

Part I.
New Hampshire

Prologue

I enter the room thinking I can't believe I actually came to one of these things. It is a small room, made smaller by the throng of people, some thirty-five or so, I guessed, milling about, talking in hushed tones, smiling politely at me, the newcomer. The chairs, royal blue vinyl on chrome frames with genuine imitation simulated wood arms, are arranged in a circle on the avocado green and mustard mixed shag carpet. On the wall are paintings, the same landscape done in each of the four seasons; I ruminate on the symbolism of them for, oh, a minute or so, then people begin taking their seats.

I am so nervous, I sit quickly next to a woman with long, deep red hair and octagonal rimless glasses, a nose that turns up at the end and lipstick that is all wrong for her. Hannah would have said that. I think I may have done alright but then I let my eyes fall slowly to the ample space her rear-end takes up in the pretty good sized chair. A man a little older than me gets up and speaks.

"Hi. I'm Dean."

"Hi Dean," is the chorused reply.

"I'm thirty-five years old, and I am an adult child."

The man tells his story, badly, but the sentiment is still there. He, like all the rest of us here, has never made his way past a certain point in his

childhood. For some, it is caused by blatant abuse and neglect. Others grew up in a family with either one or both parents absorbed in alcoholism, which led to emotional deprivation of the children, which stunted emotional growth, which, often, started them on the bottle at an early age. Or drugs, or sex, or any number of things that one can become addicted to.

Even so, I begin to think that I do not belong here, that these people are not like me at all, when I become aware that I am the focus of everyone's attention, but I have missed the question.

"Ah, what was that?"

"Tell us something about yourself." The first man, Dean, says to me.

"Well, to tell you the truth, I don't actually know what I'm doing here."

Different levels of smiles and head-nodding is the response from nearly everyone in the group. The redhead next to me is practically laughing and I think her head is about to come loose from her neck, she is nodding so vigorously.

I go on.

"My father wasn't an alcoholic, at least I don't think so. But, he was, in every definition of the word, a 'holic.' He was a workaholic, an emotionaholic, a despairaholic, an ice creamaholic, he always seemed like such an old man, even from the first recollections of him." They are listening to me. I am listening to me.

"But now, looking back, I see so much childishness in his memory.

How he would sulk when he didn't get his way. How he would squander any money that he was able to get his hands on. How he would act like he was sixteen years old at the wheel of a car. How he treated my mother like his.

"And the sad part is that I began looking back over my own life the other day, and I realized that, without trying to, without knowing it, easier than falling down, I had become the man.

"And that's why I'm here. I'm Virgil. And I'm an adult child."

"Hi Virgil."

When the meeting broke up, I started to leave, but a small crowd gathered about me. Dean, and a couple of the other men wanted do shake my hand, let me know that I wasn't alone or anything. One woman, a tiny, greasy-blonde woman with massive teeth, asked if I would like to go for coffee. I politely declined, but she continued.

"I've read everything you've written."

"Excuse me?"

"You are Virgil Peal, aren't you?"

"Yes," I thought that my beard would hide my identity."

"Well, I've read every one of your books; I just love them."

"Ah, thank you, thank you very much." I did my best to wade through the sea to the door, but she was right on my heels.

"You know, I did it first in a barn."

"Excuse me?" I was having trouble breathing and I could feel my face heating up.

"In your story, "No Trespassing," you know, they did it in a barn, the boy's first time and all."

"Oh, yes, yes," how old was that? Five years? Seven?

"I read it in Playboy. It was very sexy."

"Again, thanks." Let me out of here.

"I've read everything you've written." Great. My only fan and she's as fucked up as I am. More.

I realized that I pushed a fellow a bit hard trying to get past him, but I had to get to the door. When I did, I looked back to see if the scrawny woman was in tow, but she was gone. Got the message it seemed. But I

walked fast. Loosening my tie and taking deep

breaths the whole way, my footfalls echoing in the cooling night. Faster.

Without a single glance back.

On the dead walk.

1.

Hurricane Gladys raged outside, and the weather decks had been secured. The boatswains had even fixed lanyards across the openings, just in case anyone had any ideas of using the outside passageways which were always the quickest way of getting from stem to stern. Everyone, it seemed, was seasick as we gathered in the mess deck. We clung desperately to the secured tables and stools, playing cards and backgammon, pretending that the howling wind and crashing swells outside of our small ship were everyday occurrences, an act of false bravado taught to us by our fathers.

At 7 P.M., we tried to eat, but that was a joke. Fresh food was spilling over tables with each forty-foot sea swell, and the day's earlier meal was flying in every direction from the mouths of the most seasoned seamen.

I watched Peter enter the small, crowded deck. He looked bad. A radioman, he told me that once the sea was so violent that he had to send messages with a bucket next to the morse coder. He would punch a few keys, puke, then punch a few more, puke some more.

That's the way seasickness hits. And it doesn't care if there's no more to puke; it still grabs your insides and makes you lurch uncontrollably toward the bucket heaving the golden remains of what is left inside

of you. "Dry heaves" is an apt term for it.

But something was different about Pete this time. Maybe it was the glassy look in his eyes or the dried vomit all over his work uniform. And, as he made his bumpy way to the hatchway on the starboard side, I spoke between heaves.

"You gonna make it, Pete?"

"Nope, none of us are."

I hadn't been aboard for long, this being my first assignment since boot camp, and his statement worried me. For the first time since the hurricane began to murmur in the south, I got an eery feeling and a new sense of reality. I felt, for the first time, that I might lose my life, along with the hundred other crewmen aboard the United States Coast Guard Cutter "Aggressive," in the ice water of the North Atlantic.

"This ain't so bad," said Gunner, the crusty middle-aged Gunners Mate. A barrel-chested Cajun whose lack of facial hair made him look like a big kid, he smiled. It was a wary smile without much conviction, and his face, green from motion sickness, could not hide the fact that he too was scared.

"Why, one time, I was on an LST out of Norfolk, and we were out on maneuvers just off Hatteras when a hum-dinger of a storm hit. A winter storm, they're the worst. We didn't know what to do, so we just hung on.

When we finally made it back to Little Creek, a rookie RM climbed up the main stack and found seaweed and a crab-pot up there, and that's about a hundred feet above the waterline."

Peter looked around. He held a hand in front of his mouth searching for a place to vomit. But, the buckets were all being used, and the sink in the dish galley was also occupied, so he lunged toward the hatch, tore the lanyard away, and threw the heavy door open to the cold blackness.

"Pete! Come back in. You can't go out there," I hollered, and someone, maybe Ronnie Hogan, made his way from stansion to stansion, across the mess deck to the door. But Peter eluded his grasp and was hanging over the rail, spewing his guts into the ocean. At that point, the bow of the ship plunged down off the top of a massive swell, and the fantail lifted out of the water so that you could hear the propellers slicing through the air, and the vessel rolled to starboard. And, in one instant, Peter lost his grip on the rail and plummeted into the freezing water.

