

Wonderland · C. S. Godshalk

WHEN THE ROOM WAS LIKE THIS, in the dark, with only the window letting in moonlight and the white blanket looming up pale and square, anything could be in it. Anyone. Merle could be curled up on the day bed grinding his teeth, his small knees jammed into his chest. He was. She could be rolling over on the big fold-out couch, snoring lightly, or just there. She wasn't. But in the night Paulie was never completely sure. He let this uncertainty fold over him, the dreamy possibility of his mother's presence in the room would roll up under his chin, and he would sleep.

In the morning it was just himself and Merle, but it was all right because in the morning he was energetic and there were things to do fast. Juice and cereal and Bugs Bunny vitamins and hot milk heated in the little pot on the good burner and the pot run full of water right away so he could clean it out easily when they got back. Then rinsing and stacking the dishes in the sink and smoothing out the beds. He got Merle's jacket and hat and gave him the fifty cents. He had made her fill out the form saying they needed lunch for fifty cents and not a dollar like the other kids only a lot of the other kids had the same form.

Sometimes, when he first woke up but didn't open his eyes, knowing she'd be nowhere in the room, he would panic. He'd decide then to tell them, he'd yell to them all off the backstairs of the apartment and down the halls of Our Lady of the Snows, that she had left. "What kind of a mother is she!" they would cry. "A Whore! A Drunk!" and he would rush into their arms, into all their arms. But it would be Peg holding him, smiling with her cigarette and that stretched pink and silver sweater, looking nothing like anybody's mother, and a tremendous ache would fill his chest. That's when he dropped an arm off the bed and groped for his sneakers. He knew if they were there, exactly as he left them, side by side with the toes perfectly even, it would be all right and he could get up.

He poured the milk out of the pot over two bowls of Cap'n Crunch while Merle's headless form stumbled out of the bathroom. Paulie reached out with his free hand and yanked at the little boy's shirt until the large grey eyes appeared, the shirt still hitched on the nose, the face of a baby robber.

“Did you go to the bathroom? Did you DO anything?” The small boy looked up gravely, his red cheeks almost comical under Paulie’s long pale chin. Despite their differences, the children shared a wide mouth and straight, almost broomlike reddish hair. “That bed damn well better be dry!” Paulie said.

After the dishes, Paulie took the plastic watering can from under the sink and watered all the plants. Then he shoved Merle’s arms into a leather jacket and zipped up both their jackets, checked for the key in his breast pocket, and slammed the door. That part of the day was finished right. Outside, down the rickety backstairs, they stepped carefully over the brilliant bits of ice, beneath Nudorf’s underwear lifting flat and frozen in the sunlight, mid-high to the peeling bottle of Meyer’s Rum shooting its tremendous cap and stars off the billboard into the bright blue sky.

The house itself listed. It looked like all the other broken down three deckers in East Boston, except it was tilted slightly forward so that, they had discovered, a marble rolled on their bathroom floor on the second floor would continue out across the linoleum, slowly increasing speed, making a little leap over the TV wire, over the kitchen door jamb and out the back door, dropping in little crystal slaps down the twenty-seven steps, staying in the depression in the middle of each, before it fell backward off the twenty-seventh step and clanked on the trash cans.

They had told Peg about the marble. Paulie told her exactly how it would go but she just shoved him away, holding her cigarette inside the cup of her hand the way she did when she touched them. Later she came out on the back porch with her fake fur jacket over her robe and grabbed Paulie’s neck and steered him back inside to the bathroom and smacked a marble in his hand. She shuffled back out to the porch and yelled “Go!” and he squatted and let the marble go, he didn’t push it, he just let it roll away, and it passed her dirty pink slippers and started to bounce and she leaned over the wooden rail and watched it hop down below her until the final chink on the can and she said “Holy shit!” with that smile. She wasn’t drunk then and she wasn’t sober. She was in between and she was nice.

