

RAND RICHARDS COOPER

*Heroes of 1974*

I never actually saw her, but in my mind she was X-rated, a cartoon figure straight out of *Playboy* or *Fritz the Cat*—tiny waist, boobs swelling from a pink sweater, a look that said, *Meeeow*. She had a car to go with the flashy boobs, too, a yellow Mustang that gleamed like a huge piece of sugar-coated candy. The Mustang was real. It stood parked for all the world to see, at a motel on Route 44, next to my father's Camaro. His girlfriend's name was Tina: ridiculous, because my mother was Gina, and leaving Gina for Tina sounded like a game. And in a way it was. Somewhere in America, a giant round of marital musical chairs had begun, and by 1974 it had reached Hartford, Connecticut. Anyone could get up and switch lives for any reason, even boobs and a shiny car. For two months my father lived at the Royal Motel. Then one day he and Tina were gone—off to California, where her car made sense.

*Good riddance*, said my mother.

But there wasn't anything good about it. It was bad all the way around. *He* was bad, and my mother believed that at thirteen I needed to know it. "I should've seen this coming," she'd mutter, with my little sister Lisa out of hearing. "I should've seen that man for what he is."

My father had joined the Navy at twenty and been to Vietnam. A hero, who came home to build machines for heroes: subs at General Dynamics, later jet engines at Pratt&Whitney. We lived near Hartford, renting, owning, then renting again; we swung up or down, depending on him. My father resembled Burt Reynolds, all speed, smile, and mayhem. He gambled at the jai alai fronton; drank bourbon and fought with my mother, lurid fights that brought the walls down. He told me about Vietnam, how they'd go into a village and clean it out.

*Craig, stop it!* my mother would complain. *He's just a kid.*

But I didn't want to be a kid; I wanted to be tough like him. I watched reruns of *Combat*, starring Vic Morrow, and smashed bottles with my friend Gary Woicek, lobbing them like grenades in the woods behind the Little League field. I wanted to be clean and mean

and mission-ready. My father had grown up in Virginia, driving fixed-up jalopies and hunting on weekends. He had ideas about what went into being a man. Playing basketball in the driveway, he would back me in, battering-ram style. *Take your man inside*, he said, *take him to the hole!* When we played he got mad and wanted me to be mad too; being mad was the lesson.

And now that he was gone, it was my mother's turn to be mad. She took his favorite beer stein and smashed it against the living room wall. If she didn't do that, she said, she'd be in her room crying her eyes out, and who'd get up and go to the damn Montgomery Ward tomorrow? She fumed with righteous wrath. "I'll divorce him *in absentia*," she said on the phone to her best friend, Carmen Florio. "He won't know what hit him." But didn't she know divorce was a sin? I was in eighth grade at St. Crispin's School, where the nuns rapped your hand with a ruler if they didn't like you. People who get divorced go to hell, I reminded my mother.

She laughed. "Oh, that's good. He goes to California, and I go to hell."

That summer my father called twice, and I got a postcard from the San Diego Zoo, and Lisa a birthday present. Then nothing. A month passed, two. I expected him at any time. He would walk through the back door, grinning, and pick up life as usual. After all, I had a guarantee. Hadn't he left his Camaro in the garage? Hadn't he said, Keep an eye on my wheels, OK Tiger?

The Camaro was my father's prize, a sapphire blue model with whitewalls and rear spoiler and a death's-head stick shift. My mother had once had her picture taken posing on the hood, but now she turned against his car. One night she came rushing into the TV room, jabbing her finger in a magazine. "Listen to this," she said. "'Buy as much house as you can afford and as little car as you can accept.' Does that tell you something? We're sitting here renting, and he buys that Batmobile out there."

"I think it's a good car," I said. "I think it's boss."

"That's my whole point," she said.

One day I came home from school to find the garage door open and the Camaro gone. I ran up the drive. Bits of glass decorated the garage floor, and to one side stood a sledgehammer my father used for splitting firewood.

