnny grinned and opened his eyes. "There boy! That's gonna be my bike. I don't know how long it's gonna take me," he winked at Roy, "but ol' Johnny Parish'll have the best goddamn bike in Wilkinson City."

"I'll help you get some of those accessories, too." Roy dropped his cigarette and ground it out with his toe. He looked narrowly up at Johnny. "And there's something else I wanted to ask you."

Johnny swallowed. "Yeah?"

Roy's face suddenly broke into a smile. "What would you say if I set you up in business—selling candy and gum and those Lance Cookies?"

"In here?" Johnny's eyes opened wide.

"Sure," Roy nodded toward the case Johnny had been leaning on, "there's a lot of room in there. We can get a large selection of candy-bars and gum. You can get a cigar box and keep your own change—keep your own books. Learning small business is the first step to big business."

"Yeah." Johnny took a few steps back with his hands on his hips. "Yeah," he repeated, "yeah man!"

"Tomorrow we'll go down to Bookman's Wholesale and get a supply of candy and gum."

"Gee yeah." Johnny smiled, then turned business-serious. "Think I can make very much?"

"Sure, if you don't eat your profit."

"You're the nicest guy inna whole wide world, Roy."

"Go on. . . ." He smiled.

"You're prob'ly tired of hearin' me say it, but Jesus man, it's the truth."

"I like to see you happy," he said softly.

"I'm happy. Happy as real happy."

Roy got up out of the chair and stamped his foot, making a left jab at Johnny's jaw. "After I fix this flat we'll close up the dump and get some grub—then go fishing. What say, bub?"

"I say that'll be fine, *bub!*" Johnny laughed. "That's hillbilly."

"What?"

"Bub."

"You should know." Roy grinned.

Johnny put his thumb against his fly and wiggled his fingers and ran out of the station and opened a coke.

They locked the toolshed and brought the oil rack in from between the two pumps and Johnny locked the women's restroom, the kerosene and white-gas pumps at the side of the station, the pop-cooler, checked the two gas pumps and everything was secure.

Johnny climbed in the Oldsmobile and boy was it hot. They drove down Elliott Avenue to Central Street, down Central Street Hill and on up to Center Square. He turned to his right and drove around the square to Park Drive East and Johnny looked out the window at Congress County Courthouse. They went down Park Drive East and went under the concrete underpass, and drove out Route 40 a short distance until they arrived at the orange and black root-beer stand.

"Four sloppy-joes and two large root beers," Roy told the dark-haired girl as she approached the window. Johnny took a flashglance at her low sharp breasts beneath the white silk blouse.

Roy turned and said, "How was your grandmother today, Sport?"

"Oh crabby—you know." Johnny wrinkled his nose.

"Yes." Roy sighed. "It's a shame."

"She wants ya to stop an' see her."

"Me? She wants to see me?"

"Yeah: she wants to see the nice man." He laughed.

Roy glanced slyly at Johnny, smiled and said, "Well, I might stop in tonight when I take you home."

"I want'cha to meet Mom an' Aunt Marg, too. Aunt Marg'll prob'ly go for you—she's single."

Roy laughed. "How old is she?"

"Oh, just about forty." Then he whispered, "She's a *virgin*."

"You don't even know what a virgin is." Roy grinned.

Johnny nudged Roy as the girl approached the window. She connected the tray to the door and Roy paid her. As she walked away Johnny said, "Hubba-hubba," and Roy smiled handing him a massive glass mug, cold and sweating, foaming with rich tangy root beer. He set the heavy mug on the floor between his feet and Roy handed him a sandwich wrapped up in a paper napkin stained reddish from the juice that ran out from the bun.

When they had finished, Roy blew his horn and a different girl came and took the tray and brought a box of hot, freshly popped popcorn that Johnny had asked for. Roy paid her and drove back on Route 40 toward the underpass, but turned onto the Williamson Road, a highway that went directly east. Johnny was munching on the popcorn with his elbow out the window. Roy sat back in the seat, relaxed, smoking a cigarette.

"Want some?" Johnny extended the box.

"No thanks, Sport—I'm full."

"Full?"

"My stomach isn't as big as yours." He smiled.

"The hell if it ain't."

"*Ain't*?" Roy frowned.

"Means isn't." He grinned.

"Ain't ain't a good word to use."

"Uncle Gerald—Aunt Irene's husband—he tol' me it was inna dictionary."

"I was only kidding, Sport. . . . I don't care how you talk."

"I don't care either." He belched.

"You're a character."

"Inna funnypapers," he added and looked out his window. He gazed at the passing countryside thinking of Sunday and going to the Lake. I really like Roy, he thought. He knows I don't have a dad and he's trying to make me happy.

"What are you thinking about, Sport?"

"The Lake." Johnny turned to Roy. "We used to go up every summer when I was little. I really like the Lake a lot. Did you know I could swim when I was about four years old?"

"Yeah?" Roy smiled disbelievingly.

"It's the truth," Johnny vowed.

"Okay," Roy chuckled, "I believe you. I think I was around ten."

"Jeez, I like swimmin'," he said, then frowned. "But I'm not much of a swimmer now 'cause I forgot a lot. There wasn't any swimmin' pools over in Malvern—'cept at the YMCA an' I never took swimmin' lessons." Johnny shrugged. "I don't even know a thing about fishin'."

"You'll get your first lesson tonight—I wouldn't be surprised if you had beginner's luck and ended up with a half-dozen."

"If I caught a half a dozen, I'd have three. I'd give you half of'em."

Roy turned and looked at Johnny's serious face. "You really mean that, don't you?"

"Sure—we're partners."

Roy shoved his tongue in his cheek and threw his cigarette down out the window.

Chapter 7

THEY drove up a short hill and at the top they could see many lakes spread out in the long low green valley, like little mirrors reflecting the blue of the sky, with small patches of wooded islands.

"God!" Johnny exclaimed. "It's beautiful, ain't it?"

"It sure is," Roy said and drove down into the valley. He turned to his right onto a dusty road that led back to a tall two-story farmhouse in the cool shade of large oaks. He drove around the house and came to a halt before an open gate. A screen door slammed and Johnny turned to see a man approaching the car. He had a round red face with a blue and white napkin tucked under his buttoned collar.

"How's the fishing?" Roy asked.

"Good 'is mornin'. Lots o' cropies an' cats—din't see too many 'is afternoon. Th' coo'ness 'is evenin'll bring'em up."

"Fine," Roy smiled, "what's the damage?"

"Oh, fifty cents, I reckon. . . . Need minnows er worms?"

"No," Roy said and gave the man two quarters. He drove through the gate and across a pasture and up a slight rise and down into a gully. They were now on a large wooded peninsula with a gullied and rutted road in the center with tall trees on both sides. Roy drove on a way and pulled off the road beside some bushes.

He opened the trunk and handed Johnny a fishing rod. "Here, Sport—this is yours to keep."

Johnny took the silvery rod admiringly in his hands, looking at the reel and the cork handle, the metal guides lined with red plastic and the black nylon line. "Gee, Roy"—Johnny didn't know what to say—"I only wanted to use it. I—I don't know how to thank you."

"Don't even begin—are you happy?" Roy waited for his answer.

"Jeez, you know better than to ask that."

"Good."

Roy took the tacklebox and Johnny carried the tin can with the worms Roy'd dug up that morning behind the station. Johnny noticed Roy's rod wasn't as new or as shiny-looking.

They walked down a path through tall narrow trees, smelling water and moss, to a gravel-and-sand beach. They were facing a mild breeze that blew over the water with the hot evening sun behind them. Small waves lapped up on the shore.

Roy set the tacklebox down. "Know how to hook a worm?"

"Huh-uh." Johnny shook his head.

"Well—first I'll show you how to put on the hook and sinker."

"Hot damn!" Johnny said after Roy opened the tacklebox. There were many different drawers full of strange-looking accessories.

"What are those, Roy?" Johnny pointed.

"These? Spinners—for trolling. The pull of it under the water rotates this silver propeller. It attracts the fish. These other ones with the feathers look like insects to the fish."

"That's sure a nice collection."

"Thanks, Sport."

Roy showed Johnny how to hook his line and attach the lead weight about ten inches above the hook. Johnny dug a worm out of the moist earth in the can and very awkwardly hooked the squirming creature. His nose wrinkled and his face twisted.

"What's the matter?" Roy laughed.

"I hated to hook the poor sonofabitch 'cause I know it hurts, don't it?" Johnny lifted his face up and looked at Roy. "A worm has feelin's, don't it, Roy?"

"Sure, Sport."

"Ya know when I was livin' over in Malvern?"

Roy nodded, looking down at Johnny who squatted on his heels.

"There was a slaughterhouse next to the Project. Not so close that we could smell it unless there was a strong wind. . . . Well anyway, one day Junior Savan, that's my buddy, me an' him goes over there to see 'em kill cows. Jesus! Do you know how they do that?"

"No."

Johnny's face turned sour. "With a sledge hammer. A guy stands there an' the cow come inna ramp-enclosed sort of thing—then this sonofabitch raises the hammer and pow right onna cow's head. Ya should hear the poor thing beller. If the cow don't go down, pow onna head again. . . . an'en they put chains on their feet an haul'em up inna air upside down."

"That's the way it is, Sport." Roy squatted down next to Johnny. They both looked out to the small island past the rippling water. "There are plenty of things on this earth that aren't right," he said mildly, "but who are we to say what is right and what is wrong? Sure a cow will suffer those moments, but the suffering isn't long. Everything suffers."

"Yeah—but Sheeze! You should give the cows *sleepin'* pills or somethin'."

"I don't think those men particularly like what they're doing—but it's a job. You get used to things you don't like after you realize you're stuck with them." Roy put his hand on Johnny's shoulder. "I'll show you how to cast." They stood up and Roy got his rod.

"Now watch me," he said and Johnny stepped back. Roy raised the rod behind him in his right hand and whipped it around and snapped it and the line shot waveringly out. The sinker plopped into the water and the light pressure of Roy's thumb stopped the reel. Roy pushed the little button on the reel. It made a series of clicking noises. "If you have a fish hooked that click will warn you." Roy smiled.

"Yeah?" Johnny grinned. "Is mine like that?"

"Sure, you've got a Pflueger reel mounted on a Heddon rod. You couldn't ask for anything better. Now let's see you cast."

Johnny put his tongue in his cheek and raised his rod behind him. "Remember," Roy warned, "snap it . . . relax your thumb."

Johnny did just like Roy did and Roy said, "Good going, Sport—that was excellent."

Johnny grinned from ear to ear. Roy opened a small can of Heinz's baked beans and gave them to Johnny. He carried several small cans in his tacklebox with a spoon and a pint of Old Forester whisky.

Johnny sat on a log to eat the beans with this rod propped up beside him. Roy took a long swig of whisky and put the bottle back in the tacklebox. He lit a cigarette and tossed the lighter into the air, catching it in the palm of his hand. He licked his lips and sat down on the tacklebox facing Johnny. He drew up his legs and rested his chin on his knees.

Johnny left a few of the beans in the can and threw it into the dense bushes behind them. They remained silent, drinking in the peaceful silence. Far out on the lake a silver fish leaped out of the water, arched itself and cut back in as smooth as a knife. A flock of birds flew across the sky to the southeast. The smoke from Roy's cigarette smelled good, but not as good as a wood fire.

"You haven't ever been married, have you?"

"No," Roy answered rather sadly.

"Because of no babies?"

"Perhaps. That may be it—it wouldn't be fair to the woman I'd marry."

"Oh." Johnny nodded. "You gotta sister, ain't'cha?"

"Yes."

"That's right . . . you told me once. I remember: she has a little kid, doesn't she?"

"A daughter."

"Old Uncle Roy." Johnny laughed, then he stopped and said, "But that's too bad about you though."

"What, Sport?"

"'Bout not havin' any kids."

"Oh . . . yes." Roy turned to Johnny, half smiling. "We all have our cross to bear." Roy looked out to the lake seriously and distantly, then turned back to Johnny. He raised his hand halfway to his face like he was going to hide his eyes, but stopped and took a drag from the cigarette. "It's really not suffering. It's something unpleasant you get used to having. . . . If you get bitten by a rattlesnake often enough your system becomes immune to the poison. If you're miser-

able long enough it becomes a part of you that you soon ignore."

Johnny nodded. "But not having anyone to follow you—you know that crap about your own flesh an' blood—that stuff: your name an' *all* that, you know."

"Yes," Roy looked across the calm blue waters of the lake to the rolling wooded hills, "I know."

"Yeah, but fucking's the main thing an' if you can still do that, *man* you don't have no worries at all."

Roy grinned and his right brow shot upward. "It's not really as important as you may think, Sport. I told you before that the flies do it . . . so do the birds and all animals. It's no great accomplishment. If it's such an amazing achievement, you should be awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor after every piece you're lucky enough to knock off." Roy grinned slyly and added, "Or something like a Hollywood Oscar: a gold piece to put on your mantel so everyone could see it and you wouldn't have to brag."

Johnny howled and slapped his leg. "Man, you *kill* me!"

"It's the truth, Sport," Roy said seriously as he took a drag off his cigarette. He blew the smoke to the pebbled ground and said very slowly, "If I had to knock off a piece just to prove to myself and to others, through bragging, that I was a man, I'd cut them off and wear a skirt. Don't laugh, Johnny—I mean it. You don't have to sleep with a woman to make you feel that you're a man—that's just a crock."

"Yeah, but to me it'd really be something," Johnny said slowly.

Roy nodded with an easy grin. "I imagine it would."

"Ya know what?"

"What?" Roy smiled.

"Aunt Marg'ud marry you. She'd probably marry any man that was nice to her an'ud take her away from Grandma."

"What's the matter? Don't she and your grandmother get along?"

"Oh, hell no!" Johnny shook his head. "They're all the time at each other's throats."

"How old did you say your Aunt Marg was?"

"I don't know right off the bat—but she's under forty."

"That covers a lot of territory." Roy grinned.

"Yeanh, but she's a virgin."

"How do you know?"

"She's not married," Johnny said simply.

Roy laughed, throwing his head back. "That doesn't mean a thing."

"It don't?" Then he said, "You don't know my ol' Aunt Marg."

Roy smiled respectfully and Johnny added, "I've been wondering a lot about girls and things like that."

"Give me a for-instance."

"Oh"—he shrugged—"you know—about how old they have to be before you can screw'em and things like that. Budd Freemont said they have to be sixteen."

"That isn't true. Certain tribes in Africa prepare their women for intercourse when they're around eleven or twelve. That's when *all* women begin to mature—when the body begins to change and develop and prepare itself for the duties of motherhood."

"Well I'll be darn."

"You did."

"What?"

"Mature."

"Huh?"

"I mean by doing what you told me you did, if you really did it."

"Course I did," he said rather proudly. "Heck, I'm not lyin', Roy. . . . You mean that's maturing?"

"Yes. Do you know what maturing means?"

"No," Johnny laughed, "but I musta started pretty late."

"No you didn't," Roy answered seriously. "Girls begin to mature earlier than boys. Maturing is a growth—growing from one phase of life into another. It's a form of development you go through to become a man or woman. Do you understand now?"

"Yeah," he answered tight-lipped seriously, "now I do. I wasn't *too* sure about it before."

"That's why I'm telling you these things, Sport." Roy flicked his cigarette into the water and turned back to Johnny. "I want to get you straight on things." He paused and shook out another Chesterfield, lighting it slowly. "I suppose you've heard that if you masturbate too much you'll end up in the bughouse, hopelessly insane. . . ."

"Yeah." Johnny frowned. "There's a guy over in Malvern called Wally who runs a newsstand. He's a hunchback an' his arms an' legs were bent"—Johnny wrinkled his nose and his frown bit deeper—"crooked, an' he could hardly talk er walk er *anything*. My buddy Junior, he told me his dad said that Wally's father musta done it a lot

when he was a kid—or even *Wally* could've done it too much an' got all twisted up that way himself."

"Awwwwwwwwwwwwww-fffffffffuck *no*, Sport—don't go believing that kind of bull!" Roy said disgustedly, shaking his head. "That's not at all right."

"It ain't?"

"Why no. . . . It makes me mad that people'll be so damned ignorant as to tell their children stupid things like that! God! They only do it to scare children away from masturbating—but that doesn't stop them because they go ahead and do it anyway. Then they begin to feel a guilt after it's over and the more they do it the guiltier they become. . . . until they think they really are beginning to go crazy. It's really funny."

"Man, I don't think it is."

"I didn't mean laughing-funny, Sport. I mean funny that parents can be so selfish and stupid—they cause more harm than they really know."

Johnny nodded: boy, some things set Roy off like a firecracker.

"Guilt drives people."

"Yeah."

"I'm only confusing you." Roy took a deep drag off the cigarette.

"Well anyway, I'm sure glad to know you can't go crazy. I've been thinking a *lot* about that."

"Well," Roy told him soothingly, "just forget about it. There's only one worry in sex anyway. . . ."

"What's that?"

"Well, when you're with a young girl— Maybe I shouldn't tell you."

"Sure, ca'mon, Roy—tell me."

"I don't want you to worry."

"Ca'mon—I won't worry." Johnny reached out and touched Roy's shoulder and he suddenly felt for him: something way down deep.

"Sometimes," Roy's eyes searched the island, "sometimes being with a young girl can be very dangerous."

"How's that?"

"Have you ever heard of the metaforsite bone?"

"Metaforsite? Huh-uh." He shook his head.

"It's a bone inside a young girl that can slip down when you're having an intercourse with her. . . . It can be dangerous to both parties concerned. It's really two bones, Sport, and they can come to-

gether like a vise." Roy made a fist with each hand and brought the second joints of his knuckles together until they were touching. "And they can hold you up in her like that—it's quite painful, too."

"Jeez." Johnny whistled.

"Yes." Roy looked back to the lake and then at Johnny. "You see, they can slip out of position when the girl gets excited . . . and there's an operation involved to get the two bones back into their lodgings. It can mean possible death for either the boy or the girl."

"Awwwwwwwwwwwwww." Johnny grinned and felt he shouldn't, but gee-whiz and holy-cow and everything else!

"Jeez—I never heard of *anything* like that before."

"Metaforsite operations are kept quiet."

"Man-o-man! You mean they operate on you—on both of'em when they're like *that*?"

"Yes."

"Jeez," Johnny whistled, "goddamn." He slapped his forehead with the palm of his hand. "Does it happen often?"

"It's not what you would call a rare incident."

"Hummmmmmmmm," Johnny nodded, frowning, "that'd be pretty embarrassing, boy, I'll tell ya!"

Roy licked his lips. "See, Sport, it's only in young girls. The metaforsite bone isn't firmly lodged in muscle and tissue until the girl reaches twenty or so—that's why people always say never get married until you're twenty-one."

"Yeah . . . I've heard that. Is that the reason, huh?"

"Yes. By time the girl reaches twenty-one the bone is firmly set and it won't slip during intercourse."

"Boy oh boy oh boy oh boy. . . ."

"That's another reason for so many sports for girls today in school . . . girls are getting married a lot younger these days . . . and sports in school strengthen the muscles and build up the tissue around the metaforsite bone."

"Well I'll be *damndarn*," Johnny said with slow amazement. "It's funny I never heard anything about that bone before."

"It's kept pretty hushhush." Roy took a final drag and flicked the cigarette out into the water.

"Wait till the guys hear about *this*!"

"They'll just laugh at you," Roy said with a shrug.

"Yeanh—until they get caught with 'at hairy old bone. Man alive!"

"I shouldn't have told you, Sport—I don't want you to go worrying about it."

"But I'm glad ya did, Roy. I like to know about things like that."

Roy's voice had an edge of harshness: "Just forget it, Sport. I'd rather not discuss it now."

"Sure, Roy," Johnny said, noting it sounded like it could've happened to Roy, returning a swift rush of unhappy and embarrassing memories.

He turned to Roy and opened his mouth when there came a short click from the reel. He grabbed up his rod and fell to his knees, turning the crank. There was a slight pull on the line but it became slack.

"You were too fast," Roy said. "He was just nibbling. You should have waited until he got a hold of it."

"I thought I had the bastard that time, oright!" Johnny snorted and grinned. He sat back down on the log holding the rod. He turned to Roy and said, "How old were you when you had your first piece?"

"Oh, fifteen, I'd say."

"Jesus—I'd hate to wait *that* long," he said thoughtfully. "Where'd it happen?"

"In my car."

"*Your* car?"

"Yes."

"You had a car when you was *fifteen*?"

"I had a car when I was fourteen."

"Well I'll be!"

"I was driving my father's delivery truck when I was thirteen."

"Gee, I'm thirteen an' I don't even know a thing about driving."

"I'll teach you sometime this summer."

"Okay boy, that's a deal."

Roy smiled broadly and Johnny felt a lot better.

Shadows lengthened and stretched far past them over the water toward the island and an evening coolness settled. On the far shore Johnny saw a red fox creeping cautiously down the hill out from the trees to the edge of the water. "Look," he whispered pointing. Roy nodded and they both watched the fox drink and raise its head and drink again. It turned and disappeared in the brush.

"There doesn't seem to be much fishing here tonight, Sport." Roy brushed his hands. "What do you say to shoving off and taking in a show?"

"I'd say that's a keen idea." He slapped at a puky mosquito on his neck.

Roy smiled and winked and they wound in their lines and carried their stuff back up the path to the car.

Chapter 8

ROY drove back toward the city. The low evening sun splashed its brilliant red rays of color across the sky. From the summit of the high hill they saw the distant city spread out below them in a blanket of smoke-haze reflecting pink under the orange fireball sinking in the western hills through banks of purple jagged clouds.

"Man, ain't that sump'n?" Johnny murmured.

"Yes," Roy agreed, "it's a beautiful sight."

"Makes ya think there isn't a thing the matter inna whole wide world."

"You Dutchman," Roy chuckled, "you damned Dutchman."

Roy parked his car on Fulton Street and they walked around the Wilkinson Craven Hotel, crossed Park Drive West to the Blue Moon Theatre where they saw *The Postman Always Rings Twice*. Johnny ate about five hairy old boxes of candy and it was one of the best movies he'd seen in a long time.

After the show Roy said, "Like a sundae?"

"Who's buyin'?" he asked innocently.

"Come on." Roy grinned and they walked up the street to Doc Miller's Confectionary. Johnny ordered a chocolate sundae and all Roy wanted was a cup of coffee.

"That was a good picture," Johnny said, working his spoon into the chocolate mound of ice cream. "An' that ol' John Garfield—man, I like him. I like him better 'an Humphrey Bogart. Bogart slobbers all over the place."

"Bogart's a good actor."

"I seen him in *Casablanca*. I gotta uncle 'at looks like Humphrey Bogart—my Uncle Cliff. You know him?"

"No." Roy shook his head.

"'Nother good old tough guy's that Edward G. Robinson. . . ."

Roy nodded and grinned and Johnny wanted to know what was so funny.

"Nothing, Sport." Roy smiled, lowering his coffee cup. "I just feel good."

When they were finished, Roy paid the cashier and they walked down the street and up Fulton to the car. Roy drove a block up to State, up State to Dobson Road and parked in front of Grandma's house.

"Say, you comin' in?" Johnny asked.

"I don't believe I should, Sport. It's pretty late now."

"Aw no it ain't."

The lights were on in the living room and Roy looked at his watch. "It's nine-thirty."

"Come on, Roy," Johnny coaxed as he opened the door, stepping to the street. He walked around the front of the car through the blaze of headlights and opened Roy's door. "*Ca'mon* now—I want'cha to meet Mom an' the rest . . . so she'll know who I'm goin' to the Lake with."

Roy sighed and turned the car lights off. He slipped the keys into his pocket and said, "We'll look in the window first to make sure they're up."

They walked up the lawn, passing the living-room window between the front porch and the driveway. They could see Barbara and Margaret in the dining room at the table and Johnny took Roy's hand and pulled him around to the side door, saying, "'At's Mom an' Aunt Marg."

Johnny led Roy through the kitchen and said, "Hi Mom, I want'cha to meet my boss, Roy Davies. . . . Aunt Marg, 'is is Roy Davies."

"I'm very pleased to meet you, Roy," Barbara said, "if I may call you that. Johnny's talked so much about you I feel I know you personally."

"By all means." He smiled.

"I'm glad to meet you, Roy," Margaret said pleasantly. "Won't you join us in a cup of coffee?"

"I—I don't believe so. Thank you anyway. I was going on home but Johnny was insistent that I come in to meet you both." He chuckled.

"Well, I'm glad you did," Barbara said. "It's too bad that Mama's in bed. . . ."

"Surely you can join us in *one* cup of coffee." Margaret stood up.

"Wouldn't it be pretty crowded with three of ya in it?" Johnny grinned.

"Well I—" Roy smiled and pulled his ear lobe.

"Come on," Johnny insisted, "one cup ain't gonna hurt'cha none what."

"*Isn't*," Barbara corrected him. "Ain't is *not* a word. And *none what* is very poor English. You wouldn't think that you were a Seventh Grader—you talk worse than Danny."

"Heck with it—ca'mon, Roy."

Margaret handed Roy a cup and saucer before he could answer and he sat down at Johnny's place at the head of the table in front of the French doors. Margaret poured his coffee and Barbara offered a cigarette, which he accepted.

It was the first time Johnny had ever seen Roy embarrassed or awkward.

"We din't catch a thing," Johnny said disgustedly.

"I believe that Johnny would have had a fine catch—but he was too eager and jumped the gun." Roy chuckled softly and stirred his coffee.

Margaret smiled from Johnny to Roy with her face full of brightness.

"How's Johnny's work?" Barbara asked.

"Excellent—he's a fine worker."

"This is his first job." She smiled.

"Johnny learns fast." Roy looked from Barbara to Johnny to Margaret, then down into his cup.

"You were in the service, weren't you?" Margaret asked.

"Yes. The Navy . . . Pacific Duty."

"He flew a PBX," Johnny told them.

"I didn't fly it, Johnny." Roy scratched the back of his head. "I was just a gunner."

It sounded funny for Roy to call him Johnny. "Well," he shrugged, "it's just about the same."

"Want to bet?" Roy raised his brow.

"Roy's right," Barbara said, knocking the ashes off her cigarette into the candleholder ashtray.

"Oh yeah, Mom!" Johnny whispered excitedly. "Roy's goin'

fishin' up at the Lake Sunday—an' he said I could go if it's oright with you. Gee, Mom, *can* I?"

"Really?" Barbara turned to Roy.

"Yes," he answered, "I plan to leave around ten o'clock."

"Please, Mom?" Johnny pleaded.

"Why not let him?" Margaret said. "I think it would be good for him to get away for a day or so—he does a lot here, you know, and then goes to work at—"

"All right," Barbara said, "all right. You can go."

"Hot *diggety* dog!" Johnny kissed Aunt Margaret on the cheek, catching a faint whiff of perfume. "That's my *ol'* aunt!" Johnny turned to Barbara. "Thanks, Mom—*oh* yeah, guess what?" He hooked his thumbs under his arms and said, "Roy gave me a fishin' rod for all my own."

"Why, I'd say that was very nice of him." Barbara turned and Roy lifted his eyes from his coffee. They smiled.

Barbara turned back to Johnny. "Did you thank him?"

"I sure did, didn't I, Roy?"

"That's right, Sport."

"Sport?" Margaret questioned, lowering her cup to the saucer.

"My new nickname."

"Oh." Margaret smiled at Johnny.

"I think Johnny needs some breaks, Mrs. Parish, and that's why I like to do all I can for him. He gives up a lot too—staying here with his grandmother. And as I said before: Johnny's a very good worker."

"Just call me Barbara, Roy."

He smiled lopsidedly.

"My bike's just about finished, too." Johnny told them.

"Oh, yes, I've been meaning to ask you about that." Barbara turned to Roy. "Surely you're not putting your own money into a bike for Johnny, are you?"

"No," Roy explained seriously and dropped cigarette ashes on the plastic covering. Barbara leaned forward and blew them to the floor. Roy smiled and cleared his throat and continued: "I bought an old frame for a couple of dollars and we're just fixing it up." Roy ran his forefinger back and forth under his nose. "It really doesn't cost me anything—although I did buy him a set of fenders, and I did that mainly because he was truthful with me. So—"

"Truthful?" Barbara interrupted.

Roy hesitated and Johnny said, "About Hunt's" very softly.

There was a slight embarrassed silence; then Roy smacked his lips and smiled and said, "So it isn't going to cost much. Besides, if he wants to, he can pay me back a little each week—"

"Of course, that's the right thing to do." Barbara nodded.

"Sure," Johnny agreed.

Roy glanced at his watch and drank down his coffee. And looked at his watch again. "I'd better be going, being that I'm a working man and have to get up early." Roy stood up. "I'm glad to have met you, Miss Kesler."

"Just plain Margaret." She smiled. "I'm glad to have met you, too."

"I'll see you to the door." Barbara stood up.

Roy followed her through the living room to the front door. She switched on the porch light.

"Good night, Barbara . . . Johnny."

"Night, Roy. See ya tomorrow."

"We've enjoyed having you," Barbara said through the screen, "even if it was for a short time. You must come back again."

"Why thank you." Roy turned on the steps and waved a farewell. He walked down the driveway to his car, and as he drove away Barbara switched off the light and followed Johnny to the dining room.

"Boy," Johnny sighed, "I'm hungry."

"I didn't know you could fish in the dark," Margaret said.

"Aw, we couldn't catch anything so we went to the show."

"Oh," Margaret said.

Barbara went into the kitchen to get Johnny a glass of milk. He yawned and put his elbows on the table and rested his head in his hands. She brought him a big slice of golden-yellow cake that Margaret had baked.

"We should've offered Roy a slice," Barbara said, setting the cake and milk in front of him.

"It completely slipped my mind." Margaret yawned.

"I want you to thank him for everything he does for you," Barbara told him.

"Heck yeah—I always do. He's a nice guy."

"He's a nice *man*." Barbara yawned. "It isn't polite to call a person *guy*."

"He seems pleasant," Margaret said.

Johnny shrugged. "He's sort of a sad guy—I mean man."

"How?" Barbara asked, pouring herself a half-cup of coffee. "How do you mean sad?"

"He's got *wimmen* trouble," Johnny informed them, munching on the cake. "I heard him talkin' on the phone the other night—to his girl friend, I guess. I was inna toilet an' when I come out he had tears in his eyes. I ast him what's the matter and he kept sayin' 'Nothin'.'"

Margaret and Barbara exchanged glances.

"Don't you go making a nuisance of yourself in his personal affairs," Barbara said. "Some people resent it."

"Oh, I ain't."

"You *aren't*," Barbara sighed. "Can't you remember *anything*?"

"Yeah," he said tiredly.

"How much are you getting an hour?" Barbara asked. "Has he told you yet?"

"Huh-uh."

"Well, I'd ask him if I were you," Margaret said.

"I will," Johnny said and finished his cake and milk. "Is Danny here?"

"No," Barbara answered, "he and Walt are sleeping out in the tent tonight."

"I'd like to go down to Aunt Edna's an scare'em." He grinned.

"You'll do no such thing—and take your glass and dish out to the kitchen."

Johnny sighed and did as he was told. "Well, I'm goin' up an' read a bit." He kissed Aunt Margaret on the cheek, smelling her corny perfume.

"I'll be up shortly," Barbara said.

He opened the attic door and switched on the light and climbed the stairs. The ceiling light was dim and the shadows were deep *and goddammit he didn't want to be afraid and run across the attic to the bedroom door*. The floor lamps and furniture, covered with long hanging sheets, looked scary. There could be a million and one things hiding behind something to grab him with claws as he passed.

He walked slowly toward the far door trying to shove back that picture of a half-decayed face he once saw in a *Life* magazine. He suddenly broke into a swift run, on the tips of his toes, to the bedroom door, feeling the back of his neck tighten: IT WAS GOING TO GRAB HIM NOW!

He slapped up on the wallswitch and slammed the door and leaned up against it. He swallowed, feeling his heart thumping high in the center of his chest. He was a chickenshit. He went to his room.

When Barbara came upstairs a few minutes later she went into Johnny's room. "You didn't wash, did you?"

"I'm clean," he mumbled, reading a Smilin' Jack Big Little Book.

"Roy sure does take an interest in you."

"Yeah . . . he's a nice guy."

"Why did you tell him about Hunt's?"

Johnny shrugged his shoulders.

"Put that book down and pay attention to me while I'm talking."

"I don't know," Johnny said, rolling over on his back keeping his finger in his place, "I just told him."

"That was a very silly thing to do." Barbara unbuttoned the front of her dress.

"What'cha mean?"

"It's a wonder he trusts you—most men wouldn't let you work for them if they found something out like that."

"Roy trusts me . . . an' I wasn't the only one takin' comic books either."

Barbara took off her dress and stood in the doorway in her slip. "But you still shouldn't have told him."

Johnny sighed. "He's a nice guy—he don't care because he said so. He said he trusted me an' he does a lot more for me 'an *Dad* ever did."

"What do you mean?" Barbara put her hands on her hips.

Johnny rolled over and sat up. "Like helpin' me get a bike an' takin' me fishin' . . . goin' up to the Lake an' things like that."

"Your father never had a car to do those kind of things with you boys."

"He never done much for me that I can remember," Johnny told the beaverboard wall. "All he was doin' was goin' out an' gettin' drunk. 'At's why he never had a car."

"That's just enough out of you, young *man!*" Barbara said sharply, pointing her finger at him. "Any more talk like that and you won't go to the Lake—I'll guarantee you *that!*" Barbara swung her finger around to the attic door. "Now you go downstairs and wash, and don't you dare go banging anything around and waking up Grandma."

"Yeanh." He got off the bed. Can't do anything to please anyone any more and it seemed that everyone was mad and if not at him at something else.

"Perhaps if he'd stop drinking, he'd change," Barbara said from the doorway as he approached the attic steps.

Each step he clomped was a *bull* and the one beneath it was a *shit*.

Chapter 9

WHEN Johnny Parish opened his eyes that morning he lay facing the wall. There was something great and wonderful that had happened or was going to happen. Was it just another one of those hairy old dreams where someone had given him a wristwatch? What happened yesterday? Nothing much: just a dull Saturday.

He rolled over and sat up. Today was the day they were going to the Lake! The room was bright with late sun, not the dull early light of seven or eight. It was a bright nine- or ten-o'clock glow and a heavy morning warmth had settled in the room. He threw back the sheet and ran into Barbara's room. She was downstairs and Danny was sleeping. The electric clock on the dresser read five to nine. He felt the wild beating of his heart and put his hand to his chest feeling the heavy throbbing through flesh and bone.

Johnny went back to his room. The window was out and he looked down to the quiet road. It was calm and peaceful with the silent reverence of Sunday. He was thinking you could always tell a Sunday from any other day in the week. Johnny could see the powder-blue sky with a few curling pencil-thin clouds to the north.

As he was slipping into his clean denim Levis he suddenly felt sorry for Danny. There wasn't any argument last night, but Danny had felt bad because he couldn't go along today.

Barbara was putting up her hair and she had told him, "You have fun and play all week while Johnny works and stays here. Besides, Roy didn't invite you. After all, Johnny does work for him."

"Sure," Johnny said, "we'll be goin' again an' we'll take ya along the next time."

"I doan w-w-wanna go no *n-next* time." Danny pouted.

"We'll go and see a show," Barbara said.

"I doan wanna go," Danny replied stubbornly.

"You and Mom go to a show," Johnny told him.

"I doan wanna go to no show. I wanna g-go fishin'."

"The matter is settled." Barbara turned from the mirror, closing her eyes. "Now just forget about it."

"Nnnnn-ahhhhhhhhhh," Danny grunted.

"What was *that*, young man?"

"Nothin'." Danny said tearfully, snatching up a Superman comic book and rolling over on the bed away from his mother.

Johnny had put his hand on Danny's warm bare shoulder. "You can go the next time."

Danny shook his shoulder irritably. "Come on, quit *messin'* r-round."

"Leave him alone," Barbara told him. "Go to your room and read or something."

"You can go the next time," Johnny said, going to his room. There had been no answer.

Johnny buttoned his fly and took the belt out of his dirty pants and looped it into his clean ones and put on a clean white sweet-smelling T-shirt. Down in the bathroom he splashed water on his face and it took about five minutes to comb his hair. He was training it to lay back on the sides and he used a lot of Vaseline to keep it down because Roy said it was good for training hair. Yeanh man, it made him look a *lot* older.

"Here comes the fisherman," Grandma chuckled.

"Yep." Johnny grinned, sitting at the table.

"You just better be careful," Barbara warned him with a nervous frown, "and not go showing off."

"Don't go worryin'."

Johnny put two slices of cracked wheat in the toaster. Barbara went to get the cocoa she had begun to heat when he came downstairs. As he waited for the toast to pop he looked over at Grandma. Gee, he loved'er. She was wearing her blue bathrobe and her long, silver hair hung down her back to her waist. Grandma never wound it up into the familiar bun on the back of her head until after breakfast. In the mornings before she made her pigtail, with her long hair brushed back, she was very beautiful.

Aunt Margaret came out of her room wearing a light-brown suit with a frilly white blouse. There were two silver cupids pinned to

her lapel connected with a little chain. She had a little black hat perched on the side of her head with a veil covering her curly brown hair.

"Hi, goodlookin'." Johnny winked.

"You look very nice," Grandma said.

"Thank you, Mama." Margaret smiled and poured herself a cup of coffee. Her eyes were bright and had a twinkle. She turned to Johnny. "If Roy comes before I go, do you think he'd be kind enough to drive me to church?"

"Sure he would. It won't be out of our way, and even if it was he'd still do it—he'd do anything for anyone."

"He is a nice man . . . a kind face. Working hands, too." Grandma nodded seriously and Johnny smiled. When he and Roy had closed the station last night at eight, Johnny brought Roy home to meet Grandma. He had never seen Grandma take to anyone right off the hairy old bat like she did to Roy. He knew that his job was safe, now. He and Roy had planned to go to the show but Roy said he had an important welfare meeting to attend at the American Legion.

"We'll see that ya get to church." Johnny gave Margaret a confident wink and he was so happy he felt like exploding.

Roy was humming "Pennies from Heaven" as he finished brushing his hair. He splashed some Old Spice lotion on his freshly shaven cheeks and felt the stinging coolness.

He lit a cigarette and took the change from the dresser and put it in his pocket. He was winding his watch when Mother came into the room. She went to his bed and tossed back the covers, sighed, and sat down on the edge of the mattress. She looked up at Roy. "What time did you get home last night, Baby?"

"It was pretty late." He slipped the silver watchband through his hand to his wrist.

"Were you out with Grace Wells again?"

"Uh-huh."

"Where did you go?"

"Down to the American Legion."

"Oh."

Roy looked at his mother sagging the edge of the bed. Her face was red and flabby and she had dark circles under her eyes. Her hair was almost completely gray now. She looked very old and tired and sorry for herself.

"Where are you going so early?"

"Fishing—up at the Lake." Roy took a deep drag.

"Alone?"

"No—I'm taking Johnny Parish."

"Oh." Mother pursed her lips. "Why don't you take Grace Wells?"

"Fishing?" He smiled.

"Are you getting serious with her? She's a very nice girl—quite attractive, too, I must say."

"Yes, she is."

"I'll invite her up for supper some evening—how's that?"

"I'll conduct my romances without your assistance, thank you,"

Roy answered coolly feeling his arms beginning to tremble.

"You'll be the death of me yet." She sighed, fingering a corner of the sheet.

"You'll be the death of yourself," he corrected. "And will you please get off my back?"

"But when I pass from this earth into—"

"Don't make me feel sorry for you. When you die, you're dead. That's all. Will you *please* stop making me feel that I'll be rid of a cancer?"

Mother pursed her lips and raised her hurt eyes to his. "Do you feel that way toward me: feel that—that I'm a *cancer*?"

Roy turned and walked to the window. A small boy and girl were walking hand in hand down the sidewalk.

"Why do you hate me, Baby?"

"I do not hate you," he answered emotionlessly as he watched a car pass. "You talk of hate as if I thrived on it . . . but I don't. I don't hate anything." He turned and looked into Mother's bright eyes, his voice now bordered with a plea. "I don't hate anything—I try to hate a lot of things, but I honestly can't. Something's the matter. I'm not capable of hate. I'm just that way but no one will understand. . . . I love everything and everyone. All I ask out of life is to be understood and equally loved. To go my own—" He abruptly halted, looking into his mother's puzzled and frowning face.

She took her index finger from her lips and said, "What about the love Grace gives you?"

"Love!" He laughed, throwing his head back, "It's a joke—an escape. People fall in love to escape from one environment into another, from one extreme to the other. Ego plotting against ego. One gigantic battle." Roy laughed and his face was red.

"I don't understand you half of the time." His mother sighed again, shaking her head.

"You can't—don't even try. It's wasted effort."

She sighed in defeat.

"Take care of Father—leave me alone." Roy walked around the bed and lowered his face to his mother's. "What would you do if there weren't any stars—that you were hypnotized when you were a little girl into believing that every time you looked into the sky at night, you'd see stars?"

"You talk foolish and in riddles."

Roy went to the bedroom door and started to leave, but turned and said, "I talk in voices that sound—leaving impressions in dust."

He walked down the hall to the stairs.

At quarter to ten Roy pulled into Grandma's drive and peeped his horn to the tune of *Shave and a haircut, two bits*, and Johnny opened the front door and motioned Roy to come in. Johnny raised his index finger, nodding that it would be just a moment.

Roy walked up the circular walk to the front porch. The living room was cool and Grandma was smiling widely.

"Will you have some coffee?" She half rose from her chair and Roy motioned her back.

"No thank you, Mrs. Kesler."

"Call me Grandmother." She laughed. "Do you have a grandmother?"

"No, Mrs.—Grandmother. They died when I was very young. . . . I've been telling Johnny here how proud he must be of you."

Grandma smiled. "He is a good boy."

"Hello, Roy," Barbara said coming from the kitchen. "Can I get you a cup of coffee?"

Roy stood up. "Hello, Barbara—no thank you, I've already had breakfast."

"He works for me," Grandma said, "then he works for you. . . . He does all my cleaning." She made a wide sweeping gesture around the living room. "He is a hard worker."

They all smiled at Johnny who said, "Aunt Marg just left. If you was earlier you could've taken'er to church."

"That's too bad." Roy scratched the back of his head.

"Irene—my sister—she was here and gave her a lift uptown," Barbara told him.

"Irene's been coming to the station," Roy said and turned to Grandma. "So has your son, ah . . . oh, Ralph."

"Grandma told'em all I worked there; 'at way we can get their business."

Roy laughed and brushed his nose. He turned to Johnny. "Well, Sport—ready to go?"

"I'm ready for Freddy."

"Someone else is going with you too?" Grandma asked.

"No," Roy smiled, "it's just a rhyming expression."

"Oh yes." She nodded. "Drive the machine careful and watch so the boy don't fall in the water."

"I will." Roy stood up and took her hand. "Good-by, Grandmother."

"Good-by." She smiled and patted the back of his hand.

Barbara followed them to the door.

As they were walking to the car Danny called to Roy. He was upstairs in the gable looking out Johnny's half-moon window.

"Hi, there, Danny!" Roy waved.

"Hey, Roy, c-c-can I g-go the nex' time?"

"If you're a good boy and do what your mother says."

"O-Okay!"

They got into the car and Roy backed down the drive and they waved to Barbara and Danny and turned onto Tweed Street. Roy drove down Tweed past Carter and on down to Park Drive West. He turned to his right and drove down to Nelson. At Second and Nelson Roy stopped for a red light. Johnny pointed to the church on the corner and said, "I went to a couple of Boys' Club meetings there 'is last spring. It's run by a Mr. Bentley—know him?"

"No," Roy confessed, "I don't believe I do."

"He's sort of a bigshot down at the Magnet Electric."

"How old is he?"

"'Bout fifty—talks with a funny kind of voice."

"I can't place him. . . ."

"There's where I'd like to work." Johnny pointed to the Sweete Candy Company across the street from the church.

"You'd soon get tired of candy." Roy smiled.

"I would like hell."

"So," Roy exclaimed as the light flashed green, "you don't like working for me, huh? Well," he sighed, driving off, "that's okay. See if I care."

"I'm sorry," Johnny said seriously, "I was only kiddin' like. I didn' *mean* it." He put his hand on Roy's shoulder. "Really I was only kiddin'."

Roy turned and winked, smiling broadly with his lower lip stuck out. "So was I."

As Roy drove out Central through what was commonly known as the Flats, Johnny gazed out his window at the old buildings and paper-cluttered sidewalks, hearing the music and wild laughter from the open tavern doors, looking at the men in dirty unpressed suits sitting around on the steps of doorways and closed shops.

Boy, he sure was lucky. This really had turned out to be a nice day.

Chapter 10

ROY crossed the B & O tracks and drove on past the depot, filling stations, small shops, warehouses and finally past the Malleable Metals to the city dump, which was surrounded by a cluster of leaning shanties. Then they were passing a big steel mill, far to their left across flat fields. Johnny looked over at the mile-long plant that seemed engulfed in a pale-blue smoke haze.

Roy lit a cigarette.

"Jeez—I can hardly wait!" Johnny sucked air in excitedly between his clenched teeth.

"Excited, huh?"

"You bet'cha! I can picture that old lake now: blue an' everything . . . alla cabins along the lake . . . alla beaches!"

Roy smiled to the highway.

"Did you know Rose Fuller?" Johnny asked suddenly.

"No," Roy said slowly, "should I?"

"She used to live up the street from Gran'ma's house. Do you know where that empty lot is onna other side of the street?"

"Yes."

"She used to live in that small white bungalow next to the lot—know the house I mean?"

"I believe I do." Roy turned with a half smile. "Why? Did you have a crush on this Rose?"

"Naw—nothin' like that. She's about forty. I just thought ya mighta known her."

"I believe I know the house you mean."

"I used to go to the store for her," he gazed out to the highway, "'cause she wasn't well. She's a nice-lookin' woman an' I used to have talks with'er inna livin' room. She'd always gimme a coke. Rose acted real funny when we were alone. . . ."

"How do you mean: funny?"

"For instance: I'd sit inna chair an' she'd sit onna davenport—'cross from me. She talked real low an' soft. Just talk to talk. She'd move her lips with each word like maybe I was deaf an' hadda read lips. . . . Sometimes she sounded gruff, but most of the time her voice was purry. . . ."

Rose Fuller wasn't a well woman and everyone on Dobson Road knew she was sick. Her husband, Sam, worked as manager at Fields Department Store. Sam was a heck of a lot older than Rose. Maybe ten years older, and Rose was pretty close to forty. Rose and Sam Fuller were real happy. They had a hairy old one-story bungalow that was painted white every spring, and in the front yard there were a couple of tall poplar trees with tape wrapped up the narrow trunks so the ants wouldn't get them.

Sam was a short man with a round cheerful face, graying hair, and a number of scars on his jaws, below his ears and around his neck. They were from a bad burn and he always kept the top button of his collar buttoned right up to his throat. He must have been pretty young when he got the scars because they were faint and you could barely see them at times.

Rose wasn't beautiful but there was something about her. A beauty that wasn't on the outside: the way she made you feel you were a very important guy and that there were a heck of a lot of people that couldn't get along without you. Rose always held her body stiff-like, as if it was a habit from when she was a kid. She was a lot taller than hairy old Sam—maybe three or four inches—but her sickness made her awful thin, sinking her cheeks and making her eyes look dull, and her black hair was getting gray pretty fast.

There are words like *haunting* and *decay* and *spirit* and *mist* that

always reminded me of Rose when I heard them: not of Rose herself, but of the way her sickness made her out to look and be and sometimes act.

I used to go to the store for Rose, but I don't any more. It isn't that I'm too busy because even if I was busy I'd still take time out to go to the store for Rose or for anything else she wanted me to do. I used to go to the store for Rose a lot when I came back to Wilkin-son City after Mom divorced Dad.

I'd carry the old sack of groceries to the kitchen for her and she'd follow me. The first thing I'd do was get the bill from under the string that was wrapped around the meat. Then I'd take the change from my pocket and count it up and add it to the amount on the bill. I was never short one darn penny, but sometimes I did make a mistake in adding—but the second time I added it, it always came out right.

—Here's a quarter for you, Johnny. Now you take it and go to the movie.

I really wanted the money but pretended I didn't and she knew I did and finally always won by taking my hand and putting the quarter in my palm and she would close my hand, holding it a minute. Sometimes her hands were pretty cold.

—Gee, Rose, I like goin' to the store for you. I really don't want to get paid for it.

I would always say something like that.

—You keep it now. Let's have a coke. . . .

—Okay.

When she said *let's* have a coke she never meant *let us*: it always meant me because she never drank any.

We'd go into the living room then.

The Venetian blinds were always pulled shut. At first I thought it was just to keep the bright morning sun out as the living room faced the east, but I guess it wasn't because of the sun at all, because after school during the week when the sun was on the other side of the house she still had the blinds pulled shut.

Saturday mornings were the best of all because we could sit and talk a long time, but after school when I went to the store for her I'd usually have to hustle right on down to Grandma's house for supper.

Those hairy old Saturday mornings were something: Rose would switch on the small lamp and sit on the davenport and I'd always sit

in the chair off to the side in front of her. The furniture was all new, but it wasn't having new things that made me think they were rich: it was their books. There were about five million and fifty books in that darn old bookshelf that went clear up to the ceiling, to the left as you came in the door, covering half the wall. There was a coffee table in front of the davenport—a long low one—and on the far end there was a *Life* magazine, and on top of that there was a *Look* magazine, and then in one long row with just the edges sticking out there were hundreds of magazines, and most of them had those little pink subscription stickers on the covers. Boy, I always thought it was something to have all those magazines and books. It really was. You could lock me up in that little white bungalow for five hundred years and I'd never want to leave.

I'll always remember that Saturday morning just before Easter: I'd gone to the store, and after we put the groceries away in the kitchen Rose made me a big soda with ice cream and Dad's Old-Fashioned Root Beer. Then we went into the living room. Rose looked a lot sicker that day and she smiled a lot. As soon as we sat down she said:

—Has your mother found a job yet?

—She thinks she might get a job as a waitress at the Wilkinson Craven Hotel. JoAnn Brown works there. Do you know JoAnn Brown?

—No.

I took a sip of my soda and said:

—JoAnn's a good friend of Mom's, an' her sister is the hostess in the dining room. JoAnn's the cashier, so Mom thinks she'll get in. She'll know sometime next week.

—I guess you would like a home to live in, wouldn't you? Course you would. If your mother did get the job, Johnny, would you still be living at Grandmother Kesler's?

—Golly, I don't know. At first we lived at Aunt Edna's place. . . . Then I laughed and said: Mom said our next move would be over with Aunt Irene, then down to the Salvation Army.

Old Rose didn't smile much; just moved the corners of her mouth.

There was a silver engraved cigarette case on the coffee table in front of the davenport. I'd always watch Rose when she'd lean forward to get a cigarette. Rose never wore a brassiere and they hung long and limp, like Mom's did when she didn't have on a brassiere. It made me uncomfortable and the cool glass felt good in the palms

of my hands. I spooned out some more ice cream while Rose sat back smoking with the ashtray in her lap. Rose took small puffs and hardly blew out any smoke at all. I liked staying with her, even though I was in a hurry to get down to the Blue Moon Theatre to see that week's chapter of the *Masked Marvel*.

—Has your father been over lately? Rose asked.

Most people I'd think were nosy and wouldn't say much, but Rose was different.

—He's been over once.

Rose frowned, bunching up her whole forehead with wrinkles and she said:

—A growing boy needs both his mother and father.

—A man in the family, I said.

—That's right.

—Well, *I'm* the man in the family now, I told her, because I'm getting a paper route.

—You are? *Wonderful!*

—You'll be on my route because all of Dobson Road is.

—Will you . . . how many . . . will you deliver many papers?

Something seemed funny with Rose and what she said she had to strain out. I was afraid something was going to happen because she didn't breathe easy . . . like she was making herself, and I said:

—Not many. . . . Don't you feel good, Rose?

—Yes . . . why? she said and boy if I ever saw a fake smile, she had one. Her eyes were sad dog's eyes.

Then I said, Rose what's the matter with you? What makes you sick?

She looked at me smiling, her white teeth sparkling between her red parted lips.

—It's nothing, really.

—I never see you dressed up at all, ya know it? Even in the evenings when I come up to see you and Sam, you're still not dressed up or anything.

—Please. . . . I'm all right.

—If anything hurts you *real* bad you should go see a doctor or someone. I wouldn't want anything to happen to you.

She didn't look at me. I don't know what really made me do it but I was moving and the next thing I knew I was sitting on the davenport beside her.

—Please don't cry, Rose.

She lowered her head and a couple tears dropped to her red silk bathrobe and the wet spots grew big. I put my hand to her shoulder. I thought I could help her feel better by touching her like she tries to feel better when she holds my hand with the quarter. Like maybe I had something in me that she got through me when she touched me.

—I'm sorry for making you feel bad. . . . I didn't mean to say anything at all. Honest.

—That's okay, Johnny.

I wanted to shout and say: *say it again, say it again, say it again. Goddamn say it again.* Gee-whiz and holy-cow I loved Rose Fuller!

