

Christopher Torockio

HIGH CRIMES

I don't answer the phone anymore. I've become one of those people—a screener. Actually, I never knew this practice was called "screening" until a couple of years ago when my son bought me an answering machine—a pretty good one, so he said, a Panasonic—for Christmas. He was fed up. Before I had the machine my screening process consisted simply of not answering the phone, ever. "Here," Brendan said, handing me the crumpled Radio Shack bag. "Now you can *properly* screen your calls, so when I call you you can make an informed decision not to pick up. I'll feel more comfortable with that."

That was a year after Brendan's mother and I split and I moved here to Wrightsville Beach and started living on my half of our savings. When we got married and had Brendan, our only child, thank God, we were both in sales—I sold vending machines (candy, cigarettes, soda, coffee, condoms) and Linda had a Mary Kay distributorship. How she came up with this idea I haven't a clue, but when she did we thought we'd tapped into some sort of under-achievers' gold mine: a way to personally control the breadth, magnitude and duration of your work day. She wouldn't make much money, but the amount of work she had to put into it, exponentially, to maintain her minimum sales figures and earn *something*, was wonderfully small. She'd worked out this convoluted law of diminishing returns, and sometimes, at night, we'd lie in each other's arms and laugh ourselves to sleep talking about how little she'd done that day. I was happy for her.

Another advantage of her job was that she "worked" out of the house, with Brendan resting on her hip. This was important since I traveled a lot, hitting up all the convenience stores and bowling alleys and factory cafeterias in the Southeast. I'd go in with my binders and samples and try to talk the owner or manager into renting vending machines from Charlotte Coin Company. There wasn't much to it, and before long I had a decent sized list of regular stops, customers who usually just renewed their rental agreements or replaced an old machine with a newer model. In short, I had enough going to keep my head above water, to keep me employed.

Linda knocked on a few doors a day. Brendan started school. Soon Linda

got a few girls working under her and then a big pink car was delivered to the house. That was shocking enough, but the thing that really floored me was that Linda didn't want to send it back. She kept it. She drove it places. She put a vanity plate on it that read BLUSHIN'. Brendan started high school. We were forty-two, we lived in the same split-level house in Gastonia we'd bought when we were thirty. I said to Linda, "Let's have another kid," and she laughed—that same laugh we used to share while we lay in bed together years before. Only I didn't laugh this time.

My only saving grace was a massive account I landed with Marriott Corporation back in 1991. It included all the vending machines in their Southeast region: soda, snacks, toiletries, air fresheners, video games, the works; and the commission was pretty sweet. I'm still getting checks. I put that money in a savings account, and then one day I'm watching TV and I see a commercial for some investment counselor and the guy says, "Let your money work for you," and I thought, Hell, I'll let anybody or anything work *for* me. I called up the local branch of this firm and wrote them a check and they haven't exactly made me rich by any stretch but they've put me in a position where I don't have to think too much about it, which is all I've ever asked for from anyone.

I live less than a block from the ocean now, in a second floor, one-bedroom apartment on Greensboro Street. There's a tiny balcony off the living room and if you wedge your feet in between the vertical slats and lean way out over the railing you can see a little sliver of blue. Sometimes, as I've just done, I stand out on my balcony and I think, Man, Linda would have loved this sliver.

The last message I received from Brendan instructed me to make sure I was home on Friday, which is today, because he was coming for a visit. He didn't say how long he planned to stay, but I suspected it could be a good while, since this is the middle of summer and he'd be on break from up in Chapel Hill. He has this way, which I at once abhor and admire, of talking *to* the machine when he leaves his messages. He is not talking to me by way of the machine; I am not a consideration in this process. He's leaving a message with the machine, trusting that it will relay his words, which in this case took the form of instructions, to me. I've played the message a half dozen times now, searching the tone and tenor of his voice for some hint, some nuance or inflection that might emerge and reveal the voice as one that is in fact speak-

ing to another person, or at least *means* to speak to another person. Even though it's my own voice drolly inviting the caller to leave a message at the tone, Brendan still starts off by saying, "This message is for my father, Ray Selby." And there's one part near the end where he says, "If he needs to get in touch with me before Thursday, he can reach me at my mother's house," and then he gives the number. Each time I hear this, part of me is strangely embarrassed and part of me wants to strangle the little bastard.

But I'm not letting it bother me now as I sit at my kitchen table, in the breakfast nook, reading the morning paper, the *Wilmington Star*, which is no *Charlotte Observer* but a pretty good paper nonetheless. My sliver of ocean is off to the right and, though I can't see it from where I'm sitting, I know it's there, and I feel all right. I sip my coffee, to which I've begun adding a splash of Frangelica, and turn to the regional section, taking notice of the lead headline: "Okay to Destroy Gators, County Says." Heat blows in through the open screen door and settles on my skin. Outside, beachcombers are already scouring the side streets for parking spaces. I read on to find that New Hanover County is experiencing an "alligator epidemic." It's mid-July, the heart of gator mating season, and, due to the lack of rain this summer, and the extreme heat, even by North Carolina standards, which makes the gators more energetic, they're traveling farther than usual to find their mates. People are finding them in swimming pools, underneath lounge chairs on back porches, crossing at neighborhood crosswalks. They're showing up on the beaches and in the shopping center parking lots and small dogs are disappearing. These alligators, the article says, are in a bad way; they're lost and ornery and dangerous—all of which is news to me.

