

"The Altar Boy" and Other Stories

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This thesis is dedicated to John for his  
acumen and perseverance and to Joan for  
her patience.

ABSTRACT

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The Altar Boy and Other Stories is a collection of seven short stories which takes as its central concern the struggle for self-understanding and self-definition. For the most part, the boys, adolescents, and young men of these stories are observed in the process of coming to a crucial self-understanding, or in the process of defining themselves through a crucial choice.

Repeatedly, the issues central to this struggle towards self-understanding/self-definition are religion, sex and work or occupation. Often the concept of self which results is an exaggeratedly negative or tragically mistaken one. Occasionally characters gain a saving insight into themselves through a glimpse of the saving graces of others.

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## Ink

Tommy Winters stopped outside the school yard and stared through the chain-link fence at the other children playing noisily about the small gravelled lot. Slowly then, as if the wire alone kept him from the games beyond, he reached out and gripped the frosty mesh.

The nails of his bare fingers were chewed to the quick, the skin red and so badly chapped it was beginning to scale. He'd eaten his sandwich alone in the shadows of a nearby alley and then washed his hands at an outdoor tap. But there'd been nothing to dry them on, and now, as they grew sorer by the minute, he realized it hadn't helped at all. His hands were still ugly and dirty. He put them in his pockets where the last crumbs of his sandwich lay gritty in the seams. Absentmindedly then, he brought some to his mouth on the tip of a finger.

Above him all was grey, the noon sun merely a faint glimmer behind a low ceiling of thick haze. To the east a blot of storm clouds was darkening the horizon. They'd been massing all morning, and though the weatherman had said the storm would pass them by, Tommy doubted that it would. He suspected the dark, angry clouds were coming to

stay, to sit overhead like a curse. A curse he'd somehow brought upon himself. This was not a thought but rather a feeling, a vague inkling that was spreading a cold, heavy qualm throughout his being.

Suddenly, echoing in the small enclosed yard like gunfire in a cave, the shrill peal of the school bell overrode the sounds of play. Tommy gave a start, his eyes leaping toward the entrance. All over the lot games stopped immediately. Then, as the harsh sound ceased, the children began to trudge toward the school, converging on the big front doors. They lined up in pairs, each class a spoke in a wheel radiating from the hub of the entrance.

Tommy dashed for the gate, afraid he might be taken for late if spied outside the yard after the bell. He ran as he walked, pigeon-toed and tilted forward at the waist, as if a heavy hand pressed his shoulders, so that he seemed perpetually off balance, trying to catch up with himself. He fell in alone at the back of his class just as the big doors began to open. They opened slowly, the old nun on duty, looking as if she barely had strength to walk, leaning her shoulder into each side separately.

His eyes on the doorway, Tommy pressed close to two girls in raincoats who stood ahead of him. He was sure that other nuns would be watching from the dim interior, and he was conscious of being exposed, protruding unpaired at the back of the line.

All at once he came up against one of the two girls,

bumping into her so hard she was pushed off balance. She spun around quickly as he hurried to back away. "Moron," she snapped, her blue mittened fist raised to push back if necessary. Then she arched her back and lifted her foot to peek at her heel. Instantly her eyes spread wide with increased anger as she discovered a scuff mark soiling the white sheen of her rubber. Tommy retreated another step, his face instantly scarlet. An apology struggled on his lips but as usual the words wouldn't come. The violated one had no such trouble expressing herself. She began to scold him hotly until yanked forward by her companion. Their class was marching into the school.

Though he stood out more than ever now, Tommy lagged behind until prodded on by the nun at the door. The shadows of the vestibule came as a relief, a cover for the flush that was burning up his face. Straight ahead through the second set of doors he could see the broad stairway that led directly to his classroom on the first gallery. A column of dark wood stood like a sentinel on each side of the first step. A heavy bannister of the same wood ascended from each, patches gleaming like flashes of code in the half light.

The children ahead climbed quickly, their hands resting lightly on the bannister and gliding smoothly over the polished wood. Tommy's hands, clumsy and clammy with sweat now, met only with resistance, sticking even to that smooth surface. Way at the top of the stairs, like twins

of the bottom columns, stood two nuns, silver crosses glinting against the black habits draping their breasts. The nun on the right, arms folded across her chest, hands buried deep in her sleeves, was Sister Caritas, his teacher. His mouth went dry as he imagined her strange eyes peering at him from the shadows of her cowl.

For the first time since escaping the school that morning, Tommy was facing the possible outcome of his flight. It was against the rules to leave the lunch room without permission, and the possibility that he might be punished for his disobedience was a thought he'd held from his mind until now. At twelve o'clock he'd been too full of the need to get away. Two and a half days of scorn had been enough, two and a half days of being despised for his ragged clothes and junky school supplies, his skimpy jacket, shoes with holes, broken crayons in all the wrong colours, no ruler. Poor, shabby, even among those who were far from rich themselves. And at lunch time he felt worse. There was something extra shameful about a paper bag, used over and over, beside a lunch box or thermos. Even more shameful was having nothing to swap. Even if he had dared to ask, who would trade meat and cheese, soup, apples or potato chips for a dry sandwich of bread and peanut butter? He had to get away.

Now as he climbed toward Sister Caritas, the thought of being singled out and exposed before the eyes of the class set his heart knocking in his chest. He passed in



front of the nun with his eyes cast down, expecting her at every moment to lay her hands upon him. But then he was by, stepping under the crucifix that hung over the door and passing, apparently safe, into the cloakroom. In his relief, he barely noticed the strange presence of the janitor toiling at the front of the classroom.

Quickly he found his designated hook and hung up his jacket. Leaving many of the others still struggling with their boots, he hurried into the classroom and took his seat. His desk, a small wobbly wooden table added on at the back of the middle row, was unlike any of the others. The others were large, identical one-piece units with lifting tops, anchored into perfectly straight rows by long iron bars. At first, his desk had added to Tommy's feeling of not belonging, but now he was beginning to appreciate the cover it provided. Dwarfed by the desks in front, it allowed him to conceal himself from most of the class. He scrunched down low in his chair to hide himself even more as the slowest children made their way to their places.

The children were strangely quiet. Not even the usual rustling and whispering were to be heard. A sort of nervous hush ruled the room. Even the pigeons outside on the window ledge sat still and silent, their breast feathers ruffled against the cold. So quiet and dim, lit only by the feeble light leaking in through the dirty windows, the room was like a place submerged in silty water.

The only one moving, the only one making any sound was the old janitor. He was working in the corner, a few feet from the supply cupboard, sloshing at the floor with a mop. His back was to the class, sweat staining dark wings on his khaki shirt. Bobbing and jerking a head bristling with grey hair, he muttered to himself as he worked. The acrid smell of detergent seemed to come from him like the essence of his being..

Tommy peeked around the desk ahead of him and eyed the man in puzzlement. Why was he washing the floor now? And why did he seem so angry? What was there about the man that made him feel so uneasy? Frustration gnawed as the work ended and nothing was made clear.

"Thank you, Mr. Kirshnik," said Sister Caritas as the gloomy figure slouched toward the door dragging his wheeled pail. "We're sorry we had to bother you."

Tommy was watching him anxiously how but the janitor merely bobbed his head wordlessly. The sound of the water in the pail lisped across the room, coupled with more of the sharp bitter smell. The wheels creaked and whined, the pail bumped over the lip of the doorway, and, with a final bang of the door, the man was gone.

In the following silence all eyes turned toward the front of the room, toward Sister Caritas. She was leaning toward the class now, hands braced on her desk. Only the tips of long, daintily manicured fingernails protruded from beneath her falling sleeves. Her left eye gazed full

of sadness and deep disappointment upon the little lost sheep that confronted her. The right eye, the only flaw in her otherwise pretty face, wandered out and upward on its own, as if to implore heaven for the strength to meet her trials. Finally she spoke, standing upright and folding her hands loosely into her armpits.

"Children, we have a problem," she began in a soft, sad voice, her sad, gentle tone and apparent composure at odds with the erratic struggle of her loose eye. "Our class has suffered a set-back--I might even say a hardship--that will not be easy to overcome."

About the room the round sober eyes of the children flashed questions at neighbours and friends. When no answers were found their sombre attention returned to the nun. Tommy's attention shifted as well, back from the black clouds where he'd felt himself directed by Sister Caritas' wayward eye. His right hand moved to his mouth and he began to worry a hangnail on his little finger.

"And this cross," the nun was saying, "has not been ours alone to bear. Mr. Kirshnik has had to abandon his other duties and drag his heavy pail all the way up two flights of stairs from the basement. I am referring, children, to the fact that over the lunch hour someone has broken the ink well."

She paused a moment to let the enormity of the situation sink in, and Tommy, his heart beginning to flutter, sneaked a peek at the corner. Sure enough, the

stand that usually held the big bottle from which they filled their desk wells was empty. He peered down the aisle to where the janitor had been working. At first it looked as if the man had done a good job. But finally he saw it, a faint dark blur that quickly revealed itself as a splotch too dark to be shadow. Then abruptly it was gone, swallowed up in a larger darkness. Sister Caritas stood over the spot, looking from the floor to the children, her shadow engulfing the stain.

"This is where it fell," she said. "The table was found tipped to the floor with the jar smashed here. It was a horrible mess, and it had lots of time to soak in before it was discovered. Now it's there indelibly. We'll never get it out.

"But that, children, is not the worst part. The worst part is that whoever did this has not had the courage to come forward and redeem himself. There is no reason for this. I know there must be fear in his heart, fear and shame. But there's nothing to be afraid of. No one will be punished for telling the truth. Our only concern is for the sinner and his soul.

"You see, children, the soul of the one who did this has also been soiled and damaged. A black sin, blacker than this stain on the floor, has crept into his innocent soul and left its pure whiteness marred with filth. And it will stay that way until the sin is admitted. Only the waters of confession can wash away such dirtiness."

The nun was on the move now and Tommy, crouched in his chair, a thumbnail jammed between his teeth, was aware of her every step. She drifted along the window aisle toward the back of the room. Tommy fell absolutely still, his body rigid with apprehension. Outside the windows the pigeons began to stir, some birds cooing as if in warning, while others shifted back and forth in short jerky steps along the ledge. A few took wing.

Sister Caritas moved very slowly, her eyes scrutinizing her charges as she walked. Somewhere in the deep folds of her sleeves she fiddled with the wooden beads of the rosary attached to her waist. When no hand was lifted to answer her she continued her appeal.

"You must realize, children, that not owning up just makes things worse. It just makes the sin bigger and blacker until the good Lord, our Father in heaven, can't stand it any longer and has to look in judgement upon it. But all of us here know that he does not punish those who seek his forgiveness and confess their sins. He casts down only those who don't return his love and show contrition for their offenses against him."

She paused, allowing herself a moment of hope, and looked expectantly about the room. Then her voice began to rise, becoming sharper, more agitated, as her solicitude went unrewarded, her sympathy, her infinite love, unrequited.

"Children, speak up now! For the good of your own souls and for his soul also, you must tell me who did

this."

She was at the back of the room now, out of Tommy's sight, but the quiver in her voice seemed to shiver the air even after the words had stopped. Suddenly a sound as loud as a gunshot shattered the silence. It jerked Tommy upright in his desk, reflex spinning him around to face the source of the noise. Sister Caritas, her eyes flashing, stood holding one end of a yardstick across the top of a bookcase. She was gripping the stick so tightly that each knuckle stood out as an individual scarlet splotch.

All colour drained from Tommy's face as his heart burst into a fierce tattoo. She was looking straight at him! Somehow her crooked eye had been brought under control, pulled downward to be turned on him. Its stare seemed to burn right through him and pin him to his desk.

"I didn't do it! I didn't do it!" he blurted in horror, the first words he'd volunteered since he'd been there leaping from the deep wells of fear within him.

The nun stopped short, completely surprised by the outburst. Then, the light of triumph in her eyes, she was on him like a hawk.

"What did you say?" she demanded, looming over him, the yardstick still clutched in her hand, her voice ringing with exultation.

"It wasn't me! I didn't do it!" he repeated in terror, realizing the harm he'd done himself by speaking.

"Don't lie now. Don't lie and make it worse."  
Sister Caritas was breathing rapidly now, almost ecstatic

with jubilation.

Tommy trembled in his desk. His eyes were locked on the nun's face, but he knew every other eye in the room was fixed on him. His whole body burst into sweat, though he'd never felt colder in his life.

Sister Caritas backed off a bit and braced her hip against a nearby desk. She considered him thoughtfully for a moment, then leaned forward once again, effusing her most motherly concern. Calmer, full of confidence now, in a voice once more gentle and solicitous, yet unmistakably tinged with threat, she urged him to confess.

"You must tell the truth now, Tommy, and you won't be punished. Everything will be alright as long as you don't lie. But if you do lie, if you don't own up to what you've done, I'll have to send you to Mr. MacKensie. He'll know what to do with you better than I."

Mr. MacKensie. The principal! Tommy had encountered the man only once, the day he enrolled at school, but he remembered the meeting vividly. He and his mother had been ushered into an office where the little man sat behind the large metal nameplate on his desk. The principal's face with its trim moustache had been as tight as a clenched fist, and while the man consulted briefly and formally with his mother, Tommy had taken his eyes from his face only once--to stare in awe upon the black leather strap displayed prominently on the wall near the desk.

Yet, as much as he feared the threat of Mr. MacKensie, the principal was not his greatest dread. Much worse was the image he had of having to stand up exposed to all the condemning eyes, of slinking from the room like a thing despised and hearing the final click of the door as it shut behind him forever. At that moment he thought of the vast, empty gallery outside the classroom door as the edge of a dark, bottomless pit. He would descend into that darkness alone, he thought, and never escape again.

"Tommy."

The nun's voice brought Sister Caritas' face into focus once more, framed by the windows. The last pigeon had disappeared from the ledge and the sky seemed blacker now, the clouds much closer. The weatherman had been wrong as Tommy had suspected. The clouds weren't passing by. They were settling down like dark birds come home to roost.

"Tommy." The nun's voice swooped in once more.

"It was you who spilled the ink, wasn't it? Wasn't it?"

"Yes," he whispered, tears welling in his eyes but refusing to fall.

"What?"

"Yes, it was me. I did it," he blurted loudly, grasping at the straw of promised forgiveness, his fear now greater than his sense of victimization and injustice.

Sister Caritas relaxed, seemed to soften. She stared at him for a moment.

"That's better, Tommy," she said.



She reached out and briefly layed her victorious hand upon his head. It was a soft hand, pink and smelling of lotion. And her touch was light, almost tender, almost loving.

"I'm sure you'll be much happier for your honesty."

Then she turned her back on him and walked across the room.

Tommy sat numbly at his desk, eyes cast down upon his lap. His hands lay curled submissively on his thighs, as limp, dry and scaly as dead fish. Yet for one brief moment, as Sister Caritas threw switches by the door and flooded the murky room with light, he felt almost happy, relieved that the ordeal was over and a great cloud lifted from his mind. He could stay, he wouldn't have to leave. He'd been forgiven and accepted. They would not cast him out into the darkness.

Then suddenly, with an intensity that chilled him to the core and seemed to suck the breath from his body, he was aware that the light was not his friend. In its icy brilliance heads were turning, and all over the room eyes were seeking him out and staring upon his shabbiness and his shame. Unable to face them, he lifted his own eyes to the tear-spurring glare above him, and wept at the great wrong he'd suffered, and despaired at the greater wrong he'd done.

## Blue Eyes and Barbwire

"Sweet little Sheila / You'll know her when you see her / Blue eyes and a ponytail . . ." Yeah, it was her alright. You couldn't miss her. At least I couldn't. I would have known Sheila Lenify from a mile away, let alone a half a block.

Of course, I recognized the car she got into, as well - a black Chrysler. Anybody in camp would have. And knowing who the driver was didn't exactly make me ecstatic, if you know what I mean. Finding out the rumours were true made that cold day a lot colder, believe me. At least for a little while, until things got hot as hell all of a sudden and thawed me out a bit.

It was late in October, my second year in high school, and biting cold as I said. The first day that fall you could see your breath. We'd had a light snowfall the night before and there were patches in the ditches and streaks along the cinderblock foundations of the houses. It was so cold I was wearing an extra sweater and had the top of my jacket done all the way up.

I'd just finished lunch and was going to meet the bus that hauled us from the base to the high school in town. I was crossing the playground that centered our

block of PMQ's, and the swing chains rattling in the wind and the ball joints creaking in their sockets had my teeth on edge like I'd just chewed on a piece of tin foil or something. The sky was bleary with a grey haze that made the sun look like a pale fuzzy lemon, and the light was so weak everything seemed wooly around the edges.

Everything but Sheila, that is. She stood out in that grey day like a plam tree on a glacier. She was walking away from me, but I could easily imagine her sad smile, and her friendly, sympathetic face. Sheila had big blue eyes that seemed to fall on you like balm, and when you talked to her, as I had once, sitting next to her on the bus, her voice was as soft as feathers and you felt like she was a friend you'd known forever.

I stopped when I saw her, and when the Chrysler drove off I scooped some snow from a sandbox and started packing a snowball. It was hard as ice by the time I reached the end of the block and before I passed out into the street I fired it at Delorova's cat.

To get to my bus stop I had to follow Artillery Crescent to the top of a slight rise everybody called "Officer's Knob", and then follow Dunkirk Drive down the far side to Stopansky's, an old grocery store near the junction of Perimeter Road and Rural Route twelve. It was windier on the road so I put my hands in my pockets and hunched my shoulders against the cold. But as I topped the rise the wind hit so hard I had to turn around and walk

backwards for a minute. Then, when I faced into it again, I saw the Bear.

I recognized him by his size and by the way he walked, and because he was one of the few people at school who still wore the old style burgundy jacket instead of the new powder blue. The Bear was a senior at Coal Lake High and an all-star tackle on the football team. His real name was Larry Gare, but everyone called him the Bear because of his size and the shaggy black hair that grew all over his body, including his shoulders and back.

I suppose right then somebody else might have had a premonition of what was to come, but even though I didn't like the Bear, I didn't think he was anything like some of the guys said he was. He had been the drill instructor for the Air Cadet Squadron my father had made me join the year before, and he could yell and bark with the best of them. But I'd never seen any of the rage people talked about. Away from the squadron he was quiet and sort of broody, one of those serious, Mr. Competent type of guys who seem to know exactly where they are going and never get sidetracked. Though he was no genius, he got good grades by working hard and everyone knew he was off to the Royal Military College in Kingston as soon as he graduated.

I think that's what I had always grudged about the Bear. He always seemed to have such a sure grip on himself and his future. No doubts, no waverings, no hesitations. Nothing, it seemed, could distract him. I'd never heard of him dating a girl and always imagined his mind as blinkered

to all but the disciplines of study hall, football field, and drill square. He seemed indomitably iron-willed.

Already a man.

Anyway, that day he bore on to Stopansky's while I shuffled along about a block behind. Despite the cold there were already a lot of people at the stop. I could see them huddled in the quadrangle at the side of the store like sheep in a fold. By the time I reached the store the Bear had gone in and come out again and taken up a place by himself against the rough wall of the shack.

Most of my friends were bunched around the front corner of the store. Thumper Monquist was sitting on the wooden bicycle rack, swinging his legs and chattering away like it was the summer holidays. His chubby cheeks glowed as pink as cotton candy and his breath hung like comic strip balloons in front of his face. He was the only one talking. Whenever Kelly or one of the other guys opened his mouth it was to curse the cold or bum a cigarette. As I squeezed into a space between the bike rack and the store I heard a scratchy sound above me and looked up to see a row of sparrows wing to wing in the eaves, their tiny chests puffed out against the cold.

I would have liked to wait in the store but without any money I couldn't go in and take my time picking out a chocolate bar. Mrs. Stopansky wouldn't let you in unless you were buying. She was like that, grouchy and mean. To keep us out of her back lot she'd strung a barbwire fence

between the back corner of the store and another barbwire fence that paralleled Perimeter Road. This left us with a square pen of hard packed dirt about fifteen feet across in which to wait for the bus.

As people trudged in that day, they seemed to form little groups more out of habit than out of desire for banter and horseplay. There was very little said as even Thumper quit his twittering. Everybody stood silent, tensed against the cold, chafing their hands and nudging their feet together, or tapping their toes on the hard ground.

I'd only been there a few minutes when a car pulled up to the front of the store and Kelly nudged me with his elbow. As I craned my neck for a better look a Hercules transport growled low over head on a landing approach and the powerful vibrations shook the wall at my back. With the grumble of the huge plane rumbling in my ears I peered past Kelly at the black Chrysler I'd seen Sheila get into. It belonged to Colonel Gallagher, the Base Commander, but it was his seventeen year old son, Terry, who was driving.

Terry got out and walked toward the store. He was jacketless despite the cold, but sported his usual flashy tie. His ties were his trademark. At our school that year even the girls were allowed to wear jeans and no one but Terry would have been caught dead in a tie.

Almost from the moment he'd arrived at Coal Lake the previous spring from a NATO base in the States, Terry

had stood out notoriously both on the base and in town. Muscular and handsome, with very blond hair and a brilliant smile, he'd quickly become famous for his apparent ability to have any girl he wanted. And this despite a skyrocketing reputation for arrogance and rowdiness.

