

Vegas · Doran Larson

YOU FIGURE IT. You pay this guy thousands of bucks to cut into your guts and reattach this and seal off that like some grease monkey hacking into your Riviera. Except the guy who fixes the Riviera he don't get paid unless he can put it back together so it runs. But this goddamn urologist whatever, he gets his money even if you're leaving the place in a black plastic suit. I mean you figure it.

So there I am, it's the night before the surgery and I'm watching a Burt Reynolds movie with these monkeys, in the movie, and the sleeping pills are just getting a grip when I start to shake. I mean, Yeah the odds are in my favor, but you buy lottery tickets on worse odds, and then, it's weird, all of a sudden I'm not shaking anymore — maybe it's the pills — feeling real gone already. And I laugh. Like there's nothing left to fight for anyway. But then that really gets me freaked and I bite the laugh right in two. The guy in the other bed's not watching Burt or the monkeys 'cause he's had spinal and only groans for his morphine at three A.M. So I pick up the phone and dial. Slow. And I fuck up once 'cause the seven looks a lot like a five from where I am and I get — catch this — I get a funeral home and that puts the fear of God in me, so I sit up and dial it right.

It's Thursday night and she's straight since she met Sam and got into this Jesus shit. I tell her, "Gina, I'm sorry," with my mouth a little screwed up from the pills.

"Where you at?"

"It don't matter. I just wanta tell you."

"You're drunk. I don't like this, Frank. You're bad news. I'm gettin' myself straightened out, you know. I'm gettin' my life fixed up."

"I'm sorry about all the crap, you know." 'Cause I'm positive if I don't apologize and they cut something wrong, it's gonna be bad on the other side. I mean I am *stoned*. "The times I hitchya'n'all."

She doesn't say anything right at first.

"What's with you, Frank?" I open my mouth but no sound comes out. "When the hell you payin' Sarah's support, huh? You answer me that?"

"Maybe we shouldn't of got divorced."

"You're stoned. I tell you I don't like this. I'm gettin' my life straight, see. I got Jesus now, Frank," like she's hired a body guard, and I get this

picture of Christ with pecs. But I don't laugh. I feel bad.

"It wasn't just the sex, you know."

It's the old Gina, the one never talked about God or redemption, she says, "No. It was the trips to Europe and the parties at Malibu, I guess."

"Honest to shit, I cared about you and Sarah. I know we was a long shot. But honest to shit."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. See I'm gettin' this test tomorrow. They got to cut inside." Burt's smuggling a monkey on an airplane in a suit bag. The monkey's goin' nuts. "They think I got cancer maybe."

"Well, my goodness." She doesn't buy it, I can tell. "Gosh, Frank, it's too bad you told me so late. 'Cause I just called a lawyer and if you don't pay me some money pretty goddamn — pretty fuckin' soon I'll see your ass in jail. And you know what else, Frank?"

I wait. There's no use telling her again. She knows I don't have any money. The guy with the spinal snores. Maybe I missed something. All of a sudden Burt and the monkeys are trying to land the airplane on a freeway. Right this minute I could be talked into trading places with any one of 'em.

"Here's what, Frank. Fuck you, Frank. Capital F, Fuck you."

And she hangs up.

So after I come out of the hospital with my crotch sewed back on, I get a cab — laid out in the back seat — and I go over to Cindi's 'cause I'm not sure Cherry-Rose will be home and I know Cindi'll spring for the fare. I call Cherry-Rose and ask her to bring me some clothes (soft stuff like sweat-pants and T-shirts), 'cause I don't want to be around there while I'm waiting for the lab report. Not if Gina's got a lawyer. After a couple days, when I can stand up again, I call my mom. She just got a good job dealing in one of the big casinos. She wants to know why I ain't called. I tell her.

"You goin' back to work?"

"They canned me."

"They can't can you for a havin' a test. You could sue."

"This is Indiana, Ma. You don't sue. You just get canned."

"Still. What kind of test?"

"Still nothin'."

I'm in the living room, laid out across the armchair watching balloons shrunk up like old tits wag their strings in the corner of the ceiling. Happy

Birthday with stretch marks. Cindi's dog, this Dachshund named Weener, he's laid out on his back in my lap giving me dirty looks whenever I stop scratching his belly. It cracks me up the way his leg pumps when you hit the right spot in his ribs. You wish you had a spot like that yourself.

My mom tells me there's work all over the place out there, a couple big hotels going up. Then she says what she always says, she says I need a girlfriend smarter than Cherry-Rose, so I tell her Cherry-Rose is smart enough she didn't sign on for a test she can't pay for and forget about getting whatever it is might be wrong fixed—which I realize is true for the first time when I say it and I feel like some kind of goddamn fool. I ask her if she's talked to Bob, who is her husband.

"Yeah I talked to him, so don't ask. I told you all these Mormons got the routes locked up, you can't even get in the union, see."

"Drivin' a truck. What's drivin' a truck got to do with bein'—"

"You ask Bob."

Weener flips over and bounces to the sliding glass to bark at a jet from O'Hare. The dog has this thing against planes.

When I was a kid Bob used to bring me Twinkies and Snow Balls at the bar where my mom worked and where Carl, my old man, worked too until he had a stroke waterskiing on Lake Mead and fell down in front of a tour boat. The Lucky Star, the boat was called. His ski got caught in a big fake paddle wheel and slammed him against the back of the boat three times before they got the thing shut off, and two old ladies almost had heart attacks watching. Twice would of been okay, it came out in court, but three times was "criminal negligence" by the tour boat company and got my mom a big fat settlement—like he would of been any less dead after two slams—and she sold the bar and married Bob and bought him his own Wonderbread outlet.

