

## Synopsis

Judas Coyne is a collector of the macabre: a cookbook for cannibals... a used hangman's noose... a snuff

film. An aging death-metal rock god, his taste for the unnatural is as widely known

to his legions of fans as

the notorious excesses of his youth. But nothing he possesses is as unlikely or as dreadful as his latest

discovery, an item for sale on the Internet, a thing so terribly strange, Jude can't help but reach for his wallet.

I will "sell" my stepfather's ghost to the highest bidder...

For a thousand dollars, Jude will become the proud owner of a dead man's suit, said to be haunted by a

restless spirit. He isn't afraid. He has spent a lifetime coping with ghosts — of an abusive father, of the

lovers he callously abandoned, of the bandmates he betrayed. What's one more?

But what UPS delivers to his door in a black heart-shaped box is no imaginary or metaphorical ghost, no

benign conversation piece. It's the real thing.

And suddenly the suit's previous owner is everywhere: behind the bedroom door...

seated in Jude's restored

vintage Mustang... standing outside his window... staring out from his widescreen TV. Waiting — with a

gleaming razor blade on a chain dangling from one bony hand...

Scanner's note: I understand that Joe Hill is the son of Stephen King and this is his

first novel.

HEART-SHAPED BOX

By

JOE HILL

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For my dad, one of the good ones

HOW MAY THE DEAD HAVE DESTINATIONS?

—Alan Moore,

Voice of the Fire

BLACK DOG

Jude had a private collection.

He had framed sketches of the Seven Dwarfs on the wall of his studio, in between his platinum records.

John Wayne Gacy had drawn them while he was in jail and sent them to him.

Gacy

liked golden-age

Disney almost as much as he liked molesting little kids; almost as much as he liked

Jude's albums.

Jude had the skull of a peasant who had been trepanned in the sixteenth century, to

let the demons out. He

kept a collection of pens jammed into the hole in the center of the cranium.

He had a three-hundred-year-old confession, signed by a witch. "I did spake with a

black dogge who sayd

hee wouldst poison cows, drive horses mad and sicken children for me if I wouldst let him have my soule,

and I sayd aye, and after did give him sucke at my breast." She was burned to death.

He had a stiff and worn noose that had been used to hang a man in England at the turn of the nineteenth

century, Aleister Crowley's childhood chessboard, and a snuff film. Of all the items in Jude's collection,

this last was the thing he felt most uncomfortable about possessing. It had come to

him by way of a police

officer, a man who had worked security at some shows in L.A. The cop had said the video was diseased.

He said it with some enthusiasm. Jude had watched it and felt that he was right. It was diseased. It had also,

in an indirect way, helped hasten the end of Jude's marriage. Still he held on to it.

Many of the objects in his private collection of the grotesque and the bizarre were gifts sent to him by his

fans. It was rare for him to actually buy something for the collection himself. But when Danny Wooten, his

personal assistant, told him there was a ghost for sale on the Internet and asked did

he want to buy it, Jude

didn't even need to think. It was like going out to eat, hearing the special, and

deciding you wanted it  
without even looking at the menu. Some impulses required no consideration.  
Danny's office occupied a relatively new addition, extending from the  
northeastern end of Jude's rambling,  
110-year-old farmhouse. With its climate control, OfficeMax furniture, and  
coffeeand-  
cream industrial  
carpet, the office was coolly impersonal, nothing at all like the rest of the house. It  
might have been a  
dentist's waiting room, if not for the concert posters in stainless-steel frames.  
One  
of them showed a jar  
crammed with staring eyeballs, bloody knots of nerves dangling from the backs of  
them. That was for the  
All Eyes On You tour.  
No sooner had the addition been built than Jude had come to regret it. He had not  
wanted to drive forty  
minutes from Piecliff to a rented office in Poughkeepsie to see to his business, but  
that would've probably  
been preferable to having Danny Wooten right here at the house. Here Danny  
and  
Danny's work were too  
close. When Jude was in the kitchen, he could hear the phones ringing in there,  
both of the office lines  
going off at once sometimes, and the sound was maddening to him. He had not  
recorded an album in years,  
had hardly worked since Jerome and Dizzy had died (and the band with them),  
but  
still the phones rang and  
rang. He felt crowded by the steady parade of petitioners for his time, and by the  
never-ending  
accumulation of legal and professional demands, agreements and contracts,  
promotions and appearances,  
the work of Judas Coyne Incorporated, which was never done, always ongoing.  
When he was home, he  
wanted to be himself, not a trademark.  
For the most part, Danny stayed out of the rest of the house. Whatever his flaws,  
he  
was protective of  
Jude's private space. But Danny considered him fair game if Jude strayed into the

office — something Jude did, without much pleasure, four or five times a day. Passing through the office was the fastest way to the barn and the dogs. He could’ve avoided Danny by going out through the front door and walking all the way around the house, but he refused to sneak around his own home just to avoid Danny Wooten. Besides, it didn’t seem possible Danny could always have something to bother him with. But he always did. And if he didn’t have anything that demanded immediate attention, he wanted to talk. Danny was from Southern California originally, and there was no end to his talk. He would boast to total strangers about the benefits of wheatgrass, which included making your bowel movements as fragrant as a freshly mowed lawn. He was thirty years old but could talk skateboarding and PlayStation with the pizza-delivery kid like he was fourteen. Danny would get confessional with air-conditioner repairmen, tell them how his sister had OD’d on heroin in her teens and how as a young man he had been the one to find his mother’s body after she killed herself. He was impossible to embarrass. He didn’t know the meaning of shy. Jude was coming back inside from feeding Angus and Bon and was halfway across Danny’s field of fire — just beginning to think he might make it through the office unscathed — when Danny said, “Hey, Chief, check this out.” Danny opened almost every demand for attention with just this line, a statement Jude had learned to dread and resent, a prelude to half an hour of wasted time, forms to fill out, faxes to look at. Then Danny told him someone was selling a ghost, and Jude forgot all about begrudging him. He walked

around the desk so he could look over Danny's shoulder at his computer screen. Danny had discovered the ghost at an online auction site, not eBay but one of the wannabes. Jude moved

his gaze over the item description while Danny read aloud. Danny would've cut his food for him if Jude

gave him the chance. He had a streak of subservience that Jude found, frankly, revolting in a man.

„Buy my stepfather's ghost,“ Danny read. „Six weeks ago my elderly stepfather died, very suddenly. He was staying with us at the time. He had no home of his own and traveled from relative to relative, visiting

for a month or two before moving on. Everyone was shocked by his passing, especially my daughter, who

was very close to him. No one would've thought. He was active to the end of his life. Never sat in front of

the TV. Drank a glass of orange juice every day. Had all his own teeth.“

„This is a fuckin' joke,“ Jude said.

„I don't think so,“ Danny said. He went on, „Two days after his funeral, my little girl saw him sitting in

the guest room, which is directly across from her own bedroom. After she saw him,

my girl didn't like to be

alone in her room anymore, or even to go upstairs. I told her that her grandfather wouldn't ever hurt her,

but she said she was scared of his eyes. She said they were all black scribbles and they weren't for seeing

anymore. So she has been sleeping with me ever since.

„At first I thought it was just a scary story she was telling herself, but there is more to it than that. The

guest room is cold all the time. I poked around in there and noticed it was worst in

the closet, where his

Sunday suit was hung up. He wanted to be buried in that suit, but when we tried it

on him at the funeral

home, it didn't look right. People shrink up a little after they die. The water in them dries up. His best suit

was too big for him, so we let the funeral home talk us into buying one of theirs. I don't know why I

listened.

„The other night I woke up and heard my stepfather walking around overhead. The bed in his room won't

stay made, and the door opens and slams shut at all hours. The cat won't go upstairs either, and sometimes

she sits at the bottom of the steps looking at things I can't see. She stares awhile, then gives a yowl like her tail got stepped on and runs away.

„My stepfather was a lifelong spiritualist, and I believe he is only here to teach my daughter that death is not the end. But she is eleven and needs a normal life and to sleep in her own room, not in mine. The only thing I can think is to try and find Pop another home, and the world is full of people who want to believe in the afterlife. Well, I have your proof right here.

„I will "sell" my stepfather's ghost to the highest bidder. Of course a soul cannot really be sold, but I

believe he will come to your home and abide with you if you put out the welcome mat. As I said, when he

died, he was with us temporarily and had no place to call his own, so I am sure he would go to where he

was wanted. Do not think this is a stunt or a practical joke and that I will take your

money and send you

nothing. The winning bidder will have something solid to show for their investment. I will send you his

Sunday suit. I believe if his spirit is attached to anything, it has to be that.

„It is a very nice old-fashioned suit made by Great Western Tailoring. It has a fine

silver pinstripe," blahblah,

„satin lining," blah-blah...." Danny stopped reading and pointed at the screen.

"Check out the

measurements, Chief. It's just your size. High bid is eighty bucks. If you want to own a ghost, looks like he

could be yours for a hundred."

"Let's buy it," Jude said.

"Seriously? Put in a bid for a hundred dollars?"

Jude narrowed his eyes, peering at something on the screen, just below the item description, a button

that said YOURS NOW: \$1,000. And beneath that:

Click to Buy and End Auction Immediately!

He put his finger on it, tapping the glass.

“Let’s just make it a grand and seal the deal,” he said.

Danny rotated in his chair. He grinned and raised his eyebrows. Danny had high, arched, Jack

Nicholson eyebrows, which he used to great effect. Maybe he expected an explanation, but Jude wasn’t

sure he could’ve explained, even to himself, why it seemed reasonable to pay a thousand dollars for an

old suit that probably wasn’t worth a fifth of that. Later he thought it might be good publicity:

Judas Coyne buys a poltergeist

. The fans ate up stories like that. But that was later. Right then, in the moment, he

just knew he wanted

to be the one who bought the ghost.

Jude started on, thinking he would head upstairs to see if Georgia was dressed yet.

He had told her to put on

her clothes half an hour ago but expected to find her still in bed. He had the sense she planned to stay there

until she got the fight she was looking for. She’d be sitting in her underwear, carefully painting her toenails

black. Or she’d have her laptop open, surfing Goth accessories, looking for the perfect stud to poke through

her tongue, like she needed any more goddam... And then the thought of surfing the Web caused Jude to

hold up, wondering something. He glanced back at Danny.

“How’d you come across that anyway?” he asked, nodding at the computer.

“We got an e-mail about it.”

“From who?”

“From the auction site. They sent us an e-mail that said „We notice you’ve bought

items like this before and

thought you’d be interested.”

“We’ve bought items like this before?”

“Occult items, I assume.”

“I’ve never bought anything off that site.”

“Maybe you did and just don’t remember. Maybe I bought something for you.”

Jude said, “Fuckin’ acid. I had a good memory once. I was in the chess club in junior high.”

“You were? That’s a hell of a thought.”

“What? The idea that I was in the chess club?”

“I guess. It seems so... geeky.”

“Yeah. But I used severed fingers for pieces.”

Danny laughed — a little too hard, convulsing himself and wiping imaginary tears

from the corners of his

eyes. The sycophantic little suck-ass.

2

The suit came early Saturday morning.

Jude was up and outside with the dogs.

Angus lunged as soon as the UPS truck ground to a halt, and the leash was yanked

out of Jude’s hand.

Angus leaped against the side of the parked truck, spit flying, paws scuffling furiously against the driver’s side

door. The driver remained behind the wheel, peering down at him with the calm but intent expression

of a doctor considering a new strain of Ebola through a microscope. Jude caught the leash and pulled on it,

harder than he meant to. Angus sprawled on his side in the dirt, then twisted and sprang back up, snarling.

By now Bon was in on the act, straining at the end of her leash, which Jude held in

his other hand, and

yapping with a shrillness that hurt his head.

Because it was too far to haul them all the way back to the barn and their pen, Jude

dragged them across the

yard and up to the front porch, both of them fighting him the whole time. He shoveled them in through the

front door and slammed it behind them. Immediately they set to flinging themselves against it, barking

hysterically. The door shuddered as they slammed into it. Fucking dogs.

Jude shuffled back down into the driveway, and reached the UPS truck just as the rear door slid open with a

steely clatter. The deliveryman stood inside. He hopped down, holding a long, flat box under his arm.



“Ozzy Osbourne has Pomeranians,” the UPS guy said. “I saw them on TV. Cute little dogs like house cats.

You ever think about getting a couple cute little dogs like that?”

Jude took the box without a word and went inside.

He brought the box through the house and into the kitchen. He put it on the counter

and poured coffee. Jude

was an early riser by instinct and conditioning. When he was on the road, or recording, he had become

accustomed to rolling into bed at five in the morning and sleeping through most of

the daylight hours, but

staying up all night had never come naturally. On the road he would wake at four in the afternoon, badtempered

and headachy, confused about where the time had gone. Everyone he knew would seem to him

clever impostors, unfeeling aliens wearing rubber skin and the faces of friends. It took a liberal quantity of

alcohol to make them seem like themselves again.

Only it had been three years since he’d last gone on tour. He didn’t have much interest in drinking when he

was home, and was ready for bed most nights by nine. At the age of fifty-four, he had settled back into the

rhythms that had guided him since his name was Justin Cowzynski and he was a boy on his father’s hog

farm. The illiterate son of a bitch would have dragged him out of bed by the hair if

he’d found him in it

when the sun came up. It was a childhood of mud, barking dogs, barbed wire, dilapidated farm buildings,

squealing pigs with their flaking skin and squashed-in faces, and little human contact, beyond a mother

who sat most of the day at the kitchen table wearing the slack, staring aspect of someone who had been

lobotomized, and his father, who ruled their acres of pig shit and ruin with his angry laughter and his fists.

So Jude had been up for several hours already but had not eaten breakfast yet, and he was frying bacon

when Georgia wandered into the kitchen. She was dressed only in a pair of black panties, her arms folded

across her small, white, pierced breasts, her black hair floating around her head in  
a  
soft, tangly nest. Her  
name wasn't really Georgia. It wasn't Morphine either, although she had  
stripped  
under that name for two  
years. Her name was Marybeth Kimball, a handle so simple, so plain, she'd  
laughed when she first told  
him, as if it embarrassed her.  
Jude had worked his way through a collection of Goth girlfriends who stripped,  
or  
told fortunes, or  
stripped  
and  
told fortunes, pretty girls who wore ankhs and black fingernail polish, and whom  
he always called by  
their state of origin, a habit few of them cared for, because they didn't like to be  
reminded of the  
person they were trying to erase with all their living-dead makeup. She was  
twenty-three.  
"Goddam stupid dogs," she said, shoving one of them out of her way with her  
heel.  
They were whisking  
around Jude's legs, excited by the perfume of the bacon. "Woke me the fuck up."  
"Maybe it was time to get the fuck up. Ever think?" She never rose before ten if  
she could help it.  
She bent into the fridge for the orange juice. He enjoyed the view, the way the  
straps of her underwear cut  
into the almost-too-white cheeks of her ass, but he looked away while she drank  
from the carton. She left it  
on the counter, too. It would spoil there if he didn't put it away for her.  
He was glad for the adoration of the Goths. He appreciated the sex even more,  
their  
limber, athletic,  
tattooed bodies and eagerness for kink. But he had been married once, to a woman  
who used a glass and  
put things away when she was done, who read the paper in the morning, and he  
missed their talk. It was  
grown-up talk. She hadn't been a stripper. She didn't believe in fortune-telling.  
It

was grown-up  
companionship.

Georgia used a steak knife to slice open the UPS box, then left the knife on the counter, with tape stuck to it.

“What’s this?” she asked.

A second box was contained within the first. It was a tight fit, and Georgia had to tug for a while to

slide the inner box out onto the counter. It was large, and shiny, and black, and it was shaped like a

heart. Candies sometimes came in boxes like that, although this was much too big for candies, and

candy boxes were pink or sometimes yellow. A lingerie box, then — except he hadn’t ordered

anything of the kind for her. He frowned. He didn’t have any idea what might be in it and at the same

time felt somehow he should

know, that the heart-shaped box contained something he’d been expecting.

“Is this for me?” she asked.

She pried the lid loose and took out what was inside, lifting it for him to see. A suit. Someone had sent him

a suit. It was black and old-fashioned, the details blurred by the plastic drycleaning

bag pulled over it.

Georgia held it up by the shoulders, in front of her body, almost as if it were a dress she was thinking of

trying on but she wanted his opinion of it first. Her gaze was questioning, a pretty

furrow between her

eyebrows. For a moment he didn’t remember, didn’t know why it had come.

He opened his mouth to tell her he had no clue, but then instead heard himself say,

“The dead man’s suit.”

“What?”

“The ghost,” he said, remembering as he spoke. “I bought a ghost. Some woman was convinced her

stepfather was haunting her. So she put his restless spirit up for sale on the Internet,

and I bought it for a

grand. That's his suit. She thinks it might be the source of the haunting."

"Oh, cool," Georgia said. "So are you going to wear it?"

His own reaction surprised him. His skin crawled, went rough and strange with gooseflesh. For one

unconsidered moment, the idea struck him as obscene.

"No," he said, and she flicked a surprised glance at him, hearing something cold and flat in his voice. Her

smirk deepened a little, and he realized he had sounded... well, not frightened but momentarily weak. He

added, "It wouldn't fit." Although, in truth, it looked as if the poltergeist had been

about his height and

weight in life.

Georgia said, "Maybe I'll wear it. I'm a bit of a restless spirit myself. And I look hot in men's clothing."

Again: a sensation of revulsion, a crawling of the skin. She shouldn't put it on. It unsettled him that she

would even joke about it, although he couldn't have said why. He wasn't going to

let her put it on. In that

one instant, he could not imagine anything more repellent.

And that was saying something. There wasn't much that Jude found too distasteful

to contemplate. He was

unused to feeling disgust. The profane didn't trouble him; it had made him a good

living for thirty years.

"I'll stick it upstairs until I figure out what to do with it," he said, trying for a dismissive tone — and not

quite making it.

She stared at him, interested at this wavering of his usual self-possession, and then

she pulled off the plastic

dry-cleaning bag. The coat's silver buttons flashed in the light. The suit was somber, as dark as crow

feathers, but those buttons, the size of quarters, gave it something of a rustic character. Add a string tie and

it was the sort of thing Johnny Cash might've worn onstage.

Angus began to bark, high, shrill, panicked barking. He shoved himself back on his haunches, tail lowered, rearing away from the suit. Georgia laughed. "It is haunted," she said. She held the suit in front of her and waved it back and forth, walking it through the air toward Angus, flapping it at him, a bullfighter with cape. She moaned as she closed in on him, the throaty, drawn-out cry of a wandering haunt, while her eyes gleamed with pleasure. Angus scrambled back, hit a stool at the kitchen counter, and knocked it over with a ringing crash. Bon stared out from beneath the old, bloodstained chopping block, ears flattened against her skull. Georgia laughed again. "Cut it the fuck out," Jude said. She shot him a snotty, perversely happy look — the look of a child burning ants with a magnifying glass — and then she made a face of pain and shouted. Swore and grabbed her right hand. She flung the suit aside onto the counter. A bright drop of blood fattened at the tip of her thumb and fell, plink, onto the tiled floor. "Shit," she said. "Fucking pin." "You see what you get." She glared, flipped him the bird, and stalked out. When she was gone, he got up and put the juice back into the fridge. Jude dropped the knife in the sink, got a hand towel to wipe the blood off the floor — and then his gaze caught on the suit, and he forgot whatever it was he'd been about to do. He smoothed it out, folded the arms over the chest, felt carefully around. Jude couldn't find any pins, couldn't figure out what she'd stuck herself on. He laid it gently back into its box. An acrid odor caught his attention. He glanced into the pan and cursed. The bacon

was burnt.

3

He put the box on the shelf  
in the back of his closet and decided to stop thinking about it.

4

He was passing back through the kitchen,  
a little before six, to get sausages for the grill, when he heard someone  
whispering  
in Danny's office.

The sound jumped him and halted him in his tracks. Danny had gone home more  
than an hour ago, and the  
office was locked, should've been empty. Jude tilted his head to listen,  
concentrating intently on the low,  
sibilant voice... and in another moment he identified what he was hearing, and his  
pulse began to slow.

There was no one in there. It was only someone talking on the radio. Jude could  
tell. The low tones weren't  
low enough, the voice itself subtly flattened out. Sounds could suggest shapes,  
painted a picture of the  
pocket of air in which they'd been given form. A voice in a well had a deep, round  
echo, while a voice in a  
closet sounded condensed, all the fullness squeezed out of it. Music was also  
geometry. What Jude was  
hearing now was a voice clapped into a box. Danny had forgotten to turn off the  
radio.

He opened the door to the office, poked his head in. The lights were off, and with  
the sun on the other side  
of the building, the room drowned in blue shadow. The office stereo was the  
thirdworst  
in the house,

which was still better than most home stereos, a stack of Onkyo components in a  
glass cabinet by the water  
cooler. The readouts were lit a vivid, unnatural green, the color of objects viewed  
through a night-vision  
scope, except for a single, glowing, vertical slash of red, a ruby mark showing the  
frequency to which the  
radio was tuned. The mark was a narrow slit, the shape of a cat's pupil, and  
seemed to stare into the office  
with an unblinking, alien fascination.

"...How cold is it going to get tonight?" said the man on the radio in a husky,

almost abrasive tone. A fat man, judging by the wheeze when he exhaled. “Do we have to worry about finding bums frozen to the ground?”

“Your concern for the welfare of the homeless is touching,” said a second man, this one with a voice that was a little thin, reedy.

It was WFUM, where most of the bands were named after fatal diseases (Anthrax), or conditions of decay (Rancid), and where the DJs tended to be preoccupied with crotch lice, strippers, and the amusing humiliations that attended the poor, the crippled, and the elderly. They were known to play Jude’s music, more or less constantly, which was why Danny kept the stereo tuned to them, as an act of both loyalty and flattery. In truth, Jude suspected that Danny had no particular musical preferences, no strong likes or dislikes, and that the radio was just background sound, the auditory equivalent of wallpaper. If he had worked for Enya, Danny would’ve happily hummed along to Celtic chanting while answering her e-mails and sending faxes.

Jude started across the room to turn off the stereo but had not gone far before his step hitched, a memory snagging at his thoughts. An hour ago he’d been outside with the dogs. He had stood at the end of the dirt turnaround, enjoying the sharpness of the air, the sting on his cheeks. Someone down the road was burning a waste pile of deadfall and autumn leaves, and the faint odor of the spiced smoke had pleased him as well.

Danny had come out of the office, shrugging on his jacket, headed home. They stood talking for a moment — or, to be more accurate, Danny stood jawing at him while Jude watched the dogs and tried to tune him out. You could always count on Danny Wooten to spoil a perfectly good silence.

Silence. The office behind Danny had been silent. Jude could remember the crows going  
cawk-cawk  
and Danny's steady stream of exuberant chatter, but not the sound of the radio coming from the office  
behind him. If it had been on, Jude thought he would've heard. His ears were still as sensitive as they'd  
ever been. They had, against long odds, survived all that he'd inflicted upon them over the last thirty  
years. By comparison, Jude's drummer, Kenny Morlix, the only other surviving member of his original  
band, had severe tinnitus, couldn't even hear his wife when she was yelling right in his face.

Jude started forward once more, but he was ill at ease again. It wasn't any one thing. It was all of it. It was  
the dimness of the office and the glaring red eye staring out from the face of the receiver. It was the idea  
that the radio hadn't been on an hour ago, when Danny had stood in the open office door zipping his jacket.

It was the thought that someone had recently passed through the office and might  
still be close by, maybe  
watching from the darkness of the bathroom, where the door was open a crack —  
a  
paranoid thing to think  
and unlike him, but in his head all the same. He reached for the power button on the stereo, not really  
listening anymore, his gaze on that door. He wondered what he would do if it started to open.

The weatherman said, "...cold and dry as the front pushes the warm air south. The  
dead pull the living  
down. Down into the cold. Down into the hole. You will di—"

Jude's thumb hit the power button, switching off the stereo, just as he registered what was being said. He  
twitched, startled, and stabbed the power button again, to get the voice back, figure  
out what the hell the  
weatherman had just been going on about.

Except the weatherman was done talking, and it was the DJ instead: "...going to



freeze our asses off, but  
Kurt Cobain is warm in hell. Dig it.”  
A guitar whined, a shrill, wavering sound that went on and on without any  
discernible melody or purpose  
except perhaps to drive the listener to madness. The opening of Nirvana’s “I  
Hate  
Myself and I Want to  
Die.” Was that what the weatherman had been talking about? He’d said  
something  
about dying. Jude  
clicked the power button once more, returning the room to stillness.  
It didn’t last. The phone went off, right behind him, a startling burst of sound  
that  
gave Jude’s pulse another  
unhappy jump. He shot a look at Danny’s desk, wondering who would be calling  
on the office line at this  
hour. He shifted around behind the desk for a glance at caller ID. It was a 985  
number, which he identified  
immediately as a prefix for eastern Louisiana. The name that came up was  
COWZYNSKI, M.  
Only Jude knew, even without picking up the phone, that it wasn’t really  
Cowzynski, M., on the other end.  
Not unless a medical miracle had transpired. He almost didn’t pick up at all, but  
then the thought came that  
maybe Arlene Wade was calling to tell him Martin was dead, in which case he  
would have to talk to her  
sooner or later, whether he wanted to or not.  
“Hello,” he said.  
“Hello, Justin,” said Arlene. She was an aunt by marriage, his mother’s sister-  
inlaw,  
and a licensed  
physician’s assistant, although for the last thirteen months her only patient had  
been Jude’s father. She was  
sixty-nine, and her voice was all twang and warble. To her he would always be  
Justin Cowzynski.  
“How are you, Arlene?”  
“I’m the same as ever. You know. Me and the dog are gettin’ along. Although he  
can’t get up so much now  
because he’s so fat and his knees pain him. But I’m not callin’ to tell you about

myself or the dog. I'm  
callin' about your father."

As if there could be anything else she might call about. The line hissed with white noise. Jude had been interviewed over the phone by a radio personality in Beijing and taken calls from Brian Johnson in Australia, and the connections had been as crisp and clear as if they were phoning him from down the

street. But for some reason calls from Moore's Corner, Louisiana, came in scratchy and faint, like an AM radio station that's just a little too far away to be received perfectly. Voices from other phone calls would bleed in and out, faintly audible for a few moments and then gone. They might have high-speed Internet connections in Baton Rouge, but in the little towns in the swamps north of Lake Pontchartrain, if you wanted a high-speed connection with the rest of the world, you souped up a car and got the fuck out.

"Last few months I been spoonin' him food. Soft stuff he don't have to chew. He was likin' them little stars. Pastina. And vanilla custard. I never met a dyin' person yet didn't want some custard on their way out the door."

"I'm surprised. He never used to have a sweet tooth. Are you sure?"

"Who's takin' care of him?"

"You are."

"Well, I guess I'm sure, then."

"All right."

"This is the reason I'm callin'. He won't eat custard or little stars or anything else.

He just chokes on

whatever I put in his mouth. He can't swallow. Dr. Newland was in to see him yesterday. He thinks your dad had another infarction."

"A stroke." It was not quite a question.

"Not a fall-down-and-kill-you kind of stroke. If he had another one of those, there wouldn't be any question

of it. He'd be dead. This was one of the little blow-outs. You don't always know

when he“s had one of the  
little ones. Especially when he gets like he is now, just starin“ at things. He  
hasn“t  
said a word to anyone in  
two months. He isn“t ever going to say a word to anyone again.”  
“Is he at the hospital?”  
“No. We can care for him just as well or better here. Me livin“ with him and Dr.  
Newland in every day. But  
we can send him to the hospital. It would be cheaper there, if that matters to you.”  
“It doesn“t. Let “em save the beds at the hospital for people who might actually  
get better in them.”  
“I won“t argue you on that one. Too many people die in hospitals, and if you  
can“t  
be helped, you have to  
wonder why.”  
“So what are you going to do about him not eating? What happens now?”  
This was met by a moment of silence. He had an idea that the question had taken  
her by surprise. Her tone,  
when she spoke again, was both gently reasonable and apologetic, the tone of a  
woman explaining a harsh  
truth to a child.  
“Well. That“s up to you, not me, Justin. Doc Newland can poke a feedin“ tube in  
him and he“ll go on a  
while longer, that“s what you want. Till he has another little blowout and he  
forgets how to breathe. Or we  
can just let him be. He isn“t ever goin“ to recover, not at eighty-five years old.  
It“s  
not like he“s bein“  
robbed of his youth. He“s ready to let go. Are you?”  
Jude thought, but did not say, that he“d been ready for more than forty years. He  
had occasionally imagined  
this moment — maybe it was fair to say he“d even daydreamed of it — but now it  
had come, and he was  
surprised to find that his stomach hurt.  
When he replied, though, his voice was steady and his own. “Okay, Arlene. No  
tube. If you say it“s time,  
that“s good enough for me. Keep me updated, all right?”  
But she wasn“t done with him yet. She made an impatient sound, a kind of stiff

exhalation of breath, and  
said, "Are you comin' down?"

He stood at Danny's desk, frowning, confused. The conversation had taken a leap from one thing to another, without warning, like a needle skipping across a record from one track to the next. "Why would I do that?"

"Do you want to see him before he's gone?"

No. He had not seen his father, stood in the same room with him, in three decades.

Jude did not want to see the old man before he was gone, and he did not want to look at him after. He had no plans to so much as attend the funeral, although he would be the one to pay for it. Jude was afraid of what he might feel — or what he wouldn't. He would pay whatever he had to pay not to have to share his father's company again. It was the best thing the money could buy: distance.

But he could no more say this to Arlene Wade than he could tell her he'd been waiting on the old man to die since he was fourteen. Instead he replied, "Would he even know if I was there?"

"It's hard to say what he knows and what he doesn't. He's aware of people in the room with him. He turns his eyes to watch folks come and watch folks go. He's been less responsive lately, though. People get that way, once enough lights have burned out."

"I can't make it down. This week isn't good," Jude said, reaching for the easiest lie. He thought maybe the conversation was over, and was prepared to say good-bye. Then he surprised himself by asking a question,

one he hadn't known was even on his mind until he heard himself speaking it aloud. "Will it be hard?"

"For him to die? Naw. When an old fella gets to this stage, they waste away pretty

quick without bein' hooked to the feed bag. They don't suffer none."

"You sure on that?"

“Why?” she asked. “Disappointed?”

5

Forty minutes later

Jude drifted into the bathroom to soak his feet — size 14, flat arches, and a constant source of pain to

him — and found Georgia leaning over the sink sucking her thumb. She had on a T-shirt and pajama

bottoms with a cute pattern of tiny red figures that might’ve been hearts printed on

them. It was only

when you got close that you could see that all those tiny red figures were actually images of shriveled

dead rats.

He leaned into her and pulled her hand out of her mouth to inspect her thumb.

The

tip was swollen and had

a white, soft-looking sore on it. He let go of her hand and turned away,

disinterested, pulling a towel off the

heated rack and throwing it over his shoulder.

“Ought to put something on that,” he said. “Before it festers and rots. There’s less

work for pole dancers

with visible disfigurements.”

“You’re a sympathetic son of a bitch, you know that?”

“You want sympathy, go fuck James Taylor.”

He glanced over his shoulder at her as she stalked out. As soon as he said it, a part

of him wished he

could take it back. But he didn’t take it back. In their metal-studded bracelets and glossy black, deadgirl

lipstick, they wanted harshness, the girls like Georgia. They wanted to prove something to

themselves about how much they could take, to prove they were hard. That was why they came to him,

not in spite of the things he said to them or the way he treated them but because of

those things. He

didn’t want anyone to go away disappointed. And it was just understood that sooner or later they

would

go away.  
Or at least  
he

understood it, and if they didn't at first, then they always figured it out eventually.

6

One of the dogs was in the house.

Jude woke just after three in the morning at the sound of it, pacing in the hallway,  
a

rustle and a light swish  
of restless movement, a soft bump against the wall.

He had put them in their pens just before dark, remembered doing this very clearly,

but didn't worry about

that fact in the first few moments after coming awake. One of them had got into the

house somehow, that  
was all.

Jude sat for a moment, still drunk and stuporous from sleep. A blue splash of moonlight fell across Georgia, sleeping on her belly to his left. Dreaming, her face relaxed and scrubbed of all its makeup, she looked

almost girlish, and he felt a sudden tenderness for her — that, and also an odd embarrassment to find himself in bed with her.

"Angus?" he murmured. "Bon?"

Georgia didn't stir. Now he heard nothing in the hallway. He slid out of bed. The damp and the cold took

him by surprise. The day had been the coolest in months, the first real day of fall, and now there was a raw,

clinging chill in the air, which meant it had to be even colder outside. Maybe that was why the dogs were in

the house. Maybe they had burrowed under the wall of the pen and somehow forced their way in, desperate

to be warm. But that didn't make sense. They had an indoor-outdoor pen, could go

into the heated barn if

they were cold. He started toward the door, to peek into the hall, then hesitated at the window and twitched

aside the curtain to look outside.

The dogs were in the outdoor half of the pen, both of them, up against the wall of the barn. Angus roamed back and forth over the straw, his body long and sleek, his sliding, sideways movements agitated. Bon sat primly in one corner. Her head was raised, and her gaze was fixed on Jude's window — on him. Her eyes flashed a bright, unnatural green in the darkness. She was too still, too unblinking, like a statue of a dog instead of the real thing. It was a shock to look out the window and see her staring directly back at him, as if she'd been watching the glass for who knew how long, waiting for him to appear. But that was not as bad as knowing that something else was in the house, moving around, bumping into things in the hallway. Jude glanced at the security panel next to the bedroom door. The house was monitored, inside and out, by a collection of motion detectors. The dogs weren't big enough to set them off, but a grown man would trip them, and the panel would note movement in one part of the house or another. The readout, however, showed a steady green light and read only SYSTEM READY. Jude wondered if the chip was smart enough to tell the difference between a dog and a naked psychotic scrambling around on all fours with a knife in his teeth. Jude had a gun, but it was in his private recording studio, in the safe. He reached for the Dobro guitar leaning against the wall. Jude had never been one to smash a guitar for effect. His father had smashed his very first guitar for him, in an early attempt to rid Jude of his musical ambitions. Jude hadn't been able to repeat the act himself, not even onstage, for show, when he could afford all the guitars he wanted. He was, however, perfectly willing to use one as a weapon to defend himself. In a sense he supposed he had always used them as weapons.

He heard one floorboard creak in the hall, then another, then a sigh, as of someone settling. His blood quickened. He opened the door. But the hallway was empty. Jude plashed through long rectangles of icy light, cast by the skylights. He stopped at each closed door, listened, then glanced within. A blanket tossed across a chair looked, for a moment, like a deformed dwarf glaring at him. In another room he found a tall, gaunt figure standing behind the door, and his heart reared in his chest, and he almost swung the guitar, then realized it was a coatrack, and all the breath came rushing unsteadily out of him. In his studio, at the end of the hall, he considered collecting the gun, then didn't. He didn't want it on him — not because he was afraid to use it but because he wasn't afraid enough. He was so keyed up he might react to a sudden movement in the dark by pulling the trigger and wind up blowing a hole in Danny Wooten or the housekeeper, although why they would be creeping about the house at this hour he couldn't imagine. He returned to the corridor and went downstairs. He searched the ground floor and found only shadow and stillness, which should've reassured him but didn't. It was the wrong kind of stillness, the shocked stillness that follows the bang of a cherry bomb. His eardrums throbbed from the pressure of all that quiet, a dreadful silence. He couldn't relax, but at the bottom of the stairs he pretended to, a charade he carried on for himself alone. He leaned the guitar against the wall and exhaled noisily. "What the fuck are you doing?" he said. By then he was so ill at ease the sound of his own voice unnerved him, sent a cool, prickling rush up his forearms. He had never been one to talk to himself. He climbed the stairs and started back down the hall to the bedroom. His gaze drifted to an old man, sitting



in an antique Shaker chair against the wall. As soon as Jude saw him, his pulse lunged in alarm, and he looked away, fixed his gaze on his bedroom door, so he could only see the old man from the edge of his vision. In the moments that followed, Jude felt it was a matter of life and death not to make eye contact with the old man, to give no sign that he saw him. He did not see him, Jude told himself. There was no one there.

The old man's head was bowed. His hat was off, resting on his knee. His hair was a close bristle, with the brilliance of new frost. The buttons down the front of his coat flashed in the gloom, chromed by moonlight.

Jude recognized the suit in a glance. He had last seen it folded in the black, heartshaped

box that had gone

into the rear of his closet. The old man's eyes were closed.

Jude's heart pounded, and it was a struggle to breathe, and he continued on toward

the bedroom door,

which was at the very end of the hallway. As he went past the Shaker chair, against

the wall to his left, his

leg brushed the old man's knee, and the ghost lifted his head. But by then Jude was beyond him, almost to

the door. He was careful not to run. It didn't matter to him if the old man stared at

his back, as long as they

didn't make eye contact with each other, and besides, there was no old man.

He let himself into the bedroom and clicked the door shut behind him. He went straight to his bed and got

into it and immediately began to shake. A part of him wanted to roll against Georgia and cling to her, let

her body warm him and drive away the chills, but he stayed on his side of the bed so as not to wake her. He

stared at the ceiling.

Georgia was restless and moaned unhappily in her sleep.

He didn't expect to sleep  
but dozed off at first light and then woke uncharacteristically late, after nine.  
Georgia was on her side,  
her small hand resting lightly on his chest and her breath soft on his shoulder. He  
slipped out of bed  
and away from her, let himself into the hall and walked downstairs.  
The Dobro leaned against the wall where he had left it. The sight of it gave his  
heart a bad turn. He'd been  
trying to pretend he had not seen what he'd seen in the night. He had set himself  
a  
goal of not thinking  
about it. But there was the Dobro.  
When Jude looked out the window, he spotted Danny's car parked by the barn.  
He  
had nothing to say to  
Danny and no reason to bother him, but in another moment he was at the door of  
the office. He couldn't  
help himself. The compulsion to be in the company of another human, someone  
awake and sensible and  
with a head full of everyday nonsense, was irresistible.  
Danny was on the phone, craned back in his office chair, laughing about  
something. He was still in his  
suede jacket. Jude didn't need to ask why. He himself had a robe over his  
shoulders and was hugging  
himself under it. The office was filled with a damp cold.  
Danny saw Jude looking around the door and winked at him, another favorite  
asskissing  
Hollywood  
habit of his, although on this particular morning Jude didn't mind it. Then  
Danny  
saw something on  
Jude's face and frowned. He mouthed the words  
You okay?  
Jude didn't answer. Jude didn't know.  
Danny got rid of whoever he was talking to, then rotated in his chair to turn a  
solicitous look upon him.  
"What's going on, Chief? You look like fucking hell."  
Jude said, "The ghost came."  
"Oh, did it?" Danny asked, brightening. Then he hugged himself, mock-shivered.

Tipped his head toward  
the phone. "That was the heating people. This place is a fucking tomb. They'll  
have a guy out here to check  
on the boiler in a little while."  
"I want to call her."  
"Who?"  
"The woman who sold us the ghost."  
Danny lowered one of his eyebrows and raised the other, making a face that said  
he had lost Jude  
somewhere. "What do you mean, the ghost came?"  
"What we ordered. It came. I want to call her. I want to find some things out."  
Danny seemed to need a moment to process this. He swiveled partway back to his  
computer and got the  
phone, but his gaze remained fixed on Jude. He said, "You sure you're all right?"  
"No," he said. "I'm going to see to the dogs. Find her number, will you?"  
He went outside in his bathrobe and his underwear, to set Bon and Angus loose  
from their pens. The  
temperature was in the low fifties, and the air was white with a fine-grained mist.  
Still, it was more  
comfortable than the damp, clinging cold of the house. Angus licked at his hand,  
his tongue rough and hot  
and so real that for a moment Jude felt an almost painful throb of gratitude. He  
was  
glad to be among the  
dogs, with their stink of wet fur and their eagerness for play. They ran past him,  
chasing each other, then  
ran back, Angus snapping at Bon's tail.  
His own father had treated the family dogs better than he ever treated Jude, or  
Jude's mother. In time it had  
rubbed off on Jude, and he'd learned to treat dogs better than himself as well. He  
had spent most of his  
childhood sharing his bed with dogs, sleeping with one on either side of him and  
sometimes a third at his  
feet, had been inseparable from his father's unwashed, primitive, tick-infested  
pack. Nothing reminded him  
of who he was, and where he had come from, faster than the rank smell of dog,  
and  
by the time he  
reentered the house, he felt steadier, more himself.  
As he stepped through the office door, Danny was saying into the phone, "Thanks

so much. Can you hold a moment for Mr. Coyne?" He pressed a button, held out the receiver. "Name"s Jessica Price. Down in Florida."

As Jude took the receiver, he realized that this was the first time he"d ever heard the woman"s full name.

When he had put down his money on the ghost, he"d simply not been curious, although it seemed to him

now that it was the kind of thing he should"ve made a point to know.

He frowned. She had a perfectly ordinary sort of name, but for some reason it caught his attention. He

didn"t think he had ever heard it before, but it was so inherently forgettable it was

hard to be sure.

Jude put the receiver to his ear and nodded. Danny pressed the button again to take

it off hold.

"Jessica. Hello. Judas Coyne."

"How"d you like your suit, Mr. Coyne?" she asked. Her voice carried a delicate southern lilt, and her tone

was easy and pleasant... and something else. There was a hint in it, a sweet, teasing hint of something like mockery.

"What did he look like?" Judas asked. He had never been one to take his time getting to the point. "Your stepfather."

"Reese, honey," the woman said, talking to someone else, not Jude. "Reese, will you turn off that TV

and go outside?" A girl, away in the background, registered a sullen complaint.

"Because I"m on the

phone." The girl said something else. "Because it"s private. Go on, now. Go on."

A screen door

slapped shut. The woman sighed, a bemused, "you know kids" sound, and then said to Jude, "Did you

see him? Why don"t you tell me what you

think he looks like, and I"ll say if you"re right."

She was fucking with him.

Fucking

with him.

"I'm sending it back," Jude told her.

"The suit? Go ahead. You can send the suit back to me. That doesn't mean he'll come with it. No refunds,

Mr. Coyne. No exchanges."

Danny stared at Jude, smiling a puzzled smile, his brow furrowed in thought.

Jude

noticed then the sound

of his own breath, harsh and deep. He struggled for words, to know what to say.

She spoke first. "Is it cold there? I bet it's cold. It's going to get a lot colder before

he's through."

"What are you out for? More money? You won't get it."

"She came back home to kill herself, you asshole," she said, Jessica Price of Florida, whose name was

unfamiliar to him, but maybe not quite as unfamiliar as he would've liked. Her voice had suddenly, without

warning, lost the veneer of easy humor. "After you were done with her, she slashed

her wrists in the

bathtub. Our stepdaddy is the one who found her. She would've done anything for

you, and you threw her

away like she was garbage."

Florida.

Florida.

He felt a sudden ache in the pit of his stomach, a sensation of cold, sick weight. In the same moment,

his head seemed to come clear, to shake off the cobwebs of exhaustion and superstitious fear. She had

always been Florida to him, but her name was really Anna May McDermott. She told fortunes, knew

tarot and palmistry. She and her older sister both had learned how from their stepfather. He was a

hypnotist by trade, the last resort of smokers and self-loathing fat ladies who wanted to be done with

their cigarettes and their Twinkies. But on the weekends Anna's stepfather hired himself out as a

dowser and used his hypnotist's pendulum, a silver razor on a gold chain, to find lost objects and to tell

people where to drill their wells. He hung it over the bodies of the ill to heal their auras and slow their hungry cancers, spoke to the dead with it by dangling it over a Ouija board. But hypnotism was the meal ticket:

You can relax now. You can close your eyes. Just listen to my voice. Jessica Price was talking again. "Before my stepfather died, he told me what to do, how I should get in touch with you and how to send you his suit and what would happen after. He said

he'd see to you, you ugly, no-talent motherfucker."

She was Jessica Price, not McDermott, because she had married and was a widow now. Jude had the impression her husband had been a reservist who bought it in Tikrit, thought he recalled Anna telling him

that. He wasn't sure Anna had ever mentioned her older sister's married name, although she'd told him

once that Jessica had followed their stepfather into the hypnotism trade. Anna had

said her sister made almost seventy thousand dollars a year at it.

Jude said, "Why did I have to buy the suit? Why didn't you just send it to me?"

The calm of his own voice

was a source of satisfaction to him. He sounded calmer than she did.

"If you didn't pay, the ghost wouldn't really belong to you. You had to pay. And, boy, are you goin' to."

"How'd you know I'd buy it?"

"I sent you an e-mail, didn't I? Anna told me all about your sick little collection..."

your dirty little oh-cult

pervert shit. I figured you couldn't help yourself."

"Someone else could've bought it. The other bids—"

"There weren't any other bids. Just you. I put all those other bids up there, and the

biddin' wasn't goin' to

be done until you made an offer. How do you like your purchase? Is it what you were hopin' for? Oh, you

have got some fun ahead of you. I“m goin“ to spend that thousand dollars you paid

me for my stepdad“s

ghost on a bouquet for your funeral. Goin“ to be one hell of a nice spread.”

You can just get out,

Jude thought.

Just get out of the house. Leave the dead man“s suit and the dead man behind.

Take Georgia for a trip

to L.A. Pack a couple suitcases, be on a flight in three hours. Danny can set it up,

Danny can...

As if he had said it aloud, Jessica Price said, “Go ahead and check into a hotel. See what happens.

Wherever you go, he“ll be right there. When you wake up, he“ll be settin“ at the foot of your bed.” She was

starting to laugh. “You“re goin“ to die, and it“s goin“ to be his cold hand over your mouth.”

“So Anna was living with you when she killed herself?” he said. Still in possession of himself. Still

perfectly calm.

A pause. The angry sister was out of breath, needed a moment before she could reply. Jude could hear a

sprinkler running in the background, children shouting in the street.

Jessica said, “It was the only place she had. She was depressed. She“d always been bad depressed, but you

made it worse. She was too miserable to go out, get help, see anyone. You made her hate herself. You made

it so she wanted to die.”

“What makes you think she killed herself because of me? You ever think it was the

pleasure of your

company drove her over the edge? If I had to listen to you all day, I“d probably want to slash my wrists,

too.”

“You“re going to die—” she spat.

He cut her off. “Think up a new line. And while you“re working on that, here“s something else to think

about: I know a few angry souls myself. They drive Harleys, live in trailers, cook crystal meth, abuse their

children, and shoot their wives. You call “em scumbags. I call “em fans. Want to

see if I can find a few who  
live in your area to drop in and say hello?”  
“No one will help you,” she said, voice strangled and trembling with fury. “The  
black mark on you  
will infect anyone who joins your cause. You will not live, and no one who gives  
you aid or comfort  
will live.” Reciting it through her anger, as if it were a speech she had rehearsed,  
which perhaps she  
had. “Everyone will flee from you or be undone like you will be undone. You “re  
goin” to die alone,  
you hear me?

Alone

.”

“Don”t be so sure. If I”m going down, I might like some company,” he said. “And  
if I can”t get help, maybe  
I”ll come see you myself.” And banged the phone down.

8

Jude glared at the black phone,  
still gripped in his white-knuckled hand, and listened to the slow, martial  
drumbeat  
of his heart.

“Boss,” Danny breathed. “Ho. Lee. Shit.

Boss.

” He laughed: thin, wheezing, humorless laughter. “What the hell was all that?”  
Jude mentally commanded his hand to open, to let go of the phone. It didn”t want  
to. He knew that Danny  
had asked a question, but it was like a voice overheard through a closed door, part  
of a conversation taking  
place in another room, nothing to do with him.  
It was beginning to settle in that Florida was dead. When he had first heard  
she”d

killed herself — when

Jessica Price threw it in his face — it had not meant anything, because he  
couldn”t

let it mean anything.

Now, though, there was no running from it. He felt the knowledge of her death in  
his blood, which went  
heavy and thick and strange on him.

It did not seem possible to Jude she could be gone, that someone with whom he”d  
shared his bed could



be in a bed of dirt now. She was twenty-six — no, twenty-seven; she'd been twenty-six when she left.

When he sent her away. She'd been twenty-six, but she asked questions like a four-year-old.

You go fishin' much on Lake Pontchartrain? What's the best dog you ever owned? What do you think happens to us when we die?

Enough questions to drive a man mad.

She'd been afraid she was going mad. She was depressed. Not fashionably depressed, in the way of some

Goth chicks, but clinically. She had been overcome with it in their last couple of months together, didn't

sleep, wept for no reason, forgot to put on her clothes, stared at the TV for hours without bothering to turn

it on, answered the phone when it rang but then wouldn't say anything, just stood

there holding it, as if

she'd been switched off.

But before that there'd been summer days in the barn while he rebuilt the

Mustang. There'd been John

Prine on the radio, the sweet smell of hay baking in the heat, and afternoons filled with her lazy, pointless

questions — a never-ending interrogation that was, at turns, tiresome, amusing, and erotic. There'd been

her body, tattooed and icy white, with the bony knees and skinny thighs of a longdistance

runner. There'd

been her breath on his neck.

"Hey," Danny said. He reached out, and his fingers grazed Jude's wrist. At his touch, Jude's hand sprang

open, releasing the phone. "Are you going to be all right?"

"I don't know."

"Want to tell me what's going on?"

Slowly Jude lifted his gaze. Danny half stood behind his desk. He had lost some of his color, his ginger

freckles standing out in high relief against the white of his cheeks.

Danny had been her friend, in the unthreatening, easygoing, slightly impersonal way he made himself a

friend to all of Jude's girls. He played the role of the urbane, understanding gay pal, someone they could trust to keep their secrets, someone they could vent to and gossip with, someone who provided intimacy without involvement. Someone who would tell them things about Jude that Jude wouldn't tell them himself.

Danny's sister had OD'd on heroin when Danny was just a freshman in college. His mother hanged herself six months later, and Danny had been the one who discovered her. Her body dangled from the single rafter in the pantry, her toes pointed downward, turning in small circles above a kickedover

footstool. You didn't need to be a psychologist to see that the double-barreled blast of the sister and the

mother, dying at almost the same time, had wiped out some part of Danny as well, had frozen him at nineteen. Although he didn't

wear black fingernail polish or rings in his lips, in a way Danny's attraction to Jude wasn't so different

from Georgia's, or Florida's, or any of the other girls'. Jude collected them in almost exactly the same way

the Pied Piper had collected rats, and children. He made melodies out of hate and perversion and pain, and

they came to him, skipping to the music, hoping he would let them sing along.

Jude didn't want to tell Danny about what Florida had done to herself, wanted to spare him. It would be

better not to tell him. He wasn't sure how Danny would take it.

He told him anyway. "Anna. Anna McDermott. She cut her wrists. The woman I was just talking to is her sister."

"Florida?" Danny said. He settled back into his chair. It creaked beneath him. He looked winded. He

pressed his hands to his abdomen, then leaned forward slightly, as if his stomach were cramping up. "Oh,

shit. Oh, fucking shit," Danny said sweetly. No words had ever sounded less obscene.

A silence followed. Jude noticed, for the first time, that the radio was on,

murmuring softly. Trent Reznor sang that he was ready to give up his empire of dirt. It was funny hearing Nine Inch Nails on the radio just then. Jude had met Florida at a Trent Reznor show, backstage. The fact of her death hit him fresh, all over again, as if he were just realizing it for the first time. You go fishin' much on Lake Pontchartrain? And then the shock began to coalesce into a sickened resentment. It was so pointless and stupid and self-involved that it was impossible not to hate her a little, not to want to get her on the phone and curse her out, except he couldn't get her on the phone, because she was dead. "Did she leave a note?" Danny asked. "I don't know. I didn't get much information from her sister. It wasn't the world's most helpful phone call. Maybe you noticed." But Danny wasn't listening. He said, "We used to go out for margaritas sometimes. She was one hell of a sweet kid. Her and her questions. She asked me once if I had a favorite place to watch the rain when I was a kid. What the hell kind of question is that? She made me shut my eyes and describe what it looked like outside my bedroom window when it was raining. For ten minutes. You never knew what she was going to ask next. We were big-time compadres. I don't understand this. I mean, I know she was depressed. She told me about it. But she really didn't want to be. Wouldn't she have called one of us if she was going to do something like...? Wouldn't she have given one of us a chance to talk her out of it?" "I guess not." Danny had dwindled somehow in the last few minutes, shrunk into himself. He said, "And her sister... her sister thinks it's your fault? Well, that's... that's just crazy." But his voice was weak, and Jude thought he didn't sound entirely sure of himself.

“I guess.”

“She had emotional problems going back before she met you,” Danny said, with a little more confidence.

“I think it runs in her family,” Jude said.

Danny leaned forward again. “Yeah.

Yeah

. I mean — what the Christ? Anna’s sister is the person who sold you the ghost?

The dead man’s suit?

What the fuck is going on here? What happened that made you want to call her in

the first place?”

Jude didn’t want to tell Danny about what he’d seen last night. In that moment —

pushed up against

the stony truth of Florida’s death — he wasn’t entirely sure

what

he’d seen last night anymore. The old man sitting in the hallway, outside his bedroom door at 3:00

A.M., just didn’t seem as real now.

“The suit she sent me is a kind of symbolic death threat. She tricked us into buying

it. For some reason she

couldn’t just send it to me, I had to pay for it first. I guess you could say sanity isn’t her strong suit.

Anyway, I could tell there was something wrong about it as soon as it came. It was

in this fucked-up black

heart-shaped box and — this will maybe sound a little paranoid — but it had a pin

hidden inside to stick

someone.”

“There was a needle hidden in it? Did it stick you?”

“No. It poked Georgia good, though.”

“Is she all right? Do you think there was something on it?”

“You mean like arsenic? No. I don’t get the sense Jessica Price of Psychoville, Florida, is actually that

stupid. Deeply and intensely crazy, but not stupid. She wants to scare me, not go to

jail. She told me her

stepdaddy's ghost came with the suit and he's going to get me for what I did to Anna. The pin was probably, I don't know, part of the voodoo. I grew up not far from the Panhandle. Place is crawling with toothless, possumeating trailer trash full of weird ideas. You can wear a crown of thorns to your job at the Krispy Kreme and no one will bat an eye."

"Do you want me to call the police?" Danny asked. He was finding his footing now. His voice wasn't so winded, had regained some of its self-assurance. "No."

"She's making threats on your life."

"Who says?"

"You do. Me, too. I sat right here and heard the whole thing."

"What did you hear?"

Danny stared for a moment, then lowered his eyelids and smiled in a drowsy kind of way. "Whatever you say I heard."

Jude grinned back, in spite of himself. Danny was shameless. Jude could not, at the moment, recall why it was he sometimes didn't like him.

"Naw," Jude said. "That's not how I'm going to deal with this. But you can do one thing for me. Anna sent a couple letters after she went home. I don't know what I did with them. You want to poke around?"

"Sure, I'll see if I can lay a hand on them." Danny was eyeing him uneasily again, and even if he had

recovered his humor, he had not got back his color. "Jude... when you say that's not how you're going to deal with this... what's that

mean?" He pinched his lower lip, brow screwed up in thought again. "That stuff you said when you hung up. Talking about sending people after her. Going down there yourself. You were pretty pissed.

Like I've never heard you. Do I need to be worried?"

"You? No," Jude said. "Her? Maybe."

His mind leaped  
from one bad thing to another, Anna nude and hollow-eyed and floating dead in  
scarlet bathwater,  
Jessica Price on the phone —  
You“re goin“ to die, and it“s goin“ to be his cold hand over your mouth  
— the old man sitting in the hall in his black Johnny Cash suit, slowly lifting his  
head to look at Jude  
as Jude walked by.  
He needed to quiet the noise in his head, a thing usually best accomplished by  
making some noise with his  
hands. He carried the Dobro to his studio, strummed at it experimentally, and  
didn“t like the tuning. Jude  
went into the closet to look for a capo to choke the strings and found a box of  
bullets instead.  
They were in a heart-shaped box — one of the yellow heart-shaped boxes his  
father used to give to his  
mother, every Valentine“s Day and every Mother“s Day, on Christmas and on  
her  
birthday. Martin never  
gave her anything else — no roses or rings or bottles of champagne — but  
always  
the same big box of  
chocolates from the same department store.  
Her reaction was as unvarying as his gift. Always, she smiled, a thin,  
uncomfortable smile, keeping her lips  
together. She was shy about her teeth. The uppers were false. The real ones had  
been punched in. Always,  
she offered the box first to her husband, who, smiling proudly, as if his gift were a  
diamond necklace and  
not a three-dollar box of chocolates, would shake his head. Then she presented  
them to Jude.  
And always Jude picked the same one, the one in the center, a chocolate-covered  
cherry. He liked the  
gloosh  
of it when he bit into it, the faintly corrupt, sticky-sweet sap, the rotten-soft  
texture  
of the cherry itself.  
He imagined he was helping himself to a chocolate-covered eyeball. Even in those  
days, Jude took  
pleasure in dreaming up the worst, reveled in gruesome possibilities.

Jude found the box nestled in a rat's nest of cables and pedals and adapters, under a guitar case leaned against the back of his studio closet. It wasn't just any guitar case, but the one he'd left Louisiana with thirty years before, although the used, forty-dollar Yamaha that had once occupied it was long gone. The Yamaha he had left behind, onstage in San Francisco, where he'd opened for Zeppelin one night in 1975. He'd been leaving a lot of things behind in those days: his family, Louisiana, swine, poverty, the name he'd been born with. He did not waste a lot of time looking back. He picked the candy box up, then dropped it just as quickly, his hands going nerveless on him. Jude knew what was in it without even opening it, knew at first sight. If there was any doubt at all, though, it fled when the box hit the ground and he heard the brass shells jingle-jangle inside. The sight of it caused him to recoil in an almost atavistic terror, as if he'd gone digging through the cables and a fat, furry-legged spider had crawled out across the back of his hand. He had not seen the box of ammo in more than three decades and knew he'd left it stuck between the mattress and the box spring of his childhood bed, back in Moore's Corner. It had not left Louisiana with him, and there was no way it could be lying there behind his old guitar case, only it was. He stared at the yellow heart-shaped box for a moment, then forced himself to pick it up. He pulled off the lid and tipped the box over. Bullets spilled onto the floor. He had collected them himself, as avid for them as some children were for baseball cards: his first collection. It had started when he was eight, when he was still Justin Cowzynski, years and years before

he'd ever imagined that someday he would be someone else. One day he was tramping across the east field and heard something snap underfoot. He bent to see what he'd stepped on and picked an empty shotgun shell out of the mud. One of his father's, probably. It was fall, when the old man shot at turkeys. Justin sniffed the splintered, flattened case. The whiff of gunpowder itched his nostrils —

a sensation that should've been unpleasant but which was strangely fascinating. It came home with him in his dungaree pocket and went into one of his mother's empty candy boxes. It was soon joined by two live shells for a .38, swiped from the garage of a friend, some curious silver empties he had discovered at the rifle range, and a bullet from a British assault rifle, as long as his middle finger. He had traded for this last, and it had cost him dear — an issue of Creepy with a Frazetta cover — but he felt he had got value for value. He would lie in bed at night looking his bullets over, studying the way the starlight shone on the polished casings, smelling the lead, the way a man might sniff at a ribbon scented with a lover's perfume; thoughtfully, with a head full of sweet fantasy.

In high school he strung the British bullet on a leather thong and wore it around his throat until the principal confiscated it. Jude wondered that he had not found a way to kill someone in those days. He'd possessed all the key elements of a school shooter: hormones, misery, ammunition.

People wondered how something like Columbine could happen. Jude wondered why it didn't happen more often.

They were all there — the crushed shotgun shell, the silver empties, the two-inch bullet from the AR-15,



which couldn't be there, because the principal had never given it back. It was a warning. Jude had seen a dead man in the night, Anna's stepfather, and this was his way of telling Jude that their business was not done.

It was a crazy thing to think. There had to be a dozen more reasonable explanations for the box, for the bullets. But Jude didn't care what was reasonable. He wasn't a reasonable man. He only cared what was true. He had seen a dead man in the night. Maybe, for a few minutes, in Danny's sun-splashed office, he'd been able to block it out, pretend it hadn't happened, but it had. He was steadier now, found himself considering the bullets coolly. It came to him that maybe it was more than a warning. Perhaps it was also a message. The dead man, the ghost, was telling him to arm himself.

Jude considered the .44, his Super Blackhawk, in the safe, under his desk. But what would he shoot at? He understood that the ghost existed first and foremost within his own head. That maybe ghosts always haunted minds, not places. If he wanted to take a shot at it, he'd have to turn the barrel against his own temple.

He brushed the bullets back into his mother's candy box, pushed the lid back on. Bullets wouldn't do him

any good. But there were other kinds of ammunition.