The story goes on to say that at its last meeting the Board of County Commissioners gave in to the bitching of some folks and said, Fine, if a gator is found on your property, you have the right to go ahead and "destroy" it, but the county takes no responsibility for the safety of the person attempting to do the destroying, nor for anyone in the destroyer's family, and gives no suggestions as to how to do the destroying, and a bunch of animal rights groups are so up in arms they don't know what to do with themselves, and for good reason if you ask me, and if you ask me the whole thing sounds like inviting a lot more trouble than you already have, and with that I close the paper and slug down the rest of my coffee and Frangelica, put my mug in the sink with the other stuff, and head off to take a shower.

I have preparations to make for Brendan's arrival. The apartment needs to be cleaned, that's one thing. There's sand in the carpet and in the corners along the baseboard and the place smells of dank humidity and me. The bathroom looks like, well, like it belongs to a middle-aged man who's not yet accustomed to living alone. I get out the Yellow Pages and start calling maid services until I find one—Maid-4-U—that can come right away. They say they'll have to charge me seventy bucks, even though the square-footage of my place would ordinarily cost less, because of the short notice. But I don't care; I'm splurging today, and when I come back from the supermarket, I figure, the place will be presentable. I put on some shorts and a golf shirt and I walk around the apartment with my hair wet, picking up my dirty clothes and stuffing them into the hamper in my bedroom closet. Then I find a pad and pen in the drawer by the answering machine and write down what I need at the store: bread, beer, cereal, shrimp. The rest I'll figure out when I get there. I tuck my shirt in my shorts and run a hand through my hair and I'm ready. But on my way out the door the phone rings. I wait, and at the tone I hear Linda's voice. "Ray," she says, "Ray, Brendan's not there yet, is he?" She, unlike our son, talks to *me*, as if the machine did not exist between us, as if she knows exactly where I'm standing in the room, as if she knows my hand is on the doorknob and my shirt is already stuck to my chest from sweat and that I'm planning to walk to the supermarket as opposed to relinquishing my streetside parking space to one of the beachgoers but that right now I can't do anything because I'm transfixed by my ex-wife's tinny, air-filtered voice. She says, "He actually left yesterday. We had a . . . oh, I don't want to discuss it now. Just tell him I'm sorry for how I reacted. Tell him—no don't tell him that. Just, please, tell him I need to speak with him. And say it—Ray, are you listening?—say it in a way that lets him know I'm sorry and I'm not angry, not any more, but that *my* side is worth considering, and just that we shouldn't leave things this way."

She pauses and I take a step toward the phone sitting on the table next to the stove, but I don't let go of the doorknob and Linda makes a garroled noise that might be a snuffle but who can tell through the telephone and the wires and the machine and 224½ miles? "On second thought," she says, "maybe it's best if you don't tell him I called. I don't know now. Or tell him. Whatever you think is best. Feel him out, maybe, see what presents itself. Just make sure you clean that place of yours up a bit. No use in him thinking . . . oh, never mind. So what are you going to do while he's there? Do you have

anything planned?” And it is this—this conversational tone, this genuine interest—that unclenches my hand from the doorknob and guides me across the room and I’m just about to pick up the phone when Linda says, “Oh, forget it. This is stupid. Whatever you do—about this call, I mean—at least give him my best. I . . . I didn’t get a chance. Do that for me, okay. Bye, Ray,” and then she hangs up and the little micro cassette tape revolves a few more times, hissing, and then clicks to a stop. What must be a convertible drives by on the street outside and I can feel the bass from the stereo pounding in my chest. I can feel my feet sweating inside my tennis shoes.

It’s not like Brendan and I never see each other. Even though he was seventeen when Linda and I split up—old enough to know what love is and isn’t, old enough to understand and identify how stupid various adult actions can be—which ordinarily would work against me, he’s still youthful enough to take advantage of the fact that his old man lives at the beach, and feels guilty. But he’s always seemed bored with the usual stuff I plan for his visits: fishing, golfing, lying around the beach. Seems the only time the boy demonstrates any semblance of personality is when he’s leaving those goddamn messages on my answering machine.

The last time he visited, though, in March, we got in the car and drove down to Myrtle Beach, which isn’t far, with the intention of lighting up the town, painting the sucker red, the whole shebang. He was nineteen at the time (he’s twenty now, since May), and I figured the fact that he was underage for such an activity would somehow fall to my favor.

It turned out horribly, of course. They wouldn’t let him into most of the places we went (which had never occurred to me; I guess I figured bars were like R-rated movies: as long as you’re accompanied by a parent or guardian, it’s okay) and on those rare occasions when he was allowed into a place, we stood together stiffly, smiling terrified smiles at each other, sneaking secret sips of our beers, holding the bottles as cautiously as trip flares—as if afraid of being caught in the act—and embarrassed by the volume of the music and by the men and women around us, all of whom were older than him and younger than me and who were trying desperately and way too obviously to pair up. Brendan fell asleep two minutes into the ride back up the coast. Or pretended to.

Now, walking back from the market, I’ve made a decision about this visit. I’m going to go through this weekend like I would any other. If I sit and

watch a baseball game on TV, he can sit and watch it with me. If I get in the mood to go down to Southport and check the shallows for oysters, maybe stop at an antique shop, he can come along and do *that* with me, too. Or not. I'm not going to push it. I'm going to be natural. I'm going to be myself, and in so doing, if nothing else, maybe I'll figure out who the hell I am these days.