Then she set the ashtray on the wide-topped arm of the davenport. She looked at me with shining wet eyes.

—You ain't *mad* at me, are you? I asked.

—Of course not, darling. . . .

I guess I knew what she was going to do because I was ready too, and the next moment I was in her arms with my arms around her and I buried my face on her breast. My eyes were closed and Rose ran her hand up and down my back. She smelled clean and sweet.

—Sam and I were talking how we always wanted a son like you. But they never came. Her breath was hot on the top of my head. I didn't say anything for a while.

—For a real *honest-to-God* son? I finally asked.

—Yes, for a real honest-to-God son.

Rose and Sam Fuller wanted a son like me! I kept thinking about that, in her arms, feeling her warmth, her hand patting my back. I was ashamed of myself. Boy, I was the crummiest dog that ever lived. I was ashamed and felt crummy because it wasn't the talks we had or the cokes or the quarters that made me keep coming back: it was because I thought if I came back often enough and we got to be real real good friends, she'd show me what it looked like down there and we'd go in the bedroom and do everything, but now, jeez, I felt like crying because of what I had been thinking about and I wouldn't want to do anything like that now, not now, and I thought why couldn't I have been born from Rose instead of my own mother?

I didn't want to think about that now because I just wanted to hold Rose. Why couldn't I have been born from her? But it wasn't that way and maybe the next time I'm born, if I'm born again and there is such a thing as that, I'll have Rose for my mother and my

mother will be like Rose is now. How about having two mothers, one that creates me and one that loves me: all the time that way, if there is an allthetime and I get mixed up thinking of things like that but I wouldn't want to see Rose down there now. I'd close my eyes, close them tight just like I would if Mom tried to show me. I love Rose now, oh jeez I love you Rose. My Rose.

—Sometimes I wish you were my mother, I said.

—Johnny, Johnny darling, she whispered.

Say it again say it again: because my mother never did.

—You'd make a nice mother.

Then Rose said:

—Sit up a moment, darling. . . . I have something I want to tell you.

I sat up and held her thin arm in both my hands.

—Sam and I, we . . . I mean, we're leaving town. We're leaving next week. . . . Going back to Nebraska. Collins, Nebraska. That's where I was born and raised, on a farm. Rose forced a smile and said: I'm just an' old farm girl at heart. . . . I want you to know I'll always be thinking of you.

It seemed hard for her to talk: I'll write you, darling, will you answer?

—Gee, you know I will.

The next day Rose and Sam gave me one of the biggest Easter baskets in the whole wide world.

I thought that when they left they'd leave me some of their books, but they didn't because they had to sell everything and I knew if I asked them they would. On the evening they left I went up to see them off. There wasn't anything left in the house no more, and stuck plunk right in the middle of the front yard there was a big sign that read:

FOR SALE

but it was dark and I couldn't see it then. Rose was sitting in the front seat of their Studebaker and Sam was beside her behind the wheel. She was all dressed up but she didn't look too good dressed up. The headlights of the car glared on the closed garage doors and spilled all over the rest of the front of the house. I kissed Rose on the mouth and she held my face there with both her hands:

—God bless you, Johnny, Rose whispered.

—'By, son, Sam said.

I wish Rose hadn't of said that: her breath was awful bad. I knew it was sickbreath and that she couldn't help it but still . . . I didn't give a damn. She put something folded in my hand and was crying without making any noises.

I stood in the driveway as they backed down to the street with the carlights shining on me, then off me and everything was dark and so was I: inside of me because I felt empty. Gee, I loved Rose. I watched them drive off and remembered the joke Rose and me had about their new Studebaker: You didn't know if it was coming or going.

Under the streetlight I unfolded a slip of paper with writing:

remember, I will always love you. . . .

Rose

and there was a ten-dollar bill. Boy, did I cry that night, but I did it in my pillow so Mom wouldn't hear.

I never got a letter from Rose because she died before she got to Collins, Nebraska. Sam wrote me a letter and said she didn't have any pain but brother, that was a bunch of shit: there's always a pain with cancer. I folded Sam's letter and put it in my Tarzan book with Rose's note. I still had five dollars out of the ten stashed away in the Tarzan book too. It was my goddamn safe. I had my paper route for about a week already and I'd only known Roy a short time so I didn't tell him a thing about Rose. That night when I delivered papers after getting the letter she was dead, I missed half the porches. I threw the papers so I would miss. I didn't care if I made the people mad or not. She wanted to go home to die on the farm, and maybe to see a few of her old friends and be buried next to her mother and father because she always said she loved them so.

I kept from crying all during supper and the rest of the evening until I got to bed and then I couldn't cry.

I
sometimes
still pretend that
Rose and
Sam still live
up

the street
from Grandma's house
in that
hairy old small
white bungalow
but I'm
just too busy
to
go to the store for
Rose Fuller
a n y m o r e

Chapter 11

"YOU say that woman acted funny?" Roy questioned with his eyes on the road.

Johnny looked out his window. He really couldn't explain it to Roy. He turned and said with a shrug, "I guess it was her bein' sick."

"You should stay away from strange-acting women, Sport. They can get you into serious trouble."

"She doesn't live there any more," he explained softly, "she moved away."

"This woman—Rose—did she ever make a sexual pass at you?" Roy still kept his eyes on the road.

"You mean flirtin'?"

"Something like that. Wanting to get playful."

"Naw," Johnny shook his head, "she never done nothin' like that."

"You said she always wore a bathrobe. Did she ever let it fall open so you could see something?"

"Huh-uh."

"There are women like that, Sport," Roy told him as he passed a rickety old Ford. "Everything they do will seem innocent—like letting their robe slip open so you can take a quick glance at their breast or leg. . . . Anything to stimulate or get you worked up. That way you'll be ready for their advances."

Johnny nodded, suddenly disliking Roy for making a whore out of Rose, but Roy didn't know a thing about it so he couldn't really blame Roy for talking like that. Why did he have to say *anything* at all about Rose? Way down deep inside of him this was supposed to be his own secret; a secret and wonderful love, something of his that only he had, something that even a thief couldn't steal. Even as bad as he wanted Roy to know, he still wanted it for his very own.

"I guess there are women like that," Johnny said thoughtfully, "but this Rose wasn't. . . . Really." Then he broke into a nervous laugh. "Holy-jeez, if there *are* women like that, I'd like to find *me* a few."

"There's a lot of them," Roy assured him, "but they're not the kind you want to mess with. . . . It's serious business. Half of them are cracked in the first pl—" Roy cut himself off and tossed the cigarette out the window.

Johnny wanted to get back to talking about opening bathrobes but Roy said, "Someday, if you really feel you have to have it—*really* have to—I'll take you to a whorehouse." His voice was dead serious. "But just don't mess around with young girls."

"Oh *heck* no." Johnny's eyes popped wide.

Roy looked sadly at the road.

"A *real* hotdog whorehouse?" Johnny asked excitedly.

"Yes," Roy answered firmly, "but *only* in an emergency."

"It's a deal, boy." Johnny nodded seriously. "One of the best hairy old deals I've had in a long time."

Roy turned and winked but his eyes were sad. Johnny figured he'd just better drop it for now because something, all of a sudden, had begun to worry Roy.

Johnny looked out his open window past his elbow cutting the cool breeze. They were passing a small lake in a green pasture and he looked intently at the slim necks of the brown and white horses lowered to the water. A horse looked up, gazed around proudly, holding its head high and erect. Then with a shake of its head and a toss of its mane, it returned to the water.

"We'll be coming into Fairfield soon," Roy said. "Do you want to eat there or wait until we get up to Pie Pier?"

Johnny turned to Roy. "Let's wait. . . . Unless you wanna eat now."

"We'll wait." Roy broke into a broad grin. He was out of that sad mood. They didn't last long anyway.

"I wanna get up there: *Jesus!* I'm as excited as hell—no foolin', I

am." Johnny wrinkled his nose and slapped his thigh with a shrug of his shoulders. "But today'll be over inna few hours, inna few minutes. It's always minutes when you're happy."

"Yes," Roy agreed sighing comfortably back in the seat. "And when you're miserable, it's eternity."

"Boy, ain't that the truth." Johnny looked over to Roy. "Like when you're goin' to the dentist an' everything."

Roy smiled reaching in his shirt pocket for a cigarette.

"Yep," Johnny sighed, "today'll flash by inna couple of minutes."

"We can make a lot of trips up here, Sport. There are more tomorrows following today. We can come up here on a Saturday morning and stay until Sunday night. Plenty of fishing and swimming. How does that sound?"

"That sounds *keen* boy—it really does!" Johnny smacked his fist into the palm of his hand. "All that and a whorehouse too."

Roy threw his head back and roared out laughing, almost swerving off the highway.

He stopped to get some gas and they drank a Doctor Pepper and drove on through Fairfield to the open country. They were on a flat cement highway with the farms back in the distance, and Johnny noticed there weren't any hills, just low bottom land stretching out to flat woods. Then far ahead he could see the trees, and through the trees the Lake seemed to blend into the blue of the sky. The closer they came, the more distinguishable the horizon appeared between the calm Lake and the hanging sky.

"Jeeeeez," Johnny said in wonder, "look at the Lake . . . ain't it pretty out there?"

"It sure is, Sport."

The road they were on ran into and halted at the Lake Shore Highway and Roy turned right toward Pie Pier.

"Look man! There's old Eden!" Johnny pointed out his window as they passed a camp of one-room cabins and trailers and tents, and just down over the hill was the beach and the Lake. "We used to stay there—a long, long time ago when I was a *kid*."

Roy smiled.

Johnny's eyes followed the Lake as they passed resorts and trailer parks and camps. They came to the wide bridge over the Pie River that emptied into the Lake, and on the Pie Pier side of the bank stood the Boat Club.

The tires of the car hummed drummingly over the open metal

grill as they passed over the reddish-brown river and Johnny looked with fascinated wonder at the tall sailboats, the cabin cruisers, the speedboats, the outboard motorboats, the network of docks and the white-painted clubhouse above the bank of the river, far enough away from the bridge so the tourists could see it.

There's nothin' like the Lake inna *whole* wide world!

They drove into Pie Pier and Roy turned to his left at Main Street, and they could look straight out through the town and past the fisheries to the pier and the towering white lighthouse at the very end.

Roy parked the Olds in front of the Morris Movie House that was showing a *Millie* movie starring Ann Sothern and a Johnny Mack Brown Western. He smacked Johnny on the thigh. "Let's get some grub, huh?"

"Yeanh man!"

Roy put a nickel in the meter and they crossed the busy street. The sun was hot and the air still. The sidewalks were crowded with people from various camps and trailer parks. Almost everyone was wearing walking shorts and sunglasses. Most of the men wore short-sleeved brightly designed sportshirts unbuttoned down the front, and the women wore either blouses or halters with shorts. Their skins were an odd mixture from snow white to deep exotic tan.

"The Davis Dairy is down the street," Roy said. "It's a wonderful place to eat. They have the biggest and thickest milkshakes in town."

"Hot *diggety* dog, man-o-man am I hungry. I really feel too excited to eat—what time ya got?"

"Three-thirty. . . ."

"Wha'—" Johnny looked up, then grinned. "Go on."

"It's eleven o'clock." Roy chuckled.

"Don't *do* things like that." Johnny laughed. "They got hamburgers?"

"The best in town."

"Seven of 'em for me, by God!"

The Davis Dairy was a cool, air-conditioned, clean-smelling place. It had an all-white interior with booths along the wall and tables and chairs between the booths and counter. Roy and Johnny sat at the counter. From the jukebox in the back they could hear Vaughn Monroe singing "There I've Said It Again":

*"I love you, what more can I say?
Believe me, there's no other way—"*

A tall woman, smiling pleasantly, placed glasses of cold water on the white marble counter before them. She waited expectantly.

After Johnny took a gulp of water he said, "Do you have any chili?"

"Yes, sir."

He always felt a proud embarrassment when anyone addressed him as *sir*. It didn't happen often.

He smiled. "I'll have a bowl of chili an' two hamburgers." He turned questioningly to Roy. "Is that okay?"

"Why sure, have all you want." Then he smiled at the waitress. "I'll have the same."

"Yes sir." She wrote it down on a pad and asked what they'd have to drink.

"Chocolate milkshake," Johnny said.

"I'll have coffee," Roy said.

"It will be just a few minutes." She smiled as if she was sorry about the whole thing and went to the kitchen.

Roy took a cigarette and crumpled the empty pack. Johnny looked around. The place wasn't very crowded. The jukebox began grinding, then made a series of loud clicking noises and Frank Sinatra began singing "You Go To My Head." There were two giggling girls sitting at a table in front of the jukebox holding hands. *Bobbysoxers!* Hell, he could sing twice as good as that hairy old Frank Sinatra. *Bubblingchampagne!*

Hubba-hubba:

Down the counter to his left there was a girl about sixteen sipping a lime soda. Johnny glanced up her smooth tan legs over her thighs to the white shorts with the blue stripe. She was wearing a halter and it seemed she had nice breasts but before he could really tell, a cruddy man in a business suit sat down between him and the girl.

Johnny nudged Roy. "Hey, how old do I look?"

"Thirteen, why?"

"Really?"

"Thirteen."

Johnny turned disgustedly away.

Roy chuckled. "What made you ask that?"

"Nothin' I guess," he shrugged, "just wonderin'."

When they were finished, the girl in the shorts had gone and all he had to remember her by was a pair of lipstick-stained straws drooping out of an empty glass. It's always like that, he thought.

Roy paid the check, bought three packs of Beech-Nut Chewing Gum and several packs of Chesterfields. He gave the gum to Johnny and they crossed the street and walked up toward the car.

They got into the car and the air was hot and musty. Johnny opened the gum and offered a stick to Roy who accepted and Roy opened the cigarettes and offered one to Johnny who accepted.

"You don't really plan to smoke it, do you?" He smiled in surprise.

Johnny hadn't planned to but found himself saying, "Yeanh—sure, why not?" He grinned lopsidedly.

"Better wait until we get out on the highway."

"Man, I wasn't gonna smoke it here in town."

Roy started the car and they drove down Main Street and turned east, toward Aldrich. They passed camps and bathing beaches and custard stands and roadhouses, and when they passed the roadhouses they could smell the stale beer and hear the loud music from the jukeboxes, and when they passed the fruitstands along the road they could smell the ripe peaches and melons and bananas, and when they skirted close to the Lake they could smell the hot sand and the water and Johnny could always see the Lake blue through the trees across the fields. The sun was hot and high in the sky and Johnny had never seen a hairy old sky that seemed as high and fair as it did that day.

It was the first cigarette he'd ever smoked and it left a bad but sweet funny taste in his mouth. He threw it half smoked out the window.

"Enjoy it?"

"Sure," he said shoving a fresh stick of gum into his mouth.

"The next one you smoke you'll have to inhale. Every drag, too."

Johnny cleared his throat. "I don' care *too* much for smoking."

Roy's laugh trailed off and he put his hand on Johnny's leg. It made Johnny stiffen and feel funny for a moment. Roy lifted his hand and said, "We'll fish for about an hour and a half, then go back toward Cottage Bay and swim near there. Over here the swimming's not so good."

"They got more amusement parks on the Cottage Bay side too, don't they?"

"Yes—and better beaches."

"Hey, where's Rocky Point?"

"A few miles on up."

"It's a lot bigger than old Carnival Beach, ain't it?"

"Oh yes. They've got a big hotel and dance casino—the St. George Hotel, that's it. Some pretty big dance bands get booked there."

"Hey, do I look like Frank Sinatra?"

Roy turned. "No. Why?"

"Someone told me I looked like Frank Sinatra. Most people think I'm a wop because I'm dark-like, but Dad's mom, Grandma Parish—she's a *solid* Indian. Old Dad don't hardly look nothin' like an Indian at all, but my Uncle Hiram does a *little* bit. . . . But some people think I look like old Sinatra."

"You look like Johnny Parish," Roy said seriously. "Why do you want to look like someone else?"

"You look like that Joseph Cotten movie star."

"I look like Roy Davies."

"Don't you wanna look like old Joseph Cotten?"

"Nope," Roy replied matter-of-factly, "I'm Roy Davies and not Joseph Cotten. I want to be myself and look like who I am. . . . How about you?"

"Yeanh," Johnny grunted and wrinkled his nose, "you're right. I wanna look like me, too. Who in the hell wants to look like that corny old Sinatra? He's a *drip*!" he added with a bitter snort and turned grinningly to Roy who also turned with a snapping wink.

They passed the large colorfully illustrated sign pointing the lane to Rocky Point. Roy drove on a few more miles and before arriving at Aldrich he turned off the highway and drove down a dusty tree-lined road to the beach.

They got out of the car and stretched.

A shirtless man in dirty gray pants rolled to his knees stood barefooted in the doorway of a tumbledown unpainted shack several feet away. He turned his head and said something, then approached them. He had a week-old beard and his barrel chest was covered with a thick mattress of curly black hair.

"Howdy, people," he said with a cigarette bobbing up and down in the corner of his mouth. "Wanna rent a boat?"

"That's the idea." Roy put his hands on his hips. "What are your rates?"

"Seventy-five an hour."

"Sounds fair."

"Got bait, too," he drawled, squinting at Roy.

Johnny saw a woman come to the doorway with a wooden spoon

in her hand. She was wearing a pair of men's shoes and her print dress hung like a sack. They must be pretty poor, he was thinking as the woman turned and disappeared. He'd bet anything they were happy.

He suddenly had a feeling he'd like to do what this man was doing: live on a beach all alone in a shack with no one to bother you. It seemed so far away from Newspapers and Salesmen and Gangsters and Movies and talk about Atomic Wars. He figured if the whole World was blown up like the science magazines pictured, there would still be this strip of beach and that shack with the man in the doorway looking out to the Lake and smoking while his wife was cooking something for dinner.

"Do you have minnows?" Roy asked.

"Yep."

Roy bought a dozen minnows in a little cardboard container with a wire handle. Johnny carried the tacklebox and his fishing rod and they went out on the short wooden pier. He could look far out on the Lake to his left and see rising, as if a trick of the eyes and sun glare, the island of Rocky Point. He thought of old castles because of the different high buildings and various structures that appeared to be distantly floating on the water and the water seemed to carry the mumble and tempo of the resort, as if it were a sliding-board carrying the noises of excitement to his ears.

Roy did the rowing, and when they were out far enough Johnny could hear the noises and music clearer because of being on the water and not above it.

Roy showed Johnny how to bait a minnow through its mouth and out its gill so that the minnow would live. Roy cast out his line and Johnny followed, but he forgot and left his darn warning-catch on and the line didn't go half as far as Roy's and it made a series of machine-gun clickings. Laughing, he wound it in and cast again.

"That was a nice one, Sport."

Johnny was sitting stern and Roy sat in the center on the cross-board.

"Where'll we swim at, Roy?" Johnny squinted.

"Somewhere near Cottage Bay—so we can go to Carnival Beach Park."

"We gonna go to Carnival Park?"

"If you want to." He smiled kindly. "They've got some wonderful rides there."

"Hot-dog-man-o-man!"

They took their shirts off and folded them. Old Roy didn't have too much hair on his chest, just a little in the center, but boy he sure had a good build. The sun was hot but didn't seem to beat down like it did on the beach.

After a few minutes Roy said, "Have you thought much about our man-to-man talk?"

"The one at Jackson the other night?"

"Yes."

"Yeah, I've thought about it. I won't mess much with this young stuff—I'll wait till ya take me to a whorehouse like ya promised. The only time I think about somethin' like that's when I'm alone because I *always* get a boner. Then I have to think of somethin' *real* bad *real* hard for it to go away."

"What do you mean, *bad*?"

The water lapped against the side of the boat and Johnny looked into the blue deep waters thinking of its coolness. "Like maybe Gran'ma er Mom er Dad er Danny er *someone* dyin'. I have to see'em layin' out dead an' gone an' everything. I don't wanna think about anyone dyin' but that's the only way I can get rid of it."

"Did that happen very much in school?"

"No—not until towards the last."

"This spring?"

"Yeah."

"Did George get that way when you were telling me about this woman?"

"Oh, hell yes," Johnny grinned lopsidedly, "it always got that way. But when I was with the old whore [*shes dead and she said she loved you*] I never thought about doin' it to her. It was always when I was away from her that I thought things like that."

"You say you sat in front of her?"

"Yeah." Johnny nodded with his tongue between his teeth.

"Didn't she tease you when she crossed her legs?"

"No," Johnny answered slowly, "nothin' like that. I didn't get to [*please dont say anything about that day please dont whore it up youre whoring it up shes dead dead gone gone so dont whore it up*] see anything, except maybe a little of her tits now and then. You know how those bathrobes come down on the chest—"

"Yes."

"Well sometimes I'd try to get a look at'em, but I couldn't see

[*shes dead she cant hear you she knew you as you were not as you are now*] nothin' except maybe where they started."

Roy lit a cigarette and wiped his face with a towel he took from the tacklebox. Johnny could read the white lettering on the blue background:

HOTEL COX JACKSONVILLE FLA

After Roy wiped his shoulders and chest he spread the towel on the plank beside him and said, "Was she big-breasted?"

Johnny felt awful clammy. He couldn't sweat. "Naw," he said spitting his stale gum into the Lake, "she had the kind that just hang unless she was wearing a brassiere."

"She didn't wear a bra, huh?" Roy raised his brows.

"A what?" Johnny looked up.

"Bra. . . ."

Johnny started laughing.

"What's the matter, Sport?"

"Bra!" He laughed, doubling up. "*Bra!*"

Roy grinned. "That's what they call it."

"I can't help it! Oh Jesus, Bra, *Bra!*" Johnny roared and tears ran from his eyes. "Bra, Bra, *Bra!* Goddammit, a *Bra!*"

Roy continued to grin rather sadly. Johnny finally calmed down, snickering and shaking his head from side to side.

"Didn't you ever hear of it called a bra?"

"*No!*" he shouted and began laughing again, "Brassiere!" He wanted to throw himself in the Lake. "It's a brassiere—a Bra brassiere!"

Roy began laughing too.

The two sat in the rocking boat holding fishing rods, doubled up with laughter in the middle of the Lake over a bra.

Finally they both stopped and sat shaking their heads. Johnny had a cramp in his side from laughing so hard. He thought he'd stopped laughing about it until he said, "No, she didn't wear any *Bra!*" and splurged out with laughter. "A hairy old *Bra!*" Then it seemed to have lost its puky humor and Johnny sat weakly shaking his head.

Roy wiped himself off again with the towel and said, "Damn, is it hot."

"Boy you know it," Johnny agreed, feeling the sun bake into his back and shoulders making him feel sleepy.

Roy flicked the cigarette into the water. He looked out to Rocky

Point and his eyes went far away and he began chewing on his lower lip. He turned to Johnny and said in a soft even voice, "How often do you masturbate, Sport?"

"A couple of times a week," Johnny answered, finding it now less difficult to be honest with Roy. "Was it the same with you?"

"Sure—of course. No man is any different from any other man, Sport. No matter what."

"You are."

Roy's eyes flashed up from his thumbnail and he opened his mouth to say something but closed it and smiled warmly.

There came a click from Johnny's reel.

"Hold it!" Roy quickly said. "It might just be a current."

Johnny could feel his heart against his ribs.

"Just take it easy . . . jerk the line . . . easy . . . pull it just a little . . . easy now, not much."

Johnny reached out between the guides and gave the black line a short pull. Something was the matter: he'd stopped breathing.

There was another sudden jerking pull and it wasn't no darn old current.

"*Here!*" Johnny said wide-eyed as he extended the rod toward Roy.

"No—I can't. You bring him in."

The line was being taken out and Johnny grabbed the spinning handle of the reel.

"Take it!" he told Roy, watching the water.

"I can't. You have to do it yourself. Go on—bring him in."

Johnny wound in the line feeling the tugging fight on the other end. "He's a big one! Goddamn!" he said feeling the twisting pull on his line.

"Don't let it slack!"

"No!"

"Good!" Roy said as the fish leaped out of the water. "Just a little more—then swing'em over the side."

Johnny wound in a little more line, then lifted and swung the rod, and the fish on the hook jerked free of the water and fell flipping in the bow of the boat.

"It's a carp."

"Yeah?" Johnny looked at the flapping fish as it smacked helplessly on the wooden bottom.

"All you have to do now," Roy told him, "is grab him and take the hook out of his mouth by—"

"Says you!" A wry sneer curled his lips.

"Nothing to it. All you have to do is—"

"Nothin'—plain nothin' is all I have to do."

"Awwwwwwwwww."

"I ain't touchin' nothin'." Johnny laughed nervously with his face drawn up, as if he'd bitten into a sour apple.

"Why you big *sissy*!"

Johnny felt ashamed but he was afraid.

Roy reached down and grabbed the carp in his left hand and with his right he worked the hook around until it pulled loose. He grinned and held the fish up in his hand, then put the eight-inch carp in the pail with the holes, screwed on the top, tied the rope of the pail to the middle plank and tossed the pail over the side. Johnny watched the metal container sink until the rope pulled tight.

Roy swished his hands in the water over the side and said, "Nothing to it."

"God! I was scared of it."

"You brought him in good."

"I was afraid of a goddamn hairy old *fish*."

"He couldn't have bit you."

"I know, but . . ."

Roy laughed and put his warm hand on Johnny's shoulder and Johnny looked up grinning. He rebaited his hook and cast again.

They fished another half hour getting only small nibbles. The sun was getting much hotter and they had to put on their shirts, and Roy finally said, "Let's call it a day, Sport."

"Yeanh—I wanna get some swimmin' in. God, I'm thirsty."

"So am I. The next time we'll have to get some pop to take with us."

"Want me to row?"

"No. I've got it."

Roy tied the boat to the dock and had Johnny go to the car to get the container for the pail, filled it with lake water and slipped the pail down into the container. Johnny put it in the trunk of the Olds with the tacklebox and rods.

"How many'd ya get?" the man said from the door of the shack.

"The boy got one."

"Good."

"Well, so long."

"Come back soon."

"We will." Johnny waved his hand and turned to Roy. "Did you pay him?"

"Yes—before we went out."

They got in the car and drove down the road toward the highway.

"Well," Roy said turning on the highway toward Pie Pier, "how does it feel to catch your first fish?"

"Great!"

"You didn't care too much for fishing before, did you?"

Johnny folded his leg under him and put his elbow out the window. "Not until a little while ago . . . until after the first one."

"The first one's the important one."

"Yeanh," he agreed, "in *anything*."

They both turned slowly to face each other with wide grinning faces.

They stopped at a filling station and took a leak and both drank two bottles of Squirt. Roy bought Johnny a big sack of potato-chips and they walked lazily back to the car.

The sun was slanting late afternoon shadows when Roy pulled into the parking lot at Royal Beach, on the Lake Shore Highway, west of Pie Pier.

"Where do we change?" Johnny asked.

"In the car."

Johnny looked out the windows: there were empty cars on either side. He took off his shirt and pants, sneaking a look at Roy as Roy was pulling up his swimming trunks. Nothing the matter with *that*.

They got out of the car and Roy locked the doors and tried them. He slipped the key into the pocket of his trunks and pulled the zipper. They draped their towels around their necks and sauntered toward the boardwalk.

Royal Beach was one of the finest public beaches along the Lake Shore Highway. There was a huge dance casino with a high dome roof facing the highway to the left of the parking lot, open seven nights a week selling beer and liquor except on Sunday when they only sold beer. In front of Royal's parking lot on the lawn that stretched to the hill above the beach there were several picnic benches, with fireplaces under the shading of tall trees. Directly behind the dance casino there was a concession stand, a miniature golf course and railroad, and pony rides for the children.

Johnny and Roy walked down the plank boardwalk to the wooden

steps that led down the hill to the sandy beach. Roy was three or four steps down before he noticed that Johnny wasn't with him.

"What's the matter, Sport?" he asked as he turned and looked up at Johnny.

"My God!" Johnny said unbelievably. "Where'd the *beach* go?"

Johnny stared down at the narrow strip of grayish sand between the bottom of the hill and where the small waves lapped up on shore.

"This is the way it is all over," Roy told him.

Johnny quickly figured the beach to be only fifteen to twenty feet wide. It wasn't crowded, just a few couples on blankets and several swimming.

"Jeeeee-sus," he mumbled walking down to Roy, "I can remember when 'is beach was so long ya got tired just *walkin'* to get to the water."

They reached the bottom of the steps and Roy said, "That's why the new highway was built."

"New *highway*?"

"Yes, the old road's being washed out."

"I *knew* it!" Johnny exclaimed, "I knew there was something missing: that hairy old drive on the old Lake Shore Road!"

Roy nodded.

"What about the *cabins*?"

"The ones that aren't being saved are being washed into the Lake."

Johnny couldn't believe it. Those cabins that were built on and off the hill below the Lake Shore Road, with a forty- to fifty-foot beach, were sinking into the Lake. The road above the hill that went along the Lake was being washed away. "I can't believe it."

"There's close to three-quarters of a million dollars' worth of property and cabins being washed away this very minute . . . nothing but straight cliff from the road down to the water. Most of the cabins are lying in the Lake—even the road's being washed out in places. It's a tragic sight if you knew what it used to be like."

"I knew. . . ."

"That's why they had to build the new highway circling that five-mile stretch. We're on the old road here—we came back on it just a few miles back, didn't you notice it?"

"Nope. . . . jeez, Roy: I knew there was *something* I'd missed from what I remembered from a long time ago. That was it."

He felt so bad he almost didn't care if he went swimming or not. . . .

Johnny wasn't such a good swimmer so he stayed in close to shore and near Roy, who promised he wouldn't horse around or do any monkey business. The water and sun were very warm. Roy was a heck of a fine swimmer and he sure did have muscles. Old Johnny could feel the icy-cold currents sweep by his ankles every now and then and he kept his toes curled up off the smooth sandy floor of the Lake: was it turtles or crabs that once they bit you they wouldn't leave go until the sun went down? Even if you *killed* it'd'em.

A half-hour later they walked up the steps to the boardwalk, through the cool shade of the trees, and Johnny could almost taste the bright green of everything around him. They dried off good before getting back into the car where they peeled down their wet trunks and got back into their clothes.

"We used to know some people that had a cabin there once," Johnny murmured thoughtfully.

Roy lit a cigarette and said, "Where?"

"On the old road. . . . It makes me feel bad."

"Why?" Roy turned.

"Because I wanted to have a cabin there," Johnny looked through the windshield to the benches, to the eating people and past them to the Lake, "all by myself with a telescope on my front porch so I could watch the ships. A cabin so I could live there all a time with no one to bother me." He turned to Roy who was listening intently, sitting in the corner of the seat against the door. "I don't know," he said with a helpless shrug, "there's just something about that old road."

"I know what you mean."

"Really?"

Roy closed his eyes and nodded.

Johnny looked back out to the Lake where the dark-blue sky became lighter and lighter as it met the horizon.

"Hey," Roy said cheerfully, "want to get some grub—no, no: don't answer that!"

Johnny turned with a wide grin. "How'd ya guess?"

They stopped at a drive-in and had four hotdogs apiece and several large glasses of foamy root beer. Roy drove on through Cottage Bay to Carnival Beach Park. There was a huge crowd milling around and Johnny was eager to find a sexy sideshow but there wasn't any there at the time. They rode on different types of thrilling coasters and Roy won a statue of Superman by hitting the bull's-eye twice with a twenty-two. Then they went on the roller coaster and Johnny didn't

think it'd be too bad but Jesus he got scared fartless when they climbed up for that first dip that damn near killed him and that hairy old second dip just about finished the job.

Johnny staggered down off the platform. "My God I'll never get on one of them sonofabanshees again," he said half under his breath to Roy who was laughing.

"This one isn't anything compared to the one at Rocky Point." Roy smiled.

"Jeeeeehez," he sighed, "I could see *Chicago* we were so far up."

"If you saw Chicago here you could see St. Louis at Rocky Point."

"To hell with Rocky Point."

They both laughed. Evening was drawing on and the sky was becoming purple above the bright lights of the amusement park. They each drank a cup of orange and Roy bought Johnny a box of popcorn. They went through the penny arcade and old Johnny got some postcards that didn't show *anything* because they were lousy movie stars in bathing suits. It was a dirty gyp because none of them were as sexy as the phony ones on the outside advertising the machine. Then they went home after a long busy day with one old hairy carp in the trunk of the Olds.

The day was only ten minutes long.

Chapter 12

ON a warm Tuesday afternoon following their first trip to the Lake, Roy suggested they close the station early and take a drive.

"Okay," Johnny agreed, "where'll we go?"

"Someplace where we can talk without interruption." Roy smiled but his eyes didn't.

Johnny watched him light a cigarette and the lighter trembled in his fingers. He could tell Roy was uneasy about something: ever since he came to work Roy'd been nervous and his eyes were troubled.

Johnny went outside and opened a root beer. A warm breeze was blowing up Elliott. He looked down at the blisters in the palm of

his hand that he got this morning from the clippers when he was trimming.

What did Roy want to talk about?

Maybe it was something sexy because he always liked to talk about things like that without being interrupted.

The root beer was good and cold and seemed to cut the thickness in the back of his throat. Johnny looked up from the white gravel as he heard the piercing wail of a siren. The screaming shriek grew louder and it was coming up Elliott. Cars pulled to the curb and a long white Packard ambulance sped by and went through the changing red light.

"Prob'ly a wreck," Johnny said to Roy who appeared in the doorway.

"I wouldn't be a bit surprised." Roy frowned. "Route Forty: The Bloodiest Strip in the state . . . they haul'em in every day."

Then Roy wasn't in the doorway and Johnny wondered what the hell had got into him. It couldn't be anything *he'd* done. . . . If it was, old Roy'd come right out and say so, wouldn't he? Sure. He wouldn't go beating around the bush talking about taking a ride. If Roy knew he was knocking down on the cash register he'd come right out and say so. Roy never missed a quarter here or a quarter there. Roy even took money out of the register himself to put in his own pocket without marking it down. He even paid bills that way too.

Look, why in the heck do you want to take money from him in the first place? He shrugged his shoulders lamely. That's easy to do: shrugging things off. You know what you are don't you? You're a thieving sonofabitch. I am not, I never take over a half a rock. You're just trying to fool yourself. How much money do you have hid at home in your Tarzan book? About ten bucks . . . but that's not all swiped. No, just about maybe nine bucks worth, huh? I always know the score. A buddy *never* steals from another buddy. You ought to go home and hit yourself over the head with that Superman statue and bring the money back and give it to him. Aw lay off, quit thinking about it, forget it: I'm gonna stop taking money . . . tomorrow.

What's the matter with right now?

Charlie Myers came swaggering up the gravel drive to pick up the rest of his papers. His long blond hair hung down over his broad forehead. His sharp-featured face was flushed and feverish-looking. "Boy," he sighed, "is it a bitch!"

Johnny watched him open a coke and was thankful *he* didn't have pimples. Charlie didn't have too many, just a few on his forehead and chin. Most kids were just plastered with them.

Charlie fished out a nickel and handed it to Johnny saying, "Man, you sure knew what you were doin' when ya shoved 'is job off on me fer a lousy *five bucks*."

Johnny grinned, pocketing the coin. "Takes brains." He tapped his forehead with his finger.

"I've got 'em, boy, ya don't have to worry about that. They were jus' takin' a rest when ya pawned 'is racket off on *me*."

"Rest hell," Johnny grinned, "they was in your hankie."

"Oh *yeah*?" Charlie grinned broadly.

"Oh *yeah*." Johnny nodded grinning.

"Awwwwwwww, go *frig* yourself," Charlie said and drank half the bottle of coke and opened his mouth wide, lifting his neck up and out, tearing loose with a froglike belch.

Johnny smiled and glanced in the open window but Roy was reading the paper, running his fingers like a comb through his dark wavy hair.

"A big ambulance went out Forty a little bit ago," Johnny said.

"I seen it."

"They say Route Forty's the Bloodiest Strip in the state."

"Yeah." Charlie gulped down the rest of the coke and dropped the bottle in the half-filled empty-case. He opened another one and gave Johnny a dime and Johnny gave him back the nickel.

Charlie stepped out in the sunlight and held the bottle up to the sun, closing one eye. He shrugged his shoulders lazily and came back into the shade saying, "They say people find mice in these. . . ."

"Yeah, I know—I look in every bottle before I put it in the cooler."

"Man, just think of all the money ya could *sue* for."

"*Millions*."

"You ain't kiddin'."

"Even for a *fly*."

"Yeah," Charlie said and nodded toward the billboard. "That's a bunch of crap too. I've been eatin' 'at bread for *five* years an' look at me." He held up a thin suntanned arm. "Not one goddamn *muscle*. . . ."

"They go where your *brains* go." Johnny grinned.

"Drop dead."

"Kiss my fat petunia."

"Ya oughta be glad I'm givin' ya all 'is business," Charlie frowned tiredly, "'stead of makin' fun of me."

"One fat dime—I'll send ya a Christmas card."

"Don't put yourself out."

"Ya can always go down to Hunt's if ya don't like my company."

"I can't go down there."

"Why?"

"Same reason you can't, boy."

"No shit? Were *you* caught swipin' comic books, too?"

"Naw," Charlie shook his head, "it was a box of candy . . . fer Mother's Day."

"No *kiddin'*?"

"Yeah, I'm not *kiddin'*," Charlie said seriously. "A whole two-pound box of chocolates. I woulda got away with it if it'd been a *one-pound* box."

"Well I'll be corn-likkered."

"Yeanh . . . he tol' me to get out an' never come back again an' that *I* was lucky *he* wasn't gonna phone the bulls. Jeeeeeeez!"

Johnny laughed. "'At ol' phony Hunt's just about got *all* us kids inna neighborhood kicked out."

Johnny looked in the station and saw Roy watching them with a mild smile.

Charlie drank his coke and said, "Man, 'is horsin' around ain't gettin' my papers delivered." He got down on his knees and put the rest of the papers in the canvas bag, stood up and adjusted the strap on his shoulder and walked away toward Dobson Road. He flung his arm in a wide wave and walked away.

Swiping a box of candy for his old lady on Mother's Day. . . . Johnny grinned. That old Charlie was a nice guy. A little off his rocker but that's okay if you like a person.

Johnny found himself thinking that Charlie'd be the kind of a guy that'd be givin' it to a young girl when them two bones of hers came together. It wasn't funny but he sure couldn't help grinning. Johnny turned and looked in the window and Roy was watching him with a study-expression.

Johnny raised his index finger and made a circular motion at the side of his head, pointing in the direction of Charlie.

Roy's face broke into an understanding smile.

Later they were driving out Park Drive West and evening was

drawing on. The sun had descended behind the distant hills and the sky above the horizon was a fiery red.

Roy was deep in thought and the reflection of the sky on his face made him look reddish-orange like an Indian, with deep-shadowed lines crossing his features. He gripped the steering-wheel with both hands and rubbed his thumbs slowly over the black plastic. He seemed stiff and not relaxed like he usually was when driving.

Johnny was looking out, sitting on his leg with his elbow sticking out the window. He saw the dry and dusty fields and the rows and rows of drooping dog-eared corn. It sure as heck looked sad. The paper said things about the farmers needing rain to save their crops. He turned to Roy and said with a smile, "You look like a devil."

"You look like my assistant." Roy smiled.

There seemed to be something strained between them: only not as tense as it was at the supper table with Grandma and Aunt Marg sitting next to each other after a big fight or argument. The straining coldness that hovered over the table always ruined the whole meal. Johnny was glad he didn't have to eat at Grandma's in the evenings now that he was at the station. Fighting Fighting Fighting: that's all there was ever between his mother and father and he hadn't escaped from it yet.

"If I'm your assistant," Johnny grinned, "I make a motion we build a relay station out next to the wimmen's restroom."

"You mean an information booth to direct lost souls on their way to the lower depths?"

Johnny laughed. "If ya wanna put it that way, yes."

Roy smiled and lit a cigarette. He pulled a drag deep into his lungs, lowering his chin to his chest. Then he turned and said, "Are you *sure* you don't care, Sport?"

"Heck no, Roy."

Roy looked back to the road and his Adam's-apple bobbed. "You know I could get into trouble . . . if you told."

"Oh heck, Roy, you know better 'an 'at." Johnny laughed nervously.

"You don't mind wasting a baby, huh?" He smiled broadly.

"I never thought about it that way. . . . I guess it is wastin' a baby, ain't it?" Johnny nodded his head up and down. "Oh hell . . . I've been *bumpin'* off a lot of'em lately."

Roy chuckled and became serious again. "If you don't want to, just tell me."

"I don't care, Roy—honest." Johnny cleared his throat.

"You aren't scared, are you?"

"Scared? No . . . why?"

"I just thought you might be."

"Nahhhh."

"It's just that some people wouldn't understand, though."

"You mean *if* I told?"

"Yes."

"*Jeez*, Roy," Johnny put his hand on Roy's arm feeling the tense muscle, "I wouldn't tell on you—not even if ya *killed* a person. I really mean that, Roy. It . . . it makes me feel sorta bad not havin' ya *trusting* me—it does."

Roy turned his head slowly and looked into Johnny's watering eyes. "You really mean that, don't you?"

Johnny nodded.

"Thanks, Sport." He turned back to the road. "I'm a little nervous."

"Sure . . . I know."

Roy turned south off the highway onto a dusty tree-lined road. Johnny really wasn't embarrassed or anything like that, not much anyway. It's just that he wished Roy wouldn't go worrying about him telling. Jimminy Christmas, he'd never tell *anything* on old Roy. He didn't have to worry.

Roy drove on for several miles. The shadows became heavy and purple and the car left a swirling trail of powder dust to further coat the bushes and trees along the rutted lane. At last he slowed and pulled over to the side of the road, bringing the car to a halt.

Roy looked over at Johnny then turned in the seat, putting his hand on the boy's shoulder. His face was serious, more serious than Johnny had ever seen him. . . .

"Remember, Sport: this has to be a Secret between you and me."

"Sure." He swallowed.

Roy bit his lip. "People wouldn't understand that I'm trying to help you."

"Sure Roy, hell, we're *buddies*. I like you a lot . . . a heck of a lot."

Roy looked down the road and then leaned over the back seat to look out the window. The crickets in the growth beside the car began chirping again with the evening song of the birds.

It was dark when they drove back to Park Drive West.

"You were scared, Sport, weren't you?" Roy nervously smoked a cigarette.

"Huh-uh."

"Oh, come on," Roy laughed easily, "don't go feeling ashamed."

"I'm not. . . . [*Roy wouldn't do anything wrong.*] You know that gun you got at the station inna desk drawer?"

"Yes."

"Well . . . do you think maybe we can shoot it sometime, huh?"

"Sure—of course." Roy cleared his throat and frowned. "Sport . . . ah, you weren't afraid I had the revolver *with* me, were you?"

"No."

"I wouldn't hurt you—you know that, don't you?"

"Sure." Johnny moved in closer and put his arm around Roy's shoulder. "I wouldn't care if ya did hurt me, Roy. . . . I mean it. Because if ya ever at all did, I'd really have to deserve it."

"Don't go talking like that, Sport," Roy said softly in a hurt voice. After a few minutes he said, "Do you care terribly much if we don't go to the show tonight? There's another special meeting down at the American Legion that I can't avoid."

"No—I don't care."

"We'll go tomorrow night after work."

"Sure, that's okay, Roy."

"I just have to go to that meeting tonight. . . . But we've got a lot of time to see a lot of shows."

"An' the Lake an' everything else."

"That's right."

"Jeez, Roy," Johnny whispered, "you're the best guy inna *whole* wide world."

They both watched the heat lightning in the north dance waveringly across the dark sky beneath the million stars. Then the lightning was erased in a sudden explosion of fire-red light that shot up into the sky from the steel mill several miles away.

Johnny looked carefully up at Roy's soft profile etched against the red sky and he tried desperately hard to remember when his mother or anyone besides Rose had told him that they loved him. . . .

Chapter 13

"YOU *do* look tired, Roy," Grace Wells said.

"Yes he does," Howard Cooper agreed.

"Oh, quit picking on him." Beverly Cooper laughed. She patted Roy's hand. "At least *I* love you."

"Well thanks." Roy smiled.

The two couples were seated at a table next to the dim and deserted dance floor at the American Legion. They were all drinking whisky highballs except Beverly Cooper who was six months pregnant. She sipped on a glass of ginger ale.

"It isn't the work," Roy said thickly, raising his brow, "God knows it isn't the work. Business is lousy . . . period."

"That station up there never has done business worth a tinker's damn," Howard said and added with a grunt, "It's bankrupted some of the nicest guys I know." He was a short neat-appearing man in his mid-thirties with dark thinning hair. His round sensitive face and watery eyes made him appear boyish. Howard was floor manager in the Shoe Department at Fields Department Store.

Beverly was a slender, soft-spoken woman six inches taller than her husband. She had long, flaming red hair and her thin, attractively freckled face had filled out giving her angular sharp features a rounded softness.

He was already named Tom, and Howard was the purchaser of a baseball, bat and glove, football, and various other toys for boys that would be collecting dust for three or four years.

Roy was always glad to see other people have faith in their slimmest expectations. It produced a subtle reaction within him, some twist of light manipulated into a fine reflecting beacon that dissolved a bitter, war-torn, unhappy world.

He had to pick up something hard and bitter and shape it into something kind and understanding. Maybe what had happened tonight wasn't right . . . just yet. But he couldn't stand around and see the boy sink deeper and deeper. He *knew* he was helping Johnny.

He *had* to be helping him. Wasn't there a statue in every chunk of rock?

When Johnny first began coming to the station he was a tough little know-it-all, bitter and mean. But Roy could see now that it was his defense: a phony guard of toughness.

I wanted to slap him down and say: Well, if this is the type of generation I fought in a war for, taking those daily chances of getting shot down, giving my life in exchange for a brat like that who would never know I died for him and who would probably laugh and shrug if told so, for the future of America run by smug, thieving Johnny Parishes, for cocky brats like this: *it repudiates all I believed and I myself repudiate it!*

I looked at the boy and I looked at myself. I looked in the boy and saw my heart. I wouldn't let the world twist him any further, destroy and ruin him. I'm winning that fight. I have taken *something* and I am making a someone, I am, I really am, and too, I'm doing it for myself.

Roy was suddenly conscious of Grace smiling at him from across the table. He looked into her oval face and noticed how her shoulder-length blonde hair framed her features perfectly. The soft light behind Grace caught in her hair, forming a halo. Her large eyes were blue, her nose small and slightly turned up, her mouth wide and sensual. Grace was twenty-six and worked as a salesgirl at the lingerie counter at Charm House. Roy had met her through Beverly Cooper, who had been in school with him.

He tore his glassy eyes away from her and glanced in the direction of the bar. There were only a few customers seated on the red and white leather stools. They were the only ones seated at a table.

Roy gulped down the rest of his drink. That's it, drink to get drunk. To hell with the moderate drinking. He'd done enough of that. Everyone coming back from the service went out to drink to get drunk, to forget, to make up for lost time, to fall back into the pattern set by the hectic age that tends to follow a war.

Was he feeling a blind guilt about this evening? Trying to drown it in alcohol? Alcohol wouldn't drown a problem, only invigorate and enhance its proportions. Self-pity was the root of the bottle. What was all this? Forget it. Forget everything. Concentrate on Grace.

Roy waved his arm to Raymond Garner, the bartender, to bring another round. Raymond nodded his balding head and began to mix the drinks. He brought them over to the table and Roy paid him.

Someone at the bar played "Poor Butterfly" on the jukebox and Roy looked at Grace. "Let's dance."

Grace stood up and Roy followed her to the dance floor. She turned and glided into his embrace. The music was soft. Roy held her close, feeling her young body against him. It felt good. He was all balled up inside: iron-tight.

"What's the matter, darling?" she whispered.

"Nothing."

"I can tell *something's* troubling you."

"It's nothing . . . just business."

"Do you expect me to believe that?"

"Well . . ."

"When you love someone you can *feel* when they're bothered by something."

Roy held her close with his face against her hair. They glided over the smooth floor past the dark and deserted orchestra platform.

"You look strained and tired and defeated—in fact, you don't even look like Roy Davies."

"That bad?"

"Yes."

"Oh Grace," he whispered harshly, "I don't know . . . Jesus, I don't know. I just can't seem to figure—don't love me. Just don't love me."

"But I *do*—very much. So *very* much."

"You shouldn't, dammit."

"I don't see why *anything* should stand in our way," she pleaded in his ear.

He felt her firm breasts against him. They were so small, like a young girl's. He smelled her hair, her perfume, her face powder, her lipstick. He pulled these mixed smells into his lungs to remember.

"Let's talk about it later. When we go—we'll take a ride."

He felt the catch in her breathing and after a brief second she said, "All right, Roy."

The song ended and he led her back to the table and as she sat down he gave her arm a firm squeeze. He looked at his watch. It was a quarter to twelve. There was one hour of drinking left.

"I'm expecting my car any day now," Howard said as Roy finished off his drink. He was buying a new Plymouth.

"At least you know where to get your gas," Roy hinted with a lopsided grin. He felt dizzy.

"Do you know where to get your shoes?"

Everyone laughed and Roy said, "Wasn't I in yesterday?"

"That's right," Howard snapped his fingers, "with that kid."

"Johnny," Roy said slowly as the room rocked from side to side. It stopped and Roy waved to Raymond to bring another round.

"No more for me," Howard said.

"Nor me." Grace shook her head, indicating her untouched drink.

"Just one an' a ginger ale," Roy shouted and Raymond nodded.

"How come you have that kid working for you then—I mean if business is so bad?" Howard asked.

"He's helpful. He does as much as can be expected. I hardly pay him anything at all."

"I wish I worked for someone who bought me a pair of shoes," Howard said.

"I feel sorry for the poor bastard," Roy explained, "mother an' father divorced. He gets shoved from relation to relation. Now he's living in the attic at 'is grandma's. Jesus! Course 'is mother an' brother live up there too. Do you folks happen to know his mother? Barbara Parish?"

"Was her maiden name Kesler?" Beverly asked, interested.

"Yeah."

"Oh yes, we know her sister Edna. Edna Bonkisk."

"Sure," Howard said chewing on his lip. "Cliff and Edna? Sure, we know 'em."

"I know Barbara," Beverly continued, "but nothing to speak of though . . . only that she didn't get married until *after* she had her first child. . . ."

"Johnny," Roy said slowly.

"Isn't it funny," Beverly said shaking her head, "that I know something like *that* about her—nothing good. It's the nasty and scandalous things that are kept alive because they make good gossip."

"That's true," Roy agreed. "But what I want to tell you about her involves the kid, Johnny, psychologically. You know she's a waitress now at the Wilkinson Craven—doesn't have any time to spend with the kids. *Never* home. That boy was goin' off 'is rocker livin' in that house with 'is grandma: she's off her *nut*. Completely gone. Dominates the hell outta the whole family. . . ."

Raymond Garner set the drinks down and Roy paid him from the pile of change beside his cigarettes and Garner left with the empty glasses.

"Well anyway, he has to take care of 'is grandma all day until 'is aunt comes home. . . . She's an old maid and just about as *nuts* as the grandma. . . . But Johnny—the kid—he's one holy mess."

Grace shook her head sadly. Howard lit a cigarette.

"I only let'im work so he can get away from 'at damn house."

"It's a shame," Beverly said.

"Yeah, ain't it?" Roy said bitterly, breathing heavy. "He was stealin' stuff down at the drugstore, an' from me too—ya know why?" Roy raised his brows.

They all shook their heads.

Roy sneered and said, "He wanted to get back at a world he felt was doin'im an injustice."

"Uh-huh," Howard murmured, chewing on his lip.

"Yeanh," Roy took a drink, "but I think I'm gettin'im straightened out. Barbara drinks like a fish an' I think she whores onna side too—*never* home at night. Most painful thing is I think the boy *knows* it an' he won't admit it, even to himself."

"Oh, *no*!" Grace said, putting her fingers to her lips.

Beverly's mouth opened and her sad eyes searched Howard's face. She turned to Roy with a tragic appeal shadowing her face. "Golly, Roy . . . honestly?"

He clamped his lips firmly together and nodded again.

"Some people sure have it rotten," Howard said, taking a sip of his drink.

Roy drank down half his drink. "Oright," he sneered, "now I'll let you in on some *rich* dirt. . . . Ya wanna hear somethin' *really* good? That boy, tonight . . . Johnny . . . I found'im in the back of the station, crying. . . . Know why? Ya wanna know *why* he was cryin'?" Roy looked deeply into each waiting face. "He was cryin' 'cause no one loved him."

He took a drink and leaned forward saying, "He tol' me somethin' once . . . it happened several years ago, but no matter when it happened he still 'members it. Barbara was runnin' around with 'is father's bes' friend. Well anyway, this one night when they were out drinkin' they dragged the kids along, an' they finally ended up at some kind of party out inna country. Barbara got drunk as hell. He said she could hardly walk. On the way back home the kids fell asleep inna back seat, an' Johnny said he suddenly happened to wake up. They were parked. The kid brother didn't wake up to see what

he saw—said 'is mother an' this guy were down inna front seat. Take it from there." Roy stared solemnly into their eyes.

"*Oh no!*" Beverly was aghast.

Howard snorted disgustedly.

