

I blame my father for my having gone to Shepard's in the first place. Dad always told me that if he had to beat me every day of my life to get me to turn out like he expected, he was up for it. Luckily for me, he died when I was eleven.

Dad died as he lived, as he continually admonished me to act, "like a white man." He was putting up a clothesline on a pulley from the upstairs window to the garage. I was supposedly helping. I think he just liked to have an audience. We had already affixed one end to the garage, and Dad was on the top of the ladder using a nut driver to put carriage bolts into the sill of the window. I was handing him the bolts using a bathroom plumber's helper for reach because I wasn't very tall at eleven. The plunger was Dad's idea.

"Smarter than the average bear," he chortled, quoting a cartoon character.

He was about finished when the ladder slipped, and for some reason he had his neck between the cords. The tough, rubber coated rope held him long enough for something to snap.

He landed badly, too, on the plunger which adhered itself to his bald head. After he came to rest, I prodded the white tufts of chest hair poking from his open melon-colored bowling shirt. "Dad?" I asked, gently. I wasn't completely sure that the fall wasn't just the proper dismount after putting up a clothesline. Dad was full of odd ideas.

When some time had gone by and he didn't get up, I called the cops using the number I had memorized.

"Has he gotten to her yet, or is she just cornered in the bedroom?" the dispatcher asked when he heard my voice.

"She's not home. I think *he's* dead. He was hanging the clothesline, and it returned the favor." Short as I was at eleven, I was already glib.

They couldn't get the plunger off his head so they had to saw the handle to get him in the ambulance.

My Uncle Dukey took an interest in me after Dad died. Dukey teaches piano at the high school. Duke is his first name. His full name is Duke Of Windsor Jameson. His mother was very impressed that the Duke abdicated his throne for the woman he loved. Uncle Dukey awoke in me a great feeling for music that wouldn't have happened if Dad had lived. Dad had always despised Dukey and all musicians except maybe Charley Pride.

Uncle Dukey made me a competent musician. While I like playing to small groups like in bars, I don't have whatever it takes to play on a stage or, frankly, the interest to be there. I wrote songs and hoped someday to make it big selling them. However, average bar pianists don't make enough money to live comfortably, so long before I left home I looked for a trade that I could learn quickly that would afford me a living while I waited to strike it rich.

During my junior year in high school I happened to be thinking along these lines while having my hair cut. I asked my barber how long it took him to become one. He said about nine months, but if he could start over he would become a hairdresser. They made three times as much money for a cut, did expensive chemical stuff like perms and colors, and got paid to just *dry* hair. “Besides,” he pointed out, “you get to hang around women.”

So, based on this suggestion and perhaps to avoid dying like a white man, I decided to attend Shepard’s Academy in Lewiston.

After Dad died, Mom changed my role from an ally to a stand-in for Dad. Physically I resemble him when she first met him. We both are of average height, thick chested with broad shoulders. He had my shock of dark hair and high forehead, my square face and broken looking pug nose. I’ve seen the wedding pictures when he was at his best, looking trim and confident, and felt the jolt of recognition. My Aunt Joan, Dukey’s wife and Dad’s sister, tells me that while I’m alive Dad is never truly gone. It all scares me. I always fear that his anger, his rage, his penchant for violence, and, yes, even his dark, secret pain may live within me. Though I was often a trial during adolescence, I was never like Dad. I was rebellious to Mom, continually testing her, fearful that she would convert to the way he acted and yet prodding her to it. We were both locked into our sour memories of him, me cursing her for being so strong only after he was gone, and her searching me for the shadow of him. Then, I blamed her for the world. Now, I can understand that her ability to judge men could have been seriously impaired by fourteen years of living with a man whose favorite line was “If I killed you after he was born, I’d be out by now.”

Life at home for the last six years had been so . . . loud, that three days after I graduated from high school, I packed what I owned in my old yellow Buick Apollo and left to seek my fortune. Mom said she was sad to see me go, but I felt her relief, verbally echoed by my much younger sister, Opal.

After leaving home, I took a small room in a boarding house and found work playing piano in a lounge for the summer and waited for autumn when I would begin beauty school.

That is when my nine months of lessons in truth and beauty began. But I learned far more than I was taught in school. I did more than grow up, I became so changed that I can never look back on that time without wondering how it all happened, how I became a man without becoming my father.

On my first day of school I sat in a room with about twenty other would-be cosmetologists, painfully aware that I was the only guy. The room, forty feet square with cheap wood paneling and duct tape on the worn spots in the carpeting, was stuffy. In Maine the first week of September is sometimes the hottest of the year. Sticky, twitching, but silent, we all waited for a teacher to arrive. Finally, Ted, the manager of the school who modestly used the title “Director of Admissions,” came in and opened the window. Ted was a very calm man whose every facial expression reminded me of an elderly

basset hound. Whenever he smiled it looked like a mistake. He was middle-aged with short cropped gray brillo for hair. He mostly liked to wear argyle knit vests.

“This will be the quietest day of the year.” Ted predicted with a slight Acadian-French accent. “Relax. Your faces are as white as your uniforms.” This sparked nervous titters. “Welcome to Shepard’s. We expect you to dress as if every day is your state board exam. Women must wear tan hose, not white. White is for nurses. We do not allow gum. Smoke only in the basement breakroom or outdoors. You will be in class in the mornings on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday this week. In the afternoons you will be in the practical application room upstairs. Next week we switch. After you know what you are doing, you will alternate class/practical with the clinic out front. We do this by your name tag color. Half are blue, half are red.” Everyone looked to see what group she or I was in. I was blue. “Once you have covered the whole book you will be in the clinic full time until you graduate at the end of fifteen-hundred hours.” He covered the handbook and answered questions about parking and the like.

Halfway through the morning there was a knock at the door. It was the rest of the faculty, one man and two women. The younger of the two women was about thirty. She was heavy set and had bottle-blond, medium-length, heavily lacquered hair which projected off one side of her head. Her mandrill makeup caked her cheeks. She wore a taupe and cherry colored scarf around her thick neck accenting her teepee of a beige uniform. In direct contravention to the handbook, she had bracelets from her wrists to her elbow.

“This is Anna,” Ted stated. “Her father bought the school from Mr. Shepard five years ago. She’s my boss, but I tell her what to do.”

“I have to get back to class.” Anna sniffed. I felt like she was staring at me, but I often thought that of people.

“I’m George,” the man said. George was slender with a sandy mustache and thinning hair. He was dressed in flashy slacks and shirt. “I need to get back to the clinic. We lose more ears when I am absent,” he clucked. “I look forward to working with you all.”

“And this is Mrs. Pononnaleu. We call her Mrs. P. She’ll be your teacher for the first two weeks. Good luck.” Ted said as he left.

“Poe-non-na-loo.” we all said in our heads. Mrs. P. must have been a former fashion model. She looked like she was in her late thirties-early forties. She wore a tasteful rose uniform and a stylish hairdo. A student hairdresser for almost an hour and already I felt sure that I knew what was stylish. During the summer I had studied the hair magazines.

Mrs. P. spied something out the window and barked, “FAT TRUCK!” cheerfully. I looked out the window and saw Anna already marching purposefully out to a van that was opening into a snack cart. “The first person who sights it gives the call,” Mrs. P. explained. “Anyone who missed breakfast, now is the time. We’re taking a break.” She left the room followed by several students.

A blonde girl with a smile that was so broad it could set her earrings swinging tapped my shoulder. “I’m Jenny Lou Colby from here, Lewiston.” She had dimples on both cheeks of her heart-shaped face.

“I’m Forrest Cone. I come from Putnam,” I gasped, with undue emphasis on my first name. My Dad always called me Percy. It became the name most people used except my Uncle Dukey and a few other teachers. Most people thought it was what my middle initial P. stood for. I resolved to put up with Percy to hide the even more horrible truth that my

mother had named me “Forrest Pine Cone.” The blue Shepard’s name tag on my white uniform said “Forrest.” I was pathetically happy about it.

“I was studying to be a nurse, but it got too much for me, so I quit. I can’t seem to shake the white uniform, though. This is my roommate, Linda Lentil.” Jenny continued.

“Pleased to meet you.” I said. “I’m Forrest,” I repeated. Linda had lovely brown eyes. Looking into them was like gazing into deep water sluicing wildly under a bridge in the hot summer. She had very long, dark hair combed back. Little wisps curled at her hairline. She smiled. I smiled.