At Carl's Pantry I bought all the stuff on my list, plus paper towels, orange juice, batteries, and shampoo, the absence of which annoyed Brendan last time (I've taken to using regular bar soap on my hair). It's getting on towards eleven and the sun is high and hot and the streets are a mess with beach people looking for prized meterless parking spots. Traffic slows to a crawl. A hot breeze teases the back of my neck and disappears. A woman in bicycle shorts and with a golden retriever on a leash rollerblades by on the sidewalk. She smiles at me, but it is a casual smile, one of simple courtesy, and even if it weren't, she's—like the people at those bars in Myrtle Beach and so many others—too young for me and too old for Brendan. I wait for the light to change at the corner of Lumina and Greensboro and when it does I look down the street toward my place and I see a white van out front. It is double parked and its flashers are going. Then, when I see *Maid-4-U* painted across the side of the van, I realize that I forgot to leave the key under the doormat as I promised the woman on the phone.

I hike the grocery bag up in my arms and start down the street and immediately two cars turn off of Lumina and begin tailing me slowly, thinking I might get into one of these parked cars and drive away. I shift the bag to one arm and with my free hand dig my house key out of my pocket. The breeze is a bit nicer here, now that I'm heading toward my sliver of ocean, but it's still hot, a heavy, pressing heat, and I have a considerable sweat going. I can feel it in my crotch—a damp, slimy sensation—and that's a horrible feeling to have in public with people following behind you, watching your every move, and other people waiting for you at the place where you are headed.

When I get close enough I see a woman up on my landing, knocking away. There are two men in the front seat of the van. I call out to the person on the landing and head over toward the stairs and when I do the car following closest behind me hits its brakes and begins orchestrating what will end up being an angry six- or seven-point turn in the narrow street. The second car begins backing straight up. I climb the stairs with my bag and when I get to the top the woman says, "Selby?"

"Yeah. Sorry, I guess I forgot to leave the key." I stop and pant, nod

toward my grocery bag. "I was just at the market. You been waiting here long?"

She looks at her watch. "Considerable."

"Well, again, I'm sorry. Here, let me get that." I balance the grocery bag on my hip and shake out my keys. As I'm doing this, the woman—who's dressed in a white, bowling-league-type polyester shirt, its front buttons straining against her chest, which is significant, and her blond hair pulled back in a ponytail that is a tad too youthful for her—waves at the van and it pulls away. "Oh," I say. "Just you?"

She picks up her two buckets of cleaning supplies. "That all right? You aren't one of these backwards chauvinists, are you? Want a man to clean your house?"

"No. Of course not," I say. My key sticks sometimes in the heat and I jiggle it. "There *are* such things?"

She shrugs, looking off toward my sliver. "You got a vacuum, I expect?"

"Indeed, I do," I say, a bizarre air of pride in my voice, and kick open the front door. She steps in ahead of me and takes a look around. Dust floats through the streaky beams of sunlight and I realize then that, had I just walked into this apartment for the first time, I'd come to the immediate conclusion that it had been hastily abandoned some time ago. "I've never paid anyone to clean my apartment for me before," I say, setting the bag down on the counter.

She turns to me. "That's what they all say." There is no irony here, though irony is sometimes difficult to detect in a southern drawl, and she turns away again. "I'll start in the bathroom," she says, and heads right for it.

"Suit yourself," I say. Then, as I'm sliding the two six-packs into the refrigerator, I ask her, "Would you like a beer?" which, even as I'm saying it, I realize is one of the dumbest things that's ever come out of my mouth.

"Please," she says, from around the corner. "In a glass, if you wouldn't mind."

I get down a glass and start pouring the beer and as I'm negotiating the foam I see the red light on my answering machine blinking off two messages. I know one is the message Linda left earlier, which I have not erased, so the other must be new. I stare at it, pour some more beer. Then I press the button. The tape rewinds for a long time before clicking on.

"This message is for Ray Selby, from his son, Brendan. I want to make it known that I'm currently in Lumberton, which, in case he's wondering, is

three highly conspicuous exits off I-95. Also in case he's wondering, I spent the night at the Howard Johnson's and I'm right now at a pay phone outside a Waffle House where I've just had two eggs, sausage and hash browns and I'm about to turn around and head back up to Chapel Hill. There is a reason for this change in plans, and the reason is that I was informed the other day that I've been suspended from school. The offense is plagiarism and the sentence is one year. So, instead of coming down there and flubbing my way through a torturous weekend, I've decided to just go back now, pack up my stuff, and get it over with. I do need some money, though. I owe the guys I'm living with—er, lived with—a month's rent so that they can find someone else. Summers are tough. So, yeah, two-fifty oughtta do for that. I'm sure he wouldn't want me to hit my mother up for the dough."

Here he pauses. I can hear what sounds like a truck's horn in the background. Then he says, "Answers to a couple of questions that might be asked. First off, yes, I am guilty. I was short on time and resources and I fairly blatantly plagiarized a pretty good portion of my final paper in poli-sci. I'm just finding out my punishment now because the hearing and all the crap that goes along with it took a while to get through. Oh, and the punishment itself. Yeah, it seems a bit extreme. I expected to fail the paper, maybe even the course—which I did, by the way—but the university just implemented this new regulation where plagiarism is considered 'high crimes against the integrity of the school,' or some such rat shit, and the professor was pretty pissed off, so he pushed it. Plus, the board was looking to make an example of someone and, the way I see it, *someone* had to take the fall, so it might as well be me."