Inside, Carmen Florio and my mother sat at the kitchen table amid a cloud of cigarette smoke. They were drinking wine, and my mother held a cloth to her face. Lisa sat alongside, playing with her Etch-a-Sketch. My mother glanced at me and looked away.

"Is Dad home?" I said. "Is he OK?"

She made a noise, somewhere between a laugh and a hiccup. Lisa looked up from her game. "Mommy got hurt. She bled."

"But where's the car? What happened?"

"I sold it," my mother said. She looked at me.

"You *sold* it?"

"That's right. I sold it to the first guy who came along. How do you like that?"

"Ricky," Carmen said. "Your mom's upset. She—"

"I don't care." I sputtered in outrage. "I don't care if she's upset."

I stomped upstairs to my room and threw myself down on the bed. A minute later Carmen came in, carrying her glass of wine. Carmen had red hair, glamorous like Ginger on *Gilligan's Island*, and a dozen silver bracelets jingled on her arm. She walked around, inspecting my model aircraft carriers and Wall of Fame collage—athletes I had cut out of *Sports Illustrated* and pasted to the wall above my bed, Yaz, Walt Frazier, O.J. Simpson.

"Are these your heroes?" she asked.

"No," I lied. "They're just some players."

She had ice cubes in her wine and clanked them around. "You're mad," she said. "It's your father's car and you're supposed to take care of it."

"She drives it and then she lies. And now she did something to it."

"And how do you know she drives it?"

All fall I'd been marking the tires with chalk—a trick my father had shown me—and three times the mark hadn't lined up. "I just know," I said.

"No, you don't," Carmen said. "You don't know at all. I'll bet you know some pretty good thirteen-year-old things. But not this."

I didn't say anything. She held out her wine, and I took the glass and drank, turning it away from where lipstick smudged the rim.

"Now I'm going to tell you what you're thinking," she said. "You're thinking, wine tastes horrible. You can't believe we really like it. Right?"

"Wine's OK," I said. "I mean, I've had bourbon before."

"I'm sure you have. Craig would want you to taste bourbon." Carmen Florio smiled. "OK, your turn. Tell me what I'm thinking."

I tried, but I couldn't even make up anything. She let me hang for a moment, then beckoned for the wineglass.

"Well," she said. "Nice visiting with you, Ricky."

I lay on the bed and listened to her bracelets jingle down the stairs. She and my mother started talking. My mother laughed, and I thought about all I would tell my father when he came back.

It would be years before I learned the truth. How my mother hadn't been driving the Camaro, just turning the engine over and moving the car a few feet in the garage, keeping it in shape—for him. And how he'd called that day from California, telling her he'd be sending someone over, one of his pals, to pick his car up and drive it out for him. My mother's answer was the sledgehammer. Four swings: front and back windows, roof, hood. Then she called Mel's Garage and sold it to them on the spot.

I didn't know that yet. All I knew was that I hated her for those bits of glass gleaming in the empty garage, and for what I heard in her laughter from downstairs. I might be thirteen, but I understood that laughter. She was going to get on with her life, it said, and join in the game of musical chairs. Everyone else was playing, and damned if she wouldn't play too.

After that there were men around—men calling (*hiya*, a voice would ask, *Gina there?*), men waiting in a car outside as my mother put on lipstick by the door. There was a blowhard professor from the community college, she called him The Whale. There was a mopey guy who sold women's clothing from Scotland and drove around with boxes of kilts in his trunk, and a travel agent who turned out to be married, and a salesman at Olympic Sporting Goods with a crewcut like my father's, who blanched when my mother showed up with Lisa and me one day, and never called again. A guy from shipping at Montgomery Ward gave her a present of a fancy patio grill, and days later two cops came to the door and confiscated it. "A crime spree," my mother said later to Carmen. "Real Bonnie and Clyde stuff." How did they think they could get away with it? she asked aloud—meaning, giving you stolen merchandise, or telling you they weren't married when the ring was on their finger, or putting on airs because they managed a Midas shop. Every man she met had something

wrong with him, some defect that explained why he was out there in the first place, unbought, rejected, returned.

