

Salvage

by

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Zuck asked Old Walt to lock up the garage and tromped in oil-stained boots through the ashen evening air, across the dry dirt and through the gut-rot smell of the meat packing plant just east of the salvage yard that now belonged to him. No wind to lift that east-side funk. It had become, through the years, part of his skin.

Sometimes, years ago, his mother had cried after a day at the yard, her head bent into the kitchen sink with six different bottles of drugstore toilet water lined alongside it. She could rinse the contents of every one through her dark curls—until her hair smelled of Lilies of the Valley, White Shoulders, Shalimar, and who knew what else—she swore the stink stayed on her scalp. It would probably kill her to know that Zuck thought of her whenever the smell nudged at him. Mostly he pretended the stink didn't exist, like people he preferred not to remember, like his mother: they evaporated. Wished he evaporate his sister. But Jenny was always with him, her small, cold arms around his neck. Her white bones in a box. The wide blue eyes that were forever sleeping but wide open, trained on Zuck. The yard would have been hers too.

Traffic grumbled across the viaduct that stretched over the yard and toward the golden dome of capital building, which he could just barely see from strategic locations around the yard; he'd mapped them out as a kid. Now those posts were useful only to see what was coming.

Something was coming.

The last light glinted over a thousand glass and metal surfaces of the yard, angles stretching out to the horizon. A mosaic of junk. Fourteen acres of ripped steel and smashed glass and cancerous rust that spread across entire ruined bodies. When the air vibrated just right, all Harmon Zucker Junior could see was possibility.

Most of the time the snake that was his dread coiled around his body, slithered up his spine, and wrapped its scaly skin around his shoulders. He should shake it off. He

knew this. It was over. The suspicion, the cool inertia he felt when the fear got hold of him, should have shattered with the glass pipe he dropped on the cement floor the day they finally got him.

But like Jenny, it was always there. Something still crept toward him.

Today, though, the air vibrated just right. Today, after a day's work in the garage, he was strong, was a straight-up man, the hustle was behind him. He flexed his arms and the burn was pleasant. He was Harmon Zucker Junior. He knew how to build a machine that could drive down the road, or over an obstacle, or through a wall. He knew how to smooth the skin of a crumpled el Camino or Buick Regal or Ford F150 to look like it was birthed fresh from assembly the day before. He knew, like he knew how to destroy things, how to fix them.

Inside the trailer he scuffed off his boots and at the kitchen sink he scrubbed his hands with steel wool until they stung red. They never got clean enough at the garage sink, even with the degreaser he rubbed on and slathered and wrung around and around on his hands. Satisfied at his pink-clean fingers, he perched on the edge of the nubby old couch, elbows on knees, clutched the remote and punched at the buttons. There had to be a game show or a cop drama but all he found was news, and other people's bad news was old news to him. Wasn't nothing he hadn't done or seen. In every scenario he saw himself, the other self. The one he'd been. The one he wouldn't be now.

He turned it down, and took the small book from the table. *It is a common misconception that pigeons are dirty animals; in fact cleanliness is crucial the bird's health, and so the care and keeping of their food area is of great importance. Because pigeons drink by suction, it is important that the water bowl you provide is at least 2-1/2 inches deep, which will allow the bird to immerse its beak in the bowl.* The book went on to tell him that pigeons will eat almost any kind of seed, but that a mixed diet of corn and

soybeans was ideal, and their food and water must be kept separately from their bedding, for optimum cleanliness.

Jenny had loved birds, had chased them, clapping her hands as they flapped and squawked and lifted away from her. She would chase them into the street, Zuck or his mother screaming after her, running to bring her back.

But these birds would come back to you.

These birds did not fly off in fear of human hands.

He put the book down.

A steak and some buttered green beans and some applesauce sounded good for dinner. Meal planning was still a pleasure after the monochromatic gruel he'd slopped down for dinner over the last three years. Now he would sometimes think a week in advance what kind of breakfasts and dinners and lunches he'd like to have, what he would buy at the brand-new Aldi store that had opened while he'd been inside. Sometimes he'd make stew. Haagen Dazs hadn't been around when he went in; now he kept a half-dozen little cartons of the sweet stuff stacked up in the freezer. Vanilla shouldn't have been his favorite—he wasn't a vanilla-type man. But it was. It was perfect.

He had a stack of porn videos in the TV cabinet, which occasionally interested him. He'd push one in the VCR after dinner, smooth his dark moustache with his hand and suck at his teeth. He'd keep the volume off so he didn't have to hear the stupid chatter, but sometimes he chuckled at them anyway, like watching silent cartoons. Other times he just unbuttoned his jeans and sat back.

Sometime he fell asleep there on the old couch, which irritated him. He was fond of his queen-size waterbed, which he'd bought right off the furniture store showroom when he made the first sale at the yard. He would deck out the whole rest of the trailer

with brand-new furniture, he was thinking slick black lacquer, just as soon as he could buy the lift. Just as soon as he could get the units, and the money, moving a little faster.

Tonight he ate his dinner and watched a rerun of *Hardcastle & McCormick* and lifted 250 on the press he'd set up in the laundry alcove by the back door. He pushed until he could lift no more, arms numb. Eyes closed. Breathing. The night would end, and it would end fine.

But the pressure behind his eyes was coming. He squeezed them tighter, as if his clenched lids could protect him but here it came. It happened sometimes when he lifted, like the good chemicals that crackled to life in his body set off something sinister in his nervous system and electrocuted him with the muscle-memory of the high which would ping and vibrate in his skull, the dull shriek ringing his ears, a far-off train whistle, an endless gash in the night. He panted. From the workout or the jones, he did not know. Mexican beans jumped in his arms and legs and neck. He wished for the millionth time that he still smoked, then remembered how much cigarettes made him want to get high, too.

He could never get high again. This idea, this resolution, was a wild bull that surged through him, a scream in his sleep, a gasp now. Again. Never. Again. He had to stop thinking of it like that, had to get the one day at a time through his head, slow his body to a minute-by-minute clock, quiet the ache.

He jumped from the bench and walked in circles around the couch and coffee table, then turned up the TV to drown out the noise in his head and wandered into the kitchen, which formed a shallow U on the south end of the trailer. Three neat stacks of papers lay at the end that faced the door, and on the floor beside his chair were several stacks of files. He paced on the yellow linoleum, then sat down at the small oak table and flipped through a stack. The ink on the title transfers and odometer disclosures was a blur

of squiggling lines and he spun the lazy susan in the center of table and watched the plastic mustard and catsup bottles, A-1 sauce, and glass salt and pepper shakers spin.

He stood and did pushups against the sink. Above it was a small bay window and in the ledge were several small cactuses and license plates that leaned side by side against the curve of the glass.

He thought about Sharri, wild little thing. Word had it she got clean too, and was still shacking up with that faggot Henry who ran the flower shop. Man, they'd had some good times together. The thought of her straddling that tubby, balding, flower-arranging fuck, man, he could just spit bullets. Sharri had slept in his bed off and on for eight years—even waited out two of the almost three he spent in jail—before she told him she was tired of his meanness and skirt chasing, and ran off with Henry. When she left she took everything he ever gave her and then some, including the diamond starfish pendant he'd mail ordered for her the Christmas before, six leather jackets of varying length and color, and the silver '71 Mach 1 Mustang he'd spent six months restoring.

He missed her. Or he missed someone.

In the drawer beside the refrigerator he rummaged around the loose receipts, paper clips, tubes of superglue, business cards, and old sunglasses, and found the list. Across the top of it was written the serenity prayer...*accept the things I cannot change...courage to change the things I can...wisdom to know the difference.* Zuck didn't pray, figured if there was a God, He was probably done listening to him about the time Jenny died. But he did like that prayer.

The Narcotics Anonymous meetings were at some rickety old Victorian house on the west side they called Big Blue. He'd never been to one but he'd heard about them from the counselors at The Walls, and his parole officer, Jimbo, had given him the schedule *in case he felt like he might need to go to one.* Zuck'd seen him just the week

before, had to drop a UA. Those few beers from the night before had shown up, and Jimbo had banged his lanky, hairy forearm on the desk between them, tightened his gristly jaw, and reamed him on the *importance of keeping to the straight and narrow* and told him he *could easily get revoked for that*, and why didn't he just go check out the meetings? Plus, Jimbo had snarled at him, *Shouldn't be hanging out at the bar, whether you drinking or no. Nothing but old playgrounds and old playmates up in them places.* Zuck shouldn't have told Jimbo he'd been at the bar, but he couldn't really figure what the big deal was. Neither whiskey nor beer had landed him in prison, and Jimbo should understand that, seeing how he was a dried-out junkie himself.

Truth was he felt like he needed to go to a meeting pretty often, if needing to go to one meant he felt like getting high. But what was the point of telling a bunch of ex-junkies you felt like getting high? *No shit, Sherlock.* He looked at the clock on the microwave. 8:12. Jesus, they ran almost twenty-four hours a day. He could still make the 9:00, easy.

But he didn't need that. Stupid, stupid.

He slammed the schedule back inside the drawer, reminded himself to clean it out, padded back to the couch and threw himself onto the cushions. His heavy landing resounded in his head, and he turned the TV up higher and focused again on breathing. His body was quieting. The blare of the TV slowed the train in his head. After awhile he turned it back down and lost himself in "The A-Team."

In the pale daybreak he sloshed onto his side in the waterbed and pawed at his eyes with the heels of his hands, then reached instinctively for a cigarette on his bedside

table. How many more times would he do that, only to be disappointed? He sat up and arched forward, then back, pulling the breath into his body.

If only he could forget his body. If only his body would forget him.

He straightened up, then almost lay back down, but something flickered on the other side of his window. He pulled at the blinds, and what the fuck was that but a someone or something, smallish, darting by the window and around the corner of the trailer. He jumped and banged his elbow on the frame, felt along the inside of the doorless closet for the Ruger, checked the revolver, and threw open the front doors.

He should have been quieter. Something rustled at the south end of the trailer and he cocked the gun and stepped alongside the front siding, his bare back sliding across the dust and grime, which made him wince. He wondered for a moment where the old man had stashed the power washer, but focus, *focus*. *Goddamn it*. He'd known it. Something *was* slithering around. It wasn't just his dope-scarred street-thug deep-down sissy-bitch paranoia. Someone was *here*.

As he reached the corner of the trailer the figure, which wore jeans and a coat with a fringed hood, bolted in long, sprinting leaps toward the viaduct. Zuck screamed something, he didn't know what, then fired two shots, one to the left and one to the right of the small man who was remarkably fast, with graceful strides like an animal. He disappeared under the viaduct. On the other side the dude would have to think quick about scaling the steep hill, up toward the governor's mansion, which surely had better security than the Harmon Zucker Salvage Yard. The path under the viaduct would soon give way to nothing but river, and a bank that rose straight up. There was no crossing over there; he would have to come back to the yard, or head up the hill. Little fucker was screwed either way.

He shivered, adrenaline giving way to awareness that he wore only boxer shorts in the sharp fall morning. His body, again. Inside he shut the screen and wooden doors and locked both, then slid the Ruger under a stack of towels in the hall closet. The film that had transferred to his back from the face of the trailer felt like dry sludge, and he stepped under the shower spray while the water still ran cold. The icy trickle carved some kind of clean into his scalp, and for a moment he felt himself relax.

He didn't bother with breakfast, only slapped a knife full of peanut butter on a slice of Wonder bread, folded it in half, and jammed it in his mouth on his way to the garage, a stack of files under his arm. Sunlight winked over the roof of the garage and he squinted, looking for signs of disturbance on the three bay doors. He saw none. He walked all the way around the garage; still nothing. When he came out on the parking-lot side, he saw that Old Walt's ancient Pontiac was parked in the small lot.

Old Walt—he'd never been Young Walt, far as Zuck could remember—had worked for Harmon Zucker Senior for thirty years, had been the one to run the place when the old man got sick. When the old man died Walt boarded it, kept his squinting eye on it, and waited for Zuck's release, the gray Fedora surely cocked forward on his head the whole time.

Now Old Walt stood smoking in front of the long workbench, just inside the Bay 1 door. He fiddled with a starter—looked like he was unpacking it to get to the solenoid—his hands chapped, steady. He was getting so deaf Zuck wasn't sure if he'd heard him come in until he barked *mornin'* in Zuck's direction without looking up. He'd already made coffee and Zuck poured some into a brown clay mug that had been the old man's, sipped at it, and stood next to the bench, eyes on Walt with the starter.

They'd had this conversation at least twenty times already. Old Walt would tell him he was paranoid, and to get busy pulling the yard together, don't worry so much

about the filching sons of bitches. They'd been coming as long as the yard had been there, usually came in over the long stone wall on the east end to the east to pilfer rims, tires, radios, even scalped leather from the seats, though what they did with those seamy hacked-out skins was anyone's guess. They'd never come in to the garage. Why worry? Everyone around the bottoms had been scared shitless of the old man. Everyone except Zuck, of course, who had taken the old man's boot and belt enough times he knew what the he was made of, knew what to expect.

But no one was afraid of Zuck now that he was straight, and he guessed no one thought he could make the yard go without the old man. When the old man had the place it was a machine; now it was just a broken and withering old husk, its engine in pieces, parts disconnected and spinning in the open air. Zuck couldn't afford the loss or the disrespect of thieves. It was just too much.

"What's on your mind, Zuck?"

Old Walt tapped his cigarette ash, jammed it back in his mouth, and squinted at the solenoid he'd successfully released from the starter, in pieces. He threw the ring gear on the bench and cupped the rest of the parts like a handful of marbles.

Zuck paused, considered his answer, and Walt gave him a sideways look. The tall man, now a little stooped, was a hulking figure, powerful even now, but had a small head like a turtle, and his jowls were chubby, so that when he smiled, which was rare, he appeared even more like a friendly reptile. His eyes were blue and frank and when he looked right at you it was difficult to look away, like now. Zuck coughed, and leaned on the bench with one hand.

"I seen somebody this morning. Running around the trailer, then out under the viaduct."

"They carrying anything?"

"Didn't look like it."

"What'd you do?"

"Shot a couple rounds in his general direction while he was running—"

"—stupid. You trying to get your PO back on you?"

"I don't know what the fuck you expect me to do, Walt. I can't exactly afford anything to go missing here, and I'm trying to save up for that lift—"

"—I told you keep that Ruger down unless someone's on *you*, Zuck. Not the goddamned yard, not your flashy Lincoln, not some ass you been chasing; *just you*—"

"—I wasn't trying to hit 'em—"

"—don't matter. You want to go back up? Leave it alone until you actually need it. You don't know. Could have been somebody just passing through."

Zuck crossed his arms and turned to survey the garage.

"They ain't going to get the best of me, Walt. I ain't no Billy Badass, man, but I'll sure as hell get my hamburger before they'll get their steak. You know what I—"

The steel door behind him, which led to the office, exploded open and his arms flew up but it was only Curtis, limbs like fluid wire, walking like swimming; Dave-o, bow-legged, footsteps like a staccato drum; and Tony the Grunt, lumbering, wearing his usual strange expression of blank, sour, and confused. Curtis and Dave-o were laughing, cutting up, trading insults, and they tossed various versions of good morning over their shoulders as they made their way to their stations. How could Zuck have missed the jangling bells of the front office door when they'd come in? Further proof that he was slipping. That's what he got for getting clean: dulled senses.

He slurped at his coffee and burned his tongue and watched the men gather their tools.

Zuck had tracked down Curtis for the engine and electrical as soon as he'd settled in. Crazy brother could hotwire the chariots of angels, and was the only hustler Zuck still trusted, partly on account of his automotive expertise, which Zuck had to admit easily surpassed his own; partly on account of they'd known each other since they were kids, had been running partners as long as Zuck could remember. Curtis was the only black kid the old man would allow to step foot in the house. He was like a brother, except a brother would screw you on account of being family.

Just after the Harmon Zucker Salvage Yard Grand Reopening, Dave-o had come knocking, claimed to remember Zuck from fourth grade at Our Lady's Sacred Heart, and declared himself a hell of a body man. This proved correct, and Zuck was glad to have him, even though he was yippy as a Chihuahua and a bit of a crybaby. Tony the Grunt was a dude Dave-o knew from the North side. He had been gassed into retardation at his previous job, where the foreman lowered him into a chemical tank minus the safety apparatus, which apparently should have included a mask. He was built like a gorilla; this and his stupidity made him extremely useful around the yard, like a robot.

These were decent guys, Zuck was sure, even if Curtis still got himself tangled up in the dope from time to time. But Zuck needed him. There was no way he could get it together without Curtis and Old Walt, at least.

He headed back into the office to see about setting the files straight. The men had their instructions, at least for the morning. After lunch he updated the jobs list on the clipboard and hung it on from the nail on the garage cabinet, and went out to wander around the yard. There had to be something that would make good at auction and get him ahead a little among all this folded-up steel and sagging headliners and busted-off bumpers and exterior mirrors. The afternoon was overcast, and the smell of blood and entrails from the plant was a heavy curtain draped over everything.

The morning chase still nagged at him, but for all his squinting around the yard he couldn't find a single thing out of place. Maybe Old Walt was right. Maybe someone was just passing through.

He ran his hand along the massive curving trunk of a Pontiac Grand Ville. She was in pretty good shape, cream-colored paint still shiny in places under the grime. Didn't seem to be a thing wrong with the body, in fact. She had a 455 V-8, and he wondered if it needed rebuilding; it seemed like he'd seen a file on it somewhere, *1975 Grand Ville coupe/cream/VIN...* Yes, he was sure he'd seen that. She'd make a good driver, and would sell from the lot down at that scumsucker Rocco's in a heartbeat.

He'd get her on the list.

But first he wanted to get on the Brougham. He'd had his eye on that starlight blue '76 Chrysler New Yorker Brougham since the old man picked up in '80, a repo, if Zuck recalled correctly, which the old man had parked on the north end of the yard and left. The glass was missing from the back passenger side window but Zuck had taped a plastic sheet to the inside to protect the upholstery. The Brougham was rare, beautiful, her enormous front end dignified by fins that framed her headlights with automatic fold-in covers like metal eyelids. Between them jutted her nose, its grill a horizontal steeple, and her roof was a frosting of white vinyl.

Now another twenty cars had accumulated around her, so that she was smack in the middle of the north end; unless Zuck could find keys for all those other wrecks he'd have to lift her out—and he needed a lift for that. But dang, she'd be worth it. He'd have a hard time parting with her once she was finished.

Zuck shook his head at the units that were stacked up at the garage as it was. Tomorrow he'd have to put the hammer down, get those boys cranking them out. Cash flow. He just needed to get the cash flow running.

At the end of the day, when the garage had quieted, Zuck stood at the key wall and studied the hooks on the pegboard, and goddamned if he could figure out an easy way to sort out the stupid things, figure which key went to what vehicle, how many were missing, which were duplicates. The old man had it all memorized, just kept them in shoes boxes on top of the cabinets, one of which Zuck now held in his hand. Crafty sonofabitch.

"Zuck."

The voice rasped behind him, and he twirled, fist balled and swinging before he had a chance to recognize it.

"Jesus fucking christ, man."

Dave-o bent in front of him, hands up. *Goddamn it.* He swallowed hard and tried to slow his breath, like they taught him to do, and Dave-o took a step back and straightened up slowly. He said he had something to say, but he didn't feel right saying it in front of somebody else. Old Walt sat on a stool, the sports section of the *Daily Register* tented inches from his face, cigarette huffing from his cracked lips.

Zuck said there was nothing he could say that Old Walt couldn't hear and Dave-o kind of hopped around and flapped his elbows a little and Zuck told him to get on with it, he had things to do.

The little man hissed, "I think somebody's stealing from the garage, Zuck," and glanced at Old Walt again. Zuck asked what the fuck he was talking about and Dave-o said that twice in the last two weeks he'd put a tool behind the back tire of whatever unit he was working on, to start up the next day where he'd left off. Twice now he'd come back and it was gone, nowhere to be found. He had to replace it, and he didn't have the jack to keep replacing shit. Three times now he'd had cash stuffed in his work jacket,

which he left hanging in the front office just like they all did, only to reach for it the next day and find the pocket empty.

Zuck set down the box of keys.

And there was something else, today, Dave-o said: That very morning when he'd come in, the air compressor had been disconnected and moved from the back of Bay 3 up to the front, near the garage door, and sat in a dark corner behind the stack of rims. He jabbed his thumb over his right shoulder toward Bay 3.

"I need this job, Zuck. You know they ain't real plentiful right about now, especially for a grease monkey who barely made it through the eighth grade. I ain't never stole nothing from nobody except a BB gun from my brother when we was kids. I'm just saying, don't look over my way when you start finding shit missing." His brown eyes were wide.

Walt still puffed into the paper.

Zuck smoothed his moustache, pulled up a bench, and sat on the edge. He told Dave-o he appreciated the information and when Dave-o asked if they were straight, Zuck replied that they were. The little man nodded, pulled on his work coat, and left.

Zuck focused on breathing and considered how they might get in and out; he guessed from almost anywhere except directly behind the garage, which had a small window but backed up to the embankment that supported the viaduct. It was steep, would be treacherous to climb, especially with merchandise. And how did they know where to find things? They could watch from the yard, if they stayed close enough to the garage during daylight hours. They could really hide anywhere.

It couldn't be any of his guys. Impossible. He looked over at Old Walt, who shuffled and tinkered, throwing washers and screws into their respective coffee cans,

lighting a cigarette, which he left burning in the huge metal ashtray next to the bench, just as the old man used to do. His movements forceful and loud.

Zuck thought over his men. Grunt was too stupid. Dave-o? Not as scared as he was, saying how bad he needed the job and all. And Curtis would never. They'd been brothers and partners too long, plus Curtis knew Zuck would snatch out his jugular and knit it into a sweater.

Zuck heard Old Walt light another cigarette, and looked up from the bench where he still sat. Walt's white eyebrows were knitted so tight they almost touched.

"Need to get you some dogs, Zuck. Your dad always kept 'em. Probably how he kept this junkyard like he did. Secure, I mean."

The old man had kept Dobermans, and he was the only soul who could go near them. Those nasty, skinny-headed canines had whined and sniveled like a bunch of kittens when the old man neared the pen he'd built on the north edge of the yard, where they could see in all directions. They terrorized everyone else, welcome or not, growled and snarled and kicked their feet like bulls. Zuck hated them.

But they'd been sweet to Jenny. Hard-coal eyes on her every move. She could toddle to the pen and giggle at them and stick her hands through the chain link and they would pant and lick her fingertips. The old man would holler at her to get away from there, but he never really made her, just shook his head and mumbled at whatever he was doing about the god-blessed little doll doing whatever she damn well pleased.

But there was nothing those dogs could have done for her from the pen, where they stood barking frantically when she died.

Zuck didn't want to think about that.

He shelved the box of keys back on top of the cabinets and asked Old Walt to lock up, headed into the bathroom to scrub his hands, then plodded back to the trailer,

eyes searching the yard. Who the fuck was out there and why were they fucking with him now? He only had one shot at this. He had one year, as per the old man's will. Which meant he had six months left to get this yard up and running in the black again, before it would be taken away and sold.

Inside, on the couch, arms at his sides, hands pressed into the cushions, the restlessness shimmied up his spine and made it impossible to sit still. He didn't want to eat anything, didn't want to watch TV. Jacking off seemed the most ridiculous thing he could do but he tried anyway just to get some relief and was outraged to find he could not bring himself off. He lay down and stared at the ceiling, water and cigarette stained, like a white-speckled sky filled with yellow clouds. Suddenly chilled, he zipped up his fly and pulled Grandma Fran's old afghan from the back over his arms and chest. He imagined again the loft he would build for the birds, plotting its dimension in his head, but suddenly the idea of them sickened him. He'd read they were clean, but what else would somebody nuts enough about birds to write about them say?

He rolled onto his side. He could take himself down to the Majestic Horseshoe. But that was playing with fire, as Jimbo had reminded him.

No. He needed to think.

About where he would get some dogs.

About how he was going to pull this off.

For the millionth fucking time about why he shouldn't buy a pack of smokes.

The slam of a heavy car door sounded like it came from somewhere in the middle of the yard. He'd slept fully clothed, clean jeans and t-shirt after the long, steaming shower that had finally lulled him enough to lie down in his bed. Some satisfaction brimmed in his chest as he trotted out into the purple dark, backlit by the streetlamps of

the viaduct: He wasn't going soft, knew that this was coming. His instincts hadn't failed. He crept under windowsills, enveloped in shadows through metal carcasses and sharp edges. Thirty yards off he saw a figure duck. Sweat prickled his back and he resisted the urge to spit. He heard another door shut, heavier than the first, older.

He crouched between a Dodge Omni and a Trans Am and listened, but when he heard nothing he rose a little and peered through the windows and headed toward the place where the Brougham was parked.

But the dude was inside the Brougham. In the back seat a fringed hood slipped under the horizon of the window sill. Zuck's boots were brushstrokes on frozen earth as he made his way to the car. He crouched and raised the gun, and came around the front right quarter panel of a bottle-green Datsun B210, its hood gaping like a nasty mouth, one hinge broken at the base.

Breathless, he squatted beside the Datsun and considered his next move. He cocked the Ruger and smoothed his moustache, his thoughts wild, imagining every scenario that could play out, none of them good. If he got the cops involved they might want to come into the trailer; if they did that they might want to search it, and if they did that he'd be sent back up for the other six guns he had stashed in various locations around the trailer. Nevermind the fact he flat out hated the fucking pigs.

This would be all him.

He peered between the hood and the engine, got a clear shot of the back window of the Brougham, its plastic snapping, sucked inside the back seat like a wind sock. He could make out a few tufts of nappy fur sprouting up from behind the plastic, and he poked the pistol through the plastic sheet, popping the tape on the bottom and pushing down until it was pressed against the figure's head.

"Please. Don't."

The voice was small and raspy as a kitten's. Zuck opened the door and a girl tumbled onto his feet, fetal, black hair swirling out from under her hood, peering up at him through dirty pea-green coatsleeves crossed over her face. Zuck uncocked the pistol, bent over, and yanked her up into a sitting position.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Zuck still pointed the pistol at her.

The girl took her arms from her face, narrowed her eyes on the pistol and pressed her lips together, pulled her long blue denim legs closer, wrapped the grimy sleeves around them and rested her chin on her knees. Her jaw was tight and her gray eyes were shiftless moons. He'd never seen eyes that color. She spat a bullet of saliva beside his right boot.

"I asked you what the fuck you was doing and you got about a second and a half to answer before I head back in the house and call the cops." The last thing he wanted there was cops, but she didn't know that.

Her eyes darted everywhere like a flock of birds when Zuck said *cops*. She took in a breath, brought the eyes back to his face and steadied them.

"I'm just keeping warm, man. That's all. I'm not messing with anything and I ain't stealing cars. I can't even drive. Just keeping warm."

"Yeah, well I got somebody stealing a whole lot of something out of here and you're looking most likely about right now so what the fuck you got say to that?"

She blinked at him and shrugged, but didn't flinch a bit and Zuck thought there was no way this little thing could be responsible for the shit missing from the garage but you never could be too sure, and anyway she didn't belong here. He looked inside the car. An empty pack of Marlboros was crunched on the floor beside several books that were stacked neatly beside what looked like a stack of notebooks, spiral and some others. A shoulder bag that looked like it had been knitted or something lay in an empty-looking

heap beside the stacks. On the passenger's side floor was a little baseball bat, the kind you got as a souvenir for free with a pop and a hot dog at ball games and he shook his head and wondered if she thought that would protect her if he or anyone else meant her any harm.

She still huddled on the ground.

"Where you from?"

She continued to stare, defiant, and he almost laughed. She was a fine thing. Black satin hair, cheekbones like that Indian girl he used to bang in the room above the Conoco where he and Hammerhead worked in high school.

But her gaze made him fidget, hands floating at his sides like they weren't attached to him, except that one still held the pistol. He holstered it at the small of his back, under his belt and told her to get back in.

"You can stay the night. Then you got to get on."

She backed into the Brougham, eyes on him in a way that made him want to look into them, but knew he shouldn't.

In the morning he gulped down black coffee, split the horizontal blinds on the front window with his middle and index finger, and watched. He could see only part of the back quarter panel, the back windshield, and the roof of the Brougham from there, but he would see her if she came out. There was plenty of work to be done at the garage, but the boys had instructions, and he was curious.

Around 8:30 she rose, huddled in her coat, and scurried through several metal heaps to the tailgate of a rust-red Chevy truck, and struggled with the latch until it laid out. Then she went on to the vehicle beside it—he couldn't see which, maybe the Dodge Caravan that had sacrificed its tranny years before. She opened the door and ducked in. He turned to head for his pistol again—there was nothing in the van, but he couldn't have

her pinching around—when he saw her head pop up, and a bulging black Hefty sack hoisted in front of her. He split the blinds wider to get a better look. She walked over and heaved the bag onto the tailgate, opened it, and plunged her hands inside it, rummaging.

She'd stashed her things. He shook his head and let the blinds snap shut, then wondered what she'd pull out of the bag, and opened them again, just in time to see her drag out two large jackets. She took off the coat she wore, put one jacket on and buttoned it to the top; then layered the next, then stuffed herself back inside the first coat. She grabbed the top of the bag with both hands like a pair of dog ears and tied it gingerly, then drug it back to where she'd retrieved it. Zuck tossed back his coffee and swallowed hard, dressed, and headed to the garage.

The day passed as usual, but Zuck was edgy, guarded. When Tony the Grunt wanted to head to the other side of the yard to check for a pair of 15-inch rims to put on a little Toyota, Zuck said he'd get it himself. At lunch, he forgot the sandwich he packed in the fridge at the garage, and returned to the trailer, where he warmed up some SpaghettiO's. He stood at the window watching as he ate, the blinds open slightly. No movement around the Brougham.

When the boys went home for the day and evening darkened the yard, Zuck took out two blankets for her. One, a weighty smatter of old blue, orange, and brown rags, which his mother had given him before she ran off with Joe E. Miller and left Zuck to his shenanigans and the old man to the yard. The other was a handmade gift from Sharri: thin, with a large blue Dallas Cowboys star in the center, sort of. The star was crooked, and he had often complained that one point was shorter than the others, which in his opinion gave the thing a crippled look.

When he reached the back of the car with the blankets tucked under one arm he could see through the good window that she was sleeping. Her hand covered her mouth

like she whispered some secret to the plush bench seat beneath her. One of her feet was folded up under the other and in the caramel suede knee-high moccasins they reminded him of animal paws.

He opened the back passenger door and when she sat up her head hit the headliner of the Brougham, which broke loose and hung like a curtain in an abandoned house. The sunbleached blue felt floated around her hair as she knelt and stuck out her fists, a southpaw, he noticed. Zuck reached in, grabbed her wrist, and pressed his thumb and middle fingers into her bones. He bent and leaned his face in close to hers, a smile barely parting his full, dry lips, his breath clouding the space between them.

"Let's get something straight right now. Don't fool with me. I got a good twenty years on you and I've fought men ten times your size and four times mine on this very lot and came away like a man who knows the business of the world. I just come out to get you some blankets but if you ain't cold, I'll trot em on back to the house and mind my own. You're was supposed to be gone by now anyway, remember?"

He still held the girl's wrist and she winced, then cocked her head and smiled.

"Thanks for the blankets."

Zuck dropped her wrist and straightened up.

"Listen, you got to stay low out here. I got men working on the other side of the trailer. Unless you want trouble, you best stay out of sight."

He tossed the blankets inside and she pulled them toward her, then leaned out. The heavy hinges groaned as she pulled the door shut. Zuck watched her nest the blankets around her and lay back, head propped on one arm behind her. She pulled a book from inside her coat, opened it, and began to read, and above her fingers he read *Whitman*. The name stirred something he used to know but when he groped for it in his memory it was just out of reach and he wondered if his curiosity had kicked up some imagined

connection to the book she held in her hands. He had read some books in The Walls, mostly mechanical manuals and biographies of famous bands and musicians. He particularly liked anything he could find on the Man In Black but they were always in high demand. He also had a soft spot for country women like Loretta Lynn and Dolly Parton but you could *never* get ahold of those for long without someone wanting to fight you for them.

He leaned against the car for a moment, flustered and ashamed, then headed to the trailer without looking back.

Wednesday he left her alone, but throughout the day he found reasons to return to the trailer, where he looked for her through the window. Eventually, he figured, she'd get cold enough to come knock on the door. The temperature barely stretched to fifty degrees.

But if she left the car, even to relieve herself, he didn't see her.

Friday the lock he'd placed on the Bay 3 window was busted wide open and an entire tool chest was missing from under one of the old long wooden work benches and Zuck slammed and cursed and spat all day, raging against his men, against the gear shafts and the cracked heads and the rusted hinges, and into the phone, haggling over units he knew were worth more than the car lot guys and the auction guys and the crooked fucking dealership guys wanted to pay for his blasted hard work and the sweat of his men and the overhead of his goddamned stinking grease monkey joke of a garage.

By the time the men filed out of the garage, their grimy, miserable heads hung. Zuck sat at the old bench beside the office door and rubbed his eye into the crook of his

arm, and cupped his forehead with one greasy hand, which made him cringe but he was so goddamned tired. He looked around and the stillness of the place was like a dirty gray death and it sickened him so suddenly that his stomach lurched and he stumbled forward off the bench. He could just pack it up, get high and stay high, roll around in the filth of the street and the hustle and pay for a piece of ass with a little dope and a funny line and never be alone even though he would always be alone.

He went back to the Brougham, but even as he neared it he knew she wasn't there. Inside, she'd left the blankets folded and stacked in the back seat. He opened the door and found no other trace of her. A cold cigarette smell made the back seat seem all the more vacant. He stood up, hand on the edge of the door, and looked around at the cars. Dark suddenly came so much earlier, was slipping over the edges of the yard and behind the viaduct. He slammed the door, then went to the minivan, just in case.

Sure enough, through the back window he could see the bags were gone. He almost turned away, had to put the dog out and go figure what the hell he was going to do next but some white flicker dotted the corner of his eye. Between the interior wall and the back seat it looked like some papers poked through. They had to be from something else, some forgotten someone else, but he couldn't walk away without knowing and he thought again of the girl's eyes, the swirl of her hair. The way she'd thanked him for the blankets, unafraid of him. She should have been afraid of him. He popped the hatch and slid out the papers, which turned out to be several pages, folded into quarters.

And they had to be hers, though the scrawl was terrible, he thought, for a girl. On one were scribbled words in random places on the page, stacked on one another:

perchance	Exist	distance	chapter
enchant	Mist	resistance	rapture
	Bleeding fist	insistence	laughter
		existence	after
		circumstance	

It was like some kind of a code. He held his breath. Along the right side, trailing downward and scribbled out in a long spiral, was

*the shadows cast their eerie spell
over the bridge from which we fell*

and in the center, horizontal in the middle of the page was a swirl as if she had tested the pen, then

a love tormented

with a peace sign scratched underneath. He smiled. Tormented love, eh? The next page held two small somethings, he guessed poems:

*the jailer
shreds our words
until our souls
are quiet*

And on the next page:

*The children with their hungry eyes
Take flight but each one slowly dies
Silently, not a sound is heard
Footsteps on the wings of a nightbird*

Well, damn. The girl was a little poet, or a songwriter. With tormented loves. He thought again of her eyes, the way they brimmed with something, some force. How they had pulled at him. He slammed the hatch on the minivan.

Inside the trailer he stood at the sink for a full ten minutes scrubbing at the grime on his hands. All day he'd looked forward to the stew he'd put on that morning and its smell was rich in the trailer. But as he heaped it into his bowl and buttered a slice of bread his mind jumped and lurched between whatever low-rent piece of shit was robbing the shop blind and this girl. Who the hell was she and what was her story. Thoughts of the girl were much more appealing, and he settled into that as he sat with his bowl on the

coffee table and flipped on the news. He took a few bites, sucked at the air to cool it off, and pulled out the pages again, wiping at his moustache with a paper towel.

Footsteps on the wings of a nightbird.

Obviously she had no place to go. Was she part of some pack of kids running loose and sleeping in cars or was it just her? *Children with their hungry eyes*. She didn't look like a child to him. And what about the jailer shredding words? He thought back to The Walls, to his gray cell and the gray faces and the blur of gray that had been his time. His cell mate Shooky's long, slow descent into the hell of his mind and the way the guards had mutilated him on the day they finally dragged him away to the twelfth ward, his eyes rolling around in his head as he chased some imagined evil rabbit. He'd said, *she'd leading us, magistrate, can't you see she's leading us down her hole...* and the guards had laughed and said they'd like to see her hole, that wascally wabbit.

Zuck began to shake and he pressed the image of the girl's face over Shooky's and the guards' and threw the pages down and finished off the bowl of stew. Des Moines wasn't a very big town, and he knew it backward and forward so if the girl was out wandering around he could probably find her, give her back her poems, but before he even finished the thought he told himself it was crazy and he knew it was.

But he could imagine the places she might go. He could see her scurry through the fairgrounds, hood bouncing, alongside the buildings with their ornate tile entryways and the chiseled marble animal heads that protruded from the corners, their stone eyes blind to her passing.

Or hanging around Nollen Plaza downtown, leaning against the giant green iron umbrella, smoking.

In the Bottoms where he himself had grown up—there were plenty of kids there, running all over the streets, plenty of stoners and suppliers, rarely a cop in sight, and almost no traffic.

Or maybe over at Greentree Park, where the kids loitered and pissed alongside the woods, smoked and slurped at tall glass bottles of Mountain Dew and kicked hackey sacks around on the busted-up parking lot, until late in the night, until the snow flew.

Zuck had met plenty of connections there.

Had in fact met connections at all of those places.

He jumped from the couch and lay down on the bench, lifted the bar and began to push. He lay beside it with his legs up over it at ninety degrees and huffed the breath through his lips as he sat up, up up. He changed out the weights, lifted the bar and stepped back, squatted again and again until he could no longer feel his legs for the burn.

It was dark. There was no way he'd be able to see her, even if she was outside somewhere. He told himself these obvious truths even as he turned on the shower and stepped under the spray. He tried to blot out an image of steering the Mark VIII through the inky smog, his eyes trawling the streets and sidewalks for her. God forbid she would be down on 6th. He jerked at himself quickly, pushing against the girl's face, flipping over images in his mind, wanting to envision anyone except her, even Sharri.

He could help her. Keep her out of sight, just for a little while, until she figured something out. No one would have to know. The Yard was a big place. Hell, he could give her the little shed way over on the east end and no one would ever know she was there, buried as it was under stray doors and truck lids and god knew what else. He told himself this as he slid on a fresh pair of jeans, shaved carefully, up close in his reflected face, combed the dark wave of hair back from his forehead. Trimmed his moustache. Flexed in the mirror. *Strong. Stronger.* He thought about the pigeons. He would build the

loft for them that weekend. She could help, maybe learn something. What girl didn't love birds, or any animal? If Jenny had lived, she probably would have grown up to be a zookeeper, or a veterinarian. Something.

The Mark VII was a luxury Zuck afforded himself after the first set of big sales at the yard. He'd picked her up at auction—the only thing wrong with her was a crumpled back fender and trunk—the unfortunate result of a scorned woman with a baseball bat—an oil leak, which as it turned out only required a pressure sensor, and a fuel pump. Levitt Paint and Body had pulled out the wrinkles and matched the cocoa-colored paint perfectly, and he'd done the sensor and fuel pump himself, with pleasure. He patted the wheel as he slid into her now, and turned on the radio, singing along as she warmed. He felt under the seat for the Ruger, habit, and shifted into drive.