“Linda’s from Vermont.” Jenny Lou continued. “Middlebury.”

“Middlebury. My girlfriend is going to school there.” I said. Wendy really wasn’t my girl friend in the traditional sense. I deeply wished she were. She’s my first cousin, but Wendy confided to me that she was adopted when I objected to playing doctor with her when we were six. From six to eighteen I daydreamed she was mine and waited until she was finished toying with lesser men before declaring my intentions.

“Oh, small world,” Jenny Lou said.

“Yes.” I agreed.

Mrs. Pononnaleu came back, and we all settled in to learn something. The first chapter of the text book covered personality, ethics, and poise. Mrs. P. rushed through personality, took a little more time with ethics (gossiping is bad!) and moved right to poise. I could tell it was her favorite. We all practiced poise which meant standing with your right foot facing forward, putting your left foot at an angle with your left knee bent slightly like it said in the book.

“Feels weird, dunnit?” Mrs. P. asked.

We agreed, and she continued. “You are all starting out, so now is the time to learn to stand correctly. This angle stuff is so much silliness. You aren’t modeling for a magazine. This is a job where you’ll spend all your time on your feet.” She showed us how to stand, straight with weight on both feet. Then she said, “Forrest, you can relax a bit. This isn’t the army.”

I felt the burn as my ears flushed with my cheeks. My Dad had made me stand at attention so often it was my nature to act like I had a plunger for a spine. I hated being singled out.

We all sat down and learned not to behave like every stereotypical movie hairdresser. “Beware the current popular image,” Mrs. P. warned. “We are like doctors, lawyers, and college professors. If we all act that way, cosmetologists will become just as respected. Don’t think of yourselves as hairdressers or . . .” she cringed, “beauticians.” With this grim advice we broke for lunch. Mrs. P. reminded us that we would meet upstairs in practical in the afternoon.

I got my ham sandwich from the fridge in the basement and brought it back to the classroom. Jenny Lou, Linda, and a few other girls drew their chairs in a circle. Linda told me to join them. I am always squeamish around new people so I shook my head.

“Hey-boy, get over here.” Linda said. We glared at each other for a minute. I stayed put because I felt it would be awkward to *obey*, or at least on the first day. I gulped my food and hurried to the practical room to get a spot in the back.

I carried my case filled with rollers, rods, and other equipment from the basement and got my head from the rack. We all were issued a mannequin with hair from poor, I guess newly bald women in the orient. I named mine “Harriet.” I clamped her to the table. The

big room was full of tables. Chairs lined the walls. The windows along the two outside walls had plastic over them. On the third wall there were very old posters depicting cranial nerves.

Ted, whose office had a picture window looking into the practical room, saw me and came to sit beside me. "Feeling out of place?" he asked, crossing his fingers in his lap.

I nodded.

"Well," he said, "I learned a different way. Mr. Shepard took me on when I was a little older than you. All I did for years was shampoo patrons and hand him clips, rollers, rods, and end papers." Ted made passing motions in the air. "I watched him do hair. I watched his fingers do magic. He never did two women's hair the same. That's why they loved him. After he became famous, he started this school. At first he loved having so many people to show off to. But as the years went by the rules, they piled up, and he proved to be a lousy businessman, so he slowly sold out to Anna's father. Her father sells supplies to salons. He wants you to learn to use his products.

"Forrest, there are two kinds of hairdressers, pardon, cosmetologists: artists and mechanics. The artist, like Mr. Shepard, makes the look happen. The mechanic like me can be taught steps to achieve it. I never did figure out the secret that was in Mr. Shepard's fingers and went into the business side of it. He had me run the day to day stuff but never asked me about the big things."

"Where is Mr. Shepard now?" I asked.

"He's in Tennessee. He started another school."

"You didn't go with him?"

"Our . . . relationship was over by then, and I was very hurt when he sold this place, that we both had worked to build up, without telling me." Ted said. "I think now it was just because he was embarrassed about having it slip away. He was a proud man."

"Why have you told me all this?" I asked.

"You looked very miserable." I must have seemed uncomfortable then because Ted said, "Don't worry. I am not looking for anything from you." He showed me his wedding band. "I have been married for six happy years. I just feel like I'd like to have a protégé."

"Okay," I said. "I'd like to be one."

"Okay. First lesson: Twenty percent of all cosmetologists are men, and they make eighty percent of the money. So, learn to enjoy being in the minority."

He left, and I stared at Harriet until lunch was over. My fellow students came up the stairs giggling, already friends. I was disappointed when Linda and Jenny Lou went to a table across the room.

A slender ash blonde set up beside me. She had a very dark tan and long fingernails. "Karrie Honniger," she said, "with a K." when I told her my name. She was very pretty but seemed annoyed.

Mrs. P. had us wet down our heads using the spray bottles from our kits. The hair became tangled and knotted immediately. The oriental hair had been bleached white and colored Caucasian with a brown dye that bled onto our white uniforms. We had to use lots of creme rinse that looked like chicken fat.

Karrie started to complain, "Are these cheap mannequins? I paid a lot for it. This hair is a rat's nest, and this icky brown stuff is all over me."

"It washes out," Mrs. P. comforted. "Don't worry, the first time is always the hardest. It's what we have to do to practice on real hair."

She counseled us to learn to never put down our combs. "Make it a part of you," she said. "Eat, study, read with your combs. Make it feel comfortable in your hand."

At that point I was ready to throw my comb through Harriet. I had already lost one in the snagged hair and was pulling strands out by the roots. Mrs. P. showed me how to start at the ends to work snarls out.

After we all had the miserable hair combed out we learned to part hair and section it in bunches about the head. That was easy. I got too much of a kick out of my big plastic butterfly clips. I'd never seen the like before. I had Senor Wenchez talks with the big toothed mouth.

After we had the heads sectioned Mrs. P had us comb the hair out and redo the parting. Over and over. We learned the Shepards' philosophy. If you do an operation ten times you are better off than if you did it once, one hundred was better than ten, one thousand and so on. You were there to comb, standing straight.

"The biggest thing you must learn is confidence." Mrs. P. said. "You learn confidence by having done something over and over until it becomes second nature. You will be surprised at the number of times you will part hair if you are to be cosmetologists. Much of what we do are things we do over and over. If you're to be successful it will be doing Mrs. So-and-so's hair the same way every Tuesday at ten."

The afternoon, like the morning, parted in a neat line on a plastic scalp. I soon was on the way home with eight of my fifteen hundred hours completed.

The room I had gotten at the boarding house was very small but it was all I could afford at the time. It had a desk and a bed and not much else. There was only a narrow tunnel where you could stand up straight, as it was under the eaves. The landlady was a crusty oldster who charged extra for every little thing like parking and use of the communal kitchen. I had given up the latter privilege a few days after moving in. The first time I used it was enough.

On the wall of the kitchen were two fly specked crayon signs: OVEN OUT OF ORDER and DO NOT USE KITCHEN AFTER NINE. There were three people sitting at a table pushed against the wall. The woman at the end of the table had a tonsured haircut. She was wearing a baggy black sweat shirt and double knit stretch pants with an elastic waist. She had been eating a pigeon. Raw. Feathers formed a semicircle on the table and drifted in the air about her head. On the opposite side of the table was a short muscular man with frizzy hair. He had a huge tattoo on his arm that depicted an unspeakably gruesome act that would be considered obscene in most countries. He was eating a steak sandwich with one hand. It looked cooked anyway. In the middle was a guy about my age with a dark thin mustache and a sneaky look on his face. He was dressed in white. He was slurping soup, which I later found out was all he knew how to cook. I went to the sink to make an ice tea when the woman yanked her nose up, glared at me and returned to her once statue- perching repast. The guy with the tattoo pulled his arm up like he was going to shake hands, but I noticed his hand was closed around a gun.

"You from out of state?" he demanded.

"No, I'm from Aroostook." I said.

"Cain't be too careful." he grunted.

"I agree," I swallowed.

The woman said “Whenrooburn?” staring at me again.

“Excuse me?” I asked.

“August, so you’re a Leo,” she cackled, spraying feathers. She grandly licked each finger, wiped her mouth on her sleeve, and dry washed her hands. She wrapped the bird in the foil it lay on, put it in the refrigerator and minced to the sink where I stood.

“I’m Pat, and you are in my way.” Her eyes glittered wildly as she elbowed me in the ribs.

