

Home · *Don Kurtz*

WHEN I GOT HOME from the lakes that year it was still early, the second week of March, and I pulled up to park in what was left of the barn lot. Whoever'd ended up with the place had plowed up to within about ten feet on the west side of the house, looped out some in back, and then cut close in around the barn. It was hard to even imagine that there had been a yard there once, where Byron and I had conducted army campaigns, and mounted Indian resistance a century too late. Our football field had been only thirty feet wide to begin with, but now it was gone, planted to corn.

There were some hogs wandering around out in the pens, and I walked out to look at them. Two new grain bins stood next to the barn, with a muddy dug-out place in front of them where they'd set up an auger. The milk house was gone. Early spring in that part of the country is about as desolate a time as you can imagine, and I kind of missed the trees, the three in front and a long row of poplars that had run along behind the house. It made for a better view anyway, out over low black fields to a distant row of brush along the ditch, and the woods that lay over behind the Shaw place, a mile to the south.

A house you grew up in is supposed to have pleasant memories, I guess, but I won't kid you, what I thought of as I went up on the porch were the whippings I'd got, for letting the screen door slam shut a couple of dozen times too often. I deserved them, no doubt, but nobody likes to be whipped, and I was pleased to come up to the storm door and kick it open, splintering the frame. I stepped into the dry rot smell of an old empty farmhouse, our house, the place I grew up. It opened into the kitchen, where there were the very same cheap paneled cabinets we'd had back then. The refrigerator and stove were gone, but there was a new water heater over in the corner, dusty and cold, wiring coiled around its base. De-Con pellets were spread out along the floor by the pantry.

It wasn't any warmer inside, so I jammed my hands in my pockets to walk on back through the house. The last I'd heard, and that had been some time before, there'd been a family renting it out, a man who'd hauled steel for Continental down in Kokomo. He'd hung on a couple of months after it shut down, until one night he finally packed up his family and left,

still owing two months' rent. The west wall was charred from a blanket fire they'd accidentally started with a space heater, trying to save on fuel. The miracle was that the old place hadn't burned down, but there it still was, cold and empty around me.

It wasn't a place I'd ever felt particularly fond of, and I didn't feel particularly fond of it then. I stood in the living room, where once there had been an old sofa set along one wall, and two arm chairs lined up against the other. Now there was nothing. Water was getting in somewhere because the floorboards had buckled at the far side of the room. A faded flowery wallpaper, there as long as I could remember, had begun to peel down from the walls.

The floor wasn't used to people anymore, and it creaked under my steps. The door to the front parlor, mostly closed off when I was a boy, stood ajar, and I slid past it to go inside. It was the biggest room in the house, almost square, so that's where the trucker had put his pool table. Even a year later I could see four deep impressions from where it had rested, and wide jagged holes in the plaster, where he'd hung up, and then been in a hurry to tear off, a rack for the cues.

On the stairway there was a single narrow landing. Right there, so you could see it whenever you went up or down, there'd always hung a picture of the three of us boys, me and Byron and Danny. It was gone too, of course, and I didn't miss it. At the top of the stairs was the room I'd shared with Danny, and then, after he was killed, had all to myself. Next to that was the bathroom, where the toilet and sink were ripped out and a wide yellow stain had spread across the tile. There in the bathroom I pulled the shade free to look out past where the poplars used to be, out onto wide black Indiana, heavy on flatness and mud.

The screen windows were stacked in the hallway, along with a fifty-pound bag of rock salt and some spare pieces of ducting. Byron's room was down at the other end. Across from it was my dad's, and I remembered it well enough, the way it used to be, with his sagging bed and shiny comforter, always made up crisp and tidy in our house of men. I had only the faintest memories of my mother there too, lying back on white pillows, surrounded by white walls, everything white, which just goes to show you how lousy our memories really are, because it was the same wallpaper up there in the bedroom that we'd had downstairs, that had been there since the beginning of time. I was still pretty little back then, though, just

able to walk and understand. I'd hung back in the doorway, afraid of her, the woman who after all was almost a stranger to me, someone I'd never really known not to be sick.

There wasn't much more to see, so I went back down to carry in my duffle bag and cot, along with a couple of bags of groceries I'd picked up in town. The trucker had evidently made a clean sweep of the place; even the light fixtures were gone, wires hanging down twisted and bare from the ceiling. In the kitchen I plugged in a radio I'd brought. It worked, so I rigged up the drop light from the car, hanging it down from one of the wires. By then it was almost dark. From the porch I looked out past the barn to Byron's, out across the forty acres that had once been my dad's.

Byron had built his own place over on the county road, the one that runs north-south a quarter of a mile away. I'd seen it when I pulled in, a low red brick ranch house with Bedford stone facing, not elegant particularly, but prosperous, just about right for an assistant principal over at Tippy Valley. It sat alone on a four-acre lot, and to get there I had to walk all the way around to the crossroads, where the sun had worked through the ice earlier in the day. The road still glowed wet but the wind was raw, coming in over my shoulder. Byron's Toyota and jeep were in the garage. As I came up the driveway I looked in at his house through the picture window, lights up bright and the news playing on a color TV console just past the drapes. I watched his wife Kendra come out of the kitchen and stop, when she saw me there standing on the porch.