"He was only about nine, didn't know the score—yeah, the *score!* It only meant a bad word with four letters. Tonight when he was cryin' he wanted me to assure him that Barbara an' this guy was jus' messin' around. He knew I was lyin' when I—" Roy sighed and lifted his shoulders.

"Just think," Grace said clicking her tongue, "he'll go all through life seeing that happen. That woman must be just *awful.*"

"Complex-extreme." Roy closed his eyes, shut his ears and a calm settled over him. For a moment there he had felt as if the table were coming up to hit him in the face. He tried floating away in an inky void.

He opened his eyes. "I'm sorry 'bout sayin' what I did. It was confidential and I shouldn't have. I was angry . . . angry. I felt an injustice. Maybe I'm sentimental about the kid—but I feel he's tragic."

"It's normal," Howard said.

The jukebox began playing "My Reverie" and Grace looked up and said, "My favorite song."

"Let's dance." Roy stood up. "'Scuse us, folks."

Out on the dance floor with Grace in his arms he said, "I'm a little tight."

"I know." She smiled mischievously, wrinkling her little nose. "But only a little." Then her head rested on his shoulder as the woman sang:

*"Our love is a dream but in my reverie
I can see that this love was meant to be.
Only a poor fool who is lost in a whirlpool,
Of romance could be so cruel, as you are to me."*

"I've only been drunk three times in my life," Roy told her. "This is my third time."

"I love you sober or drunk."

"When I graduated, when I was discharged, and tonight."

"Roy . . . we could be happy . . . really. If you didn't care too much about the *unimportant* things." Her voice was barely above a whisper. "We could still *try* for a baby—nothing's impossible. I love you, darling. Nothing should hold us back."

"Oops"—he kicked her foot—"sorry."

Grace murmured sleepily and his hand clutched tighter at the small of her back. "Oh Grace," he whispered hard, drawing her closer to him.

*"My dreams are as worthless as tin to me.
Without you life would never begin to be.
So love me, as I love you in my reverie.
Make this dream a reality, let's dispense
With formality, come to me,
In my reverie."*

The song ended and Roy left Grace and selected Artie Shaw's "Begin the Beguine." He walked back across the dance floor to where she was waiting. He took her in his arms and they moved to the rhythmic beat of the music. He didn't want an argument now, not before the ride. After the ride everything would be wonderful.

"But I don't care if you aren't capable of—of being a father—" Grace hesitated, then continued in a hurriedly furry whisper: "We could always adopt a child if it's going to be that important to our happiness. There's always other directions to turn toward than the one before you. Why should being sterile be that impor—"

"It's a lot of other things too," he interrupted.

"You mean because your sister's in a hospital?"

"Maybe."

"Oh *darling*," she whispered tearfully, "that doesn't matter to me. It's *you*. It's *you* that I love and nothing else matters *except* you."

Roy was dry and he wanted a drink. He wanted a cigarette. He felt weak for the pulsating sensation of her, to feel her hungry mouth on his. . . .

"There is nothing the matter with *you*," Grace said against his neck, "I know there isn't."

"Sometimes I wonder."

"Don't go talking like that. *Please* don't go talking like that."

"All right."

"And another thing: you can't go on a one-man crusade to save this lousy goddamn world, either. Don't you know that?"

"How do you mean?"

"Buying that boy shoes and things like that. . . . Giving him a job when you can hardly make out yourself."

"He needs—"

Grace clutched him tighter and said, "If the world wants to go to hell, let it. It's a rotten nasty vile place. Let it go its merry way."

"Might just as well."

"You're too good, Roy. Too good for your own good."

"That may be the whole thing in a nutshell."

They went back to the table, where Howard and Beverly were ready to leave. Roy and Grace finished their drinks and Roy went to the bar and bought six cans of Schlitz.

From the door Howard said, "I'll give you a ring in a couple of days, Roy. We can get together some evening up at my place."

"Fine." Roy waved back.

"So long, kids." Beverly waved.

Roy watched them leave and Grace came up to him as he paid Garner for the beer. There was an opener in the glove compartment.

The night was warm and heavy and they walked to the car in the parking lot. Grace sat beside him, her high-heels off and her legs tucked under her. Roy sat smoking. It was dark and a fraction of light from a high glass-brick window in front of the car caught and reflected and held the soft glow of Grace's hair. Her round attractive face was turned toward Roy, her eyes deep and searching.

"Have you seen Charlotte lately?"

"No."

"It *is* her mental state that's keeping us from marriage, isn't it?"

"No."

He suddenly realized he wasn't playing the game right. It was Roy Davies who held all the aces this trip. He had to play the cards right for the Big End, the Grand Finish.

"But I love you," he sighed, running his hand down his face.

"Let's go," Grace suggested.

Roy drove out Park Drive West and turned onto the road he and Johnny had taken earlier that evening but he did not drive as far. Nothing was said and he switched off the lights and killed the engine. Grace was in his arms and their mouths crushed twisting together. Roy broke the kiss and opened a can of beer. "Want one?"

"No, darling—I don't believe so."

"I'm thirsty." Roy drank the beer with his arm around Grace's shoulder. He finished the beer and threw the can out the window. He could feel the blood pumping at his temples, racing through his body. He turned in the seat. "I need you, Grace. Love me. I need it."

"I love you."

"I don't feel good. I don't feel worth a damn."

"What is it?"

"Over . . . all over . . . I just don't feel good all over." He wanted to sleep. Sweet sleep. Forever sleep. He let go of her hand and unbuttoned the front of her dress to her belt. He pulled it open and put his hand flat on her chest, above her white bra beneath the string of pearls. Her flesh was warm and he felt the thudding of her heart.

"I can feel your heart beat."

"I can feel it too." Her voice was a hoarse whisper.

"I like to touch you."

"I like to feel your hands on me."

"Why?"

"Because you make me feel that I'm a woman. Your hands are strong but gentle and when your strongness touches me I know I'm a woman."

He pulled her to him and kissed her closed eyes. "It's getting late."

"I don't care," she whispered, "I don't care about anything when I'm with you."

"I'm going to have you now."

"Love me, Roy. *Love me . . . just love me!*" Her legs slipped out from under her and there was that forever downward possessive blackness.

Grace always cried when it was over. A vindication. She sobbed on Roy's shoulder as he tenderly caressed her back. Why did he want to hurt her? Was he going to hurt her? Was he going to build it up to the Big End, the Grand Finish where he would break her heart as his had been broken nine years ago?

"Don't cry . . . darling," he whispered huskily. "Don't cry."

Grace only shook her head. Roy looked out to the darkness. Just because he was hurt it didn't give him the right to go around breaking other people's lives. His hurt was caused by himself; of his own making. No, he couldn't hurt Grace. She's just a kid. He had planned everything so carefully. Step by step, until that day when he'd cut her heart out. Three months' work shot to hell, but he had learned a little more about himself. He would gradually work it around until she didn't want to see him any more. Her pride would be saved that way.

Chapter 14

LATER that same evening, Johnny found it hard to fall asleep. He sat on the floor in the darkness in front of the window, chewing on a fresh wad of bubble-gum. It was late and he didn't know what time it was. The stars above were bright and heat lightning danced in flashing waves across the sky. He could hear the distant rumble of thunder. It sure as heck was scary. He reached in his pocket for another ball of bubble-gum and his fingers touched a round object. He pulled it out and in the dim light he saw that it was the dime Charlie gave him for pop that afternoon. He stretched out and slid it on his desk.

Johnny looked across the street at the Murphy house. It stood tall and dark. Probably full of ghosts. . . . He glanced behind him to the room where Barbara and Danny were sleeping, then looked back out the window.

And yesterday afternoon, after Roy bought him a pair of shoes, his old fat mother drove up to the station in a rickety car with another woman. She sure acted funny. Ignored him, too. He even offered to buy her a bottle of pop.

"No thank you," she had told him curtly, then turned to Roy. "I'll need about ten for your father's medicine."

Roy sighed and dug out his wallet.

Johnny looked out to the night, whispering under his breath: *please God don't let him like me less because of what I let him do. Please don't. And make his mother like me too . . .* Then he added with a grin: *but not as much as he does.*

By the next morning Johnny was wondering how he should act toward Roy. Everything that had happened last night in the car seemed remote and different. When he closed his eyes and thought of Roy there was no definite, visual portrait of him. Of course he'd never tell. He'd even deny he Did It himself if Barbara asked him, and she'd probably try to get him to admit it by saying it was natural too. What a heck of a word. Johnny was beginning to think *natural*

was becoming more *unnatural* every day. He asked himself how Roy could be guilty of wrong? Didn't he always talk of truth and honesty? Damn right he did.

Why wouldn't people understand? Oh, he knew why they wouldn't understand. What difference does it make? Forget it for chrissake-almighty, if Roy lost all his respect for you it serves you right. Quit stewin' for *God's* sake! He's still the same old Roy.

Johnny happened to see his Uncle Ralph drive up in his old black Ford. He dressed slowly and after waiting a few minutes for Uncle Ralph to talk with Grandma he went downstairs.

Ralph was a tall thin man with a narrow gaunt face, a slender chiseled nose and high cheekbones like Grandma. He was always clean-shaven and had big brown eyes that blinked rapidly as he talked. Johnny thought Uncle Ralph's eyes resembled those of a bloodhound he'd seen in a photograph, mostly because of their sensitive, hurt and abandoned stare. Ralph was thirty-four years old. He was a salesman, and had been one for the last eleven years at London's Clothing Store.

Ralph had married Bertha Kelly twelve years ago and they were childless. They always lived in the best district of town, on the best street, in one of the best houses, with the best furniture, wore the best clothes and drove an old black 1936 Ford.

"I was just over to get some gas, Johnny," Uncle Ralph said in his high soft voice, blinking his eyes, smiling.

Once you're a salesman for eleven years you're always smiling, Johnny thought.

"Yeah? I won't be going over until late this afternoon."

"How do you like it?"

"Fine." Johnny was looking at Ralph's tan single-breasted suit. Ralph was sitting on the davenport beside Grandma who sat in the chair. "How do you like Roy?"

"He's a very courteous and polite gentleman."

"Yaw," Grandma agreed, "Roy is a nice man."

"How's Aunt Bertha?"

"Oh, she's still around." Ralph laughed, blinking.

"How are you this mornin', Grandma?"

Grandma sighed and raised her hands palms up in a helpless gesture, pushing out her lower lip. "Well," she said looking sadly at Johnny, "it is hot." She nodded *it is so*.

Ralph looked lovingly at his mother with soft eyes, blinking sev-

eral times. Johnny saw that he felt very sorry for his mother. Jeez, what if old Mom'd end up like Grandma, jeez.

"I hear you're the big shot down there now," Johnny said.

Ralph laughed. "I just do a few more things."

"Aren't you the manager?"

"In a way. . . ."

"I am proud of you, my son. You have worked hard in life. God sees and God helps."

"Thank you, Mama. I owe everything to you."

"You pay me back now—by seeing me in my old age."

Ralph turned to Johnny. "Grandma's been telling me you are a big help." Ralph's wide brown eyes searched the boy's face.

"What?" Grandma looked up from her lap. "What?"

"I was telling Johnny you told me he was a big help."

"Yaw . . . but he play the radio too loud." Grandma shook her finger at Johnny. "When Grandmother isn't feeling good you should not play the radio so loud."

Johnny nodded.

"That's right," Ralph agreed.

Johnny couldn't figure out if Uncle Ralph was agreeing with his mother or not, if only for peace, realizing all this was being created in Grandma's head.

"Do you want anything, Uncle Ralph?" Johnny asked starting for the dining room.

"No thanks, Johnny. I have to be going down to the store." He stood up and bent over, kissing Grandma.

"Be a *good* boy."

"I will, Mama. Bertha and I will stop by tonight."

"You do that."

"We'll bring ice cream, too."

"You don't have to. . . ."

Johnny was pouring milk into a saucepan to heat for breakfast when Uncle Ralph came into the kitchen. "You haven't been playing the radio loud, have you?"

"Been hardly playin' it at *all*."

"I guess the best thing we can do is just agree on everything she says."

"That's about the way to do it."

"You be good and watch Grandma."

"I will, Uncle Ralph."

Ralph put on his hat and started to leave, but he stopped in the cellar-hallway and turned saying, "You aren't angry about what she said concerning the radio, are you?"

"*Naw*, I understand."

Ralph winked and smiled. "Okay," he laughed going out the side door, "see you tonight."

As Johnny sat at the table with his breakfast before him, he gazed dreamily down into the steaming surface of his chocolate. Roy once said that the mind contained billions of rooms which held and kept every little word, object, or anything desired and even things undesired. Each room can hold a secret, locked and preserved until you want to remember.

—paint

—blue

—bike

Just in that tremendous split second I can see my bike all finished on a movie screen in my head. I can flash back to the billions—billions—billions of rooms in one-tenth of a split second and get what I want and have it.

But in Grandma's case it must be different.

She must have lost her keys, Johnny thought staring down into the cup, she's running wild up there trying every door, but none of them will open. That is why she invents such things like the radio being too loud, because there is no door to open to remember something of the truth.

Johnny sat motionless, frowning.

You know where you put a book. Okay. She forgets. She has a real big Nothing. Is there anyone in there with her? All day, just sitting and staring, seeing nothing but visions and yet not visions. She makes them up. They aren't real. While visions of sugarplums danced in their heads. . . .

She's not in this world because she has a whole different one in her head. That's the world she lives in. There's an Angel with a broken wing playing a harp out of tune. She can hear it. She sits there all day listening. That's why she sometimes hums. She sees the Black Forest in the mountains of Germany and runs barefooted as a child through the fields of golden grain to the Rhine, her yellow hair trailing after her, laughing beneath the blue sky above.

But the harps are out of tune and the angels only groan. . . .

Johnny pushed his cup back and laid his forehead on the cool plas-

tic cover with his hands limp in his lap. I've got to do it, he thought, it wouldn't be painful. She would go to *her* God. The God that I would shit piss and spit on before accepting as my own. The God that brought her this. The God that moves my hand to the knife that will . . .

His closed eyes filled with tears that burned at the thought of killing his grandma; the only person he loved with all his life, the one he must destroy to bring peace.

(You . . . I know Youre there and can hear me. . . . I didnt mean what I said about You. . . . I really didnt but You make me mad sometimes. . . . It wouldnt take much to make her well again . . . just put Your hand on her head . . . heck it wouldnt be half as hard as doing some of them things You used to do like holding back a sea and burning bushes. . . . You used to talk to people long before radios and movies and things like that. . . . Want to know something . . . I think Youre a big phony. . . . You sure could show off in the Bible days . . . talking to people and keeping lions mouths closed. . . . You only did that because people were looking and You wanted to show off. . . . Youre supposed to be kind arent you. . . . All she does is make everyone cry. . . . Did You ever cry . . . naw Youre too big for that aint You . . . why dont You take her now . . . if You dont I will . . . go on and let a kid do Your dirty work . . . if I fry for it itll be Your hairy old fault . . . boy Id be glad to go to hell . . . I wouldnt want to be anywhere near You. . . . God Im sorry about what I said about You being a phony and them big deals . . . if You just tap my left shoulder Ill never tell a living soul . . . honest . . . Ill make a deal with You. . . . Ill never jack off again if You take her without pain. . . . Ill become a preacher and preach Your word. . . . I aint got nothing much else to offer . . . if I become a preacher I wont steal no more. . . . I can guarantee You that . . . when I go in the room let me find her eyes closed . . . if Youre there You cant ignore me. . . . Ive said I hated You and I have because Youre cruel. . . . I know You can hear me. . . . If I fry for it boy dont forget it was me that was kind . . . not You . . . it was me that released her from the filthy bonds of your fucking earth . . . go on and strike me dead . . . I dont care. . . . I know Youre mad because of what Roy did last night. . . . I only did it back to prove I was a pal. . . . I love him better than my father and boy you know Roys a nice guy too. . . . If he was in Your shoes this hairy old world wouldnt be in the crummy shape its in

now . . . we didnt do anything bad last night. . . . Ill give him up and never see him again for the rest of my livelong life if you want me to . . . just give Grandma a place in Heaven . . . oh please God Im begging You to help me . . . if I ever did Do It again or see Roy You could strike me dead . . . dont worry about me Ill keep up my end of the deal . . . did You say something . . . let me go in and find her in peace. . . .)

Johnny walked half afraid from the dining room and looked at Grandma who sat smiling. "Ralph is a good boy." She laughed. "Come to me, *mein Kind*, I want to tell you a funny story about him."

Her eyes sparkled with mirth, glistened with joy, and her face glowed with a radiant softness. Johnny sat on the floor at her feet, his arms folded across her knees with his chin on his arms.

"When he was a little *Kind*," she smiled nodding her head, "maybe as old as you are, he come home one day and says to me, he says 'Mama' . . . wait a moment . . . he says . . . no, now *wait* a moment . . ." She suddenly became confused and the lost-child look came into her eyes. She closed her eyes, slowly nodding her head up and down, moving her lips as if silently talking to herself. She began groping blindly, hesitatingly confused as there was no open door. No door: only the haunting melody of a tuneless harp playing a forgotten song in a barren chamber with the slender and broken chords fleeing down a dark corridor in the broken mind of an old woman.

Johnny could remember when she was happy. That was more important. And as he looked up into the transparent tight face of confusion, he wondered if it could be the same woman. Now she was tormented by a lost vision that only a few seconds before had made her joyous and happy.

"No," she sighed, "it is gone."

Johnny left Grandma sitting there shaking her head. He was crying bitterly as he went into the kitchen and opened the utility drawer. He wrapped his fingers around the handle of the butcher knife and stood there sobbing. *I warned you you sonofabitch!*

In a fit of complete disgust Johnny threw the knife across the kitchen and it rebounded off the side of the breadbox and fell to the floor with a dull clatter.

He didn't have to kill Grandma to be kind to her. Just love her. Do like Roy said: be firm and tolerant and understanding.

His knees were weak and his hands trembled as he bent over to

pick up the knife. He put it back in the drawer and went over to the breadbox. He looked at the long gash-dent and how the paint chipped away showing dull gray metal.

How'd that happen? Danny must of done it.

As Johnny was wiping up the chipped yellow paint from the linoleum drainboard, Grandma appeared in the doorway from the dining room. "What happened?" she asked tugging nervously at her pink woolen shawl. "What was that noise?"

"Nothin', Gran'ma," he answered, evading her eyes. "I just dropped a pan in the sink. . . . Want some coffee or a glass of milk?"

"No, my child." She started to turn and go but stopped and said, "When you get the kitchen all cleaned up, will you call me? I am going to bake a cake."

"Sure, Gran'ma," he said watching her turn and shuffle through the dining room. "I'll call you," he whispered.

Johnny splashed some cold water on his face and dried with the dishtowel; then as he hung the towel the telephone rang. It was Aunt Irene. "How are you?" he asked.

"Just fine," she answered cheerfully sounding like a young girl.

"Who is it?" Grandma called.

Johnny put his hand over the mouthpiece. "One of my boy friends," he said and felt ashamed for lying but Grandma would talk on and on and he'd never get a word in edgeways.

"How did you like your trip to the Lake?" Aunt Irene asked brightly.

"Had lots of fun, boy. It was real *keen*—I got me a fish."

"Yes," she laughed, "that's what Aunt Edna told me."

"Roy cleaned it an' Aunt Marg fried it. Man was it good."

"Glad to hear you enjoyed it." She sounded like she really meant it.

"Yeanh," he grunted then laughed, "after everyone tasted it, there wasn't hardly even enough left for *me*."

Irene chuckled. "Is Grandmother handy?"

"Just a sec. . . ." Johnny put his hand over the mouthpiece. "Grandma," he called, "Aunt Irene's on the phone!" Then he turned back to the mouthpiece. "She's coming. . . . Tell Uncle Gerald I said hello . . . here she is . . . see ya."

"Okay, Johnny."

He handed the receiver to Grandma and she pulled up a dining-room chair and sat down with a tired sigh asking: Who is this speaking?

Chapter 15

WHEN Johnny went over to the station that afternoon, he sure was relieved that Roy was the same old Roy. Last night hadn't changed him a bit. In fact, after several minutes he almost forgot all about it himself. Everything was the same as usual. Hell, it wasn't anything to get all excited about. He did all that stewing around for nothing.

Earlier that afternoon Roy had borrowed a spray-painting outfit complete with generator. As soon as business became slack, Johnny and Roy carefully hung the bike from the ceiling in the back room on sturdy wires they had saved from Johnny's newspaper bundles; then Roy painted it. He waited two days before applying the second coat. On the third day following the second coat, Roy bought some masking tape and began the slow but careful process of blocking in a long streak on both sides of the top center bar, making the streaks of equal length and width. On the second center bar the streaks were shorter and narrower. Then with white paint Roy brushed in the streaks on both bars. The following day he applied a second coat. Two days later he removed the masking tape, pulling it off slowly by pulling it in toward the streak. That way none of the paint would be jagged-edged. And it wasn't. Johnny was getting impatient as hell and Roy made him polish the frame. Meanwhile, Roy painted both the bike's new tires with a black tire paint and then painted in white sidewalls.

One scorching afternoon toward the end of June, when Johnny was about ready to give up hope of ever riding his bike before he was twenty-five, Roy called him outside the station just after he had come to work.

"I want to show you how these damn cheap bricks at the base of the building are chipping away," Roy mumbled as they walked around to the side of the building facing the point. Johnny shrugged and reluctantly followed. When they turned the corner of the building Johnny stopped dead in his tracks. There it was: finished.

Johnny could hardly believe his eyes. It had a headlight on the chrome fender that sparkled and glistened in the afternoon sun like a mirror; black rubber handle-grips with dangling plastic strips of red, white and blue that hung slightly swaying in the warm breeze; a speedometer; a horn that peeped on flashlight batteries; a lambwool seatcover, fluffy and golden yellow; mudflaps on both fenders with green and red glass studs; a sleek, streamlined cuffguard around the chain, painted a shining black with a rear fender-rack that matched it—and from the fender-rack hung leather saddlebags with cut frilly ends.

Johnny threw his arms around Roy and hugged him, ran over to the bike and lifted up the bikestand with his toe, hopped on the seat and rode down State Street a short way.

Roy stood smiling with his hands on his hips.

Johnny came riding back beaming from ear to ear. "Man, I just gotta ride over an' show Grandma!" he shouted and Roy waved as he made a neat U-turn and peddled down State Street to Dobson Road. Boy-o-boy, just look at that hairy old goshdarn speedometer go up to eight an' a half miles per.

Margaret and Grandma came laughing out the side door as he stood in the driveway madly peeping the horn. Grandma clasped her hands, nodding her head from side to side, saying, "My oh *my*, look at the *bicycle* . . . my oh *my*!"

"It's a *beautiful* bike, Johnny," Aunt Margaret said, running her hand over the lambwool seatcover.

Johnny threw his arms around Grandma and hugged her and kissed her soft cheek saying, "*Ca'mon* sugardoll—hop on an' I'll take you around the block."

"Go on with you." She laughed and hit him affectionately on top of the head.

Margaret peeped the horn and stood up straight, smiling from ear to ear.

"Let me do that." Grandma laughed and reached out toward the button with a hesitant look on her face. She peeped the horn and jerked her hand back as if she'd been electrocuted. Her face broke into a wide smile as she clasped her hands together and peeped it again. "Oh my oh my oh my. . . ."

"Want a ride, Aunt Marg?"

"Oh *goodness no!*" she shrieked and unbuckled the straps to one of the saddlebags, peering in.

While old Grandma was peeping the horn like crazy Johnny tore in the house and called Roy saying he was going down to Aunt Edna's. Roy laughed and said okay and Johnny ran out of the house and old Aunt Marg was switching the headlight on and off. Grandma just stood there smiling and shaking her head, tugging nervously at the shawl around her shoulders.

"Well folks," he told them hopping on the lambwool seat, "ol' Kit Carson's gotta hit the trail West."

"Be *careful*," Margaret shouted as he rode down the driveway.

Johnny peeped his horn and waved. Mr. Murphy who was watering his posies turned to wave too. He really picked up speed going down Tweed Street. The darn old speedometer went clear up to fifteen miles per. He rode down Carter past Cherrytree High, turned into the wide gravel driveway next to Aunt Edna's place and rode to the back door peeping his horn.

"Well fer *Jesus Christ*!" Uncle Cliff called from the corn patch in the garden.

"What'cha think of it, huh?"

"Looks pretty goddamn cheap if ya ask me." Cliff grinned as he approached the bike, pushing back his straw hat.

"Hi, kiddo!" Edna said coming out the kitchen door. "Say now, isn't that something?"

Cliff peeped the horn and sniffed and broke into a wide grin. "It won't last long."

"Ohhhhhhhhhhhhh," Edna said, giving him the reproachful eye.

Old Uncle Cliff was always critical in a comical way of things he didn't own. Edna reached out and peeped the horn. Her whole face lit up with joy. "Now *isn't* that something?"

Cliff snorted and shoved a Lucky in his mouth. "Wait till da batteries corrode. . . ."

"Isn't he something *awful*?" Edna smiled at Johnny, folding her arms across her breasts. She stepped in front of the bike and tilted her head, closing one eye.

"Cheap leather," Cliff said out of the side of his mouth as he flipped the flap of one of the saddlebags. "Fall apart inna week."

"Aw, what you talkin' about, man?"

"He's talking through his hat, kiddo."

"An' wait till da rain hits dat *seatcover*!" Cliff laughed pointing.

"Listen to him, will you." Edna licked her lips and peeped the horn again.

Jesus, he'll have to put new batteries in it tonight.

"One *fart* on dat seatcover, Parish," he sneered, "an' all dat fuzzy stuff'll come off."

"Awwwwwwwwwwww," Edna grinned with her hand at her mouth.

"An' wait till da rain gets in dat headlight." Cliff walked over to the headlight and switched it on. "Well I'll be damn—it *works*." He took a step back saying, "Not very bright. . . ."

"You need glasses."

"*You* tell him, kiddo."

"Dem kind of fenders'll rust trough like *dat*!" Cliff snapped his fingers.

"That's all *you* know, boy." Johnny switched off the headlight.

"Why, I used to *build* dese tings," Cliff said seriously, then laughed. "I *did*."

"Don't pay any attention to him, honey. The sun's got to him." Edna leaned over and gazed into one of the saddlebags. "Say, these are *swell*."

Cliff laughed and said, "Go in da house an' get my wallet. . . . I'll give da kid ten bucks for it."

"Like *heck* you will."

"Tell ya what I'll do: I'll give ya ten bucks an' let ya keep dat seatcover—how's dat?"

Johnny squinted up at his uncle. "If it's in such bad shape I couldn't take ten bucks for it—I wouldn't be able to sleep at night thinkin' of how I gyped'cha."

Edna laughed. "That's telling him."

"Hey! Where's Danny and Walt?" Johnny glanced toward the house.

"They went swimming out at Columbia Pool."

"Five bucks, an' I trow in da saddlebags with da seatcover—'at's a bargain."

"A bargain you ain't gettin', boy."

"Don't let him kid you, Johnny. It's a fine bike—it really is."

Cliff shrugged his shoulders. "Aw, it'll pass."

Edna peeped the horn again. "That horn really *fascinates* me."

"Ya better just keep blowin' it while it works," Cliff laughed, "'cause it ain't gonna be workin' after *dis* week—I'll tell ya *dat* much."

"I got to be goin'," Johnny said, then turned to Cliff. "Sure ya found everything the matter with it?"

"Dem brakes ain't da best."

"Sez you." Johnny hopped on his bike. "See ya," he shouted and rode down the drive to the street. As he was about to turn onto Carter, Cliff called to him. He stopped and turned in the seat, shielding his eyes from the bright sun.

"Dat back tire's wobbily!" He laughed.

"Frig you!" Johnny said under his breath and began pumping up the short hill to Cherrytree High. He peeped his horn to make sure it still worked. He was a little glad that Danny and Walt weren't there. Boy, that old Walt can sure break things up. He couldn't ride a bike but Danny could.

Johnny coasted past Cherrytree High. Gee, it sure felt good to be riding along. The Carter Street bus passed him on its return trip to town and Johnny exchanged waves with the driver. The breeze felt good and cool in his face. Maybe I'll get a pair of goggles: naw, you don't wear goggles with bicycles.

Then he suddenly remembered that he was so excited he forgot to thank Roy. He began pumping harder. He breezed right by Tweed Street and began pumping up the gentle rising grade of Carter to State Street. Roy was dying at the station. He was laying in a pool of blood, trying to hold on until Johnny came back and thanked him.

He pumped harder. He was Kit Carson with the Pony Express saddlebags trying to get to Fort Red Dot with the mail. There were fifteen hundred Indians after him. He had to deliver the mail.

Johnny turned sharply onto State Street, ducking his head and keeping it low from the flying arrows. He had to see that the orders from the President of the United States arrived safely in the hands of Captain Davies. He saw Fort Red Dot ahead. Susan Parker was waving her hankie at him from the top of the blockhouse. An arrow hit him in the arm but he kept on riding.

Johnny turned sharply into the driveway and really put on the brakes as he circled around to the lubricating platform. He jumped off the bike looking around seeing Roy at the desk. Johnny kicked down the rest and ran around the station, through the open door and past the candy case. He flung himself into Roy's arms. "Thanks, Roy . . ." he panted, feeling a swelling in his chest, "thanks . . . gee, thanks a lot! It's the best doggone bike in the *whole* wide world."

A week later, in the evenings after work, Roy'd begun teaching Johnny how to drive a car. They would go out to some country road and with a couple of pillows under him, Johnny'd proudly take the wheel. Shifting gears was his only problem. Roy was patient and slow and didn't rush him, but he'd frown pretty deep when Johnny couldn't shift from one gear to the other and there was that awful tearing grinding noise. He'd never laugh when Johnny'd let the clutch out too fast gunning the accelerator. When that occurred, the old black Olds would suddenly leap angrily forward and lurch drunkenly down the dusty road in quick spasmodic leaps and finally end up stalling in one puky final shiver. That only happened a couple of times because Johnny was learning to master his co-ordination. Each time he went behind the wheel, Roy's firm and authoritative voice gave him more and more confidence in himself. He knew he was learning and improving, because Roy chewed his lip less and less. Just five days after he first sat behind the wheel of the Olds he was driving it from one end of the country lane to the other.

Of course by then everyone in the family knew Johnny was learning to drive a car. On the very night Roy had showed him how to start the car, practically everyone knew that Johnny knew how to drive.

Chapter 16

IT WAS Monday morning, July the first, and while Roy was counting the day's change into the cash register, Johnny restocked the pop-cooler. Aunt Marg got the day off because Doctor Richmond had to take a trip to Buffalo. Johnny could work all day.

The morning air was thick and humid. There wasn't a cloud in the sky and Johnny felt pretty sticky and clammy. It was going to be a scorcher. He had that pressure in the bridge of his nose and up between his eyebrows. He turned and went sluggishly into the station and leaned up against the candy case, resting his head in his folded arms. "You think that maybe next month we can spend a *whole* week up at the Lake?"

"It's really hard to tell, Sport." Roy shoved the cash drawer in and turned. "The Company might not like it. We've been taking off Saturdays and Sundays for the past two weeks as it is. They haven't said anything . . . yet."

"Weekends are fun—but jeez, one whole *week*!" Johnny opened his eyes and slapped at a fly on the back of his neck. He stood up straight and stretched with a lazy yawn. When he relaxed he felt faint and bright sparks shot past his eyes. "I'm seein' spots."

"Perfectly natural."

Johnny blinked his eyes and shook his head and went around the case to the desk. Instead of sitting up on the desk he leaned against the counter.

"Think of your mother, Sport." Roy wiped his forehead and upper lip with a hankie. "This coming Fourth will be the first time she's been to the Lake in a couple of years. I'm glad I asked her the other night to come alone with us."

"Yeanh." Johnny unwrapped a cut of Shelby's bubble-gum, "You sure as all of Lucifer's hell made her happy, Roy. She was just about as happy as Danny."

"I'm glad to hear that." He smiled broadly.

Johnny popped the pink wad in his mouth and began chewing. "She likes the ol' Lake better'an I do—almost. But that damndarn hotel job don't give her any no time at all to go *nowheres*."

"You damned *Dutchman*!"

Johnny munched away on the rubber toughness, sucking out the sweet juice. "What made you say 'at now?" he slurped.

Roy only laughed and shook his head. "Nothing."

"Okay—make fun of me."

Roy lit a cigarette and Johnny tried to blow a bubble but the hairy old gum was still too soft. He gazed down through the glass at the boxes of candy. They were just about out of gum. There were still a few packs of Yucatan and Doublemint left. He'd chewed up all of the Black Jack.

Johnny got to his knees and slid open the back panel. He rearranged the boxes of candy and gum. "We're needing new stock," he said absently and blew a big bubble. It broke with a sigh.

"We'll drive down to Bookman's at noon. How much cash do you have in the box?"

Johnny reached in the case and took out a King Edward cigar box. He slowly counted out nine dollars and thirty-five cents.

"Does that talley with what you've sold?"

"I guess."

"You guess?"

"How do you mean?"

"Take a complete inventory on the amount of candy you have left,"

Roy explained, "then add it up and subtract—"

"Yeah," Johnny grinned, "but I've got *pop* money in here too."

"You'd make a helluva businessman."

Johnny blew a big bubble and this time it shattered with a pop. He peeled it off the tip of his nose and chin saying, "Now don't you go swearing, Mr. Davies—and you'd better look before you cross the bridge and all the chickens are hatched." Johnny narrowed his eyes and pointed an accusing finger. "*You're* the one that's been eating up all my *cheesy profit!*"

"Well how do you like *that!*" Roy chuckled as he slapped his thigh. "Here I go setting you up in a profit-making business—and what do you do? I'll tell you what you do: you accuse me, I, that one that befriended you! Oh, merciful pity to my ragged soul!" Roy put the back of his hand against his forehead in a dramatic pose.

Johnny laughed. "Ragged ass, you mean."

"Indubitably!"

"You should be in the goddamn movies, or somethin'. . . ."

Roy smiled and laced his fingers across his stomach and tilted back in the chair. "By the way, how much have you drawn from that little box so far, huh?"

"Oh, *pity* to my *ragged* soul!"

"Come on now," Roy grinned, "I'm serious."

Johnny thrust out his hand. "Glad to meet you, Serious, my name's Parish."

Roy grabbed Johnny's hand and sat up, pulling the boy to him. He dumped Johnny across his knees and raised his hand above his head. "Dare me?"

"Go ahead, boy," he said chewing away. "Just hit me *once* . . . go on, just hit me *once*."

"What a temptation. . . ."

"*Shazam!*" Johnny waited a second. "Something's the matter . . . I'm supposed to be Captain Marvel!"

"I'll Captain *Marvel* you right here on your fat behind—Jesus," he laughed, "what an opportunity!"

"Hey," Johnny twisted his head around, "did you ever think of all

the crooks that would be runnin' around if telephone booths hadn't been invented?"

"How's that?"

"Superman wouldn't have no puky place to *undress!*" Johnny laughed and jumped up out of Roy's lap.

"You're a character all right."

"Right from the funnypapers."

"Correct."

"You don't *have* to agree," Johnny snorted and tossed the tough wad of bubble-gum to the wastebasket. It was getting to be as hard as a rock.

"Say," he suddenly said, "I don't want Mom or Danny goin' up to the Lake with us."

"Why's that?"

Johnny pulled himself up on the corner of the desk. "Oh, I guess it's a little *selfish*—but we'll have more fun going alone."

"Of course it's selfish," Roy agreed raising his brow. "You surprised me, Sport. I thought you were a lot different from the way you just sounded. Look how hard your mother works at the hotel every day, day in and day out. Think of how happy you were the first trip we made up, then put yourself in your mother's place. . . ."

"Yeah," Johnny nodded jiggling his foot, "you're right, Roy. I guess it was pretty selfish of me. I'm sorry—I guess I just didn't think."

"Take the last couple of weeks: we closed up on Friday night and took off for the Lake. We had the whole weekend to ourselves. We can still do that but your mother can't." Roy smiled and added, "Let's make this Fourth of July a happy day for her . . . what'cha say, bub?"

"*Damn* right we will." Johnny winked and unwrapped another wad of bubble-gum.

When the ice truck came Johnny bought twenty-five pounds for the pop-cooler. He filled the tank of a new black shiny Buick. As soon as the Buick drove off a woman in a '41 Ford drove in and wanted two dollars' worth of Regular. She had coal-black hair with a white streak running through it. It was pretty neat, he thought with his eyes on the meter. He wished he had one like it. Just like Steve Canyon in the funnypapers.

It was about ten-thirty and so hot and sultry he could hardly breathe. The flies were biting like heck. Johnny went around the side

of the station toward the lubricating rack, where it was shady, to dust off his bike with a soft cloth. He looked up when that Howard friend of Roy's drove in. He'd finally got that new Plymouth of his. Johnny went around under the station roof where he met Roy. They both stood looking at the shining green coupe.

"Fill'er up, John." Howard beamed coming around the front of the car. "What do you think of it?"

"It's a beaut," he answered.

"Well, Roy, I *finally* got it. They notified me at work a few minutes ago. She just came in." Howard stood there proudly, looking from Roy to the car.

"It's full," Johnny called back.

"Is it?" Howard laughed. "What do you think of it, Roy?"

"Hell of a nice-looking car—but don't leave it out in any hail-storm."

Howard's mouth opened and Roy slapped him on the back saying, "I was only kidding."

"Oh." Howard grinned.

"She's really nice." Roy nodded with his hands on his hips.

"I told you the other night when you and Grace were up that I'd get it this week."

"It's a good thing I didn't bet you."

"He doesn't pay off his bets anyways," Johnny said walking up to them.

"Oh I don't know about that," Roy replied putting his hand on Johnny's shoulder.

"Take a spin around the block, Roy," Howard told him. "Get the *feel* of that wheel. Engine's as smooth as peaches and cream. Go *on*—I'll drink a coke."

"Well—okay." Roy laughed. "My pants are clean," he said walking around the car, "I just put them on this morning. By the way, if I'm not back in a half-hour, make yourself at home."

Howard really thought that was funny.

As Roy drove off Howard began chewing on his lower lip. He opened a coke and gave Johnny a dime. He got change in the cigar box and brought Howard back his nickel.

"How long have you worked here, John?"

"About a month and a week."

"Like it?"

"Sure. . . . Roy's teaching me how to drive."

"Roy's a nice guy," Howard said sadly. He set his coke down to light a cigarette.

"Uh-huh." What was the name of that girl Howard said Roy was up at his place with? He looked down at the powdery white gravel. Roy wouldn't ever get married. Johnny glanced up and out to the street as a big red truck squeaked to a halt with a hiss of airbrakes. Just turn and say *What did you say that girl's name was Howard?*

At first Johnny thought Howard was sighing, but the whistling noise grew into a shrill screaming shriek and Johnny ran out from under the roof to see a silver jet plane shooting across the sky to the north. "Boy, 'em bastards really go."

"Indeed they do." Howard tilted the bottle to his lips.

"Say," Johnny waved his hand, "come here—I want to show you something." He walked excitedly over to the Olds sitting on the lubricating platform where Roy had moved it before Howard came because he wanted to change the oil. Johnny's insides were tight. I've got to do this right, he thought. I've got to do this right.

Johnny opened the door and put the pillows on the driver's side of the seat. He sat down and wiggled himself around until he was comfortable. As he reached down to switch on the ignition Howard said, "You'd better not start it, John."

"Ohhhhhhhh, it's all *right*," he told Howard, who was peering in the window on his right. "Roy don't mind it a bit. I'll just start it and drive it to the street and right back up here on the rack," he said with a confident shake of his head.

"I don't know, John . . ." Howard took his lower lip between his teeth.

"Roy lets me do it *all* the time," he lied.

"Well, I don't think you should."

"Look—" Johnny turned on the ignition. He felt the thud of his heart just below his throat. He stretched his foot down to the starter.

His toe plunged it into the floorboard.

There was a grinding tear as the car leaped violently backwards. Howard let out a frightening yell as the rear of the Oldsmobile smashed and crashed crunchingly into the open toolshed.

"Jesus *Christ!*" Howard said.

The car stopped rocking and Johnny sat numb behind the wheel. "Oh shit," he murmured. "Something must of gone wrong. . . ."

Howard went around the front of the car and opened the door and Johnny got out. His knees were sorta rubbery. Howard got in

and pulled the Olds back up onto the two runways of the lubricating platform.

Johnny heard the final gurgle of a gallon can of brake fluid. The bumper of the Olds was bent and there were at least five hundred dents in the trunk. Oil cans lay scattered in the gravel. Some of them had burst when they flew down on the trunk. The left door of the toolshed was hanging on one crummy hinge. The two-by-four separating the two doors was caved in and the first shelf, about four feet from the ground, had collapsed. Everything was a holy goddamn mess.

Johnny looked back to the trunk. Boy, you sure as hell could tell where that puky can of brake fluid hit.

"I wish you would've listened to me."

"It was in reverse."

"You should of had it in neutral, John, and even at that you should never start a car without the clutch in."

"Yeah. . . . I know. . . ."

"I knew something was going to happen." Howard sadly shook his head.

Johnny had a notion to ask Howard to take the blame for it. He kicked savagely at a can of oil and hurt his toe. He walked back to the station thoughtlessly numb, leaving Howard standing there.

Johnny sat up on the corner of the desk. Man is it hot. It sure was. Didn't Howard say: *I dare you to drive it to the street and back?* Goddamn no he didn't. Then he began trembling all over.

He looked up as Roy drove in under the roof. Roy came into the office and raised his brow. "Where's Howard?"

"Out by the toolshed." Johnny threw his head back.

"Something happen?"

"No," he answered looking at King Edward in the candy case.

"You look pale."

"Howard wants to see you. . . ."

"Did he say anything to you?" Roy asked narrowly.

"No."

"Anything at all?"

"No . . . what?"

"Nothing."

Johnny looked up to see Roy's back as he went out the door. His stomach quivered. He didn't turn and look out the window. He just

sat there waiting. Boy-o-boy. He heard a car door slam and Roy shout, "See you, Howard."

Roy come in the station and looked at him. He lowered his eyes.

"Well?" Roy asked.

Johnny didn't say anything. Roy's jaw was trembling.

"Haven't I told you *over* and *over* again not to do a *goddamn* thing to the car when I'm not here?"

"Yes."

"Jesus Christ—*over* and *over* again!" Roy raised his arms and let them fall to his sides.

"I'm sorry." He didn't want to cry but he was ashamed of himself. He kept back the tears and took his upper lip between his teeth.

"Oh Sport," he groaned, "*goddamn*—if you'd only listen to me things like this wouldn't happen."

"I'm sorry."

Roy scratched the back of his head. He lit a cigarette and dropped his lighter. He walked over to Johnny and said, "I don't want you *ever* to touch that car again when I'm not with you."

"I won't."

Roy put his hand on Johnny's shoulder. "I want you to promise me."

Johnny raised his eyes. "I promise."

"Okay." Roy sighed again. "Let's go out and clean up that mess."

"All right."

Roy smiled weakly as they walked out of the station and around into the hot bright sun. Nothing would be fine again until Roy told a joke or something funny. He'll probably laugh and say something funny any minute now.

They began picking up oil cans.

Chapter 17

THE Fourth of July was a beautiful day. Roy turned onto the Lake Shore Road. He'd watch the way Barbara would hold her hands together while she talked, gazing out the windshield, then turn to him

with an excited and childish smile. Johnny was sitting in the front seat with Barbara between them. Danny was in the back seat leaning up against the front seat most of the time. Roy knew the poor kid was afraid of being left out, because he continually talked to remind them he was along on what Roy thought might be called a Gay Outing. Danny was deathly afraid of missing the fireworks that evening, and Roy continually assured him that they'd be somewhere where there would be fireworks.

They'd decided to go swimming at Eden, which was a private beach, and Roy'd have to pull that old trick again: he drove in the gate and told them all to wave to the old lady in the small office like they'd taken one of her cabins or, more plausibly, were visiting some friends that had.

Roy parked the car near some trees above the beach and he and the boys took a short stroll as Barbara slipped down in the back seat to change into her swimming suit. Roy suddenly wished he was down in the seat with her. He looked back once but couldn't see her. He thought about Barbara undressing and that if it wasn't for the boys, he'd be helping her. What do you say we forget sex, huh Roy? he asked himself and countered: bull!

The door opened and Barbara stepped out. She looked good in a "baiting" suit, he realized. It was a two-piece affair of turquoise nylon. Barbara had smooth graceful legs swelling to heavy creamy thighs. Her stomach was pulled in flat and her waist narrow, curving up and in from slender hips. She had low wide-slung breasts that hung limp in the small pockets of her swimming bra. Roy and the boys had their trunks on beneath their trousers but Barbara turned her back to them while they undressed.

After Roy locked the car, they all went down over the hill to the wide golden beach. Johnny and Danny ran excitedly to the water's edge as Barbara helped Roy spread the Indian blanket over the sand. They sat down and Barbara asked Roy if he'd please rub some suntan lotion over her shoulders and back.

It felt as if his fingers were gliding over milky silk. Her flesh was warm and soft. Barbara's hair was shampoo sweet and Roy caught the faint whiff of perfume behind her ear. His head clouded and he was blinded with white as he put his lips to the back of her neck. Barbara's hand went to his elbow.

The boys were in the water and Roy noticed that Johnny appeared to be going too far out. He stood up and called, "Don't go

out too far, Sport!" But Johnny stood up in waist-high water and waved. Sandbar.

Barbara lay back on the blanket with cotton Coeds over her eyes beneath sunglasses. Roy reached over her for the small blue and white towel to wipe the sticky suntan lotion off his hand.

"Can you see the boys?" Barbara asked shortly.

"Yes. Danny's building a sandcastle and Johnny's helping him. . . . I'll keep an eye on them."

"Swell. Now maybe I can relax. Danny can't swim."

Roy looked down to the boys. It surprised him that Johnny would even consider playing in the sand because he tried so hard to be grown up; to act and talk as a grownup. He had just momentarily slipped back into being thirteen-year-old Johnny Parish. It was funny, Roy mused, how nature inevitably reclaimed command once you forgot the part or act you were playing. He gazed down at Barbara. Her breasts appeared to have submerged themselves into her ivory, oil-glistening bosom. Roy reached out and took her hand. She kept murmuring what a positively marvelous day; doesn't the sun feel marvelous; wasn't everything just absolutely marvelous, wasn't it. . . . Roy thought she sounded like a perfect Hemingway bitch. He released her hand as Johnny came running up through the sand followed by Danny.

"You got a quarter, Roy?" Johnny asked. "Danny and me want to go up to the Trading Post an' get a coke an' some potato-chips."

Roy handed him the car keys. "In my pants pocket."

"Take it out of my purse, Johnny," Barbara said.

"Don't be silly." Roy looked up at Johnny. "Take enough and bring your mother and me a root beer."

"Okay," Johnny said and started off toward the hill with Danny at his heels.

Roy called after Johnny and told him to be sure and lock the car and he hollered back that he would. He probably wouldn't, Roy thought, and wouldn't have been surprised in the least if the Olds came shooting over the hill at sixty-five miles an hour with Johnny smiling at the wheel. That kid never listens until it's too late. Roy had let him drive for a few miles on their way up and Barbara was damn near a nervous wreck by the time he took over again.

The sun pumped down in blasting waves and was hotly heavy on his shoulders. There were quite a few couples on the beach but they

were all quite far apart. The heat-shimmer wavered magically above the golden expanse of reflecting sand.

Roy rolled over on his stomach and began telling Barbara about himself and anything else that skimmed absently through his sun-drowsy mind. He was saving his Line. He had a perfect Line. He raised himself on his elbow, leaning over Barbara. His fluent words flowed with an even smoothness and soon his mouth was but an inch from hers. Then their lips were brushing and he didn't talk as much. She didn't talk at all. Roy wondered what she was seeing beneath those cotton Coeds. Then Barbara's hand slid up flat over his ribs and across his back to his neck and she gently pulled down until their open mouths twisted together. Barbara's warm and moist snake tongue worked and played against his. Her fingernails scratched slowly over the back of Roy's neck, raising goosepimples over his arms and thighs.

They heard a whistle behind them and Roy looked up to see three boys and a girl standing in the sand several feet away. Barbara raised herself on her elbow and took off the sunglasses smiling, shielding her eyes, squinting at the four children. They were only about seven or eight years old. The little girl was about six and Roy thought she was as cute as a button. Her black hair was plastered close to her head in wet streaks.

"Love'er, mister?" One of the boys giggled. "Huh, mister? Ya love'er?"

Barbara turned to Roy and laughed.

"Sure he loves'er, *stupid*," another boy answered in a singsong voice.

"Huh, mister?" another boy chimed in.

"Sure he loves'er," the first boy said, then they all laughed and slapped each other on the back and ran off through the sand shouting in high-pitched voices: "The man's in love, the man's in love. . . ."

Roy and Barbara laughed. She sighed and then a frown crossed her brow. "I wonder what's keeping the boys?"

"Oh, they'll be back shortly," he assured her.

Barbara lay back down and closed her eyes against the overhead sun. Roy glanced down at the soft bulge of her groin, noticing the way her trunks pulled tight against that gentle curve. He quickly looked out to the pale horizon above the Lake.

"How's Johnny's work coming?"

"Fine. He's learning a lot of small but important things about business that'll help him later in life."

"I'm glad to hear *that*."

Roy turned and looked down at her. Her eyes were still closed. The waistband of her trunks had slipped down her stomach a short way, exposing her twisted and sunken navel. Roy placed his middle finger behind his thumb, reached over and plunked it down plop against her navel.

Barbara sat up and laughed with her white teeth sparkling in the sun. "I swear, Mr. Davies," she laughed coyly, "I do believe you have an ornery streak in you." Her eyes were clear and bright and searched his as she pulled up the waistband of her trunks, throwing him a wink above a sly smile.

Roy found himself thinking how easy it would be to get rid of Johnny and Danny for several hours by taking them to a show. He and Barbara could say they had already seen it. That was crazy. Just crazy. He didn't want a thing to do with Barbara. He couldn't go getting involved. Anyway, Johnny's got a one-track mind with the Local Express always rumbling with a clickity-clack toward Sexy Junction. He sees two ants creeping across the sidewalk and immediately they're shacking up and looking for a place to go and diddle. Roy smiled. That's a kid for you anyway.

They sat in silence looking out to the Lake. A roaring speedboat went by with its red and yellow nose high in the air, fleeing a churning wake of disrupted white foam. Roy lit a cigarette and gave it to Barbara, then lit one for himself.

"Ever read Hemingway?" Roy suddenly asked.

"No," Barbara answered, "I'm not much of a reader, although I did read *Gone With the Wind* three times. It's one of my favorite books."

It figures, Roy thought, and glanced up to see Johnny and Danny coming down over the hill. Johnny came running up saying he had to leave a nickel deposit on each bottle. He handed Barbara the two sweating bottles of root beer, Roy the car keys, then hit Danny on the arm. "Last one in's a nigger baby."

The boys ran off and Johnny kicked sand up on Barbara's calf. Roy kept fighting that hammering impulse to reach down and brush the sand off her leg. He liked to touch Barbara and look at her

body when she wasn't aware of it. He could feel that animal instinct swell hard in his gut and his throat. He wanted to rip off her swimming bra and beat her breasts until she begged him to stop and take her now and that she loved him. Sometimes he thought he was mad. But didn't everyone have mad suppressed desires from the lower muck of their soul? he thought. I can't be alone in this hopeless madness.

Roy took a swallow of root beer, and as he turned to Barbara a calmness settled through him and the inner trembling turmoil subdued to peacefulness. Barbara sighed and the exhaled smoke swam around her face. She took a drink and began telling Roy how unhappy she was living with Mama and Margaret, and about the violent fights Mama and Margaret would have over small unimportant matters.

She sighed and turned to Roy. "I might just as well tell you the whole story, Roy—but you'd better keep it under your hat."

"Oh, of course." He frowned and licked his lips.

Barbara looked out to the Lake. "Margaret took Mama to the lawyer this spring and had the will changed. I didn't know what to think at first"—she looked back to Roy—"but I had a notion to tell Irene and Edna, and then I just couldn't. It doesn't make too much difference to me—yes, yes it does. It makes a *hell* of a big difference. She was sneaking behind our backs—afraid of Mama suddenly dying and leaving her alone with nothing—a pauper." Barbara sighed and set the empty bottle in the sand, took a drag on her cigarette and continued. "The will had been made out so that Mama's estate would be divided equally among us. I'm the only one in the family that has anything to lose by it. That's why Margaret's nerves are going—fear at the thought of anyone finding out and afraid at what will happen when they do. Irene and the rest are pretty well off, but—but I can't go making a big stink. Mama's in no condition for one of those old-fashioned Kesler Arguments." Barbara smiled bitterly. "You ought to be in on one of those gatherings—they're doozies, all right. I just don't know. . . ." She sighed.

"Do you think your mother's forgotten about the changed will?"

"She probably forgot it before handing the pen back to the lawyer."

"I really don't know what to tell you to do." Roy sadly shook his head and looked down to where the boys were playing in the sand.