I said, “You could have asked. I’d’ve moved.”

“You’re a Leo, so go lie-on something.” She sniggered and slapped her thigh.

I thought she was done at the table so I sat down. She turned to me and said with greasy umbrage, “You are sitting in my seat.”

“You didn’t use the sink.” I mentioned, as I got up. She tripped me, and I landed heavily on the floor.

Pat shrieked, “This will teach you to leave other’s things alone, you young scum.”

Instantly the landlady appeared. “Who make dis racket?” she spat. She had a shotgun in her hand. Good gravy, I thought, what is this, the NRA chapter house?

Pat put on an angelic expression and pointed to me and said, “J’ accuse!”

The other two men ignored the whole thing. “How’s the soup?” Tattoo asked. “Luke warm. How long do *you* heat it?” Sneaky Mustache replied.

The landlady glared out of one eye and said, “One more racket and you sleep in de streets!” She wheeled, ignoring my apologies. Pat followed her.

I got up from the floor and sat at the table. “I’m Forrest.” I offered.

“Rory,” Tattoo said.

“Tony,” Sneaky Mustache said.

Pat came back in the kitchen, and I got up and skipped to a corner. She eased up to me and handed me a clipping. “This will enrich your life,” she bubbled. I read it. “Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor’s goods.” it said. “You want my pigeon,” she asserted edging closer.

“No, I don’t.” I answered truthfully.

“Okay, I’ll sleep with you.” she cooed.

“You must be joking.” I said aghast.

“Faggot!” she screamed, and neatly hooked my legs out from under me. I nearly brained myself on the counter on the way back to the floor. The landlady was back as if by magic. “Rough House Fine! Five dollar or you sleep in the street.” Pat stalked off happily. I paid, grabbed a peanut butter sandwich and my ice tea, and slunk to my room. When I got there I found a feather in my glass.

After that I usually ate at the bar where I worked. I got a dorm fridge which cost extra to have in my room. I drew water from the bathroom sink.

Shepard’s matched students with roommates so they could get apartments, but I had to wait until another guy started school that needed a place to live.

The next morning we were back in practical. I was late getting to school because Pat was chanting in the bathroom, but found I needn’t have rushed because Mrs. Pononnaleu hadn’t arrived either. My place next to Karrie was open, so I clamped Harriet to the table

there. I started to wet Harriet down and the rest followed my lead. Anna came in the room and smiled.

“You are all so industrious!” she burred. She walked over to me. “Forrest,” she read. “That doesn’t suit you. Why don’t we all call you . . . Studly?”

“Uh, no, let’s not.” I pleaded.

“Why?” she smiled brightly, cocking her head to one side.

“FAT TRUCK,” came the call from downstairs. Anna left hurriedly.

“Studly?” asked Karrie, looking querulous.

“Forrest.” I affirmed. “Forrest.” I said to the room at large, though I could tell the damage had been done. A new hateful name had been embedded in all of their minds like dentures in a caramel apple.

Mrs. P. finally arrived. She had a flat tire. She praised us for jumping right in. That morning we were to learn to be gentle with our patrons. The way we learned this is a medieval torture called a frosting cap.

One student, the victim, would put a tight rubber cap on her or my head. Then another student, the tormentor, would take a crochet hook, six inches of pointed steel, and poke it into the cap and hook some hair and pull it out the tiny hole. Karrie agreed to be my partner. I was capped first. The hook entered what felt like my right frontal lobe, and I bellowed. Everyone looked at me.

“Geeze, Studly, get a grip.” Linda said.

Karrie popped me on the ear with her knuckles. “You are making me look bad,” she snarled. I bit my lip, and she went for more hair. After I resembled a porcupine, and the cap felt like it was adhered to my scalp with my own blood, Karrie yanked the cap off. “Your turn.” she said.

I tried so carefully not to hurt her, that I couldn’t get the hook through the hole. Finally I did. Her hair was very fine and I had to swirl it around like a fork in spaghetti to catch some. I eased her hair out through the hole, and she asked me, “What was so bad about that?”

“I’m ticklish, I guess.” I said.

At home I had used Mom’s washer and dryer so I had never been to a Laundromat. Saturday, after the first week, I loaded a duffel with my soiled stuff and hiked the familiar trail down to the nearest one. I was amazed at the seediness of the place. The walls were gray fiber board and all the machines were dented and rusty.

The freaks who were hanging out there looked like they were waiting for a half decent excuse to get in a violent argument. There was a really smelly red-headed-and-bearded giant slouching on the laundry folding table. His leather coat said “Slick Sammy.” He was showing off a new toy to two rough friends. It was a nine inch long black cylinder. When he pushed a stud on the side it elongated out to two feet in length. He grinned showing his nicotined teeth and cackled in bursts. He then started to slam it against the palm of his hand to get it to close. It didn’t, and he rammed his paw a good one. He dropped his plaything and started to jump around like the wounded animal he was. Unfortunately he landed on the thing, which, being round, rolled, spilling Sammy to the floor. The gadget shot over and bounced off of my sneaker.

I picked it up, pressed the stud on the side and closed the thing up with one finger. Then it hit me that that may have been a foolish thing to do. "It was stuck." I said sheepishly.

I offered my hand to Sammy to help him up. He looked at me as if deciding whether honor dictated that he fold me, but he took my hand and got to his feet. "This is a neat weapon." I said. "How do you get an enemy to use it?"

"You're all right, buddy." Sammy guffawed, swatting my back. He dug out his wallet and pulled a card from it. "You are now an honorary member of the N.K.S.S."

"National Knights of the Silver Stallions" I read, feigning awe. I tucked it in my own wallet. We shook hands.

I resolved to find another place to do my laundry.

The rest of the month was just as much fun. I got a 96 on my personality, ethics, and poise test. I missed the trick question asking what the name of the publisher of our text book was. Hairdresser humor.

Anna taught us permanent waving. She made a lot of mistakes in the class part, and while the others didn't notice whenever she said something wrong, Karrie and I made the mistake of correcting her. When I got my perm test back I was surprised to see I had gotten a perfect score. Anna had, however, written a note to the effect that she "would appreciate your (my) keeping my work as unadorned as possible." I had doodled some notes and a treble clef while thinking. It was an old habit.

We learned to cut. I hacked my knuckles so bad the flesh on them looked like rice.

At noon of the last day of the month I scurried up to practical after eating. Linda Lentil followed me up.

"What do you do up here all by yourself?" she whispered. Her husky voice sounded sensuous when she talked quietly, which wasn't often.

"I think." I said. "And I part hair. It was the last thing I was good at."

She frowned and seem to be considering something. "You're weird." She paused a moment like she was considering something important. "Hey-boy, Columbus Day weekend I am going home. If you want to visit your girlfriend, I can give you a ride. I could use the company. If you can stand to be with someone for that long."

"I would be delighted to go." I said.

Before long it was October.

TWO *Early October*

After I first moved to Lewiston I experienced quite a bit of disorientation. Putnam, the town I grew up in, the place on Earth I hate the most, is a very small, mean little town of about six-thousand, continually declining into the potato dirt on which it rests. As my Dad always said, “A great place to be *from*.” Lewiston, when I lived there, had about twenty-four thousand people. I had to adjust to not saying “hello” to people on the street, to witnessing embarrassing public displays of very personal moments, to the smells of the bread and shoe factories, to the raucous come-ons of the hookers that hung outside the French clubs on lower Lisbon Street, and to the constant grunt and bleat of cars passing day and night in front of the house in which I lived.

What bothered me most was that there was no place to go where I could be alone in the evening when the claustrophobia of my tiny room became too intense. I hiked the streets forlornly seeking a respite from the aural elbows of my fellow city dwellers. I thought I might find it among the barkless trees, mud, and dandelions of JFK Park in the center of the city, but a librarian warned me not to find myself there after dark.

Finally, after weeks of seeking stillness, I happened upon St. Peter and Paul’s Catholic Church on Ash Street. I was living on Pine just a block away and had passed it dozens of times on my perambulations. However, I was raised as a Protestant, though no specific denomination. I think Mom and Dad were married in the armory because the Methodist Church had recently burned down. What I knew of Catholics was given to me by my grandmother who had two strange prejudices, both relating to death. One was that Catholics were all rich but never spent any money except on lavish, gaudy tombstones, and, second, that they stood their dead up in a corner at all night drunken wakes.