It took a while for the door to open, but when it did he stood above me tall and stoop-shouldered, a large soft belly hanging over his belt. Kendy must have gotten him into the aviator glasses, bought him the sharp green sweater, but otherwise it was clearly my big brother Byron, puffy-faced and growing baldheaded, blinking as he looked down at me.

"What do you want?" he said, and it was the damndest thing, I lost my voice. Kendra was behind him, but he stood in the doorway in his stocking feet, blocking my way. There was a walker next to the TV, and a blond-haired baby, my niece, was in it.

"You back for a visit?"

"Who's got the place now?" I asked. "Everett still got it?"

Byron shook his head. "Charlie Sellars took it over. Everett had trouble, so Charlie took it over. He's doing all right, I hear." He had the outer door pushed open, newspaper in hand. "I wondered who that Camaro belonged to. You had it long?"

I told him I had, and when Kendra said something behind him he shifted in the doorway, wiping across the bridge of his nose with his sleeve.

“I reckon you’ve had dinner already.”

“I don’t want to put Kendy out,” I said. “That’s okay. I got food.”

“Well, that’s good. It’s good you got food.”

He folded the paper up under his arm. I heard Kendy behind him again, and he reached back for the door. When I glanced up, though, I could see what the poor bastard was only just then realizing: he was glad to see me.

“Oh come on in, Arthur,” he said suddenly, pulling me roughly by the shoulder. I stepped up past him onto a throw rug they had by the door, feeling bulky in my heavy boots and coat. Kendy had stayed younger than Byron, pretty and smiling, still hugging herself against the draft. She’d turned off the TV, which made the baby start crying, red-faced and unhappy, banging her fists on the walker. A boy of about ten, my nephew Joey, watched me from the hall.

“Well, Kendy,” I said, “I don’t suppose you remember me much,” but she’d already opened her arms.

“Yes, Arthur,” she said, “I do.”

It may have taken some effort, that first evening back, to leave Byron’s house and go back outside. Not that we’d been having such a warm and wonderful time: we tried, but I hadn’t seen any of them for five or six years. I’d never lifted a finger to care for my dad. I’d missed his funeral, the sale—there wasn’t any excuse and I didn’t offer one. Byron never was one for a quick decision, and while he stepped back to chew over whether to let bygones be bygones, his wife took over. She showed me my niece Celeste, introduced me again to Joey. It’s the kind of thing you appreciate, because even in the best of circumstances Byron and I wouldn’t have had much to talk about.

At our reunion dinner, though, he was the very same Byron I remembered, head bent low to the table, concentrating on his meal. He looked up only to pick at Joey, who, excited by the visitor, squirmed in his seat until Byron sent him to his room. Celeste mashed peas into the tray of her high-chair while Kendra played hostess, fussing and apologizing around us.

After dinner Byron and I settled in front of the TV, where he filled me in on who was farming what, which of our relatives had gotten rich or

died, what he was teaching at Tippy Valley. Tedious as it might be to listen to, somehow it indicated that the past was behind us, more or less, and that slowly but surely Byron was absorbing me back into his world. It was an effort that didn't involve me, so while he talked I watched Kendy, as she cleaned up the table, put my nephew and niece to bed. When she brought out a pillow and blankets, I said I couldn't stay. Byron didn't press it. By the time I'd walked back around to the farmhouse the wind had died down, the night was clear, and a solitary hog rooted out in the pens next to the barn.

The last couple of years on the ore boats I'd run with a guy named Lenny Jaynes. Lenny'd gotten married right after the season, and he was wintering up in Saginaw, where his wife had a block of apartments. We were pretty close, and he told me they'd be glad to find me one there, furnished. So I could have just as easily gone back up to Michigan that same night. My Camaro was there, but instead I spent a half hour walking around in the barn lot under a new mercury vapor light Charlie'd put up next to the barn. Up on the porch, it made me smile to see the door swinging loose in the moonlight. I liked a little air.

It was just an old house, could have been anybody's for that matter, as much difference as it would make. I set up camp in the kitchen, and when I'd put up my cot and slid into my sleeping bag, the drop light lit up a pleasant circle around me. And from that point on that was all the world there was, three feet wide. Some people feel the need to peer out into the darkness, let their imaginations run wild, but there's no law that says you have to. The key is to put everything out of your mind, and when I had I could have been in the Delfina jail or the White House, it didn't matter, I was there to sleep. Most people get scared and give in too easily, and then they wonder why they're lost.

The next morning around eight I was back out by the hog pen, where Charlie Sellars was unloading bags of feed. I'd heard the idle of his pickup as he slowed by the front porch, inspecting the door, so neither of us pretended surprise.

"Why hello, there, Arthur. Long time, no see." When I complimented his hogs, he shrugged. "Oh, they're gaining, I guess. Market's better than it will be when they're finished, though, that's what they're saying."

