

RABBIT AT REST

MODERN



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John Updike

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***RABBIT AT REST***

**John Updike**

*Rabbit basks above that old remembered world, rich, at rest.*

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—Rabbit Is Rich

*Food to the indolent is poison, not sustenance.*

—Life and Times of Frederick Douglass

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STANDING amid the tan, excited post-Christmas crowd at the Southwest Florida Regional Airport, Rabbit Angstrom has a funny sudden feeling that what he has come to meet, what's floating in unseen above to land, is not his son Nelson and daughter-in-law Pru and their two children but something more ominous and intimately his: his own death, shaped vaguely like an airplane. The sensation chills him above and beyond the terminal air-conditioning. But, then, facing Nelson has made him feel uneasy for thirty years.

The airport is relatively new. You drive to it off Exit 21 of Interstate 75 down three miles of divided highway that for all the skinny palms in rows and groomed too-green flat-bladed grass at its side seems to lead nowhere. There are no billboards or self-advertising roadside enterprises or those low houses with cooling white-tile roofs that are built by the acre down here. You think you've made a mistake. An anxious red Camaro convertible is pushing in the rearview mirror.

"Harry, there's no need to speed. We're early if anything."

Janice, Rabbit's wife, said this to him on the way in. What rankled was the tolerant, careful tone she has lately adopted, as if he's prematurely senile. He looked over and watched her tuck back a stubborn fluttering wisp of half-gray hair from her sun-toughened little brown nut of a face. "Honey, I'm being tailgated," he explained, and eased back into the right lane and let the speedometer needle quiver back below sixty-five. The Camaro convertible passed in a rush, a cocoa-brown black chick in a gray feathered stewardess's cap at the wheel, her chin and lips pushing forward, not giving him so much as a sideways glance. This rankled, too. From the back, the way they've designed the trunk and bumper, the Camaro seems to have a mouth, two fat metal lips parted as if to hiss. So maybe Harry's being spooked began then.

The terminal when it shows up at last is a long low white building like a bigger version of the sunstruck clinics—dental, chiropractic, arthritic, cardiac, legal, legal-medical—that line the boulevards of this state dedicated to the old. You park at a lot only a few steps away from the door of sliding brown glass: the whole state babies you. Inside, upstairs, where the planes are met, the spaces are long and low and lined in tasteful felt gray like that cocky stewardess's cap and filled with the kind of music you become aware of only when the elevator stops or when the dentist stops drilling. Plucked strings, no vocals, music that's used to being ignored, a kind of carpet in the air, to cover up the silence that might remind you of death. These long low tasteful spaces, as little cluttered by advertisements as the highway, remind Rabbit of something. Air-conditioning ducts, he thinks at first and then crypts. These are futuristic spaces like those square tunnels in movies that a trick of the camera accelerates into spacewarp to show we're going from one star to the next. *2001*, will he be alive? He touches Janice at his side, the sweated white cotton of her tennis dress at the waist, to relieve his sudden sense of doom. Her waist is thicker, has less of a dip, as she grows into that bumpy body of women in late middle age, their legs getting skinny, their arms getting loose like cooked chicken coming off the bone. She wears over the sweaty tennis dress an open-weave yellow cardigan hung unbuttoned over her shoulders against the chill of airport air-conditioning. He is innocent and proud that she looks, in her dress and tan, even to the rings of pallor that sunglasses have left around her eyes, like these other American grandmothers who can afford to be here in this land of constant

sunshine and eternal youth.

“Gate A5,” Janice says, as if his touch had been a technical question. “From Cleveland by way of Newark,” she says, with that businesswoman efficiency she has taken on in middle age, especially since her mother died seven years ago, leaving her the lot, Springer Motors and its assets, one of one two Toyota agencies in the Brewer, Pennsylvania, area: the family all still speak of it as “the lot” since it began as a used-car lot owned and run by Fred Springer, dead Fred Springer, who reincarnated, his widow Bessie and daughter Janice have the fantasy, in Nelson, both being widowers with shrimps with something shifty about them. Which is why Harry and Janice spend half the year in Florida—so Nelson can have free run of the lot. Harry, Chief Sales Representative for over ten years with him and Charlie Stavros managing it all between them, wasn’t even mentioned in Ma Springer’s will, for all the years he lived with her in her gloomy big house on Joseph Street and listened to her guff about what a saint Fred was and her complaining about her swollen ankles. Everything went down with Janice, as if he was an unmentionable incident in the Springer dynasty. The house on Joseph Street that Nelson and his family get to live in just for covering the upkeep and taxes, must be worth three hundred thousand now that the yuppies are moving across the mountain from northeast Brewer into the town of Mt. Judge, not to mention the cottage in the Poconos where even the shacks in the woods have skyrocketed, and the lot land alone, four acres along Route 111 west of the river, might bring close to a million from one of the hi-tech companies that have come into the Brewer area this last decade, to take advantage of the empty factories, the skilled but depressed laboring force, and the old-fashionedly cheap living. Janice is rich. Rabbit would like to share with her the sudden chill he has felt, the shadow of some celestial airplane, but a shell she has grown repels him. The dress at her waist when he touched it felt thick and unresponsive, a damp hide. He is alone with his premonition.