"Does Margaret know that you know?"

"No," Barbara answered. "Let's forget it. I don't like to think about it—not now, not today, anyway." She turned to Roy with a wide smile. "I'll work it out."

Roy nodded and turned back to the boys. Everyone's got troubles, Roy thought, but they needn't get superior by knocking other—To hell with it. Roy looked down at Johnny and it made him feel good to see him a boy again. When Johnny tried to act grown up, Roy thought, he only made a stupid ass of himself. Like my car. Jesus, I haven't got the dough to repair the trunk. If he'd only follow orders, quit trying to always be showing off and wait to grow up, things like that wouldn't happen. He's really too goddamn sensitive for a real tongue lashing. He takes it too much to heart.

Barbara turned over on her stomach and politely asked Roy if he'd please rub some lotion on the back of her legs. As he squeezed the tube shooting the greasy crap out all over his fingers, he refrained from saying *Yas ma'am, Miz Scarlett*. With tongue in cheek, Roy kneaded his fingers into the soft pliable flesh of her calves.

"It's a wonder some woman hasn't trapped you yet," Barbara murmured sleepily.

"I run too fast." Roy laughed. He buried his cigarette in the sand and the golden grains stuck to his oily hand as he covered the stub.

Barbara was thinking it wasn't a very wise idea to have told Roy about Margaret changing the will and now she wished she hadn't. He was so shy and boyish. His hands were gentle and didn't have dirt under the nails. Most men from filling stations had the filthiest hands she'd ever seen. She realized that Roy was good to Johnny. It took a load off her aching back. Johnny hadn't been taking things that she knew of, and she finally had admitted that Roy was the answer to a number of her problems.

There's nothing quite as marvelous as lying out in the sun hearing the surf, she thought. This is a fine beach. I'm almost an old woman, now. Thirty-one, with two boys. Being up here makes me feel young and reckless and almost in love with love all over again. I haven't been kissed like that in a whole week. Having two boys to support and living with Mama cuts me off from a lot of things. Not too many though, but enough to break a horrible boredom.

She and Jim, before the war, used to spend their vacations up here at Eden. Two weeks every summer. Those were the Good Old Days. No matter where they went, there were always parties and

something exciting to do and some place to go. Now she was older and wiser if not a little sadder. She could always look back to what it used to be like.

The sun felt good on her back and thighs and legs. Her life sure panned out pretty goddamn lousy, she thought with bitterness. Be a fool about the will. She could do a lot of things with five or six hundred dollars. Mama isn't even dead yet, she thought with sudden shame, and here I am spending an inheritance I don't even have coming.

Barbara was only a year older than Roy but there was something about him that made her want to mother him. If she could only spend a week up here. She was so excited she hardly slept a wink last night. She had lain in bed wondering what it would be like without Jim being along today, and like a damn fool woman she began to cry. She'd been crying too much lately. Poor Barbara. Poor Little Barbara. Isn't it a shame? It sure as hell is.

The sun was making her feel sleepy. She wished that Roy'd lie down next to her and take her in his arms and kiss her and tell her that he loved her. She could picture it. It would be night and the orange moon would rise over the Lake as his eager breath whispered love in her ear. They'd hear the low wash of the surf and the quiet hush of the night would press in close with the warm darkness. He'd kiss her face and her neck and her breasts and belly. Then she'd feel that slow sliding with his quick breath in her face as his hands pulled down on her shoulders.

Barbara could always tell when the ax was going to fall. Roy's mouth would hurriedly seek hers and in that tremulous few seconds he'd be a chicken with its head cut off. The whole thing is nothing but ten or fifteen seconds, Barbara thought with sardonic amusement. All men act like a chicken with its head cut off. My whole goddamn life was ruined by those lousy ten to fifteen seconds. That's all men live for. I haven't met a man yet that hasn't wanted to tell me a filthy joke and cart me off to bed. No doubt Roy's already sized me up as a good make since I didn't slap his finger out of my belly-button. The only reason I laughed was because it tickled. I couldn't go blowing my top and get mad at him. I'm not walking back to Wilkinson City.

"A bottle of beer would sure hit the spot," Roy said and put his freshly lighted cigarette to her lips.

Barbara pulled in a drag. "Please don't make me thirsty." She

smiled through smoke and looked at Roy, thinking about a little boy drinking a bottle of beer.

Johnny messed around in the corny old sand helping Danny build a fortress, but at first he sure as hell made sure there weren't any pretty girls around. It was fun for a while but now he was getting all bored. He helped Danny finish digging out a moat, stood up and walked into the surf. He had to be careful as heck and not get the sides of his head wet because he forgot to bring his jar of Vaseline. Sheeze, he couldn't make his hair lay down no what on the sides if he got it wet and didn't have his Vaseline. He turned and saw old Mom getting up off the blanket, laughing and pulling on her bathing cap.

"It's about time you two came in!" Johnny shouted. "The water's fine." He turned and ran in the water and that's the hardest way to run there is. The sand on the bottom was smooth and it squinched up between his toes.

Johnny hoped old Roy knew he was kidding him about marrying Mom. He sure was fooling around all right. Mom's sure got a figure, he thought. She'd be in the movies only she looks too much like Ingrid Bergman.

Roy and Barbara ran into the water and began swimming out toward Johnny. He was out on the sandbar where the water was clear up to his hairy old nipples. They really weren't hairy yet but boy they sure would be in a couple of years. The last time he measured the hairs under his arms, they were a half an inch long.

Barbara was using that old sidestroke and Roy was right along beside her. Roy was a good swimmer and wasn't afraid of crabs or turtles or getting stung by catfish. Man, Johnny was glad Roy wasn't a coward like that dopey Howard Cooper. Roy had told him how Howard Cooper was a puky conscious injector during the war and wouldn't shoot one Jap at all. Johnny didn't even know there was a kind of person called conscious injector but he did know there were guys that didn't fight in the war because they didn't believe in killing. Howard really wasn't a coward because Roy said he went all the way up to the front lines before he realized he couldn't shoot a Jap.

Johnny sure hoped that Roy knew he was kidding, jokelike, about marrying Mom. Barbara was breathing heavy standing beside Johnny with her hand on his shoulder. He was really glad she came because

she was so damndarn happy and everything. She was laughing all the time. Boy he sure was selfish for not wanting her to come along. Gee-whiz, he wanted Mom to have some hairy old fun because she worked hard like Roy said and anyway, they could have their old Party tomorrow and fer corn-sakes he hoped Roy knew he was just kidding him about Mom because cripe she's a year older than he is.

Roy was panting too and said, "Too many cigarettes."

"Isn't that the Gospel truth," Barbara agreed, breathing heavy. "I've got to cut down—*pheewh!*"

Johnny wanted to turn to Roy and say *Too many Parties* but said instead: "I guess old George ain't going to go gettin' sick today."

"George who?" Barbara asked.

"A fellow with an ulcer that stops at the station every day," Roy answered.

Barbara turned to Johnny. "Why won't he get sick today?"

"Because Johnny won't be there to devil him." Roy laughed.

Boy, he's sure fast, Johnny thought. Roy gave him a quick side glance, screwing down his mouth.

"When in the heck are we going to eat?" Johnny asked.

"Johnny Parish," Roy said seriously, "the Gargantua of Prodigious Eaters."

Barbara laughed and Johnny knew that Gargantua was an ape in a zoo, so he said, "Okay, if I'm a monkey you're a monkey's uncle." He snorted. "I'll race yaw'll back for a quarter."

Roy began counting. "One . . . two . . . three . . . *go!*"

Barbara was the first to dive under and Roy quickly turned to Johnny with a painful look. "Don't talk about George, Sport," he begged, "your mother wasn't born yesterday. . . . Let's go!" Roy dived under.

Johnny stood there and watched old Roy just about beat Mom to shore. He heard her laugh and saw her hit him playfully on the back of the head. Gee, Johnny thought, I don't want old Roy to be mad. Cripe, Mom'ud never know what we call George er anything like that. Hell, Roy ain't mad. Mom don't know what gettin' sick meant. I invented it.

Danny was sore because Johnny left after finishing the damn moat. Then Mom and Roy went out to the deep water where he couldn't go. He don't give a damn if they swim out an' leave him all alone with his damn sand fort. A lot of help Johnny was. Thinks he's big

'cause he's learnin' how to drive a damn car, Danny thought. Who inna damn can't learn how to drive a damn goddamn car? That's what I'd like to know.

He was gonna show'em all, someday. If he was older an' could learn how to swim gooder 'an good, he'd be swimmin' across 'is damn lake so fast it'd make ya dizzy. Boy, it's a good damn thing ol' Uncle Cliff didn't bust him the other day when he spilled his milk at the damn supper table. Ol' Walt gets busted inna mouth all the time. If he was Walt, he'd sure as shootin' run away. Big Deal Uncle Cliff. Get's a big kick outta bustin' around damn little kids.

Roy's gotta goddamn stinkin' crush onna Old Lady, Danny thought looking down at his sand fort. I'm gonna run away tomorrow. I'm going over to Malvern an' live with my pop. I'm gonna start hitch-hikin' first thing inna damn morning. Boy, we just better not miss them damn fireworks tonight. 'At's all I gotta say.

Roy suggested they all dry off and go somewhere for dinner. It seemed to be a good idea and Roy gave Barbara the car keys and he and the boys stayed down on the beach while she went up to dry and change. He watched Johnny skipping flat stones out over the water. That little asshole never uses his head in anything he says or does, Roy thought thinking about the sick George remark. The damn trunk to my car would be dentless if he'd used his head. Always acts on impulse. Be too goddamn good to anyone and you're always sure to get fucked. It happens every time. What the hell, Roy. What the hell. Why take it out on the kid when you know it isn't really the lousy trunk that worries you as much as that shrinking bank account.

Roy could see the extensive concrete Pie Pier breakwater jutting out to the massive slabs of square rock that crept low against the Lake to the base of the looming white lighthouse. He could barely make out the tiny clustering forms of people fishing.

Danny came running up through the sand. "Hey Roy," he breathed excitedly, "d-did you have fireworks when you were a b-b-boy?"

"We sure did." He smiled.

"You like ta watch fireworks?" He squinted up to Roy's face.

"I most certainly do and I wouldn't miss them tonight for all the tea in China!"

"Hotdog!" he exclaimed, then pointed a nail-bitten finger up to

Barbara who was standing at the crest of the hill above the beach shielding her eyes with her hand.

Roy and the boys gathered up the blanket and walked through the soft sand with Danny skipping ahead of them singing "Cement Mixer Puttsy Puttsy." Roy was feeling pretty good. That swim fixed him up fine and he didn't feel sluggishly dopey and nauseous.

Barbara looked refreshed and her face was glowing with happiness. Roy and the boys dried and got in the car where they changed back to their clothes. When they were dressed, Roy called Barbara, and Johnny hopped out and held the door for her. As they drove out the gate they waved to the old lady, who lifted her hand hesitatingly, wonderingly.

Roy drove toward Cottage Bay. After passing Royal Beach he turned into the wide asphalt drive of the rambling white Lake-Vue Restaurant that he thought looked like a cheap version of Mount Vernon. It was a clean well-lighted place if you go for clean well-lighted places. Running the length of the restaurant facing the Lake there was a huge plate-glass window.

They took a table near the window and the boys ordered spaghetti with meatballs and iced tea. Roy and Barbara ordered a Swiss steak special and drank a bottle of Miller's High Life while they waited to be served. Roy was thinking that everyone was looking at them and thinking he was the father. The beer was cold and superb like beer is when you're hot and hungry and comfortably waiting for dinner. Then Roy suddenly thought of Grace. He felt sorry for her in a way.

To Barbara, it seemed like they were one big happy family out to enjoy the Fourth. She looked at the waitresses around her and felt sorry for them. Look honey, she had wanted to say to the one that had waited on them, you don't have to smile for us if you don't want to. Look tired all you want. My feet hurt too but sometimes not as bad as holding a lead smile.

Then Barbara began to wonder how many waitresses she had served at the hotel that felt like telling her the very same thing. Probably none. A waitress couldn't get into the dining room at the Wilkinson Craven. If Barbara had an evening off and a date, they couldn't eat at the Wilkinson Craven because she was employed in the dining room. In other words, she wasn't good enough to sit and eat at a table she had previously waited on. It peeved the hell out of her whenever she thought about it.

Barbara took a sip of beer, then turned and looked out the window to the deep blue expanse of the Lake. My goodness, she wondered, where has the day gone?

Johnny watched Roy sipping at his beer. It was the first time he saw Roy drink except those little sips from that pint of whisky in the tacklebox. He didn't seem mad now. Heck, Johnny thought, he wasn't in love with Mom.

The waitress was pretty goodlooking all right and boy did she have a big pair of knockers! The iced tea wasn't too good but it was cold and a lot better than all that lake water he'd swallowed. Maybe he and Roy could come up again tomorrow night right after work and be up here that night and all day Saturday and Sunday. He could tell that Roy liked Mom a little bit but Roy'd always told him that he was a confirmed bachelor of high standing.

Johnny looked at Roy study-close across the table and thought about him being seventeen years old when he was born. Cripe, it was a little hard to believe that Roy'd already had a piece of ass and a car even before he was born.

Barbara knew Danny wouldn't finish the spaghetti when he ordered it. She and Roy drank a cup of coffee over cigarettes. Barbara could tell the boys were becoming a little impatient as they rocked back and forth in their seats talking about sailboats.

"Don't jiggle the table, honey," Barbara told Danny. "Can't you act like a little gentleman?"

"I d-d-oan wanna be no gentleman 'cause I'm Danny Parish, and my d-d-dad's the secret brother of Jack A-Armstrong!" He gave an empathic nod to assure them.

Roy laughed. Barbara reached out to muss his hair but Danny ducked. "Doan mess," he said and grinned at Johnny. "'Ere might be a p-p-pretty *girl* around."

Johnny ignored him and said, "Anybody here know why Little Orphan Annie don't have eyes?"

"No," Roy said.

"Why doesn't she?" Barbara asked.

Johnny laughed and told them to think about it and if they didn't guess by the time they got home, he'd tell them.

Probably some foolishness, Barbara thought, regarding him with pursed lips. She was feeling very fine. Happy and light. Not sensual

like she did on the beach. She had felt like she could've let herself go, but she had to think of the boys. Everything was fine, now.

Roy paid the check and bought the boys each a pack of Wrigley's Spearmint gum and they walked back to the car in the listing afternoon sun. Barbara's thighs and the back of her legs were beginning to feel pretty warm. I shouldn't be getting a burn with all that lotion Roy put on, Barbara thought, and began to worry about tomorrow at the hotel and what it would be like if her legs did burn.

She didn't know what time it was or more or less cared.

When they got back in the car, Johnny gave Roy and Mom a stick of gum. He noticed that Mom still looked happy and excited but she was starting to get red in the face and tired around the eyes. She almost seemed like one of those corny old high school girls that laugh and giggle at everything. He couldn't stand them kind of girls. Maybe Roy'll let him drive a little on the way back. Old Danny was in the back seat munching on all *five* goddamn sticks of gum.

Tomorrow's jus' another damn day, Danny thought, looking out the window to the passing Lake. Maybe me and Walt can pack a lousy damn lunch an' go onna hike. 'At sure would be fun. Nope, 'at's out. Ol' Uncle Cliff works nights 'is week an' he'll be damn home all day an' have me an' Walt either workin' in the damn garden or mowin' the damn lawn. I jus' ain't gonna go down until sunset, is all. Cripe, Johnny's lucky an' I jus' doan getta do a thing. I'm gonna run away tomorrow. Ol' Pop'll let me live with'im. I doan care if he drinks er what the hell damn he does. Ol' Roy says he likes to watch fireworks too. If we miss seein' the fireworks I'll never speak to him ever again for the res' of my damn livelong life. Aw piss on everything. Boy, if I was growd up.

Danny looked out at the Lake, munching and sucking in the sweet from the wad of gum, looking at the damn sailboats sail. The best kind of gum for suckin'-in is that damn old Juicy Fruit. He wished he had one of them damn sailboats. He'd sail far away to some place where he was wanted if there was a place like that. Johnny's okay. He lets me ride the bike all I want. Pop'll buy me a bike. I hate the old lady. I hate her. I'm gonna run away tomorrow an' will she ever be sorry when she finds out I'm gone in about three weeks when she begins to miss me. All I gotta say boy is 'at we better *not* miss 'em damn fireworks. *At's all I'm gonna say, too.*

Roy could see Danny in the rear-view mirror looking out the window and blowing spit-bubbles. He was planning on asking Johnny to let Danny sit up front on the way back. It isn't going to hurt him sitting in the back seat a little, Roy thought. Christ I feel sorry for Danny. He really isn't enjoying himself.

Roy had to drive Mother up to the hospital tomorrow. That's been something else gnawing on his mind. He and Johnny won't be able to come back up until Saturday evening. At first, he was going to have Johnny open the station tomorrow but decided against it. It would be too much for him. Roy planned to call him in the morning and say his sister Charlotte suddenly took sick and he had to leave town with Mother and wouldn't be back until the next morning. I don't want to go. I have to go but I don't want to. How many things do you have to do in life that you don't want to do? Huh? PLENTY!

Barbara was thinking that now that the old Lake Shore Road is gone there was a lot more gone with it than meets the eye. You couldn't take a drive on it and remember what it was like when you were young. The things you've done. Those happy times. So long ago. The past that's a little romantic that you like to recall now and then that you're getting old. She'll always have those distinct memories of the many lost summers.

The Lake, the Enchanted Lake: glamour, youth, dances, and always a whole new world of wonderful escape. Escape from the housecleaning, the smelly streets, the gabby breadman and milkman and iceman that yackety yackety on and on; away from the fat grocer and his stinking cigar. You laugh at his stupid jokes when you owe him money.

Barbara lit a cigarette. Remember what it was like on the old Lake Shore Road after a scorching day? There was nothing better than to open a can of beer and sit on the porch, looking out to the calm waters and brilliant sunset against the distant lighthouse at Pie Pier, hearing the easy swish of the surf, a remote plane droning thin, the roar of a speedboat out on the Lake, smelling the water and the musty decay of driftwood and dead fish. The pleasure and peace, a faint cooling breeze from the waters bringing an inner satisfied content; the sun-warmed back and arms and legs; the purple dusk on the horizon. Maybe the night would be clear and the stars glittering with even more fierceness far above the small flickering

fires from beach parties, the plinking of a uke, the splashing of mid-night bathers.

Now all that is gone, Barbara thought with sadness. It has dissolved like the mist that comes with early dawn.

Why didn't Little Orphan Annie have eyes?

When Roy stopped to get some gas, Johnny let Danny sit up in the front seat by the door next to Mom. We're going to Carnival to ride the rides, Danny thought as Roy drove on, and the filling station man said they were gonna have a big display of fireworks from a boat out on the Lake an' that we could see it from Carnival Beach. Ol' Johnny's my best brother. He said I could sit up here all the way back home if I wanted to. Gee, I ain't ever been to Carnival in a long time.

"Hey, Ma!" Danny laughed excitedly. "We're going to Carnival to ride the rides!"

Johnny was in the back seat with the roaring wind blowing his hair back. It was all good for training. He could see the Lake and that's what he wanted to see. Up in the hairy old front seat he couldn't see a damndarn thing. He was alone back there and that was good because he could think about a beach party with some pretty blonde girl with a nice dark tan. Gee-whiz, there ain't nothing like a pretty blonde with a dark tan. He was going to live up here when he grew up. He was really a lot older than thirteen but everyone treated him like a goddamn kid.

There were lots of them, too. At the custard stands. At the root beer and fruit stands. At the little stores across the road from the cottages and camps on the beach. They wore shorts and halters or swimming suits. A lot of them were with boys and not much older than he. A lot of them were walking with boys to the beach with towels around their necks carrying a portable radio and picnic basket. They made him feel pretty doggone lonely. He wanted to be so much older so he could have a real honest-to-God pretty girl love him. Johnny got to feeling so bad he wished he was home. He wanted to cry because there would be hundreds of pretty girls at Carnival Park—all with boys. I just want one for a week, he thought. Just one for a week of unloneliness up here. For a week . . . just a week.

"Danny," Barbara said softly, "don't go jumping in the seat."

Danny turned to Barbara and his big brown eyes were alive with excitement. "Hey Mom," he said and took her red sun-warm arm in both his hands, "we're going to Carnival to ride the rides."

we're going to Carnival to ride the rides

Chapter 18

IT WAS the last Friday in July. The rain on the station roof was a steady needling hum; a summer afternoon thunderstorm appeared, black and threatening, climbing up the western horizon.

Johnny had noticed how all the flies had gone up to the ceiling. The breeze had suddenly stopped and everything was still as the dark scudding roll swept across the sky, blotting out the sun. Bright spears of lightning came first followed by cracking thunder releasing driving sheets of rain. "Don't worry," Roy assured him, "it'll be over in twenty minutes."

It was five to four and as soon as it quit raining they were going up to the Lake for the weekend.

The skies opened with ripping thunder and the heavy downpour cooled the asphalt out on Elliott. Johnny stood in the doorway smelling the fresh coolness, watching the steam rise from the street in curling vapors. The rain sort of smelled like starch did in one of Mom's freshly ironed white hotel uniforms and the clean smell made him want to breath deeper.

A sly grin curled over Johnny's lips as he thought about Charlie: probably wet and huddled and swearing on some front porch with his canvas bag of soaked newspapers. People really bitch about wet newspapers! Johnny suddenly dropped that amused grin because maybe if he made fun of someone's misfortune it would never stop raining at all, and golly-gee. Things had a way of working out like that.

The rain beat down all the harder.

HOT DIGGETY DOG! It was over as suddenly as it began and the storm fled eastward on swift wings of wind.

"See," Roy winked with a short nod as Johnny turned from the door, "I told you it wouldn't last long. All that fretting . . ." His voice trailed off in a soft chuckle.

"Yeanh," he sighed, "boy, I kinda thought it was going to ruin our trip."

Roy smiled understandingly. "You want to start locking up and bringing things in?"

Johnny snapped to attention and saluted saying, "Yes, *sir!*" crisply.

The air smelled sweet and fresh and clean but the sun was beginning to get hot again. Johnny carried the rest of Charlie's papers outside and set them on the pop-cooler. He wouldn't have brought them into the station when it began to rain if Roy hadn't reminded him. *Why couldn't he think of things like that?* He didn't forget the gun though. The first thing he'd done when he came to work that afternoon was take the .32 out of the desk drawer and put it in the glove compartment. They were going to get some bullets tomorrow and go shooting.

Before locking the station they went into the back room and changed into gabardine slacks and polo shirts. Roy had a dark-blue shirt with a white collar; Johnny's was fire-red with a yellow collar. Johnny carried their old clothes out to the car to wear when they went fishing. Roy locked the station and walked around to the car and Johnny rolled down his window. Roy hopped in and handed him the canvas moneybag and Johnny put it in the glove compartment on top of the gun.

"Let's go to the old Shore Road tomorrow an' shoot the gun there."

Roy started the car. "All right."

"We can leave the car at the roadblock an' go down on the beach. There's probably a *lot* of things we can shoot at."

"There probably are." Roy smiled turning onto Elliott. The air rushed in through the car, smelling clean and cool and like the green leaves on the trees.

"*Hey man!*" Johnny shouted to Charlie, flinging his arm out the window. Charlie was busy folding a paper and he looked up with surprise, recognized the car and waved back, stubbing his toe on the sidewalk. He almost went sprawling but regained his balance and went on swaggering down the sidewalk.

"That ol' son of a banshee slays me," Johnny told Roy laughingly and it felt good to laugh so free and easy. His whole life was becoming a magical unblemished charm.

Roy drove down Elliott to Central and up to the square, circled it and returned to Central and drove down through the Flats. They passed the city limits and drove into the open country—wide, fresh and newly green. Johnny made a wide sweep with his hand. "Don't all this make you feel free and glad to be free?" he said in awe.

"Yes . . . it does."

"Being like this now is why I was afraid that time—about ending up in the damned old reformatory," Johnny licked his lips, "missing being free and going places like we are now. Cripe," his voice dropped, "I feel sorry for guys in jail."

"What's brought all this on?" Roy inquired softly.

Johnny sighed. "Thinking how lucky I am," he murmured with grateful reverence.

Roy turned with a puzzled arched eyebrow. "I feel sorry for people that are in jail too, Sport. But they are there because they've made a mistake and it has to be paid for. . . ." Roy cleared his throat. "It's something you can't escape from. You always pay for your mistakes, one way or the other."

Johnny was sitting on his leg with his shoe off, his bronze arm out the window. He studied Roy's profile and watched the cigarette smoke curl out his mouth, catch in the breeze from the window and whip around his head with a sweeping twist.

Roy ran the tip of his tongue over his lips. "There's a lot of things you do that you wouldn't do if you knew the outcome. . . . That's how lessons in life are learned. Sometimes you learn and sometimes you don't." Roy turned and looked at Johnny. "If you don't, you just repeat the mistakes until you do."

"You're talkin' about crooks and guys that swipe stuff, huh?"

Roy took one last drag and threw the cigarette down out the window. "In a way yes and in a way no."

Johnny narrowed his eyes and listened closely.

"See that line in the middle of the road?"

"Yes," he answered.

"What happens when you cross that line?"

"You're on the other side of the road," Johnny replied seriously, knowing Roy was trying to explain something simply so he could understand it better.

"That's right. And sometimes being over there can be dangerous, can't it?"

"Yeah."

"Well Sport, I'll tell you: there's a line like that in life. A sort of dividing line that's just as easy to cross as this one here, right now. That line in life is called society—composed of laws, morals, beliefs and creeds."

Johnny nodded. Roy was relaxed back in the seat staring at the highway, noiselessly rubbing the edges of his teeth together. "A lot of people can cross that line and when they do they take a chance—just like here on the highway. You can get hurt a lot no matter which of the two lines you cross. People in jail cross the line of law which also is the line of society."

"What does society exactly mean?"

"Everybody—as a whole group."

"You mean like you and me an' all the people we know?"

"You're on the ball, Sport. Now sometimes you can cross that line and come back safely—then again maybe you can't. Sometimes you're caught between a truck and an oncoming car. You're caught and you can't turn off the road. It was just poor judgment and you have only a split second to realize it before everything flashes red and goes white. . . ."

"Yeah." Johnny was awed. "You explain things good. I know what'cha mean all right. . . . An' them other people in the other car get hurt too . . . they get hurt when it ain't even their fault."

"That's right, Sport. I'll explain it better to you someday, and how it can affect certain things—certain people's lives. Okay?" He turned, smiling.

"Sure, Roy. You know a lot of things—but you never tell'em to me, only when ya look sad."

"Wait until you get older."

"That's an insult-difraction."

"There's no such word as insult-difraction." Roy turned with an amused smile.

"Oh yes there is," Johnny informed him. "I just *invented* it. . . . It means a hell of a lot bigger than a big insult."

Roy laughed.

"Aw, go to hell." He hit Roy lightly on the arm with the back of his hand. Then he turned and gazed out the window over his arm to the rolling green hills and patches of woods. Most of the hills were covered with nothing but woods, stretching as far as the eye could see. He thought about the cool dim woods with ice-cold trickling springs rippling down to the little creeks over flat worn stones

making bubbling noises. Golly but he liked the woods: the musty smell of the decayed layers of leaves packed in the black earth; the damp mossy barks; and he especially liked the woods when the sun shone down through the trees in slanting rays of hazy golden light.

Johnny saw a rabbit take off across a pasture toward some woods in high leaping zigzag bounds. If that hairy old gun was loaded he'd of plugged that darn rabbit right in the corny ass. He could smell the rich earth and damp sun-dried grass.

They passed acres and acres of cornfields. When they came to the large red barn with: CHEW MAIL POUCH TOBACCO painted in big yellow letters on a black background, Johnny knew they were almost at Fairfield. He turned to Roy. "Are we going to take that flat cement road out of Fairfield so I can drive?"

"If you wish."

"Man I do. . . . I'm gettin' to be a good driver," he said reflectively, then laughed. "I don't make you a *bit* nervous any more, do I?"

"No," Roy shook his head, "you don't make me nervous any more, Sport." He turned and smiled a little sadly.

The hell of it was, Roy had a lot on his mind. Mother wanted him to drive her up to the hospital again on Monday to see Charlotte. The hell with it. She can take the bus. Sure she can. Goddammit! He couldn't go up there again. He didn't even want to go up several weeks ago. It was a horrible experience. Charlotte. Wretched and ugly and old. Hollow-eyed and thin. Talking and talking and talking with fingery gestures without meaning or direction.

I'm sorry, Mrs. Davies, Doctor Burns had said, helplessly chewing on the bit of his pipe, there's just hardly anything we . . .

Roy had wanted to pick up a chair and smash the doctor's flat head open. He left Mother and the doctor talking and walked across the room to Charlotte who was sitting fearfully on a brown leather couch.

I've missed you, Roy. You promised me you'd be back soon. . . . Tears of pity filled her eyes. Are we going home together? I've been away for such a long—have I told you about Carol, Roy? I've got a photograph someplace. . . . Charlotte looked down to the cushion beside her and then up to Roy. I didn't bring it. I think one of the spies took it. Her eyes snapped to caution. It's awful here, she whispered, there're spies everywhere. Charlotte's eyes shot over to

Doctor Burns, then drifted back to Roy. *Please don't tell him, Roy. He's a spy, too.* She smiled. *I wrote Daddy a long letter. . . . I'm going to write you a letter too. We get all the pencils and paper we want—I draw pictures all the time. I love to draw pictures. . . .* Charlotte's smile fell. *I won't be able to sleep tonight unless you go out and get me a milkshake.* She looked hopelessly down into the palms of her open hands resting in her lap. *Chocolate milkshakes are good. I don't like it here.* She pouted, then looked up at him. *Oh sweet, you look so terribly sad. Where's Jean?* She looked around the room with wide searching eyes. *Didn't you bring Jean? Oh Roy sweet, I do want to see her. I . . .* her voice trailed off. *Will you bring her the next time? You will? Oh Roy, that will be wonderful. . . .* Charlotte laughed. *Remember how you used to think Br'er Rabbit was the Easter Bunny. . . .*

Charlotte reached out, ungoverned, and put her fingers on the front of his trousers. He lightly slapped the back of her hand. She drew it away and put it up to her open mouth, palm out, fingers spread wide. He saw the tear creep out of her eye. He watched it roll down her cheek between spread fingers. Her right hand was a bloodless fist pressed into her stomach. Her knees were tight together and her slippered feet were crossed under the edge of the couch. Her eyes searched his face as if she didn't know who was there. He was the Stranger.

I'm sorry, he said, poor you and poor me.

He went to the open window across the room behind the doctor's desk. He locked his fingers in the wire mesh, straining not to turn into a helpless mass of whimpering jelly. He looked out to the trees, the brick walks and full blooming gardens. He turned from the window and Charlotte was sitting stiffly composed, her slender fingers were laced and her hands rested on her knees. Her eyes were closed and her mouth was a straight firm line. There was a blotch of red rouge on each cheek.

Charlotte, Mother pleaded, what's the matter? Mother turned to Doctor Burns who was regarding Charlotte silently, playing thoughtfully with the bit of his pipe against his teeth. His eyes shifted across the room and gazed blankly into Roy's.

She's not here, Roy murmured softly as he approached them. *We might as well go.*

Mother reached out to Charlotte's shoulder but Doctor Burns gently touched her wrist and slowly shook his head.

Roy took Mother's arm. She sighed heavily with her hankie at her mouth, looking pitifully down at Charlotte who would remain a turtle retreated into its shell until she felt it was safe to peek out at the world again. A retreat from the infinite.

They left and Charlotte didn't say good-by. He didn't want to go back there again. He couldn't go back there because if he did, he'd stay.

Chapter 19

JOHNNY drove all the way from the Fairfield city limits to the Shore Highway. He wasn't tense any more when another car approached and his driving was a lot smoother. He'd had a tendency to vary the flow of gas but he was learning how to drive steadily, and not in sudden splurts. There were just a few junctions along the way and man he got through them superduper. He was still a little scared at the idea of driving through a town like Fairfield or Pie Pier but heck, he used to be afraid of doing anything when he was first learning how to drive. Roy sat relaxed smoking and gazing at the countryside, and he hardly even looked up when another car approached. Holy-cow and gee-whiz, there ain't nothing that's as much fun as driving a hairy old car.

When Johnny pulled off the road near the Shore Highway Roy said, "You did very well, Sport. You're really improving."

"I just got me a good teacher." Johnny laughed and they exchanged seats.

It was twenty after five when Roy drove into Pie Pier. It hadn't rained there and the air was still, hot and dusty. He parked the car a little ways down from the theatre and Johnny hopped out and put a nickel in the meter. The streets were crowded and Johnny could smell whisky and beer and sardines and hear the jazzy music from the open door of a bar in front of the car. He heard a loud gruff laugh and grinned. Roy came around the front of the car. He stood there with his lip shoved out looking up and down the street. "I don't want to eat hamburgers, do you?"

"I don't care . . . just so we *eat*."

Roy laughed and put his hand on Johnny's shoulder and they walked up the street. The sun was still bright and high in the sky and the pavement was hot and reflected it back.

Roy turned his shoulder and directed him to the plate-glass door of the Colony Inn. He held the door for Roy and as he passed, Johnny gave a short bow and followed. It was cool and dim inside and they sat in a booth. There was a bar along the far wall with empty red leather stools. It was a modern, newly built restaurant and they could still smell the varnish from the pine paneling along the walls. They were the only ones there.

Johnny sighed and suddenly looked up at Roy. "We left the *money-bag* in the glove compartment!"

A look of concern passed over Roy's face and Johnny slid out of the booth. "I'll get it," he said and went out the door to the street before Roy could answer.

Boy, was it hot out there after being in that restaurant. He clicked his tongue against his back teeth at a couple of hubba-hubbas he passed. He went to the Olds and opened the door, leaned in and opened the glove compartment. He took the moneybag and shuffled the gun under some papers and sales-slips, got out of the car and slammed the door.

"*Hold* it there," came a heavy voice from behind him.

Johnny turned and there was a police officer next to him. He felt a sinking panic and his knees grew weak. People had stopped and turned to look.

"What are you doing there, boy?" the officer asked.

"Oh *this*?" Johnny held up the bag and he felt his ears burning. The officer had a heavy reddish damp face with hard brown eyes. Johnny glanced at the badge on the breast of his light-blue shirt and the big black phony gun in the holster on his hip.

"Yes?" the officer said.

He looked up into the waiting face. "This is my stepfather's. We was gettin' ready to eat down at that res'rant"—Johnny pointed his finger down the street, keeping his eyes on the officer's face—"when I 'membered the moneybag in the car. His name's Davies—Roy Davies. We're from Wilkin—Wilkinson City. Come on down an' *he'll* tell ya. . . ."

"All right."

Johnny turned and walked slowly toward the circle of watching

people and they parted to let him through. All eyes were centered on him and he felt weak-kneed. The dirty cop was right behind him with his holster probably unbuckled, just waiting for him to make a break for it so he could plug him in the corny back.

When they got to the Colony Inn the officer took a step ahead of Johnny and held the door.

Roy looked up from a drink in a tall milkish-white glass as they approached the booth and his jaw seemed to drop. The officer gave him a nod and smiled.

"Is something the matter?" Roy stood up, looking from Johnny to the officer.

"Is this your stepson?"

"Why yes . . . yes, of course he is." Roy looked a little surprised and dumbfounded.

"Sir, I was standing inside the door at Bud's Bar—making my rounds—when I happened to observe this boy," he turned to Johnny who was looking down at the tall sweating glass on the table, "open the car door, get in and take out a moneybag. I thought I'd better investigate it."

"Oh, of course." Roy smiled. "If you need identification my bankbook's in the moneybag and here's my wallet." Roy handed the officer his wallet.

Johnny's hands trembled as he opened the canvas bag. He reached in and fumbled around bills and silver and finally pulled out the bankbook. As soon as the officer took it he let go: he wasn't going to get contaminated. Jeez he was really peeved. Just think of all the pretty girls that saw him get arrested!

"Everything looks shipshape, Mr. Davies," the officer said. "I'm sorry if I inconvenienced you—but you know why I had to do this. In my business you have to watch for things like that and use your judgment."

"I appreciate it, officer."

"Thanks for your time, Mr. Davies." Then the cop turned to Johnny and lightly touched his shoulder with the tips of his fingers. "Sorry if I embarrassed you out there, son, but your stepdaddy knows I was only protecting his property."

"At's okay." Johnny smiled weakly.

The officer went out the door.

"The dirty sonofabitch," Johnny growled as he sat down.

"Now Sport—that's no way to be. What if it *wasn't* you . . . suppose it was someone else? I've got a hundred and thirty-six dollars in there." Roy nodded toward the canvas bag on the table against the wall.

"Everyone was watchin'—lookin' at *me*—didn't have anything better to do 'an stand around watchin' a little *kid* get arrested. That bastard."

"You weren't arrested."

"The heck if I wasn't."

"He didn't book you."

"That don't make no difference at all—I was *still* arrested."

"Okay," Roy grinned, "now you're a big old tough badman gangster. You've been arrested. Does the big old tough badman gangster want to eat?"

"Why don't you go to hell?" Johnny said sourly, then grinned. He didn't want to grin but dammit he couldn't help it.

"That's the way I like to see you look."

"*Horse*-manure—what's that puke you're drinkin'?"

"Tom Collins."

"Yeah? What's in it?"

"*Horse* manure."

"Ca'mon," he grinned, "what's in it?"

"Gin, powdered sugar, soda. . . ."

"Give me a sip—just a tiny one." Johnny took a sip and smacked his lips. "Jeez, that was good. . . . Order me one."

"I'll order you iced tea and give you a smack on the *rear* end. I don't want you turning into a juvenile alcoholic on me. You're enough trouble being a *sex* fiend as it is."

"Oh yeah?" Johnny laughed. "If you don't like it lump it."

"I might just do that."

"*Ha*—that's a laugh."

"We're going to have to get a place to stay."

"Yeah. I know it. Think maybe we can go to Carnival Park tonight?"

"Sure, if you want to." Roy turned and signaled the waitress. She nodded and approached the table with a warm smile. She was young and good-looking, with long black hair, and she wore a white nylon uniform so thin you could see her white slip and pink fleshy shoulders. She smiled curiously at Roy.

Johnny ordered a cube steak with mashed potatoes and gravy, a side dish of corn and a slice of watermelon. Roy ordered the same but asked for a Thousand Island salad instead of watermelon.

She smiled at Roy and asked what they'd have to drink?

"Make mine an iced tea," Johnny said.

"I'll have coffee."

"Fine," she wrote that down in her little old pad, smiled at Roy, "it will just be a few minutes," turned and walked away.

Roy raised his brow and winked at Johnny, pulling down his mouth.

"Jeeeeeex—you like that? Man alive, I thought she looked *crummy*. You ain't got no taste at all."

"*Phissssssst*." Roy lifted his brow and gazed at his fingernails, sighed on them and polished them on his shirt.

"Jeeeeeex—she's just after a big *tip*."

Roy laughed as two men came in and sat at the bar. Then an old couple came in and took a booth toward the back.

After they'd finished eating and the dishes were pushed aside, Roy lit a cigarette to smoke with his coffee. Johnny tinkled the ice cubes against the thin glass sides and drank the last watery sip of his iced tea.

The waitress came over and put the check face down on the table. This time she smiled at Johnny too, only it wasn't the hairy old smile she smiled at Roy. Aw, these dames always go for the older guys with the curlier hair. The only waitresses that smiled at him were the old gray-haired ones. Grandmotherish like.

"Was everything satisfactory?" she asked Roy politely.

"Perfectly fine. Wonderful meal."

She smiled and nodded and walked away. Johnny gazed dreamily up her legs to her swaying hips. "She's got good legs though's about all," he murmured.

"Hey."

Johnny looked over at Roy.

"A piece of that and a cup of this," Roy lifted his coffee, "would decommission you for a week."

"Why in the hell couldn't you've said *kill* me? Huh? All the time showing off with them big thirty-five-cent words. *De-com-mis-sion!* *Phooey!*" Johnny glanced sourly up into Roy's smiling face and broke into a wide grin.

Roy paid the check and Johnny carried the moneybag as they went out to the warm thronging sidewalk. There was a hot breeze blowing gently down the street and the sun was low behind the buildings across the street. The first thing Johnny did when he got in the car was make sure that darn old gun was still there.

Roy drove west, toward Cottage Bay. The traffic was heavy and slow until they got out on the highway. The Lake looked choppy and Johnny could see a boat far out against the horizon.

"I'd like me to have a boat someday."

"Sailboat?" Roy asked.

"Naw—one of them cabin cruisers. You know, with a kitchen an' bathroom an' everything. . . ."

"Just wish and you'll get it," Roy assured him. "But you've got to work along with that wish for it to become a reality. You just can't sit back and say I want this and I want that—wishing and work and faith go hand in hand."

"Old me an' you could go down to *Mexico* an' *Cuba* an' *South America*."

"Would you really want me to go along?"

"Sure. We're buddies, Roy. You and me, man. We'll always be buddies and go everywhere an' do everything."

Roy was silent a moment. "When you go back to school this fall I want you to get a nice girl. I'll see to it that you have plenty of sharp clothes. Work hard at your studies, that's important."

Johnny moved closer to the center of the seat, "You'll help me with my lessons, won't you? Jeez I know Mom won't—it might help *you* too." Johnny laughed and put his arm around Roy's shoulder.

Roy chuckled.

"With you around helping me with my hairy old lessons, I'll be the smartest guy in school."

"Johnny—" Roy started to speak but stopped.

"Golly-whiskers, I could still work at the station after school and when we close up we can do my homework." Johnny laughed and hugged Roy. "*We*—isn't that funny? *We* can do *my* homework."

"If I helped you with your lessons you'd flunk."

"Aw." Johnny laid his head on Roy's shoulder and looked down at the heater under the glove compartment. His eyes burned and filled with tears and he closed them. Johnny swallowed.

"I'll help you with your lessons, Sport."

"Okay," he murmured softly with his eyes still closed.

"Anything the matter?" He could feel Roy turning his head to look at him.

"Huh-uh." He squeezed his throat tight.

"Think you'll like it down at Cherrytree?"

"Sure."

"Do you feel tired?"

"Just comfortable being near you." Johnny felt Roy's smooth fingers touching his hand that rested on his shoulder, felt Roy's finger tips caress the back of his hand. His voice cracked. "You'll never go away?"

"No, Sport."

"Never ever?"

"Never ever."

The tears were pressing against his eyelids but he wouldn't let them go. He swallowed hard and breathed steadily.

"I mean it, Johnny," Roy said tenderly, "with all my heart I mean it."

The air was hot up in his nose. "Gee, Roy. . . ."

Roy gave Johnny's hand a firm squeeze and took his hand away. After several moments Roy asked softly, "What are you thinking about?"

"Nothin' much, just sort of relaxing."

"Oh."

Johnny could hear the cars zooming by. "Roy?"

"Yes, Sport?"

"Think we can go over to that bookstore in St. Simon's and get another one of those Hardy Boy books?"

"Sure, Sport. Have you read the one I bought you last week?"

"Uh-huh," he murmured sleepily with his eyes closed. "An' the ones ya bought the week before that an' the week before that." He felt Roy's shoulders moving and his lighter went click—snap. Johnny caught a whiff of sweet smoke. "Roy . . ."

"Yes?"

"What's it really like to be with a woman?"

"Oh, like anything else—there are times when you want to and times when you don't."

"Gee, there ain't a time *I* wouldn't wanna."

"Just don't mess with young girls. Sexually."

"Huh-uh," he murmured.

"What would you like to be when you grow up?"

"A painter," Johnny opened his eyes and sat up, "I'm going to be a painter and have a room full of *naked* women." He laughed and put his hand on Roy's warm arm. "An' if they don't pose the way I want'em to, I'll chase'em all around my studio an' beat'em across the fanny with a hairy ol *bral*!"

They both laughed.

The soft shadows of evening were beginning to lengthen and the Lake appeared calm and very blue beneath the fleecy horizon clouds.

About two miles before arriving at Cottage Bay, Roy turned off the road and drove down a short dusty hill. They were going to stay at the CASKIN CABINS.

"*Hot-diggety-dog!*" Johnny grinned. He'd always wanted to stay there.

The Caskin Cabins were huge wine barrels imported from France and converted into one-room cabins. There were eight of them lining the left side of the dusty road from the foot of the hill to the beach. On the other side of the road there were four of them, then the one-story cement-block building which was the manager's office, a grocery store and where the manager lived.

Roy stopped in front of the building and Johnny opened his door and jumped out. He could see the sandy beach and the Lake beyond the single line of tall trees about forty feet away. He could smell the warm sand and the water in the easy breeze that blew off the Lake. He breathed it in deep as if for five days he had been slowly wasting away and only the smells of the beach and the Lake could ever revive him.

Johnny and Roy walked up to the gray, unpainted building and Roy held the screen door for Johnny and followed him in. There was a long counter of varnished pine running the length of the building with a rack of potato-chips and pretzels beside the old, massive black-chipped cash register. Along the outside wall there was a bread rack and a high-reaching shelf of canned goods, the door, a pop-cooler and three of those slot-machines Roy called One-arm Bandits. In the corner there was a rack of twenty-five-cent paperback pocket books.

A thin-faced man with iron-gray hair and stooped rounded shoulders came out from behind a green curtain directly behind the cash register.

"*Evenin', evenin'.*" He smiled, hiking his pants up. They fell back down below his belly again.

"Hello." Roy smiled.

The man glanced over at Johnny who was shuffling through the pocket books, then looked across at Roy.

"We'd like a cabin until Sunday night."

"*Sure* thing, mister. Fix ya up *fine*, yes *sir!*" He looked over at Johnny and back at Roy. "Just you and the boy?"

"The Missus may be up tomorrow but I doubt it."

"I see, I see—yeah, *sure* thing. Uh-huh!" He smacked his lips and hiked his pants up by the belt-loops. He reached under the counter and brought out a roster sheet. He held it at arm's length, tilting his head and pursing his lips. His eyes were narrow slits as he scanned down it. "Eh . . . *hum* . . . ah . . . yep, yep, *yep!* Seven. Cask *Seven.*" He looked over at Roy. "Seven okay with you?"

"Seven's fine."

"Good, good, *good!*" He put the roster sheet back under the counter, looked at Johnny, hiked up his pants, brushed the back of his hand over his mouth and said, "Good. She's the second one up from the beach. *Second* one."

"Swell."

"That'll be five an' a half until Sunday night." He looked back over at Johnny. "*Five* an' a half."

Roy gave him a ten and signed the registration card. It read: *George M. Hammett Prop.* up in the right-hand corner.

Mr. Hammett counted out Roy's change and handed it to him with a Yale key. "No deposit on the key, Mr. David. *No* deposit." Mr. Hammett sniffed and looked over at Johnny, hiking his pants up.

"Davies. . . ."

"Wha'? Oh? *Oh!*" Mr. Hammett looked at the card again. He glanced over at Johnny.

"Johnny," Roy sighed, "have you found a book you wanted?"

"Huh-uh," he answered.

"Shower an' washroom's just beyond this building, Mr. Davies." Mr. Hammett pointed toward the beach.

Johnny came up to the counter. "How's the swimming?"

"*Wonderful!* Swimming's *wonderful*. We've got a *wonderful* beach here. *Fine* beach."

"Thank you, Mr. Hammett." Roy turned to leave.

Mr. Hammett ran the back of his hand across his mouth and hiked up his pants. "Glad to have ya stayin' here. . . . If your wife

decides to come up there'll be no additional charge. *No* additional charge a-tall!"

"Thank you, Mr. Hammett." Roy nodded.

Johnny looked up at Roy: "Play the machines, will ya? I want to see how they work."

"Honest machines," Mr. Hammett said, hiking up his pants, "*honest* machines."

"I haven't seen one of those since I left Frisco."

"*Own*'em myself," Mr. Hammett said as Roy walked over to the slot-machines. "*Yes* sir, *own*'em myself . . . no crookedness there, Mr. Davies."

Roy dropped a quarter in the slot and pulled down on the handle. Johnny stood back watching the three spinning dials.

Clank. . . . ORANGE

Clank. . . . ORANGE

Clank. . . . ORANGE

DONG: twenty quarters spilled and clattered with a jingle down the chute into the cuplike basin.

"Well I'll be a *sonofagun*!" Mr. Hammett laughed and hiked his pants up. "You're *pretty* lucky, Mr. Davies. *Yes* sir, *pretty* lucky."

"Yes," Roy laughed scooping out the coins, "it seems that I am."

Mr. Hammett really didn't seem too happy about it but he laughed, giving Roy a five-dollar bill for the pile of quarters.

"Here's some spending money, Sport." Roy gave Johnny the five. "Put it in your wallet."

"*Say* man." Johnny grinned reaching for his back pocket.

"Let's go take a swim, Sport."

"Okay," Johnny answered, putting his wallet in his back pocket. He gave it a pat to make sure it was still there.

Roy pulled the Olds into the car tracks alongside the second cask from the beach. Johnny hopped out of the car and looked at the huge wooden barrel resting in concrete circular supports at the front and back.

They walked up the narrow steps and Johnny opened the screen door and stepped inside. The inside walls were curved to the original shape of the barrel, but there was a built-in ceiling and floor. To the right of the door there was a brass iron bed against the gradual curving wall toward the beach. At the back of the room below a small screened window there was a brown-painted table and two chairs.

In the center of the room an unshaded light bulb hung from the ceiling on a black cord.

"Cheery dump." Roy grinned as he arranged his shaving things on the dresser.

"Yeanh," Johnny replied setting the moneybag down on the dresser. He went over to the wall above the towel rack and touched it. "You mean this *whole* room was full of wine?"

"Yep—and remember there's a floor and a ceiling in here too."

"God," Johnny smelled the wall barely scenting the grapy sourness, "that's a lot of booze."

Roy laughed.

Johnny looked around the room and finally threw himself on the bed, rolling over on his back with his legs over the side, his hands folded behind his head. "Let's take a swim, Roy."

"Okay."

"You want to know something?"

Roy came over and sat down beside him on the edge of the mattress. "What?"

"I'd really like to be a painter." He let his eyes drift down from the darkening ceiling. The light was slowly fading and the red rays from the low western sun came through the window and spilled pink along the gently curved wall above the towel rack. Johnny gazed at Roy's handsome profile against the pink glowing wall. "Not for the *sexy* part—like paintin' naked women and all that. I want to be a *good* painter . . . a real, real good painter."

"I'll tell you what," Roy stretched out on his side propped up on his elbow, his head resting in his open hand, looking down into Johnny's face, "I'll send you to school. I've got a little money saved and by the time you graduate I'll have enough to send you to a fine school. By then, Europe may be on its feet again. You could go to Paris or any school you wanted."

"Gee. . . ." Johnny gazed up at the ceiling and saw the Eiffel Tower and the Arch of Triumph, cancan dancers and holy-cow!

Johnny quickly rolled over and jumped on Roy. He grabbed Roy's wrists and sat plunk on his belly. "*Oooooh*," Roy grunted and Johnny laughed as he pinned his arms down on the bed. "Give up?" He grinned.

"Nope."

"Better. . . ."

"Nope."

"You don't know how tough I can be. . . ."

"As tough as a big old badman gangster?"

"You bet'cha."

Roy smiled warmly.

"I'm warnin' ya!"

Roy just smiled with an amused look in his eye.

"I'm givin' ya *one* more chance to give up."

"Okay."

"Okay what?"

"Okay—let's go swimming." Roy lifted his arms without much trouble and grabbed Johnny up and turned and tossed him to the middle of the bed.

"That's dirty as hell," Johnny pouted as soon as he'd stopped bouncing.

Roy laughed and pulled off his polo shirt.

"You always let me beat you *before*—"

They both turned looking at each other with wide grinning faces.

Johnny went out to the car to get the suits and towels. He brought the gun in and put it in the canvas moneybag. Roy locked the cabin and they walked side by side down to the sandy beach. The western sky was bright and beautiful, with the sun a red ball of flame half sunken in the Lake behind purple-blue clouds. They dropped their towels in the sand and ran into the warm curling surf.

Johnny didn't dive under like Roy because if he got his hair wet it wouldn't lay back on the sides no matter how much Vaseline he plastered on. He always had that cruddy trouble after a haircut; barbers *never* cut your crappy hair the way you tell them. He swam with his head above the water. His strokes were pretty choppy, not smooth and graceful like Roy's. Roy was a heck of a good swimmer.

At last Johnny ran out of the surf and stood panting on the damp-packed sand with his hands on his hips.

"What's the *matter*?" Roy shouted.

"Seen a shark!" Johnny slapped at a banshee mosquito on his arm and washed the bloody mess off in the Lake.

Roy came swaying through the surf knocking the side of his palm against his tilted head. Then he smiled. They walked through the warm sand to their towels and stood there drying off, facing the last glow that hung low over the horizon. They draped their towels around their necks and walked in the filtering purple back through the sand past the trees to the cabin and dressed. Roy locked up and

Johnny put the goshdarned moneybag in the glove compartment: he felt it was beginning to be a pain in the kibotchy.

