

Glissando · *Robert Boswell*

IN THE SPRING OF 1970 my father and I lived in a one bedroom apartment over a laundromat in Lordsburg, New Mexico. He was working as a real estate agent through the mail, and a short order cook at a truckstop cafe during the night. He'd also lifted a master key to the washers downstairs and borrowed coins from the machines as the need arose. To allay suspicion, he took only a handful of change at a time.

On my birthday that May he came home hours early from S & P Truckstop, bursting through our door with a lemon meringue pie held like a newborn in the crook of his arm. His pockets bulged and jangled with coins. Before he said a word, I knew we were about to move on.

"Fourteen, a golden year," he began, pulling my birthday present, a new deck of playing cards, from his rear pocket and tossing it my way. "Time you learned how to drive an automobile," he said. Then he added, "Good catch," as I snagged the deck before it hit me in the face.

Our only vehicle, a motorcycle—and not a big Harley as he had once owned, but a little JSA 125—had no headlamp and was not licensed for street use. He had to take alleys across town and park behind buildings, locking it up with a chain the way you do a bicycle. We hadn't owned a car for three years.

"Birds have wings," my father went on, as if explaining himself to a stranger, "men got to have automobiles." He set my birthday pie on the couch that doubled as my bed, then fished through the stolen coins in his pocket and withdrew a pair of keys looped together by a noose of electrical wire. "Happy fourteenth," he said, throwing them as he had the cards. "That's your personal set. Pack your things real quick-like, and let's go for a ride."

An hour later, rumbling out of town in a '64 Chevy Bel Air, he told me I would no longer go by Jim Wallace, my real name. I would now answer to Jim Barley.

"Just till you turn eighteen," he said, wiping meringue from his lips and onto the steering wheel, "then you can call yourself anything you please."

Some of his real estate deals had not been entirely above board, and he had decided to go by his half-brother's name, Louis Barley. Louis had disappeared the year of my birth, but wherever we moved my father put his

photograph on top of the refrigerator. It was Louis who gave me a gap-toothed smile every time I opened the door for a Coke or an ice cube or to just stand in the refrigerated air. The new Louis Barley, my father, had gotten a driver's license using his half-brother's birth certificate.

"What should *I* call you?" I asked him.

"Father," he said, "same as always. Nothing's changed but the distance I can put between us and trouble."

A dozen miles out of New Mexico, he pulled the Bel Air onto the shoulder and killed the engine. "Give your old man a hand," he said as he climbed out. In one corner of the car's trunk, among our clothes and possessions, lay a screwdriver and a set of Arizona license plates. "The Chevy gets a new identity, too," he explained. I removed the old plates. He replaced them with the new. My father liked to plan things in detail, and this stop was a calculated part of the trip. Poor timing and bad luck often conspired to ruin his plans, but this evening all went smoothly, which pleased us both.

"One gorgeous night," he said when we had finished and leaned happily against the trunk. The desert rolled around us, dark and seemingly without end. Up above, the sky held an amazing network of stars. He handed me the New Mexico plates, and I sent them whirling over the barren ground. We'd become new people: Louis Barley and his son Jim.

"You got your keys?" he asked me. When I nodded, he pointed to the driver's side.

White specks of gravel embedded in the asphalt sparkled like gems in the Bel Air's headlights. "Hammer that clutch in all the way," he shouted. I obeyed him, then turned the key and the engine came to life. We lurched out onto the dark highway.

He pulled a bottle of rum from beneath the seat, bumping his head against the dashboard as the car jumped forward. "That didn't hurt," he said, rubbing his temple. He began telling a story about his very first drive, how his half-brother Louis taught him. "Lousy driver himself," my father confided. "Worked the clutch like he was stomping ants."

My heart pounded as we hit fifteen, twenty, thirty miles an hour, the highway all but abandoned—an occasional diesel, a few desert creatures. My father put his hand over mine on the gear shifter, showing me the way down to second, then up and over to third.

