

PHILIP TATE

BLACK CHEVY

Soon time will take a leap.

The car is a 1950 Chevrolet, the one his father left. It is black and has fender skirts over the rear wheels and a visor above the windshield. Its paint is dull and scratched, it has over 65,000 miles on the odometer, and the rods are shot: they hammer against the crankshaft from deep within the engine. He understands how engines work and how they wear out, so he drives slowly, keeps the engine topped off with heavyweight oil to keep the noise down. He idles through town, cruising, driving with one hand on the steering wheel, slumped in the seat so he can barely see over the hood. The radio glows but is broken and silent. He shifts early, keeps the engine down, but still feels the dull thudding in his right foot of all that is going wrong.

His hair is too long, he wears sunglasses that are no longer stylish—too big, too black, too thick—and he works a toothpick in his mouth. Already he is eighteen. Later this spring, he will graduate. As he drives back and forth through town, he thinks of the future, how time will soon take off. He drives faster and chews his toothpick harder. But then the engine hammers, so he slows down, hopes the rods will last. When they finally go, and he knows that it won't be long, they will knock a hole in the side of the engine block, and there will be no fixing that. The whole thing will turn to junk. He throws the chewed toothpick out the wing window and closes it. He is nervous about the engine, and he is nervous about the end of high school, the space of time that he sees laid out steely and gray. His friend Andy is already dead: Navy, medic, Vietnam, shrapnel.

He feels time clicking off, hears it in the deep hammering of the engine, hears it in the steady sweep of wind past his car window.

His mother is lying on the couch with her hands beneath her head, watching baseball on the television. The sound is turned off. "Where were you?" she says.

"Driving," he says. "Killing time."

"Are you back with your girl?"

"I already told you about that."

He goes off to the little bedroom at the back of the house. For an hour or so, he is awake, lying on his back, listening to nothing, seeing nothing, feeling just a hint of dread. He gets up for a glass of water. His mother is still awake, still on the couch with the television flickering, her flattened hands joined to form a pillow beneath her head. "You won't be able to get up," she says, her eyes on the television.

At two o'clock, he is still awake, watching the sharp angles the moonlight casts on the floor through his bedroom window. And then it is three, and if he has been asleep, he doesn't feel it; all night is the unsteady notching of time toward summer. It is the clamor of knocking rods, the sudden absence of his friend. It is the girlfriend he no longer has, the job that ended, the life that is now behind him. All of it torments him, pushes him insistently toward summer.

He sits up in bed, presses his hands to his head, worries that what hasn't already gone wrong soon will.

34

"Your father wouldn't let you stay out so late," his mother says in the morning.

"My father is nowhere to be seen."

"If he had stayed, he'd be talking to you." She eats buttered toast, sips coffee thick with sugar, sits with her heavy robe pulled tightly about her and high up her neck, as if it is winter.

He eats cereal with milk—sees nothing but what is in the bowl, hears nothing but the clink of his spoon—picks up his books, hurries to his car. He lets it idle a minute to warm the oil, to soften the hammering of the rods, then drives off slowly toward school. He smokes a cigarette on the way, imagines his girlfriend beside him, touching up her lipstick in a mirror she holds in one hand, imagines that she leans over to kiss him when she has everything just right. He closes his eyes to receive it, feels the warm, glorious red, touches his cheek where it would have been, if that, too, had not gone wrong.

He parks on the street near the side entrance of the high school, hurries in because he is late.

"No sunglasses," the teacher says, so he takes them off, blinks against the bluish lights in the small classroom. The ceiling is high, and the windows are so near it that he can see nothing but the blank sky. "And pay attention," the teacher says. "This is history. And get that toothpick out of your mouth."

He looks at the teacher, sees him as if for the first time: he is tall and thin, has a dark shadow of a beard, wears a blue sweater with the collar of his white shirt showing. The boy blinks. History. He thinks, somewhat slowly and incompletely, *Where, exactly, am I?*

At midterm, he is failing all but one subject, PE, and in that he has a D. "I don't know what to do," his mother says. She is holding his report card. "You won't graduate, you know. Not with these grades."

High school. He sees it as a slab of time, imagines it from the other end, looking back. History. He sits down to eat his soup.

"And then what?" his mother says. She is watching a baseball game on television.

He spoons canned soup, smells chicken and metal, crumbles crackers between his thumb and fingers. "Then I'll be dead," he says, and sits up straight.

"Oh, you will not. High school doesn't kill you."

He puts down his spoon. Too much chicken. Too much thin soup.

Kansas City is behind by two. His mother moans.

35

He skips the rest of the day, drives instead up the hill past the empty swimming pool where he once worked, then down again and through town. Back and forth, up and down. After school, he stops at the far edge of town to see her. She works at the drive-in, skates to cars with food balanced on a tray. She passes him three times before stopping beside his car. "I can't talk," she says.

"I know. I want to eat."

"What?"

"I'm still thinking." He raises his dark glasses to read the menu on the pole outside his window.

She skates off. When she comes back, she says, "Your car is smoking."

"I know."

"Well, turn it off. It's stinking up the place."

"It may not start if I do. The old Chevy's about had it."

"Look, I've got to go. I can't stand around. And I meant it when I said it was over."

"I know."

Her lips are gloriously red, and her dark hair is hanging down from the hat they make her wear. Before she skates off, she looks at him. For just a second, he wants to cry because she has the look of someone he will never see again. He puts his dark glasses back on and lights a cigarette, idles out of the parking space, shifts, idles out onto the street, drives back and forth through town until dark. The streetlights come and go: white, white, white. And the engine is noisier than ever, knocking even at an idle.

He parks in front of his house, turns off the ignition, and pats the dashboard as if it were an old dog.

His mother is waiting inside the door. "You missed dinner," she says.

"I know."

"Where have you been?"

"Nowhere. Just driving around."

"Well, you got your letter," she says. "It says you've got to report."

He looks at the letter, sees nothing, lays it down on the kitchen table, and turns his eyes to the ceiling, seeking nothing. Eventually, he lights a cigarette.

36 His mother puts her hand on his shoulder, kneads his tight muscles. She is wearing her pink robe and has a towel wrapped around her head, as if she has just washed her hair. "Give me one," she says, reaching for the pack of cigarettes in his shirt pocket.

"Since when do you smoke?"

"Since I found out my boy is going to the Army."

They sit watching baseball in the dark, with nothing to light the room but the television. They are smoking cigarette after cigarette, tapping ashes into a tin tray between them. The sound is turned down so they can talk, but they say nothing, just watch batter after batter come to the plate—swing silently at pitch after pitch—until Kansas City is down by one at the bottom of the ninth. The boy and his mother lean toward the mute television, holding their breath as thin streams of white smoke curl from the cigarettes they hold between their fingers. Pitch after pitch, swing after swing, until it is the last pitch—a high fastball—and the batter swings a mighty swing, hits it silently with one swift, round movement that sends it flying on a high, climbing arc toward the outfield. It rises, rises, rises—forever and gloriously outward.

His mother, her eyes fixed on the television, raises her free hand as if asking for silence, as if to say *wait*, but he is stunned, frozen in place as he

watches the ball rise above the lights on its smooth and inevitable arc into the darkness; he is still and silent—and terribly, terribly happy—for that small fraction of his life before it begins to fall, before time resumes.