Back then we lived in three rooms built onto the bar, two turnoffs north of the Strip in the middle of sand and scrub brush and snakes. It was our last meal in the bar. Salami sandwiches and macaroni salad at the rear booth where I did my homework when I was in school, while my little brother Seth pushed plastic motorcycles over the reinforced black formica and the old man could keep an eye on us, kicking our butts when we got out of line. Except now Bob was sitting there and the place was pretty much empty except for the real drunks, the Indians and Tom who was about a hundred years old said he was a Hollywood extra and drank Yukon Jack

and wore a different bolero every night. But all I saw was Bob with that moony Mormon smile, and Seth getting fidgety as hell, maybe wishing what I was wishing, that the old man was there to bust Bob's goddamn teeth. Seth was twelve. My mom pinched his ear but he wouldn't stop squirming and then he slid out and said he was going for a ride. Bob tried to stop him. He thought he was some kind of psychiatrist and Good Humor man in one, but my mom said, "He'll be fine."

We heard his mini-bike fire up and rattle off into the sand. It was light out still, the sun just gone over the Arrow Canyon Mountains. People said later they saw him headed in the direction of Vegas, going straight out across the desert, bouncing over rabbit dens and scrub knolls, bouncing like hell half thrown off the seat with his head down, hair slicked back in the wind and dust, balling it out at twenty-miles an hour for that big yellow glow that people around there always said made sunrise look like government work. It was the last anybody ever saw of him. But still I'm not about to tell my mom what kind of test it was I had. No way, not after I was sick last time.

When I was in junior high, after she married Bob, the pantry was always full of Ding Dongs and HoHos in the broken boxes he had to throw off the truck anyway. We'd moved into this wall-to-wall suburb and I got fat and hypoglycemic and I was glad. My mom got all pissed but I was glad anyway. I didn't like Bob, but there was nothing he ever did you could hold against him. He wasn't like my old man at all. He didn't drink or shoot craps, and he never hit anybody. Not even me and my mom. He's a Mormon and never ate a Twinkie or a Coke in his goddamn life. He didn't gamble even a little bit, like even the slots in Safeway, which in Vegas is kinda like being queer.

Cindi brings me a beer and sits down behind her kid, Jody, who is on the floor on her back, watching "Sesame Street" upside down. Jody turned four the day after I got the pain in my crotch. I was at work and I couldn't even run my lift until my buddy Jack took me to emergency and they gave me pain pills and talked me into having the test. On "Sesame Street" they're doing animals that start with T.

I tell my mom I'll think about coming back out and hang up before she starts asking about Sarah and when am I bringing her one and only granddaughter out to see her for once.

After I set down the phone, I say, "Twinkies," just to get Jody's goat

after a tiger and a tyrannosaurus scare each other off.

“Twinkie’s not a animal,” Jody says and slaps the tip of my bare foot with the hand that isn’t all the way down the bottom of a box of Lucky Charms across her chest. I drink the beer. Cindi is smoking and studying up for a test at the Joan Dixie School of Hair Design. The front of the book has this blonde babe with her lips pushed out like she ate a hot potato supposed to look sexy but is just stupid. Then I start thinking about what Gina meant by getting her life straightened out, if that means she isn’t fucking or what, and then I wonder if Sam and her are feeding Sarah that Jesus shit, and I get kind of ticked because it seems like I should have some say. Then the phone rings and I drink some more beer. But it’s for Cindi. The phone makes me nervous because I keep thinking it’ll be the hospital about the test. So when she hangs up, to keep it quiet I call Cherry-Rose at work. She’s on soda duty and can’t talk long, she says.

Then right off she says, “I’m pregnant.”

“You’re fuckin’ what?”

“I’m fuckin’ pregnant. You still at Cindi’s?”

“We got beer.”

“I can’t drink.”

“How come?”

“Are you deaf *and* stupid, Frank? I just told you—”

“What the fuck. Come over anyway.”

“Gina’s still calling every night.”

“Screw her.”

“Sam came by yesterday.”

“He bring his goddamn Bible? I swear if it wasn’t for God, man, my life would be smooth as fuckin’ snake shit.”

“He says you got to pay Sarah’s support.”

“There’s the fuckin’ balls.”

“He says even if he’s living there Sarah’s your progedy or some damn thing—you know Sam—he says you got to pay, and no, he didn’t have his Bible. But he said God bless me and made that smile the way he does.”

“Pay her for what?” Jody looks up and shooshes me. Little balls of clay are turning from numbers into turtles and back again. Weener’s crying to get out. “She gives me twenty minutes a week with Sarah and expects *me* to pay.”

“You don’t even go half the time, and that’s you and Sam’s problem. I

just don't like him comin' around. He's a weird guy." We don't say anything for a while. Oscar the Grouch is counting trash cans. "You shouldn't hit people, Frank—" . . . seven, eight, nine!—"That what's stupid."

"Fuck you." Jody turns over and Lucky Charms spill on the carpet. Cindi lets Weener outside. Now Gordon is counting trash cans. "I'm sorry." My chest is all tight. It feels like my stitches are going to bust and spill my guts all over. "I mean, I'm sorry."

She's quiet a little while. "You really got beer?"

"Come over."

"What kind? You got Michelob?"

"It'll be too hot. I don't like it hot."

We're in Cindi's kitchen drinking our beers and Cherry-Rose's got on the Subway's uniform her boss Joe makes them all wear with this subway map of Paris printed on the back. It looks like one of those things in school shows your heart and veins, like I can see x-ray through Cherry-Rose's skin. If I've got cancer, it's somewhere down around a stop called Denfert-Rochereau.

It's good Cherry's here because this way if the hospital calls about the bill or the test, they won't get anybody. She smells like burnt onions and mayonnaise and her hair is all wrecked. Brown pushing up under the red dye. She's never happy with anything the way it is. When I met her she was blonde and her name was just Rose except she thought it sounded like an old lady so she changed it on everything but her birth certificate and now she gets pissed as hell if you call her just Rose. But she's got a real attachment to Indiana it turns out.

