

## Second Skin · *Doran Larson*

I WAS TRYING to turn my ankle suggestively, like Dorothy in the ruby-slipper closeups, showing off my new back-to-school shoes despite my mother's claims that you could tell Judy Garland wasn't really such a nice girl just from that gesture, and that a girl's reputation depended intimately upon style. She was boning a chicken as she spoke. Deep inside the flesh, snapping cartilage made an ugly sucking sound. Then she looked out toward the pool.

We had only been back from the store for a few minutes. My father had insisted we leave my little brother Freddy at home. He'd promised us a surprise when we got back, but we had found the house empty. My mother reached without wiping her hands and pinched my shoulder. Something was the matter. She used that for-your-own-sake grip I knew from crossing streets. Then the sliding glass door thumped shut, like a sheet of glaring ice.

I didn't really care what kind of reputation Judy Garland had. I'd wanted red pumps and I carried my new saddle shoes through my father's den, to the workbench in the garage. I stood on a chair in my socks, searching for a can of cherry-red spray paint. Then my mother came through the patio door. Her face was pale as barbecue ash in the shaded light—empty between her imitation pearl earrings.

I looked out through the window and saw my father in his bathing suit, sitting slumped at the end of the diving board.

She said, "Honey," in a way I'd never heard before. She looked at the black and white shoes on the floor, as though they were infinitely mysterious. Then she looked back at me. She smiled like the shoe salesman and I knew something was wrong. "Honey, you're going to get all of our attention again. All to yourself. Just like before."

I looked at my father. His weight made the board bob in the breeze. The surface of the pool was an enormous blue looking glass into a world without air. I knew my brother was dead. I felt the aloneness already surrounding us, like a big gray bubble. I wanted to ask my mother if we could telephone God, and get Freddy back, the way my father had once traced his dry-cleaned jacket to a shop in Laguna.

But what I said was, "Did you call the police yet?" The calm in my voice surprised me. It was just she and I left. The aloneness excluded him too, like

the bathroom door when we did girl things like coloring her hair. “Do you want him to just get away?”

“So what is it, little sister? Yes or no?”

“Don’t call me that. And whose idea was this anyway? Certainly not yours.”

“We decided together.”

“Meaning she won.”

According to my mother’s postcards, they had already begun backsliding on their separation: holding hands at movies, snuggling on dance floors they’d never frequented while the three of us lived together. She knew I thought she was crazy. An actuary for thirty-five years, my father *seemed* like a man who had spent eight hours a day, every day of his working life, weighing how much people could be expected to pay against how long they could be expected to live. Now he was calling for the third time to ask if I’d join them fishing in Mexico. I knew she had put him up to it. His patience was beginning to wear thin.

“We’re going whether you come or not. It’s not a big deal.”

And yet the letters and calls. As though their new intimacy required my blessing. Through my second-story window, I watched cars swoop around the roller coaster at the Boardwalk.

“You there? It’s a cheap vacation. Yes or no?”

This was in the hot December after I’d graduated with honors in comparative religion and police science, the end of my first six months of living entirely on my own. The pressures of financial independence had forced all my spite to the surface: head shaved to a black stubble, I had traded in my Birkenstocks for combat boots and gone nocturnal. At night I ran a forklift in a publisher’s warehouse, chauffeuring remaindered Greek tragedies from the loading dock to the maw of the shredder, and crates of romances from the stacks to the dock. During the day I slept, watched Oprah and Geraldo, and began exegetical essays on the story of Lazarus which I sent to him stapled to clippings on manslaughter trials and photos of myself in full street regalia.

It was a life with which I was comfortable. I got along with my landlord, Jerry, so long as I offered no sisterly advice to the runaway girls he harbored downstairs in a stench of stale pot and Vaseline. Generous people, such as my mother, said it was only natural I should take some time off after

finishing my degree so quickly. But I wasn't planning any changes. Being everything my father hated was full-time work as far as I was concerned. A kind of permanent spiritual stake-out. I told him, "I'll think about it."

"Hey. I mean, don't ruin your day."

When they had announced their plans to separate, my hair was brown and braided down the back of a tie-dyed shirt. I sat extremely stoned on one side of our Red Lobster graduation dinner, diploma across my bread plate, facing what struck me later as post-parental resolve.

"We're proud," my mother said, beaming despite her disappointment I was sticking to my vow of chastity and had invited no nice Robert or Franklin. She'd started dying her hair blonde again. Back to her Lana Turner look. "Really, Beth. You just don't know."

"I'm leaning toward Chicago for graduate school. I've been rereading *Eliade*." I said into his face, "I want to get out of California."

My mother bit a trembling lower lip. Hunkered over his plate, trying to keep a lid on it, my father tore the tail from a jumbo shrimp. I'd given up hoping she'd ever become really angry. Freddy's death had left her only shoe salesman smiles to express her despair. Then she said, "We're leaving. I mean, I'm moving out."

"It isn't what you think," my father put in, wagging a fish stick to defend her. "This is for us. It's what *we* need, see."

I had been working for years to achieve a blessed detachment.

Like the Buddha.

Like any good cop.

I steadied myself by gazing deep into the boggy swirl of haddock oil annexing my pilaf. "Good," I said. "Good."—teeth locked—"That's just fine."