Driving to Cottage Bay they watched the bright wavering lights in the sky above Carnival Park.

"I don't care if we don't go to Carnival tonight," Johnny said. "Let's drive on to St. Simon's and see a show."

"Okay, Sport." Roy turned with a warm smile.

Chapter 20

DURING the summer months Barbara saw less of Johnny than she ever had before. She was extremely grateful to Roy for taking the boy under his wing; it was just one worry less and it helped her enormously.

Barbara worked as much and as often as she possibly could, then either went over to Edna's or had an occasional date with one of the businessmen she happened to meet down at the hotel. Mama made her staying at home very unpleasant by continued domination and consistently accusing her of running around with men that were up to no good.

Mama picked on Barbara every chance she got. Barbara couldn't listen to the radio downstairs because it annoyed Mama. Barbara walked too hard on the upstairs floor and that annoyed Mama. When Barbara took a bath she couldn't run the tap long because the water rushing through the pipes annoyed Mama. If Barbara talked too long on the phone Mama became annoyed because she was positive one of the girls was trying to call her.

When I received my divorce, Barbara often thought, I jumped from the frying pan into the fire.

Whenever Mama started something the best thing Barbara could do was leave the room. Five minutes later, if and when she returned, the incident would be forgotten. They'd always strike up a pleasant conversation, but inevitably and in due course it always led back to the unescapable fact that on certain nights Barbara was staying out too late.

"Look what happened with James . . . a drunkard who got you into trouble! I told you it would work out as such."

"The reason I was late the other night, and tonight, if you must know and if it's any of your business," Barbara told her coolly, restraining herself from blowing up like Margaret, "was that I was working a wedding reception that I didn't *have* to work, so I can make some extra money to put shoes on my sons' feet, to put clothes on their backs so when they start to school in two weeks they won't be *naked*. So I can pay *Margaret* the rent, so she can buy food, so she can pay the light and the gas bill, so we don't have to go on relief, so my time is occupied at something to keep me from going *crazy*! I'm over twenty-one and if I decide to take a drink after twelve hours on my feet, I'll take that drink. If I'm in the mood for another drink then I'll have another—and if you want to *evict* me for coming in with something on my breath, fine and dandy. And about Jim—you've *always* liked him until I got my divorce. . . . Since then you haven't had a good thing to say about him. So will you kindly *refrain*, dear Mother, from making dirty cracks at my ex-husband?"

Mama's mouth was hanging open and she snapped it shut shaking her fingers in Barbara's face: "Don't you talk to me in that tone!" she screeched. "You have no respect! No! No! If that happens again I will slap your insolent face!" Tears of anger ran down Mama's cheeks as she half rose from her chair. She collapsed crying weakly, "Ach, *Mein Gott! Mein Gott!*"

"Good night, Mama," Barbara murmured softly as she opened the attic door, ignoring Margaret who was writing a letter at the dining-room table.

Barbara switched on the light and slowly climbed the stairs. Bewilderedly, she shook her head. God but her feet and legs ached. Mama always made her feel so horrible. Damn damn damn, how could she possibly go on? She'd worked ten hours and she deserved a little peace and quiet when she got home and did she get it? No!

Barbara halted midway across the attic, looking at the ghostly shapes of sheet-covered furniture, dark slanting shadows and hollow rafters; smelling the sweltering heat heaviness and the musty staleness and decay. Thank God tomorrow is Sunday and Roy's taking Danny and me to the Lake again. She began to smile softly. He was such a sad young man. Such nice manners, so considerate of others too. He made her feel attractive and alive for excitement and

fun, like that time at Carnival Park on the Fourth: *riding the rides!*

She felt a tender sadness remembering the evening a week ago when he had asked her to marry him. They were sitting out in the Olds in the driveway. It was the first time she'd been alone with him since that afternoon up on the beach. It was about nine and the light from the living room fell through the Venetian blinds, creating parallel stripes on the lawn in front of the house.

". . . and so you know now that I can't have a family," Roy had lamely told her. "That's why I . . . I've sort of taken to Johnny . . . pretending in a way that he is my son. I want to do that for Danny."

"You're very kind," Barbara had whispered softly. It made her feel bad to hurt him. She could see the light reflecting on his handsome face, his sad face, his wise young face. Barbara ran her tongue over her lips. "A couple of weeks ago when we were up at the Lake . . . it seemed . . . it *seemed* like we were a family. So real . . . and nice too. It was *so* much fun."

"I felt the same way." He smiled boyishly, and turned in the seat and took both her hands in his and kissed her soft palms, then closed her hands and held them in his.

"You don't love me as a woman—I can tell that. It's the boys. Your interest is in making a home for them—am I right?"

"Partly," he whispered. "We can learn to love. . . ." Roy frowned. "You're a beautiful woman, Barbara . . . the kind that's easy to fall for." He chuckled. "I'm not such a bad guy—really."

She laughed embarrassedly. "I don't know, Roy . . . it's too soon. It's just too soon."

"I understand."

"Please do, Roy. I want you to because I don't want to make you feel bad by refusing. But if you do . . . if you do understand, then . . . then you know I'm not *rejecting* you. There's no one else. It's just that . . . God there's so many things on my mind. I'm not ready for marriage again, I don't want to get married now, it's so . . . so . . ." Barbara looked from the dashboard up to Roy's waiting and listening face. "Honestly Roy, I want you to believe me when I say I think the world of you. You're a grand person . . . and if I ever . . . if I . . ."

Roy put his hand under her chin and leaned over, kissing her. Her hands went up to his smooth-shaven cheeks and she held his face. She relaxed all over and when he took his mouth from hers she murmured, "Gee mister, where'd you learn to do that?"

"The USN." He grinned.

The side door opened and Johnny leaned out waving his arm. "Coffee's ready."

Roy made sure he wiped off all traces of lipstick, but Barbara had felt that he didn't want to.

Now Barbara stood there in the gloomy darkness with her lower lip between her teeth. *I do not want to hurt him.* She walked through the attic to the bedroom door *I don't want to hurt him* and switched on the overhead light and snapped off the attic light *he's sad enough as it is* and closed the bedroom door. She sat down on the edge of the bed and then stood up and unbuttoned her white hotel uniform.

She hung it carefully in the closet and sat back down on the edge of the bed pulling her nylon slip above her knees, then crossed her legs and leaned over untying her white shoes. They were getting dirty and scuffed. Coffee had been slopped over the toe of the right one. She could feel the sudden flowing relief as she pulled each one off. She sighed, placing them carefully on the floor beside the dresser. She was their prisoner when all the time she thought she was a prisoner of love. God! Her feet were *killing* her. She'd just have to get an easier job where she could sit on her fat behind all day letting the middle-age spread take over.

She stretched and made a mental note to have Johnny polish her shoes tomorrow. He and Roy had said something about going swimming at Glasgow Lake tonight and then taking in a movie. Danny was down at Edna's house, as per usual.

Barbara leaned over and rubbed her right instep, then straightened up and uncrossed her legs and put her hands on her knees. What if someone was hiding under the bed ready to grab her ankles? It was a perfectly terrifying thought that always flashed through her mind whenever she sat on the edge of a bed. It could be Clark Gable, Barb.

She smiled wearily. Oh I'm just too dead to bend over and look. Margaret's been home all day and no one would sneak in and come up here. . . .

Danny sure is spending a lot of time down at Edna's. God I don't blame him, Barbara shook her head, what has he got to stay up here for? A cross and irritable aunt. A grouchy nagging grandmother. A mother that's never home. Someday I'll give my boys a home. Oh

dear God I swear that someday I'll give them a place where they can always live together with me. Someday . . . where and when is Someday?

Barbara lifted the lacy flounce of her slip higher on her swelling thighs and was in the act of unfastening her hosiery from her garter belt when through the window from the Rodman house the haunting music drifted up to her listening ears, as if they'd turned the volume up just to torment her:

*Moonlight and lovesongs, never out of date.
Envy and passion, jealousy and hate,
Woman loves man and man must find his mate,
On that you can rely.*

Barbara would have given anything if she could have stopped the tears from swimming to her eyes. Dammit, as if she wasn't feeling bad enough as it was.

She laid the cigarette in the ashtray and sat back down on the bed. She carefully peeled her hosiery off and stuck her legs out with her toes pointing toward the wall. She braced her hands under her thighs turning her head from side to side, examining the smooth graceful lines.

A faint smile of approval crossed her lips.

When JoAnn drove Barbara home after they left the London cocktail lounge, she told Barbara that if she should change her mind about going out to give her a ring before ten o'clock. She and Merv were going to be at the house until ten; then they were going dancing at the Plantation, a roadhouse on Route 40.

"Now if you call me before ten," JoAnn had said, "I can fix you up with a date—possibly Robert Crawford. We'll make it a foursome and have one hell of a grand time. . . ."

The clock on the dresser read ten after nine.

No. If she went out she'd be sluggish and foggy tomorrow. She wanted to enjoy the trip to the Lake.

Barbara slipped into a pair of slippers and went to Johnny's room to see if the window was open, and it probably was, but she suddenly had to do something or get the screaming heebies, or jeebies or whatever the hell you want to call them. The window was open. There wasn't any breeze. The heat was like dust you had to push and kick your way through. Fighting to breathe not to smother. It seemed to rest heavily on her round bare shoulders.

She was going to buy a fan Monday.

JoAnn said ten o'clock.

No.

Robert.

No.

Ten.

No.

It was quarter after nine.

Barbara opened the bottom drawer and brought out her half-full fifth of Gordon's. She poured a drink and left the bottle out. She drank it down and shuddered.

Sixteen after.

Barbara took another drink and pulled a drag of smoke deep into her lungs. It was hard being lonely. It was a craving gnawing hunger for love that made her drive herself so. She had to be so damn tired she couldn't stand up in order to go to sleep. She was thirty-one. She was still attractive. It wasn't the sexual drive altogether. It was wanting someone to care for and being cared for in return. Someone to love and kiss and laugh with. Someone to lie beside in the dark. A strong body to snuggle against in the wakeful core of the night. It's a comfort to know a man is there when you want him. There were a lot of nights when she would be in a dream with Jim and she'd reach out and touch Danny.

Barbara took another drink.

It was about eighteen after.

She crushed out her cigarette. A warm glow spread from her stomach through her body. She pulled off her slip and lay back on the bed in her brassiere and step-ins with two pillows behind her and an open copy of the *Ladies' Home Journal* resting back against her drawn-up thighs.

The love stories bored the hell out of her. She'd read a paragraph and not know what she read. It was just the same old crap writers who had never been in love except with themselves always seem to write. All the stories are the same, only the names are changed to protect the author from a lawsuit. Boy wants girl. Boy gets girl. Boy loses girl. Boy wins girl back. Boy marries girl. Same formula. Same reading time.

The electric clock on the dresser hummed on.

She wished she'd bought a copy of *Life* or *Look*. Something with

pictures. Barbara flipped through the *Journal*, glancing at the Latest, Newest, Exciting Paris Fashions she'd never have.

"*Shit!*" She tossed the magazine to the foot of the bed. She could hear the big soft millers and June bugs crashing against the screen.

Almost nine-thirty.

There was a spider crawling down the wall. She got up and killed it with the sole of her shoe because if she didn't she wouldn't be able to sleep for worrying if it was going to bite her.

"*Take back your rumba aye,*" Barbara sang off key, "*your conga aye, your samba, aye aye aye. I can't keep shaking aye, my chassiss aye, any longer, aye aye aye! All the Latins aye, in their middles aye . . . built stronger, aye aye aye . . .*"

She frowned at her face in the mirror. She couldn't sing worth a damn.

It was nine thirty-three on the nose.

She poured herself another drink.

Barbara felt sticky and clammy and toyed with the idea of taking a nice cool bath. Mama's probably in bed by now. She tossed off the drink and it was hot in her throat.

Barbara reached behind her and unfastened her brassiere. She felt the slip of her breasts and she tossed the brassiere to the bed. Her step-ins fell to her feet and she stepped out of them. She gazed in the mirror at her white flesh reflection. She had a body made for loving. It was created to give love. A love machine? Why should she waste her life up in a goddamn bedroom trying to sleep when she could go out and have a little fun?

Why?

It was nine thirty-seven.

She inspected her body which was the most natural thing she had ever seen. It wouldn't always be that way. She was thirty-one now. What would it look like in twenty years?

Flabby and white and loose and cold?

She was perfect except for her breasts, but none of the Kesler girls were prominent on the bosom except Irene, who was a little prominent all over.

Barbara snapped her fingers.

She'd better hurry.

She turned and ran to the closet and slipped into her kimono, pulling it tight around her young lovely eager warm body as she hurried to the attic door.

BOOK THREE

The Titan

Chapter 21

THE SUMMER had passed in a swift mirrored dream of enchantment. Roy and Johnny continued their weekend trips to the Lake until quite suddenly it was Labor Day and they were up for the last time. The Labor Day weekend had appeared so far away all summer that when it finally arrived it seemed that it had been just around the corner all the time.

It was Sunday night and tomorrow was the last day. Roy was asleep and breathing easily. Johnny was wide awake listening to the gentle unconcerned wash of the surf outside the cabin. He turned from Roy and lay on his side facing the wall across the small room. A patch of pale moonlight fell in a long slender angular ray down the wall to the edge of the baseboard. He stared at the flower-bouquet pattern on the old yellowed wallpaper. The light darkened and brightened as clouds raced across the face of the moon.

He just couldn't sleep. There were so many things that were over now. All the many things that had happened this summer were little more than exciting fragments in his memory, though still fresh and clear and sharp with smells and colors.

He could hear the faint ticking of Roy's watch on his wrist just under the edge of his pillow. Roy wasn't selfish and let Johnny wear the watch all the time. It was a silver Navy watch: waterproof, dust-proof, shockproof and it shone in the dark. He smiled remembering Roy telling him that it was shockproof because if he ever got electrocuted the watch wouldn't stop. Fat need he'd have for the time if he was electrocuted.

He heard a car pull alongside the next cabin and stop. Two car doors shut softly with clicks and a girl laughed. There were footsteps crunching in pebbles and a screen door opened with a high yawning squeak.

In the silence he felt more alone than ever.

Johnny slid his wrist out from beneath the pillow and in the pale

greenish glow read ten after twelve. The room was nice and warm. Golly he wished he could go to sleep.

He looked at the patch of moonlight.

What had happened to this summer? It seemed just last week that he was skipping home from Hutchinson School with a passing report card in his pocket. Where had the summer gone?

There was all day tomorrow left and tomorrow night they'd go home. There was Tuesday and school started Wednesday. Just like that! Man-alive. Three more days and a whole new life would open for him. At least he wouldn't have to stay at Grandma's crummy house all day.

Carnival Park was going to close down after tomorrow. It made him sad to think about it.

The moonlight on the wall faded to a warm grateful darkness.

They had been at Carnival Park earlier that evening and the organ music and laughter and shouting voices still soared through his wakeful mind. He could see the happy pushing crowds and hear the sudden screams from the rollercoaster as it took its first huge dip plundering downward with such rattling speed that it vibrated the firm tramped ground.

It was strange how he could lie in bed and still smell the popcorn and peanuts and hotdogs and mustard drift past his nose.

There were pretty girls all along the midway with tan shoulders and arms and smooth graceful legs. They wore bright and gay summer dresses and sunsuits, or shorts and halters displaying their bronze swelling thighs and slender legs, the curved softness of a round back and the full and eager youthful strain of breasts. He'd catch whiffs of their perfume and see their satin skin and wish he was old enough to take them on rides.

That's when he hated Roy very much. He didn't hate Roy now, only then: when the pretty girls were around and he was stuck with Roy. He wanted to run from Roy and be with a pretty girl. Roy was nothing but an old man.

Whenever he saw a pretty girl he'd feel a stabbing hollowness in the center of his chest. He'd feel sad because he was stuck with an old man. He always wanted to push Roy out of the way and run up to the prettiest girl and say, "I'm Johnny Parish—I love you. . . . I'm not with him—" pointing an accusing finger at Roy. "I'm only thirteen but I'm really a lot older than that. Gee I love you. Honest I do.

Let me buy you some rides—lean on me, hold my hand. . . . Will you?”

That’s what he always wanted to do and say but never did. He couldn’t do that.

The patch of moonlight blurred and became a long, white brightness. The wash of the surf on his last night at the Lake rippled on the edge of the beach with a sad whispering softness.

It wasn’t always like that.

He could remember how on some nights there came a foggy mist rolling off the Lake accompanied by the periodic moans from a distant foghorn.

On nights like that he’d lie quietly listening to the tumbling waves as they washed up on the shore. He wanted to go out alone on nights like that and stand in the swirling fog. He wanted to watch the waves rising and crashing on the sandy beach, but he was afraid of the darkness and fog so he stayed in bed with the sheet pulled up to his chin. Above all else the foghorn was too spooky. He tried to suppose the feeling it would have given him if he had gone out to stand on the deserted beach, watching the waves suddenly curve inward and outward and crash downward beating angry fists upon the shore. Johnny loved the Lake and the water and to be alone on the beach watching the waves come in. He would watch the bubbling foam grasping and pulling and sucking a million grains of sand and pebbles down into its blue darkness, all the length of the beach in that one long retreating thundering wave. But he still couldn’t go out in reply to the whispering waters he heard calling to him.

He loved the Lake during the day but yet at night he feared it.

He felt lonely many times that summer after the swelling electric intensity in the room had diminished to a serene, relaxing peacefulness that seemed to free and float every joint in his body. The sex was gone, leaving him thinking of all the lovely girls he had seen that day, thinking of them without sex but with a deep love of wanting to be near them to go places and do things with them. To put his head in their laps and say secret words of love, to have them run their fingers through his hair telling him they loved and depended upon him. To kiss them and hold them and have them. Sure he was only thirteen, but he knew what he wanted: to be a man and to be loved.

Or was it something else?

Something in the deepest corner of his heart that he would never uncover? Was it something he had lost and would never find again?

Even if he wandered to the far corners of the earth, he would never find it, it would never say: Here I am, Johnny, here—look, the end of your journey, you've found me at last. . . . Here, here, here. . . .

Was it in his heart all the time?

What *really* was it?

It was more than a mere pebble washed up on the beach, a golden grain of magic sand, a piece of water-logged driftwood that would give him three wishes when he touched it.

What were they doing in the next cabin? He could still hear the girl's laugh drifting aimlessly through his head. Were they happy? Were they *really* in love? Had they just come back from going dancing at Royal Beach or Rocky Point? Were they kissing? Were they lying in each other's arms talking about how much they loved each other? What were they doing? Jesus what? Huh? He felt a lot better thinking he had never seen them.

Jeez but he wanted to see all his pals over in Malvern. He wanted to see his father that almost died from double pneumonia caused from sleeping in the rain all night on the front lawn of the place where he roomed because he was too drunk to climb the front steps.

He didn't ever go over to see his dad.

All he'd got that summer from Dad was a couple short notes written with a shaking hand. He could hardly make out any of the words.

Roy was like a father in his own way but there was something missing. . . . Maybe it was because of the Parties. He wanted to go down to the River Valley to see Grandma Parish. She lived hundreds and hundreds of miles away and he hadn't seen her for years and years. He began to feel bad because he loved Grandma Kesler a little better.

It sure would be swell if he could see all his old pals again. Like during that last summer vacation at Cherokee Hills when he and some of his buddies would all pack a small lunch and set off across the cornfield to the highway to the gully on the other side that led them across a grassy field to a small thicket of woods. Once they were in the woods it wasn't too far to the cable.

The cable swung out and over a deep ravine and they always felt

so far from civilization they figured it was safe to take their clothes off and play Tárzan.

Johnny lay there remembering the last time he had gone to the cable. It had been a bright hot August afternoon. His dad had just finished mowing the lawn and Johnny was pushing the lawnmower back to the Government Administration Building when he heard someone calling to him. He turned and Junior Savan shouted for him to wait and came running across the field grinning broadly. Junior Savan was a year older than Johnny and besides having a little dingus-hair, he could say bullshit and damn and hell in front of Mr. & Mrs. Savan all he wanted. They didn't make him come in when it got dark, either. Junior was the toughest guy in the neighborhood but he didn't go around picking on guys to show off like guys will when they're tough and know it. But boy he didn't take no crap off no one. Junior Savan was Johnny's best friend. . . .

Johnny lay watching the patch of moonlight being pulled away from his eyes. The soft ripples of the surf ran in his ears with a hushed *shhh shhh shhh shhh*.

His whole body felt hypnotized and floating in a vacuum space above the bed. Only his mind was alive and awake but that was slowly shadowing. It seemed that if he so much as wiggled a toe or moved a finger, the spell would break and his body would crumble and fall back to the bed. He had tomorrow left. All day tomorrow to remember a little more. . . .

The summer was only a day long.

Chapter 22

EARLY Tuesday morning, the day before school started, Johnny rode his bike crunchingly across the gravel driveway and parked it in the shade of the brick building and unlocked the station door.

The morning was cool and the air was crystal and fresh. The sky was a deep blue behind billowing continents of snowy white fleece that drifted southward.

He switched on the electricity and unlocked the gas pumps, then lugged out the rack with the cans of motor oil and set it on the concrete dais between the two pumps. He unlocked the pop-cooler and opened a bottle of orange. It was a little warm.

Johnny went into the station and took the canvas moneybag with Friday's receipts out of the coal stove where he and Roy usually hid it. He sat at the desk and counted out thirty-three dollars and forty-two cents. He put fifteen dollars in bills and change in the register, then folded three and slipped them in his watchpocket. He put the rest of the money in the bag and put it in the back of the top drawer of the desk.

This would be the last time he'd have a chance to open the station except on Saturdays and Sundays. He felt a tense happy excitement whenever he thought about starting to high school tomorrow: being with older boys and girls; having his own locker; taking Gym and Shop and Mechanical Drawing. Golly, he'd even have a chance to get on the football and baseball teams. Just think, he wouldn't have to stay in one crummy classroom all day.

Everyone told him the Fourth and Seventh grades were the hardest. He'd just have to apply himself and study hard: that's what Barbara told him last night when he and Roy came back from the Lake. Jeez, he barely got through the Sixth but he had a growing secret suspicion that Mrs. Cooke either passed him because she passed all the other kids and felt sorry for him, or she passed him because she didn't want a big crook in her class another year. Hell yeah, you can't pass on D's and F's. His lousy card was loaded with'em.

He looked up at the clock above the door that advertised THE PAUSE THAT REFRESHES: it was quarter to eight. He'd timed it so he would be early because there was something sentimental in opening the station. Naw, something inside him that wasn't an actual thought but a plain complete knowledge he denied, told his listening mind that he only wanted to come early so he could knock down on a few dollars.

He took a drink of orange and closed one eye watching the revolving red second hand on the clock. What if the clocks would stop? What if everything would stop but me? Buses and cars and people and birds and everything would just freeze in their tracks. Boy it sure would be fun to go snooping around. Johnny grinned thinking about emptying all the banks in town. He'd swipe a car and find a

whorehouse and cart the prettiest one off and haul her up to Grandma's and hide her in the attic. The woman'd probably raise a stink when he told the world to start going around again. Hell, if he emptied all the banks in town he wouldn't have to kidnap any old whore; he could go down in the Flats every night and pay for it. That way there wouldn't be a snotty spat if Grandma or Aunt Marg happened to find her hiding behind a box or something up in the attic. Christ, they'd evict him quicker than he could say *ish-kabibibbleboo*. That's the trouble with religious people.

He could probably hide a couple of million dollars up in the attic under the floorboards where he hid his nudes. And boy, he sure as hell could buy a lot of bubble gum and Big Little Books, too. But one of the very *first* things he'd buy would be a real big tombstone for Rose. A white marble one all engraved with hundreds of angels and flowers.

He looked out the door and no one was coming so he lit a Chesterfield from the open pack on the desk. He took mouthful drags and tried to blow smoke rings but cripe: a car drove in under the roof and he dropped the cigarette to the floor and ground it out with his toe.

"Fill it up with Regular please." The sleepy-looking woman smiled.

Johnny filled the tank and she wanted him to check the oil. It was pretty low so she told him to put a quart of thirty-weight in. He brought her the change from a ten and as she pulled away from the pump Roy drove in. He was frowning and looked pale and tired.

"Morning, Sport." He smiled, putting his hand on Johnny's shoulder and they went into the station.

As Roy drove to work that morning he went through a red light and had to pull over to the curb and park until he had stopped trembling. By the time he arrived at the station he had developed a splitting headache. The whole day was shot to hell. He asked Johnny to go up to the dairy and get a quart of coffee—"And tell her not to put much cream in it, Sport."

"Sort of muddy like, huh?" he asked from the doorway.

Roy smiled and nodded. As soon as Johnny turned and left, Roy let the smile drop. It was too heavy. He took three aspirins and sat down at the desk. He right eyelid was twitching in unison with the dull throbbing above it. He looked out the window and up to the

sky. The clouds were nothing but mist and beyond that blue ceiling there was an infinite darkness. The stars do not twinkle above the atmosphere. They glow white and cold.

Roy sighed. He was always sick after an argument with his mother. Every morning she started something. It always ended up with her crying and him leaving the house slamming the back door. But the arguments had never become as violent as the one this morning. He didn't know what happened: maybe he was tired; perhaps he had his fill; he had to let off steam.

The very first thing Mother said to him when he came down to breakfast that morning was, "You know you and that snot-nosed *brat*—that Johnny Parish—are doing things that aren't right. . . ."

Roy ignored her.

Mother sighed and set her heavy body down in a chair across the table from him. A wisp of iron-gray hair hung down over her forehead. "Roy. . . ."

He looked up. "Are you going to let me drink my coffee in peace or am I going to have to eat out in the mornings?"

"Oh why do mothers have to suffer so?" she wailed with her thumb at her lower lip.

Roy stirred his coffee and yawned.

"All summer," she persisted, "this—this thing's been going on all summer. . . . Oh Baby, oh my *Baby*."

"Are you going to shut up and leave me alone?" he asked her curtly.

"Look at your poor father up in bed with arteriosclerosis," her tear-bright eyes gazed searchingly into his angry-hot eyes, "look at the worry and pain I go through taking care of him, and instead of lightening the burden on my back like a loving son should, you only add to its weight. . . ." She sighed and closed her eyes. "Sometimes I feel I could cut my wrists."

Roy smiled malignantly. "Say, you know that's not at all a bad idea, Mother." His words were sharp and cruelly clear. "Any particular brand of blades you prefer? Come, come Mother—don't look so flabbergasted. Tell me what kind you want so I'll be sure to bring them home tonight. Surely you can wait until tonight. I want to watch—I want to see you destroy something besides other people—especially your husband and daughter! Why didn't you love Charlotte when she was a little girl? *Why?* Why didn't you *love* her?"

"I did! I *did*!" Her eyes pleaded. "I *loved* her—oh my Baby!"

"You *liar*," Roy shouted, "*liar liar liar! You never loved her—why? Answer me!*"

"Oh my *Baby!*" she cried out. "*My Baby, my Baby!*"

Roy suddenly stood up knocking the chair over. His neck and face swelled red and the veins in his forehead made dark bluish ridges. He picked up his half-filled coffee cup and flung it against the wall as he screamed, "I'm a man *goddammit!* I'm no one's *goddamn baby!* I'm a *MAN!*"

The brown coffee streaked down the rose pattern wallpaper staining it dark, and the china cup lay shattered on the linoleum floor. He hurled the sugarbowl next and as it crashed he boomed, "Let me *be* a *MAN!*"

The cream pitcher followed splashing and shattering against the wall. "I want to be *free!* I want to live my Own Life! I want to be a *man!* Something that's never been in this house since it was built! A *man!* If I'm not a Man, take a knife and cut them off like you did to *him!*" Roy raised a wavering arm pointing to his mother's and father's room above the kitchen. "But let me *try* to be a *MAN!* Let me *try!*" he roared at the top of his voice as tears of anger and repudiation streaked down his inflamed cheeks.

He threw the box of cornflakes and the bottle of milk against the wall. The cap popped off the milk and the bottle fell to the floor unbroken. He ripped off the tablecloth and whipped it behind him to the drainboard. The toaster and silverware fell to the floor with a clatter. The bottle of milk *glunk glunk glunked* and floated cornflakes through the archway to the dining room.

The silence was astoundingly brightly light, expanding itself to an explosive quietness.

The toaster on the floor clicked and began ticking.

"I believe you're insane," his mother murmured with a calm detached voice.

"You've made me that way," he hissed hoarsely in a thick voice. "You can't live in a house with lunatics for *thirty* years and not go insane yourself. Oh you—"

Her eyes held no fear as he ran around the table putting his left palm out, drawing back his right fist in direct line with her inquiringly calm face.

He didn't strike her and the pane of glass cracked as he slammed the back door. . . .

Roy shut his eyes, turning from the sky and the great face with the beard in the clouds. His eyelid had stopped twitching but the throbbing above it persisted stubbornly.

He lit a cigarette and gazed back up at the sky. Clouds were like people, always changing and driven along by one or another impelling source outside themselves. Inspect them closely and you would find many apparently human features, and those features carefully and intricately merged into other features, changing their individuality all the time. People, like clouds, had frantic swirling turmoils under the outer layer of calmness usually apparent to the eye. No one was ever what he seemed, at least not for very long.

Roy spun around in the seat and tilted back in the chair with his hands behind his head, and he stared at the mucky, once yellow painted walls. He sucked in a drag from the cigarette dangling in the corner of his mouth. It was all over between him and Grace now. He exhaled through his nose. At first he had felt a little blue and sad. Everything had gone according to the plan. Except now he had that little lonesome regret he always felt. Grace's pride had been salvaged. He had furnished her that. She was really a damned good kid. One of the best yet. The next one will be even better, he thought. They always are.

As Johnny rode back to the station with the quart of coffee in the crook of his arm he wished he hadn't bought that sack of Kraft caramels. Well, Roy probably wouldn't say anything but he still should've called up and asked anyway. Roy was in a mood. He parked his bike around next to the lubrication platform and the first thing Roy said to him when he went in the station was, "Young man, don't you know you shouldn't waste cigarettes?"

"Huh?" He set the sack on the desk.

Roy pointed to the cigarette on the floor behind the candy case. Johnny laughed as he bent over and picked it up.

"That's from when that customer come in," he explained.

"Sport, I don't want to go crabbing but you're really too young to smoke. Why don't you wait a few years—at least until you're sixteen? It's a bad habit to start."

"I really don't care to smoke anyhow," he told Roy, wrinkling his nose as he tossed the dirty butt into the wastebasket. "But I like to get that taste in my mouth every now and then. . . . I'll quit if ya want me to."

"Okay." Roy winked and turned to open the sack.

"Oh yeah—I bought a sack of them Kraft caramels."

"That's okay."

"Them's the best." Johnny put the change from Roy's dollar on the desk. "Say, the *phone's* off the hook. . . ."

"I know," Roy murmured as he twisted the lid off the*white cardboard container.

"Your mother again, huh?"

Roy nodded and put the receiver back in the cradle.

Johnny ripped open the sack of caramels. "She don't like me because we went to the Lake all the time—that's it, isn't it?"

"Partly." Roy tossed the crumpled paper sack to the wastebasket and missed.

Johnny picked it up and dropped it in. As he straightened his voice was narrow. "You don't think she might know something about our Parties, do you?"

"Naaaaaaaaw." Roy pulled down his chin.

"Gee," he frowned, "I'd never want her to know anything about *them*."

"Don't worry about it, Sport."

"You're not, huh?"

"No, of course not. Just forget it," he said softly, "don't let it worry you."

"She couldn't ever do anything, could she?"

"No."

"No one can do anything because we know and won't let anything happen. . . . Ain't that so?"

"You hit it on the head." Roy smiled.

"You aren't happy, are you?" Johnny put his hand over Roy's.

"Sure I am, Sport."

"I mean thinkin' about she *might* find out. . . ."

"Why should I let something like that bother me?"

"You *know*," he suggested.

"Yes," he smiled, "I know. But it still doesn't bother me."

Johnny fell silent as he unwrapped a caramel. What would old Mom do if she ever knew? He knew she wouldn't go for it too well. Johnny put the caramel in his mouth and began to chew. Jeez, there's some things you don't even want to think about.

"Almost forgot." Roy twisted in the chair and reached in his back pocket for his wallet. He gave Johnny a five-dollar bill. "Here—now

you get your little rearend uptown and buy those school supplies.”

“Okay.” Johnny slipped the bill into his pocket.

“Put it in your watchpocket so you don’t lose it.”

“Oh I won’t lose it.” Johnny patted his pocket and unwrapped another caramel. A few minutes later he saw the bus drive up Elliott past the station. It would take eight minutes to reach the end of the line and return. He went to the restroom and combed his hair. He had to make sure he combed it just right because there’d probably be some pretty girls on the bus. There was always about fifty-five old farts riding the bus that liked the windows wide open. He always had to sit up close to the door if he didn’t want his hair blown all to hell. Cripe, if they liked fresh air so well why in the heck didn’t they walk?

“Don’t miss this bus,” Roy called.

“I’m havin’ a *Party*,” he called back in a straining voice.

“I’ll Party you.”

Johnny came out laughing. Boy his arms felt lined with lead.

Roy grinned, lowering the container of coffee. “Are you coming right back here then?”

“Yeah.” He nodded.

“You better get out now for that bus.”

“Okay,” Johnny sighed and went to the door, “don’t do anything I would.”

The bus was loaded with a bunch of crummy little yelling brats and old ladies. Jeez.

Johnny bought his school supplies at Benton’s Books & Typewriter Supply on Central Street and it cost him four dollars and eighty-six cents. It wouldn’t have cost that much if he hadn’t bought a dictionary, but the frog-faced saleswoman said, “Are you going to use your Elementary Dictionary, or do you wish a more *advanced* one?” And gee-whiz, since she put it that way there wasn’t any other choice except to buy a “Higher-Upper” dictionary. There sure were a lot of pretty girls.

Johnny walked down the warm street carrying the heavy sack in his arm. He passed an embarrassed mother who was scolding a small boy who screamed at the top of his lungs. He felt like stopping and saying: Lady, why don’t you buy that little fart the cap gun he wants?

Johnny turned onto Third Street and went to the Haycox Drug-

store where Barbara told him she used to work. He flopped his sack of supplies down on the marbletop counter and ordered a milkshake. "Double-thick, please," he told Mrs. Haycox.

"All right." She smiled.

Johnny watched her closely. She wasn't bad-looking even if she did bleach her lousy hair. He'd bet anything she was a killer-diller in her day.

After Mrs. Haycox put his milkshake in the mixer she began talking with a handsome young man down the counter. It looked to Johnny like she was simply nuts about him. Jeez, if anything peeved him it was seeing a phony old woman flirting with a young guy.

He went over to the comic-book rack and picked out a *Tarzan*, *Daredevil*, *Dick Tracy* and *Crime Doesn't Pay*. He would've swiped the damndarn things right there and then if he didn't have a puky milkshake to drink.

Chapter 23

WEDNESDAY morning Johnny was assigned to Homeroom 115. Miss Edith Stamper was the Homeroom teacher. She was a tall attractive woman in her late thirties with hair so black that Johnny was sure she used a dye on it. Her smile was wide and warm and her teeth were very even and white. Probably false.

Man-alive, there ain't nothing like going to high school even if it was a *junior* high.

South Cherrytree High had been constructed in 1938 and 1939. It had an extensive two-story front facing Carter Avenue with two large wings running behind the school and a grassy court and parking lot between. The school was very modern in design and had been constructed of a smooth yellow porcelain-type brick. The football field was behind the school running the length of the pine woods with a pasture on one end and the fenced-in back yards of the houses on Tweed on the other.

Homeroom 115 was on the first floor in the right wing of the school directly behind the auditorium.

After Miss Stamper introduced Johnny to the class he took his seat. Already the old sickening familiar smells of varnished desks and books and chalk and newly sharpened pencils were beginning to bore him. He didn't see anyone from his old Sixth Grade class and boy that made him feel pretty good. There were a couple of pretty girls but most of them were drab and homely-looking things. Everyone looked clean and polished and happy.

In the back of the room there was a big tall black-haired mean-looking overgrown ox of a guy that Johnny knew was going to be the Showoff, the Stupe, the Dumb-bunny, the Bully and Know-it-all because every class had one.

Miss Stamper seemed very pleasant as she sat proudly stiff behind her desk. She told them she was going to be their Homeroom teacher for the following three years and she was positive the class would make her as proud of them as her last class did and they must remember they were in high school now and they should act like ladies and gentlemen.

It would've sounded like crap if she wasn't so pretty.

Johnny was assigned to share a locker with Louie Foster, a hawk-nosed boy with reddish hair, ruddy pimply skin and teeth that were slightly buck. Johnny felt more at ease as he and Louie carried their books and things down the noisy marble hall to their locker.

"Where'd you go to school at, Louie?"

"Chestnut—where'd you go?"

"Hutchinson."

"No stuff? We beat you in football last year." He grinned widely.

"I wasn't going there then. We just moved over from Malvern this spring."

"Oh." Louie nodded.

"Here it is—locker five-three-nine."

They each wrote the lock combination down on a slip of paper and Johnny took the top locker shelf because he was a little taller than Louie. After their books were put away they went back to the Homeroom.

"Hey look," Louie pointed across the hall to a boy with a lipstick-smeared face, "the old Ninth Graders got to him."

"Yeanh." Johnny grinned at the comic sight. "But they ain't going to get *me*," he boasted.

"Me either," Louie bragged confidently.

Thank God there'd only be school a half-day! The principal, Mr.

Wilber Gunning, rang the three gongs that reminded Johnny of an NBC station break. The whole room fell silent as the intercom above the door crackled and Mr. Gunning spoke:

"I would like to welcome all students of the Seventh Grade, and all new students attending our school for the first time." His voice was thick and gruff. Mr. Gunning was a tall beefy stern-looking man with a heavy red face and snow-white hair. "We, here, are very proud of our school and greatly hope you will be too. If there is any difficulty in finding"—he cleared his throat—"excuse me"—he cleared it again and went on—"if there is any difficulty in finding your various classes, any teacher will be pleased to direct you. . . .

"I ask the older student body to please refrain from using lipstick. Any student caught in the possession of lipstick, or administering it, will have two weeks without social activities to remind them of my warning, which they did not heed. . . . Thank you."

Then there were the three NBC gongs followed by a little static, then a click.

The cootie old Ninth Graders got Johnny at noon when he left the building. Two boys grabbed him while another one ran lipstick several times across his forehead, down his cheeks and across his chin. Johnny laughed and twisted away running up the street but they didn't chase him. He saw old Louie crossing the street ahead of him and they got him too. Johnny laughed. What the heck, you're only in junior high once.

Johnny ate a meatloaf sandwich and drank a glass of milk while he related the morning to Grandma, who was drinking a cup of coffee across from him. It was the first time in several days that he'd seen her smile and laugh. Man she really got a big bang out of the lipstick.

After he washed his face good he went upstairs to change clothes so he could get over to the station. Cripe, half the clothes on his back Roy'd bought for him. It was impossible to think of life without Roy around somewhere.

While Johnny was buttoning up his Levis Danny came clomping through the attic. He flopped himself disgustedly on Johnny's bed. "H-h-how is it down 'ere?"

"Real *keen*, man. Lockers and everything. There's a radio in every room so old man *Gunnysack* can talk to everyone without leaving his *fat* office."

"Yeanh? Any hell p-pretty girls?"

"Shhhheeze," Johnny scowled, "nothing you'd *drool* over—not in my Homeroom."

Danny looked up at the ceiling and Johnny said, "How do you like Chardin Heights School?"

"T-t-t-too many *rich* kids g-go there—ridin' new *bikes* an' every-thing."

Johnny tucked in his T-shirt. "Well, you can use *my* bike—it's a hell of a lot better than some of these *crummy* *skinny* new ones."

"No *foolin'*!" Danny excitedly sat up. "Huh? You mean you'll let me ride it to *school*?"

"Sure."

"Jeez," he shook his head gratefully, "you're a *swell* brother, Johnny."

"I just don't want them rich bastard kids showin' ya up. That bike's better than *new* anyhow."

"You d-d-damn right it is, boy." Danny closed one eye nodding in agreement.

"An' if anyone makes fun of your stutterin' you just tell'em they're going to have to deal with me. . . . I'll knock the *piss ka-roosky* out of'em," he said bitterly. "An' that goes for them *cruddy* teachers too—I'll *fracture*'em with this—" He grabbed the front of his pants. "I want you to get a good *deal* there. . . . With allem rich Chardin Heights kids there, ya know who's gonna get the *breaks*, don't'cha?"

"Don't worry, man." Danny sighed.

"What's the matter now?"

Danny's eyes glistened with tears. "I—I couldn't even say my las' name w-w-without stutterin' when the t-t-teacher ast me."

"Just pretend you're alone in the room—not even the teacher there. Just pretend that and you won't stutter."

"I can't pretend *that* good."

"I'll see ya, Danny ol' boy—remember what I said." Johnny patted his brother's shoulder warmly and left the room.

Danny sat up and scratched his thigh. He could hear Johnny running down the attic steps. All I hear any more around this dumpy place is advice an' hello an' good-by. I bet if I went away for three weeks they'd never miss me at all.

Danny stood up and stretched and yawned. He went to Johnny's desk drawer and took an Oh Henry candybar. Old Johnny's desk drawer was loaded with loot that he took from the station.

He began munching on the damn candybar thinking about going down to see Walt and maybe they could cook up something to do. He was getting tired of going down to the Phantom Clubhouse.

After he took off his shirt he sat down on the bed. Why did it embarrass him so much when he had to tell Mrs. or was it Miss—and now he'd even forgotten her last name—that his mother and father were divorced? He wondered if Johnny felt ashamed of it too.

Johnny rode his bike to the station. Roy was sitting at the desk and looked up as he came in. "Hi, Sport." He smiled glumly.

"Howdy, sir," he bowed, "how's business?"

"Really moving today. I could have used you this morning. How was the first half-day of school?"

"Oh it wasn't too bad. . . . Say, what the heck you look so sad about for, huh? I thought you said business was good."

"There isn't any more station, Sport. I've lost it."

Johnny frowned. *Lost the station.* "How do you mean?"

"They won't renew my lease."

"Who won't?"

"The Company."

"I thought you *owned* this station."

"No. I only leased it for six months."

"Why won't they let you lease it again?"

"We're not doing the business. Not pushing the products. Closing early. Closed weekends. . . ." Roy raised his brow and his hands and let his hands fall to his thighs.

Johnny frowned. "Well I'd call them up an' tell'em it ain't none of their goddamn *crummy* business to—"

"No, Sport," Roy raised his hand and shook his head, "that wouldn't do any good. Besides, I was losing money here anyway."

"Yeah, business was bad . . . but *jeeez!*"

Roy sighed and he looked very tired.

"What are you going to *do*?" Johnny asked.

"I've been offered a job at the Wilson-Miller Company. They make ball-bearings." Roy looked up. "We can still get another station, Sport."

"Yeanh," he grunted bitterly and his face fell sad. "Jeez, I'm used to working here."

"You mean hanging out here," Roy corrected.

"Aw go on." Johnny turned away.

"I was only kidding."

"Sure." Johnny sighed.

"I'll be open until Saturday." Roy smacked his lips.

"Jeez . . . what a *crummy deal!*"

"I'm not making anything here, Sport. Really I'm not. At Wilson-Miller I'm guaranteed sixty a week. . . . That's not peanuts. So?"

"Well," he sighed, "I sort of like this place."

Roy smiled, letting his eyes drift shut.

Johnny rode up the street to the dairy to get four hamburgers and coffee. He almost swerved his bike out in front of a car: he'd just realized that he couldn't knock down on the register every now and then like he'd been doing all summer.

Roy didn't tell Johnny how angry the Company official had been; or about how he had to close the station this morning to go to the bank to cover a twenty-five-dollar check; or about getting only thirty dollars a week instead of sixty; or about spending the night in a hotel; or about the floozie he picked up who rolled him of eighteen dollars when he passed out. And for two cents he'd jump in the fucking river.

"You got two cents, friend?" Roy asked a fly walking across the desk. He threw his head back and roared out laughing.

As Johnny rode back to the station feeling the warm hamburgers through the sack against his ribs he figured he sure had all the bad luck.

Chapter 24

THURSDAY and Friday were happy exciting days composed of newness, confusion, embarrassing awkwardness, new teachers, getting the classrooms and studyhalls mixed up, being lost in one end of the school when he should've been at the other. But boy it sure was fun.

There was Shop where they'd work with wood and during the first year they would build a lamp, from rough-finished pieces of

wood to a smooth round-edged mahogany-stained varnished piece of modern handiwork. There was Mechanical Drawing, the early stages of learning how to draft and draw up blueprints. He had these two classes scheduled only once a week. Art and Literature and Geography classes were new. In high school, Arithmetic was called Math.

But underneath everything, Johnny Parish was sick and miserable. What ruined everything for him was that none of his old Sixth Grade class seemed glad to see him. It appeared that they tried to avoid any personal contact with him. They ignored him and when he approached in a cheerful friendly manner they were cold and distant, as if they were sorry or surprised to see him there or to have been associated with him. Johnny had never felt so bad and hurt in all his life.

Those sonofabitches. He wanted to lay his head down on the desk and cry; those dirty rotten no good snob sonofabitches. All because he and Jesse Pitts were caught swiping a couple cartons of gum and candy at the drugstore across the street from the school last spring. The old Sixth Grade was still holding it against him and probably spreading it all around; smug and mighty in their own stinking coma. Every one of them would turn out to be a lousy two-faced Aunt Blanche.

By Friday it became a hard bitterness and the actual thought of murdering a couple of them entered and clung in his enraged mind. He didn't want to dismiss those thoughts of murder because they glowed with an orange warmth and were good to think about.

He could picture the .32 and ambushing Bud Freemount as he went home through the woods. He wanted to beat the butt of the gun in Bud's pimply face and shoot his eyes out. He wanted to kick fat lard-ass Henry Edmund between the legs until he was almost unconscious, then shoot bullets in his chest.

Each one had a violent slow death and Johnny would sit in the classroom breathing heavily and hotly with angry furious thoughts. His mind became feverish and sick with the careful step-by-step plotting of murder. He finally realized that he meant those thoughts of murder with a cold seriousness and looked forward to performing them. The biggest thing in his life was not to commit them.

It wasn't a matter of having guts or not having guts.

Grandma invited Roy up to dinner Friday night following the first three days of school. He sat at the head of the table with Grandma on his right and Barbara on his left.

Margaret had prepared a large pot roast dinner. There were butter-rich lima beans, a heaping bowl of creamy mashed potatoes sprinkled with paprika, a rich brown beef gravy, hot butter rolls, a bowl of red radishes cut down along the edges to resemble blooming roses, long strips of sliced carrots and celery. There was a small platter of sweet-and-dill-pickle chips and a Thousand Island salad. The pot roast was so tender and juicy it fell apart and just about melted in their mouths. When the main course was over, Margaret brought out the enormous apple pie she'd baked. It was still a little oven warm and the ice cream melted over the flaky golden-butter crust.

Johnny took a half cup of coffee and put three teaspoons of sugar in it and filled the cup the rest of the way with milk. He wondered if he'd succeed in gagging it down.

"Margaret," Roy sighed over his second cup of coffee, "your supper was simply marvelous."

"Why thank you, Roy." She smiled proudly.

Unconsciously, Roy reached to his shirt pocket for the second time.

"Go on and smoke a cigarette if you wish," Grandma said placing her hand over his. She gave it a few fond slaps and laughed.

Roy started to say that he really didn't care for one but Grandma ignored him. "Margaret, get Roy a tray so that he may smoke."

"Of course." Margaret went into the living room and brought back the glass candleholder.

"Thank you." Roy brushed his index finger back and forth under his nose. He offered a cigarette to Barbara and she accepted and he held a light for her.

"I taught Margaret how to cook," Grandma nodded with a satisfied smile, "I taught *all* my daughters."

"I bet you can still whip up an excellent dinner yourself, Grandma." Roy smiled.

"*Ach*," she chuckled, beaming from ear to ear and patting the back of his hand, "go on with you."

Johnny could see that the smoke from Roy's cigarette was worrying him. He kept it in his left hand and watched so that the curling smoke didn't drift over toward Grandma. He blew the smoke up to the ceiling. Old Mom always waited until Grandma left the table before she lit up. Even then Grandma'd sometimes jump all over her for stinking up the house. Johnny bet old Roy could eat at the table in his undershirt if he wanted too.

"It's really too bad about the station, Roy," Barbara said, "but if you're going to make more money at the Wilson-Miller Company, maybe it's for the best."

"I hope so," Roy replied, looking from Barbara to Margaret to Grandma.

Grandma put her hand over his and her face was sad. "Things will go better," she told him, closing her light blue eyes. "You wait and see."

"I know they will," he said to the nodding old woman, who pulled the shawl tighter around her shoulders with her free hand. Roy smiled and looked down to his coffee, "In some ways I'm glad I'm giving up the station." He looked at Grandma, then at Margaret. "Besides, I'm not making anything. . . ." He turned to Barbara. "I've been paying a large per cent of my bills from the money I'd saved in the Navy."

Grandma shook her head and clicked her tongue on the roof of her mouth.

Roy had told Johnny not to mention anything about the Company man, just to say that he was giving up the station because he couldn't make ends meet. That's all Johnny told them.

Roy looked down the table to Johnny and Danny. "You two boys better get ready if you want to go to the show. . . ."

"I got to build a house *first*," Johnny grinned getting up from the table. A sip from that brown crap in the cup called coffee was all he could stand.

"That is good," Grandma told Johnny as he passed around her. "You build a house to live in—a real big one. Christ was a carpenter too."

"Sure." He laughed, going to the hallway.

"A real nice one so I can come to *visit* you," she called after him.

Danny snickered as he opened the attic door.

Barbara noticed that Roy was about to speak when the side door opened. "Anyone home?" Edna called cheerfully from the kitchen and came into the dining room followed by Walt.

"Just in time for coffee and pie." Margaret smiled.

"Hi, *Gran'ma!*" Walt waved and walked around the table to kiss her cheek. Grandma reached up and held his face and kissed him happily on the mouth.

"How you, Mama?" Edna smiled and kissed her mother's forehead.

"This is a big surprise." Grandma laughed.

"Hello Roy, it's good to see you again," Edna said turning.

Roy was standing with an embarrassed smile. He nodded. "Evening, Mrs. Bonkisk"—he turned—"how are you, Walt?"

"Fine." Walt smiled.

Edna waved her hand. "You can forget that Mrs. Bonkisk stuff, Roy—I'm not one for formalities."

"All right." He smiled and sat down.

Edna flopped into Danny's chair next to Grandma, crossed her legs slapping her thigh. "Brother did I have a *rough* day!"

Johnny came out of the bathroom and said, "Hi."

Roy looked up. "Say, Mrs. Bon—Edna—I'm taking the boys to see that Ernie Pyle story, *The Story of GI Joe*. . . . Would you allow me to take Walt along? I'd be glad to."

Edna pursed her lips and raised her brow.

"Can I, Ma? Huh? *Please*. . . ." Walt begged.

"Ca'mon, Aunt Edna," Johnny said, "it's a good war picture. Let'im come with me and Danny."

"Danny and I," Barbara corrected.

"Okay. Danny and me."

"Danny and I!"

"Can I, Ma?" Walt whined, "Please—*pretty* please?"

"*Phisssssssst*." Edna turned to Roy. "You won't be too late, will you?"

"Oh no—it's just a single feature."

"Okay, he can go." Then she added seriously, "Now if he's going to be a bother—"

"Of course not." Roy smiled and raised his coffee cup.

Edna opened her purse and took out her wallet. She extended a crumpled bill toward Roy who shook his head. "No. This is on me."

"Oh, go *on* now," she insisted.

"No. I invited Walt—he's my guest."

"*Phisssssssst*." She cocked her head. "Okay." Edna turned to Walt, putting the bill back in her purse. "Aren't you going to thank him?"

"Sure I am." He turned to Roy. "Thanks a heap, Roy."

"That's okay, Walt."

Edna poured herself a cup of coffee.

"Come on up," Johnny told Walt and they went to the attic door.

They could hear the boys running up the steps and across the attic. Grandma watched the living-room ceiling expectantly.

Edna took a small piece of pie, tasted it and murmured her approval: "This pie's wonderful. You make it, Margaret?"

"Yes." She smiled and looked at Roy then back at Edna. "It's the butter-crust recipe I got from Mrs. Gamow."

"Roy's giving up the station," Barbara said.

"Oh?" Edna's brown eyes went big. "Is that right?"

"I've got a job—*finally*." Roy laughed and scratched the back of his head. "At the Wilson-Miller Bearing Company."

"Oh yes." Edna lowered her coffee cup and smacked her lips. "I hope you enjoy it—lots of luck, anyway."

"Thank you."

"He will get it," Grandma said. "A good man with a good heart will always get luck."

Roy's cheeks colored as Grandma beamed into his face. He crushed out his cigarette.

"How are things?" Barbara asked Edna.

"I talked to Louise Wilhelm this afternoon—I guess Mama Wilhelm isn't too well."