"Come on. People bust their asses all their lives to kick back in a place like Las Vegas. It's the dream vacation on "Wheel of Fortune." There's movie stars."

That makes her think a minute.

"It's still too hot."

"There's jobs there. It was on "20/20." Anyway, everybody works at night and you go to the casinos when it's hot. There's air conditioning, and swimming pools. And anyway, how you know you're pregnant?"

"I did one of those tests I bought."

"Those things don't work," I tell her and start to wonder if my mom isn't right.

We're eating Doritos from little bags Cindi puts in Jim's lunch box. I was eating Fritos from a bag that size in the back of my Uncle Phil's speed-boat the day my old man died. It was a hundred degrees even out on the water. He kept coming up like a fish caught in a mower, getting his head whacked against the back of the paddle boat. The colors reminded you of Fourth of July. In the heat everything looked blue and flat except the red splat against the flat white paint.

Cindi, Jody, and Jim are on the back patio. Jim came home a little plowed with a new tricycle for Jody that's a couple years too big. Cindi's curled up on a lawn chair, reading her hair book. The sky is looking mean, like it might rain, and the air all wet like never happens in the desert. Jim is on one knee, taping chunks of two-by-four to the pedals with masking tape so Jody can reach. She's already on the seat, making motor noises in her throat. And then all of a sudden I'm thinking how it would be to have another kid, a little boy this time, and for a second there it seems like it'd be cool. Weener's digging after gophers and ripping up the dead tulip bulbs the last people lived here planted.

Cherry-Rose nibbles a Dorito and drinks her beer and asks, "You want to pay for the doctor's bill to find out I'm right?"

In the hospital she told them some bullshit about insurance and I acted doped up whenever the big black lady from accounting came to talk about money. Then the night before the stitches were supposed to come out I grabbed my clothes and snuck out. So all of a sudden I realize they aren't even going to give me the results of the test anyway until I pay what I owe, and I start to feel a lot better. But I don't feel much like messing with doctors, or bills, or even hanging around the house for some guy to come trying to repossess my crotch. I heard somewhere that in Sweden hospitals are free. You wonder why anybody works at all, fishing and cutting lumber or whatever they do over there.

"We got to get it fixed," I tell her. "It's not that expensive." Jim's finished taping the pedals and Jody rides the front wheel off the patio into the grass and gets stuck. Cherry-Rose finishes her beer and puts her hand over the Viceroys she says she isn't going to smoke any more. Weener runs over and starts to yap at the Mexican boys next door who are passing joints and a bottle of Beefeater while their fat little girlfriends brush out their hair. They've got the music on loud on their car stereo. Cindi looks over at the Mexicans and she's pissed.

“I won’t,” Cherry-Rose says.

“You want a kid?”

She keeps looking at the Viceroy.

“I know I don’t want to kill one.” She sticks her thumbnail under the cellophane. “I don’t want to sin.”

I crunch up a Doritos bag in my fist until it disappears.

“Hey,” I tell her. “It’s a little late in the game.”

She looks out at Jim and Jody. Jody doesn’t want to get off the trike and Jim’s drunk and can’t get the front wheel out of the mud.

“We got to get married.” I let the bag go. It makes noises like static. The world’s a whole different place after they cut you open and put you back together and nothing does go wrong, and you got to save your ass for the long haul. My old man used to say you knew you made the wrong bet when your horse was first into the backstretch. I start to wonder if somehow I could get the test results without paying.

“If you don’t marry me I’ll have the baby.”

I look at her. Stupid. But not as stupid I guess as what I’m doing next, ’cause I feel like hell doing it even before I start. Like some sorry SOB hijacked my brain, which is how it feels every time it happens and doesn’t mean I’m in any better position to stop.

I watch my hand move over from the beer can and grab her elbow. I squeeze. Hard. But she won’t say anything. She thinks she’s tough even though she bruises easy.

“And if I do, you won’t?”

She has to think about that one a minute too. She tries to make it look like she’s just thinking, but I know damn well it hurts now.

“Yeah.”

“Jesus H. Christ.”

I let her arm go. She shoots out a tight breath and I turn around.

Jody starts to cry just before Jim gets the wheel free. Then she’s smiling and giggling through her tears when he pushes her around in circles, with the pedals coming up and smacking her feet in a way that makes my stomach feel even worse than it did. Somebody from another yard yells at the Mexicans and they yell back, but they turn the music down. All of a sudden, life out on the patio’s just crackers and beer.

It takes three days to get the Plymouth in shape. Jim lets me work on it in his driveway 'cause he's got all the tools and Cherry-Rose brings subs from work after the lunch rush. Cindi helps me pick up heavy stuff while Jody rides her trike around the car on the driveway and up and down the sidewalk. I like the beer and the sandwiches, and the kind of lonely days even, messing with the engine, listening to the radio set up on a lawn chair. Until one day Cindi's holding the alternator in place while I ratchet it down and I'm a little tight on Millers. I got my blue jeans on for the first time and just as a joke, her hands are full, leaning over, I reach inside her tank-top and give her tit a little pinch.

You'd of thought I'd poked her in the ass, she gets so pissed. There's grease on her shirt and she's saying she'll tell Jim. Until she sees Jody sitting on her bike on the sidewalk staring at us, her head tilted, and wondering what's wrong.

That same afternoon Sam comes by and tries to get tough about Sarah's support money. Tough means he isn't smiling his stupid Jesus-loves-you smile, and I come out with a crescent wrench in my fist and tell him to tell Gina she can forget I ever breathed.

"It's your duty, Frank. It's a sacred obligation. To a child. We are all children, you know, Frank."