The next morning I turned down two generous fellowships, a Secret Service interview, and with my scalp still nicked and bleeding, claimed on my application to the warehouse that I'd had three other jobs running forklifts. For years I had begged her to leave him. Now that she had done it and they were gone in a yellow and black checkered ripple of June heat, I realized that I had lost any leverage I'd ever had on him.

"I don't understand why you're doing this," I had told her when she first called about the trip to Mexico. "I thought we were through playing family."

After a long pause, she asked very flatly, “What did we do to you that was so terrible? What did we ever do that you didn’t first ask of us?”

It hadn’t been a great day so far anyway.

The publisher I worked for had begun pushing me to join the editorial staff, to direct a new series of murder mysteries set in Biblical Jerusalem. At three A.M. that morning, the other driver on my shift, Manny Sanchez, had told me his daughter was in a wheelchair with something spinal. Then Big Bill Ferguson, the floor manager, called me into his office. Bill taught classics until he got caught publishing graduate students’ research. He was smoking a cigar behind mirror sunglasses as he typed a new Tabitha Jones best seller. He said without taking his eyes from his PC, “I’m thinking about canning Manny.”

“You know his kid’s sick.”

“Is that right.”

“Don’t use him to pressure me.”

Big Bill typed in “sylph-like.” His voice always drops when quoting his own translations of tragic chorus: “‘Who of the gods is so cruel-hearted, that such a crisis can proffer him pleasure?’”

“I think it was Zeus.”

He smiled wickedly. “Very good.” He relit his cigar. “You take a job in editing, Manny’s senior man on the floor. We couldn’t afford to lose him.”

“This is blackmail.”

“We live in the world, Beth.” He looked at me and I looked at doubled convex images of myself. On the whole I liked Bill, though he was a pagan. He would not stop at dangling me over the heat of my own moral rhetoric. I could not ignore Manny’s dilemma with any intellectual integrity. “In the world.”

Something suddenly felt cold inside. Deep down. Like a ball bearing had dropped from an ovary.

Letting my mother wait, I felt fat-hipped and repulsive. I pulled my ankles up onto my bare thighs. The lights on the Boardwalk snaked and glittered. The screams of roller-coastering girls rose and faded through the surf and traffic like a squeak in the machinery. I could imagine their flapping hair. Their precious femininity. Girls with little brothers they taught to sit up straight and keep their clothes clean—little mothers all of them. Through the floor I could hear Jerry yelling at his latest girlfriend. I closed my eyes

and pinched the bridge of my nose. “Nothing,” I assured her. “You don’t have to do anything. You’re just you.”

I’d read that morning that the prices at amusement parks were skyrocketing. I felt her stop breathing. The line went dead. I kept my eyes closed and tried to imagine a blessed, giggling insensitivity. I saw day-glo halter tops. I saw pink Spandex—a stupidity willing to pay to be scared out of its wits.

I found him seated in the dark, at the back of his pine-panelled den, watching home movies. The air inside that room always felt dank, as though a dozen adolescent boys had been vigorously misbehaving just before you walked in.

“Sit, sit!” He was watching my first haircut. “God, you were loud!” He reached over and cast an enormous thumb of shadow up under my grainy chin. “The little tyrant.” I sat in the lounge near the door. I was sweating. The 8-mm projector made a sound like someone flipping through an endless deck of cards.

“The flight was fine, thanks.”

Draped in a white bed sheet, my screaming face was a little puff of red lava at the tip of an icy volcano. My father wielded scissors and comb. He was twenty-five, already carrying his cannonball of gut. My hair was blonde then.

“How’s mother?”

“Fantastic. I bought her one of those bicycles, with the nubby tires. She rides and I run. Lost three pounds already. God, you were a *fussy* little bitch.”

Ever since Freddy’s drowning, I have suffered from chronically weak lungs. But if the movie was any evidence, this was clearly not for lack of exercise.

“Hey, you didn’t see. You got to see this.” He scrambled to his feet and started digging through a box of video tapes, humming tunelessly—“mmmma, ummma.”

Poor throughout his childhood, my father’s dream had been to raise decorative houseplants. Then the greenhouse he’d built with borrowed money burned down. After serving in the army, he had sold seeds for a small exotics company before entering the insurance office where he had worked the rest of his life, watching younger men promoted over his head.

And then, wanting to surprise us, my father decided he would teach his only son to swim.

Before I carried my saddle shoes into the garage, I saw her stop on the patio. Years later she told me his eyes were blank. He claimed he'd tried to save him, though he never could explain how the body had gotten back into the pool. Through the garage window, I saw his toes touching, and then untouching the water, sending out ringlets, like radar into the next world, directly above the little blue lump at the bottom.

We were then in a state of rewind, and he sat back on his heels, roughly facing Mecca. His canvas shorts hung like ventilation ducts around his thin legs.

“So how’s the God game? How’s...” He suddenly became funky and confused. The life drained from his face. He looked at his hands.

There was mercy in me. But it didn’t know how to get out.

“Why am I here? I want you to tell me why I’m here if this is what I’m in for.”

“Okay,” he nodded. “So—” smiling painfully, “So how’s your love life?”

I stared at the TV.

The pretty one among five Catholic sisters, my mother had thought she was making a break when she took a job in my father’s office. I suppose they both had reasons to feel resentful. You can’t really blame them for being angry people. I don’t think you can blame me.

He pushed a button and backed into his chair. The spark was back in him. “I mean would you look at that! Clear as a glass skirt!”