I took it almost as a divine gift when on a melancholy whim I climbed the two tiers of worn stone steps to the peace of the upper balcony. The church is built on the side of a hill and the added forty or so feet the steps ascended put the balcony even with the roof of the four story apartment house across the street. The stone parapet crushed down the clamorous garble of city sounds to whispers and muted echoes. I would sit there, my back to high carved doors, joined by two blind statues hanging overhead, and stare down on the city through the short granite balustrade, at the bloody yellow light of the clock on city hall, the dirty plumes of smoke, rising like grisly, escaping dreams, and the jagged roofs of the boxy, gray tenements. I would carefully, quietly listen to myself think. I could always find calm no matter how swaddled I was with my troubles. It was the closest to God I have ever felt. I saw a Smile in clouds crossing in front of the stars far above the twin spires curving from where I sat to the heavens. I never understood why the parish never used the upper doors during the time I lived in Lewiston. They just used the lower ones under the balcony.

We had been asked to bring in a friend on Tuesday of the first week of October to give us a break from mannequins. I asked around the bar where I played piano but got no takers. The kindest response I got was “Like fun.” I ruled out the people at the boarding house. Jenny Lou brought two of her cousins for herself and Linda. Karrie introduced me to Mom Honniger. All the other students had found someone so George, the current teacher, asked Anna if she would be my guinea pig. Anna had her hair colored auburn by then. I wanted to part her hair, and if I couldn’t just part, I wanted to do a very minor trim.

“I want a frosting.” Anna said. I noticed then that she was rather muscular. I wondered if I had enough experience being gentle.

George looked at the kinky, thick hair damaged from too many color choices and told me to do a glinting. Frostings are two processes, a bleach down to white and a color on top of that. Glintings are a one process high lift tint. “Her hair is pretty beat up. I think you’d get too much breakage with a frosting.” George said.

It sounded good to me. I discussed it with Anna. She told me to go ahead. I had a hard time finding a cap large enough. I finally ended up using a plastic shower cap like hotels give out. Shepard’s used them to cover hair when giving facials. I had to make my own holes and fretted over spacing. I was glad that I used the thin plastic because I don’t think I could have pulled the coarse hair through the small holes in the thick rubber frosting caps. I gingerly drew the hemp-like stuff out, and Anna grumbled and lifted a heavy arm if the hair snagged for a second going through the hole.

I applied the tint and carefully timed it. George looked at the color and agreed with me that it was done. I rinsed her off.

Her hair was still wet so I offered to dry it with my airwaver. At Shepard’s we called them airwavers because some elderly matrons kept calling blow dryers “blow jobs”. I think they knew what they were saying and got a sly kick out of it. Mrs. Pononnaleu was mortified. She came up with the name “airwaver.”

Anna thought it over and said, “I *always* have it set by Ted, but you need the practice, so go ahead.” I think she enjoyed being worked on, and then again she’d taught me to set.

I was never very good with an airwaver. Basically all the women students did their own hair and had some experience before starting school. I hate to admit it but my own hair hadn’t much involvement with a comb before I started at Shepard’s. I definitely needed the practice, so I stuck my brush into her mop and started to dry the hair.

The hair seemed to grow. It got bigger and bigger until it looked like the Bride of Frankenstein but all around her head. I frowned and calmly asked her, “Does your hair usually get this big?”

Anna picked her hand up to touch it, and her hand hit hair a good foot from her head. She looked in the mirror and simmered for five, six seconds before exploding with long, fairly graphic curses. Her eyes bulged. “Come here so I can *hurt* you.” she snarled. I gamely stuck out my arm and choked, “If it will make you feel better . . .”

She shoved me, said, “Get away from me!” and went for the door. My fellow students looked on in horror.

Anna ran into George coming back in after having stepped out for a smoke. “My God, what happened to you?” he said, blanching.

She bellowed and wheeled back to me. She grabbed my shears, backed me to the wall, and lunged. Crazy as this may sound, I was wondering if Sassoon had started that way as

I ducked. The shears bent as they tore a piece of cement from the wall the size of a walnut. She fell over from the force of her blow, and somehow I managed not to be under her.

I ran for Ted's office, slammed the door, and leaned against it. "Hide me." I pleaded.

"What did you do?" Ted asked. "You have to be a gentlemen around these young ladies. You go apologize, and I am sure everything will be just fine."

Anna's fist burst through the door a scant space to the right of my head, and I said, "I don't think so."

I darted for under Ted's desk, and he opened the door. He calmly examined Anna's hair, and told her to go wet it down and he would set it for her. She screaming that she was going to twist parts of me off. From under the desk I could see her eyes weren't even focused, she was so enraged. Ted kept talking in a soothing voice that her hair was fine.

She meekly complied. I watched from his office through the picture window, sure I had ruined her hair. Ted threw the rollers in. I have never seen someone work so fast. Of course the other teachers showed us how to be slow and careful. After Ted combed her out she looked fine. The glinting added softening highlights to her face. She thanked me. She even had her father give me a discount on new shears.

Ted told me, "Second Lesson: As long as there is hair, you can fix it, but you must stay in control."

At the bar where I work I play mostly show tunes. Occasionally when it's up to me, I play Jackson Brown, Warren Zevon, or Jimmy Buffet. I wasn't old enough to drink, but my boss, Jerry, a transplant from the sunny south with a horrid toupee and a handle bar mustache, would slip some gin in my tonic now and then. He called me "Bo." "Have un on the house, Bo," he'd say, smiling, "I dunno what that-all song is, but it's pree-dee. Sounds like thirsty work, though." When I had a couple or if it was slow, I felt brave enough to play one of my own songs. Once a guy said I made him cry and gave me a twenty in the tip jar. I told Jerry to cut him off.

The bar, which was also a restaurant, was in Auburn the city just across the bridge over the Androscogin River. On various occasions during the summer before I had started school I had also served as a sort of utility infielder. I cooked, waited tables, washed dishes, ran the cash register, and, when we were sure the liquor inspector wouldn't be around, tended bar. I had filled in some on weekends since starting school.

Thursday evening I was playing piano when I espied a tall, heavy guy with red hair and a beard. He was neatly dressed in a gray pin-striped suit and sitting at the bar with a thin, balding man. The red-head looked a lot like Slick Sammy but his bearing was completely different. I didn't think anything other than the old saw about everyone having a double in the world until Red saw me looking at him questioningly. His eyes widened in panic, and he almost spilled his drink on his friend. They left as soon as their table had been called.

Red soon came up to me and said, "You're the gentleman from the Laundromat, are you not?"

"Ah, yes," I said. "You're Slick Sammy?" His diction was much changed.

"Sometimes. Please pretend you don't know me."

"I *don't* know you." I said.

“Good.” he said as he hurried back to his table.

Later after the man with him had left, Sammy came back in and bought me a drink.
“Thanks for not exposing me.”

“Who are you to be exposed?” I asked.

“I work in a bank. Personal loan department. That was my boss.”

“Oh. Is your name really Sammy?”

“No. It’s Walter. Walter Butterfield. Sammy is my alter ego.”

“I’m Forrest Cone. I play piano by night and attend beauty school by day. You should have seen how ugly I was when I started.” We shook hands and chatted awhile. I thanked him for the drink. He seemed really formal, like someone who would wear a three piece, double-breasted suit. He had a slight British accent. His movements were gentle for such a big man.

“I was raised to be very proper, very controlled, but sometimes, deep inside, I have undeniable needs that Walter can’t fill, and I let Sammy loose.” he explained. “But the Walter side always fears that Sammy will be connected to him.”

“Wow,” I said. “I thought I had problems.”

“Sammy is that, a problem, but also a solution.” he said. “Thank you. It felt good to talk to someone about my dual nature. I appreciate it.” He smiled and left.

Columbus Day weekend came sooner than I would have liked. I was trapped by my overstatement that Wendy was my girlfriend and would welcome a pre-conjugal visit. I could have mayhap crafted another fib to explain to Linda why I was disinclined to accompany her to Middlebury. But I had finally grown sick of stale lies and fey imaginings. I resolved to tell Wendy how I felt. She had welcomed me so often in my interior dramas it seemed to me to be axiomatic that she would echo my unvoiced infatuation. I considered writing or calling to tell her I was coming, but lacked the nerve. I convinced myself I needed to see her face, feel her arms as what smoldered, splendidly ignited.