He's a little wimpy guy, always wears cowboy boots stuffed with tissue paper under the heels and his pants too short and this tattoo of Christ on the cross on his forearm. He's pale too, like somebody left him in the bath too long.

"You fuck her, you pay," I tell him. I give the wrench a spin in the air, which somehow yanks my stitches and hurts like fire but I tell him to get the hell out of my life if he likes having a face.

"Sarah asks about you."

"You my goddamn conscience all of a sudden, that it?"

"I'm telling you what's right." The guy's got little eyes, like a teddy bear, make you sick just to look at. "She's your blood." He waits, looking at the wrench. "Jesus loves you, Frank."

"That's his fuckin' bad luck."

He shakes his head like some old sonofabitch seen it all. "Sarah never had the choice."

It's a damn good thing he's chicken, 'cause now I'm coming at him

across the lawn and Weener runs out barking at him too, or right now I'd be locked up.

At night Jim helps me on the car. He brings parts he rips off from work, even though I try to pay for them 'cause of the way Cindi keeps glaring at me all the time, even when Jim and Cherry-Rose is there so it's got me nervous, and Jim being generous is not making her any more happy. He does the timing and adjusts the carburetors, the fine-tune stuff you can mess with and just screw up worse and worse if you don't know what you're doing—which I kind of don't.

These are good nights. Jim and me leaning under the hood in the driveway with the trouble-light hanging off the edge of the garage door while Cindi and Cherry-Rose and Jody sit on the lawn chairs between tools and parts and beer bottles watching "Family Feud" and "Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous," eating barbecued hotdogs and burgers. Then the weather warms up and it's like summer. But all of a sudden one night it feels like time to leave.

We get the Plymouth fired up and about purring except for some valves that're too much to take on and Jim says will be okay anyway if we take it easy. Then Jim gets a half gallon of Seagrams, and we watch wrestling in the garage, which is so fake but we laugh anyway, and get a little looped so when the Mexican boys start racing their cars up and down the street, where there's kids riding their bikes 'cause of the heat, he gets pissed off a blue streak and goes out with an ax handle. Cherry-Rose and Cindi are screaming their lungs out for him to come back 'cause there's five of the Mexicans and they want to cut in too, except I grab an elbow each and keep them back in the garage. Cindi hauls off and punches me in the jaw, but I'm too drunk to feel it though I can see it in her eyes she'll tell Jim about that pinch if I piss her off too far.

Jim takes out one of the kid's eyes but comes back all sliced up on his arms and bleeding all over. It's real bad. Like the air's all froze with acetone kind of nervous. I follow him and Cindi into the house, but stop just inside, next to the new china cabinet with Cindi's plates from every state. And then we can hear them in the bathroom, Jim saying I should of backed him up and Cindi actually defending me, saying I couldn't with my stitches, and then she's pissed off. Cherry-Rose just gets real quiet in the garage, standing there on the greased-up cement floor, under the bare bulb, in

front of Hulk Hogan and the Texas Destroyer. Then I think maybe Cindi says something about the pinch on her tit 'cause she's really screaming, threatening to call the cops if Jim doesn't quiet down. I come out and yell at Cherry to get in the car, but she doesn't want to leave at first 'cause of Jody still out there in the yard, so I shove her in behind the wheel. I leave thirty bucks on one of the lawn chairs, under Jody's little orange and yellow plastic computer with pigs and cows on the buttons, and we take off with Jody waving from her trike in the driveway and Weener still barking at the Mexicans and the Mexicans kind of regrouping in their driveway, around an older guy on a motorcycle, looking like all kinds of misery about to blow the house down.

Cherry-Rose and me spend the night at her house packing things up and I call my mom and tell her we're headed out. Cherry-Rose is still pregnant if she ever was, and we're not married and we're not talking about changing either one of those things. Fact we're not saying much of anything. We ain't even talked about moving out to Vegas, it just seems like the thing there is left to do. All I know is we're getting the hell out of town and out of Indiana headed for points west after she gets her last pay check on Friday. By this time there's a bill from the hospital, and on the phone she tells them I don't live there anymore and she doesn't know where I am.

The first time the guy collecting for the hospital comes around I'm alone and I get inside the bedroom closet. I listen to him knock for about fifteen minutes, breathing lint with my nose to the door until it seems we both know what's up and I wonder could I talk to him, and if he knows how the test came out. The second time is when we're about to leave. It's five A.M. and we got the car all packed with the trunk wired 'cause it won't close on the ironing board and crap. We watch him from behind the curtains. He's a little suede saddle-shoe guy, but his white jacket's cut loose, like he's carrying heat, and we hide out in the bedroom, hanging onto each other like some Gestapo movie, until he gets back into his big red Buick and drives away.

The day after my old man died, my mom and my uncle got him cremated. It was just too gross to think about his head all beaten like a ragged bloody husk, even inside a coffin six feet under. Back then my mom was thinking about converting Mormon, for Bob's sake, and they'd talked about what

they would have to do to get my dad's ashes taken care of the Mormon way, even though he never had but spit for Jesus and the whole show, let alone some story this guy Joseph Smith says about how He showed up in Central America someplace, like some kind of package vacation before He rose up. They gave us the ashes in a heavy blue plastic box, like what you'd expect they might store toxic waste inside, which we kept in Bob's den under his football trophies and driver-of-the-month plaques, pastel sketches of Brigham Young and a plaster seagull hung from the ceiling with monofilament. I was fifteen. When they burn you the ashes don't come out like last week's charcoal briquets. The movies lie. Blood and guts and muscle, you come out this heavy grit like dirty ashtray sand with brown chunks of bone mixed in.

We had the box in that room for a couple weeks 'cause my Uncle Phil went to court to get custody of it. I was on Phil's side. Bob had nothing to do with it, and since my mom had married him so fast I kind of felt she didn't either. I looked at that box a couple times every day, mostly in the days when I was hypoglycemic, stuffing down Snow Balls while they were at work. I even talked to it a couple times. It put a thing between Phil and my mom for life.