I didn't make things easier. If she brought a date home, I sat glowering. After he left, I'd ask her, was she going to marry him?

"Who, him?" she'd say, taking a drag from her Virginia Slim. "No, honey. Not even close."

Then what about Dad? Was she still going to be married to him?

She sighed. "Ask me something I can answer," she said.

But there weren't any simple answers for a woman in her situation, saddled with two kids, needing the rent. My mother also wanted payback for years she considered stolen, and if that meant dressing in a suede miniskirt on a Friday night and heading to the Dial Tone Lounge, so be it. At the Dial Tone you could phone from table to table, and I hated the thought of her sitting there with Linda, her fellow salesgirl at Monkey Ward, dialing away. I imagined busting in and tearing the phone out of her hand; then, when some creep skulked away from another table, gliding over like Clint Eastwood and stuffing it into his face.

A tough kid at St. Crispin's taunted me. *How's Gina doing?* he'd say—rhyming it with "vagina." *I hear some guys ran into Gina at Dial Tone—they ran WAY DEEP into Gina!* I bided my time until one day at recess, then blindsided him, knocking his legs out so he hit the pavement hard.

The school called home. I was becoming a problem, they told my mother. She pleaded with me; she said people blamed a divorced woman for everything, and told me I had to be a good example for Lisa, and packed me off to my room without dessert. She called Carmen. "He needs someone to keep him in line," I heard. "God damn him"—and I knew who she meant. She didn't have to say his name.

In the middle of class I was summoned down to Father Connelly. He kept his office in a tiny room crammed with books and diplomas and electric candles, and Jesus dreamily agonizing on His cross. Father Connelly talked to you through the steeple of his fingertips, pressed together in front of his mouth. I was entering a stage of life, he told me, where I would need to be mature. Star athletes were mature. Jesus had been mature, which was why he accepted his Father's will even though he didn't like it. And our school's patron, Saint Crispin, was mature, giving up all his possessions to make

shoes for the poor. He wanted to help others, which is what mature people did.

I stared at the wall clock—the school’s clocks were ancient relics that tocked off the minutes mechanically—and avoided his gaze. Father Connelly went on talking. Maturity, he pointed out, didn’t mean you had to be a shrinking violet. “Take St. Crispin. The Romans tortured him. They pulled out his fingernails.” He leaned forward. “They boiled a cauldron of fat and tar and dunked him in. Can you imagine that?”

The story didn’t make sense to me. “If God was so mature and everything,” I said, “then why didn’t He help Crispin?”

“Ah, but He did.” Father Connelly smiled. “In fact, He gave him a great gift. He made him a soldier for goodness.” And that was his question for me, he said. Clearly I wanted to be a soldier. But what *for*?

It wasn’t the kind of question you answered. I sat there. On the clock the big hand trembled, as if it might move backward, then clicked ahead.

My father didn’t come home. Not for Christmas or New Years, not all winter. And then it was spring, and Jeff appeared on the scene.

He was twenty-eight, four years younger than my mother. They met at the Green Thumb gardening store, and with his long hair and denim shirt he looked like a gardener, though in fact he was a carpenter. “He’s going to be an architect,” my mother reported. “He’s going back to school. And he means it.” Unlike my father, she meant.

And that was the essence of Jeff, that was the maddening point of him: he was the opposite of my father, in every way. He had been a conscientious objector during Vietnam. He talked about gardening and travel, and about books, like *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*; he listed the big ideas that would change the world. He and his friends were building a solar-heated house out in the woods. One day the nuclear power plants would all be shut down, he told us, and America would go solar.

“It’s the only real option,” he said.