That was the week before she left. He got back from school with Merle and there was a box of cream-filled cupcakes on the dinette. On top of the box was a long envelope with magic marker writing. The magic marker was still there with its top off. She never put the tops back on and they

always got dry. "Paulie" it said on the envelope "I'm going away for awhile" and he closed his eyes. "I'm going on a trip. You're almost twelve. That's no baby! Make sure Merle eats and don't take any crap. If you need me, *a real emergency*, go up to Nudorf and use this number." It was the number of the new guy from Texas. Mitch. "Uncle" Mitch. Inside the envelope were eight twenty dollar bills and a piece of yellow paper. "Use this slow" it said on the paper. "I'll be back before it's gone, or I'll send your father." A bright set of her lips was pressed into the paper.

"Fuck her" he said in a high, choked voice. He ripped open the cupcakes and shoved them at Merle. Merle pushed a cupcake into his mouth and backed away.

"Fuck her!" Paulie said again and the little boy started to cry. Chocolate squeezed out of the sides of his mouth and onto his shirt. "Fuck her!" Paulie screamed, and Merle moaned, a slow bright circle of water surrounding his darkened pants as if the tears were too much for the eyes alone to discharge.

"You pig!" Paulie said. "You little pig!" Merle began to wail and Paulie shoved him into a chair and stared at him savagely until he was quiet. Then he went over and dumped out the twenty dollar bills. He took one and folded it up and shoved it deep in his breast pocket and he stuffed the rest in a jar and put it way in back of the freezer part of the refrigerator. He took the envelope and tore it into bits and dropped them in the trash. "We're not calling her" he said, pulling off the small boy's shoes and socks and pants and wrapping him around with a dishtowel. "Ever."

He decided the first thing to do, despite the cash in the jar, was to get a job. He went to Foodland the next afternoon and applied for a job bagging. He was younger than the other bag boys, but he was tall and acted polite and they didn't hassle him. At first it was only for Saturday, but by the next week they told him he could come everyday after school. Between Foodland and Peg's cash, he figured they could last for quite awhile.

Except for the nights, which Merle screwed up, it was better than it had been. They got to school on time. The place looked good. They ate right. "If anybody asks" Paulie said to Merle repeatedly "Old man Nudorf, Sister Cecilia, *anybody*, Peg's outa town. Say we got our aunt to cook and do stuff. Say Peg sends us postcards."

"Where?" Merle suddenly brightened.

"Where what?"

"Where are the postcards?" the child's eyes shone even more. "I want to see 'em!"

"There ARE no postcards, you little shit. Pay attention!" Merle looked at him blankly. He started to rock, as if a light breeze had entered the room. "Now" Paulie said again. "What are you going to say if someone asks—like Sister Cecilia?"

"What?"

"What are YOU going to say?" Paulie's fingers dug into the small arm. "YOU say—'my aunt is staying with us and cooks and stuff. My mother will be BACK SOON!'"

"She will?" Merle cried in pain.

Paulie let go of his arm and sunk into the yellow chair. "Yeah" he said blackly. They had gone eleven days, though, and nobody asked. When Nudorf finally squared them off on the stairs, putting down his bag of soda bottles and drilling into them with small, colorless eyes, they both wet their lips. "Where's your mother?" the old man said, and before Paulie could jerk back he grabbed a pinch of white cheek. "Jesus, you two look nice!" Nudorf's eyebrows raised like little hats. "She must have run outa booze in there and had nothing to do but polish you up!" He bent over and heaved the bottles against his chest and pushed past. They watched his galoshes push up under the dirty coat, disappearing and reappearing like pedals, until the old man vanished around the bend of stair and sky.

Our Lady of the Snows elementary school was a huge yellow building set between the church on one side and the convent and rectory on the other. Our Lady herself stood in yellow stucco in front of the church, balancing her bare feet on a little globe. Merle waited here for Paulie each day because the second grade always got out before the seventh. He stood in front of Our Lady while the buses pulled up and hundreds of kids rushed out and around him and then he held onto the gate so as not to be pushed out of place. Eventually he'd see Paulie's purple ski hat bouncing through the crowd.

Paulie would push up his collar and they'd walk together to Foodland. Sometimes Angel Ruiz would join them. Ruiz was smaller and older than Paulie. He looked like a monkey with dark, skinny arms and a wide mouth. He was always happy looking. He'd shuffle up fast in his stupid little jacket, the small shoulders twitching back and forth, his sneakers bouncing.