In a recent noon hour episode he'd been caught by Mr. Furley, the vice-principal, drinking in the school parking lot. When ordered from his car he'd smiled and calmly finished off his micky of rum, as Furley grew apoplectic with rage watching him. It had been griped more than once that if it wasn't for his father's position he'd have been run out of town before he'd been there a month.

There was one other thing Terry was famous for as well though, something that drew mixed reactions. Terry was a terrific boxer. He was tall and strong and had a long reach. And he was very fast. He'd had good coaching in the States and the Phys Ed instructors thought that he'd have a good shot at the Golden Gloves if he'd quit goofing off and train harder.

It was because of his boxing that Thumper and some of the other guys thought Terry was a nice guy, though Kelly and I weren't convinced. One Saturday afternoon, we'd gone to the rec hall to play badminton and seen Terry stop his own practice to help out some kids taking lessons from a rec spec. One hopelessly uncoordinated kid was being pummeled by everybody he faced. Then Terry stepped.

in and gave the kid a few pointers and sparred with him a bit. After some weaving and poking he leaned forward with his guard down and gave the kid a shot at his head. The punch landed square on Terry's nose, hard enough to water his eyes. After a few more chances like that the kid strutted from the ring grinning, and Terry went back to his own practice, shaking his head and rubbing his nose.

But it wasn't this image of Terry I had on my mind as I watched him leave the car. Bad as it was seeing him with Sheila, I was further put off by his aura of self-confidence - his cocky grin and his flashy tie. The tie was a broad one patterned in red circles and blue triangles and tied in a Wellington knot. It hung loosely over a shirt unbuttoned at the neck, and as he stepped into the open the wind flipped it back over his shoulder. He quickly snapped it back around and tightened it as he entered the store. A minute or two later he sauntered out again with a package of mentholated cigarettes and went around to the passenger side of the car and handed them in to Sheila.

Then, acting like the wind whipping snow out of the ditch and rumbling the coke sign on the front of the store didn't bother him a bit, he stood with a big grin on his face, looking over the car at the rest of us shivering in the quadrangle. It was obvious he was looking for someone as his eyes made a slow, careful sweep of the crowd. Behind him more pale blue jackets straggled toward



the bus stop, and beyond them, way off across the snow streaked fields, a hawk swooped out of the grey sky and settled on a telephone pole.

When Terry's eyes finally came to rest on someone behind me in the line along the wall, his grin broadened. He started around the car and Sheila said something to him and he said something back and laughed. She called to him again when he passed the car, but he just glanced back at her without answering. As Terry swaggered into the crowd, Sheila leaned across the driver's seat and looked out the window, her hair, no longer tied back, framing her lovely face, and her eyes actually cross looking. She was wearing her hair the way I'd often day-dreamed she'd wear it for me, and all I wanted right then was to pull that hair down over my face and never come out.

But then Kelly nudged me again and drew my attention to Terry. He had stopped in front of the Bear and seemed to be confronting him. At first the Bear seemed unimpressed, for he stayed as he was, leaning against the wall, his hands buried deep in the slant pockets of his burgundy jacket. But then his arms and shoulders grew tense and a slight scowl joined his thick eyebrows into a solid black line above his eyes.

Terry said something about the Bear insulting Sheila, and the people nearby moved away, leaving an open space in the square behind Terry. Then Terry laughed and said Sheila thought the Bear was a flunky jerk and that

started it. The Bear came off the wall swinging wildly and Terry slid to his left and cuffed him on the ear. When the Bear charged again, Terry jabbed him under the eye, clipped him over the other ear and dodged out of reach. This happened a couple of times and the Bear just couldn't get ahold of him. You could tell the Bear was going crazy, though Terry really looked like he was enjoying himself. He was grinning all the time and even had a twinkle in his eye.

It was a funny kind of a fight. All you could hear was the scrunch of their feet and the snorts Terry let out as he punched, and every now and then a grunt from the Bear. Hardly anyone was cheering or egging either of them on. I think that was because it was hard to tell how serious it all was. Certainly the Bear was becoming more and more enraged, but Terry seemed more like he was playing. His punches seemed more irritating than damaging and everyone had seen the Bear get roughed up worse in a football game.

Then suddenly it all changed. Terry got a little careless and the Bear, lunging, caught hold of his tie. A startled "oh" rose from the crowd and Terry lashed out reflexively with a hard punch that cut the Bear over the eye. But the Bear held on and slammed a fierce punch into Terry's stomach. The boxer grunted and brought his fist around fast, not at the Bear's face as you'd expect, but into the back of the hand holding his tie. Right

away the Bear let go and Terry was free again. But now the Bear was encouraged, and he kept coming on.

Now, though, Terry didn't look playful anymore, and he turned the fight around, moving from the defensive to the offensive and putting more muscle into his punches. A sharp "crack" rang in the cold air as a fist hit the Bear's cheekbone, and a blunter, softer sound followed as another punch landed on his nose, sending a gush of blood over his mouth. A third swift blow landed on the side of the Bear's head and then Terry pivoted his right shoulder all the way through and drove his fist into the Bear's solar plexus, so that he bent forward and crumpled to his knees.

Terry stepped back and darted glances at the crowd, his eyes flashing with a different light now. His chest rose and fell quickly with his breathing. A car door slammed and Terry blinked toward the road and a look of pain crossed his face. I followed his gaze and saw Sheila marching away, books clenched against her chest and her head hung forward so that her hair hid her face. Looking longingly after her for a moment, I took some spiteful satisfaction from the thought that Terry, the Conqueror, would never see Sheila again.

When I turned back the Bear was still on his knees struggling for breath. Someone stepped out of the crowd and reached under his arm from behind to help him up. But the Bear shrugged him off and stayed where he was, drawing

long breaths into his lungs. People looked around at each other quizzically, with wrinkles showing around their eyes and mouths.

Gradually, the Bear's breathing eased and the tension in the crowd eased too. People began moving back into their usual circles. Terry stood in the middle of the empty space in the middle of the square, looking around sheepishly. And then, his eyes fixed on Sheila's shrinking form, he gritted his teeth and cursed under his breath. Beyond him, far off down Perimeter Road, the bus chugged toward us, trailing the white plume of its exhaust under the sullen sky.

It was then that the day burst its bonds and I saw something that completely reversed how I felt about Terry, something that haunts me still, bringing that afternoon back as vivid as if it were yesterday. Looking apologetic and disgusted with himself, Terry stepped forward and leaned over slightly, his right hand extended to help the Bear up.

Suddenly the Bear exploded off the ground and caught Terry completely off guard. Before Terry could do anything the Bear rammed a shoulder into his stomach and wrapped his arms around his waist. Legs pumping, he drove Terry back against one of the logs that supported the fence. There was a thud as they hit. Terry batted uselessly at the Bear's back and the Bear, looking incredibly like the real thing, pulled him away from the

post and shook him. Then he rammed him back against the fence. Not against the post this time, but against the wire.

Terry yelled and his face shrivelled in pain as he struggled desperately for a moment. But then his body went stiff, as a long moan welled up from deep inside him and his face stretched to an incredible length, his chin dropping and his mouth falling open. With his shoulder pressing Terry backwards, the Bear had found safe spots between the barbs and pulled the wire in with both hands. Then he dragged the wire up Terry's back. After the first pass he ripped it down again. And up and down, up and down, over and over again, he dragged the wire over Terry's back.

Somewhere in the crowd a girl screamed. Thumper stumbled away, vomit gushing from his mouth, and other people looked away, their faces blank with shock. As if pulled by some horrible magnet, my eyes locked on the scene. Over the Bear's shoulder, Terry's eyes, spread wide toward the veiled sun, showed white all around their centres.

Finally, after a last snort of effort, the Bear loosened his grip and stepped back. Somehow Terry remained upright for a moment, seeming to loom gigantic out of the low clouds overhead. Then slowly he tipped face down onto the ground.

Foiled by the grey day, the bloody barbs glistened

brilliantly, like wicked rubies on a chain. I looked in horror upon Terry's savaged back then turned away, suddenly so clammy with sweat I had to open my jacket to the wind.\* Across the snow dunned fields the hawk rose from its perch and climbed swiftly, disappearing almost instantly into the grey haze.

At that moment the bus arrived and the driver hurried down and covered Terry's back with his jacket and Kelly rushed into the store to call an ambulance. That's when I looked at the Bear. He was standing half toward me, staring down at Terry. He had changed completely. He looked like an invalid, like he was sagging inside of himself somehow, and his face was as white as snow. Then he looked up toward camp and a sheen came over his eyes. That puzzled me for a moment. But then, just in time, I turned and followed his gaze. All I could see was a patch of blue near the top of the rise. It was Sheila, the back of her jacket twinkling like the last blue sky of summer, as she disappeared over the hill.

## Carride

A glowing golden flash. Bright. Too bright.

Kimmy snapped his eyes shut, then slowly opened them again and stretched. Everything around him was unbelievably golden, bright and shiny. A glowing golden cloud.

He rubbed his eyes and wondered. The last thing he could remember was sitting in the dark looking for a star. Now where was he?

He sat up and something soft and warm slipped from his shoulders. He saw a patch of yellow wall, some brass things shaped like candles, a round window. Then he knew where he was.

He scrambled to his knees and leaned out over the window ledge, and the sunshine that was making everything glow fell soft and warm on his face. All around him were the crowns of elm trees, scattered about like green fluffy nests he could flop in, and he could smell the lilacs that grew beneath them. Off to his right, three blocks away, the steeple of his church, St. George's, glistened against the soft blue sky.

Suddenly he remembered what day it was.

Bouncing from the cot, he hurried down the spiral stairs to his bedroom and realized for the first time that he still had all his clothes on. Even his cowboy boots. He knew what had happened. He had fallen asleep on the old cot under his tower window, and his mother had covered him up and left him. But it didn't matter that he'd slept in his clothes. He had to wear something better anyway.

He crossed the bare floorboards to the black metal trunk at the end of his bed and yanked it open. Right on top was his favorite T-shirt, the one his mother had given him for his eighth birthday a month before. The picture of Paladin holding his derringer and horse-head card stared up at him from its chest. He pulled the T-shirt on over clean jeans and zipped the jeans very carefully. Then he tucked his jeans into his boots, passed a hand over his cowlick, and stepped into the hall.

Ignoring the front staircase that gaped opposite his door, he headed for the stairs at the back of the house. All the bedroom doors were closed, and the long windowless hall was very dim. Just enough light rose up the stairwell so he didn't have to feel his way. He stepped very softly, avoiding the threadbare center of the runner and sticking to the thicker fringe.

Suddenly something bumped his leg and he froze. Then something furry touched his hand and he let out his breath. It was Merlin, the cat, tail erect as a



flagpole, come for a rub. A loud meow arose from his throat.

"Sssh," Kimmy whispered, hoofing him away, "you'll wake somebody up."

Quietly he continued along the hall and descended the stairs, the cat padding at his heels. Like his tower, the big kitchen was full of sunshine, let in by large undraped windows along two walls. The clock above the rear windows said it was quarter to eight.

Kimmy was surprised. It was earlier than he'd thought. Maria had said to come about nine o'clock, and an hour was a long time to wait. Impatient, he drove Merlin away once more and let his eyes roam over the room. The coffee cups and ashtray his mother and grandmother had used the night before were on the back counter by the sink. On the other counter under the right hand windows sat the boxes his grandmother had brought for them.

Wincing at the screech it made on the tiles, Kimmy dragged a chair from the table to the counter. Then he climbed up and tugged open the top box. In the box were stacks of old clothes, all neatly ironed and folded and smelling pleasantly of detergent. Pants and shirts and a sweater for him, and skirts and blouses for his mother and sister. No sign of a wooden sword or a six-shooter anywhere.

He wrestled this box to the counter and dove into the second one. No swords or guns or toy airplanes there

either. Just some old drapes and towels and sheets. Things his grandmother had said they'd need for the boarders.

Boarders. He remembered how his grandmother had looked as she lectured his mother about the boarders the night before. She'd leaned toward them with her eyes flashing and rapped on the table as she talked. Her face was pinched tight and her lips dry despite the coffee, and her white hand was spotted with grey freckles and made a sharp sound.

"Nursing students, nursing students or working women," she'd said. "You don't want a man anywhere near the place or you'll end up with nothing but trouble."

She always said things like that about men. She called his father 'that bum' and got mad when she saw his picture. Kimmy had a picture of his father in uniform on his bedroom wall. He was bareheaded and grinning, and had a plane behind him just like he was a pilot. Sometimes he dreamt his father was in a war somewhere, flying a Sabre jet to protect them against the red communists. Though he knew his father had only been a mechanic and hadn't been in the air force for years.

His mother hadn't answered his grandmother about the boarders, but as he'd hung on the back of his mother's chair, his nose full of the smell of her hair and her sweat, he'd sensed the tension in her body. He'd hated his grandmother then and hated her even more later.

Along with the boxes of clothes and things, she'd brought a box of groceries. Sitting right on top was a bag of apples, red and shiny in their plastic wrapping. All the time his mother and grandmother sat talking, his eyes kept drifting to the apples. Finally he couldn't hold back any longer.

"Gramma, mommy, can I have an apple?"

His grandmother stopped talking and looked at him, and her eyes looked mad again.

"Don't you have any manners, Kimmy? You're getting as rude as your father used to be. Polite people don't ask for things, they wait until they're offered."

His mother opened her mouth to speak but stopped. Kimmy hung his head and felt very bad. He didn't think he was so bad but his grandmother could sure make him feel that way. That was why he hated her sometimes.

It was then that he'd climbed to the tower, the 'cupo' something as his mother called it. Ever since they'd moved in he'd called it his tower and made it his own. Many hours had been spent at its high windows, defending it heroically against Saracen hordes or screaming Comanches.

Now, with the boxes plundered and nothing found that he needed, he climbed down from the chair. The big hand of the clock had moved a little, but there was still forever to wait. Itching for some kind of movement, he squeezed out the door into the yard, locking Merlin behind him in the kitchen.

A rectangle of thick, uncut grass dotted with dandelions separated the house from a large vegetable garden. The garden was neatly tilled and planted with carrots, potatoes and corn, a rough boardwalk dividing it down the middle. At opposite sides of the lawn wooden lattices covered with vines stood twice as high as the picket fence that surrounded the rest of the yard. Next to his tower this yard was what Kimmy liked best about his new home.

For a moment he stood at the edge of the lawn, tuning himself to the life around him. A robin hopped along the edge of the garden in search of worms. A purple butterfly fluttered from a dandelion and wobbled away. Bees darted their gold-nugget bodies in and out of a rose bush.

Excited, envious, Kimmy lifted his arms and bent his body forward. With a soft buzz sounding on his lips he raced across the lawn, dipping and weaving. Dewdrops sparkled on the grass and dandelions flashed as big as saucers beneath him as he swooped about the yard. Briefly, wonderfully, he lost himself in the hum of insects and the soft stroke of the air upon his body. Then, gradually, he tired. The sensations faded, the earth grew firm, then hard beneath his feet, and his arms grew heavy. Panting, but happy, he pulled up near the end of the boardwalk.

His pulse raced and every nerve in his body tingled with the exercise and with anticipation of what

was to come. He pictured himself in a sleek and shiny car, swooping over hills and around curves and gliding on a smooth road. With Maria beside him on the soft leather seats it would be like flying. Flying high, high up in the sun. Or like floating on a cloud like guardian angels.

Suddenly he was on fire with impatience. He had to get started. Even if there was still an hour to go it would be better to wait with Maria.

He dashed down the boardwalk and stopped at the gate. From experience he knew the bent and rusty handle stuck, so he left it alone. Instead, he poked the toe of his cowboy boot through the gate's wire mesh and climbed to the cross-beam of the fence. Carefully then, his arms held out at his sides, he tottered Indian style, one foot in front of the other, to the corner of the yard. There he stepped over the pickets onto a garbage can and dropped into the alley.

Straight ahead the sun seemed to wait for him at the end of a long gauntlet of picket fences and boarded up garages. Lots of telephone poles stood higher than the garages and he eyed every one he passed. But always the lowest of their steel cleats was just out of his reach. There were many trees that he would have liked to climb as well, but they were in the yards behind the fences, some sprinkled with white winged fruit and others with papery key-shaped leaves. Here and there the darker line of a Spruce poked up like a blue-green arrow.

Where Maria lived was very different. There were no trees in the yard and the fence was made of iron bars instead of wood. Raspberry bushes grew thick and tall inside the fence and hung so close above the walk that Kimmy had to watch for thorns as he passed through the gate.

The house was different too. It was made of brown brick and had high walls and a flat roof. The tops of the walls were notched like castle walls and the back wall had slits instead of squares for windows. Once it had been the parish rectory, Kimmy knew, but it looked like a rich fort to him.

Excited, but nervous of the house, he paused on the steps and brushed at his cowlick. The doorbell was an oval of pink plastic with a light behind it, and he hesitated before jabbing it. He heard no sound, but very soon the inner door swung open and a small man in a brown suit stood looking down at him. His wrinkled forehead and bald scalp looked as pale and dry as old newspaper, and the little bit of hair above his ears was as grey as his tired eyes.

"Is Maria home?" Kimmy asked.

The man nodded and pushed open the glass and screen outer door. Kimmy squeezed past him into a long hall that ran straight across the house to the front door. The man closed the doors behind them then walked to the foot of a staircase halfway down the hall and called up for Maria.

Then he came back toward Kimmy, a weak smile curling the corner of his mouth.

"Have Gun Will Travel, aye," he said, gesturing at Kimmy's T-shirt. "A real gunslinger. But you wouldn't really like to shoot anybody would you?"

The question confused Kimmy. Paladin shot at people all the time.

"Only real bad guys," he said, wondering why he was blushing all of a sudden. "I'd shoot their guns out of their hands."

"That's good," the man said.

He turned away and entered what looked like the kitchen. From where he stood Kimmy could only see part of it. A Formica topped table and chairs in a corner, a pale blue wall, a door open to the dining room.

The man sat down sideways to the table with his back to the hallway and crossed his legs. He picked up a coffee cup, sipped from it, and stared at the part of the room Kimmy couldn't see. Kimmy could smell garlic and onions and hear a sharp rapping sound.

He looked away from the kitchen and took his first close look at the hall. Compared to his house everything looked brand new. Better somehow. The walls were white and spotless and the floor gleamed with polish. A crucifix hung under the crescent window in the front door, and a statue of the Virgin Mary stood on a three legged table of dark wood near the foot of the stairs.

Suddenly he heard the familiar jerky sound of Maria's feet on stairs. As she always did at school, she was descending with her hand on the bannister, placing both feet securely on each step before stepping down again.

Finally she reached the bottom and came along the hall, a shy welcome on her solemn face. She wore a dark blue jumper and white blouse, and there was a ribbon in her hair.

"Hi, Maria!" he said.

The words came out louder than he intended, and a large swarthy woman with wiry grey hair peered out of the kitchen. She wore an apron with a faded flower pattern and bits of lace on it and held a butcher knife with pieces of onion clinging to the blade. After squinting at him a moment she moved out of sight and a tap swooshed on.

"You're early," Maria whispered.

Then the tap noise ended and she spoke louder.

"Do you like my new dress? It used to be my sister's convent uniform, but she got too big and mommy fixed it up for me."

"It looks nice," he said.

The woman's voice rose in the kitchen.

"Angelo don't you think you should get going? Father Morin will be waiting for you."

"Yes, Franca, I'm leaving right away. But there's really no hurry. The good priest said it was only a small job."



The man stood up and carried his cup and saucer out of sight. Then he came back wearing a narrow brimmed hat pulled down almost to his ears. As he passed by, smiling another weak smile and patting Maria on the shoulder, Kimmy thought how funny he seemed. He knew his father would never be like that. This man probably never fought a war in his life.

When the man was gone, Kimmy leaned toward Maria.

"Did you ask. . .?"

Maria shook her head. But then she whispered, "I know she'll let you come. Don't worry! I'll go ask her now."

She entered the kitchen and closed the door behind her, darkening the hallway. Kimmy stood in the darkness and stared at the crescent of light cast on the floor by the window in the front door. He strained to hear what was said, but all he could hear was the mumble of voices, the thump of cupboard doors, and the clatter of dishes. Then the door opened and Maria came out, flooding the hall with light again.

"My mommy says you can come," she said, "if it's alright with your mommy."

"Oh boy!" he said. "She'll let me go for sure. I'll go ask her now, but I know she'll let me."

"Good. But mommy wants Seraphina to go with you."

"Who's Seraphina?"

"My sister. She's bigger and older. She's eleven."

Maria called up the stairs, and in a minute Seraphina came down. She was a stocky girl with lighter hair than Maria's and a square face like her mother's. At first she seemed cross, but then he saw the twinkle in her eyes and she smiled at him. She was quite willing to go with him.

"We'll be right back, momma," she called.

Kimmy controlled his urge to run and stayed beside her, chattering all the way down the alley. When they reached the back of his yard he stopped short and slapped his leg in frustration. He'd forgotten about the stuck gate.