*He’s smart*, my mother told Carmen, *and handsome too*. To me he was a joke, with floppy ears and a Fu Manchu like the Bad in *The Good, The Bad and the Ugly*. He was skinny, so that when he fixed our water heater and took off his shirt, you saw every one of his ribs. He wore

blue jeans low on his waist, a leather belt with two rings for a buckle, and a headband he tied with solemn care, the same reverent way he tuned his Epiphone acoustic guitar. Then there was his car— a rusted-out green Fiat, with Mardi Gras beads dangling from the mirror, whose back seat swam with magazines and tools and old orange juice cartons, and whose front seat had come loose from its moorings. I hated that car, just as I hated how Jeff swept my sister up on his shoulders, and used the soul brother handshake, and hid E-Z rolling papers in his jeans pocket, and played my mother druggy music like The Grateful Dead. *Why do you listen to that?* I asked her.

*I'm expanding my horizons,* she said.

I could see she liked him, and he liked her too. He liked the way she tossed her hair and made remarks. He liked that she was from the South, that she knew where Cripple Creek was, and said “liquor drinks,” and cooked deep-fried hush puppies, and even, if she'd had enough of those liquor drinks, said “y'all.” He wanted to take her places, he said, Colorado, Mexico. He wanted to hike with her on the Long Trail. “You're gonna love it,” he'd say. “You're gonna be in heaven.”

Jeff's heaven, as I pictured it, was his friends all living in tents somewhere and growing pot. In my mind he was an older brother to the freaks who hung out at night in the high school parking lot, getting high in their vans. I felt sure Jeff was doing illegal things, things I could use as evidence to have him hauled out of our life. One day he showed up with a pumpkin pie he'd baked, and while he helped my mother in the garage, I examined it—sniffing it, searching the surface for a rainbow sheen of drugs. *What on earth are you doing?* said my mother, watching from the doorway.

This was in May, one of the first warm days, and we drove in the station wagon to the state park for a picnic. Jeff and my mother tossed a Frisbee, her throws curving wildly, Lisa and our dog, Princess, chasing after. On a spread-out blanket we ate sandwiches and pickles and chips. No thank you, I said, when it came time for the pie. My mother smirked at Jeff.

“Let me ask you something, Ricky,” he said to me. “What's wrong with planting a plant in your own garden? That's all hemp is, really.” You could make rope from hemp, Jeff said, and fabric, and it was far less dangerous than drugs the government allowed, like alcohol.

But alcohol wasn't a drug, I insisted.

“Sure it is. It’s just *their* drug.” Jeff winked at my mother, and tried to give me a friendly tap on my shoulder, but I jerked back.

“Pot is a sin,” I said. “It’s against the commandments.”

“Which one? Thou shalt not *toke*?” He laughed, until my mother gave him a look. “Listen,” he went on. “What my Bible says is love thy neighbor. It says honor thy mother and father. It’s about people. Who told you all this, anyway?”

Father Connelly, I lied.

Jeff nodded. The thing about the Church, he observed, was that it sometimes forgot how simple Jesus’s message actually was. Maybe Father Connelly needed to take another read-through with his Bible.

I couldn’t stand him, his mildness, his fairness. “At least he’s not a draft-dodger,” I broke in. “At least he doesn’t do drugs.”

Jeff frowned, and a little spot of anger flared. He stood, shaking his head. “You know something?” he said. “The FBI could use this kid. Bring him to the airport, let him loose on the baggage.” Taking the Frisbee, he wound up and threw it as far as he could—way down, the green disc sailing between trees and over picnic tables. He ran after it, Princess trotting along.

“Are you happy now?” my mother hissed, and went after him.

We drove back in silence. At home Jeff went straight to his beat-up Fiat, my mother leaning in at his window for a minute. When he drove away, she came up to where I was shooting baskets.

“He’d play basketball with you,” she said. “If you gave him a chance.”

I didn’t say anything. I was working on my pivot move: back to the basket, drop a shoulder, clear your man out.