He didn't want to, but he had to start on 6th Ave., just to put his mind at ease, and he hoped like hell he wouldn't see anyone he knew. He passed the shells of buildings on downtown's east end and thought of the old man, whose own father, after twenty-five years of working the mines, had finally been able to buy a building there and turn it into a bakery, which went out of business in two years and then burned down uninsured, a loss that everyone said put him in the grave. Its craggy remains still sulked on the corner of 3rd and Locust, a poor man's grand ruin, a dream so useless that no one even cared to tear down the evidence of its failure, a dream whose collapse left a charred relic. As far as Zuck knew, he himself had inherited it but he didn't care. The thought of stepping foot in there filled him with the heavy, pulsing dread.

He drove on, and tried to remember again how he knew the name *Whitman*. He would need something to start the conversation.

The girl was a poet.

Surely the book was poetry.

But what did he know?

The avenue was as it had always been. Ugly women in ugly clothes and heels that neither supported nor flattered their legs, which ranged from rough and scrawny to well oiled and sausage-fat. Many of their mostly bare limbs sported bruises and scratches, and Zuck had learned long ago to spot the tracks on the insides of their arms and along their thighs. No way the girl would be here, alongside these wrecked women, their mascara caked and bleeding black onto the hollows of their eyes, down their rouged cheeks, their smiles chipped with black and missing teeth. Only a few were still pretty, and they of course were young, which is why he had to check here first. There was always the chance.

He looked into the faces, ignoring the high-pitched cackling calls, asking did he want a date. He eased the Mark through them, watching to see that their rings and purses and buttons did not accidentally scratch it. One woman, a blonde with red slashes of rouge smoothed over cheekbones that stuck out badly, beat on his hood and jogged alongside the Mark as he drove, screamed *what the fuck mister you a fucking pig motherfucker or do you want a fucking date? You take a wrong turn pretty boy?* And he put down his window and told her to back the fuck off his car before he ran her skinny ass over as a pair of black women, one of them pretty, laughed and called out *You cute, boy, why don't you come on over here and get some chocolate candy...*

No, none of these women was the girl and he was surprised to find that he was a little disappointed and he asked himself why as he continued up 6th and onto University Ave but could come up with no reasonable explanation.

Greentree Park was empty except for a few parked cars, in which lighters flared every couple of minutes. He backed the Mark in beside the big green dumpster and shifted into park, and squinted through the windows and windshields when they lit up. He

couldn't make out any faces, and there was no way in hell he'd go knocking on windows, even in this peaceful little pocket. It was sure to provoke something: either a fight or an offer he'd have a hard time refusing. Smoke billowed from the window of a '78 LTD, and he shifted into drive and peeled slowly down the long drive onto Grand and pointed back east. He could drive around the Plaza, then go back to the Bottoms. When he reached the iron umbrella he was unsurprised to see no one around, except a bent-up old black man with a hot pink duffle bag at his side.

East 6th Street was the center of the bottoms, and he slowed the Mark to a creep through it. Chilly as it was, and dark—barely a street light was lit—there were still plenty of people milling around, mostly in twos and threes, their crouching strides and quick glances telltale signs of the local activities.

On the right was the old settlement house, a tumbling-down four-story brick thing the old man had often said dated back to the late 1800s. He was all nostalgic about it, had gone to preschool there while his own mother learned to sew and took in washing for west siders. The settlement house had dedicated an entire floor to women who performed this one act of servitude for the moneyed; the space and the machines could be had for a small fee so that the women could eke out a few dollars a week while their husbands turned themselves to sinew and soot in the southside mines.

It made Zuck sick to think of his little granny, who he barely remembered as a squeaking thread of a bunched-up woman with no teeth and sharp blue eyes, acting like a rich woman's slave up on that second floor. The old man said when she was rearing him she beat him within an inch of his life so many times that even other boys in the neighborhood steered clear of her, but he adored her until the day she died, which was the only time Zuck ever saw the old man cry, including when Jenny passed. Zuck guessed if as a kid the old man was half the sonofabitch he turned out to be, he probably had it

coming and in any case he couldn't imagine the little woman who patted him on the head raising her hand to strike anyone.

Thinking about her just reminded him that his family was nothing but poor white trash and no matter how hard the old man had worked to make it not so, here was Zuck, sticking scraps together to put some dollars in his pocket and keep the old man's legacy burning, for what, he had no idea because goddamned if he didn't hate the sonofabitch, even dead and buried as he had been for going on two years.

There was no glamour in other people's junk, the old man had always said, just money, and when you got money you don't need glamour, don't need to prove nothing to nobody. Zuck didn't see it that way, knew now that he had always been proud and more than a little vain. He'd always wanted too much, his eyes on the prize, the sweet spot, the conquest. His old friend Hammerhead—the best friend of his youth, maybe of his whole life—hadn't been that way, which Zuck guessed is what made him get respectable long before Zuck even thought about cleaning himself up. Hammer was humble enough to disappear into an ordinary man's life, while Zuck had just wanted more. More dope, more money, more women, more speed under the hood.

Zuck blinked back into the streets that lined his boyhood. On the corner stood two boys and a girl, maybe a little older than Andi but they were all bundled up so he couldn't be sure. They crossed the street in front of him and he called out to them. One of the boys and the girl kept walking but the other boy tuned and gave him a hard stare. He was a birdlike little dude, scrawny and quick, with a schnoz that jutted out like a pier and let out a long stream of steaming cigarette smoke.

"What." He hopped around a little in the cold.

"I'm looking for somebody. A girl."

"Man, you can't get that here, you're thinking 6th Avenue. Just up north of downtown—"

"—naw man, not like that, a specific girl, about your age—"

"What are you, her dad?"

Zuck paused, then shook his head.

"You a cop? Man I got to go—" he walked toward his friends, who waited on the other corner and stared, stonefaced, at Zuck.

"—her name's Andi—"

"—I don't know no Andi," he called over his shoulder and with the other boy and girl hurried up the street without looking back.

Zuck knew how stupid the exchange had been, even if the kid did know Andi, he wouldn't give it up to Zuck. He zigzagged through the neighborhood, to the house where he'd grown up until Jenny died. It was even smaller and sadder than he remembered it, everything that should have been a straight line kind of sagged. It had been a broken-down piece of shit when it was home, but his mother had kept it best she could, made the old man paint it every year and always had tall snapdragon stalks swaying out front in the spring.

This place was his beginning, and probably would have been his end if he hadn't been sent up. As a kid, he'd played dice in the gray-grit alleyway behind this house, and fought boys big and small to collect on debts. In junior high he befriended punks in rival neighborhoods and worked them against his own boys to jack up prices on stolen stereos and speakers and jewelry, weed and Quaaludes and LSD. He hotwired cars from the yard and sold them to his friends, then stole parts and loitered in garages, hopping them up for drag racing. He became an eager and deft distributor for anyone who had product and credibility; he was a biker brother, a *bato*, or a trusted homey, depending on the

neighborhood. He was called Harm—even his mother called him Harm—until he was seventeen, when she left and never called him anything again.

Zuck stayed parked on the street until the image of Jenny running again and again through the patchy front lawn blurred his vision and he had to drive away with the image of her streaming blond hair filling his rearview mirror.

Trying to find this girl was the dumbest idea he'd had in a long time.

The Horseshoe was a casino, a shoddy old riverboat pocked with rust and unidentifiable detritus from the greasy river that ran through the center of the city. It never actually left its dock, which was partially submerged. The wood staircase that had led from it had long since collapsed and swirled into the eddying water; a steel gangplank of sorts with wobbling side rails stretched from the sidewalk on the bank to the entrance.

Zuck loved the place.

Inside was a carnival of bad taste—even he could see that. Velvet curtains hung outside the vinyl-seated booths and rumor was, for a small fee, some of the waitresses would pull the faded tassel ties, let the curtains fall, and spend some time entertaining patrons behind them. He'd never seen this happen, and he'd never pursued it, but savored the possibility like hard candy held between his teeth.

Most girls who worked there were pretty good looking. They flounced around in too-short wild-west dresses and even put on two dancing shows, at 7:00 and 9:00. They called it burlesque. Zuck called it silly, but he liked to watch. More than that he liked to shoot craps at one of the twenty tables on the upper deck, or stand at the mahogany bar that spanned the entire length of the "promenade," on the main level and drink 7Up. The bar was the only furniture on the boat that looked authentic, saloon-like, which was the

look he figured they were going for. Zuck knew it was real mahogany because every time someone mentioned it, Sam the bar manager, with bent shoulders and 'nam-crazed eyes said,

“Damn right. Real-live mahogany, the whole thing, one solid piece,” then he wiped at it like it was the most beautiful thing on earth.

Lately Zuck liked to wait around for Tralene, who covered the second cocktail shift, from 8:00 to close, and tonight Tralene was what was on his mind when he walked through the crooked door to the promenade. She might have been about twenty-five, and he didn't think he had much of a chance, but still he looked forward to seeing her, and right now chasing her around was better than thinking about the girl.

Tralene didn't do the shows, although she was tall and slim and moved like someone who should, and he asked her once why she didn't dance, told her he'd like to see her out there. She told him she *was* a dancer, at Big Earl's Gold Mine, for three years until she gave up the shit and got her daughter back. Starla was the kid's name. That was six months ago. He imagined her laid out on the small stage, arms outstretched, legs crisscrossing in the air, teasing.

Tonight he found her seated at the edge of the bar, her drink tray laid over her thighs, staring at the stage, which was empty and dark. He sat down beside her and asked what was up and she smiled, but a real unfamiliar smile like they'd never seen each other before, even though he'd seen her at least six times by now. She was like that, though. Her voice was spacey and tended to trail off, but she would snap back to hold the conversation.

"Hey Tralene. How you doing, sweetheart?"

She nodded and looked ahead.

"Not much for business tonight?"

She sighed, and spun to face him, then shook her head and gave him a vague smile. She wasn't the prettiest girl in the place, but there was something about her. A long, catlike nose and puffy lips, sleepy dark green eyes. Not much makeup. He liked that.

He asked if he could get her a drink and she said no and in her nasal, deflated voice, told him she didn't drink. It would be nice, he thought, to find a woman who could help him stay straight. He said he was trying to stay away from the bottle himself, but he liked coming in to the Horseshoe. Then he turned and asked Sam for a beer.

She told him she smoked a lot of reefer, because methadone either made her want to tie off, or jump off. A building, she added. She was allergic, she said. He listened, not caring. He liked the way her lips moved and she had pretty teeth, very straight.

She pushed up the elastic cuffs of the uniform's puffy blouse sleeves to show him the insides of her arms, where tattoos spread from bicep to the middle of her forearms. They were slick—the ex-boyfriend was a tattoo artist, on top of being her supplier—one, a tall sword impaling a heart wrapped in barbed wire; the other a long Scorpio symbol with a wide human eye in the center of its body. She stood beside the bar and bounced a wet cocktail tray on one leg, flipping it this way and that, while she showed him one arm, holding it up so he could see where the tattoos had covered the tracks; then she switched hands so she could show him the other. Seeing these parts of her anatomy, the long skinny limbs near his face so that he could smell her, suddenly seemed very intimate, more even than if he was kissing her, or going down on her, even. Her arms smelled like baby oil.

He said he liked the tattoos and she thanked him, and he considered his next move, but Sam gave her a nasty look and told her she had a couple tables in the back and asked if she wouldn't mind serving them. Zuck waited another hour and half for her to

come back, but she got busier, and after three beers turned into two whiskeys he figured he better get on.

He had a hard time keeping the Mark pointed straight on the way home, and it seemed he went straight from parking it crooked in front of the trailer to a sloshing mushroom of sleep on the waterbed.

In the muffled, drunken dark, he dreamed of Jenny.

In the dream he was a small boy, maybe six. The yard was an endless country of twisted metal. There was nothing beyond the yard. He sat in the cool weeds in the shade of the garage, only two bays then. August shimmered like cooked oil over everything. Jenny toddled nearby, blinked at pebbles on the ground, bent over to pluck them with her tiny hands and drop them into the gingham pockets of her grime-streaked dress.

He tied strings around the waists of small plastic soldiers, and his mother's fabric scraps to the string. Parachutes. This was unsuccessful, again and again unsuccessful and he dropped them—three small soldiers—one by one from the pile of bricks that stood as tall as he was behind the garage. He wondered, if he lit the scraps on fire, how long it would take to lick up the string to the soldiers. He could hear Uncle James bang around in the garage on the other side of the wall. His loud curses were rhythmic, soothing.

He heard the motorcycle pull up the drive, the old man. He had been waiting.

One soldier in his hand, he ran to the front of the garage, the open bays big caverns behind him, thick with humidity. He danced a little, thrilled at the roar of the blue Triumph, at his father's proud scowl, hands firm on the handlebars, his leather bomber jacket tight around his thick middle. Zuck's mother sat behind him, legs squeezed over Zucker Senior's thighs, her black curls electrified in tufts above her head.

He tried to remember the model name, the engine—he'd practiced—*Tiger, 6-something cc*—as he ran, even as his father raged over the engine.

“Stay back! *Back!*”

His arms were wrapped his mother’s soft waist when the burn screamed into his leg.

When he lay on the ground Jenny crouched over him and slapped at his face with both hands.

“No cry Harm-y no cry Harm-y no cry Harm-y.”

A few feet away the killed engine ticked, and he heard his father’s Zippo ignite, then a cigarette crackling.

His eyes flickered in the dark. He shivered, and his leg still burned. He sat up, moved his hand to the place on his leg where the Triumph’s exhaust had eaten into his flesh. But there was no scar. The Triumph had not burned him.

It had burned Jenny.

He remembered.

It was Jenny.

Zuck lifted the shade. The hairline fracture of morning split the horizon over the yard, a chilled purple, and he lay down hard, which sent his body on a nauseating wave. Might as well get to the garage. He wouldn’t be able to sleep now.

The promise he’d made to Jenny, crouched on the cement floor of his cell, hissed in his ears, his voice breaking over the words, breaking over her small body. He would make it up to her, just a little, he would make the yard that would have been hers fire up like the engine it had been. He would salvage it. She could forgive him.

Nothing had been touched in the night—Zuck scoured the parameters of everything worth stealing or stealing from, and nothing was out of the ordinary but the

paranoia, the raw anticipation grated on him, and agitation that felt too much like the jones. He had to get out of there, do something that felt like he was doing something.

He stood in the open mouth of the garage's first bay, damp September and the neighborhood's stinking breath clinging to his flannel shirt, and hollered at Curtis that he wanted three units brought into the shop: a '78 Chevy Suburban, a '72 Chevy Nova, and a bottle-green Jaguar circa 1968. The spindly blueblack man took long, almost bouncing strides back through the garage to the key wall and took down the box above the cabinet. Zuck couldn't help but notice how fast Curtis identified the keys to those three units but when he asked Curtis how he found them so quickly his friend just shrugged and said he guessed he remembered stuff like that, and jangled the keys in his hand. Zuck raked his hand through his hair and ran his fingers over his moustache, absently checking its cleanliness.

"I got nothing for the electrical on them two, Curtis—the Nova and the Suburban. I can't figure it, on either one of them. I fiddle-fucked with both last week but I don't know why they aren't firing. Rocco said he'd take them both but not if they ain't running. We got to move some units, Curtis. I'm scraping bottom pretty hard."

He wouldn't have said it to anyone else. Curtis blinked at him, expressionless.

"You got it boss. You know I got it. What you worried for?"

Curtis tapped his own chest with his middle and forefinger and pointed in the direction of Zuck's heart, then grinned down at Zuck with the goofy space where his eye tooth should have been but was knocked when he was running from the cops on a moped and ran into a stop sign. Zuck couldn't help but smile back at him. Cheerful, funny, fearless Curtis. The mechanical genius. Keeper of secrets, enough that he could get Zuck sent back up for the rest of his life if he ever told. Curtis held out his hand for a slap and

when Zuck held out his own Curtis made a move like he was just combing his hair and Zuck laughed and called him an asshole.

Dave-o had turned up the boombox on the old wooden workbench and he fist pounded with the thumping rhythm as he made his way to the second bay, where a '78 Celica with a bum overdrive was up on blocks. He lay down on the creeper and slid underneath it. Curtis shouted directions at Grunt, and Zuck went into the office to post the day's jobs.

Once the noise of the garage rose into a more or less constant, vibrant clang he and Walt climbed into the old man's Red Chevy truck, which was parked behind the front shed, red paint now a dusty matte, rusty lesions scarring its skin. They'd loaded the bed with an old wooden dog crate the old man had stashed in the shed. They were silent as the Chevy coughed down the road. They left the windows open and Zuck sang along with the radio. He shut his mouth when he thought what Old Walt might think—what a sissy thing, singing like that—but then again, Walt had known him since he was a kid in short pants playing with plastic army guys and ramming matchbox cars together in the dirt. Besides, it didn't look like Old Walt was paying him any mind. He smoked and watched the outside roll by, and who the hell knew what went on under that old hat.

"Zuck, I ain't said much on how you're running the yard, and I think you're doing just fine."

Of course, until he had a mind to tell you.

Zuck turned down the radio a bit and waited for him to go on, and the pause widened into a sort of time warp that Zuck wanted very much to break but his mouth wouldn't move. Finally, Old Walt lit another cigarette, squinted over the white stream, and waved a gnarled, stubby index finger to the right.

"Turn here."

"But that ain't the way to the—"

"—Just turn here."

And Zuck obeyed, and turned onto Oak Mill Avenue. Then turned again when Old Walt pointed left, and right again on Sylvia Place, which dead ended after four houses on the left and gave way to a long, yellow scrabble of dried-up and drying vegetation, bordered on the other side by some other neighborhood. Old Walt told him to pull into the second drive, at a small blue house with white shutters and neat shrubs under a large picture window, which seemed to take up the entire front of the house.

Zuck asked what this was and his mind stumbled over the possibilities. The old man had a girlfriend, and this was her house. This is where his mother had disappeared to, although that was impossible; she couldn't have hidden out within two miles of the yard, not from him and certainly not from the old man, although he had to admit he hadn't known this little pocket of a neighborhood was here. Or maybe some old enemy had paid Walt to bring Zuck here for an ass whupping. Walt got out, straightened his hat, and motioned for Zuck to follow him around back, which he was suddenly reluctant to do.

When he rounded the back corner of the little blue house he sucked in his breath. The entire yard was a botanical paradise, tall stalks of sunflowers with heads bowed heavily in the fall air, the remains of daisies and rosebushes and about a hundred things Zuck couldn't even identify, in various stages of wilting into the changing season, but healthy. The rows and clusters were perfectly laid out, and Zuck didn't see a single weed.

"Where are we?"

"This is my house."

They stood side by side, hands in pockets. Old Walt puffed. Something rose in Zuck that made him want to turn away.

"Ain't my garden, though."

Zuck tried to remember the name of Old Walt's wife. She'd died when Zuck was maybe ten, a couple years after Jenny, and he had never had reason to remember her face, though he did remember that she had been a kind and funny woman, good to his mother. Old Walt cleared his throat.

"This here was your dad's garden."

He pinched the cherry from the end of his burning cigarette and threw it into the grass, then walked toward the back door of the house, where a tall ashtray stood beside the door. Zuck watched him, afraid to hear what would come next. When Old Walt returned he took careful steps along the edge of the garden, and Zuck followed.

Old Walt told him that after Jenny died, the old man like to have died too, drank himself silly, beat his wife to keep from beating his young son, fucked women far and wide, made mistakes at the yard. When he'd finally worn himself out, sick to death of being a pathetic excuse of a man, he came to Walt and asked him a favor. He wanted to build something beautiful, something that would always remind him of his little girl. His wife wanted no such reminder in her own back yard, she couldn't take it, was already caring for the grave at the little family plot outside of town, and the soil at Harmon Zucker Salvage Yard was nothing but poison. He'd pay rent for the plot of land.

"It was closer to the yard than your old place anyway, right on the way between the yard and the house. Claire and I talked it over, and she was real sick. She liked the idea. So Senior got to work. He didn't miss one day when there wasn't snow on the ground, sometimes he even came to rake when there was, all the way up until he got sick while you was away. I ain't been able to keep it up like he did, but I ain't done too bad."

Zuck thought he might vomit.

"What I'm saying is, son, you got to have something other than that yard, something to keep you living. Living right, I guess I mean. This place here is as much yours as it is mine, and I'm too goddamn old to keep it up."

"I don't want it."

Old Walt lit another cigarette and paused at a patch of rose bushes, mostly bare, with a few brown clusters of petals clinging here and there. He snapped off a thorn and rubbed it lightly between his thick fingers.

"Suit yourself."

A breath of wind pushed through the plants and they shushed and swayed, and Zuck knew he should be thinking about Jenny, should respect her memory, should piece together what Walt had told him, what Walt was trying to do. But he couldn't get the girl's face out of his mind, and an urgent desire to find her and bring her here swelled in his chest. He turned and walked back to the truck.

When that massive, hulking cave that was The Walls Correctional Facility had shot Zuck from its bowels back in April, after thirty-two months and six days for dealing cocaine and fencing stolen goods, it was Old Walt who waited for him outside the crumbling chrome and brick of Jeff City. He was in the Pontiac, Winston mashed between his lips, wearing the same fedora, the focused expression. When Zuck got in Old Walt threw a bag of clean clothes in Zuck's lap, stopped at a gas station so Zuck could change, then drove the miles to deliver him back to the cement and fumes and grudging rivers of Des Moines fresh and sober as the day he was born. He was grateful.

That's when he'd set his mind to calling himself Zuck. He was thirty-four.

In the six months he'd been out, Old Walt had never slipped and called him Harm. Curtis had slipped so many times, Zuck told him if he fucked it up again he'd have to kick his jigaboo ass, which pissed Curtis off but he'd got the point.

The old man had provided for Walt's retirement, and left word on how he should handle both the yard and his ne'er-do-well only son. The instructions were simple: Zuck would get one chance at the yard. Old Walt should give the kid a year out of the clink to pull it together and make it hum. If he failed, or continued to do dope and blow his change on cheap pussy, Walt was to call Patrick J. Harris, Attorney at Law, and start proceedings to sell the place. Old Walt would get 40% of the proceeds; the rest would go into a trust for Zuck, for the unlikely event that he would get his shit together, or the more likely event that he would need money for legal fees or medical expenses. Patrick J. Harris had the paperwork in order, and the instructions; Old Walt had the Power of Attorney.

Patrick J. Harris could go fuck himself. Zuck would make the yard go round again, and the old man could cuss and grind his teeth and watch from his seat at the head of the dinner table in hell.

Now as Zuck drove north in the old man's Chevy, he glanced sideways at Old Walt to see if he could detect some anger or disappointment in his face. He saw none.

The pound building, which they called *animal rescue*, was a long red brick thing, with a length of tall chin link fence behind it, divided into runs for the dogs. Zuck backed into a parking space so he could watch the runs for awhile, maybe get the feel for which dog could really throw down. The white morning sun hurt his eyes and the air was all sweet clover and cut grass and seemed to lean soft into the windows of the truck. The

smoke from Old Walt's Winston hung in the cab like a pungent spice and Zuck remembered when he was a kid and the old man would take him on the road where he was happiest and ceased for a little while to be a class-A prick.

Zuck and Old Walt sat and watched dogs come into the runs, do their dog things, jumping and barking and pissing and the like. Zuck chewed a piece of Big Red and sighed. Most of these mutts looked useless as tits on a boar, and work at the shop was waiting.

There, in the third run. Looked like a German Shepard, all white. It bounded out the door and pranced around the perimeter of the run, then squatted on the pavement. A girl. When it was done it raced back and forth from the door to the end of the run about fourteen times, then sat and stared at the door. A woman came out and put a leash over its head and led it back inside.

Zuck looked at Old Walt, who nodded, and they got out, both doors slamming. Inside Zuck told the woman at the desk he wanted to see that white dog that had just been out in the run.

"Real good-looking one, Shepherd, maybe? Slanted back."

The fat woman smiled with that maddening cheer shared by so many women who lorded over front desks and asked if he was interested in adopting a lifetime friend, or if he simply planned to use the dog as protection.

"Because," she whined, blinking stupid blue eyes, "That dog was just rescued from a drug dealer's house—*crack*—where nobody loved her or gave her *any* attention. She was just chained up at the door. Just a little doghouse for shelter. Here at the Animal Rescue League we are committed to placing animals with owners who will treat them like a part of the family."

He said he did plan to use her for protection, but he had a good setup. She'd have a big kennel with a big old dog house during the day, and the run of fourteen acres of salvage yard at night. And, he added, he planned to get another dog for some company for her just as soon he could find one, which he'd actually not considered until that moment but didn't sound like a bad idea. The old man had four doxies. And anyway why was he trying to convince this muffin-cheeked bitch he was the perfect adoptive father for some dog? He resisted the urge to shake his head and mumble a jesus fucking christ.

She handed him a clipboard and told him in the drippy voice to fill it out. When he gave it back to her she disappeared through a door behind the desk, and returned a few minutes later with a skinny young man trailing behind her, the white dog on a leash behind him. She cowered a little, her tail sunk in a low J, and peered out from behind stick boy.

Old Walt knelt on the ground and gave a couple of quick kissy noises and the dog's ears pricked and her tail rose tentatively.

"Come on, little girl. We ain't gone hurtcha." His voice was croon, and the dog's tail swung a little faster and she lifted her head.

Stick boy offered a stupid little Woody Woodpecker laugh and drawled, "I think she likes you. She hasn't taken to anybody like that. Doesn't seem to want people near her."

Old Walt ignored him and made the kissy noise again, then clapped softly. She wagged out in front of stick boy and sniffed at Walt's outstretched hand, then his knee.

Zuck offered his hand to her and she put her ears back and hunched a little.

"It's alright, girl."

He didn't remember the last time he talked to anyone in that tone. But there was something he liked about the dog. Her black eyes were quick and curious, and looked like

they could get mean. And that shock of a snowy coat over her powerful haunches looked like a wild animal's.

"How much?"

The fat woman had on some reading glasses and narrowed her eyes at the paper he'd filled out.

"Twenty-five dollars." She didn't look at him. He handed her some bills, signed a few more papers, and took the leash from stick boy.

As they led the dog out the door the woman called, "You take good care of that pretty little girl, now. Hear?"

Outside, the dog loaded into the bed as soon as Zuck lowered the rusted tailgate, and when he shut it, she juttred her snout over the top of it, out onto the breeze like the figurehead of some hillbilly ship. Zuck watched her through the rearview, and pointed the truck south. Old Walt kept calling to her through the open back window of the cab. She'd sniff at his face, then wander back to her perch like she was born to it.

Back at the yard he set up the kennel with some bowls that were left over in the doghouse, which he cleaned up with the hose and filled them with water and the dog food he'd picked up at Aldi on the way home. She let him pat her head, then tore into the food like she hadn't eaten in a week, glaring at him between bites. He closed the chain link gate and headed to the garage.

The men, he found, had peppered the morning with stupidity, which left the three cars that were slated for auction idle in the garage. Curtis never even got the other units inside. Dave-o forgot to order a windshield for the TransAm, Curtis reported that mice were living in the engine of the Pontiac he'd been rewiring and he couldn't stand to move

them because he was terrified of mice, and Grunt popped the clutch on a Dodge Omni while searching for a dropped cigarette and the car lurched forward, slamming into a six-foot tool chest.

“Jesus fucking christ.” Zuck paced and flapped his burly arms in the air, “What kind of mickeymouse bullshit is this? You fuckers can’t find your asses with both hands. You’ve got to be kidding me.”

He threw a wrench and it landed just shy of a stack of tires and kicked up a scritch of earth.

“Six cars. I’m going to get paid on eight cars. That’s sixty-six percent of what Joe was going to take. How’s sixty-six percent of your pay sound today, boys? That sound alright with you? Oh, looky, here he is now. Fuck.”

Joe pulled his rig in between the trailer and the garage, stopping shy of the six cars parked in two rows. He left it idling as he eased out of the cab. Joe did nothing in a hurry, didn’t have to. He giggled as he walked over to Zuck and extended his dark brown hand for a slapshake, his ample gut heaving.

“Hey, now. What you got going on, Zuck? You looking too red in the face. It’s Friday, man.”

Zuck ranted.

“Uhhh-huh. I see. Oh, I know, Z. Them boys don’t care. It ain’t nothing but a thing to them, business. It ain’t theirs to care nothing for. Their business happen on the weekend, right?” He giggled again. “It ain’t nothing to get bent for, Z. Come on. Let’s have a look at them’s going on the truck.”

Zuck was a teenager when he met Joe; theirs was the same neighborhood, although Joe was six years older, and had started running cars for the old man straight out

of high school. Joe always managed to stay on the right side of the street, but he had friends on both sides, and folks respected and feared him.

Zuck pressed at his mustache and laughed a little. He was happy to hear the dog shoot off some fierce barks and he called a couple of *good girls* in the direction of the kennel.

The wind picked up as they began moving the cars to the rig, and the men shouted to one another as Grunt, Dave-o, and Walt drove them onto the lifts. It took half an hour to get them loaded. Zuck was sullen again as he handed Joe the inventory list. He'd counted on the cash from this sale to put toward the new hydraulic lift, which would move units around faster; which meant the units reconned and out the door faster. At this rate he'd never get the lift. It was hard to stomach the fact that the old man had put up the last lift as collateral to pay for Zuck's legal squabbles, which only served to get him a reduced sentence.

After Joe pulled out the drive and snaked onto SE 14th, he told the boys to get out of there, and show up Monday with heads removed from their asses. He thanked Old Walt for helping him with the dog, and asked him to lock up.

"Whatcha going to name her." Walt chomped his unlit cigarette.

"What?—oh. Maybe Snowball or some stupid shit like that. How about Bitch? Or I could just shorten it to Sharri."

Walt snorted.

Zuck said he guessed he'd have to train her. Lay down the law.

"Hey. Don't be like Senior. You got me?"

Zuck nodded, then took a slow look around the garage, and tried to make a mental note of where everything was, then looked back at Walt.

"You got any ideas?"

"Nope. I ain't seen nothing move yet, but that don't mean nothing. I hear better than I see these days."

Zuck nodded, grabbed the stack of papers Tow Joe had brought him, and headed for the door. He wanted to tell Walt thank you, but for what, he couldn't say.

"Go on home, Walt. Get you a beer or something."

Walt shook his head, and Zuck let the door slam behind him.

The breeze that rippled through the trailer screens was hypnotic, the faded wet asphalt smell of fall. He thought over the day again, tried to make sense of the garden, tried to imagine the old man building it, tending it. He could only imagine him pissing in it, or whacking at it with a scythe. Cursing it.

He ate and lifted weights but the feeling was on him again, and he wasn't feeling strong. Something throbbed from somewhere in the middle of the city, pulled at him. He dug out the Narcotics Anonymous schedule again. Hell, it was something to do, and it ought to keep him out of trouble, even if the idea made no sense to him at all. He showered and slid on a pair of jeans and an old Harley Davidson t-shirt.

Big Blue was actually pretty small, and looked very old. The whole thing leaned to the north as if it was trying to hear something, and Zuck rubbed at his moustache as he slammed the door. There were about thirty cars in the parking lot, most of them shoddy, but a few late-model Cadillacs and Buicks, none of which, he was pleased to note, nicer than the Mark. That's what the car business got you, he boasted to himself as he pulled open the front screen door.

The place looked like it could tip and collapse into a pile of sticks and beams. The entire bottom floor had been cleared of its walls; only a single, load-bearing beam stood in the middle of the room. Even the kitchen walls had been cleared, and a beat-up row of cabinets and a refrigerator lined the south wall. The north wall housed a steep staircase, which leaned with the exterior.

The rest of the room was filled with rows of metal folding chairs, and at the front, near the kitchen, was a small podium, painted white. A group of people, mostly men but a couple women, milled around the kitchen counter, where there was a row of enormous coffee urns and stacks of Styrofoam cups. Christ, if he had a cup of coffee he'd be up all night, exactly what he didn't need.

He leaned against the back wall, next to the door. If he did decide to sit down he figured he'd sit in the chair closest to where he stood now, for easy access to the exit. From the looks of things, he'd need it.

The scene was like a dreary church potluck, which had been a downer anyway, when his mother dragged him to them as a kid. But this was downright fucking morose. People milled around slurping at the cups, gray faces sagging. They eyed each other with something like sympathy and nodded, patted arms and backs, then broke out in what looked like tales of their own. Some simply flopped in the folding chairs, ankles crossed over knees, resignation blanking their faces.

Here came another woman through the back door. She was loud and cheerful, and big as an Amazon. Zuck wondered if she was a lesbian, and hoped so, for her sake. He watched her mingle, pat backs and shake hands. Several people seemed to light up when she approached them. Some eyed her with curiosity. Zuck heard a man whisper to the redheaded woman seated next to him, third row from the back, that was Ruthann, and the woman nodded.

People started to make their way toward the seats and Zuck rushed to claim the one at the back corner. He cleared his throat and hunkered down a little in his chair. Ruthann took a seat adjacent to the podium, escorted by a midget with a crewcut and glasses, who Zuck guessed he hadn't seen on account of his height. Zuck smirked. He might not be sorry he came, after all.

Chatter filled the room, rising as people sat, like standing had been a drain on their energy. At 7:00 on the dot, Ruthann lumbered to the podium.

"Well, good evening."

A murmured ripple responded.

"I'm Ruthann, and I am a drug addict."

"Welcome, Ruthann," came an earnest chorus.

She reminded the slipshod congregation that this was a closed meeting, and asked that anyone who did not identify themselves as a drug addict, or a person with potential drug abuse problems, should excuse themselves with the well wishes and kind regards of the group. No one moved. Then she asked if anyone had something to share that evening. Anything at all, before she got started.

A man with a long blond braid who sat in the second row shared that he was Andrew and he was a drug addict and they all welcomed Andrew. Then he said he had been at the drugstore the other day to pick up an antibiotic, and while he stood at the counter, the druggist who'd been helping him got distracted by an agitated customer at the drop-off window. While she was thus occupied, Andrew noticed that four bottles of morphine stood like a gleaming row of soldiers to the left of the register, just within his reach.

He said it just like that: *a gleaming row of soldiers* and waved his hand in the air to emphasize the magic of the bottles, and Zuck leaned forward in his seat and thought

that was an awfully poetic way to describe them. He almost let a low whistle escape his lips but kept quiet, and tried to get a look at the man's face. He could see only the back of his ear and his jaw line, but he noticed that it quivered.

"And man, I got so scared, man I just ran, and I forgot I had the box of maxipads—my girlfriend asked for them—they were in my hand—until I was out in the parking lot and I'll be goddamned if this pimple-faced kid from the front register who I see all the time didn't come out hollering at me, and there I am holding the fucking maxipads and all I can think of is making a cocktail with them bottles of morphine—I'd a put it right on the rocks, man." His voice broke. "But I didn't do nothing. I just threw down the box of maxipads right there on the parking lot and kept running. I ain't been back since." He wiped at his nose with the back of his hand. "I been clean two years and one month today."

A round of *thank you Andrews and we're with you brothers and pray on its* dappled the room, and Zuck sat back and thought what an awful story that was but what kind of whupped-up asshole gets maxipads for his girlfriend.

He pondered for a moment the chunk of change that little jackpot might have brought on the street. He could have turned that over in a half hour, if that.

Could have.

Ruthann thanked Andrew again for sharing. A woman three rows ahead of Zuck introduced herself as simply Jaclyn and told the group she didn't know why she was here but she sure was glad, *yes she was*, because it beat kitchen duty at the halfway house.

The group welcomed her in exactly the same tone they had welcomed Andrew and Ruthann, and Zuck wondered why they didn't tell her to leave if she didn't know what the hell she was doing there. He didn't suppose most people stumbled into these meetings by accident. Ruthann asked if anyone else wanted to share and the room fell

quiet, then asked if any other newcomers wanted to introduce themselves. Zuck tightened his body as best he could and stared at the empty chair in front of him.

Ruthann cleared her throat, an aggressive, rumbling sound. "I'd like to focus, tonight," Her face turned up and radiated like a Baptist preacher at an August Sunday service, "on Step Four of our program. That we will make a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves." Her voice rose on *searching* and *fearless* and *moral*, and for a moment Zuck was too lost in the sound of her voice to register the words.

When he was a kid his mother had taken him to church, where he sat swinging his legs in the pew and making faces at Jenny, who might have been about two. She wore a bonnet, and she squealed, and his mother smacked the back of his head, hard. More annoyed that hurt, he leaned again into Jenny's face and crossed his eyes, and she began to cry, just as a woman preacher took the stage. His mother leaned closer to hear the words but she didn't need to, her voice was as loud and as mesmerizing as Ruthann's.

His attention floated back to the room, where Ruthann talked about the scouring pad that is prayer and service work, which Zuck took to mean something like community service, which he'd been fortunate enough to avoid. The scouring pad, she said, would clean the conscience, and set right some of the wrongs we have done through our treacherous addictions.

Zuck fidgeted, the muscles in his legs flexing. He wished he'd gotten a cup of coffee or at least some water; at least then he would have something in his hands.

"And when we find, in our moral inventory, that character flaw that exploits and manipulates for our own gain, we must recognize that this is part of the disease, it makes predators of us, and we must learn to recognize when we are helping hands, and when we are sticky fingers..."

Zuck rose as quietly as he could but the heel of his boot struck the metal leg of his chair and many in the group turned to look at him.

Then he saw her. Sharri'd been sitting there the whole time, four rows ahead of him and to the left, that pudgy arm wrapped around her skinny shoulders. How could he not have recognized the gleam of her red hair? Her green eyes fixed on his and beside her, the skeezy florist Henry with his half-bald head and mushed-up, sissy-boy expression. He wore a sport coat and his shirt was tight under his double chin, a stupid navy-colored tie twisting as he twisted to look at Zuck.

His movement from the folding chair to the door felt like one long stumble and his heartbeat punched at his chest and a funnel cloud raged in his solar plexus. He was blocks away, speeding in the Mark, when he realized he'd left his leather jacket draped over the back of the metal folding chair, his favorite, the leather bomber. He could not convince himself to go back.

The CopaCabana had been a Spanish-themed restaurant run by Italians when he was a kid, popular with the old man for its dark-haired young waitresses, who despised him for pinching their pubescent asses every time he stopped in with his young family. Zuck's mother pretended not to notice, and ate her beans and rice in silence. His own cheeks burned, ashamed for his mother, who he thought beautiful then.

Now it was a nightclub with fading sombreros and velvet paintings lining the walls. It had been fifteen years, at least, since Zuck was in there. But wouldn't you know it, the barmaid recognized him right away. Marnie, she called herself. That was all he could remember the next morning—her name, and how she morphed into a blank body, then became Sharri in his vision, as she served him whiskey after whiskey on the rocks.

When later he lay in his waterbed, still fully clothed, a poisonous rot festered in his gut and he wanted to cry for how his head felt encased by cement, the pressure constant and impassible. He'd always had a solid stomach, never was a puker, which he again found unfortunate as last night's poison gurgled in his veins. When he tried to move, his leg trembled like a 20-pound weight had been strung from his ankle.

Fuck.

He woke again what seemed like hours later, but he didn't know, had kept forgetting to put a clock on the bedside table. He drifted, and when he woke again to darkness and crickets and night traffic shush-shush-shushing over the viaduct, a lazier, less insistent traffic than during the day. This time he trudged to the kitchen. Sometime as he slept he must have been too warm because now he wore only his thin blue boxer shorts and one sock. He made a ham sandwich with salad dressing slathered on both sides, poured a glass of milk, and squandered the remainder of the evening on the couch, drifting in and out until *Saturday Night Live* blinked off and the static fuzz crackled him back into an uncomfortable coma.