Charlie would have been a young man to my dad's middle age, but now

he himself was nearing sixty, heavy in the chest and arms, his ears and cheeks pink under a clear cold sky. He shook my hand when I offered it, but that didn't reassure him, he was already edging away from me along the edge of the pen. From what Byron told me Charlie'd married a widow from over near Manchester and had a brand new lease on life. He'd managed to come up with the money to buy my dad's place and at least one other, so he was doing fine.

He was doing fine, he'd known me since I was a boy, but I had the feeling right then that if I'd stamped my foot and shouted "Boo!" he would have scampered away like a calf. As it was he settled in a few feet away, watching me warily out of the corner of his eye.

He turned to nod back to the house. "I see you got in okay. Did you find some heat in there? The thermostat's in the hall, next to the bathroom. You find it okay?"

"I found it, but I left it where it was. I don't need heat."

"I had to put a new furnace in, Byron probably told you that. That other one was plumb wore out, the heating man told me he didn't know how it lasted as long as it did. That gets kind of salty, a new furnace like that."

Charlie couldn't have expected me to feel much sympathy, and I didn't, but I knew he was just slipping on the old heartland prophylactic— nothing makes a farmer feel more secure than a recitation of his troubles. We leaned against the fence, watching his hogs nose in at the feeder. It was something I'd seen a hundred times when I was a boy, my dad and some other man leaning in together out in the barnlot. Only this time it was me, and I knew that what Charlie was busy wishing was that he'd burned down this house like he had the one on his other place, so that way he wouldn't have Hurd Conason's crazy son back around kicking down his door. What might have comforted him some was what I didn't feel like telling right then: I didn't want that damn farm and never had.

"You feeling okay these days, Arthur? You doing all right?"

"I'm feeling fine, Charlie."

"Ain't had no more troubles? Spells like you had?"

He was waiting for me to put him at ease, and when I didn't say anything he was forced to improvise.

"That's good you're feeling okay. Health's important. Well, anyway, I reckon you'll be shipping out again pretty soon. Them lakes thaw out

before too long, don't they? That's where you're at now, up on the lakers? Good pay from what I hear, good pension, benefits, you know, a fella likes to have those things . . ."

His voice had grown too hopeful, so I let him back down.

"They took our boat off the lake, Charlie, shipping's not what it used to be. Might be a while before I get another."

"Oh," he said, frowning, and we studied the hogs.

A lot of people feel sentimental these days, or at least think they ought to, about owning a piece of land. Most of them are people who never had to stay up all night worrying about how to pay it off, but I guess somebody still might imagine that I harbored some resentments about Charlie ending up with our place. You have to think it through, though, because after all, my dad hadn't exactly hacked it single-handedly out of the wilderness. He'd bought it from somebody else, who'd bought it from somebody else, who'd bought it from somebody else, and the vast majority of all those somebody elses were dead and gone, clear title or not. Land changes hands. I know Charlie would have agreed, and not just for selfish reasons—we weren't neither of us children, and we knew the rules. The trouble was, from Charlie's point of view, that I hadn't kept up my end of the bargain, which was to fade away and stay gone. Out over the empty field a thin line of white smoke came up from the chimney at Byron's, so Kendra was home. The night before I'd taken a minute to go back to see Joey in his exile, staying to look at his toys. He was a cute little kid, growing anxious when he had no more to show me.

"I'll give you a hundred a month," I said to Charlie, "for the time I'm here. That sound okay?"

Charlie had an old habit I still remembered, of acting like he hadn't heard what you said. You could almost see the sound winding back into his head, and just getting lost somewhere back inside. I knew, though, that just when you went to say something else, he'd come back with an answer, throwing you off. So I was patient, waiting him out.

"Fox Lake people done drove up the prices around here, can't hardly believe what these houses go for anymore. You wouldn't believe it, Arthur."

He was right, I wouldn't, and didn't either. "A hundred a month," I said, "plus take over the propane. You're heating those pipes anyway, so you might as well let me pay for it."

“Bob Marlin got offered four hundred dollars for that place of his dad’s, can you imagine that? And you wouldn’t believe the people that call up, wanting to know about this one. Hard to figure, ain’t it? Now look over there, Arthur, look at that gilt. See her? She’s got me worried. But goddamn, I can’t have a vet out here every ten minutes. They don’t even want to come out no more, and when they do, the costs eat you alive.”

“A hundred and fifty, then. Plus the propane.”

I was rushing it, there was a rhythm to these kind of conversations that I still remembered, but if I’d followed it we would have wound so far away from the house that in a half an hour neither of us would remember that it had ever been discussed.

Charlie scratched the back of his head, his gloved fingers pushing up under his cap. He took it off, rubbing his hand up over his forehead and flattop.

“You know, I remember your dad out here, all of us do. Don’t seem like five years since he died. No sir, it don’t seem like it, not at all. You wouldn’t wish on nobody the troubles he had out here. Nobody.”