He reached up and yanked at the handle so the whole gate shook. But it wouldn't open. Then, his cowlick sticking up like an Indian feather at the back of his head, he leaned against the handle with all his might. He pushed and pushed till his T-shirt came untucked and his face grew red. All of a sudden the handle gave and the gate swung open, almost tumbling him onto his face. Seraphina cheered and he grinned in triumph and rubbed his hands.

"What's wrong?" Seraphina asked.

Kimmy looked at his hands. Bright red creases streaked with rust crossed his palms.

"It's alright," he said, starting up the boardwalk. "It doesn't hurt. Don't worry, I won't cry. Mommy says I cry less than any little boy she ever knew. I NEVER CRY!"

They were crossing the lawn and nearing the corner of the house where the rainspout ran down. He was swelling with pride over his victory and the words were gushing from his lips.

"I didn't even cry when I hurt myself with my zipper, and it hurt more than anything! It's still a little bit sore, but it's getting better. See!"

He stopped and pulled down his pants so his underwear slipped down too. There was a small brown scab on the end of his drooping penis.

Seraphina stared wide-eyed, looking shocked and confused.

"Kimmy!"

The explosion of sound swung his head toward a shape behind the kitchen screens. Then he looked back toward Seraphina. She had taken a step backward and her eyes were all fear now. Then she was running, her shoes clattering on the boardwalk.

"Kimmy, what are you doing?"

His mother, wrapped in a housecoat, was rushing out the door.

"Nothing mommy! I was just showing her where I hurt myself with the zipper."

His mother slowed and her face softened. She knelt beside him and pulled up his pants.

"I didn't do anything bad mommy, honest."

He was trembling.

"It's alright, Kimmy. It's alright."

She ran her fingers down his ribs and tucked in his T-shirt. Then, a hand around each of his knees, she looked into his face and spoke softly.

"It's just that boys and girls are supposed to keep their clothes on together. But don't worry now. I know you weren't being bad. Who was that little girl?"

"That's Seraphina, Maria's sister. Maria's my friend. Her mommy said I can go for a carriage with them. Can I mommy? Please?"

"Where is she going for the car ride?"

"Out in the country! To a farm where there's sheep and animals and everything."

She brushed hopelessly at his cowlick and tried to part his hair with her fingernails.

"Okay," she said finally. "You can go."

His whole body relaxed and the tension drained from his face. She stood up and he walked across the lawn. As soon as he reached the boardwalk he started to run.

He expected to see Seraphina ahead of him in the alley, but she was out of sight. He ran faster, kicking up dust, unconscious of his surroundings. Streets came and went as he crossed without looking. Then suddenly it came. A rattle of chains and a fierce barking lunge. He dodged to his left and tripped stumbling into the dust. Pale with terror, he turned to face the dog. It

was a police dog, a German shepherd, teeth bared and snarling. But it was chained to a post and behind a fence.

He jumped up and ran on, followed by the barking. Soon the end of the block drew near and he was behind the former rectory. Panting for breath, he stopped outside the raspberry hedge and brushed at his clothes. Then he hurried through the gate. As he ducked by the hedge a thorny branch seared across his arm, and he saw a long red scratch appear on the skin. But then he was through and mounting the steps. He pressed the lighted bell three times and stepped back, rubbing his sweaty palms on his pantlegs.

Suddenly the door burst inward and Maria's mother was standing above him. Behind her stood Seraphina and behind her, Maria.

"My mother says it's alright! My mother says I can go for the carriage, Mrs. Capucci!" Kimmy blurted. His eyes darted back and forth between her and the girls.

A look of astonishment swept over the woman's face, and her large breasts swelled beneath her apron's lacy bib. Quickly she reached down and pulled him by the shoulder into the hall. Seraphina and Maria stepped back as she pushed him against the wall.

"What did you do to Seraphina? Expose yourself? You should be ashamed, such a dirty thing! What's wrong with your mother she doesn't teach you right. You should

be spanked!"

Kimmy stood speechless, blinking back his shock and fear, his mind whirling in the blizzard of words. Then suddenly the woman quit shouting and stepped back, perhaps moved by his obvious fright. For a moment she looked down at him and calmed herself. Then all at once she turned and herded her daughters through the kitchen into the far room.

Kimmy stood in the hall and listened to her question Maria. She made no effort to lower her voice.

"Who is this boy? Where is he from? Has he ever done anything like this before? Has he ever tried to touch you? Does he talk dirty? Look how dirty his clothes are. . ."

Maria answered in a low voice and more questions flew. But Kimmy quit listening. Suddenly he was aware of the alley dust all over him and how he must have looked in the spotless hall.

Then the woman came back and stood in the kitchen doorway and the hall went dark. She stood with her hands on her hips and looked at him. Her square face was much calmer now but it was still hard.

"I should send you home this minute," she said, "but Maria says you're a good boy and you've never done anything like this before. So I'll let you come with us this time if you apologize and promise never to do such a thing again."

Kimmy stood with his head bowed, overcome by a bewildering mixture of relief and humiliation.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"I'm sorry I did such a dirty thing and I'll never do it again," she directed. The words came out as cold and hard as hailstones, and Kimmy felt their cold, hard weight upon his heart.

"I'm sorry I'm...I'm sorry I did such a dirty thing and I'll never do it again," he repeated, the blood running from his face and an icy knot twisting in his stomach.

"Good," she said. Then she turned her back on him and disappeared into the kitchen.

Kimmy glanced at Seraphina and Maria. Like her mother Seraphina had a look of satisfaction on her face. Maria looked sad for him.

"We can wait outside," she said softly. "Mommy will be ready in a minute."

They waited in silence on the steps until the woman came out with her apron off and a grey sweater draping her white blouse. She'd brushed her wiry hair and added a touch of pale lipstick. Her bulky purse swung from the crook of her elbow as she pushed a key into the lock and swung the garage door up.

The car was an old Dodge, high and clumsy. It was black, dusty, and dull, nothing at all like Kimmy had expected. There were rust spots on the bumper and the

hubcaps were missing.

"You sit in the back," the woman told him, "and you, Maria, sit in the front."

Kimmy pushed forward the front seat and crawled into the back. The seat was covered with a grey blanket of rough, prickly wool, and the musty interior held a tinge of old air-freshener. A small plastic statue of St. Christopher stood on the center of the dashboard.

"That father of yours," the woman groaned as she opened the driver's door. "How can he let this car get so dirty and rundown?"

She shook her head tiredly and pulled the floor mat out and wacked it on the cement beside the car. Then she replaced the mat, straightened the cover on the driver's seat, and squeezed in.

Kimmy glanced nervously at the woman before sitting as far forward as he could. But even then he could barely see over the high front seat. Outside the side windows fences and tree trunks and lampposts slid by.

After a few blocks he was surprised when they turned left toward the center of the city.

"Where are we going, mommy? Aren't we going to Mrs. Allioti's farm?" Maria asked.

"Yes, cara mia," her mother answered, "but we have to make another stop first. A friend of your Uncle Carlo is going to get us some fresh meat cheap. We have to pick it up."



Slowly, with many long stops at traffic lights, the car passed through the center of the city. Then it entered an area Kimmy had never seen before. Old buildings rose high on both sides, shutting out the sun and turning the narrow streets into dark cold tunnels. The car jolted over railroad tracks, and they continued along a road so bumpy he had to hang on to keep from being bounced from the seat edge. The roar of big engines thundered in his ears, and the acrid reek of gas and diesel fumes burned his nose.

After a while they stopped for a light behind a truck stacked with crates jammed so tight with grunting, squealing pigs that legs and tails and snouts stuck out through the wooden slats. Looking out the side window Kimmy saw a railway track lined with box cars and beyond that tall chimneys spewing black smoke across the sky. Suddenly the car was so full of the stench of burning fat that he began to gag.

As the car jolted over another crossing, he slid back against the prickly blanket and struggled to hold down the revolt in his stomach. From the chrome ashtray in the middle of the seat in front of him his distorted reflection looked back at him. His face squashed and flabby, hair greasy with sweat, cowlick sagging. He scrunched back in the corner of his seat and closed his eyes.

All at once the car stopped and the noises around

him sounded louder. Cattle bellowing, hooves drumming on wood, men yelling. He opened his eyes and sat forward, forcing himself to look. They were in a dark, foul smelling yard between two big buildings. A few yards in front of them, men with long poles were driving bawling, white-eyed steers out of cattle cars into corrals.

The woman told them to stay there and got out of the car. Kimmy looked at Maria. But she was looking away from him with her shoulders hunched and he didn't think she wanted to see him. A dull queasiness sinking through his stomach, he slipped back into the far corner of the seat. Suddenly it was as if his whole body was too limp and heavy to support and he was falling away from her, shrinking to the bottom of a dark, dark box. Frantically he lifted his eyes to the upper edge of the window beside him, desperate for a glimpse of sun or sky. But there was none. There was only the stacks, the tall, smoke-blackened chimneys. The stacks and smoke. And slowly falling ash.

## On the Bus

One Friday evening in mid December, with a heavy snowfall chilling its way down his neck and slush soaking his Wallabies, with the bus rapidly filling and a long line ahead of him still waiting to board, it seemed to Dale Sulk to be finally, absolutely proved: the whole world was against him. Actively so, conspiring always to block and frustrate him. His pigskin briefcase, bottle of Chablis, and box of millefeuille bulky and awkward in his hands, he trudged outside the lighted windows of the bus and peered in bitterly at the blest ones settling their weary bodies into the few remaining seats. On top of the mortifications suffered earlier that day, it appeared he was now to be denied a seat.

But then, as the line shortened and the door drew near, his hopes lifted. Instead of proceeding to the few seats still empty at the back, three women in the grey garb of hospital nuns remained standing near the front of the bus. Bless their meek little hearts, he thought, maybe there was cause for hope yet. Then, as the old man ahead of him climbed slowly into the glowing interior and

he stepped forward to follow suit, a voice whispered huskily off his right shoulder.

"Excuse me. Would you mind?"

Gleaming dark hair framing her lovely face, a young woman draped in silver fur pressed forward, a lovely eyebrow lifted in query. Surprised and dazzled, Dale paused, and the young woman smiled and squeezed up the steps ahead of him, murmuring her thanks. Recovering himself, Dale deposited his ticket and hurried after her, pushing hastily by those standing near the front of the bus. Sure enough, right before his eyes, the woman was settling into the last seat.

Furious, Dale marched past her to the tail end of the bus. Dropping his briefcase between his feet, he clutched his wine and pastry in his right hand and seized the support bar with his left. Unable to restrain himself, he cast a look of pure hatred at the young woman. She was looking at him and seemed about to smile, but suddenly her face froze in shock. Quickly she snapped her eyes away and looked toward the opposite side of the bus, pulling her expensive coat - new lynx, Dale saw now - tightly around her.

Seething with frustration and resentment, but somewhat embarrassed by his unusual exhibition of his feelings, Dale turned his glaring eyes to the swirl of light and dark outside the windows. Rush hour traffic was crawling along Guy in a line so solid nothing could

enter from the side streets. The lights at the corner ahead turned amber, then red, but the line across Maisonneuve remained as solid as ever. The staccato hoots of car horns turned to a solid blare.

Finally the light changed again and the bus, jammed now, edged away from the curb. Trapped in a crush of bodies, helpless and miserable, Dale turned his gaze inward. Beginning a ritual frequent with him lately, he began to recollect the day's mortifications, imagining each scene or image vividly, though as if through flames. The condescension in Erika's polite refusal of his luncheon invitation; Bronstein's peremptory manner as he questioned the lateness of the kitty litter project; the fur princess's smug assurance that he would give way to her as she slipped by him at the door. He could feel his anger boiling inside him, yearning so badly to be loosed it was threatening to spring as tears from his eyes.

Suddenly a loud voice spoke directly into his ear.

"Where the hell are we?"

Startled, his brooding shattered, Dale clutched his slipping bottle before it could fall, and twisted his head toward the speaker. A face pressed in on his, cutting off a glimpse of the woman in fur. The face was red and bloated, with puffy red cheeks, shaggy red eyebrows, and a frizzy burst of red hair. Flattened in the middle of the face as though it had been broken once or twice was a nose even redder than the rest.

It was the face of a man flushed with beer, Dale thought; but, nose to nose as they now were, he could catch no scent of booze. Nor was there any sign of drunkenness in the man's eyes. Rather, Dale realized with a jolt, the eyes held a sharp glint of intelligence - an intelligence that was now focussed sharply on him.

"Where are we?" the man repeated after a long moment, removing his scrutiny from Dale's face and leaning toward the roadside windows, his gaze changing from an open eyed stare to a squint as he tried to penetrate the darkness outside.

"Just above Sherbrooke," Dale answered reflexively, as traffic inched forward once more and the bus resumed its laborious climb up the mountain. Plumes of exhaust rose like flak bursts to window level then dissolved in the blizzing snow. Car horns honked all around them.

"Damn slow these bloody buses," the red-head muttered, still inclining his bulky body toward the windows and peering out. "Bloody drivers ought to be shot."

Dale smiled sourly and gave a soft snort of agreement. His sentiments exactly, he thought, though he wouldn't have dared to voice them quite that way, especially in public. But the man's words did follow the bent of his opinions; and they agreed very strongly with his rancorous mood. The bastard transit workers, already making more than they were worth, had just come off another

strike and the fares were about to go up again. It seemed as though things were getting worse and worse in every possible way. You got less for your money, less for your work, less for everything you had to offer.

He glared past the red-haired man toward the woman in the lush fur. But this time she was staring fixedly in front of her, and he didn't think she noticed him. Her dark, glossy hair was swept back behind one ear now, and her earring was exposed. A single large pearl. Simple, elegant, and very expensive. Why, he wondered, was this woman riding the bus? Though women in fur coats were not uncommon on public transportation, somehow this woman seemed completely out of place. She looked like she belonged in a Mercedes or a Porsche or at the very least a cab. Why had she condescended to suffer the masses? Impossible to say. But it was cheering indeed to imagine her feeling the pinch of the times like everybody else.

Then once again his thoughts were pulled to the red-faced man. Red had abandoned his window gazing and, standing straight again, had returned his sharp eyed scrutiny to Dale.

"Slow," he said, "but better'n nothing I guess. Effing strike just about killed me."

Dale hesitated. Usually he avoided conversations with strangers, especially working people. But there was no doubt the remarks were aimed at him. There was no way he could pretend otherwise. And what the hell: though

the man was a little rough looking, he seemed agreeable enough.

Dale nodded his head emphatically, though the strike hadn't been so bad for him. Hitch-hiking had been easy. Even old ladies driving alone would stop for him: it was against their better judgment, they'd always say, but it was awfully cold out there, and he looked so clean cut they'd take a chance this once.

"Just about lost my day job," Red said. "Late for work too often. Cabs too expensive all the way from my place and thumbing was lousy. Nobody'd pick me up."

An edge of bitterness crept into his voice here but was quickly swept away by a sudden jolly grin and a twinkle in his eyes. It was as if by lighting up his rough face he was claiming to understand and accept its role in his dilemma.

"Yes I know what you mean. I mean I know what it's like," Dale replied fervently. "Some people think only of themselves. They're totally incapable of thinking of others."

The words were out before he realized what he was saying, and he was surprised at himself. But the words were true; they expressed exactly how he felt. Every day he was growing more and more disgusted with how selfish and greedy people were. And saying so was a pleasure; it felt good to have it off his chest.

He looked into the man's red face, expecting a nod



or smile of approval. But Red was eyeing him with the same unsettling look of appraisal and speculation he'd noticed earlier. Dale took a closer look at the man. Now that Red was standing perfectly straight, Dale found that his earlier impression of the man's size was way off. Red was even bigger than he'd thought: easily over six feet tall and over two hundred pounds. Wrapped in his strange, bulky parka, he had the stature and mien of a grizzly - an impression in no way relieved by the half smile glued to his face.

"Yeah. Those bastards really had me by the balls. If I'd lost that job it'd have been tits up for me. I need every cent I can make these days and good jobs don't come easy. Bastards like that, big unions and everything, they go for everything they can get and they don't give a fuck who has to bleed for it."

He stopped, waiting for Dale to respond, and Dale felt a wave of heat crawl up the back of his neck like a small animal. This was getting a little out of hand. Sure, the man had legitimate complaints, they both had. But there was no need to go overboard with the swearing. This was a public place. Other people could hear them.

He wondered if people were watching and listening, tying them together, blaming him for Red's outburst. The thought horrified him. He wouldn't want anyone to see him in that light. It was so unlike him to even voice a word of complaint. Surely they must understand he was

simply being polite, sympathetic. Merely humouring the man.

He wanted to check people's faces, but he didn't dare. It would be too obvious. Then the bus pulled in to the curb and gave him the chance he needed. The doors flapped open and people pushed each other about, as a boy saddled with a back-pack helped a girl in a pink jacket wrestle her skis out the exit. Glancing about him, Dale noted with relief that, except for one woman who was pointedly ignoring them, no one seemed to be aware of them. In fact, the one man on the bus he recognized, a police detective in a corduroy trench coat, seemed to be sleeping.

"If I'd lost that job," Red continued when Dale didn't reply, "I'd've had to go back to working nights full time. You know I've been going seven days a week, doing three jobs the last six months?"

The question wasn't rhetorical; Dale knew it required an answer.

"Is that right?" he said. And then, reluctantly, "What do you do?"

"Play drums. That's the best thing I do, what I like to do the most anyway. Sundays and week nights François and me practice with our band."

He jerked his head backwards as he spoke, and Dale looked past him at a young man clinging to a pole on the other side of the aisle and looking at his feet. He

was small and swarthy and wore a lumber jacket patterned in red and black squares like a checkerboard. Pulled down over dark greasy hair that hung to his shoulders was a child's toque with a red, tufted top and a chain of white lambs prancing around the middle. The colours had run a bit so that the red had bled pinkly into the white. Apparently François heard Red speak, for he looked up at Dale for a moment. Then he cast a troubled glance at Red and looked away again.

"He's got the sweetest, softest touch on lead you've ever heard," Red said, "and as soon as we can get the bass and the keyboard in shape, we're gonna go places. Isn't that right, François?"

The little man looked up again and nodded. His worried glance bounced from Red to Dale and back to Red again. Softly, in French, he said something Dale couldn't understand, though it seemed to have the tone of an entreaty. When Red answered, Dale caught only the last words.

"Inquiet-toi pas."

"Yeh, we're going to make it alright," said Red, turning back to Dale, "because we're good and we practice hard. But it takes bread too. So I'm working two jobs to save some bucks. During the week I'm a machinist, and weekends I work part time in a bar."

He paused as if holding a door into the conversation open for Dale, and Dale, taking his eyes

from the nervous François, stepped through with the first words that came to mind.

"Oh, a bartender! Do you know how to whip up a lot of exotic cocktails?"

Red grinned.

"Yeh, sometimes I help behind the bar. Fill the fridges, serve beer, you know. But mostly I work the door."

He brought his big right hand down from the crossbar and flexed it in front of his chest.

"I got this last weekend."

He held the back of his hand up for Dale's perusal. The skin over the first two knuckles was red and swollen. The last two knuckles were yellowish, the flesh puffy..

"Thought I'd broke it. But the doctor says it's just sprained. I had to crank a guy was giving one of the girls a hard time. You know how it is. Fancy suits, lotsa bucks, and some guys still got no class. Always gettin' out of line or gripin' about something. You know what I mean. No class and looking for trouble."

Dale smiled wanly and said nothing. Once more the bus was pulling away from a stop, the motor grinding fiercely and shuddering the floor, sending vibrations up through his sweaty feet and shivering his legs. He felt incredibly hot. The bloody bus was still jammed and as stuffy as hell. He risked letting go of his support and undid the top of his coat. Jesus Christ, they were taking

a long time!

He ducked a bit and glanced out the window. Across the street, the brownstone façade of the Macgregor Arms rose up like the side of a box canyon. They hadn't even reached the top of the mountain yet. Maybe if he kept looking out the window and ignoring the man Red, would turn his attentions elsewhere.

"That coat looks like a warm one," Red said, reeling Dale in once again. "It's one of them genuine Eskimo parkas, isn't it? They're supposed to be great coats."

Dale didn't know what to say. The man's interest in his coat seemed friendly and harmless enough, but so far nothing Red had said had remained innocuous. It always seemed to lead on to something else. Something tricky and testy.

"How do you like my coat?" Red asked suddenly.

It was a new full length parka of greenish khaki, with a lurid orange stripe overlapping the zipper vent and a similar orange stripe down each sleeve. Dale hadn't seen the back of the coat, but he could only too well imagine another orange stripe there as well. Obviously the coat had been designed for a specific purpose, some kind of work that required high visibility. But in public it made the man look ridiculous, like an ice show clown who'd forgotten to change his costume.

"It looks very warm," Dale said.

"It is. Expensive too, at retail. But the yard supervisors at work get them at a discount, and I talked the boss into selling me one. Only cost me forty bucks. Bet yours isn't any warmer, but I'll bet it cost more."

His tone had been low and slightly defensive, but then suddenly it reversed itself and became much more aggressive.

"What did yours cost you, anyway?" he challenged.

The question flustered Dale. It was so blue-collar, so tasteless and impolite. It was also somehow intimidating. He knew it would be a mistake to tell Red the coat's real value.