Wendy had always been my best friend. We wrote each other more or less daily. I knew all of her classes, her friends, the way around a campus I had never visited. I knew her every petty disappointment, all her sublime aspirations. It didn’t seem a far reach to expect, to crave, more. Heck, I *had* seen her naked a mere decade earlier.

Friday evening after school let out, I followed Linda to the parking lot. I had been walking to school because I liked the two mile stroll and hated to drive in downtown Lewiston. So I was surprised by her car, a Delorean. I put my duffel in the boot, and opened Linda’s gull-wing door for her. She looked at me with a frown.

“You’re not one of those radical feminists that punch well meaning gentleman are you?” I asked.

“No,” she said. “I just thought only my daddy did stuff like that.”

“My grandmother taught me to be a gentleman.” I explained. “After my grandfather died, my grandmother didn’t like to be alone, so I would visit her in the early evenings. We watched the news together, and she’d lecture me on things she observed when she was a waitress at resort hotels during the depression. She met John Kennedy when he was young. Well, not met, she brought him a malted milk.”

Linda got in the car, smoothing her white uniform dress under her buttocks before sitting. I think she smiled when she caught me looking. It was hard to tell with Linda.

I closed the door and walked around. When I had eased into the leather seat I gushed, “Wow.”

“Isn’t it neat?” she said. “It was my big graduation present.

“I take it your dad’s rich.”

“He owns a lot of the gas stations, car washes, and convenience stores around New England. I think he’s into fuel oil, too. When I moved here I got in terrible trouble because I just drove away after they pumped my gas. When I was growing up I never had to pay. Geeze, was I embarrassed.”

“Really?” I said.

“Yes, really.” she said.

I must have hurt her feelings because she didn’t speak again until we were in New Hampshire. “Really that I didn’t have to pay, or really that I was embarrassed.” she said quietly.

“I didn’t mean anything by it. I was trying to make conversation. I’m not good at it. I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings.”

“Let’s start over.” she said. “Why do you want to be a cosmetologist?”

“It is just a means to end. I kind of fell into it.” I told her about my haircut and then, in a rush, about my music.

“Sing something for me.” she said.

“I don’t sing. I never write the words, just the music. It’s how I express myself. Come by the bar where I work, and I’ll play something for you.”

“You have a job and go to school, too? How do you find the time to study.”

“I do it on breaks.”

“I suppose I should feel lazy, but I never have had a job. Sometimes Daddy would have me roll quarters from the car washes, but only when my allowance ran out, to teach me the value of money.”

“I’ve worked since I was eight.” I said.

“What did you do at eight?”

“In the fall I picked potatoes. Year around I delivered newspapers. We had a three acre garden to weed in the summer. Sometimes I shined shoes door to door.”

“Geeze, did you play harmonica while your little monkey danced, too?”

That hurt. I was beginning to really dislike Linda. “No, I did it for clothes, to help with the mortgage, and to buy groceries. Money was tight even before . . .” I paused. I had never talked about Dad’s death to an outsider before.

“Before?”

“My dad died. It was an accident. He was hanging a clothesline and . . .” My old joke seemed so silly I didn’t want to tell it to her. “. . . he died.” If I had been able to cry at that time I probably would have. I certainly felt like it. Remembered fear . . . relief . . . guilt seized me in waves. I turned my face to the window, deeply embarrassed.

“You must have loved him.” she whispered.

“No, I *hated* him.” I hissed, wishing she would stop talking.

“How could you hate your own father?” she asked.

I looked at her. “It was easy. Look, can we just listen to the radio.”

“Fine by me.” she said grimly.

She dropped me off outside Wendy's dorm. We agreed to meet there again at two on Monday.

I was wickered light-headed looking at the dormitory. It was three stories tall, made of brick and had lots of big windows. I knew which one was Wendy's. I couldn't tell if she was home. Her light was on. I wished I had a piano so I could serenade her. Choosing a heavy instrument kept me from being corny, so I walked into the lobby.

There was a brunette with long hair in her face reading a Harlequin romance seated at a desk. She looked up with just her eyes, her jaw slack. She was very pale.

"Help yooo?" she sighed.

"Barney Google." I said. It was the password for friends for that month. There were two. The other was for pizza delivery men. The dorm was run with a kiddy club attitude that Wendy found too precious.

"Huh?" she said.

"It's the password." I explained.

She looked under the desk blotter. "Oh. Yeah. You want me to buzz someone, or do you know the way?"

"I know the way." I said and started up the hall.

"Wait a minute." she called. "You forgot the secret handshake."

"I don't know any handshake." I said.

"Just kidding." she grinned.

I ambled up the hallway. The further I walked the blurrier my vision seemed to get. Finally I came to her door. The cardboard dial beside her door had the various places that she went. As she had said in her letters, there was a position labeled, "Writing Forrest, Do Not Disturb." That is where it was turned to, a good portent. I hoped I would find my way to her heart as easily as I did to her room. It was about nine-thirty. I could hear her humming inside. I decided to go for the big effect. I had visions of playing something beyond doctor. Forrest, the Flesh Surgeon, that was me. I wanted to go right from Band-Aids to a Nobel Prize for medicine. I twisted the knob; it wasn't locked. "Heh, heh," I thought as I threw open the door. "Surprise!" I chortled with glee I did not feel.

I watched in morbid fascination as a creek of sweat rippled down her face. Time had compressed, and I found that I was really concentrating on the dewy trickle as it formed drops on her chin and on a curl of hair stuck to her cheek. Then I noticed her lipstick was smeared all over her lower face like she had been kissing a newly painted barber pole. I had never seen such shock in her eyes, or for that matter on the face of the guy she was already operating on.

"I'll be going now." I mentioned, pulling the door closed. I staggered up the hall promptly getting literally lost. In my state all the walls and halls looked the same. Finally a resident assistant, bellowed crisply, "Excuse me. Who are you? What are you doing here?" I guess I looked a mite deranged.

"Barney Google." I said wishing I could go back to last time I said it.

"Who plays third base for the Dodgers?" she asked. I guess it was the floor password.

"You've caught me. I am a German spy. Have me shot at dawn." I said.

"What do you want?" she asked, looking concerned, thinking no doubt that I was on something instead of off something.

“I can’t find my way out.” I said.

She took me to the lobby. Wendy was there, hurriedly dressed. “Oh, Forrest,” she said.

“Oh, Wendy.” I answered.

She took my arm and said, “Let’s go for a walk.”

We went out into the chilly air. On the maples around the dorm some leaves had turned, on the grass some had fallen, but in the yellow light of the flood lamps, they all looked gray.

“Why didn’t you tell me you were coming?” she asked.

“I really made an ass of myself.” I whined. She didn’t say anything. We sat on a bench near a small pond twenty yards from the dorm. The weeds around the edge bubbled in the dark. “Ever since I have known you, I have been in love with you.” I said. It was so easy to talk about after it was no longer an issue. “Tonight, I decided to tell you. I saw the sign on the door and . . .”

“It’s a code.” Wendy said.

“I figured that out.” I replied tartly.

“Forrest,” she said, “we’re cousins.”

“You said you were adopted. Plenty of times.”

“I lied.” Wendy said. “You know my mom. You would lie, too.”

“Oh.”

“You must have known. I mean, I look so much like her.”

“I hadn’t wanted to believe it.” I said, picking at some loose wood on the bench. The air smelled like rust.

“I’m sorry.”

“Me, too. You looked like you were having a good time.” I said. She punched my arm and then hugged me.

“You’re my best friend. I don’t want to lose what we have, but I just don’t feel that way about you. I couldn’t.” she whispered.

I flicked the wood into the pond. It made slow, creeping circles. “It’s probably just my hormones.” I said. “It’s all sex for guys my age.”

She smirked in her sly way and shook her head. I grinned and kissed her still damp cheek. I got up feeling so light, so free of an unvoiced promise, that I could no longer sit. I started to walk away.

“Where are you going?” she called after me. “I’ll write you about it. You go back to writing me. Write me about *that*. See you at Thanksgiving.” I said. I wandered into the night.

