

The Other Side of Things

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By Levi Gardner

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Empty parking spaces in front of Bryan dormitory waited for Vicky Swede to park her red Volvo station wagon. Mid-May clouds scuttled low in the sky and filtered soft light onto the red brick building where her son Vic waited for her. He had turned twenty-one on the 6th of the month. Vicky was forty-five, but with her long legs and slim athletic body, her short black hair and well-kept face, she often passed for ten years younger. She'd worn a sleeveless black sweater and a string of pearls her husband Fritz had given her on their wedding three years earlier. Her blue jeans fit snugly around the delicate curves of her hips. Her lipstick glowed with a reddish-orange tint, and she kissed her son's cheek after she entered his room.

"Hi, honey. Are you ready?" she asked.

"The books are boxed," he said. He snapped shut a suitcase. "The computer and the cell phone are packed in the carrying case. The bedding and the clothes are in the suitcase and the coat bag." He pointed his long arm toward a print his mother had given him during the Christmas past. "The Hopper print is sitting against the wall over there. I thought you might want to put it in its case."

"Indeed." Vicky looked at her son a moment longer. He stood over six feet tall and sported a wiry body with wide shoulders. He appeared to be in excellent physical

condition. His hair shone with the same blackness as hers, and when he smiled comma shaped dimples cut through his cheeks and reminded her of his father. She usually managed to hide the feelings his dimples and his resemblance to his father stimulated in her, and sometimes she would blush and turn away. She did this now, turning toward the door to look behind her, as if looking for someone not there.

"Go ahead mom, pack the print," Vic said.

Vicky wrapped the well-framed facsimile of Edward Hopper's "The Lighthouse at Two Lights" in a cushioned black cover and placed the covered print into a hard carrying case she fastened shut. She had matted and framed the print especially as a gift for Vic, and had given him the carrying case as well to help protect the glassed frame whenever it was moved. They'd toured a Hopper exhibit in Richmond a couple of years earlier, spending a Saturday afternoon at the Virginia Museum of Fine Art, and they both fell in love with Hopper's lighthouses. They had agreed about how his style of realism seemed to mix itself with the natural and dreamlike, as if his art came from an edge where one world flowed into another. Hopper's images at once troubled and soothed both of them, so Vicky bought the print and framed it for her son as a reminder of that autumn afternoon over two years earlier. Looking at it for a moment, she realized that Hopper's painting had to do with longing - with the reach of light across oceans to issue warning, as if to beacon safety in the presence of danger. The hot blush she'd felt upon seeing her son's dimples changed into a warm feeling of understanding about Hopper's capture of longing - or so she understood the feeling in her body as she packed the print and picked up its carrying case.

Her son wore cologne and a pair of blue jeans more scruffy and patched than hers. He'd dressed in a white button down shirt with the top button undone, as she'd taught him to do when he dressed casually. He walked in leather sandals and his long feet exposed closely clipped toenails.

"Is there something to carry your belongings to the car on?" she asked.

"There's a handcart outside, up the hall a ways. One of the residents used it this morning. It should be right outside." He smiled at her and she left the room to get the cart.

Vicky rolled the cart up to the door and Vic stacked his boxes of books on it. The boxes had no tops, so she could read some of the titles. The authors included Aristotle and Derrida, Rawls and Nussbaum, Foucault and Beaudrillard. He'd always had big ambitions as a thinker. They made her fonder of him, though she sensed these ambitions were risky, and that they had contributed to his troubles in the past.

"Do you read anything other than philosophy these days?" Vicky asked.

"Not in a while," he said. "I've got my studies set up to graduate with two easy semesters next year. I've been busy preparing the foundations of a senior thesis and I think I know where I want to go with it. But you didn't come up here to gab with me about school and philosophy degrees, did you?"

"No, no Vic, I didn't. I came down here to take you home and maybe gab with you about what you're going to do this summer."

"I was afraid of that," he said, putting another box on the cart.

"My father wants to see you while you're out of school. In fact, he wants you to spend the summer with him." She bit at her bottom lip. She anticipated a sudden shift of mood.

Vic provided it, straightening, looking at her. "I couldn't possibly do that." His glare bored into her.

"Well, I know you want to work. I know you want to go to Altavista and do what you've done the last three summers, but I think my father has something else in mind for you this year." She rested her hands on her hips, curving her elbows outward. She was prepared to dig in and argue if necessary.

"Mom, I haven't seen your father since I was sixteen. I mean, I like him, and I know I owe him a lot, a great deal in fact, and I don't want to hurt him, but why, I mean what on Earth does he want with me at this point? For an entire summer?" He turned away from her and picked up another box and dropped it onto the cart with a loud thud. "I'm just about to finish the biggest project, or one of the biggest projects, in my life, and now he wants me to do, what?, spend the summer sitting on his front porch watching the traffic pass by on 301? I mean, come on. It's outrageous. It's outrageous." His face reddened and sweat formed a mist on his forehead.

"That's not it at all. He doesn't want to waste your time or have you come and hold his hand. He's not that kind of man. You know that." Her arms fell to her side.

"Well what is it then?"

"He told me he wants you to drive him on a long trip."

"What kind of trip?" His voice gained pitch with this question, and his face soured with a frown. He wiped his forehead with his sleeve.

"Don't sulk about it. He's very, very old and he wants to see places he hasn't seen in years. He wants to recollect his life, before..." She caught herself, closing down her voice to keep from releasing a rush of emotion she felt spring up from her chest. It was a tide of feeling that collected in her throat behind a dam of timid uncertainty.

"He wants me to spend the entire summer with him?" His voice squeaked. He sounded boyish to Vicky. His face contorted. It looked as if he was being told someone he cared about had just turned against him. "Astonishing," he moaned.

"He wants you to drive him to these places he's lived in the past, Vic. I think he wants to come up to Virginia and see Navy friends in Norfolk. I think he wants to go down east in North Carolina and see the places where he grew up in the depression. I think he wants to go out to the Dakotas and visit some of his Sioux friends. He wants all kinds of things. But mostly, I think he wants to finish his life, and he wants you to help him with that." She spoke softly, and she could see its effects on him.

"Is he dying?" he asked with more gentleness in his voice.

"He thinks he is. You know, he's seventy-nine. He's been alone since you were born. I think he's lonely. I think he needs someone."

"You think he needs someone," he echoed. Vic sat down in a thick green chair he had moved into the room from the dorm lobby. He looked out the window and withdrew into a moment of silence. His face reflected light from the window, where the curtains were open and the football stadium was visible across the lawn and beyond a long row of boxwoods.

Vicky walked up behind him. She placed her hands on his shoulders and looked out the window in the same direction as he.

"Why is it," he asked, "why the hell is it that whenever I get close to finishing something really important, some intrusion comes along and misdirects things?" He crossed his legs and tilted his head to the right, resting it at a slant. "I knew something like this was going to happen. I don't think I can do it, mom. I don't think I can spend my summer with my grandfather traveling across the country." He leaned back into the chair. "It's not what I want. I want to make money. I want to pay for my schooling. I want to finish my degree. I want to go to law school."

"That's a lot of Fs. That's a lot of wants. Sometimes things aren't about what anyone wants just for their self." She said the word self with a hiss.

"Damn it, you're right But shit. I mean, you're right. That was a lot of I. 1,1,1. Me, me, me. But I'm being trained to be that way. You know, school, competition, it isn't about altruism. Be a nice guy and express some generosity and you get eaten up." He rubbed his sleeve against his forehead again.

Vicky rubbed his neck, tolerating his language, pressing her hands deep into the muscles of his neck and massaging the folds of his shoulders with her long and elegant fingers. She looked down and said to him, "I'll take you up to Arlington and you can spend some time there relaxing. Fritz is having some troubles making money, you know."

"That should make things easier," he interrupted sarcastically.

"Your," she swallowed, and then she continued, "your step-sister Kathleen is there.'

"Ah, my favorite lesbian," he snorted.

"Don't be harsh, dear."

"But mom, she is my favorite lesbian. I mean it." He rolled his eyes up and looked at her, playful for a moment. Vicky recognized his attempt at manipulation.

"Well, don't be too sure about that lesbian business," she said. "I think she's got a boyfriend in Utrecht. She's going back in a week, and I think he's the reason." She dug her hands deeper into his shoulders.

"How am I going to make money this summer?" he asked. "They're waiting for me at the Burlington plant. Aren't they? Didn't Fritz set that up? Didn't you talk to them?" His eyes were quizzical. His shoulders tightened.

"You've become even more practical than you were when you were a boy. Your grandfather has some money for you. He says he'll compensate you dollar for dollar for what you would've made at your summer job." She smiled down at him, rubbing his shoulders in circles, swirling her hands in light, fast movements.

"He has the money, then? I could easily have made twelve thousand dollars working with Stanton Cross in weave room."

He kept his gaze on her and she nodded. As she did so, she ran her tongue behind her tightly closed lips and along the row of her top teeth. She narrowed her eyes.

"Not that that's what I'm interested in, mind you," he assured her. "Don't be so impatient with me, Mom."

"William and Mary seems to be changing you," Vicky said. "I'm not sure I like it all that much. You seem very competitive and money oriented."

"You have to admit that the money thing sheds a different light on things, though. Money is important."

She nodded her agreement and withdrew her hands. Money was important, and its absence was beginning to have effects on her and her husband it was going to be difficult to conceal for more than a few months.

He moved forward in the chair. "Well then, let's go. Do you want to go to one of the Taverns or to the pottery factory?" he asked.

"Not today. I want to get us home. If we leave now, maybe we can get there before it gets dark."

Vic pushed the cart of boxes and bags down the temporary ramp over the old stairway leading out of the dorm. A large magnolia tree was in full bloom and the sweet fragrance of its large white flowers pleased Vicky. She walked over to the tree and took one of the blossoms from its lower branches into her hands and pinched it free with her thumb and index finger. She placed the bloom in a small pottery bowl with a lipped bottom she had in the back seat of her car. She'd eaten her breakfast cereal from it yesterday morning while on her way to work at the framing and print shop where she made an inadequate living in Arlington. Fiber from bran flakes and a thin film of curdled milk stuck to its ceramic sides.

"This will sweeten our trip," she said, pouring some of her bottled water into the milky bowl and placing it with its fresh white blossom on the coffee cup container sticking out of her dashboard. The bowl held in the coffee container but wobbled enough on its perch to make a spill possible. She'd have to attend to it on the drive.

Vic placed his belongings in the back of Vicky's station wagon and she drove the Volvo out to Interstate 64 and headed west to Richmond. She took the connector to 1-95, heading toward the nation's capital, in or near which she had lived since she'd left

Williamsburg for the final time herself not long after her first husband, Vic's father, had disappeared. Vic had been nine years old when his father deserted them. She was in her early thirties. She could not come to Williamsburg without recalling the time she'd spent there, dramatic and unsettled portions of her life that included her own aborted undergraduate education at the same college her son now attended. She remembered her love affair and marriage to Ty Casey, a man who looked much like his son, and whom she'd always considered a taller, more American version of the young Omar Shariff, minus the mustache and Arab-British accent. Ty was passionate and foolish and he was a failure at life. He was a flirt and a hedonist and he floundered when he studied at William and Mary. He'd entered school at twenty-one, following a three year Navy hitch. He came no closer to graduating than Vicky did. They'd both been marginal and wayward about academics; they didn't study or finish things. Ty had claimed an identity as a poet; Vicky had been a piano major. They embodied roles when younger that had to do mostly with the games and tricks of the party life. They lived as children in adult bodies interested in frenzied sexual dissipation and better living through chemistry. They cultivated the identity of cultural deviants and modeled poses of exasperation, living in ways that told others clearly how to get nowhere in the world. School ended and what passed for adult life came on. Money, work, independent housing and a child appeared in all their raging fury. Vicky survived it, but after a decade of pointless conflicts between mindless pleasure seeking and boring domesticity, Ty ran away.

Vic seemed early on to her to have resisted the more jagged edges of despair evident in his parents' lives. He matured quickly and proved functionally well adjusted most of his still brief existence, except for one extended and remarkably difficult period

in the heart of his adolescence when some venom unfolded from his psyche that had nearly destroyed him. Vicky didn't like to think about it. It was an old and complicated story. Her father and his friends were involved in helping Vic come back to himself after a sudden and catastrophic period of brokenness and self-abandon and after several weeks of literally being lost on the road. It had involved a failed school project, and what amounted to a nervous breakdown, then a disappearance that nearly drove Vicky out of her mind. Fortunately, through some apparent act of grace, he was alive and cognizant when her father and one of his Navy friends tracked him down over a thousand miles from home.

From a couple of months after his fourteenth birthday to just before his sixteenth, Vic spent his time as a resident at a boy's psychiatric camp in the mountains of North Carolina called Noble Forest. It still seemed strange to Vicky how, when he'd run away, he'd burst into full blown madness, and then, when he returned two years later, it was as if nothing unusual had happened at all. He had never repeated the interval of madness that took his mind captive- at least not yet. It made her wonder, though. Whether his demons been cast out, or simply gone into hiding, there remained a compliant surface of sweetness about her son she that pleased her, along with a lingering concern about him that sometimes made her question his growing qualities of maturity and seriousness, qualities he carried forward now in his early twenties with promise of genuine success.

Vic put on a pair of earphones connected to the dash board and turned on Vicky's CD player. She'd been listening to Satie and Brahms on the drive down. She had several other CDs scattered across the passenger's side of the Volvo, She knew that Vic liked her taste in music and that he was not easily entertained or pleased by music that reflected

the chaotic agitations and well-financed ugliness of pop culture. Vicky's own piano skills had once carried grace, even beauty, but she'd come to neglect her musical practice and had taken few risks with her musical talent. When Vic was small, and his father was still around, she had taught piano in their home in Williamsburg. She had often played Satie's Gnossiennes and Gymnopaedies for him, since he cooed and smiled as a toddler when she performed them with only her child as her audience.

"Is the Yamaha still in the basement?" he asked in a loud voice.

"Of course it's still there." She nodded her head, knowing he couldn't hear her through the earphones now that he'd put them on and turned up the CD player's volume.

"Is it still covered?" he asked.

She did not answer, but nodded again, remembering that she had not played a note in three years.

"You were a fine pianist." He adjusted the ear phones. "I don't know why you quit."

"Thank you." She mouthed the words with exaggerations of her lips, as if speaking to someone deaf.

"The only time I hear Satie..."

She reached over and patted him on the leg. "Stop shouting," she shouted. She got his attention and moved her hand away.

He nudged the left ear phone back and kept the right side in place. "Sorry," he said. "I just remembered how I loved the way you played the Russians." He looked ahead at the road. "Tchaikovsky, Rachimanoff, Khatchiturian - you played them so

well. Hey, remember that Sunday you sat me down and played that LP of Khatchaturian's, what was it called?"

"Concerto for Piano and Orchestra," she answered.

"God, I loved it." He spoke more softly, as if he'd moved from a rock concert to a chamber music recital. "The time you took to explain its themes - I don't remember a thing about your technical explanations, but I remember your presence, the way you looked, the way you moved across the room dancing and conducting. You were so passionate. You were beautiful that day."

For a moment, she looked at him and saw him looking ahead at the road, as if he was looking back in time by looking forward in space.

"I wrote a paper about that day for a class this past spring. I concluded humans are made of large forces and feelings. Things greater than anything we can make clear in conventional language work through music." He adjusted the ear phones one more time, keeping his left ear open to hear her part of the conversation. "Great music puts us in a kind of rapture, doesn't it?" He looked over at her.

"I remember that you seemed a little frightened by that music. I also think that you're exaggerating my skills at the keyboard." She looked ahead at the oncoming traffic. She checked her rear view mirror. She glanced at her son. She loved the feeling she received from his praise and his attention.

"It wasn't the music that frightened me. It was that story you told me about the composer, about how Russian music and Russian politics blend inspiration and madness. I mean, it was as if there was an order evident in the music that is never evident in the human world. The music seemed to me to plead for kindness in a world where kindness

was impossible." He snapped the earphones back on, covering his left ear, then wrinkled his brow, and removed the left earphone once again. "It told us, no, it sang to us, about a possibility we prevent ourselves from realizing in the clumsiness of the ordinary forgetful world."