He had had a movie even older than the haircut transferred to video. It was 1967. I was a diapered infant in my mother’s arms as she walked back and forth at the edge of the gaping hole that would eventually be our swimming pool. In a strapless, one-piece bathing suit, her legs were very straight and slender atop black high heels. This was two years before Freddy was born. I was a few months old, trying desperately to gum my way through the fabric stretched over her left breast. Defeated, my mouth opens in the classic home movie baby wail. As I watched, I could only see in that kidney-shaped hole an enormous, undetected grave. I turned and looked at my father. He was breathing hard, vehemently ignoring my glance, looking far beyond the screen. Suddenly I wondered what it was Manny’s daughter had. And why it had affected her legs.

What my mother is actually doing in the movie is demonstrating that, although a new mother, she still has the gams and tush of a USO star. That was part of the message registered in my father's desperate eyes.

I said, more softly than expected, "You might have asked us before you had the movies put on video."

Batting it away, "You two never watched these things."

"Neither did you until now. Did you ask mother?"

He batted again. "She's got her own life." There was a low gurgling in his throat. Like something wounded. "Watch."

The music rose slowly. He'd chosen big band swing: wild trombones, heavy bass drum. I was back to slobbering around her draped nipple.

I don't know where my instinctive disgust had hidden. But suddenly I felt as though that gaping pit had never swallowed my brother. I felt it was I who hadn't survived, that it was his consciousness now in the room with my father. I remembered—as though it were someone else's memory: they thought I was in the pool and I saw them both naked. She was drying her hair, her head bowed inside a white towel that shone in the sunshine like an erasure of all color. He just stood there with his half-awakened dick. And he stared at me. He stared at me. Acned, all pubescent elbows and knees in my hopeless bathing suit. And he smiled. Not exactly lecherous. He smiled like we were playing some joke because she couldn't see. Because she could not cover herself and slam the door or order me away.

In his den, I wanted to scream for her, and for myself. To hang onto something heavy. And then it dawned on me.

What he'd wanted was not so much a son, or any child at all, but only a friendly rival for my mother's sex appeal. That was what he had forfeited by killing my brother. And in my staring, paralytic silence, that was what I was giving him. My scalp tingled. I clenched my fists and teeth with the resolution that this humiliation would not go unavenged. For in the grainy glow of black and white video, we had become, my father and I, a couple of leering men. Watching a sexy young mother in the Busby Berkeley film that would turn into our life.

When I was fourteen, in an effort to expand my lung capacity, I filled two plastic milk containers with sand, which I used as ballast walking around the floor of our swimming pool's deep end. For years I had been scared to death of the water, imagining Freddy's puckered hands grabbing me

beneath the surface. But then I had seen my father smiling and naked, and what discomfort I could cause him suddenly outweighed all fear. I took pleasure in staying under water as long as I could while he checked the pool's chemical balance or pruned the patio plants. It made him nervous. Once my head went under, and I entered the blurry blue-green world, I would start to daydream. Some days I was Martin Luther's illegitimate daughter; others I had severe Scandinavian good looks. Congregations trembled at my eloquence. Men threw themselves over cliffs after a single glance. By strength of holiness, or sheer sex appeal, I raised children from the dead.

And then sometimes I simply lay still, clutching the bottles to my stomach as my brain went from black to bright pink, imagining the hard and then terribly soft doors Freddy had passed through on his way to dying. Then I dropped the bottles and flew chest first, arms back-fluttering, toward the silvery sky, the water's surface already blistered and broken by my exhausted breath.

Where I once sank and paced, dreamed and soared up again, my father was propelling himself in backwards circles. My mother had arrived at noon from her new job as a receptionist for a wetsuit manufacturer. She looked slim and gorgeous in a tight gray skirt and a yellow Hawaiian shirt stenciled with her company's logo—SS—across the shoulder. She'd found us on the patio where my father was watering his hanging fuchsias. On each of her arms, she'd carried a chartreuse wetsuit, like very large and strange fruit.

"They're for you two," she'd said, looking uncertainly at the suit with the deflated ridges for breasts. "I thought you could use them fishing. I hope they fit." Her elbows quivered forward—her life a continuing failure not to try too hard.

Now, covered by the wetsuit, my body looked like some sadly misconceived mannequin. She stared at my boots on the patio table, then at me standing in the shallow end, her eyes intent on my face to avoid looking at the water. Inside the warm green rubber, without hair, navel, distinguishing appendages, I felt comfortable for the first time.

"Come on, little sister. Take the plunge!"

Suddenly he flipped into an abortive dive. The suit made him so buoyant that by flapping his arms wildly underwater he could keep his legs straight up in the aqueous sunshine. They looked like day-glo cactus with five-toed



blossoms. While his head was still deep under water, my mother whispered, "He's been very concerned about you."

I stroked the surface. I said pleasantly, "You always say that when you're angry."

Up to my crotch and still no sensation of either wet or cold, I started down the slope. His legs flopped over and he resumed his circles.

She pulled a lawn chair to the edge and sat. "I guess you've probably started thinking about graduate school again." Through the water, my toes did not look like my own. She added, "You know we'll pay." Uncomfortable with this tone, my father beat harder, causing waves. "You're reading, aren't you?"

"I watch a lot of TV."

She looked at me. I looked back down at my feet. She said, "I want to make an announcement." My father and I waited. She stared at him. She would not meet my eye. "I'm going back to school."