Where do you go at ten on a Friday night in a strange town when you need a piano? I couldn’t think of a place. Then, as before, I happened on a Catholic church. It was one of those modern jobbies that they slapped together in the sixties with strange geometric shapes and big panes of stained glass, St. Anne of Something. The door was unlocked, my night for them. There was an elderly priest praying near the sanctuary. The priest was taller than me and in his fifties. He had thick, black glasses. He was bald on top except for a black cotton ball of a curl in the middle of his forehead. He smiled in the middle of his heavy ten o’clock shadow and asked if he could help me. I told him I wanted to

borrow his piano or organ for a bit and briefly explained why. His name was Father Labbe, and he took it well. "It's late," he said. "I was traveling today and just popped in to say my office. I'll be going to bed right off."

Right then, I felt exhausted, but didn't have money for a motel room. I had gone for broke and found it. I considered asking for a pew, too. He must have understood because he took my arm and said, "Come with me. You can play in the morning." He took me to a guest room with my duffel dragging on the floor all the way. I slept more soundly that night than I had since leaving home in June.

In the morning I awoke to the smell of coffee. Father Labbe brought me a tray the housekeeper had made up. I gratefully ate the shirred eggs and toast points. After breakfast and a shower, Father Labbe said, "Perhaps before you start playing the piano you would like to help me rake some leaves. Our sextant is ill and the cemetery looks dreadful." He handed me some gloves and a wicker rake. I smiled and told him I would be delighted.

We raked through the morning, and at noon the housekeeper called us to lunch. I told him a version of my odd relationship with Wendy. We agreed I probably hadn't been in love, just in love with the idea of being in love. He was easy to talk to. I also told him about hairdressing and writing music. When I mentioned my ride, Linda, Father Labbe recognized his wealthiest parishioner. "Roland Lentil's daughter," he said. "Pretty girl. I think she is to be engaged soon to a young man in the military." I hadn't known Linda was attached. Father Labbe must have gotten the impression that I was unhappy about that, because he said, "I don't know if that's definite. It is something Roland told me. Now you wanted to use our organ . . . over the baptismal and the mother's room.

I sat on the bench and flexed my fingers. "Nothing too racy, now, and if you see a small elderly woman with a plaid coat and small oval glasses come in the church leave as quickly as you can." Father Labbe said enigmatically. He left, and I played through the afternoon. The organ was one of those big electronic ones. I can't remember what I played. About three I walked downstairs to go to the bathroom and saw Father Labbe sitting in the last pew. He grinned sheepishly. "I wanted to listen to you. I hope you don't mind," he said. "You are very good. It will be time for Saturday evening service soon. You are welcome to join us, but our organist will insist on playing."

"Can I sit in the gallery with the organist?" I asked. "I have never been to a mass and don't know when to sit and kneel and what all. I don't know Latin."

"That would be fine," Father Labbe said. "And we do the mass in English now."

When the lady Father Labbe described entered the gallery she looked at me sitting in the choir and sniffed, "You sing?" I told her no, I just wanted to watch.

"You going to learn something from Ol' Eleanor?" she snickered. She was tiny and elfin. Her eyebrows were drawn in with a pencil.

"Yes, Ma'am," I said.

She practiced, her head thrown back, swaying, her eyes closed like she was playing Carnegie Hall in a movie. She was a very bad organist. During the mass she kept smiling at me like she was Liberace. I looked for Linda, but didn't see her.

After the mass I asked Father Labbe why they had such a poor organist. "She bought the organ for us years ago with the stipulation that she be the organist until she decided to retire. She was already retired from teaching so the pastor at the time agreed."

That night he and I played cribbage. He could have beaten me easily but didn't.

The next day at eight I watched another mass with Eleanor. She was emboldened enough to start to sway like Ray Charles. If I had hung around a little longer she may have made it up to Jerry Lee Lewis. I could just see her with her black, thick-heeled pumps banging on the keys.

Early in the eleven o'clock service I saw Linda sitting up front between a short bullet-shaped man and a tall guy in dress whites. It was the first time I had seen Linda out of uniform. She had a green velvet dress that looked nice with her dark hair and eyes. She wore white gloves. She didn't seem that affectionate to the soldier, but then again she was in church, a Catholic one at that. Eleanor noticed my inattention and asked me to take over for a spell.

"I have never played a mass before." I whispered.

"Play the notes." she said. "I'll coach you. I used to teach piano." she whispered. She talked like her teeth were clenched. I guess something was supposed to have happened because Father Labbe cleared his throat over his microphone. I sat down and played. Luckily, the hymns were set up to be easy. I hit the keys, my eyes on the black beetle notes, my ear full of Eleanor's murmurs, and my mind in the first pew. After the service Eleanor took Father Labbe and I out to brunch. "The boy isn't bad, Father." she said. "You from around here?"

"Just visiting for the weekend." I said.

"Too bad. A few more weeks and I could have sharpened you right up."

After lunch I helped the sextant clean up the church. He was feeling better. During my shellacking at cribbage that night I told Father Labbe that I thought Linda had looked very nice that day. He looked at me sorrowfully. "I find it silly that one of my functions is to give council on matters of the heart, but I have grown fond of you these past few days. If you do decide that you care for Linda Lentil, remember to tell her in fewer than ten years."

I laughed and said there was little chance that either case would happen.

The next morning I thanked Father Labbe for all his kindness and promised to write. I walked anxiously back to Wendy's dorm and arrived forty-five minutes early. Linda was already there. "Where were you coming from?" she asked.

"I caught Wendy with another guy, and we broke up." I said. I briefly explained my adventures with Father Labbe.

"That was you playing at mass? We wondered what had gotten into Miss Ribbagee."

"Eleanor?" I said. "She knows her stuff. I think she has arthritis."

"Did you see me?"

"No. Of course, I was busy playing. Who all is we?"

"Oh, just my mom and dad." she said. "Studly . . ."

"Forrest." I corrected.

"Forrest, I am sorry for whatever I said that made you mad on the way here." she said. "I'm surprised I didn't suggest you eat cake."

I chuckled.

She looked at me seriously, "I'd like it if we could be friends."

I was taken aback. I had thought of her giving me a ride as a kindness to a fellow student. I hadn't many friends growing up. I had either been too shy or too busy. "I'm not sure what that means." I said.

"I'd just like to get to know you. Would that be so hard?"

“I won’t join your group.” I said. “But I’ll give it some thought.”

She did most of the talking on the rest of the way back to Lewiston. She cheerfully told me about growing up with her brother and two sisters doted on by her happily married parents. It sounded incredible to me though every once in a while I had to remind myself that what she experienced was normal and my life its cold shadow. I was suffused with jealousy and scorn.

I saw her as a frivolous, vapid little thing that would never fully know life as anything but a reflection of her inner ego. I couldn’t see how we could ever be friends.

And yet, the glimpse of her in her green dress between the two men haunted me. She had seemed oddly vulnerable. I don’t know why, but I wanted to protect her from them. That really made me feel foolish. I resolved to put her off until she forgot that I existed.

For myself, I had to learn how to live life by myself without a fantasy woman in my thoughts.

THREE

Late October

Tuesday morning I walked into the classroom, and a new student was in my usual seat. The girl's blue name tag said "Joy." She had reddish hair in a bouffant and freckles. I frowned. I am an creature of extreme habit and hate to have my routine broken. It bothered me that she was in *my* seat. Karrie came in, looked at the girl, and sat down.

Joy saw me still standing there staring at her and misinterpreted my agitation. "You're Studly, right? I'm supposed to watch out for you." Joy said. I hurriedly, but grudgingly, sat in another chair. A different new girl opened the door and said, "Joy, we're supposed to be upstairs this morning."

Joy got up. The other girl asked, "Is that the famous Studly?"

"I guess so, he's the only guy I've seen."

They left, giggling up the hallway.

I had hoped that the "Studly" name would die out but apparently it had an obscene life of its own. I quickly recaptured my seat. "Forrest," I told Karrie. "My name is Forrest."

"I know," she said, but Anna has been giving new students orientation tours. I heard her talking to them about you and me. She has a low opinion of us."

We were supposed to have Mrs. Pononnaleu that morning, but every six weeks, except for four in August when George and Mrs. P took their vacations, Shepard's started a new class. Ted liked to have Mrs. P. break in the new students. So we ended up with Anna.

After all of my fellow classmates had arrived, Anna started teaching the theory of hair-styling. I raised my hand to ask a question, and Anna said, "Studly, I don't want to hear from you. Just put your hand down."

Karrie spoke up quickly, "Anna, his name is Forrest. You aren't his mother. I don't see why you insist on naming him. I can't see why the rest of you are so childish and keep calling him something that he obviously dislikes. We're paying your father for you to teach us. If Forrest has a question, please answer it."