He shook his head, looking at me directly for the first time. “You don’t want to come back into this goddamn old house, Arthur.”

It’s not often another man will look at you straight on like that, and what Charlie said was so true on the face of it that for a minute I wanted to believe him. I almost forgot there, just for a minute, that he’d been working on his own plan ever since he drove up that morning, which was to get me away from there, back out of his sight forever. I remembered seeing Charlie at the elevator when I was a boy, he seemed decent enough, my dad never had a bad word to say about him. And here he was, pretending like he wanted to help, but really not any different after all than those young guys who had come along later, Russ Stewart, Gerry Maars, big farmers who would just as soon have a neighbor’s land as have a neighbor.

“You just say how much you want for it then,” I told him, but I was talking to his back, he’d already climbed halfway up the fence. He straddled it with care.

“These hogs, the fuel, your equipment wears out, all these goddamn costs. It’s like throwing money down a hole, Arthur, I don’t know what things are coming to.”

I didn’t either, but a half hour later I finally did get the damn place back again, for three hundred dollars a month. My dad would have had his

stroke all over again to know what I paid, and I'd realized by then that Charlie was right. I didn't really want it, even to rent, even for a month. It kept me going, though, just to see how little he wanted me there. That, and watching what a poor match he was for his greed. Once he was officially my landlord Charlie felt free to talk my ear off, and by the time I'd finished helping him fill the feeders I could see he was thinking that it might be all right having me around, that he might come out ahead after all. It never hurt to have a man around who could open a couple of bags of feed. He had my three hundred dollar bills in his shirt pocket, and maybe it was just an occupational hazard, but I noticed Charlie had taken on that same sly look that his livestock had, a look that always made me laugh at those goddamn hogs, with their narrowed eyes and smiles, because let's face it, this week's slyness is next week's bacon, nothing more. When Charlie finally left I went back in to survey my kingdom. It was depressing enough that I didn't even get past the kitchen. Out of the sunshine the chill from those old rooms was impressive, and with the trees gone the March winds blew up unbroken, harder than ever.

It was hard to believe that my dad had been any poorer a farmer than Charlie, or that any of us worked any less. Maybe he forgot to pay the preacher, or just didn't hang on long enough to marry a widow from Manchester. But my dad, to be honest, never was able to get it right. He was the kind of guy who was always a step late on everything: late to get out on his own, late to get married, late to have us boys too, for that matter—he'd seemed like an old man even when Byron and I were kids.

He'd grown up over in Liberty Township, where his family had apparently started to make a go of it by around 1910, the year he was born. He was eleven when his own dad got trampled by a team, and they'd ended up having to board him out to an Amish family. Later on he was the hired man over at the Overmeyer place. He saved up until he finally had enough to buy a couple of horses and a cultivator, and go on shares. By the late 1930s he'd bought a place over near Tipton and was farming on his own.

If this sounds like a success story so far, don't be fooled, he only had that place three or four years before he was drafted into the army, getting back to Fulton County just in time to miss whatever high prices they'd had during the war. He'd begun to hire himself out again, further behind than ever.

The high point must have been when he met my mother, at a Sunday School picnic up at Winona Lake. After a couple of years they got married, and he bought twenty acres east of Delfina, along with the house I'd just rented. That muck ground fought him every step of the way, but I remember we were always supposed to think a little less of my Uncle Willy, who'd had the good sense to get on at GM. Generous Motors, my dad called it, handing out money with both hands. Or for that matter my dad had never had much good to say about his sister's husband Chester either, who'd taken his last army paychecks and bought into National Homes. Within a few years Chester was living in Florida, where the decision he faced every day was a tough one: whether to fish or play golf. They hadn't done it right, somehow, but it was hard to see how we had either. If there were any good years, easy years, I came along last and missed them. I don't remember too much sweetness and light back then, just too much quiet, an elderly woman now and then coming in days, and me waiting for my chance to leave.

Byron was around back then too, of course, so he provided some company. It's funny, but what I remembered about Byron were mostly his collections: pennies, matchbooks, feed company ball point pens—anything that didn't take too much initiative or imagination to accumulate. We were a little short on entertainment back then so I'd come down the hall to watch him go through them, stretching from where I sat on his bed to catch a glimpse of his "electricity box," a wood crate full of wires and insulators, and a huge black transformer that I coveted with all my heart. Whenever he would come in to find me in that crate, or see that I'd helped myself to a few of his pennies, he'd pound me dutifully but without any real enthusiasm—Byron was dull more than mean. Later he saved up for a year, sent off in the mail, and then spent the next eight months putting together what had to have been the last vacuum tube radio in America. He gave it to my dad for Christmas, and the old man still had it years later when I visited him in the nursing home, on the nightstand beside his bed.