He clears his throat. "Goddamn, it's hot. Is it hot there, too? I—" A grinding noise drowns him out, a motorcycle passing by, perhaps. When he fades back in he is saying ". . . can just send the money to my Chapel Hill address. I'll be there for a couple days. Then . . . hmm. I hadn't thought about what next. I suppose I should go see my mother again. She about went ape-shit when I told her everything. Then, well, I guess I should get a job, since I have a year to kill. Maybe—" he stops himself here; he's just thinking out loud and I can't help feeling for him—"um . . . Dad? Dad, maybe you could, uh, check to see if there's anything down there for me. Waiting tables or something like that. If, you know, if you wouldn't mind a relative stranger crashing on your sofa for a few months. Just—it's just a thought. Anyway, that's all from here, from outside the Waffle House in Lumberton, which, by

the way—here’s a fun fact—is where Michael Jordan’s father was murdered—the next exit down. Did you know that?” Then the line goes dead and the machine beeps. I can hear squeaking sounds coming from the bathroom, sponge on tile, and I head that way to make good on the promise to deliver the beer I’ve offered and gone ahead and poured.

Bonnie, the cleaning woman, and I sit on the sofa and nurse our beers. Since there’s no longer any need for my apartment to be cleaned I thought it made sense for Bonnie and me to just relax for the next hour until her ride shows up, and Bonnie agreed, though she was quick to point out I’d still have to pay the full seventy bucks. For my part, I just wanted a live voice around. I also couldn’t help treating myself to a sense of pride in my enabling Bonnie to extract an absurdly high payoff-to-work ratio, even if it was at my expense.

“So I seen you use that yellow mouthwash,” she says, and shudders. Her feet are flat on the floor, hip-width apart. She’s wearing kneepads on the outside of her jeans. “Excuse my noticing.”

“Not at all. I take it you’re not a big fan of that mouthwash?”

She shrugs. “Tastes like pine floor cleaner. The kind *without* bleach.”

I don’t see how I can possibly dispute this. I say, “Mm,” and look at her, my main purpose being to see if I can figure out how old she is. It’s tough. There’s a slight degradation in skin color where her sunglasses normally cover her eyes, which have little pouches under them and are of an indeterminate color—not really green but not really blue or grey either—and her forehead is high and round and a little bulbous but I can’t say it’s particularly unattractive. Her left earlobe, the one facing me, is pierced three times: one silver hoop, one silver stud, one silver yin-yang. If I had to put money on it I’d guess she’s only a couple of years younger than me, but, then again, I figure if there’s one thing that can make you look older than you are it’s year after year of cleaning other people’s bathrooms.

She throws back the last of her beer, hands her empty glass to me and says, “This is weird.”

I take her glass and stand. “It’s not so weird, really,” I say. “You want another?”

She touches her forehead with her fingers, as if checking herself for a fever. “Yeah, sure. Whatever.”

While I’m in there opening two new beers I catch a glimpse of the answering machine’s red light out of the corner of my eye. It’s a place I’d rather my

mind didn't go, but now that it has it's got me to thinking. "Hey," I call out to Bonnie, "you know anyone who works at any of the restaurants or stores or anything around here?"

"What?" she says.

I carry the refilled glasses back into the living room. "I just thought," I say, handing one to her, "you might know someone—a friend or whatever—who works at one of the restaurants. Out here or in Wilmington."

Her cheeks bulge out as she swallows. She licks her lips. "What the hell are you asking me?"

"Just that," I say. "Okay, here's the thing—" and I tell her about my son. Not about him getting suspended from UNC, but about him possibly coming to stay with me, and that he'll need a job, and adding, "How old are you, by the way?"

She just stares at me. Finally she says, "What's your name again?"

"Ray."

"And what do *you* do, Ray?"

"I'm . . . retired."

She sets the glass down on the coffee table. If this information surprises her, if I look too young to be "retired," she doesn't show it. She blinks twice, her indiscriminate eyes slowly taking on a hard blue-grey color, like a wolf's. "Actually," she says, "I have a friend—she's a psychic—who has a little shop set up over on South Kerr where she reads tay-roe cards and a bunch of other malarkey like that. I think she's looking for an assistant. A boy to run errands and to, sort of, kick a little behind. Sometimes when people don't like the fortunes, they get pissed off. Is your son big?"

"Uh, not too big," I say. "I'm not sure that would work."

"And, let's see, my sister waits tables over at Clarence Foster's. She's screwing the manager over there."

I sit up straight. "Now that's something. That could help."

She shrugs, neutral on the idea, but the notion of helping Brendan has stirred something in me, and I'm not sure what to do next. I set my beer on the coffee table next to hers. "Let's go down there," I say.

"What? Now?"

"Yeah. I'll buy you lunch. I'll pay you the seventy dollars *and* I'll give you a nice tip, plus I'll buy you lunch—whatever you want—and you can talk to your sister." I notice then that my left knee is bouncing up and down wildly,

drumming with excitement. “Come on, it’ll be fun.”