"You're getting it." He nodded encouragingly and took another swig of

rum. My first time behind the wheel, I took us a distance of one hundred miles.

Alida McGowan was a small and pretty woman whose face would flush red after only a moment in the heat, the pink of her skullcap shining through her thin blonde hair, which she cut short like a boy's. She was twenty-two in 1970, ten years younger than my father. Her favorite activity consisted of lying in her underwear on the couch and watching television while sipping iced tea.

She had grown up in Chicago, her father a butcher, but her mother divorced and remarried before Alida turned three. Her second father managed his own grocery, and the third taught high school French. Alida's mother married her way up the same social scale that Alida, in turn, descended. At seventeen, she ran off with a college boy, leaving him in Los Angeles for an appliance salesman whom she abandoned for a ranch hand. His pickup broke down in Arizona where Alida met a diesel mechanic. She was living with him in a Ford van when she encountered Louis Barley.

My father stood five feet nine inches tall with hair black as a crow's wing. He ironed his shirts and buttoned every button regardless of the weather. He owned a succession of crumpled gray felt hats common to an older generation and wore one all the time, except in bed and in the car. Though he had strong arms, they appeared more swollen than muscular. I wound up with an identical build—something my wife would call wiry when we first met, and scrawny when we broke up.

While Alida looked very much like a modern woman, my father, the brim of his fedora tipped up, looked like a relic. He treated her well, though, and did the same to me. True, he drank, but meanness was not the result. In his whole life he struck me only once. That was later, in Nevada, when things had turned bad between us. To be honest, I'd had it coming.

Our first night out of Lordsburg we slept in the Chevy on a dirt road beside the highway east of Tucson. The following day he managed to drive only a couple of hours. The desert sun reflecting brightly off the hood—combined with his hangover—caused him too much pain. He stopped in Gila Bend, Arizona, pretending it had been our destination all along.

His pretending was something I both recognized and denied. We moved so much, he served not only as my sole parent but as my single enduring friend. I preferred to believe he knew what he was doing, and I did so for a

long time, until it was impossible to continue.

Gila Bend was a hot little desert hole, a place to get gas and beer and a second wind for the remainder of whatever long drive you were on. We rented a stucco house painted an aqua color—to look like the ocean, my father claimed. The paint had flaked off in spots, and a gray like bad skies shone beneath it.

He got a job as night clerk at the Space Age Lodge, a concrete block motel with plastic furniture in the lobby and photos of early space flights on the walls. I joined him behind the registration desk to study. We had left Lordsburg before I finished ninth grade, and he'd decided to compensate with a few lessons of his own. On the evening Alida McGowan stepped into our lives, he had been instructing me in what he called the algebra of blackjack, a complicated system of when to hold and when to ask for a hit.

“No guesswork to it anymore,” he told me, shaking his head in awe of such progress as he dealt out five hands. “All mathematical. What you need is a head for numbers, and I think you got one.”

Eight that evening Alida appeared at the door. The sun had not set and the temperature outside remained over one hundred degrees. Her face and scalp glowed pink. Her short dress had wide, brightly colored stripes—the sort of thing that would make other people look ugly—and she wore a braided leather strap around one ankle. She lived across the highway with the diesel mechanic but checked in that evening with a truck driver, a big-chested man who wore a John Deere cap.

My father took to her immediately. While the trucker bent over to sign the registration card, my father stared straight into her eyes, smiling and adjusting the brim of his hat. She didn't say a word. If she gave him any kind of signal, I missed it. As she left, she knotted a handful of skirt in her fist as if nervous.

My father lost all interest in the lesson. When I mentioned it, he put his arm around my shoulder and led me outside into the heat. We stood beside the motel's whitewashed walls, and he said softly, “When's the last time you heard of a trucker cashing in before dark?”

He asked as if I'd been with him all those nights at the truckstop. Then he added, “That any way to leave your vehicle?”