"I don't really know," Dale said with his friendliest laugh. "It was given to me as a Christmas present a few years ago."

"That's a pretty expensive present," Red growled. "I saw one like it in Eaton's for three hundred bucks."

"Oh I'm sure she didn't pay anything like that. It was a couple of years ago when things were cheaper. And I think she bought it on sale or got a discount through a friend."

"Your wife gave it to you?"

"No. . . I'm not married."

Red looked at him.

"It was a lady I was going out with then."

"Women give you presents like that?"

"No, not really. Not often. We were engaged at the time."

Dale couldn't believe what the man was dragging out of him. But he couldn't stop talking. He was trapped, he didn't know what to do.

He remembered how it had been that Christmas. They'd just announced their engagement and Sonia had showered him with love and affection. And many presents. She'd always been generous, but that Christmas it was as if she couldn't do enough for him. And the flood of generosity had continued after Christmas, well into the New Year. But then it had stopped. She wanted it back.

First came the questions about his job: Were things opening up for him? How come he'd only had one raise in two years? When did he expect to be promoted?

Then came the advice, the suggestions, the offers: He should push harder, be more aggressive; he should take work home in the evenings, spend Saturday mornings at the office, produce more than those around him; he should take a job with her Uncle Eric. Eric would drive him hard and push him along. Eric would teach him how to work, how to discipline himself, how to succeed. There were no slackers around Eric.

Then came the complaints and the threats: He was getting nowhere; he had nothing to show for his life; he was making her ashamed of him. She was tired of having nothing and doing nothing and going nowhere. She was tired of doing all the giving and getting nothing back. It had to stop. If he didn't take the job with Eric or

do something else decisive she was going to leave.  
Finally she did leave.

Yeah, that's how it was, thought Dale: there was always a catch. They all wanted to bleed you. You weren't good enough as you were, you had to buckle down, knuckle under. And you had to bleed. Nothing was ever given, truly given to you; sooner or later payment was always expected. The coat, the watch, the ties, the briefcase - they hadn't been gifts or love offerings; they'd been investments, speculations. And when he didn't yield the expected return he was written off.

"She give you other things too?" asked Red, breaking in on his thoughts. "More expensive stuff like that?"

"Well. . ."

"I bet she gave you a lot of nice stuff. What about you? You give her things? Things as nice as that?"

"Sure. Of course I did. . ." Dale could hear the hesitation in his own voice.

Not nearly what she gave me though, he thought. Birthday and Christmas presents sure. But nothing terribly exciting or valuable. And nothing spontaneous, no surprises. Whenever the impulse hit him there was always something for himself he needed to spend the money on.

It wasn't as if she had minded though. Sonia had always made more money than he and it was understood she could afford to spend more. What she had minded, she said, was his lack of drive, his lack of energy, his



reluctance to struggle and take risks. It was his unwillingness to stretch, his refusal to spend himself, that bothered her.

"I'll bet you did," said Red. "I'll bet you were a real Santa Claus."

Dale was startled. He looked into Red's face. The man's eyes were filled with disgust and his face was clenched in antagonism. It was alarming, even frightening. For the first time Dale realized that he could have more to fear from Red than mere annoyance or embarrassment.

"What kind of work do you do anyway?" Red rasped suddenly.

"I'm a copywriter."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm in advertising. I write ads for magazines and commercials for T.V. and radio."

"Oh, a jingle junky. Sit with your feet up in an office all day and daydream."

"Well, there's more to it than that. It's hard work."

"Yeah, well you guys make pretty good bucks, don't you? In an office and everything. Shirt and tie and no slogging around. Make \$20,000 too, I bet. Even more."

Dale felt himself flushing with embarrassment. How did he get caught up in such situations? Why him? He didn't deserve that kind of grief. And to make it even worse, Red was wrong. He should have been making that - \$23,000 in fact - but he wasn't. With everyone

climbing all over him and stabbing him in the back, he'd lost a promotion and been denied a raise. He was still sitting at \$19,000.

Dale couldn't answer. He turned his face away and stared out the window. On the seat below him, beneath an ad for Remy Martin, a man who had been watching them looked away. Outside, the street was rushing by in a stream of lights. There wasn't the same traffic bottle-neck on the downward side of the mountain and with the stops few and far between the bus was winging along. The descent of the mountain was passing much quicker than the ascent.

"You didn't answer me," Red said, and Dale felt a hand on his arm.

He looked at Red. The man's lips were parted as if he was breathing through his mouth, and there was fury in his eyes, his expression so intense that his frizzy hair seemed to bristle as if charged. It was unbelievable, but it looked as though the man wanted to fight.

The thought made Dale's heart leap hammering into his throat and sent his eyes skittering over his fellow passengers. Few, if any, seemed concerned with him. Then, with a start almost of panic, he noticed that the trench-coated policeman he'd seen earlier was no longer there, his seat now taken by a fat black woman eating peanuts from a tin.

The bus was approaching the elegant towers of the Rockhill Apartments now, and as it pulled in toward the

stop Dale saw his former foe, the young woman in the fur coat, rise from her seat. As she rose she cast a sharp glance in his direction, and he knew she understood everything that was going on. With a gratified half smile curling the corners of her mouth, she minced her high heels sideways down the steps and left the bus.

For a moment Dale felt anger flare inside him; then it died. She was right, he had to admit it. He deserved what was happening, what was going to happen; he'd brought it all on himself. Just as he'd brought all his other troubles on himself.

The aisle was now almost free of standing passengers. He looked out the curb-side windows to see if she was sneering in at him. But she was gone. All he could see was the vast sprawl of the cemetery on the northwest corner of the mountain. It was a view he usually found scenic and peaceful, summer or winter. But tonight, with the snow falling through the darkness and only the snow and a few grey stones visible on the slope, it merely looked bare. Bare and windy. And very, very cold.

He faced Red once more. The disgust written all over the man's livid face no longer seemed shocking. It was appropriate - though perhaps unequal to the disgust he felt for himself. For one fervid moment gladness blazed in his heart and he was almost eager for what was to come. Fighting with Red, even if he lost, would be a

trial by combat, a cleansing penance for his many sins, and a testament to his real strength and fortitude.

Then, as the bus plunged toward Queen Mary Road, the fantasy dissolved and the reality forced itself upon him. Red was a third again his size and insane with rage. Fighting with him would be no gymnasium wrestling match or school yard push-and-shove. The man was tough and at home with violence, and he would try to hurt him; in his state of mind, Red would be eager to hurt him badly. Suddenly Dale was afraid once more. He could feel the sweat popping out all over his body.

The bus pulled in to the stop at Queen Mary Road, a transfer point, and about a third of the passengers crowded toward the doors. Red stood fast, glaring his hatred at Dale. He was clearly having trouble controlling himself, and Dale felt sickness rising in his stomach as he saw the man's last inhibitions dissolve in his eyes.

Then, as the last exiting passengers edged down the steps, a hand reached out and took Red by the arm. It was François, Red's little friend in the toque. The soft touch seemed to bring Red out of himself for a second, and he glanced at his friend before turning back to Dale. Red was desperate to start swinging, but again Toque tugged at his arm, more urgently this time. The little man was holding the gate with his left hand and tugging Red's elbow with his right. His forehead below the toque was creased with urgency and his eyes held

apprehension and concern. Dale could see how deeply the little man cared for his friend.

Toque tugged again and Red took a half step backwards toward the door, his eyes still locked on Dale. Finally, with his friend halfway out the door, Red gave an impatient jerk to his arm, threw a last look of hatred at Dale, and clumped down the steps.

Beginning to tremble as the tension drained from his body, Dale fell into the nearest empty seat. He felt weak with relief. He knew it had been a narrow, almost miraculous escape. He was certain now that Red would have injured him severely. And to make it even worse, it all would have been seen by others. Every indignity, every humiliation would have been witnessed - no doubt sympathetically by some, but certainly with approval and satisfaction by others. He would have been the subject of many scornful conversations that evening, and probably recognized and whispered about for weeks to come.

The thought made him blush with shame and embarrassment. He could feel the heat rising up his face. Then he felt the heat intensify as he realized such conversations might occur anyway. Certainly what had transpired had not been lost on everyone around him. Some of those close by at least had witnessed Red's growing rage and observed his own discomfiture and terror. And some for sure had seen into his mean, petty soul, and known it for what it was.

Afraid to meet the eyes of anyone around him, unwilling that anyone should even see him, Dale turned his face to the window. Outside in the darkness the snow was falling ever more thickly from the black sky. With a start Dale saw that Red and Toque were still nearby. They were arguing. Or at least Red was, for he was yelling and waving his arms about. Suddenly, he lashed out and sent his small companion tumbling into the slush, the toque falling from his head. For a moment Red stood over him, looking as though he was going to strike again. Then, with a final grimace of rage, he turned and stalked off up the street.

Dale swung his eyes to where the little man had fallen. He was up on his knees now, in the pool of light cast by the street lamp. The toque was in his hands and he was shaking it, clearing it of slush. As soon as it was dry, he pulled it down on his head and rose to his feet. Then, without hesitating, he hurried after Red.

Amazed, Dale watched as Toque closed the gap and fell into step beside Red. It seemed unbelievable. What kind of person would take such abuse and still cling to the one who used him so badly? Was the little man sick or merely a coward?

Then suddenly Dale knew. Perhaps it was some trick of the street lights flickering through the falling snow, but for a moment, as Red and François wheeled in tandem from the sidewalk and started across

the street, they were as one, a unit bonded and indivisible, indistinguishable one from the other. And for that moment their feet seemed to leave the ground, step upward, and stride upon the wind blown snow itself.

With the bus moving into the intersection, Dale twisted around to watch as long as he could. What he was seeing, he realized, was not sickness or cowardice, but forgiveness. Forgiveness simple and genuine, bestowed on a man by his friend. And as the bus picked up speed, sliding smoothly into traffic with a soft swoosh like the exhalation of pent breath, he knew by the joyful pounding of his heart, that if he kept that image in his heart, he too could learn to forgive and be forgiven.

## The Wage Earner

Ignoring the steps as he knew Randy had done, Kevin leapt straight from the high porch to the ground. Gravel bit, his palms burned. But then he was up and running again, shaking his hands as he ran, his eyes peeled for Randy. He reached the road just in time to see a flash of red hair a block away, just rounding the corner onto Ash Street.

Kevin slowed, swearing. He should have known Randy would go down Ash. He looked around, searching for another route. But no, it would be worse if they caught him in an alley. And besides, he might lose Randy that way.

Damn! Randy would be all right. They probably wouldn't even go near him. But if he went down there they'd come after him for sure. He slowed to a walk, almost stopped. But then he charged on. If he wanted to learn how to stand up for himself, he had to overcome his fears and stick with Randy.

When he reached the corner of Ash he cast his eyes along the length of the block. Randy was already well beyond, racing down the center of the street like



he owned it, almost to the next corner. But in the danger zone there was no movement. The weeping willow drooped still and dusty under the noon sun, and nothing stirred beneath it. It seemed to be safe.

Sticking to the sidewalk on the far side, Kevin walked quickly, not daring to run but hurrying as fast as he could. His eyes darted back and forth between Randy's shrinking form and the shade around the willow. As he drew even with the tree his heart leapt in fright as something shifted in the shadows. But then he was past and there was no sound and it was obvious that the German shepherd and his pack were not around.

He allowed his eyes to seek out Randy once more. Randy was stopped a block away, waiting in the shade of the big lilac bush just around the corner from the fairgrounds. When Kevin caught up, Randy pulled him into a squat and started to give instructions. Just like Sergeant Morrow on Combat.

"We might have trouble getting in the gate," Randy said, "'cause everybody's supposed to have a pass. If the guard stops us, let me do all the talking. You always sound like you're scared of something. If he doesn't let us in we'll go around to a hole in the fence behind the cow barns. Okay?"

Kevin nodded. He hadn't expected this, but he struggled to keep his worry from his face as he followed Randy toward the gate.

In a small booth to the left of the three turnstiles sat an old man with a red band around his left arm. He was fanning himself with a grey cap and seemed to be staring at something way off in the distance outside the far window. A single fly buzzed against the glass inside the booth.

Kevin kept his eyes focussed straight ahead while Randy pushed through the stile. Then he stepped forward himself. But just as he touched the silver bar the guard stopped his fanning.

"Where you guys think you're going?"

Kevin froze, his eyes locked on Randy. If the red-head ran, he would too. But Randy quickly turned back to the booth.

"We're going to the arena," he said calmly. "We're supposed to meet Mr. Becker there at nine o'clock. We're going to work for him at the horse show."

Kevin only hoped that it were true. Sure, Randy would get a job. He knew what to do. But what about him, he'd never worked before.

"Where are your passes?" asked the man.

"Mr. Becker said he'd get some for us when we got here," Randy said.

The guard hesitated, looking at Kevin.

"He's probably looking for us right now," Randy continued quickly.

A moment passed.

"All right, go ahead," the guard relented. "But this is the last time you get in without a pass."

"Yes, sir," Randy said.

Kevin pushed through the turnstile and scurried to catch up with his friend. Still afraid the guard might change his mind, he could barely keep from breaking into a run, though Randy just kept walking.

Straight ahead was the grandstand and the racetrack. Beyond the racetrack was the arena that was their goal. Kevin could glimpse flashes of its white stucco walls through the single line of pines on the far side of the track. Though he was eager to get there, his first impulse was to avoid the track and circle around through the shade of the picnic grove at the nearest end. There was something about wide open spaces like the barren oval in the middle of the track that bothered him. He always felt like he was being watched. Like even the low prairie sun was an eye dropped down to inspect him. It made him feel like something bad was going to happen.

But these weren't things he could tell Randy. The big red-head would just make fun of him and keep going his own way. With his goal in sight, Randy would take the shortest way he could find. Kevin watched as Randy ignored the KEEP OFF signs, ducked under the rail, and started across the track. Kevin hesitated and looked around. Then, when Randy reached the infield, he screwed up his courage and darted under the rail.

All the way across Kevin felt like a fly crossing a bull's-eye, and when they finally stepped from the brilliant sunlight into the gloom of the arena stable he gave a sigh of relief. But then, as his eyes grew used to the darkness, he noticed how different this stable was from the few others that he'd seen. It was nice and dim and had the same pleasant smell of hay and horses, but it was much bigger. There was no loft overhead, and the vast space under the roof where sparrows and swallows darted and swooped was awesome. He felt like he was shrinking, like his small body was growing even smaller, and suddenly he was very conscious of how little he was compared to the men who belonged there.

"It doesn't look like there are many nags in yet," said Randy, "but let's have a look."

Kevin followed him down a long aisle of stalls. There were two of these aisles, each sixteen stalls long and halved by the wide walkway that ran from the big outer door to a matching door opposite it. All the stalls had recently been painted, white on the bottom, clover-leaf green on top. One stall in each section was piled high with bales of golden hay. So far there were only three horses in the whole place.

When they'd finished a tour of the stable, Randy drew Kevin toward the door that led deeper into the building. It opened onto a big empty room with whitewashed walls and a dirt floor. The room was bright with sunlight

that poured in through windows high on the south wall. Three boys were pitching pennies in a corner.

"This is the paddock," said Randy. "See that guy in the black T-shirt over there, that's Melvin. I'm going to see if he's got a smoke."

Kevin leaned against the door frame and watched Randy cross the paddock. The other boys looked up as the red-head approached. While he talked to Randy, the one called Melvin stood hip-shot, twirling a pack of Black Cat cigarettes. Once he glanced toward Kevin. Just before Randy turned away Melvin showed him the inside of his cigarette pack.

"Melvin figures he'll be able to work for the same jerk he did last year and get some other jobs besides," said Randy when he returned. "Melvin really knows the ropes around here. This will be his third year."

"Didn't he give you a cigarette?" asked Kevin.

"Naw, he only had two left. You got any money?"

"A dime."

"Good. Let's go get a Coke."

Kevin followed Randy across the paddock and into the arena. The tiny snackbar was behind a Dutch door in a far corner. Though drab, it was clean and softly lit with sunshine and smelled pleasantly of coffee. There were no other customers. A surprisingly young girl with patches of pimples on her forehead and chin slumped behind the counter. She had dirty blond hair and wore a pink

uniform, and despite her pimples Kevin thought she was pretty.

Fingering the dime in his pocket, Kevin paused briefly at the chocolate bar display, then followed Randy to the soft drink cooler. After Randy pulled out his Coke, Kevin rummaged in the dingy water for an Orange Crush. He wiped the bottle on a rag tied to the cooler handle and joined Randy at an arborite topped table by the windows.

Neither boy said anything as they sucked at their drinks. Kevin glanced briefly toward the empty parking lot outside the window then turned his attention to the room. His gaze passed quickly over the few pictures of horses on the dun walls and came to rest on the counter girl. She was staring out the windows as if all alone in the room. Kevin's eyes fell to the swell of her breasts beneath her pink uniform. Then, feeling himself flush, he quickly looked away. When they got up to leave, he glanced at her once more.

"Screws like a mink," said Randy, as Kevin closed the door behind them. "Melvin knows a guy that felt her tits the first time he was with her. One time in the loft in A barn, he shoved a Coke bottle up her cunt."

Kevin was boggled and his mind remained in a daze all the way back to the stable. Then he was brought around by a commotion at the outer door. A large trailer was backed into the opening and two men in jeans and

cowboy boots were unloading horses. Directed by a man in a grey business suit they were struggling with a palomino that wouldn't back down the ramp. The two men were at the horse's shoulders trying to push it back while the third man stroked its side. Suddenly the businessman moved to the horse's head and gave a yell. The palomino reared and the cowboys stumbled forward. Hooves drummed on the wooden ramp and someone swore. Then the horse was down.

"That's Mr. Becker," Randy blurted, as the man in the suit followed the palomino away. "I'm going to talk to him. You wait here."

Kevin did as he was told. Uneasy at being left alone, he paced back and forth near the door. As more and more horses were brought in he found a corner out of the way and watched from there. He hoped Randy would get back before somebody kicked him out.

When Randy finally came back, more than half an hour later, he was grinning from ear to ear. A square of shiny white paper jutted from his shirt pocket.

"Did you get a job?" Kevin asked, though he knew what the answer would be.

"Sure," Randy replied.

"What took you so long?"

"I forked some hay and set things up in the tack room. Then I reminded Mr. Becker I needed a pass and he took me over to the office to get it."

He pulled the shiny paper from his pocket. It was a plastic covered I.D. card stating his name and Mr. Becker's. A red star was stamped in one corner.

"I hope I can get a job now," Kevin said.

"Don't worry," said Randy cockily, "it's easy."

As if to support this statement, Melvin came strutting around the corner from the second row of stalls, his T-shirt damp with sweat and clinging to his body.

"Hi," said Randy in greeting. "I saw you pitching hay a while ago. Are you working for Dangerfield again?"

Before Melvin could answer, the boys were startled by a shout from the paddock door.

"Hey, one of you guys come here."

All three looked to where a man about thirty stood holding the reins of a grey horse. He was swarthy skinned and wore a dirty white cowboy hat, a checked western shirt and jeans.

"Come here and take this horse," he called again, without indicating any one of them in particular.

Melvin and Randy exchanged glances while Kevin looked back and forth between them. Melvin urged him forward with a jerk of his head, but Kevin didn't move. Finally, when Randy gave him a nudge in the ribs, he stepped forward.

"Come on," the man commanded impatiently, and Kevin took hold of the reins.



"Walk Star Argent until I get back," the man instructed. Then he crossed the paddock and joined another man at the arena door. The other man was about the same age, but he was shorter. He wore high shiny boots and pants that puffed at the hip. His fair thinning hair was combed straight back from his high forehead. When they disappeared in the direction of the snackbar, Kevin looked up in bewilderment at the horse.

"You better get to it," Randy said.

Kevin took a tight grip on the reins with both hands. Then he tugged on the reins and stepped away. His eyes widened in alarm as Star stood firm, snapping her head back in protest.

"Don't jerk the reins!" called Randy. "Just hold them firmly and walk at an even pace."

Kevin did as he was told, and Star followed calmly behind as if happy to oblige him now that he'd learned some manners. By the time Kevin had finished his first circuit of the paddock, Randy and Melvin had left the doorway. Half an hour later the two men returned. The cowboy took the reins and led the horse away. The little man walked ahead. Neither man said anything to Kevin.

Kevin looked around for Randy but the red-head was nowhere in sight. So, holding well back, he followed the men to the stall. He hovered a short distance off as the horse was groomed and watered. From the men's conversation he learned the short one with the light hair

was Star's owner and rider, and the cowboy was his foreman. It sounded as though the little man owned a really big farm or ranch and a lot of horses. It was only after the cowboy had shot the bolt to the stall that either man seemed to notice Kevin's presence.

"Is . . . is that all for now?" Kevin asked, as they prepared to leave.

Hands in his pockets, the owner smiled vaguely and said nothing.

"Yeah," said the foreman, scraping the bottom of a badly scuffed boot on the edge of a stall door. "She's all tucked away for the night."

"Oh."

Kevin was lost.

"I guess I'll see you tomorrow then," he repeated, as the men walked away.