"You're sensitive that way," she said. "You've always sensed things behind the scenes, as it were."

"Yeah? Guess who I got that from." He pointed his right index finger directly at her heart.

She laughed delicately and kept her eyes on the road.

She fell into the swarm of thoughts and memories that come to entertain and distract the mind from the monotonous and mechanical repetitions of long drives. Of course, she returned to thoughts of Ty, whom she had heard from only twice since he had left them. There'd been a letter and several hundred dollars sent from Wyoming five years after he'd left. She'd never found out how he got the address, and she moved a month later. He'd called on a Sunday afternoon a year before she married Fritz and told her he was in Northern California at a Men's Gathering in a Redwood Grove just inland from Mendocino. He said that he'd been involved in a ritual to grieve the unaccounted deaths in the world. He'd realized that their marriage had been such a death, and it had torn him apart inside. "Get over it," she'd said to him. "Your grief is of no importance to me." She had lied to him, but it was a wise and necessary lie. "Don't be so fucking silly," she finished. "Don't be so goddamned naive." She had the number changed the next day and paid to keep it unlisted.

She thought inevitably of her father, of how alone he had been since his wife and her mother died and since Vic had been born, events that happened, she recalled with a familiar flash of anguish, on the same day. She remembered how Vic had runaway from home after the destruction of his ninth grade science project had caused such a furor in his school, and how her father had found a Sioux tracker, an old Navy friend, to find him. Her father and the tracker somehow located Vic in Northern Michigan, hallucinating his brains out, looking for his father, as if his father could be found by hitchhiking to the edge of the world. The search had taken shape in her imagination as if the two of them had been scouring the Prairie on foot, riding horses and studying the ground for footprints, though the tracker had actually used phone systems information, checked hotel police reports, social security numbers and had conversations with teachers, friends and relatives to establish linkages, scenes, impulses and longings in his mind that he could read like facts on an accounting sheet. She thought of Fritz, who was depressed and drinking too much. She thought of Kathleen, her step daughter, of her red hair, her freckles, her stocky upper body, fiery blue eyes and playful personality. She thought of how much she liked Kathleen, of how indeed in some way she loved Kathleen. Kathleen was smarter than Vic, but she would never get as far as him, even though she came from a better background and had sharper edges of sensibility and wit.

Vicky drove along the northbound Interstate picking her way through traffic and her isolated thoughts. Cars and trucks passed her and were passed by her. She began to see the machines as if they were extensions of their inhabitants. She thought of how none of them knew where the others were going, that they all traveled in isolation toward unknown destinations, like dust in a prairie storm, or music in an empty auditorium.

The orange sun was setting to the west of the city as Vicky and her son drove into Washington. She had noticed that Vic had listened to the Eroica symphony and a movement or two from Brahms' first during the drive north. He was leaning back in the seat and had closed his eyes.

With a quick jerk, Vic took off the earphones and asked Vicky how Kathleen was doing.

"Why do you ask?" she answered.

"I like her." He unplugged the earphones and stored them in the glove compartment.

"Well, she's playful. She just got her M.Ed, diploma from Maryland, a year after she graduated. She'd left for Europe last spring and had left no forwarding address, so her father told them to hold it." Vicky looked at an eighteen wheeler roar by her at eighty-five miles an hour. "She had several hundred dollars in unpaid parking fines and library fees and he had to pay them. She got it in the mail the day before yesterday and I offered to frame it for her." A state trooper rushed by, probably chasing the eighteen wheeler that had just sped past. "You know, she's messy and rebellious even though she's twenty-six."

"I used to think of her as foolish. I'm not so sure anymore."

"No, she's no fool. But there is something wild about her."

"Do you think her wildness, as you call it, has to do with her mother?" He looked over at her and she made brief eye contact with him.

"Of course it has to do with her wildness. By the way, do you mind if I smoke a cigarette?" She looked back over at him anxiously.

"Smoking again, huh?"

She shrugged, as if helpless.

"Yeah, go ahead." He depressed his window button and a blast of air rushed through the small opening. Vicky did the same thing to her window and lit a long American cigarette with the car lighter. She held it close to the window.

"You may breathe while I smoke," she joked.

"The way she lost her mother, you know," he continued. "To breast cancer like that. Don't you think she grew through it? You know, it's like the way she was forced to adapt to that kind of loss, somehow she's a real human being because of it."

"Maybe. But she's troubled in a way she doesn't like people to know. I think she acts out her anguish as a kind of political protest against the world."

"What's wrong with that? Politics are anguish."

"That's a bit of a radical statement for you." She inhaled smoke and blew it toward the window.

"Not radical in any conventional way," he said.

"I think you're making me nervous here." She blew smoke out the window. "You sound like you've been questioning the system or something. The last time I thought that way I was preparing to turn my life into an act of pointless rebellion." She drew heavily on her cigarette and it brought some chemically induced relief.

"I don't mean to like some angry rebel. Maybe you've been around Washington for too long. Up there, a person begins to carry all the received banalities of the political culture. And that, it seems to me, is an ocean of anguish."

"Yeah, but it's not personal anguish." She took another puff,

"Anguish is always personal. Anxiety, anguish, anger, all those angst words, they're carried by individuals, even when they're inflicted by systems. This is what happens in human groups. It's what happens in human hearts. The politics of anguish."

She turned and looked directly into his eyes for a second. "What's that got to do with Kathleen?" she asked.

"Well, she seems the last year or so to have become a person who's transforming her angst into forms of play. You know, she's exploring. She's a kind of adventurer. She's collecting experiences she will use to make a structure in her life."

"Is that the philosophy major or Noble Forest speaking?" she asked pointedly.

"Both," he answered. "It's both."

"Are you happy?" she asked suddenly, breaking up the context of the conversation to get its object off Kathleen.

"Happy? At the moment? Well, yes, come to think of it, I am. Why do you ask?"

"Just asking. If you're happy, you should try to enjoy it."

"While it lasts, you mean. Yeah, I learned that one, too."

"From where?" She flicked the ashes toward the crack in the window.

"Your father. He sent me a letter on my birthday. You remember. May 6th? Twenty-one?" He looked at her with his head twisted slightly to one side.

"I didn't know he did that. It's very unusual for him to call any attention to that day. I know it's your birthday, but it's not a good day for him." She flicked her cigarette out the window and pushed the button to seal it. The surprise made her anxious again. Vic closed his window, too.

"A big day and a bad day, too, I guess," he said.

She exited the Interstate one exit beyond where she usually turned for home, having let her attention slip from the driving. Vic packed the CDs neatly into their containers and began reading a book on personal finance Vicky had placed in the glove compartment. Vicky lapsed into a kind of reverie about her father, as if the flow of her awareness had flooded over and taken her somewhere else, leading her to drive on autopilot as she penetrated further into Arlington. His mention of her father stunned her. Because of the missed exit and another wrong turn, the drive consumed more and more time. The sky got darker. Twilight faded. Then a pizza delivery car pulled out in front of her; she stopped with a screech of the tires and looked around.

"Shit," Vicky exclaimed.

"What? Oh, my God, you missed the turn to the house." Vic said. "Do you remember how to get home, Mom?"

"Yeah, I must have been distracted," she replied. "Wasn't paying attention to the driving. Gotta get better at that." She felt her face grow warm. "I just didn't realize my father had communicated with you. Neither of you told me." She turned the car quickly to the left hand lane and hit the brakes too hard when she saw a UPS deliver⁷ track hurtling directly toward her. The bowl with the milky water and the magnolia blossom, which had traveled over one hundred and fifty miles without doing much more than a few

wobbles, fell from its perch on the coffee cup container and spilled its contents onto Vic's side of the car. A splash of water moistened one of his shoes.

"Mom, my guess is there's a lot we haven't told each other," he said calmly, moving his feet so as to inspect the unexpected mess.

"God, honey, I'm sorry." She kept driving and he cleaned up the spilled flower and overturned bowl.

"It's not too bad. Just a little water on the side of my foot. Good thing I wore sandals. I won't even have to change." He reached behind him and placed the bowl in the back seat, with the flower stranded in its empty container.

Vicky circled around and found the correct turn. A small accident delayed them • another fifteen minutes once they reached the desired streets. Two cars had collided in an apparent attempt to avoid a bicyclist neither had succeeded in avoiding. An ambulance crew loaded the body of a man in cycling clothes onto a gurney they were preparing to zip away to the hospital. He looked to be hurt. Two women cried by the automobiles, which sat at the site of their collision with his bicycle crushed beneath the front tires of the smaller of the two cars.

Night had fallen by the time they arrived home. Sirens howled over on the main streets. Fritz and Kathleen waited for them in the brightly lit front room of Fritz's spacious and well furnished Arlington house.

Vicky drove into the driveway and she and Vic meandered up the curved walkway to the front door. The outdoor lights cast bright clarity over the front lawn. They walked close to each other and commented on the dry smell of the mums Vicky had planted in April. The grass crawled over the edge of the concrete and needed mowing.

Gardenia bushes bloomed on either side of the front steps. Vicky looked at her son with pleasure as she inhaled the gardenias' fragrance. Kathleen pushed open the storm door and called to them with a wide-mouthed smile.

"Hi!" She wore ragged cutoffs and a red tee-shirt with the words "Maryland Rugby" woven over its front. Her red-orange hair was tied behind her head into a large bun with a brown braiding stick. She'd rouged her freckles with an application of facial powder and she wore blue eye make-up that was likely intended to radiate some degree of heterosexual appeal to her handsome step-brother. She moved aside to let them through the door and she grabbed Vic and gave him a hug.

"Good to see you, Kathy. Mom tells me you're bound for Europe again," he said.

"Not tonight, little brother. How are you?" She held to his arms as she looked up into his face.

"I'll tell you later," he said.

Fritz reached out for a handshake. His drab olive Dockers had worn knees and his golf shirt was gray and wrinkled. He wore his reading glasses over his nose and had on his bedroom slippers. His gray hair looked windblown and was thinning on top. His face was unshaven and ruddy.

Vic took his hand. "I hope you're well," Vic said to his stepfather.

"Not too bad for a fifty-six year old man who hasn't worked in a while."

Vicky moved around her son and gave Fritz a kiss on the cheek. "Did you have a good day?" she asked her husband.

"I cleaned up the garage a bit. I talked to some former colleagues down at the Commerce Department and they said they missed me."

"Oh, did you go down to see them at the office?" she asked with some enthusiasm,

"No, I called them. They told me I should be glad I left when I did. You had a good trip, I hope." His small blue eyes reflected weariness. He appeared tired and bored to Vicky. She sensed he'd been drinking. Vicky felt cut inside, and she thought this might be all she deserved from a man.

"Let's sit. Let's talk. Let's have a drink or two," Kathleen said. She looked at Vic and swept her arm toward the sitting room behind her. Vicky turned her head down from Fritz and moved toward the room and took a place on a small lounge. Kathleen sat beside her and Vic collapsed into an overstuffed green chair not unlike the one in his dormitory room in Williamsburg. He sat nearest the fireplace. Its bricks were black with soot. Wood and kindling left over from the winter sat in a sloppy pile along side it. Fritz removed his glasses as he leaned back in a burgundy recliner near the front door. No one spoke for several long and awkward seconds.

"Lively crowd," Kathleen began.

"Long day," Vicky answered.

"It's like this when things are churning beneath the surface," Vic said. He slouched back in the chair.

"Meaning?" Fritz asked with a slight scowl creasing his eyes.

"Meaning I missed the turn into Arlington," Vicky interjected. "It took us an extra half hour to get home after missing our turn and then there was a wreck and it was all tiring." She leaned her head to the right and ran her fingers along the side of her head,

brushing back her hair, which immediately fell back to where she had just brushed it from.

"A wreck?" asked Fritz, who was immediately interrupted by Kathleen.

"I think we need a night of serious drinking/" Kathleen said in a loud voice. She smiled at Vicky.

"There's only one serious drinker in the house, Kathy, and you're it," Vic said.

Vicky noticed Vic's dimples and crossed her legs.

"I can't understand why you wouldn't be interested in an extended evening of consuming Scotch down at Bloody Dick's Talking Head. There's also Romantic Pierre's Island of the Eternally Young. They give you a free drink every fourth round there. And there's Amber Honey's House of Hounds, where they store and pour the finest malt scotches in the entire DC area. I mean, it's a spiritual experience." She moved her hands through the air as she spoke and appeared excited about the possibility of getting drunk.

Vicky moved to her left and leaned her left arm on the back of the sofa. She re-crossed her legs and faced Kathleen, smiling as if she enjoyed her little rant.

"Sounds like there might be a few biker chicks haunting your hang outs to me," Vic said.

"Well, a few maybe, but it's the quality of the spirits that matter," Kathleen answered.

Fritz rubbed his hand over his face, swaying his torso to the left and then the right as if he was agitated. He bent forward in his recliner. He kept silent at this daughter's attempt at humor.

"I guess you're just surrounded by aging or indifferent white people," Vic said.

The darkness outside the window infiltrated the room's silence. It seemed to bring weight and stillness to Vicky's sense of the four people collected there. Vicky's chest admitted a mood of sharp fear. It was as if Kathleen had caught and exposed her for a moment as something she didn't want to be: a smothering and controlling mother, a dishonest and manipulative parent, a nagging and shrewish wife. She disliked the feeling, and it was as if the silence stabbed it more deeply into her body. Vicky's sense of shame about her motherly mistakes ached in her body. The Grandfather clock's ticking and the siren of an ambulance finally broke through the stiff spell.

"Vic seems to be ok with it," Vicky said. "It's not just about the money."

The room teetered in a pause between the silence Vicky sought to break and her sense of the actions she had initiated in her son's life.

"She's right," Vic said to Kathleen. "It's not just about money." His statement relieved Vicky, but it infuriated Kathleen.

"What is it about? Letting people run your life behind your back?" Kathleen spoke sharply. "Bringing your life into compliance with plans others have made for you? That's not my idea of living. I'd feel like there was some kind of conspiracy at work here." She made the last statement looking directly at Vic, peering at him through narrow and angry blue eyes much like her father's. "I feel like there are too many secrets going on here. I hate family secrets, and I don't respect people who keep them." She surveyed each of them, one by one, revolving from one set of eyes to another. "This pisses me off."

Kathleen's father pointed his chin down and his eyes up at hers. "There's a phrase about sleeping dogs," he said. "And about letting them lie."

"I'll change the subject, then." Kathleen answered.

"Thank you," Fritz said with a snap.

"Maybe you could share about your day, Dad." Kathleen leaned toward Vicky, playing demure.

"I didn't have much of a day. I worried a little about Vicky. I'm glad she's home. It's good to see Vic. I've been thinking about him recently." He looked at his step son. "I hope you're well." His speech was slow and laborious.

Vic's eyes widened and he said, "I'm well. A couple of days rest and figure out what to do this summer."

"That hasn't been figured out yet? Kinda late for that, isn't it?" Kathleen asked.

"It's been figured out," Vicky said. "He's taking a trip with my father."

"I thought maybe you were gonna work in that factory you work in every summer. Did you know anything about this change of plans, Dad?" Kathleen asked Fritz.

"Well," he said reluctantly, "Ah, you're mom, I mean Vicky, asked me to call Walter Gladfelter and Stanton Cross and tell them that Vic was probably going to be doing other things than working at their textile plant in Altavista. Three summers there might be enough." He puffed out his top lip with a pocket of air.

"Did you talk to Vic about it first?" Kathleen asked.

"Ah, well." Fritz stopped there and looked over at Vicky. Kathleen looked at Vicky, too. Vic looked down at the floor, as if embarrassed or humiliated for a moment, though he appeared to hold his composure. He looked back up and toward the opposite wall and gazed through the window to the patio across from which Kathleen and Vicky sat.