Sunday he woke with a start: He'd forgot the dog. He was chilled, still in his boxers, and could smell his own funk something serious. But he dressed and headed out to the kennel. The dog lay in front of her empty bowls, head on her paws, and stared at him. Jesus.

He told her he was sorry, then opened the gate and scooped up the bowls, and she stood and stretched, then stared at him again, tail erect and still. He coaxed her again, then backed away from the kennel's entrance. She took a few steps toward him and he took a few more steps back. Then he turned toward the trailer, and she followed. At the door he told her to wait there and she sat, but pulled back her head when he reached out to scratch her ears.

He thought again of the crack he'd made to Old Walt, about naming her Sharri. Inside, he filled the water dish, then poured the dry dog food, and cracked an egg over it as he'd seen Sharri do with her little dog Ferris, a Pekinese she'd had only three years before it wandered off one night, never to be seen again. The egg, she said, made Ferris's coat silky, and he *just loved it*. Zuck never paid Ferris enough attention to verify this—couldn't stand the little rodent—but it was worth a try now.

Outside the dog still sat, ears at attention. This time she bounded after him as he walked back to the kennel, and she let him scratch behind her ears a little when he set down the bowls. When she finished eating he spent an hour walking the perimeter of the yard with her, showing her the boundaries, the eastern fenceline, the railroad tracks to the north, the viaduct to the west, Maury Street to the south. Her polar-bear coat glowed pink in the low sun and she sniffed at everything, stepping carefully and glancing sideways at Zuck. He talked to her a little, like a tour guide or an instructor, and he realized he was training her the way the old man had trained the doxies, minus the beatings. This dog didn't need beat. He took her back to the kennel with few more pats and scratches and *good girls*. When he looked back at her she was sitting in the kennel at attention, looking out over the yard and he called to her again, *good girl, good dog*. She moved her gaze to him for just a moment, then returned to watching.

Ice. That was a good name for a pretty bitch in a white coat.

He shuffled inside, toward the shower. He could barely stand the feel of his own skin.

Zuck leapt from his bed, tripping over the sheet and banging his shin on the frame. He cursed, and reached into the closet for his Ruger. He struggled to remember

whether he had left the dog out of the kennel this time; he recollected that had, and he was anxious to see what she would do. The barking was a good sign; maybe they'd catch some sorry sonofabitch in action and that would be an end to it. Zuck liked a good stakeout: hunter and hunted moving in tandem, in a dance, anticipation and response.

The barking walloped and echoed through the yard, and Zuck was proud for a moment that it sounded a little like when the old man and his hounds were alive, and there was some disturbance in the yard. The Shepherd crouched midway between the trailer and the garage, and her snout pointed toward Bay 3. Once Zuck reached her they trotted toward it together, Ice slightly ahead, brooding in a half-whine, half growl; Zuck with the Ruger raised.

Zuck'd be damned if a slender figure didn't tumble out of the side window of Bay 3. It wore dark pants and a long-sleeved shirt. Its head was covered with what looked like a t-shirt with eye holes, and a baseball cap to hold it in place. The figure fell to the ground and rolled, then scrambled toward the hill that led to the viaduct. Zuck fired three shots, each right where the figure's feet left the ground. The dog whimpered.

Fuck all.

The exterior entrance door was still locked, and Zuck jogged back to the trailer for the keys, then back to the garage again. Inside he saw right away that a second compressor was missing, and where there had been three stacks of rims there was now one, and that was considerably shorter. He'd have to check the files to figure out how many and which ones he'd lost.

He went into the office through the door on the Bay 1 side, but nothing looked out of place. There was nothing in there anyone could use, anyway. Unless someone was smart enough to get ahold of the spec sheet and figure out which cars were close to running. His tight knot of rage tightened in his chest and he reminded himself that they'd

never be able to title the vehicles. Not that anyone street enough to steal the shit in the first place gave a damn about that.

He sat down at the desk, which was bare except for a box of rubber bands, a Greek fisherman's hat that had been the old man's, and a tattered book on engine repair, which was well worn, but which Zuck himself had not read. He flipped at the corner of pages and wondered if it was sabotage, some old enemy trying to get him to fail. Plenty of people wanted to buy the place, Zuck had always known it, had heard the old man piss and moan and brag about it all the time. There were probably plenty of people who wanted to see him fall down, and who wanted to get ahold of the yard.

It could be anyone, he guessed, but if he had to take a shot in the dark, he'd say it was that slobbery, crooked-assed sonofabitch Rocco who'd got himself popped three months before Zuck, and mysteriously returned to his little car lot unscathed, only doing four months. He'd always been a competitor, just shy of an enemy. They'd run in the same circles, run the same games. Now Zuck did business with him—straight-up business—and he would keep doing business with him until he knew for sure.

He laid the Ruger on the desk, and looked at the dog, who sat and stared at him from the middle of the office. Zuck couldn't help but smile at her. Bitch was all business. This time when he gave a *good dog, yes you're a good ol watch dog ain'tcha, that's my girl, you're going to get a hamburger for that*, she panted and wagged her tail.

He didn't sleep when he returned to the trailer, but sat at the table and drank coffee and scratched out figures on the paperwork and dug through the shoeboxes of keys that were stacked in the hall closet, trying to match them up in his mind with units he'd seen around the yard. He tagged a few, but threw most of them back in, cursing.

When he got to the shop at eight he told the men what had happened. They didn't have much to say, except that Dave-o's eyebrows shot up in what looked like triumph. He

later told Zuck he was glad he'd said something, lest Zuck think he might have had some part in it, which made Zuck wonder for a moment if he did, but he swept it aside.

They managed to hammer out four more units that day, and lined them up beside the garage. Tow Joe would be back Tuesday, and Zuck felt confident, despite the thieving cocksuckers, that he would pocket some change that week. Maybe he could even get the old sign lit up again. He could make that a weekend project. That night he slept wearing jeans and a t-shirt, the Ruger on safety, laid across his chest.

The barmaid at CopaCabana who'd claimed to remember him would probably be working tonight. Marnie, he thought she said her name was. For the life of him he could not recall what she looked like—kept placing Sharri's face on what should have been the barmaid's—or from where she said she knew him, which made him more than a little uneasy. Had he used to get high with her? Supply her? Run with or against her old man, or her brothers, maybe. Was she from the southside? East? The Bottoms? He turned her name over again in his mind, and squirmed a little on the sofa cushion, excited at the possibility that she might have been good looking.

The CopaCabana seemed shoddier than it had been that Friday night, but he was probably actually remembering how it was when he was young, because that Friday was a blank spot, other than the NA meeting with Sharri and Henry and big Ruthann. He made his way to the bar, where a handful of men sat and gazed with sullen, watery eyes at the Cardinals game that flickered on the old black and white behind the bar, the sound turned off or broken. The jukebox was silent, too, so that the only sounds in the place were the clatter of plates and utensils as the dark and bitter-looking busboy stacked them in the corner, the clang of waitresses rolling silverware on the dining side of the room, partitioned off from the bar by a half wall and some ornate iron bars.

When Zuck took a seat there was no one behind the bar and he scanned the room, then squinted through the porthole window on the swinging kitchen door. He saw only small, dark men, who laughed and bantered in Italian or Spanish, he couldn't tell. A scabby-looking elderly man sat two seats to his right, smoking a cigar, and told him the barmaid would be right back, she was in the pisser, powdering something, and he wished she'd hurry it up because his gin was empty. His voice was like death itself—like a horn with gravel in it—and Zuck hoped he wouldn't say anything else. It didn't seem likely, fixated as he was on the game, hunched over the bar with elbows spread like some prehistoric bird.

Now here came the barmaid and Zuck felt the air go out of him. The only thing she had in common with Sharri was her size, even shorter than Sharri and petite, but flabby. She was maybe in her late thirties; it was hard to tell whether she was a little older than him or just badly aged. She might have been pretty once, but now her large eyes sagged and glittered with bright blue shadow smeared across the lids and a thick black gash lining them underneath. Her rouge was dry and powdery and her hair was a teased, dishwater blond helmet that floated around her head like an angry cloud. She did have nice tits, Zuck mused, large and jiggling in the low-cut sweater she wore. Her shapeless ass was squeezed into some of those new-fashioned acid-wash jeans, which looked to Zuck like white tie-die, in other words, ridiculous. When she saw him her face lit up and he sank a little more into the barstool. Her pink-smudged lips cracked into a thin smile.

"Well, hi there *Mr. Zu-uck*. You came back to *see-eee me-eee*."

Good christ, that screech of sweetness could skin something alive.

"Ah, yep. Nice to, ah, see you—"

"Marnie," she chirped before he had a chance to offer the wrong name, "It's Marnie-marn-marn—"

"Yeah, I ah, I do remember that. About all I recall, I guess."

He shouldn't have told her that, it would make her think he liked her—as she clearly liked him—and as bad as he needed a piece of ass, he didn't want to string this one along. There could be other prospects here at some later date, he didn't need to blow his chances by hooking this bag.

But the curiosity was killing him.

"You say you ah, knew me from somewheres? I don't recall meeting you, but—"

"—Zuck, I known you since you used to run around that house over on Bowdoin, you used to go by Harm—I think that was your daddy's name too? I could never forget you."

Hammerhead's. She was talking about Hammerhead's house, where he had indeed "run around," for years, until they fell out and went their separate ways. Hammer had been his best friend, was still probably the best friend he'd ever had. Surely he'd remember someone from that neighborhood. He looked at her, unsure what to say.

She laughed, a high-pitched guffaw that was so startling that Zuck nearly jumped off his barstool.

"Baby, you probably wouldn't remember me, I was younger than you. I mean, I *am* younger—"

—"Oh"—

"And I was about three hundred pounds when I was thirteen, and you boys was around seventeen, I guess..." She put her hand on her hip and jutted it a little, then cocked her head downward and looked up at him.

He realized she wanted him to tell her how great she looked now, and he mumbled a *can't believe it now, you're looking good, there, ah*—and then he

remembered: Marnette. She had lived down the street, and he and Hammer had thrown Hostess fruit pies at her once when she'd been taking in the mail.

"Oh, yeah, yeah. I do remember you. Sure."

"You want me to get you a whiskey, Zuck? It is Zuck now, right? You know I was so in love with you—"

"—I ain't drinking tonight, I don't think, ah, Marnie. Got a lot of work to do tomorrow."

"You was the finest thing I ever seen back then, still looking right now, I must say."

The scrawny old man harrumphed and began to bang on the bar with his glass.

"—Well, maybe just one beer—"

She poured him a draft and set it down with a smile, darkened by one brown tooth on top, right next to one of her front ones. Zuck shuddered. What the hell was he doing here? He felt wrung, his chest heavy, the pressure building behind his eyes. Rage and paralysis all at once, like a restrained psychotic must feel. On the little TV Bruce Sutter threw a wicked fastball, and Zuck sighed and got a sideways glance of Marnie's breasts again, which moved wildly as she caught up the drinks of the other men behind the bar. Zuck saw that they noticed, too, three construction guys, a little light brown man in a suit that was two sizes too big for him, the scrawny old man, and two other old men on the other side of the bar who had begun to play gin rummy and already bickered over the cards that could be played.

He drained his glass and laid a dollar on the bar, then made his way out before Marnie could try to persuade him to stay.

After he let out the dog, he showered and put himself to bed.

Monday morning, he woke later than he'd wanted to, and dressed quickly. Outside, he called to Ice and she trotted over to him from someplace on the west end of the yard, which pleased Zuck. He told her *good girl*, reloaded her water and food, and coaxed her back into the kennel with a rawhide. She stood still just long enough when he gave it to her to let him scratch behind her ears, then lay down with the hide upright between her paws.

He hustled in to the garage, where Old Walt's head was ducked under the hood of the Pontiac in Bay 3, hand plunged deep inside the bowels, where he seemed to dig around for something. Curtis should have been finishing the rewire, and Zuck did a quick scan of the bays. No Curtis, but Grunt and Dave-o came through Bay 1 teetering a windshield box between them, making their way to the TransAm. Bay 2 held the Omni, and Zuck took a look at the front end. There didn't seem to be any damage where it had slammed into the wall, and he kicked the tire. The boombox blared, and Zuck had to holler.

"Grunt, you get that clutch dialed in?"

Grunt and Dave-o set the windshield box down gingerly and Grunt teetered over to Bay 2. His hands were so calloused and dry that they sounded like fall leaves scuttling across desert sand when he rubbed them together, and it made Zuck a little queasy. The carrot hair was so ludicrous sprouting as it did from under his hat that Zuck shook his head at the sight of him, and reminded himself that Tony the Grunt came cheap, and knew his way around the garage, which was something, considering he couldn't seem to find his ass with both hands in any other area.

Grunt burbled when he talked, like bubbles formed in his mouth and made it hard for his tongue to make their way around the sounds. He told Zuck the Omni's clutch still popped out of third, but he was working on it, and Zuck nodded.

"You seen Curtis?" He scratched at his moustache, uneasy. It was going on 7:45, and Curtis was always there by 7:00.

"Nuh-uh. Motherfucker ain't been here." His giant head weeble-wobbled. The hat he wore said *Beer Is the Nectar of the Gods*.

Zuck nodded again and headed back to the Pontiac, where Old Walt was still deep under the hood. "Walt, you heard from Curtis? He call up to the office or anything?"

Old Walt's rangy body retreated from under the hood slowly, like a tortoise revealing its head. He wiped his hand on the shop rag that hung from his back pocket and adjusted the fedora.

"Nope."

Zuck leaned against the quarter panel and Old Walt lit a Winston and rested one hand on the edge of the open hood. It was weird, Zuck noted, how the smoke went in to Old Walt, but never seemed to come back out. He longed for a cigarette and anxiety crawled over him, tightened his neck and arms.

"You notice anything out of place?"

"Nope. Nothing. I took a good look around before them boys got in, and they been hard at I it since they got here, about six forty-five for Dave-o and a little before seven for Grunt." He hacked, and leaned over far enough to flick the ashes toward the upright ashcan with the Conoco symbol on the side.

The first time Curtis disappeared, back in June, he'd been gone over a week, Monday through Friday, then Monday the Next week; he showed up about ten in the morning on Tuesday, and Zuck had raged at him. Curtis looked haggard and Zuck knew he was hitting the pipe again but couldn't stand to ask, couldn't stand what he would have to do if the answer was yes. Zuck kicked doors and threw wrenches and the other men cleared out of the garage while they had it out.

Which really meant Zuck had it out. Curtis stood with his hands at his sides, head sunk a little low, and said *sorry, boss* or *Zuck, I'm sorry man* or *I know, I know* whenever he could get a word in. Zuck told him he would be a sorry sonofabitch if he ever took off like that again, he was counting on him and if he couldn't be counted on, Zuck would find someone who could.

The bitch of it was how bad he needed Curtis. Old Walt was competent, Dave-o could do a lot to clean up a body, but Curtis was magic. And unfortunately, he knew it, and knew Zuck's limitations without him.

Zuck crossed his arms and imagined telling Curtis he was fired, just to prove a point. Curtis had been sent up too. Jobs weren't exactly plentiful right then, particularly if you were an ex-con, and black in a town where plenty of white men were out of work.

Where the fuck was he?

Zuck cursed the timing; it was going to be a hell of a day—or, for chrissakes, a week—without him. *The courage to change the things I can, the wisdom to know the difference...* He could do only what he could do, would do what could be done that day. Maybe go grab some dinner someplace nice that evening, stop by the Horseshoe and look for Tralene, then come back to that garage that night

But he hated being in the garage at night. Always had. The sense of the old man lurking was always stronger after dark, and now that he was in the ground the thought of it scared Zuck so much more than it ever had when he'd been a kid, stealing spark plugs and crank shafts, flywheels and cylinders.

By midday he and the boys managed to get all three units lined up outside, and three more into the bays. Diagnostics were under way on two—Old Walt on one and Grunt and Dave-o on the other—and Zuck sweated over the splayed hood of a Chevy Impala, mining it for parts. At lunchtime they stood around, sandwiches mashed in

blackened fingers, cellophane from HoHos and Cheetos crackling. Afterward Zuck made a list of the parts he wanted and wrote out instructions on how he wanted them catalogued, handed the mining off to Grunt, whose freckles gathered like weather as he complained of having to do extra on account of Curtis being gone. Zuck shut him up with a look, then headed into the front office to square away paperwork and see about some organization of files.

Someday, he thought, he'd have a secretary up here clicking away at title transfers and disclosures with a typewriter. She'd have a bumped-out ass and willing, liquid breasts that threatened constantly to spill out of her blouse. Occasionally she would accidentally open her legs as she crossed and recrossed them, an expanse of thighs giving way to a sweet, dark spot unconstrained by either underwear or pantyhose.

At five the men began to wear down, and although Dave-o and Walt kind of shuffled around, reluctant to leave the shop with so much more to do, Grunt would follow Dave-o's lead, Zuck waved them all out the door and told them to show up the next day bright and early. He'd take care of them for the extra hours just as soon as he got paid on this next load. He turned up the boom box and took his time sorting out the work that he could do alone, then locked up with slow, deliberate, watchful steps, counting everything in the shop.

His boots thumped around the corner of the trailer and nearly left the ground when he saw the girl, who crouched on the ground next to the front stoop. He stopped and fastened his eyes on hers. She was completely still. Seconds ticked. He stepped toward her and she slid upward, her back against the siding, with what looked like a tin box cradled in her arms, then leaned against the trailer, eyes unmoved, straightfaced.

He felt naked. What was it about her that so fucking unnerved him?

"You're back." Stupid, stupid.

She nodded. For a brief moment he wonder if she had a mental problem, and scanned the first words she spoke to him, her speech—about not stealing nothing and just trying to keep warm and couldn't even drive—for a trace of slowness. He could recall none.

"What are you doing?" Reasonably intelligent.

"I'm wondering if I could borrow a screwdriver. I thought cold was supposed to constrict things," she said, and held out the tin box. "But I guess not this thing."

He stepped toward her and held out his hands, which in his opinion was not yet clean enough to touch anything. They looked rough and brittle and too large next to hers, which were delicate and punctuated by ragged, chewed fingernail stubs. The box was about the size of a loaf of bread, and jangled unevenly when he moved it. It was a faded mustard color, with butterflies stamped all over it, like a stationery box his mother had when he was young. He pulled at the lid.

"It's got something wedged up in there. What's in it?"

She shrugged. "Stuff. Just different stuff." She lifted off from the side of the trailer and turned to look around the front of the trailer.

"You could probably paint this thing," she said. She bit off a piece of thumbnail and nibbled at it with her front teeth.

Her coats were all unzipped, and as he wrestled with the box lid, he noticed that her nipples were hard under her pink thermal t-shirt. She was chesty for such a little thing. He looked back down as the lid budged open under his hand. Inside he saw two small jewelry cases, a tattered leather-bound book fastened with a wraparound leather string, several tampons, a neon-green hackey sack, a hotel sewing kit, a statuette of praying hands, and a wadded-up silky cloth with a lace edge that looked like a slip. There was more, but she took the box from him.

"Thanks." She turned back toward the yard, her hair a fan that flipped just inches from his face, so that he could smell it, damp and a little musty. Something in it aroused him, and instinctively he flexed every muscle in his body against it. He watched the shape of her legs in her dirty jeans as she walked toward the battered husks. Her footfalls were soft, but she walked like she had somewhere to go.

"Hey, what are you going to do?"

She turned around and shrugged.

"You think you're going to stay back up in that car?"

She nodded and he shook his head and threw his hands up at his sides, then spoke without thinking.

"You want to come in and eat? I got some stew I made the other day."

"Nah, thanks," she tossed over her shoulder. "I'm not hungry."

Her voice was throaty, a little bit cocky. He thought again about the pages she'd left and wondered if he should say something. Maybe that would bring her back, they could talk about it. Maybe she would tell him what they meant. He shook his head.

The wind lifted her black hair in heavy swells around her head, and Ice yipped with excitement as she watched her pass. The girl grinned and called over to her.

"Hi there, doggie-doggie. Are you just precious? I think you are...yes I do..."

Ice cocked her ears and whined.

Inside Zuck ate, and paced, lifted, and paced, drank two beers and paced. Every time he got himself to sit down, he would go back to the window when he rose again, split the blinds, and look for movement. He wondered if she was warm enough then remembered he had left the blankets in the car.

Walt was right: He needed something other than the yard. He definitely needed to get his mind wrapped around something less dangerous than a runaway teenage girl with

nice tits. He'd finished reading the book, *Homing Pigeons: Breeding and Racing your Loyal Friends*. It was as good a time as any to work on the pigeon lofts. The brochures he'd sent for had been sitting on the counter for a week.

He planned to start with just two, but he would build the loft for ten. The design of the building had already shaped up in his mind—he would build it right beside the front shed, facing east for maximum sunlight. Now he sat down at the table with a pad of graph paper to sketch the specifications. He'd decided on a 6-inch insulated wood floor—he'd read that cement could promote sickness—and he would cover the floor with plywood, cheaper than cement anyway. He'd raise their coops on poles to keep them safe from stray cats and dogs, and the rats that he knew roamed freely in the neighborhood, lured by the foul scent of the plant, and he would put sliding doors on their coops, to avoid crushing a bird or an egg in a door.

He bent over the pages and made drawing after drawing, piecing it together, and for a little while he forgot the girl, the garden, Jenny, Sharri, the yard, the thieving. Dope. Whiskey. The gash of loneliness that was splitting him open, flaying him like a trout. He opened the magazine the Homing Pigeon Association had sent him, *The Homing Pigeon Enthusiast*, which apparently had been in publication since 1886. The quotation above the Table of Contents read:

"The distinguishing characteristic of the homing pigeon is the love of home and the impulse and ability to return to it. This love and impulse is not peculiar to the pigeon, nor possessed by all members of its family, but the pigeon alone of the birds of the air has submitted to the control of man and is to be trusted with its own liberty."

And then he remembered Whitman. Why the name echoed something in his ears. His mother had read something. What was that? He set down the magazine. When he was a kid, really young—before Jenny died—she'd read to him from a book of Whitman and

there was one poem, *America Singing*, or something, where a mechanic, and a shoemaker, a carpenter, a boatman, even a mother washing something—all are singing. He had loved the poem, as he remembered, because it had made him proud of his father. He didn't yet know, he supposed, what the old man was about. But maybe he really had been different before Jenny died. There had been another poem, too, about a spider, where for some reason he ended up thinking there was a spider in his soul and it terrified him. But he had listened. He had never told his mother he was afraid.

He picked up the magazine again and tried to read an article about bonding among pigeons, how to promote it, but now he couldn't forget anything.

Just after sunup Friday morning she knocked on the door and asked if she could come in. He stood in the doorway, plaid shirt buttoned off track, sweatpants low on his hips.

"I think I'm kind of sick," she said, and sniffed.

Her eyes were glossy and her cheeks were a hot-dry flush. She stepped inside, and they stood together on the small patch of yellow linoleum. She looked away from the hairs curling over the open neck of his shirt, then around the inside of the trailer, then down.

He didn't move.

He was suddenly thinking of all the reasons he really shouldn't let her in: the cash and guns he had around the house—she could clean him out. The auction and dealership customers—he'd like to do business at the kitchen table just like his dad had done for thirty-five years before him—how the hell would he explain a teenage girl in the house? Plus he'd be fighting them off her. Those assholes were unscrupulous. He didn't even

know how old she was. Who knew, with girls these days? She might be twelve, or twenty. And she had to be some kind of runaway. He didn't know what the jail time was for harboring one, but he didn't want to find out, definitely not while he was on parole. And what about statutory rape? He knew the score on that. She could say he tried something on her.

Who's to say he wouldn't?

Suddenly all the time he'd spent thinking about her, the night he'd gone looking for her was so outrageous, a sick joke. He thought again about the garden, which he had thought about already a million times since Old Walt had taken him there. It had convinced him he needed to get out to the cemetery. He looked into the girl's gray eyes, which had not left his, and swept those places from his mind.

“You got folks or somebody around here who could come pick you up? I ain't really set up to take care of a sick girl.”

He felt agitated and embarrassed when she still wouldn't look away, and angry for feeling agitated and embarrassed. “I mean...I'll let you make some phone calls here, but this really ain't no place for a young girl.”

“I don't want to make any phone calls. You just got some aspirin or something?”

Jesus H. Christ, she looked like she might cry, and her eyes were so wide and so honest he thought he felt like crying too, just looking at them, which filled him with the dread and a panic he fought to push back down. He cleared his throat.

“Sit down there.”

He pointed to a folding chair that flanked the door, blue with red flowers painted on it, his father's mother's. She sat on the edge and gripped the sides of the seat, drumming her fingers on the underside. Zuck gave her a look over his shoulder as he walked away, and she stopped. The air between them in the trailer suddenly felt like a

mushroom cloud, spreading slowly, uncontrolled, it made every corner, every edge closer, smaller. He stood in the kitchen and looked around, confused about why he stood there to begin with, what he'd been after.

“What’s your name,” she croaked.

He rummaged through a drawer, slammed it shut, opened another, then another until he found a plastic bottle of pills that sounded full when he shook it.

“Zucker,” he said, his back to her. He reached into a cupboard by the sink and took out an old Coca-Cola glass, and filled it with tap water. The cupboard door slammed shut and a license plate fell forward onto one of the cactuses in the window ledge.

“People just call me Zuck.”

“Is Zucker your first name or your last?”

“Last.”

He knew she was waiting for him to offer a first name. He didn't. She asked, with some eagerness, “Do you smoke? I mean, cigarettes?”

“Quit.”

She coughed.

“Sounds like you need to.”

“It’s just a cold,” she said, “I don’t smoke that much anyway.”

He was above her now, holding out two aspirin and the Coca-Cola glass. His hands shook a little when he handed them to her. He saw her notice, and jerked his hands back.

“Thanks. My name’s Andi.”

“Sandy?”

“Andi. With an A. Short for Andreyia.”

“How old are you?”

“Ho old do you think I am?”

“I don’t know. Hell. Listen, you can’t hang around here. I got a business to run. I don’t know what your story is, and I don’t care. I ain’t got time for this shit, like I said. You can see there ain’t any kids around here. There’s reasons for that.”

“I ain’t—I-I’m not a kid. I’m fifteen.” She sat up straighter in her chair and coughed again.

“Look, Andrey, Andi, whatever. You got to go. You can stay in the Brougham—

“—the what?”

“That car you’re staying in, it’s a classic...forget it. You can stay in the car for a couple more days, a couple means two, then you got to get moving along. I’ll bring you some more blankets if you want, and you probably need a bath or something, I’ll let you use the bathroom. I’ll send you with some sandwiches...” Jesus. Sandwiches? What the fuck was he doing?

“Okay,” she said, and stood up. She hugged her coat around her and pulled at the door.

“Whyn’t you zip that thing?” His voice was rougher than he meant it to be. The last thing he needed was for her to start bawling.

“It doesn’t zip any more.”

The door swung open, punched by the wind, and she walked outside, pulling up her hood, which swallowed her head as she hunched away.

He called after her, “What was you thinking you was going to do? When you got back up in the yard here, I mean. You got a plan?”

She swung her body around and walked backward, hands pushed deep in her coat pockets and shook her head.

“Nope. No plan.”

Ice barked after her as she trotted back into the yard.

He pulled the door shut and stood for a moment. Goddamn it. He'd fry some eggs and get an early start. Tow Joe would be there at noon to pick up the twelve cars that were set to go to auction; only eight were ready. He pulled four strips of bacon from a plastic bag in the refrigerator, placed them on a plate, and slammed them into the microwave, punching at the buttons.

As the butter heated in the pan he leaned against the counter and propped up the license plate. California, Orange County, PIE 250. He'd been twenty when he wrecked that red Carmengia, on his way to a hash connection up in Big Sur. The California days. The faded days. Beyond the kitchen window cars and trucks and buses already thickened on the bridge that ran from the city's south side into downtown, puffing in the cool morning. Seated at the table, he shook the girl from his mind as he slid the eggs and bacon down with a side of grape juice and looked through the files on his desk: Miracle Mile Motors, Van Jensen, Gordon's. On each he noted the cars he's sent over that week and filled out the invoices in compact capital letters.

Then he looked again at the plans he'd drawn. That night he would pick up the materials, and start on the lofts. That night he would forget again about her. Andi.

At the shop Curtis had not returned. Zuck wasn't surprised, but his anxiety swelled more each day. For the first time he wondered if Curtis might not come back, and tried to imagine what he would do if that was the case. There wasn't a better auto electrician around, and anyway he didn't want anyone else. Curtis might have a weakness for the pipe but other than Old Walt he was his only friend.

Zuck spent most of the day in the office, plotting out his next moves, which units might be most immediately profitable and which he could realistically get done without

Curtis. A few calls got him just a little closer to nowhere. This would be the third week in a row that he would have to pay the men out of the savings for the lift, and even if nothing else came up missing, the tools they'd lost were already slowing things down and he would have to replace them.

He told the men he'd be back in an hour or so and started up the Mark, raking his hand across his face and rubbing his eyes. He looked in the rearview and told himself to get it together, soothed his moustache, and considered his face. What did the girl think when she looked at him? Her stare was so bald, but gave nothing away. He could read anyone, he thought, the street and the hustle had conditioned him well. But not her. He raised his eyebrows at himself, proud that they and his hair were still dark and uninterrupted by gray. His eyes, too, were quick and brown with thick lashes that women had always gone crazy over. Clear skin, good teeth. Did she think he was handsome?

Christ. He put the car in reverse.

At a stretch of buy-here-pay-here car lots he pulled in at Rocco & Sons; inside Rocco's one-room shack of an office, the men didn't bother to greet each other. Zuck sat down and set his clipboard on the chair beside him. He didn't normally take in a list—he thought it was better if he knew all the specs from memory and so far he hadn't made many mistakes. But there were just too many to unload. And he needed to keep something in his hand.

Rocco was fat and wheezy with a sweaty mop of straw-blond hair and soulless blue eyes. Zuck could hardly see him from the other side of the steel desk that took up most of the room, papers stacked and scattered and caving in on each other like they were. He waited, smoothed his mustache, watched out the front window as a couple of squat brown men chattered, hands flying, over a Toyota Celica, a four-wheel drive turbocharged number—brand new that year. He guessed they were excited, poor bastards.

They didn't know its frame was twisted—broad-sided by a '66 Chevy—and would limp down the road for the rest of its natural life. Their breath puffed white and it occurred to Zuck that the weather had in fact turned cold, and he thought again of the girl.

"Looks like my old shop fixed that Celica up just like you wanted, Roc. I see you got it on the front line. You got some fish out there."

Far as Zuck could tell the man didn't look up.

"Yeah, them happy-ass wetbacks have been back three times since yesterday morning. What can I do you for, Zuck? You want some coffee or something? There's some made."

Zuck didn't want any coffee but he went to the little cart by the back door and poured some in a Styrofoam cup just so he could stand up and look Rocco in the eyes while he pitched the units. He set the cup down on the edge of the desk, picked up the clipboard, and read them off the list, glancing up at Rocco in between them.

Rocco listened, hands clasped over the top of his gut, until Zuck had finished, then panted a little as he spoke.

"I only got room for the 024 Omni. I'll give you three-fifty for it."

"What? Bullshit, Rocco. First off, four-fifty. And I know you got room for more than that. Come on, man, you told me to take on more inventory so you'd have more to choose from. That's what I got. Inventory."

They bickered, and Rocco leaned so far backward on his swivel chair Zuck thought it would snap off its base. Rocco flicked absently at the horizontal shades that lay closed over the window behind him, and looked sideways at Zuck, who tried to look casual leaning against the wall.

Abruptly, Rocco stamped both feet on the floor, bent forward over his massive thighs, and sneezed once, twice, three...six...eight times, a tic he had. Zuck waited for

him to finish, pull an old blue handkerchief from his pocket, and blow his nose, a surprisingly faint, shallow blow considering the sneezes' magnitude. Rocco stretched out one powerful leg in front of him and jammed the rag back into his front pocket. Zuck wondered for a moment if those snotrags were ever washed.

"I'll take the Omni for four hundred and the LeBaron for six. In two weeks I'll take the W100 pickup, if you get the fuel gauge to read. I'll give you a grand for it."

"What, you got a hard-on for Chrysler all the sudden?" Zuck smiled as he wrote Rocco's name beside the stock numbers on his sheet. Two today, one next week or the week after was not as many as he hoped he would take, but better than nothing.

Rocco snorted. "Yeah, I got a hankering for Chrysler. I also got a thing for Caddies. I hear you got a fine Brougham sitting out there on your lot."

Zuck glanced sideways at Rocco, who stuck a toothpick in his mouth and smirked. Zuck finished his notes on the spec sheet and slid the pen behind his ear.

"Yeah?" His heart thumped. "She ain't cleaned up yet."

"I hear she'll clean up fine."

Zuck paused. "Where'd you hear that, Roc?"

"Oh, you know. Word gets around. Anyway, why don't you give me a holler when she's firing up and I'll take a look at her."

Rocco smiled, and Zuck's stomach lurched at the sight of the fat man's teeth, which had wide shadowy spaces between them. Sweat prickled at his temples and the base of his neck.

"Probably won't be for a while. I'll let you know. I'll have Tow Joe drop off the Omni and the LeBaron Wednesday morning."

"Thank you kindly, Zuck."

The man still smiled, and Zuck barely choked out a thanks before he walked, unsteady, out the front door. He passed the pair of brown men, who nodded at him with dark, solemn faces on their way toward the office. He climbed into the Mark and pulled off the lot's gravel drive into a thick blur of traffic.

How could that fat fuck know about Andi if he wasn't the one trying to hustle the yard? He tried to think who else might know about her, who would care enough to run his mouth. He needed to talk to Curtis, find out if he knew, what he knew, and who else knew. Curtis would be straight with him. And Curtis wouldn't take the story around town. Goddamn it, where the hell was Curtis.

Zuck flipped the conversation with Rocco over in his mind. He had tried to keep it nonchalant, pretend they were talking about the Brougham. He never should have said "I'll let you know"—the fat bastard was probably thinking he meant he would send Andi his way. And Zuck would do that right when he skated on the thin ice of Hell.

But what if he was wrong? What if they really were talking about the Brougham? Maybe Rocco really wanted the car. Zuck thought about the nasty smile, the toothpick mawed between Rocco's thin lips. Goddamn it.

When the men left that evening he went straight for the yard, but when he yanked the Brougham door open, she wasn't there. In fact there was no trace of her, except, again, the blankets that were neatly folded and stacked. He slammed the door and headed over to the Caravan. Nothing. As he walked back toward the trailer he saw a ragged shoelace sticking out from underneath a deflated Volkswagon bug; he bent and pulled it out, but it was old, had probably been there twenty years.

When Sharri was around it was easier to pass the time. He didn't think about it much, but that weekend as he worked around the garage and began to build the bird lofts, he missed her. She would have nagged him to straighten the garage, pick up the yard, even probably would have told him to plant flowers outside the trailer. The only green that ever showed up around there were the weeds that encircled the parameter of the yard like big strangling arms.

Sharri would have made the trailer and the yard feel like a home.

She cooked, too. Not very well—she burned every casserole she ever made, and she undersalted things—but it was comforting to come in from whatever hustle he'd been chasing and find her in the kitchen, humming during the commercial breaks from the soaps she liked to watch. She worked as a secretary downtown, at a small, seedy tax firm that had been there forever. The tax man was a huffy, loud old character named Beau who liked to grab your hand with his chubby paw and clap you on the back hard enough for you to fall forward. It caught Zuck off guard the first time he met him; he took a step and almost swung at him, but straightened up when he saw Sharri and her one raised eyebrow. That was a trick she had, where one brow peaked high and wild while the other stayed gently arched.

Why think about her now? He guessed it was because he kept thinking about Andi. He imagined her cooking in the kitchen like Sharri and chased the thought from his mind. She was a kid. Fifteen! She probably couldn't tell a spatula from a teaspoon. He thought again about her breasts, and the way she'd looked up at him in the doorway, pleading, sick. Too pretty, with those gray eyes. He wondered again, as he had while he watched her from the window, what her story was. She didn't seem like a thief, but women could look innocent even as they robbed you blind, like a dog that pisses on your

leg while he licks your hand, as the old man used to say. This one could take over the world, looking like she did.

Saturday night he went down to the Horseshoe. Tralene didn't show up for work, which disappointed him much more than he cared to admit, but he ran into some old boys from the Nielly Auto store, played some pool, drank some whiskey, and careened home in the '84 Lincoln Mark VII. He loved that car, and as he drove it home he cursed at his own stupidity for chancing it. He had to start taking a beater from the yard when he went out to drink.

As he drove he thought about a time when he and Sharri had laid around the second-floor apartment they shared on the north side, snorting line after line of cocaine. She lay back on the couch, skinny and naked, and let out a long breath. She'd been trying to get him hard for an hour or so, teasing with her mouth her hands, straddling him and bouncing around. She'd given up, and she was quiet for a while.

“What made you do all them things you always did, Harm?”

“What things, baby?” He was so high. He ran his fingers again and again through his own hair, tingle followed by shiver.

“You know. *Bad.*”

“I don't know, man. I mean, what do you mean, Share?” He rolled on his side and lit a cigarette, looked down at her at the opposite end of the couch.

She said she meant he came from good folks, who tried to teach him right from wrong.

“My mother was a weak-ass whore. She ran off on my dad when I was seventeen...you know that—“

“—but she raised you right up until then, and your daddy was strict, made you work and all that...and wasn't y'all Lutheran? I mean, you went to church and all that...”

He propped his head on his hand and looked out the window, where the sun blared an impossible light against the late afternoon sky. His ash grew long, and he barely made it to the ashtray on the coffee table before it fell in one cylinder and collapsed onto the clean porcelain. Coke made him a neat freak, and he cleaned the ashtray after almost every smoke.

He had nothing to say.

Years later, when she left, she brought up that conversation, which he'd long since forgotten. She told him she wanted a man who knew how to do right, and he would never be that man. He couldn't argue with that, but sometimes he wished he'd tried.

At the last minute, he passed the entrance to the yard and pointed the Mark toward the CopaCabana, and once he hit the bar and said hello to Marnie, who reached across the bar to take his face in her hands, and made him feel more welcome than he probably deserved, a thick haze swallowed his regret.

Sunday morning his head blazed, and felt around the floor beside the bed for his pants. He slid them on while he lay there and wished for a cigarette. And there was Andi's face again. He sat up and parted the blinds almost involuntarily, then got up, stopped in the bathroom, and went to the door for the paper.

When he opened it, a pink plastic lei blew inside—the kind you get at those stupid luau parties—with scrolled notebook pages tied to the bottom end with thin red electrical wire. The lei hung from the doorknob, and he wondered first if she'd lifted the wire from the garage, and second where she would get a lei. He picked up the lei in one hand, the

papers in the other, and stood bare-chested in the chill doorway, looking out at the yard, which was still. The dogs trotted toward him, panting, stupid happy, but he shut the door on them.

He marveled again at how awful her handwriting was, how he had to squint and hold it up to his face.

Dear Zucker,

I know you said I had two days left. If it's okay I want to come back tomorrow night and stay until Wednesday. I'll have another place to stay by then. If yes just put this flower necklace in the back seat of the broham and I'll know it's okay to come back. And I won't come over to the garage again, I don't think you saw me waving anyway because I was behind that stack of tires. I was only going to let you know I was leaving because I found out my friend Lisa had a place for me to stay. But where she's staying is her boyfriend's and he's got too many people living there now with his sister and her three kids and her boyfriend and his brother. Anyway, just the two days, like you said, okay?