There was a wind on the desert the night I snuck him out and hitchhiked the fifteen miles or so to Hoover Dam with this old lady smoking long Salems, in ripped fishnets, who thought I was cute until I told her what I had in the box. It was a cool night. But real clear, so on the dam you could see the red rock rising up in tiers all around, and the water on Lake Mead. I went right to the middle, to the center of the curve, hearing my own steps on the concrete, and dumped him over the down river side under the veil of starlight that turned the thirteen pounds of heavy stuff that had been my old man into a long beard of shadow against the ghostly white concrete slope. And then I yelled. For all I was worth, I called him every name in the damn book and then some, hearing my cusses echo back, slamming into each other and getting all mixed up and then I flung the box out as far as I could and listened to it bang, and echo, and slide out of hearing. He'd hit me. He'd hit all of us when there was no damn reason but drunken meanness, but there were good times too and I thought he deserved to end up on the down-river side of things, instead of in some air-conditioned place with plaster seagulls and wall-to-wall Mormons coming around all the time.

My mom was pissed off as hell, of course, threatened to get me arrested. Bob was so damned understanding I felt sick. My Uncle Phil cried. We were in his rec room. He thought it was so great when I told him about wanting to let my old man go down river, he said, "My brother wasn't worth much, Frank. But by God you don't do another decent thing in your life, boy, you're still okay with me." And then he wiped his eyes and turned over the keys to my dad's old Plymouth, which my mom had let him take.

I drove it into the ground three or four times out on the dirt roads, and then on a 105-m.p.h. scream up to Tonopah, all the way up to the peak six-thousand feet plus, before the water pump broke, and then coasting around ninety back down. Then I'd fix it up and run it down again, until I got sick of watching Bob and my mom being in love like my old man and Seth never walked the face, and I quit school and went off bumming around the country for five years. I met Gina in a bowling alley in Milwaukee, where I was shooting pool for beers and change and she was serving the beer, and we lived together with her sister-in-law who wanted to be a fireman and drank about a gallon of Classic Coke watching disaster movies all day on the VCR. Then Gina heard there was a better job back where her people come from near Gary, as a shipping clerk for UPS, which is where she met Sam, who was our friend until he got Jesus and his tattoo and I wouldn't let him come around 'cause I didn't want Sarah exposed to that crap. I mean, you live around Mormons and casinos and paddleboats and coyotes, you learn a few things like what's worth thinking about and what's not.

But it isn't my old man dying ever bothered me that much, or that I was running away from it. I thought the Plymouth was better than a fair trade, though it never did run real great. Now I can't even sit up behind the wheel because the seats don't go back very far and if I crimp my stitches it's all I can do not to scream, let alone drive.

So all the way down across Illinois, the combed wet fields and all, Cherry-Rose smokes and drinks diet 7-Up and drives and talks about Jody. About how smart the kid is—which is true—until outside of Normal it's warm but sticky and I'm filling the tank and this guy comes up, about my size but old and slick as a gutter in this ripped up old coat and smelling like sewage and he asks can he get a ride. For a laugh I ask him where he's going, and he says (where else) California.

Cherry-Rose is ripping down paper towels for napkins because it's lunch time and we're about to eat the last subs she stole from the shop. The old guy wanders off chewing on his hat around the corner of the station. Cherry-Rose wipes the sweat off her face and tells me, "A kid as smart as Jody, she'll probably get a scholarship and get a good job, in a bank or some place. Then you know what she'll do." I watch the meter on the gas pump. "She'll help out Jim and Cindi when they get old. She'll be making plenty of money."

"Look. It ain't I don't like kids." There's a couple motels across the highway and the sky's looking mean. In the desert it turns dark blue and silver before the light shows start. My old man and me used to hunt rabbits and snakes then. "But kids is goddamn expensive, you know."

I'm paying attention to the pump so I don't see the old guy come back around the back of the station. He's on the sidewalk in front of the office. Pissing himself in these greasy white pants.

"I did wrong," he says, about to cry almost. "I did wrong and I'll be punished."

My guts go so tight my stitches start to itch. There's something bad about this guy. Bad news from here to Tuesday. The nigger kid tending the station is washing the windshield on this yellow Mercedes with New York plates, and the couple inside screaming at each other in sunglasses. The kid's trying not to laugh until he hears the old man, and then he comes over with the squeegee and whips it at him to scare him off.

"I did wrong," he's crying right at me, and Cherry-Rose sees it too and shuts up because it's weird.

And I'm telling the kid, "Shut him up. You call this a gas station?"

The kid pushes the old man and it's like he's made of paper, he collapses right there in front of the Prestone rack and starts to cry and I don't say a thing. I fill up the tank and I pay, and then I drive us across the street and I still don't say a thing even though Cherry's asking what the hell's going on, renting a room, it isn't even lunch time, until we've got the room and I tell Cherry-Rose to take off her clothes.

She doesn't ask what's going on then 'cause she can see plain enough I'm not in a talking mood even if I could and it'll cost her some black and blue she messes with me right now. I fuck her standing up because it's easier on my stitches. It's like I got to do this to ward off that old man's screaming,

to wipe it out of my ears. And when we're finished there's this pus the color of rotten bananas in her pubes. And the stuff is coming out of me.