"You're turning this conversation into nap time for lying dogs," Kathleen said. She leaned back on the sofa, tossed her left leg over the arm piece and looked away from him.

"Where are we going with this?" Vicky asked, noticing Kathleen's leg.

"I don't know," Kathleen answered, gazing up at her stepmother. "All I wanted was a drink."

"Then get one," Fritz said. "Get several."

"Very well then, I will." Kathleen stood and went out to the kitchen to pour scotch into four glasses she filled with crushed ice from the freezer.

Vic cleared his throat. He propped his elbow on the arm of the chair and rested his chin on his fist. He turned toward his mother and smiled, as if to reassure her, and Vicky felt grateful for his solicitous silence. She winked at him.

Fritz walked out to the kitchen and offered to help Kathleen bring drinks out for everyone. Kathleen handed Vic his scotch mist. Fritz handed Vicky hers. They moved their glasses through the air at each other, attempting what turned into an awkward and unspoken toast.

Vic didn't finish his scotch, but Vicky, Kathleen and Fritz had a couple of strong drinks. Their talk drifted into mild mannered pointlessness. It seemed to Vicky that the hostility opened by Kathleen's anger was quickly drugged, as if alcohol worked to relieve some mistaken exterior of conflict and weight. It was as if a little whiskey turned the house and everyone in it into people waiting peacefully, even comfortably, for the next pending disaster.

II.

Kathleen cooked dinner that night. She made beef Stroganov and blanched fresh asparagus, which she served with new potatoes she baked with dill. She served everyone espresso and strawberry shortcake for dessert. Vicky raved about her cooking and encouraged her to do more of it.

"You should see what I come up with when I really try," Kathleen said, blowing on her fingers and rubbing them against her chest in a small gesture of bragging.

Vicky began to clean up, and Kathleen offered to help Vic bring in his belongings. She walked out to the Volvo with him.

Night was deep and quiet when they walked to the car. Arlington was dotted with nearby landscape lights and street lamps. Mostly foreign cars drove by on the street in front of the house. Kathleen stood behind the Volvo and opened the back door. She reached for a box of books and slid them toward her.

"What's going on with Fritz?" Vic asked.

"He's depressed." She pulled the box out and held it in front of her body. "He hasn't worked in three months and there are no prospects, or so he tells me. He feels a little troubled by your mother's youthfulness." She moved toward the house. "He's fifty-six, and she's eleven years younger, and looks even younger than that. You know, your mom's a hottie."

"That's what I've always heard. I tend to think of her as straight-forward, even a little old-fashioned." He followed her in and they moved up the stairs to his room.

"You know, I think it's about dad, not about your mom. He drinks too much. And they live in this house where they both feel haunted by my mother's ghost." She headed back down the stairs.

Vic followed her back out to the car. "I'm sure your right about that thing about your mother. Does mom still keep that picture of Jennifer in the hallway?"

"Of course, you walked right by it in the hallway upstairs. They keep it there to assuage their guilt." She walked to the car and grabbed another box of books. Vic brought his suitcase and the hanging bag containing his clothes into the guest room where he'd be sleeping. He made a point of noticing Jennifer Swede's picture as he carried his cases into his room.

They made a third trip down.

"What's this flower doing in the back seat?" Kathleen asked, opening a back door to the station wagon.

"Mom picked it from the magnolia tree by my dorm. She put it in her cereal bowl and poured some of her bottled water into it. I think she wanted to bring it into the house, but it looks like she forgot it." He looked at the large white bloom, trying to decide what to do with it.

"Give it to me," Kathleen said. "I'll take it in to her."

Vic handed her the bowl and the flower. "There's a print in the back of the car. I'll tell mom to come out and get it later. I think she may want to store it at the shop."

"Fine. Take the bloom out. I'll carry it in my fingers." Kathleen took it from him and carried it in while carrying another box of books in her right arm, a minor feat of strength and control.

"I'm impressed/" Vic said as Kathleen opened and walked through the door.

"By what?" she asked, turning to look back at him coming in behind her.

"By your combination of delicacy and strength/" he said.

She smiled. Her eyes glittered in the lamplight, shadows and light mixing in her face. For a moment she looked girlish, even as she carried thirty pounds of books under her right arm and a delicate white magnolia blossom in the fingers of her left hand.

Vicky stood just inside the door and Kathleen handed her the blossom. Vic heard his mother say thank you, and saw her give Kathleen a kiss on her left cheek before Kathleen romped up the stairs.

Vic climbed the stairs the final time and placed his belongings in his closet. He had never really lived in the house. He stayed in a guest room and lived there only as a passer through. During his summer trips to southern Virginia to make money and twice yearly semesters in Williamsburg he lived on other people's territory. While he wasn't literally homeless, on a technical level he had no place to call his own.

Vicky made the room both ornamental and pleasant by Vic's unsophisticated design standards. She covered the bed with colorful comforters and large pillows. She had hung several abstract expressionist prints on the walls. A small television sat in a media cupboard and a desk with computer hook ups and a telephone sat across from the bed. The window had thick burgundy drapes atop thin white sheers. The room seemed both to welcome Vic and to remind him that he was a temporary guest. He would use the room for storage; by August, it would contain no sign of him.

"You want to go out for a while?" Kathleen stood in the doorway with her arms folded across her chest.

"I don't know exactly what I want at the moment." Vic sat on the edge of the bed. He looked at the desk and saw several large notebooks standing between two wooden bookends. He pointed at them and asked, "What are those?"

Kathleen stepped toward the desk. She picked up one of the notebooks and opened it. "These are photo albums," she said. She began to turn the thick embossed pages. "Your mother's, I believe."

"Come over here. Let me see."

Kathleen thumbed through the pages of the photo album and walked toward Vic's bed. She spun around and sat down beside him. "These look pretty old. I don't recognize anyone." She let one side of the album fall onto his lap.

"I've seen a few of these." He pointed to a small girl standing in front of a lighthouse with a black swirl running up it like a barber's pole. "That's my mother, at Hatteras. She was three or four years old."

"She was cute. That's a sweet smile on her face."

"She told me once that she lived in Stantonsburg down in eastern North Carolina whenever her father went out to sea. Her mother would take her down and they would stay with her grandparents. Though, this would've been a summer picture, taken on a vacation, likely taken by my grandfather."

Kathleen moved closer, as if to get her balance on the edge of the bed. Her leg came squarely into contact with Vic's. "Is this the same grandfather that you're planning to give your summer to?"

"One in the same," he said with a sigh.

Kathleen looked at him. Vic felt her eyes probing his face.

"What?" he asked.

"What did he do at sea?"

"US Navy," he answered.

"Ahh," she said. "My dad was in the Navy."

"Is that right? Does that explain something?"

"Something. Probably. Or everything. Or nothing." She turned the page. "Your plans, then. What would they be?"

"Her father has something in mind for me that seems to have to do with a great deal of traveling. He's been a busy man, and now that he thinks he's a dying one, looks like he wants to find a way to somehow finish things." He looked over at Kathleen. "At least, that's my Mom's story."

"Oh look, these are in color. Beach pictures." He noticed softness in her voice. It was a definite turn away from the harshness with which she had spoken to Fritz and Vicky earlier. For a moment, he found it pleasing.

"They drove out to Hatteras every other summer or so." He looked at the pictures with her. "There's my grandmother, drinking a beer. There's mom when she was six. There's their pet poodle, Charley. Mom says he ran off and it broke her heart."

"You didn't tell me what your plans were, dear brother." She kept her eyes on the photographs.

He felt awkwardness come over him. He wasn't sure how to answer her.

"Cat get your tongue?" She glanced over at him. A smile. "Well, if you asking a serious question, then I'd say my plans would be to make money so that I can graduate from The College of William and Mary with a degree in

philosophy one year from now. They make you pay, you know. Apparently, my grandfather is willing to pay me to drive him around the country to God knows where so that he can retrieve some symbolic meaning from his life."

"A pilgrimage, then. And a personal one at that."

"A pilgrimage?" He looked down at another picture of the Cape Hatteras lighthouse. The image was crooked and a finger intruded across a third of the screen. It was of his grandmother and grandfather. "Looks like mom took that one. See the tip of the girl finger?" he said, pointing at the picture.

"It makes sense to me. People don't usually like to die feeling like their lives have been wasted. They want to remember things before they pass on." She moved closer to him. "You, however, have plans and ambitions."

"I have patterns. I like to keep my life structured and predictable. I try to keep moving in the right direction."

"Hence, a summer in a textile factory. A blue collar path to a white collar world." She turned another page. "My goodness, we're moving forward here. Your morn looks to be about fourteen in this one. Have you seen this one before?" She alternated her gaze between the photographs and Vic's face.

"No, it's news to me. That's her mother standing behind her. And her aunt standing off to the side. My grandmother was from a large family. There were eight children." He felt her watching his reactions. He sought to keep them simple.

"But your mother's mother had only one child."

"No, she had two daughters."

"Then where's you mom's sister? I see no evidence of her."

"Mom probably took any pictures of her out a long time ago."

"Trouble there, then."

"Big trouble. My dad."

Kathleen chuckled without meaning to. "Vicky and Fritz have never really told me anything about your family. Is your grandmother still alive?" Kathleen looked to Vic to have become attentive to the pictures. He liked sitting with her while they observed them. They shared a shoulder to shoulder rapport that began to feel safer to him. On some vague level he began to trust her. Perhaps it was the apparent quality of her interest.

"No, my grandmother died about ten years after that picture was taken."

"So your mother was about twenty-four when her mother died."

"Something like that."

"Isn't that about the time that you were born?"

"I was born the same day my grand mother died."

Kathleen turned her head quickly. Her eyes softened. Their blue moisture was appealing. She turned her head slightly to the side and looked back down at the pictures.

"Astonishing."

"I haven't thought about that in a long time." He felt her empathy.

"From the looks of these pictures, it looks like your mom has."

"You know, now that you mention it, I think my grandmother was the same age as my mother about the time she died," Vic said, doing the calculations.

"Forty-five?" she asked.

"Yes, forty-five, I'm certain of it."

"Does that trouble you?" She turned another page. Images of a Naval Base appeared. A row of aircraft carriers sat assembled along wide docks. Several images of a gang plank flooded with disembarking sailors sat beside other images of a carrier coming through the harbor guided by tugs.

"Nothing about my Mom really troubles me. She always seems pretty stable to me. She got over my dad a long time ago. We both did. She's married, she's happy, she's secure. What's to worry about?" He wanted to know.

"You'd have to ask her that." She turned to another page of pictures and pointed toward a young man. "Who's he?"

"My father. Ty Casey." He looked on impassively.

Vicky had placed several pages of Ty in the album. The first featured black and white portraits of a young man with thick hair and a wide smile wearing a white button down shirt and a dark tie. His hair grew longer in the next set of images, reflecting a current in the culture that found some young men taking on androgynous appearances. Pictures of Vicky and Ty together followed. Vic recognized them on the arched footbridge at Crim Dell and frolicking with Frisbees in the Sunken Gardens. Another featured the two of them sitting on the steps of the Wren Building, and several more displayed them resting a few feet from the Atlantic Ocean at what was to Vic obviously Virginia Beach. He knew these places well, both from school and from his childhood.

Vicky came to the door and entered the room. "I see you found the photos. I'd planned to give some of them to you to take to my father," she said. She entered the room casually and sat beside Kathleen. She joined the bedside viewing of the photographs of her family, husband and herself.

"Your old flame," Kathleen said, looking at Vicky sitting right next to her on the edge of the bed. Kathleen spoke to her with a hint of playful mockery in her voice.

"That burned out long ago. He was nice to look at, though."

"Where did you marry him?" Kathleen asked.

"We were married in Williamsburg, at Wren Chapel. Ty was five years older than I. He'd served in the Navy for three years before he came to school. He was twenty-four and I was nineteen when we met. He tried to convince me he was a barbaric Wildman."

"Was he?" Kathleen looked more closely at his images.

"No. He was a silly fool."

"When does this young man sitting beside me come along?"

"A few years later. I'm afraid Ty wasn't a much better father than he was a husband,"

"What was the draw for you, then?" Kathleen asked. She turned with Vic toward her to see her answer.

"I thought I loved him. He was beautiful. What else is there to say?"

Kathleen turned toward Vic and said, "A child of love and beauty. Why, it's as if you're Eros himself." She exaggerated her statement further by kissing his cheek on much the same spot as his mother had greeted him that afternoon.

"I guess," he answered flatly. He began to think of other things. He had a certain ritual he did to close each day and he could feel its presence taking shape in his thoughts. He could not avoid it, and he felt anxious about having his stepsister and his mother in his room as these things found movement within him.

"Where are the pictures of Master Victor?" Kathleen asked.

"In one of the other albums. They stay here, though," Vicky answered.

"What did you think about your dad?" Kathleen closed the album and turned toward Vic.

"I don't think about my dad. Not if I can help it."

"I'm going to go to bed, children," Vicky said. "We'll call dad tomorrow night," she told Vic, and as she did so she gave Kathleen a hug by wrapping her left arm around Kathleen's thick hair and tugging her step daughter toward her.

"Night, sweetie," Kathleen said.

"The print's still out in the car, Mom," Vic told his mother.

Vicky left the two of them sitting on the edge of the bed. "I'll get it later. I'm going to hang it at the shop. Goodnight." She turned and left the room.

"Your mother is a Princess," Kathleen said.

"Meaning?"

"What do you mean, 'meaning?'" She gave a penetrating look at her step brother. "Oh my God, you're jealous," she said. "What a little runt you are."

"Well, Kathy, you are, how shall I say it, our favorite, well, you know, the L-word."

"I never pretended not to be. But don't think that's all there is to me." She twisted her head at an angle and smiled at him. "You're pretty bold, though."

"Well, mom tells me you have a boyfriend in Utrecht, so clearly that's not all there is to you." He returned her searching and curious smile with a more bemused one.

"That's right. I have a boyfriend. I discovered that I like to suck cock as much as I like to eat pussy."

His left hand wandered up to his eyes and covered them, rubbing back and forth, while he slowly shook his head and suppressed a laugh. "It must be the water in Holland."

"Lots of toasty hot little things happen there. And come to think of it," she said, "Don't be surprised if some toasty little things happen around here tonight, you handsome devil."

"No, no, no, not that. Now go on, move along big sister, I've got some work to do."

She put her left hand on his right thigh and pushed down hard as she pushed herself up. "Maybe later, then," she said.

"In the morning," he answered.

"In the morning, oh goodie."

"No, I mean I'll see you in the morning."

Kathleen sauntered toward the door and out into the hallway, half-turned, tossed a wave, then shuffled quietly down the hallway and into her room. She shut the door to her room behind her. Vic got up and shut his. He unloaded and hooked up his laptop before turning out the light and sitting in the corner. Leaning forward and wrapping his arms around his knees, he waited in the dark room for an invisible guest to arrive.

III.

Vicky showered. Hot water and thick soap suds flowed over her body. The water hummed and splashed in the shower stall. She caressed each arm with the other and ran her hands over her breasts, her torso, her neck, her face. With her eyes closed, she felt the heat and soap washing away the grime of her long trip and longer day. She felt grateful that it was Friday night. Tomorrow was Saturday and she did not have to work. A rare weekend off with her son awaited her.

She lingered under the hot water. The room steamed. She shampooed her hair.

When she stepped out of the shower, she dried herself with a large beach towel as tall as she. She blow dried her hair in a couple of short minutes. She brushed her teeth. She gargled. She put on a night gown.

She did these things for herself now. They were no longer a matter of presentation. Fritz laid on the King sized bed with his thick black eye shades on, already asleep, with an assist from the four drinks he'd had during the evening and an Ambien he took every night. Vicky was fond of him; the marriage had not started out as one of convenience, but since Fritz had stopped working at the Commerce Department, he'd lost his vitality and confidence. Besides, convenience does not come in form of debt and mortgage pressures. It was as if he'd lost ten years of potency in the last three months, and Vicky was beginning to find herself imagining partners. She was also beginning to notice some gray hairs turn up in her black hair after her showers. She intended to keep them colored.