Peace and love,

Andi

PS: I thought you might like this poem. I didn't see any books around your place so maybe you need something to read?

*I am a dancer on an abandoned stage
 Words on a forgotten page
 And empty face on a timeless clock
 A copper key to a broken lock
 Nothing is what a nothing knows
 Its mind is blank, its ears are closed
 My lips pour out these twisted lies
 But you can see my shameful eyes
 Can you forgive my liar's dance?
 I'm trying to be someone
 I just need a chance*

Jesus. He laid the pages on the coffee table and tossed the lei on top of it. He tried to imagine where she was, where she might stay tonight. What was the kid doing, just bouncing around. What would he do with her when she came back? Maybe he'd just keep the lei, let her know she wasn't welcome. That was the smart thing. He didn't need to be tangled up in this brat. What was she talking about, with the lies and the dancing? He could see her shameful eyes? Ashamed of what? He scanned the page again until he came to the words "my lips" and he pictured them speaking, smiling, pressed together defiantly like the first time he saw them and every time she'd refused to speak since.

He went to the refrigerator and pulled out some ham slices, rolled them up and took a few bites. He didn't feel like cooking and something like a ball-peen hammer banged around in his head. He gulped down a large glass of water, poured a cup of coffee, and burned his lip slurping at it. He wiped his moustache with a dishrag, left the cup on the counter, and went out the front door, pulling on a coat.

Ice came running from the south end of the yard when he whistled and grunted at her. She trotted, panting and smiling, and her front legs hopped up in a little dance when she reached him. He rubbed her ears as he surveyed the yard. Was she near, did she watch his movements? That's what he'd do in her shoes. He'd be watching him like a hawk, in her shoes, to see just what she was getting herself into. He led the dogs to the pen and went back inside.

He passed the day with the paper and a couple of football games, though he wasn't much interested until the Cowboys came on to play the Saints. Aspirin and beer soothed his head and he dozed. The phone screamed behind his head and he jumped from the couch, swinging his arms, disoriented. It was Marnie, calling from the CopaCabana, where he'd forgotten he stopped by on his way home. Shit, she'd probably lifted his wallet just to make this very call, he could hear her eyes widen and blink as she drawled

into the phone, gooped-up lashes sticking together. He never should have gone in there. What had he been thinking?

“Nah, Marnie. I’ll stop by and get it later. I got to go to the store anyway.”

“You sure, Zuck? I really don’t mind. I know where your place is, that old junkyard that was your daddy’s?”

The clock said 4:30 and he closed his eyes. “Yeah, okay Marnie.” What the hell. “Yeah, just bring it by.” He dropped the phone in the cradle and turned over.

He awoke again to his own guttural snoring and an insistent knock at the door. He rubbed at the matted thatch of hair on his chest and pulled his flannel back on. This ought to be interesting. He wondered for a moment how nasty Marnie’s blue-encrusted crow’s feet would look in the late sunlight, and shuddered. He lifted the blinds.

But it was Andi, huddled in her coat. She squinted at the window and caught his eyes, then poked her small hand through her sleeve and gave a little wave. He opened the door, and past Andi’s shoulder, saw Marnie’s rusted-out tin can of a Toyota Corolla pull slowly toward the trailer.

“I thought you weren't coming back until tomorrow. I got company coming, see?” He pointed and she glanced sideways at the approaching car. He paused. “You’re selling...calendars. Okay? And I’m going to write you a check, and you’re going to walk right back on out of here down where that car came in from. Right?”

Andi looked at the car, which was now parked, and the woman who was alternately staring at her and fluffing her hair with a round brush in her rearview mirror. Zuck looked back and forth between them. When Marnie appeared to dig in her purse for something he gave Andi a hard look.

“You understand what I’m saying?”

“Yeah, I understand. What do you want me to do with the check?”

“You can bring it back—”

“Hey Zuck...who you got there? I got your wallet...from *last night*...” Marnie shimmied up to the door, and squeezed part way in the space between him and Andi, holding the screen door open wider with her shoulders.

Zuck coughed. “I’ll get you that check there, hon. Be just a sec. Kid’s selling calendars for her school, Marn. You can come on in.”

“Well, alright,” huffed Marnie. She wore a hot pink denim jacket with a tight black sweater underneath, and acid-wash jeans that squeezed her ass into a flattish upside-down heart. More like a real heart, Zuck thought, than the valentine’s type.

“What kind of calendar you selling, sweetheart? Maybe I could use one.” She tittered in Zuck’s direction as he knelt beside the kitchen table and wrote out a check. He glanced at her, then Andi, and slowed his scrawl.

Andi’s voice bloomed outside the doorway, “Oh, I don’t have any samples with me. I had them last time I came by and...this guy here told me to come back because...he was out of checks...so I...came back. Today.”

She smiled sweetly at Marnie, who was slightly shorter than she, and Zuck fought back a smile.

He didn’t latch the screen door when it fell closed; he hung his hand on the top of the wooden door and rocked it back and forth. Marnie fastened and unfastened the two bottom buttons on her jean jacket, and looked past him into the kitchen.

“You got a nice little place here, Zuck. Cleaner than I would’ve thought. Real clean, in fact.”

Her forced laugh was high pitched, with long notes like a siren. He hated it as much as the first time he’d heard it. She looked down, then up at him, her dull eyes all soft. They were so pale they were almost colorless.

“Well, I got your wallet.” She swung her purse, which dangled on a long black worn-leather strap below her hips, in front of her, held it up, and pretended to rummage for it.

He could see the wallet on top of the purse’s rubble.

“Well here it is, right here. Ha! Look at that, right on top. I swear—”

“Thanks Marn.” He took the wallet from her and slid it into his back pocket.

“Okay.” He swung the door again.

She jutted one hip and pouted, "Ain't you going to invite me for a beer or something Zuck? I did drive the wrong way from my house just to bring you that ratty old wallet."

He looked out through the screen door, careful not to squint. He didn't want her to think he was looking for anything in particular. There was no sign of Andi and he shut the inside door.

She sighed and looked out through the door too. "I guess I could go see my sister while I'm over here." Her voice had softened, was suddenly very quiet, and Zuck felt a wave of unexpected tenderness.

“Yeah, Marn. I got a beer for you.” As he turned to walk toward the kitchen he saw the lei and the note and flashed a look at Marnie. She cocked her head at the coffee table.

“You going to a Hawaiian party? Or was you playing dress-up when you got home last night? Kind of shape you was in—” She snorted and took a step toward the living room.

On TV a man drawled for Bob Evans Restaurant. *Weekday Breakfast Lover's \$2.45 combo special: hotcakes and sausage; or bacon & eggs, hashbrowns, and biscuit;*

or biscuits and sausage gravy with hashbrowns; or sausage and eggs, hashbrowns, and biscuit...

Zuck barreled past her into the living room and swiped the lei and the letter in one hand.

“Dang, Zuck, something set your tail on fire?”

He folded the letter and put it in the front pocket of his jeans, then stuck the lei in as far as it would go. Pink flowers fluffed out the top and she laughed, a real laugh this time. He went up to the kitchen, and as he pulled a can of Miller Light from the refrigerator with his right hand he pulled open the drawer next to it with his left and shoved the lei and the letter inside. He handed the unopened beer to Marnie, who now stood in front of the two kitchen stairs. She looked past him into the kitchen and he distracted her with a heavy hand on her shoulder. Her blue eyeshadow shone greasy in the crease of her eyelid and her blush gashed pink across her loose cheeks.

"You going to ask me to sit down?"

Man, she was straightforward, wasn't she? He considered whether this made him like her more, and concluded that it could. She was still kind of pretty. He realized she thought he was admiring her when she bent her head a little and smiled up at him, eyes wide and sweet. Her top eyetooth was brown. He spun her around to face the living room.

"Yep. Have a seat."

She sat dead center on the edge of the couch, legs spread a little so that he could see the skinny flab bulge from the hip of her jeans. But her tits were nice. Her bra cut lines in her flesh under the tight black sweater she wore, and clung to the place where her breasts squeegeed out over the edges in front. He kept his eyes on them as he sat down at the end of the couch, leaned on the arm rest, and propped the foot closest to her up on the coffee table. The TV seemed suddenly loud and he quieted it with the remote. The game

was in the third quarter. Zuck sipped his beer and looked over at the breasts between plays.

He could see from his peripheral vision that she watched him and glanced at the TV only when he muttered something at it.

“Yeah. C’monc’monc’om. Aw, man—what are you, a kindergarten girl? Jeez-us.”

She put her hand on his knee and left it there. He didn’t move. She turned toward him, and splayed her leg on the couch. He looked down. She was flexible. She peeled off the hot pink jean jacket, which smelled of dryer sheets, and laid it on the coffee table. He kept his eyes on the TV as she kissed his cheek, her mouth elastic and too wet. Eyes locked on the game, he clamped on to one breast, then the other. She lapped at his ear and leaned into him, her hand creeping toward the movement in his jeans. When she unzipped his pants he let his foot hit the floor like a punch delivered to the thin carpet. She bent over him he watched her yellow hair, its surface a tight net of hairspray, then pushed his fingers into it, grabbed the roots and pushed down hard. He went fast.

She perched on her knees on the couch and wiped her mouth with the heel of her hand. From under his heavy lids, head bent over the top of the couch, he could see her eyes fastened on him. Then she walked into the kitchen came back with some paper towels, leaned over, and wiped at his jeans. She stood between him and the TV and looked straight ahead at her hipbones, studying the streaks of the acid wash, until she began to pull the sweater over her head.

“No, no, no. Marnie. Marn, put your shirt down. Don’t do that. Put your fucking shirt back down. Listen Marnie, I’m tired. I got cars stacked up tomorrow, I got to get an early start.”

She stood, arms crossed, holding the sweater above her enormous breasts, suspended between peeling it all the way off and pulling it down. Her eyes steamed up

and she mashed her lips together. He pulled himself out from under her and stood up. She stretched the sweater back over herself and snatched the jacket off the table.

“Well, Zuck I hope you enjoyed that little performance.”

“Marn you knew what you were—“

“What? I knew what? Don’t even act like—“

“Yep, time for you to go—“

“—like I was expecting that—yeah, I think it is. I kind of thought you liked me, Zuck—“ her voice broke.

“—I do, Marn—“

The smooth voice here. He was out of practice.

“—I do, it's just ah—“

What? What was it just? He was waiting for a fifteen-year-old girl? Or Sharri? Here was a woman who wanted him, was willing. Who said she used to be in love with him. She stared at him now, tears still smearing streaks down her face. After a few seconds she wiped at her nose with the sleeve of her jean jacket, and grabbed the doorknob, struggling with it hard as she pulled. She grunted a little and he took her hand off the knob but when he pulled at it the door yanked open the corner of it knocked her in the forehead and she yelped and slapped her hand to her brow.

“Aw, Marnie, damn it, I’m sorry—“

“Fuck you, Zuck.”

When she walked out she kicked the screen door closed behind her, and her black purse bounced off her backside.

He wished he could be happy to find the Cowboys had won but the smiling, kicking cheerleaders depressed him, and he shut off the TV. He’d make a sandwich, have another beer, and call it a night. Right after he put the dog out.

At 5:21 he woke on the couch, his back in an unnatural twist, a thick film of meat and beer on his tongue. He willed himself to sleep a little more, pressed his face into the cushion and squeezed his eyes shut. But he'd dreamed of Jenny again, the headstone, Jenny's hands, her feet running, then her feet motionless, reeling like movie clips in his head. He pushed off from the couch. In the bathroom the light exploded in his skull. He turned it off, turned on the shower, and stood under the hard spray. As he washed himself in the dark he wondered, as he had so many times, what it was like to be dead.

He packed a lunch and taped a note to the office door: *Gone all morning. Old Walt manage jobs, Grunt do post-op quality checks. Dave run inventory to salvage. Everybody keep moving. Zuck.*

He didn't want to check the car for Andi. Why should he? Maybe she was there and maybe she wasn't. And maybe if he showed her he didn't give a damn one way or another she'd quit coming around.

In the shed behind the garage were the lawnmower, a rake and shovel, and various garden tools in the same old leather bag that had been his mother's father's. The old man had used it for hauling. Zuck used it only for this. He loaded the lawnmower, fished the key from the glove box, and revved the cold engine. The cab still smelled like the old man: cigarettes, grease, sweat that seemed to stain the air. Zuck pulled around to the front of the trailer.

But he couldn't stand it.

He cursed as he shifted into park, then left the door open as he jumped out and stomped toward the Brougham. He could feel in the weightless quiet that she still was not there, but he looked anyway. As he turned back toward the truck he resisted the urge to recount the cigarette butts.

He pointed the grumbling old Chevy south on 14th Street, and rubbed at his cheek. He hated when he forgot to shave. It felt like the dirt of the street creeping back over him, made the early morning feel like it did all those times he stumbled from a hotel room or the back room of a strip club or someone's basement, numb and surprised that the sun had come up again so soon, or at all.

This morning he would have crawled on his belly through a field of shit for just one cigarette.

He stopped at the Kwik Mart to fill his mug with coffee, and there, paying for a dozen doughnuts, was Marnie. He paused inside the door, mug in hand, and waited for her to finish with the cashier. Her hair was teased up into some kind of twist in the back and she was wearing a skirt and blouse that was tied in front of her neck into a poufy bow. Her makeup was fresh, the blue of her eyeshadow done in three careful stripes that reminded him of a sunset, dark to light.

“Oh. Well hi there, Zuck. Cat drag you in?”

Her voice was shrill and clearly she wanted the whole Kwik Mart to hear her. Her stupid hair rose in a teased-up wave in the front, over her forehead. It reminded him of a bird he'd seen once in a *National Geographic*.

“Morning, Marnie.” He walked around her and to the ledge of coffee burners that steamed beside the back wall. He listened for her footsteps to either follow him or leave. She did neither.

“I guess I didn't mention. I got a real job working for an auto dealer down the street, so I ain't going to be working at the Copa much more. This guy does a limo service, too. You know Jay Paterno?”

He wondered how long it would take the old dago to get Marnette to work under his desk.

“Yep. I know him.”

Zuck had tried to get him to buy his units, but every time he called him, Paterno huffed through a thick Italian accent that he didn't want nothing to do with no convicts, he ran a clean business, he didn't want no druggies coming around. Zuck wondered if he knew that any one of his slick-haired salesmen or slow-witted drivers could be found downtown on any given Friday night with a spoon up his nose.

He'd keep working Paterno. He'd been a friendly rival of the old man's for years.

“Good for you, Marnie. Copa ain't going to be the same without you.” He threw a dollar on the counter for his coffee and waited for the change without looking at the cashier.

She made a small squeak as if to say something, then turned and clopped out the door on an ugly pair of beige pumps, which wobbled at every step. She squealed her tires as she pulled out the drive, and slammed on her brakes at the stoplight on the side street.

Well, he could keep going to the Copa, which was good. He'd started to like the place. He chuckled as she squealed again from the green light. Back in the truck he turned up the radio and tried to forget where he was going.

From the dream, Jenny's sing-song voice Came back to him, *No cry, Harm-y*. Her small hands. The thought of her white bones in the black coffin made his head scream. It made him want to get high, spark something that would burn in his chest, make his eyes pop. Made him want to hustle someone, get one over, take home something that wasn't his. Fuck a woman from behind, hard and merciless, yank on her hair. Mangle something with his hands, until it was bloody and unrecognizable.

It made him want out of his skin, and for a moment he thought wildly about what it might be like to touch Andi, to place his body over the length of her bareness, enter her with tender, controlled brutality, holding her still. His cock pressed painfully against his

fly, and his too-shallow breath made him feel like he was swimming, fighting toward an invisible shore.

He jerked his mind back to Jenny. He'd sworn he would make it right for her, would straighten out the yard, make it rumble and purr, like the old man used to say. It was Jenny's yard, too. Would have been. He'd do what his mother had stopped doing twenty years before.

Maybe he'd get pink daisies this time.

The family plot was on a tiny piece of land that had been attached to a farmhouse that was in his mother's family for generations. The stones dated back to 1871, where the last-born child of his great-great grandparents was buried, two-year-old Lucille. When his grandmother died, the new farmers tore down the house and built another about ten acres from the little cemetery, on a treeless patch near a highway.

Zuck had liked the little cemetery when he was small. His mother tended it when her own mother said she was old, and aching, and tired of tending a garden of dead people. He and Jenny went with her sometimes on Sunday afternoons, to watch her pull weeds and mow, clear off vines and scrape mildew from the sides of the stones. He took toy soldiers and cars that warred and raced each other between the graves, and he complained when he grew tired and bored and hot.

Sometimes he drank greedily from a jug of water and spit it at Jenny until she cried; or he chased her, his arms raised like ghoulish claws roaring that he was a monster and would get her. Sometimes he pulled her around in the wagon as he picked up the green and brown scraps his mother had pulled. He liked the way she chattered to him from the wagon, about things that made no sense at all.

He was nine when they buried Jenny here. She was four. He had been sad to think that both the first and last people to be buried there were little girls. He wondered if little

Lucille's brother had caused her to die. That's what the women said. Harm, he was called then, had "caused Jenny's passing." Not killed her, they corrected in whispers on front porches, at the grocery store. Not on purpose.

The old man, and the other men he knew, said nothing.

As Zuck drove through the small towns and farms outside the city he tried to imagine the people inside the houses, the small stores, the tractor dealerships. His mother had talked like country people were better. She often complained to the old man about people in the city, where "nobody makes nothing with their hands" and you "can't depend on nobody." The old man said city people were harder but people were people and you couldn't depend on none of them.

Zuck tended to believe the old man.

At the Farm and Fleet store, where he always stopped before the cemetery, he looked around for pink daisies, which they didn't have. He settled on some purple flowers, which the cashier said were irises, and looked *so real*. He didn't think so, but he nodded and smiled anyway. She was a pretty thing, even if she was a little stout. Brown hair in a long braid down her back, plump breasts that spilled out unconstrained from the sides of the coveralls she wore. But her waist was surprising small, and her nails were long and painted red. They were chipped at the ends and around the cuticles. She asked if he had someone special to give the flowers to and he snatched the bag with the flowers from the counter without answering, and left.

The cemetery wasn't much farther. When he pulled onto the plot, he saw that two of the old trees had snapped in half and now bowed with high branches on the ground, and thick splinters in the middle. That would be a job. He tried to think whether there was a chainsaw around the yard, then remembered he had pawned his to help pay off a supplier before he went to jail. He noticed a lot of the other trees needed work, too, with

branches hanging far out over the graves; if one fell it could easily crack one of these old stones. He'd have to pick up a new saw and get back out here. The thought of pushing the spinning blade through the wood excited him a little.

Zuck picked up random sticks scattered around the twenty-four stones, some coffin-length slabs, some just flat headstones, some like Jenny's that rose from the ground, monuments large and small. Then he set to work with the weed eater, carefully edging the thick overgrowth. The sun was sharp and grew warm. He took his old baseball cap from the truck cab and threw his jacket on the seat. When he finished with the weeds he drank from a jug and ate one of the bologna and cheese sandwiches he'd packed, sitting on the tailgate.

He looked out at the farmhouse that had replaced the old one, a white stamp past the treeline and across the bean field. No one from that house had ever stopped by to see his mother when she'd worked out here, but a man from the house would drive slowly past in a truck and watch her. She waved when he passed and he would lift his middle and forefinger from the steering wheel in response. The man hadn't paid Zuck any attention in the three years he'd been coming out here—and neither had anyone else—which was fine with him. Maybe the man was dead. Maybe someone else owned the house and the farm now.

When he first got out of jail, the stones had been buried under the weeds and vine. He'd had to go through it with a machete and mow it four times just to get to the stones; then he worked at setting the broken ones upright. Jenny's was still intact, just caked with dirt. He'd found a couple of rusted rakes on the ground once he cleared the overgrowth, so someone must have tried to clean it once over the years. But not for a long time.

Now it didn't look too bad. He raked up the clippings and mopped at his face with a rag. A few stones had toppled again and he struggled to set them. A few of the flat ones

were broken, and he put the stone pieces back together so the names and dates and sentiments lined up. When he was satisfied with the rest of the plot he took the scrub brush from the leather bag, a jug of water, and the bottle of dish soap, and knelt at Jenny's grave.

*Beloved Daughter
Jennifer Georgianne Zucker
April 7, 1955–June 25, 1959*

He placed his hands on the two humps of the heart-shaped headstone like they were shoulders and forced his eyes onto the words.

“Hey there, Sissy. Got this mess all cleaned up out here. Looks pretty good now. Going to work out your stone, then I got to be on my way. Okay? Okay.”

As he tipped the jug above the stone he patted the top of the heart, until both sides were wet, then saturated the scrub brush with the blue liquid soap. He held the side of the gravestone with one hand and scrubbed at it in circular motions, soft. He started soft every time.

But as he poured and lathered and scrubbed he felt his eyes pinch and his nose sting like he might lose it as he tried to wipe off the suds and something alive and terrible pulsed so large in his throat that he could not swallow and all he wanted was to rinse it one last time and leave it and never look at it again. And he scrubbed like he could scrub off the words, scrub off the surface, scrub the stone back into the ground.

He stood above it and emptied the remainder of the jug over it and he could not look at it except through the peripheral vision underneath his eyes. He watched the house in the distance. Nothing moved there.

It was twenty after eleven when he loaded the tools and the lawnmower back into the bed. Zuck backed out of the plot slowly but did not look at his work. He watched the road in his rearview and watched the treeline ahead of him.

The countryside flickered against the falling light as he drove, radio off.

At the garage Zuck headed straight for the doorless bathroom without a word or a nod to anyone. As he scrubbed at his hands he could hear the men scramble for their incidentals, anxious to get to the bar or the woman or the bowling alley of their evenings. He had no idea what any of them did after work and he didn't care, as long as they showed up and did their work. He held up his dark red hands like a surgeon and shook them off as he emerged from the bathroom.

"Listen up."

His hands felt parched as they dried, and the garage had slowed. When he came out they were all at various stages of bland attention. Grunt's rusty, clown-like hair poked out from under his greasy baseball cap in matted clumps as he leaned on the long workbench by the office door. He crossed his arms and hung his head as if he were asleep, except that his eyes focused on Zuck from the sunscarred face, his rubber mouth slack.

Little Dave-o stood straight, hands on his hips, grease-smudged white t-shirt clinging to his chiseled chest and torso, restless weight shifting on the bow legs. His dark hair feathered so perfectly he must have just smoothed it with the comb he kept in his back pocket alongside a wrench.

Old Walt leaned with one hand on the Nova, now parked in Bay 1, the fedora perched on his bald, liver-spotted head. In the thirty years Old Walt had worked for the old man, and the six months he'd worked for Zuck, the hat had never left Old Walt's head in Zuck's presence.

"So Tow Joe'll be by tomorrow at nine with two units. He'll be *back* at noon to pick up the Celica, the F-150, and the Cutlass. F-150 still needs a clutch—Dave-o—and the Cutlass needs the hood reattached. Walt, you check up on the F-150 pistons?"

Old Walt gave a single nod.

"Dave-o, you finish touching up the paint on the Cutlass's hood?"

"Sir yes sir," Dave-o drawled with that smirk.

"So Grunt you help him hoist that thing tomorrow. Walt, I'll need you for paperwork-type bullshit again, and moving things around. Questions."

They all shrugged and shook heads. Dave-o fidgeted and bit his thumbnail, then asked what they would do about the now six units that were slated for electrical work.

"They're starting to take up space we ain't got, Zuck." said he had no fucking idea and guessed he'd have to look at them himself. Three faces stared back at him, a mob of doubt. He turned and walked to the long workbench, his back to them, and over his shoulder he said he would see them tomorrow.

Something ticked in his sleep. Had he turned off the gas on the stove? He didn't smell anything but sleep and whiskey on his own breath but he rustled out of bed, naked. He located the sound in the front room, at the window. Where the hell was the dog? When he split the blinds he jumped from the face that was pressed on the other side of the glass, then realized it was Andi. Ice wagged around at her feet and sniffed. Suspended next to the glass was the paper clip she held in her bitten fingers, bent out at one end.

He pulled his thick fingers from the blinds and stood for a moment, listening to her coo at the dog. It sounded like singing.

The clock on the microwave read 4:12. He went to the bedroom and pulled on some pants and yanked an old red t-shirt from a hanger in the tiny closet. He snapped on the lamp beside the TV on his way to the door, and when he opened it Andi was kneeling, cuddling Ice.

“That dog ain’t for company, she’s a watch dog. Won’t be worth a shit, you keep that up.”

His voice was gravel. The damn dog nuzzled the girl’s face like a stupid Pomeranian.

“She likes me.”

She stood and brushed her hands off on her jeans. She wore a different coat this time, spruce green and puffy. It zipped. Her hair was a mess, part way in her eyes, staticky strands poking out from under the hood. But the gray eyes were clear.

“Is it okay if I stay now? I put my bag in that minivan.” She fished in her jeans pocket, pulled out a crumpled paper, and offered it to him. “And I brought back your check. Sorry, I don’t have any calendars left. They ran out.” She grinned and looked down, rubbed the toes of her brown moccasins together.

Zuck ran a rough hand through his hair and stood for a moment.

“Get in here. Just for a minute. Warm up.” He pushed at the dogs with his feet to get them back while she stepped inside. “Go on over and sit on the couch.” She obeyed. He went to the kitchen and put some coffee on, then sat on the edge of the old recliner, elbows on his knees, hands locked.

She yawned and rubbed at one eye.

“You still sick?”

“No, I’m feeling better.”

She sat hunched, her hands buried deep in her coat, which was still zipped. She’d taken down her hood and her hair was wild and soft-looking. It looked very clean, and Zuck wondered where she bathed. He shook off a picture of her in the shower, water streaming from her skin, in rivets from the black hair, over everything.

“Andi, right?”

“Yep. Andrey, Andi.”

“Alright, Andi. What the hell are you doing? I mean, you know. What’s the story here. You running from the cops? Get in some trouble? Bought some reefer, broke into a school—”

“Why, you going to turn me in?”

The same look she’d given him when he pointed the gun at her, the same steel in her eyes she’d had when he grabbed her wrist.

“No, I ain’t going to turn you in, but I don’t need no shit, neither. I need to know what kind of trouble you got if you’re going to hang around here.”

“I’m not going to hang around here. I told you. I just need two more days.”

“Then what. You going to show up here in another week and ask for two more days? You’re a kid. You can’t keep sleeping in cars. Shouldn’t you be in school or something?”

She sat back on the couch, looked around the room, and smoothed the thighs of her jeans, which were too big. The percolator slowed and hissed in the kitchen.

“Sounds like your coffee’s done.”

She tucked her hair behind her ear. What was left of her thumbnail was outlined with blood where she’d bitten it too low. A silver peace sign dangled from her earlobe, and an aqua-colored stud above that. Her jawline was smooth, chiseled.

He poured coffee into the brown clay mug he always used, a clunky German thing that some forgotten relative had passed down to his mother. A thin, cold light spread outside the window and he leaned against the sink and blew at the steam. He’d give her two more days, then tell her don’t come back.

He spoke to the window. “Blankets are still in the car. Sun’ll be up soon. You get some sleep out there this morning and lay low today. Don’t let none of them old boys I got working see you around—“

“You going to put the dog away?”

“Why?” He half turned.

“Because she really likes me.” She sounded pleased. “She’ll hang around the Brougham all day if you don’t pen her up—“ She pronounced Brougham as one syllable, *brome*.

“That dog is getting trained—“

“She slept in the back seat with me one night when you forgot to put her back in that cage—“

“You leave the goddamn dog alone, alright?” He set down his coffee and skipped the stairs on the way to the door. “She works here, just like the guys at the garage.”

She smiled sideways at him and popped the door open on the first try. “Even working dogs need a little love, don’t they.”

Ice jumped from where she had laid waiting, and Andi pushed open the screen door, patted her, then half skipped, half jogged into the yard. Ice followed her until Zuck hollered and whistled; she stopped, but looked back to where she’d disappeared before she galloped back to him, her white coat dingy. Zuck put on his coat and led her to the pen.

Inside, he pulled open the blinds and made some breakfast; at the kitchen table he shuffled files, signed his name, frowned at the spec sheets for the units that would come that day. Six of them. He still had two out of the four that should have gone the week before: the Dodge Omni and the Pontiac 6000. The Pontiac was still gray with primer, but he’d send it to auction anyway. He’d get less than he would from the buy-here-pay-

here boys, but he needed to unload it, there was no time to send it through the paint shop. Inventory was outpacing the garage, and if something didn't change quick, he'd have to stop the work. Fucking Curtis.

An ash-colored light tinged the hoods and roofs in the yard when he banged out the front door, and the dogs ran to him from the Midwest region, where Andi was surely sleeping in the Brougham by now. He was half tempted to leave Ice out to keep an eye on her, but that might be risky. He'd check on her later.

He was satisfied to hear the clank and hiss of the garage when he barreled in through the small, tidy front office, which he never used, except for general public customers.

“Status. Give me some status.”

No one answered, but Curtis was back. His grasshopper legs juttied out from under the Omni, pants too short, knock kneed, a hole in the sole of one of the black lace-up dress shoes he always wore, and in the sock underneath.

Some confrontation was heating toward the back of the garage and as he rounded the back of the Pontiac he saw Dave-o shouting up at old Walt. Dave-o stood rigid on his bow legs and bounced up on tiptoes for emphasis. He still couldn't get near old Walt's face, which was gnarled as an old tree trunk, his nose red-veined and pitted. Hunched with age he still stood at least six foot three. His cracked lips were firmly lopsided when his mouth was shut, which was almost always.

“—and tell Zuck you need some spectacles, you blind old fuck, before you try to nail something with a blowtorch.”

Old Walt met Zuck's eyes as he approached behind Dave-o, and the little man turned around.

“See right here Zuck, Walt keeps taking my compressor when he’s got his own. He knows I always keep mine right here but he moves all over and can’t remember or see where he took his. Then I can’t find mine because this blind senile motherfucker lifted it. I can’t get in a day’s work because I’m looking all over for my tools. This here’s mine, Zuck, you know I saved for it, and it’s a nice one. That’s why I take it home, else Curtis might sell it downtown for a rock—“

On the other side of the Omni Curtis slid out and stood, wiped his hands, and glared at Dave-o, his black face shiny.

“Dave-o. Come on, man.” Zuck took his wiry arm and turned him toward the open garage door. “Whyn’t you step out and have a smoke or something.”

Dave-o wrenched away and twitched with rage as he walked away. “Goddammit Zuck, you got to do something about things around here. You can’t just let these guys run—“

But Zuck was done listening, and now stood in front of Curtis, who mopped at his face with a red shop rag, wrapped his arms around his skinny body, and eyed Zuck with solemn attention.

“Glad you saw fit to grace us with your presence. You clean enough to work, or you want to go home and geek out a few more days? I got plenty of shit to get done around here and I ain’t got time to hold your hand.”

“I don’t need no hand holding.”

Curtis’s voice was buttery, but Zuck knew him. He could sound just like that, then disappear an hour later, only to turn up the following week, bone thin, eyes on fire like they burned now. Zuck gave him a long look and shook his head, then turned and cupped his mouth with his hand. Zuck shook his head.

“Alright now.”

The garage quieted to a dull hum, and he shouted a rundown of work: units coming in, what had to go out, Tow Joe's schedule. He reminded them to get supplies written on the clipboarded list that hung inside the office, he'd be ordering that day, and get the grease barrels ready to send to recycle. The men listened, blank faced, wiped dirty brows with dirtier rags, fished in pockets for cigarettes, hitched up work pants. They shouted back answers when asked, shrugged when they didn't have one.

Curtis stood beside Zuck, long arms at his sides, and met the men's eyes as Zuck spoke. Dave-o, who had been pacing in front of the open door, now just shuffled, antsy on his bow legs, chainsmoking in fitful puffs. Old Walt rocked forward and back, his hands clasped on the handle of a shop broom. He adjusted the fedora and lit a smoke. Grunt leaned in the open doorway of the next bay, smoked, watched Zuck as he rattled off orders, eyed Curtis with an irritable smirk. Zuck pretended not to notice.

When he finished, he turned to Curtis. "I got some things to attend to this afternoon or tomorrow, not sure which. You think you can manage around here?"

"Yeah, Zuck. I got it. I'm telling you, it ain't what you think this time. I just had some family things, you know. We straight? I can stay late all this week. I got everything worked out. You know. Serious, Zuck."

It was no good to repeat now what had been said before. Zuck knew where Curtis was, had been there. Hell, Zuck had sold Curtis the first rock he ever smoked. And after Zuck went down, Curtis had brought him cigarettes and visited him in jail. People you thought you knew scattered like seeds in a tornado when you went down. But not Curtis. Which was why Zuck would forgive him this absence, and the last. But it was costing him, and he wouldn't forgive another.

"You hear me say we got six units piled up, waiting for your fucking magic?"

Curtis smiled, and his buck tooth made him look almost angelic.

“That’s alright, Zuck. That’s decent, man. I’ll take care of it, don’t you think nothing about it.”

He squatted onto the creeper and laid back on it, felt around for a wrench and slid back under the Omni.

Grunt still stood watching, the crags of his face set, mouth pinched. Zuck walked over to him, thumbs hooked in his pockets. "What’s up, Grunt. You got something to do, or you need directions?"

Greasy ropes of Grunt’s hair stuck out from under an army-green baseball cap and he wore a flannel shirt unbuttoned over a t-shirt that read *Virginia Is for Lovers*. His gut hung out underneath it, pinkish, hairy. He leaned over and picked up a Coca-Cola can and a sandwich wrapper from the concrete floor, and crushed the can between his palms, then folded it neatly inside the paper.

“I don’t know, Boss.” He pronounced it *bawss*. “I guess I need directions. I just ain’t as smart as some dudes around here. Some dudes can just take a vacation any old time they want and still come back and get treated like they’re something.”

“Grunt, what the fuck are you talking about? I ain’t got time to mickeymouse around with your bullshit. I got three units that only need tranny work and a cleanup, and I want to send them out Friday. How’s that for directions?”

“Huh. Alright, I see.” Grunt tossed the trash into a can behind Zuck, crossed his arms and planted his feet. “I guess as long as I’m taking them orders from you and not some pipe junkie nigger, that’s alright.”

Fuck. “What’s your problem, Grunt?”

“No problem, boss. No problem. Where’d you say them cars was? I’ll get them lined up.”

Grunt was dumb as a stump, and Zuck imagined he hadn't had much for brains before they'd lowered him into that chemical tank. And he didn't have anything—just an old two-room house on the southside and an old Econoline van he always tinkered with. But he could raise a dropped transmission from the dead, and he'd been reliable. Showed up every morning at 7:00 sharp—sometimes with Dave-o if the van was on the fritz—and never missed a day. Now he stood, biceps tense, grubby hands fisted at his sides.

“Grunt, I don't know what's up your ass, but get over it. With a quickness.”

He didn't wait for a reply. He made the rest of his rounds, checked in with the two kids Dave-o had talked him into taking on part time—young, wide-eyed, wouldn't last long. He didn't even know their names, planned to pay them under the table. But he needed them to stick around long enough for the shop to catch up, so he talked to them like he cared. He left the job lists on the board, grabbed the supplies list, and headed back to the trailer.

Around noon he hung up the phone and set down his pen. He wondered if Andi was still sleeping, and wished for dark, so he could check on her. Back at the garage he ate with the guys, who stood, sat, squatted, leaned, munching potato chips, tunafish sandwiches, ham and cheese on Wonder bread. They talked women and traded insults, then chewed in silence. Grunt and Curtis avoided each other. Grunt finished two of the three units he was assigned and said goodnight with a smile, even asked Zuck if he wanted to go out for a beer. Zuck said no, he was looking forward to the steak he was marinating, and he had a lot of work to do.

He had actually marinated two steaks.

Curtis worked until after dark. Zuck organized a shelf of fluids in the back room, tearing off tags and signs his father had made years ago, now blurred, unreadable. Zuck didn't suppose he had needed them, could find his way around with his eyes closed.

Curtis stuck his head in and asked if Zuck would need him to cover the shop in the morning. Zuck said that he would. Curtis's head remained between the door and the jamb, and Zuck stopped and turned to him.

“What's up.”

“I just, ah. I just want to say I, ah. Apologize. For taking off again. I know you ain't got to hold my job for me and maybe if you was doing right, you wouldn't. I don't know. All I know is, I appreciate it, man. I really do.” He extended his hand through the door without opening it further. Zuck gave it a quick pump, then looked back to the shelf, embarrassed. He tore off another tag and Curtis disappeared from the doorway. Soon Zuck heard his car start, and pull out from the drive.

He could tell she was gone again before he reached the Brougham. Again, no sign of her other than the blankets neatly folded and stacked in the backseat, and some more cigarette butts on the ground. Her bag was not in the van. He sighed as he walked back to the trailer and let out the dog. She paused, pointed her nose to the north, and sniffed the air, then surveyed the panoramic of the yard. Maybe he just imagined she was looking for Andi.

Zuck pushed a twenty at the bar man, a new guy. It was more than enough to cover his tab, and stumbled a little down the gangplank, his steps hollow and unsteady on the decline. On the drive home he sang along to an Eagles tape in the cassette deck. He thought of Sharri for a while, how she might be getting along. He tried to think of something else and Marnie's sloppy but effective blowjob pressed uncomfortably on him, heated his cheeks with shame. He moved on to Tralene. Man, he would have liked to see her tonight. He'd been hitting the Horseshoe around six, every third or fourth night, for

several weeks. He'd play cards for a while and watch the girls until he got bored. A couple of times he'd sat at the bar with some guys he knew from Rumble & Ride Auto, a North side parts store.

Tonight he'd found himself drunk, out of things to say, and still waiting to catch Tralene. When he asked Sam, the stooped man shrugged, said he hadn't seen her.

The streetlights blurred into the traffic lights blurred into the two gaslamps that lit the entrance to the yard. He sang...*take it easy*...pulled up the drive and scanned the sharp shapes that formed the horizon and snapped to attention as his smeared vision caught movement in the Midwest region. Where the Brougham was parked. Where he hadn't seen Andi for almost a week now, but this wasn't Andi. It was someone big, and it bent over, struggled with something.

He killed the lights and slowed the Mark VIII to a crawl; as he did he reached for the Colt King Cobra 357 and a small flashlight he kept under his seat. He pulled behind the trailer and parked outside the glare of the flood lights that shone from the tops of the garage bays. The keys buzzed in the ignition for a shard of a second before he slid them out and held them tight in his hand, then pulled, *honey slow* as his mother used to say, on the door handle. He could still hear Ice whine and growl, and just what fucking good was that, he wondered, if she wasn't going to do what she was supposed to do? The gun in his hand was a limp dick. If he got caught with it or any of the other twelve he had stashed around the house and the garage—ten were the old man's—he'd would be revoked in a heartbeat. Jimbo was relaxed about the drinking, but drugs and weapons were his sore spot.

Damn, that dog.

He peeked around the front corner of the trailer. The flashlight weighed down his back pocket and he pulled up on the back of his Levi's, the good ones he'd worn to the

Horseshoe in hopes of running into Tralene. Looked like they were about to get dirty. The man's voice was loud, but Zuck couldn't make out the words. Something in the reverb, some tone in it caught at Zuck's mind, familiar. Someone from back in the day? A dozen faces and voices flipped over like a pack of cards fanned for a shuffle. None matched the sound he heard.