"Hey!"

She said—a pre-emptive strike toward my profile—"I can't be a receptionist the rest of my life."

"You're forty-five," I reminded her.

She told him, "I want to go to law school."

He was treading water. "Well hey!"

I said, "You'll be fifty."

"That's wonderful! Oh, baby doll. That's so great!" My stomach turned sour. He squinted at me. "She can count. You aren't the only one went to school."

She was proud of herself. "Fifty if I'm lucky."

"Well, you got my blessing." He started circling again. "Hell. You can do our divorce!"

She laughed. The water was to my neck now. "I think it's crazy." Just as her smile started to twist at one end, I took a breath and went into a ball. The water chilled my scalp and temples. My body made an oblong shadow on the bottom of the pool like a small, dense cloud.

In the editorial department, I would have to be awake and working every day at that hour. There was no one like Big Bill or Manny to discuss the aesthetics of faith or the ethics of inaction over 7-Up and cigarettes. There would be only assistants and secretaries, undiscovered novelists and poets all of them who bewailed the costs of day care and formed softball leagues

in late spring. There would be secret love affairs that ended in tasteful redwood-deck weddings.

The chlorinated water started to sting cold on my corneas, feeling myself bob and sway like an abandoned buoy. It was perfectly silent there under water. Turquoise-green, moiling with wet light, I imagined Freddy sitting over the drain: a fat little Buddha, smiling serenely with tiny silver bubbles blocking each nostril. I saw him wink at me.

Even after emptying my lungs, after the bubbles broke around my ears, I remained at the surface. The wetsuit would not let me sink.

So I hung there, like a warning against watery death, six feet from the floor. As my chest tightened, the familiar panic moved into the back of my skull until my father tooted by and shoved me with his foot. My face rolled toward the surface. I burst up gasping.

Her chair was tumbled over backwards. She was on her knees. Reaching precipitously toward my face, her shirt untucked and licking the water.

My own mother. Ready to be overtipped, to fall in if it would help.

The motor home he'd rented was the size of a small house. Wind and waves roared through the open windows; silverware jangled, cups and cans and plates banged inside drawers and cupboards on each turn as he drove fast along the narrow coast road.

Men in baseball caps and women in shapeless dresses walked the rocky gutters. We were quiet until she spotted pelicans flying in a ragged line, hugging the swells of the ocean far below.

She said, "It's really beautiful."

"What's that?" he shouted. But before she could repeat it he yelled, "What I like about this country is the one-on-one attitude! Real frontier mentality! We could learn a few things!"

Then they traded a silent glance. He shrugged and she faced the sea again. I was sitting in the Naugahyde booth, bracing my boots against the opposite seat as we swerved back and forth. He shouted back at me over his shoulder, "You mighta guessed we didn't invite you here for no reason."

Her elbows sucked in tight to her body. Her hair pulled back in a shining ponytail, wearing white shorts, she seemed very young. She turned her head to the side, looking neither at him nor at me. "It wasn't just for that."

I couldn't move. I stared at a tiny fishing boat hundreds of feet below.

Breaking our unspoken pact, I once invited one of Jerry's girlfriends up to my apartment for a cup of coffee. Her name was Betsy. She wore tight cut-off jeans, halter top, and a bluish *AC/DC* tattoo on her pale left arm. Her hair was frazzled from cheap perms and bleach, and she smoked half a pack of Kents telling me about her abusive brother and how her father had been killed repairing boiler tanks in Omaha. She'd run away after her mother married a man who would never leave her alone. As thanks for listening she offered to clean my apartment. She said, "I'm good at it. You'll see," with that Midwestern, cut-the-crap hospitality. She was fifteen. I wanted to beat Jerry over the head, really feel something heavy cave bone into blood and brains.

I felt trapped in the booth. Yet I nodded slowly, squinting past my mother's face toward the horizon. She would not look at me.

He shouted, "We want to know what your plans are!"

"Jack. Maybe this isn't the best time." Then she turned, her eyes warning me not to get out of hand. "Your father had an idea."

"I talked to George Beederm," he yelled.

Fists pressed together on the formica, I said to her, "No."

She reached back and touched my wrist. She said below her breath, "Just listen."

"No."

"Lookit," he said, smoothing his scalp, then staring at me in the rear view mirror. "We're not trying to marry you off for godssake. George's got an opening in the office."

I said, "Tell him to stop." I felt I would vomit. She appeared angry when I repeated, "Tell him to shut up about my life."

She said, "Just listen."

He shrugged into the mirror, "It's just an idea."

"It's your fault," I told her. "You let him."

Her eyes narrowed.

I knew she thought I meant about Freddy.

My heart thudded and I shook my head. I said, "No." He looked confused, at me, then at her.

Her mouth tightened.

"What's going on here?" he said.

I said, "Holy God."

He said into the mirror—all eyes and no mouth—“Listen, little sister . . .”

“Don’t call me that. *Don’t*. I’m not anybody’s sister. Am I? I mean, am I?”

He looked at her, then back at me again. He was scared. In the strip of mirror, without his ugly grin, I could see he was really terrified. He squeaked, “You just listen here—”

“Shut up,” she told him. She wrapped her arms tight around herself. “I want you both to just be quiet.”

I swayed back toward the big bed. I sat up with my hands locked around my knees. She reached over and put her hand on his shoulder in the wind and view, racing past the ocean from which even the birds had suddenly disappeared.