Byron had to have been as surprised as I was when he ended up with someone like Kendra. Her dad worked at the lumber company in Delfina, and she and Byron had been trapped together in the same small high school, so it made some sense—she didn't know any better. She was twice the student he was, but stayed home working at the ASCS office while he went off to college. Byron spent one year teaching down at Noblesville

before he got on at Tippy Valley, right after the consolidation, and they finally got married. Women are romantic at heart, every last one of them, but it's still hard to imagine my brother as anybody's knight in shining armor. All those years that I'd seen Byron hulking through the house with his baggy underwear and thick pimply legs made it hard to believe that he'd ever gotten them between Kendra's, but the kiddies had proved me wrong twice already, at the very least.

Now she was Byron's wife ten years over, and she'd come up to greet me that first night with a married woman's solid hug, her breasts and butt pulled back, her breath warm on my neck. Joey should have been able to remember me but he'd shaken his head, quick to blush like his mother. When I went by that next morning, after Charlie left, he was in school.

Joey was in school, but Kendra and my niece were there, Kendra at the stove and Celeste on the floor playing. Kendy had her sleeves rolled up, and in her western shirt and jeans she looked like any one of the new breed of farm wives you see in the magazines: a quick snapshot before they dash out to run the combine or tend to some baby calves. Except, of course, that she and Byron didn't farm anything and most likely never would. There was coffee dripping and fresh rolls set out on the counter. Uncleness has its privileges: I'd driven by hundreds of houses on my way down from the north, and not one of them could I have come into like I did this one, to be told it was good to see me, to have my night inquired about, and to sit down to a cup of coffee while a little girl played across the room on the floor. Celeste was a cool customer, though, careful in her affections, eyeing me from a distance.

With all Joey's toys out of sight, and Byron at work, there was scarcely a trace of them left. A sideboard from the old house held dishes at one end of the kitchen; french doors at the other made it so bright that Kendra and I had to squint to see each other when she sat down across from me. Squinting took some of the cuteness out of her face, and left her what she was, an attractive woman, in a warm bright kitchen, her baby safe on the floor beside her. A mouth that was a little too small, and eyes that were a touch too close together, were probably all that had kept Kendra there in Fulton County and not out in Hollywood playing herself on TV.

Everything around us, except that sideboard, which I hadn't even liked back in the old place, was modern and fit in perfectly, the way it was supposed to. I remembered thinking as I'd come up that morning that the

house was perfect too, set down low and completely by itself, just like in the magazines. In the magazines the whole world is right there in the picture, they design it that way, a place so completely possible that almost anyone, even somebody like me, can imagine fitting in there too. Not long ago where we were sitting would have been mud waiting for beans, the west end of a field with drainage problems, like a lot of that muck soil had. Byron knew that much at least, and he'd built up on the higher ground nearest the road.

It was my brother's house, but I can't say that we missed him, it was easier not having him around. If Kendra seemed to go a little overboard about things, you could understand it, she had to be around Byron. He couldn't help it, I guess, but he soaked up energy like a sponge. With just the two of us there at the table she filled the kitchen with talk: when they'd last seen Willy, a card they'd gotten from Chester's trip to Bermuda at Christmas, her mother's gall bladder operation in June. With her short blond hair, her skin that flushed so easily in front of me, it was clear that she was a lot prettier and more alive than someone like Byron really deserved. I think she just got lonely out there for somebody to talk to, and I was glad to listen. She was older by then, but so was I, not like when I'd been Byron's fourteen-year-old brother, and she'd been about the only woman under seventy we'd ever had come by the house.

She slipped in and out of the hostess role, jumping up to get coffee, but letting me steady jars at the counter while she poured out the berries she was boiling down for jam. Some tar paper on their well housing had been flapping in the wind, and I went out to nail it down. A couple of taps from Byron's hammer and it was done. I didn't stay much longer, but it was long enough for Celeste to finally give in, coming up to bang on my leg as I slipped on my jacket. When I'd had her on my knee for a minute or two, Kendra complimented me on my ease.

"Oh, I've played daddy a time or two," I told her, and I had, with girlfriends around the lake. I didn't mind being nice to their children, and I was good enough at it, but the truth was that I'd never really cared much for how any of them mothered, smoking around the house, drinking too much, they were just big kids themselves, shackled up with me when they should have been paying attention. Maybe she hadn't been particularly fortunate as far as a husband goes, but Kendra was the right mother, doing things the way they needed to be done.

“Joey thinks you’re tops too,” she said, “he’s asked and asked about you. He liked the tattoo.”

I remember being embarrassed about that—impressing a ten-year-old was about all that damn thing was good for. Kendra wasn’t a tiny woman, by any means, but slender, she seemed a lot smaller than I was when I reached over to hand back Celeste.

“Nobody understands all that with you and your dad,” she said, “but nobody has to, it’s over now.”

I remember shrugging, the troubles I’d had with him had caused nothing but hard feelings. Still, you could appreciate that too, her willingness to say it out loud.

“You won’t be quarreling with any of the rest of us, though, will you?”

My brother’s wife was smiling a little as she said it, dodging as Celeste, half-giggling, half-fussy, banged at her face.

“Oh, I don’t reckon I will,” I said, and she laughed, backing away. I decided to take her pat on the arm as something like friendship, and turned to go back outside.