"That is a shame." Grandma shook her head and turned to Roy. "A German friend of mine," she explained, "we come over from the Old Country on the same boat."

"Oh," Roy said softly.

"Maybe I should go and see her tomorrow," Grandma said half aloud, looking down into her empty cup. She turned to Edna. "How is Clifford?"

"He's doing just fine, Mama."

"And no drinking yet?" She shook her head.

"No sir—it'll be a year in *three* weeks."

"Wonderful!" Margaret chimed.

"It sure is," Barbara added.

Barbara crushed out her cigarette and smiled at Roy who finished his coffee.

Grandma looked worriedly up at the living-room ceiling as the boys again ran across the attic. She appeared annoyed as she tugged nervously at her shawl.

They came laughingly clomping down the attic steps. Johnny was the first one down.

"Young man," Barbara said sharply, "what have I told you about running across the attic?"

"Yaw," Grandma nodded and shook her finger at him, "you will crack the ceiling and it will fall down."

"Heck," he sniffed, "they was *chasin'* me."

"I'm not going to warn you another time about that. . . . Mark my words."

"Okay." He sighed while Danny and Walt snickered behind him.

Roy told them good-by and the three boys went out the side door, running past Roy to the car.

As Roy closed the side door Edna said, "I don't suppose either one of my sisters can get off work tomorrow, huh?"

"Impossible." Margaret sighed.

Barbara agreed, nodding.

"Well," Edna told them, replenishing her coffee cup, "Irene and I are planning to go shopping up at Cleveland tomorrow. . . . We might even take in a baseball game."

"Yankees?" Barbara asked.

Edna shook her head. "The White Sox—Chicago."

"If it was the Yankees," Barbara laughed, "I'd take off work."

"How is Gerald?" Mama asked.

"Oh so-so." Edna frowned. "He's working every day, when he shouldn't, and it'll end up killing him if he don't let up."

"Well . . ." Margaret shrugged helplessly.

"How are things at the hotel, kiddo?"

Barbara looked up. "Everything's jumping." She managed a tired smile. "Mr. Singer, the old man that owns the Standard Brass, is giving his daughter Eunice a tremendous wedding reception tomorrow."

"It's a waste of money," Margaret said bitterly. "I don't see why a man will spend thousands of dollars, unless he wants free publicity in the *Wilkinson Independent*."

"Isn't old man Singer a big wheel on the *Independent*?" Edna looked from Margaret to Barbara.

"Yes," Barbara answered.

"Big wheel?" Mama questioned. "What is this?"

"It means a very important man, Mama," Margaret replied, "an executive."

"Oh, this *slang*," she laughed clasping her hands together, "I just do not understand it."

The three daughters felt the elasticity of their hearts swell as they looked at Mama who was laughing like she always used to do. When

they began talking German, Edna had a difficult time following the conversation.

That night after the show, Johnny lay in the darkness with his face in the cool pillow. Tomorrow would be the last day the station would be open. He had to wake up at seven o'clock so he could get there before Roy. Shhhhheeze, what a week. One damndarn thing after the other. *Seven o'clock*. He fell asleep feeling pretty bad about old Ernie Pyle dying like he did in the movie.

Chapter 25

JOHNNY got up at seven o'clock because he'd thought about seven o'clock real hard before going to sleep. He woke Barbara up when he dropped his shoes and she whispered for him to be real quiet when he went downstairs. The morning was cloudy and gray and it looked like it was going to rain. He fixed some cocoa and drank it in the kitchen, then walked over to the station.

It was nice and warm out and he could smell rain in the air real clear and clean. He tried to forget school because it wasn't important anyway. He and Roy was the only thing that was important. Roy had told him he loved him more than anything else in the world and at first it sounded a little funny. But Johnny loved him too. Roy was a kind man and didn't hate a thing. He knew old Roy wasn't a happy guy. Even when he was laughing, Johnny could tell he was sad. Man he could tell if a person was really happy or not.

After Johnny opened the station he took four dollars. He knew he could get it from Roy if he asked but he wanted to keep how much money he had a secret. He had ten saved away at home in his Tarzan book. He liked the feel of different things being kept a deep secret.

He stood in the station looking around. Shhhhheeze, he even felt sad when he ran his hand along the smooth wood border of the candy case. When he looked in the case at the old King Edward cigar box, he knew his business was all shot to hell too.

Jimminy-crickets he wished the day was sunny because if it rained it would make things even gloomier than they already were.

He went outside and opened a bottle of orange. He never could drink those crummy cokes in the morning because of the soda. The orange wasn't bitey and didn't prickle his throat or stomach.

Whenever he was all alone like he was now on these old gloomy days, he always felt like he was going to be a real smart killer-diller sort of guy. Boy he wanted to be a smart guy and grown up more than anything else on this earth. Things never seemed hard for grownups and that was probably because they were all grown up and their own boss. They could go to the movies any time they wanted to, too.

Roy told him the other night when they were coming home from the Lake for the last time that grownups were just kids that never grew except on the outside. Roy told him that they just give up comic books for newspapers where the hero changes from Captain Marvel or Superman to real-life characters. Roy explained that they got a warm satisfied glow in tragedy that didn't involve or touch them in any way. He said they don't realize that satisfaction, but it's there and it makes them feel secure and safe.

Man-alive that old Roy was a smart guy. Everything he said made a lot of sense. From that hairy old bone to that Line running down the middle of the road. But Johnny couldn't see where knocking off a piece was a natural thing, like the birds and the flies and all that stuff. He wanted to try it himself and form his own idea on that. How could Roy know how natural it was? Johnny figured it was a natural thing for him to do because he's been doing it since he was fifteen. Cripe, look how natural it was for Roy to drive a car and he's been doing that too since he was fifteen. But when Johnny was driving it sure was some big production as far as he was concerned. So there boy!

Another reason why he wanted to be grown up was so that he could go to a whorehouse. The Flats were just cram-packed with them and if he knew where one was he'd go there because holy-cow he had the money now. He thought it would sound a little funny: a thirteen-year-old kid wanting to go to a whorehouse. But no fooling, he could act a lot older if he wanted to.

Johnny sat down in the chair and put his feet up on the desk. He took a swallow of orange and began to wonder if Roy didn't take him to one because he would be a little bit jealous of him knock-

ing off a piece a couple of years earlier than he ever did. Yeanh, he'd bet that's why Roy kept putting off that deal. Gee-whiz, he'd never brag it up to him.

This gloomy old day was really working on him. 'Way down underneath in the inside of him from his neck to his belly there was something that made him feel alone and lonely. He wanted a girl friend pretty bad. Not really to bang or anything like that, but he would and man he knew that; he sure as heck would but that wouldn't be the only thing he wanted a girl for and he'd know that even before he did it, and maybe that would be one of the main reasons, but the really most important thing was that he wanted someone to love.

He never really loved his mother. Not with the kind of love most people say they love their mothers with. Gee, he knew that when Mom died he was going to feel sorry for thinking that. But you can't help thinking because it's just there and as long as he didn't say it in sounding words, he wasn't guilty of a thing.

There was one woman that he did love and that was Rose but she's dead. He *knew* he *did* love her because sometimes he'd cry, cry real hard with a lost sadness when he was alone and thought about her. Golly but he was glad her name was a pretty flower.

You can love anything you want, he thought.

This was the time Johnny liked best of all: when he was all alone and did nothing but think and think and think and think and he'd never get tired. Thinking in bed was about the best, though, because there was no one that was going to come in and bother him. He could be anything in bed from a handsome Flying Tiger Pilot to an Indian Fighter out West and there was always some pretty girl to save from something. Yeah man!

Like that time he crashed his airplane in the jungle and the only passenger was that young pretty woman named Sally he'd saved from an attacking gorilla. Johnny had jumped on the gorilla's hairy old back and broke its goddamn neck right smack in two. Sally threw her arms around him, hugged and kissed him and said she'd love him for the rest of his life and she wanted to live in the jungle all alone with him. He wasn't going to argue and he didn't know how to fix the crummy old airplane in the first place. They built a tree hut to live in like old Tarzan and Jane. He was always having to save Sally from lions or quicksand or one thing or another. She really knew the ropes all right and man did they have a mess of fun.

The one he liked best was where he was the hairy old Desert Sheik

with his band of three hundred robbers. They only robbed the rich and gave to the poor something like that corny old Robin Hood. The Desert Lord was a puky mean sonofabitch but his cute little daughter and Johnny were madly in love. The Desert Lord finally got killed in a sword fight with one of Johnny's men and they took all his jewels and gold and set the slaves free then tore his palace down. The Desert Lord's daughter got on the horse with him and they rode across the sandy dunes (with her boobies bobbing all over the place) to their hideout up in the mountains with all of them singing that Riff Song. Johnny was a heck of a good singer. A heck of a lot better than that crummy old Dennis Morgan who did it in the movie.

All he had to do was pretend and man he could be anything. It was easy as heck. He had hundreds and hundreds of stories all different. All he had to do was go to bed and close his eyes and pull one out. Sometimes he thought he couldn't wait until he got to bed to have one of his stories. He'd think and plan about it all day. Thinking at night sure was the best time.

Roy came in about eight and Johnny went up to the dairy to get some coffee. Roy didn't look too good and Johnny'd bet his bottom dollar he got drunk last night after he took them all home. Johnny knew Roy's old lady was a pain in the kibotchy and caused him all kinds of trouble.

When he came back with the coffee old Aunt Irene drove up in her flashy Packard. She and Aunt Edna were going shopping up at Cleveland and Aunt Irene told Johnny to fill it up. Old Aunt Edna wanted the restroom key. She had the weakest kidneys in the family.

Aunt Irene always told Johnny she was going to leave him the Packard in her will. When he got a little older she was going to give him that set of *University Library* books. She never read them anyway.

As Johnny filled the tank Aunt Irene went in the station to talk with Roy. Jesus, he thought, if it wasn't for old Aunt Irene and Uncle Ralph we'd hardly have any business at all and I guess they just got their gas here because I work here.

If that was it and it probably was they sure as hell went clear out of their way, because they both lived on the other side of town. Johnny figured Grandma had something to do with it. If she told them to get their gas up in Liberty you can bet they'd get their gas in Liberty.

Johnny couldn't figure out Uncle Ralph. He was such a funny drip. He didn't mean that he really *was* a drip, but he was pretty funny in a corny way. Take now for instance: he had more jack than anyone in the family and yet he still drove an old beat-up shitty-looking Ford. A Ford's a damn good car because his dad used to work for Old Man Ford, but Uncle Ralph's Ford was just plain for the birds. It was dirty and dented and the windows were cracked and full of bubbles. Johnny didn't have anything against any car but just think now, here's old Aunt Irene and Uncle Gerald who are almost broke and they got two cars, this Packard and the Dodge Uncle Gerald drives to the ice-cream plant, and old Uncle Ralph and Aunt Bertha were just about as rich as Grandma and they still drove that Ford.

Johnny shrugged his shoulders. Couldn't figure it out. He put the handle in the pump and went into the station. Aunt Irene and Roy were just about splitting a gut over something funny. He could smell old Aunt Irene's Yardley perfume. She used all kinds of that Yardley stuff and the first thing he'd do whenever he went to her house was go right to the bathroom and wash his hands with that Yardley soap. Jeez he liked that smell. He'd wash his hands before leaving too.

"I got her full," he told Aunt Irene.

"Hi there, Roy!" Edna came in with a big circular wave.

They were both dressed pretty doggone sharp.

"Hello, Edna." Roy smiled.

Aunt Edna gave Johnny the restroom key.

"I hope we don't run into any bad *weather*," Aunt Irene said with a frown, looking hopefully at Roy.

Roy looked out the window. "It might sprinkle a little, but not much."

Man-o-man, Johnny hated to ride with old Aunt Irene in bad weather. She was a heck of a nervous driver and when she got worried or upset she'd rub her thumbs over the tips of her fingers. Shhhheeze, she could hardly hold the wheel.

"Well," Aunt Irene sighed sadly, "we had better get started." Her thumbs were going a mile a minute over the tips of her fingers.

Johnny went out to the car with them and said, "Ain't you going to pay me?"

Aunt Irene laughed and opened her purse. Man she really must have been nervous because Johnny knew she wasn't stingy or anything like that.

"Can I get you anything?" Aunt Irene asked hopefully after she paid him. She was holding the wheel with both hands and boy were her thumbs going.

"Naw." Johnny shook his head. She couldn't get him what he wanted.

"Well, so long," Aunt Edna said, leaning over to look out the window.

"Good luck," Roy said from the doorway behind Johnny.

Aunt Irene broke into a wide happy smile. She was probably figuring she could use all the luck she could get.

"Yeah," Johnny called, "good *luck*."

Aunt Irene waved. Johnny wanted to shout for her to be careful and not go wrecking *his* car but he didn't want to worry her any more than she was.

Old Aunt Irene wasn't too good-looking. But he'd been looking at her for thirteen years so he got used to seeing her. He did funny things like that: look at people that he knew and pretend that he'd never seen them before to see what they really looked like.

One day he did that to himself and it really scared the hell out of him because he didn't recognize himself: he looked like a stranger that resembled Johnny Parish. It made him feel awful funny because all these years he thought he looked the way he thought he did and boy was he surprised. They were only thirteen years but boy he was used to seeing that one idea of the way he looked. Even that little scar on his forehead looked new. He guessed he was so used to having it and seeing it that it began to be a part of him that he never noticed. It was only about an inch long but faded now because his head grew and stretched the skin until it could hardly be seen. He even had a tiny mole beside his Adam's apple that he never noticed before.

So sometimes he'd look at himself in the mirror and he wouldn't see himself, not himself as Johnny Parish and what he thought he looked like, but himself as himself and what he really *did* look like.

That just about drove him nuts like thinking about dying. Johnny was awfully scared about dying. He wondered if it was something like sleeping and if there really was a heaven and hell. Roy told him one afternoon that he'd go crazy if he thought about it too much and that we had our own heaven and hell right here on earth with us every single day. He said too that he knew of a man that not only

wasted twenty years of his life, but a very brilliant carrier to boot, all because he worried and stewed around about death and dying, and that when the guy dies he might just possibly know at the last moment how foolish and vain he'd been.

Johnny knew right off the bat that it was old Howard Cooper because he was a conscious injector. So Johnny didn't think about dying *too* much.

After Aunt Irene left, Johnny followed Roy into the station and kidded: "You look like you didn't rack *out* last night."

"I've got a little headache." Roy smiled weakly and took the last three aspirins from the small tin box. He put them in his mouth and swallowed them with coffee. He looked up and smiled with a wink that made Johnny feel happy and warm all over. Roy let his eyes circle the station. He shook his head and went *humph!*

"I feel the same way too boy," Johnny murmured sadly.

"I know you do, Sport." Roy spoke with a soft understanding just like he might've known how bad Johnny really did feel. He smacked his lips and lit a cigarette, making a face. He took a drink of coffee and Johnny sat up on *his* corner of the desk.

The sliding door of the candy case was open just a crack and he could see the corner of the cigar box. His hairy old cash register without a bell. He made up his mind right there and then that when he grew up and had a car he'd never use a drop of Red Dot stuff because of what they did to Roy and him and *his* business. Cripe. . . .

"Buck-up," Roy smiled, "it's just a filling station."

Johnny turned. "No it's not—it's more than that to *me*. . . . Gee-whiz Roy, you know that." He looked over at the coal stove and saw the wind blowing leaves down the deserted boarded-up midway at Carnival Park. He saw tiny flakes of snow fall from low gray skies. He saw the closed camps and resorts and the beaches that were as cold as waves that rolled foamy up the sand. . . .

Johnny was startled fifteen miles up in the goddamn air when the phone right behind him rang with a piercing shrill. Roy laughed and Johnny scowled at him picking up the receiver, saying, "Davies' Oilco," before he thought it might be Roy's old mother and she was one nag of a witch he didn't want to talk to.

"Johnny?" Grandma asked. "Is this you?"

"Yeanh," he answered sourly knowing he had to go to the damn-darn store or something.

"Is Roy there?"

"Just a sec. . . ." He handed the receiver to Roy and whispered, "Grandma."

Roy raised his brow. "Hello?" He smiled. "Oh hello, Grandmother, how are you today? . . . Fine, fine. That's *fine*. What? . . . Oh I don't know if I can right this *minute*. . . . What's that? Yes. . . . Yes. . . . Un-huh, I see. . . . *What?*" Roy's face dropped and he looked up at Johnny and back down to the edge of the mouthpiece, "No, no *really*. . . . What's that? . . . I know you do but I really want to give up the station. . . . What? . . . No, *honestly*. I couldn't, Grandmother." His face went awfully sad and he licked his lips. "No really, I appreciate it though. . . . *Believe* me I do. . . . Surely. I just couldn't. That's right. . . ." His eyes went bright with tears. "I love you for it, Grandmother. Believe me I *do* . . . but I was giving up the station anyway. Thank you very much though. What? . . . Oh, yes, yes, that's right. Good-by. . . . Yes, I see. . . . Good-by."

Roy dropped the receiver in the cradle and swallowed hard. He frowned sadly and looked up at Johnny. "Grandma wanted me to come over and see her." Roy chewed on his cheek a second and continued. "She offered me five hundred dollars so we could keep the station open. . . ." His voice sort of cracked toward the end.

"Gee, is that right!"

Roy nodded solemnly, chewing at his sucked-in cheek, staring at the floor.

"She must've meant it," Johnny told him, "'cause I seen her bank-book about a month ago—she's got about *five* thousand dollars in the bank."

"It doesn't make any difference if she has the money or not, Sport," Roy said softly, "it's just the fact that she cared enough to offer it."

Roy got up and went to the doorway and leaned there smoking, looking out to the street. Every now and then he'd shake his head.

That made Johnny love Grandma more than he already did. He didn't want to love her because he knew she wasn't going to live too much longer and when she died he was going to remember kind things like this. It was just going to make him feel worse.

When Roy went out to the car Johnny could see he was hitting that goddamn bottle in the tacklebox. It was okay if he wanted to drink but Johnny had never seen him tight and he didn't want him getting that way on their last day.

Johnny sat there looking at the back of the candy case. Grandma

had a heart of pure gold. He took a lot of pennies last spring from her piggy-bank so he could buy bubble-gum and he knew he'd remember dirty things like that when she died.

Grandma got all the goddamn fucking blame for the goddamn fucking dent in the goddamn fucking breadbox. Aunt Marg just blew her goddamn fucking top all over the place and he was there but didn't say a word. When she died he'd remember that but good. When they put her in the ground he'd still hear Aunt Marg's screaming and Grandma's heavy sobbing. He'd been up in the attic at the head of the stairs holding his throat tight in his fists hearing it all. When he went down, Grandma was sitting at the table wringing her hands. She looked up at him with a wet tear-streaked face and her eyes pleaded for help as she sobbed, "Do-Do-Do you know ha-how this thing happened, Ja-Ja-Johnny?"

He shook his head and went out the side door hearing Aunt Marg scream, "Of course he *doesn't*! Of course he *doesn't* you—you . . . good *God*! What's the matter with you!"

As he walked over to the station that afternoon he knew he'd never forget Grandma's bewildered eyes begging him for the help he didn't give. Remember them, he had told himself, because when she dies they'll haunt you like her sobbing. They will haunt someone else too.

"Sport," Roy called from the car, "I have to go uptown a few minutes."

"I'll hold the *fort* down!" Go on and get drunk you goddamn son-of-a-bitch! I hope you're in a dirty lousy car wreck and get killed with your face all mashed and cut up so no one will ever recognize you!

As Johnny heard him starting the car the first few drops of rain began to fall. Everything was grayer. Roy drove off and Johnny sat there letting the tears roll warm down his cheeks and hang on his chin with a tickle.

Johnny dropped off the desk and went to the restroom. He looked in the mirror. It was darker in there because of the high window and his reflection was a gray shadow of blurred lines. "I hate your goddamn guts you *putrid* bastard," he sniffled. "You're a lousy no good. I hate you, Johnny Parish. . . . I—I hate your stinking guts."

The rain beat harder on the station roof and then he really broke down and cried. But he knew nothing would happen to Roy because he was a safe driver.

Roy came back about forty-five minutes later. He had a sack of Coneys for Johnny and another sack wrapped around a pint of whisky. His eyes were shiny and his breath smelled just like Dad's always did.

"Gotta celebrate today, Sport." Roy smiled crookedly and put his hand on Johnny's shoulder. "You don't care, do you, Sport?"

"No, Roy," he shook his head, "I don't care."

"Thatsa mi boy." He laughed, putting his arm around Johnny's neck. Roy went out to open a coke and he didn't stagger. He sat quietly at the desk with a glass of whisky and coke.

Johnny didn't blame him. He felt sorry for Roy because he thought Roy had an idea that Grandma loved him a heck of a lot better than his own mother did.

They kept the lights off and it was pretty dark in the station except at the desk where the gray light came in the window. The rain just kept on coming down and the humming noise on the tile roof got to be a sleepy drowsy sound. Johnny sat on the desk swinging his legs and eating his Coneys. Roy leaned back in the chair with his fingers laced across his stomach, talking about the war which he didn't often do.

They might as well have had a big sign above the station saying: STAY THE HELL AWAY! WE'RE OUT OF BUSINESS! WE WANT TO BE LEFT ALONE! because no one came.

Roy talked on and on and on in a quiet soft and even voice and opened cokes and drank whisky. He smiled a lot but the smiles were fake because they didn't stay up there long and they didn't warm Johnny.

Around eleven o'clock the rain let up a little. They just sat there in front of the window and talked and smelled the fresh cool air. It wasn't damp or chilly but clean and fresh.

When the pint was empty at noon Roy said, "The hell with it, Sport, let's take off an' drive over to Rockport."

"That sounds okay—but what about the inventory?"

"Ta hell with that too, Sport." He smiled tiredly. "We'll do it tomorrow."

Johnny started bringing things in while Roy took the money out of the cash register and moneybag, slipping it into his wallet. Then they locked the station and Roy drove toward Rockport.

The rain had turned to a drizzle and the *click-clack click-clack* of the windshield wipers made Johnny sleepy. He kicked off his shoes

and lay back with his head in Roy's lap. Roy put his warm hand on Johnny's arm and he looked up at Roy's sad and tired face. Johnny knew that he was feeling bad about a whole mess of things at once. If he cried he'd feel better. After Johnny cried it made him feel hollow and empty but not as bad as he did before.

He closed his eyes feeling the vibration of the engine and hearing the licking sizzle-hum of the tires. He was just about asleep when he jerked his eyes open with effort saying, "Can I drive, Roy?"

Roy squeezed his arm and lifted his hand to pull off to the side of the road. They changed seats and Johnny sat on the pillow and drove off. Roy leaned quietly against the door staring out the windshield and he didn't even tell Johnny to be careful of the slippery highway.

Johnny knew why: he knew that when he felt like he was going to bust out and bawl he never said one word because if he opened his mouth for anything there'd be nothing stopping him from letting loose. God but he felt sorry for Roy. He had so many troubles and so much on his mind. He just sat there and pretended he was playing with something in his fingers.

Johnny drove carefully. He felt like he did when he had shot the .32—in full command of a lot of power. Power was him. Driving in the rain was relaxing but not as much fun as driving at night. The cars and big trucks whizzed and rumbled on by, giving him more confidence in himself. So did Roy because he didn't even pay attention to the road. He just looked thinkingly down at his hands in his lap. Johnny would've liked to have known what it was Roy thought he was playing with in his fingers.

Johnny suddenly wondered what would happen to him if he got killed without getting a piece: "Gee," he said reflectively with a short laugh, "what if I went and got killed without even getting a piece?" He turned to Roy. "Wouldn't that be a sad ending?"

Roy smiled.

Guess it wasn't very good. Man it sure made him feel big to drive. Roy taught him everything. There wasn't a thing Johnny wouldn't do for him. Just before they arrived at Rockport, Roy had him pull over to a roadhouse.

"I'll be right back, Sport," he said without looking at Johnny as he closed the car door.

Johnny sat there gunning the engine. He'd just robbed a bank and the goddamn cops were on his ass. He was going ninety miles an hour and Louie and Charlie were in the back seat shooting out the

window. Stella, his peroxide babe, was up front with him. She put a fag in his mouth. He snorted a thanks. His hairy old shoulder was bleeding pretty bad where that bankguard plugged him. He did to that damn bankguard what the damn phony cowboys do in every crummy movie: he shot him fifty-five times between the eyes without loading his six-shooter once. Jesus, what a laugh.

Why did Roy want to go and drink so much?

Roy came back out smelling of fresh whisky and his eyes looked glassy and sleepy like he just woke up. Roy took the wheel because they were almost at Rockport. They drove in on Madison Boulevard and went to the Belmont Theatre and saw *Gilda* with Rita Hayworth and Glenn Ford. Old Rita Hayworth was pretty sexy all right and she was always giving Glenn Ford a hard time. That Glenn Ford was one of Johnny's favorite actors. He had a mouth just like Johnny's and he talked a little bit like Johnny too.

Johnny ate about forty sacks of popcorn and every time he headed back to where they were sitting, he'd just close his eyes and smell his way down to Roy.

After the show they went to Stone's Grill and ordered meatloaf dinners. While they waited for their food Roy drank about sixty-six double shots of whisky and looked a hell of a lot better than he did when they came out of the show. He was getting all tight again.

The waitress brought their dinners but Roy just picked at his food and shoved his plate to one side. He ordered a whisky-soda.

"Gee Roy, I wish you wouldn't *drink* so much," Johnny finally said after finishing his dinner.

"Okay Sport," he smiled dully, "I'll quit after this one, okay?"

"Sure." Johnny smiled. "I don't like it when you drink."

"I know." He lifted his shoulders tiredly and looked at Johnny with glassy eyes and they smiled at him with warm understanding even if his mouth didn't.

By the time they left Stone's it had quit drizzling and the air was cool and smelled of leaves and grass from the park in the square. Roy drove back to Wilkinson City and they didn't stop to have a Party.

Sunday was a hell of a day. There was still a misty drizzle and everything was gray and chilly. Johnny was at the station by eight o'clock and Roy was already taking inventory. He didn't look too bright, but gee-whiz he was glad Roy was out of that mood and

okay again. Johnny drank so much pop that morning he couldn't take inventory for leaking.

Grandma called up around eleven and told Johnny to bring Roy home for dinner. He told her okay.

"Why you *stinker*," Roy laughed, mussing up Johnny's hair, "why didn't you ask me?"

He was old Roy again. "'Cause," he grinned, "'jus' 'cause, that's why."

When Johnny went in to comb his hair, Roy called some uncle of his and said that if he had any intention of eating at his place, he'd just better get a taxi. Roy hung up and turned to Johnny who came out from the restroom. "Ain't that right, Sport!"

"You damn *betcha*!"

They both winked with short agreeing nods. Old Roy and Johnny just about agreed on everything except on what was natural and what wasn't.

At noon they went over to Grandma's and the first thing Roy said was, "I'm sorry I couldn't dress up, Grandmother. . . ."

"Pooh-pooh," she laughed, "you forget all about that. You are a working man, Roy. A working man is always welcome to sit at my table—to eat the food with peace at heart."

They were finished with the inventory at two o'clock. What little candy and gum was left in the case, Johnny dumped in a box and took out to the car. When he went back in the station he took one last sad look around. Roy put his hand on his shoulder and they went out the door. Roy locked the station for the last time and it seemed to Johnny that he was locking a very important part of his life. Don't feel sad, he told himself following Roy to the car, you still have one of the greatest things you ever got here.

They took a drive out in the country.

When they came back Johnny was feeling awfully tired and depressed. There wasn't any more Lake or anything. Whenever he thought of that crummy school he wanted to kill himself.

Just as if Roy'd been reading his mind he turned and said, "I want you to get in with a good group of kids at school, Sport."

"Aw, what the hell for?"

"Start going out with girls—mix it up."

"All girls can do is *giggle*," he said sourly. "I want me a woman." Roy sighed.

"I just can't stand a phony giggling *girl* is all," he added, "I never could."

Roy was silent and then Johnny asked him something he had never asked before. "Have you ever been in love, Roy?"

"Once." He licked his lips.

"What happened? Why didn't you marry her?" Johnny put his arm around Roy's shoulder.

"Had that accident. . . . Her father killed the marriage. It seemed he wanted a grandson so he poisoned her mind against me."

"Gee," Johnny shook his head sadly, "that was a *dirty* thing to do. . . . Do you still love her?"

"In a way yes and in a way no." Roy frowned. "She's happily married now."

"What was she like?"

"Forget it, Sport," he said softly.

Johnny knew Roy still cared just like he still cared about Rose. You don't want to talk about things like that. It's something you want to keep close yet burst out and tell at the same time. He is being with me like I was with him that time he tried to get me to talk about Rose.

Johnny ate a Baby Ruth.

Since Roy had to go to work at seven in the morning he wanted to go right home and go to bed. "We can see the same show tomorrow night."

"Yeanh," Johnny agreed, "there won't be as many there anyway."

After Roy took Johnny home he said he'd be up tomorrow night.

"Okay." Johnny waved and went up to the house.

Barbara was down at JoAnn's house and Danny had just come back from Walt's. Johnny took the radio upstairs to his room. Then he remembered he'd left the damndarn candy in the car. He had a sack of potato-chips in his desk drawer and he gave Danny a crummy dime to rub his back during Jack Benny's program. They ate the stale old potato-chips and he had to give Danny another hairy old dime to rub his back through Amos 'n' Andy.

He dreamed of Rose that night like he often did.

Chapter 26

THE days dragged boringly on and during the last week of September, Johnny signed the roster with about a hundred other boys who were also going out for the football team. That same afternoon Coach Shaver ordered an assembly in the gym when school let out.

Coach Shaver was a tall slim chinless man with his thin brown hair clipped short. He wore a clean pair of pressed slacks that sagged down below his stomach with his forest-green sportshirt tucked in neatly. He always wore slacks and forest-green sportshirts.

Coach Shaver glanced over the group of boys seated in the gym before him and thrust his hands deep into the pockets of his sagging slacks. He began to jingle the loose change in his right-hand pocket as he swaggered back and forth in front of the boys with his voice echoing hollow in the empty, high-ceilinged gym:

"Now every *one* of you guys—every one"—it sounded as if he were talking in a jar—"has a chance, an *equal* chance. . . . Just because there's close to two hundred names—a *hundred* names signed on the roster—it don't mean that you're going to be *overlooked*. Overlooked or left out."

Coach Shaver suddenly halted and his eyes swept over them. He resumed his nervous swagger with his frayed cuffs dragging at his heels. "Of course now," he said watching himself slide one foot before the other, "most of my *first* string—my first string from last year—will be a few steps higher on the stairs of *experience*. But that don't mean—*mind* me now, that don't mean that you Seventh Grade boys don't have an equal chance. An equal chance. It's *ability*." Coach Shaver turned to the boys and spelled *ability* slapping the four fingers of his right hand in the palm of his other with each letter. He began walking with a swaying stride and said with a shrug, "Maybe some of my old boys lost their *zip* during the summer—hard to tell yet, hard to tell. . . .

"Don't you guys go thinking—I don't want you fellas going and thinking I play *favorites*. I don't play ball that way. If you're going to

be on my team you've got to show *ability*—that *ability* and the good old-*fashioned* school spirit. That spirit to win. . . . It's true we didn't win many games last year—we didn't win very many but we never missed showing up for one."

No one cracked a face until they saw the Coach smiling and even then the chuckles were weak and faded as quickly as they began: South Cherrytree High had lost *all* their football games last year.

"Now," Coach Shaver continued, "we're going to start weeding out you boys—going to weed you out. Yes *sir!*" He stopped and his eyes looked up from the floor and swept over the boys. He frowned. "It's going to be tough—*mighty* tough!"

Johnny dropped out the first week.

Miss June Carson, Johnny's Geography teacher, was a very attractive woman in her mid-thirties, plump in a hefty sensual way and one of the most popular and attractive teachers at South Cherrytree.

By the time Johnny had Geography toward the close of the school day, he couldn't help but notice that the dark-haired Miss Carson had to shave every day. Even though she wore a heavy powder it still couldn't hide what was termed around the school as the *Five O'clock Shadow*. Johnny really felt sorry for Miss Carson in what he thought of as *Double-Duty*. Roy had once told him that men go through the daily agony of shaving to compensate for women's pain and sickness during monthly menstruation.

Since Miss Carson had both, Johnny often wondered just exactly how bitter she felt about it. She always seemed cheerful and happy and was one of the most pleasant teachers he had. She was one of those rare teachers with a keen sense of humor who always liked to joke around, let the class chew gum if they wanted and never questioned a restroom pass or the length of time it took, as long as it didn't happen too often. Miss Carson was one teacher you never enjoyed taking advantage of.

Another of Johnny's favorite teachers was Miss Lee McCarthy who taught his First Period English. He came to admire and look up to her with more love and admiration than he had ever held for any other teacher.

Lee McCarthy was a small woman of thirty-three with raven-black hair cut short and tousled around her clear glowing face. Her teeth were slightly prominent, which gave her a girlish appearance. She wore no make-up except a little powder on her turned-up nose and a

slight dab of lipstick. Her cheeks were always rosy and her big dark eyes were always bright and gay behind hornrim glasses. Lee McCarthy always wore neat trim tweed suits over white frilly blouses with the heavy suit jackets cutting down the thrust of what small breasts she did have.

No matter what he was in his Night Stories, Lee was always the fresh young girl who was in love with him. Not madly in love with him like all the other girls in his Night Stories, but just good in love with him in her quiet, soft way. Golly, they had beach parties up at the Lake and everything. He didn't have to save her too many times, just enough to prove he loved her. Maybe from a madman or an escaped killer or something like that.

During his First Period English the Night Story with Lee would still be fresh and vivid in his mind and he'd look at her seated behind her desk as he thought, You don't remember what happened last night! You don't remember flying with me to Cairo and Rome and Paris! You don't know how happy we were! You don't remember all the gay and exciting things we shared in. . . .

Just why in the hell did Johnny Parish have to fall in love with women he could never have? I'll have loved a hundred women by the time I'm twenty-one, he thought one afternoon in studyhall, and by then all the love I had to give will be given to women I can never have and there will be nothing left but false love. Phooey and bulldung!

Sex in school was a Big Deal. It was always fascinating to find out what teachers were sleeping with each other. It made good conversation. In grade school it wasn't so much who was sleeping with who as it was being in the know as to who was a smoker and who was a drinker.

Most of the Eighth and Ninth graders knew all the latest inside dope with the Complete Histories of the Teachers' Sex Lives. They themselves boasted of taking girls down into the pine woods behind the football field at noon. But they'd be damned if they'd pimp for the Virgin Seventh Graders: they could dig up their own nooky.

Johnny didn't mention anything about the bone. He was going to play it cool and smart by trying to get in with the most athletic girl in school. Just wait until one of them suckers get caught. Boy-o-boy, he could see the raising of the school roof and old man Gunnysack's head rolling down the halls.

Roy and Johnny still met almost every night. Johnny did most of his homework in studyhall but Roy helped him a lot with Math because that was Johnny's poorest subject. Fractions were a pain and gave him headaches and made him sweat and feel disgusted and clammy. Every summer since the Third Grade he forgot his multiplication tables and always had to learn them over. Roy told him that if he wanted to be a draftsman, Mathematics was one of the most important tools he'd have to learn to work with. *Shhhheeze!*

If they didn't go to a show, they took in a boxing or wrestling match at the Armory. On some evenings they would take a drive over to Liberty and swim and shower at the YMCA. For some reason, Roy didn't like the "Y" at Wilkinson City.

It was the first of October and Roy was driving back to Wilkinson City from Liberty. They had taken a swim and shower and had gone to the show. The night was cool and clear and the scattered stars glittered brightly and coldly across the dark sky. The fields smelled of cut hay and alfalfa and there was a dampness in the air.

"Well, Sport," Roy said regretfully, "winter will be knocking on our door in about another month. . . . Do you like skiing?" He brightened.

Johnny sat in the seat with his shoes off and his legs crossed under him. "It won't be long until spring'll be back," he murmured gravely. "Things'll be the same."

After a long pause Roy said, "No, Sport." He licked his lips and they glistened moist in the dashboard lights. "Things are never the same again. You can never go back *directly* to the same things."

"Sure they are . . . you can *make* them that way."

"No," Roy said softly, "that's where you're wrong."

"They are too." He frowned and put his elbows on his knees and laid his head in his hands. He was seeing red against an unending checkerboard with stars and comets and shooting bright sparks.

"What's the matter?" inquired Roy's troubled voice. "What brought all this on?"

"Everything . . . everything," he said in his hands as a fearful hotness washed down his back. "I'm going to grow up and you won't love me any more . . . that's what. I always want you to love me . . . nothing to change!"

"A father doesn't stop loving his son just because he's growing up," Roy answered in a soothing voice. "As a rule, they generally become closer companions."

"I don't want anything but to always be with you and be your son." Johnny saw the beacon from the airport. A white beam of light circled across the sky above the dark shadow trees. He saw a red flash followed by a green and soon the white light shot across the sky again. That's always the same, he reflected, but different the same.

"I'll always love you, Roy." Johnny turned from the window and put his arm around Roy's shoulder. "Always treat me like a son, will you? Just don't ever be mean or mad with me. It isn't because of all the books and things you buy me. It's you that I care about . . . honest."

Roy nodded.

After Roy took Johnny home he stopped down at the Tweed Street Café for a couple of short beers. He was the only customer. Dago Joe, the owner, sat in the booth reading the paper.

Roy sat at the bar slowly drinking his glass of beer. It was flat and tasted like the oil he worked with down at Wilson-Miller. What a hell of a job. All he did was stand for eight goddamn hours splashing oil on a piece of steel, shove it on down to Jack and grab another piece of steel. Even his cigarettes tasted like oil. At the filling station they had tasted like kerosene and gas. What was all this getting him? Where the hell was he going? There had to be some kind of goal. His life would be empty and meaningless if it wasn't for Johnny. How long was it going to last anyway? How long could it last? Look how lucky they'd been so far . . . or were they? In the air there was the Point of No Return but you always knew beforehand how far you could go.

Instead of ordering another beer he went on home. The house was dark except for the light in Mother's and Father's room. Mother had said something that morning about going to the show with Uncle Harry if he himself wouldn't take her. Roy went up the stairs in the dark and made his way down the hall to where the light crept out from under the door. He knocked. "Father?"

"Yes—come in, come in."

"Hello, Dad," Roy closed the bedroom door, "how are you tonight?"

"Feeling a little better," answered the old gray gaunt-faced man. He gazed up at Roy with large brown eyes.

The reading light cast deep angular shadows into the far dark corners of the room. Its pale light played softly on his mother's odds-

and-ends which were on shelves along the wall and over the cluttered dresser and weak-legged end tables. One year she collected little glass dogs. Then it was ivory elephants, followed by tiny wooden carved horses. This year it was dainty little china shoes and slippers.

The room smelled stale.

"What's on your mind, son?"

"Nothing in particular. . . ." Jesus Christ, couldn't they talk about something?

"How did work go today?"

"Little slow." He smiled. "Did Mother get you those new pills Doctor Gibbon prescribed?"

"Yes. They were awfully expensive." Father cleared his throat. "I sure appreciate how you're helping us." He sighed.

"I'm only doing it for you, Dad. Only you. Don't forget it. You are completely out of your mind if you think I'd stay here if you were well."

"Your mother isn't in good health," he said sadly with a weary groan.

"She's as strong as a bull. She just tells you that. She wants you to feel that you're a—aw the *hell* with it!"

"Don't talk that way, son," Father said mildly and turned down the corner of the page in his *Zane Gray Western Magazine*. He laid it beside him on the blue wool blanket.

"That's the way I see it." Roy touched his father's hand. "I have to go to bed now, I'm really tired."

"Good night, son."

"Good night, Dad."

"Son . . ."

"Yes." Roy paused at the door and turned.

"Nothing."

"Sure?"

"Yes." He smiled, picking up his magazine. "It was nothing."

Roy closed the door and walked down the dark hallway to his room. It felt as if Charlotte were going to reach out of the darkness and touch his arm like she always used to do.

The following morning at the breakfast table Barbara said, "Do you remember a Mr. Bentley, Johnny?"

"Who?" Johnny frowned.

"Mr. Bentley—the man at the Boys' Club."

"Oh yeah," he mumbled sleepily as he dunked his toast into the hot cocoa.

"He was asking about you," Barbara continued. "He's started up the club again and he wants you to come and join."

"Where'd you see him?" He looked up at Barbara as she finished the last button on her white uniform.

"At Rotary yesterday. He seems to be a perfect gentleman. Very educated man, too."

"What'd he do? Use a lot of big words?"

"Gee," Danny sighed, spreading jam over his toast, "I wish I was inna Boys' Club."

"Ya gotta be twelve," Johnny muttered.

"I still wish it."

"That is fine." Grandma smiled, patting his head of wild brown hair.

Johnny wished Grandma'd nose out.

"What's fine?" Margaret chirped brightly as she came out from the hallway. She smiled a good morning around the table and began to pour a cup of coffee.

"Johnny," Grandma told her, "he is going to the Boys' Club."

Margaret smiled. "Oh how *nice*!"

Johnny scowled. "That's *sissy* stuff. . . . And anyhow, I don't like that old Mr. *Bentley*."

"Why?" Grandma asked.

"I just don't like him is all."

"He's a very important man down at Magnet Electric," Barbara told him with a wise nod.

"So what? That don't cut no *cake* with me. . . ." Johnny plunged his toast down through the surface of his cocoa.

"Now you can just *cease* being impudent, young man!" Barbara warned him coolly with a shaking finger. "I can begin to tell already that you're hanging around with the wrong bunch at school. You never talked cocky like that this summer when you were running around with Roy." She raised her brows. "It's just started since you began going back to school—and I'll tell you right here and now that I don't like it *one* bit!"

"Well, he never made me ever try to get forced into any Boys' Clubs."

Barbara closed her eyes. "No one is *forcing* you." She opened her eyes and shook her head. "I just can't see what you have against the

club. You never *missed* a Boy Scout meeting over in Malvern. . . .” Then her voice became firm and authoritative. “You’re going to go whether you like it or *not*, young man. At least you can go and give it a *try*—that’s the thing to do.”

Johnny felt like spitting in his cocoa. He didn’t say anything.

“You will like it,” Grandma assured him.

“Sure you will.” Margaret smiled.

“Of course,” Barbara agreed softly.

“I wish *I* was old enough to go to the club,” Danny said hopefully.

“Sure, Sport,” Roy told him that evening as Johnny drove toward Rockport, “I think it’s a fine idea. It’ll help develop your muscles and teach you a lot of things we can use next month when we go hunting. . . . you used to be in the Scouts, didn’t you?”

“Yeanh—over in Malvern. I passed my *Tenderfoot*.” Johnny kept his eyes on the road. “But this is different. That’s no Scout Troop. Just a lousy old club and I don’t like Bentley.”

“There must be *some* reason behind it. . . .”

“*Jesus!*” Johnny exclaimed. “Didn’t you ever meet a guy ya didn’t like right off the bat?”

“No—I look for the good in everyone.” Roy grinned with a sly twinkle in his eye.

Johnny turned and caught it and looked back at the road. “Okay, okay, *okay*,” he said exhaustedly, “I’ll go for *two* lousy *crummy* weeks and that’s all!”

“That’s my Sport.” Roy tapped the side of Johnny’s head with his finger. “Always do the sensible thing.”

“I wish you wouldn’t mess up my hair,” he said sounding just like old Jimmy Stewart. He turned and smiled but Roy was lighting a cigarette.

He said it again but it sounded like him.

The night was cold. The next morning the first snow lay thinly scattered over the half-frozen earth.

Chapter 27

THE following Monday evening Roy stopped by at six-thirty to take Johnny down to the club meeting at the church. Grandma poured him a cup of coffee and cut a large, almost triangular slab of fudge cake. It was the first time Grandma had baked in over six months.

"It's really delicious." Roy smacked his lips. "About as delicious as you, Grandmother."

"Ach, go on with you," she laughed.

"Is Barb here?"

"No," Margaret answered from the kitchen, "she went down to the Capital with that JoAnn—the woman she works with at the hotel. I guess they're going to bring her husband home. Did you know he was in the Vet's Hospital?"

"No," Roy half turned his head, "I don't believe I even know the gentleman."

"I baked it this morning," Grandma said.

"It's really good." Roy nodded. "You can bake in my kitchen any time."

Grandma laughed and delightedly clapped her hands.

"He's been in the mental ward for the past six months," Margaret said as she wiped off the stove. "He's convinced he's got a traveling cancer."

"Is that right?"

"Does your mother bake?" Grandma asked.

"Not very much." He smiled sadly.

"I've never heard of anything so ridiculous as a *traveling* cancer," Margaret continued. "All the doctors say he's well, but JoAnn told Barbara he secretly doesn't believe them."

"Huh!"

"I just had to do something." Grandma shrugged and pulled her shawl tight across her rounded shoulders. "Is it really good?"

"Hmmmmmmmmmmmmm," Roy nodded seriously, "very good, Grandmother."

"Anyone in their right mind," Margaret added haughtily, "would know there's no such disease as a traveling cancer."

"That's right." Roy half turned his head, then looked back to Grandma with a warm smile.

"Some people get the silliest notions." Margaret smiled as she entered the dining room. She sighed herself down into a chair beside Roy.

Roy quickly tore his eyes from Grandma and gazed down into his half-filled cup.

"*Mama!*" Margaret said sharply. "Get your *teeth* up!"

Grandma clicked her teeth together and then squeezed her upper plate to the roof of her mouth with her thumbs. "They always seem to slip," she apologized softly.

Danny came downstairs and closed the attic door saying, "Hi Roy—ol' Johnny's g-g-gettin' dressed. Said he won't be long."

"Fine. . . . How was school today?"

Danny ran his hands deep into the pockets of his denim pants and shoved out his lower lip. "Aw," he said out of the corner of his mouth, hunching his shoulders, "it weren't *too* bad."

"*Wasn't.*" Margaret smiled.

"Wasn't too bad," he said sitting down next to Grandma, combing the wild brown hair up off his forehead with spread fingers.

"Already he's got a girl friend," Grandma chuckled.

Danny blushed and grinned. "Naw, I wuz ju-ju-jus' kiddin'."

"*Ho-ho!*" Roy laughed and nodded knowingly.

"You can't have girl friends and study, can you?" Margaret asked Danny.

"Nope." He shook his head and his hair slipped back down over his forehead. Danny sat up. "Jimminy Christmas I wish I was old enough to go to a club!"

Johnny came down buttoning his heavy navy-blue pea jacket, "Ready to go?"

"Sure," Roy answered.

"Better put on a cap," Grandma warned. "It is cold out."

"Aw, it'll be okay."

"He don't wanna mess up his *pretty* hair," Danny told them. "He thinks 'ere's gonna be a bunch of girls down'ere. . . ."

"Drop dead, goon."

"Don't talk like that," Grandma said.

Johnny ignored her as Roy finished his coffee.

"What time will you get out?" Margaret asked Johnny.

"Around nine," he answered.

"I'll bring him home," Roy said standing up.

"Be good boy." Grandma smiled.

"I will—so-long."

"Good-by Grandmother, Margaret." Roy nodded his head, "And thanks again for the cake and coffee."

"You are very welcome."

Roy turned to Danny. "You'd better do that homework." He smiled.

"Awwwwww," he sniffed sourly, "I'd rather go with you."

They all laughed but stopped as his half-tearful voice rose above them. "Please Johnny," he begged, "see if Mr. Bentley'll let me come to the next *meeting*, huh?"

"I'll ask'im," Johnny said and they left.

It was several minutes after seven when Roy pulled up to the side entrance of the church. "Act your age now." Roy slapped Johnny's leg.

"Yeanh," he said sourly. "Say, Roy." Johnny turned in the seat and looked up into Roy's face. It was green from the go-light. "What are you going to do?"

"I don't know. Maybe go home and read or go—I don't know. . . . Why?"

"I want to go with you. I don't like stuffed *shirts* and Bentley's an old stuffed shirt." Johnny grinned and nodded. "You'd run a hell of a good Boys' Club."

Roy smiled and his face went yellow and flashed red. "Go on, who are you trying to kid?"

"No one—that's who."

"You'd better go on now, Sport. You're late already. I'll be here at nine on the nose."

"Okay," he said glumly.

"Sport—" Roy called out as Johnny was about to close the car door.

"Yeah?" He leaned in with his hand on the back of the seat.

"Why doesn't Little Orphan Annie have eyes?"

Johnny looked dumbly at Roy and then remembered the joke he made on the Fourth of July. "I was just kidding," he smiled, "I don't know why. . . ." He laughed. "What made you ask?"

"It's been driving me nuts all day."

"I'll think up an answer." He laughed and closed the car door.

As Roy drove off Johnny walked up to a dark wooden door set back under an arch of massive chunks of dark stone covered with clinging ivy. He pulled open the heavy door and swung it wide, stepping inside. The door crashed shut and Johnny pulled his neck in. He was in a pitch-dark hallway smelling like old and musty hymnbooks. He immediately heard laughing voices and saw a crack of light coming from under a door. He went to the door and fumbled for the knob, found it and stepped into a dimly lit hallway and the voices and laughter were louder. He went through an open doorway and stood in a big basement room.

"Why hello there!" Mr. Bentley smiled walking up to Johnny with his hand extended. His fat cheeks and jowls quivered with every heavy step. "I thought you weren't coming, so I turned the hall lights off. I'm so *very* pleased you could make it."

"Thank you," Johnny said shaking his cool firm hand. His eyes swept over the room. There were five boys there, seated in chairs forming a half-circle around a long table. At the far end of the table in a tripod on the floor stood a torn and ragged American flag. At this end of the table there was a banner inscribed WILKINSON CITY BOYS' CLUB—UNIT 4. The golden fringe was dirty and frayed.

"Oh Warren," Bentley called, "come here, will you?"

But the young handsome man had already shoved back his chair and was approaching. It was embarrassing to be standing there with everyone looking at him. He grinned lopsidedly as he took Warren Carney's firm hand.

"Glad to meet you, Johnny." Warren smiled warmly. He was a tall thin dark-haired man with a narrow trimmed mustache.

"Oh boys," Bentley spun around, "I want you all to meet our new member, Johnny Parish."

Johnny half turned toward Bentley, then looked at the smiling boys who stood up and walked over to him. They all shook Johnny's hand solemnly and told him they were glad to have him in their unit. Johnny had never met any of them before.

Bentley asked Earl Proctor if he'd show Johnny where they hung their coats. Earl was a tall blond-haired boy with a slim hook nose, large bulging wet-looking eyes, and his forehead and chin were covered with pimples.

Johnny hung his coat on a hanger behind a green painted plywood

screen. He told Earl thanks and sat down in a wooden folding chair someone had opened. He was beginning to feel a little easier.

"Johnny," Bentley'd been staring at him all the time, "we haven't got a large membership as yet, and we are *extremely* glad to have you on board. There are two chaps that couldn't make it tonight, and with them we shall have eight members, including you. . . . Our dues are ten cents a week which go into our club fund for suppers, or for the equipment we will eventually need.

"Warren here," Bentley tilted his head toward Warren, "is the Assistant Coach and Treasurer." Bentley smiled broadly. "If there's any information you need, by all means please come to us."

"I will." Johnny smiled and swallowed.

Warren Carney read the minutes of the last meeting. Earl Proctor had suggested a camping trip sometime toward the end of the month, from Saturday morning until Sunday evening. The motion had been seconded by Frank Jackson, a dark-haired boy with a chubby continuously smiling face. Mike Nobel, a short stocky boy with a crew-cut, had passed the motion to third. It was finally official that during the last weekend of October, weather permitting, the club would go out on an overnight trip. The minutes of the last meeting were concluded and there was twenty-six dollars and eighty-five cents in the club fund.

Johnny was conscious of Bentley staring at him while Warren was reading the minutes. It was uncomfortable. Every time he happened to glance over at Bentley, the man flashed a smile.

"I makes a motion," Benny Morgan said standing up, "dat we have one of dem *Fodder* Suppers jus' before T'anksgivin'."

Johnny thought Benny Morgan talked worse than his old Uncle Cliff.

"Second the motion!" Ernest Baker said.

"How about it, Johnny?" Bentley smiled.

He awkwardly stood up. "I third the motion!"

"Fine." Bentley beamed. "Just speak up—you're one of us now."

Johnny sat down feeling pretty keen. Aw, the hairy old club wasn't *too* bad.

They proposed to have the supper there in the church basement. They had permission to use the kitchen, and as Reverend Kingsman told Bentley, and Bentley repeated to the boys, "We could have our meetings in the pulpit if we so desired."

The boys smiled and Bentley beamed brilliantly.

"All right boys," Bentley said, "it's settled. We'll have a baked-bean supper, hotdogs, potato salad, ice cream and cake, milk, and coffee for the fathers. . . ." He cleared his throat. "Now we'll have to have some form of entertainment."

Earl Proctor stood up. "Ernie here, he plays a real *keen* trumpet."

"Yeanh *man!*" Frank Jackson exclaimed.

"I dig him the most," Earl said and sat down.