Bonnie looks over at me. There is an expression on her face that I’ve seen before. Not on her, but on Linda, one time when I suggested maybe it was time to sell her Mary Kay franchise. “Hey,” I said, “you’ve had a good run. A hell of a run. But don’t you think enough’s enough? I mean, what are you after anyway?” The look Linda gave me then was expressed through the eyebrows. There was a severe jaggedness to them that was both quizzical and accusatory. I didn’t like it. It made me feel small and childish and ridiculous and it’s exactly what the expression on Bonnie’s face is doing to me now. But then, unlike Linda, Bonnie’s eyebrows begin to unravel and soften, as if I suddenly make sense to her. The shade of grey in her eyes lightens a bit, too; they’re starting to remind me of those old mood rings. Then she says, “I don’t want lunch. But I’ll give you my sister’s name and you can go and talk to her. And I’ll go back in your bedroom with you, now. If you want.”

My knee starts up again and the sweats come back. “Why?” I say.

She looks right at me and says, “I don’t know.”

“Well, don’t you have any self-respect?”

She shrugs.

“How old are you?” I say. “Be honest.”

“How old are *you*?”

Then we both stand. Beyond the open sliding glass door I can hear the muted roar of a lifeguard’s ATV racing across the beach—maybe to save someone, maybe just showing off—and for the first time in years I wish the phone would go ahead and ring.

We’re standing next to the coffee table, her right hand in mine, a gesture we both intend to serve as some sort of affectionate ice-breaker but which really must look like two gentlemen cordially shaking hands, and I’m trying to come up with the right words to back out of what we’ve started and still save face, when she releases my hand and bends down to remove her kneepads, and at that moment the front door flies open and Brendan steps inside, a duffel bag slung over his shoulder.

“Hey,” he says. He looks from me to Bonnie and back to me again. “I guess you got my message.”

“I did,” I say. “What happened?”

“Changed my mind. Again.” He drops the duffel bag on the floor. He’s wearing jeans and a blue t-shirt with SECURITY printed across it. He’s thinner than the last time I saw him and there’s a half-dollar-size spot of beard on his

chin. Bonnie, who's having trouble with the second kneepad, sits down on the sofa to get better leverage.

"This is Bonnie," I say.

He walks past us to the kitchen where he opens the refrigerator door and disappears behind it. "So what we doin' this-here weekend, Paw?" he says in an exaggerated hillbilly accent. "We goin' a-bar-hoppin' agin, er what?" Finding nothing of interest in the refrigerator, he comes over to the sofa and holds out his hand. "Hi, Bonnie. I'm Brendan."

"The son," she says, shaking.

"So you've heard of me. I must be famous." He fingers his little chin-beard.

"What made you change your mind?" I ask him. "Where did you park?"

"Bonnie," Brendan says, "I'm sure you're a very nice person. But would you please leave now. I think it's important for my father and me to be alone for a while. This is a very important time for us." Then he winks. "Family stuff."

"I got you a job," I say quickly.

Bonnie gathers her kneepads and stands and as she does she pops a strained button on her shirt and I glance over at Brendan and see him noticing the gap there. Then she notices it, too, and squeezes it closed. "Seventy dollars," she says to me. "Plus tip."

"Of course." I go to the kitchen and write out a check for one-twenty-five. I leave the *Pay to the order of* line blank.

She folds the check and slides it into her shirt pocket, then takes up her buckets and heads for the door. I figure I should walk her out.

"What's your sister's name, by the way?" I place my hand on her back.

She turns to me and I see that, though her face appears to be otherwise completely unaffected, she is crying. There is no jaw-clenching or pouting or squinting. No sound. Her eyes are not red or puffy and the lines in her round forehead are no deeper than they've been all afternoon; there is not a trace of discernible anguish showing anywhere on her, yet a single tear clings to each cheek, caught halfway down, and another is welled up in each eye, glassy, ready to fall. "Tricia," she says. "Her name is Tricia."

"Oh, okay," I say, and push open the door. Warm air smacks against us. "Are you all right?"

She steps out onto the front porch. She does not wipe at her eyes. "I'm fine," she says. "I don't know what I'm doing." Then she descends the stairs

quickly, ponytail bobbing, glancing out toward my sliver as she turns at the landing, and I watch as she reaches the street and starts walking up Greensboro toward Lumina. I wonder where she's going, where the van will pick her up, which, I realize now, I should have mentioned before she left, and I'm just about to go after her when Brendan appears at my side and calls out, "Bye-bye, Bonnie, bye-bye," and waves, but of course she doesn't turn.

Brendan giggles. Bonnie's buckets swing casually at her sides.

First thing we do—after I hear of how Brendan started for Chapel Hill, then changed his mind *again*, turned around and headed down here after all—is start out for Clarence Foster's. I refrain from asking him any questions. I still want to help Brendan, but, right now, I don't want to talk to him. I don't want to hear about his plagiarism or his roommates or his mother or how much money he needs for this or for that. I just want to get him a job, for no other reason, it occurs to me now, than to say I did.

It's a little after three, and it must be 100 degrees. Shadows stretch across the sidewalk, which is so hot I can feel the hazy vapors wavering up from beneath me, and the exhaust from the cars passing by makes it difficult to breathe. Sunlight glints sharply off shop windows. Brendan, though, walks with careless, even playful, ease. His chin is turned up toward the sun, the patch of whiskers there looking more blond than his usual brown, and he's chewing on an enormous wad of bubble gum. I watch him. I watch where his arm comes out of the sleeve of his SECURITY t-shirt; the thin, hairless bicep; the way he swings his arms when he walks, long fingers naturally curled into curious half-claws, and I can't help thinking of his mother.

He's not talking either—he sees that I'm not in the mood—though he does occasionally hum a few bars of "My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean." I find that I'm not at all upset about his getting suspended from UNC. I think I might be glad.