"Man overboard! Man overboard! Someone get on the horn and sound Man Overboard, for christ's sake!" Hogan, usually the personification of control, screamed like someone was killing his kids and his throat collapsed until nothing but air came out.

"Get the fuckin' phone! Call the bridge!" I suddenly lost the urge to puke and made my way to the sound-powered phone and punched "7."

"Bridge," the voice answered.

"Man Overboard! I say again, Man Overboard, starboard side. This is no drill!"

Immediately my message was broadcast throughout the ship, and the claxton sounding General Quarters snapped everybody to action. The big vessel suddenly listed heavy to port, a standard maneuver as the rudder kicks hard right to push the tail end away from the victim and, hopefully, keep him from being caught up in the screws.

As I made my way to the lookout perch, my GQ station, I had one thought going through my mind, the same thought I'm sure everyone had: No way could anybody survive two minutes out there tonight. If it was summer, maybe five minutes was tolerable. But this, being late October, and us, being almost within sight of Nova Scotia, the chances of Pete staying alive long enough for us to get back to him were less than slim; they were non-existent.

We searched for a while, bathing the cold, indignant water with about a million watts of flood-light, but it was all ceremony, charade. We stayed in the area until late the next morning, even though Gladys was bearing

down on us heavier by the hour. Finally, about ten a.m. we stopped circling and charted a course northeastward, all the time steaming in the trough and trying to stay somewhere near level.

When the wind passed a hundred miles an hour, the call went out for anybody who could to lay to the bridge to spell the QM and helmsman, but most of the crew was unable to stand up, let alone walk. Finally, Hogan made it up, and, as he walked past my rack I gained enough energy to grab at his leg.

"Hogan," I rasped, "help me up, man. I want to go, too."

He knelt down and grabbed my upper arm as I swung my legs to the deck. At once, I was overcome by the urge to puke, and I fell to the floor.

"Stay here, man. You can't even walk."

Reluctantly, I lay back down and swung my legs back inside my small rack. Better, I thought. Heaven.

Outside, I could hear the ship heave, creaking up and slamming down. Our quarters were at the forward-most point in the vessel, and from that nasty location got the most abuse. I could hear people being lifted off their beds and slapped back down, even though most of us were strapped down to our racks.

Every now and then, the small ship rolled so far to

one side that I was sure it would never recover. And it wasn't so much the roll itself, but the endless time it stayed over that had me thinking This is it. Time stood still as we rolled over and over, farther and farther down until it just lay there, the coats hanging on the hooks almost perpendicular to the deck.

But every time, every time I thought This is it, back she rolled again, lifted by some invisible force or a mountain of water. It still was a surprise when, after the storm subsided, I walked down a main passageway and noted footprints about waist high on the wall.

And subside the storm finally did, three days later, and we awakened to the sunny welcome sight of the coast of Nova Scotia. We put in at Lunenburg, a small fishing village located an hour south of Halifax, and, after we tied up, three-fourths of the crew was granted liberty.

I was among the lucky contingent that made its way to the nearest Veterans Hall, the Canadian equivalent of the VFW, and, in the space of half an hour, quaffed no fewer than eight pints of Schooner lager. It was only then that I could begin to assess what had happened in the Gulf Of Maine only three nights earlier.

"Pete Heflin," I said to one middle-aged man who had to have been a regular at the hall. "He was my friend."

"Hell, he was all of our friend," said Sculnick,

another Radioman.

"Yeah, but he was mostly my friend." I turned back to the first guy. "We used to ride motorcycles together along the coast, past Wentworth, on down to Rye. Shit, he was one of the easiest-going guys I ever met."

"Well, he shouldn't have gone out there." The voice belonged to Sonny Callabrice, a certified whacko who, harmless enough, spent many hours doing his Elvis imitation, although he resembled Elton John more. He was short, pudgy, Italian, with slicked back hair and a voice that had that street-gang timbre, but he was, as I have said, harmless.

"Fuck you, Callabrice, he was sick, SICK! You of all people should know what I mean by that. He was not well, he was under the weather--"

"We were all under the weather--did you see any of the rest of us doing a half-gainer over the rail?"

At this point, I stood up. I was angry at Callabrice, and he knew it, so he smiled.

"Take it easy Peal, I'm upset too. Losing a guy like Heflin--well, there's no words for it."

"No, no--not that easy. You think he actually jumped overboard? Is that what you think?" I was real close to him now, and all around me I could hear various guys telling me to take it easy, to calm down, and I heard my name a few times, but I wasn't listening. I

grabbed Callabrice by the throat and pushed him up against a wall.

"I'll tell you something, Callabrice. If you want to join Heflin you just keep on spouting that same shit, you hear?"

That's what I would have said had Callabrice not kned me in the stomach and then boxed my ears. The next thing I knew, I was sitting in a chair, now in a different part of the bar, and Callabrice was sitting across from me. Someone was behind me holding my shoulders up, and my head hurt. Callabrice spoke.

"Are you alright, Peal? Peal? Listen, man, I'm sorry. I reacted and, well, I didn't mean to hit you so hard, okay?"

And it was okay. I could sense the sincerity in his voice. That was Callabrice; you couldn't stay mad at him for long.

"I'm alright," I said, shaking my head. "I'm sorry too."

"Oh now look," came the voice behind me, "they're making up, isn't that nice?"

I turned around. Micky Kurtser, tall, lanky, mustachioed, had his heavy hands on my shoulders and was making a weak attempt to restore order, and I glared at him too. I didn't know then what I was thinking, feeling.

A couple of guys were playing darts, (Very big game in Canada) and some music was playing on the antique juke box, and I stumbled to my feet and went to the bar, ordered a double Jack Daniels, guzzled it, ordered another, decided to sip that one. I stepped into the middle of the hall where there were a few tables set up, faced the wall of windows that looked toward the sea and raised my glass.

"To a fallen comrade," I said loudly enough for only me to hear, and took a swallow. And, as I looked out onto the now peaceful, even serene, North Atlantic, I thought about the horror of drowning, not so much the death itself, but the loneliness, the isolation, and then, then I was standing in the middle of the small frozen pond at the base of the hill behind our house in Norwich, and it was early Spring, and the ice was thawing in the bright sunshine, and my brother and some friends were there, moving gingerly along the ice cracking beneath their feet, and I was six years old and I watched them, feeling the wonderful sensation of skating, how I loved to skate then and always, and then they were rising, higher and higher upward, and I saw their waists, and then their knees and then their green insulated boots and then the cross-section of the ice and then the cold and the wet and the panic.