Ruiz was the only one Paulie told about Peg. “No shit!” he said smiling, “Wow, if my old lady took off I’d grow some fucking wings or something!” He reversed to a moonwalk. Ruiz could moonwalk for blocks. “But why Foodland? I mean FOODLAND!” he slapped his forehead and rocked back drunkenly. “My old lady puts you on a roof, two hours you make fifty bucks. Just have to ‘look’! Just tell ‘em who’s going down the street. FOODLAND!” Ruiz stumbled backwards again, laughing.

“Your old lady” Paulie said, shoving Merle forward. “How long is she going to do that thing with the string? A guy whistles in the alley—down comes Rosita’s string with the stuff. I mean EVERYBODY sees it. What does she need a guy on the roof for?” Paulie had sat on the roof with Ruiz once or twice. The last time it was freezing, and they sat there watching the street and fooling with the steam coming out of their mouths. Suddenly Ruiz jumped up and began a little break routine on the ledge, jiving fast, before Paulie yanked him back down on the tar. “Ruiz is crazy” he said to Merle later. “Don’t hang around with him unless I’m there.”

Usually Ruiz left them at Dean Street, but this time he went all the way to Foodland. He hung around inside for awhile, then he slipped some gum into his jeans and did a fancy move on the electric eye mat and waved good-bye without turning back.

The day after Paulie told him about Peg, Ruiz came to the apartment. He had a big bag, full of Fritos and Sprite and Spanish stuff in cans. He said he could get more if Paulie needed it. At home, Paulie knew, Ruiz ate strangely. There’d be nothing for days and then Rosita would have fifty people over and there would be meat and bananas, big cooked bananas, beans and beer and guys in beautiful tight shirts. Only now Rosita’s parties were small. Ruiz suddenly had real money because of these parties. He did his first trick with two guys she had up there over Christmas. “You gotta get out of there” Paulie said when he told him. “Yeah” Ruiz smiled softly. “Next week I’m going to Miami.”

After Ruiz left Foodland, Paulie put on the yellow jacket and took Merle to the receiving area in back of produce. He sat him on a box between other boxes and gave him some old comics and told him not to move. Most of the time he wouldn’t. He sat there turning the pages, rubbing his feet together. The first day Paulie told the assistant manager that he had to watch Merle sometimes after school and the guy said “No way,”

but when he passed the small boy sitting with the comic books a few days later, he shrugged and walked away. Merle ate stuff in back of Foodland, but he was careful. Paulie told him not to take anything out of the store that wasn't in his stomach and he didn't.

Going home, they wouldn't talk for blocks. They'd walk through the alley behind the store, down and over the MTA tracks and up the small embankment toward the fading light in the west. Sometimes Paulie would pretend she was there waiting for them in the gold armchair, and the pale yellow light became part of the vast chair, her reddish hair spread out above, her wide lips smiling over the bank of clouds like something floating on a movie screen. Once the light spread out in a dappled band and he saw her suddenly in her leopard kerchief the way she was that one time she came to school. She came for the Christmas play and she stood in the hallway with her fur jacket and her hair high and puffy under the leopard kerchief. She was the only adult there and she looked somehow saved when she saw him. "Paulie! Where do I go?" He was walking in a line of boys and he just kept in line as they passed her. "Home" he spat.

"What? Whatya mean?" she cried. "You said ten o'clock!" but he kept going. "I'm EARLY!" she screamed, rushing after him and yanking him around so that the kids in back bunched up and then walked around them, staring. "Ten o'clock yesterday" he said with venom, then pushed passed. At the end of the hallway he glanced back and she was still standing there in that stupid kerchief, her hands dangling dead out of the jacket. He flung the image from his mind and twisted round to look for Merle. The small, pinched face pushed all sorrow from his heart.

By the time they turned onto their street the sun had usually disappeared, but Nudorf's laundry still caught the high lemon color, waving to them like bright cardboard cutouts of himself. The top of the huge billboard bottle glinted too in the yellow air, and they knew they were home.

One time, starting up the stairs, Paulie stopped. "What's that?" he asked, and Merle slipped a small brown ball into his pocket.

"A kiwi."