He had a collection of books on the shelf at one end of the studio, books about the occult and the

supernatural. Around the time Jude was just beginning his recording career, Black

Sabbath came out big,

and Jude's manager advised him that it couldn't hurt to at least imply that he and

Lucifer were on a firstname

basis with each other. Jude had already taken up the study of group psychology and

mass hypnosis,  
on the theory that if fans were good, cultists were even better. He added volumes  
by Aleister Crowley and  
Charles Dexter Ward to the reading list, and he worked his way through them  
with  
a careful, joyless  
concentration, underlining concepts and key facts.  
Later, after he was a celebrity, Satanists and Wiccans and spiritualists, who from  
listening to his music  
mistakenly thought he shared their enthusiasms — he really didn't give a fuck; it  
was like wearing leather  
pants, just part of the costume — sent him even more (admittedly fascinating)  
reading: an obscure manual,  
printed by the Catholic Church in the thirties, for performing exorcisms; a  
translation of a five-hundredyearold  
book of perverted, unholy psalms written by a mad Templar; a cookbook for  
cannibals.  
Jude placed the box of bullets up on the shelf among his books, all thoughts of  
finding a capo and playing  
some Skynyrd gone. He ran his thumbnail along the spines of the hardcovers. It  
was cold enough in his  
studio to make his fingers stiff and clumsy, and it was hard to turn pages, and he  
didn't know what he was  
looking for.  
For a while he struggled to make his way through a strangled discourse on  
animal  
familiar, creatures of  
intense feeling who were bound by love and blood to their masters, and who  
could  
deal with the dead  
directly. But it was written in dense eighteenth-century English, without any  
punctuation. Jude would labor  
over a single paragraph for ten minutes, then wouldn't know what he'd read. He  
set it aside.  
In another book he lingered on a chapter about possession, by way of demon or  
hateful spirit. One  
grotesque illustration showed an old man sprawled on his bed, among tangled  
sheets, his eyes bulging in  
horror and his mouth gaping open, while a leering, naked homunculus climbed  
out  
from between his lips.

Or, a worse thought: Maybe the thing was climbing in.  
Jude read that anyone who held open the golden door of mortality, for a peek at the other side, risked letting something through, and that the ill, the old, and those who loved death were especially in danger.  
The tone was assertive and knowledgeable, and Jude was encouraged until he read that the best method of protection was to wash yourself in urine. Jude had an open mind when it came to depravity, but he drew the line at water sports, and when the book slipped from his cold hands, he didn't bother to pick it up. Instead he kicked it away.  
He read about the Borley rectory, about contacting spirit companions by way of the Ouija board, and about the alchemical uses of menstrual blood, his eyes going in and out of focus, and then he was flinging books, lashing them about the studio. Every word was crap. Demons and familiars and enchanted circles and the magical benefits of piss. One volume swept a lamp off his desk with a crash. Another hit a framed platinum record. A spiderweb of gleaming shatter lines leaped through the glass over the silver disk. The frame dropped from the wall, hit the floor, tilted onto its face with a crunch. Jude's hand found the candy box full of bullets. It struck the wall, and ammo sprayed across the floor in a ringing clatter.  
He grabbed another book, breathing hard, his blood up, just looking to do some damage now and never mind to what, then caught himself, because the feel of the thing in his hand was all wrong. He looked and saw a black, unlabeled videotape instead. He didn't know right away what it was, had to think awhile before it came to him. It was his snuff film. It had been sitting on the shelf with the books, apart from the

other videos for... what? Four years? It had been there so long he'd stopped seeing it among the hardcovers. It had become just a part of the general clutter on the shelves. Jude had walked into the studio one morning and found his wife, Shannon, watching it. He was packing for a trip to New York and had come looking for a guitar to take with him. He stopped in the doorway at the sight of her. Shannon stood in front of the television, watching a man suffocate a naked teenage girl with a clear plastic bag, while other men watched. Shannon frowned, her brow wrinkled in concentration, watching the girl in the movie die. He didn't worry about her temper — anger didn't impress him — but he'd learned to be wary of her when she was like this, calm and silent and drawn into herself. At last she said, "Is this real?" "Yes." "She's really dying?" He looked at the TV. The naked girl had gone slack and boneless on the floor. "She's really dead. They killed her boyfriend, too, didn't they?" "He begged." "A cop gave it to me. He told me the two kids were Texas junkies who shot up a liquor store and killed someone, then ran for Tijuana to hide out. Cops keep some sick shit lying around." "He begged for her." Jude said, "It's gruesome. I don't know why I still have it." "I don't either," she said. She rose and ejected the movie, then stood looking at it, as if she had never seen a videotape before and was trying to imagine what purpose one might serve. "Are you all right?" Jude asked. "I don't know," she said. She turned the glassy, confused look upon him. "Are you?" When he didn't reply, she crossed the room and slipped past him. At the door Shannon caught herself and realized she was still holding the tape. She set it gently on the shelf before she

walked out. Later the housekeeper shoved the video in with the books. It was a mistake Jude never bothered to correct, and soon enough he forgot it was even there. He had other things to think about. After he returned from New York, he found the house empty, Shannon's side of the closet cleaned out. She didn't bother with a note, no Dear John saying their love had been a mistake or that she'd loved some version of him that didn't really exist, that they'd been growing apart. She was forty-six and had been married and divorced once before. She didn't do junior-high theatrics. When she had something to say to him, she called. When she needed something from him, her lawyer called. Looking at the tape now, he really didn't know why he had held on to it — or why it had held on to him. It seemed to him he should've sought it out and got rid of it when he came home and found her gone. He was not even sure why he had accepted it in the first place, when the tape had been offered to him. Jude teetered then on the edge of an uncomfortable thought, that he had, over time, become a little too willing to take what he was offered, without wondering at the possible consequences. And look at the trouble it had led to. Anna had offered herself to him, and he had taken, and now she was dead. Jessica McDermott Price had offered him the dead man's suit, and now it was his. Now it was his. He had not gone out of his way to own a dead man's suit, or a videotape of Mexican death-porn, or any of the rest of it. It seemed to him instead that all these things had been drawn to him like iron filings to a magnet, and he could no more help drawing them and holding on to them than a magnet could. But this suggested helplessness, and he had never been helpless. If he was going to throw something into the wall, it

ought to be this tape.

But he'd stood too long thinking. The cold in the studio sapped him, so that he felt

tired, felt his age. He

was surprised he couldn't see his own breath; that was how cold it felt. He

couldn't imagine anything more

foolish — or weak — than a fifty-four-year-old man pitching his books in a fit of rage, and if there was one

thing he despised, it was weakness. He wanted to drop the tape and crunch it underfoot, but instead he

turned to put it back on the shelf, feeling that it was more important to recover his

composure, to act, at

least for a moment, like an adult.

"Get rid of it," Georgia said from the door.

10

His shoulders twitched in reflexive surprise.

He turned and looked. She was naturally pale to begin with, but now her face was bloodless, like

polished bone, so she resembled a vampire even more than usual. He wondered if it was a trick of

makeup before he saw that her cheeks were damp, the fine black hairs at her temples pasted down with

sweat. She stood in pajamas, clutching herself and shivering in the cold.

"You sick?" he asked.

"I'm fine," she said. "Picture of health. Get rid of it."

He gently set the snuff film back on the shelf. "Get rid of what?"

"The dead man's suit. It smells bad. Didn't you notice the way it smelled when you took it out of the closet?"

"It isn't in the closet?"

"No, it isn't in the closet. It was lying on the bed when I woke up. It was spread out right next to me. Did

you forget to put it back? Or forget you took it out in the first place? I swear to God, it's a surprise

sometimes you remember to put your dick back in your pants after you take a piss.

I hope all the pot you

smoked in the seventies was worth it. What the hell were you doing with it anyway?"

If the suit was out of the closet, then it had walked out on its own. There was no percentage in telling Georgia that, though, so he said nothing, pretended an interest in cleaning up. Jude went around the desk, bent, and turned over the framed record that had dropped to the floor. The record itself was as busted as the plate of glass on top of it. He popped the frame apart and tipped it on its side. Broken glass slid with a musical clash into the wastebasket by his desk. He plucked out the pieces of his smashed platinum album — Happy Little Lynch Mob — and stuck them in the trash, six gleaming scimitar blades of grooved steel. What to do now? He supposed a thinking man would go and have another look at the suit. He rose and turned to her. “Come on. You should lie down. You look like hell. I’ll put the suit away, and then I’ll tuck you in.” He put his hand on her upper arm, but she pulled free. “No. The bed smells like it, too. It’s all over the sheets.” “So we’ll get new sheets,” he said, taking her arm again. Jude turned her and guided her into the hallway. The dead man was sitting two-thirds of the way down the corridor, in the Shaker chair on the left, his head lowered in thought. A drape of morning sunshine fell across where his legs should have been. They disappeared where they passed into the light. It gave him the look of a war veteran, his trousers ending in stumps, midway down his thighs. Below this splash of sunshine were his polished black loafers, with his black-stockinged feet stuck in them. Between his thighs and his shoes, the only legs that were visible were the legs of the chair, the wood a lustrous blond in the light. No sooner had Jude noticed him than he looked away, did not want to see him, did not want to think about

him being there. He glanced at Georgia, to see if she had spotted the ghost. She was staring at her feet as she shuffled along with Jude's hand on her arm, her bangs in her eyes. He wanted to tell her to look, wanted to know if she could see him as well, but he was too in dread of the dead man to speak, afraid the ghost would hear him and glance up.

It was crazy to think somehow the dead man wasn't going to notice them walking past, but for no reason he could explain, Jude felt that if they were both very quiet, they could slip by unseen.

The dead man's eyes were closed, his chin almost touching his chest, an old man who had nodded off in the late-morning sun.

More than anything Jude wanted him to stay just as he was. Not to stir. Not to wake. Not to open his eyes; please, not to open his eyes.

They drew closer, but still Georgia didn't glance his way. Instead she laid a sleepy

head on Jude's shoulder

and closed her eyes. "So you want to tell me why you had to trash the studio?"

And

were you shouting in there? I thought I heard you shouting, too."

He didn't want to look again but couldn't help himself. The ghost remained as he

was, head tipped to the side, smiling just slightly, as if musing on a pleasant thought or a dream. The dead man didn't seem to hear her. Jude had an idea then, unformed, difficult to articulate. With his closed

eyes and his head

tilted just so, the ghost seemed not so much to be asleep as to be listening

for something. Listening for him

, Jude thought. Waiting, perhaps, to be acknowledged, before he would (or could) acknowledge Jude in

return. They were almost on top of him now, about to walk past him, and Jude



shrank against Georgia  
to avoid touching him.

“That’s what woke me up, the noise, and then the smell—” She made a soft coughing sound and lifted her head to squint blearily at the bedroom door. She still didn’t notice the ghost, although they were crossing directly in front of him now. She came up short, stopped moving. “I’m not going in there until you do something about that suit.”

He slipped his hand down her arm to her wrist and squeezed it, shoving her forward. She made a thin sound of pain and protest and tried to pull away from him. “What the fuck?” “Keep walking,” he said, and then realized a moment later, with a pitiful throb in the chest, that he had spoken.

He glanced down at the ghost, and at the same time the dead man lifted his head and his eyes rolled open.

But where his eyes belonged was only a black scribble. It was as if a child had taken a Magic Marker — a truly magic marker, one that could draw right on the air — and had desperately tried to ink over them. The

black lines squirmed and tangled among one another, worms tied into a knot.

Then Jude was past him, shoving Georgia down the hallway while she struggled and whined. When he was

at the door to the bedroom, he looked back.

The ghost came to his feet, and as he rose, his legs moved out of the sunlight and painted themselves back

into being, the long black trouser legs, the sharp crease in his pants. The dead man

held his right arm out to

the side, the palm turned toward the floor, and something fell from the hand, a flat

silver pendant, polished

to a mirror brightness, attached to a foot of delicate gold chain. No, not a pendant but a curved blade of

some kind. It was like a dollhouse version of the pendulum in that story by Edgar Allan Poe. The gold

chain was connected to a ring around one of his fingers, a wedding ring, and the razor was what he had

married. He allowed Jude to look at it for a moment and then twitched his wrist, a child doing a trick with a

yo-yo, and the little curved razor leaped into his hand.  
Jude felt a moan struggling to force its way up from his chest. He shoved Georgia through the door, into the bedroom, and slammed it.

"What are you doing, Jude?" she cried, pulling free at last, stumbling away from him.

"Shut up."

She hit him in the shoulder with her left hand, then slugged him in the back with her right, the hand with the infected thumb. This hurt her more than it hurt him. She made a sick gasping sound and let him be.

He still held the doorknob. He listened to the corridor. It was quiet.

Jude eased the door back and looked through a three-inch opening, ready to slam it

again, expecting the dead man to be there with his razor on a chain.

No one was in the hallway.

He shut his eyes. He shut the door. He put his forehead against it, pulled a deep breath down into his lungs and held it, let it go slowly. His face was clammy with sweat, and he lifted a hand to wipe it away.

Something icy and sharp and hard lightly grazed his cheek, and he opened his eyes

and saw the dead man's curved razor in his hand, the blue-steel blade reflecting an image of his own wide, staring eyeball.

Jude shouted and flung it down, then looked at the floor, but already it wasn't there.

11

He backed away from the door.

The room was filled with the sound of strained breathing, his own and Marybeth's.

In that moment she was Marybeth. He couldn't recall what it was he usually called her.

"What kind of shit are you on?" she asked, in a voice that hinted at a hillbilly drawl, faint but distinctly southern.

"Georgia," he said, remembering then. "Nothing. I couldn't be more sober."

"Oh, the hell. What are you taking?" And that subtle, barely-there drawl was gone,

receding as quickly as it  
had come. Georgia had lived a couple years in New York City, where she'd made  
a studied effort to lose  
her accent, didn't like being taken for a cornpone hick.  
"I got off all my shit years ago. I told you."  
"What was that in the hall? You saw something. What'd you see?"  
He glared a warning at her, which she ignored. She stood huddled before him in  
her pajamas, her arms  
crossed under her breasts, hands tucked out of sight against her sides. Her feet  
were spread slightly apart, as  
if, should he try to move past her into the rest of the bedroom, she would block  
his  
way — an absurd  
prospect for a girl a hundred pounds lighter than he was.  
"There was an old man sitting out in the hall. In the chair," he said at last. He had  
to tell her something  
and didn't see any reason to lie. Her opinion of his sanity didn't trouble him.  
"We  
walked right by him,  
but you didn't see him. I don't know if you  
can  
see him."  
"That's lunatic bullshit." She said it with no special conviction.  
He started toward the bed, and she got out of his way, pressed herself to the wall.  
The dead man's suit was spread neatly across his side of the mattress. The deep,  
heart-shaped box lay on  
the floor, the black lid resting next to it, white tissue paper hanging out. He  
caught  
a whiff of the suit when  
he was still four paces away from it and flinched. It hadn't smelled that way when  
it first came out of the  
box, he would've noticed. Now it was impossible not to notice it. It had the ripe  
odor of corruption,  
something dead and spoiling.  
"Christ," Jude said.  
Georgia stood at a distance, a hand cupped over her mouth and nose. "I know. I  
was wondering if there was  
something in one of the pockets. Something going bad. Old food."  
Breathing through his mouth, Jude patted down the jacket. He thought it very  
likely he was about to

discover something in an advanced state of decomposition. It would not have surprised him to find that Jessica McDermott Price had stuffed a dead rat into the suit, a little something extra to go with his purchase, at no additional charge. Instead, though, he felt only a stiff square of what was maybe plastic in one pocket. He slipped it out for a look.

It was a photograph, one he knew well, Anna's favorite picture of them. She had taken it with her when she left. Danny snapped it one afternoon in late August, the sunlight reddish and warm on the front porch, the day swarming with dragonflies and glittering motes of dust. Jude perched on the steps in a worn denim jacket, his Dobro over one knee. Anna sat beside him, watching him play, her hands squeezed between her thighs. The dogs were sprawled in the dirt at their feet, staring quizzically up at the camera.

It had been a good afternoon, maybe one of the last good afternoons before things started to go bad, but looking at the photograph now brought him no pleasure. Someone had taken a Sharpie to it. Jude's eyes had been marked out in black ink, covered over by a furious hand.

Georgia was saying something from where she stood a few feet away, her voice shy, uncertain. "What did he look like? The ghost in the hall?"

Jude's body was turned so she couldn't see the photograph, a lucky thing. He didn't want her to see it.

He struggled to find his voice. It was hard to get past the unhappy shock of those black scribbles blotting out his eyes in the picture. "An old man," he managed at last. "He was wearing this suit."

And there were these awful fucking black scribbles floating in front of his eyes and they looked just like this,

Jude imagined telling her, turning to show her the snapshot at the same time. He didn't do it, though.

“He just sat there?” Georgia asked. “Nothing else happened?”  
“He stood up and showed me a razor on a chain. A funny little razor.”  
On the day Danny took the picture, Anna was still herself, and Jude thought she’d  
been happy. Jude  
had spent most of that late-summer afternoon beneath the Mustang, and Anna  
had  
stayed close by,  
crawling under herself to pass him tools and necessary parts. In the photo there  
was  
a smear of motor  
oil on her chin, dirt on her hands and knees — an appealing, well-earned grime,  
the  
kind of filth you  
could take pride in. Her eyebrows were bunched up, a pretty dimple between  
them,  
and her mouth was  
open, as if she were laughing — or, more likely, about to ask him a question.  
You go fishin’ much on Lake Pontchartrain? What’s the best dog you ever  
owned?  
Her with her questions.  
Anna had not asked him why he was sending her away, however, when it was  
over. Not after the night he  
found her wandering the side of the highway in a T-shirt and nothing else, people  
honking at her as they  
went past. He hauled her into the car and pulled back his fist to hit her, then  
slugged the steering wheel  
instead, punching it until his knuckles bled. He said enough was enough, that he  
was going to pack her shit  
for her, send her on her way. Anna said she’d die without him. He said he’d send  
flowers to the funeral.  
So: She at least had kept her word. It was too late to keep his.  
“Are you messing with me, Jude?” Georgia asked. Her voice was close. She was  
creeping toward him, in  
spite of her aversion to the smell. He slid the picture back into the pocket of the  
dead man’s suit before she  
could see. “Because if this is a joke, it sucks.”  
“It isn’t a joke. I guess it’s possible I’m losing my mind, but I don’t think that’s  
it either. The person who  
sold me the... suit... knew what she was doing. Her little sister was a fan who

committed suicide. This  
woman blames me for her death. I talked to her on the phone just an hour ago,  
and  
she told me so herself.  
That's one part of this thing I'm sure I didn't imagine. Danny was there. He  
heard  
me talking to her. She  
wants to get even with me. So she sent me a ghost. I saw him just now in the hall.  
And I saw him last night,  
too."

He began to fold the suit, intending to return it to its box.  
"Burn it," Georgia said, with a sudden vehemence that surprised him. "Take the  
fucking suit and burn it."  
Jude felt, for an instant, an almost overpowering impulse to do just that, find  
some  
lighter fluid, douse it,  
cook it in the driveway. It was an impulse he immediately mistrusted. He was  
wary  
of any irrevocable  
action. Who knew what bridges might be burned along with it? He felt the  
slightest  
flicker of an idea,  
something about the awful-smelling suit and how it might be of use, but the  
thought drifted away before he  
could fix on it. He was tired. It was hard to pin a solid thought in place.  
His reasons for wanting to hold on to the suit were illogical, superstitious,  
unclear  
even to himself, but  
when he spoke, he had a perfectly reasonable explanation for keeping it. "We  
can't  
burn it. It's evidence.  
My lawyer is going to want it later, if we decide to build a case against her."  
Georgia laughed, weakly, unhappily. "What? Assault with a deadly spirit?"  
"No. Harassment, maybe. Stalking. It's a death threat anyway, even if it's a crazy  
one. There's laws on  
that."  
He finished folding the suit and set it back in its nest of tissue paper, inside the  
box. He breathed through  
his mouth as he did it, head turned from the stink.

"The whole room smells. I know this is pussy, but I feel like I might yak," she said.

He slipped a sideways look at her. She was absentmindedly clutching her right hand to her chest, staring blankly at the glossy black heart-shaped box. She had, until just a few moments before, been hiding the hand against her side. The thumb was swollen, and the place where the pin had gone in was now a white sore, the size of a pencil eraser, glistening with pus. She saw him looking at it, glanced down at herself, then up again, smiling miserably.

"You got a hell of an infection there."

"I know. I been putting Bactine on it."

"Maybe you ought to see someone about it. If it's tetanus, Bactine won't take care of it."

She closed her fingers around the injured thumb, squeezed it gently. "I pricked it on that pin hidden in the suit. What if it was poisoned?"

"I guess if it had cyanide on it, we'd know by now."

"Anthrax."

"I spoke to the woman. She's country-fried stupid, not to mention in need of some

superior fucking

psychiatric drugs, but I don't think she would've sent me anything with poison on

it. She knows she'd go to

jail for that." He touched Georgia's wrist, pulled her hand toward him, and studied

the thumb. The skin

around the area of infection was soft and rotten and pruned up, as if it had been soaking in water for a long

time. "Why don't you go and set in front of the TV. I'll have Danny book an appointment with the doctor."

He let go of her wrist and nodded toward the door, but she didn't move.

"Will you look and see if he's in the hall?" she asked.

He stared for a moment, then nodded and went to the door. He opened it half a foot

and peeked out. The

sun had shifted or moved behind a cloud, and the hallway was in cool shadow. No

one sat in the Shaker  
chair against the wall. No one stood in the corner with a razor on a chain.  
“All clear.”

She touched his shoulder with her good hand. “I saw a ghost once. When I was a kid.”

He wasn’t surprised. He hadn’t met a Goth girl yet who hadn’t had some kind of

brush with the

supernatural, who didn’t believe, with utter, embarrassing sincerity, in astral forms

or angels or Wiccan

spellcraft.

“I was living with Bammy. My grandmother. This was just after the first time my daddy threw me out. One

afternoon I went in the kitchen to pour myself a glass of her lemonade — she makes real nice lemonade —

and I looked out the back window, and there was this girl in the yard. She was picking dandelions and

blowing on them to make them fly apart, you know, like kids do, and she was singing to herself while she

was doing it. This girl a few years younger than myself, in a real cheap dress. I pushed up the window to

yell out to her, find out what she was doing in our yard. When she heard the window squeak, she looked up

at me, and that’s when I knew she was dead. She had these messed-up eyes.”

“How do you mean messed-up?” Jude asked. The skin on his forearms prickled and tightened, going rough with gooseflesh.

“They were black eyes. No, they weren’t even like eyes at all. It was more like... like they were covered over.”

“Covered over,” Jude repeated.

“Yes. Marked out. Black. Then she turned her head and seemed to look over at the

fence. In another

moment she hopped up and walked across the yard. She was moving her mouth, like she was talking to

someone, only no one was there, and I couldn’t hear any words coming out of her.

I could hear her when



she was picking dandelions and singing to herself, but not when she got up and seemed to be talking to someone. I always thought that was a strange thing — how I could only hear her when she sang. And then she reached up, like there was an invisible person standing in front of her, just on the other side of

Bammy's fence, and she was taking his hand.

"And I got scared all of a sudden, like got chills, because I felt something bad was going to happen to her. I

wanted to tell her to let go of his hand. Whoever was taking her hand, I wanted her

to get away from him.

Only I was too scared. I couldn't get my breath. And the little girl looked back at me one more time, kind

of sad, with her marked-over eyes, and then she came up off the ground — I swear

to God — and floated

over the fence. Not like she was flying. Like she was being picked up by invisible hands. The way her feet

dangled in the air. They bumped into the pickets. She went over, and then she was

gone. I got the flop

sweats and had to sit down on the kitchen floor."

Georgia darted a look at Jude's face, maybe to see if he thought she was being foolish. But he only nodded

that she should go on.

"Bammy came in and cried out and said, „Girl, what's the matter?" But when I told her what I saw, that was

when she got really upset and started crying. She sat down on the floor with me and said she believed me.

She said I had seen her twin sister, Ruth.

"I knew about Ruth, who died when Bammy was little, but it wasn't until then that

Bammy told me what

really happened to her. I always thought she got run over by a car or something, but it wasn't like that. One

day, when they were both about seven or eight — this was 1950-something — their mother called them in

for lunch. Bammy went, but Ruthie stayed out, because she didn't feel like eating and because she was just

naturally disobedient. While Bammy and her folks were inside, someone snatched her out of the backyard.

She wasn't ever seen again. Except now and then, people at Bammy's house spot her blowing on

dandelions and singing to herself, and then someone who isn't there takes her away. My mother saw Ruth's

ghost, and Bammy's husband seen her once, and some of Bammy's friends, and Bammy, too.

"Everyone who saw Ruth was just like me. They wanted to tell her not to go, to stay away from whoever

was on the other side of the fence. But everyone who sees her is too scared by the sight of her to speak.

And Bammy said she thought it wouldn't ever be over until someone found their voice and spoke up. That

it was like Ruth's ghost was in a kind of dream, stuck repeating her last minutes, and she'll be that way

until someone calls out to her and wakes her up."

Georgia swallowed, fell silent. She bowed her head, so her dark hair hid her eyes.

"I can't believe the dead want to hurt us," she said finally. "Don't they need our help? Don't they always

need our help? If you see him again, you should try to talk to him. You should find

out what he wants."

Jude didn't believe that it was a matter of if, only when. And he already knew what the dead man wanted.

"He didn't come for talk," Jude said.

12

Jude wasn't sure what to do next,

so he made tea. The simple, automatic gestures of filling the kettle, spooning loose

tea into the strainer,

and finding a mug had a way of clearing his head and slowing time, opening a useful silence. He stood

at the range listening to the kettle tick.

He did not feel panicked, a realization that brought him some satisfaction. He was not ready to run, had

doubts there was anything to gain from running anyway. Where could he go that would be better than here?

Jessica Price had said the dead man belonged to him now and would follow him

wherever he went. Jude  
flashed to an image of himself sliding into a first-class seat on a flight to  
California, then turning his head to  
see the dead man sitting next to him, with those black scribbles floating in front  
of  
his eyes. He shuddered,  
shook off the thought. The house was as good a place as any to make a stand — at  
least until he figured out  
some spot that made more sense. Besides, he hated to board the dogs. In the old  
days, when he went on  
tour, they always came on the bus with him.  
And no matter what he’d said to Georgia, he had even less interest in calling the  
police or his lawyer. He  
had an idea that dragging the law into it might be the worst thing he could do.  
They  
could bring a case  
against Jessica McDermott Price, and there just might be some pleasure in that,  
but  
getting even with her  
wouldn’t make the dead man go away. He knew that. He’d seen lots of horror  
movies.  
Besides, calling in the police to rescue him rubbed against his natural grain, no  
small matter. His own  
identity was his first and single most forceful creation, the machine that had  
manufactured all his other  
successes, which had produced everything in his life that was worth having and  
that he cared about. He  
would protect that to the end.  
Jude could believe in a ghost but not a boogeyman, a pure incarnation of evil.  
There had to be more to the  
dead man than black marks over his eyes and a curved razor on a golden chain.  
He  
wondered, abruptly,  
what Anna had cut her wrists with, became conscious all over again of how cold it  
was in the kitchen, that  
he was leaning toward the kettle to absorb some of its ambient heat. Jude was  
suddenly certain she had  
slashed her wrists with the razor on the end of her father’s pendulum, the one  
he’d  
used to mesmerize

desperate suckers and to search for well water. He wondered what else there was to

know about how Anna

had died and about the man who'd been a father to her and who had discovered her body in a cold bath, the water darkened with her blood.

Maybe Danny had turned up Anna's letters. Jude dreaded reading them again and

at the same time knew

that he had to. He remembered them well enough to know now that she'd been trying to tell him what she

was going to do to herself and he'd missed it. No — it was more terrible than that.

He had not wanted to

see, had willfully ignored what was right in front of him.

Her first letters from home had conveyed a breezy optimism, and their subtext was

that she was getting her

life together, making sound, grown-up decisions about her future. They arrived on

rich white card stock and

were composed in delicate cursive. As with her conversation, these letters were filled with questions,

although, in her correspondence at least, she didn't seem to expect any answers.

She would write that she

had spent the month sending out job applications, then rhetorically ask if it was a mistake to wear black

lipstick and motorcycle boots to an interview at a day-care center. She would describe two colleges and

wonder at length about which would be better for her. But it was all a con, and Jude knew it. She never got

the job at the day care, never mentioned it again after that one letter. And when the

spring semester rolled

around, she had moved on to applying for a spot at a beauticians' academy, college forgotten.

Her last few letters were a truer picture of the place she'd been in mentally. They came on plain, ruled

paper, torn out of a notebook, and her cursive was cramped, hard to read. Anna wrote that she couldn't get

any rest. Her sister lived in a new development, and there was a house going up right next door. She wrote she heard them hammering nails all day long and that it was like living next to a coffin maker after a plague. When she tried to sleep at night, the hammers would start up again, just as she was drifting off, and never mind that there was no one over there. She was desperate to sleep. Her sister was trying to get her on a treatment plan for her insomnia. There were things Anna wanted to talk about, but she didn't have anyone to talk to, and she was tired of talking to herself. She wrote that she couldn't stand to be so tired all the time. Anna had begged him to call, but he had not called. Her unhappiness wore on him. It was too much work to help her through her depressions. He'd tried, when they were together, and his best hadn't been good enough. He'd given it his best, it hadn't panned out, and still she wouldn't leave him alone. He didn't know why he even read her letters, let alone sometimes responded to them. He'd wished they would just stop coming. Finally they had. Danny could dig them out and then make a doctor's appointment for Georgia. As plans went, it wasn't much, but it was better than what he had ten minutes before, which was nothing. Jude poured the tea, and time started up again. He drifted with his mug into the office. Danny wasn't at his desk. Jude stood in the doorway, staring at the empty room, listening intently to the stillness for some sign of him. Nothing. He was in the bathroom,

maybe — but no. The door was slightly ajar, as it had been the day before, and the

crack revealed only darkness. Maybe he had taken off for lunch.

Jude started over toward the window, to see if Danny’s car was in the driveway, then held up before he got

there, took a detour to Danny’s desk. He flipped through some stacks of paper, looking for Anna’s letters.

If Danny had found them, however, he’d tucked them somewhere out of sight.

When Jude didn’t turn them

up, he settled into Danny’s chair and launched the Web browser on his computer,

intending to do a search

on Anna’s stepdaddy. It seemed like there was something about everyone online.

Maybe the dead man had

his own MySpace account. Jude laughed — choked, ugly laughter — down in his throat.

He couldn’t remember the dead man’s first name, so he ran a search for

“McDermott hypnosis dead.”

At the top of Jude’s search results was a link to an obituary, which had appeared in

last summer’s

Pensacola News Journal,

for a Craddock James McDermott. That was it: Craddock.

Jude clicked on it — and there he was.

The man in the black-and-white photograph was a younger version of the man

Jude

had seen twice now in

the upstairs hallway. In the picture he looked a vigorous sixty, his hair cut in that same close-to-the-scalp

military bristle. With his long, almost horsey face, and wide thin lips, he bore more

than a passing

resemblance to Charlton Heston. The most startling thing about the photograph was discovering that

Craddock, in life, had eyes like any man’s eyes. They were clear and direct and stared into Forever with the

challenging self-assurance of motivational speakers and evangelical preachers everywhere.

Jude read. It said that a life of learning and teaching, exploring and adventuring, had ended when Craddock

James McDermott had died of a cerebral embolism at his stepdaughter's home in Testament, Florida, on

Tuesday, August 10. A true son of the South, he had grown up the only child of a Pentecostal minister and

had lived in Savannah and Atlanta, Georgia, and later Galveston, Texas.

He was a wide receiver for the Longhorns in 1965 and enlisted in the service upon

graduation, where he

served as a member of the army's psychological operations division. It was there that he discovered his

calling, when he was introduced to the essentials of hypnosis. In Vietnam he earned a Purple Heart and a

Bronze Star. He was discharged with honors and settled in Florida. In 1980 he was

wed to Paula Joy

Williams, a librarian, and became stepfather to her two children, Jessica and Anna,

whom he later adopted.

Paula and Craddock shared a love built upon quiet faith, deep trust, and a mutual fascination with the

unexplored possibilities of the human spirit.

At this, Jude frowned. It was a curious sentence—"a mutual fascination with the unexplored possibilities

of the human spirit." He didn't even know what it meant.

Their relationship endured until Paula passed away in 1986. In his life Craddock had attended to

almost ten thousand "patients" — Jude snorted at the word — using deep hypnotic

technique to

alleviate the suffering of the ill and to help those in need to overcome their weaknesses, work that his

oldest stepdaughter, Jessica McDermott Price, carried on still, as a private consultant. Jude snorted

again. She had probably written the obituary herself. He was surprised she hadn't included the phone

number for her service.

Mention that you heard about us in my stepfather's obit and receive 10 percent off

your first session!!!

Craddock's interest in spiritualism and the untapped potential of the mind led him

to experiment with

"dowsing," the old country technique of discovering underground water sources with the use of a rod or

pendulum. But it was the way in which he led so many of his fellow life travelers to discover their own

hidden reservoirs of strength and self-worth for which he will be best remembered

by his surviving adopted

daughter and his loved ones. "His voice may have fallen silent, but it will never be forgotten."

Nothing about Anna's suicide.

Jude passed his gaze over the obit again, pausing on certain combinations of words

that he didn't much care

for: "psychological operations," "unexplored possibilities," "the untapped potential of the mind." He

looked again at Craddock's face, taking in the chilly confidence of his pale blackand-

white eyes and the

almost angry smile set on his thin, colorless lips. He was a cruel-looking son of a bitch.

Danny's computer pinged to let Jude know that an e-mail had come through.

Where the hell was Danny

anyway? Jude glanced at the computer's clock, saw he'd been sitting there for twenty minutes already. He

clicked over to Danny's e-mail program, which picked up messages for both of them. The new e-mail was addressed to Jude.

He flicked a glance at the address of the sender, then shifted in the chair, sitting up

straight, muscles

tightening across his chest and abdomen, as if he were readying himself for a blow.

In a way he was. The email

was from craddockm@box.closet.net.

Jude opened the e-mail and began to read.

dear jude



we will ride at nightfall we will ride to the hole i am dead you will die anyone who  
gets too close will  
be infected with the death on you us we are infected together we will be in the  
death hole together and  
the grave dirt will fall in on top of us lalala the dead pull the living down if  
anyone  
tries to help you i  
us we will pull them down and step on them and no one climbs out because the  
hole is too deep and the  
dirt falls too fast and everyone who hears your voice will know it is true jude is  
dead and i am dead and  
you will die you will hear my our voice and we will ride together on the night  
road  
to the place the  
final place where the wind cries for you for us we will walk to the edge of the hole  
we will fall in  
holding each other we will fall sing for us sing at our at your grave sing lalala  
Jude"s chest was an airless place, stuck full of icy-hot pins and needles.  
Psychological operations,  
he thought almost randomly, and then he was angry, the worst kind of angry, the  
kind that had to stay  
bottled up, because there was no one around to curse at, and he wouldn"t allow  
himself to break  
anything. He had already spent a chunk of the morning throwing books, and it  
hadn"t made him feel  
better. Now, though, he meant to keep himself under control.  
He clicked back to the browser, thinking he might have another glance at his  
search results, see what  
else he could learn. He looked blankly at the  
Pensacola News  
obituary one more time, and then his gaze fixed on the photograph. It was a  
different picture now, and  
in it Craddock was grinning and old, face lined and gaunt, almost starved, and his  
eyes were scribbled  
over with furious black marks. The first lines of the obituary said that a life of  
learning and teaching,  
exploring and adventuring, had ended when Craddock James McDermott died of  
a  
cerebral embolism  
at his stepdaughter"s home and now he was coming lalala and it was cold he was

cold Jude would be  
cold too when he cut himself he was going to cut himself and cut the girl and they  
would be in the  
deathhole and Jude could sing for them, sing for all of them—  
Jude stood up so quickly, and with such sudden force, that Danny’s chair was  
flung back and toppled over.  
Then his hands were on the computer, under the monitor, and he lifted, heaving it  
off the desk and onto the  
floor. It hit with a short, high-pitched chirp and a crunch of breaking glass,  
followed by a sudden pop of  
surging electricity. Then quiet. The fan that cooled the motherboard hushed  
slowly  
to a stop. He had hurled  
it instinctively, moving too quickly to think. Fuck it. Self-control was overrated.  
His pulse was jacked. He felt shaky and weak in the legs. Where the fuck was  
Danny? He looked at the  
wall clock, saw it was almost two, too late in the day for lunch. Maybe he’d gone  
out on an errand. Usually,  
though, he paged Jude on the intercom to let him know he was headed out.  
Jude came around the desk and finally made it to the window with the view of the  
drive. Danny’s little  
green Honda hybrid was parked in the dirt turnaround, and Danny was in it.  
Danny  
sat perfectly still in the  
driver’s seat, one hand on the steering wheel, his face ashy, rigid, blank.  
The sight of him, just sitting there, going nowhere, looking at nothing, had the  
effect of cooling Jude off.  
He watched Danny through the window, but Danny didn’t do anything. Never  
put  
the car in drive to leave.  
Never so much as glanced around. Danny looked — Jude felt an uneasy throb in  
his joints at the thought —  
like a man in a trance. A full minute passed, and then another, and the longer he  
watched, the more ill at  
ease Jude felt, the more sick in his bones. Then his hand was on the door and he  
was letting himself out, to  
find out what was wrong with Danny.

The air was a cold shock  
that made his eyes water. By the time he got to the side of the car, Jude’s cheeks

were burning, and the tip of his nose was numb. Although it was going on early afternoon, Jude was still in his worn robe, a muscle shirt, and striped boxers. When the breeze rose, the freezing air burned his bare skin, raw and lacerating.

Danny didn't turn to look at him but went on peering blankly through the windshield. He looked even worse close up. He was shivering, lightly and steadily. A drop of sweat trickled across his cheekbone.

Jude rapped his knuckles on the window. Danny started, as if springing awake from a light doze, blinked

rapidly, fumbled for the button to roll down the glass. He still didn't look directly up at Jude.

"What are you doing in your car, Danny?" Jude asked.

"I think I should go home."

"Did you see him?"

Danny said, "I think I should go home now."

"Did you see the dead man? What did he do?" Jude was patient. When he had to be, Jude could be the most patient man on earth.

"I think I have a stomach flu. That's all."

Danny lifted his right hand from his lap to wipe his face, and Jude saw it was clutching a letter opener.

"Don't you lie, Danny," Jude said. "I just want to know what you saw."

"His eyes were black marks. He looked right at me. I wish he didn't look right at me."

"He can't hurt you, Danny."

"You don't know that. You don't know."

Jude reached through the open window to squeeze his shoulder. Danny shrank from his touch. At the same

time, he made a whisking gesture at Jude with the letter opener. It didn't come anywhere close to cutting

him, but Jude withdrew his hand anyway.

"Danny?"

"Your eyes are just like his," Danny said, and clunked the car into reverse.

Jude jumped back from the car before Danny could back out over his foot. But Danny hesitated, his own

foot on the brake.

"I'm not coming back," he said to the steering wheel.

"Okay."

"I'd help you if I could, but I can't. I just can't."

"I understand."

Danny eased the car back down the driveway, tires grinding on the gravel, then turned it ninety degrees and rolled down the hill, toward the road. He watched until Danny passed through the

gates, turned left, and

disappeared from sight. Jude never saw him again.

14

He set out for the barn and the dogs.

Jude was grateful for the sting of the air on his face and the way each inhalation sent a stunned tingle

through his lungs. It was real. Ever since he had seen the dead man that morning, he felt increasingly

crowded by unnatural, bad-dream ideas leaking into everyday life where they didn't belong. He needed a

few hard actualities to hold on to, clamps to stop the bleeding.

The dogs watched him mournfully as he undid the latch to their pen. He slipped in

before they could

clamber out past him, and hunkered down, let them climb on him, smell his face.

The dogs: They were real,

too. He stared back at them, into their chocolate eyes and long, worried faces.

"If there was something wrong with me, you'd see it, wouldn't you?" he asked them. "If there were black

marks over my eyes?"

Angus lapped his face, once, twice, and Jude kissed his wet nose. He stroked

Bon's back, while she sniffed

anxiously at his crotch.

He let himself out. He wasn't ready to go back inside and found his way into the barn instead. He wandered

over to the car and had a look at himself in the mirror on the driver's-side door.

No

black marks. His eyes

were the same as always: pale gray under bushy black brows and intense, like he meant murder.

Jude had bought the car in sorry shape from a roadie, a '65 Mustang, the GT

fastback. He'd been on tour,  
almost without rest, for ten months, had gone out on the road almost as soon as  
his  
wife left him, and when  
he came back, he found himself with an empty house and nothing to do. He spent  
all of July and most of  
August in the barn, gutting the Mustang, pulling out parts that were rusted,  
burnt  
out, shot, dented,  
corroded, caked in oils and acids, and replacing them: HiPo block, authentic  
cranks  
and heads,  
transmission, clutch, springs, white pony seats — everything original except for  
the speakers and the stereo.  
He installed a bazooka bass in the trunk, affixed an XM radio antenna to the roof,  
and laid in a state-of-the-art  
digital sound system. He drenched himself in oil, banged knuckles, and bled into  
the transmission. It  
was a rough kind of courtship, and it suited him well.  
Around that time Anna had come to live with him. Not that he ever called her by  
that name. She was  
Florida then, although somehow, since he'd learned of her suicide, he'd come to  
think of her as Anna  
again.  
She sat in the backseat with the dogs while he worked, her boots sticking out a  
missing window. She sang  
along with the songs she knew and talked baby talk to Bon and kept at Jude with  
her questions. She asked  
him if he was ever going to go bald ("I don't know"), because she'd leave him if  
he did ("Can't blame  
you"), and if he'd still think she was sexy if she shaved off all her hair ("No"), and  
if he'd let her drive the  
Mustang when it was done ("Yes"), and if he'd ever been in a fistfight ("Try to  
avoid them — hard to play  
guitar with a broken hand"), and why he never talked about his parents (to which  
he said nothing), and if he  
believed in fate ("No," he said, but he was lying).  
Before Anna and the Mustang, he had recorded a new CD, a solo disc, and had  
traveled to some twentyfour  
nations, played more than a hundred shows. But working on the car was the first

time since Shannon  
had left him that he felt gainfully employed, doing work that mattered, in the  
truest  
sense — although why  
rebuilding a car should feel like honest work instead of a rich man’s hobby, while  
recording albums and  
playing arenas had come to seem like a rich man’s hobby instead of a job, he  
couldn’t have said.  
The idea crossed his mind once more that he ought to go. Put the farm in the  
rearview mirror and take off,  
it didn’t matter for where.  
The thought was so urgent, so demanding —  
get in the car and get out of here  
— that it set his teeth on edge. He resented being made to run. Throwing himself  
into the car and  
taking off wasn’t a choice, it was panic. This was followed by another thought,  
disconcerting and  
unfounded, yet curiously convincing: the thought that he was being herded, that the  
dead man  
wanted  
him to run. That the dead man was trying to force him away from... from what?  
Jude couldn’t  
imagine. Outside, the dogs barked in concert at a passing semi.  
Anyway, he wasn’t going anywhere without talking to Georgia about it. And if  
he  
did eventually decide to  
light out, he would probably want to get dressed beforehand. Yet in another  
moment he found himself  
inside the Mustang, behind the wheel. It was a place to think. He’d always done  
some of his best thinking  
in the car, with the radio on.  
He sat with the window halfway down, in the dark, earth-floored garage, and it  
seemed to him if there was  
a ghost nearby, it was Anna, not the angry spirit of her stepfather. She was as  
close  
as the backseat. They  
had made love there, of course. He had gone into the house to get beer and had  
come back, and she was

waiting in the rear of the Mustang in her boots and no more. He dropped the open  
beers and left them  
foaming in the dirt. In that moment nothing in the world seemed more important  
than her firm, twenty-six-year-old  
flesh, and her twenty-six-year-old sweat, and her laughter, and her teeth on his  
neck.  
He leaned back against the white leather, feeling his exhaustion for the first time  
all day. His arms were  
heavy, and his bare feet were half numb from the cold. At one time or another, he  
had left his black leather  
duster in the backseat. He reached for it and spread it over his legs. The keys  
were  
in the ignition, so he  
clicked the engine over to the battery to run the radio.  
Jude was no longer sure why he had climbed into the car, but now that he was  
sitting, it was hard to  
imagine moving. From what seemed a long way off, he could hear the dogs  
barking again, their voices  
strident and alarmed. He turned up the volume to drown them out.  
John Lennon sang "I Am the Walrus." Jude let his head rest on the back of the  
seat,  
relaxing into the pocket  
of warmth under his jacket. Paul McCartney's slinky bass kept drifting away,  
getting lost under the low  
mutter of the Mustang's engine, which was funny, since Jude hadn't turned the  
engine on, only the battery.  
The Beatles were followed by a parade of commercials. Lew at Imperial Autos  
said, "You won't find offers  
like ours anywhere in the tristate area. We're pulling deals our competition can't  
come close to matching.  
The dead pull the living down. Come on in and get behind the wheel of your next  
ride and take it for a spin  
on the nightroad. We'll go together. We'll sing together. You won't ever want  
the  
trip to end. It won't."  
Ads bored Jude, and he found the strength to flip to another station. On FUM  
they  
were playing one of his  
songs, his very first single, a thunderous AC/DC ripoff titled "Souls for Sale." In

the gloom it seemed as if  
ghostly shapes, unformed wisps of menacing fog, had begun to swirl around the  
car. He shut his eyes and  
listened to the faraway sound of his own voice.  
More than silver and more than gold,  
You say my soul is worth,  
Well, I'd like to make it right with God,  
But I need beer money first.  
He snorted softly to himself. It wasn't selling souls that got you into trouble, it  
was  
buying them. Next time  
he would have to make sure there was a return policy. He laughed, opened his  
eyes  
a little. The dead man,  
Craddock, sat in the passenger seat next to him. He smiled at Jude, to show  
stained  
teeth and a black  
tongue. He smelled of death, also of car exhaust. His eyes were hidden behind  
those odd, continuously  
moving black brushstrokes.  
"No returns, no exchanges," Jude said to him. The dead man nodded  
sympathetically, and Jude shut his  
eyes again. Somewhere, miles away, he could hear someone shouting his name.  
"...ude! Jude! Answer me Ju..."  
He didn't want to be bothered, though, was dozy, wanted to be left alone. He  
cranked the seat back. He  
folded his hands across his stomach. He breathed deeply.  
He had just nodded off when Georgia got him by the arm and hauled him out of  
the  
car, dumped him in the  
dirt. Her voice came in pulses, drifting in and out of audibility.  
"...get out of there Jude get the fuck..."  
"...on't be dead don't be..."  
"...leeeeeeease,  
please  
...  
...eyes  
open  
your  
fucking



...

He opened his eyes and sat up in one sudden movement, hacking furiously. The barn door was rolled back, and the sunshine poured through it in brilliant, crystalline beams, solid-looking and sharp-edged. The light stabbed at his eyes, and he flinched from it. He inhaled a deep, cold breath, opened his mouth to say something, to let her know he was all right, and his throat filled with bile. He rolled onto all fours and retched in the dirt. Georgia had him by the arm and bent over him while he horked up.

Jude was dizzy. The ground tilted underneath him. When he tried to look outside, the world spun, as if it were a picture painted on the side of a vase, turning on a lathe. The house, the yard, the drive, the sky, streamed by him, and a withering sensation of motion sickness rolled through him, and he upchucked again.

He clutched the ground and waited for the world to stop moving. Not that it ever would. That was one thing you found out when you were stoned, or wasted, or feverish: that the world was always turning and that only a healthy mind could block out the sickening whirl of it. He spat, wiped at his mouth. His stomach

muscles were sore and cramped, as if he'd just done a few dozen abdominal crunches, which was, when you thought about it, very close to the truth. He sat up, turned himself to look at the

Mustang. It was still running. No one was in it.

The dogs danced around him. Angus leaped into his lap and thrust his cold, damp nose into his face, lapped

at Jude's sour mouth. Jude was too weak to push him away. Bon, always the shy one, gave Jude a worried, sidelong look, then lowered her head to the thin gruel of his vomit and covertly

began to gobble it up.

He tried to stand, grabbing Georgia's wrist, but didn't have the strength in his legs

and instead pulled

her down with him, onto her knees. He had a dizzying thought —

the dead pull the living down

— that spun in his head for a moment and was gone. Georgia trembled. Her face was wet against his

neck.

"Jude," she said. "Jude, I don't know what's happening to you."

He couldn't find his voice for a minute, didn't have the air yet. He stared at the black Mustang, shuddering

on its suspension, the restrained idling force of the engine shaking the entire chassis.

Georgia continued, "I thought you were dead. When I grabbed your arm, I thought

you were dead. Why are

you out here with the car running and the barn door shut?"

"No reason."

"Did I do something? Did I fuck it up?"

"What are you talking about?"

"I don't know," she said, beginning to cry. "There must be some reason you're out

here to kill yourself."

He turned on his knees. He found he was still holding one of her thin wrists, and now he took the other. Her

nest of black hair floated around her head, bangs in her eyes.

"Something's wrong, but I wasn't out here trying to kill myself. I sat in the car to

listen to some music and

think for a minute, but I didn't turn the engine on. It turned itself on."

She wrenched her wrist away. "Stop it."

"It was the dead man."

"Stop it. Stop it."

"The ghost from the hall. I saw him again. He was in the car with me. Either he started the Mustang or I

started it without knowing what I was doing, because he wanted me to."

"Do you know how crazy that sounds? How crazy all of this sounds?"

"If I'm crazy, then Danny is, too. Danny saw him. That's why he's gone. Danny couldn't hack it. He had to

go.”

Georgia stared at him, her eyes lucid and bright and fearful behind the soft curl of her bangs. She shook her

head in an automatic gesture of denial.

“Let’s get out of here,” he said. “Help me stand.”

She hooked an arm under his armpits and pushed off the floor. His knees were weak springs, all loose

bounce and no support. No sooner had he come to his heels than he started to roll forward. He put his hands

out to stop his fall and caught himself on the warming hood of the car.

He said, “Shut it off. Get the keys.”

Georgia picked his duster off the ground — it had spilled out of the Mustang with

him — and threw it back

in the driver’s seat. She coughed, waving her hands at the fog of exhaust, climbed into the car, and shut it

off. The silence was sudden and alarming.

Bon pressed herself against Jude’s leg, looking for reassurance. His knees threatened to fold. He drove her

aside with his knee, then put his heel to her ass. She yelped and leaped away.

“Fuck off me,” he said.

“Whyn’t you leave her be?” Georgia asked. “The both of them saved your life.”

“How do you figure?”

“Didn’t you hear them? I was coming out to shut them up. They were hysterical.”

He regretted kicking Bon then and looked around to see if she was close enough to

put a hand on. She had

retreated into the barn, though, and was pacing in the dark, watching him with morose and accusing eyes.

He wondered about Angus and glanced around for him. Angus stood in the barn door, his back to them, his

tail raised. He was staring steadily down the driveway.

“What does he see?” Georgia asked, an absurd thing to ask. Jude had no idea. He stood bracing himself

against the car, too far from the sliding barn door to see out into the yard.

Georgia pushed the keys into the pocket of her black jeans. She had dressed somewhere along the line and

wrapped her right thumb in bandages. She slipped past Jude and went to stand next

to Angus. She ran her  
hand over the dog's spine, glanced down the drive, then back at Jude.  
"What is it?" Jude asked.  
"Nothing," she said. She held the right hand against her breastbone and grimaced  
a  
little, as if it were  
paining her. "Do you need help?"  
"I'm managing," he said, and shoved off the Mustang. He was conscious of a  
building black pressure  
behind his eyeballs, a deep, slow, booming pain that threatened to become one of  
the all-time great  
headaches.  
At the big sliding barn doors, he paused, with Angus between himself and  
Georgia.  
He peered down the  
drive of frozen mud, to the open gates of his farm. The skies were clearing. The  
thick, curdled gray cloud  
cover was coming apart, and the sun blinked irregularly through the rents.  
The dead man, in his black fedora, stared back at him from the side of the state  
highway. He was there for a  
moment, when the sun was behind a cloud, so that the road was in shadow. As  
sunshine fluttered around  
the edges of a cloud, Craddock flickered away. His head and hands disappeared  
first, so that only a hollow  
black suit remained, standing empty. Then the suit disappeared, too. He  
stammered  
back into being a  
moment later, when the sun retreated under cover once more.  
He lifted his hat to Jude and bowed, a mocking, oddly southern gesture. The sun  
came and went and came  
again, and the dead man flashed like Morse code.  
"Jude?" Georgia asked. He realized he and Angus were standing there staring  
down the drive in just the  
same way. "There isn't anything there, is there, Jude?" She didn't see Craddock.  
"No," he said. "Nothing there."  
The dead man faded back into existence long enough to wink. Then the breeze  
rose  
in a soft rush and, high  
above, the sun broke through for good, at a place where the clouds had been  
pulled  
into strings of dirty

wool. The light shone strongly on the road, and the dead man was gone.

15

Georgia led him into the music library  
on the first floor. He did not notice her arm around his waist, supporting and  
guiding him, until she let  
go. He sank onto the moss-colored couch, asleep almost as soon as he was off his  
feet.

He dozed, then woke, briefly, his vision swimmy and unclear, when she bent to  
lay  
a throw blanket across  
him. Her face was a pale circle, featureless, except for the dark line of her mouth  
and the dark holes where  
her eyes belonged.

His eyelids sank shut. He could not remember the last time he'd been so tired.  
Sleep had him, was pulling  
him steadily under, drowning reason, drowning sense, but as he went down again,  
that image of Georgia's  
face swam before him, and he had an alarming thought, that her eyes had been  
missing, hidden behind  
black scribbles. She was dead, and she was with the ghosts.

He struggled back toward wakefulness and for a few moments almost made it. He  
opened his eyes  
fractionally. Georgia stood in the door to the library, watching him, her little  
white  
hands balled into little  
white fists, and her eyes were her own. He felt a moment of sweet relief at the  
sight  
of her.

Then he saw the dead man in the hallway behind her. His skin was pulled tight  
across the knobs of his  
cheekbones, and he was grinning to show his nicotine-stained teeth.  
Craddock McDermott moved in stop motion, a series of life-size still  
photographs.

In one moment his arms  
were at his sides. In the next, one of his gaunt hands was on Georgia's shoulder.  
His fingernails were  
yellowed and long and curled at the end. The black marks jumped and quivered in  
front of his eyes.

Time leaped forward again. Abruptly Craddock's right hand was in the air, held  
high above Georgia's head.

The gold chain dropped from it. The pendulum at the end of it, a curved three-inch blade, a slash of silvery brightness, fell before Georgia's eyes. The blade swung in slight arcs before her, and she stared straight at it with eyes that were suddenly wide and fascinated. Another stop-motion twitch ahead in time and Craddock was bent forward in a frozen pose, his lips at her ear. His mouth wasn't moving, but Jude could just hear the sound of him whispering, a noise like someone sharpening the blade of a knife on a leather strop. Jude wanted to call to her. He wanted to tell her to watch out, the dead man was right next to her, and she needed to run, to get away, not to listen to him. But his mouth felt wired shut, and he couldn't produce any sound except for a fitful moan. The effort it took even to keep his eyelids open was more than he could sustain, and they rolled shut. He flailed against sleep, but he was weak — an unfamiliar sensation. He went down once more, and this time he stayed down. Craddock was waiting for him with his razor, even in sleep. The blade dangled at the end of its gold chain before the broad face of a Vietnamese man, who was naked save for a white rag belted around his waist, and seated in a stiff-backed chair in a dank concrete room. The Vietnamese's head had been shaved, and there were shiny pink circles on his scalp, where he'd been burnt by electrodes. A window looked out on Jude's rainy front yard. The dogs were right up against the glass, close enough so their breath stained it white with condensation. They were yapping furiously, but they were like dogs on TV, with the volume turned all the way down; Jude heard no sound of them at all. Jude stood quietly in the corner, hoping he would not be seen. The razor moved back and forth in front of the Vietnamese's amazed, sweat-beaded face. "The soup was poisoned," Craddock said. He was speaking in Vietnamese, but in the way of dreams, Jude

understood just what he was saying. "This is the antidote." Gesturing with his free

hand at a massive

syringe resting inside a black heart-shaped box. In the box with it was a widebladed

bowie knife with a

Teflon handle. "Save yourself."

The VC took the syringe and stuck it, without hesitation, into his own neck. The needle was perhaps five

inches long. Jude flinched, looked away.

His gaze leaped naturally to the window. The dogs remained just on the other side

of the glass, jumping

against it, no sound coming from them. Beyond them Georgia sat on one end of a seesaw. A little

towheaded girl in bare feet and a pretty flowered dress sat on the other end.

Georgia and the girl wore

blindfolds, diaphanous black scarves made of some sort of crepelike material. The girl's pale yellow hair

was tied into a loose ponytail. Her expression was an unreadable blank. Although she looked vaguely

familiar to Jude, it was still a long-drawn-out moment before it came to him, with a

jolt of recognition, that

he was looking at Anna, as she had been at nine or ten. Anna and Georgia went up

and down.

"I'm going to try to help you," Craddock was saying, speaking to the prisoner in English now. "You're in

trouble, you hear? But I can help you, and all you need to do is listen close. Don't think. Just listen to the

sound of my voice. It's almost nightfall. It's almost time. Nightfall is when we turn on the radio and listen

to the radio voice. We do what the radio man says to do. Your head is a radio, and my voice is the only broadcast."

Jude looked back, and Craddock wasn't there anymore. In his place, where he had sat, was an oldfashioned

radio, the face lit up all in green, and his voice came out of it. "Your only chance to

live is to do

just as I say. My voice is the only voice you hear.”

Jude felt a chill in his chest, didn’t like where this was going. He came unstuck and in three steps was at the

side of the table. He wanted to rid them of Craddock’s voice. Jude grabbed the radio’s power cord, where it

was plugged into the wall, and yanked. There was a pop of blue electricity, which stung his hand. He

recoiled, throwing the line to the floor. And still the radio chattered on, just as before.

“It’s nightfall. It’s nightfall at last. Now is the time. Do you see the knife in the box? You can pick it up.

It’s yours. Take it. Happy birthday to you.”

The VC looked with some curiosity into the heart-shaped box and picked out the bowie knife. He turned it

this way and that, so the blade flashed in the light.

Jude moved to look down at the face of the radio. His right hand still throbbed from the jolt it had taken,

was clumsy, hard to manipulate. He didn’t see a power button, so he spun the dial,

trying to get away from

Craddock’s voice. There was a sound Jude at first took for a burst of static, but which in another moment

resolved into the steady, atonal hum of a large crowd, a thousand voices chattering

all together.

A man with the knowing, streetwise tone of a fifties radio personality said,

“Stottlemire is hypnotizing

them today with that twelve-to-six curveball of his, and down goes Tony

Conigliaro. You’ve probably

heard that you can’t make people do things they don’t want to do when they’ve been hypnotized. But you

can see here it just isn’t true, because you can tell that Tony C. sure didn’t want to

swing at that last pitch.

You can make anyone do any awful thing. You just have to soften them up right.

Let me demonstrate what

I mean with Johnny Yellowman here. Johnny, the fingers of your right hand are poisonous snakes. Don’t



let them bite you!"

The VC slammed himself back into his chair, recoiling in shock. His nostrils flared, and his eyes narrowed, with a sudden look of fierce determination. Jude turned, heel squeaking on the floor, to cry out, to tell him to stop, but before he could speak the Vietnamese prisoner whacked the knife down.

His fingers fell from his hand, only they were the heads of snakes, black, glistening. The VC did not scream. His damp, almond-brown face was lit with something like triumph. He lifted the right hand to show the stumps of his fingers, almost proudly, the blood bubbling out of them, down the inside of his arm.

"This grotesque act of self-mutilation has been brought to you courtesy of orange Moxie. If you haven't

tried a Moxie, it's time to step up to the plate and find out why Mickey Mantle says it's the bee's knees.

Side retired in order...."

Jude turned, reeled toward the door, tasting vomit in the back of his throat, smelling vomit when he exhaled. At the very periphery of his vision, he could see the window, and the seesaw. It was still going up and down. No one was on it. The dogs lay on their sides, asleep in the grass. He shoved through the door and banged down two warped steps and into the dusty dooryard behind his father's farm. His father sat with his back to him, on a rock, sharpening his straight razor with a black strop.

The sound of it was like the dead man's voice, or maybe it was the other way around, Jude no longer knew for sure. A steel tub of water sat in the grass next to Martin Cowzynski, and a black fedora floated in it.