The rig was parked haphazardly in the lot, taking up half the spaces. “Let's give them a call,” he said. We went back inside and dialed their room number.

I heard the driver's loud voice coming through the receiver. "Hell, it won't be there more than an hour." The diesel, in fact, pulled out twenty minutes later.

"Jimmy, run check on that room." My father watched through the window as the truck rolled over the curb and out into the street. "Stick your ear to the door and see if you hear life."

I ran along the sidewalk that rimmed the Space Age Lodge and leaned up against the green metal door, hot to the touch. I couldn't hear anything at first, but I kept listening. It seemed likely the woman had stayed, this being the sort of thing about which my father was invariably right.

In a few seconds she started walking around. Then the television came on. I peered through a gap where the curtains failed to meet and saw Alida McGowan on the bed wearing nothing but panties and a bra, a bottle of dark liquor in her hand.

"Didn't mean for you to pry," my father told me. "Peeking in, that was prying. I only wanted you to listen." He said this seriously but smiling, delighted with the news. "If a customer comes, you say your daddy's fixing an air conditioner and will be right back. Then you call her number."

During the hour he spent with Alida McGowan, no one came to the Space Age Lodge, but I picked up the receiver several times, thinking I would ring them with one phony message or another. Finally, I raced back to her room.

The curtains had been yanked hard so they overlapped. When I pressed my ear against the door this time, I heard the soft and low voice my father got while doing something he enjoyed. I heard her, too, just once, a little laugh that sounded like a wind chime.

Alida moved in with us later that week. My father came home one night with her under his arm, and she never left. Before he even introduced us, she smiled at me and said, "Jimmy always makes me think of jimmying a lock, and Jim makes me think of basketball and the smell of men sweating. You've got a good name. It makes pictures in my head."

I think I fell in love with her right then.

My father got an advance on his paycheck to buy a portable black-and-white Zenith. She lay on the couch half-wrapped in a blanket, drank instant iced tea, and watched whatever came on. We received a clear picture on only two channels, but she never complained—it was not in her nature to object. I often thought she wouldn't even change the channel if I didn't ask to see a certain show.

In all his life my father had never had anything to do with banks, but as Louis Barley he opened a checking account shortly after Alida moved in. Louis Barley also worked more ambitiously than the man I'd grown up with. Midway through June, the Space Age Lodge promoted him to day clerk. "I'll make manager in another six months," he announced proudly. "Nobody is motivated to stay in Gila Bend but me." He took a second advance to buy an air conditioner for the living room. Before Alida arrived, we'd used just the one in his bedroom and left doors open.

Once he started working days, Alida and I spent a lot of time together in front of the television. I liked to look at her in her underwear, and she didn't seem to mind. As long as my father was at work or asleep she'd lie more or less on top of the blanket, but whenever he sat with us she'd cover herself. She wore white cotton panties, often stained. One pair had a little oval hole just below the elastic waistband. Her bras, white and old-fashioned, revealed less, really, than a bathing top. Later she took to wearing my father's white T-shirts and no bra. She often lay in such a manner that I'd have to leave for a while and go back into my room. When I returned she'd let me know what I missed on television.

Alida told me several stories that summer. The one I remember best had to do with her turning seventeen and her mother throwing a surprise party and inviting the local teenagers, most of whom Alida disliked. They came to her party because of her looks.

"I am pretty, you know," she told me, smiling, her lip curled almost cruelly.

I agreed with her. She described the balloons dangling from the ceiling that had embarrassed her and the stupid gifts—one kid had given her a model car to assemble—and how she had hated all of it. Then a boy handed her a box that jewelry came in, a box made for an expensive ring. Her mother raised her eyebrows and said, "I wonder what that could be." Alida opened it and inside lay a condom. Her mother burst into tears, then shoved the boy in the chest to make him leave.

"I should have been mad at him, too," Alida told me, "but I wasn't."

"Nothing makes you angry," I said.