"I told you NOT to take stuff out of the store!"

"I didn't take it. I was LOOKING at them and Lifson gave me one.

"They're green inside" Merle said more quietly "like green jelly."

"Open it."

"No."

“Why not, for Christ’s sake! I want to see. It’ll get rotten like that other crap you stashed away.”

“So what.”

The boys climbed the stairs silently, the higher windows blinding them in the last iridescence. “You’re saving it for her!” Paulie said suddenly. “You dumb jerk! That’s what you’re doing! All that stuff! The dried up Fritos, those cupcakes! You’re saving them for her!” Merle pressed his baby lips together and looked away.

“Christ” Paulie said.

Inside he hung the two jackets on doorknobs and looked around. It still surprised him to get in and find everything so quiet and neat. The lousy smell was gone, the cigarette butts pushed into food were gone, her make-up all over the place was gone. She always wore make-up and she never put any of it away. He liked her best in the morning when her eyes were plain and they didn’t jump out of her face like they did later. She’d start with a tube of light brown stuff and then build on it. A few times she put this stuff on Merle after she hit him. Once on his arm where Kenny had pressed it. She was nice after times like that, sometimes for days. She tried to put the brown stuff on him one time, over a split cheek, but he shoved her off.

At night the two of them usually had cereal and then watched TV in their pajamas which Paulie already took twice to the laundromat with their other stuff. Sometimes they had tuna because for some reason Peg had four years supply of tuna in the kitchen, or like this night, Paulie fried up pork chops with Wonderbread on the side, which was their favorite. He set the pink formica table with two folded pieces of toilet paper and put the small snake plant in the middle of it and two forks and two knives. The snake plant looked good in the middle of the table, it’s sharp thick spikes pointing upward, dark green with no brown like when she took care of it. All the plants looked good. The big one with the ribbon and the pink foil looked great. Uncle Mitch brought it. Uncles were always bringing stuff. Crap. One day before Christmas she told him Uncle Phil was bringing them both Big Wheels and he told her she could shove Uncle Phil and all the other uncles up her ass, but that’s what she did anyway, and that’s when she opened his cheek with her hair dryer.

Paulie liked the plants. He got a small box of Vitagrow from Foodland and used it carefully after reading the directions several times. “You don’t

use too much of this stuff or you burn the roots” he said to Merle. And he watered them regularly, but not too much. “She drowned half of ’em and dried up the rest” he said.

He checked the mail each day before he dropped it in a big shopping bag. There was one tremendous, oversized post card that came from her the second week. It was a big monkey waving from the side of a skyscraper and it was all bent around the edges. “Hi guys!” it said. “Say hi to Kenny. Be good!” It was surrounded by a frame of xs and another pair of Peg’s lips in the center. Kenny, she told Paulie a few years back, was his father. He might have been too, because she didn’t call him Uncle Kenny and she didn’t seem to like him very much. He was a pale guy who always looked like he wanted to be somewhere else. Kenny didn’t seem to see Paulie when he was around. Merle’s father was another guy. His name was Merle and Peg named Merle after him, but it didn’t do much good because it turned out the guy hated the name. Somehow Peg must have asked Kenny to keep any eye on them. This made Paulie laugh.

On Fridays Paulie dumped out the shopping bag and sorted the mail. He did this when Peg was there too, because she wasn’t too good with mail. He separated what was junk, what was important—like Boston Edison, what bills could be forgotten forever practically, and what could be forgotten for a long time. Rent could wait because Peg paid that more or less on time so Nudorf wouldn’t hassle him for probably a month. The phone was no problem because it was gone. Peg flung it at the guy who came from New England Telephone to take it out. She switched her cigarette to her mouth and actually ripped it off the kitchen wall and flung it at this guy’s chest, and she was a small lady. She’d do terrific stuff like that sometimes. Paulie asked Merle in bed one night if he remembered the phone guy, but Merle was asleep.