We were sitting on folding chairs. Twenty yards away, the sandstone bluff dropped a few feet to the beach. She was staring at sunset across waves. I told her, “They want me to join the editorial department at work.”

She would not look at me. She glanced back toward where he was seated on the motor home’s bumper, working on a fishing reel. “Is that right.”

“I was just a little surprised about the law school thing.”

After a pause, she spoke to the horizon. “You’d never guess how well he understands your feelings.”

I put on my glasses. The sunset became overcast.

“Hey there. No ganging up.” It was a nervous laugh. I turned and his eyes darted away. His skin looked like greased copper as he quickly carried his gear and jumped from the dirt shelf down into the sand. A fishing manual was funneled into his back pocket.

She watched him go. “You know he doesn’t really expect you to take that job. You simply have to acknowledge the gesture. It’s a sacrifice for him, the way he hated that office.” We watched him trudge through the sand, leaning into each step. Her voice bent up, ironic. “Wasn’t there anything about that in all that religion you studied?”

“About life insurance?”

“About sacrifice.”

In the hard sand he fell to his knees and began scratching with a metal claw.

“Is that how he understands it?” I asked. He had stopped to look into the manual. “Or is that just you.”

She exhaled loudly. Then she shook her head. “What on earth does that matter as long as it’s true? What possible difference can it make.”

There was a long silence while we watched him read. When she spoke again, her voice had become cool. “You know he talked of killing himself. Until just a few years ago, without the least histrionics. He used to talk through all the arrangements to take care of me—like some couples discuss outfitting houses they’ll never own. I don’t know if there was a day when I wasn’t ready to find him.”

It took all of my strength to keep silent. I wanted to tell her about him smiling. I wanted the feeling he had put in me to be words. Her voice changed again—bemused: “You were such a sympathetic little girl. I know he was a bad father, but that’s nothing extraordinary.” She smiled crookedly toward the waves. “I remember how Road Runner cartoons made you cry.”

He put away the manual and carried the pole, wading to where the water splashed his shorts. The father of a family paddling in the waves down the beach was watching as he tilted the pole back, then catapulted forward. The teardrop of lead sailed through the sky and splashed in the foam behind a wave. He began walking backwards, feeding out line while the other man resumed throwing his children into the sea that kept washing them back.

She took her hand from her eyes and squinted. “He wants to rest. He wants to forget about life expectancy and statistical risks.”

I was not going to say it. For the first time, I knew I never would because I was not sure I would not lose *her*. It came out pleading: “What about you?”

Her head cocked back. “I have my own life now.”

“But you see him.”

She smiled, and she was someone else. She wasn’t my mother. “I see other men, too.”

The nausea was gone. My entire body—fingers gripping aluminum chair arms, toes curling tight inside sweaty black leather—had cramped into a knot.

“I hope you realize we don’t really feel responsible for whatever problems you have with us. I know you don’t like the fact that we have lives of our own, but we’re not giving them up on that account.”

The pole was in its brace and he stood back, watching the tip bend and straighten with each wave. He was reading his manual when the pole suddenly arched so hard forward it yanked down the stand, and he had to step on the whole setup before it was dragged out to sea.

Her chair squeaked. She ran to the sand. The family was watching, too. I tried to breathe. A big wave splashed my father's belly as he pulled and reeled, pulled and reeled.

Thin and oblong as an empty purse, a fish was twisting and straining just above the foam, then he was chasing the thing across the beach with one foot, pole held high to keep the line taut. She joined him on his knees, touching his shoulder. The children started to run. Hurrying, to watch the thing wriggle and die.

The restaurant was crowded. The scents of sweat and suntan lotion and steamed crab mingled in the fishnet decor.

Her hand was gripping my thigh. She had let her hair loose and I took advantage of her desperation to gaze into her mottled gray eyes. She said, "You could wait until we get back."

I told her gently, "There's no point."

"Let's talk about it."

I drank from my beer and felt sick. I had won her back, but I didn't know how to finish what I'd started. I told her, "There's nothing to discuss."

My father surveyed the room, drumming with his spoon on the edge of the chip basket.

"What about your job?" she asked.

I picked at the beer label. "I'll quit."

I had been recalling a line from Zoroastrian Scripture when they came back bearing his fish: *Whether one is lord of little or much, let him show love to the righteous*—wondering how the righteous could be recognized. Manny and Bill and I had discussed the problem during a coffee break. Manny was a believer in works. Big Bill wondered cynically if you could distinguish grace from the effects of a good bowel movement. "Maybe it's in the eyes," Manny said, hunched over his knees, shaping the coal of his Salem against a box of Sophocles destined for confetti poppers. "Like glassy, you know. Like little kids when they got fever."

And then my father hoisted his catch, fingers hooked deep into straining gills. It was somehow in my brother's memory, watching the animal's eyes

become jellied-glass, that I heard myself announce my plans to leave them at the end of their trip, continuing on by bus or train for Guatemala. While my mother waited for me to speak again, I remembered a boy in a class on hagiography, who had talked of a mission.

I told her, "I know someone in Guatemala City. A teacher."

My father winked at me. "Maybe they got orchids down there." He was happy with himself for catching a fish. He winked at me again, and I found myself grinning back stupidly. "Hey!" he called. "I'll go too!"

She squeezed my thigh one last time and took her hand away. I wanted it back. "We can talk about it," she concluded.