That hat in the water was awful. Jude wanted to scream at the sight of it. The sunshine was intense and direct on his face, a steady glare. He staggered in the heat, swayed back on his heels, and brought a hand up to shield his eyes from the light. Martin drew the

blade across the strop,  
and blood fell from the black leather in fat drops. When Martin scraped the blade  
forward, the strop  
whispered “death.” When he jerked the razor back, it made a choked sound like  
the  
word “love.” Jude did  
not slow to speak with his father but kept going on around the back of the house.  
“Justin,” Martin called to him, and Jude flicked a sidelong look at him, couldn’t  
help himself. His father  
wore a pair of blind man’s sunglasses, round black lenses with silver frames.  
They  
gleamed when they  
caught the sunlight. “You need to get back in bed, boy. You’re burnin’ up.  
Where  
do you think you’re  
goin’ all dressed up like that?”  
Jude glanced down and saw he was wearing the dead man’s suit. Without  
breaking  
stride he began to pull  
at the buttons of the coat, undoing them as he reeled forward. But his right hand  
was numb and clumsy — it  
felt as if he were the one who had just chopped off his fingers — and the buttons  
wouldn’t come free. In a  
few more steps, he gave up. He felt sick, cooking in the Louisiana sun, boiling in  
his black suit.  
“You look like you’re headed to someone’s funeral,” his father said. “You want to  
watch out. Could be  
your’n.”  
A crow was in the tub of water where the hat had been, and it took off, fanning its  
wings furiously,  
throwing spray, as Jude went past it in his stumbling, drunkard’s gait. In another  
step he was at the side of  
the Mustang. He fell into it, slammed the door behind him.  
Through the windshield the hardpack wavered like an image reflected in water,  
shimmering through the  
heat. He was sodden with sweat and gasping for breath in the dead man’s suit,  
which was too hot, and too  
black, and too restricting. Something stank, faintly, of char. The heat was worst  
of

all in his right hand. The feeling in the hand couldn't be described as pain, not anymore. It was, instead, a poisonous weight, swollen not with blood but liquefied ore.

His digital XM radio was gone. In its place was the Mustang's original, factory installed

AM. When he

thumbed it on, his right hand was so hot it melted a blurred thumbprint in the dial.

"If there is one word that can change your life, my friends," came the voice on the radio, urgent, melodious, unmistakably southern. "If there is just one word, let me tell you, that word is „holyeverylastinJesus“!"

Jude rested his hand on the steering wheel. The black plastic immediately began to

soften, melting to

conform to the shape of his fingers. He watched, dazed, curious. The wheel began to deform, sinking in on itself.

"Yes, if you keep that word in your heart, hold that word to your heart, clasp it to you like you clasp your

children, it can save your life, it really can. I believe that. Will you listen to my voice, now? Will you listen

only to my voice? Here's another word that can turn your world upside down and

open your eyes to the

endless possibilities of the living soul. That word is „nightfall.“ Let me say it again. Nightfall. Nightfall at

last. The dead pull the living down. We'll ride the glory road together, hallelujah."

Jude took his hand off the wheel and put it on the seat next to him, which began to

smoke. He picked the

hand up and shook it, but now the smoke was coming out of his sleeve, from the inside of the dead man's

jacket. The car was on the road, a long, straight stretch of blacktop, punching through southern jungle, trees

strangled in creepers, brush choking the spaces in between. The asphalt was warped and distorted in the

distance, through the shimmering, climbing waves of heat.

The reception on the radio fizzed in and out, and sometimes he could hear a snatch of something else, music overlapping the radio preacher, who wasn't really a preacher at all but Craddock using someone else's voice. The song sounded plaintive and archaic, like something off a Folkways record, mournful and sweet at the same time, a single ringing guitar played in a minor key. Jude thought, without sense, He can talk, but he can't sing

.  
The smell in the car was worse now, the smell of wool beginning to sizzle and burn. Jude was beginning to burn. The smoke was coming out both his sleeves now and from under his collar. He clenched his teeth and began to scream. He had always known he would go out this way: on fire. He had always known that rage was flammable, dangerous to store under pressure, where he had kept it his whole life. The Mustang rushed along the unending back roads, black smoke boiling from under the hood, out the windows, so he could hardly see through the fog of it. His eyes stung, blurred, ran with tears. It didn't matter. He didn't need to see where he was going. He put the pedal down. Jude lurched awake, a feeling of unwholesome warmth in his face. He was turned on his side, lying on his right arm, and when he sat up, he couldn't feel the hand. Even awake he could still smell the reek of something burning, an odor like singed hair. He looked down, half expecting to find himself dressed in the dead man's suit, as in his dream. But no; he was still in his tatty old bathrobe. The suit. The key was the suit. All he had to do was sell it again, the suit and the ghost both. It was so obvious he didn't know why it had taken so long for the idea to occur to him. Someone would want it; maybe lots of people would want it. He'd seen fans kick, spit, bite, and claw over drumsticks that had been thrown into the crowd. He thought they would want a ghost, straight from the home of Judas Coyne, even

more. Some hapless asshole would take it off his hands, and the ghost would have to leave. What happened to the buyer after that didn't much trouble Jude's conscience. His own survival, and Georgia's, was a matter that concerned him above all others. He stood, swaying, flexed his right hand. The circulation was coming back into it, accompanied by a sensation of icy prickling. It was going to hurt like a bitch. The light was different, had shifted to the other side of the room, pale and weak as it came through the lace curtains. It was hard to say how long he'd been asleep. The smell, that stink of something burning, lured him down the darkened front hall, through the kitchen, and into the pantry. The door to the backyard patio was open. Georgia was out there, looking miserably cold, in a black denim jacket and a Ramones T-shirt that left the smooth, white curve of her midriff exposed. She had a pair of tongs in her left hand. Her breath steamed in the cold air. "Whatever you're cooking, you're fuckin' it up," he said, waving his hand at all the smoke. "No I'm not," she said, and flashed him a proud and challenging smile. She was, in that instant, so beautiful it was a little heartbreaking — the white of her throat, the hollow in it, the delicate line of her just-visible collarbones. "I figured out what to do. I figured out how to make the ghost go away." "How's that?" Jude asked. She picked at something with the tongs and then held it up. It was a burning flap of black fabric. "The suit," she said. "I burned it."

16

An hour later it was dusk. Jude sat in the study to watch the last of the light drain out of the sky. He had a guitar in his lap. He needed to think. The two things went together. He was in a chair, turned to face a window that looked over the barn, the dog pen,

and the trees beyond.

Jude had it open a crack. The air that came in had a crisp bite to it. He didn't mind.

It wasn't much warmer

in the house, and he needed the fresh air, was grateful for the mid-October perfume

of rotten apples and

fallen leaves. It was a relief from the reek of exhaust. Even after a shower and a change of clothes, he could still smell it on him.

Jude had his back to the door, and when Georgia came into the room, he saw her in

reflection. She had a

glass of red wine in each hand. The swaddling of bandages around her thumb forced her to grip one of the

glasses awkwardly, and she spilled a little on herself when she sank to her knees beside his chair. She

kissed the wine off her skin, then set a glass in front of him, on the amp near his feet.

"He isn't coming back," she said. "The dead man. I bet you. Burning the suit got rid of him. Stroke of genius. Besides, that fucking thing had to go.

Whoo-ee

. I wrapped it in two garbage bags before I brought it downstairs, and I still thought

I was going to gag from the stink."

It was in his mind to say,

He wanted you to do it,

but he didn't. It wouldn't do her any good to hear it, and it was over and done with now.

Georgia narrowed her eyes at him, studying his expression. His doubts must've been there in his face,

because she said, "You think he'll be back?" When Jude didn't reply, she leaned toward him and spoke

again, her voice low, urgent. "Then why don't we go? Get a room in the city and get the hell out of here?"

He considered this, forming his reply slowly, and only with effort. At last he said, "I don't think it would

do any good, just to up and run. He isn't haunting the house. He's haunting me."

That was part of it — but only part. The rest was too hard to put into words. The idea persisted that everything to happen so far had happened for reasons — the dead man’s reasons. That phrase, “psychological operations,” rose to Jude’s mind with a feeling of chill. He wondered again if the ghost wasn’t trying to make him run, and why that would be. Maybe the house, or something in the house, offered Jude an advantage, although, try as he might, he couldn’t figure what. “You ever think you ought to take off?” Jude asked her. “You almost died today,” Georgia said. “I don’t know what’s happening to you, but I’m not going anywhere. I don’t think I’m going to let you out of my sight ever again. Besides, your ghost hasn’t done anything to me. I bet he can’t touch me.” But Jude had watched Craddock whispering in her ear. He had seen the stricken look on Georgia’s face as the dead man held his razor on a chain before her eyes. And he had not forgotten Jessica Price’s voice on the telephone, her lazy, poisonous, redneck drawl: You will not live, and no one who gives you aid or comfort will live. Craddock could get to Georgia. She needed to go. Jude saw this clearly now — and yet the thought of sending her away, of waking alone in the night and finding the dead man there, standing over him in the dark, made him weak with dread. If she left him, Jude felt she might take what remained of his nerve with her. He did not know if he could bear the night and the quiet without her close — an admission of need that was so stark and unexpected it gave him a brief, bad moment of vertigo. He was a man afraid of heights, watching the ground lunge away beneath him, while the Ferris wheel yanked him helplessly into the sky. “What about Danny?” Jude said. He thought his own voice sounded strained and unlike him, and he cleared

his throat. "Danny thought he was dangerous."

"What did this ghost do to Danny? Danny saw something, got scared, and ran for his life. Wasn't like

anything got done to him."

"Just because the ghost

didn't

do anything doesn't mean he

can't.

Look at what happened to me this afternoon."

Georgia nodded at this. She drank the rest of her wine in one swallow, then met his

gaze, her eyes bright

and searching. "And you swear you didn't go into that barn to kill yourself? You

swear, Jude? Don't be

mad at me for asking. I need to know."

"Think I'm the type?" he asked.

"Everyone's the type."

"Not me."

"Everyone. I tried to do it. Pills. Bammy found me passed out on the bathroom floor. My lips were blue. I

was hardly breathing. Three days after my last day of high school. Afterward my mother and father came to

the hospital, and my father said, „You couldn't even do that right."

"Cocksucker."

"Yup. Pretty much."

"Why'd you want to kill yourself? I hope you had a good reason."

"Because I'd been having sex with my daddy's best friend. Since I was thirteen.

This forty-year-old guy

with a daughter of his own. People found out. His daughter found out. She was my

friend. She said I ruined

her life. She said I was a whore." Georgia rolled her glass this way and that in her left hand, watching the

glimmer of light move around and around the rim. "Pretty hard to argue with her.

He'd give me things, and

I'd always take them. Like, he gave me a brand-new sweater once with fifty dollars in the pocket. He said

the money was so I could buy shoes to go with it. I let him fuck me for shoe



money.”

“Hell. That wasn’t any good reason to kill yourself,” Jude told her. “It was a good reason to kill him.”

She laughed.

“What was his name?”

“George Ruger. He’s a used-car salesman now, in my old hometown. Head of the county Republican steering committee.”

“Next time I get down Georgia way, I’ll stop in and kill the son of a bitch.”

She laughed again.

“Or at least thoroughly stomp his ass into the Georgia clay,” Jude said, and played the opening bars of

“Dirty Deeds.”

She lifted his glass of wine off the amp, raised it in a toast to him, and had a sip.

“Do you know what the best thing about you is?” she asked.

“No idea.”

“Nothing grosses you out. I mean, I just told you all that, and you don’t think I’m… I don’t know. Ruined.

Hopelessly fucked up.”

“Maybe I do and I just don’t care.”

“You care,” she said. She put a hand on his ankle. “And nothing shocks you.”

He let that pass, did not say he could’ve guessed the suicide attempt, the emotionally cold father, the family friend who molested her, almost from the first moment Jude saw her, wearing a dog collar, her hair hacked into uneven spikes and her mouth painted in white lipstick.

She said, “So what happened to you? Your turn.”

He twitched his ankle out of her grasp.

“I’m not into feel-bad competitions.”

He glanced at the window. Nothing remained of the light except for a faint, reddish

bronze flush behind the

leafless trees. Jude considered his own semitransparent reflection in the glass, his face long, seamed, gaunt,

with a flowing black beard that came almost to his chest. A haggard, grim-visaged

ghost.

Georgia said, “Tell me about this woman who sent you the ghost.”

“Jessica Price. She didn’t just send him to me either. Remember, she tricked me into paying for him.”

“Right. On eBay or something?”

“No. A different site, a third-rate clone. And it only looked like a regular Internet auction. She was

orchestrating things from behind the scenes to make sure I’d win.” Jude saw the question forming in

Georgia’s eyes and answered it before she could speak. “Why she went to all that trouble I can’t tell you. I

get the feeling, though, that she couldn’t just mail him to me. I had to agree to take

possession of him. I’m

sure there’s some profound moral message in that.”

“Yeah,” Georgia said. “Stick with eBay. Accept no substitutes.” She tasted some wine, licked her lips, then

went on. “And this is all because her sister killed herself? Why does she think that’s your fault? Is it

because of something you wrote in one of your songs? Is this like when that kid killed himself after

listening to Ozzy Osbourne? Have you written anything that says suicide is okay or

something?”

“No. Neither did Ozzy.”

“Then I don’t see why she’s so pissed off at you. Did you know each other in some way? Did you know the

girl who killed herself? Did she write you crazy fan letters or something?”

He said, “She lived with me for a while. Like you.”

“Like me? Oh.”

“Got news for you, Georgia. I wasn’t a virgin when I met you.” His voice sounded

wooden and strange to

him.

“How long did she live here?”

“I don’t know. Eight, nine months. Long enough to overstay her welcome.”

She thought about that. “I’ve been living with you for about nine months.”

“So?”

“So have I overstayed mine? Is nine months the limit? Then it’s time for some fresh pussy? What, was she

a natural blonde, and you decided it was time for a brunette?”

He took his hands off his guitar. “She was a natural psycho, so I threw her ass out.

I guess she didn’t take it

well.”

“What do you mean, she was a psycho?”

“I mean manic-depressive. When she was manic, she was a hell of a lay. When she was depressive, it was a little too much work.”

“She had mental problems, and you just chucked her out?”

“I didn’t sign on to hold her hand the rest of her life. I didn’t sign on to hold yours

either. I’ll tell you

something else, Georgia. If you think our story ends „and they lived happily ever after,” then you’ve got the

wrong fuckin’ fairy tale.” As he spoke, he became aware that he’d found his chance to hurt her and get rid

of her. He had, he understood now, been steering the conversation toward this very

moment. The idea

recurred that if he could sting her badly enough to make her leave — even if it was

just for a while, a night,

a few hours — it might be the last good thing he ever did for her.

“What was her name? The girl who killed herself?”

He started to say “Anna,” then said “Florida” instead.

Georgia stood quickly, so quickly she tottered, looked as if she might fall over. He could’ve reached out to

steady her but didn’t. Better to let her hurt. Her face whitened, and she took an unsteady half step back. She

stared at him, bewildered and wounded — and then her eyes sharpened, as if she were suddenly bringing

his face into focus.

“No,” she breathed softly. “You’re not going to drive me away like that. You say any shitty thing you want.

I’m sticking, Jude.”

She carefully set the glass she was holding on the edge of his desk. She started away from him, then paused

at the door. She turned her head but didn’t quite seem able to look into his face.

“I’m going to get some sleep. You come on to bed, too.” Telling him, not asking. Jude opened his mouth to reply and found he had nothing to say. When she left the

room, he gently leaned

his guitar against the wall and stood up. His pulse was jacked, and his legs were unsteady, the physical manifestations of an emotion it took him some time to place — he was that unused to the sensation of relief.

17

Georgia was gone.

That was the first thing he knew. She was gone, and it was still night. He exhaled,

and his breath made

a cloud of white smoke in the room. He shoved off the one thin sheet and got out of bed, then hugged

himself through a brief shivering fit.

The idea that she was up and wandering the house alarmed him. His head was still

muddy with sleep, and it

had to be close to freezing in the room. It would’ve been reasonable to think

Georgia had gone to figure out

what was wrong with the heat, but Jude knew that wasn’t it. She’d been sleeping badly as well, tossing and

muttering. She might have come awake and gone to watch TV — but he didn’t believe that either.

He almost shouted her name, then thought better of it. He quailed at the idea that she might not reply, that

his voice might be met with a ringing silence. No. No yelling. No rushing around.

He felt if he went

slamming out of the bedroom and rushing through the unlit house, calling for her,

it would tip him

irrevocably toward panic. Also, the darkness and quiet of the bedroom appalled him, and he understood that

he was afraid to go looking for her, afraid of what might be waiting beyond the door.

As he stood there, he became aware of a guttural rumble, the sound of an idling engine. He rolled his eyes

back, looked at the ceiling. It was lit an icy white, someone’s headlights, pointing in from the driveway

below. He could hear the dogs barking.

Jude crossed to the window and shifted aside the curtain.

The pickup parked out front had been blue once, but it was at least twenty years old and had not seen another coat in all that time, had faded to the color of smoke. It was a Chevy, a working truck. Jude had whiled away two years of his life twisting a wrench in an auto garage for \$1.75 an hour, and he knew from the deep, ferocious mutter of the idling engine that it had a big block under the hood. The front end was all aggression and menace, with a wide silver bumper like a boxer's mouthpiece and an iron brush guard bolted over the grill. What he had taken at first for headlights were a pair of floods attached to the brush guard, two round spots pouring their glare into the night. The pickup sat almost a full foot off the ground on four 35s, a truck built for running on washed-out swamp roads, banging through the ruts and choking brush of the Deep South, the bottoms. The engine was running. No one was in it. The dogs flung themselves against the chain-link wall of the pen, a steady crash and clang, yapping at the empty pickup. Jude peered down the driveway, in the direction of the road. The gates were closed. You had to know a six-digit security code to get them open. It was the dead man's truck. Jude knew the moment he saw it, knew with a calm, utter certainty. His next thought was, Where we going, old man? The phone by the bed chirped, and Jude half jumped in surprise, letting go of the curtain. He turned and stared. The clock beside the phone read 3:12. The phone rang again. Jude moved toward it, tiptoeing quickly across cold floorboards. Stared down at it. It rang a third time. He didn't want to answer. He had an idea it would be the dead man, and Jude didn't want to talk to him. Jude didn't want to hear Craddock's voice. "Fuck it," he said, and he answered. "Who is it?" "Hey, Chief. It's Dan." "Danny? It's three in the morning."

"Oh. I didn't know it was so late. Were you asleep?"

"No." Jude fell silent, waited.

"I'm sorry I left like I did."

"Are you drunk?" Jude asked. He looked at the window again, the blue-tinted glare

of the floodlights

shining around the edges of the curtains. "Are you calling drunk because you want

your job back? Because

if you are, this is the wrong fuckin' time—"

"No. I can't... I can't come back, Jude. I was just calling to say I'm sorry about everything. I'm sorry I said

anything about the ghost for sale. I should've kept my mouth shut."

"Go to bed."

"I can't."

"What the fuck is wrong with you?"

"I'm out walking in the dark. I don't even know where I am."

Jude felt the back of his arms prickling with goose bumps. The thought of Danny out on the streets

somewhere, shuffling around in the dark, disturbed him more than it should've, more than made sense.

"How'd you get there?"

"I just went walking. I don't even know why."

"Jesus, you're drunk. Take a look around for a street sign and call a fuckin' cab," Jude said, and hung up.

He was glad to let go of the phone. He hadn't liked Danny's tone of spaced-out, unhappy confusion.

It wasn't that Danny had said anything so incredible or unlikely. It was just that they'd never had a

conversation like it before. Danny had never called in the night, and he'd never called drunk. It was

difficult to imagine him going for a walk at 3:00 A.M., or walking so far from his home as to get lost. And

whatever his other flaws, Danny was a problem solver. That was why Jude had kept him on the payroll for

eight years. Even shitfaced, Danny probably wouldn't call Jude first if he didn't know where he was. He'd

walk to a 7-Eleven and get directions. He'd flag down a cop car.

No. It was all wrong. The phone call and the dead man's truck in the driveway were two parts of the same thing. Jude knew. His nerves told him so. The empty bed told him so. He glanced again at the curtain, lit from behind by those floods. The dogs were going crazy out there. Georgia. What mattered now was finding Georgia. Then they could figure out about that truck. Together they could get a handle on the situation. Jude looked at the door to the hallway. He flexed his fingers, his hands numb from the cold. He didn't want to go out there, didn't want to open the door and see Craddock sitting in that chair with his hat on his knee and that razor on a chain dangling from one hand. But the thought of seeing the dead man again — of facing whatever was next — held him for only a moment more. Then he came unstuck, went to the door, and opened it. "Let's do it," he said to the hallway before he had even seen if anyone was there. No one was. Jude paused, listening past his own just slightly haggard breathing to the quiet of the house. The long hall was draped in shadows, the Shaker chair against the wall empty. No. Not empty. A black fedora rested in the seat. Noises — muffled and distant — caught his attention: the murmur of voices on a television, the distant crash of surf. He pulled his gaze away from the fedora and looked to the end of the hallway. Blue light flickered and raced at the edges of the door to the studio. Georgia was in there, then, watching TV after all. Jude hesitated at the door, listening. He heard a voice shouting in Spanish, a TV voice. The sound of surf was louder. Jude meant to call her name then, Marybeth — not Georgia, Marybeth — but something bad happened when he tried: His breath gave out on him. He was able to produce only a wheeze in the faint

sound of her name.

He opened the door.

Georgia was across the room in the recliner, in front of his flat-screen TV. From where he stood, he

couldn't see anything of her but the back of her head, the fluffy swirl of her black hair surrounded by a

nimbus of unnatural blue light. Her head also largely blocked the view of whatever

was on the TV,

although he could see palm trees and tropical blue sky. It was dark, the lights in the

room switched off.

She didn't respond when he said, "Georgia," and his next thought was that she was

dead. When he got to

her, her eyes would be rolled up in their sockets.

He started toward her, but had only gone a couple of steps when the phone rang on

the desk.

Jude could view enough of the TV now to see a chubby Mex in sunglasses and a beige jogging suit,

standing at the side of a dirt track in jungly hill country somewhere. Jude knew what she was watching

then, although he hadn't looked at it in several years. It was the snuff film.

At the sound of the phone, Georgia's head seemed to move just slightly, and he thought he heard her

exhale, a strained, effortful breath. Not dead, then. But she didn't otherwise react, didn't look around,

didn't get up to answer.

He took a step to the desk, caught the phone on the second ring.

"That you, Danny? Are you still lost?" Jude asked.

"Yeah," Danny said with a weak laugh. "Still lost. I'm on this pay phone in the middle of nowhere. It's

funny, you almost never see pay phones anymore."

Georgia did not glance around at the sound of Jude's voice, did not shift her gaze from the TV.

"I hope you aren't calling because you want me to come looking for you," Jude said. "I've got my hands

full at the moment. If I have to come looking for you, you better hope you stay



lost.”

“I figured it out, Chief. How I got here. Out on this road in the dark.”

“How’s that?”

“I killed myself. I hung myself a few hours ago. This road in the dark... this is dead.”

Jude’s scalp crawled, a trickling, icy sensation, almost painful.

Danny said, “My mother hung herself just the same way. She did a better job, though. She broke her neck.

Died instantly. I lost my nerve at the last second. I didn’t fall hard enough. I strangled to death.”

From the television across the room came gagging sounds, as if someone were strangling to death.

“It took a long time, Jude,” Danny went on. “I remember swinging for a long time.

Looking at my feet. I’m remembering lots of things now.”

“Why’d you do it?”

“He made me. The dead man. He came to see me. I was going to come back to the office and find those

letters for you. I was thinking I could at least do that much. I was thinking I shouldn’t have bailed out on

you like I did. But when I went in my bedroom to get my coat, he was waiting there. I didn’t even know

how to knot a noose until he showed me,” Danny said. “That’s how he’s going to get you. He’s going to make you kill yourself.”

“No he’s not.”

“It’s hard not to listen to his voice. I couldn’t fight it. He knew too much. He knew I gave my sister the

heroin she OD’d on. He said that was why my mother killed herself, because she couldn’t live knowing

what I had done. He said I should’ve been the one to hang, not my mom. He said if

I had any decency, I

would’ve killed myself a long time ago. He was right.”

“No, Danny,” Jude said. “No. He wasn’t right. You shouldn’t—”

Danny sounded short of breath. “I did. I had

to. There was no arguing with him. You can't argue with a voice like that."

"We'll see," Jude said.

Danny had no reply for that. In the snuff film, two men were bickering in Spanish.

The choking sounds

went on and on. Georgia still did not look away. She was moving just slightly, shoulders hitching now and

then in a series of random, almost spastic shrugs.

"I have to go, Danny." Still Danny said nothing. Jude listened to the faint crackle on the line for a moment,

sensing that Danny was waiting for something, some final word, and at last he added, "You keep walking,

boy. That road must go somewhere."

Danny laughed. "You aren't as bad as you think, Jude. You know that?"

"Yeah. Don't tell."

"Your secret is safe," Danny said. "Good-bye."

"Good-bye, Danny."

Jude leaned forward, gently set the phone back in its cradle. As he was bent across

the desk, he glanced

down and behind it and saw that the floor safe was open. His initial thought was the ghost had opened it, an

idea he discarded almost immediately. Georgia, more likely. She knew the combination.

He pivoted, looked at the back of her head, at the halo of flickering blue light, at the television beyond.

"Georgia? What are you doin'", darlin'?"

She didn't reply.

He came forward, moving silently across the thick carpet. The picture on the flatscreen

came into view

first. The killers were finishing off the skinny white kid. Later they would get his girlfriend in a cinderblock

hut close to a beach. Now, though, they were on an overgrown track somewhere in

the bush, in the

hills above the Gulf of California. The kid was on his stomach, his wrists bound together by a pair of white

plastic flexi-cuffs. His skin was fish-belly pale in the tropical sunlight. A diminutive, walleyed Anglo, with

a clownish Afro of crinkly red hair, stood with one cowboy boot on the kid's neck.

Parked down the road

was a black van, the back doors thrown open. Next to the rear fender was the chubby Mex in the warm-up

suit, an affronted expression hung on his face.

"Nos estamos yendo," said the man in the sunglasses. "Ahora."

The walleyed redhead made a face and shook his head, as if in disagreement, but then pointed the little

revolver at the skinny kid's head and pulled the trigger. The muzzle flashed. The kid's head snapped

forward, hit the ground, bounced back. The air around his head was suddenly clouded with a fine spray of blood.

The Anglo took his boot off the boy's neck and stepped daintily away, careful to get no blood on his cowboy boots.

Georgia's face was a pale, rigid blank, her eyes wide and unblinking, gaze fixed on the television. She wore

the Ramones T-shirt she'd had on earlier, but no underwear, and her legs were open. In one hand — the bad

hand — she had clumsy hold of Jude's pistol, and the barrel was pushed deep into her mouth. Her other

hand was between her legs, thumb moving up and down.

"Georgia," he said, and for an instant she shot a sidelong glance at him — a helpless, pleading glance —

then immediately looked back to the TV. Her bad hand rotated the gun, turning it upside down, to point the

barrel against the roof of her mouth. She made a weak choking sound on it.

The remote control was on the armrest. Jude hit the power button. The television blinked off. Her shoulders

leaped, a nervous, reflexive shrug. The left hand kept working between her legs.

She shivered, made a

strained, unhappy sound in her throat.

"Stop it," Jude said.

She pulled the hammer back with her thumb. It made a loud snap in the silence of the studio.

Jude reached past her and gently pried the gun out of her grip. Her whole body went abruptly, perfectly

still. Her breath whistled, short and fast. Her mouth was wet, glistening faintly, and

it came to him then that

he was semihard. His cock had begun to stiffen at the smell of her in the air and the

sight of her fingers

teasing her clit, and she was at just the right height. If he moved in front of the chair, she could suck his

dick while he held the gun to her head, he could stick the barrel in her ear while he

shoved his cock—

He saw a flicker of motion, reflected in the partly open window beyond his desk, and his gaze jumped to

the image in the glass. He could see himself there and the dead man standing beside him, hunched and

whispering in his ear. In the reflection Jude could see that his own arm had come up, and he was holding

the pistol to Georgia's head.

His heart lurched, all the blood rushing to it in a sudden, adrenalized burst. He looked down, saw it was

true, he was holding the gun to her head, saw his finger squeezing the trigger. He tried to stop himself, but

it was already too late — he pulled it, waited in horror for the hammer to fall.

It didn't fall. The trigger wouldn't depress the last quarter inch. The safety was on.

"Fuck," Jude hissed, and lowered the gun, trembling furiously now. He used his thumb to ease the hammer

back down. When he had settled it into place, he flung the pistol away from himself.

It banged heavily against the desk, and Georgia flinched at the sound. Her stare, however, remained fixed

on some abstract point off in the darkness before her.

Jude turned, looking for Craddock's ghost. No one stood beside him. The room was empty, except for

himself and Georgia. He turned back to her and tugged on her slender white wrist.

"Get up," he said. "Come on. We're going. Right now. I don't know where we're going, but we're getting

out of here. We're going someplace where there are lots of people and bright lights, and we're going to try

to figure this out. You hear me?" He could no longer recall his logic for staying. Logic was out the window.

"He isn't done with us," she said, her voice a shuddering whisper.

He pulled, but she didn't rise, her body rigid in the chair, uncooperative. She still wouldn't look at him,

wouldn't look anywhere except straight ahead.

"Come on," he said. "While there's time."

"There is no more time," she said.

The television blinked on again.

18

It was the evening news.

Bill Beutel, who had started his journalism career when the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand was

the breaking story of the day, sat stiffly behind the news desk. His face was a network of spiderweb

wrinkles, radiating out from around his eyes and the corners of his mouth. His features were set in their

grief expression, the look that said there was more bad news in the Middle East or

that a school bus

had gone off the interstate and rolled, killing all passengers, or a tornado in the South had inhaled a

trailer park and coughed out a mess of ironing boards, splintered shutters, and human bodies.

"...there will be no survivors. We'll bring you more as the situation continues to unfold," Beutel said. He

turned his head slightly, and the reflected blue screen of the teleprompter floated in

the lenses of his

bifocals for a moment. "Late this afternoon the Dutchess County sheriff's department confirmed that Judas

Coyne, the popular lead singer of Jude's Hammer, apparently shot and killed his girlfriend, Marybeth Stacy

Kimball, before turning the weapon on himself to take his own life."

The program cut to video of Jude's farmhouse, framed against a sky of dingy, featureless white. Police

cruisers had parked haphazardly in the turnaround, and an ambulance stood backed

up almost to the door of

Danny"s office.

Beutel continued to speak in voice-over: "Police are only beginning to piece together the picture of

Coyne"s last days. But statements from those who knew him suggest he had been distraught and was

worried about his own mental health."

The footage jumped to a shot of the dogs in their pen. They were on their sides in the short, stubbly grass,

neither of them moving, legs stretched stiffly away from their bodies. They were dead. Jude tightened up at

the sight of them. It was a bad thing to see. He wanted to look away but couldn"t seem to pry his gaze free.

"Detectives also believe that Coyne played a role in the death of his personal assistant, Daniel Wooten,

thirty, who was found in his Woodstock home earlier this morning, also an apparent suicide."

Cut to two paramedics, one at either end of a sagging blue plastic body bag.

Georgia made a soft, unhappy

sound in her throat, watching one of the paramedics climb backward into the ambulance, hefting his end.

Beutel began to talk about Jude"s career, and they cut away to file footage of Jude onstage in Houston, a

clip six years old. Jude was in black jeans and black steel-toed boots, but barechested,

his torso glowing

with sweat, the bearish fur on it plastered to his breast, stomach heaving. A sea of a

hundred thousand halfnaked

people surged below him, a rioting flood of raised fists, crowd surfers tumbling this way and that

along the flow of humanity beneath.

Dizzy was already dying by then, although at the time almost no one except Jude knew. Dizzy with his

heroin addiction and his AIDS. They played back-to-back, Dizzy"s mane of blond hair in his face, the wind

blowing it across his mouth. It was the last year the band had been together.

Dizzy

died, and Jerome, and

then it was over.

In the file footage, they were playing the title song off their final album as a group,  
“Put You in Yer Place”;  
their last hit, the last really good song Jude had written, and at the sound of those drums — a furious  
cannonade — he was jolted free from whatever hold the television seemed to have over him. That had been  
real. Houston had happened, that day had happened. The engulfing, mad rush of the crowd below and the  
engulfing, mad rush of the music around him. It was real, it had happened, and all the rest was—  
“Bullshit,” Jude said, and his thumb hit the power button. The television popped off.  
“It isn’t true,” Georgia said, her voice hardly more than a whisper. “It isn’t true, is  
it? Are we... are you...  
Is that going to happen to us?”  
“No,” Jude said.  
And the television popped back on. Bill Beutel sat behind the news desk again, a sheaf of papers clasped in  
his hands, his shoulders squared to the camera.  
“Yes,” Bill said. “You will both be dead. The dead pull the living down. You will get the gun, and she will  
try to get away, but you will catch her, and you will—”  
Jude hit the power button again, then threw the remote control at the screen of the  
television. He went after  
it, put his foot on the screen and then straightened his leg, shoved the television straight through the open  
back of the cabinet. It hit the wall, and something flared, a white light going off like a flashbulb. The flatscreen  
dropped out of sight into the space between cabinet and wall, hit with a crunch of plastic and a short,  
electrical, fizzing sound that lasted for only a moment before ending. Another day of this and there would  
be nothing left to the house.  
He turned, and the dead man stood behind Georgia’s chair. Craddock’s ghost reached around the back to  
cup her head between his hands. Black lines danced and shimmered before the old man’s eye sockets.  
Georgia did not try to move or look around, was as still as a person faced with a

poisonous snake, afraid to  
do anything — even to breathe — for fear of being struck.  
“You didn’t come for her,” Jude said. As he spoke, he was stepping to the left,  
circling along one side of  
the room and toward the doorway to the hall. “You don’t want her.”  
In one instant Craddock’s hands were gently cradling Georgia’s head. In the  
next  
his right arm had  
come up to point out and away from his body:  
Sieg heil.  
Around the dead man, time had a way of skipping, a scratched DVD, the picture  
stuttering erratically  
from moment to moment, without any transitions in between. The golden chain  
fell  
from his raised  
right hand. The razor, shaped like a crescent moon, gleamed brilliantly at the end.  
The edge of the  
blade was faintly iridescent, the way a rainbow slick of oil is on water.  
Time to ride, Jude.  
“Go away,” Jude said.  
If you want me to go, you just have to listen to my voice. You have to listen hard.  
You have to be like  
a radio, and my voice is the broadcast. After nightfall it’s nice to have some radio.  
If you want this to  
end, you have to listen hard as you can. You have to want it to end with all your  
heart. Don’t you want  
it to end?  
Jude tightened his jaw, clamped his teeth together. He wasn’t going to answer,  
sensed somehow it would be  
a mistake to give any reply, then was startled to find himself nodding slowly.  
Don’t you want to listen hard? I know you do. I know. Listen. You can tune out  
the whole world and  
hear nothing but my voice. Because you are listening so hard.  
And Jude went on nodding, bobbing his head slowly up and down, while around  
him all the other sounds of  
the room fell away. Jude had not even been aware of these other noises until they  
were gone: the low  
rumble of the truck idling outside, the thin whine of Georgia’s breath in her  
throat,  
matched by Jude’s own



harsh gasping. His ears rang at the sudden utter absence of sound, as if his eardrums had been numbed by a shattering explosion.

The naked razor swayed in little arcs, back and forth, back and forth. Jude dreaded

the sight of it, forced himself to look away.

You don't need to look at it, Craddock told him.

I'm dead. I don't need a pendulum to get inside your mind. I'm there already.

And Jude found his gaze sliding back to it anyway, couldn't help himself.

"Georgia," Jude said, or tried to say. He felt the word on his lips, in his mouth, in the shape of his breath,

but did not hear his own voice, did not hear anything in that awful, enveloping silence. He had never heard

any noise as loud as that particular silence.

I am not going to kill her. No, sir,

said the dead man. His voice never varied in tone, was patient, understanding, a low, resonant hum that

brought to mind the sound of bees in the hive.

You are. You will. You want to.

Jude opened his mouth to tell him how wrong he was, said, "Yes," instead. Or assumed he said it. It was

more like a loud thought.

Craddock said,

Good boy.

Georgia was beginning to cry, although she was making a visible effort to hold herself still, not to tremble.

Jude couldn't hear her. Craddock's blade slashed back and forth, whisking through the air.

I don't want to hurt her, don't make me hurt her,

Jude thought.

It ain't going to be the way you want it. Get the gun, you hear? Do it now.

Jude began to move. He felt subtly disconnected from his body, a witness, not a participant in the scene

playing itself out. He was too empty-headed to dread what he was about to do. He knew only that he had to

do it if he wanted to wake up.

But before he reached the gun, Georgia was out of the chair and bolting for the door. He didn't have any

idea she could move, thought that Craddock had been holding her there somehow, but it had just been fear holding her, and she was already almost by him.

Stop her

, said the only voice left in the world, and as she lunged past him, Jude saw himself

catch her hair in

one fist and snap her head back. She was wrenched off her feet. Jude pivoted and threw her down. The

furniture jumped when she hit the floor. A stack of CDs on an end table slid off and crashed to the

floor without a sound. Jude's foot found her stomach, a good hard kick, and she jerked herself into a

fetal position. The moment after he'd done it, he didn't know why he'd done it.

There you go

, said the dead man.

It disoriented Jude, the way the dead man's voice came at him out of the silence, words that had an

almost physical presence, bees whirring and chasing one another around the inside

of his head. His

head was the hive that they flew into and out of, and without them there was a waxy, honeycombed

emptiness. His head was too light and too hollow, and he would go mad if he didn't get his own

thoughts back, his own voice. The dead man was saying now,

You need to show that cunt. If you don't mind me sayin' so. Now get the gun.

Hurry.

Jude turned to get the gun, moving quickly now. Across the floor, to the desk, the gun at his feet, down on

one knee to pick it up.

Jude did not hear the dogs until he was reaching for the revolver. One high-strung

yap, then another. His

attention snagged on that sound like a loose sleeve catching on a protruding nail.

It

shocked him, to hear

anything else in that bottomless silence besides Craddock's voice. The window behind the desk was still

parted slightly, as he had left it. Another bark, shrill, furious, and another. Angus.

Then Bon.

Come on now, boy. Come on and do it.

Jude's gaze flitted to the little wastebasket next to the desk and to the pieces of the

platinum record

shoved into it. A nest of chrome knife blades sticking straight up into the air. The dogs were both

barking in unison now, a tear in the fabric of the quiet, and the sound of them called to mind, unbidden,

their smell, the stink of damp dog fur, the hot animal reek of their breath. Jude could see his face

reflected in one of those silver record shards, and it jolted him: his own rigid, staring look of

desperation, of horror. And in the next moment, mingled with the relentless yawping of the dogs, he

had a thought that was his own, in his own voice.

The only power he has, over either one of you, is the power you give him.

In the next instant, Jude reached past the gun and put his hand over the wastebasket. He set the ball of his

left palm on the sharpest, longest-looking spear of silver and lunged, driving all his

weight down onto it.

The blade sank into meat, and he felt a tearing pain lance through his hand and into

the wrist. Jude cried

out, and his eyes blurred, stung with tears. He instantly yanked his palm free from

the blade, then clapped

his right hand and the left together. Blood spurted between them.

What the fuck are you doin' to yourself, boy?

Craddock's ghost asked him, but Jude wasn't listening anymore. Couldn't pay attention through the

feeling in his hand, a sensation of having been deeply pierced, almost to the bone.

I'm not through with you,

Craddock said, but he was, he just didn't know it. Jude's mind reached for the sound of the barking

dogs like a drowning man grasping at a life preserver, found it and clasped it to him. He was on his

feet, and he began to move.

Get to the dogs. His life — and Georgia's — depended on it. It was an idea that

made no rational sense, but  
Jude did not care what was rational. Only what was true.  
The pain was a red ribbon he held between his hands, following it away from the  
dead man's voice and  
back to his own thoughts. He had a great tolerance for pain, always had, and at  
other times in his life had  
even willfully sought it out. There was an ache way down in his wrist, in the  
joint,  
a sign of how deep his  
wound was, and some part of him appreciated that ache, wondered at it. He  
caught  
sight of his reflection in  
the window as he rose. He was grinning in the straggles of his beard, a vision  
even  
worse than the  
expression of terror he'd glimpsed in his own face a moment before.  
Get back here,  
said Craddock, and Jude slowed for an instant, then found his step and kept on.  
He shot a look at Georgia on his way by — couldn't risk a glance back to see  
what  
Craddock was doing —  
and she was still curled on the floor, her arms around her stomach and her hair in  
her face. She glanced  
back at him from under her bangs. Her cheeks were damp with sweat. Her eyelids  
fluttered. The eyes  
beneath pleaded, questioned, fogged over with pain.  
He wished there were time to say he hadn't meant to hurt her. He wanted to tell  
her that he wasn't running,  
wasn't leaving her, that he was leading the dead man away, but the pain in his  
hand was too intense. He  
couldn't think past it to line words up into clear sentences. And besides, he  
didn't  
know how long he'd be  
able to think for himself, before Craddock would get ahold of him again. He had  
to  
control the pace of what  
happened next, and it had to happen fast. That was fine. It was better that way.  
He  
had always been at his  
best operating in 5/4 time.

He heaved himself down the hall, made the stairs and took them fast, too fast almost, four at a time, so it was like falling. He crashed down the last few steps to the red clay tiles of the kitchen. One ankle turned under him. He stumbled into the chopping block, with its slender legs and scarred surface stained with old blood. A cleaver was buried in the soft wood at one edge, and the wide, flat blade glinted like liquid mercury in the dark. He saw the stairs behind him reflected in it and Craddock standing on them, his features blurred, his hands raised over his head, palms out, a tent-revival preacher testifying to the flock.

Stay,

Craddock said.

Get the knife.

But Jude concentrated on the throbbing in the palm of his hand. It was the deep hurt of pierced muscle and had the effect of clearing his head and centering him. The dead man couldn't make Jude do what he wanted if Jude was in too much pain to hear him. He shoved himself back from the chopping block, and his momentum carried him away from it and down the length of the kitchen. He hit the door into Danny's office, pushed through it, and rushed on into darkness.

19

Three steps through the door, he pulled up, hesitated for a moment to get his bearings. The shades were drawn. There was no light anywhere. He could not see his way in all that darkness and had to move forward more slowly, shuffling his feet, hands stretched before him, feeling for objects that might be in his path. The door wasn't far, and then he would be outside.

As he went forward, though, he felt an anxious constriction in his chest. It was a little more work to breathe than he liked. He felt at any moment his hands would settle on Craddock's cold, dead face in the dark. At the thought he found himself fighting not to panic. His elbow struck a standing lamp, and it crashed over.

His heart throbbed. He kept moving his feet forward in halting baby steps, but he

had no sense of getting  
any closer to where he was going.  
A red eye, the eye of a cat, opened slowly in the darkness. The speakers that  
flanked the stereo cabinet  
came on with a thump of bass and a low, empty hum. The constriction was  
around  
Jude's heart, a  
sickening tightness.  
Keep breathing,  
he told himself.  
Keep moving. He's going to try to stop you from getting outside.  
The dogs barked and barked, voices rough, strained, not far away now.  
The stereo was on, and there should've been radio, but there was no radio. There  
was no sound at all.  
Jude's fingers brushed the wall, the doorframe, and then he grasped the  
doorknob  
with his punctured left  
hand. An imaginary sewing needle turned slowly in the wound, producing a cold  
flare of pain.  
Jude twisted the doorknob, pulled the door back. A slash opened in the darkness,  
looking out into the glare  
of the floodlights on the front of the dead man's truck.  
"You think you're something special because you learnt how to play a fuckin"  
guitar?" said Jude's father  
from the far end of the office. He was on the stereo, his voice loud and hollow.  
In the next moment, Jude became aware of other sounds coming from the  
speakers  
— heavy breathing,  
scuffling shoes, the thud of someone bumping a table — noises that suggested a  
quiet, desperate wrestling  
match, two men struggling with each other. There was a little radio play going. It  
was a play Jude knew  
well. He had been one of the actors in the original.  
Jude stopped with the door half open, unable to plunge out into the night, pinned  
in  
place by the sounds  
coming from the office stereo.  
"You think knowin' how to do that makes you better than me?" Martin  
Cowzynski, his tone amused and  
hating all at the same time. "Get over here."

Then came Jude's own voice. No, not Jude's voice — he hadn't been Jude then. It

was Justin's, a voice in a slightly higher octave, one that cracked sometimes and lacked the resonance that had come with the development of his adult pipes. "Momma! Momma, help!" Momma did not say anything, did not make a sound, but Jude remembered what she'd done. She had stood up from the kitchen table and walked to the room where she did her sewing and gently closed the door behind her, without daring to look at either of them. Jude and his mother had never helped each other.

When they needed it most, they had never dared.

"I said get the fuck over here," Martin told him.

The sound of someone knocking into a chair. The sound of the chair banging against the floor. When Justin cried out again, his voice wavered with alarm.

"Not my hand! No, Dad, not my hand!"

"Show you," his father said.

And there came a great booming sound, like a door slamming, and Justin-the-boyon-

the-radio screamed

and screamed again, and at the sound of it Jude pitched himself out into the night air.

He missed a step, stumbled, dropped to his knees in the frozen mud of the driveway. Picked himself up,

took two running steps, and stumbled again. Jude fell onto all fours in front of the dead man's pickup. He

stared over the front fender at the brutal framework of the brush guard and the floodlights attached to it.

The front of a house or a car or a truck could sometimes look like a face, and so it was with Craddock's

Chevy. The floodlights were the bright, blind, staring eyes of the deranged. The chrome bar of the fender

was a leering silver mouth. Jude expected it to lunge at him, tires spinning on the gravel, but it didn't.

Bon and Angus leaped against the chain-link walls of their pen, barking relentlessly — deep, throaty

roars of terror and rage, the eternal, primitive language of dogs:

See my teeth, stay back or you will feel them, stay back, I am worse than you.  
He thought for an instant they were barking at the truck, but Angus was looking  
past him. Jude glanced  
back to see at what. The dead man stood in the door to Danny's office.  
Craddock's ghost lifted his  
black fedora, set it carefully on his head.  
Son. You come on back here, son,  
the dead man said, but Jude was trying not to listen to him, was concentrating  
intently on the sound of  
the dogs. Since their barking had first disrupted the spell he'd been under, up in  
the studio, it had  
seemed like the most important thing in the world to get to them, although he  
could  
not have explained  
to anyone, including himself, why it mattered so. Only that when he heard their  
voices, he remembered  
his own.  
Jude hauled himself up off the gravel, ran, fell, got up, ran again, tripped at the  
edge of the driveway, came  
crashing down on his knees once more. He crawled through the grass, didn't  
have  
the strength in his legs to  
launch himself onto his feet again. The cold air stung in the pit of his wounded  
hand.  
He glanced back. Craddock was coming. The golden chain dropped from his right  
hand. The blade at the  
end of it began to swing, a silver slash, a streak of brilliance tearing at the night.  
The gleam and flash  
fascinated Jude. He felt his gaze sticking to it, felt the thought draining out of him  
— and in the next instant  
he crawled straight into the chain-link fence with a crash and dropped to his side.  
Rolled onto his back.  
He was up against the swinging door that held the pen shut. Angus banged into  
the  
other side, eyes turned  
up in his head. Bon stood rigidly behind him, barking with a steady, shrill  
insistency. The dead man walked  
toward them.  
Let's ride, Jude,  
said the ghost.



Let's go for a ride on the nightroad.

Jude felt himself going empty, felt himself surrendering to that voice again, to the sight of that silver blade

cutting back and forth through the dark.

Angus hit the chain-link fence so hard he bounced off it and fell on his side. The impact brought Jude out of his trance again.

Angus.

Angus wanted out. He was already back on his feet, barking at the dead man, scrabbling his paws against the chain link.

And Jude had a thought then, wild, half formed, remembered something he had read yesterday morning, in one of his books of occultism. Something about animal familiars. Something about how they could deal with the dead directly.

The dead man stood at Jude's feet. Craddock's gaunt, white face was rigid, fixed in an expression of

contempt. The black marks shivered before his eyes.

You listen, now. You listen to the sound of my voice.

"I've heard enough," Jude said.

He reached up and behind him found the latch to the pen, released it.

Angus hit the gate an instant later. It crashed open, and Angus leaped at the dead man, making a sound Jude

had never heard from his dog before, a choked and gravelly snarl that came from the deep barrel of his

chest. Bon shot past a moment later, her black lips drawn back to show her teeth and her tongue lolling.

The dead man took a reeling step backward, his face confused. In the seconds that followed, Jude found it

difficult to make sense of what he was actually seeing. Angus leaped at the old man — only it seemed in

that instant that Angus was not one dog but two. The first was the lean, powerfully

built German shepherd

he'd always been. But attached to this shepherd was an inky darkness in the shape

of a dog, flat and

featureless but somehow solid, a living shadow.

Angus's material body overlapped this shadow form, but not perfectly. The

shadow dog showed  
around the edges, especially in the area of Angus"s snout — and gaping mouth.  
This second, shadowy  
Angus struck the dead man a fraction of an instant ahead of the real Angus,  
coming  
at him from his  
left-hand side, away from the hand with the gold chain and the swinging silver  
blade. The dead man  
cried out — a choked, furious cry — and was  
spun,  
staggered backward. He shoved Angus off him, clipped him across the snout with  
an elbow. Only no;  
it wasn"t Angus he was shoving, it was that other, black dog that dipped and  
leaned like a shadow  
thrown by candle flame.  
Bon launched herself at Craddock"s other side. Bon was two dogs as well, had a  
wavering shadow twin of  
her own. As she leaped, the old man snapped the gold chain at her, and the  
crescent-shaped silver blade  
whined in the air. It passed through Bon"s front right leg, up around the  
shoulder,  
without leaving a mark.  
But then it sank into the black dog attached to her, snagged its leg. The shadow  
Bon was caught and, for  
one moment, pulled a little out of shape, deformed into something not quite dog,  
not quite... anything. The  
blade came loose, snapped back to the dead man"s hand. Bon yelped, a horrid,  
piercing shout of pain. Jude  
did not know which version of Bon did the yelping, the shepherd or the shadow.  
Angus threw himself at the dead man once more, jaws agape, reaching for his  
throat, his face. Craddock  
couldn"t spin fast enough to get him with his swinging knife. The shadow Angus  
put his front paws on his  
chest and heaved, and the dead man stumbled down into the driveway. When the  
black dog lunged, it could  
stretch itself almost a full yard away from the German shepherd it was attached  
to,  
lengthening and going  
slim like a shadow at the end of day. Its black fangs snapped shut a few inches  
from the dead man"s face.

Craddock's hat flew. Angus — both the German shepherd and the midnight-colored dog attached to him — scrambled on top of him, gouging at him with his claws. Time skipped. The dead man was on his feet again, backed against the truck. Angus had skipped through time with him, was ducking and tearing. Dark teeth ripped through the dead man's pant leg. Liquid shadow drizzled from scratches in the dead man's face. When the drops hit the ground, they hissed and smoked, like fat falling in a hot frying pan. Craddock kicked, connected, and Angus rolled, came up on his feet. Angus crouched, that deep snarl boiling up from inside him, his gaze fixed on Craddock and Craddock's swinging gold chain with its crescent-shaped blade on the end of it. Looking for an opening. The muscles in the big dog's back bunched under the glossy short fur, coiled for the spring. The black dog attached to Angus leaped first, by just a fraction of an instant, mouth yawning open, teeth snapping at the dead man's crotch, going for his balls. Craddock shrieked. Skip. The air reverberated with the sound of a slamming door. The old man was inside his Chevy. His hat was in the road, mashed in on itself. Angus hit the side of the truck, and it rocked on its springs. Then Bon hit the other side, paws scrabbling frantically on steel. Her breath steamed the window, her slobber smeared the glass, just as if it were a real truck. Jude didn't know how she had got all the way over there. A moment ago she'd been cowering next to him. Bon slipped, turned in a circle, threw herself at the pickup truck once more. On the other side of the truck,

Angus jumped at the same time. In the next instant, though, the Chevy was gone, and the two dogs bounded into each other. Their heads audibly knocked, and they crashed down onto the frozen mud where the truck had been only an instant before.

Except it wasn't gone. Not entirely. The floodlights remained, two circles of light floating in midair. The dogs sprang back up, wheeled toward the lights, then began barking furiously at them. Bon's spine was humped up, her fur bristling, and she backed away from the floating, disembodied lights as she yapped.

Angus had no throat left for barking, each roaring yawp hoarser than the one before. Jude noted that their shadow twins had vanished, fled with the truck, or had gone back inside their corporeal bodies, where they'd always been hiding, perhaps. Jude supposed — the thought seemed quite reasonable — that those black dogs attached to Bon and Angus had been their souls.

The round circles of the floodlights began to fade, going cool and blue, shrinking in on themselves. Then they winked out, leaving nothing behind except faint afterimages printed on the backs of Jude's retinas, wan, moon-colored disks that floated in front of him for a few moments before fading away.

20

Jude wasn't ready until the sky in the east was beginning to lighten with the first show of false dawn. Then he left Bon in the car and brought

Angus inside with him. He trotted up the stairs and into the studio. Georgia was where he'd left her,

asleep on the couch, under a white cotton sheet he'd pulled off the bed in the guest room.

"Wake up, darlin'," he said, putting a hand on her shoulder.

Georgia rolled toward him at his touch. A long strand of black hair was pasted to her sweaty cheek, and her color was bad — cheeks flushed an almost ugly red, while the rest of her skin was bone white. He put the

back of his hand against her forehead. Her brow was feverish and damp. She licked her lips. "Whafuck time is it?"

"Five."

She glanced around, sat up on her elbows. "What am I doing here?"

"Don't you know?"

She looked up at him from the bottoms of her eyes. Her chin began to tremble, and

then she had to look

away. She covered her eyes with one hand.

"Oh, God," she said.

Angus leaned past Jude and stuck his snout against her throat, under her jaw, nudging at it, as if telling her

to keep her chin up. His great staring eyes were moist with concern.

She jumped when his wet nose kissed her skin, sat the rest of the way up. She gave

Angus a startled,

disoriented look and laid a hand on his head, between his ears.

"What's he doing inside?" She glanced at Jude, saw he was dressed, black Doc Martens, ankle-length

duster. At almost the same time, she seemed to register the throaty rumble of the Mustang idling in the

driveway. It was already packed. "Where are you going?"

"Us," he said. "South."

RIDE ON

21

The daylight began to fail

when they were just north of Fredericksburg, and that was when Jude saw the dead

man's pickup

behind them, following at a distance of perhaps a quarter mile.

Craddock McDermott was at the wheel, although it was hard to make him out clearly in the weak light,

beneath the yellow shine of the sky, where the clouds glowed like banked embers.

Jude could see he was

wearing his fedora again, though, and drove hunched over the wheel, shoulders raised to the level of his

ears. He had also put on a pair of round spectacles. The lenses flashed with a weird

orange light, beneath

the sodium-vapor lamps over I-95, circles of gleaming flame — a visual match for the floods on the brush

guard.

Jude got off at the next exit. Georgia asked him why, and he said he was tired.

She

hadn't seen the ghost.

"I could drive," she said.

She had slept most of the afternoon and now sat in the passenger seat with her feet

hitched under her and

her head resting on her shoulder.

When he didn't reply, she took an appraising look at his face and said, "Is everything all right?"

"I just want to get off the road before dark."

Bon stuck her head into the space between the front seats to listen to them talk.

She

liked to be included in

their conversations. Georgia stroked her head, while Bon stared up at Jude with a look of nervous

misgiving visible in her chocolate eyes.

They found a Days Inn less than half a mile from the turnpike. Jude sent Georgia to

get the room, while he

sat in the Mustang with the dogs. He didn't want to take a chance on being recognized, wasn't in the mood.

He hadn't been in the mood for about fifteen years.

As soon as Georgia was out of the car, Bon scrambled into her empty seat, curled up in the warm ass print

Georgia had left in the leather. As Bon settled her chin on her front paws, she gave

Jude a guilty look,

waiting for him to yell, to tell her to get in the back with Angus. He didn't yell.

The dogs could do what

they wanted.

Not long after they first got on the road, Jude had told Georgia about how the dogs

had gone after

Craddock. "I'm not sure even the dead man knew that Angus and Bonnie could go

at him like that. But I do

think Craddock sensed they were some kind of threat, and I think he would've been glad to scare us out of

the house and away from them, before we figured out how to use the dogs against him.”

At this, Georgia had twisted around in her seat, to reach into the back and dig behind Angus’s ears, leaning

far enough into the rear to rub her nose against Bon’s snout. “Who are my little hero dogs? Who is it?

Yeah, you are, that’s right,” and so forth, until Jude had started to feel half mad with hearing it.

Georgia came out of the office, a key hooked over one finger, which she wiggled at

him before turning and

walking around the corner of the building. He followed in the car and parked at an

empty spot, in front of a

beige door among other beige doors, at the rear of the motel.

She went inside with Angus while Jude walked with Bon along a tangle of scrub woods at the edge of the

parking lot. Then he came back and left Bon with Georgia and took Angus for the walk. It was important

for neither of them to stray far from the dogs.

These woods, behind the Days Inn, were different from the forest around his farmhouse in Piecliff, New

York. They were unmistakably southern woods, smelled of sweet rot and wet moss

and red clay, of sulfur

and sewage, orchids and motor oil. The atmosphere itself was different, the air denser, warmer, sticky with

dampness. Like an armpit. Like Moore’s Corner, where Jude had grown up.

Angus

snapped at the fireflies,

blowing here and there in the ferns, beads of ethereal green light.

Jude returned to the room. In the ten minutes it took to pass through Delaware, he

had stopped at a Sunoco

for gas and thought to buy a half dozen cans of Alpo in the convenience store. It had not occurred to him,

however, to buy paper plates. While Georgia used the bathroom, Jude pulled one of the drawers out of the

dresser, opened two cans, and slopped them in. He set the drawer on the floor for the dogs. They fell upon

it, and the sound of wet slobbering and swallowing, harsh grunts and gasps for air,  
filled the room.

Georgia came out of the bathroom, stood in the door in faded white panties and a strappy halter that left her midriff bare, all evidence of her Goth self scrubbed away, except for her shiny, black-lacquered toenails.

Her right hand was wrapped in a fresh knot of bandage. She looked at the dogs, nose wrinkled in an expression of amused disgust.

“Boy, are we livin’ foul. If housekeepin’ finds out we been feedin’ our dogs from the dresser drawers,

we will

not

be invited back to the Fredericksburg Days Inn.” She spoke in cornpone, putting on

for his

bemusement. She had been dropping

g

’s and drawing out her vowels off and on throughout the afternoon — doing it sometimes for laughs

and sometimes, Jude believed, without knowing she was doing it. As if in leaving New York she was

also traveling away from the person she’d been there, unconsciously slipping back

into the voice and

attitudes of who she’d been before: a scrawny Georgia kid who thought it was a laugh to go skinnydipping

with the boys.

“I seen people treat a hotel room worst,” he said. “Worst” instead of “worse.” His own accent, which

had become very slight over the years, was thickening up as well. If he wasn’t careful, he would be

talking like an extra from

Hee Haw

by the time they got to South Carolina. It was hard to venture back near the place you’d been bred

without settling into the characteristics of the person you’d been there. “My bassist, Dizzy, took a shit

in a dresser drawer once, when I wouldn’t get out of the bathroom fast enough.”



Georgia laughed, although he saw her watching him with something close to concern — wondering, maybe, what he was thinking. Dizzy was dead. AIDS. Jerome, who’d played rhythm guitar and keyboards and pretty much everything else, was dead, too, had run his car off the road, 140 miles an hour, hit a tree, and crushed his Porsche like a beer can. Only a handful of people knew that it wasn’t a drunk-driving accident, but that he had done it cold sober, on purpose. Not long after Jerome cashed out, Kenny said it was time to call it a day, that he wanted to spend some time with his kids. Kenny was tired of nipple rings and black leather pants and pyrotechnics and hotel rooms, had been faking it for a while anyway. That was it for the band. Jude had been a solo act ever since. Maybe he wasn’t even that anymore. There was his box of demos in the studio at home, almost thirty new songs. But it was a private collection. He had not bothered to play them for anyone. It was just more of the same. What had Kurt Cobain said? Verse chorus verse. Over and over. Jude didn’t care anymore. AIDS got Dizzy, the road got Jerome. Jude didn’t care if there was any more music. It didn’t make sense to him, the way things had worked out. He had always been the star. The band had been called Jude’s Hammer. He was the one who was supposed to die tragically young. Jerome and Dizzy were meant to live on, so they could tell PG-13 stories about him years later, on a VH1 retrospective — the both of them balding, fat, manicured, at peace with their wealth and their rude, noisy pasts. But then Jude had never been good at sticking to the script. Jude and Georgia ate sandwiches they’d picked up in the same Delaware gas station where Jude had bought the Alpo. They tasted like the Saran Wrap they’d come wrapped in. My Chemical Romance was on Conan. They had rings in their lips and eyebrows, their hair done up in spikes, but beneath the white pancake makeup and black lipstick they looked like a collection of chubby kids who had probably been in their high-school marching band a few years

earlier. They leaped around,  
falling into each other, as if the stage beneath them were an electrified plate. They  
played frantically,  
pissing themselves with fear. Jude liked them. He wondered which of them would  
die first.