The little Indian guy running the motel gives us directions to a doctor and we find this place looks like anybody's house next to a used car lot that specializes in rust, and there's a sign on the mailbox says Dr. Krupp. He's an old guy smells of cotton candy, and the room looks like it used to be his kitchen with the windows painted over white and where he keeps gauze and swabs and alcohol used to hold Saran wrap and Frosted Flakes. But he cleans me off and tapes me back up while Cherry-Rose fills out the insurance forms with the same bullshit she put down in the emergency room the day I got hauled off from work, which is something she can be real quick about when need be. Anyway, old Krupp looks at the insurance forms and stuffs them in this drawer full of the same forms and charges thirty bucks cash and sells us a bottle of codeine for ten more which looks old but is about all we can afford anyway. He's wiping his hands, sucking a Lifesaver and looking at my guts and he says I best stay in bed a few days knowing goddamn well there's no chance. You can see he knows, but then he says, "Maybe you ought to slow down all together," looking at Cherry-Rose then and I say, "Fine. Okay, no problem," and we're back on the road with Cherry-Rose at the wheel and me chewing codeine, drinking wine cooler, eating Doritos and feeling like some kind of asshole for getting myself this misery for a test I can't even find out what it showed, until I fall asleep stretched out in the back seat.

The codeine works just fine because we're all the way past Topeka and half-way across Kansas before I wake up and Cherry's already stopped twice for gas and it's night.

"I gotta sleep," she says.

I'm staring up at the inside of the roof where the vinyl looks like cracks of lightning when the headlights pass. There's her cosmetics case, and a box of cassettes, an iron, clothes and blankets all on the floor and behind my head. And after all that sleep I should be hungry, but what I am is horny as a stud farm dog. We're stopped by the road. By the interstate. I can tell that much.

"We gotta get a hotel," she says.

“I can drive.”

“You’re stoned, Frank. You even remember talking to me?”

“When we came out of the doctor.”

“Nuh-uh. You sat up bolt straight and told me all about how Bob couldn’t shoot like your dad and about how the rain comes in the desert so fast you can’t outrun it.” She’s sitting up in the middle of the front seat, hair pulled back, telling it to the windshield. “And then you were on some goddamn trip about a girl you saw in the crematorium and how it was the first time you really wanted to fuck somebody. And about how you play the odds at craps, throwing left-handed, and how nice the winters are in Las Vegas when it cools down, and then it was mini-bikes and sunsets along with about fifty thousand other things.”

We’re parked on this off-ramp, near an underpass below Interstate 70. I sit up and it hurts like a barbed-wire jock. There’s weeds. Gray and brown weeds across this field, and then a little reservoir or a pond and another road with a U-Haul lot, a Mobile station and a Wendy’s. There’s ducks in the reservoir. When trucks go by you can see the weeds bend, but the ducks don’t give a shit. I can see all of this ’cause of the security lights back of the U-Haul. The ducks are just black cutouts against the sheen on the water. They’re all symmetrical too. The top half is duck and the bottom half is duck shadow. It’s warm inside, but outside looks as cold as it is dark.

“This is really cool,” I say, trying to look back through the rear window.

“You’re stoned.”

I sit up. She’s making sandwiches with Hormel and Wonder bread, using the light from the glovebox. She’s picked up a quart of milk too, and styrofoam cups. She hands me a sandwich. The dials on the radio and on the dashboard are radar green. The styrofoam and milk are so white, poured out on the glovebox door, it looks weird. Her thin legs in the light under the dash. Maybe I am stoned. I don’t know exactly. But it’s like something in a movie. A special effects thing, this kind of glow everything has, except more important somehow — a feeling in my guts kind of like I had after I told Uncle Phil about dumping my dad over Hoover Dam, like I could sit here with Cherry-Rose, all warm inside the car with our sandwiches and milk, for about a hundred years and feel just fine.

“I wanna hotel,” she says, and drinks. “With a bath. One what don’t smell.”

“I can drive,” I say, though that’s the last thing I want to do.

“You’re in lulu land, Frank. We’re gettin’ a hotel.”

She hands me my milk and drinks hers. Then she hangs her sandwich in her mouth and slides back behind the wheel after she snugs the quart of milk down between a pillow and an empty 7-Up bottle on the front seat.

A semi hauls by and the car rocks. The weeds bend and I drink my milk and you can even see a ripple across the shiny water. But the ducks just keep doing duck stuff.

They don’t pay any attention when Cherry-Rose swoops up onto the on ramp and jumps out into the road. The moment is over. But back through the rear window, under the security lights, they just keep being capital D, Ducks.

Now I’m awake like crazy and I want to save my codeine for the road tomorrow. The room we’ve got has a bath, but it’s not much smaller than the room, which is only half again the size of the bed. It feels like the whole place shivers when the big trucks barrel past. But when it’s quiet again you can hear this little stream out back ’cause the place is called the Stoney Brook Motel.

Cherry’s dead asleep. Down the row, some woman’s ragging on her old man and I can’t even remember if we got out of Kansas before we stopped— I mean, where’s the stony brooks in Kansas?— and I keep thinking of that goddamn old man in the gas station, and pretty soon I’m up and putting on my shorts and pants and a shirt and closing the door behind me.

There’s a pay phone looks like a single’s bar for moths and mosquitos up the slope of the parking lot by the office. I don’t think we come far enough for the time to change, but I don’t know what time it is here in Kansas either so I punch in the number and tell the operator collect. After a while Sam answers and can’t make up his mind what to do and finally, god bless the wimp, he says okay to take the charges.

“Let me talk to Sarah.”

“She’s asleep.”

“I know she’s asleep, genius, you gotta wake her up.”

“I’ll get Gina.”

“No.”

“Where’re you?” he wants to know. “A guy came looking for you. Where are you?”

I want to ask him was it a guy in saddle-shoes and I get this funny feeling

like maybe Gina has the test results somehow and I wonder if she'd tell me. But what I say to Sam, I say, "I'm right where I want to be, asshole, so put Sarah on."

He sets the phone down and I'm ready to hear Gina come on and hang up in my face. Maybe it's this sacred duty thing with Sam, but pretty soon it's her, it's Sarah on the other end. She says hello like she's still asleep.

"Hiya honey. You sleepy?"