She turned off all the lights except her reading lamp. More bed existed between them than either of them occupied alone. A pack of dogs could've slept there without

disturbing either of them. She picked up Alexander Theroux's An Adultery, a novel she'd started earlier in the week. She'd decided to finish it, despite its drab and paranoid morbidity. She didn't like the characters, didn't like the flimsiness of their affair or the illusion of their love. As the novel got darker, meaner and deadlier, she found herself staying with it not out of enjoyment so much as painful fascination. What was adultery, after all, but psychosis and torment?

She read to within forty pages of the end and decided to turn the light off. She couldn't sleep when she did. Fritz snored lightly, sounding like an overweight cat. She thought about Kathleen and Vic. She couldn't help but worry about them. Kathleen was bound for Europe. Vic was heading to wherever her father might decide to take him, which could be anywhere - the Dakotas, upper Michigan, Long Beach, Norfolk, the Canyon, Gods knows where. She hoped Vic was in the mood to drive. She hoped her father wasn't really sick.

She got up after an hour of worry and took one of Fritz's Ambien. When she fell asleep, she dreamt she was falling from the sky.

IV.

Vic learned at Noble Forest that he possessed what the chief social worker called "inner wisdom figures." That social worker was named Mr. David, and he often led small groups of boys into the remote mountains of western North Carolina on extended treks along old bison and elk trails where the boys would camp and fish and talk with each other and the counselors about nature and society and how to adapt to each. Each of the boys possessed, or could create, such inner wisdom figures, Mr. David said. They

could be useful in informing awareness and the mind about things hidden from the eye or from what Mr. David called "the visions of deficiency" the world tended to give shape to. All they had to do was find a way to imagine them, talk with them, learn to listen to what they had to say and learn to see what they had to show.

Mr. David knew many of the caves throughout the Blue Ridge and the Smokey Mountains. He would take some of the boys into the simpler underground openings and lead them down a short ways into the Earth, where he said inhabitants of other worlds could be found. Mr. David liked Vic, and took him under his wing, and taught him separately and apart from the other boys, many of whom were damaged by drugs or violence or neglect in such a way as to be far more difficult to reach. Mr. David said that he was teaching Vic things that went back many centuries. He said that there had been a time on this planet when this was the way men communicated with figures, sometimes called gods or daimons or mystery beings or spirit beings who knew everything of importance about what human beings are here on Earth to be and to do. Conversations with these figures, communicating to others what was communicated to them from the worlds inhabited by these figures, was the way men created human worlds over the millennia, the way they had created what became medicine and law, the way they made governments and cities, and it was the place from which they found myths. All of it had been turned into something quite different many centuries earlier, Mr. David said. Our world was a truncated distortion of what it might be. It was only becoming more that way, more of a machine, more of nightmare, because no bothered to visit the gods anymore, and very few remained who understood what they were trying to tell us about ourselves.

Vic became close to Mr. David. Once, Mr. David took Vic on a solo vision quest in a high old growth forest somewhere out in Jackson County. The Cherokee had lived and hunted in this forest for many centuries. Mr. David told him that some of the Cherokee hunting gods could still be sensed in the forest and along the ridge lines, if one were properly prepared for encountering them. A tourist site on the Blue Ridge Parkway called "Devil's Courthouse" was within sight of where Vic took his vision. The whites had called it that, assuming any sacred figure not of their making was a devil. Mr. David had told Vic that such names for the sacred were themselves the devil in action.

On his vision quest, and later in a deep cave up in Watauga County, Vic learned to see the figures Mr. David talked to him about. He used his imagination to conjure them, he said, but then Mr. David told him that they used his imagination to find him, since his imagination was the only part of him not wholly despoiled by the wreckage of what whites liked to call Western Civilization. The white system of reality controlled his senses and his mind in much the same way a virus controlled the DNA it fed on, he said. But there were parts of him that civilization could not get to, and it was those parts, such as his imagination, and often times his dreams, that were best used to communicate with the presences of the invisible.

Vic's vision happened in broad daylight, while he was fully awake. He saw two hawks mating in the air above the ridge line, tumbling toward earth in a twisting spiral of entangled feathers. Then the sky opened, and he saw that the surface of the earth was mating with the blue dome. Within the blue dome, he could see thousand of day blind stars pouring their distance light through the canopy of the sky and filling the atmosphere with distant messages hundreds and thousands of years old, all singing to the earth with

some song of radiant wisdom that embodied the enormous powers they brought to the planet. They sang to the earth of her beauty. Vic wept at the enormity of the picture he saw, wept at how little and human he and every other person on the planet he was, and somehow the circulating beams and spirals of cosmic mystery seemed to reassure him, simply through their presence, that he was as necessary, and as unnecessary, as any other feature of the whole.

A different vision had happened in the cave. After less than two days of incubation, Vic's head had taken on the sense of the mountain in which he lay. He became of many openings, and at the sight of each opening was a door to another dimension of experience. It would be possible one day for him to learn how to move through those doors. Approaching them frightened him, and when Mr. David came down to check on him in his second day, he told him that what was on the other side of these doors was quite aware of him and they would find a way to let him know when he could pass through them to the other side.

"Are the doors about death?" he asked Mr. David.

"Yes. Passing through the doors is a way of dying before you die. You see, if you die before you die, then when you die, you will not die."

Memories of the doors to other worlds and the vital firmament stayed with Vic. Mr. David said it was the job of Noble Forest to make it possible for young men like Vic to go back the world and live normal, functional lives while remaining in contact with their inner wisdom. He said that it was best to keep silent about these things, but he also said that to see these things was, without his knowing it, to make contact with others who had seen these things as well.

"Shamanic knowledge and powers are alive and well on this continent," Mr. David told him. "But they are not part of public discourse, and they will quickly desert anyone who speaks openly of them to those too deeply attached to this world of machines and mechanical blindness we've all fallen into the pit of without our knowing. I am convinced the madness you experienced was an attempt on the part of this world to reach you."

Vic's mother would telephone him once a month during the two years that he resided at Noble Forest. He would talk to her about Mr. David. She asked what he was like, and he said to imagine a stereo-typical New York City Jewish male social worker from the nineteen seventies, and that's what he looked like. She got no particular image from that, so she asked for concrete details. He described thick glasses, a mustache, curly hair, and a body that was fit but not sleek, a voice that was New York City but a mind that was something else all together. She accepted that Mr. David could be trusted with her son.

Six weeks before Vic was to leave Noble Forest for the final time and return home certifiably sane and verifiably functional, Mr. David was driving to Charlotte on US 74, a few miles outside Chimney Rock on the curving mountain section of the road. He was driving a young woman who'd interviewed for a job with Noble Forest back to Charlotte to catch a plane home to Milwaukee. A large red dump truck had lost its brakes and was trying to round a curve when it plowed head on into Mr. David's van. Mr. David was killed instantly. The young female social worker managed to survive because of the angle of impact, though she spent three months in the hospital due to spinal

damage and walked with great difficulty afterward. Vic sent her a card every Christmas. She once visited him in Williamsburg.

Mr. David's sudden death shattered Noble Forest. Several of the boys were moved quickly to other institutions. No one among the remaining counselors was prepared to do his job. Without his leadership and direction, indeed without his vision, the program quickly slid into therapy groups and medications, schooling and behavioral sanctions. Mr. David had sometimes talked with Vic about the difficulty of creating an organization that did not reduce itself to a social power system. A hospital consisted of closed domestic hierarchies, or practiced proscribed discursive methods, and healing and vitality was impossible in such places. They specialized in the technical, in the pharmacological, in the mechanical methods of a complex of limiting practices, but they v/ere not connected to life and they did not admit the natural and they ruled out anything that did not establish or reestablish the familiar and the normal. He saw them as training grounds for complying with the wrecking of the world. His vision of Noble Forest was that of a living social group, never more than forty people, who held to and cared for the Earth and inhabited the imaginative terrain of the psyche and brought the two together for the sake of healing both. He viewed it as a place of human medicine. Vic had understood this; he also understood how a red dump truck could put a quick and final end to it.

On his vision quest on the mountain side, and in the cave in the northern Blue Ridge, Vic had learned to conjure ancient figures of wisdom and to see a primordial world in its living and miraculous embodiment. He had been in the practice most nights

of his life since leaving Noble Forest of kneeling or sitting with his spine in a rounded curve and focusing his mind on these figures and energies. They would come to him Most nights, though not always, and they would tell him things that he would write down in a small journal with a number two pencil and, later, in files in his laptop. Eventually, a few years later, with the business of school and the rationality of philosophy as it was taught at William and Mary, with his urgent feeling for law and his frankly unapologetic desire to see true justice done throughout the world at large, some of the figures changed or faded. One night, while he was out for a walk in the Colonial gardens over by the Governor's Palace in Williamsburg's historic area, a vision of Mr. David appeared as if walking out from behind a boxwood. He looked at Mr. David's rather ghostly figure and saw that he could not talk to him. He looked at him for a half a minute or so, then returned to his dormitory room. When he did his inner wisdom ritual that night, Mr. David was there again.

It seemed to Vic that his former teacher had found access to his imagination from the other side. It presented a quandary for a young man being trained in rational thought and material causality. Dead people are not visible in that discourse; dead people are simply dead. Life is finite, temporally bound, always in some form of entropic decline. When it ends, it's over. That is why, as human populations grow, as more and more entropy is generated and more and more of the entropic requires dissipation, phenomena at large become more complex and the human world correspondingly more chaotic. But from Mr. David's perspective, and from Vic Casey's, something else is going on; it is as if a storehouse exists for the habitation of souls, and the pathways, entrances and exits to that place, to that mysterious palace of extended being, infer to the senses and circulate

through the productions of human imagination, if one possesses either the courage or the madness to become open to them.

For whatever reason, whether to protect his sanity or to challenge it, Vic had chosen, at least in the secret confines of his late night meditations, to remain open to it. Mr. David began to visit regularly, and often with explicit instructions. Mr. David's messages were not always immediately relevant or even helpful. Mr. David himself said that the passage of vision from one world to another is at least as clouded as the passage of words from one person to another in the waking daylight world. Messages gather dust, collect lint, and inevitably lose form and structure; even when they are correctly interpreted and effectively enacted, they often achieve unintended consequences. The point is to keep paying attention; the aim is to be present; the great necessity is to adjust, to adapt, to be quick on one's feet and to keep the wits sharp and the body fully alive. It does not grant control, but it does invite grace, Mr. David told him early on, and of the two, the latter is often the safer and saner.

That night in May in Arlington, at his stepfather's house, Vic sat in his corner, huddled like an abandoned boy tired of begging in the street, and called in silence to Mr. David or to whatever inner wisdom figure might avail his or her self. Mr. David appeared with no particular difficulty. Vic felt his own body glow. His consciousness became a clear stream. He heard Mr. David talking, though he could not see his face on this night, because his image stood barefooted in a stream and watched the transparent later flow by.

"The greatest risk is the death of the imagination." Mr. David spoke as if in some reverie. "The most vital work is keeping the imagination alive. If it is true that only real

path is a path with a heart, then some light must be cast on it, and training the mind in clarity is an essential skill in remaining on such path. But you are now surrounded by figures with sharp edges. There is breakage all around you: in the city, in the house, in the rooms nearby. Yes, breakage, the sweep of the work of wrecking the world. It's woeful. I see much woefulness. I tell you this: this woeful world you inhabit is only a reflection of a weakened and wounded mind. You must train your mind in the terms of your world to protect yourself from the consequences of what these terms produce.

"There's a lock on the door. Use it tonight. What comes in one form may deliver quite another. Do you have any questions, Vic?"

"Do you mean that someone will come for me? Do you mean my step sister?"

"She will go after what she wants. It's her way. Desire. Desire leads somewhere important, but always through some rough field of foolishness. The real teacher within desire is despair. Very few adequately distinguish the two. Your family is saturated with both."

Vic sat there in silence, his eyes closed now for what seemed a long time, though it was only about twenty minutes. Desire and despair - twin fruits of different flavors, one intending pleasure, the other delivering its irremediable absence - circulated through his trance-like thoughts. He caught an image of Mr. David crossing the stream and moving up the embankment on the other side. He heard a bird singing, a bird that turned out to be a mockingbird taken to song during the middle of the night right outside his window. He took a deep breath and straightened his body. He moved his awareness back into his body and into the house and the room. The bird kept up its strange

nighttime song. He listened until silence overtook it. Then he stood and turned on the light on the desk where the albums of photographs stood.

He returned to Arlington and tonight's ritual concluded.

The room seemed fresher and cleaner to him. He stepped over to the bathroom and brushed his teeth. The world restores itself to normative equanimity with some ease after one has sat in the deep cave or viewed the world from a high ridge top. Vic felt this vital restoration taking shape in him, Mr. David's gift from the dead. A moment of love for his mother, a chuckle to himself about the humorous neurotic wildness of his stepsister, some darker compassion for his stepfather, whom he now knew to be flirting with the dangers of unkempt madness: these concerns moved through him like three waves washing ashore from an infinite ocean. He was glad to be home, happy that he had learned to be practical in the world, and grateful for his secret way⁷ of moving beyond his practical habitus by moving more deeply into connections to other worlds.

He made some notes at his computer in his journal, and he checked his email. Once he was in bed, he felt he had finished an orderly day. He slept lightly for an hour before he was woken by the twisting of his door knob. He watched and listened. It moved four times, as if the person trying to get in thought what was locked might magically become unlocked if only they kept trying. They had no such luck, and Vic smiled, as if technical phenomena such as locks could prevent moral disasters such as incest, which on this night was exactly what happened.

V.

Vic was dreaming of a man walking away from him when the sun woke him early in the morning. The man wore a business hat and a top coat. Vic had had this dream before. He never saw the man, though. He was always leaving, always taking something that belonged to someone else.

Downstairs, Kathleen sat at the kitchen table. She drank coffee and was reading the Washington Post. She wore a light blue bathrobe and her hair was wet from her morning shower.

"Good morning," Vic said. He poured a cup of strong black coffee. He could see from the package by the coffee maker that Kathleen had ground French Roast.

"Morning." Her voice was high pitched and she kept her eyes on the paper.

She seemed peevisish to Vic. He decided to ignore her mood. He sat down at the table with her and took the entertainment section for the coming weekend. He sipped his coffee.

"I have a key, you know," Kathleen announced.

He quickly caught her drift. "Why didn't you use it then?"

She looked up from the paper quickly, checking, it appeared to Vic, to see if he was actually interested. "Are you suggesting I should?" She put her paper down on the kitchen table and looked away from him. She began to smile in a way Vic saw as more than a touch wicked. She clicked her tongue, preparing a response. "You take a moral stand on these kinds of issues, I see. Perhaps I've underestimated you."

"What's for breakfast?" he asked.

She resumed reading. "What would you like? I could scramble us some eggs. I hear Vicky getting up. Dad will likely stay in bed a while."

"Anything you want to fix. Your dinner last night was terrific, so anything you cook is fine with me. As Brecht said, *'nach dem Fressen, die Moral.'*"

"Meaning?" she asked, friendly.

He could sense her mood shifting, losing its harsh edge. "Meaning we'll talk about morals after we've fed our bodies."

"There's more than one way to feed a body."

"There's more than one way to starve one, too. I'll go get my clothes on."

Vic ran upstairs to the free bathroom and showered and shaved in about ten minutes. He put on some jeans and a casual blue button down shirt. He passed his mother in the hallway. She wore a black body skirt and a silk white short sleeve blouse, was in fact well dressed for a Saturday morning, and walked down with Vic to the kitchen. They drank coffee and ate the eggs Kathleen had scrambled with tomatoes, garlic and scallions. Kathleen popped toast into the toaster and had hashed some of last night's left over potatoes in a second saute pan.

"Let's eat," Kathleen commanded, spooning food onto her plate. "Help yourselves. Is dad getting up?"

"He'll be up eventually. I'll save some food for him." Vicky crossed herself before her breakfast plate.

Vic saw Kathleen watching this, and heard her say her own playful little prayer, one she repeated from the night before, her eyes wide open on her eggs, toast and potatoes.