She shrugged and shook her head as if I had missed the point. "Your mother ever make you miserable?"

"She took off when I was little. We don't know what become of her." I looked at the carpet while I spoke. Talking about my mother embarrassed

me. "I only know her from stories I hear."

Alida grunted knowingly. "Your daddy likes to tell stories." She was silent a moment, then she said, "I could never resist the things my mother hated. My whole life has been an answer to that gift."

I had little idea what she meant, but I smiled and nodded as if it made perfect sense.

A couple of weeks after school began, I got into a fist fight. Clay Looking-point, a big kid who was part Indian, said I reminded him of a squat-legged hen. I hit him and broke his nose.

I was accustomed to being new at a school and thought it better to punch someone early on rather than let the abuse build up. I got a swat and sent home.

I faked the call to my father and walked the short distance to our house. As soon as I stepped inside, I heard a rush of movement. The sliding glass door that led to the back yard opened and closed. "Alida?" I called and walked into the living room. The drapes that covered the door swayed. In the gap between the hem and the floor, an inch of bright sunlight shone on our concrete porch and on a man's big naked feet. As I watched, those feet stepped into pants.

Alida lay on the couch watching TV, the blanket over her as usual. When I started toward the glass door to see who it was dressing on our back stoop, she called my name and patted the couch beside her. "As The World Turns" flickered on the set and she began filling me in. I might have gone on to the door, but she let the blanket fall. She was not wearing panties. She continued talking about the soap opera, lying on her stomach, her pretty white behind out in the open. She called me again and turned her head to face me. "Jimmy, come over here," she said.

I went to her then. When I reached the couch she unbuttoned my pants, slipped her hand inside my underwear, and took my cock into her mouth. She left it there only a moment, then turned back to the television.

"There'll be more later," she said. I was immobilized for several moments. Finally, I buttoned my jeans and sat in my regular chair.

In another minute, she got up, without trying to cover herself, and went into the bedroom. When she returned, she was fully clothed.

"You're a part of it now, too," she told me. "So you better keep quiet."

I came home from school the next day during lunch. She took me in her mouth again, just as briefly, then used her hands to finish. I was a boy and it didn't take long.

I found if I ran to and from the house during lunch break, I could get back in time for my next class. Occasionally, that same man was there. Alida locked the front door when he came by, having asked me not to unlock it. Once I hid around back and waited for him to emerge—a big dark man without much hair on his head. Alida told me she used to live with him in a Ford van. She told me then about the other men and her father. She trusted me with this because of my dedication to her warm mouth and hands.

“Men fall for me,” she said, “but they don't fall in love.” She was washing at the kitchen sink. I had trailed her into the room, still buttoning my pants. “If I were a man, I'd find a way to love someone like me.”

“My father loves you,” I said. “He says so all the time.” Then I added in a whisper, “I love you.”

“Your daddy thinks he made me up out of thin air. He thinks whatever he finds must be just what he was looking for.” She dried her hands on a dish-towel. I waited to see if she had heard my confession. “And you, well . . .” She rolled her eyes. “You just like to get your rocks off.”

I laughed with her at this, although we both knew it wasn't the whole truth.

During the last days of the school year, I ran home and she was gone—along with the TV set and all of her clothes. I started to call my father, thought better of it, and went back to school instead. I stayed late, sitting in the gym, acting like I was studying, wondering who was next for her, how far down her mother's scale she'd be able to go. Mainly, I kept a textbook in front of my face, hiding my eyes.

When I finally got to the house, my father stood in a corner of the kitchen making hamburger patties. He had a story about Alida that I might have believed if I hadn't already known her better than he did.

“She got a call from her kin in Chicago. Some family trouble,” he told me. I didn't ask for details. I had been angry with him several days. It gave me an evil pleasure to see him suffering and pretending.

“You just missed her,” he continued. “She asked me to give you her love.”

“Sure, she did,” I said coolly.