I could have gone back over that evening, but I didn’t, it’s easy to be too much of a pest. Late that night I drove around a while, out onto the grid of roads that, except for jogging around a lake or bending along a river, mark out sections and take a person as far as he wants to go in any direction. They run out into the night over hundreds of miles of farmland, past dark houses and one-street towns. Blacktop freeways open to anybody who has some gas and a car to put it in. Of course I’d noticed by then that hardly anybody was ever out there using them, except for me.

The car was warmer than that damn kitchen at least, and I took it out the next morning too, on into Delfina to call up to Lenny. When I finally got through to him he said he’d heard we might be out longer, maybe until the middle of June. I didn’t tell him that I’d rented the house, so he offered the apartment, a little reluctantly it seemed, with his voice low like someone might hear. After I hung up I came back to my kitchen, sat down on the floor, and made myself lunch.

I hadn’t stopped over by Kendra’s the night before, or that morning, and I spent most of the afternoon rewiring the water heater. It was about two by the time I got ready to trace the wires out to the fuse box. I

thought I had a flashlight in the trunk somewhere, but it was just as easy to walk around to Byron's and borrow his.

Joey was toward the end of the school bus line, and wouldn't be home for a while, but I didn't know that yet. Celeste was down for her nap, but I didn't know that either. Kendy met me at the door, and I waited there on the throw rug while she went down to the basement to look.

Now the church had its way with me early, before I knew any better, so some sense of right and wrong is like a part of you—it's the only way you know how to be. On the other hand, I'd never been one to put a check on my daydreams, or not to notice things that were right there waiting to be noticed. So sure, I'd watched Kendra color as she smiled, noticed the life in her that my brother was not up to answering. Sure I'd seen her bottom, the day before, stretched under denim. I might even have wanted those busy hands to touch my temple too, her attention to focus in on me, the way it did on Celeste, quickly, intensely, whenever the baby had a difficulty or complaint. Maybe that morning, sweeping out that cold kitchen, I might have thought about pulling her, my brother's wife, into my arms—and more—but thoughts aren't poison, no matter what they tell you.

Kendra was gone quite a while, and finally came back with a plastic lantern.

"It works," she said, flashing it at me once before she handed it over.

Kendy had been good to me, had opened her house to me, and it seemed natural to hug her again, like she had me, that first night. So I did. It's hard to remember now, but I was kind of out of practice, and I must have hung on too long. It was one of those damn houses where anything can happen, she felt soft in my arms, and she didn't push me away. I probably did hold on too long. She didn't push me away.

I did make a mistake, though, coming back too soon, only a little later. I could have waited, probably anybody else would have, but I'd finished with the flashlight and wanted to bring it on back. My dad taught me that much, anyway, that you return other people's property. She had to have seen me coming again, because by the time I'd walked all the way around to the crossroads and back up to Byron's, Kendra was already coming out, my niece in her arms. She met me at the top of the driveway and talked me back down the way I had come, all about her appointments in town, groceries she had to buy.

When we got to the door on the passenger side, I reached for the baby. “No, no, that’s okay,” Kendra said, “I’ve got her.”

“Here, let me give you a hand, I can hold her while you get the door.”

“I’ve got her,” Kendy said, and I could see that her little mouth was set tight. Celeste was bundled in her jacket, still sleepy-eyed and angry, blaming me.

“Here, I got her.”

“No!” she said then, so sharply that I finally stepped back. She fastened Celeste into her car seat and closed the door. I watched her hurry around to the other side of the car, and a moment later they were gone.

It was easy enough for me to understand the whole thing later, who couldn’t see that it was awkward for her with me around. Hell, she’d be almost a prisoner there, with me dropping over whenever I wanted, what did I expect? I was busy the next day anyway, running current to the bathroom, getting the hot water pipes hooked up again. I went in to Del-fina, drove around the courthouse a couple of times, and called the union, but they knew even less than Lenny had about when the company would be calling us back. Kendra’s car was gone the rest of that day, and most of the next. I did go ahead and stop by the third day, but that was only because the UPS had dropped off a package for Byron at the farmhouse, the afternoon before. It was a long walk around, and I was just going to drop off the package, that was it. She insisted I come inside, though, where there was fresh coffee waiting. I took the cup she offered me. She wouldn’t have had to offer me anything, but she did, and it could have been the first morning when we’d talked so easily except this time she stayed at a distance, her voice hurried and sharp. I felt like the prisoner, then, stuck with a hot cup of coffee, while Kendra talked around me. And I do not, to this day, think I have ever heard one single person’s name mentioned more times than I did Byron’s, over the next quarter hour.

“Byron has more responsibilities now, but he’s good at that kind of thing, administration. I know Byron is glad to have you back, he would have been over last night, only he had another meeting at school. Club Night is coming up, and it takes planning. Byron says he’s glad to have his brother back, we’re both really glad to have you here. Byron especially.”

Meanwhile she was setting the table in front of me, three placemats and a space for Celeste, high-chaired and protesting as she was pulled up to the table.