"Bless this food with our appetites," she invoked.

Vicky retrieved orange juice from the refrigerator. "I guess we'll call my dad tonight and find out what he wants to do about having you come down to North Carolina," she said. She gave Vic and Kathleen a glass of orange juice and sat down to her breakfast. "I think he wants you to rent a car and drive down;" She took bites of her eggs.

"Why can't he fly down and rent a car at the airport and drive from Durham or Charlotte or some such place?" Kathleen asked.

Vicky looked across the table at her. "I think he's done his own cost-benefit analysis."

"Oh, that's right; you're getting paid for this. It's your summer job. Driving Grandfather." Kathleen's bathrobe was loose about her neck. The curved tops of her breasts were visible to Vic and his mother. Vic noticed but he wasn't surprised or interested. Vic saw his mother notice and caught a glimpse of her pretending not to.

"I think dad wants you to stop in Altavista and see Stanton Cross and Walter Gladfelter before you come down to his house. He figures it might be an important thing for you to do before you begin your trip." Vicky looked at Kathleen's breasts again.

Kathleen tightened her bathrobe's neck. She looked at Vicky and took a drink of the juice.

"I guess I can make that work. I could leave as soon as tomorrow." Vic crunched a big bite of toast.

"So soon?" Kathleen kept her hand about her neck for a moment.

"Aren't you leaving next week?" Vic asked Kathleen. He got up and walked to the refrigerator for another glass of orange juice. Both women accepted his offer of more.

"Next Tuesday, in, what," she looked up at the ceiling, counting, looking at the revolving brown ceiling fan above them, "in one, two, three, in ten days. For Amsterdam. But I was hoping to spend more time here, frankly, with the two of you, before I leave."

A look passed between Vic and his mother. He held her eyes for a moment. He found it difficult to read what her gaze might be saying. She seemed to be coming toward him and moving away from him at the same time. He heard words going off in his head. Indecipherable. Enigmatic. Mother. Beauty.

They finished their breakfast, drank more coffee, talked about what they would do during the day.

"I think I'll mow the yard," Vic said.

"That's fine. I'd like to maybe go into Washington and see the Hirschorn," Vicky offered. "Would you like to go Vic?"

"I'd love to. I always like going to museums with you, Mom."

"Can you come with us, Kathleen?"

"I'll drive us," she answered quickly.

Vic changed into some dirty trousers and a sweat shirt. He took the stairs to the basement garage and gassed up Fritz's lawn tractor. He put on ear muffs and safety glasses, opened the automatic door but didn't start the mower just yet. In addition to

Fritz's Mercedes, the garage was filled with old books and paintings, most of them collecting dust. Power tools and saws stood to one side. Vic examined them, finding a lathe, a multi-bladed ban saw, soldering equipment, an iron file. The equipment gave his hands a certain vibration and induced an inclination to build things. He remembered the feeling from earlier in his life of using such equipment, and he felt badly that machinery of such fine capability for craftsmanship made him feel empty for moment, sitting there in their abandonment and neglect.

He started the mower and backed it out of the garage. He cut the back yard in a square, moving inwards to pile the cuttings toward the center of the yard.

He'd been mowing ten minutes or so on the half acre lot behind the house when he looked upstairs and saw Kathleen standing by her full length bedroom window, curtains pulled all the way open, as naked as the day she was born. She waved at him. He waved back at her, assuming an inner attitude of neutral normality, thinking to himself that such an approach might clarify to her how outrageously she was acting toward him. He kept mowing, and as if to further annoy or seduce him, perhaps to attempt both, she began to dance for him, posing at various angles, sucking on her fingers, wiggling and jutting various aspects of her body toward him, pretending the erotic elegance of stripper while not quite achieving it. It was just effective enough to amuse him. He intended, and he knew that Mr. David likely also intended, to keep it at that level.

He kept busy with the backyard, finishing it as Kathleen, holding the curtains to the window in front of her, spread open the lace to display her smooth surfaces, yielding another view of her fully naked body, apparently wanting him to see as much of it as she

could make visible. He saw her, and drove the mower around to the front yard, cutting the patch of front yard without any further distractions.

Vicky came out dressed in her outdoor clothes and trimmed the grass along the walkway. She rolled a sharp round trimming edge between the grass and the cement and then swept the walkway. She and Vic walked around the house after he cut the front yard and raked the grass cuttings into a small wheel barrel. The curtains to Kathleen's window were drawn by then.

Vic enjoyed the physical labor. He broke a steady sweat. The freshly cut grass was dark green and healthy. He breathed its fragrance in and noticed the way his mother worked with rough, forceful movements. They had the yard looking well kept within an hour and a half.

"Honest work," he said to his mother.

"Honest work," she echoed, wiping her forehead.

They finished up the Saturday morning yard work, putting the lawnmower and yard tools away. They came in, cleaned up and dressed once again. Kathleen had bathed and perfumed herself and wore her hair tied with a green ribbon. She wore a pair of gray slacks and a dark blue cotton blouse. She'd made them lemonade.

"I'll drive us in," Kathleen told them.

"How can we refuse?" Vicky smiled, looking happy as she answered, having returned to her body skirt and silk blouse after a quick shower that woke Fritz only briefly. He was still in bed when they left just before noon.

Not a lot of talk passed between them as they drove into D.C. Kathleen drove her used Mazda, which she planned to sell before going to the Netherlands. Failing that, she'd leave it in storage in Hyattsville before flying off to Europe and taking up with her anarchist friends.

Vic sat in the back seat and Vicky up front. They loved the sculpture garden at the Hirschorn and had spent several hours during visits to it whenever Vic came to Arlington for his infrequent visits. Their habit was to speak very little in the museum, keeping their attention on objects, attending to forms, engaging the art and the anti-art for long moments, as if something might find a way to speak to them. They took their time with art. It connected them in a way they didn't need to talk a great deal about.

The only exchange of substance during the drive into Washington involved a couple of glances Kathleen and Vic shared through the rear view mirror. She would catch his eye, and then look away smiling, as if she was planning something, as if she was greatly enjoying herself. Vic didn't let it interrupt his intention to avoid her over-the-top advances. Yet he couldn't help but to be friendly to her. He felt hooked by her in some way and it troubled and challenged him.

The three of them walked together after they entered the museum. Vicky spoke to her son about his grandfather.

"I thought you'd fight longer about spending the summer with your grandfather," she said. "I'm surprised you agreed to the plan as quickly as you did."

"I did resist at first, didn't I?" He glanced over at Vicky.

"At first, but not in the prolonged, fiery way I thought you would." She returned his gaze.

"How do you know I'm not through resisting?" he asked.

"I don't, but I'm becoming a more trusting person these days. Someone told me at work recently that if I want to hear the gods laugh, I should tell them my plans."

"I will say that my grandfather did a great deal for me when he found me up in Michigan seven years ago."

"Yes, he did. He did a great deal for me, too."

"This is about the only thing he's ever asked of me."

Kathleen listened to them. Walking beside Vicky, she moved around to Vic's side. She nudged his shoulder and asked, "What are you talking about?"

"My Grandfather. Mom's dad. Amos Rogers." He felt Kathleen making light contact with his arm, moving into him as she moved with him.

"The man you're chauffeuring this summer?"

"Yes, the man who saved my life years ago," he said.

"That sounds like some introduction to a 50s western. The man who saved my life, starring Randolph Scott and Jimmy Stewart." Kathleen observed his lack of expression.

"But you're serious, aren't you?"

"It's just what the facts are. You don't know about any of this, though, do you?"

"Your grandfather? Your past? Not very much. It frankly never seemed that important before. Maybe it isn't that important now, but today it interests me."

Vic looked at his mother. She'd heard the exchange and was as close to Vic on his left side as Kathleen was on his right. They sandwiched him between them. He stopped. He put his arms around both of them and asked, "What do we want, then, art, or autobiography?"

"Maybe we could have both. Maybe we could have coffee, too/" Vicky said.

"There's a cafe downstairs."

"I prefer the bench by the fountain/" Vic said.

He sat on the bench and Kathleen and Vicky surrounded him. Vic took a quarter from his pocket and tossed it over his shoulder into the fountain. "I wish my grandfather pays me," he said.

Kathleen leaned forward, positioning her face so as to move in front of his view.

"You were saying something about being fourteen."

He looked at his mother, questioning her with his eyes.

Vicky said, "Go ahead, tell her about it."

"Well, Kathleen, when I was fourteen, in the ninth grade here in Arlington, I started a large project for the ninth grade science fair. The structure of cities interested me, and I had this idea of cities as being something like a biological organism. All of these complex interlocking systems come together and keep a city alive. I wanted to do a science project that would express that idea. You know, complexity, organization, the way people do things for one reason on one level when what they do contributes to a much larger set of phenomena which actually work the build the city at another level. Like right now, for instance, the way we think we are visiting a museum, but we are actually contributing to the city's countless interrelated processes."

Kathleen settled back against the back of the bench. The water sprayed from the fountain and splashed a steady, relaxing flow of liquid sounds. Vicky sat upright, appearing to Vic to listen even more intently than Kathleen. He would look at his

mother, then at Kathleen, then ahead of himself, as if speaking to the information desk near the fountain when he was not speaking to one or the other of them.

"This idea of a city as a living biological cell got reduced down further to the notion of a city as a genetic entity. So, I conceived a gene as an organic prototype of a human city, and the idea kind of took possession of me. I mean, when you see a map of a piece of genetic material, it's like you're looking at a picture of a city. Mom and I lived in a rental house with a large basement, where we'd been living since we moved to Arlington when I was ten, so I dreamt up this idea of building a city based on a genetic map. I wanted a three dimensional representation of a city as a kind of discrete organism, with the underground visible, and various sources of food and water and waste disposal all part of the working constructions of the model. I imagined it built as a model of a genetic map so that the city and gene would mirror each other."

"You're fond of big ideas and ambitious projects, aren't you?" Kathleen asked.

Vicky jerked where she was sitting. Vic looked over at her to see what was wrong.

"Nothing, nothing's wrong," Vicky said.

"Goodness," Kathleen said. "I didn't realize you'd studied philosophy to explain the entire fucking world." She slouched a bit on the bench. "As above, so below, as they say."

Vic listened to her remarks then he kept on with his story. "That Hermetic idea was actually one dimension of the project. You know, nucleic acids gather and store things, structure and transform things, dispose of and regenerate things. As I started to build the city, or at least build a model of one, more ideas came to me about the

similarities between cities and genes. They compete and they cooperate. They live and they die. They kill and they reproduce. They evolve adaptively and mutate randomly. All genes can renew themselves. Some genes are more independent than others, like viruses for instance, yet all of them are dependent on a much larger environment. Cities and genes can both invade and exploit other cities and genes. Cities and genes can combine and make a new and larger city or gene."

"You should've seen him," Vicky intervened. "He was always bringing new things into the house, always on the phone talking to cabinet makers and architects about how to put models together, about how to combine different materials. He got way beyond anything I could hope to help him with." She reached her right hand to his left knee.

"It sounds good, Vic. A work of craft as an act of faith," Kathleen said, looking straight at the information desk.

"It was a demanding project. I began working on it in September and the science fair wasn't until March. I had a paper route at the time and had been mowing lawns all summer. I had several hundred dollars saved. The science fair director said that the first three places would be reimbursed for materials, and would have a chance at the state science fair in May. I recall in fact the final judging would've been on my birthday, May 6th."

"What's that got to do with it?" Kathleen asked. She sat up straight.

Vicky dropped her gaze to the floor, then turned and looked to her left, away from them.

Vic looked from one to the other. "Is this boring you?" he asked.

"No, not boring. But irritating. I already sense it's going to come to no good/'

Kathleen said. She folded her arms over her chest.

"But it was a good thing. It was a good idea. There was the promise of a substantial scholarship if I won the state science fair. There was an element of risk and reward attached to the competition. Neighbors and teachers began to come over and look at it. It started as just a wood project. I used plywood and plastic models at first, but teachers and students and some of their parents began to make recommendations about other materials to use. Eventually I found a loosely permeable form of Plexiglas that I could build structures on either side of. I could drill through it. That enabled me to use it as a surface membrane, through which I could connect the surface city with its underground. The physics teacher told me how to use small electric motors to get transportation systems in the city to move. I learned how to shape different kinds of plastics. I found a way to build the underground systems underneath the city as if they were their own world. I bored openings, for instance, connecting a subway system to the overland railway lines. I ran highway systems above sewer and water lines, I got it to a point where you could see the city built over the underground. Or you could invert the city, and see the underground systems running down into the surface world. One of my neighbors loaned me a wood lathe that would shape very small pieces of wood. I put all this technical equipment in the basement beside the model of the city. I got better and better at using these things. The real trick was to fit in the confines and structures into a form consistent with a genetic map, with streets, courtyards, gardens, parks, business districts coinciding with the nucleic interrelating structures of adenine, guanine, thiamine and cytosine. The paper I was to write and the visual graphs I was going to construct

would explain both the functions of the city and the functions of the DNA structures. I had to designate how the activities of the city and the underground acted as structural reflections of a single complex form of organization that consisted of DNA."

Kathleen leaned forward and looked across Vic at his mother. "You either had to hate him or love him," she said.

"Yes, both." She and Kathleen exchanged eye contact.

"Does this make any kind of sense to you?" he asked Kathleen.

"I made an A in organic chemistry at Maryland," she answered. "And I took an elective once in Urban Design. You haven't lost me yet, though I cannot imagine the amount of tedious mental work this must have required of you." She sat back on the bench. "You may continue," she said to her step brother.

"It got more complex over time. And more expensive."

"And more ambitious, obviously" Kathleen responded.

"A local newspaper, one of those advertising rags, sent a reporter and a photographer over to talk with me about the thing and to take pictures of it. It became like this publicized project that brought attention to the school. Some of the students started calling me 'Doctor Science,' making fun of me, though no one who saw the developed project made fun of me. It became like the center of my life. I mean, I began to understand what cities really are, what chromosomes and organic molecules actually do, and how you can fit one right over the other. They are living organisms working at different levels of complexity. It became clear to me in a practical way how if you take any cell or sub-cellular structure or any human city and look at it whole, you'll find the same characteristics, structures, and necessities at work even though you will never find

any systematic process of exact duplication. Nature repeats itself structurally, and it does so at different levels of scale and complexity, even though each repetition is a brand new variation, like a completely unique variant of the themes that cities and genes embody and dramatize. Creation is utterly complex and beautiful that way. Or that, anyway, is how I saw it at the time." He fell silent.

"Tell me what happened," Kathleen said.

Vicky, who had been sitting with her eyes closed, breathing almost imperceptibly, intruded. "I think he managed to trick himself and paint himself into a corner. The final version of the city was three inches too large to get out the sliding glass doors. No one had even bothered to think of moving the city from where it was built. I had mis-measured the door width early on and never corrected it. It took me..."

"Wait a damned minute, Vicky," Kathleen shot at her. "Why are you doing this? This seems to me to be your son's story. Why are you telling it for him?"

"It isn't just his story. He couldn't trust me with the most basic aspects of it. It was like I unconsciously kept his city in my basement. I think I sabotaged it for him."

"That's nonsense, Mom."

"What did you do, Vic?" Kathleen asked. She moved closer to him, as if using him to shield herself from Vicky, touching her leg against hers.

Vicky stood and walked a few feet away. She turned her back to them, but she was still close enough to hear Vic tell Kathleen about the outcome of his science project.

"I had to redo physical parts of the project a week before the science fair. I cut new and smaller surfaces, but there wasn't enough time to shape it into transportable components. It was as if the city was telling me it was intended to grow and live on

indigenous ground, and that city was built in my Mom's basement. I don't think it wanted to move." He met Kathleen's gaze.

"That's rather primitive, animistic thinking," Kathleen said.

"Can you imagine trying to move Amsterdam to Rome?" he asked.

"No. They're stuck where they are."

"Eventually several teachers and some of Mom's friends came to help me move it.