He crept along the west perimeter of cars. The craggy dark-on-dark outlines were backlit by the floods on the front of the trailer, and he tried to isolate the Brougham in his vision beside the man who kept crouching over, standing, ducking, weaving. Zuck could see now that he wore some kind of baseball cap, crooked on his head.

It was definitely the Brougham.

Had the bitch cased the place, and now she was back for the haul?

Was this guy a boyfriend, come to collect her?

Maybe she had a brother or something. Good. He could wash his hands of her.

Maybe she was nowhere around and this dude had nothing to do with her.

Zuck crouched so low his back ached, popped up here and there to decipher who else might be with him. Dude was big, and Zuck had too much whiskey in him to look forward to a fight. He kept the gun close to his gut, stayed bent, and circled around to the south, four cars from the Brougham. He could hear the chink of the dogs' tags, and their whimpers and growls sounded confused, more like groans. He peered out over a maroon Impala and saw Ice hop around, agitated, her black head bobbing. Through the metal tent formed by a Mack semi grill leaned up against the side of a Buick Regal, he saw the old white Shepard bearing down, hair prickled high between his thick white shoulders. Just as he squatted behind the Regal and got his balance he heard the voice again, and the wind must have been just right, because it was clear.

“You’re going to like it, I promise—hold still now, why you fighting? Just hold still, it ain’t going to hurt. I’ll take my hand off your mouth when you’re ready to say please—“

“Grunt?” Zuck stood up, lowered the gun. That was the voice. Holy shit it was *Grunt*.

No answer.

“Grunt you better fucking answer me. Is that you?”

He knew it was. He cocked the Colt, raised it, and shot into the air.

“Put your fucking hands where I can see them, and back up.”

His own voice moved through some tunnel in his head. Grunt stood up. Zuck still couldn’t see into the Brougham.

“You got somebody else with you?”

Goddamn it. Goddamn it.

“Grunt!”

He moved around the front of the Regal, slow, the Colt aimed just past the tall, thick figure. He didn’t want to point it at Grunt. He didn’t want it to *be* Grunt.

“No, man, just this little slut here.”

He talked like he had marbles in his mouth and he motioned toward the open car door.

“Grunt. What do you mean, man. Who do you have with you? Talk to me.”

He could hear her now, crying from the open car door. He walked around the Eldorado, the last car between him and the Brougham, and he saw her through the windshield, crouched in the driver’s seat, arms wrapped around her legs. Her back and shoulders and arms were bare, her hair half up in a ponytail, half pulled out and scattered down her pale back. The steering wheel was tilted up as far as it would go. Zuck shined

the light on Grunt. His moon-shaped face was one big scabby freckle, hair like rusty tap water, all poufed out from under his baseball cap, which read *Beach Bum*. He blinked and put a hand up at the light, wavered where he stood, and steadied himself, hand on the roof of the Brougham. The dogs panted and sniffed at Andi, circled around Grunt, whined.

“Jesus god, Grunt. What the fuck did you do?”

“I don’t know, man, I just seen this girl out here last week—“

“And you thought what? What—“

“You know she was here, man?”

“What fucking difference does that make—“ Now only the open door was between him and Grunt. He tried not to look at Andi, her torn t-shirt hanging from the floor board out over the door jamb, jeans pushed down to the tops of her moccasins. One of the laces was undone. She had stopped crying. Now she shivered and rocked, forearms tucked between breasts and thighs. Eyes blurred black with mascara. She stared at the ground.

But he couldn’t help it. He kept looking from her to Grunt, gun and the flashlight raised, hair raised, stomach raised like it would shoot out of his mouth and every muscle in his hand wanted to pull the trigger. His hand was an animal, detached from him, and it trembled, finger like a spring.

He was afraid. Not of going back to jail, not right then. Of killing somebody. He really didn’t want to kill anybody ever again, that much he had worked out in the last twenty-five years or so.

Except that right now he did. He cleared his throat.

“Andi. Tuck your feet up inside now, I’m going to close this door real slow now, hon. Okay. Do that for me now.”

She scrambled inside. He pushed the door until its weight met the jamb, then gave it a shove. He set the flashlight on the roof of the Brougham so that it shone on the man's wide middle. Grunt leaned now against the Datsun B-210, feet planted far apart, head lolling, eyes pinched at the light and the gun.

“What are you doing, Zuck, man—“

“She's fifteen fucking years old Grunt, you know that? She's a baby. And what the fuck are you doing in the yard this time of night for? Eh? I've told you boys I'll shoot you dead in your boots, you ever come on this lot after hours, I'd just assume you're stealing—“

“Huh. Huh-uh.” Tony the Grunt gave the laugh that was his namesake.

“Everybody knows you can't shoot nobody with nothing but a needle, Zuck. Everybody knows that.”

Zuck aimed and fired a shot into the dirt between Grunt's feet. The man screamed and jumped, patted clumsy hands around his body.

“What's that you say, Grunt?”

He fired another shot into the back quarter panel of the Datsun, inches from Grunt's leg.

“I'm sorry.” Zuck stepped up to him, jammed the gun into the big man's slack mouth, and pushed it in until he gagged. “I'm sorry motherfucker, just one more time. Come again?”

Grunt staggered back and lost his balance, then fell to his hands and knees. “Zuck, I worked for you a while now, fucker, you know me. You know me. I didn't mean nothing. Come on, man.” His hat hit the ground.

Zuck kicked his ribs just hard enough to make him fall on his side, then stood over him, the Colt pointed at his face. His eyes were a muddy yellow, the approximate color, Zuck had often thought, of sewage.

“You low-rent walk-the-dog motherfucker. I don’t know you. I don’t know you now. Get the fuck out of here. You hear me. Get up and get the fuck out of my yard.”

He spat at the ground beside Grunt’s head and took a step backward. The man doubled over again, pulled one foot and then the other underneath him, and pushed off the ground with his hands to stand up, picking up his hat and beating it on the side of his thigh. He bucketed his greasy head in it and straightened out his pants before he turned. Zuck swallowed a swell in his throat. When Grunt had reached the drive without looking back, he uncocked the gun and slid it under his belt.

Outside the Brougham Ice wagged and panted. The flashlight still glared from the roof; Zuck picked it up and shined it into the back seat. The blankets were wadded up as if she had been sleeping; an ashtray overflowed on the little cardboard box table she’d made behind the passenger’s seat. A Mountain Dew bottle still had the cap on, waiting for morning, and a small, rusted bottle opener beside it. The leather-strapped book from the tin box was wedged between the makeshift table and the seat, sticking out a little above the Cowboys blanket and her coat was wadded up into a pillow.

He moved the light to her, careful not to shine it in her eyes, and looked away as he opened the door where she still sat, fetal, face planted in her hands on top of her knees. He touched her head, smoothed the hair where it parted.

“Andi. Hey girl. Come on now. Andi, It’s cold as hell out here. Let’s get you—covered.”

She rocked. Zuck picked up her t-shirt and stuck it and the flashlight, still lit, in his back pocket, then walked around to the passenger’s side, opened the door, and

reached back for the coat and the patchwork quilt. He lifted her chin, then placed the coat backward over the front of her, tucking the hood around her neck and the shoulders over her shoulders; the rest of it covered her dry, bare knees. One had a nasty scrape on it; the blood speckled with dirt.

He wrapped the blanket around her from the other direction, draping it around her back and bundling it together in front after he covered her head with the top. Only her eyes were visible above the green hood. They looked far away, somewhere past the yard. He held the blanket with one hand, reached in and scooted her out a little with his other arm, then scooped up the whole bundle of her. He could feel her breathe as he wound through the cars and trucks and vans, the scraps and rims and severed mirrors. She made no sound otherwise. Inside the trailer he deposited her, still wrapped, in the recliner and flipped the handle back so that it would cradle her.

In the kitchen he poured a glass of Jack and drank it in three hard swallows. Then he poured another, leaned over the counter, and put his face in his hands. He could feel the burn behind his eyes and he hit the counter with the heel of his fist, beating it back. God, don't fucking cry. He saw Grunt's slack, drunk face again, Andi's bare knees, the moccasins, the ruined ponytail on her back. He pounded the counter again and straightened up.

Fuck.

He drank the whiskey and poured some more. Then he half turned to look at the bundle of coat and blanket that still had not moved in the recliner, and got out another glass. The liquid warmed his body, softened his muscles.

“Andi. You want some milk or something? I ain't got much around here, just juice and milk and whiskey, really.” He saw her fingers creep out of the blanket, then her shiny black head.

“I’ll have some whiskey.” Her voice was low. She paused, then asked, “You got anything to put in it? Like pop or something?”

He wondered if she drank often, then thought about the last time he had seen a fifteen-year-old girl drunk. That time with Hammerhead—they were about nineteen—flashed in his mind: the Pheasant’s Run Motel, those three girls Hammerhead picked up at the Sweet Shack, all freshfaced and miniskirted, two blondes and a redhead. The redheaded one admitted through giggles that she was only a freshman in high school as she finished off her fourth beer—Zuck was counting because he didn’t have enough money for another twelve pack—right before she leapt from the motel bed where she’d sat in her untucked shirt, and ran to the bathroom.

Zuck cracked the last beer as she began to retch, and told Hammerhead to turn up the TV. *Welcome Back, Kotter* was on. He sat down on the bed and watched it as Hammerhead stretched out one blond girl behind him; the other one sat, nervous, at the small table by the window. Zuck eyed her beer, knowing it was still full. When the retching stopped, Zuck knocked on the bathroom door and when the redhead opened it, he turned on the tap and filled a motel glass for her, then handed her a towel. Then he kissed her neck, propped her on the counter, slid up her miniskirt and fucked her while the water ran.

Yes, he thought. That was probably the last time he saw a fifteen-year-old girl drunk. He poured the glass half full for Andi and dropped a couple of ice cubes into it. “Nope. No pop. So drink this slow. Alright?” He set it on the telephone table beside her then stood, drink in hand, one thumb and forefinger perched on his hip.

She sat up, blanket now under her arms and clutched tight against her bare chest. “You got a sweatshirt or something I could borrow?”

He got a long-sleeve t-shirt from the bedroom closet, and set it on the back of the toilet. He told her where it was, then looked away as she gangled out of the chair, blanket still wrapped around her. She tripped when she stood up.

“You need some help?”

Zuck didn't want to help her. He didn't want to touch her. And he wanted desperately to touch her. And as he watched her thrash under the blanket, trying to get her pants up, he wanted to pick her up and throw her back outside. He emptied his drink and stood to make another one. His breath slowed, and his hands had stopped shaking.

As he walked back to the kitchen his eyes rested here and there and he tried to imagine how the place looked through her eyes. What did she think of the coats piled thick on the oak coat rack, or the pretty little chair by the door or the license plate collection on the window sill, and stacked under the coffee table? What did she think of the painting of horses wading through a river that hung above the TV? Was this like the house she came from? Better? Worse?

When she came out of the bathroom her face was clear, all the mascara washed from her eyes and cheeks. She had twisted her hair into a bun at the base of her neck, which made her look younger and older at the same time. The blanket was tucked under her arm, and she laid it on the couch, then picked up her glass. She sipped at it and winced, then sipped again, licked her lips, then drained it. He watched her from the kitchen. The black shirt was like a sack on her, but he could see the outline of her.

“You need to go to the doctor or something? I mean, you know—“

“He didn't get me.”

“He didn't? I mean, oh. Not at all? I mean, are you hurt?”

She looked at the empty glass in her hand. “Could I—“

“Yeah. Yeah, bring it here.” He filled it three quarters full and dropped another handful of ice cubes in it. “Listen, Andi, so you see now what I’m saying. This ain’t a place for you. Not like I thought that would happen—“

“I’m alright. Could I just stay on the couch tonight? I’m really tired—“

“What are you going to do tomorrow? You can’t stay here, understand? You’re a kid, and you’re supposed to be somewhere, and it ain’t here, and the last thing I need is someone barking up my tree to take you back where you belong—”

“Shelter.”

“What?”

“I’m supposed to be at a shelter. For kids. I got kicked out of my foster home.”

She sipped at her drink, mashed her face up for a second and shook her head, then sipped again.

“Why?”

“I kept sleeping with the son. Of the foster parents. Eddie. I mean, I guess he kept sleeping with me. They couldn’t keep him out of my room. So they—the parents—sent me back. They were real Catholic. Kids went to a private school and everything.”

For chrissakes. “Are the cops looking for you?”

“Probably. They’ve taken me back a bunch of times, sometimes different places. They’re trying to send me to a home for girls, lockup, long term. Until I’m eighteen. Which I’m not doing.”

She reached around him to set her glass on the counter and stood with her arms crossed, blinking slowly. The microwave clock read 3:36. Zuck walked past her, back into the bedroom, his mind bending around the night. He’d lost one of his best guys, Grunt, over this girl, and who knew what ears Grunt was bending about that. She’s got cops out looking for her, she’s a tramp, and she can drink whiskey. And she’s beautiful.

He pulled a wooden palette on casters from under the bed, and took out an Army blanket that had been the old man's, and a down pillow that Sharri had left behind. Tucked underneath it was a pillow case embroidered with pink and blue and green curlicues that had been Jenny's; he thought about putting it on for Andi—it was soft and pretty—but decided against it. He'd never let Sharri use it, why would he put it on a pillow now?

Especially for this kid. Who was leaving tomorrow, first thing.

Sharri would have gone ape shit about the girl being here. She was always the jealous kind, and she had a bug up her ass about younger women. She wouldn't see this as him trying to help the kid out. She'd have called the kid a pop-tart, called the cops to haul her out, and called Zuck a pervert. Was he? He thought again about Grunt's voice, saying he'd take his hand off her mouth just as soon as she was ready to say please.

On the couch Andi was already asleep, curled again with one hand over her mouth, like she had some secret for the nappy old couch. He covered her, tucked the pillow under her head and slipped into the bathroom, closing the door and locking it as noiselessly as possible.

It was after nine when he woke to the smell of strong coffee and meat frying; he could hear the grease snap, and the small thuds of bare feet in the kitchen. Sun swelled from under the window shades. He was warm and comfortable, almost happy; some anticipation bubbled in him and he vaguely traced its source as he opened and closed his eyes.

Sometimes when he was a boy, Grandma Fran, Mom's mother, would show up late Friday night after he was asleep, to stay on the pull-out couch in the small living room of their two-story east-side house, with its faded red carpet and wood paneling. He would wake to that smell, and stumble from his room. His mother would be flushed, her

short, dark curls damp with sweat; Grandma Fran was a jiggling blur, expert, precise. The two of them mixed and measured, banged pans, boiled and fried, spiced meat for the afternoon meal. Jenny, quiet in her Jenny world would dress and undress dolls nearby, and chat to herself and the dolls and the people she saw in her mind.

Grandma Fran was so fat Zuck couldn't fit his arms around her. He tried to sneak up on her those Saturday mornings, hiding behind the TV or the old wing-back chair, or behind the coat rack that had been buried under coats in those days too, except then they belonged to all of them: Mom, the old man, Jenny, Zuck. She would squeal when he jumped out at her, chubby hand clapped to her mouth in pretend fear.

His mother would shoo him out, tell him to get dressed and go help the old man in the one-car garage behind the house; they'd call when breakfast was done. He'd stall, pick at bacon that drained on a plate or the edge of a banana loaf, until she hollered at him to get going before she swatted him with the paddle that hung on a tiny nail at the end of the kitchen cupboards.

Outside he would take the long way to the garage, which was in fact a very short way in the cramped, scraggly patches of crabgrass and sand they called a backyard. He'd stop at the garbage cans to look for mice, or the downspout for frogs, or hunt for discarded wires, washers, and lug nuts that pushed through the sand and mud like weeds. These he collected and kept in an ancient tool chest the old man had thrown away at the yard.

In the garage the old man would be bent over his work table, dark hair greased and combed to the side, humming to the gray transistor radio on the shelf he'd made for it above the bench. Sometimes he sang, if Lefty Frizzell or Jimmie Rodgers came on—he loved that old twang, and he could yodel a little. He soldered and wired, bent things in the vise grip, bent anything into something, the ropes of muscle alive under his smooth olive

skin. He'd nod at Zuck as he crept in, tentative, testing his own footsteps against the sounds of the old man at work. The old man would take a drag from one of the two or three cigarettes that burned in the huge orange ceramic ashtray, and motion to the metal stool for Zuck to sit and watch.

If he did not sing or hum, Zuck knew the silence would give way, in a minute or an hour, to long, violent strings of curses that sounded as if he had created the curses himself, like they gusted out from some powerful storm inside him. He'd snatch Zuck by the ear and set him to some task, usually scrubbing oil from a pan or sanding some unidentifiable corroded metal surface.

While he worked he would think of all the ways the old man could die: his heart could stop, the wires he twisted could light him up like a Christmas tree, he could fall from the steep roof as he patched it in the spring, the shingles and hammer flying from his hands as he fell to the ground.

He could just not wake up one day, and it would be Mom and Jenny and sometimes Grandma Fran. Zuck could take care of them, he knew it. He could get a paper route or some other job, like he had begged to do since he was six. The old man always said no, he had a job already, in the yard.

In the kitchen Andi shuffled a big frying pan back and forth on the stove and mixed whatever what in it—potatoes? He smelled potatoes—with a wooden spoon. Sausage patties cooled on a plate on the table, which was cleared, and Zuck looked around for his files. He found them stacked on top of the TV. In fact everything in the trailer looked as if it had just been arranged, and he could smell something like Ajax, faint and antiseptic. The blankets were folded and piled on top of the chair by the door, with the feather pillow laid on top. A broom leaned in between the corner of the refrigerator and the wall beside it, a newspaper on the floor under the bristles.

He sat down at the kitchen table and watched her clatter around, look for a bowl large enough to hold the potatoes, and spoon them in. A Tupperware bowl of eggs steamed on the counter, and she brought it and the potatoes to the table. She wore only the t-shirt he had given her, which hung almost to her knees; he could see the scrape that had formed a scab just under the hem. She got some plates and forks, tore off two paper towels, and sat down opposite him.

For a moment he stopped seeing this kitchen and imagined another one, one that belonged to the two of them, one where they ate together every day, breakfast, reading the paper, dinner, watching the news. There would be a porch, where in good weather they would sit and drink coffee and he would tell her stories of the time before her, when he had been a bad man, but that she had changed all that, had charmed him, fed him with her beauty and her poems and her scrambled eggs. He would tell her funny things, enough so she would know he had not been all bad. Not completely.

“Well? Dig in. I was going to wake you up to say come to breakfast. Was I too loud out here?”

He was losing his mind.

“No.” He fisted his fork prongs-up as she leaned over the table and spooned eggs and potatoes onto his plate.

She sat and cut a piece of sausage patty with the side of her fork and popped it in her mouth, then smiled, lips closed, chewing. He ate, watching her. Pieces of fine hair wisped around her forehead and in front of her ears in small tufts, fuzzy from sleep; the rest was in a long ponytail down her back. One of the pink studs that had dotted her ears was missing; he wondered if it had been lost in the Brougham the night before and made a mental note to look for it. Her fingernails were like tortured nubs, some of them bleeding. He salted his eggs, then pushed back from the table to fish for some hot sauce

in the refrigerator; when he came back to the table he noticed she sat cross-legged in the wooden chair.

He couldn't put her out.

He knew it as he sat down again. He thought about what he could say to the guys, how he could keep her here. He couldn't just keep her locked in the trailer.

He could say she was related to him. A niece.

But no one had ever heard him talk about a sibling and if anyone who was around now knew about Jenny—either that she existed or what happened to her—they weren't saying.

Maybe he could say the old man had a brother, and this was his granddaughter. Somebody died and left her, he was the only family she had.

But Marnie had seen her, that night, the calendar thing. What if she ever came back around? She'd cause a scene for sure. And what if Sharri ever came back?

He could take care of the Grunt story, say the kid just showed up, and he found Grunt trying to take advantage of her. He could explain it that way. Everyone knew Grunt's brain had half disintegrated in that chemical tank he was dropped into, minus mask and protective suit, when he worked for Dow. They'd see how it could happen.

What about the cops?

He had to think on that one.

What about school? Didn't she need to be in school? He'd finished high school, barely, but he finished. He knew enough to know you should finish; wasn't much in the world for you if you didn't. Girls who didn't ended up with three kids by the time they were twenty, and she sure hadn't kept her legs closed so far.

What if he just let the yard go, cut his losses and moved? He could take her with him, let her grow up a little more, finish school. Then she could be his, when the time was right.

But that was crazy. He needed to think.

“I got to go run some errands today. I got to pick up some parts from the south side and get some things at the grocery store. Almost out of booze. You want me to pick up anything for you?” He wondered what she might like to eat. “Some chips or something? Cereal? Ice cream?”

“I need Tampax.”

He choked on a piece of egg. She laughed, a big bright laugh that surprised him, made him want to laugh at himself. He thought about what it might be like for her to put her arms around him, and shook it off.

“I like cottage cheese. And orange Crush.”

He picked up his plate and scraped it into the trash beneath the sink, then rinsed it and laid it on the counter. “You’ll wash up?”

She started to stand.

“I don’t mean now. Finish your breakfast for chrissakes. I’m getting in the shower.”

When he came out, dressed, clean shaved, raking his wavy hair back with his fingers, she was seated, cross-legged again, on the couch, reading a paperback book. He glanced at the white flash of panties he could see under the tunnel of t-shirt and forced himself to focus on her face.

“You got some clean clothes out in your bag?”

“Not clean, but I have clothes.”

“Why’nt you get them in here and get them washed up. The washer’s right over there.” He pointed around a corner on the other side of the living room. “Dryer don’t work too good, so you might have to hang up your jeans. There’s some hangers hanging up over there. Wash soap’s on the shelf. Get you a shower, too.”

She stared at him for a moment, and opened her mouth, then closed it. She dog-eared the page she was reading and closed the book, then looked at it in her lap.

He grabbed his keys from the row of hooks beside the door, which were screwed into a long piece of wood that had been carved to look like a skeleton key. From every hook hung a bundle of keys; he kept his personal keys on the end.

As he jammed them into his pocket she said, “Anything else around here you want me to wash?”

“No. Washer can’t handle too much. It’s old.” He pulled a thick cotton-duck coat from the rack. “I won’t be too long.” He locked the front door, then walked past her to the back door on the other side of the trailer. “Keep these locked, and don’t answer the door. And keep the shades pulled, alright?” He looked at her for just a second before he closed the door behind him. She looked sad or scared, the gray eyes large, the thick fringe of lashes flickering. “Eat whatever you find.” It was the only thing he could think to say.

He looked in the rearview at the trailer as he pulled down the drive. It had seen better days, and Andi was right: It needed a coat of paint. The shingles were picked here and there and the roof looked like a cat that had been rubbed backward. The down spout was broken so that when it rained, as it would in the spring, the water shot in a thick fountain from the edge of the roof and pooled on the dirt below, eventually sinking in to form a deep puddle. He’d meant to get to it, maybe plant some grass there for the old man, like Sharri had always said. *It’d look better for the customers coming in.* He always asked what salvage yard customer she knew who gave a fuck about the landscaping.

He looked down at the yard as he headed south on the bridge. He was surprised at how big it actually was, how many units he owned, even more than had been there when the old man ran the place. From up there the cars and trucks and debris looked like some kind of French painting he'd seen where the picture was made up of a bunch of mashed-up brush strokes. Trees lined the east wall, and in the spring they would make a pretty green stretch, a background.

He thought about the way Andi had laughed, teasing him, and wondered if she had teased the boy at the foster home the same way. It wasn't the laugh of a little girl, nothing nervous or unsure. Had she seen Grunt before he came to her in the dark last night? Had she given him some sign that's what she wanted? Grunt had said *I just seen this girl out here a couple days ago*. What did that mean? Zuck thought about her pretty legs tucked into each other on the couch, the flash of cotton between them.

She was like a light in the room. In the trailer. In the yard.

He listened to the radio and watched Southeast 14th Street pass, dirty and broken. The gray neighborhoods flickered, the shops and bars, the fortune teller in her rickety house and sagging porch, the Cozy Rest Motel where he and Sharri had partied years before, with people whose names he could no longer remember. Empty lots cracked open their cement slabs, sparkled with broken glass under the January sun. Billboards lorded over the street, peeling; or garish with ads for the casino going up outside of town, or the I-80 truck stop, or Planned Parenthood.

In an instant, he made up his mind. He wanted a goddamned cigarette, and he would have a goddamned cigarette. He pulled into the Kwik Mart and went inside. He pulled into the Kwik Mart. Behind the register a grinning boy stood pimply and hunched against the counter, stoned. He gave a Zuck a *hey man*.

“Pack of Winstons.”

“Sure, man. Want a lighter with that?”

“Yeah. I mean, ah, no. Matches.” No need to go in there with a lighter. Going there at all was crazy.

He stood inside the Kwik Mart and looked out at a woman and an old man who argued beside the gas pump. Two teenage boys stood outside and drank from paper bags. A small brown dog wandered around the parking lot in no particular direction, sniffing at the ground. Zuck packed the cigarettes against his palm seven times, as he always had, tore open the metallic square, and lit up.

The smoke rushed to his ears and rang them, then flooded his head. His stomach swished, nauseated. He put his hand out and leaned against the pay telephone on the wall and closed his eyes. He took another drag and pushed the smoke out through his nose.

“Dude. You okay?” The cashier sounded more curious than concerned.

“Fine.” Zuck opened his eyes again, just in time to see one boy take a swing at the other outside the window. Zuck pushed the pack of cigarettes into his inside breast pocket, pulled open the door, and stepped over the boy who lay on the ground. As he started the Regal he blinked and shook his head hard, tried to throw the stars from his eyes. He lit another cigarette with the end of the first as he pulled out.

At the Safeway Grocery on University Ave. he parked, and sat in the car for a while, listening to the radio. He whistled to “Bad Company,” then turned up and screeched along with Bon Jovi. When it was over he shut off the ignition and took a deep breath.

Inside, the store looked different to him. It was usually so easy—a twenty minute deal—now there seemed to be so many choices. He stood between the bright produce stands and looked around, making a mental list of what Andi might want. He supposed

she needed some fruit. Kids needed fruit. He plunked three large bunches of red grapes into a bag and tightened the twisty tie, then threw in a bag of oranges.

He made his way through the aisles, throwing macaroni and cheese and chunky peanut butter and strawberry jam—things he hadn't even considered eating in years—into the cart. He picked up steaks and green beans—all the usual things—but he threw in air freshener and a hairbrush, too, along with the Orange Crush and the cottage cheese she had asked for.

He stopped when he came to the “feminine hygiene” section, thumb stuck into his front pocket. He squinted at the tampon boxes and picked out the slenders. Andi was pretty small. When he threw in the box he looked around to see whether anyone had seen him. At the checkout he grabbed a *National Geographic* and laid it over the box as it glided down the conveyor belt.

The bill was twice as much as usual. He put the paper bags in the trunk, whistling as cold rain fell. On the drive back to the yard he tried not to think of that morning's conversation.

He unlocked the door and looked inside before he stepped in. He didn't see Andi, and it was so quiet, for a moment he thought she might not be there. Then he heard the shower running, and Andi singing. Bags in hand, he went to the door and pressed his ear to her voice, which was strong and deep, but lifted again in a song he'd never heard before:

*Rainbow now your eyes are just like mine
Not the color but the kind
I shouldn't be so hard to find
Come and take me when it's time
Down to the southern fields you used to know
Kind souls and herb and wine will flow
We'll laugh and dance before we go
And you'll come and lay with me just so*

*Rainbow, Rainbow
 Who gave a boy a pretty name like yours?
 Rainbow, Rainbow
 I thought before you came I was alone*

He listened as she sang it all the way through one more time, her voice stretching the notes into something like a sad old folk ballad in some vague memory deep in him. It crushed him, filled him with a raw ache he could not explain and he tore from the door into the kitchen, the bags crackling in his arms. He went back out to get the rest, and by the time he came back inside she was quiet, and the water had stopped.

He let the cupboard doors slam as he put the groceries away so she'd know he was there. He heard the water shut off, then the banging around the tiny bathroom. What the hell would she be looking for? He thought about the tampons and rummaged through the paper bags, now damp from rain, until he found them. He knocked on the bathroom door, and she opened it far enough to stick out her head, which was wrapped in a thin old pink towel that Sharri had bought years before. He thought he'd thrown it away.

“You need these?” He held up the box.

She looked confused. “I told you I was just joshin’. But thanks.” She took it from him and smiled. “You have to work in the shop today?”

“No. Not today. Were you looking for something else in there? There ain’t much.” The thought of her, just on the other side of the door, wearing nothing wrenched his gut.

“Toilet paper. You’re out.”

He’d a have to go back to the store. “You want some paper towels or something?”

She nodded and he went to the kitchen and pulled the roll from the old plastic holder above the sink. She thanked him and shut the door again. When she came out ten minutes later he turned from the kitchen and knees go soft, a light tickle like breath

behind his body, hair rising on his forearms and neck. She still had the towel on her head, but she wore another towel wrapped around her body that barely covered her, which she held in place in front.

“Sorry,” she called over to him, shuffling around the corner to the laundry area. “I didn’t think you’d be home so soon.”

Zuck knew he should turn away. He stood with the bunches of grapes clutched in his hands. He’d been trying to find a bowl big enough to hold them. Her legs were slender but rippled with muscle, as he’d imagined they would look when he first watched her walk away from him in the dirty jeans. Now here they were, bare, taking quick strides in front of him.

And there was her ass, bumping under the towel.

She clutched some clothes under her arm and shimmied back into the bathroom. He dropped the grapes on the table, turned to the sink, and ran the cold water over his hands, then held his breath and bent his face under the stream.

He browned some hamburger for chili while Andi folded clothes, then sat on the bench by the back door and stacked them inside the large black garbage bag. He pretended not to pay attention to her movements, but wondered about the tin box she’d brought him to open for her. Did she have it in that bag? Was it stashed somewhere else? He tried to imagine, again, what else was inside. He covered the simmering chili and turned. She was sitting on the couch, her head bent forward.

“You can turn on the TV if you want.”

“That’s okay. I’m reading.”

He thought of the book he’d seen her with in the Brougham.

“You still reading Whitman? Or you got something new.”

“No, I got something new. But I read Whitman over and over again.”

His face burned, and he wasn't sure he should mention the poems he remembered. But he told her about them, and she said knew them, although, she said, they were not in the book she was reading.

He took the lid off and stirred the chili again, then wiped at his face with a dish towel. He looked again at the back of her head.

“Why aren't you in school? You seem like a smart girl.”

“I already told you.”

She draped her arm on the back of the couch and turned around to look at him.

“I'm not even enrolled in school. Wish I was. I used to get straight A's. When I was in the first kids' home they wouldn't let me go to school because I would take off as soon as I got off the bus. So they did classes in the place, but the teachers in there taught me absolutely nothing. I taught them. It was so fucking pointless.”

Her face twisted and her voice rose, and he heard in it some forced maturity, some bravado that didn't seem to actually belong to her. He studied her face until she turned and bent her head forward again.

At the table he watched, annoyed, as she crushed crackers into her bowl of chili until he couldn't even see the red underneath.

“You going to have some chili with them crackers?”

She grinned at him and dug her spoon into the bowl.

They ate. They looked other places—into their bowls, around the room, through the window above the sink. He tried to take in details as his eyes passed over her. She had a long, thin scar above her right eyebrow, and dark moles on her right temple and left cheek. A large sliver crucifix hung from a leather chain on her chest, and a small silver peace sign dangled beside it. She'd painted the little nubs of fingernails bright pink above the swollen, bleeding cuticles. The sweater she wore was long and loose over her jeans,

pale yellow, the color of baby chicks. She fidgeted, crossed and uncrossed her legs. Her feet were bare. When she got up to rinse her bowl at the sink he saw that her toenails were painted red and she had blisters on her heels. The one on the right looked like it might be infected.

She slid back into her chair and sat a little slumped, then looked at him so long it made his eyes hurt and he looked back down at his bowl, even though he had finished eating. She thanked him for the meal, said the chili was very good. Then she began to talk, soft and low.

She said when she was twelve she went to the first children's home—a huge old brick structure downtown that had more rats than people and cockroaches that ruled at night. LeeAnn was her first friend there and Andi loved her so much that she couldn't eat for two weeks after the girl was moved to another home. The girl had black hair and green eyes, and taught Andi how to write poems *really well*—even though she was good at it already—and turned her on to Jimi Hendrix and Lisa Lisa and the Cult Jam, and cradled her in the darkness of their shared room.

They sang together, Andi's low voice and LeeAnn's high in harmony, she said. Simon and Garfunkel, because they both knew all the words to all their songs. Plus they were real poets, back in the sixties. Now she didn't know where LeeAnn was, but last she heard she was living at the Mission and shooting up between her toes because she had collapsed all the rest of her veins.

She went on while Zuck listened and tried not to think of the chili drying on the sides of his bowl, or about the soft skin of her throat. He thought back to Grunt, to the conversation with Rocco, and his stomach churned. *Give me a holler when she's firing up and I'll take a look at her. Give me a holler when she's firing up.* He guessed a lot of men

wanted ahold of her when she fired up. When she stopped for a moment he asked her about Lisa, the friend she had stayed with before.

She said that was her best friend—she *love love loves her whole family*—and that for a while Lisa's parents would take her in a few nights a week, and hide her from the cops when they came looking for her.

“Did that happen a lot?”

“I don't know. Yeah. They've hauled me off a bunch of times. But they can't put me in juvie because I didn't break the law. Not that they caught me, anyway.”

Then she told him that Lisa's brother had been her boyfriend until he beat her up a few times when she stayed at his apartment, because, as she explained *He's very jealous*. Zuck asked did he have reason to be and she shrugged and chewed a strand of her glossy hair. He reached across the table, took it out of her mouth, and tucked it behind her ear. She crossed her arms in front of her and cocked her head.

“What about you?” she asked. “What's your story?”

“I ain't got a story.”

He stood and took his dishes to the sink, then ran the water and began to scrub at the bowl with a dishrag. He needed to find Curtis. Curtis could find out what word had gotten around without tipping anything off. He told her he was going out for a while, would put the blankets back out on the couch for her. Maybe she ought to read for a while longer. Or check out something on the TV, he didn't care. There was cable. He knew when he turned to walk away she watched him but he did not look at her. He pulled the blankets from the hall closet and threw them on the couch, then went back to the bedroom and shut the door.

He took off his shirt and pressed his hands against the pounding in his chest, then washed his hands and face in the bathroom. He hated thinking there might be something

stuck in his mustache. The TV switched on as he rinsed. When he went back out to the living room she was curled under the Dallas Cowboys blanket watching “Murder, She Wrote.” For a second the thought of her curled under something Sharri had made for him seemed wrong and he felt guilty and agitated. It confused him, which agitated him more and he went to the kitchen to pour a drink for the road.

When he took his keys from the rack beside the door he reminded her again to keep the doors locked without looking back at her.

When he let Ice out, she would not go into the yard, but instead lay on the front stoop, her gray-white head between his paws, black eyes cutting into the dark.

He hurried to the Mark VIII, started it, and swung it fast onto S.E. 14th Street, aiming for downtown. His mind bent back and forth over the evening, Andi’s thighs, the things she said, the scar above her brow. Everything about her aroused him, made him curious and edgy, unsure. Even the thought of Rocco, or the boyfriend—or anyone—wanting her both heated and sickened him.

He tried to turn his attention to Curtis, and where he might find him tonight. He didn’t want to stir trouble with Curtis’s wife, who threw him out all the time, nor did he want to stumble onto their domestic squawking. He’d try the Duck Tail first, on the north side, then make his way back toward the yard. He’d stick to the bars. No need to crawl around the old haunts. Except that’s probably where he would find him.

He pictured Andi again and ached to touch a woman. He wondered if Tralene would be working the Horseshoe that night, then scanned the faces of the other waitresses in his mind. Tralene wasn’t interested, that much he had figured out. He pictured Marnie, her shirt hovering above her waist, in front of his couch. The thought of her soft flesh repulsed him now that he had watched Andi’s bare legs move in front of him. He thought of them sprawled, wrapped around his waist and beat his hands against the steering

wheel, beating it back, willing it out of his mind. She was just a kid, he told himself aloud.

His jeans felt like they would split open.

His entire body felt like it might split open.

Big Earl's.

The girls there were rough, he knew, but sexy in that rolled-around-in-dirt way he craved sometimes. They were dangerous—they all got high—but as long as he stayed right in the club—no kitchen, no back room—he'd be alright. And Curtis, he knew, liked to hang out there, although he hadn't heard him mention it in some time. He stopped at the old Conoco station where he and Hammerhead had worked years before and exchanged a twenty for dollar bills.

Inside the door, he could barely see the stage for the cigarette smoke and the synthetic fog. The place was small—only three poles and enough room around the stage for maybe thirty guys, then some small tables scattered around and a pool table. He hadn't been there since before he got sent up, but it looked exactly the same. Zuck eased into a chair and looked around.

On stage a woman was on her knees, hands waving in the air, skinny hips rotating, the light cruel on her small breasts, which hung loose, lacerated by stretch marks. In place of her pubic hair was a tattoo in the shape of a star. Her eyes were closed and she flipped her dirty blond hair back and forth while Whitesnake roared through the speakers. Ten or so men dotted the perimeter of the stage, some with a girl wrapped over or straddling them.

On the other side of the stage a fleshy girl with bleach blond hair in a high ponytail atop her head ran a dollar bill, folded lengthwise, between her teeth over and over again as she sat atop an elderly man, her back to him, and pretended to ride him. Her

breasts were large and bulbous and strained against the string bikini top she wore. She looked Zuck in the eyes as she bounced, and ran her hands along the insides of her thighs. The elderly man looked as if he might pass out, eyes lolling around in his head. Zuck laughed and ordered a drink from the barmaid, stroking his mustache, restless.

He threw out a dollar and the woman on her knees opened her eyes and smiled at him. Her teeth were small, too small in her thick-lipped mouth. The barmaid set down his drink and he handed her a five. Another girl came out on stage, wobbling in six-inch stilettos, and began to swing around the pole in the center of the stage. She was a redhead, her hair cropped short, which wasn't normally appealing. But everything about this girl was sleek, skinny and hard, the shine on her spiky hair like shellac. A black criss-crossing apparatus barely covered her small apple breasts, the g-string and stockings were hot pink. He laid two bills on the stage and waited for her to notice. As he watched her he felt hot breath against his cheek. It was the ponytailed blonde.

“How are you tonight?” She ran her hands down his arms, and pushed her breasts against his back. “Mmm-hmm. I like these big shoulders.”

“You think you could ride them like you just did that old boy?” Zuck didn't look at her as he said it, he was still waiting for the redhead to pick up the bills. He sucked at his mustache and smoothed it with his fingers.

She laughed and said she was sure she could. She pulled up a chair beside him and asked if he wanted to go in the back for a private dance, but the redhead was making her way toward him, now without the criss-crossing thing. He smiled up as she stood over him and danced, pushing herself toward him so he could look up inside the thin length of her thighs. Then she turned, and bent, and looked back at him, pulling at the string at her hip. He reached up and placed the dollars, and the string snapped over them.

When he sat back down he saw that the blonde had moved on. He ordered another drink, then another. The girls and the music swirled around him. He ordered another drink, got change for another twenty. An old girl with a nasty thatch of dark hair curling over her panties offered herself for more than a dance and he laughed and said no thanks, grandma. She cursed him and did not come near his chair again. The blonde came back and bounced on his lap. He tried to catch the redhead's attention, but each time she was busy, had promised her time to someone else. He drank until he was swimming in the room. He drank more.