“Jeff is good, you know. He’s a good person. Every summer he works at Silver Lake for a month.” This was a camp for retarded kids, out in the woods. “You know what he gets for that? Nothing. He does that for free.”

“Because he’s an idiot,” I muttered.

“What did I hear you say, mister?”

I kept shouldering my way around the drive. My mother made a noise, a growl almost, of pure frustration. “This is not my fault,” she said. And went into the house.

Two weeks passed before Jeff came again. When he did, he brought daisies for my mother, and for me a crinkled silver ball, big, the size of a melon. It was solid tinfoil, he told us: as kids, he and his sister



had saved every scrap of foil and rolled them up over the years into a ball. "It's an object of contemplation," he said. "Think about all those layers inside. About how long it took to grow this big." I hated Jeff's peace offering—what was so great about a bunch of old tinfoil? I wanted to say—but with my mother giving me the evil eye, I just shrugged and took it and put it in my room.

I didn't care, because by now it was June. June was my birthday and the end of St. Crispin's. And it was one full year since my father left. I kept picturing those adventure-movie maps, where a line traces the hero across the continent. Death Valley, the Badlands, the Everglades: my father, making his way through the exotic dangerous places and finally back home to us, to me. He would ride in at sunset. He would show up and prove them all wrong.

On the last day of school, a half-day, we got our graduation gifts—pins for the girls and cuff links for us, tiny fake-bronzed St. Crispin's shoes. Father Connelly led the class prayer, circling among the desks, blessing the custodian and coaches and bus drivers. "All right," he said at last, to a screeching explosion of chairs. But I felt a hand on my shoulder. "Just a sec, Ricky."

He waited until the others had gone, leaving us alone in the scuffed, sour room. "So," he said finally. "You made it. You came through."

His eyes went to the box I was holding, the cuff links. My plan was to throw them away, and I wondered if he knew. He bent toward me. "I'm going to tell you something, Ricky. No matter how hard you try to be bad, God's going to turn you around. And the more you fight, the more He's going to enjoy winning. Do you think you can understand that?"

"No," I said.

He nodded. "Good for you," he said, strangely, and leaned back. "Now. I understand you have a birthday coming up. Go out and enjoy."

My friend Gary Woicek stood waiting in the hall. We went outside, yanking off our ties and undoing our collars. It was twelve-thirty and squinty bright, and the empty schoolyard already looked like summer. A car honked. My mother's station wagon stood at the curb. Someone sat beside her in the driver's seat, and my heart lurched. Then I saw.

"Hey there, birthday boy!" my mother called out.

“Who’s that?” said Gary.

“My mom. And her pothead boyfriend.”

I walked over toward the car, Gary trailing. My mother sat back, and Jeff leaned over her lap, his long hair brushing her blue jeans.

“How about a Red Sox game, buddy?” From an envelope he pulled four red-and-white tickets. “Fenway Park, first-base seats.”

My mother pulled sunglasses down her nose. “Lisa’s at Carmen’s for the night. And I already talked to Gary’s mom. Wanna come, Gary?”

Gary was in the car before I could stop him. I got in too. “Don’t you want to say something to Jeff?” my mother asked.

“That’s ok,” Jeff said, starting the car. “Don’t worry about it.”

We made the drive to Boston and joined the flood of people pouring into Fenway. My mother and Jeff drank beer and fed us Fenway franks and popcorn. We were sitting near the Red Sox dugout, and one by one they emerged, Fred Lynn, Jim Rice, Yaz, up the steps to the on-deck circle. Gary and I called their names. From the dugout, players spat tobacco juice into the dirt. “How can they just squirt like that?” my mother said.

“They’re good old boys,” Jeff told her. “Give ‘em a cheekful of Red Man, they’re in hog heaven.”