"Okay," I said. "It was just an idea."

"I mean for chrissake, Barb. When did we ever talk this girl out of anything? I mean maybe it's for the good, huh?"

The fat cook came from the kitchen with my father's fish on a bed of rice and corn. There'd been a raucous scene in the doorway of the kitchen, deciding what he should pay for cooking his own catch. The room of Mexicans in tennis shorts laughed as he licked his lips and tucked his napkin into his collar with a Bob Hope grin. After things had settled down again, he touched her hand and leaned close. "Forget it," he told her. "We got our life."

Her head jerked toward me as though I were the one who had said something thoughtless. Then she drew back in her chair, staring at her crab. She fisted her beer and drank like she meant it. He called for tequila. Then she leaned forward and started to rip out a leg.

Inside the motor home, she lit the third cigarette I'd ever seen her smoke. Something had changed. Pushing back her thick hair, all the maternity had left her. She was pure *film noir*. I sat at the booth watching her watch the sidewalks as we drove down the main street. He had decided we would drive to a lagoon famous for clams. She watched the greased-back boys and prostitutes, the barefoot children selling chewing gum, the fat cops, as though this were a life she'd given up. She said without looking at him, "You remember the time we caught my sister with that boy."

"Phil Wilkie."

"You remember."

His elbows wagged over the wheel. I wanted to talk to her alone, to tell her it had been a joke about Guatemala. But she was so tough. We were reaching the last of the lighted streets when I said, “Stop.”

“What?” he demanded.

My temples were between my fists. I felt panicked. I felt that once we left the town there would be no getting back. “I said *stop*.”

“I can drive as well as you, little Miss Sober.” At the next red light I went for the door. “Hey!”

The lamps on the broken sidewalk were a smoky yellow and a thin man wobbling atop snakeskin boots tried to touch my chest. The nearest shop was a *farmacia*. The air inside was as stale as long illness, under the faltering neon. Behind the counter, the young man in brown plaid put up his hands. It wasn’t the kind of place hairless women patronized.

“*Cerrado*. Close. I close.” I lay down a dollar and took a postcard from the metal tree on the counter. The picture had faded from blue to turquoise: a neck brace and an aluminum crutch above the brand name—*Superior*. I wrote the address of the warehouse, U.S.A. Attention: Big Bill Furgeson.

Not even Zeus. Keep Manny.

I am making my decision.

I wanted to write something more decisive. Something Big Bill didn’t already know. The man brought out a cigar box of stamps. He still looked scared, and I put another dollar on the glass. I felt the man watching me. But I could not make myself write. I imagined what Bill would have to say, about his hero Prometheus, about accepting sacrifice as the price of humanity worth the name. I left the pharmacist fingering the dollar bills and the card, as though entrusted with notes to the dead.

She said to him, “She’s still angry you know. My sister.”

He smiled. “And I thought she was just jealous you married so damned well.”

We were passing the ghosts of bolted grocery stores, ceramic angels and Virgins behind chain-link fencing, then open fields. My heart felt tight, as though something irreparable had happened, something they had made a pact to ignore. Their backs were black cutouts against the headlights that seemed to be pulling the road down into the dashboard.



He said, "Did I ever tell you about that girl I met in Korea? A photographer."

"She had a mean father."

"That's the German girl. No, this one was Australian. Liked each other right off, you know how that is, so we got drunk and swapped life stories. What it was . . ." he swerved around a smashed dog and I caught myself on the stove. ". . . she'd been married to a guy supposed to be killed in a flash flood way out in the outback. Anyway she got married again after a year, had a couple kids." He looked into each of the three mirrors. A cluster of women in white dresses appeared at the edge of the road, shading their eyes, then swung away. I wondered if we could find a phone in the next town and if I might reach Big Bill at the warehouse.

She said, "But the first husband wasn't dead."

He nodded, "That's it."

"Like a bad movie."

"The thing was they hadn't been happy anyway and he'd decided to bugger out after his car got washed away, married a girl in Malaysia. Then she got pregnant. The Malaysian. And what it was, the other, the Australian, she'd been pregnant when he was supposed to be killed."

She said, "He had to see."

"Right. Before he started this new family. Only she'd miscarried. But the clincher is they fell in love again. He dumps the Malaysian, she dumps the second husband and kids, and they open an art gallery in Brisbane like they'd always wanted but never had the gumption. She took up photography and he went hopping around Asia, like he'd wanted all his life, buying up idols and things. Happy as pigs in shit."

She nodded. "But he had to die first."

"That's it. That's it exactly." His finger wagged in the air emphasizing how right she was. "And I was thinking . . . it's kind of like us."

"Except for the miscarriage," I said but they kept looking out to where now the headlights shot over the edges of cliffs or into the sides of bulldozed hills. She smoked, feet up on the dashboard.

"What they've envied is my getting away with everything. All the fun we used to have."

"Your sisters."

"They're much more upset we're doing things together than that I moved out."

“They’re unhappy people.” He swept the air with his right hand. “Every one of them. They did everything they were told they should do.” He nodded, tapping the dashboard, then pointing at her. “They sunk too much in a policy they can’t collect on. You were the wild one and you’re getting it all.” She stared ahead. “They thought there was someone keeping score of the prayers and confession. You live your life. Screw them.”

“I guess.”