"Yeah."

"You miss your dad?"

"Yeah."

"Well maybe you can come out and see your grandma and me," and right away I'm thinking that was stupid, Gina will know where to look. "Sweetie? Sarah?" She lets out a breath. She's waking up.

"Daddy?"

"Yeah. Hiya honey."

Then someone grabs the phone and I can hear Sarah start to complain when it goes dead. And then I'm getting eaten up by mosquitoes—in the middle of goddamn Kansas with a sky as big and black as death with maybe something killing me in my guts—and where everything felt so fine back alongside I-70 a little while ago, now it's all crashed and mangled, and the woman in number two is still screaming her life out at some poor sonofabitch I can see sitting on the bed, behind lace curtains gone brown with cigarette smoke, looking at his knees like where he went wrong was getting himself born.

After I'm back in the room I use the can. I'm in there, trying to piss on the side of the bowl so it doesn't splash too loud, which is tough in the dark, feeling my way by the sound, when I see something white in the trash can and something about it makes me turn on the light.

I pick up the rusty little can, painted gold inside, and what it is it's the milk carton, all folded over on top. So I open it up 'cause you can feel the weight, there's something inside. And what it is it's a tampon with a big clot and swipe of blood on it already turned brown.

The look of it makes me a little sick, but the thing is I'm trying to remember what Gina used to tell me about this stuff. If this means she isn't pregnant anymore. I put all the stuff back the way I found it and I turn off the light and I feel like I'm not going to sleep for a week.

I get back into bed and now I'm not only stone awake again, for some reason I'm pissed off and horny all at the same time. So I roll over. I get my breath slowed down, I don't know what's wrong. And then real slow and gentle, I pull her panties down so I can rub it between her cheeks. It hurts like hell, but I figure out how to do it without using the wrong muscles and I'm wiping her off with the sheet when she wakes up.

I'm not nearly so pissed off any more. But then the goddamn shit hits the fan. I mean I didn't even have to wipe her off, but she's hitting at my shoulders and the back of my head with her goddamn bony little fists, yelling how it's rape, and a couple times her voice falls in like a weird duet with the woman toward the office in number two. I mean, she's fuckin' hysterical, so I pump my elbow back to get her off and the bone hits bone and she quiets down.

I feel pretty bad. But now I'm kind of pissed off again too and I don't say nix. She rolls over, crying real quiet like she does when she's hit, and I don't know about her, but somewhere in there I drop off dead to the world until there's light through the crappy little orange curtains and the highway's quiet and you can hear the water again, and I wake up thinking about fish.

Sarah had a thing for fish. She wouldn't eat tuna because she heard they killed dolphins when they caught them—goddamn five years old and she knows this shit—and always wanting to go with Gina's dad after he retired and spent all his time up in Wisconsin in these fishing camps with old men, retired insurance salesmen and accountants. I mean, it might of been different with a boy. You wouldn't worry so much, we could of gone fishing ourselves, together, him and me, which might of been cool. But Gina's dad, Bud, he never liked me much, so I told Sarah if you went fishing you had to kill the fish, and about how the hooks ripped up their guts. She cried and I took her to the aquarium in Chicago, and she shut up about fishing from then on.

It's a hot day all of a sudden. We're looking for a place to get coffee and something to eat but Cherry-Rose isn't getting out of the car any place, 'cause even through her makeup her cheek looks blue.

She says, "I can't do anything with you."

"I said I'm sorry. You wait 'til we get to Vegas. You'll see."

"I look ugly," she says, stretching to check herself in the rearview and

swinging over into the next lane and then back.

But she's not really half so pissed off as usual, and what this tells me is she knows she isn't pregnant anymore, but she's not going to say it.

And it's weird because it makes me kind of sad all of a sudden. As though there's already somebody missing. The way you feel when you ride a crap one throw too many and blow the wad.

In a little one-whore town called Paxico she pulls into a Circle-K and I get out without ripping my guts open and buy extra-large coffees with the works, a pack of beef jerky, a liter of Orange Crush and a box of HoHos, which I know Cherry-Rose likes though Twinkies still are my favorite. I get in again and she takes her coffee and rests it on the bottom curve of the steering wheel, pulling off the white plastic top, making that squeaking sound. There's farm pickups on either side of us. A Dodge and a Ford. I open a HoHo and hold it in my mouth and lean over for her to bite.

I think she's really pretty goddamn happy about what she left behind in that milk carton, in the little gold trash can in the Stoney Brook Motel but she keeps acting pissed off. But then I open and close my eyes real wide and blow up my cheeks, like a grouper fish, like used to scare the crap out of Sarah and make her giggle too, and Cherry-Rose, I can tell she wants to laugh but just can't give it up. She balls up her fists and screeches and punches me in the side of the head, calling me a fucker, which is okay so long as she gets it out. Then she smiles, and frowns, and finally smiles again, and frowns again.

"You're a son of a bitch, Frank."

"Yeah, but I grow on you."

"Like mold."

Then she leans over and bites the end of the HoHo. And we're chewing it up and losing some until we're chewing on each other and I got my hand in her crotch and she's got hers in my pants and we get each other off, real secret, right there in the Circle-K lot in the dusty sunlight through the windows, between the Dodge and the Ford.

Maybe it's the codeine. Or drinking Brown Derby with it, but just after we clear Limon, Colorado, and it feels like we're really out west now, starting up out of the flat midwest where the Rockies bust up like nobody's business, all of a sudden there's trees and rocks, rivers and ponds everywhere, and deer and hawks, and I tell her to stop.

“Where?” she wants to know, and she’s in a black mood now for some reason. “What for? Where the fuck am I supposed to stop?” The road’s narrow and windy and trucks coming the other way seem to blow us toward the guard rail, hanging off the side of one mountain and facing another. The air’s gone to shade and rock and cold. “You want us all killed?”