"Yeah, sure," the cowboy said.

After they were gone Kevin stood in his tracks staring down the long aisle of stalls. There was no one else about. Dust motes hung motionless in the light of the outer doorway. The only sounds were the cooing of pigeons in the eaves and the occasional snuffle of a horse.

Kevin returned to the paddock to search for Randy but his friend wasn't there. He wasn't in the empty snackbar either and Kevin didn't know where else to look. He decided to go home. He had no idea what time it was

but his stomach told him it was a long time since he'd eaten. He went back through the stable and left the way he'd originally entered.

Now that he was free to go his own way, he chose to go around the racetrack instead of across it. He zig-zagged through a small parking lot full of horse trailers and pickup trucks and headed toward the picnic grove. A chipmunk wrestling with a pine cone half its size moved closer to the nearest tree and eyed him warily as he entered the tangle of light and shadow that was the grove. By the time he emerged onto the road leading to the gate he'd convinced himself the day had gone well. He'd spent half an hour walking a horse and it had been easy. And though neither of the men had said he was hired exactly, they did expect him to return. What was there to worry about after all? Both men had probably been going there for years and they were old and knew things. They would understand what was on a kid's mind. If they didn't want to hire him, they would have said so.

"But what about a pass?" he thought with a shock as he was going out the gate. "They forgot to give me a pass!"

Or was it his own fault? He could have asked for one like Randy did. Oh well, he could always sneak in through the hole in the fence if he had to. All he really had to worry about now was staying away from Ash Street

and those damn dogs. He hoped they weren't roaming outside their usual territory.

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Kevin paused behind the cow barns and dusted himself off. Squeezing through the fence he'd snagged his T-shirt on the wire and gone down on his knees to get free. Now, brushed clean again, he hurried off to the arena and made a bee-line for the paddock. Sure enough, Randy was already there. He and Melvin and another boy were pitching pennies while two other boys looked on. Kevin wished he could talk to Randy, but not in front of the others. He hung back and watched from a distance, cheering silently for Randy.

The boy Kevin didn't know was the worst player. He couldn't leave his toss within a coin's width of the wall like Randy could. On the other hand, Randy was rarely able to beat Melvin, who had the knack of leaving his coin touching the wall, sometimes on edge and leaning. It wasn't long before the stranger dropped out.

"You want to play?" Melvin asked Kevin.

"No thanks," said Kevin. He had never played before and his lone quarter was for the Orange Crush and Crispie Crunch he planned to have for supper. But he promised himself he'd give it a try after he got paid.

When he had so much money he could afford to lose some, he would stand up to the line and take his chance.

"Melvin's lucky, aye," Kevin said, when the game had broken up and he and Randy were alone. He knew his friend had lost a lot and wanted to console him.

"He's pretty good," Randy said, "but sometimes I beat him. And I'm getting better. I'll get my money back."

"How long have you been here?" Kevin asked.

"Since about seven," Randy answered, giving Kevin a shock. "Mr. Becker had a lot for me to do this morning. How did you make out yesterday?"

"Oh, great. The guy with the grey horse told me to meet him this afternoon," Kevin lied. He was growing very uneasy about everything again and didn't want his friend to know.

"What do you have to do?"

"Oh, I just walk the horse and stuff. She's a mare."

"No kidding!"

The sarcasm made Kevin blush, and he flinched inwardly. He expected more, as he would have from his father, but Randy dropped it.

"Sounds like you're all set," Randy said. Then, "I've gotta get something to eat. Coming?"

"I'm supposed to meet my boss right away," Kevin said. He still felt embarrassed and he wanted to get

away and calm down.

When Randy had gone he drifted toward Star Argent's stall. No one else was there. Everything was the same as the day before, except a few of the lights that stretched in long lines above the stalls were now turned on. They made splotches of weak light over the green and white stalls but had no effect on the shadows in the bottom.

"Hello, Star," Kevin said.

The horse eyed him from the back of the box. Kevin wished she would come forward so he could stroke her neck but he didn't dare enter the stall. He knew he didn't have the right and he was still a bit afraid of being kicked. He was standing on tip-toe, leaning chin on hands on top of the half door, when the two men arrived.

They were almost there before he realized it and got out of the way. The cowboy had on the same dusty clothes and worn cowboy boots as the day before. The owner wore shoes with a brilliant shine, brown slacks and a green sport coat. Puffed at his throat was a funny kind of scarf that Kevin had never seen before. His high forehead was pink and shiny, especially when he stood under a light.

At first the cowboy seemed puzzled to see Kevin. Then a smile that was almost a sneer played over his unshaven face. The owner didn't even seem to notice him.

Kevin backed completely across the aisle and kept his distance as the foreman examined Star and discussed her condition with the owner. When the owner left Kevin

stepped forward, but just as he reached the door the foreman came through and forced him back again. The cowboy didn't say anything as he opened the tack room next to the stall and brought out a halter. He slipped the halter onto Star and led her out of the stall.

Kevin thought they were headed for the paddock. But the cowboy only led Star a short ways off and tied the halter to a post, leaving Star in the aisle. Then he returned to the tack room and rolled out a wheelbarrow with a pitchfork and rake inside. He started to clean Star's box, pitching the dirty straw into the wheelbarrow. When Kevin saw what he was doing he stepped to the side of the door.

"I'll do that if you want," Kevin said, surprised that he could put himself forward so boldly. Surprised, in fact, by the sound of his own voice.

The cowboy forked another load into the barrow.

"I can do a good job if you tell me how," Kevin continued.

The cowboy stopped working and looked at him, leaning on the pitchfork. For the first time Kevin noticed how cranky the man looked. His bloodshot eyes, sunk deep above his high cheek bones, looked angry about something, and his mouth looked like he was sucking something sour.

"Okay," the cowboy said, letting go of the pitchfork so Kevin had to catch the handle or get hit on

the head. "Shovel this shitty straw here into the barrow then rake the floor smooth. When that's done lay down some new straw. You want me to carry some bales from the stack?"

"No," said Kevin. "I can do it."

The man gave a snort and a brief smile of scorn that made Kevin think of his father.

"Okay kid, it's all yours."

He walked away.

Kevin set to work and found it wasn't as easy as it looked. Straw matted with manure was heavy and the fork kept twisting in his hands so that his delicately balanced loads often fell off before he could get them in the barrow, but he managed. Holding the handle in the middle instead of at the end, he was gradually able to empty the stall. After that, raking the floor was easy.

Then came the hardest part. The fresh straw was in bales three stalls down and the shortest stack was five bales high. Over his head. And the bales were very heavy. When he tried to pull one down he found he couldn't budge it, and the twine that bound the straw cut into his hands when he pulled. Finally, thankful there was no one around to see him, he climbed up and pushed one down with his feet. With the help of an old pair of leather gloves that someone had left nearby, he dragged the bale to Star's stall. When he had the bale in the stall he pulled it apart with the pitchfork and spread the straw over the dirt.



He handled the second bale the same way.

When the work was all done Kevin went to stand by Star. He stood by her head, petting her and talking softly, repeating the same few phrases over and over and keeping the same level tone he thought would be soothing to her. Awed by her sleek warmth, he ran his fingers over her cheeks, slid the back of his hands along her neck and rubbed the muscles of her shoulders. From time to time he brought his hands away and snuffed her pleasant musk from his fingers.

When the cowboy returned, Kevin wondered if he would say anything about his work. But all he did was put Star back in her stall.

"Is Star going to be in the competition tonight?" asked Kevin shyly, as the man locked up the tack room.

"Yeah," answered the man, giving Kevin a whiff of beer.

"What time?"

"About seven o'clock."

"Will she have to be walked or anything then?"

"Yep."

The man walked away.

Excited, confident now, Kevin went looking for Randy. But the red-head was not in the stable or among the small group of people chatting over coffee in the snackbar. What to do? He wanted to talk to somebody, share his excitement, celebrate a little. Then he

remembered his supper money left a nickel to spare. He searched along the counter for a treat and came across the sunflower seeds, the only thing that cost a nickel. Seeds weren't very good without a soft drink to wash them down, but he had no choice. He tugged a bag from the rack and plunked down his quarter.

The counter girl was busy serving a hot dog to a customer. Kevin could see the steam rising from the weiner as he watched her out of the corner of his eye. He thought she was even prettier than before. When she came to take his money he dropped his gaze to the floor. He looked back at her as he was going out the door.

Sprawled in the shade of the picnic grove, munching his seeds, Kevin felt quite pleased with himself. No more scrounging for bottles or golf balls for him, he'd found a real job. He was working like a man and making lots of money. He bet that Randy didn't think he was such a scaredy cat now. And what would his mother think?

As vivid as if it were on a movie screen in front of him he imagined what would happen when he showed his mother the money. Right away she would see she didn't have to worry anymore and a smile would burst on her face like the sun from behind clouds. She would kiss him and call his sisters and show them what he'd done. Then she would make his supper. They would sit around him as he ate and he would promise everyone their favorite candy. No one would care anymore that his father had left.

Everybody would be happy.

Suddenly he was jolted from his dreams by a burning in his mouth. With nothing to wash it away, salt from the sunflower seeds had coated his lips and tongue. Quickly he left the grove and found a tap in the stable and stuck his face under it. The water was luke warm and tasted of rust, but he drank till his stomach swelled.

When he wandered back into the paddock, Randy and Melvin were gabbing with some of the other boys. They were telling stories about things they'd done with girls. Kevin listened in awe until the talk was halted by a low whistle from one of the other boys. Everyone looked toward the stable door.

Two men and a woman had entered the paddock. The woman, a young blond in a red blouse, seemed to sparkle in the rough room like a cat's-eye in the dust. She was holding tightly to the arm of the younger of the two men, Star's owner. In riding clothes once again, he was doing all the talking, swiveling his head between his two companions and gesturing with his free hand. Kevin's eyes, like those of the other boys, locked on the blond. When the trio passed into the arena, the paddock began to buzz with the boys' appreciation of her glamour.

"That's my boss she's with," Kevin proclaimed with a flush, speaking up for the first time.

"Is it his wife?" someone asked.

"I don't know," Kevin said. "I think so."

"I bet she's his sextary!" Melvin exclaimed, and everybody laughed.

Then others offered their opinions.

A little while later the group broke up, everyone going in separate directions. Kevin headed for Star's stall.

Now the stable area was a brand new place, noisier and brighter than ever before. Men and boys bustled about preparing the horses, while parties of friends and relatives bunched around men in riding gear, chatting and laughing. Metal and leather shone in a room that was now as bright as outdoors. Every string of bulbs in the place was lit from end to end.

Kevin could feel the excitement in the air and he shared it. But he had liked the stable much better when it was dark. He moved through the crowds slowly, trying to be as unobtrusive as possible. To his great relief there was no one at Star's stall but the cowboy. The man had changed to a brighter shirt of red and white checks, but he still had the same angry look about him. Kevin watched as he put the finishing touches to Star's braided mane. Freshly groomed and decked out in a gleaming bridle and saddle, the mare looked beautiful.

Suddenly, as if his father had appeared before him spouting threats and ridicule, Kevin filled with panic. He didn't belong there, he thought, he was getting too big for his britches again. For sure he would do

something wrong, cause trouble somehow. He would get in someone's way, or Star would get away from him, or she would kick somebody while he was in charge of her. Horrified, all he wanted was to creep out of the light. But just then the cowboy led Star from her stall and it was too late. He couldn't let the cowboy see him running away. He followed along to the paddock.

Nerves jumping under his skin, Kevin took the reins and started around the dirt floored room. Other horses were led into the paddock, and most were in the hands of boys like himself. Kevin began to relax, reassured by the routine and by the feeling that he was just one of a number and didn't stick out. Gradually he became aware of a rising tide of noise sweeping in from the arena. The stands were filling with spectators.

Kevin kept his eye on the stable door as horses began entering the arena and returning, their entrances and exits marked by bursts of applause. Then the cowboy and Star's rider strode into view. The cowboy took the reins and helped the other man mount. Star pranced into the arena.

Kevin hurried forward to watch but a crowd of people swept into the doorway and blocked his view. Disappointed, feeling a bit like a traitor for not cheering Star on, Kevin slumped to the ground against the wall by the door and watched Randy and Melvin walk their horses. Before he knew it Star and her rider were

back and the reins were in his hands again. Half an hour later the cowboy returned for Star.

"Is Star finished for now?" Kevin asked.

The man nodded and took Star away. Kevin sensed there was no point in following him into the bright stable. Then he realized he was finished. He was through for the day, and it was still early.

His first thought was to hang around until Randy was finished. But then he remembered it was Friday. His mother would still be behind the cash register at Birnbaum's Grocery and wouldn't be home before nine-thirty. Until then his sisters would be next door watching Leave it to Beaver and Father Knows Best with the Huffers. If he went home now he could have the house to himself for a while.

Kevin slipped out of the stable into the warm August evening. The sun was low in the sky and the ground was darkly shadowed. Already moths and other bugs were dancing around the post lights in the parking lot. Kevin felt happy. He would pick up his soft drink and chocolate bar on the way home, then curl up in the arm chair and read more of Mark the Matchboy. When he got sleepy it would be just like Christmas when all he wanted was for morning to come. The night would pass quickly and the big day would arrive.

"I'll probably have the money by this time tomorrow!" he thought.

He could almost feel the paper between his fingers

as he imagined sliding the brilliant purple of a ten dollar bill into the trucker's wallet an uncle had given him for his last birthday. He carried it in his hip pocket, the chain always securely looped to his belt, though there was rarely anything in it. He wouldn't lay the money before his mother, he decided, but would have her peek inside the wallet as he slowly opened it before her. Wouldn't she be surprised when that big 10 leaped out at her like a rabbit out of a hat!

He walked out of the gate in front of the guard. Grey cap pushed back on his head, the old man sat twisted around so the light from a nearby street lamp fell on the pages of an old True magazine. Again Kevin regretted not asking for a pass. It sure would be nice to walk in that gate like he was worth something and had a right to be there. He picked up a stone, delivered his best fastball at a telephone pole, and headed for home.

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When Kevin sauntered into the stable at four o'clock the next day, he felt more lighthearted than he could remember feeling for a long time. Before leaving home he had finished Mark the Matchboy, and it made him feel good all over to know Mark had found the grandfather who would take care of him. He was also feeling much more

relaxed around the stable. Though he'd had to sneak through the fence again, he no longer felt so much like an intruder inside the building. It was familiar now and held more promise than threat.

It was also very still and quiet at present. Down the first aisle the only sign of life was a single horse with its head stuck outside its stall. Down the second aisle the only one in sight was a man sleeping on a pile of bales. In the paddock two boys were listlessly flipping heads or tails, but Kevin didn't know either of them. He hoped to find Randy or someone else in the snackbar, but before he got there he caught a glimpse of red hair in the stands. Randy and Melvin were sprawled in the bleachers near the canteen, drinking coffee and smoking cigarettes.

"Where is everybody?" Kevin asked, when he'd climbed to their roost.

"Snoozing," said Randy.

"Or screwing," said Melvin.

"Oh!" said Kevin, dropping his eyes. He scuffed his shoe against a bleacher.

"Has my boss been around?" he asked, changing the subject.

"I told you, everybody is off screwing," said Melvin. "They won't be back until they have to get ready for the jump."

Kevin blushed.

Just then a door banged and someone walked away



across the end of the arena from the direction of the snackbar. It was the counter girl, in her pink uniform.

"It's Cindy!" Randy hissed, a quality of excitement in his voice that Kevin had never heard before.

Melvin scrambled to his knees and craned his neck to get a better look as the girl opened a small door on the far side of the arena and stood facing out into the sunlight. Melvin and Randy exchanged glances. Kevin thought they were acting very strange. Both seemed to have lost a lot of their usual confidence. They seemed almost nervous.

"Must be on her coffee break," Randy whispered, and Melvin told him to shut up.

Randy pulled Kevin down behind a seat as he and Melvin hid themselves. With only their heads raised above the seat backs, they continued to watch the girl. There wasn't much to watch. She merely sat down in the doorway and rested her elbows on her knees. From time to time she plucked a dandelion from along the outer wall and twirled the stem in her fingers. When she stood up and walked back toward the snackbar about ten minutes later, the boys all ducked their heads.

It became clear to Kevin then that what Randy and Melvin had said about the girl was probably untrue. They probably didn't even really know her, might not even have spoken to her. Suddenly he was filled with exultation. This was something he could do that they hadn't! Tonight

after he got paid, when he went into the snackbar for his sister's candy, he would talk to her. It wouldn't be so hard to do when he had money. Maybe he could buy her a Coke or something. She might even like him if she knew he wasn't poor.

Thinking of these things, Kevin almost felt like an equal as he spent the rest of the afternoon lounging around with Randy and Melvin. Later, when they parted at the stable door, he was still so excited he felt like dashing down the aisle. But all the overhead lights were on again, and people were at work in the aisles and stalls. So he hurried as much as he could without drawing attention to himself.

He was almost to Star's stall when suddenly a dark mass lurched out of a doorway in front of him. He bumped into it and stumbled to one knee. Looking up he saw the cowboy looming over him, a saddle in one hand and a bridle in the other. His face was red and scowling.

"What do you want?" he snarled.

"I-I just wanted to help with Star," Kevin stammered, his eyes spreading wide in alarm.

"Go wait in the paddock."

Dismayed, Kevin did as he was told. For fifteen minutes he squatted by the paddock door, wondering if somehow he had made a mistake that would cost him everything. But then the cowboy appeared and without a word thrust the reins into his hands. Relieved, but still feeling he must

have done something wrong, Kevin couldn't even look at the man. When it came time for the rider to mount, he gave up the reins with his eyes downcast.

As the two men and the horse disappeared into the arena, Kevin realized with a gush of excitement how soon he would be finished. And how soon he would be paid. One more spell with Star and his work would be done and the money would be his.

He thought of what he would do when he had the money. First of all he'd arrange it in his wallet so the biggest bill showed. (He hoped it would be a ten dollar bill rather than a bunch of ones.) Then he'd go to the snackbar and talk to the girl and buy his sisters' candy. Then he'd come back and tell Randy and Melvin and pitch coins for a while. With as much as ten dollars in his pockets it wouldn't matter if he lost some.

Suddenly there was a swirl of activity by the gate. People moved clear as Star and her rider came through. Star was shiny with sweat and her rider, standing in the stirrups, looked awesome in his black hat and jacket and his gleaming boots. Both the rider and Kevin looked around for the cowboy but he was nowhere to be seen. So Kevin hurried forward.

The owner smiled down at him, handed him the reins and dismounted. He removed his hat, brushed sweat from his forehead with his white gloved hand, and looked around the room once more. Then he walked across the paddock

into the stable.

Kevin went happily about the job of walking Star. He thought the owner seemed nice and hoped he was the one who paid the wages. He was exciting himself with thoughts of bonuses and tips when the cowboy came for Star. Kevin wiped his palms on his pantlegs as the man led the horse away. This was it, he thought.

He crossed to the stable door and stopped. It wouldn't do to hurry after them. He didn't want them to think he was impatient or pushy.

Finally he entered the stable. After passing through a knot of people just inside the door he stopped again. Straight ahead he could see Star's owner standing near the exit. He was in street clothes and the blond woman was with him. The cowboy stood nearby. After a minute the blond woman kissed the owner goodbye, looked coldly at the cowboy, and stepped out into the night. Then the men started toward Star's stall.

Kevin followed slowly behind. When he turned down the aisle he saw the two men standing by the tack room door. They seemed to be arguing. The owner, his back to Kevin, was speaking quietly with emphatic gestures and the cowboy looked flushed and even angrier than usual. Once more Kevin held back.

When the argument seemed to be over and the conversation had become more relaxed, Kevin eased forward and hovered a few steps off the owner's right shoulder.

Only the cowboy saw him, but after he finished talking he indicated Kevin's presence. The owner turned, his eyebrows lifted in query, and the cowboy said Kevin was probably waiting to be paid.

Oh. The owner beamed a smile at Kevin and took an oxblood coloured wallet out of his jacket. It was thick with money. He fingered some bills and looked a question at the cowboy and the cowboy nodded. Smiling another one of his vague smiles, the owner held out two bills.

Kevin's heart leapt. Two bills meant he was getting a tip! He reached and took the money. Then his heart stopped dead in his chest. It wasn't a ten and a one, it was only two ones. His tongue and mouth and throat went dry. His eyes swept over the two men as a ball of lead sank to the pit of his stomach. He moved his jaws as if to speak, but nothing came out.

The owner looked between Kevin and the foreman. Wrinkles appeared on his pink forehead as he seemed to sense Kevin's distress.

"Is that enough?" he asked.

Kevin looked at him, his mind reeling. - How could the man not know? It was supposed to be ten dollars! - Then he went cold with horror as he realized it was all up to him. He had to do something, say something. But what, how? He couldn't humiliate himself and beg. And he couldn't demand more either. He knew what the answer to any kind of claim would be. The cowboy

wouldn't stand for it, and his reaction would be angry and swift.

Kevin saw himself in the cowboy's grip, saw himself squirming as he was bundled through the bright light, helpless and humiliated. He saw the sparkling eyes of the crowd enjoying his helplessness, and he heard their laughter as he was tumbled out the door.