Clarence Foster's is a pretty classy restaurant for lunch and dinner and then turns into a dance club with live music after eleven. They have a good shrimp and grits appetizer, as I recall now. Even though it's right on Lumina, about a mile from my apartment, I lead Brendan down a back alley between two rows of townhouses to escape the heat and exhaust and reflecting chrome of the main road. We'll circle around, I tell him, and he shrugs, using just one shoulder, another of his mother's tics. The buildings here are on stilts, with open carports underneath. It is much cooler here, the shadows heavier and

drier. We cut through a carport and come out on the other side, into a vacant lot of sand and pine needles, where a small, privately owned hotel had to be demolished following damage sustained in Hurricane Fran two years ago. The lot is actually prime real estate, even though it's set back more than fifty yards from the continuous foot traffic of Lumina and sectioned off from the side streets by townhouses. You have to take a little one-lane road—more like an alley, really—to get here. Still, it's just one row of buildings from the ocean and is zoned for either commercial or residential use, as I recall reading in the *Star* when the property first went on the market. Then, suddenly, as I kick the pine needles from the eyelets of my tennis shoes, I wonder how much it would cost me. I wonder if I still have enough saved up, after my living expenses and all the alimony and tuition payments. I wonder if I am responsible or ambitious or enthusiastic enough, at my age, to start a little business of some sort in this very spot—if the payoff would be worth whatever I would put up—and this gets me thinking about Bonnie. I wonder if she'll be at Clarence Foster's. Maybe that's where she was headed? To see her sister. And then, as if he's reading my mind, Brendan pipes up and says, "So, are you *seeing* this Bonnie woman?"

I stop in the middle of the vacant lot. "No. She's my maid."

Brendan nods. "Cool."

"I'm thinking of buying this place," I say.

"Wrightsville Beach? That'd be something."

"No, jackass. I'm talking about this lot. Right here, where we're standing." I sit down in the sand and take off my shoe. I scrape the inside trying to brush away the pine needles.

Brendan takes a few steps, surveying. He slides his sunglasses down to the tip of his nose and looks overtop of them; he scratches at the hair on his chin, which bugs me this time.

"Maybe put a little business in here," I say. "A bed and breakfast. A—"

Brendan starts laughing. "A *bed and breakfast*. Are you kidding me? Do you know how much *work* those things are?" He pitches forward, laughing. His sunglasses fall off his face.

"Yeah, I know they're a lot of work," I say. I'm sitting in the sand, one shoe off and one shoe on. I'm not even sure where I'm going with this. "I know they're a lot of work. I'll probably need a lot of *help*, too, especially in the summers."

He reaches down and snatches his sunglasses out of the sand. "Let's just see how *this* year goes first, why don't we." He shakes his head. "All of a sudden you have a new business." Then he laughs some more. It's a particularly obnoxious laugh, too—a lot of *tee-hees*.

"What the hell do you know about it?" I say.

He catches his breath. "I know some things. I know you haven't *worked* in three years. I know that even when you *did* work, you didn't. I see things, too, you know, Dad. And now I see you sitting here telling me selling Fritos machines was too much for you, but you can handle running a bed and breakfast. That's actually quite funny. I'm glad I came now."

"At least I never cheated," I say.

He turns to me. "What was that?"

"I never cheated. The rest—well, all that might be true. But *cheating*—" I say the word with as much distaste as I can summon—"that's one thing I've never done. Ever."

"That's what you think I did? Cheated?"

I keep scraping at the inside of my shoe even though there's nothing left inside. "What would you call it?"

He takes a couple of steps in my direction. "Then you think I cheated."

"I don't care if you did."

Then he comes at me. I had been trying not to look at him while we talked, so the lunge takes me completely by surprise. He lays himself out, completely horizontal, driving his shoulder into my chest and rolling me into the sand. We struggle like that, with him on top of me, for a few seconds as I try to figure out how serious he is with all this. He takes an awkward swat at me which connects around the temple. There's not much force behind it, as I have his arms at least partially constricted, but the intention is clear. I can feel the bones in his back and hips as we grapple with each other; his collarbone digs into my nose and bends it to the side and all I can think is, Christ, hasn't he been eating? Then he connects with another punch, a left this time, which I take in the ear. Sand kicks up around us. I can feel it in my mouth. Brendan breaks his arms free and begins swinging at me and I receive a series of blows to the upper body, shoulders and sides of the head—but not to the face, in front of which I've raised my arms in textbook Muhammed Ali Rope-a-Dope fashion. Brendan keeps at it, though. He's sitting on my chest now, flailing, and I can't help feeling like the little brother he never had.

Finally it occurs to me, this *hurts*. So I push my arms into him and knock him off balance a little, then I hook him around the waist—feeling his ribs, every one of them it seems—and try to push him off to the side. He keeps flailing, but his weight gives slightly, and I try to lift up and keep pushing. It takes much less effort than I think it should to slide a pissed-off twenty-year-old man off of me and onto the sand, but once he’s off he all at once stops swinging and says, “Son of a bitch,” and freezes.

Off to our right is an alligator. It’s about fifteen feet away, holding perfectly still, mouth halfway open. It is a relatively small one, five feet at most, but its teeth look big enough to me. I also can’t help noticing that it is lighter in color than I would expect, the shade of my coffee with Frangelica, blending in conveniently with the sand. It’s looking right at us. Or appears to be.

“Well,” I say. “Hmm.”

“Dad,” Brendan says. “Jesus Christ.”