Instinctively, I raised my hands above my head and

kicked my feet, but my heavy snow suit and my skates made the effort wasted and I continued to slip, down and down, my arm stretched up and up and when I knew that this was it, that this was how it felt to die, there was a hand and it was holding the two longest fingers on my right hand, and it was pulling me up, back up, and I saw the ice, and the boots and then I breathed and spit and coughed and I looked up, and I saw the frightened, welcome face of my big brother, Chuck.

The loneliness, the isolation, even for a few moments, that was the scariest, but I didn't know how to say that then. And later I thought that this must be why people have a fear of being alone; because dying is the ultimate loneliness. Death, that was probably okay, but no one could really prove it. But dying, dying itself, losing your grip on life, knowing it, that must be the most frightening thing, like knowing that you are a klutz and they put you in right field 'cause they know that nobody will hit it out there, and then, by a fluke of nature, some other kid who never hits finally gets hold of one off the end of the bat and suddenly, the ball is in the air, and it is headed to you and you watch it, knowing that there is nothing else you can do, and the roar of the crowd, and the screams of the other kids and your father are blocked out by the fear, screaming in your ears, "you can't catch it, you just can't catch it,

what are you going to do?" And here it comes, it's getting closer and you wish you were dead.

And I imagined Pete watching the ship pull away and thinking, Hell, it's just right there, they'll be back in a minute and they'll pull me aboard and what is this numbness, and boy are these swells huge from down here and man these clothes are heavy and they'll be right back, see they're turning around now, and I can make it, five minutes tops, and they'll be back, boy it sure is cold, and why won't my teeth stop chattering, and my arms, why won't my arms work,, and how do you do that drown-proofing they taught us in boot camp? and come on back, that's it, faster, please, please,---please...?

It must have been like that one kitten that made its way to the opening in the gunny sack just in time to see my uncle's big dark green Buick Electra pulling away from the reservoir's edge, and feel the cold spring-fed water engulf its tiny head, and the weight of the others in the bag pulling him down, down, with no one's hand there to pull him back up again--

"Virg? You alright?"

"I snapped around, spilling my drink all over Tom Brunner, a tall, blonde seaman from Alexandria, Virginia with a slight lisp and an affection for Skoal chewing tobacco.

"Hey, man, watch it!"

"I'm sorry, must have been daydreaming, you know, about Hef."

"Man, you gotta let it go. Don't dwell on it, believe me, it don't make things no better."

"I guess you're right." But something about the whole incident nagged at me anyway. "Let me buy you a drink."

"Now that," said Tom, "is the best idea I've heard all day." He laughed and put his hand on my shoulder as we turned toward the bar.

I glanced around one more time to and through the window, at the ocean that had swallowed up my friend three days ago. The anger in it was gone. The fierce, violent side of the beast of the ocean had vanished, and it said "Come, Virgil, come back to me. See how nice and pretty I am? See how far I can take you away from your troubles? Please say you'll come back to me. Promise me. Promise me, Virgil, that you'll come back to me."

And I hated the ocean, now, and I realized I always had, that the great emptiness beyond the horizon was no different than the land, the sky, this bar, my brother's hand, my uncle's gunny sack, it was just out there, someplace else, that made it seem so romantic. I saw that all things were nothing more than what was inside them and that I had no intention of ever going back out in the bleak, rolling, lonely ocean ever again. That it

was nothing more than a fairy tale, whose job it was to make little children into bigger little children, into adult children. That it was nothing more than the alluring beauty in the centerfold with dark cascading hair, large, firm breasts, and buttocks swallowing a g-string, and eyes that said, "You're the man for me, the only one I ever wanted; please take me away from all of this and keep me forever. I'm yours."

But I looked, and I looked. And I couldn't stop looking.

"I promise," I whispered, and headed off towards the bar.

2.

The trip back to New Hampshire lasted three days, and, although the weather was normal, I was seasick the entire time. In three days, I lost fifteen pounds and hadn't eaten a thing. When at last the coast off Portsmouth came into view, I sighed and waited for us to make the last leg up the harbor and into the docks when the ship slowed, and slowed, slower than normal, I thought, and then it stopped, and we were idling. We all figured that there must be a carrier or something taking up the channel, but none was seen.

"Now for the information of all hands," the ships pager came to life, "we have just received a message from station Boston that a fishing vessel located a hundred miles to our southeast is afire and taking on water, and have been ordered to go to its aid. We anticipate getting underway immediately."

"Fuck! Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck!" The voice belonged to Vinnie Romano, a thirty-year-old Italian from Worcester, to the west of Boston. Vinnie was unique in that he had the face of any number of screen leading men, a full black beard, searing blue eyes, thinning black hair with a wisp of silvery-white at the temples, macho all the way, until he spoke. His voice was very effeminate, and he spoke with that New England accent, and I, at once, liked Vinnie. He smoked joints rolled in

strawberry rolling paper while we were out to sea, "for the seasickness," and always urged me to try too, but I was still in my law-abiding-do-the-right-thing phase, and never would imbibe.

"Fuckin' A," I joined in his displeasure, and the frustration mounted. I mean, the fucking coast was right there, for heaven's sake, I could practically touch the goddam thing. And then the engines revved up, and then we were turning around, and the churning in my abdomen was starting up again, and I took one last look at the coast as we headed out to sea, and swore a solemn oath to myself, that if I ever got off of this goddam tub again, it would be for the last time.

We were back in port in three days, after towing some asshole fisherman who had 1)no fire, and 2)no water coming in, but did have 3)his nets caught up in his propellers, back in to Cape Cod, and I had lost another eight pounds and it was easy, tying the ship up, getting ready to go on liberty, leaving the ship, walking to my car, starting the engine, pulling out of the parking lot, and never looking back.

It was warm, and the air was heavy, and as I pulled out I saw the face of Jack Bullner watching me, knowing that my face told him that I would never see him again, and he raised his hand and waved.

First stop, McDonalds. I hadn't eaten for several

days, and when I walked into the restaurant it was empty. I stepped up to the counter and placed a five dollar bill down and said "Fill 'er up," and the kid must have thought I was insane cause he said, "With what?" and I told him what I wanted, and he got it, I paid, and I ate it all in about five minutes.

Then, I went across the street and filled up my yellow Mazda, that cost me eight bucks, and then I didn't know what to do, so I called a girl I had been seeing a little, and she wasn't home, but her sister was, and Rose said why don't I come over, and so I did.

I don't know why, but I never considered the older sister before, but she was lovely, dark red hair, tall, slender, full-breasted, with a pretty, pale face and green eyes, and when I walked into the small, white rancher, there she was wearing a burgundy dress with white polka-dots and her smile took up most of her face.