Struggling to keep his chin from trembling, Kevin lowered his eyes from the owner's face. There was nothing he could do. If the man thought he was only worth two dollars he had to accept it. He had no choice. With the blood pounding in his ears so loudly he couldn't hear his own voice, he gave the man his answer.

"Yes," he said.

"Are you sure?" the owner asked.

Kevin nodded.

When the two men turned away Kevin slunk from the barn. The sun had set and the sky was dark and starless. He turned toward the picnic grove and stumbled through, guided only by the faint glow of the arc light at the far side. As if stunned he moved out of the gate and down the road. Shame and self-disgust rose in him like a salt tide, bringing tears to his eyes. Without realizing what he was doing he chose the shortest route home, down Ash Street. Before he'd gone a block the first dog started to bark. Then, as he quickened his step, a second dog joined the first.

They did not draw near or even come into sight. But soon others joined the howl. Kevin picked up speed. Then he began to run. And as the noise grew louder and louder, sounding more and more like a million voices mocking him, he ran and he ran and he ran.

## La Nuit de la Fête

Leaning into the heavy glass of the revolving door, delighted to be finally escaping a long week of fruitless labour, and eager for a rare meeting with an old friend slated for that evening, Bryce McCloud was suddenly angered by the rattle of an empty tin. Caught in the slot ahead of his, a Labatt's 50 beer can in sassy red, white and green clattered along between the doors until it swung back to the cool sanctuary of the lobby and Bryce plunged into the muggy blast outside. My God it was hot! Even for Montreal in late June. For one awful moment it was as if the office tower across the street, its million windows ablaze with sunlight, was actually in flames.

Turning away from the terrible glare, he glanced back through the ten foot windows of the building he'd just left and felt his face flush with indignation as a security guard lounging by the elevator bank stared boldly back at him without making a move to dispose of the offensive tin. Shaking his head in disbelief, Bryce



spun around and strode to the curb, the humidity already plastering his new silk shirt to his back.

He ran a finger under his tight collar but refused to loosen it or remove his tie as he impatiently scanned the slow crawl of rush hour traffic gushing its thick stench of exhaust fumes along Dorchester. It was, after all, still business hours, and besides, the tie was very striking, one of his best. He smoothed the classy pattern of blue and gold down his chest and beckoned to an approaching taxi. But it was occupied, as were all the others he could see, and he realized then it would be just as quick to walk. He had lots of time before the scheduled meeting with Kent, but suddenly, as if the beer can and insolent guard had ignited something that had been damped for too long, it couldn't come soon enough. He felt the past weeks dragging on him like an anchor and he itched for some, any kind of movement. Brandishing his briefcase, he set off at a brisk march for his hotel.

"Relax!" he admonished himself, surprised and a little disturbed at the loss of his usual composure. It was just that this trip everything in Montreal seemed so . . . so disorderly, so goddamned chaotic. That's what was grating on him. He shook his head once more, the habitual gesture registering an aristocrat's incomprehension of the sad state of the world, and of people who knew nothing of propriety. For, try as he would, the city would not cooperate with him. It seemed to be doing

everything in its power to aggravate him.

His indignation built to anger, then to a slow seething rage, as his progress was constantly impeded by the flood of people pouring onto the sidewalk from the office buildings that lined Dorchester. He cursed under his breath as a styrofoam cup - just one of the many he'd spied being filled from bottles wrapped in paper bags during his lunch hour stroll - was kicked up against his leg. It left a dirty smear and splatter of liquid on the grey worsted of his new slacks. Then, stopped at an intersection, he stared aghast, as a giggle drew his attention to two young men sitting slim and saucy on a public bench, passing a tiny cigarette between them. Disconcerted by the brash mockery with which they returned his stare, he stepped into the cross street against the light, only to be forced hastily back to the curb. A Volkswagon plastered with fleurs-de-lis careered around the corner, its radio blaring. Red faced with excitement and laughter, the young revellers crammed within yelled insults at people on the corner and raised wine bottles in bravado salutes. And it was only five o'clock!

"Punks!" he thought, shaking his head again.

"Fucking little punk bastards! They're crazy! Like everyone else in this fucking frog city!"

He looked around him. He was stuck in the middle of a rapidly swelling mob, every member of which seemed to be trying to tie him in knots. Why fight it?

He was getting nowhere and being elbowed to death into the bargain. It was time to get out of it, time for a drink, no matter what he'd promised Maureen.

The Queen Elizabeth was just ahead. A good, even a classy hotel. It would do nicely. He scurried across the street and ducked through a door to the lobby. It was cool and uncrowded. A sign on the far side said Voyageur Lounge. He strode across the gleaming parquet floor and entered the bar. The large dim room was already half full and a-tinkle with happy hour gait. But the back was still relatively empty and offered some solitude. He threw himself into the cosy booth with a sigh that was echoed by the red vinyl cushion beneath him. When the waitress approached, he ordered a double Scotch and water - Chivas Regal, in a rock glass, water on the side - and leaned his head against the padded back of the booth.

The bar was long and low, its dimness cheered just enough by the chimneyed candles on the tables and the Tiffany lamps hanging from the ceiling. Though there was no one nearby, laughter and snatches of chatter drifted to him from the open tables in the center of the room and the high stooled bar along a side wall. He was pleased, even relieved, to hear most of the talk was in English. For the moment at least he was content to take what comfort could be found in the familiar. He'd had enough of Frenchmen over the past week to last him a lifetime.

There was just no understanding them. Like most

Westerners, he'd thought all the talk about Separation came from a few radicals clustered around Levesque. Now, with the Referendum drawing near, it appeared to be a lot more serious. The past week had certainly made it seem so. He'd fully expected a successful trip, one that would put him over the top, move him out of personnel. Maybe even give him enough leverage to swing that transfer into the ad department, give him a chance to exercise some of the creativity he'd been stifling for so long. But the turnout had been dismal, and the recruiting had gone badly. Apart from the few he could hire from the English minority who were anxious to flee the province, there seemed to be few workers who wanted to leave Quebec, even for the bounties offered by the company's oil fields in Alberta. He couldn't figure it out. Was it deliberate economic suicide or just laziness? It certainly seemed like nobody here wanted to work anymore. Nobody had any drive, any get-up-and-go. Everybody wanted a free ride.

A year and a half ago they'd come pouring in, hot for the oil fields and tar sands and the Big Buck. Now they were down to a trickle. A bunch of bums with no English and criminal records as long as their tattooed arms. Sure there'd been a few with potential, mirror images of himself almost, well dressed and respectful. And often without so much as an accent, though their names were Dufresne, LeBlanc and Charlebois. Ambitious men after respectable jobs and real money. But there'd

been more like the little cook who sat on the edge of his seat in his white shirt and jeans and wouldn't look him in the eye. That one had just wanted a year or so, with lots of overtime so he could rush back flush to 'La Belle Province.' Would he go back to the fields after a holiday? "Mais non, monsieur! Je vais me marier. I get marry then." Bastards! The whole trip had been a waste of time:

Well, maybe not a total waste of time, he thought, swirling the remaining ice in his glass and admiring the bright sparkle of the candlelight shining through the crystal. At least it had given him some time away from Maureen and a chance to think things over. And now it looked like he was going to get to see Kent. It sure would be good to have a few drinks and bat things around with him again. No matter what Maureen thought of him, Kent was no dummy. He'd helped him see things clearly before, and he'd be able to do it again. Maybe the crazy bugger could even give him a handle on the bloody French. Explain how they got away with calling this St. Jean Baptiste Day they were all going crazy about a "National" holiday. One thing for sure, Kent could show him the town, take him to parts of Montreal he'd never seen before. That would really be something. Get off the beaten track, do a little exploring. Kent was always talking about "checking out the fringes" and "taking a look at the other side." Well, tonight they could enjoy

the festivities and do that also. "Daring to . . .!" Strains of the Star Trek theme ran through his mind. "Yeah!" he thought with a chuckle. "That was what it was all about - 'Daring to go where no man has ever gone before.'"

He was grinning now, amused at the adolescent turn of his thoughts. Still, as the earlier tension left him, he knew that anticipation of the night ahead filled him with real excitement. And seven o'clock wouldn't be long in coming. He'd better get moving. That Scotch had really hit the spot, but there'd be time for more later when it would be like old times with Kent. He signalled for his bill, and as the waitress approached he eyed with appreciation her tall, long-legged grace and the firm jut of her breasts under her low-cut blouse. Now if Maureen were only built like that. Hell, if she could only push up some of the extra thirty pounds she was carrying around!

When he reached the street, he was surprised to find that the crowds had thinned not at all and the going was no easier than before. Still, he felt better now, as he hustled across in front of the cars choking Dorchester and turned west again in front of Place Ville Marie. The mobs milling about the concourse were even thicker than those on the sidewalk, so he decided to put up with the blare and stifling fumes and stick to the street a little longer. He'd turn north at the Sun Life

Building (There was a smart bunch; they'd gotten out of Quebec quick enough!) and walk through the small park there.

The park, too, was full. People were sprawled everywhere on the grass under the widely spaced trees, drinking openly from beer, wine, and liquor bottles. The sounds of hammers and shouted commands came from a group of workmen finishing a stage near the caleche stop at the far end of the park. Leaning, bare feet crossed, against a lamp post in the center, a ponytailed young man wearing an old set of tails over his bare chest practiced trills on a flute. Nearby, a street mime, his face whitened and dark eyebrows comically arched, dropped the orange balls he'd been juggling and silently began a frantic attempt to escape from an invisible prison whose walls were closing in on him.

The mime's clownish desperation sparked a memory in Bryce, reminding him of his own feelings the year after he graduated. The right job had just not come his way. Nor the money to go to the places he wanted to go, buy the things he wanted to buy, the good things he'd promised himself and knew he deserved after two long years at business college. He'd felt like a nobody, trapped in retail sales, a job far beneath him that didn't give the slightest hint of the go-getter he really was.

Then he'd met Maureen and things had started to change. Though it wasn't as much her doing as people

seemed to think. Sure she'd pushed him to find a better job before they were married, but he'd done the letter writing and the door knocking and all the interviews. He'd sold himself to the company without any help from her. He had enough ambition on his own, and someday soon he'd have enough money on his own as well.

In the meantime it had been nice not to have to wait for some of the good things in life. The things that let you walk with your head up and feel like you were worth something. After all, the money from her father that bought the cars and paid for the trips had just been a temporary advantage that anyone would be happy for. Everyone wanted the same things, after all, the things that really made life worth living.

That's how it had seemed then, anyway. Now he wasn't so sure. Now it all seemed to be getting a little too heavy. He was feeling a lot more weighed down than he'd ever expected. Especially with Big Daddy talking about a house and Maureen squeezing him about the other thing. The house was tempting, but what Maureen wanted was out of the question. So he'd have to say no to both of them.

For sure, absolutely for sure, if he gave in on either issue, he'd have to give in on both. And that would mean he'd have to kiss off the idea of changing jobs. He wouldn't be able to afford the risk of trying something new and uncertain, no matter how much potential



the guys in the ad department thought he had. No matter how exciting, creative and challenging he found the work. Creative and challenging: two of Kent's favourite words. They meant a lot. He could see that now.

But if he gave in to Maureen and her dad, took on that kind of financial responsibility, he'd have to opt for dollars, a secure position, and a steady salary. And the probability of twenty more years at much the same job. There weren't too many ladders leading upward from personnel.

He shuddered inwardly, shaken badly by the thought. But then, the park behind him now, he glimpsed his reflection in the window of a man's wear store and was reassured. There could be no doubt that he was a man who would go places. He was young, competent, and virile; and he looked it. He reached up to snug the knot of his tie and smoothe the front of his blazer. Yes, he looked just fine. And Maureen was wrong about the contacts. Glasses suited him. Though perhaps gold frames were a bit reserved under blond hair. He'd have to switch to black plastic. They'd give him a much bolder air and accentuate the penetrating stare he used so successfully during interviews. The stare that told people he was a man of discernment and not easily fooled.

He brought his gaze to bear on the back of a young woman walking just ahead of him. Lush blond hair hung to where her delicate shoulder blades peaked from

beneath her light summer dress. Beautiful, he thought, as he lowered his gaze past her buttocks to her legs. Her legs, too, were beautiful, long and slim, the calves given a perfect arch by the high heels of her dainty shoes. A type of shoe Maureen couldn't possibly wear, or wouldn't dare to. Wouldn't need to, for that matter, the way she always hid her milk-maid ankles under floor length skirts.

At St. Catherine Street the light was amber, and the blond girl, along with most of the others near the corner, scrambled quickly across, drawing blaring honks from aggressive motorists. Bryce, though he was only a few paces back, couldn't bring himself to risk the dash and halted at the curb. To his amazement he found he had to struggle to keep his foothold on the sidewalk as the crowd behind him pushed forward. A number of people even dared to ignore the red light and take their chances amid the cars on the street. Left hand gripping a lamppost to secure himself, Bryce peered over the river of cars to the opposite corner.

The blond had disappeared. But another beauty, dark haired this time, stood facing him. God there were beautiful women in Montreal! This one was a fashion model for sure! The make-up, the expensive, sexy clothes - she had to be. As the light changed and the last cars charged through the intersection, he ran his hand through his hair and composed his face. He kept his eyes on her as they approached each other, preparing to meet her gaze.

His clothes were right, would she notice him? He started to smile, then stopped, as she stepped regal as a queen through the mob that surrounded her and didn't even register his presence.

Bryce felt a blush sweep up his throat and burn his face. Suddenly he was very conscious of the heat again, his shirt sticking to his skin, clammy sweat greasing the palms of his hands. Surreptitiously he wiped his left hand on his pantleg and shifted his briefcase so he could do the same with his right. Thank God he would soon be off the street.

Ahead of him stood the Sheraton-Mount Royal Hotel, as solid and reassuring as a fortress. It was his first stay there. Usually he stayed at Holiday Inns because he liked their promise of "No Surprises." But this trip he felt that a change would do him good and that, in fact, a few surprises were just what he needed. But now all he could think about was the privacy and shelter of his room. He hurried by the taxi stand with its gaggle of drivers arguing loudly in a babel of languages, coughed his way through the diesel fumes from the bus loading on the side street, and dove through the nearest entrance to the hotel.

Through eyes still smarting from the diesel fumes he saw that he was in the shopping mall that made up the bottom floor of the hotel. Just inside the door stood a man in grubby clothes, a panhandler. The bum stepped forward in front of him. "Avez-vous du change?" he asked,

extending a filthy hand. For a second Bryce stopped dead in his tracks. Then he charged by and raced up the stairs to the lobby. He was livid with consternation. Vagrants and panhandlers practically in the hotel! Was the whole damn city out of control?

The elevator took forever descending, and Bryce waited impatiently, rocking on the balls of his feet. For the first time that week he didn't dwell with satisfaction on what he thought of as the classic elegance of the lobby. For the first time that week the two-story Greek pillars didn't fill him with assurance and a warm feeling of self-worth.

When the elevator swooshed softly open it was empty of people. But it wasn't empty of trash. The litter that had been so exasperating on the streets had found its way into the heart of the hotel. An empty bottle of cheap Scotch stood in one corner, and more of the inevitable styrofoam cups were squashed between the chrome handrail and the carpeted wall. It was the last straw! He would have to speak to the manager. At \$50 a night, company money or not, he was not going to put up with garbage in the elevators. No matter what the occasion.

He charged to his seventh floor room in a red blur of outrage, but once the door clicked shut behind him his anger suddenly cooled. And just as suddenly it became incomprehensible. He didn't know what was getting into him these days. He slumped to the edge of the bed and

dropped his briefcase at his feet. Slouching, elbows braced on his knees, he suddenly felt empty and weak. Slowly his mind went blank, as his gaze was absorbed by a flat expanse of sun-glared window. Then he gave his head a shake and went to close the drapes.

Pausing at the window, he looked down on the street. The sidewalks still swarmed with people, and on de Maisonneuve cars and trucks were backed up as far as he could see, even through intersections. Pedestrians wanting to cross ignored the traffic lights and crosswalks and wove their way through the traffic wherever they could find room. It was chaos, sheer chaos.

His eyes fled the confusion and climbed from the streets, as if in search of some reassuring order higher up. Montreal generally was an elegant city, particularly in terms of its architecture, but at present he didn't feel it gave him much to look at, even up high. A lot of stone and glass, a few lethargic pigeons, and, on top of a Sherbrooke Street hotel, a small flag pole, its unidentifiable pennant drooping in the soggy air.

He closed the drapes and turned away from the window. For the first time since entering the room he felt the cool touch of the air conditioning. It slid along his skin like a premonitory chill. Immediately, as if to deny this feeling, or to prove the air was merely cool not cold, he removed his blazer and tie. Then he aligned his brogues neatly under a chair by the wall and

stretched out on the bed.

Maybe Kent would call early, he thought; and the sooner the better. Not, as Maureen would think, because he was bored and wanted some kicks, but because he'd really missed Kent. Their long separation had made him feel like he'd lost part of himself. And besides, Kent could show him the real Montreal and help him to understand the whole Quebec situation. Even more important, though it wouldn't be any comfort to Maureen, Kent could help him make the decision he had to make. Just as Kent had once helped him with the decision to better himself by giving up clerking and going back to school.

Kent had always laughed at most people's ideas of accomplishment and said it was important that a man find the kind of work he could enjoy, rather than work for money alone. He'd always been unconventional like that. He'd never been horney for dollars himself and had often said that conventional marriage was a joke. It had been their different attitudes to such things that finally divided them, especially after Maureen got her back up. And it had been easy enough then, when he'd been flat broke, to see things Maureen's way. But maybe Kent hadn't been so wrong after all.

Well, they could talk about that while they were doing the town. With Kent's company and a little bit of booze he'd be able to relax and take a clear look at things before making up his mind. And if he was having a

really good time, he could even spend the rest of the weekend in Montreal and fly back on Sunday night.

He looked at his watch and rose from the bed. Kent was to call about seven and it was six-twenty now. Time to get cleaned up and changed, though he doubted that Kent would be fussing about his appearance. He probably still wore T-shirts and denim jackets and had hair down to his ass.

Bryce stripped and stepped into the white tiled bathroom. After brushing his teeth and running the Philishave over his face he stood briefly under the shower. Then, when he'd toweled himself off, he selected his clothes for the evening. A clean white shirt, navy slacks, and black loafers, and the madras jacket he'd so much enjoyed buying two days before without Maureen looking over his shoulder. A new tie perfectly matched the vermillion squares in the jacket.

Fully dressed he looked expectantly at his watch. It was six-fifty. He turned on the T.V. and a woman appeared, giving the weather in French. He couldn't make out a word of the frustrating babble but the figures on the screen showed the temperature was 32°C.-90°F!

He flicked the dial and found the same thing in English. After going around the dial twice he shut off the set in disgust and began to pace. He wished the bugger would hurry up.

At seven-twenty he was cursing under his breath.

At seven-thirty-five he was looking in the mirror and shaking his head in total disbelief. At seven-fifty he'd had enough. He'd be damned if he'd wait another minute longer. Kent could go fuck himself.

That was the trouble with Kent, always had been, he fumed as he stepped into the elevator. He was unreliable. Him and his different drummer, doing everything in his own way and in his own good time. He probably called it being free, or being an individual; though that wasn't what it was at all. It was just egotism and lack of consideration, pure and simple.

The elevator stopped and Bryce stepped into the lobby. It was time, he thought, for another drink. But not in the lounge in the middle of the lobby. That was too wide open. Better was the Piccadilly Room which was tucked in a corner down the hall.

Perched on the last free stool at the bar, half of a double Scotch warming his empty stomach, Bryce felt his earlier disappointment and indignation abate to a resentful determination. To hell with Kent, he thought. What did he need him for anyway? It wasn't as if Montreal was New York or some other place where you had to worry about muggers on every corner. He could have a good time and go exploring by himself. All he had to do was get in the spirit and join the flow. As for the other things, well he could make up his own mind there as well. He didn't need Kent to tell him what to do.



He took another pull of his Scotch, savoured it, and swallowed. Already he could feel the tension loosening in his back and shoulders and arms, the warmth creeping up his neck and face. Maureen was so, so wrong - there was absolutely nothing the matter with having a drink or two to relax you when you'd been working hard. It was good for you, helped you shrug off the yoke for a while, helped you loosen up and get a fairer view of things.

With a second double before him on the gleaming bar, Bryce twisted around on his stool and took a closer look at the room. Waiters in yellow jackets scurried between the closely bunched tables and wing-backed chairs, their trays loaded with cocktail and martini glasses and the occasional green bottle of an imported beer. A loud bark of laughter arose in one corner of the room, then was echoed in another. The door opened and three men pushed in, their faces alight with boozy grins.

Yes, thought Bryce, spirits were definitely up. This was more than the usual Friday evening crowd in the usual Friday evening mood. The spirit of festival was in the air, and boisterous feelings were on the climb. He took a gulp of his new drink and felt his own feelings lift with the laughter around him, climb until even the high ceilinged room seemed too small to hold them. Suddenly he felt restricted, cramped even. It was time to get out on the streets, time to get trekking and find out what this 'Fête Nationale' was all about.