“Yeah, well, don’t move.”

“I have no intention of moving.”

“Maybe it’ll just go away,” I say. My right ear is throbbing and my whole body feels hot and swollen, ready to burst through my skin. The alligator hasn’t moved, hasn’t blinked, though I don’t think it can.

“It doesn’t look like it’s thinking about going anywhere.”

“No, it doesn’t,” I say. Then I say, “We could kill it.”

Brendan turns to me. Sweat beads on his forehead, sand clings to his eyebrows. He squints. “*Kill it?*”

“Destroy it, I mean.”

As if this adjustment in terminology actually clarifies anything, Brendan turns his attention back to the alligator. I try to think. What I don’t like is that Brendan is sitting between it and me, and is therefore more at risk if the gator should decide to attack. My guess is it’s too small to actually eat either of us, but certainly big enough to do some damage. We sit and breathe, staring at it, waiting for it to make the slightest of movements, which it does not do. I think about screaming. Surely someone out on Lumina would hear us. But the sudden sound might spook the gator, which appears to be warm and content in the sun and happy to have us locked in his sights. Finally I decide I have to stand up, make a move. There’s a bunch of stuff lying around, left over from the hotel demolition or deposited here since: a few aluminum cans, a roll or two of mangled barbed wire, a dented and useless transistor radio,

some blue and white plastic straps of a lounge chair, a small pile of burlap sacks, and a rusted iron pipe—three feet long, slightly bent at one end, no more than three inches in diameter, like the fat end of pool cue, but solid-looking. It is in the sand just off to our left. I figure I'll make my way over to it, casually, then beat the alligator with it until it dies, bites me, or runs away. That's the plan I come up with and am just about to try and stand when Brendan looks over at me. "Okay," he says. "Let's grease the fucker."

It's what I had in mind, sure, but I don't like the idea coming from Brendan's mouth. From his head. I keep waiting for him to say, Nah, I'm kidding, to say, Let's just *run*, but he doesn't. I nod, then rise onto one knee, trying to kick up as little sand as possible.

"Dad," Brendan whispers. "What're you doing?"

I motion toward the pipe.

The gator hasn't moved. Its head is still low, jaws gaping. It's beginning to not even look real. The longer it sits there, immobile, the less danger it appears to present. But then it occurs to me, That's exactly what it wants me to think. I begin to shuffle over to our left, still wearing only one shoe. Tires squeal from over on Lumina; no sign of life from the alligator.

The pipe is heavier than it looked, and hot, and its length and bent shape make it awkward to carry. I figure I should take a couple of practice swings; the pipe makes a whistling sound as it cuts through the air. Sweat drips into my eyes. I wipe it away and lock in on the alligator. I can't imagine how it can hold its mouth open for so long without having to swallow. This thought makes my own mouth go dry and my throat constrict, and as I get a couple of steps closer to the gator I realize that its skin looks very dry, too, which must be the cause of its powdery light color. Still, though, it doesn't move. I step in close, the pipe cocked behind my ear.

When I'm close enough to see the rubbery paleness of its tongue, like a big wet mushroom, I think, *Now*, and swing the pipe downward with everything I have, and at the same moment I realize, with sharp certainty, that this alligator is not going to attack us, no matter what we do. It wandered way too far from the Cape Fear River in search of a mate, and now it is lost and dried-out and weak and confused and has absolutely no interest in us. The gaping jaws are simply to show us it's here, nothing more, and if we were to walk away it could not possibly care less. But the realization takes too long and I find I've already completed my swing and have struck the alligator across the

head. There is a dull *thwump*, like a boxer hitting a heavybag, and the alligator staggers back and to the left, then spins around spastically, its tail catching me in the ankles and upending me. I land hard on my ass and watch the gator clump awkwardly away—its four legs moving at four different speeds and seemingly in four different directions—towards the adjacent lot. It looks drunk. The front half of its body slides a bit to the left and the back end takes a second or two to catch up. It keeps going, though. I feel Brendan at my side. I stand and together we watch the gator approach the high grass at the edge of the lot; it leans to its right, lifting both left legs off the ground, then hops a couple of times to regain its balance before continuing on, through the wall of grass, in the opposite direction of the Cape Fear.

Using the pay phone outside the Clarence Foster's men's room, I call Linda. The room is dark and cool; a half-dozen or so people—one of whom is Brendan, another is Tricia—sit around the square oak bar in the front of the room, and Jimmy Buffett plays from an unseen jukebox. Since I don't have a calling card I have to get ten bucks in quarters from the bartender. This doesn't please him.

I'm hoping Linda isn't home, that I'll be forced to leave a message. I think that would serve me right. But she answers on the third ring. "It's Ray," I say.

"Oh my God," she says. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong. Or, I mean, it *feels* like a lot is wrong. I admit that. But nothing really is, I don't think. Everything's fine."

"Well, *that's* reassuring."

I wait—for the sarcasm in her voice to be explained. I hear her breathing.

"Brendan's here," I say.

"Good. I'm glad. Did you get my message?"

"I did."

"And did you tell him what I said? Did you say anything to him about . . . what I said?"

Brendan and Tricia are laughing, elbows on the bar. Their conversation seems to be going well, though, for some reason, I'm not encouraged. "I haven't had the opportunity," I say. "Yet."

"Well, fine," she says quickly. "Handle it however you want. Look, I'm glad he made it. But I have to go. I have a houseful of people here, Ray. The new line's out and I'm doing a dem—" She cuts herself off. "I have to go."