He remembered less, as the hours passed, about what he had meant to do that night, who he had meant to find and why.

A shapeless, curly-haired girl whirled and gyrated around his chair, slightly ridiculous with smeared lipstick and lingerie that looked like it had been washed and dried and rubbed and stretched for much too long. He began to feel the cocking of the gun inside his head, slow, then taut. The rage roiling in his gut, the lust. A scream he couldn't push down. The girls began to squirm away from him, angry or flustered. He ordered another drink and asked again for the redhead and was told, again, she was busy. He sat for a while, tried to loosen the tightness in him. He couldn't taste the whiskey in his drink anymore. He drank more.

He went toward the private dance room to look for the redhead and a large man with a Russian or German accent took his arm, hard, and told him quietly that he would need to sit down and wait, he was not allowed in there unless invited. He had a sweet, fleshy face and cold eyes and his name tag read *Vladimir*. Zuck obeyed, sat rigid in a chair outside the room. He could see inside through the entryway, and past a row of fake palm trees he saw her, the redhead, grinding on a heavysset man with tree trunk arms. She

leaned over and kissed his neck, then rubbed her small breasts over the man's face. The man handed her another bill, and the girl placed his hands on her hips.

Zuck thought of Andi, wondered if she knew how to move like that, if she would know what to do. His hard-on grew so painful that his throat constricted. He watched some of the other girls, some naked and writhing against the seated men, some with costumes pulled up or down in various stages of removal. All with bored, faraway faces. He hated looking at their faces.

The redhead came out, holding that fat man's hand and smiling up at him, cocking her head while he counted out more bills. Zuck stumbled to his feet and tried to make eye contact with her, to let her know it was his turn. When she did turn to him, as the fat man walked away, her smile stayed stuck on her face like bubble gum and he felt a little sick.

“How much for three songs?”

“Seventy-five. Plus tips.”

Zuck nodded, counted out the money, and followed her into the neon-lit room. Two girls stood side by side and chatted while they sprayed the vinyl chairs with pink solution that smelled like gas station cleaner. They wiped absently at the seats with rags. Zuck took a seat where the redhead pointed, toward the end of the room. He caught himself in the mirrors that covered the walls: he needed a haircut, the sandy hair was frizzing at the ends. His shirt was untucked and he leaned a little. Then she began to sway and he looked at her in the mirror. Her shoulders moved in time and she ran her hands over her very pale skin, starting in a squat, hands around her ankles, then slowly standing and moving her hands up her body. She moved his legs apart so she could place her knee between them on the chair.

Her body was all angles. He wanted to touch the shellacked red hair to see if it would give. He watched the place on her throat that moved when she swallowed and

thought of how the sheen of sweat there would taste. Andi's soft throat flashed in his mind, the curve of her under the damp towel. The redhead rolled against him, then away, then stood and turned and danced, hovering inches above his lap.

He grabbed her skinny hips, hard, and pressed her down onto himself, moving against her hard, harder again. She squirmed and yelled, cursed and flailed her skinny arms. Still he held her down. He rubbed until he came, and just as he did, just as the hoarse sigh left his mouth, the large Vladimir loomed above them and wrenched his arms from the redhead. The man was like a moving wall as he picked Zuck up by the arms and dragged him from the room. Zuck felt like he was on a train as he passed through the room and through the muddy window of his eyes he saw the ponytailed blonde was on stage. She barely glanced at the spectacle of him as she swung around the pole, hair flying.

The man threw him onto the weedy sidewalk in front of the club and he rolled once before he landed flat on his back. His head thwacked on the concrete and the thick accent told him not to come back, he was out for thirty days.

Zuck closed his eyes. He needed to rest for a minute.

“Harm. Harm! Come on man. Wake up, it's me. Come on now. Harm.”

The voice was cigarette-stained. A hand shook his arm and he wished for chrissakes it would stop because he would throw up if it moved him much more. He tried to wrench away, his eyes still closed. The ache in his head was connected to the ache in his neck was connected to the ache in his back and everything in him felt clogged, choked up. His pants felt wet. He tried to distance himself from his body, slip under the cover of sleep, keep the details at bay. But the voice and the hand kept on.

How did he know that voice? Fuck, wait. Who was calling him *Harm*?

He opened one eye and was relieved to find it was still very dark outside. Tan-colored knees and thighs squatted beside him. He muttered something incoherent. He didn't know what he wanted to say. Then he told the voice and the hand to get the fuck away from him.

“You worthless piece of shit. You ain't changed a bit, I can see.”

It was Hammerhead. Zuck heard him rise and the pebbles scratch under his feet as he stood and walked away. Zuck opened his eyes and looked him over just as Hammerhead opened the door to the club. He wore khaki dress pants, some kind of collared shirt, and a brown leather bomber jacket. His hair was pulled back in a thick ponytail that fell cleanly over his collar. He'd always been a guy who liked to look good, but he looked different. Respectable.

Zuck closed his eyes again, and rolled onto his stomach to push himself upright. He sat with his legs pulled up, arms around his knees, a test to see whether his stomach would stay down. When it lurched, he rolled to get to his feet and ran toward the car. He made it halfway across the parking lot before he lost it, a steady burning stream of churned-up whiskey and half-digested chili beans. He managed to miss his clothes.

In the car he fished in the glove compartment for a towel, found one that was smeared with something—he didn't know what and didn't care. He used a clean corner of it to wipe his mouth and wadded it back up.

This wasn't how the night was supposed to go. He thought about the girls in the club, traced the events of the evening to what had gone wrong. Then he remembered what, and why his pants were wet, remembered the redhead hollering while he held her down. He felt his face and chest for bruises. Jesus, he was lucky Vladimir didn't kill him.

He turned on the Mark to look at the time. 12:30. How long had he been out here lying on the sidewalk? Who else had seen him? He turned on the radio and listened to *Jack and Diane* and *Dirty Deeds Done Dirt Cheap*, and *Turn the Page*, the volume down so low he could barely make out the songs.

What was with Hammerhead? He couldn't imagine what that dude would be doing here. He hadn't seen him in eight or nine years, and last he did see him, they barely spoke. Hammerhead had gone his way when they both were twenty-three, up north to work for an uncle. Zuck heard on the street that Hammer got clean, worked hard. He had a wife and a little girl. Went to some kind of school for a trade. Something like that. For a few years Zuck would try to call him from time to time—he got the number from Hammer's mom—mostly when he got in a tight spot or needed some money. Eventually Hammerhead stopped returning his calls. Then his number was disconnected and Hammer's mom wouldn't give Zuck the number anymore.

Zuck fished the flask and a pack of cigarettes out of the console, drank from it, gagged, and replaced the cap; then held the metal side against his cheek. He put a cigarette in his mouth but didn't light it. In his rearview mirror he saw Hammerhead come out of the club, with the Russian bouncer behind him. Zuck tucked the flask underneath his thigh and started the car. Both men looked toward it and talked back and forth. Zuck watched, his hand on the gear shift. The bouncer went back inside and Zuck adjusted his rearview mirror as Hammerhead walked toward the car. He didn't know what to do. Should he put it in reverse to show he was leaving? He could holler out the window and tell him to get his ass out of the way.

But now Hammer leaned over, hand on his knee, and peered in the window. He knocked. Zuck left his foot on the brake, but pushed the button to lower the window.

“I got to get going, Hammer.” He stared straight ahead to the empty field past the parking lot.

Hammerhead stayed bent but didn’t respond. Zuck turned to him and studied his face. He’d gotten some lines around his eyes and he was a little heavier, but he was still a good looking man and Zuck wasn’t afraid to think so. Hammerhead was like a brother to him all those years and in his face Zuck still saw the brother he had loved. The deep blue eyes, so serious now, still looked straight into Zuck’s skull. It made him feel a little soft, and scared. Hammer knew Zuck too well for him to be embarrassed, though if anyone else had seen him laid out like that the humiliation would have singed him like a match to his short hairs. Now he just wanted to leave, didn’t want Hammer looking into him like that.

“Harm, whyn’t you let me give you a ride. You still staying out at the yard? I’m staying at my mom’s, it’s right on the way.”

Zuck looked down at himself, the stain on his pants, the dust on his jacket. A hole had ripped into his jacket on the right elbow.

“No. I got it, man. Good to see you though. —hey, how’d you know I’m staying up at the yard?”

“I mean it. Come on now Harm. I’ll get you a drink somewhere—“

“Don’t call me that, alright Hammer? I go by Zuck now—“

“Alright, yeah. I knew that. Alright.”

The looked at each other again, then Zuck stared at his hands on the steering wheel. Hammerhead stood up again and looked out at the field, then around the parking lot, at nothing in particular it seemed, just alert. Zuck wondered then how Hammerhead had known he was staying at the yard. It made him uneasy that Hammer seemed to know more about his current life than vice versa.

“Hammer, man, what are you doing here anyway,? Ain’t you living somewhere up in Wisconsin?”

“Yeah, I was. Mom’s not doing so good. Me and my wife came back to look after her.”

“Yeah? That’s nice.”

“Yeah.”

Zuck rocked the steering wheel back and forth. “What the hell are you doing here? I mean, here.” He jammed his thumb over his shoulder, toward the club. “I mean, other than, you know—“

Hammerhead laughed. “—if I was looking for that, it wouldn’t be here. Nah, I’m looking for this guy. He’s my client, and I think he’s violating...” Hammerhead trailed off.

Zuck’s head reeled. “—violated—what—?”

“—Parole. I’m his parole officer.”

Something in him flared . Over the steering wheel and beyond where he sat was an expanse of blackness, and for a moment he felt confused—where was he?—and he thought he might throw up again. How did a thug like Hammer become a parole officer? They let people like him get into that kind of work? And who, of all the people they used to know together, had Hammer turned on, who had he turned in? Red motherfucker. He licked his lips. He was so thirsty he felt like he was panting and he hoped Hammer couldn’t tell, but he asked Zuck again if he could take him home.

He thought of Andi, surely asleep now under the blankets on the couch, TV still throwing a soft glow in the room. Christ, that was all he needed was Hammerhead seeing some pretty young girl sleeping on his couch. He knew him, from way back. He’d think the worst. He’d know all the wrong thoughts Zuck had already thought about her, but

nothing about how he actually felt about her. He'd think Zuck was the same as always, just like he said before he went into the club. And now he could send him to jail for it, if he wanted.

But that wasn't right. He wasn't the same. And how *did* he feel about Andi?

"Well, Hammer, good to see you man. Looks like you're doing just fine. Good for you. I got to be going now." He put the car in reverse. Hammerhead held onto the window sill.

"Harm—Zuck—you take care. Here, why don't you take my card. I know you're still on the hook, man. Let me know if you ever need anything—"

He fished in his pocket.

"—just don't ask me for money, I don't have much and the old lady spends every bit of the extra."

As he handed the card to Zuck the dimples that dented his stubbled cheeks now stretched into long crags like on a cowboy's face. John Wayne or some sonofabitch like that. Zuck threw the card onto the dashboard.

"Yeah, see you around, Hammer."

He planned to never see him around.

Hammer patted the roof and took a few steps back to give Zuck room. Zuck gave him a two-finger salute as he pointed the car toward the road and looked into the rearview. Hammer was climbing into a new Ford F-150, blue, with a nice trim package. A parole officer. Wasn't that just fucking dandy. Zuck turned the radio up, put a stick of Big Red in his mouth, sang along with Stevie Nicks.

He was so tired, it was hard to keep the car on the road. He tried to flesh out the details of the night in his mind. His face and neck burned again when he thought of how he'd held the redhead to him, how he'd thought of Andi as he did. He lost control. He

needed to get somebody on the side, and quick. He couldn't have her staying with him, tearing him up like that. He should tell her not to run around the trailer half naked, too. It wasn't decent.

Lights glared into his rearview and he shielded his eyes. He sped up to put some distance between him and the car behind, and squinted into the rearview. Jesus. It was Hammerhead in the F-150, he was sure of it. Sweat chilled his forehead and he shut off the radio, tried to focus. Maybe Hammerhead could pull him over. Shit, the Ruger was under his seat, as usual. Man, he should have just looked for Curtis like he planned.

He scanned the street ahead for a gas station or anything that might be open. Nothing. Hammerhead had given some distance between the Mark and the F-150, but he still hung on. Only his silhouette was visible in Zuck's rearview, and he realized that he wove over the center line every time he looked back at him. Concentrate. Eyes on the road. The quiet ticked in the car, and the lack of rhythm from the radio made him feel unsteady. Only a mile to go. Now a few blocks. Now the viaduct.

He made sure to turn on his signal before he slowed at the entrance of the yard. Hammerhead's truck slowed behind him. He did not go around, and as Zuck turned the Mark into the drive, he looked back to see Hammerhead hesitate at the entrance before he eased onto the accelerator and disappeared down 14th.

The dog greeted him when he got out of the Mark and he patted her, comforted by her eagerness. He felt chilled, dirty, miserable. Inside, the TV had gone to fuzz, and Andi must have been warm, because her legs had kicked out from under the cover and lay like scissors across the length of the couch. Her upper body was nestled into the Cowboys blanket, hand cupped over her mouth as usual. Her black hair swirled around her head and covered most of her face. He went to the bathroom and flipped on the light.

Hammerhead was right. He was a piece of shit. In the mirror his face was gray with stubble and smudged with dust—even his eyelashes were dusty. The thick waves of his hair were matted on one side and vomit had dried in his moustache, which made him gag again. He leaned over the toilet but there was nothing left. He heaved, and heaved again, tears blurring his eyes, then gagged again as he brushed his teeth. As he rinsed the sink he noticed Andi's things scattered around: a Ziploc bag with mascara, a clear compact of powder rouge that was all broken up, a wide-tooth comb, an elastic hair tie that looked so small and delicate, he couldn't imagine how it held her thick hair. He turned the shower to lukewarm and undressed, leaned against the vinyl wall, his head against the cool. He shampooed his moustache first.

In fresh boxers and an old t-shirt he headed back to the living room to shut down the TV. He reached for the knob, then looked back at Andi. She had turned onto her back and she breathed deep sleeping breaths through parted lips. He went to her and covered her legs, then swept the hair from her face.

The swing of her fist came out of nowhere and connected under his right jawline, then she reared back to swing again and he caught her wrist. She was upright now and her eyes were wide open and wild. She seemed not to see him and she looked like an animal, her breath in heavy gusts. He held her wrist firm but tried not to squeeze.

“Andi.” His voice was low. “Andi it's me, Zuck. Calm down, baby.”

Baby. The word resounded in his head and for a second wasn't sure he'd actually said it. *Baby.*

She leaned back against the couch and looked at him, and her eyes registered that she saw him but they still seemed to pulse under her clenched brows. He let go of her wrist and sat down on the coffee table and their eyes locked. They both panted.

He didn't know what to do. She was afraid, that much he could see, and after his performance tonight maybe she had good reason to be. But he didn't mean anything. He really didn't mean anything.

"Y—you were all uncovered." He hated that he stuttered, was afraid she wouldn't believe him. "And your hair was all in your face. I was just headed to bed—"

"—Yeah I must have just, um. Had a bad dream." She looked down and he could see the shimmer in the corners of her eyes and her wet lashes and he hated the way he felt.

He heard himself say *okay* three or four times, but it sounded like it came through a tunnel in his head, then he told her just to get some sleep.

She said okay and her voice was so small he wondered if he imagined her response. She lay back down and looked up at him, the covers now wrapped tight around her body.

He felt glued to the coffee table, soaked by the soft, tired eyes that washed over him. He leaned over and brushed the hair from her cheek with his palm, then lay his entire hand over the side of her face. She closed her eyes and opened them again. He placed the other hand on her right cheek, his movements a machine set in motion, running ahead of him. He leaned toward her and she turned up her face like she meant to let him kiss her on the mouth and he almost did, almost, but caught himself, regained control just in time to let his open, dry mouth fall on her damp and flawless forehead, where he stayed for he didn't know how long, then pulled himself off of her, like a crane lifted him and made him stand. He lumbered to bed, aware of every inch of his own skin.

In the morning he tried to fall back to sleep but waves of pain blared like weather sirens through his head. He couldn't think about the night before, tried to think about the yard, the garage, his eyes squeezed tight against the morning, against the pictures in his

mind. The dancing girls. The redhead. The view from the ground of the parking lot where he had passed out for god knows how long. Hammerhead. Andi's wide gray eyes. He reached into his bedside table without opening his eyes and popped off the lid to a bottle of aspirin and swallowed three of them dry.

After a few minutes he got up. He tried to muffle his movements, close the bathroom door noiselessly, walked in a slow heel-toe plod. She still slept, covers pulled now around her ears, red-painted toes sticking out at the other end of the couch. He tried to look at her swollen heel but he would have had to get too close. He put on some coffee, careful not to clank around, and picked up the files that lay stacked beside the kitchen table. For an hour he scribbled on paperwork, unit titles, mileage disclosures, and as he drained the coffee and lightened the stack the pain in his head ebbed away.

Light from the kitchen window glowed over him and the table, made the morning lighter somehow. It was going to be a pretty day, the fluttering light of fall clean on everything. He should pack it in at the garage, leave Curtis and old Walt in charge and go for a drive. He could head back out to the cemetery, take down those hanging tree limbs. He could clean up the branches, split the wood and maybe sell it for fire in bundled stacks in the shop office.

Maybe Andi would want to go with him.

He thought this over. Whose grave would he tell her they were visiting? He hadn't told anyone about Jenny for years—not since Sharri, and even then they had never spoken of it again. That can of worms could definitely stay shut.

But she'd asked what his story was, and she'd told him something about hers. Maybe she would want to know.

Then again he guessed he didn't have to tell her all the details, only that it was an old family plot, he was the only one left to care for it, and his sister was buried there. She would like it out there. They could take the dogs, or at least Ice. Yes, they would take Ice.

He tore out sheet of paper from a tablet and looked at it for a while, unsure. How many ways could there be to spell her name? He settled on two E's:

Andee, I am at the shop but I will come back soon. I have to go out to this farm land to this place I take care of and you can come if you want go for a drive not very far away it is a nice day outside and we can take Ice. If you want to go get ready and I will pick you up in a old red truck.

HZ

At the shop the men were all engrossed in whatever job they'd been assigned. They barely seemed to notice him as he made his way through; even the two punk kids seemed to actually be productive, leaning over an engine listening to Dave-o explain something. Zuck took Walt aside and told him where he was headed, then left quietly.

When he stepped inside the trailer door Andi was slouched on the couch watching a soap opera. She wore a sweatshirt, her hair was pulled back and her coat was laid out on the couch. She held a book in her hand, her fingers slid inside like she had just closed it and wanted to save her page. She looked over at him, her face a question mark.

"You all cleaned up and ready to go?"

"I showered last night, remember? Where are we going?"

"Well, you don't have to go if you don't—"

"No, I just, I'm just wondering, you know—"

"Yeah, yeah, well it's this place my mother's family has out in the middle of nowhere, it ain't nothing, really. I just got to take care of it. Kind of pretty out there. I thought you'd—Ah, I don't know."

She grinned at him and he fidgeted and wondered how the hell she could do that to him just by smiling.

She sat up straight. “We can take the dog?”

He said he guessed they could. She probably ought to take book, too, in case she got bored.

“—I got work to do out there, some trees and shit to take down.”

She looked down at the book in her hand, dog-eared the page, and turned off the TV.

“Did you eat?” He barked at her now. It seemed he couldn’t control her voice around her, it was either too soft or too hard or just plain broke down stuttering.

“Some toast.”

He said they'd pick up a bucket of chicken at the KFC, then told her where to find the Thermoses in the kitchen while he went to look for an old sheet for them to sit on. He pulled the truck in front of the trailer and loaded the sheet and thermoses, another coat for Andi, looked around the corner of the yard to make sure the coast was clear, then told her to hurry into the cab. She did, and then she lay down on the sheet that was folded in the seat between them. He hollered at Ice to load up onto the tailgate, and they roared away. Once they had passed the viaduct he told her to sit up. They pulled in to the KFC just after the Kum & Go fill station and he went in and came back out with a loaded paper bag, then they were on the road.

Zuck lit a cigarette and handed one to her, When she finished smoking, Andi opened the sliding window between the cab and the truck bed and talked to Ice, who wagged his dusty tail and bounced from one side of the truck to the next, his nose juttled into the wind, sniffing. She chatted to Zuck as they drove down the mottled and mangy S.E. 14th, asked if he had ever had his palm read or ridden in a limousine or had a

“wedgie” at Paul Revere’s Pizza. She pointed here and there to neighborhoods she knew and told him about the people who lived there, some of whose family names he recognized, old southside runners and thugs, none of them good news. He listened. As they passed the mall she sighed and said she wished she could shop, she loved perfume and she knew she could be like a fashion model if she had the clothes and could do her hair right.

"I'd buy you some things."

The words were out before they registered in his head and he coughed, then looked at her sideways. She smiled a little, but he couldn't tell whether she was pleased or uncomfortable. As they passed the last trailer park and more space grew between the buildings they passed, her lips straightened and she looked around with wide eyes. He asked her if she had ever been out of the city.

"Yes. I've been all over, out of this city, other cities. Just not out in the country much." Her face was tense. "I'm just trying to figure out where we are is all."

"Going to a place called Decatur, about an hour out. We'll pass an old paper mill, then you can start looking for it." He thought maybe he should have told her they were going to a cemetery. "It's a, ah, family plot."

She asked what that was and he told her and her face lit up. She asked how many people were buried there and he told her about thirty, then she looked out the window again.

"Is anybody young buried out there?"

Why would she ask him that? He glanced at her face and her eyes were upturned, wide, innocent. The question wasn't loaded, wasn't aimed at him. Still, he sweated.

"Yep. A few."

That seemed to satisfy her and she returned to the sliding window to coo some more at Ice. When she closed it again they rode in silence, then he spoke again.

"Where's you learn that song you was singing in the shower?"

"You heard that—?"

"It was pretty. I just—"

"—I wrote it."

"You wrote that?" He was uneasy again. "You know a dude named Rainbow?"

She laughed and said she had met him on the Greyhound bus she'd taken down to Florida to try to find her dad the year before. He'd been a hippie dude, dreadlocks and all, traveling by himself even though he'd been only a year older than she. His parents had been killed just a few months before in a bus accident.

"He wanted me to go on with him." She bit the nail on her ring finger, which he could plainly see had no fingernail left on it. "To someplace in Georgia. But I didn't really like him like that. Just write the song because he was real sweet to me, and I felt bad about his folks. I know what it's like. Without people you belong to, I mean" She turned toward the window, then back to him. "But I'm glad you like the song."

Her voice was bright and sweet and he couldn't help but smile. He asked if she knew what a homing pigeon was, and when he told her about the birds she asked all kind of questions, what they looked like (they varied widely), could you have them as pets (that was the idea), did they ever race (lots of people raced them but he didn't plan to, he had cars for that). He told her about the lofts, which he planned to get built over the next few weekends, and that after that he would order the birds, two at a time. She bounced on the seat and clapped her hands, then tucked them under her thighs as if trying to behave.

They grew quiet for a while, then she asked abruptly who he knew out at the cemetery, if it was anyone he had been close to. He was surprised to hear himself answer.

“My sister’s buried out there. She died when she was five. It was ah, an accident.”

Every nerve that lay just under his skin vibrated, the hair stood on his neck and arms and legs, even the base of his back sprang beads of sweat that made him shiver. He rubbed at his temples with thumb and middle finger and wiped at his brow, then clamped the steering wheel. She was looking at him.

"I'm really sorry, Zuck. Was that your only sister?"

He nodded once.

She looked down, then leaned over and placed her hand on his knee and rubbed a little, then patted it. Then she leaned over the folded sheets and thermoses and her mouth brushed against his cheek, the softest thing ever to touch his skin. He squeezed the steering wheel and pointed to some painted ponies out her window, and she rolled it down and sang to them as they passed, *hey horsies, pretty horsies, pretty pretty horsies...*

Something cracked in his center.

Some pressure escaped, and the movie reel began in his head as it had a hundred million times but this time his voice narrated it, spoke the clips aloud to this girl who was a stranger but suddenly the closest thing ever to him and he was desperate to tell her the truth and it rose out of him like the story itself had some supernatural force.

He had been nine. Shouldn't have been driving. Told the old man again he was scared to drive. He'd told him. But the old man had hollered at him to *get in the goddamn Buick and back it up* to make way for the three other units that were coming through on the flatbed. *Don't be such and goddamn pansy, just get in there and put it in reverse and don't forget to check the mirrors, dipshit.*

He couldn't see anything in the mirrors, even after he adjusted them but he perched way up at the front of the bench seat, strained his bare foot to the brake, and turned the ignition. The engine's roar thrilled through his small body and he threw it into

reverse. But his foot wasn't pressed hard enough against the brake and the car lurched backward and kept moving backward until it bumped hard over something, rear tires, then front, before he finally got it thrown back into park. Later he would always wonder if that move had dropped the tranny—and what use was this question anyway, for the life of him he didn't know—and anyway as he sat there, afraid to know what was under the car—if it was one of the dogs the old man would kill him—he became confused and threw it into drive and pressed on the gas so that the front tires bumped over the same object.

He sank under the dash and pressed on the brake with the weight of his whole body, then shifted into drive and pulled forward again, bumping again over the object. *I got to find mom before the old man finds me* was the last thing he thought before the door flew open and Old Walt, a young man then, threw the car into park, grabbed Zuck by the waist and flung him from the seat onto the grit, got in, and pulled slightly forward. From the ground Zuck saw her, Jenny's twisted body parallel with his, released from the front tires.

He couldn't see her face—it had been flattened, he would later find out—only her long, honey blond hair spread out, floating in soft waves over the dirt. Farther under the car he could see her legs bent backward, and the small bump of her bottom rose where her pelvis should have been. No sound had penetrated his ears as he watched his father's feet run to the front of the car, watched him and Walt kneel together to pull her body from behind the front wheels. Zuck lay curved as a comma on the ground, and watched through the thick cotton of silence. They left him there. The old man held Jenny's body, which seemed to be a liquid thing poured over his arms, and fell into the passenger's side of his brand-new Corvair, his face pressed into her. Old Walt jumped in the driver's seat.

Zuck had been through five cigarettes as he spoke and Andi had been through at least as many but she sat now, feet pulled up on the seat, knees tucked against her chest. She sobbed, but no noise came from her, she only shook terribly and stared straight ahead, tears spilling steadily from her cheeks to the denim on her knees.

Zuck pulled onto a side road that seemed to go all the way out into nowhere and put the truck in park, then put his arm around her and pulled her to him. She curled against him and cried it out and he told her it was okay, baby, it was really okay and he shouldn't have told her, should have known not to tell her but he wanted to tell her. When she was finished she sat up, wiped her face on the inside of her sweatshirt, grabbed at the collar of his flannel shirt, and pressed her mouth against his, hard and soft and wet and smoky and he kissed her back, his tongue slow on her lips and inside her mouth, and then frenzied, like he had never kissed a woman in his life, and finally when she pulled away from him she sat, her silence enormous under his heaving breath.

Then she laughed and said, "Yeah, I guess it will be okay, baby."

The gravel of the cemetery drive crackled under the truck's slow wheels. Andi rolled down the screeching window and stuck her head out. A sharp angle of sun reflected on her black hair, which made Zuck think of haloes, which made Zuck think of the haloed angel on Jenny's headstone. He parked and leaned his elbow on the steering wheel, rubbed at his mustache and raked his hair with his fingers. He stared across the plots, careful not to focus in on Jenny's. There were plenty of dead limbs to clear away; they hung over the iron fence and across the stones like stiff claws.

"This place is so beautiful!"

Her voice was like a trumpet through the stubby cornfields and naked trees and prickly-yellow pasture. Zuck wanted to shush her. Suddenly everything was crazy again. What the fuck was he doing? Why had he brought her? Why for the love of christ had he told her?

Andi hopped out and opened the tailgate so Ice could jump out and the dog ran around in circles, barking at her. She laughed and half-ran, half-danced around the old dog through the dead prairie grass, then wandered around until she found a stick she could throw for her.

Zuck opened his own door and swung his feet around to the running board, but planted them there and leaned on his knees while he watched her. He lit another cigarette. The hair bounced on the hood of her faded green coat, and her feet were quick and light in the moccasins. She moved in a way that was all hers, like some athletic music pulsed in her, pushing her limbs and hips. Every leap, stride, turn, pivot cut through the chill that clung to everything around them. The dog was frenzied, breathless; she barked and whined, and in her colorless eyes Zuck thought he saw love. He spat and jumped to the ground with a stamp of his boots.

He jammed the pair of thick gloves that lay on the truck bench into his back pocket and slammed the door. When he reached into the bed and lifted the new chainsaw he'd bought from Ace Hardware, he couldn't help but grin a little. MCCULLOCH, it read on the blade—the same kind the old man had always used, but this one was better. Its black-and-yellow body had always made Zuck think of bumblebees. The old man would have envied this piece, Zuck knew, would have had to get one for himself, in a better model. Zuck pulled up on it a couple times as if to prove how light it was, then he gave a slow pull on the starter to hear the loud purr. He couldn't tell from a sideways glance whether Andi was paying attention, but he hoped she was.

Just as he unlatched the iron gate, dust rose from a couple miles up the road. Zuck squinted across the cemetery at the cloud of dust that made its way toward them. It was nothing unusual, nothing that would have made him even raise his head any other time. But the roiling in his gut as the same kind of paranoia he used to feel when he was carrying, and in a way he guessed he was carrying, just a fifteen-year-old runaway this time. Again he ticked off in his mind the shitstorm he could face if he kept her with him. A gray image of the cell at The Walls funneled over his vision. His underarms sweated and he ground his teeth. Goddamn that girl. Goddamn it.

The truck slowed as it approached the cemetery, and Zuck recognized it as the one that belonged to the farmhouse. He exhaled, nodded at the driver, and gave his customary two fingers in the air, then turned to open the iron gate. The man waved, too, but this time he pulled into the drive.

Andi moved closer to Zuck's truck, hands pushed deep in her coat pockets. Ice trotted toward the incoming truck, head forward, ears pricked. Zuck watched as the man pulled forward and stopped behind the Chevy, then walked over to the open driver's-side window, still carrying the chainsaw.

The man was younger than Zuck had expected, maybe twenty-five at most, and Zuck wondered if maybe this was a son, or a farm hand, or a new owner. He'd never seen the driver up close before. The young man's face was smudged with dust and a smatter of mud dotted his right eyelid and cheek. He was a good-looking kid, slight and wiry with shorn brown hair and a farmer's permanent squint. His lower lip was stuffed and he spat his brown juice into a Pepsi bottle that he held between his legs. Zuck took that as a good sign that he didn't plan to make any quick moves. Ice sniffed at the air, then sat at Zuck's feet.

When the young man asked how they were doing his voice was so high Zuck almost laughed, but the kid watched him like that wouldn't have been the first time he'd heard that response. Zuck maintained his usual deadpan.

“We're fine. Something I can help you with?”

He held the chainsaw up a little so the man could see the size of his arm under his heavy shirt.

“Nah, ain't nothing. I just seen you up here and wasn't doing nothing, so I figured I'd stop in and introduce myself. I seen you out here a bunch of times before. Used to see your mom up here when I was a kid.”

Zuck flinched. Through his windshield the young man now watched Andi, who leaned against the Chevy and chewed on the nail of her middle finger, hand cupped over her mouth. His eyes lingered over the places where any man's would.

“You got a daughter?”

Zuck clutched tighter at the chainsaw. “I got work to do around here, then I got to get back to business in town. You got something you need, or you just passing through?”

The young man looked startled, and he spat again into the Pepsi bottle. “I didn't mean nothing, sir. Truth is, I was wasting time before I get back to all them chores my dad's got waiting for me.”

He chuckled, which at that high pitch might have been infectious, under different circumstances.

“Your old man run that farm?”

The idea that this kid knew more about Zuck than Zuck did about him made him feel wild inside. He fought the urge to pull this kid out through the window by his neck and ask just what the fuck he knew about Zuck's mother that made him think he could mention her so casually, and why he was looking at the girl like he might have her.

“Yeah, we both own it now but Dad still runs the land. Runs me too, I guess.” He laughed again.

So he was older than Zuck thought.

“My name’s Brian.” He stuck out his hand. Zuck seized it, and watched the kid’s face pale.

“Thanks for stopping by.”

He raised the chainsaw again and walked across the front of the truck without looking back, then jerked his head at Andi and she followed without a word. He gestured for her to pass through the iron gate first, and when she turned back toward the retreating truck, Zuck said only, “Don’t.”

Before the young man drove away, he called out, “Glad you’re cleaning that place up, man.” He waited for a response, then eased the truck down the road.

Andi kept up beside Zuck as he headed to the first tree and he could see her watching him through sideways glances. When he stopped and fired up the chainsaw in one pull, she walked to the other side of the cemetery and sat down, her back against the iron fencepost. He watched for a moment as Ice lay down beside her; she bent to coo in the dog’s ear and stroked his fur. Zuck shook his head and started to work on the limbs.

His mother. Why’d that dumbfuck have to bring her up? Each shot of her face and hands, each clip of her voice that flickered and crackled through his head took him closer to Jenny, closer to that day. He cursed the young farmer, then again, louder; then again. With each push of the blade through the wood Zuck imagined a clean act of destruction, a severing of something from a part of itself.

Years after the accident Zuck’s mother told him that Jer-Jer and the Mole, two other men who worked for the old man for years, picked him up, took him into the garage and fed him popsicles from the old freezer that used to stand in the corner of the office.

He could not remember this but he did remember vomiting a steady stream of orange into the metal trash can when Jer-Jer sat him atop the old man's steel desk in the tiny office and told him that Jenny was dead. Zuck could not remember what he said, only that the ugly man's face mashed up with tears as he broke the news, and his hand on Zuck's skinny shoulder felt like the head of a nine-pound hammer.

Now Zuck couldn't feel his hands, only a vibrating mass at the ends of his arms and he suddenly realized he was on the third tree; he could not remember cutting through the two before. He turned to look at the debris he'd left behind, and screamed as the blade came inches from hitting Andi, who stood holding out a plate of food to him. He killed the saw and threw it down. It hit two upright headstones before clattering to the ground between them.

“Jesus fucking christ, girl you trying to sawed in half? That thing's a goddamned weapon, you hear me? What the fuck are you doing?”

His voice broke as he screamed and he wiped at his eyes and brow with his sleeve. Andi had lowered the plate and her lower lip quivered.

“Now, come on. Andi, don't do that. Jesus.”

“I just thought you might be hungry.” The last word broke on a sob.

“Andi.”

He pulled her toward him and pressed her to his chest, and for a moment he stood that way, shocked and unsteady. Her hair under his mouth was so soft; and he stroked it with his hand. He knew he shouldn't—he could not let this go further than it already had—but he pressed his lips to the top of her head. When he began to breathe in the smell of her he pushed her out away from him.

“I didn't, ah, mean to hurt your feelings. I'm sorry, okay?”

She nodded and bit her lip.

“You just could have got hurt is all. Okay? What you got there for me. Did you throw on some mashed potatoes and beans? I like those green beans. Come on now, you look cold. Let’s go on up to the truck and eat a little something.”

Andi trudged toward the gate and Zuck bent to pick up the chainsaw. While he looked it over for damage he tried to catch his breath, slow his heart. The chainsaw was surprisingly unscathed, and he laid it beside the tree.

Andi sat cross-legged in the truck, two plates balanced on her knees. She pulled two cartons of coleslaw from the sack, opened them both and placed them on the plates and handed him one. Then she pulled a bottle opener from the sack and reached under the seat, where she produced two bottles of Mountain Dew. She crooked them in her fingers and opened them both and swigged from one.

Then she reached over and slowly slid the bottle down between Zuck’s legs, right up against him. His head snapped up, and she was smiling. He instinctively looked in the rearview; all he saw were the farmhouse in the distance, and Ice, laying on the tailgate, head resting on her paws. Zuck took a bite of his chicken, chewed slowly, and stared straight ahead, wiping his hands on a napkin. In his peripheral vision he could see that she stared straight ahead, too.

But she still smiled.

When Zuck finished his sandwich he jumped out of the truck and slammed the door. Ice leapt down and followed him back inside the gate. While Zuck stood sizing up the branches he’d felled, Andi appeared beside him, too close. He stepped away from her.

“Here, why don’t you start stacking these branches for me. You can drag them out and throw them in the bed.”

She blinked at him.

“You want some gloves? I got an extra pair in the glove box. Should be sitting right on top.”

He watched her turn and head for the truck. When she returned to his side, gloves on, a little more distance between them this time, she squinted up at him.

“Why do you always carry a gun, Zuck?”

“What makes you think I always carry a gun?”

“Because I know you do. I've checked out your car, and I've seen them in the house.”

“I like you better when you don't ask questions.”

“Can't learn without asking.”

“Some things you don't need to learn. Anyway, seems like you already know a thing or two more than you should.” He went back to the place where he'd left the saw, and called back over his shoulder, “Try to keep up with me, okay? I want to get out of here.”

When the final branches were stacked and Zuck had raked around the stones, he leaned against the fence. Andi sat in the passenger seat with the door open, feet on the running board. She smoked, and looked around.

“Pretty peaceful place.”

He wiped at his face with his sleeve and looked at her for a moment. She returned his gaze, unflinching, and lit a cigarette.

“Where do you get money for smokes? And your Mountain Dew?”

She exhaled heavily, then tried absently to blow a smoke ring.

“I was working for a while at this rich old folks' home over on the west side. I made okay money there, and I saved a lot of it, but I lost my job when I got picked up

and put away again. I've been living on it for a while. It's about run out." She dragged on her cigarette, and Zuck watched the pucker of her mouth on the filter.

"You going to try to get another job?"

She hopped out of the truck and pushed the door shut, then walked back through the gate. "I got to do something, I guess. Problem is, it doesn't take long for the cops to find me when I start working. Social security number triggers something. I've been looking for something under the table. Something that doesn't involve taking my clothes off for money. Got any ideas?"

Zuck stood up. She didn't wait for him to answer, but looked around at the graves, read some of them aloud as she passed. She stopped in front of Jenny's.

He couldn't remember whether it bothered him when he was young. He and Hammerhead just ran. The loft over Hammerhead's mom's garage was home base, nothing could touch them up there. They sold everything they could get their hands on and inhaled or ingested everything they could buy with the profits. Blond hash was Hammerhead's particular flavor, Quaaludes for Zuck, and black beauties for both of them, which they swallowed by the handful.

They jacked off side by side, pictures spread in front of them, and sometimes gave each other a hand if the getting was slow. They swapped girlfriend to compare notes and laughed when they cried. They hustled at the pool hall on Euclid and 2nd and when the old boys caught on to their game, they hid out at Schizophrenic Sue's, a heroin connection they kept on the line for friends, who lived three streets over.

They never wanted to fight, but they did. Chicanos, blacks, whites, Italians. Old dudes and young. Hammerhead once took a broken bottle across the cheek for telling a

bar maid that he'd heard her pussy smelled like the Des Moines River. She came across the bar for Zuck but he ran down the street, around the block, and back to the 1968 Camaro they had hopped up with parts they stole from the old man. When he got back to the front of the bar Hammerhead was running down the sidewalk, shirt and pants bloody. Zuck opened the door for him at 20 miles per hour and dragged him halfway down the street until he got in. Zuck stitched him up with a fishhook back at the clubhouse. Some girls were waiting at the movie theatre downtown.