After, Georgia switched off the lamp by the bed and they lay together in the dark,  
the dogs curled up on the  
floor.

"I guess it didn't get rid of him," she said. "Burning his suit." No Daisy Duke  
accent now.

"It was a good idea, though."

"No it wasn't." Then: "He made me do it, didn't he?"

Jude didn't reply.

"What if we can't figure out how to make him go away?" she asked.

"Get used to smellin' dog food."

She laughed, her breath tickling his throat.

She said, "What are we going to do when we get where we're going?"

"We're going to talk to the woman who sent me the suit. We're going to find  
out

if she knows how to get  
rid of him."

Cars droned on I-95. Crickets thrummed.

"Are you going to hurt her?"

"I don't know. I might. How's your hand?"

"Better," she said. "How's yours?"

"Better," he said.

He was lying, and he was pretty sure she was, too. She had gone into the  
bathroom

to re-dress the hand

when they first got into the room. He had gone in after, to re-dress his, and found  
her old wraps in the trash.

He pulled the loops of gauze out of the wastebasket to inspect them. They stank  
of

infection and antiseptic

cream, and they were stained with dried blood and something else, a yellow crust  
that had to be pus.

As for his own hand, the gouge he'd put in it probably needed stitches. Before  
leaving the house that

morning, he had tugged a first-aid kit out of an upper cabinet in the kitchen and

used some Steri-Strips to  
pull the gash closed, then wound it in white bandages. But the gouge continued to  
seep, and by the time he  
took the wraps off, blood was beginning to soak through them. The hole in his  
left  
hand bulged open  
between the Steri-Strips, a red, liquid eye.  
“The girl who killed herself,” Georgia began. “The girl this is all about...”  
“Anna McDermott.” Her real name now.  
“Anna,” Georgia repeated. “Do you know why she killed herself? Was it because  
you told her to scram?”  
“Her sister obviously thinks so. Her stepdaddy, too, I guess, since he’s haunting  
us.”  
“The ghost... can make people do things. Like getting me to burn the suit. Like  
making Danny hang  
himself.”  
He’d told her about Danny in the car. Georgia had turned her face to the  
window,  
and he’d heard her crying  
softly for a while, making little damp, choked sounds, which evened out after a  
time into the slow, regular  
inhalations of sleep. This was the first either of them had mentioned Danny since.  
Jude continued, “The dead man, Anna’s stepdaddy, learned hypnotism torturing  
Charlie in the army  
and stayed with it after he got out. Liked to call himself a mentalist. In his life he  
used that chain of his,  
with the silver razor on the end of it, to put people into trances, but now he’s  
dead,  
he don’t need it  
anymore. Something about when he says things, you just have to do it. All of a  
sudden, you’re just  
sitting back, watching him run you here and there. You don’t even feel anything.  
Your body is a suit of  
clothes, and he’s the one wearing it, not you.”  
A dead man’s suit,  
Jude thought, with a shuddery feeling of revulsion. Then he said, “I don’t know  
much about him. Anna  
didn’t like to talk on him. But I know she worked for a while as a palm reader,  
and

she said her  
stepdaddy was the one who taught her how. He had an interest in the  
lessunderstood  
aspects of the  
human mind. Like, for example, on the weekends he'd hire himself out as a  
dowser."  
"Those are people who find water by waving sticks in the air? My grandma hired  
an old hillbilly with a  
mouthful of gold teeth to find her a fresh spring after her well went dry. He had a  
hickory stick."  
"Anna's stepdaddy, Craddock, didn't bother with a stick. He just used that pretty  
razor on a chain he's got.  
Pendulums work about as well, I guess. Anyway, the psycho bitch who sent me  
the  
suit, Jessica McDermott  
Price, wanted me to know that her pop had said he'd get even with me after he  
was  
dead. So I think the old  
man had some ideas about how to come back. In other words, he's not an  
accidental ghost, if that makes  
sense. He got the way he is now on purpose."  
A dog yapped somewhere in the distance. Bon lifted her head, gazed thoughtfully  
in the direction of the  
door, then lowered her chin back to her forepaws.  
"Was she pretty?" Georgia asked.  
"Anna? Yeah. Sure. You want to know if she was good in the sack?"  
"I'm just asking. You don't got to be a son of a bitch about it."  
"Well, then. Don't ask questions you don't really want to know the answers to.  
Notice I never inquire about  
your past lays."  
"Past lays. Goddammit. Is that the way you think of me? The present lay, soon to  
be the past lay?"  
"Christ. Here we go."  
"And I'm not being a snoop. I'm trying to figure this out."  
"How is knowing whether she was pretty going to help you figure anything out  
about our ghost problem?"  
She held the sheet to her chin and stared at him in the dark.  
"So she was Florida and I'm Georgia. How many other states has your dick  
visited?"

“I couldn’t tell you. I don’t have a map somewhere with pins in it. You really want me to make an estimate? While we’re on the subject, why stop with states? I’ve had thirteen world tours, and I always took my cock along with me.”

“You fuckin’ asshole.”

He grinned in his beard. “I know that’s probably shocking, to a virgin such as yourself. Here’s some news for you: I got a past. Fifty-four years of it.”

“Did you love her?”

“You can’t leave it alone, can you?”

“This is important, goddammit.”

“How’s it important?”

She wouldn’t say.

He sat up against the headboard. “For about three weeks.”

“Did she love you?”

He nodded.

“She wrote you letters? After you sent her home?”

“Yeah.”

“Angry letters?”

He didn’t reply at first, considering the question.

“Did you even fuckin’ read ‘em, you insensitive shitbird?” There it was again, an unmistakably rural and southern cadence in her voice. Her temper was up, and she’d forgotten herself for a moment. Or maybe it was not a case of forgetting herself, Jude thought, so much as the opposite.

“Yeah, I read ‘em,” he said. “I was hunting around for them when the shit blew up in our faces back in New York.”

He was sorry Danny had not found them. He had loved Anna and lived with her and talked with her every day they were together but now understood he had not learned nearly enough about her. He knew so little of the life she’d lived before him — and after.

“You deserve whatever happens to you,” she said. Georgia rolled away from him. “We both deserve it.”

He said, “They weren’t angry. Sometimes they were emotional. And sometimes

they were scary, because  
there was so little emotion in them. In the last one, I remember she said  
something  
about how she had  
things she wanted to talk about, things she was tired of keeping secret. She said  
she  
couldn't stand to be so  
tired all the time. Which should've been a warning sign to me right there.  
Except  
she said stuff like that  
other times, and she never... anyway. I been trying to tell you she wasn't right.  
She wasn't happy."  
"But do you think she still loved you? Even after you put your boot in her ass?"  
"I didn't—" he started, then let out a thin, seething breath. Wouldn't let himself  
be  
baited. "I suppose  
probably she did."  
Georgia didn't speak for a long time, her back to him. He studied the curve of her  
shoulder. At last she said,  
"I feel bad for her. It's not a lot of fun, you know."  
"What?"  
"Being in love with you. I've been with a lot of bad guys who made me feel lousy  
about myself, Jude, but  
you're something special. Because I knew none of them really cared about me,  
but  
you do, and you make  
me feel like your shitty hooker anyway." She spoke plainly, calmly, without  
looking at him.  
It made him catch his breath a little, what she said, and for an instant he wanted  
to  
tell her he was sorry, but  
he shied from the word. He was out of practice at apologies and loathed  
explanations. She waited for him to  
reply, and when he didn't, she pulled the blanket up to cover her shoulder.  
He slid down against the pillow, put his hands behind his head.  
"We'll be passing through Georgia tomorrow," she said, still not turning toward  
him. "I want to stop and  
see my grandma."  
"Your grandma," Jude repeated, as if he weren't sure he'd heard her right.

“Bammy is my favorite person in the world. She bowled a perfect three hundred once.” Georgia said it as if

the two things followed each other naturally. Maybe they did.

“You know the trouble we’re in?”

“Yeah. I was vaguely aware.”

“Do you think it’s a good idea to start making detours?”

“I want to see her.”

“How about we stop in on our way back? You two can catch up on old times then.

Hell, maybe the two of

you could go bowl a couple strings.”

Georgia was a little while in answering. At last she said, “I was feelin’ like I ought

to see her now. It’s been

on my mind. I don’t think it’s any sure thing we’ll be makin’ the trip back. Do you?”

He pulled his beard, staring at the shape of her under the sheet. He didn’t like the idea of slowing for any

reason but felt the need to offer her something, some concession, to make her loathe him a little less. Also,

if Georgia had things she wanted to say to someone who loved her, he supposed it made sense not to wait

around. Putting off anything that mattered no longer seemed like sensible planning.

“She keep lemonade in the fridge?”

“Fresh made.”

“Okay,” Jude said. “We’ll stop. Not too long, though, okay? We can be in Florida this time tomorrow if we

don’t mess around.”

One of the dogs sighed. Georgia had opened a window to air out the odor of Alpo, the window that looked

into the courtyard at the center of the motel. Jude could smell the rust of the chainlink

fence and a dash of

chlorine, although there was no water in the pool.

Georgia said, “Also, I used to have a Ouija board, once upon a time. When we get to my grandma’s, I want

to poke around for it.”

“I already told you. I don’t need to talk to Craddock. I already know what he wants.”

“No,” Georgia said, her voice short with impatience. “I don’t mean so we can talk to him.”

“Then what do you mean?”

“We need it if we’re going to talk to Anna,” Georgia said. “You said she loved you. Maybe she can tell us how to get out of this mess. Maybe she can call him off.”

22

“Lake Pontchartrain, huh?”

I didn’t grow up too far from there. My parents took us campin’ there once. My stepdaddy fished. I

can’t remember how he did. You go fishin’ much on Lake Pontchartrain?”

She was always after him with her questions. He could never decide if she listened to the answers or

just used the time when he was talking to think of something else to pester him about.

“Do you like to fish? Do you like raw fish? Sushi? I think sushi is disgusting, except when I’m drinkin’,

and then I’m in the mood. Repulsion masks attraction. How many times have you been to Tokyo? I hear the

food is really nasty — raw squid, raw jellyfish. Everything is raw there. Did they not invent fire in Japan?

Have you ever had bad food poisonin’? Sure you have. On tour all the time.

“What’s the hardest you ever puked? You ever puked through your nostrils? You have? That’s the worst.

“But did you fish Lake Pontchartrain much? Did your daddy take you? Isn’t that the prettiest name? Lake

Pontchartrain, Lake Pontchartrain, I want to see the rain on Lake Pontchartrain.

You know what the most

romantic sound in the world is? Rain on a quiet lake. A nice spring rain. When I was a kid, I could put

myself into a trance just sittin’ at my window watchin’ the rain. My stepdad used

to say he never met

anyone as easy to put into a trance as me. What were you like growin’ up?

When’d you decide to change your name?

“Do you think I should change my name? You should pick out a new name for me.



I want you to call me  
whatever you want to call me.”  
“I already do,”  
he said.

“That’s right. You do. From now on, my name is Florida. Anna McDermott is  
dead to me. She’s a dead  
girl. All gone. I never liked her anyway. I’d rather be Florida. Do you miss  
Louisiana? Isn’t it funny we  
only lived four hours apart from each other? We coulda crossed paths. Do you  
think you and I were ever in  
the same room, at the same time, and didn’t know it? Probably not, though,  
right?

Because you blew out of  
Louisiana before I was even born.”

It was either her most endearing habit or her most infuriating. Jude was never  
sure.

Maybe it was both  
at the same time.

“You ever shut up with the questions?”

he asked her the first night they slept together. It was two in the morning, and  
she’d been interrogating  
him for an hour.

“Were you one of those kids who would drive their momma crazy going, „Why is  
the sky blue? Why

doesn’t the earth fall into the sun? What happens to us when we die?”

“What do you think happens to us when we die?”

Anna asked.

“You ever seen a ghost? My stepdaddy has. My stepdaddy’s talked to them. He  
was in Vietnam. He  
says the whole country is haunted.”

By then he already knew that her stepfather was a dowser as well as a mesmerist,  
and in business with

her older sister, also a hypnotist by trade, the both of them back in Testament,  
Florida. That was almost

the full extent of what he knew about her family. Jude didn’t push for more

—

not then, not later

—

was content to know about her what she wanted him to know.

He had met Anna three days before, in New York City. He'd come down to do a guest vocal with Trent Reznor for a movie sound track

—  
easy money  
—

then stuck around to see a show Trent was doing at Roseland. Anna was backstage,  
a petite girl, violet lipstick, leather pants that creaked when she walked, the rare Goth blonde. She asked if he wanted an

egg roll and got it for him and then said,  
"Is it hard to eat with a beard like that? Do you get food in it?"

At him with the questions almost from hello.

"Why do you think so many guys, bikers and stuff, grow beards to look threatening? Don't you think

they'd actually work against you in a fight?"

"How would a beard work against you in a fight?"

he asked.

She grabbed his beard in one fist and yanked at it. He bent forward, felt a tearing pain in the lower half

of his face, ground his teeth, choked on an angry cry. She let go, continued,

"Like if I was ever in a fight with a bearded man, that's the first thing I'd do. ZZ Top would be

pushovers. I could take all three of them myself, little itty-bitty me. Course, those guys are stuck, they

can't

shave. If they ever shaved, no one would know who they were. I kind of guess

you're in the same boat,

now I think about it. It's who you are. That beard gave me bad dreams as a little girl, when I used to

watch you in videos. Hey! You know, you could be completely anonymous without your beard. You

ever think of that? Instant vacation from the pressures of celebrity. Plus, it's a liability in combat.

Reasons to shave."

"My face was a liability to getting laid,"

he said.

"If my beard gave you bad dreams, you should see me without it. You'd probably never sleep again."

“So it’s a disguise. An act of concealment. Like your name.”

“What about my name?”

“That isn’t your real name. Judas Coyne. It’s a pun.”

She leaned toward him.

“Name like that, are you from a nutty Christian family? I bet. My stepdaddy says the Bible is all bunk.

He was raised Pentecostal, but he wound up a spiritualist, which is how he raised us. He’s got a

pendulum — he can hang it over you and ask you questions and tell if you’re lying

by the way it

swings back and forth. He can read your aura with it, too. My aura is black as sin. How about yours?

Want me to read your palm? Palm reading is nothing. Easiest trick in the book.”

She told his fortune three times. The first time she was kneeling naked in bed beside him, a gleaming

line of sweat showing in the crease between her breasts. She was flushed, still breathing hard from

their exertions. She took his palm, moved her fingertips across it, inspecting it closely.

“Look at this lifeline,”

Anna said.

“This thing goes on for miles. I guess you live forever. I wouldn’t want to live forever myself. How old

is too old? Maybe it’s metaphorical. Like your music is forever, some malarkey along those lines.

Palm reading ain’t no exact science.”

And then once, not long after he finished rebuilding the Mustang, they had gone for a drive into the

hills overlooking the Hudson. They wound up parked at a boat ramp, staring out at

the river, the water

flecked with diamond scales beneath a high, faded-blue sky. Fluffy white clouds, thousands of feet

high, crowded the horizon. Jude had meant to drive Anna to an appointment with a

psychiatrist

—

Danny had set it up

—

but she'd dissuaded him, said it was too nice a day to spend it in a doctor's office. They sat there, windows down, music low, and she picked up his hand, lying on the seat between them.

She was having one of her good days. They'd been coming less and less often.

"You love again after me,"  
she said.

"You get another chance to be happy. I don't know if you'll let yourself take it. I kind of think not.

Why don't you want to be happy?"

"What do you mean, after you?"  
he asked. Then he said,

"I'm happy now."

"No you aren't. You're still angry."

"With who?"

"Yourself,"  
she said, as if it were the most obvious thing.

"Like it's your fault Jerome and Dizzy died. Like anyone could've saved them from themselves.

You're still real pissed with your daddy, too. For what he did to your mother. For  
what he did to your  
hand."

This last statement stole his breath.

"What are you talking about? How do you know about what he did to my hand?"  
She flicked her gaze toward him: an amused, cunning look.

"I'm starin' at it right now, aren't I?"

She turned his hand over, moved her thumb across his scarred knuckles.

"You don't have to be psychic or anything. You just have to have sensitive  
fingers. I can feel where

the bones healed. What'd he hit this hand with to smash it? A sledgehammer?  
They healed real bad."

"The basement door. I took off one weekend to play a show in New Orleans. A  
battle-of-the-bands thing. I

was fifteen. Helped myself to a hundred bucks' bus fare out of the family cash  
box. I figured it wouldn't be

like stealing, 'cause we'd win the contest. Five-hundred-dollar cash prize. Pay it  
all back with interest."

"How'd you do?"

"Took third. We all got T-shirts,"

Jude said.

"When I came back, he dragged me over to the basement door and smashed my left hand in it. My chord-making hand."

She paused, frowning, then glanced at him in confusion.

"I thought you made chords with the other hand."

"I do now."

She stared.

"I kinda taught myself how to make them with my right hand while my left was healing, and I just never went back."

"Was that hard?"

"Well. I wasn't sure my left would ever be good for making chords again, so it was either that or stop

playing. And it would've been a lot harder to stop."

"Where was your mom when this happened?"

"Can't remember."

A lie. The truth was, he couldn't forget. His mother had been at the table when his

father started to pull

him across the kitchen, toward the basement door, and he had screamed for her to help, but she only

got up and put her hands over her ears and left for the sewing room. He could not,

in truth, blame her

for refusing to intervene. Supposed he had it coming, and not for taking a hundred

dollars out of the

cash box either.

"S"okay. I wound up playing better guitar after I had to switch hands anyway. It just took about a

month of making the most horrible fuckin' noises you ever heard. Eventually someone explained I had

to restring my guitar backwards if I was going to play with my hands reversed.

After that I picked it up

pretty easy."

"Plus, you showed your daddy, didn't you?"

He didn't answer. She examined his palm once more, and rolled her thumb across his wrist.

"He isn't through with you yet. Your daddy. You'll see him again."

“No I won’t. I haven’t looked at him for thirty years. He doesn’t figure in my life anymore.”

“Sure he does. He figures into it every single day.”

“Funny, I thought we decided to skip visiting the psychiatrist this afternoon.” She said,

“You have five luck lines. You’re luckier than a cat, Jude Coyne. The world must still be payin’ you back for all your daddy did to you. Five luck lines. The world is never going to be done payin’ you back.”

She laid his hand aside.

“Your beard and your big leather jacket and your big black car and your big black boots. No one puts on all that armor unless they been hurt by someone who didn’t have no right to hurt them.”

“Look who’s talking,” he said.

“Is there any part of you, you won’t stick a pin in?”

She had them in her ears, her tongue, one nipple, her labia.

“Who are you trying to scare away?”

Anna gave him his final palm reading just a few weeks before Jude packed her stuff. He looked out the

kitchen window early one evening and saw her trudging through a cold October rain to the barn,

wearing only a black halter and black panties, her naked flesh shocking in its paleness.

By the time he caught up to her, she had crawled into the dog pen, the part of it that

was inside the

barn, where Angus and Bon went to get out of the rain. She sat in the dirt, mud smeared on the backs

of her thighs. The dogs whisked here and there, shooting worried looks her way and giving her space.

Jude climbed into the pen on all fours, angry with her, sick to death of the way it had been the last two

months. He was sick of talking to her and getting dull, three-word answers, sick of

laughter and tears

for no reason. They didn’t make love anymore. The thought repelled him. She

didn't wash, didn't  
dress, didn't brush her teeth. Her honey-yellow hair was a rat's nest. The last  
few  
times they had  
attempted to have sex, she'd turned him off with the things she wanted, had  
embarrassed and sickened  
him. He didn't mind a certain amount of kink, would tie her up if she wanted,  
pinch her nipples, roll  
her over and put it in her ass. But she wasn't happy with that. She wanted him to  
hold a plastic bag  
over her head. To cut her.  
She was hunched forward, with a needle in one hand. She pushed it into the  
thumb  
of the other,  
working intently and deliberately  
—

pricking herself once, then again, producing fat, gem-bright drops of blood.

"The hell you doing?"

he asked her, struggling to keep the anger out of his voice and failing. He took  
her

by the wrist, to stop

her sticking herself.

She let the needle drop into the mud, then reversed his grip, squeezed his hand in  
hers and stared down

at it. Her eyes glowed with fever in their dark, bruised-looking hollows. She was  
down to sleeping

three hours a night at best.

"You're running out of time almost as fast as I am. I'll be more useful when I'm  
gone. I'm gone. We

have no future. Someone is going to try and hurt you. Someone who wants to  
take

everything away

from you."

She rolled her eyes up to look into his face.

"Someone you can't fight. You'll fight anyway, but you can't win. You won't  
win. All the good things

in your life will soon be gone."

Angus whined anxiously and slipped in between them, burrowing his snout in her  
crotch. She smiled  
—

first smile he'd seen in a month

—

and dug behind his ears.

"Well,"

she said.

"You'll always have the dogs."

He twisted free of her grip, took her by the arms, lifted her to her feet.

"I don't listen to nothing you say. You've told my fortune three times at least, and

it comes out a

different way every time."

"I know,"

she said.

"But they're all true anyway."

"Why were you sticking yourself with a needle? Why you want to do that?"

"I done it since I was a girl. Sometimes if I stick myself a couple times, I can make the bad thoughts go

away. It's a trick I taught myself to clear my head. Like pinchin' yourself in a dream. You know. Pain has a

way of wakin' you up. Of remindin' you who you are."

Jude knew.

Almost as an afterthought, she added,

"I guess it isn't workin' too good anymore."

He led her out of the pen and back across the barn. She spoke again, said,

"I don't know what I'm out here for. In my underwear."

"I don't either."

"You ever dated anyone as crazy as me, Jude? Do you hate me? You've had a lot of girls. Tell me honest,

am I the worst? Who was your worst?"

"Why do you got to ask so many damn questions?"

he wanted to know.

As they went back out into the rain, he opened his black duster and closed it over her thin, shivering

body, clasped her against him.

"I'd rather ask questions,"

she said,

"than answer them."

23

He woke a little after nine with a melody



in his head, something with the feel of an Appalachian hymn. He nudged Bon off the bed — she had climbed up with them in the night — and pushed aside the covers. Jude sat on the edge of the mattress, mentally running over the melody again, trying to identify it, to remember the lyrics. Only it couldn't be identified, and the lyrics couldn't be recalled, because it hadn't existed until he thought it up. It wouldn't have a name until he gave it one. Jude rose, slipped across the room and outside, onto the concrete breezeway, still in his boxers. He unlocked the trunk of the Mustang and pulled out a battered guitar case with a '68 Les Paul in it. He carried it back into the room. Georgia hadn't moved. She lay with her face in the pillow, one bone-white arm above the sheets and curled tight against her body. It had been years since he dated anyone with a tan. When you were a Goth, it was important to at least imply the possibility you might burst into flames in direct sunlight. He let himself into the john. By now Angus and Bon were both trailing him, and he whispered at them to stay. They sank to their bellies outside the door, staring forlornly in at him, accusing him with their eyes of failing to love them enough. He wasn't sure how well he could play with the puncture wound in his left hand. The left did the picking and the right found the chords. He lifted the Les Paul from its case and began to fiddle, bringing it into tune. When he strummed a pick across the strings, it set off a low flare of pain — not bad, almost just an uncomfortable warmth — in the center of his palm. It felt as if a steel wire were sunk deep into the flesh and beginning to heat up. He could play through that, he thought. When the guitar was in tune, he searched for the proper chords and began to play, reproducing the tune that

had been in his head when he woke. Without the amp the guitar was all flat, soft twang, and each chord made a raspy, chiming sound. The song itself might have been a traditional hillcountry melody, sounded like something that belonged on a Folkways record or a Library of Congress retrospective of traditional music. Something with a name like “Fixin” to Dig My Grave.” “Jesus Brung His Chariot.” “Drink to the Devil.”

“„Drink to the Dead,” he said.

He put the guitar down and went back into the bedroom. There was a small notepad on the night table, and a ballpoint pen. He brought them into the bathroom and wrote down “Drink to the

Dead.” Now it had a title. He picked up the guitar and played it again.

The sound of it — the sound of the Ozarks, of gospel — gave him a little prickle of

pleasure, which he felt

along his forearms and across the back of his neck. A lot of his songs, when they started out, sounded like

old music. They arrived on his doorstep, wandering orphans, the lost children of large and venerable

musical families. They came to him in the form of Tin Pan Alley sing-alongs, honky-tonk blues, Dust Bowl

plaints, lost Chuck Berry riffs. Jude dressed them in black and taught them to scream.

He wished he had his DAT recorder, wanted to get what he had down on tape.

Instead he put the guitar

aside once more, and scribbled the chords on the notepad, beneath his title. Then he took up the Les Paul

and played the lick again, and again, curious to see where it would take him.

Twenty minutes later there

were spots of blood showing through the bandage around his left hand, and he had

worked out the chorus,

which built naturally from the initial hook, a steady, rising, thunderous chorus, a whisper to a shout: an act

of violence against the beauty and sweetness of the melody that had come before.

“Who’s that by?” Georgia asked, leaning in through the bathroom door,  
knuckling  
the sleep out of her eyes.

“Me.”

“I like that one.”

“It’s okay. Sound even better if this thing was plugged in.”

Her soft black hair floated around her head, had a swirled, airy look to it, and the  
shadows under her eyes

drew his attention to how large they were. She smiled drowsily down at him. He  
smiled back.

“Jude,” she said, in a tone of almost unbearable, erotic tenderness.

“Yeah?”

“You think you could get your ass out of the bathroom, so I could pee?”

When she shut the door, he dropped his guitar case on the bed and stood in the  
dimness of the room,

listening to the muffled sound of the world beyond the drawn shades: the drone of  
traffic on the highway, a

car door slamming, a vacuum cleaner humming in the room directly above. It  
came

to him then that the

ghost was gone.

Ever since the suit had arrived at his house in its black heart-shaped box, he had  
sensed the dead man

lingering close to him. Even when Jude couldn’t see him, he was conscious of his  
presence, felt it almost as

a barometric weight, a kind of pressure and electricity in the air, such as precedes  
a

thunderstorm. He had

existed in that atmosphere of dreadful waiting for days, a continuous crackle of  
tension that made it

difficult to taste his food or find his way into sleep. Now, though, it had lifted. He  
had somehow forgotten

the ghost while he’d been writing the new song — and the ghost had somehow  
forgotten him, or at least not

been able to intrude into Jude’s thoughts, into Jude’s surroundings.

He walked Angus, took his time. Jude was in short sleeves and jeans, and the sun  
felt good on the back of

his neck. The smell of the morning — the pall of exhaust over I-95, the swamp  
lilies in the brush, the hot

tarmac — got his blood going, made him want to be on the road, to be driving

somewhere, anywhere. He  
felt good: an unfamiliar sensation. Maybe he was randy, thought about the  
pleasant  
tousle of Georgia's hair  
and her sleep-puffy eyes and lithe white legs. He was hungry, wanted eggs, a  
chicken-fried steak. Angus  
chased a groundhog into waist-high grass, then stood at the edge of the trees,  
yapping happily at it. Jude  
went back to give Bon a turn to stretch her legs and heard the shower.  
He let himself in the bathroom. The room was steamy, the air hot and close. He  
undressed, slipped in  
around the curtain, and climbed into the tub.  
Georgia jumped when his knuckles brushed her back, twisted her head to look at  
him over her shoulder.  
She had a black butterfly tattooed on her left shoulder and a black heart on her  
hip.  
She turned toward him,  
and he put his hand over the heart.  
She pressed her damp, springy body against his, and they kissed. He leaned into  
her, over her, and to  
balance herself, Georgia put her right hand against the wall — then inhaled, a  
sharp, thin sound of pain, and  
pulled the hand back as if she had burned it.  
Georgia tried to lower her hand to her side, but he caught her wrist and lifted it.  
The thumb was inflamed  
and red, and when he touched it lightly, he could feel the sick heat trapped inside  
it. The palm, around the  
ball of the thumb, was also reddened and swollen. On the inside of the thumb was  
the white sore, glittering  
with fresh pus.  
“What are we going to do about this thing?” he asked.  
“It's fine. I'm putting antiseptic cream on it.”  
“This isn't fine. We ought to run you to the emergency room.”  
“I'm not going to sit in some emergency room for three hours to have someone  
look at the place I poked  
myself with a pin.”  
“You don't know what stuck you. Don't forget what you were handling when  
this  
happened to you.”

“I haven’t forgotten. I just don’t believe that any doctor is going to make it better.

Not really.”

“You think it’s going to get better on its own?”

“I think it’ll be all right — if we make the dead man go away. If we get him off our backs, I think we’ll both

be all right,” she said. “Whatever’s wrong with my hand, it’s part of this whole thing. But you know

that, don’t you?”

He didn’t know anything, but he had notions, and he was not happy to hear they matched her own. He

bowed his head, considering, wiped at the spray on his face. At last he said,

“When

Anna was at her worst,

she’d poke herself in the thumb with a needle. To clear her head, she told me. I

don’t know. Maybe it’s

nothing. It just makes me uneasy, you getting stuck like she used to stick herself.”

“Well. It doesn’t worry me. Actually, that almost makes me feel better about it.”

Her good hand moved

across his chest as she spoke, her fingers exploring a landscape of muscle

beginning to lose definition and

skin going slack with age, and all of it overgrown with a mat of curling silver hairs.

“It does?”

“Sure. It’s something else her and I got in common. Besides you. I never met her,

and I don’t hardly know

anything about her, but I feel connected to her somehow. I’m not afraid of that, you know.”

“I’m glad it’s not bothering you. I wish I could say the same. Speaking for myself,

I don’t much like

thinking about it.”

“So don’t,” she said, leaning into him and pushing her tongue into his mouth to shut him up.

24

Jude took Bon for her overdue walk

while Georgia busied herself in the bathroom, dressing and rebandaging her hand

and putting in her  
studs. He knew she might be occupied for twenty minutes, so he stopped by the  
car  
and pulled her  
laptop out of the trunk. Georgia didn't even know they had it with them. He'd  
packed it automatically,  
without thinking, because Georgia took it with her wherever she went and used it  
to stay in touch with  
a gaggle of geographically far-flung friends by way of e-mail and instant message.  
And she dribbled  
away countless hours browsing message boards, blogs, concert info, and vampire  
porn (which  
would've been hilarious if it weren't so depressing). But once they were on the  
road, Jude had  
forgotten they had the laptop with them, and Georgia had never asked about it, so  
it  
had spent the night  
in the trunk.  
Jude didn't bring his own computer — he didn't have one. Danny had handled  
his  
e-mail and all the rest of  
his online obligations. Jude was aware that he belonged to an increasingly small  
segment of the society,  
those who could not quite fathom the allure of the digital age. Jude did not want  
to  
be wired. He had spent  
four years wired on coke, a period of time in which everything seemed  
hyperaccelerated, as in one of those  
time-lapse movies, where a whole day and night pass in just a few seconds, traffic  
reduced to lurid streaks  
of light, people transformed into blurred mannequins rushing jerkily here and  
there. Those four years now  
felt more like four bad, crazy, sleepless days to him — days that had begun with a  
New Year's Eve  
hangover and ended at crowded, smoky Christmas parties where he found himself  
surrounded by strangers  
trying to touch him and shrieking with inhuman laughter. He did not ever want  
to  
be wired again.  
He had tried to explain the way he felt to Danny once, about compulsive behavior

and time rushing too fast  
and the Internet and drugs. Danny had only lifted one of his slender, mobile  
eyebrows and stared at him in  
smirking confusion. Danny did not think coke and computers were anything  
alike.

But Jude had seen the  
way people hunched over their screens, clicking the refresh button again and  
again,  
waiting for some  
crucial if meaningless hit of information, and he thought it was almost exactly the  
same.

Now, though, he was in the mood to score. He lugged her laptop back to the  
room,  
plugged in, and  
went online. He didn't make any attempt to access his e-mail account. In truth,  
he

wasn't sure  
how

to access his e-mail. Danny had a program all set up to reel in Jude's messages  
from the Net, but Jude  
couldn't have said how to get at that information from someone else's computer.  
He knew how to

Google a name, however, and he Googled Anna's.

Her obituary was short, half the length her father's had been. Jude was able to  
read

it in a glance, which  
was all it merited. It was her photograph that caught his attention and gave him a  
brief hollow sensation in  
the pit of his stomach. He guessed it had been taken close to the end of her life.  
She was glancing blankly  
into the camera, some strands of pale hair blown across a face that was gaunt, her  
cheeks sunken hollows  
beneath her cheekbones.

When he had known her, she'd sported rings in her eyebrows and four apiece in  
each of her ears, but in the  
photo they were gone, which made her too-pale face that much more vulnerable.  
When he looked closely,

he could see the marks left by her piercings. She'd given them up, the silver  
hoops  
and crosses and ankhs

and glittering gems, the studs and fishhooks and rings she had stuck into her skin to make herself look dirty and tough and dangerous and crazy and beautiful. Some of it was true, too. She really had been crazy and beautiful; dangerous, too. Dangerous to herself.

The obituary said nothing about a suicide note. It said nothing about suicide. She had died not three months before her stepfather.

He ran another search. He tapped in “Craddock McDermott, dowsing,” and half a dozen links popped up. He clicked on the topmost result, which brought him to a nine-year-old article in the

Tampa Tribune

, from their living/arts section. Jude looked at the pictures first — there were two — and stiffened in

his chair. It was a while before he could unlock his gaze from those photographs and shift his attention to the text beside them.

The story was titled “Dowsing for the Dead.” The slug line read:

20 years after Vietnam, Capt. Craddock McDermott is ready to lay some ghosts to

rest... and raise

some others.

The article opened with the story of Roy Hayes, a retired biology professor, who at

the age of sixty-nine

had learned to fly light planes and who had, one fall morning in 1991, taken an ultralight up over the

Everglades to count egrets for an environmental group. At 7:13 A.M. a private strip south of Naples had received a transmission from him.

“I think I’m having a stroke,” Hayes said. “I’m dizzy. I can’t tell how low I am. I need help.”

That was the last anyone had heard from him. A search party, involving more than

thirty boats and a

hundred men, had not been able to find a trace of either Hayes or his plane. Now, three years after his

disappearance and presumed death, his family had taken the extraordinary step of hiring Craddock

McDermott, Captain U.S. Army (ret.), to lead a new search for his remains.



“He didn’t go down in the “Glades,” McDermott states with a confident grin. “The search parties were always looking in the wrong place. The winds that morning carried his plane farther north, over Big Cypress. I put his position less than a mile south of I-75.” McDermott believes he can pinpoint the site of the crash to an area the size of a square half mile. But he didn’t work out his estimate by consulting meteorological data from the morning of the disappearance, or by examining Dr. Hayes’s final radio transmissions, or by reading eyewitness reports. Instead he dangled a silver pendulum above an outsize map of the region. When the pendulum began to swing rapidly back and forth, over a spot in south Big Cypress, McDermott announced he had found the impact zone. And when he takes a private search team into the Big Cypress swamp later this week, to look for the downed ultralight, he will not be bringing with him sonar, metal detectors, or hound dogs. His plan for locating the vanished professor is much more simple — and unnerving. He means to appeal to Roy Hayes directly — to call upon the deceased doctor himself to lead the party to his final resting place. The article shifted to backstory, exploring Craddock’s earliest encounters with the occult. A few lines were spent detailing the more gothic details of his early family life. It touched briefly on his father, the Pentecostal minister with a penchant for snake handling, who had disappeared when Craddock was just a boy. It lingered for a paragraph on his mother, who had twice moved them across the country, after seeing a phantom she called “the walking-backwards man,” a vision that foretold of ill luck. After one such visit from the walking-backwards man, little Craddock and his mother departed an Atlanta apartment complex,

not three weeks before the building burned to the ground in an electrical fire. Then it was 1967, and McDermott was an officer stationed in Vietnam, where he was placed in charge of interrogating the captured elite of the People's Liberation Army. He found himself assigned to the case of one Nguyen Trung, a chiromancer, who had reportedly learned his fortune-telling arts from Ho Chi Minh's own brother and who had offered his services to a variety of higher-ups among the Vietcong. To put his prisoner at ease, McDermott asked Trung to help him understand his spiritual beliefs. What followed was a series of extraordinary conversations on the subjects of prophecy, the human soul, and the dead, discussions McDermott said had opened his eyes to the supernatural all around him.

"In Vietnam the ghosts are busy," McDermott avers. "Nguyen Trung taught me to see them. Once you know how to look for them, you can spot them on every street corner, their eyes marked out and their feet not touching the ground. The living are often known to employ the dead over there. A spirit that believes it has work to do won't leave our world. It'll stay until the job is done. "That was when I first began to believe we were going to lose the war. I saw it happen on the battlefield. When our boys died, their souls would come out of their mouths, like steam from a teakettle, and run for the sky. When the Vietcong died, their spirits remained. Their dead went right on fighting."

After their sessions had concluded, McDermott lost track of Trung, who disappeared around the time of Tet. As for Professor Hayes, McDermott believed that his final fate would be known soon enough.

"We'll find him," McDermott said. "His spirit is unemployed at the moment, but I'll give him some work."

We're going to ride together — Hayes and I. He's going to lead me right to his body."

At this last —

We're going to ride together

— Jude felt a chill crawling on the flesh of his arms. But that was not as bad as the

peculiar feeling of

dread that came over him when he looked at the photographs.

The first was a picture of Craddock leaning against the grill of his smoke-blue pickup. His barefoot

stepdaughters — Anna was maybe twelve, Jessica about fifteen — sat on the hood,

one to either side of

him. It was the first time Jude had ever seen Anna's older sister, but not the first time he'd ever looked

upon Anna as a child — she was just the same as she'd been in his dream, only without the scarf over her

eyes.

In the photograph Jessica had her arms around the neck of her smiling, angular stepfather. She was

almost as rangy as he was, tall and fit, her skin honey-colored and healthy with tan.

But there was

something off about her grin — toothy and wide, maybe too wide, too enthusiastic,

the

sell-sell-sell

grin of a frantic real estate salesperson. And there was something off about her eyes, too, which were

as bright and black as wet ink, and disconcertingly avid.

Anna sat a little apart from the other two. She was bony, all elbows and knees, and

her hair came almost to

her waist — a long, golden spill of light. She was also the only one not putting on a

smile for the camera.

She wasn't putting on any kind of expression at all. Her face was dazed and expressionless, her eyes

unfocused, the eyes of a sleepwalker. Jude recognized it as the expression she wore

when she was off in the monochromatic, upside-down world of her depression. He was struck with the troubling idea that she had wandered that world for most of her childhood. Worst of all, though, was a second, smaller photograph, this one of Captain Craddock McDermott, in fatigues and a sweat-stained fishing hat, M16 slung over one shoulder. He posed with other GIs on hardpacked yellow mud. At his back were palms and standing water; it might've been a snapshot of the Everglades, if not for all the soldiers, and their Vietnamese prisoner. The prisoner stood a little behind Craddock, a solidly built man in a black tunic, with shaved head, broad, handsome features, and the calm eyes of a monk. Jude knew him at first glance as the Vietnamese prisoner he had encountered in his dream. The fingers missing from Trung's right hand were a dead giveaway. In the grainy, poorly colored photo, the stumps of those fingers had been freshly stitched with black thread. The same caption that identified this man as Nguyen Trung described the setting as a field hospital in Dong Tam, where Trung had received care for combat-related injuries. That was almost right. Trung had lopped off his own fingers only because he thought they were about to attack — so it had been combat of a sort. As for what had happened to him, Jude thought he knew. Jude thought it was likely that after Trung had no more to tell Craddock McDermott — about ghosts and the work ghosts did — he'd gone for a ride on the nightroad. The article did not say if McDermott had ever found Roy Hayes, retired professor and ultralight pilot, but Jude believed he had, although there was no rational reason to think such a thing. To satisfy himself he did another search. Roy Hayes's remains had been laid to rest five weeks later, and in fact Craddock had not found him — not personally. The water was too deep. A state police scuba team had gone in and pulled

him out, in the place where Craddock told them to dive.

Georgia threw open the bathroom door, and Jude quit her browser.

“Whatchu doin’?” she asked.

“Trying to figure out how to check my mail,” he lied. “You want a turn?”

She looked at her computer for a moment, then shook her head and wrinkled her nose. “No. I don’t have the least interest in going online. Isn’t that funny? Usually you can’t peel me off.”

“Well, see? Running for your life ain’t all bad. Just look at how it’s building character.”

He pulled out the dresser drawer again and slopped another can of Alpo into it.

“Last night the smell of that shit was making me want to gag,” Georgia said.

“Strangely, this morning it’s getting me hungry.”

“Come on. There’s a Denny’s up the street. Let’s go for a walk.”

He opened the door, then held out his hand to her. She was sitting on the edge of the bed, in her stonewashed

black jeans, heavy black boots, and sleeveless black shirt, which hung loose on her slight frame. In

the golden beam of sunlight that fell through the door, her skin was so pale and fine it was almost

translucent, looked as if it would bruise at the slightest touch.

Jude saw her glance at the dogs. Angus and Bon bent over the drawer, heads together as they went

snorkeling in their food. He saw Georgia frown, and he knew what she was thinking, that they’d been safe

as long as they kept the dogs close. But then she squinted back at Jude, standing in

the light, took his hand,

and let him pull her to her feet. The day was bright. Beyond the door the morning waited for them.

He was, for himself, not scared. He still felt under the protection of the new song, felt that in writing it he

had drawn a magic circle around the both of them that the dead man could not penetrate. He had driven the

ghost away — for a time anyhow.

But as they crossed the parking lot — thoughtlessly holding hands, a thing they never did — he happened

to glance back at their hotel room. Angus and Bon stared out through the picture window at them, standing

side by side on their hind legs, with their front paws on the glass and their faces wearing identical looks of apprehension.

25

The Denny's was loud and overcrowded, thick with the smell of bacon fat and burnt coffee and cigarette smoke. The bar, just to the right of the doors, was a designated smoking area. That meant that after five minutes of waiting up front to be seated, you could plan on smelling like an ashtray by the time you were led to your table.

Jude didn't smoke himself and never had. It was the one self-destructive habit he'd managed to avoid. His father smoked. On errands into town, Jude had always willingly bought him the cheap, long boxes of generics, had done it even without being asked, and they both knew why. Jude would glare at Martin across the kitchen table, while his father lit a cigarette and took his first drag, the tip flaring orange.

"If looks could kill, I'd have cancer already," Martin said to him one night, without any preamble. He waved a hand, drew a circle in the air with the cigarette, squinting at Jude through

the smoke. "I got a tough constitution. You want to kill me off with these, you're gonna have to wait a while. You really want me dead, there's easier ways to do it."

Jude's mother said nothing, concentrated on shelling peas, face screwed up in an expression of intent study.

She might have been a deaf-mute.

Jude — Justin then — did not speak either, simply went on glaring at him. He was

not too angry to speak

but too shocked, because it was as if his father had read his mind. He'd been staring at the loose, chickenflesh

fold of Martin Cowzynski's neck with a kind of fury, wanting to will a cancer into it, a lump of

black-blossoming cells that would devour his father's voice, choke his father's

breath. Wanting that with all  
his heart: a cancer that would make the doctors scoop out his throat, shut him up  
forever.

The man at the next table had had his throat scooped out and used an  
electrolarynx  
to talk, a loud,  
crackling joy buzzer that he held under his chin to tell the waitress (and everyone  
else in the room):

“YOU GOT AIR-CONDITIONIN”? WELL, TURN IT ON. YOU DON’T  
BOTHER TO COOK THE  
FOOD, WHY YOU WANNA FRAH YOUR PAYIN” CUSTOMERS? JESUS  
CHRIST. I”M

EIGHTY-SEVEN.” This was a fact he felt to be of such overwhelming  
importance  
that he said it again  
after the waitress walked away, repeating himself to his wife, a fantastically obese  
woman who didn”t

look up from her newspaper as he spoke. “I”M EIGHTY-SEVEN YEARS OLD.  
CHRIST. FRAH US

LIKE AIGS.” He looked like the old man from that painting,  
American Gothic,  
down to the gray strands of hair combed over his balding dome.

“Wonder what sort of old couple we”d make,” Georgia said.

“Well. I”d still be hairy. It would just be white hair. And it would probably be  
growing in tufts out of all the  
wrong places. My ears. My nose. Big, crazy hairs sticking out of my eyebrows.  
Basically like Santa, gone  
horribly fuckin” wrong.”

She scooped a hand under her breasts. “The fat in these is going to drain steadily  
into my ass. I got a sweet

tooth, so probably my teeth will fall out on me. On the bright side, I”ll be able to  
pop out my dentures for  
toothless, old-lady blow jobs.”

He touched her chin, lifted her face toward his. He studied her high cheekbones  
and the eyes in deep,  
bruised hollows, eyes that watched with a wry amusement that did not quite mask  
her desire to meet with  
his approval.

“You got a good face,” he said. “You got good eyes. You”ll be all right. With old

ladies it's all about the

eyes. You want to be an old lady with lively eyes, so it looks like you're always thinking of something

funny. Like you're looking for trouble."

He drew his hand away. She peered down into her coffee, smiling, flattered into an

uncharacteristic

shyness.

"Sounds like you're talking about my grandma Bammy," she said. "You'll love her. We could be there by lunch."

"Sure."

"My grandma looks like the friendliest, most harmless old thing. Oh, but she likes tormenting people. I was

living with her by the time I was in the eighth grade. I'd have my boyfriend Jimmy

Elliott over — to play

Yahtzee, I said, but really we were sneaking wine. Bammy would leave a half-full bottle of red in her

fridge most days, leftover from dinner the night before. And she knew what we were doing, and one day

she switched purple ink for the booze and left it for us. Jimmy let me take the first slug. I got a mouthful

and went and coughed it all down myself. When she came home, I still had a big purple ring on my mouth,

purple stains all down my jaw, purple tongue. It didn't come out for a week either.

I expected Bammy to

paddle me good, but she just thought it was funny."

The waitress came for their order. When she was gone, Georgia said, "What was it

like being married,

Jude?"

"Peaceful."

"Why did you divorce her?"

"I didn't. She divorced me."

"She catch you in bed with the state of Alaska or something?"

"No. I didn't cheat — well, not too often. And she didn't take it personal."

"She didn't? Are you for real? If we were married and you helped yourself to a



piece, I'd throw the first  
thing came to hand at you. And the second. I wouldn't drive you to the hospital  
either. Let you bleed." She  
paused, bent over her mug, then said, "So what did it?"  
"It would be hard to explain."  
"Because I'm too stupid?"  
"No," he said. "More like I'm not smart enough to explain it to myself, let alone  
anyone else. For a  
long time, I wanted to work at being a husband. Then I didn't. And when I  
didn't  
anymore — she just  
knew it. Maybe I made sure she knew it." And as he said it, Jude was thinking  
how  
he'd started staying  
up late, waiting for her to get tired and go to bed without him. He'd slip in later,  
after she was asleep,  
so there was no chance of making love. Or how he would sometimes start playing  
guitar, picking at a  
tune, in the middle of her telling him something — playing right over her talk.  
Remembering how he'd  
held on to the snuff movie instead of throwing it away. How he'd left it out  
where  
she could find it —  
where he supposed he knew she  
would  
find it.  
"That doesn't make sense. Just all of a sudden, you didn't feel like making the  
effort? That doesn't seem  
like you. You aren't the type to give up on things for no reason."  
It wasn't for no reason, but what reason there was defied articulation, could not  
be  
put into words in a way  
that made sense. He had bought his wife the farmhouse, bought it for both of  
them.  
He bought Shannon one  
Mercedes, then another, a big sedan and a convertible. They took weekends,  
sometimes, in Cannes, and  
flew there on a private jet where they were served jumbo shrimp and lobster tail  
on

ice. And then Dizzy died — died as badly and painfully as a person could die — and Jerome killed himself, and still Shannon would come into Jude's studio and say, "I'm worried about you. Let's go to Hawaii" or "I bought you a leather jacket — try it on," and he would begin to strum at his guitar, hating the chirp of her voice and playing over it, hating the thought of spending more money, of owning another jacket, of going on another trip. But mostly just hating the contented, milk-fed look of her face, her fat fingers with all their rings, the cool look of concern in her eyes.

At the very end, when Dizzy was blind and raging with fever and soiling himself almost hourly, he got the idea in his head that Jude was his father. Dizzy wept and said he didn't want to be

gay. He said, "Don't hate me anymore, Dad, don't hate me." And Jude said, "I don't. I never." And then Dizzy was gone, and Shannon went right on ordering Jude clothes and thinking about where they should eat lunch.

"Why didn't you have children with her?" Georgia asked.

"I was worried I'd have too much of my father in me."

"I doubt you're anything like him," she said.

He considered this over a forkful of food. "No. He and I have pretty much exactly the same disposition."

"What scares me is the idea of having kids and then them finding out the truth about me. Kids always find out. I found out about my folks."

"What would your kids find out about you?"

"That I dropped out of high school. That when I was thirteen I let a guy turn me into a prostitute. The only job I was ever good at involved taking my clothes off to Mötley Crüe for a roomful

of drunks. I tried to kill myself. I been arrested three times. I stole money from my grandma and made her cry. I didn't brush my teeth for about two years. Am I missing anything?"

“So this is what your kid would find out: No matter what bad thing happens to me,  
I can talk to my mother,  
because she’s been through it all. No matter what shitty thing happens to me, I can  
survive it, because my  
mom was through worse, and she made it.”  
Georgia lifted her head, smiling again, her eyes glittering bright with pleasure and  
mischievous — the kind of  
eyes Jude had been talking about only a few minutes before.  
“You know, Jude,” she said, reaching for her coffee with the fingers of her  
bandaged hand. The waitress  
was behind her, leaning forward with the coffeepot to refill Georgia’s mug and  
not  
looking at what she was  
doing, staring instead down at her check pad. Jude saw what was going to happen  
but couldn’t force the  
warning out of his throat in time. Georgia went on talking, “Sometimes you’re  
such a decent guy, I can  
almost forget what an asshole—”  
The waitress poured just as Georgia moved her cup and dumped coffee over the  
bandaged hand. Georgia  
wailed and yanked the hand back, drawing it tight against her chest, her face  
twisting in a hurt, sickened  
grimace. For a moment there was glassy shock in her eyes, a flat and empty shine  
that made Jude think she  
might be about to pass out.  
Then she was up, clutching the bad hand in her good one. “Want to watch where  
the fuck you’re pouring  
that, you dumb bitch?” she shouted at the waitress, that accent coming over her  
again, her voice going  
country on her.  
“Georgia,” Jude said, starting to rise.  
She made a face and waved him back to his chair. She thudded the waitress with  
her shoulder, on her way  
by her, stalking toward the hall to the bathrooms.  
Jude nudged his plate aside. “Guess I’ll take the check when you get a chance.”  
“I am so sorry,” the waitress said.  
“Accidents happen.”

"I am so sorry," the waitress repeated. "But that is no reason for her to talk to me that way."

"She got burnt. I'm surprised you didn't hear worse."

The waitress said, "The two of you. I knew what I was serving the moment I laid eyes on you. And I served

you just as nice as I'd serve anyone."

"Oh? You knew what you were serving? What was that?"

"Pair of lowlifes. You look like a drug peddler."

He laughed.

"And you only got to take one glance at her to know what she is. You payin' her by the hour?"

He stopped laughing.

"Get me the check," he said. "And get your fat ass out of my sight."

She stared at him a moment longer, her mouth screwed up as if she were getting ready to spit, then hurried

away without another word.

The people at the tables immediately around him had stopped their conversations to gawk and listen. Jude

swept his gaze here and there, staring back at anyone who dared stare at him, and one by one they returned

to their food. He was fearless when it came to making eye contact, had looked into too many crowds for too

many years to lose a staring contest now.

Finally the only people left watching him were the old man out of American Gothic

and his wife, who might've been a circus fat lady on her day off. She at least made an effort to be

discreet, peeping at Jude from the corners of her eyes while pretending to be interested in the paper

spread before her. But the old man just stared, his tea-colored eyes judging and also somehow amused.

In one hand he held the electrolarynx to his throat — it hummed faintly — as if he

were about to

comment. Yet he said nothing.

"Got something on your mind?" Jude asked, when staring right into the old man's

eyes didn't embarrass

him into minding his own business.

The old man raised his eyebrows, then wagged his head back and forth:

No, nothing to say  
. He lowered his gaze back to his plate with a comic little sniff. He set the  
electrolarynx down beside  
the salt and pepper.  
Jude was about to look away, when the electrolarynx came to life, vibrating on  
the  
table. A loud, toneless,  
electric voice buzzed forth: "YOU WILL DIE."  
The old man stiffened, sat back in his wheelchair. He stared down at his  
electrolarynx, bewildered, maybe  
not really sure it had said anything. The fat lady curled her paper and peered over  
the top of it at the device,  
a wondering frown set on a face as smooth and round as the Pillsbury  
Doughboy"s.  
"I AM DEAD," the electrolarynx buzzed, chattering across the surface of the  
table  
like a cheap windup toy.  
The old man plucked it up between his fingers. It made joy-buzzer sounds from  
between them. "YOU  
WILL DIE. WE WILL BE IN THE DEATH HOLE TOGETHER."  
"What"s it doin"?" said the fat woman. "Is it pickin" up a radio station again?"  
The old man shook his head:  
Don"t know  
. His gaze rose from the electrolarynx, which now rested in the cup of his palm, to  
Jude. He peered at  
Jude through glasses that magnified his astonished eyes. The old man held his  
hand  
out, as if offering  
the device to Jude. It hummed and jittered about.  
"YOU WILL KILL HER KILL YOURSELF KILL THE DOGS THE DOGS  
WON"t SAVE YOU WE"LL  
RIDE TOGETHER LISTEN NOW LISTEN TO MY VOICE WE WILL RIDE  
AT  
NIGHTFALL. YOU  
DON"t OWN ME. I OWN YOU. I OWN YOU NOW."  
"Peter," the fat woman said. She was trying to whisper, but her voice choked, and  
when she forced her next  
breath up, it came out shrill and wavering. "Make it stop, Peter."  
Peter just sat there holding it out to Jude, as if it were a phone and the call was  
for

him.

Everyone was looking, the room filled with crosscurrents of worried murmuring. Some of the other

customers had come up out of their chairs to watch, didn't want to miss what might happen next.

Jude was up, too, thinking,  
Georgia.

As he rose and started to turn toward the hallway to the restrooms, his gaze swept

the picture windows

that looked out front. He stopped in midmovement, his gaze catching and holding on what he saw in

the parking lot. The dead man's pickup idled there, waiting close to the front doors, the floodlights on, globes of cold white light. No one sitting in it.

A few of the onlookers were standing around, at tables just behind his, and he had to shove through them to

reach the corridor to the bathrooms. Jude found a door that said WOMEN, slammed it in.

Georgia stood at one of the two sinks. She didn't glance up at the sound of the door banging against the

wall. She stared at herself in the mirror, but her eyes were unfocused, not really fixed on anything, and her

face wore the wistful, grave expression of a child almost asleep in front of the television.

She cocked her bandaged fist back and drove it into the mirror, hard as she could, no holding back. She

pulverized the glass in a fist-size circle, with shatter lines jagging out away from the hole in all directions.

An instant later silver spears of mirror fell with a ringing crash, broke musically against the sinks.

A slender, yellow-haired woman with a newborn in her arms stood a yard away, beside a changing

table that folded out from the wall. She grabbed the baby to her chest and began to

scream, "Oh, my

God! Oh, my

God

!"

Georgia grabbed an eight-inch scythe blade of silver, a gleaming crescent moon, raised it to her throat, and

tipped her chin back to gouge into the flesh beneath. Jude broke out of the shock that had held him in the doorway and caught her wrist, twisted it down to her side, then bent it back, until she made a pitiful cry and let go. The mirrored scythe fell to the white tiles and shattered with a pretty clashing sound.

Jude spun her, twisting her arm again, hurting her. She gasped and shut her eyes against tears but let him

force her forward, march her to the door. He wasn't sure why he hurt her, if it was

panic or on purpose,

because he was angry at her for going off or angry at himself for letting her.

The dead man was in the hall outside the bathroom. Jude didn't register him until

he'd already walked past

him, and then a shudder rolled through him, left him on legs that wouldn't stop trembling. Craddock had

tipped his black hat at them on their way by.

Georgia could barely hold herself up. Jude shifted his grip to her upper arm, supporting her, as he rammed

her across the dining room. The fat lady and the old man had their heads together.

"...WASN'T NO RADIO STATION..."

"Weirdos. Weirdos playing a prank."

"SHADDAP, HERE THEY COME."

Others stared, jumped to get out of the way. The waitress who only a minute before

had accused Jude of

being a drug peddler and Georgia of being his whore stood by the front counter talking to the manager, a

little man with pens in his shirt pocket and the sad eyes of a basset hound. She pointed at them as they

crossed the room.

Jude slowed at his table long enough to throw down a pair of twenties. As they went by the manager, the

little man lifted his head to regard them with his tragic gaze but did not say anything. The waitress went on

sputtering in his ear.

"Jude," Georgia said when they went through the first set of doors. "You're hurting me."

He relaxed his grip on her upper arm, saw that his fingers had left waxy white marks in her already pale

flesh. They thumped through the second set of doors and were outside.

"Are we safe?" she asked.

"No," he said. "But we will be soon. The ghost has a healthy fear of them dogs."

They walked quickly past Craddock's empty and idling pickup truck. The passenger-side window was

rolled down about a third of the way. The radio was on inside. One of the AM right-wingers was talking, in

a smooth, confident, almost arrogant voice.

"...it feels good to embrace those core American values, and it feels good to see the right people win an

election, even if the other side is going to say it wasn't fair, and it feels good to see

more and more people

returning to the politics of common Christian good sense," said the deep, dulcet voice. "But you know what

would feel even better? To choke that bitch standing next to you, choke that bitch,

then step into the road in

front of a semi, lay down for it, lay down and..."

Then they were past, the voice out of earshot.

"We're going to lose this thing," Georgia said.

"No we aren't. Come on. It isn't a hundred yards back to the hotel."

"If he doesn't get us now, he's going to get us later. He told me. He said I might as well kill myself and get

it over, and I was going to. I couldn't help myself."

"I know. That's what he does."

They started along the highway, right at the edge of the gravel breakdown lane, with the long stalks of

sawgrass whipping at Jude's jeans.

Georgia said, "My hand feels sick."

He stopped, lifted it for a look. It wasn't bleeding, either from punching the mirror

or from lifting up the

curved blade of glass. The thick, muffling pads of the bandage had protected her skin. Still, even through

the wraps he could feel an unwholesome heat pouring off it, and he wondered if she had broken a bone.



"I bet. You hit the mirror pretty hard. You're lucky you aren't all hacked up."  
Nudging her forward, getting  
them moving again.

"It's beating like a heart. Going  
whump-whump-whump.

"She spat, spat again.

Between them and the motel was an overpass, a stone train trestle, the tunnel  
beneath narrow and dark.

There was no sidewalk, no room even for the breakdown lane at the sides of the  
road. Water dripped from  
the stone ceiling.

"Come on," he said.

The overpass was a black frame, boxed around a picture of the Days Inn. Jude's  
eyes were fixed on the  
motel. He could see the Mustang. He could see their room.

They did not slow as they passed into the tunnel, which stank of stagnant water,  
weeds, urine.

"Wait," Georgia said.

She turned, doubled over, and gagged, bringing up her eggs, lumps of half-  
digested  
toast, and orange juice.

He held her left arm with one hand, pulled her hair back from her face with the  
other. It made him edgy,  
standing there in the bad-smelling dark, waiting for her to finish.

"Jude," she said.

"Come on," he said, tugging at her arm.

"Wait—"

"Come on."

She wiped her mouth, with the bottom of her shirt. She remained bent over. "I  
think—"

He heard the truck before he saw it, heard the engine revving behind him, a  
furious

growl of sound, rising

to a roar. Headlights dashed up the wall of rough stone blocks. Jude had time to  
glance back and saw the

dead man's pickup rushing at them, Craddock grinning behind the wheel and the  
floodlights two circles of

blinding light, holes burned right into the world. Smoke boiled off the tires.

Jude got an arm under Georgia and pitched himself forward, carrying her with  
him

and out the far end of  
the tunnel.

The smoke-blue Chevy slammed into the wall behind him with a shattering crash of steel smashing against stone. It was a great clap of noise that stunned Jude's eardrums, set them ringing.

He and Georgia fell onto wet gravel, clear of the tunnel now. They rolled away from the side of the road, tumbled down the brush, and landed in dew-damp ferns. Georgia cried out, clipped him in the left eye with a

bony elbow. He put a hand down into something squishy, the cool unpleasantness of swamp muck. He lifted himself up, breathing raggedly. Jude looked back. It wasn't the dead man's old Chevy that had hit the wall but an olive Jeep, the kind that was open to the sky, with a roll bar in the back. A black man with close-cropped, steel-wool hair sat behind the steering wheel, holding his forehead. The windshield was fractured in a network of connected rings where his skull had hit it. The whole front driver's side of the Jeep had been gouged down to the frame, steel twisted up and back in smoking, torn pieces.