Anna glared at me and sneered, "Forrest?,"

I was shocked. All I could say was, "I forgot my question."

The rest of the class laughed. Anna steamed out of the classroom, slamming the door behind her. It was as quiet as the first day of school.

"Nice going," an older woman named Janice grumbled.

"What I want to know," Linda said, "is if the size of the rod determines the size of the curl, why can't the size of a guy's curl tell you the size of his rod."

"Ol' Forrest'd get a body wave using soup cans," Jenny Lou chuckled.

They laughed, and I felt blush-branded.

Anna was gone a half an hour. When she came back, she returned to her lesson as if nothing happened. But she looked at Karrie and me with the heavy lidded eyes of a predator.

Every Tuesday Ted and I walked up the street to the burger place for lunch. It was our weekly bull session away from the shop. Ted said to me as we walked, “I’m afraid you’ve made rather a bad enemy of the wicked witch of the west’. You and the other one had better find some way of making it up to her, or else she’ll get even in a nasty way.”

“What could I do except buy her her own fat truck?” I asked.

“You could develop a respectful attitude. She *is* your teacher.” he replied.

“I guess so,” I said, “but shouldn’t respect be earned?”

“That depends on whether your father owns the school. She wanted you both kicked out.”

“We didn’t do anything to deserve that.” I said.

“No, but while you may not think much of her, the other students like her. She and they could interpret situations differently.”

He had a point. Anna was popular with some students, particularly those far from home for the first time in their lives because of her mother hen attitude. If a problem was about school, my classmates went to Mrs. P., but if it was personal, they went to Anna.

“Think about it.” Ted suggested. “It wouldn’t hurt you to make up with her. I really think she means well. She may even have a crush on you.”

“How pleasant. How nice.” I said.

We arrived at the restaurant and ordered our usual. Ted liked a cheeseburger with no pickles, fries, and a Coke. I got the same except I liked pickles but couldn’t abide catsup. After we slipped into a plastic booth, Ted took a big bite from his burger and then checked to see if they got the order right. Ted loved it when they made a mistake. He would take his sales slip and the bitten burger to the counter to get a new one. I felt like telling him that the counter people may err on purpose to make him happy — I had seen one wink at me — but I knew it would ruin eating out for him. Ted encouraged me to do the same as he, but I wouldn’t eat the catsup even for a free bite of burger.

I have hated catsup since I was seven. That was the year Dad took the family to a public park named Burnt Brow. It was beautiful place beside a very deep lake. The trees, tall hardwoods with limbs beginning thirty feet over our heads, were spaced close enough together to make you feel as if you were in a huge room with a thick and soft nut-brown carpet of roots and packed leaves. It was thoroughly quiet except for an occasional distant yodel of a loon. The sun polished the indigo waters of the lake.

Dad and Aunt Joan must not have been feuding then because she, Dukey, and Wendy had come along. It was Father’s Day. I remember Dad as he cooked, his pink stomach hanging out from under his new blue bowling shirt with little black pin patterns, his few hairs stuck to his smooth scalp when he took off his cloth hat to wipe away the sweat, his white legs poking out from his frayed, cut-off khaki dickeys, and his left eye squinting out the smoke from the cigarette clenched in his reptilian lips. He made steaks for the adults and red hot dogs for Wendy and me. I ate three with lots of catsup.

I remember what happened after we had eaten as if I had watched it instead of lived it. Wendy was bored. She and I had drank our allotted two cans of grape soda, and she wanted some of the gingerale from the four half-gallons that Dad called mixer. She tried to convince Dad that soda should be divided evenly. She argued with him until he looked at her sourly. “Take a hike.” he growled, menace in his tone.

We didn't want to go for a walk because the woods were too buggy once you left the area where the breeze blew in off the lake. Wendy decided she wanted to go wading in the chilly water. I remember the little me, dressed in a broad-striped tee-shirt with a dark crew cut, waving my tiny arms trying to get her not to ask to go swimming. "Shoosh, shoosh, shoosh." I pleaded excitedly, jumping up and down. Wendy asked anyway. Mom and Aunt Joan agreed that we couldn't go until an hour was up, so we decided to play cards. I was relieved and hoped Wendy would forget about wading. My terror of the water sang within me, bright and sharp.

Mom was playing with my two-year-old sister, Opal, who Dad called Peggy, making funny noises and waving Opal around. Aunt Joan looked on, cooing harmony. Uncle Dukey had gone to take a nap in the back seat of his car.

Suddenly, Dad grabbed me; his thick arm surrounded my chest so it was hard to breathe. He informed me as he strode across the picnic area that no son of his was going to be scared of water. He took me to the end of the rotting gray wharf. I looked down into the murky-blue water, saw the depth crush the light, and struggled for the first time ever against Dad's will. He swatted my head and threw me off the wharf.

I didn't flail or whatever I was supposed to do. Stunned, I sank, looking up at the bubbles coming out of my mouth impacting with Dad's shadow on the sunny surface of the water. I don't know why, but fear left me. I expected to drift under the water to the far shore across the lake. Once there, I planned to walk slowly back around the shore, arriving back at the campsite in time to go home. The water was so cold it burned. After I descended so far that I couldn't see Dad's shadow, I felt safe. It was new experience, and didn't last long as I lost consciousness.

Dad realized that I wasn't learning to swim, so he ripped off his Father's Day present, the bowling shirt, and dived in after me. I remember his trashing the water and grabbing my shirt only in a vague, dreamy way. On shore he pounded angrily on my back. I coughed and puked up my lunch. I couldn't get the taste of catsup out of my mouth. Later, as I snuffled in exile in the back of Dad's pickup, Wendy snuck me some ginger ale. I had bruises on my back for days. They healed, but from then on the thought of catsup always made me nauseous.

Ted's burger had no pickles. He frowned. "Next time." I said checking both buns carefully for tomato corruption. "If you want you can have my pickles to trick'em."

"That wouldn't be fair." he said. "Why won't you eat catsup?"

"Ah . . . the acids in it cause canker sores on my tongue." I replied, munching the pickle I had offered Ted.

"So, what happened on your trip to see your girlfriend?" Ted asked.

"Well, Wendy decided we should see other people, so after a farewell frolic, we called it quits." I explained.

"You don't seem too depressed about it."

Up until then I hadn't thought over how I felt about losing all hope of Wendy's affection, a love I had coveted for over a decade. Maybe I never really believed that she would ever be mine. Maybe I was a cold S.O.B. All weekend it had never occurred to me that I should be blue. I was strangely happy.

During this thinking I must have blanked out on Ted because he expanded on his comment. “Good for you. My theory is ‘Tint Removes Tint’.” Ted referred to the strange fact that the only thing that could clean permanent hair dye spilled on something was more dye.

“I am going to stay color free for a while.” I said.

“Hah!” Ted said. “I bet that you’re ‘dyeing’ for some girl by Christmas.” “Lunch?” I said.

“Catsup.” he said.

“Excuse me?”

“You tell me before Christmas break that you haven’t been mooning for some woman, and I’ll buy you lunch for the month of January, but if you are then you have to eat a burger with extra catsup.”

“Catsup.” I said, aghast.

“Not so sure, huh?”

“Ho-kay, you’re on.” I gulped.

While I was in Vermont Rory had been kicked out of the boarding house for bringing women to his room for well, you know. The landlady didn’t mind so much the immoral aspects, but it really bothered her when a female guest would flush or shower using more of her water. Rory didn’t want to stop, so he took the invitation to “sleep in the streets.” Actually he moved in with one of his many paramours.

The landlady had a porch over her garage where she hung her laundry out to dry. She was out there the Wednesday evening after Rory left. *Someone* snuck back into the house with a big dog he had stolen. *Someone* had sprayed the dog’s muzzle with shaving cream and pushed it out on the porch, slamming the door behind him. *Someone* cruelly kicked the dog in a tender spot, and it was yipping and dancing around.

I was reading upstairs and heard the landlady scream, “He killing me! He killing me! HALP!”

The landlady had a thing about animals.

I ran downstairs to the pay phone and called the cops. It was kinda nostalgic in a sick way. The policeman, Pete Belanger, a short guy with huge biceps and one very dark eyebrow, quickly arrived in his squad car. He took a look at the dog asked me to get something to make the dog friendly.