By the third week in February, there was one twenty left in the jar. Paulie walked around with the Edison bill in his jacket because he felt somehow if he had it on him, they couldn’t use it. He knew this was ridiculous, but he still did it. At night he would wake up and see the long envelope, the one he had torn up, he would see it in front of his eyes, but he couldn’t see the phone number written on it. That postcard came from New York anyway, not Texas, so who knew where the hell she was. There were other times when he came home and he was positive she had called. She had called Nudorf upstairs. Once he got back from the deli and

Merle was in front of the TV which was on very loud the way he liked it when Paulie left him alone, and Paulie asked him.

"Did she call?"

"Who?" Merle's eyes stayed glued on the tube.

"Wonder Woman."

"Yeah."

"She DID! Christ! She DID!"

"What?"

"Did Mr. Nudorf come down?"

"No—I think—no."

"Merle!" Paulie pulled him up from the floor brutally and his head hit the side of the TV and he began to scream. In the night, on the rare occasions when Nudorf's phone rang upstairs, Paulie listened breathlessly to the old man's weight creaking over the floor. He'd wait for him to cross over to the door and start down the stairs. "Paulie!" Nudorf would shout outside their door. "Your mother is on the phone! Hey!" But he didn't.

Merle was the real problem. He wet the bed all the time now, and not just wet. The apartment smelled. Paulie kept him home from school a lot and stayed home too. He bought some postcards and wrote on them and gave them to Merle. "She sent them" he said. "She's coming back soon."

"You sent them" Merle said in a queer voice.

One night, when he made a particularly disgusting mess of his bed, Paulie hit him. He hit him hard, and Merle was quiet for a long time. He seemed all right, there was no mark, but he just wouldn't talk or anything, so Paulie finally picked him up and put him in his own bed and got in with him. He wrapped his legs around him and they slept like that and Merle was all right and didn't do anything. But when they got up the next morning, he made a mess on the floor. Paulie didn't clean it up. He got a ball point and a piece of paper from his looseleaf and he sat down and began to write. He wrote to CHATTERS at the Boston Globe. He read CHATTERS sometimes when Peg got the paper. He read it usually after Garfield and the ads for the topless bars. People wrote to CHATTERS with their problems, and other people—regular people, wrote the answers.

"Dear Chatters" he wrote "I have a small boy who wets the bed all the time and now it's more than just wetting. What do you recommend? I don't want to hit him or anything like that. Is there another mother out there with the same problem who has stopped her child from doing this?"

If you are the one, please answer.” He signed it “Big Boy.” People always signed their CHATTERS letters with funny or weird names. He mailed it right away and then he waited two days and checked a Globe at Soviero’s deli, but “Big Boy” wasn’t in yet. “Double Virgo” asked how to clean smudges off burnished copper. “Crazed Mom” asked how to stop spanking her four year old daughter. “Lamp Lady” asked if someone had the directions for a doll lamp. No “Big Boy.”

He thought of asking Ruiz about Merle because, as crazy as Ruiz was, he sometimes gave strangely good advice. He checked for the narrow back with the black and yellow jacket in social studies, but the seat was empty. This was not unusual, half the time Ruiz never showed up. Just before recess, Sister Bonaventure, the principal, came into the classroom and put her hands together so that the big white sleeves fell back like wings and she waited until everyone was quiet. “I’m sorry, boys and girls” she said, and her big ugly face looked sorry. “We’ve learned that Angel Ruiz has had a terrible accident. Last night he fell off the roof of his home. He died this morning at Children’s Hospital.” One or two children giggled softly. “We must pray for his family, for his poor parents.” Paulie saw Ruiz pass before him smiling, rotating like a wheel in the darkness, and he could not find air anywhere in the room.

“Where is he now?” Merle asked that night. “In a box” Paulie said tonelessly. “Tomorrow they’ll cover the box with flowers. They’ll put it in the ground and fifty people will come and eat.”

The entire class went to the funeral Mass. Rosita was there with a black hat resting like an elbow over her eyes. She was swaying sideways on a smaller darker man. “At least you didn’t get him” Paulie thought savagely, and at that moment Rosita looked up and he had never seen such a sad face in all his life.