"What happened?" Georgia asked, her voice faint and tinny, hard to make out over

the droning in his ears.

"The ghost. He missed."

"Are you sure?"

"That it was the ghost?"

"That he missed."

He came to his feet, his legs unsteady, knees threatening to give. He took her wrist,

helped her up. The whining in his eardrums was already beginning to clear. From a long way off, he could hear his dogs, barking hysterically, barking mad.

26

Heaping their bags into the back of the Mustang, Jude became aware of a slow, deep throb in his left hand, different from the dull ache

that had persisted since he stabbed himself there yesterday. When he looked down,  
he saw that his  
bandage was coming unraveled and was soaked through with fresh blood. Georgia drove while he sat in the passenger seat, with the first-aid kit that had accompanied them from  
New York open in his lap. He undid the wet, tacky dressings and dropped them on  
the floor at his feet. The  
Steri-Strips he'd applied to the wound the day before had peeled away, and the puncture gaped again,  
glistening, obscene. He had torn it open getting out of the way of Craddock's truck.  
"What are you going to do about that hand?" Georgia asked, shooting him an anxious look before turning  
her gaze back to the road.  
"Same thing you're doing about yours," he said. "Nothing."  
He began to clumsily apply fresh Steri-Strips to the wound. It felt as if he were putting a cigarette out on  
his palm. When he'd closed the tear as best he could, he wrapped the hand with clean gauze.  
"You're bleeding from the head, too," she said. "Did you know that?"  
"Little scrape. Don't worry about it."  
"What happens next time? Next time we wind up somewhere without the dogs to look out for us?"  
"I don't know."  
"It was a public place. We should've been safe in a public place. People all around, and it was bright  
daylight, and he went and come at us anyway. How are we supposed to fight somethin' like him?"  
He said, "I don't know. If I knew what to do, I'd be doing it already, Florida. You  
and your questions. Lay  
off a minute, why don't you?"  
They drove on. It was only when he heard the choked sound of her weeping — she  
was struggling to do it  
in silence — that he realized he'd called her Florida, when he had meant to say Georgia. It was her

questions that had done it, one after another, that and her accent, those Daughter of the Confederacy inflections that had steadily been creeping into her voice the last couple days. The sound of Georgia trying not to cry was somehow worse than if she wept openly. If she would just go ahead and cry, he could say something to her, but as it was, he felt it necessary to let her be miserable in private and pretend he hadn't noticed. Jude sank low in the passenger seat and turned his face toward the window.

The sun was a steady glare through the windshield, and a little south of Richmond he fell into a disgusted, heat-stunned trance. He tried to think what he knew about the dead man who pursued them, what Anna had told him about her stepfather when they were together. But it was hard to think, too much effort — he was sore, and there was all that sun in his face and Georgia making quiet, wretched noises behind the steering wheel — and anyway he was sure Anna hadn't said much.

"I'd rather ask questions," she told him, "than answer them."

She had kept him at bay with those foolish, pointless questions for almost half a year:

Were you ever in the Boy Scouts? Do you shampoo your beard? What do you like better, my ass or my tits?

What little he knew should have invited curiosity: the family business in hypnotism, the dowser father who taught his girls to read palms and talk to spirits, a childhood shadowed by the hallucinations of

preadolescent schizophrenia. But Anna — Florida — didn't want to talk about who she'd been before meeting him, and for himself, he was happy to let her past be past.

Whatever she wasn't telling him, he knew it was bad, a certain kind of bad. The specifics didn't matter —

that's what he believed then. He had thought, at the time, that this was one of his

strengths, his willingness  
to accept her as she was, without questions, without judgments. She was safe with  
him, safe from whatever  
ghosts were chasing her.

Except he hadn't kept her safe, he knew that now. The ghosts always caught up  
eventually, and there was  
no way to lock the door on them. They would walk right through. What he'd  
thought of as a personal  
strength — he was happy to know about her only what she wanted him to know  
—

was something more  
like selfishness. A childish willingness to remain in the dark, to avoid distressing  
conversations, upsetting  
truths. He had feared her secrets — or, more specifically, the emotional  
entanglements that might come  
with knowing them.

Just once had she risked something like confession, something close to  
selfrevelation.

It was at the end,  
shortly before he sent her home.

She'd been depressed for months. First the sex went bad, and then there was no  
sex at all. He'd find her in  
the bath, soaking in ice water, shivering helplessly, too confused and unhappy to  
get out. Thinking on it  
now, it was as if she were rehearsing for her first day as a corpse, for the evening  
she would spend cooling  
and wrinkling in a tub full of cold water and blood. She prattled to herself in a  
little

girl's crooning voice  
but went mute if he tried to talk to her, stared at him in bewilderment and shock,  
as

if she'd just heard the  
furniture speak.

Then one night he went out. He no longer remembered for what. To rent a movie  
maybe, or get a  
burger. It was just after dark as he drove home. Half a mile from the house, he  
heard people honking  
their horns, the oncoming cars blinking their headlights.

Then he passed her. Anna was on the other side of the road, running in the  
breakdown lane, wearing

nothing but one of his oversize T-shirts. Her yellow hair was windblown and tangled. She saw him as he passed, going the other way, and lunged into the road after him, waving her hand frantically and stepping into the path of an oncoming eighteen-wheeler.

The truck's tires locked and shrieked. The trailer's rear end fishtailed to the left while the cab swung

right. It banged to a stop, two feet from rolling over her. She didn't appear to notice. Jude had stopped

himself by then, and she flung open the driver's-side door, fell against him.

"Where did you go?"

she screamed.

"I looked for you everywhere. I ran, I ran, and I thought you were gone, so I ran, I

ran lookin'."

The driver of the semi had his door open, one foot out on the step-down.

"What the fuck is up with that bitch?"

"I got it,"

Jude said to him.

The trucker opened his mouth to speak again, then fell silent as Jude hauled Anna in across his legs, an

act that hiked up her shirt and raised her bare bottom to the air.

Jude threw her into the passenger seat, and immediately she was up again, falling into him, shoving her

hot, wet face against his chest.

"I was scared I was so scared and I ran—"

He shoved her off him with his elbow, hard enough to slam her into the passengerside

door. She fell

into a shocked silence.

"Enough. You're a mess. I've had it. You hear? You aren't the only one who can tell fortunes. You

want me to tell you about your future? I see you holding your fuckin' bags, waitin' for a bus,"

he said.

His chest was tight, tight enough to remind him he wasn't thirty-three but fiftythree,

almost thirty

years older than she. Anna stared. Her eyes round and wide and uncomprehending.

He put the car into drive and began to roll for home. As he turned in to the driveway, she bent over and tried to unzip his pants, to give him a blow job, but the thought turned his stomach, was an unimaginable act, a thing he could not let her do, so he hit her with the elbow again, driving her back once more.

He avoided her most of the next day, but the following night, when he came in from walking the dogs, she called from the top of the back stairs. She asked if he would make her some soup, just a can of something. He said all right.

When he brought it to her, a bowl of chicken noodle on a small tray, he could see she was herself again. Washed out and exhausted, but clear in her head. She tried to smile for him,

something he didn't want to see. What he had to do was going to be hard enough.

She sat up, took the tray across her knees. He sat on the side of the bed and watched her take little

swallows. She didn't really want it. It had only been an excuse to get him up to the

bedroom. He could

tell from the way her jaw tightened before each tiny, fretful sip. She had lost twelve pounds in the last three months.

She set it aside after finishing less than a quarter of the broth, then smiled, in the way of a child who

has been promised ice cream if she'll choke down her asparagus. She said thank you, it was nice. She said she felt better.

"I have to go to New York next Monday. I'm doing Howard Stern

,

Jude said.

An anxious light flickered in her pale eyes.

"I... I don't think I ought to go."

"I wouldn't ask you to. The city would be the worst thing for you."

She looked at him so gratefully he had to glance away.

"I can't leave you here either,"  
he said.

"Not by yourself. I was thinking maybe you ought to stay with family for a while.  
Down in Florida."

When she didn't reply, he went on,

"Is there someone in your family I can call?"

She slid down into her pillows. She drew the sheet up to her chin. He was worried  
she would start

crying, but when he looked, she was staring calmly at the ceiling, her hands  
folded

one atop the other  
on her breastbone.

"Sure,"

she said finally

. "You were good to put up with me for as long as you did."

"What I said the other night..."

"I don't remember."

"That's good. What I said is better forgotten. I didn't mean any of it anyhow."

Although in fact what he'd said was exactly what he meant, had only been the  
harshest possible  
version of what he was telling her now.

The silence drew out between them until it was uncomfortable, and he felt he  
should prod her again,

but as he was opening his mouth, she spoke first.

"You can call my daddy,"  
she said.

"My stepdaddy, I mean. You can't call my real daddy. He's dead, of course. You  
want to talk to my

stepdaddy, he'll drive all the way up here to pick me up in person if you want.

Just

give him the word.

My stepdaddy likes to say I'm his little onion. I bring tears to his eyes. Isn't that  
a

cute thing to say?"

"I wouldn't make him come get you. I'll fly you private."

"No plane. Planes are too fast. You can't go south on a plane. You need to drive.  
Or take a train. You need

to watch the dirt turn to clay. You need to look at all the junkyards full of rustin'  
cars. You need to go over



a few bridges. They say that evil spirits can't follow you over running water, but that's just humbug. You ever notice rivers in the North aren't like rivers in the South? Rivers in the South are the color of chocolate, and they smell like marsh and moss. Up here they're black, and they smell sweet, like pines. Like Christmas."

"I could take you to Penn Station and put you on the Amtrak. Would that take you south slow enough?"  
"Sure."

"So I'll call your da — your stepfather?"

"Maybe I better call him," she said. It crossed his mind then how rarely she spoke to anyone in her family. They'd been together more than a year. Had she ever called her stepfather, to wish him happy birthday, to tell him how she was doing? Once or twice Jude had come into his record library and found Anna on the phone with her sister, frowning with concentration, her voice low and terse. She seemed unlike herself then, someone engaged in a disagreeable sport, a game she had no taste for but felt obliged to play out anyway.

"You don't have to talk to him."

"Why don't you want me to talk to him? 'Fraid we won't get along?"

"It's not that I'm worried he'll be rude to you or nothin'. He isn't like that. My daddy is easy to talk to.

Everybody's friend."

"Well then, what?"

"I never talked to him about it yet, but I just know what he thinks about us taking up with each other. He won't like it. You the age you are and the kind of music you play. He hates that kind of music."

"There's more people don't like it than do. That's the whole point."

"He doesn't think much of musicians at all. You never met a man with less music in him. When we were little, he'd take us on these long drives, to someplace where he'd been hired

to dowse for a well,  
and he'd make us listen to talk radio the whole way. It didn't matter what to him.  
He'd make us listen  
to a continuous weather broadcast for four hours."  
She pulled two fingers slowly through her hair, lifting a long, golden strand away from her head, then  
letting it slip through her fingers and fall. She went on  
, "He had this one creepy trick he could do. He'd find someone talkin", like one of those Holy Rollers  
that are always kickin' it up for Jesus on the AM. And we'd listen and listen, until  
Jessie and me were  
beggin' him for anything else. And he wouldn't say anything, and he wouldn't say anything, and then,  
just when we couldn't stand it anymore, he'd start to talk to himself. And he'd be  
sayin' exactly what  
the preacher on the radio was sayin', at exactly the same time, only in his own voice. Recitin' it.  
Deadpan, like. „Christ the Redeemer bled and died for you. What will you do for Him? He carried His  
own cross while they spat on Him. What burden will you carry?" Like he was readin' from the same  
script. And he'd keep going until my momma told him to quit. That she didn't like  
it. And he'd laugh  
and turn the radio off. But he'd keep talkin' to himself. Kind of mutterin'. Sayin' all the preacher's  
lines, even with the radio off. Like he was hearin' it in his head, gettin' the broadcast on his fillings. He  
could scare me so bad doing that."  
Jude didn't reply, didn't think a reply was called for, and anyway was not sure whether the story was  
true or the latest in a succession of self-delusions that had haunted her.  
She sighed, let another strand of her hair flop.  
"I was sayin", though, that he wouldn't like you, and he has ways of gettin' rid of my friends when he

doesn't like them. A lot of daddies are overprotective of their little girls, and if someone comes around they don't care for, they might try and scare 'em off. Lean on 'em a little. Course that never works, because the girl always takes the boy's side, and the boy keeps after her, either because he can't be scared or doesn't want her to think he can be scared. My stepdaddy's smarter than that. He's as friendly as can be, even with people he'd like to see burnt alive. If he ever wants to get rid of someone he doesn't want around me, he drives them off by tellin' 'em the truth. The truth is usually enough. "Give you an example. When I was sixteen, I started running around with this boy I just knew my old man wouldn't like, on account of this kid was Jewish, and also we'd listen to rap together. Pop hates rap worst of all. So one day my stepdaddy told me it was going to stop, and I said I could see who I wanted, and he said sure, but that didn't mean the kid would keep wantin' to see me. I didn't like the sound of that, but he didn't explain himself. "Well, you've seen how I get low sometimes and start thinkin' crazy things. That all started when I was twelve, maybe, same time as puberty. I didn't see a doctor or anything. My stepdaddy treated me himself, with hypnotherapy. He could hold things in check pretty good, too, as long as we sat down once or twice a week. I wouldn't get up to any of my crazy business. I wouldn't think there was a dark truck circling the house. I wouldn't see little girls with coals for eyes watchin' me from under the trees at night.

“But he had to go away. He had to go to Austin for some conference on hypnagogic drugs. Usually he took me along when he went on one of his trips, but this time he left me at home with Jessie. My mom was dead by then, and Jessie was nineteen and in charge. And while he was gone I started havin’ trouble sleepin’.

That’s always the first sign I’m gettin’ low, when I start havin’ insomnia.

“After a couple nights, I started seein’ the girls with the burning eyes. I couldn’t go to school on Monday, because they were waitin’ outside under the oak tree. I was too scared to go out. I told Jessie. I said she had to make Pop come home, that I was gettin’ bad ideas again. She told me she was tired of my crazy shit and that he was busy and I would be all right till he got back. She tried to make me go to school, but I wouldn’t.

I stayed in my room and watched television. But pretty soon they started talkin’ to me through the TV. The dead girls. Tellin’ me I was dead like they was. That I belonged in the dirt with them.

“Usually Jessie got back from school at two or three. But she didn’t come home that afternoon. It got later and later, and every time I looked out the window, I saw the girls starin’ back at me. My stepdad called, and I told him I was in trouble and please come home, and he said he’d come quick as he could, but he wouldn’t be back until late. He said he was worried I might hurt myself and he’d call someone to come be with me. After he hung up, he phoned Philip’s parents, who lived up the street from us.”

“Philip? Was this your boyfriend? The Jewish kid?”

“Uh-huh. Phil came right over. I didn’t know him. I hid under the bed from him, and I screamed when he tried to touch me. I asked him if he was with the dead girls. I told him all about them. Jessie showed up pretty soon afterward, and Philip ran off quick as he could. After that he was so freaked out he didn’t want to have anything to do with me. And my stepdaddy just said what a shame. He thought Philip was my

friend. He thought Philip, more than anyone else, could be trusted to look out for me when I was havin' a rough time."

"So is that what's worrying you? Your old man is going to let me know you're a lunatic and I'll be so

shocked I won't ever want to see you again? 'Cause I got to tell you, Florida, hearing you get kind of crazy

now and then wouldn't exactly be a newflash."

She snorted, soft breathy laughter. Then she said,

"He wouldn't say that. I don't know what he'd say. He'd just find somethin' to make you like me a

little less. If you

can

like me any less."

"Let's not start with that."

"No. No, on second thought maybe you best call my sister instead. She's an unkind bitch — we don't get

along a lick. She never forgave me for being cuter than her and gettin' better Christmas presents. After

Momma died, she had to be Susie Homemaker, but I still got to be a kid. Jessie was doin' our laundry and

cookin' our meals by the time she was fourteen, and no one has ever been able to appreciate how hard she

had to work or how little fun she got to have. But she'll arrange to get me home without any nonsense.

She'll like havin' me back, so she can boss me around and make rules for me."

But when Jude called her sister's house, he got the old man anyway, who answered on the third ring.

"What'n I do for you? Go ahead and talk. I'll help you if I can."

Jude introduced himself. He said Anna wanted to come home for a while, making it out to be more her

idea than his. Jude wrestled mentally with how to describe her condition, but

Craddock came to his

rescue.

"How's she sleepin'?"

Craddock asked.

"Not too well,"

Jude said, relieved, understanding somehow that this said it all.

Jude offered to have a chauffeur drive Anna from the train station in Jacksonville to Jessica's house in

Testament, but Craddock said no, he would meet her at the Amtrak himself.

"A drive to Jacksonville will suit me fine. Any excuse to get out in my truck for a few hours. Put the

windows down. Make faces at the cows."

"I hear that,"

Jude said, forgetting himself and warming to the old man.

"I appreciate you takin' care of my little girl like you done. You know, when she was just a pup, she

had posters of you all over her walls. She always did want to meet you. You and that fella from... what

was their name? That Mötley Crüe? Now, she

really

loved them. She followed them for half a year. She was at all their shows. She got to know some of

them, too. Not the band, I guess, but their road team. Them were her wild years.

Not that she's real

settled now, is she? Yeah, she loved all your albums. She loved all kinds of that heavy metal music. I

always knew she'd find herself a rock star."

Jude felt a dry, ticklish sensation of cold spreading behind his chest. He knew what

Craddock was

telling him

—

that she had fucked roadies to hang with Mötley Crüe, that star fucking was a thing

with her, and if she

wasn't sleeping with him, she'd be in the sack with Vince Neil or Slash

—

and he also knew

why

Craddock was telling him. For the same reason he had let Anna's Jewish friend see

her when she was

out of her head, to put a wedge between them.

What Jude had not foreseen was that he could know what Craddock was doing and

it could work

anyway. No sooner had Craddock said it than Jude started thinking where he and Anna had met, backstage at a Trent Reznor show. How had she got there? Who did she know, and what did she have to do for a backstage pass? If Trent had walked into the room right then, would she have sat at his feet instead and asked the same sweet, pointless questions? “I’ll take care of her, Mr. Coyne. You just send her back to me. I’ll be waitin’,” Craddock told him.

Jude took her to Penn Station himself. She’d been at her best all morning

---

was trying very hard, he knew, to be the person he’d met, not the unhappy person she really was

---

but whenever he looked at her, he felt that dry sensation of chill in his chest again.

Her elfish grins, the way she tucked her hair behind her ears to show her studded little pink earlobes, her latest round of goofy questions, seemed like cold-blooded manipulations and only made him want to get away from her even more.

If she sensed, however, that he was holding her at a distance, she gave no sign, and

at Penn Station she stood on tiptoe and put her arms around his neck in a fierce hug

---

an embrace without any sexual connotations at all.

“We had us some fun, didn’t we?”

she asked. Always with her questions.

“Sure,”

he said. He could’ve said more

---

that he’d call her soon, that he wanted her to take better care of herself

---

but he didn’t have it in him, couldn’t wish her well. When the urge came over him, to be tender, to be

compassionate, he heard her stepdaddy's voice in his head, warm, friendly, persuasive:

"I always knew she'd find herself a rock star."

Anna grinned, as if he had replied with something quite clever, and squeezed his hand. He stayed long

enough to watch her board but didn't remain to see the train depart. It was crowded and loud on the platform, noisy with echoing voices. He felt harried and jostled, and the stink of the place

—

a smell of hot iron, stale piss, and warm, sweating bodies

—

oppressed him.

But it wasn't any better outside, in the rainy fall cool of Manhattan. The sense of being jostled,

hemmed in from all sides, remained with him all the way back to the Pierre Hotel, all the way back

even to the quiet and emptiness of his suite. He was belligerent, needed to do something with himself,

needed to make some ugly noises of his own.

Four hours later he was in just the right place, in Howard Stern's broadcasting studio, where he

insulted and hectored, humiliated Stern's entourage of slow-witted ass kissers when they were foolish

enough to interrupt him, and delivered his fire sermon of perversion and hate, chaos and ridicule. Stern

loved him. His people wanted to know when Jude could come back.

He was still in New York City that weekend, and in the same mood, when he agreed to meet some of

the guys from Stern's crew at a Broadway strip club. They were all the same people he had mocked in

front of an audience of millions earlier in the week. They didn't take it personally.

Being mocked was

their job. They were crazy for him. They thought he had killed.

He ordered a beer he didn't drink and sat at the end of a runway that appeared to be one long, frosted

pane of glass, lit from beneath with soft blue gels. The faces gathered in the shadows around the

runway all looked wrong to him, unnatural, unwholesome: the faces of the



drowned. His head hurt.

When he shut his eyes, he saw the lurid, flashing fireworks show that was prelude to a migraine.

When he opened his eyes, a girl with a knife in one hand sank to her knees in front

of him. Her eyes

were closed. She folded slowly backward, so the back of her head touched the glass floor, her soft,

feathery black hair spread across the runway. She was still on her knees.

She moved the knife down her body, a big-bladed hunting bowie with a wide, serrated edge. She wore

a dog collar with silver rings on it, a teddy with laces across the bosom that squeezed her breasts

together, black stockings.

When the handle of the knife was between her legs, blade pointing at the ceiling

—

parody of a penis

—

she flung it into the air, and her eyes sprang open, and she caught it when it came down and arched her

back at the same time, raising her chest to the ceiling like an offering, and sliced the knife downward.

She hacked the black lace down the middle, opening a dark red slash, as if slitting herself from throat

to crotch. She rolled and threw off the costume, and beneath she was naked except for the silver rings

through her nipples, which swung from her breasts, and a G-string pulled up past her hard hip bones.

Her supple, sealskin-smooth torso was crimson with body paint.

AC/DC was playing “If You Want Blood You Got It,” and what turned him on

wasn’t her young,

athletic body or the way her breasts swung with the hoops of silver through them or how, when she

looked right at him, her stare was direct and unafraid.

It was that her lips were moving, just barely. He doubted if anyone else in the whole room besides him

even noticed. She was singing to herself, singing along to AC/DC. She knew all the words. It was the

sexiest thing he’d seen in months.

He raised his beer to her, only to find that it was empty. He had no memory of drinking it. The waitress

brought him another a few minutes later. From her he learned that the dancer with the knife was named Morphine and was one of their most popular girls. It cost him a hundred to get her phone number and to find out she'd been dancing for around two years, almost to the day she stepped off the bus from Georgia. It cost him another hundred to get that when she wasn't stripping, she answered to Marybeth.

27

Jude took the wheel just before they crossed into Georgia. His head hurt, an uncomfortable feeling of pressure on his eyeballs more than anything else. The sensation was aggravated by the southern sunshine glinting off just about everything — fenders, windshields, road signs. If not for his aching head, the sky would've been a pleasure, a deep, dark, cloudless blue. As the Florida state line approached, he was conscious of a mounting anticipation, a nervous tickle in the stomach. Testament was by then perhaps only four hours away. He would be at her house tonight, Jessie Price, née McDermott, sister to Anna, elder stepdaughter to Craddock, and he did not know what he might do when he reached the place. It had crossed his mind that when he found her, it might end in death for someone. He had thought already that he could kill her for what she'd done, that she was asking for it, but for the first time, now that he was close to facing her, the idea became more than angry speculation. He'd killed pigs as a boy, had picked up the fall-behinds by the legs and smashed their brains out on the concrete floor of his father's cutting room. You swung them into the air and then

hit the floor with them,  
silencing them in midsqueal with a sickening and somehow hollow splitting  
sound,  
the same noise a  
watermelon would make if dropped from a great height. He'd shot other hogs  
with  
the bolt gun and  
imagined he was killing his father as he did it.

Jude had made up his mind to do whatever he had to. He just didn't know what  
that was yet. And when he  
thought about it closely, he dreaded learning, was almost as afraid of his own  
possibilities as he was of the  
thing coming after him, the thing that had once been Craddock McDermott.  
He thought Georgia was dozing, did not know she was awake until she spoke.  
"It's the next exit," she said in a sand-grain voice.

Her grandmother. Jude had forgotten about her, had forgotten he'd promised to  
stop.

He followed her instructions, hung a left at the bottom of the off-ramp and took a  
two-lane state highway  
through the shabby outskirts of Crickets, Georgia. They rolled by used-car lots,  
with their thousands of red,  
white, and blue plastic pennants flapping in the wind, let the flow of traffic carry  
them into the town itself.

They cruised along one edge of the grassy town square, past the courthouse, the  
town hall, and the eroded  
brick edifice of the Eagle Theater.

The route to Bammy's house led them through the green grounds of a small  
Baptist college. Young men,  
with ties tucked into their V-neck sweaters, walked beside girls in pleated skirts,  
with combed, shining  
hairdos straight out of the old Breck shampoo commercials. Some of the students  
stared at Jude and  
Georgia, in the Mustang, the shepherds standing up in the backseat, Bon and  
Angus breathing steam on the  
rear windows. A girl, walking beside a taller boy who sported a yellow bow tie,  
shrank back against her  
companion as they went past. Bow Tie put a comforting arm around her  
shoulders.

Jude did not flip them  
off and then drove for a few blocks feeling good about himself, proud of his

restraint. His self-control, it  
was like iron.

Beyond the college they found themselves on a street lined with well-kept  
Victorians and Colonials,  
shingles out front advertising the practices of lawyers and dentists. Farther down  
the avenue, the houses  
were smaller, and people lived in them. At a lemon Cape with yellow roses  
growing on a flower trellis to  
one side, Georgia said, "Turn in."

The woman who answered the door was not fat but stocky, built like a defensive  
tackle, with a broad, dark  
face, a silky mustache and clever, girlish eyes, a brown shot through with jade.  
Her

flip-flops smacked  
against the floor. She stared at Jude and Georgia for a beat, while Georgia  
grinned  
a shy, awkward grin.

Then something in her grandmother's eyes (Grandmother? How old was she?  
Sixty? Fifty-five? The

disorienting thought crossed Jude's mind that she might even be younger than  
himself) sharpened, as if a  
lens had been brought into focus, and she screamed and threw open her arms.  
Georgia fell into them.

"M.B.!" Bammy cried. Then she leaned away from her, and, still holding her by  
the hips, stared into her  
face. "What is wrong with you?"

She put a palm to Georgia's forehead. Georgia twisted from her touch. Bammy  
saw her bandaged hand  
next, caught her by the wrist, gave it a speculative look. Then she let go of the  
hand — almost flung it  
away.

"You strung out? Christ. You smell like a dog."

"No, Bammy. I swear to God, I am not on no drugs right now. I smell like a dog  
because I've had dogs

climbin' all over me for most of two days. Why do you always got to think the  
worst damn thing?" The

process that had begun almost a thousand miles before, when they started  
traveling

south, seemed to have

completed itself, so that everything Georgia said sounded country now.

Only had her accent really started reasserting itself once they were on the road?  
Or

had she started

slipping into it even earlier? Jude thought maybe he'd been hearing the redneck  
in

her voice going all

the way back to the day she stuck herself with the nonexistent pin in the dead  
man's suit. Her verbal

transformation disconcerted and unsettled him. When she talked that way —

Why do you always got to think the worst damn thing?

— she sounded like Anna.

Bon squeezed into the gap between Jude and Georgia and looked hopefully up at  
Bammy. The long pink

ribbon of Bon's tongue hung out, spit plopping from it. In the green rectangle of  
the yard, Angus tracked

this way and that, whuffing his nose at the flowers growing around the picket  
fence.

Bammy looked first at Jude's Doc Martens, then up to his scraggly black beard,  
taking in scrapes, the dirt,

the bandage wrapped around his left hand.

"You the rock star?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"You both look like you been in a fight. Was it with each other?"

"No, Bammy," Georgia said.

"That's cute, with the matchin' bandages on your hands. Is that some kind of  
romantic thing? Did you two

brand each other as a sign of your affection? In my day we used to trade class  
rings."

"No, Bammy. We're fine. We were drivin' through on our way to Florida, and I  
said we should stop. I

wanted you to meet Jude."

"You should've called. I would've started dinner."

"We can't stay. We got to get to Florida tonight."

"You don't got to get anywhere except bed. Or maybe the hospital."

"I'm fine."

"The hell. You're the furthest thing from fine I've ever laid eyes on." She  
plucked

at a strand of black hair

stuck to Georgia's damp cheek. "You're covered in sweat. I know sick when I see

it.”

“I’m just boiled, is all. I spent the last eight hours trapped inside that car with those ugly dogs and bad airconditionin”.

Are you going to move your wide ass out of the way, or are you going to make me

climb back

into that car and drive some more?”

“I haven”t decided yet.”

“What”s the holdup?”

“I”m tryin” to figure what the chances are you two are here to slaughter me for the

money in my purse and

take it to buy OxyContin. Everyone is on it these days. There”s kids in junior high

prostitutin” themselves

for it. I learned about it on the news this morning.”

“Lucky for you we aren”t in junior high.”

Bammy seemed about to reply, but then her gaze flicked past Jude”s elbow, fixed on something in the yard.

He glanced back to see what. Angus was in a squat, body contracted as if his torso contained an accordion,

the shiny black fur of his back humped up into folds, and he was dropping shit after shit into the grass.

“I”ll clean up. Sorry about that,” Jude said.

“I”m not,” Georgia said. “You take a good look, Bammy. If I don”t see a toilet in the next minute or two,

that”s gonna be me.”

Bammy lowered her heavily mascaraed eyelids and stepped out of the way. “Come on in, then. I don”t want

the neighbors seein” you standin” around out here anyway. They”ll think I”m startin” my own chapter of the

Hells Angels.”

28

When they had been introduced,

formally, Jude found out her name was Mrs. Fordham, which is what he called her from then on. He

could not call her Bammy; paradoxically, he could not really think of her as Mrs.

Fordham. Bammy

she was, whatever he called her.

Bammy said, "Let's put the dogs out back where they can run."

Georgia and Jude traded a look. They were all of them in the kitchen then. Bon was under the kitchen table.

Angus had lifted his head to sniff at the counter, where there were brownies on a plate under green Saran

Wrap.

The space was too small to contain the dogs. The front hallway had been too small

for them, too. When

Angus and Bon came running down it, they had struck a side table, rattling the china on top of it, and reeled

into walls, thudding them hard enough to knock pictures askew.

When Jude looked at Bammy again, she was frowning. She'd seen the glance that had passed between Jude

and Georgia and knew it meant something, but not what.

Georgia spoke first. "Aw, Bammy, we can't put them out in a strange place.

They'll get into your garden."

Bon clouted aside a few chairs to squirm out from under the table. One fell over with a sharp bang. Georgia

leaped toward her, caught her by the collar.

"I'll take her," Georgia said. "Is it all right if I run through the shower? I need to wash and maybe lie down.

She can stay with me, where she won't get into trouble."

Angus put his paws up on the counter to get his snout closer to the brownies.

"Angus," Jude said. "Get your ass over here."

Bammy had cold chicken and slaw in the fridge. Also homemade lemonade, as promised, in a sweating

glass pitcher. When Georgia went up the back stairs, Bammy fixed Jude a plate.

He

sat with it. Angus

flopped at his feet.

From his place at the kitchen table, Jude had a view of the backyard. A mossy rope

hung from the branch of

a tall old walnut. The tire that had been attached to it once was long gone.

Beyond

the back fence was an

alley, unevenly floored in old bricks.

Bammy poured herself a lemonade and leaned with her bottom against the kitchen

counter. The windowsill  
behind her was crowded with bowling trophies. Her sleeves were rolled up to  
show  
forearms as hairy as  
his.

"I never heard the romantic story of how you two met."

"We were both in Central Park," he said. "Picking daisies. We got to talking and  
decided to have a picnic  
together."

"It was either that or you met in some perverted fetish club."

"Come to think of it, it might've been a perverted fetish club."

"You're eating like you never seen food before."

"We overlooked lunch."

"What's your hurry? What's happenin' in Florida you're in such a rush to get  
to?"

Some friends of yours  
havin' an orgy you don't want to miss?"

"You make this slaw yourself?"

"You bet."

"It's good."

"You want the recipe?"

The kitchen was quiet except for the scrape of his fork on the plate and the thud  
of

the dog's tail on the  
floor. Bammy stared at him.

At last, to fill in the silence, Jude said, "Marybeth calls you Bammy. Why's that?"

"Short for my first name," Bammy said. "Alabama. M.B.'s called me that since  
she was wetting her  
diddies."

A dry mouthful of cold chicken lodged partway down Jude's windpipe. He  
coughed and thumped his chest  
and blinked at watering eyes. His ears burned.

"Really," he said, when his throat was clear. "This may be out of left field, but you  
ever go to one of my  
shows? Like, did you maybe see me on a twin bill with AC/DC in 1979?"

"Not likely. I didn't care for that kind of music even when I was young. Buncha  
gorillas stompin' around  
the stage, shoutin' swearwords and screamin' their throats out. I might've  
caught



you if you were openin’

for the Bay City Rollers. Why?”

Jude wiped at the fresh sweat on his forehead, his insides all queer with relief. “I knew an Alabama once.

Don’t worry about it.”

“How’d the two of you both get so beat up? You got scrapes on your scrapes.”

“We were in Virginia, and we walked to Denny’s from our motel. On the way back, we were nearly run down.”

“You sure about the „nearly“ part?”

“Going under a train trestle. Fella ran his Jeep right into the stone wall. Bashed his

face a good one on his windshield, too.”

“How’d he make out?”

“All right, I guess.”

“Was he drunk?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think so.”

“What happened when the cops got there?”

“We didn’t stay to talk to them.”

“You didn’t stay—” she started, then stopped and threw the rest of her lemonade into the sink, wiped her mouth with the back of her forearm. Her lips were puckered, as if her last swallow of lemonade had been more sour than she liked.

“You are in some hurry,” she said.

“A mite.”

“Son,” she said, “just how much trouble are the two of you in?”

Georgia called to him from the top of the stairs.

Come lie down, Jude. Come upstairs. We’ll lie down in my room. You wake us up, Bammy, in an hour?

We still got some drivin’ to do.”

“You don’t need to go tonight. You know you can stay over.”

“Better not,” Jude said.

“I don’t see the sense. It’s almost five already. Wherever you’re going, you won’t

get there till late.”

“It’s all right. We’re night people.” He put his plate in the sink.

Bammy studied him. "You won't leave without dinner?"

"No, ma'am. Wouldn't think of it. Thank you, ma'am."

She nodded. "I'll fix it while you nap. What part of the South are you from, anyway?"

"Louisiana. Place called Moore's Corner. You wouldn't have heard of it. There's nothing there."

"I know it. My sister married a man who took her to Slidell. Moore's Corner is right next to it. There's good people around there."

"Not my people," Jude said, and he went upstairs, Angus bounding up the steps after him.

Georgia was waiting at the top, in the cool darkness of the upstairs hallway. Her hair was wrapped in a towel, and she had on a faded Duke University T-shirt and a pair of loose blue shorts. Her arms were crossed under her breasts, and in her left hand was a flat white box, split at the corners and repaired with peeling brown tape.

Her eyes were the brightest thing in the shadows of the hall, greenish sparks of unnatural light, and in her wan, depleted face was a kind of eagerness.

"What's that?" he asked, and she turned it so he could read what was written on the side.

OUIJA — PARKER BROS. — TALKING BOARD

29

She led him into her bedroom, where she removed the towel from her head and slung it over a chair. It was a small room, under the eaves, with hardly enough space in it for them and the dogs. Bon was already curled up on the twin bed tucked against one wall. Georgia made a clicking sound with her tongue and patted the pillow, and Angus leaped up beside his sister. He settled. Jude stood just inside the closed door — he had the Ouija board now — and turned in a slow circle, looking over the place where Georgia had spent most of her childhood. He had not been prepared for anything quite so wholesome as what he found. The bedspread was a hand-stitched quilt, patterned after an American flag.

A herd of dusty-looking stuffed unicorns, in various sherbet colors, were corralled in a wicker basket in one corner.

She had an antique walnut dresser, with a mirror attached to it, one that could be tilted back and forth.

Photos had been stuck into the mirror frame. They were sun-faded and curled with

age and showed a

toothy, black-haired girl in her teens, with a skinny, boyish build. In this picture she wore a Little League

uniform a size too big for her, her ears jutting out under the cap. In that picture she

stood between

girlfriends, all of them sunburned, flat-chested, and self-conscious in their bikini tops, on a beach

somewhere, a pier in the background.

The only hint of the person she was to become was in a final still, a graduation picture, Georgia in the

mortarboard and black gown. In the photo she stood with her parents: a shriveled woman in a flower-print

dress, straight off the rack in Wal-Mart, a potato-shaped man with a bad comb-over

and a cheap checked

sport coat. Georgia posed between them, smiling, but her eyes sullen and sly and resentful. And while she

held her graduation certificate in one hand, the other was raised in the death-metal

salute, pinkie and index

finger sticking up in devil horns, her fingernails painted black. So it went.

Georgia found what she was looking for in the desk, a box of kitchen matches.

She

leaned over the

windowsill to light some dark candles. Printed on the rear of her shorts was the word VARSITY. The backs

of her thighs were taut and strong from three years of dancing.

“Varsity what?” Jude asked.

She glanced back at him, brow furrowed, then saw where he was looking, took a peek at her own backside,

and grinned.

“Gymnastics. Hence most of my act.”

“Is that where you learned to chuck a knife?”

It had been a stage knife when she performed, but she could handle a real one, too.

Showing off for him

once, she'd thrown a Bowie into a log from a distance of twenty feet, and it had hit

with a solid thunk,

followed by a metallic, wobbling sound, the low, musical harmonic of trembling steel.

"Naw. Bammy taught me that. Bammy has some kind of throwing arm. Bowling balls. Softballs. She has a

mean curve. She was pitching for her softball team when she was fifty. Couldn't no one hit her. Her daddy

taught her how to chuck a knife, and she taught me."

After she lit the candles, she opened both windows a few inches, without raising the plain white shades.

When the breeze blew, the shades moved and pale sunshine surged into the room, then abated, soothing

waves of subdued brightness. The candles didn't add much light, but the smell of them was pleasant, mixed

with the cool, fresh, grassy scent of the outdoors.

Georgia turned and crossed her legs and sat on the floor. Jude lowered himself to his knees across from her.

Joints popped.

He set the box between them, opened it, and took out the gameboard — was a Ouija board a game

board, exactly? Across the sepia-colored board were all the letters of the alphabet, the words

YES

and

NO

, a sun with a maniacally grinning face, and a glowering moon. Jude set upon the board a black plastic

pointer shaped like a spade in a deck of cards.

Georgia said, "I wasn't sure I could turn it up. I haven't looked at the damn thing

in probably eight years.

You remember that story I told you, 'bout how once I saw a ghost in Bammy's backyard?"

"Her twin."

"It scared hell out of me, but it made me curious, too. It's funny how people are.

Because when I saw the little girl in the backyard, the ghost, I just wanted her to go away. But when she vanished, pretty soon I got to wishin' I'd see her again. I started wantin' to have another experience like it sometime, to come across another ghost."

"And here you are now with one hot on your tail. Who says dreams don't come true?"

She laughed. "Anyway. A while after I saw Bammy's sister in the backyard, I picked this up at the fiveanddime.

Me and one of my girlfriends used to play around with it. We'd quiz the spirits about boys at school. And a lot of times I'd be movin' the pointer in secret, makin' it say things.

My girlfriend, Sheryll

Jane, she knew I was makin' it say things, but she'd always pretend like she really

believed we were talkin'

to a ghost, and her eyes would get all big and round and stick out of her head. I'd slide the pointer around, and the Ouija board would tell her some boy at school had a pair of her underwear

in his locker, and she'd

let out a screech and say, „I always knew he was weird about me!“ She was sweet to hang around with me and be so silly and play my games.” Georgia rubbed the back of her neck. Almost as an afterthought, she

added, “One time, though, we were playin’ Ouija and it started workin’ for real. I wasn’t movin’ the pointer or anything.”

“Maybe Sheryll Jane was moving it.”

“No. It was movin’ on its own, and we both knew it. I could tell it was movin’ on its own because Sheryll

wasn’t puttin’ on her act with them big eyes of hers. Sheryll wanted it to stop.

When the ghost told us who

it was, she said I wasn’t being funny. And I said I wasn’t doin’ nothin’, and she said stop it. But she didn’t take her hand off the pointer.”

“Who was the ghost?”

“Her cousin Freddy. He had hung himself in the summer. He was fifteen. They were real close... Freddy and Sheryll.”

“What’d he want?”

“He said there was pictures in his family’s barn of guys in their underwear. He told us right where to find

them, hidden under a floorboard. He said he didn’t want his parents to know he was gay and be any more

upset than they were. He said that’s why he killed himself, because he didn’t want

to be gay anymore. Then

he said souls aren’t boys and aren’t girls. They’re only souls. He said there is no gay, and he’d made his

momma sorrowful for nothin’. I remember that exactly. That he used the word „sorrowful.“

“Did you go look for the pictures?”

“We snuck into the barn, next afternoon, and we found the loose floorboard, but there was nothin’ hidden

under it. Then Freddy’s father came up behind us and gave us a good shoutin’ at.

He said we had no

business snoopin’ around his place and sent us runnin’. Sheryll said not finding any pictures proved it was

all a lie and that I had faked the whole thing. You wouldn’t believe how mad she was. But I think Freddy’s

father came across the pictures before us and got rid of them, so no one would know his kid was a fairy.

The way he shouted at us was like he was scared about what we might know.

About what we might be

lookin’ for.” She paused, then added, “Me and Sheryll never really made it up. We pretended like we put it

behind us, but after that we didn’t spend as much time together. Which suited me fine. By then I was

sleepin’ with my daddy’s pal George Ruger, and I didn’t want a whole bunch of friends hangin’ around

askin’ me questions about how come I had so much money in my pockets all of a sudden.”

The shades lifted and fell. The room brightened and dimmed. Angus yawned.

“So what do we do?” Jude said.

“Haven’t you ever played with one of these?”

Jude shook his head.

“Well, we each put a hand on the pointer,” she said, and started to reach forward with her right hand, then

changed her mind and tried to draw it back.

It was too late. He reached out and caught her wrist. She winced — as if even the wrist were tender.

She had removed her bandages before showering and not yet put on fresh. The sight of her naked hand

drove the air out of him. It looked as if it had been soaking in bathwater for hours, the skin wrinkly, white,

and soft. The thumb was worse. For an instant, in the gloom, it looked almost skinless. The flesh was

inflamed a startling crimson, and where the thumbprint belonged was a wide circle

of infection, a sunken

disk, yellow with pus, darkening to black at the center.

“Christ,” Jude said.

Georgia’s too-pale, too-thin face was surprisingly calm, staring back at him through the wavering shadows.

She pulled her hand away.

“You want to lose that hand?” Jude asked. “You want to see if you can die from blood poisoning?”

“I am not as scared to die as I was a couple days ago. Isn’t that funny?”

Jude opened his mouth for a reply and found he had none to make. His insides were knotted up. What was

wrong with her hand would kill her if nothing was done, and they both knew it, and she wasn’t afraid.

Georgia said, “Death isn’t the end. I know that now. We both do.”

“That isn’t any reason to just decide

to die. To not take care of yourself.”

“I haven’t just decided to die. I’ve decided there isn’t goin’ to be any hospital.

We’ve already talked that

idea in circles. You know we can’t bring the dogs into no emergency room with us.”

“I’m rich. I can make a doctor come to us.”

“I told you already, I don’t believe that what’s wrong with me can be helped by any doctor.” She leaned forward, rapped the knuckles of her left hand on the Ouija board. “This is more important than the hospital. Sooner or later Craddock is going to get by the dogs. I think sooner. He’ll find a way. They can’t protect us forever. We are livin’ minute to minute, and you know it. I don’t mind dyin’ as long as he isn’t waitin’ for me on the other side.”

“You’re sick. That’s the fever thinking. You don’t need this voodoo. You need antibiotics.”

“I need you,” she said, her bright, vivid eyes steady on his face, “to shut the fuck up and put your hand on the pointer.”

30

Georgia said she would do the talking, and she put the fingers of her left hand next to his on the pointer — it was called the planchette, Jude remembered now. He looked up when he heard her draw a steadying breath. She shut her eyes, not as if she were about to go into a mystic trance but more as if she were about to leap from a high diving board and was trying to get over the churning in her stomach.

“Okay,” she said. “My name is Marybeth Stacy Kimball. I called myself Morphine for a few bad years, and the guy I love calls me Georgia, even though it drives me nuts, but Marybeth is who I am, my true name.”

She opened her eyes to a squint, peeped at Jude from between her eyelashes.

“Introduce yourself.”

He was about to speak when she held up a hand to stop him.

“Your real name, now. The name that belongs to your true self. True names are very important. The right words have a charge in them. Enough charge to bring the dead back to the living.”

He felt stupid — felt that what they were doing couldn’t work, was a waste of time, and they were acting like children. His career had afforded him a variety of occasions to make a fool out of himself, however.

Once, for a music video, he and his band — Dizzy, Jerome, and Kenny — had run in mock horror through



a field of clover, chased by a dwarf dressed in a dirty leprechaun suit and carrying a chain saw. In time Jude had developed something like an immunity to the condition of feeling stupid. So when he paused, it wasn't out of a reluctance to speak but because he honestly didn't know what to say. Finally, looking at Georgia, he said, "My name is... Justin. Justin Cowzynski. I guess. Although I haven't answered to that since I was nineteen." Georgia closed her eyes, withdrawing into herself. A dimple appeared between her slender eyebrows, a little thought line. Slowly, softly, she spoke. "Well. There you go. That's us. We want to talk to Anna McDermott. Justin and Marybeth need your help. Is Anna there? Anna, will you speak to us today?" They waited. The shade moved. Children shouted in the street. "Is there anyone who would like to speak to Justin and Marybeth? Will Anna McDermott say somethin' to us? Please. We're in trouble, Anna. Please hear us. Please help us." Then, in a voice that approached a whisper, she said, "Come on. Do somethin'." Speaking to the planchette. Bon farted in her sleep, a squeaking sound, like a foot skidding across wet rubber. "She didn't know me," Georgia said. "You ask for her." "Anna McDermott? Is there an Anna McDermott in the house? Could you please report to the Ouija information center?" he asked, in a big, hollow, public announcer's voice. Georgia smiled, a wide, humorless grin. "Ah, yes. I knew it was only a matter of time before the fuckin' - around would commence." "Sorry." "Ask for her. Ask for real." "It's not workin'." "You haven't tried." "Yes I have." "No you haven't." "Well, it just isn't workin'." He expected hostility or impatience. Instead her smile broadened even more, and she regarded him with a

quiet sweetness that he instantly mistrusted. "She was waitin" for you to call,  
right  
up to the day she died.

Like there was any chance of that. What, did you wait a whole week, before  
moving on in your state-by-state  
tour of America"s easiest snatch?"

He flushed. Not even a week. "You might not want to get too hot under the  
collar,"

he said, "considering  
you"re the easy snatch in question."

"I know, and it disgusts me. Put! Your! Hand! Back on the mother-fuckin"  
pointer.

We are  
not  
done here."

Jude had been withdrawing his hand from the planchette, but at Georgia"s  
outburst

he set his fingers back  
upon it.

"I"m disgusted with the both of us. You for bein" who you are and me for lettin"  
you stay that way. Now,

you call for her. She won"t come for me, but she might for you. She was waitin"  
for you to call right to the

end, and if you ever had, she would"ve come running. Maybe she still will."

Jude glared down at the board, the old-timey alphabet letters, the sun, the moon.

"Anna, you around? Will Anna McDermott come on and talk to us?" Jude said.

The planchette was dead, unmoving plastic. He had not felt so grounded in the  
world of the real and the

ordinary in days. It wasn"t going to work. It wasn"t right. It was hard to keep  
his

hand on the pointer. He  
was impatient to get up, to be done.

"Jude," Georgia said, then corrected herself. "Justin. Don"t quit on this. Try  
again."

Jude. Justin.

He stared at his fingers on the planchette, the board beneath, and tried to think  
what wasn"t right, and in

another moment it came to him. Georgia had said that true names had a charge in  
them, that the right words

had the power to return the dead to the living. And he thought then that Justin wasn't his true name, that he had left Justin Cowzynski in Louisiana when he was nineteen, and the man who got off the bus in New York City forty hours later was someone different entirely, capable of doing and saying things that had been beyond Justin Cowzynski. And what they were doing wrong now was calling for Anna McDermott.

He had never called her that. She had not been Anna McDermott when they were together.

"Florida," Jude said, almost sighed. When he spoke again, his voice was surprising to him, calm and selfassured.

"Come on and talk to me, Florida. It's Jude, darlin". I'm sorry I didn't call you. I'm calling now.

Are you there? Are you listening? Are you still waiting for me? I'm here now. I'm right here."

The planchette jumped under their fingers, as if the board had been struck from beneath. Georgia jumped with it and cried out weakly. Her bad hand fluttered to her throat. The breeze shifted direction and sucked at the shades, snapping them against the windows and darkening the room.

Angus lifted his head, eyes flashing a bright, unnatural green in the weak light from the candles.

Georgia's good hand had remained on the pointer, and no sooner had it rattled back to rest on the board than it began to move. The sensation was unnatural and made Jude's heart race.

It felt as if there were another pair of fingers on the planchette, a third hand, reaching into the space between his hand and

Georgia's and sliding the pointer around, turning it without warning. It slipped across the board,

touched a letter, stayed there for a moment, then spun

under their fingers, forcing Jude to twist his wrist to keep his hand on it.

"W," Georgia said. She was audibly short of breath. "H. A. T."

"What," Jude said. The pointer went on finding letters, and Georgia continued

calling them out: a

K

, an

E

. Jude listened, concentrating on what was being spelled.

Jude: "Kept. You."

The planchette made a half turn — and stopped, its little casters squeaking faintly.

"What kept you," Jude repeated.

"What if it isn't her? What if it's him? How do we know who we're talking to?"

The planchette surged, before Georgia had even finished speaking. It was like having a finger on a record

that has suddenly begun to turn.

Georgia: "W. H. Y. I...."

Jude: "Why. Is. The. Sky. Blue." The pointer went still. "It's her. She always said she'd rather ask

questions than answer them. Got to be kind of a joke between us."

It was her. Pictures skipped in his head, a series of vivid stills. She was in the backseat of the Mustang,

naked on the white leather except for her cowboy boots and a feathered ten-gallon

hat, peeking out at him

from under the brim, eyes bright with mischief. She was yanking his beard backstage at the Trent Reznor

show, and he was biting the inside of his cheek to keep from shouting. She was dead in the bathtub, a thing

he hadn't ever seen except in his mind, and the water was ink, and her stepfather, in his black undertaker's

suit, was on his knees beside the tub, as if to pray.

"Go on, Jude," Georgia said. "Talk to her."

Her voice was strained, pitched to just above a whisper. When Jude glanced up at Georgia, she was

shivering, although her face was aglow with sweat. Her eyes glittered from deep in

their dark and bony

hollows... fever eyes.

"Are you all right?"

Georgia shook her head —

Leave me alone

— and shuddered furiously. Her left hand remained on the pointer. "Talk to her."

He looked back at the board. The black moon stamped on one corner was laughing.

Hadn't it been

glowering a moment before? A black dog at the bottom of the board was howling up at it. He didn't think it

had been there when they first opened the board.

He said, "I didn't know how to help you. I'm sorry, kiddo. I wish you fell in love with anyone but me. I

wish you fell in love with one of the good guys. Someone who wouldn't have just sent you away when

things got hard."

"A. R. E. Y. O...." Georgia read, in that same effortful, short-of-breath voice. He could hear, in that voice,

the work it took to suppress her shivering.

"Are. You. Angry."

The pointer went still.

Jude felt a boil of emotions, so many things, all at once, he wasn't sure he could put them into words. But

he could, and it turned out to be easy.

"Yes," he said.

The pointer flew to the word

NO

.

"You shouldn't have done that to yourself."

"D. O. N...."

"Done. What." Jude read. "Done what? You know what. Killed your—"

The pointer skidded back to the word

NO

.

"What do you mean, no?"

Georgia spoke the letters aloud, a

W

, an

H

, an

A

.

"What. If. I. Can't. Answer." The pointer came to rest again. Jude stared for a moment, then understood.

"She can't answer questions. She can only ask them."

But Georgia was already spelling again. "I. S. H. E. A...."

A great fit of shivering overcame her, so her teeth clattered, and when Jude glanced at her, he saw the breath steam from her lips, as if she were standing in a cold-storage vault. Only the

room didn't feel any warmer or colder to Jude.

The next thing he noticed was that Georgia wasn't looking at her hand on the pointer, or at him, or at anything. Her eyes had gone unfocused, fixed on the middle distance. Georgia went on reciting the letters

aloud, as the planchette touched them, but she wasn't looking at the board anymore, couldn't see what it was doing.

"Is." Jude read as Georgia spelled the words in a strained monotone. "He. After. You."

Georgia quit calling the letters, and he realized a question had been asked.

"Yes. Yeah. He thinks it's my fault you killed yourself, and now he's playing geteven."

NO

. The planchette pointed at it for a long, emphatic moment before beginning to scurry about again.

"W. H. Y. R. U...." Georgia muttered thickly.

"Why. Are. You. So. Dumb." Jude fell silent, staring.

One of the dogs on the bed whined.

Then Jude understood. He felt overcome for a moment by a sensation of lightheadedness

and profound

disorientation. It was like the head rush that comes from standing up too quickly. It

was also a little like

feeling rotten ice give way underfoot, the first terrible moment of plunge. It staggered him, that it had taken him so long to understand.

"Fucker," Jude said. "That fucker."

He noticed that Bon was awake, staring apprehensively at the Ouija board. Angus was watching, too, his tail thumping against the mattress.

"What can we do?" Jude said. "He's coming after us, and we don't know how to get rid of him. Can you

help us?"

The pointer swung toward the word

YES

.

"The golden door," Georgia whispered.

Jude looked at her — and recoiled. Her eyes had rolled up in her head, to show only the whites, and her

whole body was steadily, furiously trembling. Her face, which had already been so pale it was like wax,

had lost even more color, taking on an unpleasant translucence. Her breath steamed. He heard the

planchette beginning to scrape and slide wildly across the board, looked back down. Georgia wasn't

spelling for him anymore, wasn't speaking. He strung together the words himself.

"Who. Will. Be. The. Door. Who will be the door?"

"I will be the door," Georgia said.

"Georgia?" Jude said. "What are you talking about?"

The pointer began to move again. Jude didn't speak now, just watched it finding letters, hesitating on each

for only an instant before whirring on.

Will. U. Bring. Me. Thru.

"Yes," Georgia said. "If I can. I'll make the door, and I'll bring you through, and then you'll stop him."

Do. You. Swear.

"I swear," she said. Her voice was thin and compressed and strained with her fear.

"I swear I swear oh God

I swear. Whatever I have to do, I just don't know what to do. I'm ready to do whatever I have to do, just tell me what it is."

Do. You. Have. A. Mirror. Marybeth.

"Why?" Georgia said, blinking, her eyes rolling back down to look blearily about. She turned her head

toward her dresser. "There's one—"

She screamed. Her fingers sprang up off the pointer, and she pressed her hands to her mouth to stifle the

cry. In the same instant, Angus came to his feet and began to bark from where he stood on the bed. He was

staring at what she was staring at. By then Jude was twisting to see for himself, his

own fingers leaving the  
planchette — which began to spin around and around on its own, a kid doing  
doughnuts on his dirt bike.

The mirror on the dresser was tilted forward to show Georgia, sitting across  
from

Jude, with the Ouija  
board between them. Only in the mirror her eyes were covered by a blindfold of  
black gauze and her throat  
was slashed. A red mouth gaped obscenely across it, and her shirt was soaked in  
blood.

Angus and Bon bounded from the bed in the same moment. Bon hit the floor and  
launched herself at the

planchette, snarling. She closed her jaws on the pointer, the way she might have  
attacked a mouse

scampering for its hole, and it burst into pieces in her teeth.

Angus hurled himself against the dresser and put his front paws on the top of it,  
barking furiously at the

face in the mirror. The force of his weight rocked the dresser onto its rear legs.

The

mirror could be rotated

forward and back, and now it swung back, tilting to show its face to the ceiling.

Angus dropped to all fours,

and an instant later the dresser did the same, coming down onto its wooden legs  
with a ringing crash. The

mirror swung forward, pivoting to show Georgia her own reflection once more. It  
was only her reflection.

The blood — and the black blindfold — were gone.

31

In the late-afternoon cool of the room,

Jude and Georgia stretched out together on the twin bed. It was too small for the  
both of them, and

Georgia had to turn on her side and throw a leg over him to fit beside him. Her  
face

nestled into his

neck, the tip of her nose cold against his skin.

He was numb. Jude knew he needed to think about what had just happened to  
them, but he could not seem

to turn his thoughts back to what he'd seen in the mirror, back to what Anna had  
been trying to tell them.

His mind wouldn't go there. His mind wanted away from death for a few  
moments. He felt crowded by



death, felt the promise of death all around, felt death on his chest, each death a stone heaped on top of him, driving the air out of him: Anna's death, Danny's, Dizzy's, Jerome's, the possibility of his own death and Georgia's waiting just down the road from them. He could not move for the weight of all those deaths pressing down on him. Jude had an idea that as long as he was very still and said nothing, he and Georgia could stay in this quiet moment together indefinitely, with the shades flapping and the dim light wavering around them. Whatever bad thing that was waiting for them next would never arrive. As long as he remained in the little bed, with Georgia's cool thigh over him and her body clasped to his side, the unimaginable future wouldn't come for them. It came anyway. Bammy thumped softly on the door, and when she spoke, her voice was hushed and uncertain. "You all right in there?" Georgia pushed herself up on one elbow. She swiped the back of a hand across her eyes. Jude had not known until now that she'd been crying. She blinked and smiled crookedly, and it was real, not a smile for show, although for the life of him he couldn't imagine what she had to smile about. Her face had been scrubbed clean by her tears, and that smile was heartbreaking in its easy, girlish sincerity. It seemed to say, Oh, well. Sometimes you get a bad deal. He understood then that she believed what they'd both seen in the mirror was a kind of vision, something that was going to happen, that maybe they could not avert. Jude quailed at the idea. No. No,

better Craddock should get him and be done with it than Georgia should die gasping in her own blood, and why would Anna show them that, what could she want?

"Honey?" Bammy asked.

"We're fine," Georgia called back.

Silence.

Then: "You aren't fightin' in there, are you? I heard bangin' around."

"No,"

Georgia said, sounding affronted by the very suggestion. "Swear to God, Bammy. Sorry about the racket."

"Well," Bammy said. "Do you need anything?"

"Fresh sheets," Georgia said.

Another silence. Jude felt Georgia trembling against his chest, a sweet shivering.

She bit down on her lower

lip to keep from laughing. Then he was fighting it, too, was overcome with a sudden, convulsive hilarity.

He jammed a hand into his mouth, while his insides hitched with trapped, strangled

laughter.

"Jesus," said Bammy, who sounded like she wanted to spit. "Jesus Christ." Her tread moving away from the door as she said it.

Georgia fell against Jude, her cool, damp face pressed hard to his neck. He put his arms around her, and

they clutched each other while they gasped with laughter.

32

After dinner Jude said he had some phone calls

to make and left Georgia and Bammy in Bammy's living room. He didn't really have anyone to call

but knew that Georgia wanted some time with her grandmother and that they would be more

themselves without him there.

But once he was in the kitchen, a fresh glass of lemonade before him and nothing to occupy himself with,

he found the phone in his hand anyway. He dialed the office line to pick up his messages. It felt queer, to be

busy with something so entirely grounded in the ordinary after all that had happened in the day, from their

run-in with Craddock at Denny's to the encounter with Anna in Georgia's

bedroom. Jude felt disconnected from who he'd been before he first saw the dead man. His career, his living, both the business and the art that had preoccupied him for more than thirty years, seemed matters of no particular importance. He dialed the phone, watching his hand as if it belonged to someone else, feeling he was a passive spectator to the actions of a man in a play, an actor performing the part of himself. He had five messages waiting for him. The first was from Herb Gross, his accountant and business manager. Herb's voice, which was usually oily and self-satisfied, was, in the recording, grainy with emotion. "I just heard from Nan Shreve that Danny Wooten was found dead in his apartment this morning.

Apparently he hanged himself. We're all dismayed here, as I'm sure you can imagine. Will you call me when you get this message? I don't know where you are. No one does. Thank you."

There was a message from an Officer Beam, who said that the Piecliff police were trying to reach Jude about an important matter, and would he call back. There was a message from Nan Shreve, his lawyer, who said she was handling everything, that the police wanted to collect a statement from him about Danny, and he should call as soon as he could.