This man named Walter Gladfelter, an old family friend of my parents from Altavista, a guy who knew my father and mother and both their fathers, came and figured out a way to move the thing. He actually enlarged the basement door, knocking out the bricks on one side of the wall, getting the project out, and the rebuilding the door all in the same day. He was a high school principal out in Altavista, and he really liked the project. Anyway, the paper and graphs I had to write for the project got delayed. I got the cell model moved and got the city into the science fair arena in the gym at the school, but the paper was late and the graphs and maps weren't finished and the judging started and of course it wasn't fair to delay the judging on the basis of work that was overdue."

"What an irony," Kathleen said. "You started in September and it was finished late in March because of these entangled complications."

"Yeah," Vic chuckled. "That's what I was going to call the project: Entangled Complexity. Students who'd started their projects two weeks earlier were finished, and I'd been at it six months and couldn't get it done. So I didn't finish third or second or first. I was considered for honorable mention, but the school board said that a grade of "LATE" disallowed any such honor. Because the project had received some attention,

they kept the fair open an extra couple of days. It brought in more money, but none of it, well, all I got out of it was a grade of "LATE." Vic stood up and looked at the fountain.

A small boy, no more than two, reached his index finger into the pool as his father held his other hand. His mother cooed and smiled as the boy put his finger into his mouth. The boy said, "Wawas, mommy, wawas." His Mommy said, "Yes honey, that's water. WAH-Tur."

Vic moved to the pool and stuck his index finger into the water. He moved the finger across the surface of the pool, shaping a V, then a straight vertical line, then a curve, writing his name on water.

Kathleen rose and stood beside him. "I have a feeling something else happened," she said. She waited patiently for an answer.

The sounds of people walking through the entrance way and wandering by the fountain had an even, steady quality to it. Vic thought about the structural integrity of the building, about the larger context of movements outside in the city, about the political cosmos for which Washington served as the institutional center and operational headquarters. He thought of an enlarging spiral of realities and concerns that swooped toward and away from the spot he occupied at that moment, in that space. As he climbed out of his mind's impulsive desire for escape from the smothering cloister of what he understood a city to be, he thought of what he had done. "I burned it," he said.

"What do you mean you burned it?" She took hold of his arm.

"I burned it, as in torched. I burned the city, the gene, the entire project, right there in the gym, in broad daylight, with gasoline I'd put in a milk carton and a cigarette lighter I'd borrowed from a student named Jody Fish. I burned it all to ashes." Try as he

might to look erect and sturdy, his back bent and his head turned downward and he froze with a moment of shame.

"I can't believe that. That sounds as much like you as it would be like my father to get up at five in the morning and run fifteen miles. What on earth possessed you?" Kathleen looked over at Vicky, who turned and moved toward them.

"That was only the beginning," he said. "I knew the police would come looking for me, so I packed a few things in a Navy duffle bag and hit the road."

"You mean you ran away?" She asked this question earnestly, without a trace of cynicism, as if she'd been changed by what she'd heard, as if his history of shock was becoming her present moment of unambiguous attention. She was holding him by the arm, as if she could keep him from moving.

"I ran away."

"My God, Vic. Where did you go?" She tugged at his arm. "This is news to me. I never took you for anything other than a serious, studious, young man who knew who he was and what he wanted."

Vicky moved up and took Vic's other arm and said, "That's exactly who he is."

Held between the two women, Vic looked at Kathleen, eye to eye, and echoed his mother. "That's what I am now. That's what I was before."

"Before you were marked as late." Kathleen looked at Vicky again. Both of them stood straight and looked at his face. He felt a gentle maternal solicitude coming toward him from both of them. He felt it sooth him, but he knew he could not allow it to take hold of him for long. It was too comforting; it would put him to sleep.

"I think more happened to him than simply getting marked late/" Vicky said. She turned and watched two women walk by in blue Navy officer's uniforms. They returned Vicky's gaze and held it for a couple of seconds before smiling. Vicky looked back toward her son.

A lull fell over them. Vic noticed noises from the museum. People talked in soft voices. Footfalls registered on the marble floor. Children squawked and squealed and water splashed in the fountain. The sunlight from the windows poured in from the entrance and sections of glass roof and met with the shadowy light deeper in the building.

"What happened?" Kathleen asked.

"I think I tried to find my father," he said. "I don't remember very much about it. It was like I became a different person for a while."

"So you weren't just running away from the fire you set. You were trying to find your father."

"Or myself." He looked at her face. "Have you ever been lost to everything?"

"The doctor's said he was in what's called a fugue state. He was very, very lucky," Vicky said. "You hitchhiked through Pennsylvania, Ohio, Illinois, up into Michigan, all the way to the upper Peninsula." She looked at Kathleen.

Kathleen asked Vicky, "How did you find him?" She let go of Vic's arm, as if she's suddenly realized how she was clinging to him.

"My father and one of his Sioux friends found him. My father's friend is a native tracker. He taught my dad a great deal about tracking. My father has been a tracker himself now for years. Between the two of them, they managed to find him. I don't know how."

Kathleen laughed nervously. "What kind of a tracker?"

Vicky began to rub her son's shoulder. "He's a tracker. He learned it from a native friend in the Navy, a man he served with. He and one of his teachers tracked him. Not like you might imagine, like Indians or scouts on the plains, not like those guys in Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, although he could, or he and his friends could likely do that, too. He's a tracker of information. He tracks habits, patterns, possibilities. He tracks a person's presence and paths through the world. He finds needles in haystacks." She moved her hands from Vic's shoulder.

"That's certainly interesting. So he found you, poof, like magic?"

"It took him at least a couple of weeks, but he found him and brought him home," Vicky answered for him again. "The school agreed not to have him arrested. The damage to the gym was at worst moderate. The Plexiglas melted onto the gym floor. The fire left an unpleasant odor. They said they might consider readmission in a year or two on the condition that he was hospitalized and that I not engage in any public relations activities regarding the fate of his science project," Vicky said. She let go of Vic and moved back to the bench.

"So, they knew what assholes they'd been." Kathleen moved toward the bench to sit with Vicky. Vic turned and stood by them. Kathleen looked at up at him and said, "I feel as if I owe you a thousand apologies."

"The truth is, big sister, no one owes me a thing."

They sat a couple of minutes, and when it was clear to them that enough had been said, they wandered into the sculpture area and began to browse the forms and objects stored there. They took separate paths. Vic stood by a particular sculpture for nearly an

hour, studying the self-contained contours of a single line of spiraled metal that twisted in a majestic loop and shone like gold. Vicky told him on the way home later that she looked at heavier, larger structures in the outdoor sculpture garden. Kathleen said over dinner that night that she went to the bookstore and read about Henry Moore and Andy Warhol. Vic was entranced and enchanted with the single beam wavelet he couldn't seem to pull himself away from when Kathleen walked up beside him.

"It says it's called 'Wavelet/' she observed. She spoke no more than a foot from his left ear.

"I love it. A wavelet. A string."

"A superstring," she added.

He kept silent.

"I haven't been here since I was thirteen," she said. "This place seems to blend all types of qualities." She leaned against him. "Heroism, kitsch, irony, de-centered post-modernism."

"Do you know what you're talking about, or do you just know how to talk?" he asked. He softened the statement with a kind smile.

"Mostly, it's just talk. Just show. Can't you tell?"

"That was quite a show you put on this morning through your bedroom window." He stepped back from her a pace.

"Did you like it?" She smiled, seeming pleased with herself.

"Let's just say that I've never been entertained in quite that fashion, at least not while mowing the lawn."

"Well, that was all part of wanting to fuck you. And actually, I still do, but I can tell that this is not going to happen. There's something about the wounded boy in you that just wouldn't make it right."

"You're a smart woman, with at least a facsimile of a conscience." "No, not smart, although, well, actually, you're right, I am a smart woman, but this doesn't have to do with what people usually think of as intelligence. This has to do with decency. I'm afraid you may think I have none."

"Do you or don't you?" He looked into her eyes as he waited for an answer. "If I do, and I think I do, your story about your science project and your father may have woken it up. I guess the task now is to keep it awake until we're both on our way."

"I suppose that's good, that your decency is awake." "It's probably good, too, that we're not spending the summer together." "Maybe that's good, too. Here, give me your arm." Vic reached out and took hold his step sister. They walked side by side while she held to his arm with both her hands.

"I am not, my dear, by any stretch of the imagination a transgressive person. That's not what gets me started or keeps me interested. I'm much more restrained. Desire has more power when it's withheld. I am not about to go about spilling my seed in any available orifice. Don't think I don't appreciate your body, but to give you a little coaching, I think you'd be better off letting your body speak for itself." He looked at her and saw she was paying attention as she kept her gaze locked on the floor. "It doesn't require all those overwrought contortions to get its message across."

"Thank you, coach. I'll try to do better next time." She squeezed his arm, and he sensed she didn't feel the slightest shame or regret.

"Let's go find Mom and head for home," he said.

They walked through Hirschorn Museum and Sculpture Garden looking for Vicky, two siblings of circumstance with an erotic connection one was far too open to and the other was protected from by a mixture of old forest magic and interest in other things. Besides, even if he were interested, Vic knew that Mr. David wasn't going to let him get away with anything riotous or hedonistic.

They found Vicky on the highest level of the permanent exhibit and Vic talked her into heading home. Fritz was watering the flower bed by the front of the house with a long green water hose when Kathleen pulled up into the driveway. They climbed out of the car in the late afternoon warmth and shared greetings. Fritz's eyes were slightly swollen. Vicky frowned, scowling with an eruption of what seemed contempt, likely smelling, as Vic did, the liquor on Fritz's breath.

Fritz told Vic that his grandfather had called earlier in the afternoon.

VI

Kathleen cooked dinner for them. She grilled four tenderloins and served them with a bourbon butter sauce colored orange by the crushed peppercorns she mixed into it. She sauteed zucchini and spaghetti squash in clarified butter and mixed them with dill and oregano. She'd made a gescacho a couple of days earlier and it was perfectly chilled, made with a dozen fresh ingredients blended together with a sweet, spicy flavor. While

they sat at the table eating, Vicky referred to its taste as "sacred/" Kathleen urged her to drop that word from her vocabulary.

"But why?" Vicky asked.

"There's enough theological foolishness afoot in this city without having to use its language to describe my food," Kathleen answered.

Fritz sipped his Merlot. He said, "Let's not get into arguments about religion at the dinner table." He took another sip. "Talk of politics, religion and sex are not part of good mess hall comportment." He studied the legs of the wine running down the wine glass.

"I'm not referring to religion," Kathleen said. "I'm referring to evangelical nihilism."

"It seems to me Vicky was complementing you," Fritz said. "I should think you'd be flattered by her comment."

"I am flattered by the comment," Kathleen said, looking at Vicky. "I'm just not fond of the history of ideology lurking behind it."

Vic laughed at this, understanding what she seemed to be saying about the use of God to prop up otherwise lame positions and policies about everything from welfare to warfare. "Warfare, not welfare," he chimed, as if mocking the raspy voice of some famous and fatuous Southern senator.

"That's about the size of it," Kathleen said.

Kathleen had baked fresh bread. The fragrance saturated the air. She served seedless grapes over beds of watercress on each plate of tenderloin. Vicky had turned

down the dining room lights and they ate slowly and talked of the coming summer the rest of the meal.

"I wish it was possible to keep the two of you here in Arlington all summer/" Vicky said, eating a grape now that her steak was finished. "I wish the good things in life could last."

"The good things in life have to be repeated, over and over again." Kathleen took a bite of the small side of marinated raw carrots she'd served along with the steak and vegetables.

They were eating Kathleen's chocolate brownie pudding when the phone rang. Vic went to the hallway and answered it. He felt happy from having eaten Kathleen's food.

"Hey, Granddaddy," Vic said.

Vicky got up quickly from her chair and moved toward Vic to listen to his conversation with her father. She stood leaning against the doorway with her arms folded across her chest. Vic saw her and turned on the speaker.

"I asked your mother to have you come down and spend the summer with me and help me with a personal project I have in mind," he said. Age was audible in his voice, but not a trace of infirmity. Even over the phone, his voice spoke with stark clarity. "I assume she told you."

"Yes sir, she told me. While I've decided to go along with it, I'm not sure exactly sure what it is I'm going along with," Vic said.

"Let's say it involves some traveling and some visits with old friends of mine."

Vic knew that his grandfather had old friends scattered across the country. It could mean going anywhere. "That means pretty much the whole of North America, doesn't it?" Vic was trying to be humorous.

"Just the U.S."

Vic looked at his mother. He felt he needed a signal from her about asking him for money.

"Hey daddy," she said suddenly.

"Hello, dear. How are you?"

"I'm fine, daddy. Vic's willing to go down to see you and help you, but he needs to talk to you about money. He needs several thousand dollars for next year, and like we talked about he won't make it if he doesn't work in Altavista this summer."

"How much does he need?" he asked.

"I need about eighty-four hundred dollars. The rest I can get from a small scholarship from the philosophy department."

"Hell, I've got it if you need it. How come you never asked before?"

"He wants to pay his own way, daddy."

"He ain't like his daddy, is he?"

"No, daddy, he's not. He's not that way at all."

"Well, that's the best goddamned news I've heard this year."

They both laughed at his brusqueness.

"Listen," Amos said to them. "Get him a car of some kind and have him drive down to Altavista next week and spend a couple of days with Walter and Stanton. He

can come down here the Monday afternoon following the weekend. Just keep track of his expenses and I'll square them away with him when we're done next August."

"OK," Vic said. "That's what I'll do." Vic remembered, as if putting together some fact he had known before but never fully understood, that Walter Gladfelter and Stanton Cross had been his grandfather's friends in the Navy in the fifties and sixties. He's always associated them more with his mother than with his grandfather, but their connection seemed to be of greater importance to his grandfather than he might have guessed. They'd never talked much about his grandfather, but now that he was about to pay them a visit, maybe they would.

Kathleen moved into the kitchen with dirty dishes. She kept looking at Vicky, and Vicky returned her looks, as if they were exchanging signals of some kind that Vic didn't understand. Then it occurred to him that maybe his mother felt Kathleen's sudden attraction to him. There was something of a stormy feeling between them and Vic wondered if he might be the source of it. He decided he'd let them work it out between themselves. He wasn't interested in domestic entanglements.

"You still there," his grandfather asked.

"Yeah, yeah, just got distracted there for a moment."

"I'm looking forward to seeing you, son. And Vicky, I love you with all my heart."

"I feel the same way, daddy. I'll talk to you soon."

Vic turned the phone off and hung it back on its receiver base.

"Would you have gone without the money attached?" Vicky asked him.

"I don't know," he said. "It would've been difficult But as you said, it's not about the money. The thing in Michigan years ago makes it difficult not to try to give him what he needs."

"People have different kinds of debts to each other," Vicky said.

"I don't mean to be disrespectful, and I could be wrong about this, but it sounds like a sentimental goose chase." Vic moved back to the table and took a sip of his mother's wine, then another. It helped him relax.

"I don't get that impression. At least, I hope that isn't what's happening, I think he just wants..." Vicky did not finish her sentence.

"I don't know, Mom, I mean, I trust him, and I'm beholden to him, but I just don't know."

"Who really knows anything?" Vicky asked no one.

"Are we engaging in a discussion of epistemology?" Kathleen came into the room and sat down at the table. She'd removed all the dishes and Fritz had gone upstairs. "It may not be a matter of who really knows, so much as what's really known, though between the three of us, I'm of the opinion that the who who knows is more instrumental to the construction of knowledge than the what that is known."

"More Nietzsche?" Vic looked at her and propped his head on his fist like Rodin's thinker.

"He was a political romantic and a cultural conservative who happened to be anti-Christian and anti-European. That's a who. But it's a who that gives shape to a what. What?" She gave the second what a Monty Python twist.

Vic chuckled. "Who?"

"What." Kathleen said with declarative matter of factness.

"Fm glad we settled that."

The idleness of the chatter signaled them that they had reached a position calling for

more that metaphorical constructions and resolutions. Playfulness aside, things were at stake.