He pretended not to hear my tone. Then he added, “I let her have the TV set. Hell, she’d be lost without it, wouldn’t she?” He laughed at that.

Later we discovered that she’d taken both air conditioners, which my father thought unfair. For a long time he remained cross with the memory of her.

We lived in Gila Bend another six months. One day at school—I was a sophomore by that time—my father came to the classroom door and whispered with my Civics teacher. Then he gestured for me. The Bel Air, loaded with our belongings and carrying a full tank of gas, waited for us in the parking lot.

“I’ve got basketball practice tonight,” I told him.

“It’ll have to wait,” he said. We climbed in and drove out of Gila Bend for good.

My father had one story he liked to tell about my mother.

The two of them had drunk whiskey most of a winter night in a honky-tonk in Albuquerque. Somehow there came to be bets on what songs the piano player would know. My mother wanted to bet he wouldn’t know a song that used all of the keys. She had gotten it into her head that no such song existed, having heard it from another piano player way back in her youth—a thing that had stuck with her for years and she was now, finally, going to use.

My father bet fifty dollars. The man played a familiar song—sometimes my father would say “Stormy Weather,” other times, “Am I Blue”—and right at the finish, he put his fingers at one end and ran them all the way down the keys before playing the last few notes. My father shrugged and reached for his wallet, figuring they’d been had, but Mother became furious, saying you could do that to any song. “Don’t give him the money,” she said.

My father knew welshing on a bet was trouble, especially in the sort of bar they were in. He asked the piano player if there was sheet music as proof. He couldn’t have read the notes of a scale to save his life, but he studied a few sheets anyway, then returned to the table fifty dollars lighter.

“Called a full glissando, and it was right there in the margins of the music,” he told her. “A trick deal, but he took us fair and square.”

Whenever he related the story to me, he’d say, “Jimmy, that’s why your mother left us. She wanted the kind of life where you hit every note at least once. We can’t begrudge her that.”

Before Alida McGowan left us, we took two trips together. The first was to see the Grand Canyon—a long drive from Gila Bend even though it's in the same state. My father told me I could invite a friend to join us. The only person I knew very well, Clay Lookingpoint, agreed to come along. We sat in the back of the Bel Air together. For some reason, Clay had brought a notebook and wrote me messages. "She your mother?" asked the first one. I shook my head. Then he wrote, "She rides good in a car." I nodded.

By the time we got to Flagstaff, the sky had grown dark and the Grand Canyon remained a good ways off. Our stops to pee and some road construction had foiled my father's calculations. We ate burgers and fries at a crowded drive-in, then we found a motel nearby, although the original plan had us coming back that same night. Our room, made to look like a log cabin, earned my father's scorn. He spent half an hour pointing out the places where you could tell it was just paneling and not really logs. Alida turned on the television and lay on one of the two beds watching an old movie.

Clay suggested that he and I take a walk. Immediately he led me back to the drive-in where we'd eaten. He claimed to have seen girls living out of a VW camper in the parking lot. "We can go there and screw them," he said. Clay had already turned eighteen. While he couldn't have been called handsome, the little crook I'd given his nose made him seem dangerous in an appealing way. Whether I was handsome didn't matter, I knew, as I was fourteen and looked like a boy.

Clay walked right up to the VW camper parked in a corner of the gravel lot and knocked on the sliding door. When it opened a crack, he said, "We're two Indian men searching for squaws." He smiled grandly and laughed.

The person who opened it—a full grown woman with lines in her face and wrinkles in her neck—said, "Sally, look at this."

Another woman, younger but with a mean look about her, stuck her head out. "They're searching for squaws," the older one said.

"He don't look Indian." Sally pointed at me.

"Half-breed," Clay told her. "We're Yaqui braves."

"So what are your Indian names?" the older one asked. Clay pointed at his own chest. "Running Deer With Dick Like Horse." He laughed at this more than anyone else.