The next message was from Jerome Presley, who had died four years ago, after he drove his Porsche into a weeping willow at just under a hundred miles an hour. "Hey, Jude, I guess we're getting the band back together soon, huh? John Bonham on drums. Joey Ramone on backup vocals." He laughed, then went on in his familiar, weary drawl. Jerome's croak of a voice had always reminded Jude of the comic Steven Wright. "I hear you're driving a souped-up Mustang now. That's one thing we always had, Jude — we could talk cars. Suspensions, engines, spoilers, sound systems, Mustangs, Thunderbirds, Chargers, Porsches. You know what I was thinking about, night I

drove my Porsche off  
the road? I was thinking about all the shit I  
never  
said to you. All the shit we didn't talk about. Like how you got me hooked on  
your  
coke, and then you  
went and got straight and had the balls to tell me if I didn't do the same, you'd  
throw me out of the  
band. Like how you gave Christine money to set herself up with her own place  
after she left me, when  
she ran off with the kids without a word. How you gave her money for a lawyer.  
There's loyalty for  
you. Or how you wouldn't make a simple fucking loan when I was losing  
everything — the house, the  
cars. And here I let you sleep on the bed in my basement when you were fresh off  
the bus from  
Louisiana and you didn't have thirty dollars in your pocket." Jerome laughed  
again  
— his harsh,  
corrosive, smoker's laugh. "Well, we'll get a chance to finally talk about all that  
stuff soon. I guess I'll  
be seeing you any day. I hear you're on the nightroad now. I know where that  
road  
goes. Straight into a  
fucking tree. They picked me out of the branches, you know. Except for the parts  
I  
left on the  
windshield. I miss you, Jude. I'm looking forward to putting my arms around  
you.  
We're going to sing  
just like the old days. Everyone sings here. After a while it kind of sounds like  
screaming. Just listen.  
Listen and you can hear them screaming."  
There was a clattering sound as Jerome took the phone from his ear and held it  
out  
so Jude could hear.  
What came through the line was a noise like no other Jude had ever heard before,  
alien and dreadful, a  
noise like the hum of flies, amplified a hundred times, and the punch and squeal of

machinery, a steam  
press that banged and seethed. When listened to carefully, it was possible to hear  
words in all that fly hum,  
inhuman voices calling for Mother, calling for it to stop.  
Jude was primed to delete the next message, expecting another dead person, but  
instead it was a call from  
his father's housekeeper, Arlene Wade. She was so far from his thoughts that it  
was several moments  
before he was able to identify her old, warbly, curiously toneless voice, and by  
then her brief message was  
almost done.

"Hello, Justin, it's me. I wanted to update you on your father. Hasn't been  
conscious in thirty-six hours.

Heartbeat is all fits and starts. Thought you'd want to know. He isn't in pain.  
Call  
if you like."

After Jude hung up, he leaned over the kitchen counter, looking out into the  
night.

He had his sleeves rolled  
to his elbows, and the window was open, and the breeze that drifted in was cool  
on

his skin and perfumed  
with the smell of the flower garden. Insects hummed.

Jude could see his father in his head: the old man stretched out on his narrow cot,  
gaunt, wasted, his chin

covered in a mangy white bristle, his temples sunken and gray. Jude even half  
believed he could smell him,

the rank bad sweat, the stink of the house, an odor that included but was not  
limited to chicken shit, pig,

and the ashtray smell of nicotine absorbed into everything — curtains, blankets,  
wallpaper. When Jude had

finally lit out of Louisiana, he'd been fleeing that smell as much as escaping his  
father.

He had run and run and run, made music, made millions, spent a lifetime trying to  
put as much distance

between himself and the old man as he could. Now, with a little luck, he and his  
father might die on the

same day. They could walk the nightroad together. Or maybe they would ride,  
share the passenger seat of

Craddock McDermott"s smoke-colored pickup. The two of them sitting so close  
to  
each other that Martin  
Cowzynski could rest one of his gaunt claws on the back of Jude"s neck. The  
smell  
of him filling the car.  
The smell of home.  
Hell would smell like that, and they would drive there together, father and son,  
accompanied by their  
hideous chauffeur, with his silver crew cut and Johnny Cash suit and the radio  
turned to Rush Limbaugh. If  
hell was anything, it was talk radio — and family.  
In the living room, Bammy said something in a low, gossipy murmur. Georgia  
laughed. Jude tilted his head  
at the sound and a moment later was surprised to find himself smiling in  
automatic  
response. How it was  
she could be in stitches again, with everything that was up against them and  
everything they"d seen, he  
couldn"t imagine.  
Her laughter was a quality he prized in her above all others — the deep, chaotic  
music of it and the way she  
gave herself over to it completely. It stirred him, drew him out of himself. It was  
just after seven by the  
clock on the microwave. He would step back into the living room and join the two  
of them for a few  
minutes of easy, pointless talk, and then he would get Georgia"s attention and  
shoot a meaningful look at  
the door. The road was waiting.  
He had made up his mind and was turning from the kitchen counter when a sound  
caught his attention,  
a lilting, off-key voice, singing:  
byebye, bay-bee  
. He turned on his heel, glanced back into the yard behind the house.  
The rear corner of the yard was lit by a street lamp in the alley. It cast a bluish  
light  
across the picket fence  
and the big leafy oak with the rope hanging from one branch. A little girl  
crouched  
in the grass beneath the

tree, a child of perhaps six or seven, in a simple red-and-white-checkered dress and  
with her dark hair tied  
in a ponytail. She sang to herself, that old one by Dean Martin about how it was  
time to hit the road to  
dreamland, digya in the land of nod. She picked a dandelion, caught her breath,  
and blew. The seed  
parachutes came apart, a hundred drifting white umbrellas that soared out into  
the  
gloom. It should've been  
impossible to see them, except that they were faintly luminescent, drifting about  
like improbable white  
sparks. Her head was raised, so she seemed almost to be staring directly at Jude  
through the window. It was  
hard to be sure, though. Her eyes were obscured by the black marks that jittered  
before them.

It was Ruth. Her name was Ruth. She was Bammy's twin sister, the one who had  
disappeared in the 1950s.

Their parents had called them in for lunch. Bammy had come running, but Ruth  
lingered behind, and that  
was the last anyone ever saw of her... alive.

Jude opened his mouth — to say what, he didn't know — but found himself  
unable to speak. The breath  
caught in his chest and stayed there.

Ruth stopped singing, and the night went still, no sound even of insects now. The  
little girl turned her head,  
to glance into the alley behind the house. She smiled, and a hand flapped up in a  
small wave, as if she'd just  
noticed someone standing there, someone she knew, a friendly neighborhood  
acquaintance. Only there

wasn't anyone in the alley. There were old pages from a newspaper stuck to the  
ground, some broken glass,  
weeds growing between the bricks. Ruth rose from her crouch and walked slowly  
to the fence, her lips

moving — talking soundlessly to a person who wasn't there. When had Jude  
become unable to hear her  
voice? When she gave up singing.

As Ruth approached the fence, Jude felt a rising alarm, as if he were watching a  
child about to stray onto a

busy highway. He wanted to call to her but could not, couldn't even inhale.

He remembered then what Georgia had told him about her. That people who saw little Ruth always wanted to call to her, to warn her that she was in danger, to tell her to run, but that no one could manage it. They were too stricken by the sight of her to speak. A thought formed, the sudden, nonsensical thought that this was every girl Jude had ever known who he hadn't been able to help; it was Anna and Georgia both. If he could just speak her name, get her attention, signal to her that she was in trouble, anything was possible. He and Georgia might beat the dead man yet, survive the impossible fix they had got themselves in. And still Jude could not find his voice. It was maddening to stand there and watch and not be able to speak. He slammed his bandaged, injured hand against the counter, felt a shock of pain travel through the wound in his palm — and still could not force any sound up through the tight passage of his throat. Angus was at his side, and he jumped when Jude pounded the counter. He lifted his head and lapped nervously at Jude's wrist. The rough, hot stroke of Angus's tongue on his bare skin startled him. It was immediate and real and it yanked him out of his paralysis as swiftly and abruptly as Georgia's laughter had pulled him out of his feeling of despair only a few moments before. His lungs grabbed some air, and he called through the window. "Ruth!" he shouted — and she turned her head. She heard him. She heard him. "Get away, Ruth! Run for the house! Right now!" Ruth glanced again at the darkened, empty alley, and then she took an off-balance, lunging step back toward the house. Before she could go any farther, her slender white arm came up, as if there were an invisible line around her left wrist and someone was pulling on it.



Only it wasn't an invisible line. It was an invisible hand. And in the next instant, she came right off the ground, hauled into the air by someone who wasn't there. Her long, skinny legs kicked helplessly, and one of her sandals flew off and disappeared into the dark. She wrestled and fought, suspended two feet in the air, and was pulled steadily backward. Her face turned toward Jude's, helpless and beseeching, the marks over her eyes blotting out her desperate stare, as she was carried by unseen forces over the picket fence. "Ruth!" he called again, his voice as commanding as it had ever been onstage, when he was shouting to his legions. She began to fade away as she was hauled off down the alley. Now her dress was gray-and-white checks. Now her hair was the color of moonsilver. The other sandal fell off, splashed in a puddle, and disappeared, although ripples continued to move across the shallow muddy water — as if it had fallen, impossibly, right out of the past and into the present. Ruth's mouth was open, but she couldn't scream, and Jude didn't know why. Maybe the unseen thing that was tugging her away had a hand over her mouth. She passed under the bright blue glare of the street lamp and was gone. The breeze caught a newspaper, and it flapped down the empty alley with a dry, rattling sound. Angus whined again and gave him another lick. Jude stared. A bad taste in his mouth. A feeling of pressure in his eardrums. "Jude," Georgia whispered from behind him. He looked at her reflection in the window over the sink. Black squiggles danced in front of her eyes. They were over his eyes, too. They were both dead. They just hadn't stopped moving yet. "What happened, Jude?" "I couldn't save her," he said. "The girl. Ruth. I saw her taken away." He could not tell Georgia that

somehow his hope that they could save themselves had been taken with her. "I called her name. I called her name, but I couldn't change what happened."

"Course you couldn't, dear," said Bammy.

33

Jude pivoted toward Georgia and Bammy.

Georgia stood across the kitchen from him, in the doorway. Her eyes were just her

eyes, no death

marks over them. Bammy touched her granddaughter on the hip to nudge her aside,

then eased into the

kitchen around her and approached Jude.

"You know Ruth's story? Did M.B. tell you?"

"She told me your sister got taken when you were little. She said sometimes people

see her out in the yard,

getting grabbed all over again. It isn't the same as seeing it yourself. I heard her sing. I saw her taken away."

Bammy put her hand on his wrist. "Do you want to set?"

He shook his head.

"You know why she keeps coming back? Why people see her? The worst moments

of Ruth's life happened

out in that yard, while we all sat in here eating our lunch. She was alone and scared, and no one saw when

she was taken away. No one heard when she stopped singing. It must've been the most awful thing. I've

always thought that when something really bad happens to a person, other people just have to know about

it. You can't be a tree falling in the woods with no one to hear you crash. Can I at least get you something else to drink?"

He nodded. She got the pitcher of lemonade, almost drained now, and sloshed the last of it into his glass.

While she poured, Bammy said, "I always thought if someone could speak to her, it might take a weight off

her. I always thought if someone could make her feel not so alone in those last minutes, it might set her

free.” Bammy tipped her head to the side — a curious, interrogatory gesture Jude had seen Georgia perform a million times. “You might’ve done her some good and not even know it. Just by saying her name.”

“What did I do? She still got taken.” Downing the glass in a swallow and then setting it in the sink.

“I never thought for a moment anyone could change what happened to her.

That’s

done. The past is gone.

Stay the night, Jude.”

Her last statement was so completely unrelated to the one that had preceded it, Jude needed a moment to

understand she had just made a request of him.

“Can’t,” Jude said.

“Why?”

Because anyone who offered them aid would be infected with the death on them, and who knew how much

they had risked Bammy’s life just by stopping a few hours? Because he and Georgia were dead already,

and the dead drag the living down. “Because it isn’t safe,” he said at last. That was

honest, at least.

Bammy’s brow knotted, screwing up in thought. He saw her struggling for the right words to crack him

open, to force him to talk about the situation they were in.

While she was still thinking, Georgia crept into the room, almost tiptoeing, as if afraid to make any sound.

Bon was at her heels, gazing up with a look of idiot anxiety.

Georgia said, “Not every ghost is like your sister, Bammy. There’s some that are real bad. We’re having all

kinds of trouble with dead people. Don’t ask either one of us to explain. It would just sound crazy.”

“Try me anyway. Let me help.”

“Mrs. Fordham,” Jude said, “you were good to have us. Thank you for dinner.”

Georgia reached Bammy’s side and tugged on her shirtsleeve, and when her grandmother turned toward

her, Georgia put her pale and skinny arms around her and clasped her tight. “You are a good woman, and I love you.”

Bammy still had her head turned to look at Jude. "If I can do something..."  
"But you can't," Jude said. "It's like with your sister there in the backyard. You can shout all you want, but it won't change how things play out."

"I don't believe that. My sister is dead. No one paid any attention when she quit singing, and someone took her away and killed her. But you are not dead. You and my granddaughter are alive and here with me in my house. Don't give up on yourself. The dead win when you quit singing and let them take you on down the road with them."

Something about this last gave Jude a nervous jolt, as if he'd touched metal and caught a sudden stinging zap of static electricity. Something about giving up on yourself. Something about singing. There was an idea there, but not one he could make sense of yet. The knowledge that he and Georgia had about played out their string — the feeling that they were both as dead as the girl he'd just seen in the backyard — was an obstacle no other thought could get around.

Georgia kissed Bammy's face, once, and again: kissing tears. And at last Bammy turned to look at her. She put her hands on her granddaughter's cheeks.

"Stay," Bammy said. "Make him stay. And if he won't, then let him go on without you."

"I can't do that," Georgia said. "And he's right. We can't bring you into this any more than we already have. One man who was a friend to us is dead because he didn't get clear of us fast enough."

Bammy pressed her forehead to Georgia's breast. Her breath hitched and caught. Her hands rose and went into Georgia's hair, and for a moment both women swayed together, as if they were dancing very slowly.

When her composure returned — it wasn't long — Bammy looked up into Georgia's face again. Bammy

was red and damp-cheeked, and her chin was trembling, but she seemed to be done with her crying.

"I will pray, Marybeth. I will pray for you."

"Thank you," Georgia said.

"I am countin' on you coming back. I am countin' on seeing you again, when you've figured out how to

make things right. And I know you will. Because you're clever and you're good and you're my girl."

Bammy inhaled sharply, gave Jude a watery, sidelong look. "I hope he's worth it." Georgia laughed, a soft, convulsive sound almost like a sob, and squeezed Bammy once more.

"Go, then," Bammy said. "Go if you got to."

"We're already gone," Georgia said.

34

He drove.

His palms were hot and slick on the wheel, his stomach churning. He wanted to slam his fist into

something. He wanted to drive too fast, and he did, shooting yellow lights just as they turned red. And

when he didn't make a light in time and had to sit in traffic, he pumped the pedal, revving the engine

impatiently. What he had felt in the house, watching the little dead girl get dragged

away, that

sensation of helplessness, had thickened and curdled into rage and a sour-milk taste

in his mouth.

Georgia watched him for a few miles, then put a hand on his forearm. He twitched,

startled by the clammy,

chilled feel of her skin on his. He wanted to take a deep breath and recover his composure, not so much for

himself as for her. If one of them was going to be this way, it seemed to him it ought to be Georgia, that she

had more right to rage than he did, after what Anna had shown her in the mirror. After she had seen herself

dead. He did not understand her quiet, her steadiness, her concern for him, and he could not find it in him to

take deep breaths. When a truck in front of him was slow to get moving after the

light turned green, he laid  
on the horn.

“Head out of your ass!” Jude yelled through the open window as he tore by,  
crossing the double yellow line  
to go past.

Georgia removed her hand from his arm, set it in her lap. She turned her head to  
stare out the passengside  
window. They drove a block, stopped at another intersection.

When she spoke again, it was in a low, amused mumble. She didn’t mean for him  
to hear, was talking to

herself, and maybe not even completely aware she’d spoken aloud.

“Oh, look. My least favorite used-car lot in the whole wide world. Where’s a  
hand

grenade when you need  
one?”

“What?” he asked, but as he said it, he already knew and was yanking at the  
steering wheel, pulling the car  
to the curb, and jamming on the brake.

To the right of the Mustang was the vast sprawl of a car lot, brightly illuminated  
by

sodium-vapor lights on  
thirty-foot-tall steel posts. They towered over the asphalt, like ranks of alien  
tripods, a silent invading army  
from another world. Lines had been strung between them, and a thousand blue  
and

red pennants snapped in  
the wind, adding a carnival touch to the place. It was after 8 P.M., but they were  
still doing business.

Couples moved among the cars, leaning toward windows to peer at price stickers  
pasted against the glass.

Georgia’s brow furrowed, and her mouth opened in a way that suggested she was  
about to ask him what in  
the hell he thought he was doing.

“Is this his place?” Jude asked.

“What place?”

“Don’t act stupid. The guy who molested you and treated you like a hooker.”

“He didn’t... It wasn’t... I wouldn’t exactly say he—”

“I would. Is this it?”

She looked at his hands clenched on the wheel, his white knuckles.

“He’s probably not even here,” she said.

Jude flung open the car door and heaved himself out. Cars blasted past, and the hot, exhaust-smelling slipstream snatched at his clothes. Georgia scrambled out on the other side and stared across the hood of the Mustang at him.

"Where are you goin'?"

"To look for the guy. What's his name again?"

"Get in the car."

"Who am I looking for? Don't make me go around slugging used-car salesmen at random."

"You're not goin' in there alone to beat the shit out of some guy you don't even know."

"No. I wouldn't go alone. I'd take Angus." He glanced into the Mustang.

Angus's

head was already

sticking into the gap between the two front seats, and he was staring out at Jude expectantly. "C'mon,

Angus."

The giant black dog leaped onto the driver's seat and then into the road. Jude slammed the door, started

around the front of the car, the dense, sleek weight of Angus's torso pressed against his side.

"I'm not gonna tell you who," she said.

"All right. I'll ask around."

She grabbed his arm. "What do you mean, you'll ask around? What are you going

to do? Start askin'

salesmen if they used to fuck thirteen-year-olds?"

Then it came back to him, popped into his head without any forewarning. He was thinking he'd like to stick

a gun in the son of a bitch's face, and he remembered. "Ruger. His name was Ruger. Like the gun."

"You're going to get arrested. You're not goin' in there."

"This is why guys like him get away with it. Because people like you go on protecting them, even when they ought to know better."

"I'm not protectin'

him,

you asshole. I“m protectin“  
you  
.”

He yanked his arm out of her grip and started to turn back, ready to give up and already seething about it —

and that was when he noticed Angus was gone.

He cast a swift look around and spotted him an instant later, deep in the used-car lot, trotting between a row

of pickups and then turning and disappearing behind one of them.

“Angus!” he shouted, but an eighteen-wheeler boomed past, and Jude“s voice was lost in the diesel roar.

Jude went after him. He glanced back and saw Georgia right behind him, her own face white, eyes wide

with alarm. They were on a major highway, in a busy lot, and it would be a bad place to lose one of the

dogs.

He reached the row of pickups where he“d last seen Angus and turned, and there he was — ten feet away,

sitting on his haunches, allowing a skinny, bald man in a blue blazer to scratch him

behind the ears. The

bald man was one of the dealers. The tag on his breast pocket said RUGER.

Ruger

stood with a rotund

family in promotional T-shirts, their ample bellies doing double duty as billboards.

The father“s gut was

selling Coors Silver Bullet; the mother“s breast made an unpersuasive pitch for Curves fitness; the son,

about ten, had on a Hooters shirt, and probably could“ve fit into a C cup himself.

Standing next to them,

Ruger seemed almost elflike, an impression enhanced by his delicate, arched eyebrows and pointy ears with

their fuzzy earlobes. His loafers had tassels on them. Jude despised loafers with tassels.

“There“s a good boy,” Ruger said. “Look at this good boy.”

Jude slowed, allowing Georgia to catch up. She was about to go past Jude but then

saw Ruger and shrank  
back.



Ruger looked up, beaming politely. “Your dog, ma’am?” His eyes narrowed. Then a puzzled recognition passed across his face. “It’s little Marybeth Kimball, all grown up. Look at you! Are you down visiting? I heard you were in New York City these days.” Georgia didn’t speak. She glanced sidelong at Jude, her eyes bright and stricken. Angus had led them right to him, as if he’d known just who they were looking for. Maybe Angus did know somehow. Maybe the dog of black smoke who lived inside Angus had known. Georgia began shaking her head at Jude — No, don’t — but he paid her no mind, stepped around her, closing in on Angus and Ruger. Ruger shifted his gaze to Jude. His face came alive with amazement and pleasure. “Oh, my God! You’re Judas Coyne, the famous rock-and-roll fellow. My teenage son has every single one of your albums. I can’t say I quite care for the volume he plays them at” — digging a pinkie in one ear, as if his eardrums were still ringing from just such a recent encounter with Jude’s music— “but I’ll tell you what, you’ve made quite a mark on him.” “I’m about to make quite a mark on you, asshole,” Jude said, and drove his right fist into Ruger’s face, heard his nose snap. Ruger staggered, half doubled over, one hand cupping his nose. The roly-poly couple behind him parted to let him stumble past. Their son grinned and stood on his toes to watch the fight from around his father’s shoulder. Jude sank a left into Ruger’s breadbasket, ignoring the burst of pain that shot through the gouge in his palm. He grabbed the car dealer as he started to drop to his knees, and threw him onto the hood of a Pontiac with a sign stuck inside the windshield: IT’S YOURS IF YOU WANT IT!!! CHEAP!!! Ruger tried to sit up, and Jude grabbed him by the crotch, found his scrotum, and

squeezed, felt the stiff  
jelly of Ruger's balls crunch in his fist. Ruger sat bolt upright and shrieked, dark  
arterial blood gouting  
from his nostrils. His trousers were hiked up, and Angus jumped, snarling, and  
clamped his jaws on  
Ruger's foot, then yanked, tearing off one of his loafers.  
The fat woman covered her eyes but kept two fingers apart to peek between  
them.  
Jude only had time to get a couple more licks in before Georgia had him by the  
elbow and was hauling him  
off. Halfway to the car she began to laugh, and as soon as they were packed back  
into the Mustang, she was  
all over him, chewing his earlobe, kissing him above his beard, shivering against  
his side.  
Angus still had Ruger's loafer, and once they were on the interstate, Georgia  
traded him a Slim Jim for it,  
then tied it from the rearview mirror by the tassels.  
"Like it?" she asked.  
"Better than fuzzy dice," Jude said.

HURT

35

Jessica McDermott Price's house  
was in a new development, an assortment of handsome Colonials and Capes with  
vinyl siding in  
various ice-cream-shop colors — vanilla, pistachio — laid out along streets that  
twisted and looped in  
the way of intestines. They drove by it twice before Georgia spotted the number  
on  
the mailbox. Home  
was a Day-Glo yellow, like mango sherbet, like the caution light, and it wasn't in  
any particular  
architectural style, unless big, bland, American suburban was a style. Jude glided  
past it and continued  
down the block about a hundred yards. He turned into an unpaved driveway and  
rolled across dried red  
mud to an unfinished house.  
The garage had only just been framed, beams of new pine sticking up from the  
cement foundation and more  
beams crisscrossing overhead, the roof covered in plastic sheeting. The house  
attached to it was only a little

further along, plywood panels nailed up between the beams, with gaping rectangles to show where windows and doors belonged. Jude turned the Mustang so the front end was facing the street and backed into the empty, doorless bay of the garage. From where they parked, they had a good view of the Price house. He switched off the engine. They sat for a while, listening to the engine tick as it cooled. They had made good time coming south from Bammy"s. It was just going on one in the morning. "Do we have a plan?" Georgia asked. Jude pointed across the street, at a couple large trash cans on the curb. Then he gestured down the road, toward more green plastic barrels. "Looks like tomorrow is garbage day," Jude said. He nodded toward Jessica Price"s house. "She hasn"t brought her cans out yet." Georgia stared at him. A streetlight down the road cast a wan beam of light across her eyes, which glittered, like water at the bottom of a well. She didn"t say anything. "We"ll wait until she carries out the trash, and then we"ll make her get in the car with us." "Make her." "We"ll drive around awhile. We"ll talk some — the three of us." "What if her husband brings out the trash?" "He isn"t going to. He was in the reserves, and he got wiped out in Iraq. It"s one of the few things Anna told me about her sister." "Maybe she has a boyfriend now." "If she"s got a boyfriend, and he"s a lot bigger than me, we wait and look for another shot. But Anna never said anything about a boyfriend. The way I heard it, Jessica was just living here with their stepdad, Craddock, and her daughter." "Daughter?" Jude looked meaningfully at a pink two-wheeler leaned against Price"s garage.

Georgia followed his gaze.

Jude said, "That's why we're not going in tonight. But tomorrow is a school day. Sooner or later Jessica is going to be alone."

"And then?"

"Then we can do what we need to do, and we don't have to worry about her kid seeing."

For a while they were both quiet. Insect song rose from the palms and the brush behind the unfinished

house, a rhythmic, inhuman pulsing. Otherwise the street was quiet.

Georgia said, "What are we gonna do to her?"

"Whatever we have to."

Georgia lowered the seat all the way back and stared into the dark at the ceiling.

Bon leaned into the front

and whined urgently in her ear. Georgia rubbed her head.

"These dogs are hungry, Jude."

"They'll have to wait," he said, staring at Jessica Price's house.

He was headachy and his knuckles were sore. He was overtired, too, and his exhaustion made it difficult to

follow any one line of reasoning for long. His thoughts, instead, were black dogs that chased their own

tails, going around and around in maddening circles without ever getting anywhere.

He had done some bad things in his life — putting Anna on that train, for starters,

sending her back to her

kin to die — but nothing like what he thought might be ahead of him. He wasn't sure what he would have

to do, if it would end in killing — it might end in killing — and he had Johnny Cash in his head singing

"Folsom Prison Blues," Momma told me be a good boy, don't play with guns. He considered the gun he

had left at home, his big John Wayne .44. It would be easier to get answers out of Jessica Price if he had the

gun with him. Only, if he had the gun with him, Craddock would've persuaded him to shoot Georgia and

himself by now, and the dogs, too, and Jude thought about guns he'd owned, and dogs he'd owned, and

running barefoot with the dogs in the hillocky acres behind his father's farm, the thrill of running with the

dogs in the dawn light, and the clap of his father's shotgun as he fired at ducks,  
and how his mother and  
Jude had run away from him together when Jude was nine, only at the Greyhound  
his mother lost her nerve  
and called her parents, and wept to them, and they told her to take the boy back  
to  
his father and try to  
make peace, make peace with her husband and with God, and his father was  
waiting with the shotgun on  
the porch when they returned, and he smashed her in the face with the gun stock  
and then put the barrel on  
her left breast and said he'd kill her if she ever tried to run away again, and so  
she  
never ran away again.  
When Jude — only he was Justin then — tried to walk inside the house, his  
father  
said, "I'm not mad at  
you, boy, this ain't your fault," and caught him in one arm and hugged him to his  
leg. He bent for a kiss and  
said he loved him, and Justin automatically said he loved him back, a memory he  
still flinched from, a  
morally repugnant act, an act so shameful he could not bear to be the person who  
had done it, so he had  
eventually needed to become someone else. Was that the worst thing he'd ever  
done, planted that Judas kiss  
on his father's cheek while his mother bled, taken the worthless coin of his  
father's affection? No worse  
than sending Anna away, and now he was back where he'd started, wondering  
about tomorrow morning,  
wondering if he could, when he had to, force Anna's sister into the back of his car  
and take her away from  
her home and then do what needed to be done to make her talk.  
Although it was not hot in the Mustang, he wiped at the sweat on his brow with  
the  
back of one arm, before  
it could drip into his eyes. He watched the house and the road. A police car went  
by once, but the Mustang  
was tucked well out of sight, in the shadows of the half-built garage, and the  
cruiser didn't slow.

Georgia dozed beside him, her face turned away. A little after two in the morning, she began fighting something in her sleep. Her right hand came up, as if she were raising it to get the attention of a teacher.

She had not rebandaged it, and it was white and wrinkled, as if it had been soaking in water for hours.

White and wrinkled and terrible. She began to lash at the air, and she moaned, a cringing sound of terror.

She tossed her head.

He leaned over her, saying her name, and firmly but gently took one shoulder to jostle her awake. She

slapped at him with her bad hand. Then her eyes sprang open, and she stared at him without recognition,

gazed up with complete, blind horror, and he knew in those first few moments she was seeing not his face

but the dead man's.

"Marybeth," he said again. "It's a dream.

Shh

. You're all right. You're all right now."

The fog cleared from her eyes. Her body, which was clenched up and rigid, sagged, the tension going out of

it. She gasped. He brushed back some hair that was stuck to the sweat on her cheek

and was appalled at the

heat coming off her.

"Thirsty," she said.

He reached into the back, dug through a plastic bag of groceries they'd picked up at a gas station, found her

a bottled water. Georgia unscrewed the top and drank a third of it in four big swallows.

"What if Anna's sister can't help us?" Georgia asked. "What if she can't make him go away? Are we gonna

kill her if she can't make Craddock go away?"

"Why don't you just rest? We're going to be waiting awhile."

"I don't want to kill anyone, Jude. I don't want to use my last hours on earth to murder anyone."

"These aren't your last hours on earth," he said. He was careful not to include himself in that statement.

"I don't want you to kill anyone either. I don't want you to be that person. Besides, if we kill her, then we'll have two ghosts hauntin' us. I don't think I can take any more ghosts after me." "You want some radio?"

"Promise me you won't kill her, Jude. No matter what."

He turned on the radio. Low on the FM dial, he found the Foo Fighters. David Grohl sang that he was hanging on, just hanging on. Jude turned the volume low, to the faintest of murmurs.

"Marybeth," he began.

She shivered.

"You okay?"

"I like when you call me by my real name. Don't call me Georgia anymore, okay?"

"Okay."

"I wish you didn't first see me takin' my clothes off for drunks. I wish we didn't meet in a strip club. I wish

you could've known me before I started with that kind of thing. Before I got like I

am. Before I did all the things I wish I could take back."

"You know how people pay more money to buy furniture that's been roughed up a

little? What do they call

it? Things that have been distressed? That's because something that's seen a little

wear is just more

interesting than something brand-new that hasn't ever had a scuff on it."

"That's me," she said. "Attractively distressed." She was shivering again, steadily now.

"How you holding up?"

"Okay," she said, voice trembling along with the rest of her.

They listened to the radio through the faint hiss of static. Jude felt himself settling,

his head clearing, felt

muscles he hadn't known were knotted up beginning to loosen and relax. For the moment it didn't matter

what was ahead of them or what they would have to do come morning. It didn't matter what was behind

them either — the days of driving, the ghost of Craddock McDermott with his old truck and his scribbledover eyes. Jude was somewhere in the South, in the Mustang, with the seat cranked back and Aerosmith on the radio.

Then Marybeth had to ruin it.

“If I die, Jude, and you’re still alive,” she said, “I’m gonna try to stop him. From the other side.”

“What are you talking about? You aren’t going to die.”

“I know. I’m just sayin’. If things don’t break our way, I’ll find Anna, and us girls will try and make him stop.”

“You aren’t going to die. I don’t care what the Ouija board said or what Anna showed you in the mirror

either.” He had decided this very thing a few hours back down the road.

Marybeth frowned thoughtfully. “Once she started talking to us, it got cold in my room. I couldn’t stop

shakin’. I couldn’t even feel my hand on the pointer. And then you’d ask Anna somethin’, and I’d just

know how she was gonna answer. What she was tryin’ to say. I wasn’t hearin’ voices or anything. I just

knew. It all made sense then, but it doesn’t now. I can’t remember what she wanted me to do or what she

meant by bein’ a door. Except... I think she was saying that if Craddock can come

back, so can she. With a

little help. And somehow I can help. It’s just — and I got this loud and clear — I might have to die to do it.”

“You aren’t going to die. Not if I have any say in it.”

She smiled. It was a tired smile. “You don’t have any say in it.”

He didn’t know how to reply, not at first. It had crossed his mind already that there

was

one

way he could assure her safety, but he wasn’t about to put it into words. It had occurred to him that if



he  
died, Craddock would go away and Marybeth would live. That Craddock only  
wanted him, maybe  
only had a claim on this world as long as Jude was alive. After all, Jude had  
bought  
him, paid to own  
him and his dead man's suit. Craddock had spent most of a week now trying to  
make Jude kill himself.  
Jude had been so busy resisting he hadn't stopped to wonder if the price of  
surviving would be worse  
than giving the dead man what he wanted. That he was sure to lose, and that the  
longer he held out, the  
more likely he would drag Marybeth with him. Because the dead pull the living  
down.  
Marybeth stared at him, her eyes a wet, lovely ink in the dark. He stroked the  
hair  
away from her forehead.  
She was very young and very beautiful, her brow damp with her fever sweat. The  
idea that her death should  
precede his was worse than intolerable, it was obscene.  
He slid toward her, reached and took her hands in his. If her forehead was damp  
and too warm, her hands  
were damp and too cold. He turned them over in the gloom. What he saw was a  
nasty sort of shock. Both of  
her hands were pruned up, white and shriveled, not just the right one — although  
the right was more  
terrible, the entire pad of her thumb a glistening, rotted sore and the thumbnail  
itself gone, dropped off. On  
the surface of both palms, red lines of infection followed the delicate branches of  
her veins, down into her  
forearms, where they spread out, to etch diseased-looking crimson slashes across  
her wrists.  
"What's happening to you?" he asked, as if he didn't already know. It was the  
story of Anna's death,  
written on Marybeth's skin.  
"She's a part of me somehow: Anna. I'm carryin' her around inside me. I have  
been for a while, I think." A  
statement that should've surprised but didn't. He had sensed it, on some level,  
that  
Marybeth and Anna

were coming together, merging somehow. He'd heard it in the way Marybeth's accent had resurfaced, becoming so like Anna's laconic, country-girl drawl. He had seen it in the way Marybeth played with her hair now, like Anna used to. Marybeth went on, "She wants me to help her back into our world, so she can stop him. I am the doorway — she told me that."

"Marybeth," he began, then couldn't find anything else to say. She closed her eyes and smiled. "That's my name. Don't wear it out. Actually. On second thought. Go ahead and wear it out. I like when you say it. The way you say all of it. Not just the Mary part."

"Marybeth," he said, and let go of her hands and kissed her just above the left eyebrow. "Marybeth." He kissed her left cheekbone. She shivered — pleasantly this time. "Marybeth." He kissed her mouth.

"That's me. That's who I am. That's who I want to be. Mary. Beth. Like you're gettin' two girls for the price of one. Hey — maybe you really are gettin' two girls now. If Anna's inside of me." She opened her eyes and found his gaze. "When you're lovin' me, maybe you're lovin' her, too. Isn't that a good deal, Jude? Aren't I one hell of a bargain? How can you resist?"

"Best deal I've ever had," he said.

"Don't you forget it," she said, kissing him back.

He opened the door and told the dogs to get, and for a while Jude and Marybeth were alone in the Mustang, while the shepherds lay about on the cement floor of the garage.

36

He started awake, heart beating too fast, to the sound of the dogs barking, and his first thought was, It's the ghost. The ghost is coming.

The dogs were back in the car, had slept in the rear. Angus and Bon stood on the backseat together, the both of them peering out the windows at an ugly yellow Labrador. The Lab stood with her back rigid and her tail up, yapping repetitively at the Mustang. Angus and Bon watched her with

avid, anticipatory  
expressions and barked occasionally themselves, booming, harsh woofs that hurt  
Jude's ears in the close  
confines of the Mustang. Marybeth twisted in the passenger seat, grimacing, not  
asleep anymore, but  
wishing she were.

Jude told them all to shut the fuck up. They didn't listen.  
He looked out the windshield and straight into the sun, a copper hole punched  
through the sky, a bright and  
merciless spotlight pointed into his face. He made a complaining sound at the  
glare, but before he could lift  
a hand to shade his eyes, a man stepped in front of the car, and his head blocked  
the sun.

Jude squinted at a young man wearing a leather tool belt. He was a literal  
redneck,  
skin cooked to a fine,  
deep shade of carmine. He frowned at Jude. Jude waved and nodded to him and  
started the Mustang. When  
the clock on the radio face lit up, he saw it was seven in the morning.

The carpenter stepped aside, and Jude rolled out of the garage and around the  
carpenter's parked pickup.

The yellow Lab chased them down the driveway, still yapping, then stopped at  
the

edge of the yard. Bon  
woofed back at her one last time as they pulled away. Jude eased past the Price  
house. No one had put the  
garbage out yet.

He decided there was still time and drove out of Jessica Price's little corner of  
suburbia. He walked first  
Angus, then Bon, in the town square, and got tea and doughnuts at a Honey Dew  
Drive-Thru. Marybeth  
rebandaged her right hand with some gauze from the dwindling supplies in the  
first-aid kit. She left her  
other hand, which at least had no visible sores, as it was. He gassed up the car at a  
Mobil, and then they  
parked at one edge of the concrete apron and snacked. He tossed plain crullers to  
the dogs.

Jude steered them back to Jessica Price's. He parked on the corner, half a block  
from her house, on the  
opposite side of the street and a long walk down the road from the construction

site. He didn't want to take  
a chance on being seen by the laborer who'd been hovering over the car when  
they  
woke up.  
It was after seven-thirty, and he hoped Jessica would bring the garbage out soon.  
The longer they sat, the  
more likely they were to draw attention, the two of them in their black Mustang,  
dressed in their black  
leather and black jeans, with their visible wounds and their tattoos. They looked  
like what they were: two  
dangerous lowlifes staking out a place where they planned to commit a crime. A  
NEIGHBORHOOD

WATCH sign on a nearby lamppost stared them in the face.  
By then his blood was flowing and his head was clear. He was ready, but there  
was  
nothing to do  
except wait. He wondered if the carpenter had recognized him, what he would say  
to the other men  
when they arrived on-site.

I still can't believe it. This guy who looks just like Judas Coyne, sleepin' it off in  
the garage. Him and  
some amazingly hot chick. He looked so much like the real guy, I almost asked  
him if he was takin'  
requests.

And then Jude thought that the carpenter was also one more person who could  
positively identify them,  
after they were done doing whatever it was they were about to do. It was hard to  
live the outlaw life  
when you were famous.

He wondered idly who among rock stars had spent the most time in jail. Rick  
James, maybe. He did —  
what? — three years? Two? Ike Turner had done a couple years at least.

Leadbelly  
had been in for murder,  
broke rocks for ten years, then was pardoned after putting on a good show for the  
governor and his family.  
Well. Jude thought if he played his cards right, he could do more time than all  
three of them put together.

Prison didn't frighten him especially. He had a lot of fans in there.

The garage door at the end of Jessica McDermott Price's concrete driveway

rumbled open. A weedy girl,  
about eleven or twelve years old, her golden hair clipped into a short, flouncy bob,  
hauled a garbage can  
down to the side of the road. The sight of her gave him a tingle of surprise, the  
resemblance to Anna was so  
close. With her strong, pointy chin, towhead, and wide-spaced blue eyes, it was as  
if Anna had stepped out  
of her childhood in the eighties and straight into the bright, full morning of  
today.

She left the trash can, crossed the yard to the front door, and let herself in. Her  
mother met her just inside.

The girl left the door open, allowing Jude and Marybeth to watch mother and  
daughter together.

Jessica McDermott Price was taller than Anna had been, her hair a shade darker,  
and her mouth bracketed

by frown lines. She wore a peasant blouse, with loose, frilly cuffs, and a crinkly  
flower-print skirt, an outfit

that Jude surmised was meant to make her look like a free spirit, an earthy and  
empathic Gypsy. But her

face had been too carefully and professionally made up, and what he could see of  
the house was all dark,

oiled, expensive-looking furniture and seasoned wood paneling. It was the home  
and the face of an

investment banker, not a seer.

Jessica handed her little girl a backpack — a shiny purple-and-pink thing that  
matched her windbreaker and

sneakers as well as the bike outdoors — and air-kissed her daughter's forehead.

The girl tripped out,

slammed the door, and hurried over the yard, pulling the pack onto her shoulders.

She was across the street

from Jude and Marybeth, and on her way by she shot them a look, measuring  
them

up. She wrinkled her

nose, as if they were some litter she'd spotted in someone's yard, and then she  
was around the corner and

gone.

The moment she was out of sight, Jude's sides began to prickle, under his arms,  
and he became aware of

the tacky sweat gluing his shirt to his back.

"Here we go," he said.

He knew it would be dangerous to hesitate, to give himself time to think. He

climbed out of the car. Angus  
bounded after him. Marybeth got out on the other side.

"Wait here," Jude said.

"Hell, no."

Jude walked around to the trunk.

"How we goin' in?" Marybeth asked. "Were we just gonna knock on the front door? Hi, we've come to kill you?"

He opened the trunk and pulled out the tire iron. He pointed it at the garage, which  
had been left open.

Then he slammed the trunk and started across the street. Angus dashed ahead, came back, raced ahead

again, lifted a leg, and pissed on someone's mailbox.

It was still early, the sun hot on the back of Jude's neck. He held one end of the tire iron in his fist, the  
socket-wrench end, and clasped the rest of it against the inner part of his forearm, trying to hide it alongside  
his body. Behind him a car door slammed. Bon lunged past him. Then Marybeth was at his side, short of  
breath and trotting to keep up.

"Jude. Jude. What if we just... just try and talk to her? Maybe we can... persuade her to help us willingly.

Tell her you never... never wanted to hurt Anna. Never wanted her to kill herself."

"Anna didn't kill herself, and her sister knows it. That's not what this is about. Never has been." Jude

glanced at Marybeth and saw she had fallen a few steps behind him, was  
regarding  
him with a look of

unhappy shock. "There's always been more to this than we figured at first. I'm  
not

so sure we're the bad  
guys in this story."

He walked up the driveway, the dogs loping along, one on either side of him, like an honor guard. He took  
a passing glance at the front of the house, at windows with white lace curtains in them and shadows behind.

If she was watching them, he couldn't tell. Then they were in the gloom of the garage, where a cherry twodoor

convertible with a vanity plate that read HYPNOIT was parked on the clean-swept concrete floor.

He found the inside door, put his hand on the knob, tilted his head toward the house, and listened. The radio was on. The most boring voice in the world said blue chips were down, tech stocks were down, futures all across the spectrum were looking down. Then he heard heels clicking across tile, just on the other side of the door, and he instinctively leaped back, but it was too late, the door was opening and Jessica McDermott Price was coming through.

She almost walked right into him. She wasn't looking. She had her car keys in one hand and a garishly colored purse of some kind in the other. As she glanced up, Jude grabbed the front of her blouse, gathering a bunch of silky fabric in his fist, and shoved her back through the door. Jessica reeled backward, tottering in her heels, then twisted an ankle, her foot coming out of one shoe. She let go of her small, unlikely purse. It fell at their feet, and Jude kicked it aside, kept going.

He drove her across the mudroom and into a sun-splashed kitchen in the rear of the house, and that was when her legs gave out. The blouse tore as she went down, buttons popping off and ricocheting around the room. One of them nailed Jude in the left eye — a black spoke of pain. The eye watered over, and he blinked furiously to clear it.

She slammed hard against the island in the center of the kitchen and grabbed the edge to stop her fall.

Plates rattled. The counter was at her back — she was still turned to face Jude — and she reached behind

her without looking and grabbed one of the plates and broke it over Jude's head as

he came at her.

He didn't feel it. It was a dirty plate, and toast crusts and curds of scrambled egg went flying. Jude shot out his right arm, let the tire iron slip down, grabbed the upper end, and, holding it like a club, swatted her across her left kneecap, just below the hem of her skirt. She dropped, as if both legs had been jerked out from under her. Started to shove herself up, and then Angus flattened her again, climbed on top of her, paws scrabbling against her chest. "Get off her," Marybeth said, and grabbed Angus by the collar, wrenched him back so hard he flipped over, rolling in one of those faintly ridiculous doggy somersaults, his legs kicking in the air for an instant before getting up on his paws again. Angus heaved himself at Jessica once more, but Marybeth held him back. Bon ambled into the room, shot a guilty-nervous look at Jessica Price, then stepped over pieces of shattered plate and began snarfing up a toast crust. The droning voice on the radio, a small pink boom box on the counter, said, "Book clubs for kids are a hit with parents, who look to the written word as a place to shelter their children from the gratuitous sexual content and explicit violence that saturate video games, television programs, and movies." Jessica's blouse was torn open to the waist. She wore a lacy peach-colored bra that left the tops of her breasts exposed, and they shuddered and fell with her breath. She bared her teeth — was she grinning? — and they were stained with blood. She said, "If you came to kill me, you ought to know I'm not afraid of dying. My stepfather will be on the other side to receive me with open arms."



“I bet you’re looking forward to that,” Jude said. “I get the picture you and him were pretty close. Least until Anna was old enough and he started fucking her instead of you.”

37

One of Jessica McDermott Price’s eyelids twitched irregularly, a drop of sweat in her lashes, ready to fall. Her lips, which were painted the deep, almost black red of Bing cherries, were still stretched wide to show her teeth, but it

wasn’t a grin anymore. It was a grimace of rage and confusion.

“You aren’t fit to speak of him. He scraped uglier messes than you off the heel of his boot.”

“You got that about half right,” Jude said. He was also breathing fast, but a little surprised by the evenness of his own voice. “You both stepped in a pile when you screwed with me. Tell me something, did you help him kill her, to keep her from talking about what he did? Did you watch while your

own sister bled to death?”

“The girl who came back to this house wasn’t my sister. She wasn’t anything like

her. My sister was already dead by the time you got through with her. You ruined her. The girl who came back to us was poison inside. The things she said. The threats she made. Send our stepdaddy to prison. Send me to prison.

And Craddock didn’t harm a hair on her goddam disloyal head. Craddock loved her. He was the best, the best man.”

“Your stepdaddy liked to fuck little girls. First you, then Anna. It was right in front of me the whole time.”

He was bending over her now. He felt a little dizzy. Sunlight slashed through the windows above the sink, and the air was warm and close, smelled overpoweringly of her perfume, a jasmine-flavored scent. Just beyond the kitchen, a sliding glass door was partly open and looking out onto an enclosed back porch,

floored in seasoned redwood and dominated by a table covered in a lace cloth. A gray longhaired cat was out there, watching fearfully from up on the table, fur bristling. The radio voice was droning now about downloadable content. It was like bees humming in a hive. A voice like that could hum you right to sleep. Jude looked around at the radio, wanting to give it a whack with the tire iron, shut it off. Then he saw the photograph next to it and forgot about taking out the radio. It was an eight-by-ten picture in a silver frame, and Craddock grinned out from it. He wore his black suit, the silver-dollar-size buttons gleaming down the front, and one hand was on his fedora, as if he were about to lift it in greeting. His other hand was on the shoulder of the little girl, Jessica's daughter, who so resembled Anna, with her broad forehead and wide-set blue eyes. Her sunburned face, in the picture, was an unsmiling, unreadable blank, the face of someone waiting to get off a slow elevator, a look that was entirely empty of feeling. That expression caused the girl to resemble Anna more than anything, Anna at the height of one of her depressions. Jude found the similarity disturbing. Jessica was squirming back over the floor, using his distraction to try to get some distance between them. He grabbed her blouse again as she pulled away, and another button flew. Her shirt was hanging off her shoulders now, open to the waist. With the back of one arm, Jude wiped at the sweat on his forehead. He wasn't done talking yet. "Anna never came right out and said she'd been molested as a kid, but she worked so hard to avoid being asked it was kind of obvious. Then, in her last letter to me, she wrote that she was tired of keeping secrets, couldn't stand it anymore. On the face of it, sounds like a suicidal statement. It took me a while to figure

out what she really meant by it, that she wanted to get the truth off her chest.

About

how her stepfather used

to put her into trances so he could do what he liked with her. He was good — he could make her forget for

a while, but he couldn't completely wipe out the memories of what he'd done. It kept resurfacing,

whenever she'd have one of her emotional crack-ups. Eventually, in her teens, I guess, she tipped to it,

understood what he'd been up to. Anna spent a lot of years running from it.

Running from him. Only I put

her on a train and sent her back, and she wound up facing him again. And saw how

old he was and how

close to dying. And maybe decided she didn't need to run from anything anymore.

"So she threatened to tell what Craddock did to her. Is that right? She said she'd tell everyone, get the law

after him. That's why he killed her. He put her in one more trance and cut her wrists in the bath. He fucked

with her head and put her in the bath and slashed her open and watched her bleed out, sat there and

watched—"

"You shut up about him," Jessica said, her voice spiking, high-pitched and harsh.

"That last night was

awful. The things she said and did to him were awful. She spat on him. She tried to

kill him, tried to shove

him down the stairs, a weak old man. She threatened us, all of us. She said she was going to take Reese

away from us. She said she'd use you and your money and your lawyers and send him to jail."

"He was only doing what he had to, huh?" Jude said. "It was practically selfdefense."

An expression flickered across Jessica's features, there and gone so quickly Jude half thought he'd

imagined it. But for an instant the corners of her mouth seemed to twitch, in a dirty, knowing, appalling sort

of smile. She sat up a little straighter. When she spoke again, her tone both lectured

and crooned. "My sister was sick. She was confused. She'd been suicidal for a long time. Anna cut her wrists in the bath like everyone always knew she was going to, and there isn't anyone who can say different."

"Anna says different," Jude said, and when he saw the confusion on Jessica's face, he added, "I been hearing from all kinds of dead folks lately. You know, it never did make sense. If you wanted to send a ghost to haunt me, why not her? If her death was my fault, why send Craddock? But your stepfather isn't after me because of what I

did. It's because of what he did."

"Who do you think you are, anyway, calling him a child molester? How many years you got on that whore behind you? Thirty? Forty?"

"Take care," Jude said, hand tightening on the tire iron.

"My stepfather deserved anything he asked of us," Jessica went on, couldn't shut up now. "I always understood that. My daughter understood it, too. But Anna made everything dirty and horrible and treated

him like a rapist, when he didn't do anything to Reese she didn't like. She would've spoiled Craddock's last days on this earth, just to win favor with you, to make you care about her again. And now you see where it gets you, turning people against their families. Sticking your nose in."

"Oh, my God," Marybeth said. "If she's sayin' what I think she's sayin', this is about the most wrong fuckin' conversation I ever heard."

Jude put his knee between Jessica's legs and forced her back against the floor with his bad left hand.

"That's enough. I hear any more about what your stepdaddy deserved and how much he loved all of you,

I'm going to puke. How do I get rid of him? Tell me how to make him go away, and we'll walk out of here,

and that'll be the end of it." Saying it without knowing if it was really true.

"What happened to the suit?" Jessica asked.

"What the fuck does it matter?"

"It's gone, isn't it? You bought the dead man's suit, and now it's gone, and there's no getting rid of him.

All sales are final. No returns, especially not after the merchandise has been damaged. It's over. You're

dead. You and that whore with you. He won't stop until you're both in the ground."

Jude leaned forward, set the tire iron across her neck, and applied some weight.

She began to choke. Jude

said, "No. I do not accept that. There better be another fucking way, or — Get the fuck off me." Her hands

were tugging at his belt buckle. He recoiled from her touch, drawing the tire iron off her throat, and she

began to laugh.

"Come on. You already got my shirt pulled off. Haven't you ever wanted to say you fucked sisters?" she

asked. "I bet your girlfriend would like to watch."

"Don't touch me."

"Listen to you. Big tough man. Big rock star. You're afraid of me, you're afraid of

my father, you're afraid

of yourself. Good. You ought to be. You're going to die. By your own hand. I can see the death marks on

your eyes." She flicked her glance at Marybeth. "They're on you, too, honey.

Your

boyfriend is going to

kill you before he kills himself, you know. I wish I could be there to see it happen.

I'd like to see how he

does it. I hope he cuts you, I hope he cuts your little hooker face—"

Then the tire iron was back across Jessica's throat and he was squeezing as hard as

he could. Jessica's eyes

popped open wide, and her tongue poked out of her mouth. She tried to sit up on her elbows. He slammed

her back down, banging her skull on the floor.

“Jude,” Marybeth said. “Don’t, Jude.”

He relaxed the pressure on the tire iron, allowed her to take a breath — and Jessica

screamed. It was the

first time she’d screamed. He pushed down again, cutting off the sound.

“The garage,” Jude said.

“Jude.”

“Close the door to the garage. The whole fucking street is going to hear.”

Jessica raked at his face. His reach was longer than hers, and he leaned back from her hands, which were

bent into claws. He rapped her skull against the floor a second time.

“You scream again, I’ll beat you to death right here. I’m going to ease this thing off your throat, and you

better start talking, and you better be telling me how to make him go away. What about if you communicate

with him directly? With a Ouija board or something? Can you call him off yourself?”

He relaxed the pressure again, and she screamed a second time — a long, piercing note, that dissolved into

a cackle of laughter. He drove a fist into her solar plexus and knocked the air out of

her, shut her up.

“Jude,” Marybeth said again, from behind him. She had gone to shut the garage door but was back now.

“Later.”

“Jude.”

“What?” he said, twisting at the waist to glare at her.

In one hand Marybeth held Jessica Price’s shiny, squarish, brightly colored purse,

holding it up for him to

look at. Only it wasn’t a purse at all. It was a lunch box, with a glossy photo of Hilary Duff on the side.

He was still staring at Marybeth and the lunch box in confusion — didn’t understand why she wanted him

to see it, why it mattered — when Bon began to bark, a full, booming bark that came from the deepest part

of her chest. As Jude turned his head to see what she was barking at, he heard another noise, a sharp, steely

click, the unmistakable sound of someone snapping back the hammer of a pistol.

The girl, Jessica Price's daughter, had entered through the sliding glass door of the porch. Where the revolver had come from, Jude didn't know. It was an enormous Colt .45, with ivory inlays and a long barrel, so heavy she could barely hold it up. She peered intently out from beneath her bangs. A dew of sweat brightened her upper lip. When she spoke, it was in Anna's voice, although the really shocking thing was how calm she sounded. "Get away from my mother," she said.

38

The man on the radio said, "What's Florida's number one export? You might say oranges — but if you did, you'd be mistaken." For a moment his was the only voice in the room. Marybeth had Angus by the collar again and was holding him back, no easy task. He strained forward with all his considerable will and muscle, and Marybeth had to keep both heels planted to prevent him going anywhere. Angus began to growl, a low, choked rumble, a wordless yet perfectly articulate message of threat. The sound of him got Bon barking again, one explosive yawp after another. Marybeth was the first to speak. "You don't need to use that. We'll go. Come on, Jude. Let's get out of here. Let's get the dogs and go." "Watch 'em, Reese!" Jessica cried. "They came here to kill us!" Jude met Marybeth's gaze, tossed his head in the direction of the garage door. "Get out of here." He rose, one knee popping — old joints — put a hand on the counter to steady himself. Then he looked at the girl, making good eye contact, staring right over the .45 pointed into his face. "I just want to get my dog," he said. "And we won't trouble you anymore. Bon, come here." Bon barked, on and on, in the space between Jude and Reese. Jude took a step toward her to grab for Bon's collar. "Don't let him get too close to you!" Jessica screamed. "He'll try and take the

gun!"

"Stay back," the little girl said.

"Reese," he said, using her name to soothe and to create trust. Jude was a man who

knew a thing or two

about psychological persuasion himself. "I'm putting this down." He held up the tire iron so she could see

it, then set it on the counter. "There. Now you have a gun and I'm unarmed. I just

want my dog."

"Let's go, Jude," Marybeth said. "Bonnie will follow us. Let's just get out of here."

Marybeth was in the garage now, staring back through the doorway. Angus barked

for the first time. The

sound of it rang off the concrete floor and high ceiling.

"Come to me, Bon," Jude said, but Bon ignored him, actually made a nervous half jump at Reese instead.

Reese's shoulders twitched in a startled shrug. She swung the gun toward the dog

for a moment, then back

to Jude.

Jude took another shuffling step toward Bon, was almost close enough to reach her

collar.

"Get away from her!" Jessica screamed, and Jude saw a flash of movement at the edge of his vision.

Jessica was crawling across the floor, and when Jude turned, she shoved herself to her feet and fell upon

him. He saw a gleam of something smooth and white in one hand, didn't know what it was until it was in

his face — a dagger of china, a wide shard of broken plate. She drove it at his eye, but he turned his head

and she stabbed it into his cheek instead.

He brought his left arm up and clipped her across the jaw with one elbow. He pulled the spike of broken

plate out of his face and threw it away. His other hand found the tire iron on the counter, and he swung it

into the side of Jessica's neck, felt it connect with a solid, meaty thud, saw her eyes straining from their



sockets.

“No, Jude, no!” Marybeth screamed.

He pivoted and ducked as she shouted. He had a glimpse of the girl, her face startled and her eyes wide and stricken, and then the cannon in her hands went off. The sound of it was deafening.

A vase, filled with white pebbles and with a few waxy fake orchids sticking out of it, exploded on the kitchen counter.

Splinters of glass and pieces of rock flailed through the air around him.

The little girl stumbled backward. Her heel caught on the edge of a carpet, and she

almost fell. Bon jumped

at her, but Reese righted herself, and as the dog hit her — crashing into her hard enough to sweep her off

her feet — the gun went off again.

The bullet struck Bon low, in the abdomen, and flipped her rear end into the air, so

she did a twisting, headoverheels

somersault. She slammed into the cabinet doors beneath the sink. Her eyes were turned up to

show the whites, and her mouth lolled open, and then the black dog of smoke that was inside her leaped out

from between her jaws, like a genie spilling from the spout of an Arabian lamp, and rushed across the

room, past the little girl, out onto the porch.

The cat that was crouched on the table saw it coming and screeched, her gray hair

spiking up along her

spine. She dived to the right as the dog of black smoke bounded lightly onto the table. The shadow Bon

took a playful snap at the cat’s tail, then leaped after her. As Bon’s spirit dropped toward the floor, she

passed through a beam of intense, early-morning sunshine and winked out of being.

Jude stared at the place where the impossible dog of black shadow had vanished, too stunned for a moment

to act, to do anything but feel. And what he felt was a thrill of wonder, so intense it

was a kind of galvanic

shock. He felt he had been honored with a glimpse of something beautiful and

eternal.

And then he looked over at Bon's dead, empty body. The wound in her stomach was a horror show, a bloody maw, a blue knot of intestines spilling out of it. The long pink strip of her tongue hung obscenely from her mouth. It didn't seem possible that she could be blown so completely open, so it seemed she had not been shot but eviscerated. The blood was everywhere, on the walls, the cabinets, on him, spreading out across the floor in a dark pool. Bon had been dead when she hit the ground. The sight of her was another kind of galvanic shock, a jolt to his nerve endings.

Jude returned his disbelieving gaze to the little girl. He wondered if she had seen the dog of black smoke when it ran past her. He almost wanted to ask but couldn't speak, was momentarily at a loss for words.

Reese sat up on her elbows, pointing the Colt .45 at him with one hand. No one spoke or moved, and into the stillness came the droning voice on the radio:

"Wild stallions in

Yosemite Park are starving after months of drought, and experts fear many will die

if there isn't swift

action. Your mother will die if you don't shoot him. You will die."

Reese gave no sign that she heard what the man on the radio was saying. Maybe she didn't, not

consciously. Jude glanced toward the radio. In the photograph next to the boom box, Craddock still stood

with his hand on Reese's shoulder, but now his eyes had been blotched out with death marks.

"Don't let him get any closer. He's here to kill you both," said the radio voice.

"Shoot him, Reese. Shoot him."

He needed to silence the radio, should've followed his impulse to smash it earlier.