“Oh, Byron misses your father, I’m sure you both do. Byron’s not the kind of man to let on, but I can tell. It was hard those last years, for both of us, but he helped out. Byron’s so good to help with the kids, too, when he’s not at work.”

After the buildup I can’t say I was surprised to see the man himself come in a few minutes later. Kendra kissed him with an enthusiasm that seemed to catch him off guard. When he saw me he smiled, and came over.

“Nice to see you, Arthur, how’s it going? I don’t get home much for lunch, it’s a long drive.” As he sat down next to me at the table, smile fading, Byron looked up over his glasses at his wife.

“Here’s your soup,” Kendra announced, “eat it while it’s hot. The sandwiches will be ready in a minute.”

Byron nodded, wondering.

“Byron loves to come home,” his wife said, “and I love to see him. When we were first married, he used to come home all the time even if it was just for fifteen minutes. Byron’s like that, romantic.” She blushed for me, pulling on Byron’s shoulder.

My brother shrugged, picking up his spoon. “I like vegetable beef,” he said, and asked me to pass the salt. Kendra talked to us quickly and without stopping for the next fifteen minutes, competing with Celeste, who started crying about five minutes in, and continued nonstop until it was time for Byron to go back. Kendra saw us out together, waving with an almost frantic relief that we were out the door.

Byron turned to me when we’d got out to his car. He had soup on his chin and was still puzzled.

“It’s tough to get away from school like that and come all the way back for lunch. We only have forty minutes. My Lord, she calls at 10:30, and expects me home at eleven, how do you figure that? Hope she gets settled down some.” He looked at his watch and then at me. “Do you usually eat this early?”

“Not usually,” I said, and walked back around toward the house.

The pine flats and low sandy shores of Michigan, a chill dry wind off the Canadian Shield, oil, rust, cold gray lake water — they’d all smelled exactly the same to me: *freedom*. I still hadn’t been able to get away from corn, but by the time I turned twenty I was on a steel ship wrapped around 15,000 tons of the stuff, bound for all over the world. Those were the golden

years of American agriculture, all three or four of them, when bankers came knocking on doors for borrowers, and when he who dove deepest was bound to come out on top. That meant exactly nothing to my dad, of course, and I'd still see him on his old Allis-Chalmers, hauling 80 bushels at a time down the county road to Delfina, those few times I made it home to visit.

But I was out on the lakers: ore boats, grain boats, limestone carriers, even the ferries one year, not believing the luck of being out and away. Up under the bridge at Mackinaw, gliding past the deep pool of lights and sirens of a city like Detroit, it may not sound like much, but to me it was freedom of the sweetest kind. Maybe I mixed up an era with forever, but there was music I'd never heard before, college girls we'd meet at beach parties who were willing to give me a try. And I had a shot at it too, because up there I was anybody I wanted to be, not just Byron's little brother, that shy boy from the old Conason place east of town.

It's easy to miscalculate, though, to make mistakes. When Byron came over later that night I figured he was going to give me hell about Kendra. Or try to, anyway, I was ready for him. But he just hung around for a few minutes, there in the kitchen, kicking at the broken linoleum, still trying to think of something to say. He inspected the wiring on the water heater, and pronounced it fit. He poked at my campstove, asking how it worked. He drank a glass of water and told me about his day at Tippy Valley. As if I cared, the last day I spent in school was the last day I'd ever given it a thought, but I'd relaxed by then: Byron didn't notice anything and never would.

He didn't stay all that long, but you'd think—it occurred to me later anyway—you'd think that he might have come up with something to say about the house and the two of us being in it. After all, he was the older brother, and we'd spent sixteen years there together. At the time, though, I was just nervous that he *would* start in on the past. Some things are better left unsaid. If he'd considered going into it, he had the good sense to let it pass.

I thought later too, that maybe it was because we never left the kitchen. Kitchens are friendly that way, they let you get on with life. This one had already been through hundreds of pounds of bacon, thousands of eggs—breakfasts my mother would have cooked for Byron and Danny, my dad for us, and then, when we got a little older, us for us. And that doesn't

even count the family before us and the trucker's wife after. There wasn't a trace of any of them anymore, so the one memory I did have, when I was bedding down later, came up to surprise me. It was a quick clear picture of toast burning, a broken plate on the floor, my dad's arm drawn back to strike. And good old Byron there, sullen, his eyes wet, forbidden to even raise his hand. Me? I was out of the way, thank you, biding my time to leave.

I'd have to say the lake boats were friends to me early on, and over the years too. I'd grown up with them, really, into a man. The round-the-clock watches were designed with shipping in mind, not remembrance. My car was another friend, a good one, ready and waiting out in the yard.