He pretended to know baseball—but he called the ump a ref, and the warning track the warning path, and told my mother America had stolen the game from the Russians. Did you see the *form* on that? he said when Lynn made a diving catch in center field. Baseball was dance, he said, it was ballet on grass. My mother sat there, nodding. She was soaking up all this wrong information. A Twins batter walked, and the shortstop came up with nobody out. Here comes the squeeze play, Jeff said. Oooh, my mother said, I like that! The batter bunted the runner to second. My mother applauded.

“For your information,” I said, “that wasn’t a squeeze play.” I turned to Gary and made a loud, *he-doesn’t-know-squat* noise.

Jeff laughed. “Ok, so give me the concept of the squeeze. I’m all ears.”

It wasn’t a squeeze when you just advanced the runner, I explained. That was a regular sacrifice. “A squeeze play is when the bases are loaded.”

“You sure about that?”

I rolled my eyes. "Sure I'm sure, that's why it's called a *squeeze* play. There's no room, so you have to—" I stopped. Jeff was looking at me, not annoyed, but smiling. Then he smiled at my mother. And my mother turned and smiled at me. "Do you know what this is called?" She raised her beer cup to the four of us, the 30,000 of us, all Fenway. "This is called, having fun."

She leaned against Jeff, taking his arm. After that she held on to him; and when the Red Sox pulled one of their comebacks to win in the ninth, she stood on her tiptoes and kissed him on the cheek.

Back at home, Gary and I played table hockey in the den, while Jeff taught my mother guitar in the living room. I tried to shut out the sound of them, laughing at her halting chords. "He doesn't know jack about baseball," I said to Gary. "Did you see the *form* on that?" Give me a break."

"At least he took you to Fenway. I mean, that's pretty cool."

"He's a pothead," I said. "Probably lit up a reefer in the men's room."

At ten my mother leaned in. "Time to break it up," she said. And no, we couldn't call Gary's mom and ask if he could sleep over. She and I drove Gary home, and the whole way back, I complained: Lisa got to sleep over at Carmen's, it wasn't fair, nothing was fair. We came into the driveway and parked next to the Fiat.

"How long is *he* staying?" I asked.

"Jeff's making me a star," my mother said. "I'm the next Joni Mitchell."

Inside, we passed the living room, Jeff on the couch, strumming his guitar as we went by. My mother took me up to my room. "Here you go," she said, digging a pair of pajamas out of my bureau. "Come on, it's late."

"If it's late, why isn't he going home?"

"He is. But late for you isn't late for us. Now go to bed." She kissed my forehead, turned on my reading lamp, and left, closing the door behind her.

In my pajamas I lay back and studied the cut-out figures upside-down on the Wall of Fame. If you started a few feet away, then moved slowly toward the wall, the figures grew more and more foreshortened until suddenly you stopped seeing Yaz or Fisk and saw

only the paper itself, the little warps in the surface, bubbled up from the glue beneath.

From downstairs drifted guitar and muffled laughter. I was waiting for the sound of the back door thumping shut and the Fiat starting up. It didn't come. Through the open window, a breeze rustled the maple tree, its branches cut back around the streetlight like a wound. The Wall of Fame was played out, I decided. With high school coming in the fall, it was one thing to have heroes, another to paste them up on your wall.

I fell asleep.

When I woke it was dark. Someone had turned off my lamp. The house lay in a pall of quiet. From the window I looked down: the Fiat was still there.

Barefoot, I came down the back stairs through the kitchen. Lights were on. In the living room, wine glasses stood sentinel by an empty bottle, and wax from a candle in a second one had drizzled unheeded onto the coffee table. The room smelled like smoke. A blanket lay rumpled on the floor, the guitar nearby, propped across its case. As I stood there, music began—straight overhead, a lazy warm beat. *Nights in white satin, never reaching the end* . . . I looked to the hi-fi hutch on the wall. The stereo was gone. They had carried it away, turntable, speakers and all.