He turned toward the

counter, moving a little too quickly, and his heel shot out from under him, slipping

in the blood underfoot

with a high-pitched squeak. He tottered and took a lunging, off-balance step back

in Reese's direction. Her eyes widened in alarm as he lurched toward her. He raised his right hand, in a gesture he meant to calm, to reassure, then realized at the last instant that he was holding the tire iron and that it would look to her as if he were lifting it to swing. She pulled the trigger, and the bullet struck the tire iron with a ringing bong, corkscrewed up, and took off his index finger. A hot spray of blood hit him in the face. He turned his head and gaped at his own hand, as stunned by the wonder of his vanishing finger as he'd been by the miracle of the vanishing black dog. The hand that made the chords. Almost the whole finger was gone. He was still gripping the tire iron with his remaining fingers. He let it go. It clanged to the floor. Marybeth screamed his name, but her voice was so far away she might've been out on the street. He could barely hear it through the whine in his ears. He felt dangerously light in the head, needed to sit down. He did not sit down. He put his left hand on the kitchen counter and began backpedaling, retreating slowly in the direction of Marybeth and the garage. The kitchen stank of burnt cordite, hot metal. He held his right hand up, pointing at the ceiling. The stump of his index finger wasn't bleeding too badly. Blood wetted his palm, dribbled down the inside of his arm, but it was a slow dribble, and that surprised him. Nor was the pain so bad. What he felt was more an uncomfortable sensation of weight, of pressure concentrated in the stump. He could not feel his slashed face at all. He glanced at the floor and saw he was leaving a trail of fat drops of blood and red boot prints. His vision seemed both magnified and distorted, as if he wore a fishbowl on his head. Jessica Price was on her knees, clutching her throat. Her face was crimson and swollen, as if she were

suffering a severe allergic  
reaction. He almost laughed. Who wasn't allergic to a pipe across the neck?  
Then  
he thought he'd managed  
to mutilate both hands in the space of barely three days and fought an almost  
convulsive need to giggle.  
He'd have to learn to play guitar with his feet.  
Reese stared at him through the pall of filthy gunsmoke, her eyes wide and  
shocked — and somehow  
apologetic — the revolver on the floor next to her. He flapped his bandaged left  
hand at her, although what  
this gesture meant, even he wasn't sure. He had an idea he was trying to reassure  
her he was okay. He was  
worried about how pale she looked. The kid was never going to be right after  
this,  
and none of it was her  
fault.  
Then Marybeth had him by the arm. They were in the garage. No, they were out  
of  
the garage and into the  
white blaze of the sun. Angus put his front paws on his chest, and Jude was  
almost  
knocked flat.  
“Get off him!” Marybeth screamed, but she still sounded a long distance away.  
Jude really did want to sit down — right here in the driveway, where he could  
have  
the sun on his face.  
“Don't,” Marybeth said as he began to sink to the concrete. “No. The car. Come  
on.” She hauled on his arm  
with both hands to keep him on his heels.  
He swayed forward, staggered into her, got an arm over her shoulder, and the  
two  
of them reeled down the  
incline of the driveway, a pair of stoned teenagers at the prom, trying to dance to  
“Stairway.” He did laugh  
this time. Marybeth looked at him with fright.  
“Jude. You have to help. I can't carry you. We won't make it if you fall.”  
The need in her voice concerned him, made him want to do better. He drew a  
deep,  
steady breathing and

stared at his Doc Martens. He concentrated on shuffling them forward. The blacktop underfoot was tricky stuff. He felt a little as if he were trying to walk across a trampoline while drunk. The ground seemed to flex and wobble beneath him, and the sky tilted dangerously.

"Hospital," she said.

"No. You know why."

"Got to—"

"Don't have to. I'll stop the bleeding." Who was replying to her? It sounded like his own, surprisingly reasonable voice.

He looked up, saw the Mustang. The world wheeled around him, a kaleidoscope of

too-bright green yards,

flower gardens, Marybeth's chalky, horrified face. She was so close that his nose was practically stuck into

the dark, floating swirl of her hair. He inhaled deeply, to breathe in her sweet, reassuring scent, then

flinched at the stink of cordite and dead dog.

They went around the car, and she dumped him in on the passenger side. Then she

hurried around the front

of the Mustang, caught Angus by the collar, and began to haul him toward the driver's-side door.

She was fumbling it open when Craddock's pickup screamed out of the garage, tires spinning on concrete,

greasy smoke roiling, and Craddock behind the wheel. The truck jumped the side of the driveway and

thudded across the lawn. It hit the picket fence with a crack, swatted it flat,

slammed over sidewalk, banged

into the road.

Marybeth let go of Angus and threw herself across the hood of the car, sliding on her belly, just before

Craddock's truck nailed the side of the Mustang. The force of the impact threw Jude into the passenger-side

door. The collision spun the Mustang, so the rear end swung into the road and the

front was shoved up over

the curb, with such suddenness that Marybeth was catapulted off the hood and thrown to earth. The pickup

struck their car with a strangely plastic crunch, mixed with a piercing yelp. Broken glass fell tinkling into the road. Jude looked and saw Jessica McDermott Price's cherry convertible in the street next to the Mustang. The truck was gone. It had never been there in the first place. The white egg of the airbag had exploded from the steering wheel, and Jessica sat holding her head in both hands. Jude knew he should be feeling something — some urgency, some alarm — but was instead dreamy and dull-witted. His ears were plugged up, and he swallowed a few times to clear them, make them pop. He peeled himself off the passenger-side door, looked to see what had happened to Marybeth. She was sitting up on the sidewalk. There was no reason to worry. She was all right. She looked as dazed as Jude felt, blinking in the sunlight, a wide scrape on the point of her chin and her hair in her eyes. He glanced back at the convertible. The driver's-side window was down — or had fallen into the road — and Jessica's hand hung limply out of it. The rest of her had slumped down out of sight. Somewhere, someone began to scream. It sounded like a little girl. She was screaming for her mother. Sweat, or maybe blood, dripped into Jude's right eye and stung. He lifted his right hand, without thinking, to wipe at it and brushed the stump of his index finger across his brow. It felt as if he had stuck his hand against a hot grill. The pain shot all the way up his arm and into his chest, where it bloomed into something else, a shortness of breath and an icy tingling behind his breastbone — a sensation both dreadful and somehow fascinating. Marybeth walked unsteadily around the front of the Mustang and pulled the driver's-side door open with a screech of bent metal. She stood with what looked like a giant black duffel bag in

her arms. The bag was dripping. No — not a duffel bag. Angus. She pulled the driver's seat forward and slung him into the back before getting in. Jude turned as she started the car, both needing and desperately not wanting to look back at his dog. Angus lifted his head to stare at him with wet, glazed, bloodshot eyes. He whined softly. His rear legs were smashed. A red bone stuck through the fur of one of them, just above the joint. Judas looked from Angus to Marybeth, her scraped jaw set, her lips a thin, grim line. The wraps around her dreadful, shriveled right hand were soaked through. Them and their hands. They'd be hugging each other with hooks before this was over. "Look at the three of us," Jude said. "Aren't we a picture?" He coughed. The pinsand-needles feeling in his chest was subsiding... but only slowly. "I'll find a hospital." "No hospital. Get on the highway." "You could die without a hospital." "If we go to a hospital, I'm going to die for sure, and you, too. Craddock will finish us off easy. As long as Angus is alive, we got a chance." "What's Angus going to—" "Craddock's not scared of the dog. He's scared of the dog inside the dog." "What are you talking about, Jude? I don't understand." "Get going. I can stop my finger bleeding. It's only one finger. Just get on the highway. Go west." He held his right hand up in the air, by the side of his head, to slow the bleeding. He was beginning to think now. Not that he needed to think to know where they were going. The only place they could go. "What the fuck is west?" Marybeth asked. "Louisiana," he said. "Home."

The first-aid kit that had accompanied them from New York was on the floor of the backseat. There was one small roll of gauze left, and pins, and Motrin in shiny, difficult-to-open pouches. He took the Motrin first, tearing the packets open with his teeth and dry-swallowing them, six in all, 1,200 milligrams. It wasn't enough. His hand still felt as if it were a lump of hot iron resting on an anvil, where it was slowly but methodically being pounded flat. At the same time, the pain kept the mental cloudiness at bay, was an anchor for his consciousness, a tether holding him to the world of the real: the highway, the green mile-marker signs zipping past, the rattling air conditioner. Jude wasn't sure how long he would remain clear in the head, and he wanted to use whatever time he had to explain things. He spoke haltingly, through clenched teeth, as he rolled the bandage around and around the ruined hand. "My father's farm is just across the Louisiana line, in Moore's Corner. We can be there in less than three hours. I'm not going to bleed out in three hours. He's sick, rarely conscious. There's an old woman there, an aunt by marriage, a registered nurse. She looks after him. She's on the payroll. There's morphine. For his pain. And he'll have dogs. I think he's got — Oh, motherfucker. Oh, Mother. Fucker. Two dogs. Shepherds, like mine. Savage fuckin' animals." When the gauze was gone, he pinned it tight with alligator clips. He used his toes to force off his boots. He pulled a sock over his right hand. He wound the other sock around his wrist and knotted it tight enough to slow, but not cut off, the circulation. He stared at the sock puppet of his hand and tried to think if he could learn to make chords without the index finger. He could always play slide. Or he could switch back to his



left hand, like he'd done when he was a kid. At the thought he began to laugh again.

"Quit that," Marybeth said.

He clenched his back teeth together, forced himself to stop, had to admit he sounded hysterical, even to himself.

"You don't think she'll call the cops on us? This old auntie of yours? You don't think she'd want to get a doctor for you?"

"She's not going to do that."

"Why not?"

"We aren't going to let her."

Marybeth didn't say anything for a while after that. She drove smoothly, automatically, slipping by people in the passing lane, then sliding back into the cruising lane, keeping at a steady seventy. She held the steering wheel gingerly with her white, wrinkled, sick left hand, and she didn't touch it with the infected right hand at all.

At last she said, "How do you see all this endin'?"

Jude didn't have an answer for that. Angus replied instead — a soft, miserable whine.

40

He tried to keep an eye on the road behind them, watching for police, or the dead man's truck, but in the early afternoon Jude laid his head against the side window and closed his eyes for a moment. The tires made a hypnotic sound on the road, a monotonous thum-thum-thum.

The air conditioner, which had never rattled before, rattled in sudden bursts.

That

had something of a hypnotic effect as well, the cyclical way the fans vibrated furiously and fell silent, vibrated and fell silent.

He had spent months rebuilding the Mustang, and Jessica McDermott Price had made it junk again in a

single instant. She'd done things to him he thought only happened to characters in

country-western songs,

laying waste to his car, his dogs, driving him from his home, and making an outlaw

of him. It was almost

funny. And who knew that getting a finger blown off and losing half a pint of blood could be so good for

your sense of humor?

No. It wasn't funny. It was important not to laugh again. He didn't want to frighten Marybeth, didn't want

her thinking he was drifting out of his head.

"You're out of your head," Jessica Price said. "You aren't going anywhere. You need to calm down. Let

me get something to relax you, and we'll talk."

At the sound of her voice, Jude opened his eyes.

He sat in a wicker chair, against the wall, in the dim upstairs hallway of Jessica Price's house. He'd never

seen the upstairs, had not got that far into her home, but knew immediately where

he was all the same. He

could tell from the photographs, the large framed portraits that hung from the walls

of dark-paneled

hardwood. One was a soft-focus school picture of Reese, about age eight, posing in

front of a blue curtain

and grinning to show braces. Her ears stuck out: goofy-cute.

The other portrait was older, the colors slightly faded. It showed a ramrod-straight,

square-shouldered

captain who, with his long, narrow face, cerulean eyes, and wide, thin-lipped mouth, bore more than a

passing resemblance to Charlton Heston. Craddock's stare in this picture was faraway and arrogant at the

same time. Drop and give me twenty.

Down the corridor to Jude's left was the wide central staircase, leading up from the foyer. Anna was

halfway up the steps, with Jessica close behind her. Anna was flushed, too thin, the

knobs of her wrists and  
elbows protruding under her skin and her clothes hanging loose on her. She  
wasn't  
a Goth anymore. No  
makeup, no black fingernail polish, no earrings or nose rings. She wore a white  
tunic, faded pink gym  
shorts, and untied tennis sneakers. It was possible her hair hadn't been brushed  
or  
combed in weeks. She  
should've looked terrible, bedraggled and starved, but she wasn't. She was as  
beautiful now as she ever had  
been the summer they spent out in the barn working on the Mustang with the  
dogs  
underfoot.

At the sight of her, Jude felt an almost overwhelming throb of emotion: shock and  
loss and adoration  
all together. He could hardly bear to feel so much at once. Maybe it was more  
feeling than the reality  
around him could bear as well — the world bent at the edges of his vision, became  
blurred and  
distorted. The hall turned into a corridor out of  
Alice in Wonderland,  
too small at one end, with little doors only a house cat could fit through, and too  
big at the other, the  
portrait of Craddock stretching until he was life-size. The voices of the women on  
the stairs deepened  
and dragged to the point of incoherence. It was like listening to a record slow  
down  
after the record  
player has been abruptly unplugged.

Jude had been about to cry out to Anna, wanted more than anything to go to her  
—

but when the world  
warped all out of shape, he pressed himself back into the chair, his heartbeat  
racing. In another moment his  
vision cleared, the hallway straightened out, and he could hear Anna and Jessica  
clearly again. He grasped,  
then, that the vision surrounding him was fragile and that he could not put much  
strain on it. It was  
important to be still, to take no rash action. To do and feel as little as possible; to  
simply watch.

Anna's hands were closed into small, bony fists, and she went up the steps in an aggressive rush, so her sister stumbled trying to keep up, catching the banister to avoid a pratfall down the staircase.

"Wait — Anna — stop

!" Jessica said, steadying herself, then lunging up the stairs to catch at her sister's shirtsleeve. "You're hysterical—"

"No I'm not don't touch me," Anna said, all one sentence, no punctuation. She yanked her arm away.

Anna reached the landing and turned toward her older sister, who stood rigid two steps below her, in a pale

silk skirt and a silk blouse the color of black coffee. Jessica's calves were bunched up, and the tendons

showed in her neck. She was grimacing, and in that moment she looked old — not a woman of about thirty

but one approaching fifty — and afraid. Her pallor, especially at her temples, was gray, and the corners of

her mouth were pinched, webbed with crow's-feet.

"You are.

You're imagining things, having one of your terrible fantasies. You don't know what's real and what

isn't. You can't go anywhere like you are."

Anna said, "Are these imaginary?" Holding up the envelope in her hand. "These pictures?" Taking out

Polaroids, fanning them in one hand to show Jessica, then throwing them at her.

"Jesus! It's your daughter.

She's eleven."

Jessica Price flinched from the flying snapshots. They fell on the steps, around her

feet. Jude noticed that

Anna still held one of them, which she shoved back into the envelope.

"I know what's real," Anna said. "First time ever, maybe."

"Craddock," Jessica said, her voice weak, small.

Anna went on, "I'm going. Next time you see me, I'll be back with his lawyers. To get Reese."

“You think

he’ll

help you?” Jessica said, her voice a tremulous whisper.

He? His?

It took Jude a moment to process that they were talking about him. His right hand

was beginning to

itch. It felt puffy and hot and insect-bitten.

“Sure he will.”

“Craddock,” Jessica said again, her voice louder now, wavering.

A door popped open, down the dark hallway to Jude’s right. He glanced toward it,

expecting to see

Craddock, but it was Reese instead. She peeked around the edge of the doorframe,

a kid with Anna’s pale

golden hair, a long strand of it hanging across one of her eyes. Jude was sorry to see her, felt a twinge of

pain at the sight of her large, stricken eyes. The things some children had to see.

Still — it was not as bad

as some of what had been done to her, he supposed.

“It’s going to come out, Jessie. All of it,” Anna said. “I’m glad. I want to talk about it. I hope he goes to jail.”

“Craddock!” Jessica screamed.

And then the door directly across from Reese’s room opened, and a tall, gaunt, angular figure stepped into

the hallway. Craddock was a black cutout in the shadows, featureless except for his

horn-rimmed

spectacles, the ones he seemed to put on only every now and then. The lenses of his glasses caught and

focused the available light, so they glowed, a faint, livid rose in the gloom. Behind him, back in his room,

an air conditioner was rattling, a steady, cyclical buzzing sound, curiously familiar.

“What’s the racket?” Craddock asked, his voice a honeyed rasp.

Jessica said, “Anna’s leaving. She says she’s going back to New York, back to Judas Coyne, and she’s

going to get his lawyers—”

Anna looked down the hall, toward her stepfather. She didn’t see Jude. Of course

she didn't. Her cheeks

were a dark, angry red, with two spots of no color at all showing high on her cheekbones. She was shaking.

"— get lawyers, and police, and tell everyone that you and Reese—"

"Reese is right here, Jessie," Craddock said. "Calm yourself. Calm down."

"— and she... she found some pictures," Jessica finished lamely, glancing at her daughter for the first time.

"Did she?" Craddock said, sounding perfectly at ease. "Anna, baby. I'm sorry you're worked up. But this is

no time of day to run off upset like you are. It's late, girl. It's almost nightfall.

Why don't you sit down

with me, and we'll talk about what's bothering you. I'd like to see if I can't put your mind at ease. You give me half a chance, I bet I can."

Anna seemed to be having trouble finding her voice all of a sudden. Her eyes were flat and bright and

frightened. She looked from Craddock to Reese and finally back to her sister.

"Keep him away from me," Anna said. "Or so help me I'll kill him."

"She can't go," Jessica said to Craddock. "Not yet."

Not yet? Jude wondered what that could mean. Did Jessica think there was more to

talk about? It looked to

him as if the conversation was already over.

Craddock glanced sidelong at Reese.

"Go to your room, Reese." He reached out toward her as he spoke, to put a reassuring hand on her small head.

"Don't touch her!"

Anna screamed.

Craddock's hand stopped moving, hung in the air, just above Reese's head — then

fell back to his side.

Something changed then. In the dark of the hall, Jude could not see Craddock's features well, but he

thought he detected some subtle shift in body language, in the set of his shoulders or the tilt of his head or

the way his feet were planted. Jude thought of a man readying himself to grab a snake out of the weeds.

At last Craddock spoke to Reese again, without turning his gaze away from Anna.  
“Go on, sweetheart. You

let the grown-ups talk now. It’s nightfall, and it’s time for the grown-ups to talk  
without little girls  
underfoot.”

Reese glanced down the hall at Anna and her mother. Anna met her gaze, moved  
her head in the slightest  
of nods.

“Go ahead, Reese,” Anna said. “Just grown-ups talkin’.”

The little girl ducked her head back into her room and pulled her door shut. A  
moment later the sound of

her music came in a muffled blast through the door, a barrage of drums and a  
screech of train-coming-offthetracks

guitar, followed by children jubilantly shrieking in rough harmony. It was  
the Kidz Bop version

of Jude’s last Top 40 hit, “Put You in Yer Place.”

Craddock jerked at the sound of it, and his hands closed into fists.

“That man,” he whispered.

As he came toward Anna and Jessica, a curious thing happened. The landing at  
the

top of the staircase was

illuminated by the failing sunshine that shone through the big bay window at the  
front of the house, so that

as Craddock approached his stepdaughters, the light rose into his face, etching  
fine

details, the tilt of

cheekbone, the deep-set brackets around his mouth. But the lenses of his  
spectacles

darkened, hiding his

eyes behind circles of blackness.

The old man said, “You haven’t been the same since you came home to us from  
living with that man. I

can’t tell what’s got into you, Anna darling. You’ve had some bad times — no  
one knows that better than

me — but it’s like that Coyne fella took your unhappiness and cranked up the  
volume on it. Cranked it up

so loud you can’t hear my voice anymore when I try and talk to you. I hate to see  
you so miserable and

mixed up.”

“I ain’t mixed up, and I ain’t your darlin’”. And I am tellin’ you, if you come

within four feet of me, you“ll  
be sorry.”

“Ten minutes,” Jessica said.

Craddock whisked his fingers at her, an impatient, silencing gesture.

Anna darted a look at her sister, then back to Craddock. “You are both wrong if  
you think you can keep me  
here by force.”

“No one is going to make you do anything you don“t want,” Craddock said,  
stepping past Jude.

His face was seamed and his color bad, his freckles standing out on his waxy-  
white

flesh. He didn“t walk so

much as shuffle, bent over with what Jude guessed was some permanent  
curvature

of the spine. He looked

better dead.

“You think Coyne is going to do you any favors?” Craddock went on. “I seem to  
recall he threw your ass

out. I don“t think he even answers your letters anymore. He didn“t help you  
before

— I don“t see why he  
will now.”

“He didn“t know how. I didn“t know myself. I do now. I“m gonna tell him what  
you did. I“m gonna tell him

you belong in jail. And you know what? He“ll line up the lawyers to put you  
there.” She flicked a look at

Jessica. “Her, too — if they don“t put her in the nut farm. Doesn“t make a  
difference to me, as long as they  
stick her a long way off from Reese.”

“Daddy!” Jessica cried, but Craddock gave his head a quick shake:  
Shut up

.

“You think he“ll even see you? Open the door when you come knocking? I  
imagine he“s shackled up with

someone else by now. There“s all sorts of pretty girls happy to lift their skirts for  
a

rock star. It“s not like

you have anything to offer him he can“t get elsewhere, minus the emotional  
headaches.”



At this a look of pain flickered across Anna's features, and she sagged a little: A runner winded and sore from the race.

"It doesn't matter whether he's with someone else. He's my friend," she said in a small voice.

"He won't believe you. No one will believe you, because it just isn't true, dear. Not a word of it," Craddock

said, taking a step toward her. "You're getting confused again, Anna."

"That's right," Jessica said fervently.

"Even the pictures aren't what you think. I can clear this up for you if you'll let me. I can help you if—"

But he had gone too close. Anna leaped toward him. She put one hand on his face, snatching off his round, horn-rimmed spectacles and crushing them. She placed the other hand, which still clutched the envelope, in the center of his chest and shoved. He tottered, cried out. His left ankle folded, and

he went down. He fell

away from the steps, not toward them — Anna had come nowhere near throwing him down the staircase, no matter what Jessica had said about it.

Craddock landed on his scrawny rear with a thud that shook the whole corridor and

jarred the portrait of

him on the wall out of true. He started to sit up, and Anna put her heel on his shoulder and shoved, driving him down onto his back. She was shaking furiously.

Jessica squealed and dashed up the last few steps, swerving around Anna and dropping to one knee, to be

by her stepfather's side.

Jude found himself climbing to his feet. He couldn't sit still any longer. He expected the world to get

bent again, and it did, distending absurdly, like an image reflected in the side of an

expanding soap

bubble. His head felt a long way off from his feet — miles. And as he took his first step forward, he

felt curiously buoyant, almost weightless, a scuba diver crossing the floor of the ocean. As he made his

way down the hall, though, he

willed  
the space around him to recover its proper shape and dimensions, and it did. His  
will meant something,  
then. It was possible to move through the soap-bubble world around him without  
popping it, if he took  
care.

His hands hurt, both of them, not only the right. It felt as if they were swollen to  
the size of boxing  
gloves. The pain came in steady, rhythmic waves, beating in time with his pulse,  
thum-thum-thum,  
like tires on blacktop. It mingled with the rattle and buzz of the air conditioner in  
Craddock's room, to

create an oddly soothing chorus of background nonsense sound.

He wanted desperately to tell Anna to get out, to get downstairs and out of the  
house. He had a strong  
sense, though, that he could not shove himself into the scene before him without  
tearing through the soft

tissue of the dream. And anyway, past was past. He couldn't change what was  
going to happen now any

more than he'd been able to save Bammy's sister, Ruth, by calling her name.

You

couldn't change, but you  
could bear witness.

Jude wondered why Anna had even come upstairs, then thought that probably she  
wanted to throw some

clothes in a bag before she left. She wasn't afraid of her father and Jessica, didn't  
think they had any power

over her anymore — a beautiful, heartbreaking, fatal confidence in herself.

"I told you to stay away," Anna said.

"You doin' this for him?" Craddock asked. Until this moment, he had spoken with  
courtly southern

inflections. There was nothing courtly about his voice now, though, his accent all  
harsh twang, a good ol'

boy with nothing good about him. "This all part of some crazy idea you have to  
win him back? You think

you're going to get his sympathy, you go crawlin' off to him, with your sob  
story

about how your pop

made you do terrible things and it ruined you for life? I bet you can't wait to  
boast

to him "bout how you  
told me off and shoved me down, an old man who cared for you in times of  
sickness and protected you  
from yourself when you were out of your mind. You think he'd be proud of you if  
he was standin' here  
right now and saw you attack me?"

"No," Anna said. "I think he'd be proud of me if he saw this." She stepped  
forward and spat into his face.

Craddock flinched, then let out a strangled bellow, as if he'd caught an eyeful of  
some corrosive agent.

Jessica started to haul herself to her feet, fingers hooked into claws, but Anna  
caught her by the shoulder  
and shoved her back down next to their stepfather.

Anna stood over them, trembling, but not as furiously as she had been a moment  
before. Jude reached  
tentatively for her shoulder, put his bandaged left hand on it, and squeezed  
lightly.

Daring finally to

touch her. Anna didn't seem to notice. Reality warped itself out of shape for an  
instant when his hand  
settled upon her, but he thought everything back to normality by focusing on the  
background sounds,

the music of the moment:

thum-thum-thum

, rattle and hum.

"Good for you, Florida," he said. It was out before he could catch himself. The  
world didn't end.

Anna wagged her head back and forth, a dismissive little shake. When she spoke,  
her tone was weary.

"And I was scared of you."

She turned, slipping out of Jude's grasp, and went down the hall, to a room at the  
end. She closed the door  
behind her.

Jude heard something go

plink,

looked down. His right hand was in the sock, soaked through with blood and  
dripping on the floor. The

silver buttons on the front of his Johnny Cash coat flashed in the very last of the  
salmon-colored light

of day. He hadn't noticed he was wearing the dead man's suit until just now. It

really was a hell of a  
good fit. Jude had not wondered for one second how it was possible he could be  
seeing the scene  
before him, but now an answer to that unasked question occurred. He had bought  
the dead man's suit  
and the dead man, too — owned the ghost and the ghost's past. These moments  
belonged to him, too,  
now.

Jessica crouched beside her stepfather, the both of them panting harshly, staring  
at  
the closed door to  
Anna's room. Jude heard drawers opening and closing in there, a closet door  
thudding.

"Nightfall," Jessica whispered. "Nightfall at last."

Craddock nodded. He had a scratch on his face, directly below his left eye, where  
Anna had caught him  
with a fingernail as she tore off his glasses. A teardrop of blood trickled along his  
nose. He swiped at it  
with the back of his hand and made a red smear along his cheek.

Jude glanced toward the great bay window into the foyer. The sky was a deep,  
still

blue, darkening toward  
night. Along the horizon, beyond the trees and rooftops on the other side of the  
street, was a line of deepest  
red, where the sun had only just disappeared.

"What'd you do?" Craddock asked. He spoke quietly, voice pitched just above a  
whisper, still tremulous  
with rage.

"She let me hypnotize her a couple times," Jessica told him, speaking in the same  
hush. "To help her sleep  
at night. I made a suggestion."

In Anna's room there was a brief silence. Then Jude distinctly heard a glassy  
tink,

a bottle tapping against glass, followed by a soft gurgling.

"What suggestion?" Craddock asked.

"I told her nightfall is a nice time for a drink. I said it's her reward for getting  
through the day. She keeps a  
bottle in the top drawer."

In Anna's bedroom a lingering, dreadful quiet.

"What's that going to do?"

“There’s phenobarbital in her gin,” Jessica said. “I got her sleeping like a champ these days.”

Something made a clunking sound on the hardwood floor in Anna’s room. A tumbler falling.

“Good girl,” Craddock breathed. “I knew you had something.”

Jessica said, “You need to make her forget — the photos, what she found, everything.

Everything that just happened. You have to make it all go away.”

“I can’t do that,” Craddock said. “I haven’t been able to do that in a long while.

When she was younger...

when she trusted me more. Maybe you...”

Jessica was shaking her head. “I can’t take her deep like that. She won’t let me —

I’ve tried. The last time I

hypnotized her, to help with her insomnia, I tried to ask her questions about Judas

Coyne, what she wrote in

her letters to him, and if she ever said anything to him about... about you. But whenever I got too personal,

whenever I’d ask her something she didn’t want to tell me, she’d start singing one

of his songs. Holdin’ me

back, like. I never seen anything like it.”

“Coyne did this,” Craddock said again, his upper lip curling. “He ruined her. Ruined her.

Turned her against us. He used her for what he wanted, wrecked her whole world,

and then sent her

back to us to wreck ours. He might as well have sent us a bomb in the mail.”

“What are we going to do? There’s got to be a way to stop her. She can’t leave this house like she is. You

heard her. She’ll take Reese away from me. She’ll take you, too. They’ll arrest you, and me, and we’ll

never see each other again, except in courtrooms.”

Craddock was breathing slowly now, and all the feeling had drained from his face, leaving behind only a

look of dull, saturnine hostility. “You’re right on one thing, girl. She can’t leave this house.”

It was a moment before this statement seemed to register with Jessica. She turned a startled, confused glance upon her stepfather.

“Everyone knows about Anna,” he went on. “How unhappy she’s always been.

Everyone’s always known how she was going to wind up. That she was going to slit her wrists one of these days in the bath.”

Jessica began to shake her head. She made to rise to her feet, but Craddock caught her wrists, pulled her back to her knees.

“The gin and the drugs make sense. Lots of ‘em knock back a couple drinks and some pills before they do it. Before they kill themselves. It’s how they quiet their fears and deaden the pain,” he said.

Jessica was still shaking her head, a little frantically, her eyes bright and terrified and blind, not seeing her stepfather anymore. Her breath came in short bursts — she was close to hyperventilating.

When Craddock spoke again, his voice was steady, calm. “You stop it, now. You want Anna to take Reese away? You want to spend ten years in a county home?” He tightened his hold on her wrists and drew her closer, so he was speaking directly into her face. And at last her eyes refocused on his and her head stopped wagging back and forth. Craddock said, “This isn’t our fault. It’s Coyne’s. He’s the one backed us into this corner, you hear? He’s the one sent us this stranger who wants to tear us down. I don’t know what happened to our Anna. I haven’t seen the real Anna since I can’t remember when.

The Anna you grew up with is dead. Coyne saw to that. Far as I’m concerned, he finished her off. He might as well have cut her wrists himself. And he’s going to answer for it. Believe it. I’ll teach him to meddle with a man’s family.

Shh, now. Catch your breath. Listen to my voice. We’ll get through this. I’m going to get you through this,

same as I've got you through every other bad thing in your life. You trust in me now. Take one deep breath.

Now take another. Better?"

Her blue-gray eyes were wide and avid: entranced. Her breath whistled, one long, slow exhalation, then another.

"You can do this," Craddock said. "I know you can. For Reese, you can do whatever has to be done."

Jessica said, "I'll try. But you have to tell me. You have to say what to do. I can't think."

"That's all right. I'll think for both of us," Craddock said. "And you don't need to

do anything except pick yourself up and go draw a warm bath."

"Yes. Okay."

Jessica started to rise again, but Craddock tugged at her wrists, held her beside him

a moment longer.

"And when you're done," Craddock said, "run downstairs and get my old pendulum. I'll need something for Anna's wrists."

At that he let her go. Jessica rose to her feet so quickly she stumbled and put a hand against the wall to steady herself. She stared at him for a moment, then turned in a kind of trance and

opened a door just to her left, let herself into a white-tiled bathroom.

Craddock remained on the floor until there came the sound of water rushing into the tub. Then he helped himself to his feet and stood shoulder to shoulder with Jude.

"You old cocksucker," Jude said. The soap-bubble world flexed and wobbled. Jude clenched his teeth together, pulled it back into shape.

Craddock's lips were thin and pale, stretched back across his teeth in a bitter, ugly grimace. The old flesh

on the backs of his arms wobbled. He made his slow way down to Anna's room, reeling a little — getting

shoved down had taken something out of him. He pushed the door in. Jude followed at his heels.

There were two windows in Anna's room, but they both faced the back of the house, away from where the sun had gone down. It was already night in there, the room sunk into blue shadows.

Anna sat at the very end of the bed, an empty tumbler on the floor between her sneakers. Her duffel bag

was on the mattress behind her, some laundry hastily thrown into it, the sleeve of a red sweater hanging

out. Anna's face was a pleasant blank, her forearms resting on her knees, her eyes glassy and fixed on a point in the impossible

distance. The cream-colored envelope with the Polaroid of Reese in it — her evidence — was in one hand,

forgotten. The sight of her that way made Jude ill.

Judas sank onto the bed beside her. The mattress creaked beneath him, but no one — not Anna, not

Craddock — seemed to notice. He put his left hand over Anna's right. His left hand was bleeding again

from the puncture wound, the bandages stained and loose. When had that started?

He couldn't even lift the

right hand, which was too heavy now and too painful. The thought of moving it made him dizzy.

Craddock paused before his stepdaughter, bent to peer speculatively into her face.

"Anna? Can you hear me? Can you hear my voice?"

She went on smiling, did not reply at first. Then she blinked and said, "What? Did

you say something,

Craddock? I was listening to Jude. On the radio. This is my favorite song."

His lips tightened until there was no color in them. "That man," he said again, almost spitting it. He took

one corner of the envelope and jerked it out of her hands.

Craddock straightened up, turned toward one of the windows to pull down the shade.

"I love you, Florida," Jude said. The bedroom around him bulged when he spoke, the soap bubble swelling

so that it threatened to explode, then shrank again.

"Love you, Jude," Anna said softly.



At this, Craddock's shoulders jumped in a startled shrug. He looked back, wondering. Then the old man said, "You and him are going to be back together soon. That's what you wanted, and that's what you'll get. I'm going to see to it. I'm going to put you two together just as soon as I can." "Goddam you," Jude said, and this time when the room bloated and stretched itself out of shape, he couldn't, no matter how hard he concentrated on thum-thum-thum, make it go back the way it was supposed to be. The walls swelled and then sank inward, like bed linens hanging on a line and moving in a breeze. The air in the room was warm and close and smelled of exhaust and dog. Jude heard a soft whining sound behind him and looked back at Angus, who lay on the bed where Anna's duffel bag had been only a moment before. His breathing was labored, and his eyes were gummy and yellow. A sharp-tipped red bone stuck through one bent leg. Jude looked back toward Anna, only to find that it was Marybeth sitting next to him on the bed now, face dirty, expression hard. Craddock pulled down one of the shades, and the room darkened some more. Jude glanced out the other window and saw the greenery at the side of the interstate, palms, rubbish in the weeds, and then a green sign that said EXIT 9. His hands went thum-thum-thum. The air conditioner hummed, buzzed, hummed. Jude wondered for the first time how he could still be hearing Craddock's air conditioner. The old man's room was all the way down the hall. Something began to click, a sound as repetitive as a metronome: the turn signal. Craddock moved to the other window, blocking Jude's view of the highway, and he ran down that shade as well, plunging Anna's room into darkness. Nightfall at last. Jude looked back at Marybeth, her jaw set, one hand on the wheel. The blinker signal flashed repetitively

on the dash, and he opened his mouth, to say something, he didn't know what, something like...

41

"What are you doin'?"

His voice an unfamiliar croak. Marybeth was aiming the Mustang at an exit ramp, had almost reached

it. "This ain't it."

"I was shakin' you for about five minutes, and you wouldn't wake up. I thought you were in a coma or

somethin'. There's a hospital here."

"Keep going. I'm awake now."

She swerved back onto the highway at the last moment, and a horn blared behind her.

"How you doin', Angus?" Jude asked, and peeked back at him.

Jude reached between the seats and touched a paw, and for an instant Angus's gaze sharpened a little. His

jaws moved. His tongue found the back of Jude's left hand and lapped at his fingers.

"Good boy," Jude whispered. "Good boy."

At last he turned away, settled back into his seat. The sock puppet on his right hand

wore a red face. He

was in dire need of a shot of something to dull the pain, thought he might find it on

the radio: Skynyrd or,

failing that, the Black Crows. He touched the power button and flipped rapidly from a burst of static to the

Doppler pulse of a coded military transmission to Hank Williams III, or maybe just

Hank Williams, Jude

couldn't tell because the signal was so faint, and then —

Then the tuner landed on a perfectly clear broadcast: Craddock.

"I never would've thought you had so much in the tank, boy." His voice was genial and close, coming out

of the speakers set in the doors. "You don't have any quit in you. That usually counts for something with

me. This ain't usually, of course. You understand that." He laughed. "Anyplace will do. You know, most

people like to think they don't know the meaning of the word „quit," but it isn't

true. Most people, you put them under, put them under deep, maybe help ‘em along with some good dope, sink them into a full trance state, and then tell them they’re burnin’ alive? They’ll scream for water till they got no voice left. They’ll do anything to make it stop. Anything you like. That’s just human nature. But some people — children and crazy folks, mostly — you can’t reason with, even when they’re in a trance.

Anna

was both, God love her. I tried to make her forget about all the things that made her feel so bad. She was a good girl. I hated the way she tore herself up over things — even over you. But I couldn’t ever really make her go all the way blank, even though it would’ve saved her pain. Some people would just rather suffer. No wonder she liked you.

You’re the same way. I wanted to deal with you quick. But you had to go and drag

this out. And now you

got to wonder why. You got to ask yourself. You know, when that dog in the backseat stops breathing, so

do you. And it ain’t going to be easy, like it could’ve been. You spent three days livin’ like a dog, and now

you have to die like one, and so does that two-dollar bitch next to you—”

Marybeth thumbed the radio off. It came right back on again.

—“you think you could turn my own little girl against me and not have to answer for it—”

Jude lifted his foot and slammed the heel of his Doc Marten into the dash. It hit with a crunch of splintering

plastic. Craddock’s voice was instantly lost in a sudden, deafening blast of bass.

Jude kicked the radio

again, shattering the face. It went silent.

“Remember when I said the dead man didn’t come for talk?” Jude told her. “I take it back. Lately I been

thinking that’s all he came for.”

Marybeth didn’t reply. Thirty minutes later Jude spoke again, to tell her to get off

at the next exit.

They drove on a two-lane state highway, with southern, semitropical forest

growing right up to the sides of  
the road, leaning over it. They passed a drive-in that had been closed since Jude  
was a child. The giant  
movie screen towered over the road, holes torn in it, offering a view of the sky.  
This evening's feature was  
a drifting pall of dirty smoke. They rolled by the New South Motel, long since  
shut  
up and being reclaimed  
by the jungle, windows boarded over. They glided past a filling station, the first  
place they'd seen that was  
open. Two deeply sunburned fat men sat out front and watched them go by. They  
did not smile or wave or  
acknowledge the passing car in any way, except that one leaned forward and spat  
in the dirt.  
Jude directed her to take a left off the highway, and they followed a road up into  
the low hills. The  
afternoon light was strange, a dim, poisonous red, a stormy twilight color. It was  
the same color Jude saw  
when he shut his eyes, the color of his headache. It was not close to nightfall but  
looked it. The bellies of  
the clouds to the west were dark and threatening. The wind lashed the tops of the  
palms and shook the  
Spanish moss that straggled down from low-hanging oak branches.  
"We're here," he said.  
As Marybeth turned into the driveway, the long run-up to the house, the wind  
gusted with more force than  
usual and threw a burst of plump, hard raindrops across the windshield. They hit  
in  
a sudden, furious rattle,  
and Jude waited for more, but there was no more.  
The house stood at the top of a low rise. Jude had not been here in more than  
three  
decades and had not  
realized until this moment how closely his home in New York resembled the  
home  
of his childhood. It was  
as if he had leaped ten years into the future and returned to New York to find his  
own farm neglected and  
disused, fallen to ruin. The great rambling place before him was the gray color of  
mouse, with a roof of  
black shingles, many of them crooked or missing, and as they drew closer, Jude

actually saw the wind snag  
one, strip it loose, and propel the black square away into the sky.  
The abandoned chicken coop was visible to one side of the house, and its screen  
door swung open, then  
banged shut with a crack like a gunshot. The glass was missing from a window  
on  
the first floor, and the  
wind rattled a sheet of semitransparent plastic stapled into the frame. This had  
always been their  
destination, Jude saw now. They had been headed toward this place from the  
moment they took to the road.  
The dirt lane that led to the house ended in a loop. Marybeth followed it around,  
turning the Mustang to  
point back the way they'd come, before putting it into park. They were both  
staring down the drive when  
the floodlights of Craddock's truck appeared at the bottom of the hill.  
"Oh, God," Marybeth said, and then she was out of the Mustang, going around  
the  
front to Jude's side.  
The pale truck at the foot of the drive seemed to pause for a moment, then began  
rolling up the hill toward  
them.  
Marybeth jerked his door open. Jude almost fell out. She pulled on his arm.  
"Get on your feet. Get in the house."  
"Angus..." he said, glancing into the back at his dog.  
Angus's head rested on his front paws. He stared wearily back at Jude, his eyes  
red-rimmed and wet.  
"He's dead."  
"No," Jude said, sure she was mistaken. "How you doin", boy?"  
Angus regarded him mournfully, didn't move. The wind got into the car, and an  
empty paper cup scooted  
around on the floor, rattling softly. The breeze stirred Angus's fur, brushing it in  
the wrong direction.  
Angus paid it no mind.  
It didn't seem possible that Angus could just have died like that, with no fanfare.  
He'd been alive only a  
few minutes ago, Jude was convinced of it. Jude stood in the dirt next to the  
Mustang, sure if he just waited

another moment, Angus would move, stretch his front paws, and lift his head.  
Then

Marybeth was hauling  
on his arm again, and he didn't have the strength to resist her, had to stagger  
along  
after or risk being  
toppled.

He fell to his knees a few feet from the front steps. He didn't know why. He had  
an arm over Marybeth's  
shoulders, and she had one looped around his waist, and she moaned through her  
clenched lips, dragging  
him back onto his heels. Behind him he heard the dead man's pickup rolling to a  
stop in the turnaround.  
Gravel crunched under the tires.

Hey, boy,

Craddock called from the open driver's-side window, and at the door Jude and  
Marybeth stopped to  
look back.

The truck idled beside the Mustang. Craddock sat behind the wheel, in his stiff,  
formal black suit with the  
silver buttons. His left arm hung out the window. His face was hard to make out  
through the blue curve of  
glass.

This your place, son?

Craddock said. He laughed.

How could you ever stand to leave?

He laughed again.

The razor shaped like a crescent moon fell from the hand hanging out the  
window,  
and swung from its  
gleaming chain.

You're gonna cut her throat. And she's gonna be glad when you do. Just to  
have

it over with. You

should've stayed away from my little girls, Jude.

Jude turned the doorknob, and Marybeth shouldered it inward, and they crashed  
through into the dark of the  
front hall. Marybeth kicked the door shut behind them. Jude threw a last glance  
out

the window beside the

door — and the truck was gone. The Mustang stood alone in the drive. Marybeth turned him and shoved him into motion again. They started down the corridor, side by side, each holding the other up. Her hip caught a side table and overturned it, and it smashed to the floor. A phone that had been sitting on it toppled to the boards, and the receiver flew off the cradle. At the end of the hall was a doorway, leading into the kitchen, where the lights were on. It was the only source of light they'd seen so far in the entire house. From the outside the windows had been dark, and once they were in, it was shadows in the front hall and a cavernous gloom waiting at the top of the stairs. An old woman, in a pastel flower-print blouse, appeared in the kitchen doorway. Her hair was a white frizz, and her spectacles magnified her blue, amazed eyes to appear almost comically large. Jude knew Arlene Wade at a glance, although he could not have said how long it had been since he'd last seen her. Whenever it had been, she'd always been just as she was now — scrawny, perpetually startled-looking, old. "What is this business?" she called out. Her right hand reached up to curl around the cross that hung at her throat. She stepped back as they reached the doorway to let them by. "My God, Justin. What in the name of Mary and Joseph happened to you?" The kitchen was yellow. Yellow linoleum, yellow tile countertops, yellow-and-white-check curtains, daisypatterned plates drying in the basket next to the sink, and as Jude took it all in, he heard that song in his head, the one that had been such a smash for Coldplay a few years before, the one about how everything was all yellow. He was surprised, given the way the house looked from the outside, to find the kitchen so full of lively color, so well kept up. It had never been this cozy when he'd been a child. The

kitchen was where his  
mother had spent most of her time, watching daytime TV in a stupor while she  
peeled potatoes or washed  
beans. Her mood of numb, emotional exhaustion had drained the color from the  
room and made it a place  
where it seemed important to speak in quiet voices, if at all, a private and unhappy  
space that you could no  
more run through than you could make a ruckus in a funeral parlor.  
But his mother was thirty years dead, and the kitchen was Arlene Wade's now.  
She had lived in the  
house for more than a year and very likely passed most of her waking hours in  
this  
room, which she'd  
warmed with the everyday business of being herself, an old woman with friends  
to  
talk to on the  
phone, pies to bake for relatives, a dying man to care for. In fact, it was a little  
too  
cozy. Jude felt dizzy at the warmth of it, at the suddenly close air. Marybeth  
turned  
him toward the  
kitchen table. He felt a bony claw sink into his right arm, Arlene grabbing his  
biceps, and was  
surprised at the rigid strength in her fingers.  
"You got a sock on your hand," she said.  
"He got one of his fingers taken off," Marybeth said.  
"What are you doing here, then?" Arlene asked. "Shoulda drove him to the  
hospital."  
Jude fell into a chair. Curiously, even sitting still, he felt as if he were still moving,  
the walls of the  
room sliding slowly past him, the chair gliding forward like a car in a theme-park  
amusement:  
Mr. Jude's Wild Ride.  
Marybeth sank into a chair next to him, her knees bumping his. She was  
shivering.  
Her face was oiled  
in sweat, and her hair had gone crazy, was snarled and twisted. Strands stuck to  
her  
temples, to the  
sweat on the sides of her face, to the back of her neck.  
"Where are your dogs?" Marybeth asked.



Arlene began to untie the sock wound around Jude's wrist, peering down her nose at it through the magnifying lenses of her glasses. If she found this question bizarre or startling, she showed no sign of it. She was intent on the work of her hands. "My dog is over there," she said, nodding at one corner of the room. "And as you can see, he's quite protective of me. He's a fierce old boy. Don't want to cross him." Jude and Marybeth looked to the corner. A fat old rottweiler sat on a dog pillow in a wicker basket. He was too big for it, and his pink, hairless ass hung over the side. He weakly lifted his head, regarded them through rheumy, bloodshot eyes, then lowered his head again and sighed softly. "Is that what happened to this hand?" Arlene asked. "Were you bit by a dog, Justin?" "What happened to my father's shepherds?" Jude asked. "He hasn't been up to taking care of a dog for a while now. I sent Clinton and Rather off to live with the Jeffery family." Then she had the sock off his hand and drew a sharp breath when she saw the bandage beneath. It was soaked — saturated — with blood. "Are you in some kinda stupid race with your daddy to see who can die first?" She set his hand on the table without unwrapping the bandages to see more. Then she glanced at Jude's bandaged left hand. "You missin' any parts off that one?" "No. That one I just gouged real good." "I'll get you the ambulance," Arlene said. She had lived in the South her whole life and she pronounced the word amble-lance. She picked up the phone on the kitchen wall. It made a noisy, repetitive blating at her, and she jerked her ear away from the receiver, then hung up. "You crashed my phone off the hook in the hall," she said, and disappeared into the front of the house to right it.

Marybeth stared at Jude's hand. He lifted it — discovered he had left a wet red handprint on the table — and put it weakly back down.

"We shouldn't have come here," she said.

"Nowhere else to go."

She turned her head, looked at Arlene's fat rottie. "Tell me he's gonna help us."

"Okay. He's going to help us."

"You mean it?"

"No."

Marybeth questioned him with a glance.

"Sorry," Jude said. "I might've misled you a bit 'bout the dogs. Not just any dogs will do. They have to be mine. You know how every witch has a black cat? Bon and Angus were like that for me. They can't be replaced."

"When did you figure that out?"

"Four days ago."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I was hoping to bleed to death before Angus went and croaked on us. Then you'd

be okay. Then the ghost

would have to leave you alone. His business with us would be done. If my head was clearer, I wouldn't have bandaged myself up so well."

"You think it'll make it okay if you let yourself die? You think it'll make it okay to give him what he wants? Goddam you. You think I came all this way to watch you kill yourself? Goddam you."

Arlene stepped back through the kitchen doorway, frowning, eyebrows knitted together in a look of annoyance or deep thought or both.

"There's somethin' wrong with that phone. I can't get a dial tone. All I do get, when I pick up, is some local AM station. Some farm program. Guy chatterin' about how to cut open animals. Maybe the wind yanked down a line."

"I have a cell phone—" Marybeth began.

"Me, too," Arlene said. "But we don't get no reception up in these parts. Let's get

Justin laid down, and I'll

see what I can do for his hand right now. Then I'll drive down the road to the McGees and call from there."

Without any forewarning she reached between them and snatched at Marybeth's wrist, lifting her own bandaged hand for a moment. The wraps were stiff and brown with the dried bloodstains on them.

"What the hell have you two been doin'?" she asked.

"It's my thumb," Marybeth said.

"Did you try to trade it to him for his finger?"

"It's just got an infection."

Arlene set the bandaged hand down and looked at the unbandaged left hand, terribly white, the skin

wrinkled. "I never seen any infection like this. It's in both hands — is it anywhere else?"

"No."

She felt Marybeth's brow. "You're burnin' up. My God. The both of you. You can rest in my room, honey.

I'll put Justin in with his father. I shoved an extra bed in there two weeks ago, so I

could nap in there and

keep a closer eye on him. Come on, big boy. More walkin' to do. Get yourself up."

"If you want me to move, you better get the wheelbarrow and roll me," Jude said.

"I got morphine in your daddy's room."

"Okay," Jude said, and he put his left hand on the table and struggled to get to his feet.

Marybeth jumped up and took his elbow.

"You stay where you are," Arlene said. She nodded in the direction of her rottweiler and the door beyond,

which opened into what had once been a sewing room but was now a small bedroom. "Go on and rest in there. I can handle this one."

"It's all right," Jude said to Marybeth. "Arlene's got me."

"What are we gonna do about Craddock?" Marybeth asked.

She was standing almost against him, and Jude leaned forward and put his face in her hair and kissed the crown of her head.

"I don't know," Jude said. "I wish like hell you weren't in this with me. Why

didn't you get away from me  
when you still had the chance? Why you got to be such a stubborn ass about  
things?"

"I been hangin' around you for nine months," she said, and stood on tiptoe and  
put  
her arms around his  
neck, her mouth searching for his. "I guess it just rubbed off on me."  
And then for a while they stood rocking back and forth in each other's arms.

42

When Jude stepped away from Marybeth,  
Arlene turned him around and started him walking. He expected her to march  
him  
back down the front  
hall, so they could go upstairs to the master bedroom, where he assumed his  
father  
lay. Instead, though,  
they continued along the length of the kitchen to the back hall, the one that led to  
Jude's old bedroom.

Of course his father was there, on the first floor. Jude vaguely recalled that Arlene  
had told him, in one of  
their few phone conversations, that she was moving Martin downstairs and into  
Jude's old bedroom,

because it was easier than going up and down the stairs to tend to him.  
Jude cast one last look back at Marybeth. She was watching him go, from where  
she stood in the doorway  
of Arlene's bedroom, her eyes fever-bright and exhausted — and then Jude and  
Arlene were moving away,  
leaving her behind. He didn't like the idea of being so far from Marybeth in the  
dark and decayed maze of  
his father's house. It did not seem too unreasonable to think that they might  
never  
find their way back to  
each other.

The hall to his room was narrow and crooked, the walls visibly warped. They  
passed a screen door, the  
frame nailed shut, the screens rusty and bellied outward. It looked into a muddy  
hog pen, three mediumsize  
pigs in it. The pigs peered at Jude and Arlene as they went by, their squashed-in  
faces benevolent and  
wise.

"There's still pigs?" Jude said. "Who's carin' for them?"

"Who do you think?"

"Why didn't you sell them?"

She shrugged, then said, "Your father took care of pigs all his life. He can hear them in where he's layin'". I

guess I thought it would help him know where he was. Who he was." She looked up in Jude's face. "You

think I'm foolish?"

"No," Jude said.

Arlene eased the door to Jude's old bedroom inward, and they stepped into a suffocating warmth that

smelled so strongly of menthol it made Jude's eyes water.

"Hang on," Arlene said. "Lemme move my sewin'."

She left him leaning against the doorway and hastened to the little bed against the

wall, to the left. Jude

looked across the room to an identical cot. His father was in it.

Martin Cowzynski's eyes were narrow slits, showing only glazed slivers of eyeball. His mouth yawned

open. His hands were gaunt claws, curled against his chest, the nails crooked, yellow, sharp. He had always

been lean and wiry. But he had lost, Jude guessed, maybe a third of his weight, and

there was barely a

hundred pounds of him left. He looked like he was already dead, although breath yet whined in his throat.

There were streaks of white foam on his chin. Arlene had been shaving him. The bowl of hand-whipped

foam was on the night table, a wood-handled brush sitting in it.

Jude had not seen his father in thirty-four years, and the sight of him — starved, hideous, lost in his own

private dream of death — brought on a fresh wave of dizziness. Somehow it was more horrible that Martin

was breathing. It would've been easier to look upon him, as he was now, if he were dead. Jude had hated

him for so long that he was unprepared for any other emotion. For pity. For horror.

Horror was rooted in

sympathy, after all, in understanding what it would be like to suffer the worst. Jude had not imagined he could feel either sympathy or understanding for the man in the bed across the room.

“Can he see me standing here?” Jude asked.

Arlene looked over her shoulder at Jude’s father.

“Doubt it. He hasn’t responded to the sight of anything in days. Course it’s been months since he could talk, but until just a little while ago he did sometimes make faces or give a sign when he wanted something.

He enjoyed when I shaved him, so I still do that ever” day. He liked the hot water on his face. Maybe some part of him still likes it. I don’t know.” She paused, considering the gaunt, rasping figure in the far bed.

“It’s sorry to see him die this way, but it’s worse to keep a man going after a certain point. I believe that.

There comes a time, the dead have a right to claim their own.”

Jude nodded. “The dead claim their own. They do.”

He looked at what Arlene held in her hands, the sewing kit she was moving off the

other cot. It was his

mother’s old kit, a collection of thimbles, needles, and thread, jumbled in one of the big yellow heartshaped

candy boxes his father used to get for her. Arlene squeezed the lid on it, closing it up, and set it on

the floor between the cots. Jude eyed it warily, but it didn’t make any threatening moves.

Arlene returned and guided him by the elbow to the empty bed. There was a light on a mechanical arm,

screwed to the side of the night table. She twisted the lamp around — it made a sproingy, creaking sound as

the rusted coil stretched itself out — and clicked it on. He shut his eyes against the

sudden brightness.

“Let’s look at that hand.”

She brought a low stool to the side of the bed and began to unwind the sopping gauze, using a pair of

forceps. As she peeled the last layer away from his skin, a flush of icy tingling

spread through his hand, and  
then the missing finger began, impossibly, to burn, as if it were crawling with  
biting fire ants.  
She stuck a needle into the wound, injecting him here, and here, while he cursed.  
Then came a rush of  
intense and blessed cold, spreading through the hand and into his wrist, pumping  
along the veins, turning  
him into an iceman.  
The room darkened, then brightened. The sweat on his body cooled rapidly. He  
was on his back. He didn't  
remember lying down. He distantly felt a tugging on his right hand. When he  
realized that this tugging was  
Arlene doing something to the stump of his finger — clamping it, or putting  
hooks  
through it, or stitching it  
— he said, “Gonna puke.” He fought the urge to gag until she could place a  
rubber  
trough next to his  
cheek, then turned his head and vomited into it.  
When Arlene was finished, she laid his right hand on his chest. Wrapped in layer  
upon layer of muffling  
bandage, it was three times the size it had been, a small pillow. He was groggy.  
His  
temples thudded. She  
turned the harsh, bright light into his eyes again and leaned over for a look at the  
slash in his cheek. She  
found a wide, flesh-colored bandage and carefully applied it to his face.  
She said, “You been leakin’ pretty good. Do you know what type of motor oil you  
run on? I’ll make sure  
the amble-lance brings the right stuff.”  
“Check on Marybeth. Please.”  
“I was going to.”  
She clicked off the light before she went. It was a relief to be joined to darkness  
once more.  
He closed his eyes, and when they sprang open again, he did not know whether  
one  
minute had passed or  
sixty. His father’s house was a place of restful silence and stillness, no sound but  
for the sudden whoosh of  
the wind, lumber creaking, a burst of rain on the windows. He wondered if Arlene

had gone for the ambulance.

He wondered if Marybeth was sleeping. He wondered if Craddock was in the house, sitting outside

the door. Jude turned his head and found his father staring at him.

His father's mouth hung agape, the few teeth that were left stained brown from nicotine exposure, the gums

diseased. Martin stared, pale gray eyes confused. Four feet of bare floor separated the two men.

"You aren't here," Martin Cowzynski said, his voice a wheeze.

"Thought you couldn't talk," Jude said.

His father blinked slowly. Gave no sign he'd heard. "You'll be gone when I wake up." His tone was almost

wishful. He began to cough weakly. Spit flew, and his chest seemed to go hollow, sinking inward, as if

with each painful hack he were coughing up his insides, beginning to deflate.

"You got that wrong, old man," Jude told him. "You're my bad dream, not the other way around."

Martin continued staring at him with that look of stupid wonder for a few moments

longer, then turned his

gaze to the ceiling once more. Jude watched him warily, the old man in his army cot, breath screaming

from his throat, dried streaks of shaving cream on his face.

His father's eyes gradually sank shut. In a while Jude's eyes did the same.

43

He wasn't sure what woke him,

but later on Jude looked up, coming out of sleep in an instant, and found Arlene at the foot of the bed.

He didn't know how long she'd been standing there. She was wearing a bright red

rain slicker with the

hood pulled up. Droplets of rain glittered on the plastic. Her old, bony face was set

in a blank, almost

robotic expression that Jude did not at first recognize and which he needed several

moments to

interpret as fear. He wondered if she'd gone and come back or not yet left.

"We lost the power," she said.

"Did we?"



"I went outside, and when I came back in, we lost the power."

"Uh-huh."

"There's a truck in the driveway. Just settin' there. Sort of no particular color. I can't see who is settin' in it. I started to walk out to it, to see if it was someone who could maybe drive somewhere and call emergency for us — but then I got scared. I got scared of who was in it, and I came back."

"You want to stay away from him."

She went on as if Jude had said nothing. "When I got back inside, we didn't have power, and it's still just some crazy talk radio on the telephone. Bunch of religious stuff about ridin' the glory road. The TV was turned on in the front room. It was just runnin'. I know it couldn't be, because there isn't any power, but it was turned on anyway. There was a story on it. On the news. It was about you. It was about all of us. About how we was all dead. It showed a picture of the farmhouse and every-thin'. They were coverin' my body with a sheet. They didn't identify me, but I saw my hand stickin' out and my bracelet. And policemen standin' ever'where. And that yellow tape blockin' the driveway. And Dennis Woltering said how you killed us all."

"It's a lie. None of that is really going to happen."

"Finally I couldn't stand it. I shut it off. The TV came right back on, but I shut it off again and jerked the plug out of the wall, and that fixed it." She paused, then added, "I have to go, Justin. I'll call for the ambulance from the neighbors. I have to go.... Only I'm scared to try and drive around that truck. Who drives the pale truck?"

"No one you want to meet. Take my Mustang. The keys are in it."

"No thank you. I seen what was in the back."

"Oh."

"I got my car."

“Just don’t mess with that truck. Drive right over the lawn and through the fence if

you have to. Do what

you need to do to stay away from it. Did you look in on Marybeth?”

Arlene nodded.

“How is she?”

“Sleepin”. Poor child.”

“You said it.”

“Good-bye, Justin.”

“Take care.”

“I’m bringin’ my dog with me.”

“All right.”

She took a sliding half step toward the door.

Then Arlene said, “Your uncle Pete and I took you to Disney when you were seven. Do you remember?”

“I’m afraid I don’t.”

“In your whole life, I never once saw you smile until you were up in them elephants, goin’ ‘round and

‘round. That made me feel good. When I saw you smile, it made me feel like you had a chance to be happy.

I was sorry about how you turned out. So miserable. Wearin’ black clothes and sayin’ all them terrible

things in your songs. I was sick to death for you. Wherever did that boy go, the one

who smiled on the elephant ride?”

“He starved to death. I’m his ghost.”

She nodded and backed away. Arlene raised one hand in a gesture of farewell, then

turned and was gone.

Afterward Jude listened intently to the house, to the faint straining sounds it made

in the wind and the

splatter of the rain falling against it. A screen door banged sharply somewhere. It might have been Arlene

leaving. It might have been the door swinging on the chicken coop outside.

Beyond a feeling of gritty heat in the side of his face, where Jessica Price had cut him, he was not in great

pain. His breathing was slow and regular. He stared at the door, waiting for

Craddock to appear. He didn't look away from the door until he heard a soft tapping sound off to his right. He peered over. The big yellow heart-shaped box sat on the floor. Something thumped inside. Then the box moved, as if jolted from beneath. It titched a few inches across the floor and jumped again. The lid was struck from within once more, and one corner was knocked up and loose. Four gaunt fingers slipped out from inside the box. Another thump and the lid came free and then began to rise. Craddock pulled himself up from inside the box, as if it were a heart-shaped hole set in the floor. The lid rode on top of his head, a gay and foolish hat. He removed it, cast it aside, then hitched himself out of the box to the waist in a single, surprisingly athletic move for a man who was not only elderly but dead. He got a knee on the floor, climbed the rest of the way out, and stood up. The creases in the legs of his black trousers were perfect. In the pen outside, the pigs began to shriek. Craddock reached a long arm back into the bottomless box, felt around, found his fedora, and set it on his head. The scribbles danced before his eyes. Craddock turned and smiled.