They all laughed and looked at Ernie who stood up scratching the back of his head. "Gee, Mr. Bentley, I couldn't play no trumpet without a bunch of instruments backing me up. . . . And I don't know *anything* much good except jazz and that ain't exactly the right kind of music to play in a church. Anyway, my old—my *dad*, he don't care too much for jazz, so I request that the motion be dropped."

"Of course." Bentley nodded and Ernie sat back down.

"Benny can play hillbilly folk music on a comb and *toilet* paper." Earl grinned.

They laughed and Benny said, "I'll *clobber* ya after da meetin'."

Bentley smiled patiently.

Mike Nobel stood up. "I could do magic tricks."

"Excellent!" Bentley sat up straight with his hands flat on the table. "That's wonderful!"

"Carl ain't here," Earl said, "but he can do imitations of famous people. From Roosevelt to Gary Cooper—he's good, too."

"Fine, fine." Bentley smiled and turned to Johnny explaining, "Carl Mullver is one of the boys absent tonight."

Johnny made an O with his mouth and nodded.

Warren turned to Bentley. "I've got an old radio script at home. It's a very comical sketch that could be read by three of the boys behind one of those screens. You hardly need any sound effects. . . ."

"Indeed!" Bentley nodded. "That's *superb!* Why don't you dig it out and I can arrange to get it mimeographed down at the plant."

"All right," Warren agreed, "I'll bring it down next week. . . . It's really a sidesplitter." He smiled to himself.

"I'm sure Johnny would like a part in it." Bentley turned smiling to Johnny.

"Sure. . . ." He grinned. Sometimes in his Night Stories he was a radio actor just like that Howard Duff that plays Sam Spade. Gee,

this might be the start of a big carrer for him. Golly-whiskers, he'd probably end up in the movies and everything.

Bentley suggested the meeting come to a close and that Earl Proctor and Benny Morgan study their camping notes while the other boys worked on their bird spotting. As Johnny walked away talking to Mike Nobel, Bentley called to him. "Oh Johnny, bring a chair and come here, will you? I'd like to have an informal chat with you so that we may become better acquainted."

"Sure." Johnny pulled a chair up to the table across from Bentley. As he sat down Warren stood up with his pencil and notebook, excusing himself. Johnny found himself wishing that Warren had stayed. He had a mouth and mustache just like Dad's. His eyes were soft and gentle like Roy's. Johnny knew that Warren was the kind of a guy you could talk freely with, saying all the hells and damns you wanted. Maybe you could even talk about pussy with him. Yeanh man, that's the kind of a guy that should be head of the club.

Johnny couldn't see Bentley taking a crummy hike or building a lousy fire by rubbing two sticks together. He looked too stuck-up and dignified for anything like that. There seemed to be a barrier surrounding Bentley that not only commanded respect but demanded it. He figured the old fart was somewhere around fifty or in his late forties.

Bentley took out a package of Pall Malls and tapped a cigarette on the crystal of his watch, rolled the other end over his tongue, slipped it in the corner of his mouth and lit it with a Zippo, making a sucking noise as he dragged. Johnny was fascinated with Bentley's every movement. He smelled very clean: soapy clean, as if he had just stepped from a shower.

"Your mother has talked a lot about you," Bentley finally said. "She's *awfully* proud of you."

"Oh?" Johnny grinned.

"I think she's a *very* charming and beautiful woman."

"Thank you." He smiled: what else could he say? "She thinks a lot of you, Mr. Bentley."

"That's nice to hear. I'm very glad."

Johnny said nothing.

Bentley cleared his throat. "I was just wondering, since the tragedy of your mother's divorce, if your father will still be able to attend our supper?"

"Jeez I don't know." Johnny frowned and licked his lips. "But I can write him tonight and find out."

"*Splendid!* Though of course there might be someone who could come in his place, should he be *unable* to attend. . . ."

"*Hummmmmmm*—oh sure! Yeah, there's Roy Davies." He looked up to Bentley's chubby clean face. "He's sort of like a father to me—I could bring him."

"Davies, Davies, Davies. . . ." Bentley said, frowning as if he were trying to recall or connect the name. He was looking above Johnny's head.

"He's my boss—*was* my boss." Bentley looked down into his face. "I worked for him this summer at the filling station."

"Oh, of course," Bentley's face lit up, "your mother had slightly mentioned him. I try and make it a point to *always* remember a name and a face."

Johnny smiled and nodded. Bentley was drumming the fingers of one hand on the table and it sounded like galloping horses.

"How did you like filling-station work, Johnny?"

"It wasn't *too* bad—I liked it."

"It's a very dirty occupation, though."

"Yes," Johnny laughed, shaking his head, "it sure is."

"But I do suppose a lot of chaps had to give up their summer vacation in order to work." Bentley smacked his lips and tilted his head. He took a sucking drag and blew the smoke high over Johnny's head.

"Yes sir." He smiled and noticed that Bentley's hands trembled when he wasn't drumming the table or playing with the cigarette in his fingers. All businessmen and big shots were nervous wrecks.

"A lot of them," Bentley opened his gray eyes wide, "high school chaps that is, were working down at our plant this last summer."

"I didn't mind filling-station work. . . ."

"Of course not. Of course not. It was by all probability an *exceedingly* valuable experience for you. I've always firmly believed that boys should work as they grow," Bentley nodded tight-lipped seriously, "but I've also believed that while a chap is young, he should swim and fish and play tennis and have a good time during his summers." He chuckled and tilted his head, reminding Johnny, "You're only young once."

"Oh I had a good time this summer," Johnny hurriedly assured him.

"Did you take a vacation," Bentley chuckled, "from your vacation?"

"No," Johnny said slowly, "but I did go fishin' and swimming—in fact I had me a good summer."

"Where?" Bentley laughed mockingly through exhaling smoke. "Out at Jackson Dam? You can't enjoy yourself out there. . . ."

"Oh no," Johnny frowned, rapidly shaking his head, "we went up to the Lake a lot. We swam and fished up there."

"We?" Bentley questioned politely. "You mean your father and you?"

It seemed to hang there and Bentley kept his brows up.

"No, Roy. . . ."

"Oh," Bentley lifted his chin closing his eyes, "your boss, that ah—Mr. Davies."

"Yes sir."

"Fine," Bentley smiled warmly, "so you finally did tear yourself away from the station after all, huh?"

"Yes sir." Johnny smiled and nodded.

"I enjoy myself every time I go up to the Lake." Bentley flicked his ashes to the floor. "But I haven't been going up there for several years though. Nadine, my wife"—he smiled tenderly—"Mrs. Bentley and I, we've been going down to South Carolina. I've purchased a small island down there in a coastal inlet. For the past several years I've been building a cottage down there during my month's vacation."

"Shhhhheeeze," Johnny said in amazement, "is that right?" Man-alive he'd always wanted to live in a cottage on an island. He was going to make something up and use that for his Night Story tonight. He and Lee McCarthy were taking a vacation down on a South Carolina island. Remember that now: i-l-a-n-d. Lee and the Island. Tonight.

"Yes," Bentley sighed, "South Carolina is a beautiful place."

"And you're building your cottage on the island *all* by yourself?" Johnny opened his eyes wide.

"Yes, Johnny," he smiled, "all by myself."

"You must like carpentry. . . ."

"Indeed I do—very much. I've got a modern workshop down in my basement." He chuckled. "I'm always building something."

"Jeez!" Johnny whistled softly and his eyes flashed bright. "We got a workshop at school—electric saws and drills and lathes. . . . *Everything!*"

"Oh?" he said with interest. "I have all the latest electrical equipment too. . . . Do you like that kind of work?"

"Yeanh man," Johnny nodded excitedly, "but I like Mechanical Drawing just a *little* bit better—learning how to draw up blueprints." He looked up and Bentley snapped a smile, nodding that he knew. His gray eyes gazed deep and searchingly into Johnny's.

Johnny looked down at the varnished splintery-edged table. "In Geography," he continued with less enthusiasm, "we're studying *North* Carolina." He looked up at Bentley. "In a couple of weeks we'll prob'ly be on South Carolina. . . ."

"I see." Bentley flicked his ashes to the floor. "So you like drafting, eh? I drew up my own plans—from my own designs."

"Hey," Johnny smiled, "you're a jack of all trades, huh?"

"Not quite." Bentley smiled with appreciation, looking at the smoking tip of his cigarette. "I was planning to build my cottage up at the Lake," his eyes turned to Johnny, "but when I retire I'd rather live in the South."

"Yeanh, that would be nice." Johnny watched Bentley put the brown stained end of the cigarette in his mouth. As Bentley sucked in a drag Johnny said, "Oh I don't know, *I'd* rather live up at the Lake."

"So you like it up there, what?" Bentley asked through a great cloud of grayish smoke.

"Sure do boy." He sighed.

"You say you went up just about *every* weekend?" Bentley smiled lifting his brow.

"Yes sir—just about."

"How *wonderful*! I bet your mother truly enjoyed every moment. No doubt it probably was a welcome *diversion* from her job at the hotel."

"Old *Mom* didn't go up too much—just a couple of times. Mostly it was just me and Roy."

"That Roy must be some fine chap."

"You can bet your *boots* he is." Johnny laughed and reached down pretending he was scratching the inside of his thigh. Man did that feel good.

"Sometime you and I will have to go fishing together. I'll lay odds that you are an *expert* by now."

"Naw," he wrinkled his nose shaking his head, "I'm not so hot."

Bentley chuckled and sucked in a drag.

Johnny looked down at the scarred top of the varnished table. Bentley wasn't too stuffy. He didn't seem to be such a bad guy. He just

liked to sling fancy fat words around. And he was darn good at it, too. Johnny pulled back his sleeve and looked at Roy's watch. It was just quarter till eight. Golly he sure was hungry. He wished Grandma would bake some of that hairy old homemade bread, now that she was beginning to bake again. It smelled the whole house up with nothing but sweetness—no, that was out but good! Aunt Marg was still hollering and screaming her fool head off when he came home from school this afternoon because Grandma had baked a cake. She didn't want Grandma to mess around the oven because she'd forget about it being on and the house would either blow up or burn down. Aunt Marg wanted to know why that *damn* Polly Rodman couldn't come over and stop it. That's what she's supposed to do! If Grandma couldn't keep her snotty little measly fingers off the oven Aunt Marg had no alternative but to turn off the gas in the basement before she went to work. She'd put a padlock on the valve too! Grandma went sobbing to her room. Aunt Marg wouldn't eat any cake after supper and that made Grandma feel pretty bad. Old Aunt Marg can sure be bitchy if she wants. Johnny had an impulse to kick her right square in the stinking kibotchy when she got up from the table.

"Half the time," Johnny looked up into Bentley's face, "we'd stay there the whole *weekend*." He shook his head, smiling gladly as he remembered. "Golly that was fun—we'd really get in the fishing and swimming then."

"You don't say," Bentley replied casually. "Then there must have been some other chaps working at the station too, eh? Keeping it open during those weekends. . . ."

"Naw, we'd just close it up."

Bentley laughed. "I dare say that's bad for business."

"Yeanh," Johnny answered sourly, "that's why the *crummy* Company wouldn't let Roy renew his lease."

"That's a shame," Bentley replied sadly but hurriedly continued, "No doubt the Company was probably indirectly hurt by the station being closed over the weekends. A lot of people motor about during the weekends and that's when filling stations do excellent business."

"Yes sir," he nodded, "I guess you're right."

Bentley smiled warmly and sucked wondering on the brown stained end of his cigarette.

"But we're going to get another station," Johnny informed him.

"We're?"

"Oh yeah—I'm Roy's partner in everything."

"Is that right!" Bentley said in amazement.

"Sure thing. *Fifty-fifty*."

Bentley regarded his cigarette and said with a firm shake of his head, "That sure is awfully nice of Mr. Davies. I don't imagine many men would do that."

"Heck no." Johnny narrowed his eyes and leaned forward. "Well you see, Mr. Bentley," he said in a hushed confidential voice, "Roy got *hurt* once and he can't have any kids, see?"

Bentley leaned forward and nodded.

"And he sort of wants to pretend that he's my father, see. . . ." Johnny sat back. Bentley had a hell of a stinking breath. "He was going to marry Mom and make a home for us but it fell through."

"That was very nice of him—both offers were very generous." Bentley shrugged. "But perhaps your mother doesn't love him?"

"She doesn't."

"Did she tell you that?"

"No sir," Johnny looked at the table, "I know she's still in *love* with Dad. Just something I know without being told."

"Perhaps things will work out between them. It's happened to other divorced parents." Bentley smiled very kindly. "They might remarry again."

"Gee, I hope so."

The boys began playing balltag with a basketball and Bentley told Johnny to go and join them. Johnny stood up and held out his hand. "Glad to be in your unit, Mr. Bentley."

Bentley stood up and took his hand. "Why thank you, Johnny. Glad to have you aboard."

Johnny smiled up into the beaming face. Bentley's hand was still cold and clammy. As Johnny walked across the cement floor to join the boys, he finally realized what had been bothering him: the American flag was at the wrong end of the table. It should have been where the club banner was—to Bentley's right. *Shhhhheez!*

Johnny joined in the games and could those bastards throw that basketball.

Roy was parked outside the church at nine o'clock and Johnny hopped in the door suggesting they go to the Coney Island for a bite to eat.

Roy laughed and slapped Johnny's knee saying, "Okay, Sport."

Johnny had just finished his third Coney and he had a little chili left. He took a swallow of his milkshake and belched. "Well," he said to Roy who was sitting across the table drinking coffee, "the meeting wasn't too bad. . . ." He shrugged and grinned. "The old *phony* bastard asked to take me home."

"Don't call anyone a bastard, Sport—that is, not until you look at his birth certificate." Roy glanced around at the empty tables.

"I don't know if he really is or not. I don't mark the hairy old calendar like old Aunt Marg."

Roy lowered the heavy white mug. "What?"

"I was snooping through Aunt Marg's drawer the other day—looking for one of them nursing books that might have some dirty pictures in it—when I come across the *calendar* she had. She marks down the names of girls she knows and the day they get married. . . ." He snickered. "Gimme a cig."

"I'll give you a demonstration of my palm on your rear, you little squirt."

Johnny belched. "Now if I could fart I'd feel a hell of a lot better."

"What makes you feel so good?" Roy grinned with a puzzled frown.

"Damned if I know." He lifted his shoulders and let them drop.

"Just the other night when we were coming back from Liberty, you were feeling low and blue—practically gagging with self-pity because you were growing up. . . . What gives?"

"That was a *mood*," Johnny explained raising his brow, "just a *corny* mood. I get in moods, man—real *bad* moods. Right now I'm in a"—he leaned forward with his eyes up on the redhead sitting behind the cash register reading a magazine—"pussy mood. I want a little. . . ."

Roy's left brow shot up and he dropped his right shaking his head with a sad crooked grin.

Johnny lip-sank a stream of dirty words. "Now come *on*," he pouted, "you've been promising me *all* summer that you'd take me to one of those houses of illegitimate fame and now—" Johnny stopped and looked blankly at Roy who began to laugh. "Now what?"

"Oh Sport," Roy laughed, "you slay me!"

"All I want to do is get fixed up and you laugh." Johnny played around in the chili with his spoon, trying not to grin.

"They're closed on Monday nights," Roy laughed, "they have to clean out the buckets!"

"Shhhhheeze," he said sourly, then interestedly: "What buckets?" Roy just laughed, getting redder and redder.

Maybe he said something funny like that time Roy said *bra*. Johnny narrowed his eyes. "What buckets?"

"Honestly, Sport!" Roy snickered and looked down into his coffee.

Johnny grunted. "If you ate a Clark bar every day, wouldn't an old *Baby Ruth* taste good now and then?" He grinned wisely.

"Come on," Roy grinned with a burning face, "let's go."

"What *buckets*?" He frowned, raising his glass of milkshake.

"You'll have to go and find out."

"Fat chance." He nodded, tight-lipped. "If you don't tell me I'll never tell you why Little Orphan Annie don't have eyes. . . ."

Roy let out a fart and his eyes popped wide with surprise. Johnny about choked on the last of his milkshake and they both laughed walking up to the cashier's counter and Roy drove him right home.

Johnny never did find out what those *buckets* were for.

Chapter 28

THE morning after Johnny had attended the fourth club meeting he walked down the snow-packed street to Carter Avenue, so worried and upset he didn't think he'd stay in school the rest of the day. He wanted to keep on walking down Tweed to Park Drive West and on down Park Drive to the Wilson-Miller plant, get Roy and leave town.

For the past two nights he'd had horror-filled dreams. Sunday, there was a horse after him because he had tried to save the horse's colt from strangling in its afterbirth, and the mare chased him and kicked down every door he hid behind. None of his friends would help him.

Last night it was a goddamn bear and the bear smelled soapclean like Bentley. Johnny was hiding up in a tree while the huge hairy bear below was looking for him. He had a badge on his chest that Johnny could see—THE BEAR PROTECTION LEAGUE—but he couldn't read the badge unless he closed one eye. Then the bear saw him up near

the top of the high oak and growled. He started up after him. Slowly. Very slowly. Limb by limb. Johnny was about to jump just as the hairy paw was reared back to claw him but he woke up with a loud "No!" and switched on the light. He was afraid to go back to sleep fearing the dream would continue and the paw would fall.

He couldn't go in and get comfort from Barbara like he always used to do after a bad dream. Never again. He'd never ask another thing from *her* again.

Then he did something he hadn't done since he was about eight years old: he snuck downstairs and crawled in bed with Grandma. She held his hand and called him her little *Kind* and told him not to be afraid. He went to sleep and there weren't any dreams.

He wouldn't have dreamed that about the bear if he hadn't of gone to the meeting the night before. Guess he'd spilled too much about those fishing trips during that first meeting. During the third meeting he had spilled a little bit more. He couldn't help it. Bentley had drawn him into it with careful timing and a smiling friendly face.

There hadn't been any clever, friendly questioning last night. There wasn't any beating around the bush either. He didn't have to close his eyes to see it in his head. It was there: on the dark trunk of that tree: on the white clapboard side of that house: on the blue door of that parked car. It was there in the snow before his walking feet.

After the meeting last night the boys had decided to play blind-man's buff. Earl Proctor was picked to be it and he was grumbling because he always had to be *it* and the first of anything in every game. His bulging eyes and awkward stumbling clumsy manner always made him the butt of a joke.

"Oh Johnny," Bentley had called politely just as the game was beginning, "may I have a word with you?"

"Oright," he called back. These guys were going to label him as a suckass or teacher's pet if these crummy old talks kept up, at the first meeting, the third meeting, and now again.

"Let's go in the storeroom." Bentley smiled.

Johnny followed Bentley, and Warren looked up from the table. There was a sudden flash of something in Warren's dark eyes. He hurriedly ran his tongue along the border of his mustache and it looked as if he was going to form some word with his lips, but he

clamped his mouth shut and tore his eyes from Johnny. He looked down at the table and continued to write down the minutes of the meeting.

Johnny's ears and neck had felt hot all through the meeting and now Warren's action made him draw up with suspicion. Bentley was up to something.

Bentley held the door to the storeroom for Johnny and followed him in. It was a small square room with a bare bright light bulb hanging from the high ceiling on a cord. The church gave the room to the club so they could keep their camping supplies and other equipment there.

Johnny sat up on the corner of a dusty table.

After Bentley closed the door he turned to him. "Johnny," he said gravely, "I want to have a man to man chat with you about Roy Davies." Bentley paused momentarily, then continued in a troubled voice. "I don't know *exactly* how to go about it. . . ."

Johnny was swinging his legs watching Bentley. "Yes sir?"

"Johnny . . . I'm not so sure those fishing trips were as innocent as they appeared." His eyes searched over Johnny's face.

"How do you mean?"

"What else occurred?"

"Nothing." He shrugged. "We just fished and swam and went to Carnival Park. Then sometimes we'd shoot Roy's .32 at empty beer cans we threw in the Lake—I'm a *lousy* shot." Johnny laughed and looked down at the dirty concrete floor. He glanced up trying to keep worry and fear from his eyes. Bentley was leaning up against the shelves along the wall to the right of the door about six feet from the table. His arms were folded across his chest.

"What else went on *besides* that?"

"Oh I don't know," he answered casually; then his eyes lit up. "We'd go to St. Simon and *boy* would we buy books. Roy was always buying me books. You know—*Two Years Before the Mast*, *Moby Dick* and *The Spirit of the Border*. Real good books like that. He even bought me about twenty of those Hardy Boy books. I'm reading'em now." Johnny smiled and licked his lips. It wasn't easy to evade those gray eyes. He laughed. "I don't want to be a dope *all* my life."

"Those books he bought you—they weren't very sexy, were they?"

"I ain't come to any *hot* parts yet." He grinned then went serious. "Naw—real good though."

"I didn't think Roy Davies cared for anything—that is," he lowered his head with his eyes on Johnny's, "*without sex.*"

"I don't know. *He* wasn't going to read'em."

"Tell me, what did you two do when you stayed overnight?"

"Eat, drive around, maybe go to Carni—"

"No," Bentley interrupted, "you either misunderstood me or you're *evading* the question which is a sign of guilt in itself." He smiled softly, knowingly. "Where did you stay—in a cabin, in a hotel or in a car?"

"That all depended," he answered easily. "Mostly in a cabin. Why? What's the matter?"

"Roy Davies is a bad bird. . . ." Bentley's brows shot up. "You knew that all along, didn't you?"

"Aw no he ain't." He laughed. Bentley must suspect something about them Parties. "What makes you say that?" He grinned, damning the blood pumping in his face. He felt like he was glowing red. "What'cha mean, bad *bird*?"

"I've been doing some *investigating*. . . . I must admit I've been quite surprised, to say the least, at what I've found out about him."

Johnny kept his mouth shut telling himself to take it easy. What kind of *investigating*? What did he mean *surprised*? Johnny looked up at the big fat slob liar in a business suit.

"What did you do when you went to bed at night?"

"We were in different rooms—I mean *cabins*."

"I didn't ask you that. . . . Were you trying to give me the impression that you two slept apart? Come come, Johnny, do you think I am that dumb?" He smiled painfully. "I know that bird wouldn't rent two cabins when the bed in one was big enough for two. It's *absurd*. It's . . . it's . . . why it's just silly to even think such a thing."

Johnny cleared his throat.

Bentley lit a cigarette. "You do know the *real* reason why that bird lost his station?"

"Sure. . . . No business."

Bentley shook his head. "No," he said softly and Johnny watched his jowls shake, "the reason behind it was that the Company discovered you two chaps were having an affair, and they most *certainly* couldn't be involved in it in *any* way. They fired him."

Johnny watched the blue-gray smoke cloud around the light bulb.

"You know that you're not the *first* Lover Boy he's had, don't you?"

Johnny looked chokingly over into Bentley's gray eyes. There was a sudden slippage in his stomach. See, see, Mom did this. Roy did this. They made me come. I sort of knew it all along. Bentley's a goddamn frigging liar. He's jealous. Sure. That's it. An old jealous man. He's jealous because I like Roy better.

"He's my best friend," Johnny said slowly.

"Did he ever say he loved you?"

"Of *course* not." Johnny looked at the floor and his ears felt brittle hot.

"He told all his other Lover Boys that," Bentley said shrewdly, "but then they got older—about your age—and he became afraid they'd tell so he dropped them and got other little boys. . . . You see how he works?"

"No," Johnny answered sullenly. Roy never done anything like that. There wasn't any other boys. What's Bentley trying to do or prove? This isn't any of his goddamn business. The only good thing he knew was Roy and something was going to happen.

"Now look, Johnny—I'm your *friend*. I want to help you. I know what kind of a bird he is. So does Judge Russell."

Johnny looked up at Bentley. He seemed to slip into a warm blanket of smothering fear. *The Judge*. Jesus God, The Judge Knows. This is serious. I didn't want to come here, I didn't I didn't I didn't want to come. Everyone made me. Down deep I knew that something was wrong. I knew it. I really knew. But I didn't know what I knew.

"I don't know anything," he said stubbornly.

"What did you two chaps do in bed?"

"Went to sleep."

"You mean he didn't hug you and kiss you and play with you *before* you went to sleep?"

"No." Johnny lowered his head.

"Now *'fess up*," Bentley said with an absurd exaggeration.

"Ask him—ask Roy, he'll tell you."

"Now *we* know better than that, don't we?"

"No. We ain't got nothing to hide."

"How do you know he didn't play with you—that is if you *were* asleep. . . . Maybe you were just *pretending* to be asleep, huh?"

"No, huh-uh." Johnny shook his head. "If I was asleep I'd walk—I mean I'd *wake*. . . . I'd wake up. He's not a man like that anyway.

He's really not a man like that." Johnny looked down from Bentley's immobile face.

"You don't know how much fun it is to *pretend* to be asleep and have someone play with you—quite thrilling, isn't it?"

"I don't know." Johnny looked down at the toe of his right shoe. "Please, Mr. Bentley, I don't know."

The room suddenly became unbearable. Johnny stared at the door with a yellowed choir practice schedule tacked on the back. The excited shouts of the boys in the next room sounded hollow, and the echo of their voices seemed far away. There came the shrill trill of a whistle. Old Warren was going to drill them. He liked drilling and Warren had been a drill sergeant in the Army. Warren could really soldier. Right face! Right face! About face! Forward 'ARCH! Yeanh, old Warren sure knew the business all right.

Warren had tried to warn him. Johnny had a sudden urge to run out of the room and the church and go on up the street to where Roy said he'd be waiting. He wanted to say: Roy please help me, please protect me. I need you. I feel safe with you. They're after you, Roy. They're after us. What are we going to do, Roy? What?

"What did he do to you? Did he use his mouth?" Bentley suddenly asked.

"He didn't ever do anything like that!" Johnny said angrily and his voice softened. "None times—he didn't."

"Let's don't get *sassy*, young man."

"Honest he didn't," he whined. "*Honest.*"

Bentley stood up straight and took a step forward. "He's a *fairy*, a homosexual-queer, the kind of man who hangs out in public toilets and bus stations. They offer you money. They want you to be their boy and go with them—is that where you met Roy? Did he ask you to go with him?" Bentley's right hand was moving, twisting in his pocket. His gray eyes were wide and bright and his quaking emotional voice continued, "Did he offer you a lot of money to go with him?" Then his voice fell to a hiss. "Was his mouth loose and his eyes popping like Earl's? Come on—*tell* me. Tell me, Johnny . . . tell me *all* about it."

"Nothing to tell," he murmured weakly looking down at the dirty floor. He was trembling all over. Jesus what a mess. What a holy mess. Roy never done anything like that.

"How many times did you do it back to him?" he asked in a straining voice.

Johnny kept his eyes on the floor hearing Bentley breathing heavy through his nose. Maybe Warren would knock or something. Bentley was standing too close. Johnny closed his eyes against the moving fabric.

"I don't want him to corrupt you, Johnny. . . ." It sounded like Bentley was whispering inside of his ear. "You're a *nice* boy, Johnny. I don't want him to corrupt you like he did the others."

Johnny swallowed and opened his eyes. Liar Liar Liar Liar. He looked straight up at the pale soft face with the straight firm mouth. Bentley began pulling in the right corner of his mouth with nervous jerks. This wasn't the man he met once last spring and began to know just three weeks ago. This was a different person.

"Of course," Bentley whispered and licked his lips, "I wouldn't *have* to tell The Judge . . . that is I don't *have* to. . . ." The words hung above their heads like a mixture in the smoke. Bentley took his hand out of his pocket.

The room was hot and stuffy. The cigarette smoke was almost gagging Johnny and he couldn't think of anything but *liar crazyman liar crazyman liar liar liar*.

Johnny kept sullenly silent and Bentley chuckled. "Oh Johnny, please don't get the impression I was serious. Why my dear boy—" He reached out and Johnny drew his shoulder back.

Bentley dropped his cigarette to the floor, stepped on it and immediately lit another one. "I'm trying to *help* you," he pleaded. "Those kind of men don't know any better. They need the kind of help only doctors can offer them. They're twisted and warped—"

"Roy ain't *like* that."

Bentley sighed and turned, taking a step toward the shelf. He spun around toward Johnny with a puzzled look on his face. His features were beginning to show more color. He took deep nervous drags on his cigarette.

"Did he tell you about the boy up on Taylor Road?"

Johnny shook his head.

"He was in love with Roy and he went insane. He finally cut off his genitals so he couldn't ever be with a woman. He believed all that bird's lies—about how *bad* and *sinful* and *shameful* it was to sleep with a woman. I don't want that to happen to you. Can't you understand?"

Johnny knew that was a lie but he said tiredly, "I don't know. . . ."

Bentley's voice became soft and almost gentle. "Just tell me what

went on up at the Lake—a rough idea on how everything went.”

“I *told* you,” he answered stubbornly. “We fished and swam and drove around—”

“And you did it to him when he was finished with you—was that the system?”

“No.”

“You masturbated each other?”

“No,” Johnny frowned shaking his head, “no, nothing like that.”

“I can’t understand why you’re being so loyal to him.” Bentley sighed. “He’d sell you out like that”—he snapped his fingers—“if he could. I’m your friend, Johnny. Truly I am. I’m all for you a hundred per cent. Honestly.”

“*No* one’s my friend. *No* one likes me—only Roy.” Johnny lifted his eyes from the floor to Bentley’s face. “Everyone hates me and so do *you* or else you wouldn’t be doing this.”

“No one hates you, Johnny,” he said calmly with a smile. “That bird told you that, didn’t he?” Bentley came over and sat on the table next to Johnny. “Don’t be fooled by his lies,” he whispered. “Be smart, Johnny. . . . be smart.” He put his arm around Johnny’s shoulder. “We can be buddies too. The greatest of buddies, Johnny. How far has he corrupted you . . . to what limit of perverseness? I shan’t inform the Judge. It’ll be between *us* two buddies. I’ll be a great friend to you, Johnny. You can come over to the workshop I have in the basement—we can make things. Just tell me what went on.”

Johnny’s head ached and he felt weak and thirsty because his throat was dry and thick-like. The heavy blanket of smoke stung his eyes.

“You can come down to South Carolina with me next year,” he whispered softly friendly. “We can fish and swim *too*—just tell me what you birds did?”

“Nothing.” His name was Lefty Mulligan and the Detective Chief was grilling him down at their corny headquarters about a gangland shooting. They had just worked him over with their crummy rubber-hoses and he was bleeding all over the place. He wouldn’t talk. Not Lefty Mulligan. Half his teeth were scattered all over the lousy floor. He was tough Lefty Mulligan who ain’t going to say a thing that’d involve Duke Davies because Duke Davies was innocent of the shooting even if he didn’t have an alibi. These cruddy bulls were out to get Duke.

“Did you masturbate looking at hot pictures?”

"No," he said vaguely.

"I have some at home in the basement—cigar boxes full." He squeezed Johnny's shoulder. "You can come over and look at them—would you like that?"

Johnny turned. Bentley's fleshy face glistened and he smelled sweaty. His eyes were hot and intent. "Are you *testing* me again," he asked slowly, "like the last time?"

Bentley lifted his chin and laughed, patting Johnny's shoulder.

"How do you know I wouldn't tell?"

"Oh Johnny," Bentley chuckled shaking his head, "who would you tell? The Judge? On a buddy like *me*? On a friend that's trying to help you? Would you *really* tell?"

"No." Johnny shook his head. Just who in the hell would he tell? It was his word against Bentley's. Bentley's word was *far* better than his. No one would believe Johnny Parish. About that "other" testing either. He wouldn't tell anyone because he couldn't.

"See," Bentley beamed, "we're getting to be buddies. We have to *trust* each other. I only want to get you away from a man that will cause you great harm. I can give you *advantages* in life by helping you."

"I want to be buddies with you," Johnny shrugged watching his swinging legs, "but I can't tell you anything. I can't tell you if it didn't *happen*."

"But you and I," he said eagerly, "we know *different*—we know it did happen, don't we?"

"No, Mr. Bentley." Johnny shook his head.

"Don't you want to see those sexy pictures I've got?" His breath was warm in Johnny's ear and his fingers tightened on his shoulder.

"Everyone likes to see sexy pictures," he mumbled. "But me and Roy never done nothing."

Johnny could feel the heat from Bentley's face drawing back. His hand was heavy on his shoulder. Bentley sighed. "Loyalty to a point is *excellent*. But this isn't a *situation* for loyalty. . . . Do you understand that?"

"I don't want *no* one to go to jail."

"No one is going to jail." Bentley took a sucking drag and bilowed smoke out past Johnny's face. Again his hand tightened as he leaned forward. "I don't like to brag about my job or social standing, but I'm in a position where I can be a benefit to you, Johnny. I'm

only looking out for you—I think you're a swell chap and deserve some breaks."

"I don't want no one to go to jail." Ain't this guy a crock of it? He may be a crock but he ain't no one's fool. He can get just as tough as he is gentle. He didn't get where he is in life by being nicey-nice. He's being easy with you for more than one reason. String him along. Hand him some good old Parish bullcrap until you see Roy after the meeting. Just how much does Judge Whatsisname know?

Johnny's mouth got salty and for a second he thought he was going to puke. He thought about Lee McCarthy. Gentle Lovely Lee. Cool Beautiful Lee with her head on her pillow close to his face. Lee with her glasses off sleeping in his arms. He had to think of something good and clean and pure to keep his mind off puking.

The echoing shouts from the outer room grew louder. Johnny could hear the twangy bounce of the basketball on the cement floor. They were playing balltag. Old Warren must've got sore again and cut the drill short. Whenever Warren got mad he'd just glare at them and light a cigarette.

None of them guys out there know what's going on in here. Warren knows. Only three people in fifty-five hundred million know what's going on. One thing I know for sure is that old Bentley's out to get Roy. They say there's air on Mars. I wish I was on Mars with Lee and we had a big lake all to ourselves. We'd be naked and be Adam and Eve. I wouldn't be ashamed or embarrassed to be naked in front of Lee if she was too. It'd be a heck of a lot different than in my Night Stories. We just ain't ashamed of each other then. I go in the bathroom when she's taking a bath and she doesn't cover herself up because we just ain't ashamed. Tonight in my Night Story we're going to be Adam and Eve on Mars living in a deserted city of white marble on the red sandy beach of a lake.

"You won't tell me?" Bentley asked softly.

"Nothing to tell, Mr. Bentley." Johnny frowned and shook his head, putting his hands to his eyes. "I'm getting awfully confused. . . ."

Bentley patted his shoulder. "Shall we talk about it sometime later?"

Johnny nodded.

"It'll give you time to think things out."

"Yes sir—I'll think about what you told me." I'll flush it down the first toilet I come to.

"Fine, fine!" Bentley dropped his cigarette and ground it out with the shining polished toe of his shoe. "We'll talk about it later."

"All right," he said tiredly with a sigh.

Bentley smiled and patted him on the back. He slid off the table and opened the door. Johnny was sad-eyed as he passed Bentley, entering the cool fresh air of the dim hall. He wanted to breathe deep and throw back his shoulders but he didn't. Jesus but it was good to get out of that smoky hot room and those questions and lies. He could've sat on that corny table all night without spilling a thing. Walk weary. There's no hurry.

"Here comes ol' goofoff." Earl laughed as Johnny approached the group of playing boys. "What the hell happened John, ol' boy? Get your ass chewed out for ripping the Kotex machines off the wall in the *girls*hole?"

"You know it, man." He grinned.

Carl Mullver came over with the basketball under his arm. "Newcomers are it." He grinned.

"Lucky for you, huh?"

Carl grinned and flipped the ball to Johnny with a spinning twist. He was a tall dark-haired boy with a heavy flat expressionless face, the strongest in the club.

It was eight thirty-three.

Johnny bounced the ball a couple of times to get the feel of it as he eyed the boys that were beginning to tease and call to him. He started dribbling the ball, keeping his eyes on Frank Jackson. He couldn't keep his mind on the game too well and after a couple of wide misses he finally tagged Frank Jackson, who cursed and grabbed up the ball.

Johnny was breathing heavy so he dropped out for a moment. Bentley approached Johnny, smiling at the playing boys.

What the hell now?

"I'll run you home tonight after the meeting, Johnny." He smiled.

"You don't have to bother, Mr. Bentley. I'll walk on up with the boys. Earl don't live too far from Gran'ma's and we usually stop for a coke anyway."

"No matter—I'll run you up." He smiled and turned without waiting for a reply.

As Bentley walked off, Johnny stared at the roll of fat that puffed out over the back of his collar. Bentley walked up to the table where Warren held out a sheet of paper to him.

Bentley couldn't do that. He didn't have any right to boss him around. Roy was going to be waiting up the street for him and Bentley knew it. He could've gotten Earl and Carl and Ernie to say that he was with them.

He had to get out of there.

Bentley had his back to Johnny. He and Warren were talking and looking at the paper.

"I'm out, guys," he said. "Gotta take me a leakaroo."

Johnny slowly sauntered to the dim rear of the large basement. Even in the dark shadows where he could not be clearly seen he felt he was nakedly obvious to all their eyes. He was excited and wondered if they would notice that the hall light, back where the toilet was, wouldn't be on. He couldn't take the chance to go back and turn on the light and return to the room against it. He got down on his hands and knees and crawled on the floor against the wall in the dim shadows. The three rows of wooden folding chairs in front of him gave the added protection he thought he needed.

He reached the other side of the room where the kitchen was. So far so good.

In order to get his coat, he had to sneak back down the room almost parallel to the table where Bentley and Warren were still talking. He would be shielded by the network of plyboard screens that separated the outer floor from the half dozen small tables that were used for Sunday-school classes. He had to be very careful so he didn't bump into any of the tiny chairs. There was about five inches of space between the floor and the base of the screens and he was praying no one would spy his creeping feet. He came to the coat rack. He could hear Bentley and Warren still talking in murmuring voices.

Don't jingle the hangers.

He removed his coat from the hanger and carefully retraced his steps. As he came to the last screen he halted and swallowed. Just take it easy now boy, so far so good. Johnny slunk back to the wall and glided in the shadows to the dark open doorway of the kitchen.

The darkness of the kitchen swallowed him.

Jesus, was his heart ever thumping. Now if he could only get out the kitchen door. It was pitch-dark and his eyes slowly became accustomed to the blackness.

They're going to miss him soon. He tried to relax but his muscles were rigid. He could make out the pale gray squares of the frosted-glass windows across the kitchen that were slowly beginning to take

shape in looming black forms. He didn't have time to think or worry about being afraid of the darkness. It was now his friend. Every second counted. Maybe old man Bentley at this very instant was looking up from the table to see what the boys were doing. Johnny could see the puzzled frown crossing his face.

He sucked air in between his clenched teeth. Don't panic. Don't panic. But what if one of the guys came running in here for a drink? Just take it easy, old bub, let's get the hell out.

He went toward the sink and turned with his hand on the table and he edged his way forward to the door, seeing the big square ghostly light through the window.

Maybe Bentley or one of the boys were coming back now. Fear clutched at him. Bentley was coming. Closer. Much closer.

He reached the door. It was locked! He spun around looking at the doorway to the other room expecting to see Bentley standing there looking at him. He turned back to the door. Why in the name of God was a church door locked?

Bentley was coming back.

He couldn't go back now. He couldn't. This was this. He lived up to now: to this very moment with the idea of leaving this church through this door that stood locked before him. Since his mind was so made up it would be like defying a fate or something if he went back. He couldn't go back. That was out of the question. He couldn't see it and he couldn't picture it. No, man!

He fumbled for the doorknob again and his fingers touched a snap-lock. Good old Yale. His heart was beating high in his chest.

It sank again.

Even after the explosive click of turning the lock the door would still not open. He wanted to sit down on the floor and bawl, then felt the key beneath the doorknob. It scraped awfully loud. He felt and heard the snap. He sighed and opened the door and felt the cold breath of winter brush across his hot sweating face.

He slipped out the door and was about to close it when god-dammit he remembered his coat. He crept back in and picked it up off the floor by the leg of the table. He could hear the boys laughing and shouting as he closed the door behind him.

He was safe now. Even if Bentley did come after him he could run like hell because he was safe and free and had the whole wide world.

The air was bitey and crisp and he stood in the deep hollow shadow of the arched doorway to the kitchen, slipping into his coat.

He saw his vapor breath and looked at the powder-fine snow in the street that sparkled like diamonds in the coldness of the street light.

Phew, this was damn near as exciting as that time he assassinated Hitler and escaped from the Kremlin in that hairy old Night Story. He machine-gunned about fifty-five puky Germans in that one.

The Sweete Candy Company across the street was dark. The stop-light on the corner clicked red. Johnny stepped out of the doorway and walked up the sidewalk away from the church. The wind blew up along the sidewalk, blowing the shifting powder-snow up his pant legs. He got goosepimples and shivered rattlingly all over. His eyes watered from the sharp wind and he squeezed out the tears feeling them course warm down his cheeks. He licked them in on the tip of his tongue. The hairs in his nose felt brittle. Through the slits of his eyes and the blurred fuzz of damp lashes everything looked glistering brighter. Then he saw the black Olds and began running. That's when he remembered he forgot his boots.

The car was warm and cozy and Roy began driving around. All he could say in reply to what Johnny told him was, "I'll be a *sonofabitch*! Why that *dirty sonofabitch*!"

Roy looked pretty worried.

"He wasn't testing me either, was he?" he cried on Roy's shoulder against the soft leather of his jacket.

"No hell no."

"We never done anything bad. . . ."

"Of course not."

"He kept calling you a queer and a fairy," Johnny sobbed. "I know what kind of guys them are—but you ain't like that, Roy."

"That dirty sonofabitching bastard whore of a goddamn slut."

"What are we going to *do*, Roy?" he begged and fell to silent crying.

"Don't you worry, Sport," Roy reassured him and patted his arm. His voice went hard. "I've got an uncle that can make and break twobit four-flushing bastards like Bentley and Judge Russell."

Roy dropped him off in front of the house.

When Johnny came to Carter and Tweed he stood there on the corner holding his books. School kids passed him walking toward the school. Should he go down to Wilson-Miller and see Roy? When Roy dropped him off last night he said not to worry and to leave everything to him. But Roy didn't know that Bentley was going to stop

up tonight to see him when school was out. He called up last night as Johnny came in the door. He was extremely disappointed in Johnny's action, he said.

So what!

Something's the matter between Mom and Roy. She don't say his name like she used to. She even has a funny look on her face. Bentley's coming up tonight and things don't look too good.

There wasn't a thing Johnny could say or do.

He turned and walked toward school.

Chapter 29

AS JOHNNY approached the school he knew he could still change his mind. It wasn't too late to turn around and go down to Wilson-Miller. Where could they run to? Roy wouldn't run. Why should they run in the first place?

Because bigger guys were after them, that's why.

Maybe he should go down and see Roy because if he was going to handle everything he ought to know Bentley was coming up tonight. It might be important. More lies. More lies from that big word-sliding lying mouth. He knew it wouldn't make much difference if Barbara was there tonight or not because she's probably had about fifty-five chats with him already. She was a bitch. Just a holy bitch. She must have told Bentley a lot of crap before that *first* meeting. That's why she made him go. Sure, he knew that. He wasn't that dumb. But why? Why couldn't everybody just leave him and Roy alone? Roy's old uncle'll take care of that sonofabitch *and* the Judge.

Bad Bird!

But Roy's not nobody like that! He isn't.

He was about to turn and go down to see Roy when it occurred to him that Bentley might've called Old Man Gunnsack telling him to report to him immediately if Johnny Parish didn't show up this morning. Johnny spat in the street. That bastard wouldn't trust him

any more after what happened last night. He grinned: frig the drip. Frig'im inna hole!

Things were drawing up pretty tight.

He'll call Roy at noon and give him the lowdown.

Johnny went to school. He dumped his coat in the locker and grabbed down his books. He got a drink and went to his Homeroom. *Roy's nobody like that!* He took his seat and opened his Speller. A minute later the hall door opened and Mr. Gunning came in. He went directly to Miss Stamper's desk and leaned over talking softly. He was probably looking down the neckline of her blouse, too. Miss Stamper closed her big brown baby-eyes and nodded. Mr. Gunning straightened and turned, leaving the room with a stiff face. Johnny knew what he whispered: Don't look, just nod if Johnny Parish is here. . . . She nodded.

They couldn't pull nothing over on him.

He went to First Period English. Lee smiled at him as he came in the door and took his seat at the front of and slightly to the left of her desk. He was lucky only once about two weeks ago: Lee had her legs crossed high beneath her desk that morning and he could see the tan border of her stocking about five inches above her knee and the pinkish garter strap hugging tight against her white underthigh.

As the classroom slowly filled with sleepy-looking students he remembered he'd forgotten the Night Story about Mars and the Marble White City on the red sandy beach. Tonight. He wrote: *Mars and the city* on a torn slip of notebook paper and put it in his shirt pocket. After the class had taken their seats and quieted down, Lee smiled and asked them if they would enjoy her reading a story instead of having their regular class.

They all cheered. Johnny felt angry because the drips didn't want her to read to hear her voice and look at her, they wanted her to read so they could get out of their corny Spelling lesson. The crummy goddamn drips.

Lee McCarthy carried her chair out from behind her desk and sat before the class almost directly in front of Johnny. She opened a worn and ragged book, clearing her throat. "I shall read Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Cask of Amontillado.'"

She smiled over them and her eyes settled on Johnny. She looked down at the book in her lap and ran the tip of her tongue over her lips, adjusted her glasses and began reading, "*The thousand injuries*

of Fortunato I had borne as I best could, but when he ventured upon insult, I vowed revenge."

Johnny listened to the soft flow of her words. Her voice rang clear and he caught every tone of her expression, her slight and girlish lisp. He liked her to read from that dictionary-big book by Thomas Wolfe about the train that leaves the mountain town and goes north to the Tower-Masted Island of Manhattan. Every time he asked her to read that, the class booed. After a vote was taken she always read something else after looking sad, as if she were saying: I like it too, my darling, but they don't want to hear it. . . .

Roy ain't nobody like that!

Lee read on and Johnny folded his arms on the desk and laid his head over them. He let his eyes drift shut and felt his inside-something suddenly lift up a notch.

"I forced the last stone into position; I plastered it up. Against the new masonry I reerected the old rampart of bones. For the half of a century no mortal has disturbed them. IN PACE REQUIESCAT!"

Lee closed the book and raised her eyes. "Did you enjoy the story, Class?"

The phony lying bastards applauded.

"It was fine," Johnny told her and they exchanged smiles.

When the bell rang and Johnny gathered up his books he knew he was stepping out of her life until tomorrow's First Period. He was nothing to her but another student; maybe a little more than that because he was a failing student.

Johnny caught hell all the rest of the morning. Mrs. Coan, his Music teacher, chewed him out for not paying attention and Mrs. Smith jumped all over him for not handing in his Math homework. He had Studyhall before lunch and he drew cars and gazed out the windows. The sky was low and gray and it didn't help to lift his spirits any. But wait till he talked with Roy at noon. Things'ud be a little brighter then. He felt like he had a fever. Hot dog! Maybe he'll get real sick. *Roy didn't ever do anything like that!* Jesus but that Bentley had a filthy mind. He'd bet anything if old Bentley and Roy got together and had a good talk Bentley'ud see that Roy wasn't a bad guy and maybe he'd lay off. Bentley was okay except that he was a little mixed up is all. He's like Grandma when she gets a hold of an idea she won't let go of come hell or high water.

Johnny slid out of his seat. He went up to the chinless bag Miss Crawman and asked for and received the restroom pass. He didn't

have to go but it was a lot better than sitting there wiggling his toes. He washed his hands and combed his hair and washed his hands again. He was thinking of putting some soap under his arms but a lot of good it would do him to get sick right at lunchtime. He leaned over the washbowl and peered into his eyes. They were bloodshot. He had a damned headache. He looked out the window and down into the court below and across the yard to the other wing of the school. Large flakes of snow began to descend to the white covered earth.

Jesse Pitts came in. Old Jesse was just about the best goddamn friend he had. He and Jesse were both lousy crooks. Two men in a tub.

"How goes it?" Jesse asked standing at the urinal.

"So-so."

Jesse finished and washed his hands. "Me and Frank Cant are playing *hookie* tomorrow afternoon. You game?"

"Sure thing, friend."

"Good." Jesse shook his hands, spraying water all over the floor.

"Where'd you two plan on going?"

"I don't know." Jesse pulled down a paper towel. "Show, maybe."

"I'll cop some dough off my Grandma."

"Okay." Jesse threw the towel on the floor and pulled down another one. "Frank's got a system worked out so we can swipe at least *six* cartons of coffin-nails from the Kroger store across from the Empress Theatre."

"Yeanh?" Johnny raised his brow. "Good. We going to leave from here?"

"Uh-huh."

"Good-deal," he said grinning at Jesse's round sleepy face. Jesse threw the towel in the corner and sniffed.

"Say," Johnny said lifting his chin, "don't leave me out on *deals* like this, huh? I'm *chucking* school anyway. I'm not getting any breaks around this *crummy* dump," he turned back to the window, "so why the *hell* should I bust my ass learnin'. . . . I have to get back—where'll I meet you tomorrow in case I don't see you until then?"

"Outside the Cafeteria door at eleven-thirty."

"I'll be there."

"Okay," Jesse nodded, "we'll wait."

"So-long." Johnny went down the quiet hall to the studyhall. Miss Crawman gave him hell for taking so long and he'd not have the

opportunity to take advantage of her again. Johnny went grinningly back to his seat.

He laid his head in his folded arms. He'd call Roy up at noon and everything'd be fine. Things have been going cockeyed ever since Labor Day. He felt sleepy and closed his eyes. What's Roy's uncle going to do? He'd better get on the ball and fix things up. What's everything going all wrong for? It was old Mom shooting off her big yap to Bentley. All her goddamn fault. She's jealous of Roy. She nosed out all summer so what's she butting in for now? Roy sure was okay then. She was all the time messing around with that whore JoAnn.

Yesterday I asked her what was the matter with Roy? She just looked at me narrow-eyed, nodding like she knew something I didn't think she knew. Good for her. I hope she chokes on it.

"We'll have *no* sleeping in *my* studyhall, Johnny *Parish!*" Miss Crawman screeched.

"Yes *ma'am!*" he said jerking up, sitting as stiff as a board.

"See that it doesn't happen again, young man."

"Yes *ma'am!*" he replied not moving a muscle. He sat exaggeratedly stiff and erect for about three minutes until the hall became alive with clanging bells. Lunch. He relaxed and felt like he was going to collapse and cry. Someday he was going to get a machine gun and mow down a couple of hundred people. As he passed Miss Crawman's desk he wanted to stop and bust her over the head with his Math book and say: I bet you go through a rough time when you're wearing the old cotton.

He threw his books in the locker and snatched out his coat. He couldn't get out of that crummy school fast enough. He spat on the glass door as he left to prove it. He walked up Carter and down Elliott to Andy's Trading Post and drank a coke and ate a sack of potato-chips. Roy didn't start back to work until noon. It was quarter to twelve. He bought a fifteen-cent peach pie and while old Three-Finger Andy was making some kid a banana-split he swiped three Oh Henry candybars from off the counter. He ordered another coke to drink with his pie. They went pretty good together.

Three-Finger Andy was a pretty good guy and maybe he shouldn't have taken those candybars. He was always smiling and smoking a pipe. Old Three-Finger Andy was pretty good to school kids, but *no credit*.

Johnny went over to the phone on the cigar counter and after looking up the number he called the Wilson-Miller Company. A sweet-

voiced woman answered and Johnny asked if she would please call Mr. Roy Davies to the phone, that it was an emergency. She told him just a moment.

Moment hell! He was leaning up against that putrid cigar counter for about fifteen hours before he heard the phone lift, breathe, and Roy say, "Hello?"

"Roy—Johnny."

"Where are you calling from?"

"Andy's place."

"Fine. Listen Sport, I want you to call Bent—"

"That's what I called *you* for," Johnny interrupted. "He's coming up to see me after school. . . ."

"Sport . . ."

"Yeah?"

"Tell him the *truth*. Everything."

"You mean *everything*?"

"Yes."

"Why? Ain't your uncle going to *clean* up on him?"

"He's taking care of it. Just tell Bentley the truth, Sport." Roy sounded tired as hell.

"Gee Roy, that's giving *up*."

"No it's not, Sport."

He just held the phone and his breath.

"Sport?"

"*I'm* here."

"I was going to call at school and leave a message for you to call me at home this evening. I wanted to tell you to tell Bentley."

"I can't," he whined.

"You *have* to," Roy told him firmly.

"When can I see you? Be parked on Tweed again like yesterday after school."

"I can't *do* that, Sport. Do this: pretend like you're not going to see me any more, see?"

He murmured.

"You go to the show Saturday morning. Go to the Blue Moon Theatre—I'll see you there."

"Where?"

"Sit next to the aisle—the center one directly down from the drinking fountain. I'll find you."

"Tell about the . . . Parties too?"

"Yes."

"What's *wrong*, Roy?" he pleaded. "*Why?* They can't prove nothing."

"Please, Sport—just do as I say. Tell the truth about everything."

"Did you see your uncle?"

"Yes—and you're to do everything Bentley says."

"Even see the—the Judge?"

"Yes."

Johnny was so defeated he felt like he could lay down on the floor and die. "Can't I see you *before* Saturday?"