"What about you?" Sally lightly put her finger on my nose.

I started to say, “Clay Lookingpoint,” the only Indian name I could think of. Instead, I said, “Looking Up Strangers.” To which Clay quickly added “Dresses” and lifted Sally’s skirt a few inches.

The older one slapped Clay’s hand, saying, “Why don’t you chiefs go down to the bowling alley to search for squaws?” Sally shut the sliding door.

“Hey,” Clay called out and hammered against the bus with his fist. “Check this one,” he said. The cloth curtains parted and both their faces appeared in the door window. They watched as Clay unbuttoned his pants and peed against the side of their van. The women laughed and shook their heads, then the curtains closed.

Clay and I walked back to the motel pretty happy. “They wanted us bad,” he said. We laughed and repeated the names we’d made up.

Outside our room we found Alida and my father sitting in the car staring straight ahead, saying nothing. My father lowered his window. “Get in, boys. We’re throwing this trip away.”

We headed back for Gila Bend, nobody talking for a long time. Clay finally spoke. “Why we going back now?”

He asked my father, but Alida replied. “Louis is a prude,” she said.

“That’s exactly right,” my father said. “And won’t any of us say what a certain other in this car is.”

Nothing but silence followed. Clay lifted his notebook from the floorboard. He wrote, “Her shirt is backward.”

Alida’s blouse was not on backward but inside-out. The stitching showed. A little white tag turned up at the back of her neck, saying, “Small.” I hadn’t noticed her shirt. I was worried that she had told him about us, about me and her. But that hadn’t happened.

Years later when I finally asked my father about it, he said only that he’d loved Alida as he’d loved no one since my mother, but Alida didn’t have the capacity for love. He didn’t want to elaborate, and I didn’t press.

That was five years ago, the last time I saw my father alive. He wasn’t an old man when he died—his thin hair still black as a crow’s wing. A cleaning woman found his body in a dumpster outside a motel in Portales. I borrowed a car from a woman I knew and drove down from Colorado to identify the body. The car, a silver Buick with automatic transmission, had to have a new water pump in Santa Fe. Towing and repair cost me two hundred dollars, which made me think of it as mine, and is why I still drive it.

My father had been sharing a house trailer with a sad-eyed woman not over twenty-five. She had peroxidized blonde hair but dark brows and a quivering way of talking that reminded me of a dove cooing. She had no real explanation for his death. We sat in the silver Buick while she drank gin straight from the bottle, her head pushed against the seat, weeping. “He treated me like the Queen of Sheba,” she told me, “like I was nothing but good.” When I pressed for reasons someone might want to knife him, she spoke vaguely of bounced checks, gambling debts, poor timing, bad luck.

The one other trip my father and I made with Alida McGowan came about as the result of a letter from the IRS. Addressed to Louis Barley, the letter requested information about his failure to claim money he’d earned taking census. That was how my father discovered his half-brother was alive and not paying taxes. The form showed an income of a couple of hundred dollars and an address in Riverside, California. The phone company didn’t list any Barleys in Riverside, but the drive was only seven hours. My father decided to take the chance. He guessed he might never get another to see Louis.

We left in the early evening. While he drove, my father told us how his half-brother disappeared.

“You were all of three months old at the time,” he said to me. “Louis wanted to see the Caribbean. He was always big on water. Claimed the Caribbean was clear as the sky. He drove down into Mexico and never come back. I wanted to track him, but your mother didn’t want to take you south. Afraid she’d get sick and wouldn’t be able to feed you. Other things came up, and I never did find him. Years later I tried. After your mother was gone, too. You remember Mexico?”

I nodded, recalling mainly the long bus rides and the unease my father had felt down there, pretending to understand more than he really did.

“I can speak Spanish,” Alida said. She began pointing at clouds, scrub trees, a cactus, the lights of approaching cars, and recited their Spanish names—pretty words that sounded just right, as if those things belonged more to that language than ours.