"Virgil," how nice to see you!" Her Mom, Betty came out from the kitchen, her refined, nasal British accent wrapped around me like a silk shawl. The three single ladies lived together since the old man, an Air Force lifer, walked out seven years ago, and Betty, well she was pretty nice for her age, which might have been forty-five, and I had taken her for a ride on my motorcycle once last summer---

---and her breasts were pressing into my back and when I

tried to move forward to give them some breathing room, well she just bent forward too, and, since I had fooled around with her youngest daughter I thought what would it be like with Mom?

So, I pulled off to the side of a narrow road near the air base and killed the engine. I got off and Betty didn't ask what was up or anything, she just took off her helmet, and I took off mine, and she sat there on the back so I sat back down on the front part of the seat, but this time facing her, and then her tongue was in my mouth and my hands were on those breasts, and her hands were on my fly, and then she knelt on the ground and put her mouth over my penis and began to suck real hard and about three seconds later I blasted away and she sucked and sucked until I thought I would collapse from the sheer excitement and the sensitivity in my genitals, and then she stopped, stood up, and I zipped up and said "Wow," and she said "Like that, did you?" and I said "I loved it." and she said "Our secret?" and I said "Our secret." and I drove us home.

"Betty, how are you doing?"

"Oh, I'm fine, good actually--"

"Oh, tell him, Mom," said Rose, smiling back at me.

"Oh, I don't know, he doesn't care about things like this."

"Don't care about what?" I asked.

"Mom's got a boyfriend, a younger man!"

"Is that so? Tell me all about him." I looked at Betty and she looked at me, and I know we were both thinking about the time on the motorcycle, and she could tell that I was a little jealous, and she tried to ease the pain with her eyes, and I appreciated that, but resolved that tonight, tonight I was going to make it a triple, keep it all in the family.

Just then, the phone rang, and Rose ran to answer it in the bedroom. I took the opportunity to speak to Betty.

"Got a young boy, huh?"

"Well, we've had a couple of dates is all. And he's not that young, he's thirty-three, in the Air Force--"

"Another Airedale, huh? When are you going to see that those boys haven't got anything compared to a man of the sea?" As soon as I said it, I thought, I'm no man of the sea, I'm no man of the anywhere. But Betty laughed and, as I heard Rose coming back I got close to Betty's ear and whispered "I'm going to have Rose tonight. What do you think of that?"

But she couldn't answer before her lovely daughter was back in the room and I asked her if she wanted to go for a ride and some pizza, and she said "Great." It had only been a half-hour since I wolfed down the burgers,

but I was still hungry, and seeing Rose, all made up and her hair just right and her long legs, only piqued my appetite more.

We stopped for some beer and a small bottle of Jack Daniels and went to the Greek place (best pizza I've ever had) and, while it was cooking, we sat in the parking lot and I told her of the hurricane and the fisherman with the nets in his props, and I told her that I was never going out to sea again. But I left out the part about Pete's drowning, not even on purpose.

As we drank the first couple of beers and each had a shot, Rose told me about her mother's new boyfriend, and how he had originally been after Rose, and how he had once even dated Janet, the youngest at seventeen, but somehow had ended up with Mom.

"Why do you suppose that is? I mean, my mom's great and all, and she is one hell of a looker for her age, but what's wrong with me? Or Janet, for that matter, that would make a guy skip us and go for our mother?"

"You're asking me?"

"Yes, you're a man" (of the nowhere) "you should know what would make a guy do that."

"Well, I'm not sure, you see, I think Betty is sweet, and beautiful, and well-built and witty, but I don't think I could ever be attracted to her, in that

kind of sense." She wasn't satisfied. "I don't know, Rose, I'm only just eighteen. Heck, four months ago I was graduating from high school.

High school. How I loved high school. I didn't get very good grades, but I learned a lot, got to know a bunch of nice people, dated nearly every nice-looking girl in the school, as well as some not-so, and I was rather popular. My guitar saw to that. I learned to play a lot of the pop songs on the radio and performed them at talent shows and concerts at school. The crowd went wild over my voice, which was strong and melodic.

I played Ice Hockey and Tennis, lettering in both. Sometimes I wished that I would have studied harder, so that I could have gotten into college.

But, I reasoned, anyone could go to college. Only a real man could stand up to the world without fear and take on the challenge of defending America's coasts. Lately, I began to question this logic.

"Are you attracted to me?" Rose asked.

I looked at the woman next to me, older than me by a year, and I thought, How could I have ever overlooked sweet Rose? And I got close to her, the light from the neon sign reflecting off her light skin and shiny hair, and leaving half of her face in the shadow, and lifted my hand to the half that was illuminated.

"Dear, sweet Rose, yes," and "yes, I am very

attracted to you." And I placed my mouth upon hers and together they opened and her tongue flashing, and mine circling hers, and I closed my eyes and at once had three women in my arms, the mother and the two daughters, each fine in her own way, and they adored me, and they wanted me, and me only. And I was astonished to realize that never, in a million years, would they ever be enough.

I was too quick again. Rose and I had gone to a park near her house, one of those with swings and a slide and a self-propelled merry-go-round, like the one that I had ridden on exactly once, a very long time before, on the playground at school in the second grade. It looked like fun, so I got on while another kid pushed it round and round, and then the dizziness, and the churn in my stomach and the vomiting and the laughter from kids with perfect equilibrium. But I loved watching it go round, it was so heavy and the perpetual motion that kept it going intrigued me, but I never got on one again. Oh, I didn't mind pushing it for others.

When Jenny Pickrell got on and asked me to push her, but not too fast, I obliged. But as I pushed, I felt the rush of the wind as it gained momentum, and the power in my hands and arms and legs as I alone increased its speed, and Jenny was hollering and hollering, over and over, but she sounded so far away, so weak and

vulnerable, like we were standing next to the breakers at Reid State Park. And still I pushed. Faster and faster; I couldn't get it to go fast enough for me. And Jenny, distant Jenny, struggling to hold on, begging me to please, please stop it.

She finally tried to hop off, unsafe at such speed, and one of the hand bars grabbed her foot and held on. I stopped pushing, but it was too late. I stepped out of the way as she went flying past me, helpless, the ground eating away at her flesh. I guess she tried to get off or something, but she was unable, and finally her efforts were in vain, and she was dragged her underneath the spinning ride.

Crumpled in a ball, Jenny tried to stand up, but every time she did, the underside of the ride buffed her head like an orbital sander in the hands of a novice.

And I could see the blood.

And the sand.

And the tears.

And Jenny screamed for help.

And I ran.

And I ran.

And I ran.

At the park this night, I wanted no child's play, and it was warm for November, so the two of us walked to

a dark spot and I kissed her and helped her to the ground and slid on top of her.

"Ow! There's a root or something sticking in my back."