“I mean screw them. You live your life.” He reached over and touched her arm. I could barely see my own hands in the dark. I felt I was fading.

“Mother?”

She turned quickly. But she was blind after the glare of the headlights, and she faced around front.

“I mean *screw* them.”

The engine ticked as it cooled. His weight rocked us going up the ladder to the roof. She and I sat looking through the glass pocked with dead insects. The headlights chased moonlight from the surface of the lagoon. She said, “Help him.”

“Why him,” I demanded. “Why is it always him we have to think about?” She smoked, but said nothing. “I don’t understand. You said you have your own life.”

She looked through the windshield, across the fans of light on the gray water. Then she shook her head slowly. “It’s not us, you know.”

“Not you what?”

“I mean it’s not him that’s the problem.” She exhaled smoke. The vamp in her was getting tired. “You just take him too seriously. He doesn’t expect it. He doesn’t *want* it.”

I sat sideways in the booth, leaning on my knees. “It’s my fault?”

“He simply isn’t worth it.” Her voice rose to show that it didn’t matter what he heard. “Or acting as though he is worth it—worth your anger—you miss the point.” She drew on her cigarette. “The point is what you get from him, what advantage you can take despite all your moral outrage. He is good for some things. He expects to be used for whatever those things are. That was the price he paid. After the boy.” She held her brow as though taking her own temperature, then blew out smoke. “I’m not saying it’s a conscious thing. He probably wouldn’t know what I’m talking about. He couldn’t become Mother Teresa, but he expects people to know . . .

even if he doesn't really appear very willing. He would never deny you anything, you know. But of course you never ask."

I could not tell if the motor home had rocked again. Yet I felt something move inside my head. A chasm seemed suddenly uncovered between the life she had led in our family and all of my ideas about that life. As though she'd simply been acting. I held my temples between my fists again. When I looked at her, framed in the illuminated windshield, she was really like a figure on a movie screen; someone whose life you feel, but whose eyes can never touch yours. And it struck me that perhaps we had never understood each other, that if we talked it through not one memory would correspond.

"Mother."

"Help him."

"You do blame him, don't you?" I tucked my fists into my armpits. "Who else's fault could it be? You told me. He was just sitting there."

I thought there might be an opening, but she would not face me, and her voice turned fierce.

"Do you think he didn't know why I stayed? Do you think we were happy you obviously needed us to be together even after you moved out? Are you really that vain, or that stupid?"

My mouth opened but there was no air. Nothing came out.

"Or maybe that was our fault too—why you don't seem able to make a life of your own."

"Mother."

"We failed. Fine. Fine." There was more she had to say, but all the energy had run out of her. She sounded terribly tired: "Just please—please go."

And then I was landing in the sand outside. Gnats flowed off dry seaweed, swirling toward the headlights. The wetsuits and a gunny sack fell behind me, then a pitchfork plunged to its hilt. She was just sitting, a black shape in the glassed-up smoke, looking at the water. I wanted to run. I imagined myself screaming into the sand dunes and dark.

"Get in," he said, climbing down. "Get your shorts off."

She could excuse me from this duty, but she sat still, intent on the water as a stone Buddha. "Now, I got this all figured." I watched him put on the wetsuit. He did not turn away—his genitals pendulous and withered, like a rodent dead in a leather sack.

"I don't want to."

“What?” He looked up and saw her staring at the water. When he turned back I could see it in his face. He knew she had left me to him. He zipped the glowing rubber up over his stomach and chest. I looked up at her profile again. She would not face me. I turned and began unbuttoning my pants.

“It’s a slow beach the book says.” I could hear the smile on his lips. “Shallow for a good long ways.”

“You don’t know what you’re doing.” I tried to make my breath slow. “Do you? You don’t.”

“Come on.” He plucked the pitchfork with one fist and started to walk. Away from the headlights, in the moon I could see a spit of dunes across the lagoon. Our shadows loomed down the sand, then across water, where they melted at the edges. I stopped. “Please.”

He started to wade in. His heels showed yellow in the headlights. I knew she was watching. I started into the water like some glowing amphibian. I did not know how to use him and this was the punishment. “Come on.”

He carried the pitchfork over one shoulder. Our legs were cut off at the knees when he plunged the thing straight down, working it forward and back, sensing through his hands like a safe cracker.

I looked again into the glare. So I was blind facing the dark as he yanked the rusted tines from the sand. I said, “I can’t see. I want to go back.”

“There’s nothing *to* see. Just walk.”

I followed the rubbery squelch of his legs scissoring forward. The fork splashed again. I could only gauge the depth of the water by its weight around my legs.

“Here we go.”

He leaned down, digging with his hand. His fist came up dripping mud. The clam, fat and white as some primitive jewel, was the size of a stuffed change purse. He tossed it at my chest, and I put it into the sack. He turned and continued walking farther out.

I told his back, “I don’t really know anyone in Guatemala. Not anyone I can go to.”

“That some guy you lost?”

I tried to be calm. “I have my job. I have people who know me. I’m going back.” I took a breath. “I have responsibilities.”

He stopped and plunged the fork, leaning down to dig with his bare hands under deeper water. We said nothing as he dug. The sack grew

heavy. Finally, he said, “It’s your life.” He shrugged. “I mean it’s your life.”

We were so deep now he had to catch a breath and dive under to dig the shells from around the fork. The water churned above him—finger-paintings of moonlight. He came up, chest heaving, after a long dig.