I stood there, staring at the empty space where the record player had been. Jeff wasn't going home; my mother had lied to me. No, he was going to get her stoned and sleep with her, and soon he would be in my father's place, in his garage, his basement, his bedroom; and the sweaters-and-aftershave smell of my father would be gone, and his smell would be there instead. *He* would be there—not only sleeping with my mother, but taking her places, buying her flowers and objects of contemplation, showing her the world and how it worked. It would happen. It was happening already.

Quietly I picked up the guitar and laid it in its case, then buckled the lid closed and carried it through the house and out the back door.

Outside, the night was warm, the lawn plush beneath my bare feet. A dim glow shone from my mother's window as I crossed the driveway to the Fiat. The door was unlocked—that was another of Jeff's ideas, never treat your car like treasure—and I got in and sat in the driver's seat, putting the guitar on the passenger side. How easy

to release the emergency brake, I thought, then let the car roll out and down the hill.

But I couldn't do it; that kind of damage lay beyond my reach. So I ripped the Mardi Gras beads off the rearview mirror; I raised both feet and kicked the dashboard with all my strength. As I did, the front bucket seat, loose already, broke free and keeled over backwards. I extracted myself and got out of the car. Taking the guitar, I threw it case and all into the no-man's-land behind the garage, among decaying leaves and dead Christmas trees. And then I went to bed, hating myself for not being my father, with his perfect, dread anger.

The next morning I got up early and stationed myself in the drive with my basketball. I wanted to be there when they tried to sneak Jeff away. Soon enough, out he came. He had taken off the headband, his hair back in a braid.

"Seen my guitar?" he asked.

I shook my head, and smacked the ball against the backboard. He went back in, and my mother appeared.

"Jeff's guitar," she said. "Do you know where it is?"

"Why should I? He was teaching you, not me."

"Ricky," she began, then sighed. "We can talk later. Right now Jeff has to go home."

"Yeah," I snorted. "That's what you said last night."

My mother merely sighed a second time, and went back inside. Jeff came out again. He went to his car and I heard the door open and then shut.

When I turned around, he was standing there, hands on his hips. "You know, I'm a pacifist, Ricky," he said. "Being mad gives me a headache."

"So?"

"So, you're giving me a royal migraine, let me tell you." He looked away, as if deciding something. "Let's see if I'm getting the message here. I have to deal with you if I want to hang around with your mother, is that it?"

"Maybe," I said.

"OK." He nodded. "So then how about a little game of one-on-one?"

"You mean, me against you?"

"Well, you want a piece of me, right? Here I am."

I shrugged, as if to say, It's your funeral.

He gave me the ball first, and I dribbled in and missed an easy shot. Taking the rebound outside, Jeff threw up a loopy running hook that hit the top of the backboard and fell straight through.

"Lucky," I muttered. The next time he went to shoot, I reached out and knocked his wrist. The ball skittered away.

"That's not a foul in your book?" he asked.

"Hand's part of the ball," I said, and chased it down.

It was my turn now. I wheeled around, back to the basket, and pushed in, step by step. But when I pivoted he was right there to swat my shot back. The ball hit me on the shoulder, and I flung it at him.

"Hey," he said. "Watch it."

"*You* watch it. You keep fouling me. You can't just do that."

I took the ball, and this time led with my butt, ramming him and pumping my elbows, launching myself into him. An elbow caught him flush on the breastbone, and he staggered. But before I could turn and shoot, Jeff grabbed me and held me—lifted me off the ground entirely, in a bear hug.

Momentum carried us back, and we fell onto the lawn. I was shocked at how strong Jeff was, those skinny arms. He had me in some kind of wrestling hold. I couldn't get free—not my legs, scissored between his, or my arms either. So I bit him; I bit the closest thing to my mouth. It turned out to be his earlobe. I bit and clamped down as hard as I could.

"Jesus!" he howled, and hurled me off. "Jesus Christ!"

My mother came tearing out of the house. As she did, I spat out a bloody, rubbery something.