"Sorry." We eased along the ground until Rose said "That's better," and we kissed again, and I started to touch her all over. Her breasts felt like her mother's, the same shape, but firmer, and there wasn't an ounce of fat anywhere on her.

"I'm sorry, Virg, I'm just not getting into this out here. Let's go back to my house."

We slipped in through her garage and into the basement where her room was, but a friend of Janet's was crashing in Rose's bed until her mother got over her latest drunk, so we found a sleeping bag and covered ourselves with it on a roll-away bed in the hallway and now Rose was having more fun.

I entered her and began to thrust while she tried to swallow my tongue and I was so excited that I came immediately.

"My God, you were hot, weren't you?" She sounded disappointed.

"I'm sorry, it's been a while." I started to wiggle out from under the sleeping bag.

"And, where do you think you're going?"

"Well, I just figured--"

"--figured what? That you'd just leave me here, all hot and bothered?"

"Well, no, actually. I just thought you'd rather me leave, that's all."

"If that's what you want."

"It's not what I want, I thought that's what you'd want."

I was on my back now, and she lifted herself up on one arm so that her breasts were hanging down over my chest, and she swung them along my chest just grazing my nipples with her own, and she smiled. Then, she lifted herself upon me, straddling me, and moved up so that those tits were right above my face, and I started to get really hard again. I reached up with my hands and claimed them, craning my neck so that I could suck them, and squeeze them and then I was inside her again, feeling like I was going to explode so I did what a guy once told me to do: I thought about dead bodies.

I thought about all of those car-crash films they showed us in defensive driving class, the guy with his head half cut off, the woman who was laying across the hood of the Oldsmobile that she had just exited through the windshield, the sixteen-year-old girl who had fallen off the back of a motorcycle that was being chased by a police cruiser that couldn't stop before she vanished under it.

And it worked. Oh, I was still very hard, but I didn't want to come yet, and the inside of Rose's vagina felt wonderful, so much that I didn't want it to end. And then she was breathing loudly and propping herself up on her hands which were pressing down on my chest and then she was lurching, her red hair flying every direction and she spoke like she was possessed, "Oooohhhhhh, GOD, OOOOOOOHHHHH GOOOOOOOOOOOODDDDDD"

And I lost control too, how could I help it then? All the dead bodies in the world couldn't have stopped me from raising my hips up, and up, and up, up, up as I grabbed her shoulders and held on--.

"--Well, aren't we enjoying ourselves?" All went quiet as Betty's British accent filled the hall.

"He told me that he was going to screw you tonight, Rose, but I never thought he'd do it here."

Rose looked at me, puzzled.

"Rose, believe me, this was no game, no contest or anything like that, I really like you and--"

"--You told her?" She glared at me. Then she was getting up and taking the sleeping bag with her and I was naked so I started to pull on my jeans and Rose stormed into her room and slammed the door and I was going after her only when I got there, well that's when the door slammed, and I said "Rose," and "Rose," and "Please let me explain--"

And Betty was drunk, I could tell that. She had that glassy look about her, and she never stopped smiling, standing there on the first step up from the floor, half of her in view and the other hidden behind the stair casing, wearing a white terrycloth robe and holding a tumbler which contained mostly ice, now.

"Did you really think that Rose would believe you? Rose may be the prettiest of us, and she may be a terrific little fuck, but she will never believe that you care. You wanna know why, Virgil? I'll tell you why, cause you don't."

I was making the last knot in my sneakers (this was before running shoes) and had to strain my neck to watch her as she spoke.

"I admit, I didn't count on caring for Rose before tonight, but she is lovely, sensitive, shy, and so different from either you or Janet, she's like a little girl."

Betty shifted her weight, and her robe fell open. Although I had felt them before, I had never seen Betty's breasts, and now one was staring at me, and it was ample, and she was still smiling.

"Is that what you want, a little girl?"

God, she was teasing me, and I was getting hard again, and I moved closer to the mother. When I got right next to her she turned to face me fully, and she

opened her robe.

"This ain't no little girl, lad, don'tcha believe it for a minute. Well, go ahead, they're waitin', they're standing up just for you, Virgil."

I glanced at Rose's door behind me now, nothing. I looked into Betty's eyes and something, something said "Virgil, when are you going to get yourself under control?" And I thought, Not now, and reached for Betty.

The robe snapped shut.

"You Bastard! You would make love to my daughter one minute and me the next? You are a pig, Mister, and I want you out of my house this instant, and she pointed to the door."

"But, Betty--"

"OUT!"

I pulled my leather jacket over my shoulders just as the bedroom door opened and Rose came out, she had been crying, and apparently had heard her mother yelling at me. I walked toward the door that led to the garage and looked over my shoulder to see mother comforting daughter, the older leading the younger back into her room and I thought Women, I hate 'em.

When I got outside, I stuck a Marlboro on my mouth, lit it, then decided to piss on their lawn, which I did, then started my Mazda, pulled a u-turn in the street in

front of their house and punched the gas pedal. For a split second as I ran through the gears I felt like maybe, just maybe, I might one day be able to go back and set things right. But I buried the idea just as they had buried Jenny Pickrell, well before it had a chance, and watched the darkened, empty road ahead, wondering just where it would take me.

It was four in the morning and I was tired, and there was only one place where I knew that I could get some sleep. As I parked in the lot at the end of the pier and shut the engine down, I felt defeated. The ship, illuminated in the night by the harvest moon reflecting off the water reminded me of the reasons I had decided to enlist. It was so peaceful, the beam from the lighthouse out on the point that made its regular appearance, and the small rescue boats in the house at the station across the inlet looked so impressive, waiting to render aid to wayward seafarers, "Semper Paratus," always ready.

This was what I loved about the Guard, the part that only landlubbers saw, and I could have never known about the bad part. I strode up the gangway and waved to Miller, on duty in the Quartermaster's shack. He was probably getting high, so many of the crew stayed that way, and I walked to the fantail and peered over the harbor. Peace and quiet, lobster boats bobbing gently from the light breeze, yes, this, this was the way I loved the sea, the beckoning sea.

By 4:30 I was laying in my rack, the stench of beer-farts filling the compartment accompanied only by the chorus of snoring from other members of the crew, and I felt so young, so innocent, so alone in that feeling.

Below me, someone had already emptied Heflin's cubicle and locker of his belongings, and I thought That was fast. And then I remembered the woman.

Earlier, when the ship had tied up, I stood on the port side looking at the crowd which always gathered for our return; families and friends of the crew-members who, like us, had been put off from this reunion for an additional three days (asshole fisherman), and I couldn't help but notice the young woman dressed in jeans and a blue lined windbreaker, with a scarf and matching stocking hat to keep the cold onshore breeze at bay. People were waving and shouting greetings to one another, but not a word from the woman, or from the crew to her. As we got closer, I saw the face clearer, and recognized it as the same one that was once on the wall in the cubicle below, and I felt sick again. I turned away and thought My God, no one has told her, what was her name? Linda? Lydia?