In the night Paulie balled up Ruiz and Merle, Peg and the Edison bill and Rosita, he balled up all of it and he punched it until it was hard like a rock and he flung it to the back of his skull. He decided, wildly, to clean the apartment. On Saturday he shoved Merle into his jacket and hat and gloves and put him in front of the TV and then opened all the windows and the cold air rushed in. He worked hard, scrubbing and cleaning, and when he was finished he closed all the windows and took Merle’s stuff off and looked around. The place looked and smelled much better, but there was still something. The stuff on the doorknobs looked the worst. At Our

Lady of the Snows they had hooks, a long line of brass hooks for coats which Paulie admired, and also rough plastic mats at the side doors where you could scrape your shoes before going inside.

The hooks were easy. He just slipped them inside his jacket at DeVito's hardware and glided toward the door so they didn't chink together. At the door he picked up a bright green rectangle of sharp plastic grass and walked out. He walked fast, waiting for a heavy weight on his shoulder to spin him around. He was ready for it, his chest filled with air, ready to tell them everything, but nobody stopped him.

Back home he made Merle hold the hooks one by one as he pounded a nail through the hole in each one. Merle winced each time, but his small hand remained steady. After three hooks were up, the door flew open and Nudorf stood with his hands clenched, bouncing over his slippers. "You wanna bring the whole god damn place down!" he cried. "I got two pictures off the wall already! Cut it out! Where's your mother?"

Merle stared at him, his mouth open wetly. Paulie riveted his eyes on the nail and went on hammering furiously and when he was done he flipped the hammer on the yellow chair.

"Get them coats!" he ordered Merle. He turned his eyes on the old man. "Did you wipe your feet?" he asked contemptuously. "That's what the green mat's for! I shouldn't have to tell you that!"

Nudorf found himself scraping his slippers, and then turned round vacantly and went out the doorway. "Close the door!" Paulie commanded, but he was already shuffling up the stairs in confusion.

Paulie worried after he left. The old guy would go upstairs and think about it, he knew, think about just the two of them being there in the apartment. He decided to go up right away and tell him about the aunt.

Upstairs Nudorf opened the door and put out his hand and pulled Paulie in by his shirt. This had never happened before and Paulie was afraid. Inside, the old man let go of him and sank into a chair. Except for the light over a table and the chair, the room was dark. It was cramped with huge furniture and the air smelled like Nudorf, only stronger.

"Paulie" the watery eyes blinked up. "She's gone, ain't she?"

"I've got to go" Paulie said. "My aunt's coming. She doesn't like me to leave Merle alone."

"How long have you been doing this?" the watery eyes swelled open. "HOW have you been doing this?" Paulie slipped back out of the light,

and Nudorf was silent. For a moment the old man seemed to forget him. He picked up a spoon that had been buried in some mush and then slowly let it go. Paulie walked around touching things lightly. In the little kitchen there were a lot of large soda bottles lined up behind the sink. Lemon soda.

“What do you do with all the lemon soda?”

Nudorf jerked up, shifting toward the voice. “It goes down easy. I got problems here” he pointed to his stomach. Paulie lifted the dank curtain over the sink and looked out. The bottle of rum looked different from up here. You could see the four spotlights that went on at night and the huge dry flakes peeling off the top. He dropped the curtain and continued walking around, running his hand over the heavy furniture, keeping out of Nudorf’s range.

“It’s okay” Nudorf said suddenly. “I was a man at twelve! I was an old man at seventeen! Now,” he pushed away the mush, “I’m a baby. You’ll be all right. Better off in fact!”

Paulie fingered things while Nudorf talked. Nothing in the whole place was worth two cents. He pulled out a drawer and Nudorf stopped talking, his eyes bright with panic. “What’s that! What’ve you got!” Paulie withdrew his hand silently. Inside the drawer he could see loose toothpicks and a photo. It was of a tan boy about his own age in a too small jacket with his arms stiffly at his sides.

“This your kid?”

“Yes. No. It’s me, I think.” Nudorf started to get up and Paulie slipped out the door. The air in the rancid hallway was like a breath of spring.

“You and your brother” Nudorf cried, sticking his head out the door. “I saw you crossing the tracks. Don’t do that! In the snow you can’t hear so good. Snow does something funny to the sound!” but Paulie had slipped down the stairs.