"Oh my God," she said, rushing over—to me. "Are you all right? Open your mouth, let me see." She turned to Jeff. "What did you do to him?"

Jeff groped his head. "My ear," he said. "The little shit bit my fucking ear off!"

"He what?" My mother looked back and forth.

It was true. It lay there in the grass, a piece of earlobe the size of a small bay scallop. I tasted blood. Jeff had his hand clamped to his head.

"I... I didn't mean it," I said.

My mother screamed then—a throbbing, scalded, impossible noise.

"You know what?" Jeff said. "Fuck this." And he walked down the driveway. One hand covering his ear the whole time, he got into his car, managed somehow to start it up, and drove off.

My mother was beyond mad. She stood there, eyes wide, mouth hanging. This was going to cost her, I saw; was going to leave her less happy than before, and more alone. And it was my fault.

The Fiat pulled back in. Jeff got out and walked up the driveway.

"I'm bleeding," he said. "I need a towel."

My mother rushed into the house, flinging the screen door open, leaving Jeff and me together. I couldn't bear to look.

"Jesus," he said. "You little fucking cannibal."

My mother came hurrying back out, carrying Kleenex and towels, a red bottle of mercurochrome. She doused a towel in pink, guiding Jeff's hand to press it to his head. She was making little whimpering noises. Jeff pointed to the grass. "I need that," he said. "Let him get it. Give him a tissue."

She handed me the Kleenex box, and I squatted. There it lay, a neat pink lobe. I spread two tissues over it, then tucked the edges underneath and carefully picked it up. I wondered whether it counted as a living thing.

"And now," Jeff said, "how about getting me to the hospital."

In the station wagon, my mother took deep breaths and gripped the steering wheel hard. Silent tears ran down her face. We drove away, the two of us up front and Jeff in back, legs stretched out across the seat. It was still early and everything was closed. We passed the Little League field, then St. Crispin's—the building empty, no one there to judge or even to witness my crime. It scared me to think that vigilance could be flipped off like a switch, just like that.

In the back, Jeff kept the towel jammed against his head. He began to talk, with a jittery calm. "You wanted a piece of me, right chief? Well, happy birthday."

"Oh God," my mother said. "Please. No jokes." She was crying and worrying and being mad at me and trying to drive, all at once.

But Jeff went on. "How big is it?" he said. "The piece, I mean. Is it big?"

I pretended to open up the Kleenex and look. "It's not so big."

He tilted his head. "Did you say something? I can't hear you!"

"Stop it," my mother said. "I'm going to die."

In silence we came past the pharmacy and dry cleaners, and finally the hospital swung into view, a pile of brick buildings.

“They were kinda too big anyway,” I said. “Your ears, I mean.”

“Richard!” my mother shouted. “You shut your mouth—right—now!”

“Sorry,” I mumbled. We pulled in among the rows of cars. Every one belonged to someone who was sick or dying, or visiting someone sick or dying.

“He’s right, you know,” Jeff said. “About my elephant ears. I used to get the crap teased out of me. Always wanted them smaller.”

My mother found a space and parked. We got out of the car, and as Jeff swung his legs around, I saw him glance up toward the hospital, its smokestacks and dark staring windows. I could see he was afraid.

He began walking toward the EMERGENCY sign, towel still pressed to his head, thick braid snaking down the back of his blue work shirt. My mother walked alongside, and halfway there she put her arm across his shoulder. I followed, holding the ruby-stained kleenex in both cupped hands and concentrating everything on not stumbling, one step after the next. Ahead, the two of them disappeared inside. For a moment, panic froze me—I would catch the toe of my sneaker and go sprawling, I would drop the Kleenex, and all would be lost. But it didn’t happen. I knew how to walk, after all, and I was carrying another human being’s ear, and he needed it.

The automatic door whooshed open. My mother and Jeff were standing by the check-in desk with a nurse; and all three turned and watched as I came in, proceeding toward them, step by careful step, holding the ear in front of me like a ring-bearer.