"No, Sport. It wouldn't be wise. You don't even *want* to see me . . . see? Not until Saturday."

"What should I tell him—the Judge?"

"The same as you tell Bentley. The truth."

"*Bull*," he sneered.

"Now, Sport."

His eyes filled with tears and he turned from the direction of the soda fountain. "I ain't saying a thing, *hear* me?" he hissed. "I ain't saying a *thing*."

"Please do as I say?" he asked softly.

"No."

"Sport—*please*."

"But *why?* Tell me why—you'll go to jail."

"No I won't."

"How do *I* know?"

"I'm telling you that nothing will happen. Just tell the truth, Sport. Please. Do it for *me*. The honest-to-God truth."

Johnny didn't answer. Good-by everything.

"Sport?"

"Okay. I'll tell'em."

"It's for the best," Roy said softly. "I don't want you to lie for me any more. . . . Just get it *done* with." He paused. "I'll be at the Blue Moon sometime Saturday afternoon. All right?"

"Yes. . . ."

"Sport—don't be afraid."

"I'm *never* afraid when you're around." His voice cracked and his eyes were brimming. "I'll wait for you on Saturday—" He dropped the receiver in the cradle and walked to the back door. He ran across the cinder parking lot to the alley with tears streaming down his face. He leaned up against a dirty garage with his face against the

cold boards, crying in angry bitter sobs: no no no no no no no no. It's a dream. Ohhhhh Jesus! Mom's a bitch whore. I'll murder that goddamn Bentley with my two hands. I hate Mom! I hate her goddamn rotting guts! I hate her. She stinks. I hate her. She's not my mother. She never was. . . . Ohhhhhhhhhhhh she found me in the gutter when I was a small baby and she says she's my mother. Where's my mother? Dead! Dead! Dead! Dead! I want a mother I can love. She did this. I'll fix her. Thank God Jesus she's not my mother. She twotimed Dad and she twotimed me. I'll fix her someday. Roy, Roy, I want to see you, Roy. . . . Why were you nice to her? Why were you nice to me?

Johnny slid down the side of the garage and sat on some cold tiles crying with his face in his hands. It began to snow.

Everything's all over now. Just everything. I'm not going to tell Bentley. I'll tell the Judge but I won't tell Bentley. Loony nut Bentley. I don't want him to know because he won't believe anything except what he thought happened that didn't happen so I ain't going to tell him. Why did Mom do this? My own mother did this to me. She did she did she did. . . .

Johnny got up and walked down the alley wiping his face on his coatsleeve. He blew his nose and sniffed. It would be a satisfaction to Bentley if I told him so I'm not. I'm not. I'm not. I'll tell like Roy said but I won't tell Bentley.

Johnny turned onto Carter. How do I know, I just might not say anything to anyone at all. That's right. I could close my mouth and never open it again until I die. I'd open it to scream when they tortured me but I'd never open it to say another word. Maybe if I pretended that I was deaf too, people'd leave me alone, thinking I was a stupid idiot.

He stopped and viciously threw the candybars in the tall snow-covered weeds of an empty lot.

My own mother doublecrossed me.

I'm not going to tell Bentley and I'm not *too* sure I'll tell the Judge, either. Four more days until Saturday. He'd never gone *two* days without seeing Roy since he met him.

He walked down Carter toward school.

As Johnny was about to leave his Homeroom for the afternoon classes, Miss Stamper asked if he would stop in when school was out. She'd like to talk with him.

"Sure," he answered as the other students filed past him.

"Fine. I'll be waiting." Miss Stamper smiled to indicate it was nothing serious.

Johnny was beginning to trust smiles about as far as he could throw this school. He was even beginning to learn how to use one himself. It's a very good defense.

The afternoon dragged tediously. He kept repeating to himself that he wasn't going to tell Bentley. It became an iron-strong will that he knew he wouldn't break. He still wasn't too sure about the Judge. He didn't have any of his homework done and when the teachers asked why he replied, "I don't know," with a shrug.

When school let out at three-thirty Johnny went directly to his Homeroom. Miss Stamper smiled when he came in. She was the girls' athletic coach and there were four young girls wearing shorts, standing at the desk talking with her.

Johnny took his regular seat. It was difficult to find without the rest of the class seated around him. He sat there looking up at the back of the girls' heavy white thighs. Miss Stamper was responsible for building up the tissue and muscle around the Bone. Another damned unsung hero!

"Please close the door, girls," Miss Stamper called as she walked back toward Johnny. She had a pleasant smile and her white even teeth made it even nicer. He still didn't know if they were false or not.

The door was closed and the noises were cut to an almost naked silence.

Miss Stamper sat in the desk-seat directly across from him. She interlaced her fingers and laid her forearms flat on the desk. She crossed her legs and her velvet black skirt hung down to her ankles. She was still wearing her white canvas gym sneakers.

Johnny had been studying Miss Stamper. Her face was old and yet it looked young. Her hair was black to the roots. The powder-caked lines across her face could be wisdom. The wrinkles at the corners of her eyes showed a good disposition. She always walked like she was holding back a dynamic energy that made her want to run.

The calm beautiful face turned to him. "I want to talk to you about your schoolwork, Johnny," she said softly and evenly like Lee.

"Yeanh . . . I know I haven't been doing *too* good," he said wishing he was talking with Lee. That would be nice. What secrets would they share? What would she say to him in her smooth liquid voice? He could smell her hair and see her languid dark eyes flutter close

to his face. He could taste her sweet warm breath through her slightly parted moist lips. He brushed his fingers lightly over her silky soft flesh.

"It isn't *exactly* your studies," Miss Stamper was saying, "it's your isolation from others. You always seem to be out of the group, and that in turn is why your grades are *dangerously* poor."

He shrugged his shoulders helplessly.

"Don't you *enjoy* the company of the other students?"

"Yeah sure," he said automatically. Why did he have to lie? When would he ever get the guts to say what he wanted to say.

"Coach Shaver tells me you do *excellent* work in sports. But you always drop out—you lose interest. You *never* stick to *anything*."

"I'm not big enough. Maybe next year I'll go out for sports." If I'm still living.

"It isn't the size of the dog in the fight," Miss Stamper was saying from across the room, "it's the size of the fight in the dog—Johnny?"

"Yeah," he looked up at her, "but the guys that live up in Chardin Heights got it all sewed up."

"Oh *now*," she said as if it were absurd, "you have just as good a chance as they have. My goodness, they didn't drop out when they were in the Seventh. Remember there were Ninth Graders here then, too."

She didn't get it. She ain't admitting nothing. He hopes Bentley sets his ass flat waiting for him. He's doing it for nothing.

"What sports do you like best?" Miss Stamper asked.

"Baseball. . . ."

"What position do you like to play?"

"I like pitching."

"That's swell—who's your favorite pitcher in the Big League?"

"Bob Feller."

"Don't you think you could beat his pitching record if you went out and tried?"

"Nope," he said matter-of-factly, "no one could beat Bob Feller's record."

"You can always *try*. Why don't you go out for pitching *this* spring on the school team?"

"No—I can't."

"Why can't you?"

"You *really* want to know why?"

"Of course. . . ."

"I'm *afraid* of the ball."

"Is it really the ball . . . or is it something else?"

"It's the ball all right," he assured her. "And—and something else, too."

"Would you care to tell me what that something else is?"

"I don't want to talk about it. . . ."

"Is it what happened over at Hutchinson?"

Johnny looked up with surprise. "Yeah," he said narrowly. You sure can't shake a record. Lee probably knows it too. These big bitch teachers really shoot their yaps off. I bet Lee locks her purse in her desk drawer during the First Period.

"You should *forget* about that," Miss Stamper said.

"Yeah," he answered from far away, "they won't let me. . . . I can't." He could see Lee looking at him, thinking: *I thought he was such a nice boy while all the time he's nothing but a dirty little thief.*

"You won't let yourself," Miss Stamper said.

Johnny looked up. "How did you know about that? Did Miss Cooke tell you?"

"No. Mr. Davies stopped by the other night. We went out to eat and took in a show. He had been telling me about you. He's a very fine gentleman—interested in your schoolwork and how you're progressing."

"Yeanh? I don't need *no* one's help—I'm doing *all* right." There were two nights last week when Roy said he had important business.

"What do you do in your spare time?" she asked slowly.

"Oh, this and that."

"For instance?"

He paused and cleared his throat. "Listen to the radio . . . draw modern cars . . . read and go to the show." He let his eyes drift down to the scarred top of the desk:

T J lv P B class of '42 WMD  RLA
JACK-DOT KILROY WUZ HERE so what LILIAN

He looked up. He had a name and a life for everyone. Nothing was as depressing as an empty schoolroom. I don't see why he'd want to go out with old Miss Stamper. Hell, Lee'd be more his type. I wouldn't even introduce him to her. She's a virgin and to hear him talk sometimes you'd think he'd have her all laid before they got finished shaking hands.

He smiled.

"What kind of books do you read?"

Goddamn!

"The Hardy Boys."

"Oh yes. They are excellent books for boys who thirst for fun and adventure. You must like adventure stories."

"Sure. . . . I've almost finished reading all those Hardy Boy books. I'm going to read *older* ones."

"Adult books?"

"Yeanh."

"Have you read *Treasure Island*?"

"Nope."

"Miss White, your Literature teacher, has told me you are doing failing work. If you like reading, why didn't you read *Treasure Island*? You've had a month in which to do it, and because you *didn't* do it you failed in Literature this first term. Miss White said you handed in a blank test sheet—you didn't answer *one* question. Why didn't you read it?"

"I just didn't *care* for it."

"Doesn't Mr. Davies help you?"

"Sure—every night."

"He seems like a nice man."

"He is."

"Johnny"—she frowned, then smiled—"what kind of a man *is* Mr. Davies?"

"Oh he's a nice guy. He's going to marry Mom—I think."

Miss Stamper seemed quite surprised. "Oh, is that so? Would you like that, Johnny—having a *different* father?"

"Nope."

"You still love your real father—I can see that."

"Sure I do." *eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeek!*

"Is something bothering you? You looked as though you were going to *faint*."

"No," he said still far away. The dizziness was now passing but the specks remained. "I'm okay—*fine*, yeah."

Miss Stamper's eyes lighted. "Do you ever think of snow, Johnny?"

"What?" he asked with a puzzled frown.

"Do you ever sit and daydream about falling snow?"

"Daydream about *snow*?" He grinned. "Heck no, why?"

"I—I was just wondering."

"Do you want to know something?"

"Yes."

"Between you and me, I don't like school very much."

Miss Stamper closed her eyes and nodded. "I know."

"In fact I *hate* it."

"Most children do."

"I hate it a lot different. I only come here because I *have* to. I hate getting treated like a *crook*. . . . Like they did to me at Hutchinson."

"Mr. Davies told me." Her eyes were still closed.

Tears came to his eyes. "Man-*alive*, if I had me a stinkin' Atomic Bomb I'd put it under this school and set it off. . . ." Miss Stamper slowly opened her eyes and he hurriedly added, "But I'd make sure that you and—and Miss McCarthy was out though."

"Now you don't mean that, do you, Johnny?" she asked softly.

He looked up at the blackboard. "I *hate* it here. I wanted to get a new start so's they could say I done fine—but they won't *let* me."

"You won't let yourself, Johnny. You have to rise above that mistake. You have to not care."

"Well I *do* care," he said stubbornly.

"You shouldn't."

"Every time someone says 'I'm missin' somp'in',' I can see the hairy old *fingers* point to me. Eyes look at Johnny Parish."

"That's all in your imagination and it's *silly* to feel that way. It's childish and you're no child. The students like you—they'd like you even better if you'd *let* them. Make friends. Others can't get to like you if you're always by yourself. Self-*dislike* and self-hate radiates like light from a bright bulb—it makes others aware of it in you. . . ."

The noises in the hall quieted, restricted to the few last stragglers who were in no hurry. Not fleeing from the walls that others felt a prison.

Johnny looked down and saw:

♡ SUSAN LOUISE ♡

carved in the desk. It was old and dirty and deep from the sharp points of other pencils that had traced through it many times. It was cut in bold letters that he thought Carl Mullver might be fearless enough to cut.

Before going to classes Johnny often sat and thought about SUSAN LOUISE. He wondered if LOUISE was her last name and if there hadn't

been a heart at the end of it he would've cut in PARISH to read SUSAN LOUISE PARISH. What was SUSAN like? What was the color of her hair and eyes? Was she beautiful or ugly?

He could have really found out if he began inquiring but he wanted to form and keep his own idea of his SUSAN: she was a short blonde with soft green eyes, a warm red mouth with a heart-shaped mole on her right cheek. She had a musical voice and she'd tilt her head when she talked.

It was strange that he could love Lee and not touch her but in his thoughts while seeing her through his eyes, but he couldn't see SUSAN but in his thoughts as he touched her with his fingers. There was something pretty involved but significant about that that he couldn't quite figure out.

"Well Johnny," Miss Stamper sighed getting up, "I guess that's all—but *please* try to apply yourself to your studies. Mix in with the other boys and girls. . . . Are you coming to the School Dance Friday night? Of course you will." She smiled widely, showing off her white sparkling teeth. "It will be good for you. . . ." She winked. "Have a date?"

"Naw," he shook his head getting up with his fingers pulling tenderly across SUSAN LOUISE as his hand slid over the desk, "and I don't think I'll be coming."

It was getting to be dusk out and his feet were cold. . . .

Dad can't make it over for the Club Supper in two weeks. Uncle Cliff figured it up on the calendar and he'll be working nights starting that Monday but he thanked me for asking him to go. Uncle Ralph is going with me for the Baked-bean Supper on Father's Night. I'm taking Uncle Ralph on Father's Night if I'm still alive to go myself.

He walked up Tweed toward Grandma's house swearing not to tell Bentley a thing, and if he'd had a tail he felt sure that it would've been curled up between his legs.

Chapter 30

LATE Thursday afternoon, two days later, Warren Carney picked Johnny up in front of the school to take him down to see Judge Russell.

Through the high naked branches in Center Park, Johnny could see the massive brownstone structure of the Congress County Courthouse. The afternoon was cold and gray and he looked sideways at Warren who was walking beside him. They crossed Janson Street and walked up the worn sandstone steps. Warren flung his cigarette away and held the door while Johnny entered the warm wide marble hall that smelled dusty and inky and old, echoing with footsteps and buzzing voices. They passed a confection counter on their right with a smiling blind man sitting in a chair beside it. They went directly to the elevator and entered. Warren pressed the red UP button and the door slid silently shut.

im going up to sell him out he didn't say it and he didn't think it. He realized it coldly and plainly. It was an obvious fact drawing to a conclusion which he dreaded. It had been with him becoming a part of him since Tuesday evening out in Bentley's car in Grandma's driveway when he said he'd see Judge Russell. Bentley had still persisted to find out for himself exactly what occurred but Lefty Mulligan clammed up saying he'd only tell the Judge and no one else.

He looked up and over at Warren who stared unseeingly at the gray metal wall. Johnny found himself cowering in the far corner like a trapped fox.

And what will Miss Stamper talk about with the other teachers in their smoking-room (in strict confidence of course) in her off-period or when she got to shaking for a corny puff? Something sexy so she'll get attention like: about her poor poor confused pupil Johnny Parish, that got involved this past summer with a homosexual: Bentley calls them fairies and queers and they hang around in bus stations and was that where I met Roy? Jesus, I'll die if Lee hears about it. I'll just lay down and die but Roy isn't even close to being

one of those except in people's minds because they want to think he is because they're not or because they are and want to put the blame on someone else. I'll have to start going out with fifty-five different girls to prove to Danny/Lee/Edna/Irene/Ralph/Margaret/Cliff/Bertha/Gerald/Walt/Stamper/Mom/memyselfandI that I ain't a *Bird*. Poor old Grandma don't know a thing about it so I don't have to act and pretend to her that I'm not something what I'm not. Someday I'll get that goddamn puking machine gun and really go to work and I know that Miss Stamper don't want to cause me any harm or embarrassment because she's nice and all but women talk (so do we boys in the john about Coach and Mrs. Carson and Miss March and her old art students), keeping things under their hats until they meet more women wearing larger hats and that's how the *word* gets around but Miss Stamper said in friendly confidence to me at noon when I had to sort of hint why I had to get out of school early: *I do want to help you Johnny, all I can. Please feel you can come to me and trust me—with anything* is what she said or something like that. Everyone wants to be my goddamn friend, but Bentley makes me out a liar in everything I tell him even if I do happen to tell him the truth in some things. Maybe Miss Stamper will keep things to herself. This is a serious matter. Extremely delicate. Sheeze man, I wish I was dead.

The elevator hummed to a slow halt and the doors clicked twice and slid open. They turned to their left and walked down a corridor until they came to the black sign with the tall white lettering—JUVENILE PROBATE COURT above an open door. They entered.

Johnny turned to his left and saw Osbert Bentley, who was neatly dressed in a dark blue double-breasted suit, puffing nervously on a cigarette as he talked to Ernest Gibbon, a parole officer who stood listening with his arms folded across his chest. They were standing in a doorway beside a nameplate on the wall that read: *Judge William Russell*.

Johnny had met Ernest Gibbon before: in the principal's office at Hutchinson last spring when he and Jesse were caught swiping that stuff from the drugstore across the street from school.

Ernest Gibbon was a small nervous man in his late forties with iron-gray hair and a straight twitching mouth set in a lined worried face with dark, deep-set shifting eyes that were never still. Gibbon's eyes caught them and he looked over nodding to Johnny and walked away. Bentley hurried over saying, "It's a very wise choice you're

making, Johnny— Hello, Warren.” He glanced back down at Johnny, “Now remember, tell the Judge everything.”

Johnny nodded, looking down at Bentley’s shining black shoes. Bentley apologetically asked Warren to have a seat and wait, then ushered Johnny into the Judge’s chamber. It was a small high-ceilinged room with cream walls behind the Judge’s desk that sat in a corner facing the door and the two other walls with shelves to the ceiling holding thick dusty volumes of Law. The desk was wide and cluttered with papers, placed between two windows with forest-green drapes and Venetian blinds. The window on the left faced the sheriff’s office and county jail. The window on the right looked out to the utter nakedness of Center Park.

Judge William Russell walked into his office and shook hands with Bentley and turned to Johnny. He was a short squat man in his late forties wearing a black suit, the tie held fast by a plain silver clip. His hair was black and his face round, stern-appearing, with soft pink skin. His eyes were brown and flat, without emotion. He smiled at Johnny and held out his hand. After they shook hands the Judge motioned him to a chair several feet from the head of the desk.

Ernest Gibbon came in and closed the door. He took a seat against the wall next to Bentley, who sat back with his arms folded and his legs crossed. Gibbon reached in his breast pocket and brought out a small black notebook and pencil.

Judge Russell took his seat and cleared his throat. He tilted back in the chair with his elbows on the leather arms. He placed the tips of his fingers together and looked attentively at his thumbs saying, “You know why you are up here, lad?”

“Yes sir.”

“You are not here on trial.” He glanced over at Johnny and back to his thumbs. “That is something I have to clarify so we can both understand one another, and speak truthfully. Do you understand?”

“Yes sir,” then quite suddenly, “Roy isn’t going to jail is he?”

Judge Russell slightly turned his head and said sharply, “You are not to *concern* yourself with the welfare of this Davies. Just answer my questions.” He lowered his eyes to the desk and back to his thumbs saying softly, “No. Mr. Davies is *not* going to jail.”

He could be lying. Johnny caught Bentley brushing at his trouser cuff.

“When did you meet Mr. Davies, lad?”

“Last spring.”

"Under what circumstances?"

"At the filling station that he had. That's where I picked up my newspapers."

"The service station at the intersection of Elliott and State?"

"Yes sir."

The Judge nodded with pursed lips. "What kind of a man did he appear to you to be?"

"He seemed nice," Johnny said shortly.

"How do you mean *nice*?"

"Well for one thing, he gave me pop on credit and we'd talk an' he said he'd help me fix up a bike." He caught Gibbon jotting down notes every now and then. The corners of his mouth pulled in and twitched out and up. Bentley seemed interested and he held his head high and dignified. Johnny crossed his legs uncomfortably and placed his hand flat on his thigh.

"These talks you had, lad—what were their nature?" He turned for the first time and sat up straight with his arms folded across his chest.

"Oh . . . fishing."

"But not *always*," the Judge reminded.

"No." He shook his head. "He told me a lot of other things—how to be good and honest and truthful and never steal, and never hate no one. Told me that *more*'an my father."

"He did, eh?"

"Yes sir. And how to love and respect Mom. He always said that if I didn't have the money to *buy* anything, I should come to him and he'd get it for me—he didn't want me to steal."

The Judge let his eyes close. Johnny looked out to the darkening afternoon thinking he was doing a damn keen job of tearing Roy up instead of down.

"And there were other things too, of course, that you discussed."

"Yes sir."

"And what were their nature?"

"Oh, about girls and how babies were born—things like that."

"And what are 'things like that'?"

"How—how to *be* with girls. . . ."

"And this type of conversation eventually aroused a sexual desire, did it not?"

"Yes sir—I guess . . ." He shrugged.

"You *guess*? You should know, shouldn't you?"

"Yes sir."

"Yes sir what?"

"It did."

"I see." He picked up a yellow pencil between his thumb and index finger. He looked at the point and let the pencil drop on a stack of papers as he leaned lazily back in the leather chair that cracked with his movements. "When did Mr. Davies make his first sexual advance to you?"

You'd better look serious sorry for something you don't quite know why you have to look serious sorry for.

"About a month after I met him—maybe a little longer."

"On one of these—these," the Judge frowned puzzledly, raising his arm, waving his hand around impatiently, "these so called *fishing trips*?" He raised his brow in question.

"No sir."

"Where then?"

Silence. The Judge looked at Johnny with his brow still lifted. Johnny looked at the desk. You've been mocking me ever since you came in this room with that putrid play-acting of yours. I know that much.

"Where then?"

"Inna *car!* Inna car somewhere," Johnny shook his head in confusion, "*I don't know.*"

"With his mouth?"

"No."

"You mean he didn't do it *then*?"

"He didn't *ever* do it."

"Never?"

"No."

"Come come, lad, you mean to tell me that during this whole year he never once did—this thing to you?"

"That's right." Words can really hurt.

"How do I know that you are telling me the truth, lad? You've been lying to Mr. Bentley here for over three weeks."

Johnny looked over at Bentley who appeared calmly indifferent and humbly serious. What a goddamn phony.

"Tell the Judge the truth, Johnny," Bentley said.

"For the time being," Judge Russell turned from Bentley to Johnny, "let us *assume* he didn't. Now, what did you do?"

Johnny looked from the floor to the desk. "We jacked-off," he said

barely above a hoarse whisper. Now do you want me to take off my clothes to show you the rest of my nakedness that you haven't seen?

"Each other?" the Judge asked.

"Yes."

"How often?"

"I don't know." He shrugged.

"You told me you would co-operate, Johnny," Bentley said.

"I don't remember how often—not *much* though." It seemed as if he were cornered.

Judge Russell sighed and resumed his original judicial posture with his finger tips together. He tucked in his chin and looked at Johnny through his fingers. "Once a day? Twice a day? Once a week? Twice a week?"

"Twice a week."

"You're copying me, lad. Twice is only a couple of times and a couple of times is two. We know Roy Davies better than that."

Bentley coughed and said Sorry. Gibbon's face was hard and flat and the corner of his mouth twitched slowly.

"Maybe three or four times a week," he said meekly.

"I see." The Judge nodded, then said, "Did Mr. Davies ever wear any women's apparel?"

"No."

"Did he ever show you any pornography?"

"What's that?"

"Dirty photographs or stories."

"No." He wanted to look at Bentley.

"You answered that," he smiled crookedly, "as if I had questioned your answer before you gave it."

There was silence. Then the radiator began to hiss and click. Judge Russell sighed and reached for his pipe, but halted with his hand suspended. He looked at Johnny quickly square in the eye and shot: "Did he threaten you harm in any way?"

"No—he wouldn't *do* that."

"And may I ask why?" He picked up his pipe without taking his unblinking eyes from Johnny.

"Because I *know* him." He looked down at the base of the desk cutting into the gray carpet.

Judge Russell chuckled softly, shaking his head from side to side. Bentley smiled. Rockface Gibbon looked from the Judge to Johnny.

Johnny felt ashamed and dirty. They made him feel that way. He felt good and clean and happy before meeting Bentley; then things had become bad and sinful and serious and delicate. He sat there feeling the filth and shame slap and sweep over him like a bucket of black paint poured over his head. He shouldn't feel that way. He didn't want to feel that way. He and Roy: they didn't ever do anything that he knew or even suspected would make him feel so low and disgusting as he did now.

Judge Russell stuffed his forefinger down the bowl of his pipe and lit it, took a few puffs and said, "Tell me about those fishing trips."

Trying to filthy up everything, huh?

"We just fished and swam and drove around."

"You had a cabin in the evenings?"

"Yes."

"How did he register?"

"Father and son."

"You didn't mind *him* posing as your father?"

"No."

"You slept in the same bed?"

"Yes."

"And he *never* did anything to you?"

"No."

"Did he ever kiss you?"

"No," he said as if it were absurd.

"Some things don't appear to be very truthful, lad." He laid his pipe back on the desk.

When you lie they know you lie but still they want to hear you admit and say things that they can't make you say. I'm ready to sit here all night. These crummy rats are wasting their time as far as old Lefty Mulligan is concerned.

Johnny ran his fingers through his hair and sighed, licking his lips.

"There is nothing you can tell us that can make matters better or worse, as far as Davies is concerned." Judge Russell smiled and raised his hands palms up, looking from the corner of the room to Johnny. "He'll have to leave Wilkinson City, that's all. . . ."

So that's it huh? So that's the deal huh? Running him out on a rail. I bet you tar and feather him too. Boy-o-boy! So that's the great work his uncle did huh? Well kiss my dirty old fat kibotchy! Don't go wasting your time looking around when we both turn up missing you smug sonofabitch of a Judge. If I was a man I'd call you that

to your face you big bastard show-off. Yeanh. I'd clean up good on both you and Bentley. I'd leave Gibbon to pick up the pieces. Yeanh.

"I've been telling you the truth," he said meekly.

"And you'll stick to that?"

"Yes."

The Judge turned to Bentley. "Did the lad here react to your questioning in this same manner, in that he tries to be meek and afraid, to gain sympathy?"

"Yes, Judge," Bentley said. "But I believe *above* all else that Davies either has the boy buffaloed or so scared he's afraid to say a thing."

"I am *not*," Johnny spoke up, fighting to keep back the tears of anger and disgust.

Bentley took out his red pack of Pall Malls and rolled the end of a cigarette on his wet tongue so the paper wouldn't stick to his god-damn sensitive lips. Crumb-bum.

Gibbon leaned forward with his elbows on his knees holding the book in one hand, the pencil in the other. He looked tiredly back at Johnny.

"How many other lads were there participating in these sessions?"

He looked back at the Judge shaking his head. "None—it was just me and Roy."

"No others?"

Johnny shook his head.

"Answer me!" he said sharply.

"No."

"And I suppose that's the truth too?"

"Yes. Just me and Roy. There were no others."

Judge Russell sighed.

Johnny looked down at the gray carpet. He heard the opening click of Bentley's lighter, the zip and the snap metallic ring as it closed. Bentley sucked in a drag. The radiator hissed and clicked. He looked at the paneling of the desk. Other Boys!

"Did Mr. Davies drink when he was with you?"

"I only saw him drink once—at the station. Some friend of his stopped by and had a bottle of whisky. That was the only time."

"Did he ever offer you alcohol?"

"No."

"You'd say '*no*' anyway, wouldn't you?"

"No," he said shaking his head, "I'd tell you the truth."

"Let's *can* this stuff," Judge Russell leaned forward, "let's can it

and put it on the shelf. To you this is a *game*—well, it isn't." His eyes were hot and he glared at Johnny. "From now on in you're going to tell me the *truth*, understand?"

"I *have* been," he whined.

"You address me as *sir*!"

"*Yes sir*!"

"You haven't been telling me the truth and I've tried to go about getting it the nice way, haven't I?"

"*Yes sir*!"

"Take that sharpness out of your answers starting right now!"

"*Yes sir*."

"You tell me right now what kind of a man he is!"

Johnny's eyes filled with tears and he lowered his head in shame. Fake. Fake them. No, I'm not faking. I'm not faking tears. I hurt inside.

"*Answer me!*" Judge Russell demanded heavily. "Do you *know* what kind of a man he is?"

"Yes," he sobbed.

"*Tell me!*"

He stuck by you so you stick by him. Don't sell him out to the fuckers. If you sell out you're a goner.

"A homosexual fairy *queer*," he cried. "The names Mr. Bentley said he was!"

Chapter 31

WARREN had just crushed out his fourth cigarette fifty-five minutes after the door to the Judge's chamber was closed, when it was opened and Gibbon came out and passed him followed by Bentley with a hand on Johnny's shoulder.

"You'll run him up home, won't you, Warren? I have to stay with the Judge."

"I guess that's what I was waiting for," he mumbled.

"I'll give you a ring tomorrow night, Johnny. Perhaps you can

come out and meet my wife and let us be your friends. I've told you of my workshop. You will need some diversion."

"I don't know. . . ."

"Remember what the Judge said."

"Yes." He nodded. He's not to see Roy any more, unless he wants Roy to be sent to jail; but Johnny was sure that Bentley had meant the part about obeying Mr. Bentley, who was going to help him get *readjusted* and who was going to look out for his future welfare. He felt like vomiting.

Johnny didn't talk going down the hall nor in the elevator as it made its slow humming descent. They walked down the wide corridor and Warren paused by the door to button his topcoat.

He can see my red eyes and I don't care.

The Buick's engine was cold and Warren had a difficult time turning it over. It finally caught and he let it idle a minute, then pulled away from the curb and circled the Park to Janson Street.

"What did old man Russell have to say, Johnny?"

Warren meant well and Johnny liked him. "I'm not to see Roy Davies again," he whispered. "Roy's supposed to leave town and not come back."

"I see," he murmured running the tip of his tongue along the border of his thin black mustache.

"I hate Bentley's *guts*," Johnny said vehemently.

Warren shrugged his shoulders, raising his brow with his thin handsome face directed toward the Chevy in front of him. "That's your privilege."

"You can tell him if you want."

"What would I want to tell him for? It's none of my business."

"You should've been there," Johnny said flatly.

"I was," he grunted.

"You know what I mean. . . ."

"Rough, huh?"

"You would of thought Bentley was a cop," Johnny mumbled and fell silent, feeling a depressing sinking feeling sweep through him. He couldn't depend on Roy now or anything. No more trips, fishing, swimming, books, root-beer stands or anything. He wished he was home right now up in his room with the door closed so he could be alone. He might even hide himself in the attic. Taking a whole bottle of aspirins seemed about the easiest way. It would be painless.

You just go to sleep when you do that. It seemed real and dark and good. He didn't believe in what some people said about being reborn in some other form of life. He just wanted to go to sleep and sleep forever. It wouldn't be too much trouble.

Johnny thanked Warren for bringing him home and walked up the drive. He went in the side door to be swamped with the mouth watering smells of homemade rolls and chicken-noodle soup and meatloaf from the kitchen.

Grandma was dropping dumplings into the hot steaming golden broth and Aunt Margaret had just finished peeling some potatoes. He could tell by Grandma's red-rimmed glassy eyes and Margaret's aloof coldness that they must have been at it again. He'd be hearing nothing but arguments now that he'd be home. Roy's never going to be coming around any more. His feelings sank: it's true, it's true. It's all over now. It was hard to believe. Grandma would drive him crazy. He couldn't stay here night after night after night.

Johnny kissed Grandma's warm neck that smelled like babies' skin. He wanted to cut that lock of silver hair behind her ear and put it in his Tarzan book.

"Go on with you," she laughed, "I hit you with this spoon."

"Go on with you too." He grinned tiredly. "I bet that's the first time a man's kissed you behind the ear since Grandpa died four score an' *twenty* years ago."

Grandma laughed and Margaret flashed a smile and let it drop. "JoAnn drove your mother over to the store, honey. She'll be back soon. . . . They've been gone forty-five minutes as it is," she added, absently running fresh water into the pan of potatoes.

In other words they're out boozing it up, huh? I should worry?

"I'm going upstairs," he murmured turning from them. He opened the attic door and met Danny coming down the stairs. Danny lifted his chin and Johnny stopped beside him. "L-l-look in your books," he whispered.

"What do you mean?" Johnny took his arm.

"Jus' look but doan say *I tol' ya*. . . ."

Johnny went up the steps two at a time and ran across the attic to the bedrooms. He went to his room but the books were still there. Look *in* your books. He pulled out a Hardy Boy book and opened it. He swallowed hard and opened all eighteen of them. Every first leaf in the book had been ripped out leaving torn ragged edges. Some of the leaves had been ripped out with such savage determination

that it took half the paper on the back of the cover too. There was no reason why she should do that. All that was on them was:

*To my best Pal Sport
as ever*

Roy

No reason at all. Huh-uh. They weren't in his wastebasket and they weren't in the basket in the other room. Why didn't she just take the books? It was one of the goddamnedest dirtiest things she's ever done. He wondered if his fishing-rod and Roy's tacklebox were still in the basement. What difference does it make, huh? Are you going fishing any more?

Then his heart caught as a terrifying thought occurred to him. He pulled out his Tarzan book but the note from Rose was still there. He looked down at the slanting writing in his trembling hands. "Gee I love you, Rose," the writing blurred, "I really do. . . . I don't love Lee. . . . I love you—Honestinjun."

That same evening about nine o'clock, Johnny sat at his desk looking at the set of Hardy Boy books. His elbows were on the desk and his chin was cupped in his hands. Funny how he could smell the warm sand and the breeze from off the Lake. *Shhhhhh . . . shhhhhh . . . shhhhhh* came the wash of the waves. The books dissolved and the blue Lake appeared.

Shhhhhh . . . Shhhhhh . . . Shhhhhh . . . comeback comeback comeback comeback.

Barbara opened the door and came in. She closed it behind her and sat down on the edge of the bed beside the desk.

He was expecting it. He didn't turn to look at her. *Shhhhhh . . . shhhhhh . . .* don't go: she won't be long. He could smell her gin breath.

He turned to look at his mother. Her hair was up in curlers and her face glistened with cold cream. She held the wiping cloth in her hand. Her eyes were bright. He turned back to the desk putting his chin back in his open hands but it felt different than before. His back and shoulders were warm and he sure as heck hoped he didn't get the side of his head wet: no, no. It wasn't working. It would work if she'd get the hell out.

"What did the Judge say?"

"Who?"

"The Judge."

"Oh him. . . . I can't see Roy no more."

"Well that's a *relief*—you should've known what kind of a man he was."

He didn't answer her and maybe if he didn't talk she'd leave. His eyes were awfully tired.

"Give me that watch."

He slipped it off his wrist and handed it to her without turning to see her take it.

"I'll give it back to you someday," he heard her apologizing softly above the clicking of the reel, "someday when you're older and realize the *harm* that he's brought to you—I'll give it back to you then so you can smash it."

He wished to hell she'd get out and leave him alone.

"So he's ordered to leave town, huh?"

"Un-huh."

"Will you *turn* around and *talk* to me," she demanded.

Might just as well come back and get it over with so she'll get the hell out. Now don't go away, Lake, because I'll be right back.

"He never done no one harm," he said turning his head to look at her.

"He did to you," she answered softly.

Tears filled his eyes. "Like heck."

"You know I liked him a lot—before I found out what kind of a man he *really* is."

"*Ha!* He done more for me than Dad ever done or ever will."

"I won't *listen* to you talking like that!" Her gin breath billowed in his face.

Go back to your bottle because I'm not here.

Johnny turned back to the desk sighing as he ran his hands up over his face into his hair. He held his splitting head and looked down to the smooth reddish varnished pine and at way the light above the desk played against and slipped into the flowing grain of the wood, making alive wavy patterns. "Why not?" he sniffed feeling the nakedness of his wrist. "It's true."

"You be *quiet!*" Barbara answered angrily and her voice went softer. "I'll admit that he did seem to be a nice man, and he's done a few things for you too, honey—I'd be the last to deny that. But the filthy nasty *evilness* he's done to you eliminates what very little good

he *did* do." She sighed. "I knew what you two were doing—not at *first* though. I began to suspect something was fishy a short while back."

You were too busy boozing it up with that JoAnn to worry or think about me. Well go on back to your goddamn bottle of gin because you've lost me. You've lost me forever and ever.

"Did you see what I did to your books?"

"No . . . what?"

"Look."

He lazily pulled out a Hardy Boy book and looked at the cover. "What?"

"I tore out the dedication pages."

He opened the book and flipped absently through it. "What page?"

"Where he signed his name. . . ." Her eyes searched his face.

"Right inside the cover."

"Yeah?" he frowned. "You must of missed this one."

"Let me"—she pulled the book from his hands—"see."

Johnny pulled out several others. "Missed this one . . . this one too . . . and here." He let the books fall to the desk on top of each other. Blood was rushing through his head.

Barbara's eyes were narrow as she handed back the book. "Don't act funny. . . ."

"Huh?" He looked down at the page. "To my pal Sport Johnny Roy."

"I—tore—them—out." Her voice was slow and guarded. "And out of the others too."

"Oh?" He felt a sudden urge to scream.

At the edge of his vision he caught her white form stiffen. "I said let's not get *funny*. . . . What's the matter, honey?" she asked tearfully.

He ignored her and put the books back in their place. He bet that if he pretended to try climbing up the beaverboard wall screaming that if she laid a hand on him the Judge said she'd go to the workhouse, she'd go back to the bottle and leave him to his Lake.

"He was nothing they all said he was."

"He was doing *something*," she hinted.

"No he wasn't either."

"He must have done something or else he wouldn't be leaving town."

"Nothing but what people said."

"I want you to grow up to be a fine man, Johnny. We'll get a home someday and I'll be proud of *both* you boys."

"You can be proud of Danny, not me."

"Don't talk that way, honey. Things will be a lot better tomorrow—it'll be a brand new day and you can look forward in life instead of—instead of backwards to what's happened. We won't *always* be living up here," her voice pleaded, "we'll move and have a *fine* home."

"I don't want a home or anything—just to be left alone." He wanted to scream.

"You're just feeling sorry for yourself. You can't ever be alone. You'll always have yourself to contend and fight with."

"I'll be alone the rest of my life. I don't want anything. Just not to be bothered. If they—the *world*—can treat a guy like Roy like that I don't want nothing to do with it."

"You're just talking like that now because you're upset. You'll feel better in the morning. You aren't going to see him any more are you?"

"No." Yes, in two days.

"Don't you want to tell Mother all about it?"

"About what?" He wanted to scream.

"Last summer and all."

"Nothing to tell."

"If you can't confide and trust in your mother . . ."

"There's nothing to tell but what people said."

"What did they say?"

"Things that make me want to *puke*."

"That's no way to talk to your mother."

"Leave me *alone*, Mom," he pleaded, "I want to go to sleep."

"Okay, if that's the way you feel," she said sadly in that you'll-be-sorry voice. Barbara stood up and ran the cloth up her cheek, looked at it and folded it in. She bent over and kissed him good night.

He wanted to scream.

"I'll call you in the morning, honey," she said sweetly, looking hurt.

He nodded. He wanted to scream.

Johnny closed the door and turned out the light to undress in the dark. He crawled between the cool sheets and raised his arm to look at the time. Darkness.

Jesus Roy I'm sorry for selling you out. I really am but they put

words in my mouth that tasted so bad I had to spit them out and they came out wrong and here's the shirt off your back.

He screamed.

Chapter 32

JOHNNY went to the Blue Moon Theatre at eleven-thirty Saturday morning but Roy didn't show up until six. Roy tapped him on the arm and Johnny followed him to the back exit, smelling the whisky fumes that trailed after him. They went outside and through the alley to the parked Olds. A misty drizzle was beginning to fall through the darkening afternoon and the white soot-covered snow was becoming a heavy gray slush.

Neither one said a word.

Roy drove out Central just like maybe they were going up to the Lake again. Roy's eyes were glassy and red-rimmed with dark circles of heavy pouches beneath them. He had a two-day growth of beard on his face. Johnny could smell the warm damp leather of his jacket. Roy pulled off the highway onto a country road and brought the car to a halt. He sat holding the wheel, pulling his lower lip between his teeth. Johnny could hear his heavy breathing come and go in quivering shakes.

The windows were beginning to steam but there wasn't anything to look at outside except the gray dark trunks of the bare dripping trees.

"I didn't say anything but what *really* happened," Johnny finally said.

"I know, Sport," he whispered softly.

After a few moments of silence Johnny said, "They tried to get me to admit things that didn't happen but they couldn't. Honest."

"I believe you."

"Bentley said you'd *kill* me if I ever saw you again—but I knew you wouldn't, Roy. See what kind of a man he is? See how he thinks?"

Roy laid his forehead on the steering-wheel still clutching it tightly in his fists making his knuckles white.

"You wouldn't kill me."

Roy put his head on Johnny's shoulder, wrapping his arms around his waist. He was crying hard. Johnny ran his fingers through Roy's hair on the back of his neck.

"Don't cry, Roy." He swallowed hard. "If you cry that shows they've *made* you cry. Don't let them make you do that."

Roy raised his head and put his hands in front of his face. He reached over and opened the glove-compartment, taking out a pint of whisky. He uncapped it and took a long pulling swallow.

"I knew I was no good for you, Sport." Roy sat holding the steering-wheel with the whisky in his hand. His half-lidded eyes stared at the steamed-up windshield.

Now *he* didn't have to go and cry too but he couldn't help it. He sat there looking at Roy with hot tears creasing down his cheeks.

"If I was supposed to teach you goodness I wouldn't of had you meet me at the show," he said without turning. "Or had you sneak out with me. No. If I was any kind of a man at all, I would've told you to forget me. . . ."

"I did it on my own."

Roy coughed. "I should have told you to forget all about me—but I had to see you, Sport. I love you more than anything else on this earth."

"Yeah, but as long as they didn't *beat* us that's okay. They can't beat us because we're *we*. They thought they beat us but they didn't." He began crying hard. "The sonofabitches didn't beat us, Roy. The bastards didn't beat us. . . . Something's on *our* side, Roy—it has to be 'cause they didn't beat us . . . we—we fooled'em."

"No we didn't, Sport," he said calmly. "We are beat. . . . I should've kicked your little fanny out of the station the first time I saw you. Look at what I've done to you—look how you've lied and sneaked today. One of the things I've always been against. I've put another scar on you too. I'm no good. I never was and I never will be."

Roy took another swallow of whisky and shook his head. "The day after tomorrow—Monday—Mother and Father and I are leaving for Galveston, Texas. My Uncle Harry's going to sell the house—you see, Sport, we are beat."

"We *can't* be beat," Johnny pleaded tearfully. "We still live and can

be together—so we ain't beat. Are they that fuckin' dumb to think we're beat?" He shook his head. "I don't know what I'm going to do now—I just don't *know*. . . . I don't know what I'm going to *do* now," he took Roy's arm with both his hands, "I don't know *how* I'm going to live without you *helping* me. I knew this was going to happen. I knew it when you made me go to them—them sonama-bitchin' club meetings. Geehe-he-he-eeze," he cried, shaking his head in bewilderment.

"I made you go because I thought it was best for you. Bentley thinks what he's done is right and—"

"No no *no*—he's *wrong*! He's a stupid dumb drip! Oh Roy, I love you and so they *didn't* beat us!"

"You can't say he did wrong if he *believes* he's done right."

"*I can say anything!*" he screamed.

Johnny sat back weak with defeat and he caught the silver glint of the .32 in the open glove-compartment. He plunged his hand in and brought out the gun, pointing the blunt barrel to Roy's chest.

"I'll kill you if you say that those mothersuckers beat us. . . . So help me *God*, Roy, I'll kill you." His trembling forefinger pulled back the safety.

"Put the revolver down, Sport," he answered calmly.

"Say they didn't *beat* us—you better *say* it!"

"Please put the revolver down."

"I want you to say it—*go on! Say it!*"

"Please, Sport. Don't do anything foolish."

Johnny pulled back the hammer with his thumb. It locked with a loud snap.

"Say they didn't beat us."

"You wouldn't shoot me, Sport."

"You bastard *sonofabitch*! Say Bentley lost!"

"Figure it out, Sport." His voice was tired. "Who's leaving town?"

"But us, us, *us* . . . you an' *me*. They didn't whip *us*! Goddammit Roy, you *say* it! Say they didn't take what we had away!"

"They didn't take what we had away."

"And they didn't beat us! Say *that*!"

"We are beat. . . ." Roy reached out and took the gun.

"You dirty *chickenshit*!" Johnny sneered through his tears. "I know now it wasn't loaded!"

"It's loaded, Sport."

"No it's not. That's why you wouldn't say it. You *chickenshit*!

I wish I was *dead!*" he cried shrilly. "This was supposed to be something *happy.*" His voice went soft. "This here—seeing each other—an' an' I can't s-stop cryin'. Wha-wanted—I wanted to kill you."

"All you had to do, Sport, was squeeze the trigger."

"You're nothing but a sloppy chickenshit *drunk!*"

"I know it."

Johnny was against the door with his hot forehead on the cool metal window frame. "I hate your goddamn guts!" he sobbed.

"I don't blame you one bit—you have a perfect right to."

"I hope you drop dead—I hate you!"

"I deserve to be hated."

"You're a crummy *drunk* and a slob!"

"I know it, Sport."

"You're a fairy an' an' they ma-made me sa-say it."

"I know all about it, Sport."

"Wa-wa-why were you so-so-so-so gu-good ta-to ma-me? I ha-hate you!" he sobbed in bitter despair.

The steady momentum of the rain became slack. There was the blinding flare of a match and then darkness. Johnny heard the gurgling bottle.

"I-I-I ho-ho-hope you nev-nev-never sober uh-uh-up!"

"Not unless you want me to."

Johnny turned and held Roy's arm with both hands and buried his face in Roy's warm damp-smelling leather jacket. "Ta-ta-take me-me-me wi-with you. Hi-hi-I'm sor-sor-sorry. I did-didn't mean wa-wa-what I-I said. I lov-love you, Ror-Ror-Roy. . . ."

"I know you do, Sport." His soothing voice was soft and he ran his fingers through the back of Johnny's hair.

"Bu-bu-but please sa-sa-say hi-hit. . . ."

"They didn't beat us, Sport."

Johnny stood in the almost frozen drizzle and watched the two red taillights creep down Carter Avenue in the black darkness until they became tiny pinpoints almost drawing together before dissolving.

He stood there on the sidewalk in the inky darkness in front of the school and there wasn't a streetlight in any direction for several blocks. This was a dark spooky section of Carter but he wasn't afraid. He lifted his face up to the mysterious nothingness of night and let the cold needle drops sting his face. He closed his eyes. It felt

good. Gee-whiz, he didn't know why in the hell Little Orphan Annie didn't have eyes.

Johnny had a lot of deep thinking to do because he had a lot on his mind. He didn't have any friends. Only Roy. He didn't think of Danny as a friend because he loved the little squirt. He made up his mind right then and there that he was going to give Danny his bike and the bedroom because he deserved all the breaks. Danny's a good kid. But giving Danny those things wasn't the idea he'd thought of.

Johnny had to sort of think things out but good.

He went to the curb and stepped down into the icy slush and let the cold wetness soak through his shoes. His feet got real stingy and then sort of numb. Then he sat down on the curb. He should've treated Danny nicer this summer. Then like a stupid drip he began to cry because he felt sorry for and loved his brother. He loved Danny because he never hurt no one and he'd talked him out of wanting the little beaverboard bedroom. Danny never hurt no one. He even hated to step on the ants. He wants to be a Boy Scout.

Johnny told Danny once that he poisoned him by accident with a cookie, and made him drink a cheesy glass of milk with mustard and catsup and everything all mixed in it. After Danny drank it he cried and cried and Johnny told him he was okay now and that there wasn't a thing to worry about and not to tell Ma. He just did it as a joke to scare Danny and it really did and that's why he stutters. I'm a crummy sonofabitch, Johnny thought, Danny's too nice a kid for a brother of mine.

When Johnny saw a car coming down the street he got up and went to the sidewalk and pretended like he was walking. He could feel the corny old snot rolling out of his nose and he found himself shaking with excitement because he didn't want to forget what he was thinking about. His hairy old feet felt twice as big and there were about fifty-five million needles in his lead-lined shoes.

Man-alive he was sure glad when that car went by so he could sit back down on his curb. Jeez but his old ass felt frozen. If he had a pencil and paper, he would've wrote:

Danny:

I want you to be a good boy to mom and never do bad things like me and you can be all the things I wanted to be but never was if you tried. You can have my bike and my books and my desk is yours. Remember that time I said I poysened the cooky you ate?

Well that was a dirty rotten lie and I'm really sorry for saying it. Just please don't be mad at me. I don't want you to stutter and all the crummy crap I told you about the boogy man and gots is plane shit. Don't be afraid and stutter. You take my fishing rod and tacklebox in the celler. It's yours for real keeps old buddy roosky of mine I love you very much Danny old kid old boy. I'm sorry I didn't pay no attention to you much this summer but boy you know I was pretty busy and be good to mom because she loves you a lot so make her proud

Then Johnny remembered those mints he never got Grandma like he promised her he would when he first started at the station. That's when he remembered the breadbox. Goddamn but he wanted to tell Grandma and Aunt Marg that he was the one that done the breadbox because it was him.

He wouldn't have been able to add that to Danny's letter because the goddamn thing was getting too long and he couldn't of wrote anything in the first place because his stinking fingers were stiff and numblike.

If he didn't get his ass home before he died he'd never tell Danny or anyone all the things he wanted to say, what he'd tried to say for long long.

All the things he never was. Nothing but corny Night Stories. Alive at night and dead in the day. Living backwards and upside-down in a make-believe existence. Big old Flunky Johnny Parish. All the things I'll never be I was in my Night Stories, he thought, but they ain't now in the Real Life.

He got up and walked in the gutter toward Tweed Street. His pants were even colder because he'd taken a leak sitting back there on his curb. He had been pretty excited about writing that letter and just didn't want to stop thinking about it to do anything and he was all soaked in the first place. Anyway, it had warmed him for a little bit.

The only way he could walk was to kick each foot in front of him like he was trying to punt a football. A car passed him and slowed down and picked up speed again. He had to get a pencil and paper and fell clunk on the porch of a house on Tweed but then he remembered he couldn't write. He got up off the porch in a hurry and ran across the yard thinking he had to live to get to tell Danny

somehow. The porchlight went on but he was going up the street. Hey hey they called and ho ho he answered.

That's when he remembered the most important thing of all. He started to run faster and fell down a couple of times but it didn't hurt him one single bit. He had to hurry to get to Grandma's house to tell Danny to get Rose's note out of the Tarzan book because when he died Mom or someone might find it and throw it away thinking it was from some crummy and puky old schoolgirl. They can't do that oh Jesus they couldn't and he began to run faster.

Johnny turned the corner to Dobson Road seeing Grandma's house but he was going too fast and his feet slipped out one way and he fell the other way hanging up in the air a long time before he picked himself up not feeling a solitary doggone thing. He had to tell Danny old kid old boy. Danny was his brother of the same flesh and blood as him but Danny was so much finer and kinder. Danny wanted to be a Boy Scout. Danny had to save Rose's note. He had to tell all of them so many things.

I'm going to die, he thought, I've got pneumonia.

Johnny opened the side door and threw himself in the doorway onto the kitchen floor so he wouldn't fall down the cellar steps but it seemed like he was on a cloud slowly going down and down and down but when somebody touched his arm he seemed to jerk right back up.

Man, he thought he was gone.

Johnny couldn't see any of them but he could hear their voices. Someone was holding him up and pulling on him every which way but he swung his fists like crazy. Everyone was talking and shouting in bottles. He was already planning to come back and haunt them. Not Danny, though. He was too goddamn nervous and scared of things like that. But he'd figure out some way he could fix things up so he could talk to Danny and give him advice.

It was too late for a pencil and paper now. He tried to tell it and when the words came to his head, he said them but they came out of his mouth far away and they weren't the words he thought he was saying.

Everything relaxed and his chest stopped heaving for breath and there came a sudden snapping catch and he found himself gazing down at them. He felt nothing but seemed to be the very air and ceiling itself in a vast all-seeing eye. Now he'd never get to say what

he wanted to. That was worse than dying. He had so much to make up for. He couldn't die now that he knew all this. Oh dear God, please don't let me die without telling them. Let me go back. I have to go back. Let me be a star later, but let me go back now. And returning back down to that stagnant form was like climbing a ladder, rung by rung only he was climbing down, rung by rung. Pulling hard to return. He had now seen and he had known and there was no fear or pain and now he must go back and tell and show them how wrong he had been. There was nothing to dread any more.

There was a blinding flash and a rushing roar that slapped at him, spinning him down with a velocity of engulfing sensation as the universe unfolded in a magnificent resplendent explosion.

He had to catch his breath, and did.

Johnny opened his eyes and grabbed Grandma. "I done the breadbox," he sobbed clinging to her. "It was me that done the breadbox."

That was the first time Johnny Parish died.