He tossed back the last of his Scotch and, glowing now, made his way to the street. The sidewalks on Peel were completely in shadow and held fewer people than before, though the heat was still terrible. For a moment he hesitated. Then he decided. It would be Crescent Street. All week he'd been seeing posters announcing a Friday night street dance there.

He made his way to de Maisonneuve and entered the tunnel which ran from Stanley to Drummond. Then, when he came out on Drummond, he was almost blinded. The descending sun was directly in front of him, and dazzling sunlight poured straight down de Maisonneuve, glittering brilliantly on the cars creeping bumper to bumper along the one-way street. Long shadows stretched behind the people strolling the sidewalks.

As his eyes adapted to the glare, Bryce saw that a stage had been erected two blocks away on the corner of Crescent and de Maisonneuve, and a thick mob of people surrounded it. At that moment a band was mounting and taking up their instruments. By the time he approached the back of the crowd bunched fifteen deep at the side of the stage, the five white men in tropical print shirts had finished tuning up. Suddenly they broke into a discofied "Carnival."

With the sound of the saxophone pulsing in his ears, Bryce squeezed through the crowd in search of an observation post that offered a little elbow room. Almost

immediately he came across a terrace bar that was doing a booming business in outside sales. Reconsidering his choice of drink, he availed himself of a double dark rum and coke in a clear plastic cup and then found, halfway up the staircase of a building under renovation, a seat from which he could see most of the block.

What there was to see was people, people, and more people, swarming on to the block from every access point, with most of them pressing into the half block nearest the stage. Some danced, others swayed to the music, many wearing the latest in summer styles, the military look: khaki, epaulettes, and pockets and zippers galore. Almost everyone held booze of some kind. Some of it bought from the bars along the block, much of it brought in from outside. All of it was carried openly, with no one paying the least bit of attention to the two pairs of luxuriously mustachoied, tieless policemen who lounged on the fringes of the crowd. In a doorway below Bryce a stylish young couple of about twenty swigged frothy Asti Spumante from delicate, long-necked flutes.

Very quickly Bryce grew bored. Except for the size and liveliness of the crowd there was really nothing unusual for him there. Crescent Street was the part of Montreal he knew best. What he really needed was a complete change of scene.

Abruptly he stood up and descended from his perch. Returning to the bar for another double rum, he asked a

harried barman in a white shirt and black leather vest for suggestions, then worked his way back to de Maisonneuve. Once there he gulped the remains of his drink, deposited the cup in a brimming trash basket, and set out on a north-easterly course, striding eagerly through the sultry evening, blithe with booze, and proud of his ability to follow directions.

It was now nearing nine-thirty and, the sun almost down, the shadow which towed him along Sherbrooke Street was much longer than the one which had earlier trailed him along de Maisonneuve. Soon he entered the dusky, tree shaded grounds of McGill University, quickly passed through, and found his way to Prince Arthur Street.

That he'd found his way to a very different milieu was clear to him immediately. Though he was again caught up in a stream of people flowing toward a common destination, the people who now surrounded him were very different from the fashionable types he'd left behind. Here, it seemed, students were in the majority, and T-shirts, faded jeans and sandals comprised the uniform of the day for both men and women. Many of the men had long hair, and beards were common. Bryce felt like he'd slipped back into the sixties. For a moment he felt uneasy, out of place and conspicuous, hot and uncomfortable in his jacket and tie. Then he relaxed. People might look at him strangely, but there was no threat there. This was a festival. People were cheerful and happy, out looking for a good time.

At St. Lawrence he stopped for a moment and savoured the prospect of crossing over. "The Main," he knew, was the symbolic dividing line between the predominantly French east end of the city and the predominantly English west, and crossing it would be like crossing a border between one country and another. The idea filled him with the same kind of excitement, the same anticipation of novelty and change.

Prince Arthur east of St. Lawrence was a narrow street lined with small old apartment buildings and old three-story houses whose lower floors had been converted to boutiques and a variety of ethnic restaurants: Greek, Polish, Vietnamese. And though it was clearly a thriving locale, it was a few rungs down the economic ladder from the area he was accustomed to. The festivities, too, were different. Music blared not from a central stage, but from speakers placed high on poles all along the three block strip, and there was more than one focus of interest. Here and there groups of appreciative spectators massed around acrobats, jugglers and unicyclists, while above the crowd a clown strode on stilts, his sure footed progress cheered by the people below him, their enthusiasm voiced in more languages than Bryce could recognize.

To Bryce it all seemed marvelous and magical. Though at times startling. Never outside Halloween had he seen faces so strangely made up. Time and time again people appeared before him with their faces covered in

paint. White face, black face, green and red. Diamonds and moons and stars. Sparkles and gold dust and heart shaped tears.

There was just too much to be taken in quickly. Bryce stood up on a door step and tried to peer over the crowd, searching for a bar and a seat from which to watch. Suddenly, an old man came around the corner, trundling ahead of him a dolly loaded with beer, five cases of Fifty, and all for sale. Bryce handed him a dollar and accepted a chilled bottle. Then he backed away as the old man was swamped by people waving money.

For a moment Bryce was squeezed back into the doorway, prevented from descending by the old man's customers. Beside him a teenaged boy and girl, both wearing T-shirts emblazoned with a photo of the Rolling Stones, looked up and smiled. Spontaneously, the boy lifted his cupped hand and offered his cigarette to Bryce. For the briefest second Bryce was shocked. Then, semi-drunk and reckless, exhorting himself to be adventuresome, he grinned and reached for the dope.

He inhaled slowly, tentatively, coughing a bit at first and causing the girl to giggle, his eyes smarting from the smoke. Then he drew more deeply and held the smoke down as he'd read was the thing to do. Slowly he handed the joint back and grinned tight lipped as the pair waved goodbye. When he could no longer hold his breath he exhaled and quickly soothed his burning throat

with a chug of beer. Then, suddenly dizzy, he slid to a sitting position on the step and wiped a film of sweat from his forehead.

In front of the step the beer-seller and his customers had dispersed, and Bryce, as his dizziness faded, had an almost unobstructed view of the other side of the street. It was almost dark now but the street was strung with many lights. All at once a movement near the doorway of Le Bal St. Louis: Restaurant Quebecois caught his eye. It was a girl, tall and dark haired, and very lovely. She was intently watching a small group of professional dancers, and to Bryce she, too, had the look of a dancer, lithe and strong. She held herself with a sort of shy aplomb, and it was obvious that under the thin cotton of her tie-dyed purple and mauve T-shirt she wore no bra.

After a few minutes she turned in his direction and noticed he was watching her. At first her dark eyes lowered shyly, but then they lifted and stared boldly back at him. Bryce was instantly excited, overwhelmingly intrigued by the girl's beauty and demeanor. It was someone such as this, he realized, who had been prowling the shadows of his mind throughout his stay in Montreal, in fact throughout the past few months. He couldn't just sit there and look at her, he had to do something.

Just then the girl turned away and began to wend her way through the crowd on her side of the street. Bryce quickly stood up, only to be forced to hold on to the wall

for support as he was struck dizzy again. Then, beer in hand, he began to follow her.

She seemed in no hurry to go anywhere in particular. She merely wandered along the street, crossing from one side to the other through the crowd, stopping to watch some juggling here, some mime there. She drank nothing, though occasionally she reached into the small leather bag which hung from her shoulder and extracted what Bryce guessed to be nuts or raisins.

Finally she neared the end of the street and emerged from the thickest part of the crowd. Though she had more room now, she moved no more quickly than before as she approached the park which cut across the road. There was a water fountain there off the edge of the sidewalk, and she stepped up to it to drink. Stooping from the waist, she held her long hair back with her left hand and dipped her lips to the jet. Then, when she straightened again, she looked back toward Bryce.

Bryce stood in the shadows, far enough back in the crowd, he thought, to remain concealed. Still, she looked straight at him, and he realized for the first time that she'd known all along he was following her. Immediately he felt embarrassed, caught at what he himself thought to be essentially smutty behaviour.

The girl, however, seemed in no way alarmed or even disturbed. Rather, the half smile that flickered across her face suggested something to the contrary. It



was a reaction that was both encouraging and disquieting. It encouraged Bryce to continue, yet spurred twinges of guilty fear as well. Did she want him to follow - was she attracted to him? Or was she leading him on to some unpleasant surprise?

As the girl left the fountain and moved off along the sidewalk that bordered the park, Bryce stepped from the crowd and continued to follow. Looking neither right nor left, the girl drifted into the darkness beneath the over-hanging trees, then floated into the pool of orange-yellow light cast by a post lamp before disappearing into the darkness again. Here and there along the strangely quiet park dark forms lounged on the grass, their few movements betrayed by the glint of glass or the sudden flare of a cigarette. Occasionally a smattering of French came softly to his ears.

At the far end of the park the lights of a major thoroughfare glowed brightly. Here again there were swarms of people, all streaming downhill in the direction of the main streets, Sherbrooke and St. Catherine, and eventually the river. Before she reached the intersection the girl strolled into the middle of the side street that paralleled the park and crossed diagonally toward the far corner. In the street she was clearly visible, and Bryce watched her cross with some anxiety. She would soon be in a crowd again and around a corner. Would this be how he lost her? Had she planned it that way all along?

But he barely had time to grow concerned before his questions were answered. Just before she reached the corner the girl stopped in the light flowing from the window of a candy striped restaurant, a Mike's Sous-Marins, and turned to look back along her path. Surprised, his heart beginning to trip, Bryce froze in his tracks, hugging the shadows. But when the girl continued to stare calmly back in his direction as if waiting, he knew he had to commit himself in some way. Sweating, his heart racing now, he stepped from the darkness into the nearest light and gazed back at her. For a moment she stared across the intervening street into his face. Then she turned again and, with a final glance over her shoulder, merged with the crowd and disappeared around the corner.

Bryce crossed the street quickly and hurried toward the corner. Despite his urgency, his limbs seemed to lift and float almost as if he were in water. A result, he suspected, of the dope he'd smoked. It also had to be the dope which gave the lights he approached their strangely jumpy quality and made the hum of the neon bulbs buzz as loud as bees in his ears. The experience was strange, very different from being drunk, and he hoped it wouldn't interfere with his efforts to keep track of the girl.

As he swept around to the front of Mike's he was momentarily dazzled by the light outside the door. Then, when he was past it, he couldn't spot her. There were

too many people on the sidewalk. He stumbled along the edge of the walk, popping up staircases and craning his neck in the effort to catch a glimpse of her. He knew he was attracting attention to himself, drawing stares and scowls, but he didn't care. This was the adventure, the bold new exploration of experience, he'd been yearning for, and he wasn't going to give it up. Finally he spied her dark head and purple T-shirt, practically under his nose, only five yards in front of him.

He slowed his pace and exhaled, feeling as if he'd been holding his breath since he'd lost her. He was sweating profusely now and was certain the temperature hadn't dropped a degree since he'd left the office. The air was sticky, the humidity stifling. He removed his tie and stuffed it in his jacket pocket and undid his collar. That helped a bit, and he found the action curiously satisfying, like the breaking of a chain, the slipping of a conventional bond.

At Sherbrooke Street he hesitated only a second then dashed across through an amber light, feeling exhilarated at his daring. Below Sherbrooke, St. Denis, the street he was on, dipped sharply, and he felt almost like he was being precipitated down a rabbit hole. Here many of the people abandoned the crammed sidewalks and moved into the street. Below him Bryce could see a huge crowd, larger by far even than the crowd on Crescent Street. It was spread out for blocks, along a street

whose every detail seemed to proclaim the French fact. All around him were shoulder to shoulder three-story houses with bright trim or awnings and signs for French restaurants: Le Bercaill, Creperie L'Escale Bretonne, Le Saint-Malo, La Pichollette, Salon Des Cent. He passed the Bibliothèque Nationale and the Ministère des Affaires Culturelles, Province de Quebec. Over the door to a corner store, a cigarette sign advertised Gitanes, and it like everything else was strung with blue and white fleurs-de-lis.

For a moment, as he took it all in, Bryce almost forgot the girl. Then he snapped his eyes back to her lithe form. She'd stopped beside a sidewalk bar and was talking to people seated there. Three bearded men and a girl, all in jeans and fringed vests, their cheeks and eyes painted, smiled and talked animatedly, gesturing for her to join them. But she shook her head no, leaned to kiss them all, and moved on.

Now the going was very rough, the crowd, less than a block from a high central stage, almost impenetrable. No one was performing at present, but music blasted from two huge banks of speakers. It was rock, but rock Bryce had never heard before, the lyrics all in French. In front of the stage people were doing their best to dance, though they barely had room to move. The smell of marijuana and hashish drifted thickly through the air.

Bryce was beginning to grow tired. Tired of

fighting the crowd, tired of struggling to keep the girl in sight, tired of worrying anxiously about what was to come of it all. He wanted to rest, sit down and have a drink and watch the fun. He wanted to sit the girl close beside him and buy her wine. Talk to her and touch her hair, luxuriate in her smile. The fact that he would be cheating on Maureen he forced from his mind ruthlessly. This night with its fervid promise was something he wanted, something he needed. It would be a breakthrough for him, an extension of himself into a new sphere, a higher level of existence, a better and more appropriate life. This night would be the springboard to his future.

He wished the girl would move out of the crowd or at least stop somewhere. It was time to take the situation in hand, quit this skulking along. She must be wondering what was holding him back, why he hadn't approached her yet. The first chance he got he would catch up to her, talk to her, resolve and advance their little intrigue. As soon as they were free of this crushing mob.

The girl squeezed her way along the edge of the crowd farthest from the stage, occasionally encountering people she knew. Finally she broke free of the core throng, and Bryce saw space opening up beyond her. Once he too was free of the horde it would only take him seconds to overtake her.

Suddenly, the girl changed directions and started across the street, her new direction almost perfectly

perpendicular to her old. By the time Bryce had escaped the crush and reached her turning point she had reached the far curb and was approaching a terrace bar. Bryce took two steps after her then stopped. Again she was talking to friends and laughing, flipping her long hair back over her shoulder.

A young man at the center of the group seemed particularly glad to see her. He gazed up at her and laughed heartily, and when she pulled up a chair opposite him he leaned across the table and pulled her face toward a flamboyant kiss of welcome. That done, he sprawled back in his chair and smiled broadly around the table. He was either very drunk or very stoned. He looked slim and tall and had long fair hair and a trim beard. A classic example, Bryce thought, of the hippy Jesus.

Bruce looked around himself as if lost, seeking a place to withdraw to. He couldn't just stand there staring. He needed a vantage point to take up while he waited. He was convinced the girl's stop was only temporary. Soon she would stand and walk on, making herself available to him again.

To comfort himself he bought another double rum at a bistro on his side of the street and took it with him to a seat on a low brick wall across from the girl. Though his view was often obstructed by the ebb and flow of the crowd, he was confident he would see her when she arose. Spot glimpses of the table showed him others joining the

group, and then he saw that someone had provided face paint. Two girls were joyfully painting the faces of the people beside them. The next time he was given a clear view he saw that the hippy was applying paint to the face of his, Bryce's, girl. The girl had her back to him, so Bryce couldn't see the result, but the hippy seemed intent on what he was doing and worked carefully.

After he'd been waiting for about twenty minutes and his drink was almost gone, Bryce saw the first signs of disengagement. The girls facing him hung their bags from their shoulders and pushed their chairs back. Then most of the group stood up.

There was much hugging and kissing and waving goodbye as the group began to break up, splintering into small groups of two or three. Bryce slid a haunch off the rough wall and set one foot on the ground. His heart was speeding up and the rush of blood through his chest and arms and face made his skin tingle. Momentarily the crowd surged across his field of vision. Then a gap opened again, and he caught a partial glimpse of the girl lurching awkwardly from the curb, accompanied on her right by a couple of her friends. Then he saw the cause of her awkwardness. On her left, arm around her waist, her arm around the back of his paint splattered coveralls, was the drunken hippy. He seemed at once barely able to walk and uproariously jubilant, almost ecstatic. His head was tipped to the night sky, and he was laughing, laughing.

Laughing ecstatically, his delirious grin and laughter aimed upward at the stars, as if the universe itself were the source of his hilarity. For Bryce it was as if the picture of the harlequin Christ that Kent had always displayed upon his walls had come suddenly to life.

Bryce looked in bewilderment at the girl, and his bewilderment turned to alarm. Painted on her cheeks, sharp and vivid as dagger blades, were blue fleurs-de-lis. Then a strange and mocking smile played across her face. Slowly, her eyes locked on Bryce, holding his gaze as if daring him to watch, she slid her right hand down the front of her tottering friend's body and paused at his groin. For a split second she fondled him there, her hand moving as if she were flaunting his genitals, brandishing them. It was a gesture of challenge so crude and vulgar, and yet so discerning, that Bryce recoiled in horror, staggering backwards into the people near him.

He wheeled and stumbled away, fleeing in shock, as devastated as if he'd been physically attacked. Somehow he held his teetering stomach in check as he fled through the milling carousers to St. Catherine Street. There he fell into a cab and directed the driver to the Sheraton. The drive through the congested streets seemed to take forever as he lay with his whirling head thrown back against the perfume tainted seat, watching the lights go jiggling by.

Finally the cab reached the hotel and he disembarked



with the rubber faced assistance of the uniformed doorman. Bryce gave the driver a five and without waiting for his change rushed into the hotel. Across the bright, chandelier lit lobby the elevator door gaped as if waiting especially for him. His stomach dropped within him as the elevator leapt upward.

Back in the darkness of his room, it was all Bryce could do to make it to the bed. Collapsed there, still in his shoes and gaudy jacket, he saw once again the French girl's painted face twisted in a taunting smile, and the slow creep of her hand toward the man's crotch. And then mercifully it and everything else was gone, his mind blanked by the combination of fatigue and alcohol.

Suddenly he was awake again, stupefied, his head ringing. But it wasn't his head ringing, it was the phone. He groped for it along the bedside table.

"Bryce! Bryce, me laddy! Where the hell have you been? I've been calling you all night."

It was Kent, his voice vibrant with cheer. Loud music thumped in the background.

"Where have you been?" he asked again. "Why didn't you wait for me?"

"I did," said Bryce groggily, a hint of plaint in his voice. "Until eight o'clock. Then I didn't think you were coming."

"Shit. I got there about ten after. We had a

little excitement at the house. Some dodo dropped a roach or something in the couch. Burnt the hell out of it. Had a livingroom full of smoke. Old lady next door even called the fire department. But it was nothing serious. Just held me up a bit."

"Oh, well. . ."

"Listen, what are you doing now? The night is still young, it's not even twelve-thirty yet. Why don't I come and get you? There's going to be parties all night. It'll be just like old times. I've really been looking forward to seeing you."

"No. No, I can't," said Bryce. "My flight leaves first thing in the morning and I've been out on the town for hours. I'm sort of all partied out."

". . . Oh. . . Well, alright," said Kent. "I'm sorry I missed you. Hope you're not pissed off?"

"No, of course not."

There was silence on the line.

"Where are you, anyway?" Bryce asked, to end the silence.

"I'm down in Old Montreal. All the main festivities are held here. It's probably the hottest spot in town right now. You should see it."

He paused for a moment.

"Why don't you come down? Just for a drink or two."

"No, not tonight. I'll catch you next time.

"When are you going to get home again?"

"Probably in December, in time for Christmas. . .  
I'll call you when I get in."

"Fine, great. . ."

"Well, I better let you go. Let you get some  
sleep. Give my best to Maureen."

"Of course."

"Great."

"Take care of yourself."

"Sure. You too."

"Yeah."

"Bye."

"Bye."

But Bryce knew he wouldn't say anything to Maureen. He knew he wouldn't see Kent at Christmas either, even if he called, which was unlikely. Kent, he thought, undressing in the air-conditioned darkness, was part of his past now, out of his life forever. They had nothing in common anymore. Kent was still a little boy. He was stuck in neutral, never going anywhere. Maureen had been right about him from the start.

He thought of how pleased Maureen would be to discover he finally agreed with her. He'd find some way to get the message across during dinner tomorrow night.-- If he knew Maureen, the meal would be one of her welcome home specials: sirloin with broccoli and candied yams, or

capon with mushroom stuffing. And there'd be candles on the table, Barry Manilow on the record player, a muu muu on her.-- He'd ease the conversation around to Kent, entertain her with the story.

'... By the way, did I tell you I saw Kent in Montreal? He hasn't changed a bit. If anything he's loonier than ever. When I phoned him he raved on about the big festival there this weekend and said he would give me an insiders tour of the real Montreal, fill me in on what Quebec was all about. You know Kent, always thinks he's got an inside track on everything, thinks he knows more than anybody else.

'Well I took a cab over to his place thinking we could have dinner and look around a bit. But when I got there, there was a fire engine in front of the house. Turns out one of his pot-head friends -- there were about six of them hanging around -- had dropped some burning dope in the couch and just about burnt the place down. It was crazy. In a neighbourhood of old wall to wall houses like that, the whole block could have gone up, and they all thought it was a joke. They were all sitting around on the steps drinking beer and waiting for the smoke to clear when I left. Kent was getting a real kick out of the whole thing. He couldn't for the life of him understand why I wanted to leave. . . .'