Twenty minutes later, we were secured to the dock and the gangway was lowered and the first guy off was Sculnick and he was talking to the girl and then the girl was doubled over, her arms across her gut hugging herself and she was sobbing, shaking her head and saying something I could not make out. And Sculnick just stood there, all military like, and I just had to do something

so I jumped over the side and ran up to her and grabbed her around the shoulders and hugged her tightly, and I wanted to cry with her, I wanted to share the pain of my lost friend and her lost love, but I couldn't. I glared at Sculnick, and he just threw his hands out to his side and walked away.

That was when the Captain came down the gangway and over to where we were standing.

"Thanks, Peal, I'm sorry Miss--"

"Heflin," she said between sobs, "I'm Peter's sister."

"Miss Heflin," the captain was caught off guard, supposedly someone had contacted the family, and he told her so.

"I haven't talked to my family in years--I thought I'd surprise Pete." She almost smiled, then was crying violently again.

"That'll be all, Peal."

"But, Captain, she--"

"That's all, son."

"Yes, Sir," and I just walked away.

Now, as I lay in my rack, bringing the face of the woman to mind, and of her brother, and the void that each of their absence created, and the look on Rose's face when she had been betrayed, and Betty's glassy, cold stare--just like the Captain's--I felt so helpless, so

hopeless. And, only now, lying with the idea of sleep being slowly replaced by the images that I had been trying to avoid, was I able to close my eyes and purge my heart of the anguish, the pain, the self-pity, and cry.

The dank smell of hay chaff filled the air in the loft of our old barn, and I was standing at the opening looking out over the meadows and valleys surrounding our farm. My brother was below, thirty feet that looked to me like a hundred, a thousand, and he was saying, "Come on virgil, jump. I'll catch you." but I didn't believe him. He was standing in the pile of hay with his arms open wide. "See, I just did it, you can't get hurt." And I was maybe three years old which made him seven, and I guess he'd been jumping out of the barn for about four years and he seemed alright, but I was frozen with fear that somehow, some way, this would be the time that somebody got hurt and then I was standing on top of a stack of hay bales that had to have been at least a hundred feet up and Chuck was behind me and he was smiling and saying, "Go ahead, jump," but I couldn't and then he was smiling and he was getting closer and then he was pushing me and then I was falling, falling, the ground getting closer and no pile of hay to catch me and then someone was shaking me and the ground was getting closer, closer, and the shaking, shaking--

"Virgil, hey Virgil, are you going to sleep all day?"

And then I was awake, and Rick Graff was holding my arm and shaking the shit out of me, "Come on, man, wake up."

"Alright, alright, I'm awake already." I sat up in my rack and my head was still cloudy.

"What time is it anyway?" I asked.

"It's almost ten. Come on, let's go shopping."

"Yeah, yeah, that sounds like a good idea."

Whenever we got back to shore many of us did some much needed shopping. We hadn't much chance to spend money out to sea, although the ship's store carried some items that we needed. Cigarettes were only two dollars a carton, and most who smoked bought them by the case, but anything else we had to wait for.

"Let me get showered, Ricky, and I'll be ready in a few minutes."

"Alright, I'll meet you on the mess deck."

I admired this guy from Virginia Beach; he had been around some, and could play the guitar pretty well, and I had been playing for about five years then, so sometimes we would just sit around and play. And I knew that today we would hit one of the music stores in town, just to play some of the nice new guitars they had.

I gave the previous night some thought. What was I

thinking? Why didn't I go back and tell Rose that I really liked her? Why did I come back to the ship that I was never going to sail on again?

Rick and I piled in the Mazda, and I drove us slowly across the two bridges and around the winding turns that led to town. The local law enforcement held nothing but contempt for us Coasties, and anytime he could catch us going twenty-six miles an hour he nailed us, so the two miles seemed to take forever, although one could get used to it after a while.

First, I popped into the Greek place (best tuna sub I ever had

(No, wrong. The best was at a Al's Pizza, a little place in West Hanover, Massachusetts that I would go to on Saturday mornings after I had paid out for my paper route and had a little left over. I would reward myself with one of Al's perfect tuna subs that had plenty of mayonnaise and onion, and the bun was all Italian, crispy on the outside and soft and chewy on the inside. I rode the mile or so from my house to Al's on my three-speed, past Elgin field where once, the previous summer, I summoned all of my courage and stepped into a fast ball waist high on the outside corner and sent it sailing over the left field fence with the bases loaded, and, coming around third and heading for home, I looked into the stands as people were clapping and cheering, and I knew

them, and I knew that none of them were my parents, and then I realized that I didn't need them 'cause all the guys were beating me on my helmet and clapping me on the back, and the manager was saying, "I knew you could do it, I just knew you could.")

Then we went to the mall where the music store was, and Ricky and I went in and the manager, a very slim guy with a pencil thin mustache and jewelry that looked too big for him, smiled at us as we made our way to the guitar rack on the wall. There was a new Ovation roundback that Ricky liked to play, but the tone never did much for me. He took the instrument off the wall and found a seat and started his rock and roll.

For me, it was the Martin D-28 with its perfect neck and hand-made attention to detail, not to mention its deep, rich sound, that I couldn't live without. I carefully removed it from its hanger and cradled it in my lap as I took a stool. I began with John Denver's "Annie's Song," and then into Dan Fogelberg's "Part of The Plan," which was number one last year.

"When are you two going to break down and actually buy one of those guitars?" The slim guy, whose name was also Rick, had come over after helping a man and his son set up a rental on a trombone and some lessons.

"When are they going on sale," asked Ricky, smiling and playing all the while.

"Sale? Sale? You think with these prices I can afford a sale?" That was me. Every time Ricky asked that question, Rick said the same thing, so I spared him the feigned frustration and breath, and he just looked at me, then he smiled, then he laughed, and then we all laughed and I told him that seven-hundred sixty was more than I could afford, probably ever, and he placed his hands to his ears, turned and walked away.

We left, picked up a six-pack, and went for a drive along the coast. You would think that two guys who have just been through a nightmare like we had would just as soon have stayed clear from the coast, but no, we both enjoyed the sea from this safe distance.

"How ya feeling, Peal?" Ricky broke the silence as we passed Wentworth By The Sea, a very posh getaway south of Portsmouth where only the very rich from Boston and beyond spent the summer. The place was huge, spanning about ten acres overlooking the rocky coast, and had, some one had counted, two-thousand, three-hundred and eleven windows.

"What'cha mean, Ricky?"

"You know what I mean, about Hef?"