But what it is is all of a sudden I got a bad case of the jitters, just like back in the hospital, the genuine deep down dreads, and what I got to do is—I don’t know why, but I got to feel the water in the stream down below. It’s like hunger or sex, I got to get down there and touch the clear coolness. By the time she finds a little turnout where we won’t get sideswiped if we don’t breathe deep, the road’s gone up and up and the water’s maybe a hundred yards down through rock and trees and underbrush.

I can’t get my door open against the guard rail, so I roll down my window and start to pull myself out.

“You’ll kill your damn fool self!” She’s grabbing my belt but I reach back and twist her wrist off. Hard. But she doesn’t cry, because she’s tough. “You’re gonna rip yourself wide open, and see if I give a flying fuck!”

She’s got to scream because of the traffic roaring only a few inches away. Over the rail it just drops and drops, and through the trees there’s a silver sheen off the water, like starlight through clouds. Finally, I get out and I’m standing on the guard rail, holding onto the roof. You could just push off and dive and fall a damn long ways if you could jump far enough before you hit, and for some reason I feel better, but not nearly better enough.

I hop down onto the ground on the other side, which is a little damp and which helps get some grip, but after that it’s just steeper and steeper, so pretty soon I’m climbing down, rock to rock, catching my momentum on trees when I get overtopped and could go head first all the way.

Cherry-Rose, when I look back up catching my breath, she’s slid in between the Plymouth and the rail, leaning out over her knees crimped in between, yelling like all get out with the tops of trucks and motor homes flying by. But I turn down again and half my attention’s on my feet, while the other half’s already down at the water and I know it’s goddamn nuts crazy. I got a sweat on already and the wind whips up cool and you can hear it now, getting deeper down, over the whiz of traffic. But I just keep thinking of all that sand and desert come the other side of Colorado. Dry

and dead and chances are I'll never see a Twinkie truck but in my dreams. And to tell the truth at the time I was glad standing there in my uncle's speedboat, rocking side to side and watching the crew of the paddle-wheel trying to climb out and get my old man's bloody corpse—in his bright white life vest—get it out of the paddles, glad because I thought maybe I'd get to live with Uncle Phil from then on, who never hit anybody but my old man once when they was kids. But even so, it maybe doesn't seem such a good idea anymore to go living right back there near the lake where it happened. The desert, it's all just buzzards and coyotes and Mormons and green-plaid assholes from Palm Springs in red Buicks. It feels like asking for trouble. And I'll probably end up jockeying gas at minimum wage in 120-plus degrees in the goddamn shade if I don't croak all on my own with this garbage in my guts and no way out, no way with Cherry-Rose to support, and anyway the codeine and the last Brown Derby are keeping my guts from aching too bad when I land down hard on the next rock shelf.

A couple more times I look back up. She's still there, against the steely gray in the sky. She sees me looking and yells, but it's as though she's under water or behind glass. It's just the motions, her fists out in the air and her hair thrown up, when a semi roars along the rim of the gulch.

Then, with my hands cut up from the rocks, I'm moving too fast, and I get tripped and go down on my knees behind a tree. I stand up and shake it off and the exercise is moving the codeine out fast, but it gets more and more quiet too, except for my own breathing like a wind through a tunnel, as though it's only a high cloud cover of noise up above. And down here, in the crotch of the earth, it's okay. It's pulling me and that's where I want to be.

So there's this kind of balance. More pain but less sound, like I'm going slowly deaf until finally it's quiet as hell and I'm getting way down and closed in. The face of the hill across the way keeps coming closer, getting details, broken branches and granite patterns, and my ears feel full of cotton dust except to the sound of running water like somebody talking Japanese.

Now I can see water, the weird greeny blue-brown in an abalone shell, over a soft copper silt 'cause the water's slow here, clear as polished glass. Makes you feel you should hold your breath it's so damn—tranquil. Tranquil. A tranquilizer. Hah. Like waiting. Like pure waiting on the end of the earth.

On the far bank, about fifteen feet over, there's a little sweep, a kind of

beach of mixed sand and wood rot, then a face of rock. I sit down right next to the water on a sharp slick rock, but I can't really feel it too bad, I'm too tired. I put my hand down slow, as though it's going to run away, and I touch the pearly surface.

It ripples.

As it will around a pebble, thrown out far and far, messing up the bottom and the reflection of trees, and rock, and a little jagged ribbon of sky at the top.

I stand up and step across three rocks and the end of a downed tree even though my knee aches to all hell and my shirt's ripped almost as bad as my hands. And then I sit in the little sweep of soft bank where it's all soggy as a king-sized sponge. I sit there, and I scoop up a handful of water and untuck my shirt with the other hand. The air is cool down here where the sun won't reach and where my skin is hot with sweat, but the water is even cooler, and my guts jump, it chills and stings so bad when I open my fly and peel my pants back and let water drip from my fingers, down through the stitches, over the yellow pus coming out.

But after the first dose it feels fine. As though I can feel the clean and clear as much as the cold. The way in some space movies, how the alien can heal you up right here and now. Better than Twinkies. Maybe better than sex.

And even after my crotch is soaked through to my ass, I sit there. Holding still as I can and not about to move, just so I can feel the quiet. And the little bit of wind as the trees creak. There's traffic. But it's a bad song you can hardly remember the words to. My breath goes out. Comes back. Goes out. And then I turn. Slow. And I'm watching the water.

It goes so still, I swear, I can see her little blown smudge of red hair in the steely surface. Hands up and swaying like seaweed in a storm. And someone beside her now. Someone standing on the rail so his outline is wobbling against the ragged ribbon of sky. Shading his eyes. Looking down where she's pointing; down into, and up out of the water.

Like someone jumped. Like it's already too late. Like they're both leaning anyway 'cause it's the only decent thing left to do.