"What kept you?" Jude asked.

44

Here we are, you and me. All out of road, the dead man said. His lips were moving but making no sound, his voice existing only in Jude's head.

The silver buttons on his black suit coat glinted in the darkness.

"Yeah," Jude said. "The fun had to stop sometime."

Still full of fight. Isn't that somethin'?

Craddock placed one gaunt hand on Martin's ankle and ran it over the sheet and up

his leg. Martin's

eyes were closed, but his mouth hung open and breath still came and went in thin, pneumatic whistles.

A thousand miles later, and you're still singin' the same song.

Craddock's hand glided over Martin's chest. It was something he seemed to be doing almost

absentmindedly, did not once look at the old man fighting for his last breaths in the bed beside him.

I never did like your music. Anna used to play it so loud it'd make a normal person's ears bleed. You know there's a road between here and hell? I've driven it myself. Many times now. And I'll tell you what, out on that road there's only one station, and all they play is your music. I guess that's the devil's way of gettin' straight to punishin' the sinners. He laughed.

"Leave the girl."

Oh, no. She's going to sit right between us while we ride the nightroad. She's come so far with you already. We can't leave her behind now.

"I'm telling you Marybeth doesn't have any part in this."

But you don't tell me, son. I tell you. You're going to choke her to death, and I'm

going to watch. Say it. Tell me how it's going to be.

Jude thought,

I won't,

but while he was thinking it, he said, "I'm going to choke her. You're going to watch."

Now you're singin' my kind of music.

Jude thought of the song he'd made up the other day, at the motel in Virginia, how

his fingers had known

where the right chords were and the feeling of stillness and calm that had come over him as he played them.

A sensation of order and control, of the rest of the world being far away, kept back

by his own invisible

wall of sound. What had Bammy said to him? The dead win when you quit singing. And in his vision

Jessica Price had said Anna would sing when she was in a trance, to keep from being made to do things she

didn't want to do, to block out voices she didn't want to hear.

Get up,  
the dead man said.

Stop lazin' around, now. You have business in the other room. The girl is waitin'.

Jude wasn't listening to him, though. He was focused intently on the music in his head, hearing it as it would sound when it had been recorded with a band, the soft clash of cymbal and snare, the deep, slow pulse of the bass. The old man was talking at him, but Jude found that when he fixed his mind on his new song, he could ignore him almost completely.

He thought of the radio in the Mustang, the old radio, the one he'd pulled out of the dash and replaced with XM and a DVD-Audio disc player. The original radio had been an AM receiver with a glass face that glowed an unearthly shade of green and lit up the cockpit of the car like the inside of an aquarium. In his imagination Jude could hear his own song playing from it, could hear his own voice crying out the lyrics over the shivery, echo-chamber sound of the guitar. That was on one station. The old man's voice was on another, buried beneath it, a faraway, southern, late-night, let's-hear-it-for-Jesus, talk-all-the-time station, the reception no good, so all that came through was a word or two at a time, the rest lost in waves of static. Craddock had told him to sit up. It was a moment before Jude realized he hadn't done it.

Get on your feet, I said

.

Jude started to move — then stopped himself. In his mind he had the driver's seat cranked back and his feet out the window and it was his song on the radio and the crickets hummed in the warm summer darkness.

He was humming himself, and in the next moment he realized it. It was a soft, offkey humming, but recognizable, nonetheless, as the new song.

Do you hear me talkin' to you, son?

the dead man asked. Jude could tell that was what he said, because he saw his lips

moving, his mouth  
shaping the words very clearly. But in fact Jude could not really hear him at all.  
“No,” Jude said.

Craddock’s upper lip drew back in a sneer. He still had one hand on Jude’s father  
— it had moved up over

Martin’s chest and now rested on his neck. The wind roared against the house,  
and

raindrops rapped at the  
windowpanes. Then the gust abated, and in the hush that followed, Martin  
Cowzynski whimpered.

Jude had briefly forgotten his father — Jude’s thoughts pinned on the echoing  
loops of his own imagined

song — but the sound drew his gaze. Martin’s eyes were open, wide and staring  
and horrified. He was

gazing up at Craddock. Craddock turned his head toward him, the sneer fading,  
his

gaunt and craggy face

composing itself into an expression of quiet thought.

At last Jude’s father spoke, his voice a toneless wheeze. “It’s a messenger. It’s a  
messenger of death.”

The dead man seemed to look back at Jude, the black marks boiling in front of his  
eyes. Craddock’s lips

moved, and for a moment his voice wavered and came clear, muted but audible  
beneath the sound of Jude’s

private, inner song.

Maybe you can tune me out,

Craddock said.

But he can’t.

Craddock bent over Jude’s father and put his hands on Martin’s face, one on  
each

cheek. Martin’s breath

began to hitch and catch, each inhalation short, quick, and panicked. His eyelids  
fluttered. The dead man

leaned forward and placed his mouth over Martin’s.

Jude’s father pressed himself back into his pillow, shoved his heels down into the  
bed, and pushed, as

if he could force himself deeper into the mattress and away from Craddock. He  
drew a last, desperate

breath — and sucked the dead man into him. It happened in an instant and was like watching a magician pull a scarf through his fist to make it disappear. Craddock crumpled, a wad of Saran Wrap sucked up into the tube of a vacuum cleaner. His polished black loafers were the last thing to go down Martin's throat. Martin's neck seemed, for a moment, to distend and swell — bulging the way a snake will bulge after swallowing a gerbil — but then he gulped Craddock down, and his throat shrank back to its normal, scrawny, loose-fleshed shape. Jude's father gagged, coughed, gagged again. His hips came up off the bed, his back arching. Jude could not help it, thought immediately of orgasm. Martin's eyes strained from their sockets. The tip of his tongue flickered between his teeth. "Spit it up, Dad," Jude said. His father didn't seem to hear. He sank back into the bed, then bucked again, almost as if someone were sitting on top of him and Martin was trying to throw him off. He made wet, strangled sounds down in his throat. A blue artery stood out in the center of his forehead. His lips stretched back from his teeth in a doglike grimace. Then he eased gently down onto the mattress once more. His hands, which had been clutching fistfuls of the sheets, slowly opened. His eyes were a vivid, hideous crimson — the blood vessels had erupted, staining the whites red. They stared blankly at the ceiling. Blood stained his teeth. Jude watched him for movement, straining for some sound of breath. He heard the house settling in the wind. He heard rain spitting against the wall. With great effort Jude sat up, then turned himself to set his feet on the floor. He had no doubt his father was

dead, he who had smashed Jude's hand in the cellar door and put a single-barreled  
shotgun to his mother's  
breast, who had ruled this farmhouse with his knuckles and belt strap and  
laughing  
rages, and whom Jude  
had often daydreamed of killing himself. It had cost him something, though, to  
watch Martin die. Jude's  
abdomen was sore, as if he had only just vomited again, as if something had been  
forced out of him, ejected  
from his body, something he didn't want to give up. Rage, maybe.  
"Dad?" Jude said, knowing no one would answer.  
Jude rose to his feet, swaying, light-headed. He took a shuffling, old man's step  
forward, put his bandaged  
left hand on the edge of the night table to support himself. It felt as if his legs  
might fold beneath him at any  
moment.  
"Dad?" Jude said again.  
His father jerked his head toward him and fixed his red, awful, fascinated eyes on  
Jude.  
"Justin,"  
he said, his voice a strained whisper. He smiled, a horrifying thing to see upon his  
gaunt, harrowed  
face.  
"My boy. I'm all right. I'm fine. Come close. C'mon and put your arms around  
me."  
Jude did not step forward but took a staggering, unsteady step back. For a  
moment  
he had no air.  
Then his breath returned, and he said, "You aren't my father."  
Martin's lips widened to show his poisoned gums and crooked yellow teeth, what  
were left of them. A  
teardrop of blood spilled from his left eye, ran in a jagged red line down the crag  
of  
his cheekbone.  
Craddock's eye had seemed to drip red tears in almost just the same way, in  
Jude's vision of Anna's final  
night.  
He sat up and reached past the bowl of shaving lather. Martin closed his hand on



his old straight razor, the  
one with the hickory handle. Jude hadn't known it was there, hadn't seen it lying  
behind the white china  
bowl. Jude took another step away. The backs of his legs struck the edge of his  
cot,  
and he sat down on the  
mattress.

Then his father was up, the sheet slithering off him. He moved more quickly than  
Jude expected, like a  
lizard, frozen in place one moment, then lurching forward, almost too quick for  
the

eye to follow. He was  
naked, except for a pair of stained white boxers. His breasts were little trembling  
sacks of flab, furred with  
curling, snow-white hairs. Martin stepped forward, planted his heel on the  
heartshaped  
box, crushed it flat.

"Come here, son,"

his father said, in Craddock's voice.

"Daddy's going to show you how to shave."

And he snapped his wrist, and the razor flipped out of the handle, a mirror in  
which

Jude was briefly able to  
see his own astonished face.

Martin lunged at Jude, slashing at him with the straight razor, but Jude stuck out  
his foot, jammed it

between the old man's ankles. At the same time, he pitched himself to the side  
with an energy he didn't

know he had in him. Martin fell forward, and Jude felt the razor whicker through  
his shirt and the biceps

beneath, with what seemed no resistance at all. Jude rolled over the rusted steel  
bar

at the foot of his cot and  
crashed to the floor.

The room was almost silent except for their harsh gasps for breath and the  
shrieking of the wind under the

eaves. His father scrambled to the end of the bed and leaped over the side — spry  
for a man who had

suffered multiple strokes and not left his bed in three months. By then Jude was  
crawling backward, out the

door.

He made it halfway down the hall, as far as the screen door that looked into the pigpen. The hogs crowded against it, jostling for the best view of the action. Their squeals of excitement drew

his attention for a

moment, and when he looked back, Martin was standing over him.

His father dropped onto him. He cocked his arm back to slash the razor across Jude's face. Jude forgot

himself and drove his bandaged right hand up into his father's chin, hard enough to snap the old man's

head back. Jude screamed. A white-hot charge of pain stabbed through his ruined hand and raced up into

his forearm, a sensation like an electrical pulse traveling right through the bone, withering in its intensity.

He caught his father flush and drove him into the screen door. Martin hit it with a splintering crunch and

the tinny sound of springs snapping free. The lower screen tore clean out, and Martin fell through it. The

pigs scattered. There were no steps below the door, and Martin dropped two feet, out of sight, hitting the ground with a dry thud.

The world wavered, darkened, almost disappeared.

No,

Jude thought,

no no no.

He struggled back toward consciousness, like a man pulled deep underwater, churning toward the surface before he ran out of breath.

The world brightened again, a drop of light that widened and spread, blurred gray

ghost shapes appearing

before him, then coming gradually into focus. The hall was still. Pigs grunted outside. An ill sweat cooled

on Jude's face.

He rested awhile, ears ringing. His hand ringing, too. When he was ready, he used

his heels to push himself

across the floor to the wall, then used the wall to work his way up into a sitting position. He rested again.

At last he shoved his way to his feet, sliding his back up the wall. He peered out the wreck of the screen door but still could not see his father. He had to be lying against the side of the house.

Jude swayed away from the wall, sagging toward the screen door. He grabbed the frame to keep from falling into the pigpen himself. His legs trembled furiously. He leaned forward to see if Martin was on the ground with a broken neck, and at that moment his father stood up and reached through the screen and grabbed for his leg.

Jude cried out, kicking at Martin's hand and recoiling instinctively. Then he was a man losing his balance on a sheet of black ice, pinwheeling his arms foolishly, sailing back down the hall and into the kitchen, where he fell yet again.

Martin pulled himself up through the torn screen. He crawled toward Jude, made his way to him on all fours, until he was right on top of him. Martin's hand rose, then fell, a glittering silver spark falling with it.

Jude brought up his left arm, and the straight razor struck his forearm, scraping bone. Blood leaped into the air. More blood.

The palm of Jude's left hand was bandaged, but the fingers were free, sticking out of the gauze as if it were a glove with the fingers snipped off. His father lifted the razor in the air to strike again, but before he could bring it down, Jude stuck his fingers in Martin's glimmering red eyes. The old man cried out, twisting his head back, trying to get free of his son's hand. The razor blade waved in front of Jude's face without touching skin. Jude forced his father's head back, and back, baring his scrawny throat, wondering if he could push hard enough to break the cocksucker's spine. He had Martin's head back as far as it would go when the kitchen knife slammed into the side of his father's neck.

Marybeth was ten feet away, standing at the kitchen counter, beside a magnetized strip on the wall with knives stuck to it. Her breath came in sobs. Jude's father turned his head to stare at her. Air bubbles foamed in the blood that leaked from around the hilt of the knife. Martin reached for it with one hand, closed his fingers feebly about it, then made a sound, a rattling inhalation, like a child shaking a stone in a paper bag, and sagged to his side. Marybeth snapped another wide-bladed knife off the magnetic rack, then another. She took the first by the tip of the blade and chucked it into Martin's back as he slumped forward. It hit with a deep, hollow thunk, as if she'd driven the blade into a melon. Martin made no sound at this second blow, aside from a sharp huff of breath. Marybeth started to walk toward him, holding the last knife in front of her. "Keep away," Jude said to her. "He won't lie down and die." But she didn't hear him. In another moment she stood over Martin. Jude's father looked up, and Marybeth whacked the knife across his face. It went in close to one corner of his lips and came out a little past the other corner, widening his mouth into a garish red slash. As she struck at him, he struck at her, lashing out with his right hand, the hand that held the razor. The blade drew a red line across her thigh, above the right knee, and the leg buckled. Martin pitched himself up off the floor as Marybeth started to go down, roaring as he rose to his feet. He caught her in the stomach in an almost perfect flying tackle, smashed Marybeth into the kitchen counter.

She slammed her last knife into Martin's shoulder, burying it to the hilt. She might've pounded it into a tree trunk for all the good it did.

She slipped to the floor, Jude's father on top of her, blood still foaming from the knife planted in his neck.

He slashed his straight razor toward her again.

Marybeth grabbed her neck, clutching it weakly with her bad hand. Blood pumped through her fingers.

There was a crude black grin dug into the white flesh of her throat.

She slid onto her side. Her head banged the floor. She was staring past Martin at Jude. The side of her face lay in blood, a thick, scarlet puddle of it.

Jude's father dropped to all fours. His free hand was still wrapped around the base

of the knife in his own

throat, fingers exploring it blindly, taking its measure, but doing nothing to pull it

out. He was a pincushion,

knife in the shoulder, knife in the back, but he was interested only in the one through his neck, didn't seem

to have noticed the other pieces of steel sticking into him.

Martin crawled unsteadily away from Marybeth, away from Jude. His arms gave out first, and his head

dropped to the floor, his chin striking with enough force to make his teeth audibly click together. He tried

to push himself up and almost made it, but then his right arm gave out, and he rolled onto his side instead.

Away from Jude, a small relief. Jude wouldn't have to look into his face while he died. Again.

Marybeth was trying to speak. Her tongue came out of her mouth, moved over her

lips. Her eyes pleaded

for Jude to come closer. Her pupils had shrunk to black dots.

He pulled himself across the floor, elbow over elbow, dragging himself to her. She was already whispering.

It was hard to hear her over his father, who was making the cough-choking sounds

again and kicking his

heels loudly against the floor, in the throes of some kind of convulsion.

“He’s not... done,” Marybeth said. “He’s comin’... again. He’ll never... be done.”

Jude glanced around for something he could stick against the slash across her throat. He was close enough now so his hands were in the puddle of blood surrounding her, splashing in it. He spotted a dishrag hanging from the handle of the oven, pulled it down.

Marybeth was staring into his face, but Jude had an impression of not being seen — the sense that she was staring right through him and into some unknowable distance.

“I hear... Anna. I hear her... calling. We have... to make... a door. We have to... let her in. Make us a

door. Make a door... and I’ll open it.”

“Stop talking.” He lifted her hand and pressed the rolled-up dish towel against her neck.

Marybeth caught at his wrist.

“Can’t open it... once I’m on... the other... side. It has to be now. I’m gone already. Anna is gone. You

can’t... save... us,” she said. So much blood. “Let. Us. Save. You.”

Across the room Jude heard a fit of coughing, then his father gagging. He was choking something up. Jude knew what.

He stared at Marybeth with a disbelief more intense than grief. He found his hand cupping her face, which

was cool to the touch. He had promised. He had promised himself, if not her, that he would take care of

her, and here she was, with her throat cut, saying how she was going to take care of

him. She was fighting

for each breath, shivering helplessly.

“Do it, Jude,” she said. “Just do it.”

He lifted her hands and put them against the dish towel, to keep it pressed to her open throat. Then he

turned and crawled through her blood, to the edge of the puddle. He heard himself

humming again, his

song, his new song, a melody like a southern hymn, a country dirge. How did you make a door for the

dead? Would it be enough just to draw one? He was trying to think what to draw with, when he saw the red

handprints he was leaving on the linoleum. He dipped a finger in her blood and began to draw a line along the floor.

When he judged he had made it long enough, he started a new line, at a right angle to the first. The blood on his fingertip thinned and ran dry. He shuffled slowly around, turning back to Marybeth and the wide, trembling pool of blood in which she lay.

He looked past her and saw Craddock, pulling himself out of his father's gaping mouth. Craddock's face

was contorted with strain, his arms reaching down, one hand on Martin's forehead,

the other on Martin's

shoulder. At the point of his waist, his body was crushed into a thick rope — Jude thought again of a great

mass of cellophane, wadded up and twisted into a cord — which filled Martin's mouth and seemed to

extend all the way down into his engorged throat. Craddock had gone in like a soldier leaping into a

foxhole but was hauling himself out like a man sunk to his waist in sucking mud.

You will die,

the dead man said.

The bitch will die you will die we will all ride the nightroad together you want to sing la la la I'll teach

you to sing I'll teach you.

Jude dipped his hand in Marybeth's blood, wetting it entirely, turned away again.

There was no thought in

him. He was a machine that crawled stupidly forward as he began to draw once more. He finished the top

of the door, shuffled around, and started a third line, working his way back to Marybeth. It was a crude,

meandering line, thick in some places, barely a smear in others.

The bottom of the door was the puddle. As he reached it, he glanced into

Marybeth's face. The front of her

T-shirt was soaked through. Her face was a pallid blank, and for a moment he thought it was too late, she

was dead, but then her eyes moved, just slightly, watching him approach, through a

dull glaze.

Craddock began to scream in frustration. He had pulled all of himself out except for one leg, was already trying to stand up, but his foot was stuck somewhere in Martin's gullet, and it was unbalancing him. In

Craddock's hand was the blade shaped like a crescent moon, the chain hanging from it in a bright, swinging loop.

Jude turned his back on him once more and looked down at his uneven blood doorway. He stared stupidly

at the long, crooked red frame, an empty box containing only a few scarlet handprints. It wasn't right yet,

and he tried to think what else it needed. Then it came to him that it wasn't a door

if there was no way to

open it, and he crawled forward and painted a circle for a doorknob.

Craddock's shadow fell over him. Ghosts could cast shadows? Jude wondered at it. He was tired. It was

hard to think. He knelt on the door and felt something slam against the other side of it. It was as if the wind,

which was still driving against the house in furious, steady gusts, were trying to come up through the linoleum.

A line of brightness appeared along the right-hand edge of the door, a vivid streak

of radiant white.

Something hit the other side again, a mountain lion trapped under the floor. It struck a third time, each

impact producing a thunderous boom that shook the house, caused the plates to rattle in the plastic tray by

the sink. Jude felt his elbows give a little, and decided there was no reason to stay on all fours anymore, and

besides, it was too much effort. He fell to his side, let himself roll right off the door

and onto his back.

Craddock stood over Marybeth in his black dead man's suit, one side of his collar askew, hat gone. He

wasn't coming forward, though, had stopped in his tracks. He stared mistrustfully

down at the hand-drawn



door at his feet, as if it were a secret hatch and he had come close to stepping on it and falling through.

What is that? What did you do?

When Jude spoke, his voice seemed to come from a long distance off, as by some trick of ventriloquism.

“The dead claim their own, Craddock. Sooner or later they claim their own.”

The misshapen door bulged, then receded into the floor. Swelled again. It seemed almost to be breathing.

The line of light raced across the top of it, a beam of brightness so intense it couldn’t be looked at directly.

It cornered and continued on down the other side of the door.

The wind keened, louder than ever, a high, piercing shriek. After a moment Jude realized it wasn’t the

wind outside the house but a gale wailing around the edges of the door drawn in blood. It wasn’t

blowing out but being sucked in,

through those blinding white lines. Jude’s ears popped, and he thought of an airplane descending too

rapidly. Papers ruffled, then lifted off the kitchen table and began to swirl above it,

chasing one

another. Delicate little wavelets raced across the wide pool of blood around

Marybeth’s blank, staring face.

Marybeth’s left arm was stretched out, across the lake of blood, into the doorway.

When Jude wasn’t

looking, she had pulled herself over onto her side, reaching out with one arm. Her hand rested over the red

circle he had drawn for a doorknob.

Somewhere a dog began to bark.

In the next instant, the door painted on the linoleum fell open. Marybeth should’ve

dropped through it —

half her body was stretched across it — but she didn’t. Instead she floated, as if sprawled on a sheet of

polished glass. An uneven parallelogram filled the center of the floor, an open trap,

flooded with an

astonishing light, a blinding brilliance that rose all around her.  
In the intensity of that light pouring from below, the room became a  
photographic  
negative, all stark whites  
and flat, impossible shadows. Marybeth was a black, featureless figure, suspended  
upon the sheet of light.  
Craddock, standing over her, arms flung up to protect his face, looked like one of  
the victims of the atom  
bomb at Hiroshima, an abstract life-size sketch of a man, drawn in ash on a black  
wall. Papers still whirled  
and spun above the kitchen table, only they had gone black and looked like a flock  
of crows.  
Marybeth rolled over onto her side and lifted her head, only it wasn't Marybeth  
anymore, it was Anna, and  
spokes of light filled her eyes, and her face was as stern as God's own judgment.  
Why?  
she asked.  
Craddock hissed.  
Get away. Get back.  
He swung the gold chain of his pendulum in circles, the crescent blade whining in  
the air, tracing a  
ring of silver fire.  
Then Anna was on her feet, at the base of the glowing door. Jude had not seen her  
rise. One moment she  
was prone, and in the next she was standing. Time had skipped, maybe. Time  
didn't matter anymore. Jude  
held up a hand to shield his eyes from the worst of the glare, but the light was  
everywhere, and there was  
no blocking it out. He could see the bones in his hand, the skin over them the  
color  
and clarity of honey.  
His wounds, the slash in his face, the stump of his index finger, throbbed with a  
pain that was both  
profound and exhilarating, and he thought he might cry out, in fear, in joy, in  
shock, in all those things, in  
what was more than those things. In rapture.  
Why?  
Anna said again as she approached Craddock. He whipped the chain at her, and  
the  
curved razor at the  
end drew a wide slash across her face, from the corner of her right eye, across her

nose, and down to  
her mouth — but it only opened a fresh ray of brilliance, and where the light  
struck

him, Craddock

began to smoke. Anna reached for him.

Why?

Craddock shrieked as she gathered him into her arms, shrieked and cut her again,  
across her breasts, and

opened another seam in the eternal, and into his face poured the bountiful light, a  
light that burned away his

features, that erased everything it touched. His wail was so loud Jude thought his  
eardrums would explode.

Why?

Anna said, before she put her mouth on his, and from the door behind her leaped  
the black dogs, Jude's

dogs, giant dogs of smoke, of shadow, with fangs of ink.

Craddock McDermott struggled, trying to push her away, but she was falling  
backward with him, falling

toward the door, and the dogs raced around his feet, and as they ran, they were  
stretched and pulled out of

shape, unraveling like balls of yarn, becoming long scarves of darkness that  
wound

around him, climbing

his legs, lashing him about the waist, and binding the dead man to the dead girl.

As

he was pulled down,

into the brightness of the other side, Jude saw the back of Craddock's head come  
off, and a shaft of white

light, so intense it was blue at the edges, slammed through and struck the ceiling,  
where it burnt the plaster,

causing it to bubble and seethe.

They dropped through the open door and were gone.

45

The papers that had been swirling

above the kitchen table settled with a faint rustle, collecting into a pile, in almost  
the exact same spot

from which they'd risen. In the hush that followed, Jude became aware of a gentle  
humming sound, a

deep, melodic pulse, which was not heard so much as felt in his bones. It rose and  
fell and rose again, a

sort of inhuman music — inhuman, but not unpleasant. Jude had never heard any

instrument produce  
sounds like it. It was more like the accidental music of tires droning on blacktop.  
That low, powerful  
music could be felt on the skin as well. The air throbbed with it. It seemed almost  
to be a property of  
the light, flooding in through the crooked rectangle on the floor. Jude blinked  
into  
the light and  
wondered where Marybeth had gone.  
The dead claim their own,  
he thought, and shivered.  
No. She hadn't been dead a moment ago when she opened the door. He did not  
accept that she could just be  
gone, no trace of her left on the earth. He crawled. He was the only thing moving  
in the room now. The  
stillness of the place, after what had just happened, seemed more jarring and  
incredible than a hole between  
worlds. He hurt, his hands hurt, his face hurt, and his chest tingled, a deadly  
icyhot  
prickling, although he  
was fairly certain, if he was meant to have a heart attack this afternoon, it  
would've happened by now.  
Aside from the continuous humming that was all around him, there was no sound  
at all, except his sobs for  
breath, his hands scratching at the floor. Once he heard himself say Marybeth's  
name.  
The closer he came to the light, the harder it was to stare into it. He shut his eyes  
— and found himself still  
able to see the room before him, as if through a pale curtain of silver silk, the light  
penetrating his closed  
lids. The nerves behind his eyeballs throbbed in steady time with that ceaseless  
pulsing sound.  
He couldn't bear all the light, turned his head aside, kept crawling forward, and  
in  
that way Jude did not  
realize he had reached the edge of the open door until he put his hands down and  
there was nothing there to  
support him. Marybeth — or had it been Anna? — had hung suspended over the  
open door, as if on a sheet

of glass, but Jude dropped like a condemned man through the hangman's trap,  
did  
not even have time to cry  
out before plummeting into the light.

46

The sensation of falling — a weightless-sick  
feeling in the pit of his stomach and the roots of his hair  
—

has hardly passed before he realizes that the light is not so intense now. He lifts a  
hand to shade his  
eyes and blinks into it, dusty yellow sunshine. He makes it midafternoon and can  
tell somehow, from  
the angle of the sun, that he's in the South. Jude is in the Mustang again, sitting  
in  
the passenger seat.

Anna has the wheel, is humming to herself as she drives. The engine is a low,  
controlled roar  
—

the Mustang has made itself well. It might've just rolled off the showroom floor  
in

1965

.

They travel a mile or so, neither of them speaking, before he finally identifies the  
road they're on as  
State Highway 22

.

"Where we goin'?"  
he asks at last

.

Anna arches her back, stretching her spine. She keeps both hands on the wheel.

"I don't know. I thought we were just drivin'. Where do you wanna go?"

"Doesn't matter. How about Chinchuba Landing?"

"What's down there?"

"Nothing. Just a place to set and listen to the radio and look at the view. How's  
that sound?"

"Sounds like heaven. We must be in heaven."

When she says this, his left temple begins to ache. He wishes she hadn't said that.

They aren't in

heaven. He doesn't want to hear talk like that

.  
For a time they roll on cracked, faded, two-lane blacktop. Then he sees the turnoff coming up on the right and points it out, and Marybeth turns the Mustang onto it without a word. The

road is dirt, and trees grow close on either side and bend over it, making a tunnel of rich green light. Shadows and fluttering sunlight shift across Marybeth's scrubbed, delicate features. She looks serene, at ease behind the wheel of the big muscle car, happy to have the afternoon ahead of her, and nothing particular to do in it except park someplace with Jude and listen to music. When did she become Marybeth?

It is as if he has spoken the question aloud, because she turns and gives him an embarrassed grin

. "I tried to warn you, didn't I? Two girls for the price of one."

"You warned me."

"I know what road we're on,"

Marybeth says, without any trace of the southern accent that has muddled up her own voice in the last few days

.  
"I told you. One that goes to Chinchuba Landing."

She turns a knowing, amused, slightly pitying glance upon him. Then, as if he hadn't said anything,

Marybeth continues:

"Hell. After all the stuff I've heard about this road, I expected worse. This isn't bad. Kinda nice, actually. With a name like the nightroad you at least expect it to be night. Maybe it's only night here for some people."

He winces

—

another stab of pain in the head. He wants to think she's mixed up, wrong about where they are. She could be wrong. Not only isn't it night, it's hardly a road

.  
In another minute they're bumping along through two ruts in the dirt, narrow troughs with a wide bed

of grass and wildflowers growing between them, swatting the fender and dragging against the undercarriage. They pass the wreck of a pale truck, parked under a willow, the hood open and weeds growing right up through it. Jude doesn't give it more than a sidelong look

.  
The palms and the brush open up just around the next bend, but Marybeth slows, so the Mustang is barely rolling along, and for the moment anyway they're still back in the cool shade of the trees bending overhead. Gravel crunches pleasantly under the tires, a sound Jude has always loved, a sound everyone loves. Out beyond the grassy clearing is the muddy brown sea of Lake Pontchartrain, the water ruffled up in the wind and the edges of the waves glinting like polished, new-minted steel. Jude is a little taken aback by the sky, which is bleached a uniform and blinding white. It is a sky so awash in light it's impossible to look directly into it, to even know where the sun is. Jude turns his head away from the view, squinting and raising a hand to shield his eyes. The ache in his left temple intensifies, beating with his pulse

.  
"Damn," he says.  
"That sky."

"Isn't it somethin'?"

Anna says from inside Marybeth's body.

"You can see a long way. You can see into forever."

"I can't see shit."

"No,"

Anna says, but it's still Marybeth behind the wheel, Marybeth's mouth moving.

"You need to protect your eyes from the sight. You can't really look out there.

Not

yet. We have

trouble lookin' back into your world, for whatever it's worth. You maybe noticed

the black lines over  
our eyes. Think of them as the sunglasses of the livin' dead."  
A statement that starts her laughing, Marybeth's husky, rude laughter

.  
She stops the car at the very edge of the clearing, puts it into park. The windows  
are down. The air that  
soughs in over him smells sweetly of the sun-baked brush and the unruly grass.  
Beneath that he can  
detect the subtle perfume of Lake Pontchartrain, a cool, marshy odor

.  
Marybeth leans toward him, puts her head on his shoulder, puts an arm across his  
waist, and when she  
speaks again, it is in her own voice.

"I wish I was driving back with you, Jude."

He breaks out in a sudden chill.

"What's that mean?"

She looks fondly up into his face.

"Hey. We almost got it right. Didn't we almost get it right, Jude?"

"Stop it,"

Jude says.

"You're not going anywhere. You're staying with me."

"I don't know,"

Marybeth says.

"I'm tired. It's a long haul back, and I don't think I could make it. I swear this  
car

is using some part of

me for gas, and I'm about all out."

"Stop talking that way."

"Were we going to have some music?"

He opens the glove compartment, fumbles for a tape. It's a collection of demos, a  
private collection.

His new songs. He wants Marybeth to hear them. He wants her to know he  
didn't

give up on himself.

The first track begins to play. It is "Drink to the Dead." The guitar chimes and  
rises

in a country hymn,

a sweet and lonely acoustic gospel, a song for grieving. Goddam, his head hurts,  
both temples now, a



steady throbbing behind his eyes. Goddam that sky with its overpowering light. Marybeth sits up, only it isn't Marybeth anymore, it's Anna. Her eyes are filled with light, are filled with sky.

"All the world is made of music. We are all strings on a lyre. We resonate. We sing together. This was nice. With that wind on my face. When you sing, I'm singing with you, honey. You know that, don't you?"

"Stop it,"

he says. Anna settles behind the wheel again and puts the car into drive.

"What are you doing?"

Marybeth leans forward from the backseat and reaches for his hand. Anna and Marybeth are separate now

—

they are two distinct individuals maybe for the first time in days.

"I have to go, Jude."

She bends over the seat to put her mouth on his. Her lips are cold and trembling. "This is where you get out."

"We,"

he says, and when she tries to withdraw her hand, he doesn't let go, squeezes harder, until he can feel

the bones flexing under the skin. He kisses her again, says into her mouth,

"Where we get out. We.

We

."

Gravel under the tires again. The Mustang rolls forward, out under the open sky.

The front seat is filled

with a blast of light, an incandescence that erases all the world beyond the car, leaving nothing but the

interior, and even that Jude can hardly see, peering out through slitted eyes. The pain that flares behind

his eyeballs is staggering, wonderful. He still has Marybeth by the hand. She can't

go if he doesn't let

her, and the light

—

oh, God, there is so much light. There's something wrong with the car stereo, his

song wavering in and  
out, drowning beneath a deep, low, pulsing harmonic, the same alien music he  
heard when he fell  
through the door between worlds. He wants to tell Marybeth something, he  
wants  
to tell her he is sorry  
he couldn't keep his promises, the ones he made her and the ones he made  
himself,  
he wants to say  
how he loves her, loves her so, but cannot find his voice and cannot think with the  
light in his eyes and  
that humming in his head. Her hand. He still has her hand. He squeezes her hand  
again, and again,  
trying to tell her what he needs to tell her by touch, and she squeezes back  
.

And out in the light, he sees Anna, sees her shimmering, glowing like a firefly,  
watches her turn from  
the wheel, and smile, and reach toward him, putting her hand over his and  
Marybeth's, and that's when  
she says,

"Hey, you guys, I think this hairy son of a bitch is trying to sit up."

47

Jude blinked into the clear,  
painful white light of an ophthalmoscope pointed into his left eye. He was  
struggling to rise, but  
someone had a hand on his chest, holding him pinned to the floor. He gasped at  
the  
air, like a trout just  
hauled out of Lake Pontchartrain and thrown onto the shore. He had told Anna  
they  
might go fishing  
there, the two of them. Or had that been Marybeth? He didn't know anymore.  
The ophthalmoscope was removed, and he stared blankly up at the mold-spotted  
ceiling of the kitchen. The  
mad sometimes drilled holes in their own heads, to let the demons out, to relieve  
the pressure of thoughts  
they could no longer bear. Jude understood the impulse. Each beat of his heart  
was  
a fresh and staggering  
blow, felt in the nerves behind his eyes and in his temples, punishing evidence of  
life.

A hog with a squashy pink face leaned over him, smiled obscenely down, and said, "Holy shit. You know

who this is? It's Judas Coyne."

Someone else said, "Can we clear the fucking pigs out of the room?"

The pig was booted aside, with a shriek of indignation. A man with a neatly groomed, pale brown goatee

and kind, watchful eyes, leaned into Jude's field of view.

"Mr. Coyne? Just lie still. You've lost a lot of blood. We're going to lift you onto a gurney."

"Anna," Jude said, his voice unsteady and wheezing.

A brief look of pain and something like an apology flickered in the young man's light blue eyes. "Was that her name?"

No. No, Jude had said the wrong thing. That wasn't her name, but Jude couldn't find the breath to correct

himself. Then it registered that the man leaning over him had referred to her in the

past tense.

Arlene Wade spoke for him. "He told me her name was Marybeth."

Arlene leaned in from the other side, peering down at him, her eyes comically huge

behind her glasses. She

was talking about Marybeth in the past tense, too. He tried to sit up again, but the

goateed EMT firmly held him down.

"Don't try and get up, dear," Arlene said.

Something made a steely clatter nearby, and he looked down the length of his body

and past his feet and

saw a crowd of men rolling a gurney past him and into the hall. An IV bag, pregnant with blood, swung

back and forth from a metal support rod attached to the cot. From his angle on the

floor, Jude could not see

anything of the person on the gurney, except for a hand hanging over the side.

The

infection that had made

Marybeth's palm shriveled and white was gone, no trace of it left. Her small, slender hand swung limply,

jostled by the motion of the cart, and Jude thought of the girl in his obscene snuff movie, the way she had seemed to go boneless when the life went out of her. One of the EMTs pushing the gurney glanced down and saw Jude staring. He reached for Marybeth's hand and tucked it back up against her side. The other men rolled the gurney on out of sight, all of them talking to one another in low, feverish voices. "Marybeth?" Jude managed, his voice the faintest of whispers, carried on a pained exhalation of breath. "She's got to go now," Arlene said. "There's another amble-lance comin' for you, Justin," "Go?" Jude asked. He really didn't understand. "They can't do any more for her in this place, that's all. It's just time to take her on." Arlene patted his hand. "Her ride is here."

ALIVE

48

Jude was in and out for twenty-four hours. He woke once and saw his lawyer, Nan Shreve, standing in the door of his private room, talking with Jackson Browne. Jude had met him, years before, at the Grammys. Jude had slipped out midceremony to visit the men's, and as he was taking a leak, he happened to look over to find Jackson Browne peeing in the urinal next to him. They had only nodded to each other, never even said hello, and so Jude couldn't imagine what he was doing now in Louisiana. Maybe he had a gig in New Orleans, had heard about Jude nearly being killed, and had come to express his sympathies. Maybe Jude would now be visited by a procession of rock-and-roll luminaries, swinging through to tell him to keep on keepin' on. Jackson Browne was dressed conservatively — blue blazer, tie — and he had a gold shield clipped to his belt, next to a holstered revolver. Jude allowed his eyelids to sink shut.

He had a dark, muffled sense of time passing. When he woke again, another rock star was sitting beside him: Dizzy, his eyes all black scribbles, his face still wasted with AIDS. He offered his hand, and Jude took it.

Had to come, man. You were there for me,  
Dizzy said.

"I'm glad to see you," Jude told him. "I been missing you."

"Excuse me?" said the nurse, standing on the other side of the bed. Jude glanced over at her, hadn't known she was there. When he looked back for Dizzy, Jude discovered his hand hanging empty.

"Who you talkin' to?" the nurse asked.

"Old friend. I haven't seen him since he died."

She sniffed. "We got to scale back your morphine, hon."

Later Angus wandered through the room and disappeared under the bed. Jude called to him, but Angus never came out, just stayed under the cot, thumping his tail on the floor, a steady beat that kept time with Jude's heart.

Jude wasn't sure which dead or famous person to expect next and was surprised when he opened his eyes to find he had his room to himself. He was on the fourth or fifth floor of a hospital outside of Slidell. Beyond the window was Lake Pontchartrain, blue and wintry in the late-afternoon light, the shoreline crowded with cranes, a rusty oil tanker struggling into the east. For the first time, he realized he could smell it, the faint briny tang of the water. Jude wept.

When he'd managed to get control of himself, he paged the nurse. A doctor came instead, a cadaverous black man with sad, bloodshot eyes and a shaved head. In a soft, gravelly voice, he began to fill Jude in on his condition.

"Has anyone called Bammy?" Jude interrupted.

"Who's that?"

"Marybeth's grandma," Jude said. "If no one's called her, I want to be the one to tell her. Bammy ought to

know what happened.”

“If you can provide us with her last name and a phone number or an address, I can have one of the nurses call her.”

“It ought to be me.”

“You’ve been through a lot. I think, in the emotional state you’re in, a call from you might alarm her.”

Jude stared at him. “Her granddaughter died. Person she loves most in the world. Do you think it will alarm her less getting the news from a stranger?”

“Exactly why we’d rather make the call,” the doctor said. “That’s the kind of thing we don’t want her family to hear. In a first phone call with relatives, we prefer to focus on the positive.”

It came to Jude that he was still sick. The conversation had an unreal tinge to it that

he associated with a

fever. He shook his head and began to laugh. Then he noticed he was crying again.

He wiped at his face

with trembling hands.

“Focus on what positive?” he asked.

“The news could be worse,” the doctor said. “At least she’s stable now. And her heart was only stopped for a few minutes. People have been dead for longer. There should be only minimal—”

But Jude didn’t hear the rest.

49

Then he was in the halls,

a six-foot-tall, 240-pound man, fifty-four years of age, the great bush of his black beard in ratty tangles

and his hospital johnny flapping open in the back to show the scrawny, hairless cheeks of his ass. The

doctor jogged beside him, and nurses gathered about, trying to redirect him back to

his room, but he

strode on, his IV drip still in his arm and the bag rattling along beside him on its wheeled frame. He

was clearheaded, all the way awake, his hands not bothering him, his breathing fine. As he made his

way along, he began calling her name. He was in surprisingly good voice.

“Mr. Coyne,” said the doctor. “Mr. Coyne, she isn’t well enough — you aren’t well enough—”

Bon raced past Jude, down the hall, and hung a right at the next corner. He quickened his step. He reached the turn and looked down another corridor in time to see Bon slip through a pair of double doors, twenty feet away. They gasped shut behind her, closing on their pneumatic hinges. The glowing sign above the doors said ICU.

A short, dumpy security officer was in Jude’s way, but Jude went around him, and

then the rent-a-cop had to jog and huff to keep up. He shoved through the doors and into the ICU. Bon was

just disappearing into a darkened room on the left.

Jude went in right after her. Bon was nowhere in sight, but Marybeth was in the only bed, with black

stitches across her throat, an air tube poked into her nostrils, and machines beeping contentedly in the dark

around her. Her eyes opened to puffy slits as Jude entered saying her name. Her face was battered, her

complexion greasy and pale, and she seemed emaciated, and at the sight of her his heart contracted with a

sweet tightness. Then he was next to her, on the edge of the mattress, and gathering

her into his arms, her

skin paper, her bones hollow sticks. He put his face against her wounded neck, into

her hair, inhaling

deeply, needing the smell of her, proof she was there, real, proof of life. One of her hands rose weakly to

his side, slid up his back. Her lips, when he kissed them, were cold, and they trembled.

“Thought you were gone,” Jude said. “We were in the Mustang again with Anna, and I thought you were gone.”

“Aw, shit,” Marybeth whispered, in a voice hardly louder than breath. “I climbed out. Sick of being in cars

all the time. Jude, you think when we go home we can just fly?"

50

He wasn't asleep,  
but thinking he ought to be, when the door clicked open. He rolled over,  
wondering  
which dead person  
or rock legend or spirit animal might be visiting now, but it was only Nan Shreve,  
in a tan business  
skirt and suit jacket and nude-colored nylons. She carried her high heels in one  
hand and scuffled  
quickly along on tiptoe. She eased the door softly shut behind her.  
"Snuck in," she said, wrinkling her nose and throwing him a wink. "Not really  
supposed to be here yet."

Nan was a little, wiry woman, whose head barely came to Jude's chest. She was  
socially maladroit, didn't  
know how to smile. Her grin was a rigid, painful fake that projected none of the  
things a smile was  
supposed to project: confidence, optimism, warmth, pleasure. She was forty-six  
and married and had two  
children and had been his attorney for almost a decade. Jude, though, had been  
her  
friend for longer than  
that, going back to when she was just twenty. She hadn't known how to smile  
then  
either, and in those days  
she didn't even try. Back then she was strung out and mean, and he had not  
called  
her Nan.

"Hey, Tennessee," Jude said. "Why aren't you supposed to be here?"

She had started toward the bed but hesitated at this. He hadn't meant to call her  
Tennessee, it had just  
slipped out. He was tired. Her eyelashes fluttered, and for a moment her smile  
looked even more unhappy  
than usual. Then she found her step again, reached his cot, planted herself in a  
molded chair next to him.

"I made arrangements to meet Quinn in the lobby," she said, wiggling her feet  
back into her heels.

"He's the detective in charge of nailing down what happened. Except he's late. I  
passed a  
horrible



wreck on the highway, and I thought I saw his car pulled over to the side of the road, so he must've stopped to help out the state troopers."

"What am I charged with?"

"Why would you be charged with anything? Your father — Jude, your father attacked you. He attacked

both of you. You're lucky you weren't killed. Quinn just wants a statement. Tell him what happened at

your father's house. Tell him the truth." She met his gaze, and then she was speaking very carefully, a

mother repeating simple but important instructions to a child. "Your father had a break with reality. It

happens. They've even got a name for it: age rage. He attacked you and Marybeth

Kimball, and she killed

him saving the both of you. That's all Quinn wants to hear. Just like it happened."

And in the last few

moments, their conversation had ceased to be friendly and social in any way. Her plastered-on grin had

disappeared, and he was back with Tennessee again — cold-eyed, sinewy, unbending Tennessee.

He nodded.

She said, "And Quinn might have some questions about the accident that took off your finger. And killed the dog. The dog in your car?"

"I don't understand," Jude said. "He doesn't want to talk to me about what happened in Florida?"

Her eyelashes fluttered rapidly, and for a moment she was staring at him with unmistakable confusion.

Then the cold-eyed look reasserted itself and became even colder. "Did something happen in Florida?

Something I need to know about, Jude?"

So there was no warrant on him in Florida. That didn't make sense. He had attacked a woman and her

child, been shot, been in a collision — but if he was a wanted man in Florida, Nan would already know

about it. She would already be planning his plea.

Nan went on, "You came south to see your father before he passed away. You were in an accident just

before you reached his farm. Out walking the dog by the side of the road, and the two of you got hit. An unimaginable chain of events, but that's what happened. Nothing else makes sense."

The door opened, and Jackson Browne peeked into the room. Only he had a red birthmark on his neck that

Jude hadn't noticed before, a crimson splotch in the rough shape of a threefingered

hand, and when he

spoke, it was in a clownish honk, his inflections soupy and Cajun.

"Mr. Coyne. Still with us?" His gaze darting from Jude to Nan Shreve beside him.

"Your record company

will be disappointed. I guess they were already planning the tribute album." He

laughed then, until he

coughed, and blinked watering eyes. "Mrs. Shreve. I missed you in the lobby." He

said it jovially enough,

but the way he looked at her, his eyes hooded and wondering, it sounded almost like an accusation. He

added, "So did the nurse at the reception desk. She said she hadn't seen you."

"I waved on the way by," Nan said.

"Come on in," Jude said. "Nan said you'd like to talk to me."

"I ought to place you under arrest," said Detective Quinn.

Jude's pulse quickened, but his voice, when he spoke, was smooth and untroubled.

"For what?"

"Your last three albums," Quinn said. "I got two daughters, and they play 'em and

play 'em at top volume,

until the walls shake and the dishes rattle and I feel I am close to perpetratin'

dough-mestic abuse, you

understan'? And this is on my lovely, laughin' daughters, who I wouldn't under normal conditions want

hurt for any reason nohow." He sighed, used his tie to wipe his brow, made his way to the foot of the bed.

He offered Jude his last stick of Juicy Fruit. When Jude declined, Quinn popped the stick into his mouth

and began to chew. "You got to love 'em, somehow, no matter how crazy you feel sometimes."

"That's right," Jude said.

“Just a few questions,” Quinn said, pulling a notebook out of an inner pocket of his jacket. “We want to start before you got to your father’s house. You were in a hit-and-run, is that it? Some awful kind of day for you and your lady friend, huh? And then attacked by your dad. Course, the way you look, and the condition he was in, he probably thought you were... I don’t know. A murderer come to loot his farm. An evil spirit. Still, I can’t think why you wouldn’t have gone to a hospital after the accident that took off your finger.”

“Well,” Jude said. “We weren’t far from my daddy’s place, and I knew my aunt was there. She’s a registered nurse.”

“That so? Tell me about the car that hit you.”

“A truck,” Jude said. “A pickup.” He glanced at Nan, who nodded, just slightly, eyes watchful and certain.

Jude drew a deep breath and began to lie.

51

Before Nan left his room, she hesitated in the doorway and looked back at Jude. That grin was on her face again, the stretched, forced one that made Jude sad.

“She really is beautiful, Jude,” Nan said. “And she loves you. You can tell the way she talks about you. I

spoke to her. Only for a moment, but... but you can tell. Georgia, is she?” Nan’s eyes were shy, and

pained, and affectionate, all at once. She asked the question like she wasn’t sure if she really wanted to know.

“Marybeth,” Jude said firmly. “Her name is Marybeth.”

52

They were back in New York

two weeks later for Danny’s memorial service. Marybeth wore a black scarf around her neck that

matched her black lace gloves. The afternoon was windy and cold, but the gathering was well attended

nonetheless. It seemed everyone Danny had ever chatted up, gossiped with, or blabbed to on the phone

was there, and that was a lot, and none of them left early, not even when the rain began to fall.

53

In the spring Jude recorded an album, stripped down, mostly acoustic. He sang about the dead. He sang about roads at night. Other men played the guitar parts. He could handle rhythm, but that was all, had needed to switch back to making chords with the left, as he had in his childhood, and he wasn't as good at it. The new CD sold well. He did not tour. He had a triple bypass instead. Marybeth taught dance at a tony gym in High Plains. Her classes were crowded.

54

Marybeth found a derelict Dodge Charger in a local auto graveyard, brought it home for three hundred dollars. Jude spent the next summer sweating in the yard with his shirt off, restoring it. He came in late each night, all of him tanned, except for the shiny silver scar down the center of his chest. Marybeth was always waiting just inside the door, with a glass of homemade lemonade. Sometimes they would trade a kiss that tasted of cold juice and motor oil. They were his favorite kisses.

55

One afternoon, close to the end of August, Jude wandered inside, sweating and sunburned, and found a message on the machine from Nan. She said she had some information for him and he could call her back anytime. Anytime was now, and he rang her in her office. He sat on the edge of Danny's old desk while Nan's receptionist patched him through. "I'm afraid I don't have a lot to tell you about this George Ruger person," Nan said without any preamble. "You wanted to know if he's been mentioned in any criminal proceedings in the last year, and the answer to that appears to be no. Maybe if I had more information from you, as to exactly what your interest in him

is..."

"No. Don't worry about it," Jude said.

So Ruger hadn't brought any kind of complaint to the authorities; no surprise. If he

was going to bring a

suit, or try to have Jude arrested, Jude would've known about it by now anyway.

He hadn't really expected

Nan to come up with anything. Ruger couldn't talk about what Jude had done to him without risking that it

would come out about Marybeth, how he'd slept with her when she was still in junior high. He was, Jude

remembered, an important figure in local politics. It was hard to run a really effective fund-raiser after

you'd been accused of statutory rape.

"I had a little more luck concerning Jessica Price."

"You did," Jude said. Just hearing her name made his stomach knot up.

When Nan spoke again, it was in a falsely casual tone, a little too cool to be persuasive. "This Price is

under investigation for child endangerment and sexual abuse. Her own daughter, if

you can imagine.

Apparently the police came to her home after someone called in an accident report.

Price drove her car into

someone else's vehicle, right in front of her house, forty miles an hour. When the police got there, they

found her unconscious behind the wheel. And her daughter was in the house with a

gun and a dead dog on the floor."

Nan paused to allow Jude a chance to comment, but Jude didn't have anything to say.

Nan went on, "Whoever Price drove her car into took off. Never found."

"Didn't Price tell them? What's her story?"

"No story. See, after the police calmed the little girl down, they took the gun away.

When they went to put

it back where it belonged, they found an envelope with photos in it, hidden in the velvet lining of the

pistol's case. Polaroids of the girl. Criminal stuff. Horrible. Apparently they can establish that the mother took them. Jessica Price could be looking at up to ten years. And I understand her girl is only just thirteen.

Isn't that the most terrible thing?"

"It is," Jude said. "Just about."

"Would you believe all of this happened — Jessica Price's car accident, dead dog, photos — on the same day your daddy died in Louisiana?"

Again Jude did not reply — silence felt safer.

Nan went on, "Following her lawyer's advice, Jessica Price has been exercising her legal right to remain silent ever since her arrest. Which makes sense for her. And is also a lucky break for whoever else was there. You know — with the dog."

Jude held the receiver to his ear. Nan was silent for so long he began to wonder if they'd been cut off.

At last, just to find out if she was still on the line, he said, "That all?"

"One other thing," Nan said. Her tone was perfectly bland. "A carpenter doing work down the street said he

saw a suspicious pair in a black car lurking around earlier in the day. He said the driver was the spitting

image of the lead singer of Metallica."

Jude had to laugh.

56

On the second weekend of November, the Dodge Charger pulled out of a churchyard on a red clay dirt road in Georgia, cans rattling from the back. Bammy stuck her fingers in her mouth and blew rude whistles.

57

One fall they went to Fiji.

The fall after, they visited Greece. Next October they went to Hawaii, spent ten hours a day on a beach

of crushed black sand. Naples, the year following, was even better. They went for a

week and stayed

for a month.

In the autumn of their fifth anniversary, they didn't go anywhere. Jude had bought

puppies and didn't want

to leave them. One day, when it was chilly and wet, Jude walked with the new dogs down the driveway to collect the mail. As he was tugging the envelopes out of the box, just beyond the front gate, a pale pickup blasted by on the highway, throwing cold spray at his back, and when he turned to

watch it go, he saw

Anna staring at him from across the road. He felt a sharp twinge in the chest, which quickly abated, leaving him panting.

She pushed a yellow strand of hair back from her eyes, and he saw then that she was shorter, more athletically built than Anna, just a girl, eighteen at best. She lifted one hand in a tentative wave. He gestured for her to cross the road.

"Hi, Mr. Coyne," she said.

"Reese, isn't it?" he said.

She nodded. She didn't have a hat, and her hair was wet. Her denim jacket was soaked through. The puppies leaped at her, and she twisted away from them, laughing.

"Jimmy," Jude said. "Robert. Get down. Sorry. They're an uncouth bunch, and I haven't taught them their manners yet. Will you come in?" She was shivering just slightly. "You're getting drenched. You'll catch your death."

"Is that catching?" Reese asked.

"Yeah," Jude said. "There's a wicked case going around. Sooner or later everyone gets it."

He led her back to the house and into the darkened kitchen. He was just asking her

how she'd made her

way out to his place when Marybeth called down from the staircase and asked who was there.

"Reese Price," Jude said back. "From Testament. In Florida. Jessica Price's girl?"

For a moment there was no sound from the top of the stairs. Then Marybeth padded down the steps, stopped close to the bottom. Jude found the lights by the door, flipped them on. In the sudden snap of brightness that followed, Marybeth and Reese regarded each

other without speaking.

Marybeth's face was composed, hard to read. Her eyes searched. Reese looked from Marybeth's face, to

her neck, to the silvery white crescent of scar tissue around her throat. Reese pulled

her arms out of the

sleeves of her coat and hugged herself beneath it. Water dripped off her and puddled around her feet.

"Jesus Christ, Jude," Marybeth said. "Go and get her a towel."

Jude fetched a towel from the downstairs bathroom. When he returned to the kitchen with it, the kettle was

on the stove and Reese was sitting at the center island, telling Marybeth about the

Russian exchange

students who had given her a ride from New York City and who kept talking about

their visit to the Entire

Steak Buildink.

Marybeth made her hot cocoa and a grilled cheese and tomato sandwich while Jude

sat with Reese at the

counter. Marybeth was relaxed and sisterly and laughed easily at Reese's stories, as if it were the most

natural thing in the world to play host to a girl who had shot off a piece of her husband's hand.

The women did most of the talking. Reese was on her way to Buffalo, where she was going to meet up with

friends and see 50 Cent and Eminem. Afterward they were traveling on to Niagara.

One of the friends had

put money down on an old houseboat. They were going to live in it, half a dozen of

them. The boat needed

work. They were planning to fix it up and sell it. Reese was in charge of painting it. She had a really cool

idea for a mural she wanted to paint on the side. She had already done sketches.

She took a sketchbook

from her backpack and showed them some of her work. Her illustrations were unpracticed but eyecatching,

pictures of nude ladies and eyeless old men and guitars, arranged in complicated



interlocking

patterns. If they couldn't sell the boat, they were going to start a business in it, either pizza or tattoos. Reese

knew a lot about tattoos and had practiced on herself. She lifted her shirt to show them a tattoo of a pale,

slender snake making a circle around her bellybutton, eating its own tail.

Jude interrupted to ask her how she was getting to Buffalo. She said she ran out of

bus money back at Penn

Station and figured she'd hitch the rest of the way.

"Do you know it's three hundred miles?" he asked.

Reese stared at him, wide-eyed, then shook her head. "You look at a map and this state doesn't seem so

gosh-darn big. Are you sure it's three hundred miles?"

Marybeth took her empty plate and set it in the sink. "Is there anyone you want to

call? Anyone in your

family? You can use our phone."

"No, ma'am."

Marybeth smiled a little at this, and Jude wondered if anyone had ever called her "ma'am" before.

"What about your mother?" Marybeth asked.

"She's in jail. I hope she doesn't ever get out," Reese said, and she looked into her

cocoa. She began to

play with a long yellow strand of her hair, curling it around and around her finger,

a thing Jude had seen

Anna do a thousand times. She said, "I don't even like to think about her. I'd rather pretend she was dead

or something. I wouldn't wish her on anyone. She's a curse, is what she is. If I thought someday I was

going to be a mother like her, I'd have myself sterilized right now."

When she finished her cocoa, Jude put on a rain slicker and told Reese to come on,

he would take her to the

bus station.

For a while they rode without speaking, the radio off, no sound but the rain tapping

on the glass and the  
Charger's wipers beating back and forth. He looked over at her once and saw she  
had the seat cranked back  
and her eyes closed. She had taken off her denim jacket and spread it over herself  
like a blanket. He  
believed she was sleeping.  
But in a while she opened one eye and squinted at him. "You really cared about  
Aunt Anna, didn't you?"  
He nodded. The wipers went  
whip-thud, whip-thud  
.

Reese said, "There's things my momma did she shouldn't have done. Some  
things  
I'd give my left arm to  
forget. Sometimes I think my Aunt Anna found out about some of what my  
momma was doing — my  
momma and old Craddock, her stepfather — and that's why she killed herself.  
Because she couldn't live  
anymore with what she knew, but she couldn't talk about it either. I know she  
was  
already real unhappy. I  
think maybe some bad stuff happened to her, too, when she was little. Some of the  
same stuff happened to  
me." She was looking at him directly now.  
So. Reese at least did not know everything her mother had done, which Jude  
could  
only take to mean that  
there really was some mercy to be found in the world.  
"I am sorry about what I did to your hand," she said. "I mean that. I have dreams  
sometimes, about my  
Aunt Anna. We go for rides together. She has a cool old car like this one, only  
black. She isn't sad  
anymore, not in my dreams. We go for rides in the country. She listens to your  
music on the radio. She told  
me you weren't at our house to hurt me. She said you came to end it. To bring  
my  
mother to account for  
what she let happen to me. I just wanted to say I'm sorry and I hope you're  
happy."

He nodded but did not reply, did not, in truth, trust his own voice.  
They went into the station together. Jude left her on a scarred wooden bench,  
went  
to the counter and  
bought a ticket to Buffalo. He had the station agent put it inside an envelope. He  
slipped two hundred  
dollars in with it, folded into a sheet of paper with his phone number on it and a  
note that she should call if  
she ran into trouble on the road. When he returned to her, he stuck the envelope  
into the pouch on the side  
of her backpack instead of handing it to her, so she wouldn't look into it right  
away and try to give the  
money back.  
She went with him out onto the street, where the rain was falling more heavily  
now  
and the last of the day's  
light had fled, leaving things blue and twilighty and cold. He turned to say  
goodbye,  
and she stood on  
tiptoe and kissed the chilled, wet side of his face. He had, until then, been thinking  
of her as a young  
woman, but her kiss was the thoughtless kiss of a child. The idea of her traveling  
hundreds of miles north,  
with no one to look out for her, seemed suddenly all the more daunting.  
"Take care," they both said, at exactly the same time, in perfect unison, and then  
they laughed. Jude  
squeezed her hand and nodded but had nothing else to say except good-bye.  
It was dark when he came back into the house. Marybeth pulled two bottles of  
Sam  
Adams out of the  
fridge, then started rummaging in the drawers for a bottle opener.  
"I wish I could've done something for her," Jude said.  
"She's a little young," Marybeth said. "Even for you. Keep it in your pants, why  
don't you?"  
"Jesus. That's not what I meant."  
Marybeth laughed, found a dishrag, and chucked it in his face.  
"Dry off. You look even more like a pathetic derelict when you're all wet."  
He rubbed the rag through his hair. Marybeth popped him a beer and set it in  
front  
of him. Then she saw he

was still pouting and laughed again.

“Come on, now, Jude. If you didn’t have me to rake you over the coals now and then, there wouldn’t be any fire left in your life at all,” she said. She stood on the other side of the kitchen counter, watching him with a certain wry, tender regard. “Anyway, you gave her a bus ticket to Buffalo, and... what? How much money?”

“Two hundred dollars.”

“Come on, now. You did something for her. You did plenty. What else were you supposed to do?”

Jude sat at the center island, holding the beer Marybeth had set in front of him but not drinking it. He was tired, still damp and chilly from the outside. A big truck, or a Greyhound maybe, roared down the highway, fled into the cold tunnel of the night, was gone. He could hear the puppies out in their pen, yipping at it, excited by its noise.

“I hope she makes it,” Jude said.

“To Buffalo? I don’t see why she wouldn’t,” Marybeth said.

“Yeah,” Jude said, although he wasn’t sure that was what he’d really meant at all.

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