"Sounds like it's time for restful reconstitution," Kathleen said. "My friends from Iceland say that God's greatest gift is a new day."

"And you told me I couldn't call your gespacho sacred. Of all the nerve," Vicky chided.

"Aw, you caught me with my spiritual pants down," Kathleen said. Her look at Vic at that moment seemed almost sheepish to him.

Vic saw a pink brightness in Kathleen's face that brought to mind the stern warnings of Mr. David. He shuffled away from the table and went upstairs to his room after kissing his Mother on the cheek. He brushed his teeth, took off his shirt and hung it on the hanger. He did the same with his trousers. He turned on his computer and checked his email but found nothing of interest beyond a note from a dormitory companion named Paul Smithers saying he'd been given an opportunity to spend the summer in a birding house on the Chesapeake Bay. Paul left a cell phone number where he could be reached. Vic sent a quick reply, saying that his roommate, Mathias Owens, had left school unannounced during the middle of exams, taking his belongings and leaving no information anywhere or with anyone about where he could be reached, what he would be doing in the future, or what his longer terms plans were for the fall or beyond. Vic asked Paul to reply with any information he might have about Matt, saying

he was fond of Matt, and that Matt's rotten and ineffectual semester had troubled Vic. He wondered what he might do help their friend. Pve been through a crisis or two, myself, Vic wrote. Where the greatest danger lies, there too the saving graces.

He took his lap top to his bed and started a new word processing file. He titled it SummerOS.VAC and he made his first entry.

May 21, 2005 - Arlington:

Cut the grass. Watched Kathleen's side show. She's not hard to say no to, but she's persistent. All I can think of is charity fucking. It never works. It's always a disappointment. I like her, and she's taken on this kind of ovulating glow, but I'm glad I'm leaving, and will probably do so very soon. Told her the story of the science project, about becoming an aborted urban geologist at fourteen, along with assuming an identity as a juvenile delinquent. She empathized and it dampened her passions. I had a bit of a silent laugh about it.

I told her, or my mother told her, how my Grandfather had come to the rescue, sailing in from the high seas to track down his grandson and bring him home. Not a clear memory for me. It was like some desperate intervention of the gods, prompted by despair in the heavens. I talked to him tonight, and some familiarity brings us together, and I find myself curiously wanting to see him and to know more about him. We have a common enemy - my father.

Ah, there you are Mr. David. Have any inventory information for me tonight?

Nothing has changed really. Your sister is still on the prowl. And she is still your sister. Stepsisters are sisters and stepdaughters are daughters. And you are right to travel soon. Your grandfather does want to find your father, but it is not clear that he has

the ability to do so. You were easy for him to find years ago. But now, with your father, things are not so clear. It may be that your grandfather's method of finding people requires your presence to work with, that a man like you is necessary to lead him to your father. There are mysteries at work here. I cannot see all the facts.

You did a good job on the lawn. Your story telling was at best average. You leave out key details. Work them in. Remember them. As we used to say at Noble Forest, ⁱ keep your memory green. " I feel that things are going to change for you soon. You must pay attention. It's the only way you ⁷⁷ be able to make a clear line and a direct path through the entangled chaos of the world you currently inhabit. It's the best quality to apply in finding nurture and home in the battering world.

Thank you, Mr. David.

You're welcome.

Vic turned off the computer and switched off the light. He lay for some time looking at the lights from outside shining off the ceiling of the room. He let his awareness wonder through the softness of the glow yielded by the outdoor lamps of evening outside the window. He heard the door knob turn and realized that he'd forgotten to lock the door.

Kathleen tiptoed into his room and stood at the foot of his bed. She slipped her nightgown over her head and stood looking at him. He could see her naked body in the dim light. The shadows made her look ghostly, gave her erotic appeal, and made her into an image of something akin to a gothic porn star. She'd left the door open, apparently intentionally, as if to see if he'd get up and close it. He kept her gaze, frozen, caught between boyish shame and more mature desire.

Her gaze said to him, "I dare you."

Vic knew, and he knew that Kathleen knew, that Fritz and Vicky were likely still awake, in bed reading, and either of them could come out of their room at any time and look in on them. Vic lay there motionless, and Kathleen stood there naked, and they continued to stare at each other. They said nothing, and the impasse went on for twenty minutes or so, while she stood there in the shadows, her flesh iridescent, smooth, glowing in the dim bath of street light, neither calling nor waiting it seemed, planted in his vision as if a dream, not offering herself or claiming space or recognition and not proclaiming desire, just her naked body and small swimming eyes risking everything for the sake of nothing. Finally, she blew him a kiss and left his room, closing the door behind her as she walked out.

Vic lay there for some time, not really sure how long, and finally reached down to pick up her nightgown from the floor. He placed it between his head and his pillow. He drifted off to sleep, where he began to dream of being safe and breathing freely far beneath some dark liquid ocean.

He dreamt later that night of being on the road with his grandfather, a dream that connected back to the way his grandfather had driven him along with another man, an Indian, back to Virginia from Upper Michigan years earlier. It seemed his grandfather had called the man Chief Crying Bear, or was it Chief Laughing Wolf, he couldn't remember which. He was driving himself in this dream, in a car he was unfamiliar with, going places that seemed to have nothing to do with the shape of his current life. It was an odd and uncomfortable journey. Secret places kept appearing, and Vic kept finding

things he didn't know what to do with, places whose inhabitants he couldn't understand, though it seemed he had known them once, and that they knew who he was.

When the mocking bird woke him the next morning, and the fog made the morning sky gray and soft, he lay in his bed and listened to the birdsong as if it was singing his future to him in a new language he would have to learn to understand. He resisted the notion that the song was more important than the money he might or might not make during the summer. He resisted, and would continue for some time to resist, the thoughts that any push or pull from anyone or anything would swerve him from the path he had chosen as his. He also knew, however, because Mr. David had told him, that the wrong path followed in the right way can still lead to the wrong place. If you're certain you're always on the right path, or if your path is a search for certainty and its forms of authority, then you are almost certainly headed in the wrong direction, and you will end up at a place not meant for you to be. Thus Spake Mr. David.

The birdsong continued its peels outside the front door when, at six-thirty in the morning, Vic opened it and brought in the Washington Post. He released a night of urine onto the clean porcelain of the downstairs restroom and found the coffee maker set up to brew a full pot of Kathleen's French Roast. The house was quiet. He was the first to rise. He drank a glass of orange juice and waited for the coffee to brew.

The paper didn't interest him. He sat with his coffee and remembered some of the ways that Mr. David used to start the day at Noble Forest. They spent all but a few brief evenings each month out in the woods, living in camp sites the boys built with their own hands. Their handmaid cabins were not winterized, so in the winter, they often felt the

sharpness of the cold when they awoke, and would have to get out of bed and start fires and warm themselves in small groups huddled together near the flame. Bathing was virtually impossible for many of them. Mr. David didn't require them to bathe if the temperatures were below forty degrees. Some of the other counselors at the camp, who usually didn't last that long, who seemed to think of themselves as victims for having to spend their time in the forest with a group of young hooligans, had stricter requirements. But there were other ways that Mr. David was strict.

Mr. David had a way of waiting for them to come out with what they'd brought with them to camp. Not everyone wanted to come out with it, and Mr. David told them that not coming out with it was a sure way to repeat it some time in the future. But he also told them that there was no point in pretending to have them come out with it just to get the counselors off their backs. Mr. David said that a person either came out with it and got real, or kept it inside, where he said whatever it was that they were holding inside would begin to stink and rot and weaken the walls and form the basis for a larger kind of collapse. Eventually, not coming out with it would make a person crack, which is what he said had happened to each of us at this point, and it was going to happen again, until we came out with it, and got it all out, and let it go, and grabbed onto something new. It was better, Mr. David said, to go ahead and come out with it and not hold back, because holding back what was trying to come out was holding back the life inside us that was trying to find air to breath with so it could fly from its nest and fly through the world and find its own way and its own home and its own family and friends and way of life. Whether it was a beating from their stepfather, or a drug addicted mother, or sexual assault from a teacher or priest, or being told fourteen hundred times what a shit you are

by someone you would probably die without, or whether it was the thought of relief that a premature death would bring, they would be better off to go ahead and come out with it, and someone who came out with it was taking a step toward getting out and staying out of Noble Forest.

Vic was happy, sitting in the solitude of his mother's Arlington dining room, that he didn't have to get up this morning and listen to Mr. David's philosophy of life as it applied to fourteen, fifteen and sixteen year olds. He was pleased that he did not have to base his life on the cliches of people in positions of arbitrary power who'd derived their decision making authority with respect to others through no one's intended design, people who were in charge because of accidents, and would remain that way until some other accident came along to change things. Vic laughed to himself, not because Mr. David had been foolish, but just the opposite; Mr. David had been wise, and Mr. David's wisdom and presence were a part of Vic now, whether he wanted them to be or not. What Vic regretted, and what he had trouble thinking about, was the accident that had removed Mr. David from his position of authority, the accident that had in fact removed him from life all together.

One of the boys had said on the bus ride away from Mr. David's funeral that he thought Mr. David should've come out sooner, because if he had, he might not have been killed by the truck that hit him on the road back from Chimney Rock. Several boys laughed. Vic told them to shut up. He said he was going to kick their sorry asses from one side of the bus to the other if they didn't knock it off. He stood up and faced them and said that if there was any more of this kind of sorry ass shit in them he was going to tear it out them with his bare hands. Vic had been sixteen then, was a group leader, and

bigger than the other boys, who quickly silenced themselves and resumed their vacant stares toward the front of the bus.

"When you come out with it, come out with it with respect for Mr. David," he'd told them.

"Mr. David, who died for our sins." The chubby boy who said it had close cropped black hair and a white round face. Vic had wanted to smack the boy, and had moved toward him to do so, but he saw the boy was crying when he came up next to him. He left him alone, thinking he was mad, and meant what he was saying. Soon, the whole bus was crying, heaving with grief about Mr. David, mourning a figure most of them had hated, and that none of them had really understood. They buffeted the bus with their post-Christian willing, wobbling from one extreme to the other as they were driven back

to their encampment of hospitalization to be cared for within the guidance and restraints
•
of behavioral medicine. He remembered that they'd released him to his mother three days later, and by the end of the month he was back in the Arlington high school where he'd burned his science project.

He wanted to go to Altavista for the short visit with Walter Gladfelter and Stanton Cross his Grandfather had recommended. He'd have to get his mother to provide him with a rental car. He'd have to contact Walter and Stanton and organize a schedule. He thought he'd ask his mother make the contacts. She'd been friends with Walter since she was at school herself at William and Mary. He seemed to have a thing for her, despite the fact that he was nearly twenty years older than she. Of course, Walter was nearly twenty years older than his wife Connie, who'd given him three daughters, one of whom

was Vic's age and away at art school on what seemed a permanent basis. He wondered for a moment what Joy Gladfelter might be up to these days.

His mother came downstairs in her bathrobe and poured herself a cup of coffee. He was relieved to have her presence distract him from the course of memories and figures with which the early morning had preoccupied him.

"Good morning." Her bright face greeted him.

"Morning, Mom. Good to see you up early."

"It's good to be up, dear. It's good to have you sitting at my kitchen table drinking coffee and reading the Sunday paper."

"What do you have planned today?" he asked.

"I don't know. I thought I might go to church. If I can get out before Kathleen gets up to ride rough shod over me." She sipped her coffee and reached for the paper.

"Where would you go?"

"Well, I don't do Mass anymore. I've always liked that Quaker service downtown."

"I thought you might be thinking of the Episcopal service at eight just down the street."

"I like that one too. Sometimes I even go to both."

"Didn't you tell me once that there's a lot of talking at that Quaker Meeting? I thought they were about silence. You know, hearing the inner stillness." He took a big drink of coffee.

"That's true. It's amusing sometimes. I went a month ago and there was one of those popcorn meetings, ungathered as some say, a kind of disturbed garrulous mess of a

meeting." She sipped her coffee. "Some young woman started talking about an orgasm she'd had the night before. Some of the elders subtly cornered her afterwards and told her she might find greater inspiration by keeping her pants on, her mouth closed and her heart open to the silence. I felt badly for her and I haven't been back since."

Vic leaned back in his chair. "There's a tendency among the youthful to confuse the inspired with the orgasmic." Vic guessed his mother was interested in both and experiencing neither. "I've been thinking about getting a car and leaving today and heading down to Altavista to visit with Walter and Stanton."

Vicky reached for the neck of her robe. "Why so soon?" she asked.

"Youthful restlessness," he said. "What should we do about a car?"

"Well, if you're really that intent on leaving so soon, we can get you a rental today. You can leave this afternoon if you're in that big of a hurry." She looked into her coffee cup. "Didn't you and dad work out getting a car?"

"What we worked out was his paying me for it at the end of the summer. I don't have an active credit card, Mom. I'm a student. I'm poor. Other than that, I don't know what we worked out. I don't really know what I've agreed to."

"I appreciate the risks you're taking by going on this trip with him," she said. "We'll pick up a car at National. I'll use one of our credit cards." Her lips tightened. Her face lost a shade of color. Her shoulders sagged,

"This was as much your idea as anyone else's, wasn't it?" he asked.

"It doesn't matter," she said, straightening her back. She looked at him. "We'll have breakfast and go get the car. You can leave anytime you like." Her voice sounded bitter.

"Where's this coming from. Mom? You seem hurt, as if I should be grateful to you for helping send me off this excursion across North America with a man I haven't seen in five years." He stood his ground, with much the same focus as he'd kept in his bed the night before, where he'd held his position as if he was in a foxhole.

"He's not some man. He's my father. He's your grandfather. He saved your life, damn it." She spoke harshly. Then she quickly seemed to repent of her hardness. "Look, it wasn't my idea, really. My father wanted it. You can do it or not do it." She got up from the table and rushed into the kitchen to refresh her coffee.

"Are you letting me off the hook?"

She came back into the room and sipped her hot coffee. A relaxed smile etched itself across her lips, as if she'd been relieved of something heavy. "I love you son. There is probably more at stake here than either of us has been told. I don't know what's going on. I just know my father is passionate about this happen."

Kathleen stomped down the stairway and entered the dining room. She beamed at the two of them and got her coffee. "I'll bet you'd both like breakfast." She exuded energy though a bright face and radiant eyes. Her hair was tied in a bun and she looked to be making a show of her entrance.

"Yes," Vicky answered. "Then we're going to go out and get Vic a rental car. He's leaving today."

"Oh no," Kathleen cried. "Why?"

"He has a trip to take," Vicky said.

"Then I'd better make it a good one. How about peaches and omelets, blueberries and French toast, watermelon and cranberry aspic before young Telemachus takes his leave of Penelope?"

Vicky nodded.

"Fine with me." Vic sipped his coffee.

"On the way then," Kathleen said.

Vic noticed Kathleen looking at him, faking a pout, as untouched by the tensions in the house as if she was already in Europe, making it with her boyfriend, or her girlfriend, or both.

VII.

Vicky w⁷as no longer interested in attending church. Her son was moving on, and she was forced by his suddenly urgent desire to leave Arlington to make arrangements for him to do so. She went upstairs and saw her blindfolded husband asleep in the bed. She saw him as oblivious to everything except his own hung over and soon to be forgotten dreams. She tossed her robe aside and showered.

Once she'd cleaned her body and blow dried her hair, she over-dressed in a blue business suit and perfumed her neck. She slipped into black high heels. She applied her make up and took a look at the finished product in the bathroom mirror. She said aloud, for no reason she knew, "If looks could kill." She had the looks, and perhaps she felt some desire to kill, though if these passions had taken hold of her, they'd done so largely without her knowledge or permission. Remembering her father and her son, she went downstairs with her purse and ate breakfast with Kathleen and Vic.