"I understand." I check the coin slot for change, as if I don't already have enough. I was counting on this phone call costing more, taking longer. "We'll check in in a couple of days."

"Good, Ray. That's good. Look, I really have to go."

"I understand."

"Take care. Take care of Brendan."

"I will. You, too."

"All right, now. Bye."

"Linda—" I say, but I don't have anything more to tell her, and I only call out her name because I know she's already hung up. "Linda," I say again, and listen to the rush of empty air, and then replace the phone in its cradle.

Back at the bar, Brendan and Tricia are talking about college—how many credit hours are required for which degree. I sit on the stool next to him and order a draft.

"How you feeling?" he asks me.

Now that I think about it, I realize my right ear is hot and my left eye socket is throbbing. "I'm fine," I say. "You?"

"Why wouldn't *I* be fine?" he says. "I kicked your ass."

Tricia laughs. Brendan turns to her and they laugh together, as if in cahoots. She's considerably younger than Bonnie, though still a few years older than Brendan. They continue to laugh together, and it makes me wonder what I've missed while at the payphone. She has the same greyish eyes as Bonnie but, even though she sits with a slight stoop at the shoulders, there's a softness about her that Bonnie most definitely lacks. She's wearing a burgundy polo shirt with the Clarence Foster's emblem stitched on the breast, and matching eye shadow. Within a few minutes I come to understand that there is in fact an opening for a waiter and that Tricia is confident she can get Brendan in to see the manager—the person, I remember, whom Bonnie claimed her sister is "screwing."

"If Bonnie sent you," Tricia says, "I'll make it happen. Can I get you some ice for that eye?"

I realize she's talking to me and before I have a chance to answer she's up and around the other side of the bar, digging in the cooler. She straightens, turns to the bartender. "How can a *bar* not have any ice?" she says.

The bartender, whose arms are about the size of my legs, rock hard and squeezed inside the elastic sleeves of his polo shirt, is washing glasses at the

sink. He doesn't look at her. "It's making more right now," he says. "Give it a few minutes."

She stomps off toward the kitchen. Brendan swivels on the stool a few times. "You really whacked the hell out of that gator," he says.

"I guess I did."

"You know, it's weird. After the initial shock, I wasn't really afraid of it. I didn't really feel threatened."

"What were you two laughing about?" I ask.

"Who? Me and Tricia?"

I just watch him.

"Well, first I told her about the gator. She got a kick out of that. And I mentioned to her how Bonnie told you she's screwing the manager and Tricia thought that was funny because Bonnie'll screw anything that's not nailed down. Her words." He slides his fingers across the bar's brass rail. "Hey," he says then, to the bartender. "I think I'll have one of those, too," and motions toward my draft.

The bartender doesn't hesitate, doesn't ask for ID. He pours a draft and sets it in front of Brendan. His wrists are enormous.

"Where did you park?" I ask Brendan.

He moves his glass around on the bar. Tricia returns carrying a wadded towel. "Here," she says, and presses it against my temple. She's not quite on the spot that hurts, which is closer to the corner of my eye socket, but I don't say anything. "My break's just about over," she says. "When I go back on my shift I'll talk to Rudy. Are y'all gonna stick around a while? Happy Hour starts in a few minutes."

"We might stick around," Brendan says. "For a while."

"Well, terrific." Tricia takes my hand and places it against the ice-filled towel, then removes hers. "I'm working the dining room but I'll stop back soon, once I talk to Rudy." Then she heads off, tying an apron behind her as she goes.

Another Jimmy Buffett song comes on the jukebox. It's not the one about margaritas and I don't recognize it. A couple of people enter the restaurant and when the door swings open fading orange sunlight spills inside giving everything a harsh opaque glaze. Brendan drinks from his glass then reaches up and takes the ice-towel from me. He unfolds it, removes several cubes and places them on the bar, then refolds the towel.

“I don’t think I’m going to take this job,” he says. “Even if it works out.”

“No?”

He shakes his head. “There’s something, I don’t know, *illicit* about the whole thing.” He looks at me thoughtfully. “Does that make sense?”

It doesn’t really. “Yeah,” I say. “I can see that.”

“Something else’ll turn up. I mean, I’ve only been here a couple of hours.”

He makes a little handle with the overlapping corners of the towel and raises it to my head. He holds it there, gently.

I make a mental note to look into purchasing that lot. I’ll call the real estate company first thing in the morning, then I’ll call my bank. Buying the lot, putting a little business there, something Brendan might help me with, is at this moment especially important to me, and I’m interested to see if I follow through. I find that I’m rooting for myself.

Brendan holds the ice to my forehead, right on the spot that hurts.

“So why’d you do it?” I say. “Plagiarize.”

He shrugs, just the one shoulder. “Because it was all I could think of.”

I glance down at the ice cubes on the bar and see that some are broken, slivers, and they’ve just barely begun to melt. They appear to be sweating. “Where will you park?” I say, but Brendan isn’t listening. He begins rotating the ice-towel against my temple in tiny, even circles. At first the rhythm is gradual and imperceptible but soon I find that I have closed my eyes and can feel Brendan’s fingertips behind the towel. He begins humming “My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean,” softly. A glass shatters in another room but Brendan keeps rubbing, keeps humming. The room beyond my eyelids is cool and dark, and I can feel the cold from the ice penetrating into my head, seeping from the soft, numbing pressure of Brendan’s steady circles.