He and Hammerhead had matching tattoos they got from a kid named Henry. Henry was only fifteen—a year younger than Zuck and Hammerhead at the time—but he worked for Tattoo Tim on the Southside and was on his way to legendary, mainly because he had no fingers. He was the baby of six kids from the northside, whose mother was a full-blood Indian, Sioux or something. The mother fell on hard times after her husband died on some train tracks, gagged and bound with another woman. The Sioux mother slept in a van with the six kids for a winter when Henry was just a baby. She left him uncovered one night while she got some love from her brother-in-law in his car, which was parked behind the van. Baby Henry got frostbite and lost every one of his fingers.

Zuck never fully believed this story until Henry's older sister, whose name he could no longer remember, confirmed it above the Conoco after the first time they consummated their short-lived romance, and she asked him about the tattoo on his left shoulder blade. As she snorted and exhaled from the joint they shared, she assured Zuck it was true.

Fifteen-year-old Henry's fingers were grotesque nubs, most of them severed under the first knuckle, but enough there that he could grip a tattoo gun. Zuck and Hammerhead went to Tim's shop a few times to watch him—plenty of people did—awed

and repulsed by the boy's gift. He could replicate anything, or sketch it on the spot to specification, his right hand curled on the gun, a cloth to wipe the blood and ink hooked in his mangled left hand. The thing was, he didn't look like an Indian like the rest of them. He looked like a cherub, with shaggy blond hair and wide blue eyes.

Zuck and Hammerhead got a hammerhead shark with a mermaid in its mouth. The inscription around it read, in script, *No Mercy*.

No, he didn't suppose Jenny bothered him much on those days. Now she was like tumor. He could shrink it back, if only he could make the yard go.

As the truck grumbled north she lit a cigarette and cracked the window, then sat back and sighed deeply. They talked over the low hum of the radio for a while, small observations on the streets and shops and empty lots they passed, the downtown Younkers where the old ladies in the fur department would let her come in and try on coats, the Quik Shop where the clerk had chased her out three weeks before because he realized she'd been stealing cartons of cigarettes for weeks, holding them under her arm right in from of him as she bought Tootsie Pops and bubble gum. One had slipped to the floor and he'd hopped over the counter and chased her all the way up the street. She said she felt bad she didn't pay for the candy that time. She turned it down and told him about her brother, who was younger and *adorable*, and still with her mother and stepdad.

"Pops isn't partial to little boys, just girls, so he got to stay."

Zuck didn't dare ask her to explain, he knew what she meant and it made him sick to think that now he was someone who liked little girls, too. Wasn't he? Wasn't he now the kind of guy whose back he would have liked to break when he was in The Walls?

He could see how in some instances you couldn't help but break the code.

She talked about the house where they had lived, in a nice neighborhood north of town, in the suburbs. They had lived in cities before, she said, but never like she was living in the city now, with nothing but what she stole to eat half the time and girls who were bigger and meaner than any man and cockroaches and rats in every kids' home and foster home and all the crappy little apartments where she crashed. She'd had a couple of boyfriends, she said, who beat her anyway—jealous types—and she had an outgoing personality, you know?

She asked if he'd like to hear a poem she wrote and he said that he did and she cleared her throat, then her voice rose and fell almost like she sang it and it almost choked him.

Visions fall with night's descent
 these journeys that the mind invents,
 the ageless lands await our sweet liaisons
 Portraits rise from a lover's gaze
 hope blooms from the golden haze
 a blooming breeze of peace resists invasion
 Move to roam among the brave
 and sighing hearts that have engraved
 courageous names upon the walls of freedom
 Interlace your hand through mine
 symbolize our souls entwined
 from miles of struggle searching for our home

Every sound had died away, even the exhaust of the old truck and he asked her to say it again, slower, and she did. When she was finished she smiled at him, waiting, he knew, for him to say something. He kept thinking about the words "liaisons," and "courageous," and marveled that "The Walls" was in the poem, but in a free way—the walls of freedom—almost as if she read his thoughts, as if she knew what he needed to hear. He didn't know what the other words meant and he wanted to ask her but first he wanted to tell her how beautiful it was, how beautiful she was, without sounding like a fool or frightening her because he himself was terrified, filled with such want that he was

afraid he could crush her, body and soul, with his want, could actually squeeze the life from her. He saw in that moment how a boy would hurt her, would want so bad to keep her for himself that he could not help but hurt her.

"That was real pretty, Andi. Beautiful, I'd say." He swallowed. "You wrote that all by yourself, with your own words?"

She nodded, "I got a bunch of them, but that one is my best, I think. It came all by itself like it just guided the pen, like *Stairway to Heaven* came to Robert Plant. Did you know that?"

He laughed—even as he thought, *she has to go, I have to get her away from me*—he heard himself say, "You like Zeppelin, do you?"

She said she did, and a whole lot of other people, songwriters and poets, and she wanted to write even better stuff, for instance, she said, not long ago she saw a cop lurking on University Ave., giving her the stink eye, so she ducked into the university library and headed straight for the poetry where this time she found a dude named Verlaine who spun the coolest rhymes and she'd written one down—because it had reminded her of Zuck—but this was all she could remember:

*You believe in coffee grounds
Tea-cup omens, gambler's chance
I believe in your eyes' dance
I believe in colored hours
Blues and rose, when your delights
Are bared for me through sleepless nights*

Good christ, she had to go. He racked his brain, flipped through the phone book of his mind, searching for someone he knew who would take her in, a woman, maybe, who would take care of her without giving her up to the system, where she obviously didn't belong or at least didn't want to be. He came up empty. He pressed hard on the brake at the stoplight at Army Post Road, and looked sideways at her.

"Andi, we got to come up with a plan for you, baby."

Baby again. Her eyes were wide when she looked back at him, the gray like liquid mercury, a dangerous substance, a potion. He looked over the steering wheel and wished to hell it would hurry up and turn to green

"What do you mean, a plan?"

He pushed out a long breath.

"You mean I got to go. Right? Yeah. Okay, I get it. I know that story. No problem. You said I only had a little bit of time, right? I know. I just thought, ah—"

He pressed the gas and kept his eyes on the road and his hand on the clutch to keep from touching her hand or her leg or anything that would keep her from crying because Jesus he didn't want her to cry but she was definitely crying.

"—Andi, I don't want you to go but you're just a kid, baby, and I got to—"

"I ain't a kid! See? I haven't been a kid for a long time. In fact"—her voice was hard, suddenly angry—"why don't you pull this truck over and I'll show you just how much of a kid I'm not, okay? I'm not like other girls, Zuck, can't even talk to other girls. But I know how to talk to you, don't I? You like to talk to me, like to have me around—"

She had unbuckled her seat belt and slid across the bench where she turned and slid her leg against his, placed her hand on his chest, pressed wet lips against his neck. He grabbed her hair and pulled her away from him and she slid back over, wiped at her face, and looked out the window.

Zuck pulled into the Tap N Tonic and left the truck running. Ice sat at attention in the truck bed and eyed him with what looked like a scold, and he cursed her and went inside. A few minutes later he came out with a paper-bagged bottle and a Mountain Dew, which he opened with the interior latch of his door and handed to Andi. She thanked him

softly and took it from him, drank long from it, held it between her knees, and lit a cigarette.

When they passed the yard Andi asked where they were going, her voice shrill, panicked. She asked if he was going to take her back to the home and he said he would never do that and she began to cry and tried to open her door latch but he reached across and wrenched her hand from it and hollered for her to just fucking calm down already.

"There's something I want to show you."

She crossed her arms over her breasts, difficult in the puffy coat, and her gaze darted everywhere as if she still looked for a way to jump out of the truck. When he turned into the neighborhood she relaxed a bit, rolled down the window and lit a cigarette, told him she knew some people who lived around here somewhere. He nodded, and pulled into the driveway in front of the small blue house. When he got out she didn't ask where they were, just got out and followed him.

The garden had declined, but still looked like a masterpiece of foliage. Fall had all but depleted the colors, but the plants seemed to huddle together, to be stubbornly upright but dependent on a neighboring stalk. Zuck tried again to imagine the old man caring for it. Andi asked if this place belonged to him.

"I don't know. Sort of. Listen, come spring this will all be in bloom again. It needs somebody to enjoy it. You ever want someplace to just hang out and write your poems, or you want to pick some flowers—hell, I think there's even some berries in there—you can come here. I'll even make sure there's a bench for you by then. Maybe you won't know me anymore, maybe you won't want to. But as long as that garden's there you can have it, you can even call it yours."

She put out her hand and laced her fingers through his.

He said there's an old man who lives in the house, and takes care of the garden. But that old man wouldn't ever pay her any mind. He'd make sure of that. The house belonged to an old man, he said, but the garden was mostly his own.

She walked around it, stroked a few of the brittle leaves, ran her hand lightly along the thorns on the bare rose bushes.

When they pulled in to the yard she reminded him to drop her at the trailer door, to keep her out of sight. He got out to unlock it for her, and waited while she petted and kissed Ice over the top of the tailgate, then went in without a word.

He was still wrapped up in her when he pulled around the trailer and behind the garage, so that at first he didn't notice that Grunt's van was parked on the side. Ice jumped out when he let down the tailgate and he was unloading the tools into the shed when Dave-o appeared, huffing.

“Zuck, man, all kinds of shit gone down. Cops was here and—“

Zuck set down the leather bag, and the old paranoia tightened his gut and he had to remind himself he was clean. Except the guns. And Andi.

“What?”

“Cops came and broke up Grunt and Curtis because they was going at it and—“

Zuck slammed the tailgate closed and headed for the garage. “Keep up with me and keep talking.”

“I think Grunt busted Curtis's jaw.” Dave-o wheezed so hard he could barely get the words out.

“Where the hell is Curtis now?”

“I think he went to get it looked at somewhere. Maybe the hospital, I don’t know. It was hanging and bleeding and he couldn’t close it or nothing—“

”—and what the fuck was Grunt doing here, I told every one of you dumbfucks he wasn't allowed back, I told you—“

”—Zuck, he said he was here for some parts he'd left for his van, was riding with some other dude, we was just going to let him come in and get what he needed, Old Walt and me was following him, watching him. He started saying a bunch of shit about some girl running around here, said she got you all tangled up and that's why he got fired, then Curtis told him to shut the fuck up about things he don't know nothing about—“

So Grunt and Curtis knew.

Zuck walked into Bay 3. The young guys were ducked under the hood of a black ‘79 Chevy Malibu, which Zuck didn’t remember being on the spec sheet. He would check on that just as soon as he figured this mess out. He headed for old Walt, who was sitting inside a Pontiac in Bay 2, and had just fired the engine when Zuck got to the driver side and motioned for him to shut it down. Old Walt killed the ignition.

“Walt, what the fuck went down here?”

Dave-o stood on the other side of the Pontiac and opened his mouth again, his face reddening. Zuck held up a hand at him. Old Walt turned his turtle head up to Zuck and for the first time he felt the urge to holler at the old man to speed it up for chrissakes, he didn’t have all day but he breathed in through his nose instead.

“They got into it.”

“I know that, Walt. About what? And who called the goddamn cops?”

“I don’t know.”

Zuck fought back the urge to drag the old man out of the car and shake him.

Dave-o shouted, “Zuck. I’m telling you, just listen—“

“Shut up, Dave-o. I want to hear this from Walt.”

Zuck opened the door and motioned for old Walt to get out. He leaned on the Pontiac and tucked his hands into his armpits, and squinted at Zuck.

“Nothing but shit for brains, them two. Grunt showed up hollering about some girl, then Curtis tried to shut him up and Grunt went off saying that Curtis stole a radio out of his van. Curtis said Grunt was trying to set him up. Grunt pushed him out in the yard. Curtis didn’t have much chance but he held him off for a little while. Curtis got up and started towards his car. Grunt suckerpunched him and he went down. I threw a hammer and got Grunt in the back, then he went down.” He nodded to indicate he was finished.

“Can’t believe you *found* a hammer, you blind old sumbitch.” Dave-o pouted.

“Dave I said shut the fuck up. Who called the cops?”

“I don’t know.” Old Walt shook his head.

Zuck kicked the Pontiac’s front tire.

“This thing ready to move out?”

Old Walt nodded.

“Dave-o, whyn’t you get this thing moved out to the line and bring in whatever’s next.”

Dave-o shouted, “I don’t know what’s next. Curtis had the list.”

“Well then just move the goddamn thing out to the line.”

Zuck scratched at his jaw as he walked through the bays and into the office. He snatched the lists that were still tacked, items scratched out, and sat down at the desk to decipher what was done and what wasn’t. They’d gotten quite a bit done, from the looks of things. He wondered what time it all went down.

He looked out the window to the road that ran alongside the yard on the south end. Across the street were two tiny houses that had been there as long as he could remember. One was boarded up, had been for years; the other was painted bright blue—almost neon—and had maybe twenty Mexicans living in it. A whole mess of brown children chased each other in the dirt in front of the house, which was maybe ten yards square with a tired old willow tree drooping in the middle of it. Just then he was glad they were there. He felt a little calmer.

He stood and opened the door, and hollered for old Walt. When the man appeared in the doorway Zuck motioned for him to sit down at the desk.

“Got grease on me, Zuck. I’ll stand.”

“Who talked to the cops?”

“I did.”

“What did you tell them?”

“Exactly what I told you, except the stealing part.”

Zuck nodded. “They say they were going to do anything about it? They coming back?”

“Didn’t say. But there’s something them other boys don’t know. We got two units missing from the east end. Just up and disappeared overnight.”

Zuck stared at him.

Walt went on, “And three more of em’s moved. And the radios in two of them units in the garage is loosened up. I checked them after it all went down today.”

Fuck all. Zuck paced, his breath coming in swells, and he let out scream that was as if it had come from someone else’s guts, far away. This thing was never going to work. Nothing was going fucking work and he was going to lose it, lose all of this because he

couldn't make it work, in fact had thought he could make it work using the mechanical magic of a common thug, someone he knew to be every bit as crooked as he had been.

He swung and punched the wall beside the door and the chimes jangled and seemed vibrated every nerve in him. If this shit didn't calm down quick he was going to end up high for sure. He had to get it under control, all of it. He had to figure out how to get it under control.

"You know about the girl?"

"Yes. Why I took you out to your dad's garden. Thought it might give you something. I don't know, Zuck. You're a good kid. You just ain't seemed to figure out the right thing—"

"—who else knows?"

"I expect we all do. Seen her creeping around. First time I seen her I thought she was probably the one thieving. I don't think that now."

"What do you think?"

Old Walt said he didn't know what to think but he expected the best thing to do was get that girl on down the road. Send her where she came from, call her people. Buy her a bus ticket. Put her up in a hotel if he had to.

"I can't afford that, Walt. You know that."

"You can't afford what's coming down the line for you if them cops find her up in your place."

Zuck folded his arms and lit a cigarette. Old Walt raised his eyebrows and adjusted the fedora but said nothing and lit one of his own.

"You know anything about the Malibu them boys are working on?"

"Nope."

They both stared out the window for a moment.

"You think Curtis is the one who's been—"

"—yup."

"Alright."

He sat down at the desk and made some notes on the pages in front of him, and Walt headed back into the garage. Zuck made a few rounds through the bays, then checked the cars on the line. Four were ready to go, including the Omni and the Pontiac. He went to make some rounds in the yard, and mulled over the events. He thought about how Curtis had said he'd stay late all week to make up for the hours he missed. And there was the weird apology. Grunt wasn't setting up Curtis, his brains were too scrambled to pull it off. He thought again about Rocco. Grunt and Curtis both knew him. Everyone did. There was no reason to think Rocco didn't have a hand in something

He went to unload the truck. As he locked the shed he thought again about Andi, back to when he first found her, and she asked if he was going to call the cops on her. It was the only time, other than the night he scared her while she slept, that he'd ever seen her afraid. If juvie was anything like the Walls, he could see why. But he had to send her somewhere, even just for a little while, until things calmed down. Until he could regain control.

He went back inside the garage and told the men to go home, then told the boys the get the goddamned Malibu out of there and don't bring it back unless they were paying themselves for the work and him for the parts. He locked up and went back to the truck for the bottle of whiskey. As soon as he kicked off his boots inside the trailer door he knew she was gone. It was dark except for the light over the kitchen sink, and he squinted into the room for a note. It was on the coffee table. He sat on the couch and cradled the bottle, still in the bag, in one hand, and took the note with the other.

Zuck,

I got a place to stay tonight but I couldn't take all my things, just a bag of clothes. I'll come back for the rest as soon as I can. I know you'll keep them safe. And I guess since you're the only one staying at your place I'd know who to ask if something came up missing. My books are in one of the bags so be extra careful if you can. I understand you couldn't let me hide out forever. Thanks for taking me with you today.

*Love,
Andi*

He unscrewed the cap on the whiskey.

The days at the yard bled together and for the life of him Zuck could not bring himself to give a shit about any of it. Nights were filled with drink and every goddamned thing he could think to keep his mind from Andi, other than getting high. Curtis, whether through word of mouth or due to injury, did not come back, and neither did the cops, which didn't surprise Zuck. They didn't give a shit about folks in the Bottoms trying to kill each other.

The yard seemed by some miracle to pull itself together, to tighten up at the seams. Walt took on more and surprised Zuck with what he could do, and Dave-o was learning all kinds of new skills, mostly from the punk kids who still hung around and worked remarkably fast, and made few mistakes. Units suddenly moved quickly, a few to the auction, several to the dealerships, two to individuals, and Rocco committed to buy more than he'd promised. Much as Zuck wanted to distance himself from the fat bastard he knew he needed him for now, and anyway, it was all about keeping your enemies close, wasn't it?.

Zuck and Walt and Dave-o worked twelve-hour days to get the work out and he'd told the two nameless boys they could work on their hot rods in Bay 3 at night as long as they stuck around and did good work during the day.

He still didn't know their stupid names.

The birds were hand delivered by truck, in a crate. The female had a black head and tail, with white body and wings; the male had a black head and body, with brown and black speckled wings. They warbled and cooed in the crate, and when he took them to the loft and broke it open they strutted to the water bowl as if this loft had always belonged to them. When they had finished drinking he stroked each one and placed them in the cubbies. He wondered what Andi would have named them.

Zuck and Old Walt went back to the pound and picked up another dog, some kind of lab with a Rottweiler head and long, gangly legs, a mongrel that sprawled all the way out in the truck bed on the way back to the yard and wiggled around like a little girl whenever someone came near him. But the pound had said he was a good mix of breeds for watchdogging and in any case Ice needed company, especially now that Andi was gone. Two dogs were better than one at securing the yard anyway, and this dog was younger than Ice, would probably train up good.

Zuck set about working on the boundaries in the afternoon, returned to his evening dinner schedule, and began at night to trawl the Horseshoe and the Copa and a few other little watering holes in between for a tolerable and inexpensive piece of ass. His heart wasn't really in it but his dick was, and one week he was successful with three women, one right after another, a winning streak, and in the end their faces and bodies all bled together too and every time he tried to conjure their names he could only come up with Sharri's, which made him consider the possibility that he was drinking more than he should.

Andi formed a pure nerve ending right under his skin, so that when something nicked at a memory or idea, a scent of her his whole body edged against him and the place at the base of his spine ached. Nights he was home he felt such an urgency to claw

through her bags and read her papers that he moved every item from the hall closet into his bedroom closet, tied the Hefty sacks together, and mashed them inside the newly empty hall closet so that it would be a struggle to pull them out again.

But it was no use. She had been gone three weeks when he sat in an uncomfortable blur on the couch, a vague eye on *The Love Connection* with Chuck Woolery, who said he'd be back in two and two, the middle and index fingers held up front and back, his signature. Zuck had lifted until he could barely press the bar back into place, he'd showered and had every intention of going out—there was a new waitress at the Horseshoe—when *The Love Connection* returned and a contestant said she *just loved poetry*, had been writing poetry since she was a *young, romantic girl* and was looking for *just that special guy to write about*.

He tore the bags out of the closet with such force that he fell against the opposite wall, then dragged them to the couch, where he pulled at the plastic carefully, so as not to rip them, and plunged one hand into both at the same time. He pulled out a notebook with his left hand, then another, then another, and stacked them on the coffee table. The one on top had reams of flowery garland printed in it, and seemed to be something like a diary, beginning with dates two years earlier. The first page had only a few short entries.

1-12-84, *Greyhound bus to Minneapolis*

I got this new journal from Donnie. He brought it to me at the station, and actually cried when I hugged him goodbye. I love him, but not like that, so it's a good thing I'm leaving anyway. Roulette told me to quit coming around anyhow, since it just breaks Donnie's heart every time I leave. I guess she'd know, being his mother. What can I do? He rescues me, plus he's really gentle when we...

On my own now, though. Don't know what's on the other end, other than Lisa's friend Cory. I've never even met him! But Lisa says he doesn't mind hiding me out for a while. I wonder if he'll expect me to put out. Oh well, gotta do what I gotta do. After that last meeting with P.O. Pat and Oh No Mister Bill, it looks like I'll be hiding out for awhile, unless I want to spend the next five years upstate, pushing a tray and sleeping in a bunk bed.

Oh, this boy just came up to me and said he wrote a poem about me while I was sleeping outside Mankato! It's beautiful.

I don't know what sentient means but I plan to look it up just as soon as I can find a dictionary. He gave me his parents' address, too, in case I want to write. Sweet, sweet boy, I think he was about eighteen? Too bad he wasn't cute.

I miss Lisa so much. She promised she'd write every day but I know she won't. Maybe she will. I just wish we could stay together.

1-20-84

Cory is SO NICE. He says I can call whoever I want, he taught me how to make fried chicken, and he says he's pretty sure he's gay, which a good thing, since he is NOT attractive. We watch the same soaps during the day, and he works at some factory at night, comes home smelling like death itself. Meat packing, he says, which I have a hard time picturing. He also gets stoned every day, and doesn't mind sharing. I could stay here for awhile.

2-11-84

Cory is not gay. Lisa sent me a ticket and I leave tomorrow. I don't know where she scraped up the cash but sure as hell glad she did. Cory is like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, and a mean drunk.

Zuck closed the book, his stomach churning up images of all the men around her, a swarm. And why wouldn't they? Did he think he was the only one who saw she was beautiful? And what was she doing in their beds when she was thirteen? She had said her old man was a pervert, "into little girls." Zuck guessed he'd taught her well if she was getting around like that.

He got up and fetched the whiskey from the kitchen and sat back down, an image of her sitting with a rank ugly bastard watching *Young and the Restless* and taking turns at a bong. Jesus, the girl was trouble on top of trouble. Good fucking riddance.

But he couldn't stop himself. He slid a slender blue notebook that looked brand-new out from under the pile, and saw that he had selected well; the first dates were from earlier that year, and it was all poetry.

*My heart bleeds emptiness
But the jailer doesn't hear
Only you can feel the sound*

*Of my broken crystal tear
 Together we pull at the chains
 Freedom's just ahead
 Run faster on the crushed glass road
 Before our souls are dead*

Girl definitely knew about being locked up, and sure as hell was a runner. He admired her, and couldn't help but wonder how she staged her escapes. He flipped through the pages until he found one from September.

*Satan and God in a time of fraud
 Are we believers, or is it a lie
 Paying the price with sugar and spice
 I'm smiling and I don't know why
 Time and again, we lose and we win
 The fight ain't much fun anymore
 I'm getting' down from the merry-go-round
 And hoping you don't close the door*

This one belonged to him, he could feel it. The girl was right, she wasn't like other girls her age, and it was no wonder she couldn't talk to them because this girl had the heart of a pure grown woman, could read his thoughts. She could see what he was trying to do at the yard, could see him wrestling with god and satan, all wrapped up in Jenny like he was, and his addictions. But how were they paying the price with sugar and spice? He'd have to ask her about that one. But surely she smiled because of him, in spite of herself. She knew what it was like to lose and win, and what had he done? He had closed the door right on her, right when she was trying to let him know she got him. She got him.

He read the next one, and felt sick.

*Whispering long-old melodies
 Alone again in a strange land
 I'm lost again and searching
 For answers I can understand
 The doves that were my company
 Now have flown away
 I hope that they will return soon*

*To guide me on my way
 The wind that blows is bitter
 The sun is falling low
 A winter night blacks out the sky
 I have nowhere to go
 In my cold-night dreamland
 You lead me to your bed
 Show me the silken violence
 Of things we've dared not said*

He put the books back inside the bag.

Zuck sat on the couch and leaned, his elbows pressed into his knees, his eyes on the TV but oblivious to the news that that flashed on it. The sound was turned off. He swigged from the bottle of Jack. Why would Andi go there? The girl wasn't a doper. Was she? And of all places, that one. He didn't know Angelo, but he knew of him—more important, he knew that house. It was a place he had no business going. Three years, seven months, and fourteen days was a long time to keep his car on the track, just to throw it away by walking straight back to the pipe. Old Walt had told him not to even think about going after her, right after he told him what he had heard from Dave-o, which Dave-o had heard from his crackhead sister, who had seen a young girl hanging around Angelo's and didn't want a pretty thing distracting her man, or interrupting her connection. If Andi actually was hanging around there she had no idea what she was getting into, especially if she was on some crack-whore's territory.

He thought of all the things she'd told him over the weeks she'd stayed—the stepfather, the people she knew, the places she'd stayed, the boyfriends that had drug her around, her hiding places. He'd let himself get tangled up in her. Her face, her stories, her company, her laugh, her stupid books had swept him up and now he missed her and now

he was afraid for her and now what the fuck was he going to do. He just wanted to put her back together, keep her for his own. But his own what? That was the thing. She wasn't a car. She couldn't be his daily driver, couldn't be his show piece.

But he couldn't leave her at Angelo's. He set the bottle on the coffee table. He needed to think.

Zuck pulled the Colt out from under the kitchen sink and loaded it, locked the trailer, and let the dogs out, then went to the shed and pulled out an old fishing hat that had been the old man's. He took the black '78 Buick Regal from the finished units that were lined up on the south side of the garage, awaiting Tow Joe. He'd had the Mark VII long enough that somebody would recognize it. As he headed down 14th, then wound southwest through the neighborhoods, he tried not to think about being right up against the shit he'd left behind.

He thought about the silvery eyes, the way she'd kissed him the day he took her to the cemetery, and told her about Jenny. How on the way back she had begged him to see her as a woman and how he'd shoved her away, pulled her hair. How her hair fell forward as bent over a book, then swung back as she looked up to greet him. How she took his hand and held tight when he helped her back into the truck, then didn't let go when she sat down.

He parked in the alley that ran behind Angelo's, beside a garage at the other end of the block, then walked alongside the other garages and sheds that lined the alley until he reached the back yard of the house. There were three windows and a door, just as Dave-o had said there would be when he took him aside and gave him fifty bucks to figure out how to get in. An unsteady glow pulsed inside. He went to the far right window and tapped six times, pause, then three, pause, then one—with his fingertips, not his knuckles. He went to the door and stood on the concrete step, which was broken in

three places. Several minutes passed before the door bolts clicked and the door opened just a crack. He pushed it open, slid inside, shut the door behind him, and rebolted the door.

His eyes strained against the dark, interrupted by glows of lighter and torch fire held low, under the windows, which looked to be covered with black paper. As his eyes adjusted he realized the glass had been painted. The air almost choked him, it was so thick with the smog of cigarettes, cocaine, reefer, and the humid brine of unwashed bodies.

The sound of air sucked through glass vessels of all shapes and sizes swirled around him so the whole room was a storm of winds whistling through small places. The voices ranged from urgent to ecstatic as people took turns on pipes and bickered over who would get the last tiny specks of dust from a shared rock. A woman crawled on the floor and ran her hands over it, weeping. A man brushed against Zuck's sleeve and reached for his hand, offered deliriously, *hey man, what you want? I get it. What you want man...*

Zuck pulled away from him and stepped through the room, careful not to step on anyone. In a room down the hall he heard the quick, uncontrolled moans of several people, someone getting off, someone getting someone off, someone on their knees for one more hit. No way Andi could be in here. No way.

But he had to make sure.

He made his way toward an opening that looked like it might be the kitchen, where more light flickered. It was what was left of the kitchen. Three men competed for the fire of two gas burners on the stove, crowded against each other, vials in hand, the white liquid inside in various states of solidifying. They shook the Pyrex tubes, held them up, eyes wild. One man stepped back as his rock formed, and rattled it—softly, so as not

to crumble it—satisfied by the clink against the glass. Zuck guessed there was about a gram in there but he didn't want to look too long. The man moved over to the corner where a refrigerator had once stood. A woman crouched underneath him and took him into her mouth as he loaded his pipe, put the fire against it and inhaled, then loaded the still-hot vessel for her. She jumped up and took it, glaring as the rock melted too fast into the bowl. The man's cock lay like a dead rodent against his leg.

Zuck scanned the rest of the kitchen. There was a sink, but no counter around it—just a tall, unfinished wooden frame that held it in place. Three people crouched in another corner, one helping another tie off with what looked like a long leather belt that he or she—Zuck couldn't tell—wrapped around the recipient three times. Satisfied that it was tight enough, the figure crumpled against the wall and nodded. As Zuck moved closer he saw that the nodding figure had wet its pants. The other crouching person held the fire under the spoon, then prepared the rig, cooed at the arm that lay outstretched.

The smell of ether was a blanket wrapped over his face and the nerves in his body were a million severed wires that stood upright, electricity blaring from the ends of them, pounding current after current into the underside of his skin. The memory of the hit, the way it felt the first time, the way it exploded like an orgasm in his chest, how the music—*Simple Man*—unzipped his spine until his body was a coiling snake. Cold and weightless. How he wanted to be touched on every surface and orifice of his body. How he wanted to die, just like that, just in that way, preferably with his dick in someone's mouth.

He gagged and held his breath as he made his way back through the living room and walked around the perimeter. Some force wrestled in the base of his skull, something unnamable. The weight of his body pressed in on his bones.

Focus on the girl and get the fuck out of here.

“Andi. Andi you around in here? Hey I’m looking for Andi. Anybody know a little girl by that name? About this tall? Andi. Long dark hair. Hey I’m looking for Andi.”

“Andi a boy or a girl?” A woman offered from what looked like a lawn chair in the center of the room.

“A girl, I said. A girl. You know her?” Zuck stepped toward the figure. As he drew closer he lit a cigarette, then offered one to the sitting figure. The woman took it and thanked him. She looked like she was dead, rotting there in the lawn chair in the flaming room. Jesus Christ he had to get out of there. She dragged on the cigarette, then pointed over her shoulder with her thumb, toward the hallway where he had heard the moaning.

He stumbled sideways and squeezed through the smoking bodies to the hall, where he tried to count the doors—three? The one at the far end was closed but had the fewest number of people in front of it. He tapped on it.

From inside, “What the fuck, man, I’m shitting in here...aw, man...”

“I’m looking for somebody. A girl.”

“Well fuck, she ain’t in here. Wish she was.”

The man behind the door giggled, then a second voice laughed. Who knew if it was male or female but it wasn’t Andi. At the next door he just turned the handle. Inside, on the floor beside the door jamb sat a tiny lamp with no shade, the bulb dull in the gray-filled room. A black sheet hung like a closed eye over the window and three figures stood beneath it and passed a small bong. Reefer made the air sweet and Zuck was grateful for it. One figure sputtered as she passed the bong to the left, then laughed.

It was Andi. With a man who wore a floppy knitted cap and a woman in a hoody and a long skirt, maybe somewhere around twenty.

“Shut the fucking door dude.”

This from a girl in the corner who was maybe trying to sleep, with what looked like a coat thrown over her. Andi looked in his direction and looked away, she apparently did not recognize him. The stab of this annoyed him.

But he *was* wearing the hat. Did he look like the old man? Christ, was he being *her* old man? What was he doing? He didn't know what a father felt like chasing his little girl around town—playing over in his mind all the ways he would torture the poor bastard who might hurt her—but it must be something like this. He wanted to set a torch on every corner of the house, burn every scurvy geeker in the place and feed their charred bones to the dogs.

But there was that other thing. The rope that tightened between his chest and his groin every time her looked at her, every time she brushed against him. And this little fucker lighting the bong for her made Zuck want to tear the room apart. What was his problem? He didn't love her.

Oh Christ. Of course he did.

He was going to end up back in jail over this little bitch and get his throat slit or worse for the pedo collar, because he *loved* her? He dragged on his cigarette, which had almost burned down to the filter, and looked around the room. Another couple sat against the wall to his right, bent over something he couldn't see. He stared at the shadows of each face in the room. There was no one he knew.

He approached knitted cap boy and poked at his shoulder with his index finger. The man turned and threw his arm out as if to knock Zuck's away, but Zuck was faster. He caught his forearm and gave it a twist, then held him there. Knitted cap boy whined. Andi sputtered.

"Zuck? Holy shit. What are you—"

"—no girl, what are *you*? You know what this fucking place is? Huh? What are you doing here? And who are these dumbfucks? Talk to me. You geekin now? That what you're up to? Go ahead. Fill me in."

He dropped the butt on the thin carpet and stepped on it.

The girl who had been standing with them slipped out of the room while he was talking. He had a feeling he didn't have much time.

"Nevermind. Get your shit—"

"—You ain't going to tell me what to—"

"—Now."

"—do—let go of him. Please Zuck! He's a friend of mine. Come *on*."

She pulled at the grip of Zuck's fingers.

"Andi, you get your shit and come with me and I won't touch another fucking soul on the way out of this hellhole but I am telling you now things are going to get ugly here real soon if you don't come with me now."

She stared at him. Christ, he didn't have time for this. He heard shouting, then it moved closer, then the door banged open and he turned, dragging the man with him as he did.

A small man—maybe six inches shorter than Zuck—stood in the doorway. A cigarette hung from his mouth, and he pointed a calm, almost friendly smile at Zuck, along with a very handsome Beretta. Zuck dropped the arm and knitted cap boy retreated somewhere behind him, muttering.

"What's your problem man?" The cigarette bounced and the little man's voice was so slow it sounded like he was sleeping.

"I ain't got a problem, just somebody I'm taking with me, that's all. Andi, get behind me."

“Sure don’t seem like she wants to go with you.”

Long curls of light hair swirled around his head. He looked like Jesus, except for the steady hand that still held a gun so casual it could have been a bottle of Pepsi. Zuck’s hands felt like lead weights as he hoisted them up beside his face, fingers parted.

"Andi." He tossed this over his shoulder. "Last chance, baby. Come on."

The little man giggled.

"That your name, honey? You’re a pretty little thing. You know this is my house? And you can stay here all you want, fact, I got a couple eightballs down in my office I been saving for a few special friends."

Good Christ, so this was Angelo. He didn’t look like a spic to Zuck but how the hell should he know. He had to get out of here.

"Look motherfucker, I ain’t here to stir up shit but this girls’s mine, and she don’t need to be hanging around here. Do you know who the fuck I am? Listen—"

"—I know who you are. And I knew you’d be here. Curtis told me. And she don’t have to go nowhere with you if—"

"—Who? What the fuck did you just say?"

Angelo raised the Beretta until the barrel met Zuck’s eyes, and cocked it.

"I expect you’ll be on your way."

"Did you say Curtis? Curtis told you I’d be here."

"That’s right. To collect the girl."

Zuck brushed past him and out the open door, hands still raised, eyes blurred.

Outside the kitchen window snowflakes spun like there was no place to land and wind panted against every side of the trailer. Zuck smoked, and tapped his ashes into an orange speckled ashtray he'd dug out and placed on the window sill, in front of the Missouri license plate. It had been nine days since he left her at Angelo's. Her Hefty sack of clothes stood in the laundry alcove, leaks sprung into the sides and a stack of books toppling on the floor beside it. He'd looked through the stack a few days before, hoping he'd find some phone number or address, some shred that would say she could be somewhere else, she's not there, she ain't high or getting bent over the bathroom sink by that greasy spic.

He didn't find anything, except the leather journal, the strap tied in a knot. He picked it up a few times and looked over the bruised and stained cover—what the hell had she drug it through?—but didn't open it. He didn't know what he was afraid of, but the fear sickened and shamed him.

He drank.

He stayed out of the shop, except in late mornings when he would stop to ask if anyone had seen Curtis, or Grunt, and to give Old Walt instructions. The work was slowing again and he needed to get out and buy some units. Tow Joe had brought a few things by, he'd heard, but he hadn't answered the door when Old Walt came to get him, and he hadn't called Joe to claim anything for the yard. He guessed Joe probably found another home for them. He wished he cared.

It was Hammerhead's call that did him in.

Three days after the fiasco at Angelo's place, he'd worked on title transfers at the kitchen table. Coffee diluted the whiskey from the night before, when he'd mercifully fallen asleep with the bottle perched on his chest, cradled in one hand; in the other he'd held the remote control box, his thumb pressed on channel 36.

Slouched back that morning, legs crossed at the tube-socked ankles in front of him, he alternately chewed his pen, shuffled papers, and sucked at cigarettes until a sliver of sun shot through the window from the skyline past the viaduct. It felt like a puncture wound in his eyes. He rubbed them and saw, just as the phone rang, that the microwave clock read 7:03. He leapt out of his chair so fast that it fell backward into the iron railing that separated the living room from the kitchen.

"—lo."

"Har—I mean, Zucker."

Zuck had a hard time gripping the phone, and he could hear his own shallow breath bounce off the receiver.

"Zucker. You there?"

"Just Zuck, Hammer. Just, ah, Zuck's fine. What can I do you for."

His voice came out steadier than he felt, and he straightened up at the counter. Couldn't be nothing. What could Hammer want that could be so bad? Except it was seven in the morning. And he was a P.O. now. And Zuck had been in a crack house just a few nights before. And he didn't know who he could trust just now.

"Zuck, this is a courtesy call."

Zuck waited.

"I, ah. Got to talking to my partner here, my office partner, and, ah. He's Curtis Jackson's P.O."

Zuck turned the receiver upside down so that hammer couldn't hear his ragged breath, and the groan that hung in his throat.

"Curtis got sent up last week for a violation. Been talking. He says you got some girl staying with you?"

Nothing.

"A juvenile."

Nothing.

"Harm. Fifteen, I think he said?"

"I ain't got nobody staying here, Hammer."

"A pretty girl. About five-four. Brown or black hair. Goes by Andi—"

"—ain't got nobody around here like that, I told you. I seen a girl a few months back and I told her to get the hell out of here. She's come aorund a few times, stayed out in one of the cars—I told her to get on down the road—but I ain't seen her in about, ah, a week and a half."

"Huh. She ain't been staying up in your place."

"Hammer, what the fuck I'm going to do with a fifteen-year-old girl? Huh? I got enough problems." If that wasn't the truth.

Silence. Zuck realized he had been pacing, twisting the phone cord in his fingers, and now stood in front of the refrigerator. He opened it and stood for a moment, not seeing what was inside, then shut it. Back at the table he set the chair upright, lit a cigarette, and squinted at the smoke in his eye. Another was halfway burned in the ashtray.

Hammerhead's voice was quiet. "I guess I don't know, Harm. Here's what I do know. Why I'm making this courtesy call. That girl's a ward of the state. Supposed to get sent up to the girl's home and she run off—"

"—What's she done?"

"What?"

"The girl. What's she done? Just out of curiosity."

"I don't know. Way I understand it is she ain't done nothing, state's just run out of places to send her. She just keeps running. What difference does it make? Look, all I'm saying is I know you're trying to get straight, fix up the yard, make a life—"

"—What the fuck do you know about it, Hammer. Really, man."

"I know you're one pervert collar away from getting sent back up, Harm, and if they find that girl in your place that's exactly what'll happen. I'm doing you a favor, right? You got me? Don't ask why I give a fuck, but I'm just—"

"I'll tell you why you give a fuck, Hammer. You used to be me. And you ain't never going to be anything better than me, no matter what ass you kissed or dick you sucked to get that punk job of yours. If I see Annn—that girl—I'll tell her to run as fast and far as she can from you *and* your fucking pig posse. You got me?"