"Oh, well, I'm feeling a lot better now; you know, things happen when you are in our business. I'm not saying that I'm over it, but just that it doesn't hurt so bad, now." I took a long swig of Budweiser.

"That's a good attitude. But, how do you feel?"

"I told you, I'm alright."

"Yeah, I know. I didn't know Hef that well, but he seemed like a nice guy. You know, some of the guys are saying that he jumped--"

"--What guys? Huh? Who? Who's saying that shit?"

"Take it easy; just some of the guys knew that he didn't--"

"--didn't what? Didn't what? Tell me."

"Never mind, I didn't know you would be this upset. I thought you were feeling alright."

"I am, I am, really. Aw, Ricky, you're right, you didn't know Hef that well, but I did. Hear this now: Pete Heflin did not jump over the side on purpose, okay?"

"Okay, I believe you," and he drank and lit a smoke.

I returned my eyes to the road for a moment, but something, something out there, called to me. It said, "Virgil, remember our promise," and I looked but I saw nothing, nothing except the flat, blue, endless sea, and then, without realizing it, I muttered "He didn't jump, goddamit."

"Pete, you like the Coast Guard?" I asked the guy sitting in the stern of my Uncle's fourteen footer. It was early May of '76 and the Blues, it was rumored, were

beginning to run, although it was a bit early for their migration. The sun was high and bright, but on the water, in an open boat, it wasn't exactly hot, so we were dressed in sweatsuits and windbreakers, and since neither of us had had a strike, we just sat and drank and talked.

"Yeah, I guess. The pay's good, and I like the travel, but it can be dangerous. How about you, Virg?"

"I don't know, I thought it'd be different. I thought I might get a lighthouse or something. In fact, I did have the chance to go to a lighthouse, on the Great Lakes, though. That didn't seem like any lighthouse I'd ever heard of. You know what's amazing, Pete? How every minute decision that we make can change our lives forever. I mean, they called my name, when I was in the room at Cape May, and there it was, this lighthouse on the Great Lakes, and all through boot camp I had told everybody that I was going to try to get a light, and I walked up there, staring at the words on the blackboard, knowing in my heart that here it was, fate was smiling on me, I was going to serve on a lighthouse!

"And when they asked me where I wanted to go, I just opened my mouth and said, 'I'll take the Cutter Aggressive In New Hampshire' and that was it. I took my seat and my friends in my company just stared at me with their mouths open."

Now Peter was looking at me, wondering why I took a

cutter over a lighthouse, and I think he was about to say something when his line started to pay out and about forty feet from the side of the boat a beautiful fish broke the surface.

"A Blue, Pete, you got a Blue! Don't jerk him, give him a minute," God the thing must have been twelve pounds or more, a nice fish.

"Fuck, he's going under the boat," said Pete, and he moved toward me and I got out of his way after reeling my line in, and the little wooden boat started to rock and Pete tripped over one of the seats and landed face down in the bilges while his line caught on the stem of the boat and snagged under a piece of metal trim. I lurched to free it but couldn't get there before it snapped and went limp in Pete's hand.

Pete struggled to his feet and I turned around in time to see him with his empty rod in one hand and his bleeding nose in the other.

"Fuck," he said, the goddam thing's broken."

And I don't know what I found so funny but I started to laugh, and laugh and Pete, well he just got angry.

"What the fuck's so funny? Huh?"

And I really didn't know what was, so I just shook my head and held my arms out to the side and kept laughing hysterically and Pete must have had all that he could take because he threw his rod down and made his way

toward me and here, three miles off the coast of New Hampshire in a fourteen foot wooden boat, Pete grabbed me by the jacket lapels and heaved me over the side.

I surfaced in the icy water gasping for breath because of the chill, and now Pete was laughing and saying "How's that, pretty funny, don't you think?"

"Pete, get me out of here, please, it's really cold." And I could feel my lips starting to seize up, and my arms were tightening, and I said, louder now, "Pete, please, I'm freezing, you don't know how cold it is."

"You gonna stop laughing at my nose?"

"Yes, yes, anything, please, I'm not kidding."

He helped me out and it was then, when he saw me up close, that he apologized and said, "You know, you look pretty good in blue," and then we both had a good laugh.

We had started the engine to make our slow way back in when Pete said it.

"You know," he started, "I'll bet if someone really wanted to kill himself all he'd really have to do is jump off a boat in the North Atlantic in the middle of the winter. Think about it, Virg, it would be pretty quick, almost painless, and the family wouldn't have any body to worry about. What do you think?"

"I don't want to think about it, Pete. I almost drown when I was kid, and it's the last way I ever want

to go. Yeah, it was peaceful under the water, but I was only six years old and even then I knew that I didn't want to die young."

"Yeah, me either. But if a person wanted to, that wouldn't be so bad, don't you think?"

"Hef, please, drop it. Yeah, it probably beats hanging yourself, or sticking a forty-five in your mouth, but I'd say a bottle of Nembutal chased with Jack would still be easier."

"But then you've still got the body to deal with."

"Yes, yes, Pete, drowning in the North Atlantic in the winter time is the best of suicides, alright? Now drive this thing back, I'm hungry and I'm getting hypothermia out here."

And with that, Pete slammed the throttle on my Uncle's little boat all the way forward, pointed the nose toward the inlet next to our ship, and we were gone.

"You say something, Ricky?"

"I said, 'What are you going to do tonight?'"

"Is this a date? Are you asking me out or something?"

"Fuck you asshole--"

"'Fuck?' 'Asshole?' Why you little devil, Ricky, you are asking me out."

He laughed.

"No, sorry, Peal, not tonight. However, I do know these two girls who might be free."

"Jesus, Ricky, you've been in New Hampshire for, how long? A month, maybe? And already you've got not one, but two girls who might want to go out? Now that's fast."

"Forget it, never mind. I'll just have do them both."

"Un-huh, that's right, Mr. Big Dick."

"Hey, how'd you know my nick-name?"

"Your girlfriend told me, last night. She said, 'That Ricky, I like to joke with him and call him Mr. Big Dick.' And then she just burst out laughing."

"Why that bitch. I told her to go find herself some asshole, but I never thought she'd really do it."

And then we were both laughing, male bonding, although we didn't know that's what it was called, screaming down 1A, tossing back the suds. Two guys having a hell of a time on Terra Firma.

We weren't scheduled to go back out to sea for another month, so the days were filled with painting, and a little painting, some painting, with a touch of painting thrown in now and again. Just when you thought that there was nothing left to paint, some chief decided that we ought to put another coat on the decks, or the lettering, or the "racing stripe."

And the nights, the nights we went out drinking, or to the movies, or over to one of the guys' apartments for a party. I even stayed aboard some nights, watching T.V. or playing my guitar.