Inside Merle was asleep on the floor in front of the TV. Paulie took his blanket off the bed and tucked it around him and sat down and looked at the tube. A lady and two kids were smiling at a very shiny floor. It was extremely shiny, like a mirror. He looked down at the pitted linoleum between his sneakers and rolled away into the couch. He curved his arms and legs around one of the stiff pillows, kicking off his sneakers, and clung softly to what he knew was a spinning ball, with the water not falling off, with fishes hanging in it, bright sunlight on the other side, revolving fast,

nothing falling off ever, he clung with his curled toes, clung to the vast cheek, the red hair lifted behind, the cigarette cupped away somewhere out in the universe.

In the morning it was abnormally quiet. It was Sunday, but that wasn't it. The room was filled with a soft luminescence. Paulie got up and shut off the TV and the lamp, but the soft brightness remained. Merle was still asleep on the floor, soaking in the sweet smell of urine. Paulie covered him with the damp blanket and got his own sneakers on quietly and then his jacket and opened the back door. The dazzling whiteness made him wince. He stood there blind in the fiery dazzle, cracking his eyes now and then until the backstairs materialized in a sparkling spiral. He made a first step, plucking his foot back out and inspecting the perfect blue imprint. Below the cars extended in softly glistening humps all the way to the end of the street. It made him suddenly happy. He threw a snowball at her once, she was standing where he was now, looking down, and he threw a fistful of snow and her eyelashes were suddenly full of snow. "Wonderland!" she said, laughing.

At the bottom of the stairs he began to walk slowly through the quiet brilliance. It was too early for traffic on the side streets. Nothing moved. In a short time he reached the overpass where the sidewalk ducked into a tunnel and the world turned abruptly black. Cars reverberated overhead and when he emerged in front of Soviero's deli, the snow was already grey and used.

The Sunday Globe was big and he couldn't thumb through it fast enough to check CHATTERS without Soviero bitching at him, so he bought it. Outside he cradled the heavy Globe and a box of doughnut holes in both arms and the change stuck inside his glove. There was a dollar thirty-four left. "In a dollar thirty-four" he thought with a strange twist to his lips "she would be back. Or a dollar thirty-three. She said before it was gone." He jerked the glove off with his teeth and flung the money away. After walking a few yards he stopped, his eyes burning, and went back. He sunk to his knees and began poking through the small, circular tunnels made by the change, then kicked the slush violently from side to side.

There was traffic on their street when he turned the corner, several black rectangles appeared where cars had been removed, and something else. His eyes narrowed, scanning back and forth over the street for what he had seen, over the buildings and the line of parked cars, and there it

was, the fender of the deep red Camaro. It sat in front of the snow filled vacant lot. Mitch's car. He walked up and put his hand tentatively on the windshield, tracing the screaming eagle decal beneath the glass. On the bumper it said "Cowboys make better lovers." Inside there were several packs of cigarettes on the front seat, her cigarettes. He shifted the Globe and the doughnut holes and looked up at the house and the blank second story porch, still like the others, but not like the others because behind it she was kissing and rocking Merle, and Mitch had his filthy head in the frig searching for a beer. He sat down on the stoop by the car and leaned back. The blueness beyond the roofs seemed to fall away from his eyes, as if gravity reversed and he could fall up, up, as soon as he let go. He ached to see her, to collapse against her. He knew, in a moment, he would. He would get up and walk the hundred yards and climb the stairs and throw open the door and that would be that. But he just sat there.

A green truck idled a few doors down, the driver leaning on his horn for a car sliding sideways out of a parking space and the sound reverberating cruelly in the wet air. Across the street a boy in a big parka was playing with a little girl of about three. It looked like they were playing hide and seek in front of the stoop. Paulie watched the boy hold both the little girl's hands and spin around. Her eyes were closed and then she would continue to spin around alone, smiling with her arms out, and the boy would dart fast behind a car or the stoop and the little girl would look round and round and not see him and call him and then begin to cry. He would wait until she looked afraid and started to cry desperately, and then he would pop out and she would stop crying and look happy almost immediately and they would start to play again. After awhile he would sneak quickly behind another car and she'd call him and start to cry again. Paulie watched as both were repeated again and again, the little girl's joy, desolation, joy, as she continued to play, having too short a memory for despair, or too long for joy. He continued to watch, amazed.