Out of breath, he stood in the middle of the kitchen and listened for the click on the other end.

After another week Zuck was sick of himself. He went back to the shop. No one had seen or heard tell of Grunt, and everyone knew Curtis was sitting up at county, awaiting his fate. He'd been caught with Whorrie (Lorrie, a coke whore from the north side who Zuck knew better than he cared to admit) and Blowis (Whorrie's better-looking sister Lois) at the Parasite Motel (the Paradise, also familiar) laying around cooking and smoking rocks in his skivvies. That would have been bad enough but the cops did a sweep, and they had Curtis on surveillance buying three ounces of coke from a man who called himself MoJo and stayed in room 13, so they had Curtis on intent to deliver.

Now Curtis was rolling over left and right. Through his bitterness, Zuck was sad over what Curtis had coming to him, whether he ended up at Iowa Corrections or back out on the street. Word had it he owed everyone, had been smoking more than he sold, and had been at the Parasite buying from MoJo trying to make up for the losses. He was so high when they picked him up that it took him almost twenty-four hours to crash, and when he did, he went into shock.

Much as Zuck was still tempted to get high these days—just say fuck it and go—that feeling, the total collapse of mind and body, still roiled in his gut. He never wanted to come down again.

But waiting for Andi to come home—back—was like coming down, like the long ache after the impact of the crash. He'd hoped, when he put the journals in the cupboard above the washer and dryer, he wouldn't feel so desperate to finish reading them. He'd never wanted to read a book in his life; now he couldn't get the covers out of his mind, the wrinkles and spots, the drawings, the large scrawl on the ones she'd tried to make pretty. He wanted to tape the places that were torn and bind the worn-out spines. He wanted to hear her read again, the way she'd read only for him.

There wasn't enough work at the shop to soften the edge of her against him, but he tried. He let go the two rumdums whose names he could never remember, so now it was down to only Old Walt and Dave-o, which was fine. They were working only three cars at a time now, and Zuck resigned himself to that pace as long as the blanket of grimy powder covered the ground. The quiet in the yard echoed through the city, and when he drove—to the bar, Albertson's Grocery, the Kwik Mart for cigarettes—he left the radio off most of the time. He couldn't stand that Andi jumped out at him from every song. Down every alley, at every corner, in every fast food and convenience store window, he

looked for the black swirl of her hair. At least once a day he saw her turn and smile from somewhere.

But he couldn't go back to Angelo's. Something in him knew if he went back he'd end up high, or dead, or high until he was dead.

He took up movies.

Rambo and *Raiders of the Lost Ark* played in what seemed like an endless loop on HBO for a week, and he memorized the better parts of both of them. Indy's line, "You want to talk to God? Let's go see him together, I've got nothing better to do" rang in his ears. And when Trautman says, "Look John, we can't have you running around out there killing friendly civilians," Rambo's "There are no friendly civilians" took him back to Angelo's, to Curtis turning on him, to Rocco's fat snarl and Grunt drooling on the ground. He had to shut off the TV.

It had been a month to the day and he stood for the hundredth time at the kitchen window and stared up the drive. Chicken noodle soup boiled violently on the stove; he took it off the burner and set the pan in the sink in front of him. He smoked three cigarettes, then leaned over the sink with a spoon.

After he showered he sat on the couch with a full glass of whiskey and a fresh cigarette. He smoothed back his wet hair and turned on the TV. There was still nothing on the TV. He fished playing cards out of the coffee table cabinet and played solitaire for a while, and thought about heading up to the Horseshoe. There was nothing there he wanted. Tralene had moved on—he didn't know where and he didn't ask—and the thought of bullshitting with the old boys around the bar nauseated him.

He'd do some laundry. He only had a pair of jeans, two shirts, a towel, and a few pairs of underwear. Then lift, which he hadn't done in weeks now.

But he went back to the closet instead.

He opened one of the books of poems, to a place **dated** two days after he'd first found her in the Brougham.

*Peering through the demigod within me
 Enveloped in whiteness
 Let's see how many demons can live in me
 Nothing holds to sentiment in this
 What would we be if I couldn't find it?
 What would I see if I fell behind it?
 I've been sleeping slowly
 Dreaming what I used to be
 In morning I was dormant
 At night I was alive
 You'll never know where I was sent
 The places I contrived
 I just can't wrap myself around me anymore, I am
 A woman-child, a virgin whore
 What would you know if you heard me crying?
 Where would you go if you climbed inside me?
 You'd find nothing in the world, you know
 Neurotic horses fly in there
 Sometimes they wear me out just so
 My sense of time's not much to bear
 I've amended nothing that I've done but
 Through wolves and oceans I have run
 What would you offer if I let you have it?
 What would come after the flowers you sent?*

She must have known from the beginning that he watched her through the window. In the poem she was trying to tell him something. Wasn't she? He had to be the *you*, the other part of the *we*. He didn't know what a demigod was but surely she knew he was the one peering through her. He wasn't sure about "contrived," either. Again, he cursed Sharri for taking the only dictionary. Even though it was hers to start with. He read the poem again, then laid the open pages on the coffee table and jumped up.

Aldi had a copy machine, and he was sure the sign that hung above it said **\$.50 PER COPY**. If he left now he could probably make it before they closed up for the night.

December clattered on coldly at the shop. Dave-o and Old Walt kept to themselves and got along most of the time, even had a few laughs over lunch. Zuck had little to say that wasn't car, truck, van, or invoice related. Tow Joe had brought him a beautiful Cutlass Supreme that had been banged up in a parking lot tangle with a Mack truck, the front end bashed in, hood wrinkled. The head was cracked and he was under the hood, trying to determine how much time he would put into her—she'd been an awfully nice car—when Old Walt hollered at him from the other side of the garage. It took a few times before Zuck realized he was talking to him, and hollered back that he'd be there in a minute, Jesus, and glanced across the garage to where Old Walt stood. He wiped around the cylinder head and something made him look again. A black head of hair seemed to glimmer from the office, just past where Old Walt stood, and Zuck hit his own head on the hood of the Cutlass.

He tried to clean up his hands as he approached the office. Old Walt talked to her, what sounded like questions, and Zuck tried to get a better look at her before she saw him. Nausea burbled in his stomach and he knew, just *knew* it wouldn't be her.

But it was her.

"Zuck, this little lady's asking for you. I told her you ain't seeing general public customers this time of year but she says she ain't." Walt waved his withered hand. "Ain't none of my concern but just so's you know, I tried to get rid of her."

"Yep, Walt."

His voice broke, and his face and chest grew hot. He straightened up as he crossed over the threshold.

"I got her. I ah, got it from here."

He knew the crooked old man stared at him. He didn't dare look him in the eye.

She looked terrible. Her mouth was dirty in the corners and it looked like her hair hadn't been washed for a while. She didn't wear a coat, only an oversized sweater with two quilted flannel shirts over it, unbuttoned. Her face was turned partially away from him and she peered at him sideways, eyes large in her face, which was thinner. He shut the door behind him and walked over to the desk, where he leaned for support, and crossed his arms. He wasn't going to be the first to say something. They both were still for what seemed like several minutes, until Dave-o burst open the door and Zuck jumped, ready to pounce on anything that came near her.

"What the fuck, Dave-o?"

"The whole fucking belt slipped off that Nova, Zuck, and I got—"

"—handle it—"

"—what?"

"I said fucking handle it, alright Dave? Get yourself to Runnels' Parts and figure it out. I'm busy."

Dave-o sniffed and looked Andi over, then turned on his wishbone legs and huffed out the door.

When Zuck turned back Andi he saw the black eye, and the cut above her cheekbone. She looked like she hadn't slept in a week and they stood with eyes locked until she looked away, then down.

"Um. I-I-I, um." She squeezed at her eyes with her thumb and forefinger, but it was too late. She shook, then put her face in her hands, and he didn't care who watched through the window. He pulled at her shoulders and pressed her face into his chest.

There was nothing, ever, like the feel of that girl and right then he was Superman, he was fucking David slaying Goliath, he was Rambo with a tiny bird cupped in his hand.

When she stopped crying, he traced the black eye and the cut with his stained fingers, and swallowed the pain in his throat. He gathered her hair behind her neck and pulled so she had to look up at him, fished a key from his pocket, and slipped it into the front pocket of the flannel shirt, brushing her breast as he did.

"Get a shower, and don't fucking do nothing until I get there. Okay?"

She nodded, pulling his hand back and forth with her head, and he dropped her hair and lit two cigarettes. She gave a half-laugh and wiped at her nose with her sleeve as she took one.

"Hey, Zuck?"

When she smiled up at him, bare animal face striped with tears, she was the prettiest thing he had ever seen.

Back in the shop, slants of yellow light illuminated every slow speck of dust so they flickered, a trillion small specks of light that floated over every gleaming iron and steel and wooden surface.

It was two hours before he could send the guys home and close up. Before he headed back to the trailer he slathered GOOP on his hands to work off the grease, then washed his face and hands with the bar soap in the bathroom. The man in the permanently streaked mirror grinned, then shook his head. He needed to think straight. He looked around at the cracked toilet lid, the rust-stained tile, the green-gray film in the sink. He should keep Andi out of here until he could get it cleaned up.

The back door to the trailer was locked. Darkness now clung to the shop, and headlights burned a stratosphere over the viaduct above the thin wisp of cold that lay over the yard. He said her name, then said it again for the pleasure of saying it out loud and believing she would be on the other side, then rapped on the door with light knuckles. When the door opened she was brushing her teeth. Fresh jeans clung to her hips and the

plain white t-shirt she wore betrayed everything underneath. The cross still on a leather chain around her neck. Bare feet. As he closed the door behind him and she headed back to the bathroom he wondered what it was like to live inside a body like that, to know that every inch of you made men ache. When she came back she had a lit cigarette in her hand, and the smoke wrapped a slow silver ribbon around her.

"I noticed you've been smoking in here, so I figured you wouldn't mind."

Her tone was different, harder, and she narrowed her eyes at him. He went to the refrigerator for a beer, and stopped in front of it. He'd forgotten about the poems, hadn't thought about what she might think if she saw them. He took his time turning around after he opened the beer.

"You got to be hungry."

He slurped at the can and looked at her, smoothing his face to a blank surface that he hoped was unreadable. He wiped at his moustache.

"Yeah, a little."

She stared past him to the pages taped onto the refrigerator and chewed at her lower lip.

"Whatcha got there, Zuck?"

She cocked her head and shifted her weight, then dragged on the cigarette, the filter buried deep in the pucker of her lips, deepening the hollow under her cheekbones. He didn't know what to say.

"Those are mine, Zuck. You don't have a righ—"

"—you left them in my house. While I been sitting here wondering how you were getting along out there in that fucking cesspool I left you in, you left your shit—"

"I know I left my shit, man. I know. But it's not you right to be reading my journals. They're private. My private thoughts and poems and junk like that."

She brushed past him and tapped her cigarette over the ashtray on the table. He leaned on the sink with one hand.

"Why'nt you light me one of those."

She did, and handed it to him.

"I'm sorry. Okay? I think they're really nice." Damn, that wasn't the word he wanted to use. *Nice*. "I mean they're real good. I think you're a real writer, Andi, you got something special there. You know what I mean? I mean. I think you could do something like that for real, you know, if you get yourself back in school. Some college someday would love to have a girl who could write stuff like that."

She sat in the chair and hugged her knees. Her fingers bent up the cigarette in the ashtray just so it would crush the cherry, no need to stamp it out, and he thought how careful her movements were. Everything on purpose.

"Who gave you that shiner. I hope the other girl looks worse."

She lit another cigarette, and bit at the end of her thumb.

"Wasn't a girl."

Goddamn it. Goddamn it and fuck all. He thought again about Grunt. He had wanted to kill him, had felt a cold blade of hatred pin him against the redheaded fuck for reasons he couldn't explain. He didn't know then how he would feel now. Now he felt like Lou Ferrigno, detonated muscles tearing through his clothes, a funnel cloud in his chest that pushed up a tortured green-faced scream. He leaned over the sink and rested his eyes on the license plates. Colorado, California, Wyoming, Oklahoma, Utah, Missouri. A dried handful of weeds she'd picked at the cemetery were stiff and colorless in the mason jar. The ash from his cigarette hissed when he tapped it into the drain, and he took a long drag.

Through a thick stream of smoke, "Who. Tell me who fucking done that to you."

"Just some guy."

"Some guy." He half-turned toward her. "Some guy who goes off and knocks around women just on account of what? Some guy who just hauled off and what. What?"

Another ash in the sink.

"Some guy I met at a party. I went to his place the next day because he told me I could come over and have some drinks with him if I wanted, he had a whole mess of vodka and wine coolers and stuff and I was, um. I was trying to come down. So I went."

"You were trying to come down. You ain't a real good listener, are you? And then what."

"I didn't want to sleep with him—"

"—ah, Jesus—"

"—so he told me to get the fuck out and pushed me down the stairs. They were wood."

"That's one way to come down."

Andi nodded. "Lisa's sister came and got me and I stayed at her place for a few days, but like I said, I can't keep staying there. It's pretty crowded."

"Where you been staying?"

"Around. Listen Zuck, I don't need this shit. If you don't want me here I'll go. My old boyfriend says he's got this friend down in Little Rock who'll put me up, and he'll buy me a ticket on the Greyhound—"

"—No, no. I, ah. No. You can stay here. We just got to figure something out."

She'd run for sure if he told her about Hammerhead. Her eyes were so soft when she looked at him that he felt a flutter against his skin and he trembled, then stepped to the table and crushed his burned-out cigarette into the ashtray. He had to get ahold of himself.

But he couldn't get ahold of himself.

He ran his thick fingers along the part of her black hair and she pressed her head against his hip. He combed through the damp strands and touched her white cotton shoulders and when she looked up at him she seemed to ask a question but she said nothing. Then she placed her hands on the sides of his legs and moved them up his thighs and he was afraid and sick with want and his hand tightened and made a rope of her hair.

When she began to unzip his jeans it took every muscle in his body, every piston and spark plug in his brain to take her hand and say her name and tell her *no*. No, what was she doing? That's not what he was letting her stay for. She didn't need to do that. Come on now. The words tunneled through his head but didn't know how his mouth made them and he stumbled back, his boot clomping on the yellow linoleum that suddenly shone like a strobelight. Everything was suddenly too bright.

In the bathroom he leaned against the locked door and took himself furiously, forehead wet, mouth slack, and when he was done he sat on the closed toilet and slumped over, elbows on his knees, and wept, the tears strange and somehow welcome. He heard the TV snap on and Pat Sajak announce that someone was buying a vowel, and there were two E's.

When he came out she was curled in an Z on the couch, head propped in the arm, biting her index fingernail. A cigarette burned in the ashtray.

"Stay...stay...of...stay of execution!" She waved at the TV for emphasis.

Pat Sajak repeated the contestant's request to solve the puzzle, which was in fact Stay of Execution.

"How'd you know that?"

"I don't know, I read a lot of stuff."

He told her to get up, they were going to Bonanza to eat some steaks, and she jumped up with a squeal and clapped her hands. Then her face fell and she sat back down.

He was hungry, and suddenly irritable.

"What."

She said she didn't think that was a very good idea because what would they do if someone saw her? So he said he would pick up the steaks and bring them back to eat but he'd have to go to Gino's instead because it was closer and did she want a baked potato and a salad. She said yes but no dressing. She hated dressing.

It began to snow again as the Mark cut through the hazy beams of streetlights and he turned on the radio and sang along with REO Speedwagon.

They could go anywhere. He could sell the yard, or maybe even find someone to run it for him. Old Walt, maybe. He could take her to another state, somewhere they could wait for her to turn sixteen, then she could get emancipated.

Emancipated. It was emancipated. It meant set free, like with the slaves.

He could set her free. He would be free, too, of the yard, of Jenny and the cemetery. Forget everything that was here, forget Curtis and Sharri and The Walls. He was still a young man. He was still a young man, and Andi had her whole life ahead of her, if he could just give her this chance. Nobody would ever knock her around again. She wouldn't get on the shit either, wouldn't need that. She could go to school.

He imagined a blue house with white shutters in a small town with ranches, maybe in Texas. He could build a shop and make his living fixing cars and he could learn how to fix the machines that broke down on the ranches. Andi would learn how to cook and go to the community college and work at the newspaper or write her poems or whatever she wanted and someday he would want to marry her, when she was ready. And

she would want to because she knew he loved her, had always loved her and had saved her from the twin hells of kiddie prison and the street.

Steeped in this fantasy, Zuck lit a cigarette and turned the Mark into the parking lot at Gino's, where he sent a cloud of breath and smoke into the air with satisfaction as he got out of the car.

Andi ate everything on her plate, plus six garlic rolls, a handful of mints, and two glasses of milk from the gallon he'd bought on the way home. She had one of his old shirts wrapped around her and she sat shrugging at the table, for warmth or comfort, he didn't know. She watched him eat.

"Why'd you make copies of the poems, Zuck?"

He chewed slowly, sipped at his whiskey without looking at her, and cut another bite of steak. He'd noticed when he came home that she had taken down the poems that were taped to the fridge.

"I don't know. Trying to figure you out I guess." He put the bite in his mouth.

"Why'd you pick those?"

Now he looked at her. Had he picked the wrong ones? Maybe they were about someone else, or something he hadn't yet thought of.

"I don't know. I liked them." He buttered a roll.

"Where are the journals now?"

He pointed at the laundry alcove.

"Why'd you put them there?"

"Keep em safe."

She went to the sink and rinsed her plate, then cleared the rest of the table. When he was finished he handed her his plate and sat back, sucking at his moustache.

Andi wiped down the table, went to the alcove, and got the books down from the cupboard. She took a Bic pen from the drawer beside the refrigerator, shoved the lei that sprung out pink and bright back inside, and sat down again at the table, where she opened the purple fabric-covered book with the vertical rows of flowers. There she scribbled something, looked up at him, and scribbled again.

He grinned, then just as quickly, frowned. Of course the poems were about him. But what if they weren't. What if now she was writing something ugly about him? Zuck squirmed, uncomfortable in his seat. He got up, then wondered if he should stay. If she wanted to write something about him, did she want him there, at the table, across from her?

Fuck it, he was going to watch Dynasty, right after he poured himself another drink. She paid him no attention as he took his glass down to the living room and sat in his recliner, though the corner of his eye was planted firmly on her, still scribbling in the kitchen. He asked if she had enough light and she replied that she did. He asked, a few minutes later, if she was thirsty, did she want him to get her something, and she replied no thank you. A few minutes later he asked if he should turn down the TV and she gave him a look, strands of hair falling into her eyes.

"It's fine," she said, and scratched again at the pages in front of her.

He awoke to the drone of the Channel 13 News. Andi stood beside him and shook his arm. She asked did he want to go to bed and he rubbed at his face, then realized her face was only inches away. She repeated the question, her eyes tunneling through him, making him spin for a moment and when his vision cleared, he took her face in his hands.

She swung her leg so that she straddled him in the recliner, laced her hands behind his neck, and pushed her mouth against his. He picked her up just like that and carried her to bed.

He rubbed at her mouth with his thumb then covered it with his own, and when his hand made it to her nipple and tugged, she moaned and moved against him, laced her tongue around his, pushed him against her, hand on his backside. He slipped her shirt over her head and moved his mouth over and over her, over the sweetest skin he had ever tasted and he resisted the moment, he wanted to part her slowly, to push himself in her until she came in rivers that drowned him. She made no tentative movements, shied from nothing he wanted, and when he moved inside her she moved with him again and again and when he said her name he thought that he might cry.

But when she lay curved against him, her face pressed against his heart, her body was tense. He asked her if she came and she paused, then said no, and a terrible dread burned in him and he asked her if it was something he did wrong and she told him no, she never did. He asked if she could when she was alone and he felt tears trickle onto the skin on his chest, so many, so fast that they chilled him and she whispered that she did not do that, ever.

The tears lasted only a couple of minutes, and while they came he held her but said nothing, and finally she rose, lit a cigarette and walked to the bathroom.

For five days Zuck could think of nothing but having her. The shop was a haze of noise and steel and the cold grimaces of men at work. He stole back to the trailer at every opportunity, crazed with the taste of her, the next place he would touch her, how he would bend her this time. Crazed with the desire to teach her to feel what she should feel.

But she would not.

In between, they smoked and talked and watched TV. He drank. Andi read poems to him and told him about people she'd known, books she'd read.

Thursday evening Zuck sat at the table with a stack of files twice the size of any he'd tackled before, and reveled in the beef and noodles that gurgled on the stove and wafted through the place. It smelled like Sunday afternoons before Jenny died, when the house still breathed something more than the old man's rage and his mother's quiet freefall from the cliff that had been her mind.

The room was too quiet and he looked up to find Andi at the living room window wearing only a pair of his boxer shorts and an old t-shirt, hair in a ponytail that wound over her shoulder like a fur collar. She looked so small and he had to look away. He pressed his hand against his chest, the churn of guilt that he'd been beating back. A glimpse of her like this, or lying on the faded blue sheets, or twisting a towel on her head thickened something in his sternum, gathered in him like a cloud.

She didn't look like a child, certainly didn't act like one, and as he had discovered, she didn't move like one either. Couldn't someone really be wise beyond their years? This girl was wiser than Sharri, in spades, was in fact more like a grown woman that most women he knew.

She sighed.

"Andi. What's the matter, girl. You restless? You been cooped up here for awhile. I could take you for a drive or something after dinner."

"Nah, that's alright." Her voice was flat and she bit at her pinky nail, the only one, Zuck had notice in bed that morning, that wasn't chewed to a bleeding quick.

"Quit biting that. Smoke a cigarette or something. Give them nubs a rest."

She smiled a little, looped the end of her hair around her fingers, and went to the garbage sacks of clothes in the laundry alcove. She returned with the Whitman book and lay down on the couch.

What did she want? He hadn't thought much about anything in the last few days, couldn't really think straight if he tried. Even now, his want for her made it difficult to think straight, lying as she was with her bare legs dangling over the arm of the couch.

He thought again of the blue house at the end of a backwoods road, a haze of sunlight making blue the smooth black of Andi's hair as she wrote poems at the desk he would buy for her. He saw himself standing in the doorway, boots dusty, a smile breaking the scowl he'd worn on his face through the day's long work. They could be something, the two of them.

He stood now at the end of the couch and held her white-stockinged feet in his hands. He moved one up in the air so that the flap parted on the boxer shorts she wore, and he could see what he wanted.

She put the book down on the table and closed her eyes.

She seemed to be in a better mood after they ate, and he taught her how to play Rummy 500. He gave her ten one-dollar bills to bet against him, and by the time they reached 500 she had taken eight of his and beat him by seventy points.

At nine she told him she was tired, and retreated into the bedroom. He returned to the stack of files at the table. At eleven he turned on the TV and punched at the buttons on the channel box, the bottle and a glass on the table before him. He was relaxed that the couch seemed to cradle him, and he eased into the corner of it and propped his legs on the table. As he set down the channel box he saw the corner of the flower-striped journal pointing out from under the table. He'd told himself he wouldn't look any more, didn't need to now that she was here—and besides, she didn't want him to, and she was entitled

to that. They were hers. Girl didn't have nothing except that old tin box she drug around and a couple Hefty sacks of clothes.

He touched the edge of it, meant to push it back under the table but pushed it so that more of its edge emerged. She'd never know, and he was dying to read her thoughts on being with him, if she had desires she would never say to him, if she wanted him to do something different. She never spoke when they were together, only sighed and moaned with such perfection that it seemed rehearsed.

He opened it to the last page, dated that day, a short entry:

*With a lipstick smile and a sticky hand
I've stolen what you never had
 You don't seem to mind, in fact I know
 You don't mind
And when I bring it back to you
You'll tell me that you used me too
 You'll be surprised when I don't cry
 No, I won't cry*

It was like a cruel riddle. He read it until he had the words memorized, then shut the book and pushed it back under the coffee table. Stealing from, using him? He sat up, shoulders straight as a board, his neck aching. The whiskey tasted like water and he gulped back a full glass, then another. His mind somersaulted around the words. He tried to remember all the words he'd read. What had he missed?

In the inky dark of the bedroom a shard of yellow light from the streetlamp in the yard cut across the curve of Andi's body, and he swayed in the doorway as he watched her sleep, mouth cupped with her hand. Her secrets whispered into the worn bedsheets, secrets he would never understand, shouldn't understand. He felt unraveled, uncovered, like she had stripped him and now would not return his clothes. He wanted to tear the covers off of her, leave her exposed, take her again with his hand over her mouth. *Keep your secrets, you dirty little bitch.*

His eyes burned and he sat down on the end of the bed and rubbed them, then lay back on top of the covers beside her. When he turned his face was level with her backside and he touched her hip. His throat throbbed, and he wanted to bury his face in her.

He couldn't save her, and she sure as hell couldn't save him. In fact, she would ruin him, land him back at The Walls, just as Hammerhead had said, where men who outweighed him three times over would treat his body like a carnival ride, then beat him mercilessly for being a baby raper. Which, he had to conclude, he now was.

He sighed, moved up onto the bed, and wrapped himself around her, then slid his hand under the fan of her hair on the pillow and laid it over his face. He dreamed of Jenny, who stood beside her own grave and laughed at him, taunted him with some incident they'd shared, one he knew he would remember, if he could only hear what she said.

At sunrise Zuck lay beside Andi, still atop the covers and clothed, head searing. In the kitchen he made some coffee and stood at the sink, savoring its sharp fragrance in the chill morning air and thinking how simple it was, to rise from bed of his own accord, make his own coffee, formulate his own plan. It had been only nine months since he had not been allowed to do this. For three years the blank gray cell had straitjacketed him and the blank gray uniforms had been his masters and the blank gray sleep slipped into blank gray waking, all of it seeping into him, all of it coloring him gray, too.

He would shower, and wait for her to wake up and dress, then make the call. But before that he'd better round everything up. He'd better make sure he could hide any trace that she'd ever been inside.

He found the striped journal under the coffee table, along with the leather one. Under the couch were two more, along with the Salinger book. The last two were still in the cabinet in the laundry alcove. He shoved them deep inside the tangle of her clothes inside one Hefty sack, two at a time. He remembered the lei and retrieved it from the drawer, and shoved that down inside, too. The note! Yes, the note she'd written, and what about the one he'd left for her when he wanted to take her to the cemetery? Inside the brass-handled coffee table cabinet was the legal pad, with the note still on the top page.

A scuffle from the bedroom and he threw the legal pad back inside and shut the doors.

Out she came, a sweep of hair and blankets, squinting into the ashen morning light.

"Hey man, why so early?"

"Got a lot to do at the shop before the weekend. I was thinking, too, about giving you something to do over there. Maybe you could earn a little spending money?"

She blinked at him and pulled the stray strands of hair from her eyes, then shuddered.

"What do you think I could do? I don't know how to fix anything. Never was any good at that stuff. I failed shop in seventh gra—"

"—You ain't got to do much, just sweep up and shuffle some papers and shit like that. Ain't nothing. Give you something to do."

As he spoke he wondered why he hadn't had that idea, for real, sooner. He could have used her over there. Of course it never would have worked with the guys. Oh man, the guys. He'd have to send them home on something bogus. And he'd have to pay them.

Shit.

"Whyn't you go on and get dressed and I'll fry you some eggs."

She looked at him like he was a teacher keeping her after school: defiant, bad-tempered. He thought for a moment of the first time he'd seen her, the defiance in her eyes, even as he'd pointed the Ruger at her. Never in a lifetime could he imagine then what would come to pass, how he would feel, what he would do. But he'd felt something for her then. He should have known then. Stupid. Stupid. And now it was coming down to this.

He fastened his eyes on hers and swallowed hard.

"Yeah, alright. Give me a minute. I got to pee and brush my teeth, too."

As he stood at the stove, bacon and eggs popping, he lit one cigarette with the end of another as he realized if she looked for clothes she would probably come across her journals and the lei stuffed into the Hefty bag. What would he say? Just that he'd been doing some cleaning up and wanted to make sure she had everything that was hers? Dang it, he'd put the note in there, too.

The water still ran in the bathroom; if he hurried he could at least get those things out. He flipped the eggs.

He found the lei, which he stuffed in his pocket—what were the chances of having a lei stuffed in your pocket twice in as many months if you were a guy like him?—just in time and was headed back up the three stairs to the kitchen when she came back out, hair in a high ponytail. He nodded at her quizzical look, turned off the stove, and slid her breakfast onto a plate, then threw a couple shots of salt and pepper over it. If she suspected anything, she didn't say.

He leaned against the sink and smoked while she sat down, then ran the cigarette under water and tossed it into the garbage beneath the sink.

"I got to figure out how to get them guys out of there, if I'm'a take you to the shop. You sit tight and I'll be back soon."

Old Walt's maroon Mercury was already parked, and Zuck was relieved to see Dave-o pull in just as he came out the back door of the trailer. In the shop Old Walt stooped over a Dodge Ram and muttered, a cup of black coffee steaming on the bumper. Zuck called hello to him and nodded to Dave-o as he bounded in on the skinny bow legs.

"Alright now, you dudes listen up," Zuck called from the doorway to the office. Both men approached with caution, dim anxiety in their eyes. "Now relax, ain't nobody else fired. I ah, got a situation and I need you boys to take the day off."

He told them there had been a complaint—some public customer he didn't even remember dealing with—and some inspectors were coming from the Better Business Bureau. Seeing's how he didn't have them boys insured—this part was true—they'd have to make scarce for the day while some inspectors came and sniffed around. He'd pay them, don't worry, and they could come back tomorrow.

Dave-o didn't have to be told twice. He launched from where he stood and delivered a wave and a *sayonara* before he disappeared through the door he'd just come in through. Outside, his Camaro roared to life and Zuck shook his head as it peeled out of the drive, no doubt in a show of pure joy.

Old Walt crossed his arms and leaned on the cluttered wooden workbench.

"What ain't you sayin'?"

For a moment he reminded Zuck of the old man, the way his moustache twitched with suspicion and his nose wrinkled with the snarl of his upper lip.

"That's it, Walt. Really. All there is to it."

"Listen kid. I told you when you brought me on, if I's going to help you get this yard running I was going to do it for your daddy, and you was going to be straight with me. I can't do it no other way. I think your shit starts to stink, I'm out of here."

He blew his nose into a shop rag, a surprisingly faint, delicate sound out of this leather-and-steel old bastard.

"I know, Walt. I mean it. Ain't nothing but a thing, I got it down. I'll see you tomorrow, okay? Bright and early. Like always."

He latched on to Old Walt's gaze with his own until the stooped man relented with a wave of his claw and headed to the office to retrieve his coat and hat. He didn't bother to look at Zuck as he came back through the garage, only slurred over his shoulder.

"Back tomorrow."

"Yep."

Zuck waited for the sound of the Mercury to recede from the yard and join the dirty hum of Southeast 14th Street. He stood for a moment and breathed the sulfuric rot of the bottoms, then shook his head. This was no place for a girl like Andi, any more than it had been a place for his pretty mother. He had always thought it was Jenny dying that threw her off the deep end and set her on the long march out the door.

Maybe it was this.

This place where you just patch up broken old shit, over and over again, slap it together so that it looks like it never suffered the damage, only to find years later it malfunctioned or fell apart or was destroyed again, and it lay deflating, the slow collapse behind a rickety garage or in someone's front yard, for all to see. The old man used to say you had to be an optimist to run a salvage yard. Zuck suspected now that he didn't have that same optimism.

Inside the trailer Andi sat at the table with a lighted makeup mirror in front of her, plugged in across the kitchen next to the sink. Her arms were raised, her hands twisting the black satin hair into a long French braid in the back. Between her teeth were two

bobby pins. She wore an old sweater and the ragged Levi's, and the tall moccasins that made her feet look like paws. She raised only her eyes toward him when he walked in, and watched him walk toward her.

Behind her, he took the braid from her hands. Thick fingers laced through the hair that remained loose, he wove the rest of the braid, fastened the end with the rubber band she'd laid on the table, then took the pins from her lips and tucked the strands behind her ears with them. Then, his fingers lightly wrapped on her throat, he leaned over her shoulder and kissed her cheek, then her brow bone, then her exposed neck.

She had made coffee, and he poured a cup, then asked if she wanted some. When she replied "No, thank you," he remembered that it was, in her opinion, "gross."

"You ready to get to work? You might need a coat."

A sick stew was brewing in his stomach, and he fought to remember why this was a good idea. What the fuck did he know about the right thing, anyway.

She fished the puffy green one out of the Hefty bag and he coughed and fidgeted in the kitchen, waiting for her to ask him why he'd rummaged through her things. She didn't. She didn't speak a word as they made their way to the shop.

Inside, he handed her the push broom and showed her the areas he wanted swept, then dug a handful of quarters from a coffee can on the workbench, and gave them to her, pointing at the soda machine beside the bathroom door.

She shuddered a little in the cold and placed a hand on her hip.

"Zuck, why you making me do this? You got men in here who work for you. Is this me earning my keep or something? Because I've been, you know, cleaning and...stuff."

"I just thought you might get to know the shop a little, in case I need help here and there. You can't spend your whole life reading paperback books and watching soap

operas and smoking cigarettes. It might do you some good to know a few things about the shop. And anyway, quit your bitching and start pushing. I forgot something over at the trailer, and I got to make a couple—ah, find a couple files."

She fished a cigarette out of the front pocket of her shirt and lit it, then took the broom from him.

He would have to be quick. He wished he would have given her another task for when she was finished; surely it wouldn't take long to get the shop swept. Three quick rounds through the trailer turned up two pairs of her underwear, a long pink t-shirt, her makeup bag, and the lighted mirror, all of which he jammed into the Hefty bags. He fished the lei from his pocket and jammed it in last. Then he opened the front door, took one bag in each hand, and headed for the Brougham. The dogs complained in loud, short barks as he passed, and he cursed at forgetting to put them out into the yard again. One more way that girl was no good. He couldn't think. He threw the bags in the back of the Brougham and slammed the door, then jogged back to the trailer.

Hammerhead's card was in his top dresser drawer and Zuck stared at it in his hand. *Michael Calderone, Officer of Parole and Probation*. In the upper right corner were the justice scales and the state insignia. In the upper left was the scowling head of a bald eagle. Zuck sat on the bed and dialed the phone. He answered on the second ring.

"Yep, this Mike."

"Hammer, it's me. Zuck."

Long pause. Zuck felt like he might throw up.

"Hammer, about that girl you was asking about. She's, ah, here. Been sleeping out in this ah, '76 Chrysler Brougham I got out there in the yard. Got her shit all packed up in there."

"She with you now?"

"I got her over at the shop, pushing a broom."

"Nice. Giving her some job skills before you turn her over? She don't know you're calling, I expect."

"No, listen. I got to get back over there, don't want to leave her up in there alone too long—"

"Right, right—"

"—you going to send somebody around to get her or what?"

"I'll have someone on the way soon's I hang up this phone. Glad you called. I know cooperating with the fuzz isn't exactly your style."

Zuck pressed his fingers against his tightly shut eyes.

In the shop, Andi was wandering around, investigating the nooks and crannies of the cold and grimy clutter with a Mountain Dew bottle in one hand and a cigarette in the other. She had swept the places he told her to sweep, and the broom was propped against the wall by the office door, the large dustpan propped neatly behind it. Her braid whipped through the air as she spun, startled when he walked in.

"I'm done. You got something else for me?"

"Matter of fact—"

For just a moment he froze. He wanted to grab her and hold her, pick her up and buckle her in to the Mark, collect her journals and books and clothes, drive off to anywhere. Any minute now, it would be too late.

Any minute now, he would probably never see her again.

He led her in to the office and mumbled something about stacking the papers that were in disarray in the otherwise empty desk. He didn't even know what the papers were for, didn't care, suddenly everything was spinning and time seemed to hurtle out of control, too fast and impossibly slow at once. She hunched over the desk, and over her

back and through the front window her saw the cherries, then the squad car. The officer, a burly-looking dude about Zuck's age poured himself slowly from the car and sidled toward the door with a clipboard in his hand. His face was large and comically owlsh, with round eyes behind metal-framed eyeglasses, and a small, solemn mouth.

Zuck touched her back and she stood to face him.

"Andi."

"What is it, Zuck—"

"I love you."

She squinted at him and cocked her head, then turned to follow his gaze. The officer had just reached the door and his hand stretched toward the knob.

"Did you hear me Andi?"

Her scream was like an endless electric wire that wound around the world. She leapt toward the door to the garage, still screaming, and Zuck caught her by the arm just as the officer stepped inside. Andi pulled her arm out of her coat and burst through the garage door, but now the officer had ahold of her, his hands tight on her shoulders. She fought, took a breath, and began to scream again, three words, drawn out into the long, echoing screams.

"NO YOU DON'T"

Now the cop had her around the waist and he held her wrists together in front of her as he drug her through the office. She kicked backward at his shins and he did a shuffling little dance to try to avoid the blows. It was impossible. She was ape-shit crazy and wicked strong. Zuck swallowed a sob as an image of Jenny, twisted up on the ground, dead, flashed through him. It was the only other time he had ever hurt this much for another human being.

Now Andi kicked at the front door so fast and hard that the officer couldn't open it, and he asked Zuck for a hand, huffing as he struggled to hold on to her. Zuck opened it, and she nearly kicked him in the face. The officer dragged her out the door and to the squad car, where she kicked ever more violently—hood, tires, window—and squirmed in the man's arms so wildly that he looked to be juggling five of Andi.

And now she begged, crying so violently that Zuck was afraid she would forget to breathe.

The last *please* was a long, hoarse scream as the officer threw her into the squad car, where she threw herself down on the seat sideways and beat at the cushion, her screams like nightmarish bells that pealed through the foul air.

The officer propped his sizeable butt on the hood and propped one foot up on the bumper, leaning over to catch his breath.

"Holy shit." He coughed, and stuffed a plug of chew inside his beakish lower lip.

Zuck stood, dazed, and looked back and forth between the cop, whose mouth seemed much too small to hold that wad of chew, and Andi, who would hurt herself if she kept thrashing around like that.

"You going to restrain her anyhow?"

The cop spat a thin squirt of brown at the ground. "I don't want to hurt her. I put her in cuffs, she might really tear herself up. What's her story anyway? You know her?"

Now Andi kicked at the partition between the front and back seats, the cage-wire bowing out with every blow. Zuck swayed, lightheaded and pawed at his face. It was so cold that the touch of his own hand felt like a burn, and he realized he'd left his jacket in the shop and wore only a t-shirt.

"Yeah. I mean, ah. No. I don't know her. She just been coming around lately."

"I heard you found some of her stuff?"

Zuck nodded, and gestured toward the yard.

She lay now, head pressed against the window, and shook. Her sobs erupted as involuntary as hiccups, and exploded like tiny bombs into the air around them.

Zuck led the cop to the Brougham. When they returned Andi had resumed her screams. Zuck couldn't stand to look at her, and slipped into the office. The officer threw the Hefty bags into the trunk of the squad car and headed back to the office, rubbing his hands together. Inside, he retrieved his clipboard from the floor by the desk.

The officer scabbled a report from Zuck's short answers: Showed up about two months ago. Nope, she didn't stay with him. Holed up in the car. Kicked her out. Don't know where she's from, or her last name. Haven't seen any friends. No drug activity that he knew of. Heard she was a runaway from his old friend, a parole officer. Yes, he himself was on parole.

The officer pushed up his glasses and handed the clipboard to Zuck to sign.