I went home to my parent's house a couple of weekends when I didn't have duty, and struck up a relationship with a girl that I had known for some time, and had wanted to go out with for almost as long, but never had the courage to ask. Irene was beautiful, in that scandinavian sort of way. Blonde, tall, beautiful blue eyes, shapely with large, firm breasts. But I knew the first time we went out that we'd never amount to anything.

I took her to the movies, and to McDonalds after (big spender) and when we stopped in the parking lot at the grange hall near my house, I was surprised how easily she let me feel her up. She stroked my beard, and I felt good, comfortable, but I couldn't have sex with her; it

was quite a letdown after worshipping her for so many years of fantasizing.

We went out a couple of more times, we drove up to Acadia National Park in the northeastern part of the state of Maine, and I told her that it wasn't working out between us, but she didn't seem to understand.

"Don't you think I'd make a wonderful wife?" she asked.

"Probably, Irene, you will make an excellent wife someday. But it will never be mine."

"Oh, I see."

If you have never driven for six hours with a companion in complete silence, there's no way to explain it. Suffice it to say that it was like having an elephant in your living room and your mom just vacuums around it.

By then all of my school friends had gone their way, most to college, and I rarely saw them, which was good, considering. They were all so proud of me when I joined the Guard; if they saw me now, how unhappy I was, how scared I was, how determined I was that I would never go to sea again, they would be disappointed. Two weeks and we would be back at it again, or rather, they would. I wasn't going, no matter what. I thought of going to Tennessee to hide out with some friends I had there, or maybe to California, to try to break into the music

business, but really, I had no plans, other than I wasn't going out again.

When I returned to the ship one day near middle of December, I couldn't help but notice the message on the board outside the yeoman's office.

Please Post: The Commandant has announced that he intends to formulate, for the purpose of celebrating the Bicentennial, a band which will be made up of regular duty personnel. It is anticipated that this band will stay together for the entire year, 1976. Players of marching and concert band instruments of all levels of proficiency are needed, and anyone desiring a transfer should fill out a regular transfer chit, #445.0981, no later than 31 December, 1975. The band will be stationed at Governors Island, New York.

A band! What an excellent way to get off of this big white one. Within minutes I had my transfer chit, and it only took me two hours to fill it out, which is quick for the military. Next, I filled out a leave form, which gave me two weeks off for R & R, and helped me get ready to go. To New York! Where was Governor's Island? I didn't know.

"Hey Boats," I stopped the first class Boatswains Mate as he passed the mess deck.

"What is it, Peal," he answered with that same lackluster voice that expressed his attitude that you just know hadn't changed in over thirty years.

"Do you know where this Governor's Island is?"

"New York."

"Right, I know that. But where in New York?"

"It's a little island right off the tip of Manhattan in the middle of New York Harbor."

"Noooooooo Shit?"

"Look at the map for yourself," and he was gone.

I hurried to the map room in CIC, and quickly found the New York map and yes, yes, there it was, Governor's Island.

I was going to spend the year in New York City!

I phoned home and told my parents, even though my transfer had not yet been approved.

"What made you decide to do that?" My Mother's voice had that ~~this-is-all-so-shocking-and-I-don't-really-approve-of-new-things-and-what-are-you-running-from?~~ air to it. It was the same voice she used when I decided to join the Guard, the same voice when I decided to learn to play the guitar, and any number of things that sounded to her as though I was trying to live my own life, to better myself, to live without having to lean on

her anymore,

"Mom, it's a chance to get off of this ship, at least for a while."

"What's wrong with the ship?" I had told her several times about my apparent inability to appease the demons of nausea at sea. "After all, isn't that what you joined the Coast Guard for?" This was her little way of reminding me that enlisting was something she didn't approve of, and that I was getting what I deserved for going against her grain.

"Mom, you know that I can't go ten feet on that ship without puking my guts out all over the place, this band will at least keep me on solid ground for a year."

"In New York city."

"Yes, in New York City. What's wrong with that?"

"Well, I don't know--there's an awful lot of crime there. I just don't want to get a call from somebody saying that you've been murdered or something. There's a lot of drugs and wicked women there, too."

"I've met more wicked women in your church than I have anywhere else, and--"

"--It always has to come back to the church thing, doesn't it? You can't talk to me about the morning paper without mentioning something awful about religion, can you? Can you?"

"Mom--"

"--Well go then, go. Go to New York just because you get a little seasick. I don't care if you don't have the guts to stand up and take your medicine like a man. Go!"

"I see, thanks for your support, Mom. Goodbye."
And I hung up. This began a period of many years of hostility between both of my parents and myself, and, frankly, I never gave a shit. They were lousy parents, the old man always out working, stopping long enough on Saturday morning to rouse my brother and me into working in the yard, shoveling snow, "cleaning" a shed, whatever he felt like, just as long as we weren't having any fun.

And Mom always bitching about how stupid Chuck and I were, how we didn't care at all about ourselves, "That Gretchen, you boys should be more like her. Never gave me a bit of trouble." We were always being compared to our older sister, Gretchen. She was ten years older than us and my mom, I always felt, wished that she had stopped at one. Sometimes I had the same wish.

And now, now that I had decided to go out on my own, to get back into playing in a band again, that was the last straw. She never believed that my music was worth anything, unless, of course, I was playing in church, "Glorifying God."

I called her back.

"Oh, by the way, Mother, I'll be getting paid to

play my music, like you never said would happen." Slam. The other end went dead and, as far as I was concerned, so did the person who killed it.

I stayed aboard through Christmas, and I have to say the thought of being alone for the holiday was much worse than actually doing it. I sat in the captains chair on the bridge and wrote songs while most of the other crewmembers went to parties and home with their families. The quiet, frigid nights that finally came to New England made the isolation not so lonely. Every time the wind howled it was like someone, maybe Pete Heflin, was talking low and sweet, telling me everything was going to be okay.

And the time could not have flown fast enough for me. I was hungry to get out of New Hampshire, to get away from the bad memories of the ship, my family, of Rose, Betty, and Janet, and get on with my life, like George Bailey shaking the dust of this crummy little town off of me. And, yet I still felt guilty, like I had let some people down, like the time I ran in from the sidelines during a Pee-wee football game and I thought I was supposed to be in the game only I wasn't and then the guy with the ball ran right past me fifty yards into the end zone and I was only seven-years-old but the coach screamed at me and I cried and he said "Good," and then

I ran to my parents car and then they made me go back over to the bench but I quit and never went back.

But, I reasoned, that was different than this. This was running, no, no, bettering myself, taking advantage of opportunity, moving forward, finally getting a break, finding my niche, being the best I could be, like my parents taught me. The parents who now wanted to renege on all of that talk and make me stay in New Hampshire and get seasick and maybe die from it, all because I said I would? It didn't make sense to me.

Part II.
New York