Near the California line, we left the interstate and headed north on a deserted two-lane that went from Yuma to Blythe. My father pulled off and cut the engine. “I bet you didn’t know Jimmy can drive,” he said to

Alida, then he looked into the back at me. “Got your keys?”

We all three sat in the front, Alida in the middle. I stalled the car on my first attempt to get us moving. “Let her out easy,” my father advised. Alida, to soften my embarrassment, confessed she couldn’t drive a stick.

The narrow road had mild curves, lit by a bright and persistent moon. I had not driven since my fourteenth birthday, better than a year past, and I had more trouble this time than before, trying, as I was, to impress Alida.

“Louis and I took a trip like this once,” my father began. “Your mother come with us,” he told me. To Alida he added, “She had to sit on the hump, too.”

“I don’t mind,” Alida told him.

“We’d all been living in Horizon City, Texas, down south of El Paso. A record cold January, snow piling alongside the road. We were heading up to Santa Rosa by way of Las Cruces and Alamogordo. Louis had work in Santa Rosa and thought he could get me on. Can’t recall what it was because it never panned out.”

“How old were you?” I asked him, keeping my eyes on the blacktop.

“Not much older than you are now. Seventeen, I guess. Me and your mother’d been married about a year. Didn’t know it, but she was already carrying you.”

Alida said, “That means I was just a kid when this went on.”

“That’d be right,” my father said. “Louis was driving, stomping the clutch every chance he got, as usual. His old Falcon had a powerful heater, and we drank coffee with whiskey from a thermos. Before long we come to White Sands.” To Alida, he said, “If you never been there, picture huge mounds of table salt. Damnedest thing you can imagine. Only this night it got three leagues stranger. There on top of the white sand was snow.” My father shook his head. “White snow on top of white sand in moonlight just like this.” He tapped the passenger window. “Louis about got us into a head-on just staring at it.”

As he finished the story, the road wound by a rock hill. Suddenly the Colorado River appeared right beside us, moonlight, blue and beautiful, skipping across the water. “Look at that,” Alida said. I had to stop the car to keep from driving into the river.

A little after midnight we finally arrived in Riverside. My father, prepared as always, had directions and drove right up to the address—a duplex with

a big porch and a gabled roof. Plywood covered the door and window on one side, but the other half was lighted. We gathered before the good door, the three of us, all a little giggly and proud. The trip, already a big success, now presented us with the opportunity to see a ghost.

My father pounded heartily on the door. A man soon opened it. He stared at us only a second before saying, "Son of a bitch." In the harsh electric light, he looked many years older than my father, his skin a shade of gray—like the hide of an elephant. There was a gap between his front teeth.

"Louis," my father said.

We stood in the doorway for a few perfect seconds. Then a voice called from another room. A thin woman appeared down the hall. She bent forward to look at us, which made me think she had poor vision. As soon as he saw her, my father flinched and quit smiling. He said, "We got the wrong house." He reached in for the knob and pulled the door shut.

On the outskirts of Riverside, we found a seafood restaurant still open. My father ordered lobster for all three of us. He pretended to be in a good mood, although anyone could tell it was an act. "Drove all this way to see a stranger," he said and laughed. He even slapped his knee. Then he called to the waiter for more melted butter, another beer, water, crackers, ice.

I played along with him. I folded a slice of white bread and took a bite from the middle, then peeked through the hole—the sort of thing a six year old would do. I wanted desperately to recapture the happy mood we'd had only an hour earlier.

"You're a pirate," my father said, so eager to be jovial he confused eye-hole with eye-patch. "Jimmy's a pirate," he told Alida.

She smiled and nodded. "Shiver my timbers," she said and put her arm around his shoulders.

It was after two by the time we returned to the car. We had all grown quiet. I lay across the back seat and didn't respond when my father called my name.

"I wish *I* could sleep," he said to Alida.

She turned to him. Her arm appeared along the back of the seat. Her voice was flat and soft. "Who was she?"