I doubt that they would have had cable TV there yet, up in Saginaw, but they got the Detroit stations. Some of them went on all night. There in the old farmhouse I sat by myself on the cot, in the glow of the drop-light, and . . . what? Lit a cigarette? I didn't smoke. A drink then, a stiff shot of whiskey like the cowboys pour. Not very likely, though, because for my money the biggest babies in the world, even bigger than sailors, were the ones lined up in the barroom sucking on their bottles. There weren't any aerobics classes back then, I didn't study foreign languages, refinish furniture, collect feed store pens. There's every damn fool thing in the world to keep busy, but it's worth it, I think, to step up to the edge and just be there, listening, knowing you're alone in the world. Kendra had Byron, for better or worse, and Byron had Kendra. Joey didn't have anybody, but he was still a kid, and didn't know that yet. Lenny had a wife he was afraid of, Charlie Sellars had my \$300 all tucked away in the Delfina bank, and I had a three-foot circle of light. People sometimes wonder if they have the nerve to go on. I knew that I did.

A little later, with my jacket on, standing out in the living room, I could still smell the charred paneling on the east wall. A few feet behind me, just out the window in the moonlight, was the tangle of Charlie's endrows, turned over for winter. I did try to remember good times there in the house, happy times, but I came up short. The door across the room was ajar, opening into the dark parlor beyond.

I've mentioned the picture that had hung on the stairway, of the three of us boys. If it had been there that night I still would have recognized Byron, his parted lips, his heavy brow, serious even then. I remembered that Danny, there in the middle, had always seemed like a nice enough

looking boy, whenever I'd see him on my way up or down. Smooth skinned and smiling over a plaid bow-tie, he was two months from being crushed dead in a grain bin, but we didn't know that then. As the years went by, and I aged up and away from that photograph, it got harder to recognize him. It got harder to recognize myself too, for that matter, the littlest one on the end: wide-eyed, eager, clearly still tickled from something the photographer had said. We didn't know anything back then, that was the problem.

We knew nothing, nothing at all. For all I knew the world ended at the edge of our barnyard, with Delfina a distant galaxy beyond. It was a mighty small solar system too: Byron, my dad, a neighbor or two out in the yard. Willy and my cousins when we were lucky. I remember one of the old women we had in to watch us, that in my Thumper the Rabbit book she'd gone through to cross out all the "Lordy's"—the things they would protect us from! People talk about the good old days, but ask around, anybody who grew up in them will be glad to let you have them back, postage paid.

It wasn't just us, though, nobody knew anything back then. Nobody that we knew anyway. All the farmers thought they could be sober, decent people, and that would be enough. They thought that would be enough to get by, to let them keep on doing things the way they always had, but people showed up who knew better. Young farmers came in, guys like Gerry Maars, and they passed them by like they were standing still.

We just didn't know anything, that was the problem. My dad trusted that old fraud Baker in Delfina while my mother got sicker and sicker; nowadays they'd have her up at Mayo within the week. Uncle Willy was the one who finally got my dad to go up to Fort Wayne, and he was up there, too, when they finally operated. My dad always thought Willy had way too much to say about things, but I wouldn't even know this much if Willy hadn't told me, one time when I visited him down in Lafayette. He'd been with my dad in the waiting room when the doctor came out, and it was odd, Uncle Willy said, because the doctor was smiling. He had a big wide smile, and was carrying something in front of him on a towel. It turned out to be my mother's uterus, and the two of them stood in the Fort Wayne waiting room, watching while he pointed out what he said was a tumor, near what he said was her cervix. The doctor was smiling

because he'd been right, this had been the trouble just like he said. My dad and Uncle Willy smiled then too, because they could feel his confidence: she was going to get better. On the way back down to Delfina they'd finally started to relax, but it turned out the doctor was wrong after all. My mother ended up dying a couple of months later, in the same spring that I turned three.

Out there in the living room I'd noticed something that pleased me, which was that the house wasn't all that big, wasn't all that dark, wasn't much of anything once you were out in it. And by then I'd decided anyway. It was a good thing neither the trucker nor Charlie either one had gotten around to burning the place down, because the next night I carried the cot up to what had been my room, and bedded down there. The trucker's kids had left superhero stickers all over the inside of the door, so they kept an eye on things while I slept. The next night I spent in Byron's, a snap. Mice had eaten through the wire back to my dad's room, but I traced and spliced it, and that's where I set up next. No ghosts walked, and the sun came up the next morning, right on schedule.

She'd died up there, of course, in my dad's room, but that wasn't the end of it. Not the way things were back then, I told you we didn't know anything, back then the dead never left you alone for a minute. Her casket was set up downstairs, and for two or three days after that we had our breakfast with my mother behind us, just across the living room in the parlor. When Danny's turn came it wasn't any different, he got his couple of nights in there too.

I'd never had hard feelings toward the trucker who'd lived there, not like I sensed Byron and Kendra did. His family had never had an easy time of it either. For my part, I liked thinking of him playing pool there, in the room we never really used. The next night I set up my cot right in the center of the room, framed by the marks from the table. I'd picked up a Sunday *Indianapolis Star* in town for half price, so I read it there in the parlor, waiting for sleep. I must have dozed off, because the next thing I knew it was the middle of the night, and I got up and turned off the light. The morning dawned gray and overcast, warmer, with rain coming in on the wind.