Yes, something like that would do it, if he told it with just the right tone of amused consternation. Let

her know, without actually coming right out and declaring so, that he shared her view of Kent and had put the guy behind him for good.

Bryce turned on the overhead light, then rejected it as being too bright, and turned on the bed lamp instead. In the soft glow of the small bulb he began to tidy his clothes. He pulled his tie from his jacket pocket, pressed it flat on the dresser, and hung it on a hanger. He aligned the creases in his pantlegs carefully, clasped the cuffs in their special press, and suspended the pants in the closet. He draped his jacket on a round shouldered plastic hanger.

Then, his three pairs of shoes marshalled along the wall by the door, he stepped into the bathroom.

He wiped the toilet seat with some tissue, sat for a while staring blankly at the white hotel towels, wiped the seat again before flushing.

He washed his hands and face.

He checked his complexion for blemishes.

He brushed and flossed his teeth.

Then, his Philishave, brush, and other toilet articles laid out in preparation for the morning, he secured the safety catch on the door and turned out the light.

## The Altar Boy

When Tommy ran away from the church that morning the first thing he thought about was his hut. The dark gouge in the hillside he'd devoted most of the summer to. He hadn't been there since he'd started serving mass. Now it was time to go back. Finish it. Finish something for a change.

He started to run again, kicking up dust. He knew he might change his mind if he didn't hurry. He hoped the pains would hold off.

Town was behind him now and home was close. Already he was past the boundary road and fat old Mrs. Howdy's cafe. Only the unfinished Kurkoff place and another stretch of dirt road and he'd be home. Old Mrs. Kurkoff was out already, hunching about in the potato patch in front of her basement house. Her black clothes made her stand out like a scarecrow in the yellow morning. She stared at him as he ran by. The ground level windows of her house stared too. They were filled with dusty plastic sheeting and looked like dry blaming eyes.

He reached home running fast and charged around the back and almost ran over his mother. She was standing on a wooden box pinning a sheet to the clothes line. Thick varicose veins stood out like wounds on her pale legs as she stretched on tip-toe to place each pin. Another sheet sagged over the vegetable garden, halfway to the pole that tilted over near the outhouse at the back of the yard. The pulley squeaked as she reeled out the line.

"Hi mom," he said.

"Oh, hi, Tommy!" she mumbled around the last of the clothes pins. Then, when the sheet was up, "Mass over already?"

"Yeah," he lied.

"Father Maloney must have been in a hurry this morning."

His gaze avoided hers and moved to the sheets. Then it quickly slid off toward the trees that lined the river bank a quarter mile away. A gust of wind puffed the sheets and carried to his nose a nip of bleach. Off in the fields a meadowlark trilled.

His mother's forehead creased as he continued to avoid her eyes. But she said nothing. After a moment she asked if he was hungry.

"Kathey and I are going to ten o'clock mass but I've got time to make you breakfast first. Are you sure you're not hungry?"

"No," he repeated.

"Okay! What have you got planned then?"

"A hike," he answered. His head was still turned away but he was watching her out of the corner of his eye. He moved toward the back door. She followed. Her hand rested hesitantly on his shoulder for a moment then pulled away.

"I should have guessed," she said.

They entered the kitchen. It was a small low room that took up the back part of the narrow house. A box of Rice Krispies stood among crumbs of bread and glints of sugar on the dull green oil cloth on the table. But Kathey's stool was empty. Tommy squeezed between the woodstove and the table and started for the front room.

"What's your hurry?" his mother said. "Can't you stop for a minute? Sit down and I'll make you some porridge or some toast."

"I'm not hungry!" he said. He looked at her from the doorway.

"Well you've got to have something to eat before you go out! You'll be starving pretty quick if you don't."

"I'll take something with me."

She was silent for a second. He started to turn away once more.

"Tommy." He looked back again. "Is everything all right? Are you okay?" she asked slowly.

"Sure, I'm okay." He couldn't say more, but he



almost wished she'd ask again.

"Good," she said after a moment. Then she turned toward the icebox.

He hurried to the stairs and up to the half attic where he slept. His bed was stripped. Blanket and pillow were bunched at the head of the soiled mattress. The baby blue metal bedstead showed a lot of brown spots where the paint had chipped. Over it hung a crucifix, draped with a rosary.

Tommy dropped to his knees and rummaged under the bed for his army surplus knapsack and a cardboard box. The box held marbles and tattered comic books and pictures of famous hockey players that came from Bee Hive corn syrup. It also held his hatchet head and canteen and rusty jack-knife.

Set in carefully to one side were his few momentos of the father he'd hardly known. A framed oval shaving mirror that reminded him of a paten, a pewter mug like a chalice, and an awl. Each was wrapped in a Crown Royal Whiskey bag. The bags had cost him a lot, all of his best marbles.

He pulled out the knife, hatchet, and canteen. They would go in the knapsack as usual. And today so would the awl. He took it out of its bag and rolled it around in his hand. It had fascinated him strangely ever since he read about how an awl had been used against Lament. Yes, it would go too. And the mirror and the

mug also. After all, he asked himself, wasn't that why he wanted to go back to the hut? To finally finish it and fix it up the way he'd dreamed at the start? What else could he take? Books maybe?

He stepped to his small dresser. On its top stood four books. Two Little Savages and The Call of the Wild, a prayer book and The Lives of the Jesuit Martyrs. He picked up the Jesuit Martyrs. For a moment he stood flipping through the pages. Then he shrugged and slipped it into his pack.

Now to change. He replaced his good church clothes with a red T-shirt and older jeans. Over work socks darned with black wool on one heel, he pulled the only shoes he had, rubber boots with folded down tops.

When he went into the kitchen his mother and sister were both there. His mother stood at the counter wrapping sandwiches in wax paper. Kathy was perched on her stool sucking her thumb. As soon as she saw Tommy her big grey eyes opened wide as mouths. She began bouncing up and down so her stool legs raised a racket against the floor. He went to stand beside her so she could hang her arms around his neck and slobber on his cheek.

"Peanut butter, Tommy," his mother said, dropping the sandwiches into a brown paper bag. "Anything else you'd like? There's not much but there's still some cookies left from the batch Aunt Marg brought."

"Thanks, mom. That's all I need." He took the

bag from her.

"Do you want some milk before you go? Kathey's had hers and there's a little bit left. I can pick up another quart at Howdy's on the way home from mass."

He hesitated. He didn't plan to eat anything until he got to the hut. He had to quit babying himself and learn to act like a man. But he remembered how strong the pains had been that morning. He'd need something if they came like that again. And milk seemed to work best of all.

"Can you put it in a jar to take along?" he asked.

"Sure."

While she filled a small jar with milk and sealed it with wax paper under the lid, Tommy filled his canteen at the pump outside the door. He also made up his mind which way he'd go. Not straight across country. He'd take his time and go the long route along the river. He liked it there.

When everything was ready he kissed his mother goodbye and set off. Kathey went with him as far as the back of the yard. She stayed there with her thumb in her mouth until he was out of sight.

A feeling of relief swept through him as he swished through the pale grass toward the river bank. The strap of his heavy knapsack dug into his shoulder but he didn't mind because his stomach seemed alright. He almost felt unburdened. Every muscle in his body seemed

to relax. The climbing sun was like a smile growing in the cloudless sky and he smiled back as he hurried forward to meet it. He thought the pale sky was like a balloon being stretched by the sun. And the rubber was getting thinner and thinner and losing its colour and getting ready to split. He wondered what he'd see if it did. Heaven or Hell or The Garden of Eden?

He dove into the cool green woods like an otter into a stream. The shade in the bush was just right. Only dark enough to deepen colours. Sunshine sifted through the tree leaves and speckled the ground with light. In places it cut straight through to shine like a spotlight on clusters of chokecherries or gleam on the white trunk of a birch tree. Dead leaves rustled and twigs crackled under his feet. The smell of spruce prickled his nose and perked him up with every breath. But he moved carefully. He had to.

The bank he went down was very steep. It dropped off sharply then leveled out for a few yards then dropped another long way to the water level. He grabbed low bushes for support but most were still moist and slippery with dew. He had to go down sideways, digging the edges of his rubbers into soil a lot darker than the sandy stuff above.

Once on the plateau he could just catch a glimmer of the river through the trees. He moved to his left until he came to a birch tree that stuck out horizontally from the lower slope. It was nearly dead and didn't have

any leaves. It was a favourite spot. He crawled halfway out and straddled the warm trunk. His legs swung back and forth as he gazed out over the river.

He felt much better now. For the first time since he took off from the church he felt strong enough to think about it. He pictured himself as he'd knelt at the foot of the altar. As before the pains had come during the Confiteor. As before he had looked up at Father Maloney, oblivious in his green vestments. As before he had looked above to the mangled body of Jesus on the huge cross over the altar. Then he had had to flee before he threw up or fainted.

He wondered what Father Maloney would do. He guessed not much. The priest hadn't said anything the other two times. Hadn't even asked if anything was wrong. Though those times he'd at least stayed till mass was over. Today he'd run off. But no, even that wouldn't make Father Maloney mad. Not mad enough to show it anyway. All the priest would do was ignore him again.

Like his father always had.

He remembered almost the last time he'd been with his father. His father had been back about half a year and seemed much less a stranger. They went on a camping trip up north, to Lac la Croix, and pitched their tent in a meadow above the shore. For two days they fished and swam in the cold lake. His sister, his mother, his father, all of them together. His father smiling all the time.

They ate brown beans with the fish they caught, and they laughed and they sang. Songs like "Caissons Go Rolling Along" and "Ninety-nine Bottles of Beer on the Wall".

Then, on the third day, his father grew silent and cranky looking. Late in the afternoon he took the borrowed car and went into a nearby town. When he came back they'd already eaten supper and it was nearly dark. He was red in the face and smiling again, but his eyes kept darting around and he wouldn't join them by the fire or really look at anybody. Tommy didn't know what to make of it, but he saw fear appear like a wound on his mother's face.

Early the next morning his father shook him awake and told him to get up, they were going for a swim. When Tommy crept shivering from the tent, he saw that the sun was barely up and the sky was lead grey with clouds. A chill wind was gusting across the meadow. His father stood outside the tent with a towel around his neck and nothing on but his bathing suit. His skin was white with goose bumps.

"Come on," he ordered.

Tommy said he didn't want to go. It was too cold.

"Come on! Don't be a damn baby. You've got to learn to take it."

Tommy followed his father's long strides down to the lake and watched as his father marched barefoot over the sharp gravel of the shore. He flinched as his father's

body plunged into the choppy grey water.

Then it was his turn.

His father treaded water ten yards out and yelled at him to get in. Tommy took off his shirt and shoes and tip-toed over the sharp stones. His father yelled at him not to ease into the water but to run right in. The cold wind urged him forward and he plunged.

The water was so cold he almost screamed. It seemed to slam the air from his body so he could hardly breathe. He floundered, afraid the water would freeze him so he couldn't swim, afraid he would drown. He fought his way from the water and dashed for his shirt and towel, the wind cutting at his wet body.

His father yelled at him to come back, to learn to be tough and take it, not to be a goddamn sissy. But Tommy pulled his clothes on and ran for camp. All the way back, the wind whipping around him seemed to carry his father's voice after him, even when he was long out of range.

Twenty minutes later his father returned. He looked very cold, but also somehow triumphant. After he dressed he cooked breakfast and carried Kathey out to the fire wrapped in her blankets. He ignored Tommy, and for the rest of the trip hardly said a word to him. Three weeks later, when he was suddenly gone again, Tommy was not surprised.

Thinking of this, Tommy felt his stomach go

tight. The first sign that the pains were going to start. Suddenly there were tears in his eyes. No! He didn't want to cry! He wouldn't cry! But he wouldn't think about those other things anymore either.

He lifted his gaze from the shadows around him to the far bank. It was lower than where he sat and he could just see past the trees. His eyes swept hungrily over the fields in the distance. As usual the wheat there looked golden instead of yellow, like liquid sunshine. Someday, someday soon, he'd go over there and roll in it.

He lowered his gaze to the river in his way. It seemed to be getting lower every day. Stretches of gravel and mud between the trees and water were wider than before but near the shore rocks stuck above the surface like broken teeth. In the middle the water still looked smooth and sparkily clean but in the shallows where it surged around the green, slime covered rocks it was a murky grey. And downstream to his left sandbars dotted the water like the backs of giant river creatures basking in the sun. They went at least a mile. All the way to the railway trestle where he'd climb to the prairie again.

He worked his way backwards to the base of the tree and then skidded bum and heel to the shore. The first stone skipped great, in three long arcs, before it stuttered into stillness. The next one went even further. And he was just about to wing the third, a perfect skimmer, a smoothly polished slightly curved disk that he pictured



sailing clear to the other side, when something surprised him. Some sound or soundlessness. He spun around to face the woods. Willow wands stirred and poplar leaves trembled in the breeze but nothing else moved. For a moment he stayed where he was and peered into the underbrush for some clue to what had startled him. Finally he relaxed. Just a rabbit or a squirrel, he thought, shrugging.

He was turning back toward the river when a dark slash in the blue overhead caught his eye. High up, a hunting hawk glided gracefully on extended wings.

Head tipped back as he peered upward, Tommy was thrilled. He thought about what would happen when the savage bird spied a gopher or a rabbit. The dark wings would curl, the hawk would drop like lightning and the poor small victim would be stunned. Then it would be speared, shaken and ripped.

The hair at the back of Tommy's neck prickled at the thought of the piercing talons. But he knew the lord of both the sky and the fields beneath had to have its meal. It was a law, like Jack London said. Cruel, maybe, but necessary. That was how things were. Still, he shuddered as he turned back to the river.

Somehow the water didn't seem so right now. Not quite smooth enough for the perfect skimmer. He pocketed it and tried others. But none flew like the first two so he gave it up. He reset the knapsack and canteen on his shoulders and started toward the trestle. There was a lot

of mud to squish through and for once he was glad of his rubbers. When he was about halfway to the bridge a fat muskrat waddled out of a willow thicket ahead of him, its long tail twitching. Tommy grinned as it scrambled for the water. Then he looked on enviously as it glided smoothly into the stream. There was hardly a ripple in its wake.

Then shortly he was around a curve in the river and the peacefulness was gone again. A hundred yards above the trestle the calm stream gave way to rapids. Nothing great like the ones he'd read about on the Ottawa and St. Lawrence, like Brebeuf's and Lalement's Chaudière. But still a lot different from the flow he'd been following up to now. And the rapids reminded him how really fast the big river was flowing. The water gurgled and splashed as it raced over ledges and sloshed against rocks that leaned into the current like huge fangs straining for belly-timber. Pieces of driftwood and even whole logs swept over the ledges then scoured themselves on the waiting rocks.

It was violent and fascinating. Tommy always felt its attraction strongly. He dropped his knapsack and canteen at his feet and leaned on a boulder and tried to picture shooting such a hazard in a canoe. Hardy voyageurs and fearless Jesuits had overcome greater monsters, he knew. But he couldn't imagine himself doing anything but fall prey to even such little jaws as these. After all, he couldn't even stand a little stomach ache. He was really nothing but a coward.

He stooped for his gear and started in long strides up the zig-zag path that climbed to the trestle. When he reached the top the sun was almost directly overhead and his T-shirt was sweat-soaked to a much deeper red. Everything in the distance shimmered in haze.

He looked to the north, the direction of his hut. Suddenly the day went cold. For a second he thought he saw three boys, one in red flanked by two in dark clothes, just disappearing over a rise near his camp. He watched anxiously for a good five minutes but there was no further sign of them. Then he wondered if he'd been imagining things. He turned his attention to the bridge.

The trestle was a lot different from the steel bridge with green overhead arches he'd crossed so many times in the city. The trestle was all huge wooden beams stained black with creosote. It was much higher than the city bridge and had no foot path and no railings except for small ones around two platforms that held barrels. The smell of creosote was very strong.

As always at this point in his hikes he thought about crossing the bridge and following the rails his father must have ridden to the other side. But he was afraid of slipping between the ties or getting caught in the middle by a train. And he could never forget his mother's repeated warnings to stay clear. He had to keep his promise and stay off.

He decided to rest before starting the last leg of his trek. The long climb up the bank had taken something out of him, and his feet were sticky and gritty with dust. Careful to avoid splinters from the rough ties he found a place near the end of the trestle where his feet could hang in the air and pulled off his boots and socks. For the first time he noticed that the darn on his sock was unraveling. There was a good size hole. Already a blister had started on his heel. It would be a big one by the time he got home.

He swatted the dust from his feet and sat wriggling his toes in the breath of air. It felt delicious, like a dog's tongue lapping. He closed his eyes to enjoy it more. After a moment he opened them again.

Spread out before him was a view he'd always liked. The broad river wound like a silver, emerald-bordered ribbon through checkered fields of brown, pale green and gold. Five miles away the town of Overlook with its grain elevators, water tower and cross-topped church stood out against the clear blue sky. Half-way there the steel work of the new hydro-electric dam glittered in the sun. He could just make out a man walking on the rim.

Suddenly a gust of wind much stronger than anything yet that day chilled the sweat between his shoulder blades. He was as surprised as if he'd been attacked by Iroquois. His eyes probed the horizon all around for signs of a storm but there weren't even any clouds. Except for a

slight change in the colour of the sky there was nothing to be seen at all. Even the wind refused to strike again. Only a light breeze slithered over the fields, rippling the tall grass.

All at once the pains came alive, teeth of flame gnawing at his stomach. Hastily he grabbed for his pack and unbuckled it. The jar of milk was under the bag holding the awl. He unscrewed the lid and paid no attention as the wax paper floated down toward the river. The milk was a little warm but it was also smooth and creamy. He gulped at it eagerly and swallowed half. It began to soothe the pains almost immediately and little by little the fire was dampened. Five minutes later his stomach was almost back to normal.

He left the jar open beside him and took out his sandwiches. He wiped off most of the peanut butter then propped his knapsack like a pillow against the nearest rail and lay back. He lay nibbling on little pieces of the white bread. From this new angle the slight change he'd noticed in the colour of the sky seemed greater. The pale, almost transparent blue of early morning was gone, replaced by a shade much darker. It seemed glossier now, harder, as if coated with a liquid sealer that had hardened to an impenetrable finish. And the sun was no longer cheerful. It had become a lidless amber eye flickering with fire. It was too upsetting to face. He sat up.

He couldn't believe how the day had changed. The morning had broken its promise. He no longer felt light and free. Now he felt all mixed up. And scared. What should he do? He didn't want to go to the hut at all any more. The way the day had turned so sour it felt like something really bad would happen. He'd turn back then. Head for home cross-country and spend the rest of the day with Kathey and his mother. Maybe he'd even tell his mother about the pains. It sure didn't look like they'd go away by themselves any more.

He began to pull on his socks, careful to twist the right one so his heel wouldn't rub as much. He had just finished sliding on his boots when a scream drew his gaze across the bridge. Not far on the other side a black locomotive pulling box cars was charging toward him, its whistle blasting. Tommy snatched up his pack and canteen and scrambled away from the tracks.

A thrill swept through him. Trains were so exciting. They spoke to him of exploration and discovery and wide open spaces. And the friendly wave of a smiling engineer was like an invitation to come along. A promise that even he, a little boy, could someday also mount, seize the throttle and race across the country.

He stood far back from the cinder and gravel shoulder so as to get a better look and share a longer moment with the engineer. His heart pounded in his chest. A long shriek came from the whistle. The side-arms

churned and smoke poured from the stack and the great machine bore down on him. He spied an elbow on the window sill.

He smiled broadly in welcome and waited eagerly for a grin or a wink or a wave. Clunk-clunk clunk-clunk clunk-clunk rang the steel wheels. The rails quivered, the ground shook, then it was there.

Tommy stretched on tip-toe and raised his hand to wave.

The man in coveralls sat stiffly at the window. His hat was pulled down tight and his jaw jutted out like it was carved from stone. His blank gaze seemed to sweep over Tommy like he was nothing. He didn't wave or smile. He didn't even turn his head.

Then the engine was past and the long tail of box cars was rattling by. There was no one at the back of the caboose.

Tommy let his hand drop slowly to his side. Gradually the noises of the train faded and quiet returned. He remained where he was, as still as a post. Straight overhead the sun glared down out of the glazed sky. After a while he stirred. All thought of returning home was pushed from his mind. He couldn't go home. He had to go to the hut, finish what he'd started.

He was very tired. When he lifted his knapsack and canteen they felt as heavy as rock. When he slung them across his body something hard in the pack stabbed

into his side. But he hardly bothered to shift it as newly kindled flames began nipping at his belly. Somehow the milk jar had stayed upright on the end of a tie but he ignored it and headed onto the rolling prairie.

As he topped the first of the three hills between the bridge and his hut the wind shook the grass all around him. It sounded like people whispering responses at mass. He trudged down and up, down and up. When he reached the crest of the third hill a shadow passed overhead. As the hawk descended silently into the trees on the far side Tommy heard the words of the Lord's Prayer come tumbling from his lips. OUR FATHER WHO ART IN HEAVEN HALLOWED BE THY NAME THY KINGDOM COME THY WILL BE DONE. . . He plunged down the hill.