"What business is that of yours?" He spoke angrily, in a hushed tone. "She's someone I never knew. Put it that way. I might have thought I did, but I didn't."

I kept picturing the gap-toothed smile, confusing what I saw with what I'd expected. But the thin woman I remembered perfectly, how she bent over and squinted, as if looking at us from a great distance.

I didn't figure out anything that night, couldn't put two and two together. I understood only that my father was angry and embarrassed, as if those two in the house had conspired to make him play the fool. Up front, he had begun yet another story, the one about the bet with the piano player. Alida glanced into the backseat. She could see I was listening, but she didn't let on.

"Asked the piano man if he had a name for that," my father said. "He called it a full glissando, and I made him write it down. I told her it was right there in the music, but that didn't satisfy her." He shook his head furiously. "Not her. She called me a sap. Truth is, *I* had saved us from a lot of trouble, and *she* had cost us fifty dollars."

Near the Arizona border, he pulled into a rest stop. His stomach was killing him. The lobster, he claimed. "Too rich for my system," he told Alida. As soon as he left, I sat up. I was on my knees with my elbows on the back of the front seat. I watched him cross the dark ground and disappear into the little brick outhouse. The moon had vanished and the night grown dark.

Alida looked at me sadly. She was tired and bags showed under her eyes. "My parents split when I was two," she told me. "It doesn't have anything to do with your day-in, day-out life."

Her saying this made me angry. It came over me unexpectedly, like a wind that suddenly turns you cold.

"I want you to take care of me," I said, although that doesn't convey what I meant. I had unzipped my pants and pulled out my cock. "If you don't, I'll tell him everything."

She clenched her jaw and gave me a long stare. Then she glanced at the door where my father had gone. "Watch for him," she whispered. She bent over the seatback and took me into her mouth. I stayed there no longer than usual. As she pulled away, I felt the hard edge of her teeth. By the time my father returned, I lay on the seat again pretending to sleep.

"Feel better?" Alida asked him.

I didn't want to hear his answer. Something inside me had turned against him. I covered my ears, making his voice sound far away.

Alida cleared out later that week.

Louis Barley's photograph remained on the refrigerator until I swatted it down myself. I widened the space between his teeth with a kitchen knife and sent the photo spinning over the desert. My father never mentioned its absence and never said a word about Riverside. By this time I had figured it all out. I knew my father was a fool. On several occasions I started to tell him as much, but I kept it to myself a long time.

My father got credit cards in his half-brother's name and ran them up past the limits. When the bills arrived, he came to school and we drove off, heading north to Elkwood, Nevada.

Along the way we stopped at the Grand Canyon. We leaned against a metal railing and looked out over the empty space. The sun, setting through clouds, dappled the canyon with light. On the opposite rim, objects shimmered and moved as if made of water. The view held us a long time.

My father put his arm along my shoulder. He had left his hat in the car. A wind off the canyon ruffled his sleeves and lifted his lank and thinning hair. His collar fluttered against his neck, and I realized his shirt was a size too large.

"Alida would have liked this," he told me, nodding at the canyon. "It's one of the things I could have given her." He shook his head sadly. "Instead all she got was a TV and a couple of window units."

He said this as if he owned the place, as if that spectacular distance was his to give instead of the thing we stood helpless before. Despite this, or maybe because of it, I believed he was talking for the both of us. I felt close to him. The anger I'd carried for months abruptly left me. I even thought it might be gone for good.

It didn't turn out that way. He and I had trouble in Nevada. When I turned seventeen, I took off on my own. But that day at the canyon, anger lifted from my shoulders and my heart opened up. I felt for one last time a boy's unsullied love for his father.

Dusk settled in and turned the air cool. We had stayed a long time. The approaching dark ultimately decided us. We got back in the car and headed north toward hardship and misunderstanding and further betrayal, driving as if we hadn't a care, riding with the windows down, wearing our old names.