“Like what?” I asked.

“Food.” he said.

I got a pigeon from the refrigerator and handed it to him.

“What the hell is this?” he asked.

“All there is except soup.” I explained.

He threw the bird, and the dog wagged its tail and nuzzled it. Officer Belanger used his belt as a leash. The landlady quickly got up and went for her shotgun.

“Did you do this?” he asked me.

“Nope. I was studying when I heard her yelling. If I was the type to do this kind of nasty trick, would I call you?”

“I guess not,” Officer Belanger said, making his eyebrow darker.

The landlady ran up the stairs and made ready to shoot the dog, but Officer Belanger talked her out of it. Then she wanted to shoot me, thinking I had put the dog on the porch. He had a harder time talking her out of that idea.

After she had been calmed down, Officer Belanger took the dog to the home on the tag on its collar where its owner was frantic.

Pat chased me around the halls waving the used pigeon. She got me a good one with it to the noggin before I got to my room. She vowed revenge.

Even though I was banned from the kitchen, Tony constantly begged me to teach him to cook. Tony, an X-ray tech trainee, had this annoying habit of coming up to my room and talking shop while I ate supper. He delighted in describing in glowing detail patients who couldn't hold their barium enemas and spattered the walls with radioactive fecal matter. The patterns always fascinated him.

All in all I was pretty nonplused with my living arrangements. But, worse was to come. On Thursday I arrived at the boarding house exhausted. I hoped the shower was free. I wanted a hot one and a nap before going to work.

As I climbed the third flight of stairs to my room I heard a clinking noise. I started to peek above the landing, and a hunting knife flew over my head into the wall. I hustled down to tell the landlady, but she wasn't home. Our relations had been tense after the dog incident. I hadn't quite convinced her that I had nothing to do with it. I wondered if it was her on the third floor, but decided her tastes ran more to firearms. Some nights I had gotten in late, and she had met me with a jacklight mounted on her shotgun.

I went to Tony and told him. He wanted to check my story. He suspected me of drinking. He wouldn't believe that I just worked in the bar.

As we crept up the stairway I noticed the knife was gone. "She's reloaded!" I gasped.

"Look, Forrest," Tony said with the false calm of a health professional, "I believe your story about how the knife hole got in the wall, but I think you should embellish the truth for the landlady."

The clinking sound started again along with gentle murmuring. Tony poked his head up, ducking immediately as the knife flew again. It hit the same hole in the wall. Tony looked at it, his mouth open. "There's a woman up there with a *pile* of knives," he said.

"And she's good at it." I said.

Fifteen minutes later the landlady came home. She read the note I'd left and trudged up the stairs. She saw the knife and said, "You vandal! You sleep in the streets."

Some threat, I thought.

Tony explained the situation to her. After she heard some clinking she called the police.

Officer Belanger arrived and asked if there was another way to the third floor. "Yes," I said, "There is a fire escape on the far side of the building."

"Does it open easily from the outside?" he asked.

"Yes," I admitted as the landlady glared at me. I used it when I was really late and wanted to avoid a muzzle in my direction.

Officer Belanger gave me his hat to put on a broom. Then he snuck around to the fire escape. He whistled a prearranged beer jingle, and I raised the target. A knife hit the hat in the center of the brim. Officer Belanger rushed the thrower. He called that it was safe to come up.

"After you, Tony," I said, looking at the punctured cap.

The knife thrower, whose name was Jill, was a former girlfriend of Rory. She had just gotten out of prison and wanted to hurt Rory for dumping her. Pat had given her the knives, and directed her to my room. Jill broke into my room and busted into my Kool-Aid Action Bank. The clinking sounds were my copper life-savings.

Instead of pressing charges the landlady took pity on the two hundred and fifty pound waif and offered her Rory's room.

Officer Belanger mentioned to me that Lewiston had 911 service and gave me a police first aid booklet that told how to self-treat sucking chest wounds before he left.

That night Walter came in again without his boss. He was in his suit, which was good because we wouldn't have let him in dressed in his other getup. He bought us both drinks. I noticed that he was glum.

"Rough day at the bank?" I asked.

"Yes. They all look so needy when they're after a loan. One gets depressed." he sighed. "And most of them make the same stupid loan arranger joke. But I am really upset because of my roommate. Norman's a successful writer."

"Bummer." I said.

"He writes pornography. Nasty fake little missives that they print in magazines."

"Long hours of research?" I guessed.

"No, he feels that his craft insists that he must sound out the onomatopoeia for veracity. He only works at night. He's very loud. I am sure he indulges in drugs. Oh, and he's a terrible slob."

"Is it your apartment or his?"

"Mine, but I can't afford the rent alone."

I told him about my living situation and asked how much his rent was. It was only a little more than I paid at the boarding house once I added what I paid for parking. Walter's place had a free lot. Walter happily agreed to give me a look at his place after I got off at ten. Smiling, I played the William Tell Overture.

Walter got really loaded. We left his car in the restaurant lot, and I drove him home.

As Walter had said, Norman was making noises in his room that sounded like the cast recording from three porn movies played at once. The wet noises were particularly gruesome.

Walter's apartment was huge compared to my room. There were two twelve-foot-square bedrooms in the back. A short hallway with a foyer on one side and the compact bath and kitchen on the other connected the bedrooms to the open dining room/living room area in the front. Some of the walls were brick, others plaster painted off-white. It was on the third floor of the building across the street from St. Peter and Paul's. "Wow, Walt," I said, "I think I could be happy here."

"Walt," he said. "I like that." We sat in the living room sipping gin. Walt took a really big gulp of his drink and mumbled that there was something I should know first. He was pretty bleary.

"Maybe you'd like to wait until tomorrow when you are a little more cautious?" I said.

"I'm gay." he whispered.

"Oh," I said. "I'm not. But it doesn't bother me. I think one of my teachers is that way too." It came out rather too quickly.

"*That way?*" he asked.

“Didn’t sound too good, did it?” I frowned. “I’m sorry. I’m a small town hick, so I guess I have some stickiness in my world view. I *am* trying to slough it off. Actually, it’s the biker part that troubles me.”

“That. I keep the clothes at the bus station. It is nothing I want connected to where I live.” Sam said. “And to alleviate your unspoken concerns, you aren’t my type. So, would you like to live here?”

I put out my hand and said, “Delighted.”

I agreed to move in as soon as we could displace Norman. Walt swiftly got up, threw open Norm’s door and shouted at Norm that he was to be gone by noon the next day.

Cowering Norm stammered, “But where would I go?”

“I don’t know but I can’t abide your caterwauling anymore.” Walt said.

I suggested that Norm might want to switch rooms with me, until he found a new roommate. He agreed. We both moved the next afternoon. I didn’t own much stuff, but I had to clean the rest of the day. Sam helped and bought me a new mattress for Norman’s old bed. The old one was in such a state that even after all this time I don’t want to tell about it.

The bar where I work had a costume we used for radio promotions, sort of a bar mascot. It was a brown and black leotard and the obscene shoulder wings. It had a huge mosquito head for a mask that was a trial to wear. It was set up like a periscope. You looked into mirrors to see out of the eyes six inches above your head. I had been cashiered into wearing it a couple of times over the summer. I borrowed it for the Shepard’s Halloween party.

Mrs. Pononnaleu dressed as “Miss Beautician” complete with all modes of dress she warned us to avoid (including lots of bracelets and makeup). Jenny Lou wore falsies on her back. Most women went the cowgirl route. There were three Groucho Marxes and a Raggedy Anna. Ted came as a clown. Linda wore a thin body suit, thigh reaching boots, a tail, and whiskers. She looked great. I could stare at her surreptitiously, but had to limit my observance because my costume didn’t hide much.

As I promised I handed out Jerry’s cards.

“Barf-ly,” Linda read. “Is this where you work. I still am going to come by some night.”

“Bar-fly.” I corrected. “I’ll save you a seat tonight.” I said. I couldn’t see her when she was close, but I greedily inhaled her perfume. I must have made a lot of noise because she asked, “You okay in there?”

“Just fine.” I said, worried that I really wasn’t.

Linda didn’t come to listen to me play. I admit I was disappointed. Not enough so I would eat catsup, though. I did play Dixie more than usual. The song usually made Jerry think piano playing was thirsty work, “look away, look away, sweet Dixie land.”

Whether October was a trick or a treat, hours later it became November.