I said, “Maybe we have enough. We can’t eat this many.” Water streamed from his thin hair and he looked down as though at something hideous.

“It’s these damn suits. I’m too buoyant. You try.”

“Me.”

“You can pull down.”

The next time the fork hit something its handle was completely submerged. It was difficult to keep our feet on the bottom. I had the ballast of the sack. But the salt and rubber wanted to float us away. He stood on the pitchfork behind the tines. I looked back toward the motor home. Its lights were burning into the black night. I sucked a deep breath and dove.

In perfect darkness, it was like swimming in a silty, lukewarm tub, and I realized we didn’t need the suits at all. The sand was in my ears and scalp though I tightened all my features. I felt my way down the handle of the fork, between the legs of his suit, over his feet to where the metal disappeared into the floor of the lagoon. My legs kept drifting up. I had to twist my fingers in the fork and dig with the other hand. I thought, If Big Bill worked nights, maybe I could also. Maybe I could be an editor and keep the rest of my life, keep Manny and Bill and our early morning discussions. Then I could afford to move out of Jerry’s house. I could afford to tell him just what I thought of him. My breath was running out as I touched the rough edge of the clam and got my hand worked underneath. I burst up clawing for air, the heavy shell high over head.

He snatched the thing away.

“Good deal.” The light from the stars puddled all around us. I could see only the outline of his face and hair. We were beyond reach of the headlights.

I gasped, “She might be worried.”

“Huh?” He looked back across the water. Then at me. I couldn’t see his expression, only a blunt silhouette against the moon. “You can’t get in our way you know.”

I wanted to see his eyes. “I’m not trying.”

“I don’t know that you ever tried. It was just all you could do. But not now. It’s too late. It’s too late for anything but to make the best of it.” He looked at the sky, then down. “You always depended on her weakness—about the accident.”

“*Her* weakness?”

He batted at the air. “Her regrets then. Anyway, it won’t work now. We’re over all that.”

I took a few deep breaths. I pictured her watching the water. I didn’t know if she would think it the right thing, but I made myself say it. “You tried to help me.”

But he was done discussing it. He nodded toward the deep, “We’re about into the middle of them, about ten yards more.”

“I have people up north. I have my job. I have a life too, so you don’t have to worry about me. I don’t want trouble.”

“Maybe less. But I’d say ten yards.” I could see only the shining curves of his scalp and nose. “If you float too much, I can hold you down. I can push once you get hold of the fork.”

I could not say that I was ready to use him. I could not explain that I was prepared to be tough and cynical. Tough and cynical were all I had ever claimed to be.

I watched his stupid round head and ears scanning the water. And suddenly it broke. I felt like crying. For him I think. I felt like laughing too because there was no point even in saying it. He really didn’t know. He truly did not understand what price was demanded of him. He was simply living it, breathing it without a moment’s reflection. His pudgy hand ran back, sheeting water from his scalp, and suddenly I was on the verge of feeling real pity. He was not vicious. Perhaps even his smile that day. . . . Perhaps he was simply that stupid.

His feet went into the air and his elbow broke the surface, cocking back to plunge the fork down deep. He popped up, tethered over sideways by the handle. “Go!”

I handed him the sack and dove. Down the shaft of the fork, eyes shut tight and I was at the bottom. My toes were touching air when his foot found my back. I dug even as he rode me down, like an unruly balloon. His toes gripped the rubber across my shoulders and spine until I had the thing and reached behind and touched it to his ankle. His feet drifted away and we

rose, like victims of some terribly gentle explosion. I put the clam inside the sack.

“Here’s a system, hey?” He was having fun. “You game for one more?”

I was out of breath. I tried to nod. I wanted to say something that, if he told her later, would show her I had understood. But I just inhaled and exhaled, filling myself up.

“Go!”

“Wait. Please.”

He was excited. Like a child. Like some good-natured idiot—“Go!”

My chest was already heaving as I pulled myself down his arm. I was crying. I let out a piercing scream into the water and felt the bubbles riddle my face. Then his foot was on my back again, riding me down. I began scooping with both hands.

I touched the shell’s lip with my finger but it dug away again. I was nearly at the end of my breath but the thing kept burrowing. Trying to save its own life.

I couldn’t dig any more. I wanted air and I was anxious to talk to her. I told myself it would all be so much easier now that I understood him like she did. I imagined embracing my mother as I reached behind and touched my father’s foot.

His toes kept gripping my shoulder. I reached again and struck harder, feeling my fist hit skin and bone, but his foot remained. I flipped myself over. I had a terrible vision of him thinking this was great fun, and killing me. I imagined him chuckling as I went limp. I was wedged between his legs as he struggled to get free, getting dizzy and we kept starting in the wrong directions, unable to understand each other’s motions until his hand found my shoulder. And then he pulled me toward the surface with the force—turned long and slow by the water—of an impatient caress.

And then everything was calm.

The world had turned to velvet.

As I rose, I thought, I will let my hair grow and find someone nice. I will find someone she will believe is good, and kind, and sensible. I saw myself, after we have come to visit: I am twisting around backwards in the car and waving to her as she watches from the end of the driveway. And once my father has returned to the garage, while Mr. Nice is watching traffic, though I cannot really see her face, I wave through the window for as long as her arm waves too against the sky. But I can sense her smile even at this

distance. Even from here, waiting for the light to change, I know how good she feels.