She drove him over to National Airport, smoking cigarettes every mile of the drive, and she rented a metallic blue Dodge Neon. She obtained a three week rental with unlimited mileage and paid for the car and the insurance with a Master Card with a fifteen thousand dollar credit line that had about fifteen hundred dollars of available credit remaining in the account. It was one of six such accounts she and Fritz shared. Their debt cost a lot of money. It was like a noose around her neck. Fritz didn't seem to care, nor did he seem to possess the resolve or the resources to remedy the situation. They were stuck with it.

She returned to the house in tandem with Vic; the errand took a little over an hour. Kathleen sat at the breakfast table, reading The Post, the breakfast dishes still scattered and dirty where they had eaten a couple of hours earlier.

Vic went upstairs. She heard him packing his belongings.

Vicky went upstairs to her room and took the credit card receipt with her. She saw Fritz; he'd rolled over on his side away from the center of the bed. In a short-lived fit of anger and disgust, she threw the credit card receipt at him in a wad. It bounced off his back and came to rest in the middle of the bed.

Vicky went downstairs and picked up the phone to call Walter Gladfelter.

He answered after three rings. "Hello, Vicky?" he answered.

"How'd you know it was me?" she asked.

"The phone displayed your number. You're the only person who ever calls from there. It's a technical thing, not a psychic one. How can I help you?"

"You really want to know?"

"Of course. Why else would I have asked?"

"Vic wants to come and see you today. He wants to see Stanton tomorrow."

"OK. Have him come on down. We'll put him up in the cabin out back. But I've got the feeling that's not what you wanted to say."

"Never mind that. Has dad called you?"

"Several times. Something's cooking with him."

"Do you know exactly what he's up to? I mean, I've gone along with this excursion with Vic this summer, but I just want to be sure Vic's going to be safe."

"Well, to be honest with you, I don't know that he will be safe. Amos wants to go out and see the Chief."

"What for?"

"Well, I think it has to do with the fire. And I think it has to do with dying."

"You guys are never going to get over that fire, are you?"

"No, we're not. I don't think a group of men who go through a catastrophe like that can ever get over it. It's part of who we are. It links us. It goes beyond anything that I could describe to you."

"And my father's going to die with it."

"I don't know about that. He saved men's lives during that fire. Your father's a good man. He's strong. He just gets a little worried about the end of things."

"He is a good man. And so is my son."

"That's right. And so is your husband."

"He's not in good shape, Walter. He drinks every day now. He's very depressed. He doesn't want to work anymore. He's still in bed asleep and he got drunk last night. He gets drunk every night."

"Does he ever talk to you about the fire?"

"No. He doesn't talk to me about much of anything except what happened to him at the Commerce Department and how the Republicans harassed him out of his job. Frankly, I think he wants to die. I've never seen that in him before."

"It happens. Sometimes men want to die. I know the feeling. Amos knows the feeling."

"Vic knew the feeling once, I think, of wanting to die."

"He knew it way too early. Fourteen is too young to want to die. But you're right. It's hit him, too."

"Did he ever talk with you about that?" She sat down in chair beside the phone in the hallway. She lit a cigarette and smoked it in the hallway despite an agreement not to smoke in the house.

"Not really. We spent more time talking about philosophy, about law, about gaining some authority in the world. I wanted to impart to him the value of strong, well informed mind. That was what Amos wanted for him, too: the ability to stand like steel and think with piercing clarity of mind."

"I guess that's what Stanton wanted, too."

"No, Stanton wanted to make sure he knew how to work, and that he never forgot the real value of work, of hard work."

Kathleen brought her a cup of coffee. Their eyes met; Kathleen winked. Kathleen pouted her lips when she saw the cigarette, pointing at it, wagging her finger and shaking her head.

Vicky shrugged and mouthed silently to Kathleen that she was sorry. "It's anxiety," she whispered. Vicky felt a wave of fondness for her daughter in law.

Rather than return to kitchen, Kathleen kissed Vicky gently on the forehead, as if she knew that Vicky was doing something important while experiencing something difficult.

Vicky mouthed a thank you, appreciative of the solicitude, and asked Walter, "What did the Chief want for Vic?"

"I think that's what they're going to go find out."

A pause intervened. Silence stretched out across the phone lines. Vicky felt comfortable with it. She knew Walter had been attracted to her when they both lived in Williamsburg, when she was a student, mother and piano teacher and Walter was a high school principle and one of her father's many old Navy buddies from the Forrestal. She knew he was embarrassed to have those kinds of feelings for a former commanding officer's daughter who was nearly twenty years his junior, but he told her one time after Ty had left her that he wrote it off to irony and middle aged lust. While he would subtly flirt with her, Vicky recognized how he'd forced himself to remain respectful to her and her father. Vicky had been clear in her mind about her affects on Walter, and while she was not unwilling to use it to get what she wanted, he had never seemed to her unwilling to allow her to use him despite his staid ethics and fatherly familiarity. In the last three years, since her son had spent his summers with Walter, she'd come to rely on him. She felt she needed him now, even though Vic would be spending this summer doing something all together different, without Walter to guide him.

"Well, I guess I have to let him go," she said.

"He'll be fine. It will all be fine. It's not like he's going away to war."

"No, no, it's like he's going away to my father's war, to your war."

"Well, there may be some truth to that. But it's a symbolic truth, not a literal one.

"He'll be leaving this afternoon, Walter, and it looks like he's going to be heading directly to your place. He's fond of that cabin. All the time he's spent there the last three summers is very important to him."

"He's done some good work here. I'll look forward to seeing him. We'll take good care of him."

"Thank you again. Bye now."

"Goodbye, dear."

Vicky hung up the phone and drank the coffee Kathleen had brought her. She finished her cigarette, leaving ashes spread like fallen hummingbird feathers across the hardwood floor. Vic headed out the front door with a suitcase and loaded it into the back of Neon. Vicky could see him through the front windows, standing by the small car, preparing to move out of her space and into one more nearly of his own making with friends and colleagues of her father. He took his lap top out and hooked it up. She walked into the study and found a CD of Khatchaturian's Concerto for Piano and Orchestra and another of Erik Satie's piano music. She remembered how Vic had reminded her during their conversation on the drive home from Williamsburg of that day she played the Concerto on a stereo system Ty had bought when they were younger. She remembered the way that day she in fact sought to perform for her son. It was during an otherwise painful Sunday when she acutely missed Ty, baffled by how utterly he had

vanished. She'd even played a long segment of melody from the Concerto on her piano for him, performing it as if to praise him, as if to bless him, as if to feed some portion of his soul in a way that would last the whole of his life. She felt the desire to feed him that way now, but in her sadness she realized that the only real way she could do that was to release him to find whatever way or path or passage through time the contingencies of the moment might afford.

She went up to the guest room where Vic had spent the last two nights and placed the photograph albums into a small back pack. She placed the CDs inside its front pocket. She wrote a note to her father, telling him to keep the pictures as long as he wished. It was when she had finished her note that she intuitively realized her father didn't have a lot of time left, and that whatever else he might be pursuing with her son, he wouldn't be around in a year to do more of it. It came to her as a kind of inevitability, recognizing it with what she thought to be her sense of fate. Her father was asking her son not so much for driving through this world, but an escort to another. She chose against her better motherly judgment to accept the risk. She trusted her father, Walter, Stanton, the Chief, and she was sorry that Fritz, of the five men still living of a group of seven that formed from among those who'd survived the Forrestal Fire in the South China Sea - men who'd sworn a lifelong pact to protect each other's children and grandchildren - was too sick, lonely and beaten to involve himself in her father's and her son's travels. Life isn't scripted, though, she thought. Its only purpose, through all its structure, chaos and redundancy, is to be found in its effects, which are to surprise us, and to keep us guessing.

Vic made a couple of extra trips to the car. Kathleen came downstairs in cutoffs and her rugby shirt. The three of them walked to Vic's Neon. Vicky placed the back pack and the CDs on the foot of the passenger's side, below the seat where Vic had placed his lap top. She was going to tell him what was inside, but forgot to do so when she saw Vic hug Kathleen. The tight intimacy of their embrace troubled her.

"You're wonderful," Kathleen said to Vic.

He looked at the ground sheepishly. "You're not bad yourself, big sister."

"Have a good summer," she added. "That is, of course, unless you have other plans."

"Oh, I'll have a summer," he said. "I just hope I can tell you about next fall."

Vicky embraced her son. She felt a slight tremor in her body. She tried to conceal her physical shaking, but Vic said nothing about it. She held him a few seconds. She said, "Be careful. Tell Daddy I love him, tell Walter and Stanton hello, and please remember that we love you."

He nodded. "Thanks, mom. I appreciate the help with the car." He looked over at Kathleen. "There's a Yamaha baby grand in the basement den that belongs to her. Ask her to play it for you sometime," he said.

Vicky looked at the right side of his face. He turned toward her and smiled. She kissed his dimple.

He got in the car and backed out, headed up the street, tossed a wave, headed around the curve and up the street and turned out of view. For a moment, Vicky was torn with the aches of motherhood, all the stronger now that her son was so close to being the kind of man he wanted to be. She wondered if this change of plans would interrupt that.

She wondered if her father, if his friends, if she were making some grotesque mistake. She wanted none of the kind of savagery and selfishness her first husband had inflicted on those closest to him, none of the madness Vic had fallen into earlier in his life. She wanted no more vain repetitions of past disasters. She thought that the chief obstacle of Vic's life remained how to become his own person before he might fall prey to living his father's life. But this was all so complicated, so messy and fraught with trivialities and doubts. She was growing tired, and she recognized that all the risks and dangers she was preoccupied with were bubbles gurgling up from her own tired, frustrated, leaky mind.

She walked toward the house. Kathleen took hold of her hand and beamed her a smile of remarkable tenderness and openness. It consoled Vicky instantly.

When she climbed the steps to the door, Vicky looked back toward the driveway to see the empty parking space her son had left behind. Kathleen pulled her inside.

An overview and summation of *The Other Side of Things*, presented as a senior project for a creative writing degree at UNCA follows below.

The finished novel, as presently conceived, will consist of four roughly equal parts. This project is the first part.

The second part will follow Vic Casey and his grandfather Amos Rogers on their travels across parts of the US, reviewing and recollecting Amos' experiences, relationships, passions and the major accidents and incidents of his life. It seems to me this part of the novel should deliver a sense of the expanse of time, movement toward an intentional conclusion of life, preparation for death, and in Amos' case, preparation for what he considers spiritual transition. I imagine that this section of the novel will end in the Dakotas, where Amos will reconnect with and introduce Vic to a man named Chief Laughing Wolf. The Chief is a major figure in the novel. He is, in his own way, a Native American Chief, or Shaman, but he was also a Chief Petty Officer on board the USS Forrester at the time that the Chief, Amos, Stanton, Walter, Fritz, Ty Casey's father Vincent, and a man named Levin Smith survived the Forrester fire through their responses to the pain and disaster of that fire. So the name "The Chief" cuts in two directions, toward the US Navy, and toward Native ritual and leadership.

"It's a good thing that markets don't take Native ritual and wisdom seriously anymore," the Chief said. "It frees us from the great crush of money, which is no less than a god loaded down with gold with no good in his mind."

By the conclusion of the second part of the novel, the reader should know the basic life stories of Amos and Vic. The two of them should be closely linked. The novel

by then should clearly be a *Bildungs Roman* from Vic's point of view, and a story of renunciation and generativity for Amos.

The third section I imagine as a long depiction of some kind of as yet undetermined form of initiation for Amos on the one hand and Vic on the other. I want to construct this part of the novel as a convincing story of the authenticity of initiatory experience, of the symbolic and physical suffering inherent in these experiences, and how Amos' experience on the Forrestal and Vic's experiences at Noble Forest involved elements of an initiatory world seeking to enter their consciousness. In other words, two worlds are involved in their experiences of reality and their identity and location within and between these two worlds.

Vic, as a young man, confronts a terrible and painful ordeal that terrifies him. This is what his grandfather and the Chief offer him, and is, along with Amos' own initiation, what they are brought together for that summer in 2005. Vic's journal carries the narrative details of the story, and the novel provides the flesh, muscle, sinew of the experiences they encounter. Everything in Vic's ordinary world is brought into question. His study of philosophy, his desire to learn and practice law, his interest in developing authority as a student and then as an attorney, his sense of the underground of cities and nature and the surfaces and atmospheres of the world at large, even his sense of his mother and his identity as her son, everything of apparent consequence and meaning to the life he was living, are all brought into question. His experiences at Noble Forest with Mr. David, just like his grandfather's experiences on the Forrestal, when mixed with The Chiefs practices to initiate them, bring them to their knees, in the greatest anguish

imaginable which, when they survive it, opens them to new ways of being, feeling, sensing and knowing in the world.

Vic accepts initiation, but not without a long struggle, and once he undergoes his initiatory experience, he continues to suffer greatly. His initiation forces him to decide whether or not what The Chief has aided him in seeing is real, and whether or not what Western Philosophy teaches him is real, or whether or not the constructions, practices and social structures of The Law are real. What does initiation do? Does it disclose reality? Does it step up the intensity of the imagination? Can one be done without also doing the other? Does it accelerate the vitality of the body as an organism? Does it show us what our existence is, or is capable of being? Does initiation generate the kind of existential and ontological crisis necessary to receive the life and vision of creation, rather than forcing formulations and constructions onto or into the "self and the "other?"

Vic remembers his earlier bout of madness while in his initiatory ordeal. He comes to see it as having been a gift. He comes to see his reorganization of his life as its by-product. Blessings may be very painful; the gods don't much distinguish between ecstasy and agony - that's a human matter. He decides, as he leaves the Dakotas with his grandfather, to return to school, to return to his path with reason, law and authority, and to seek to hold the tension between the imaginal depths of mystery he has experienced on the one hand, and formal procedures and requirements with which he had hoped to organize a career on the other.

In the fourth section, he returns to Arlington with his Grandfather. His mother is there, and her affair with Kathleen, which starts during an interval early in the second part of the novel, and which has been continued via email and phone calls while Kathleen

is in Europe, is about to be continued when Kathleen returns to Washington early in the fall. While Vic and his grandfather spend a couple of days in Arlington, Vic's father reaches Vicky. The four of them arrange to meet in Washington. Vic finds out about his father's affair with Vicky's sister and with Vicky's mother, finds out that Vicky's mother's suicide on his birthday was an attempt at revenge, finds out that her sister has been living with Ty for many years, and they've kept a low profile out of a sense of shame, and led impoverished lives on the edges of nowhere and nothing for many years. All the incest themes of the family are disclosed. Vic sees that this entangled, enmeshed comedy of family life has been perilously destructive for everyone involved, and that even Vicky's marriage to Fritz had about certain incestuous qualities. He comes to see how the disaster of the Forrestal fire may have contributed to saving him from a much worse fate, in the way that it brought men together who somehow managed to look out for Vic, and somehow managed to get him into a view and experience of life that saved him from his father's banal, self-centered and woefully misled, errant life,

"When he saw his father that only time in the motel, he saw the man and recognized the fate from which he had been saved. Who said the natives had no sense of salvation? What their mysteries saved him from was the loss his father had endured; it was as if his father's entire sordid life had been produced by the machinery of a social order intent on either killing or demonizing any deep sense of wisdom, beauty, feeling or connection to a living world. Strangely, his father had used sex, love, pleasure to remove from himself any capacity to experience life as the immense field of beauty, happiness and vitality that it actually proves to be. A tragic quality inhabited his father's parting gaze. He'd used what he most desired to make his life pointless and empty. He didn't

have a clue as to what he'd done with his life, didn't see what he'd managed to make of himself, didn't care that there was so little hope for him or men both like and unlike him who lived only on one side of things."

Vicky returns home with her father and waits for Kathleen to come back from Europe, something she never does. She stays with him until he dies, on May 6 2006, days before or after Vic graduates from William and Mary. He's cremated and his ashes are placed in pine urn. Fritz sells the house in Arlington and comes to Wilson to personally deliver to Vicky her part of the equity, which after liquidation of their unsecured debt comes to about five-thousand dollars. She tells him there's no point in continuing things, and he agrees, knowing he has to do something about what he's become. He takes her father's ashes with him, and drives up to see the Chief.