A crowd of welcomers has collected this Tuesday after Christmas in this last year of Ronald Reagan’s reign. A little man with that hunched back and awkward swiftness Jews often seem to have dodges around them and shouts behind him to his wife, as if the Angstroms weren’t there, “Come on Grace!”

Grace, Harry thinks. A strange name for a Jewish woman. Or maybe not. Biblical names, Rachel, Esther, but not always: Barbra, Bette. He is still getting used to the Jews down here, learning from them, trying to assimilate the philosophy that gives them such a grip on the world. That humpbacked old guy in his pink checked shirt and lipstick-red slacks racing as if the plane coming in was the last train out of Warsaw. When Harry and Janice were planning the move down here their advisers on Florida, mostly Charlie Stavros and Webb Murkett, told them the Gulf side was the Christian coast as opposed to the Jewish Atlantic side but Harry hasn’t noticed that really; as far as his acquaintances know goes all Florida is as Jewish as New York and Hollywood and Tel Aviv. In their condo building in fact he and Janice are pets of a sort, being gentiles: they’re considered cute. Watching that little guy seventy if he’s a day, breaking into a run, hopping zigzag through the padded pedestal chain so he won’t be beaten out at the arrival gate, Harry remorsefully feels the bulk, two hundred thirty pounds the kindest scales say, that has enwrapped him at the age of fifty-five like a set of blankets the decades have brought one by one. His doctor down here keeps telling him to cut out the beer and munchies and each night after brushing his teeth he vows to but in the sunshine of the next day he’s hungry again for anything salty and easy to chew. What did his old basketball coach, Marty Tothoro, tell him toward the end of his life, about how when you get old you eat and eat and it’s never the right food. Sometimes Rabbit’s spirit feels as if it might faint from lugging all this body around. Little squeeze pains tease his ribs, reaching into his upper left arm. He has spells of feeling short of breath and

mysteriously full in the chest, full of some pressing essence. When he was a kid and had growing pains he would be worried and the grownups around him laughed them off on his behalf; now he is unmistakably a grownup and must do his own laughing off.

A colorful octagonal nook of a shop selling newspapers and magazines and candy and corn cobs and souvenirs and ridiculous pastel T-shirts saying what bliss southwestern Florida is interrupts the severe gray spaces of the airport. Janice halts and says, "Could you wait here a sec till I see if they have the new *Elle*? And maybe I should go back and use the Ladies while I have the chance, the traffic going home might be terrible what with the weather continuing so beachy."

"Now you think of it," he says. "Well, *do* it if you're going to do it." The little Mamie Eisenhower bangs she still wears have grown skimpy with the years and curly with the humidity and saltwater and make her look childish and stubborn and cute, actually, along with the sun wrinkles.

"We still have ten minutes at least, I don't know what that jerk was in such a hurry about."

"He was just in love with life," Harry tells her, and obediently waits. While she's in the Ladies he cannot resist going into the shop and buying something to nibble, a Planter's peanut brittle bar for forty-five cents. Planter's Original Peanut Bar, the wrapper says. It was broken in two somewhere in transit and he thinks of saving one half to offer his two grandchildren when they're all together in the car heading home. It would make a small hit. But the first half is so good he eats the second and even dumps the sweet crumbs out of the wrapper into his palm and with his tongue licks them all up like an anteater. Then he thinks of going back and buying another for his grandchildren and him to share in the car—"Look what Grandpa has!" as they turn onto Interstate 75—but doesn't trust himself not to eat it all and makes himself stand and look out the window instead. This airport has been designed with big windows viewing the runways, so if there's a crash everybody can feast upon it with their own eyes. The fireball, the fuselage doing a slow skidding twirl, shedding its wings. As he tries with his tongue to clean the sticky brittle stuff, the caramelized sugar and corn syrup, from between his teeth—all his still, thank God, and the front ones not even crowned—Rabbit stares out through the glass at the wide blank afternoon. The runway tapering to a triangle, the Florida flatness turning brown as thatch beyond the green reach of a watering system. Winter, the shadow of it that falls down here hasn't hit yet. Every day the temperature has been in the eighties. After four winters in Florida he knows how the wind off the Gulf can cut into you on the first tee if you have an early starting time and the sweaters can be shed only as the sun climbs toward noon, but this December except for that one cold snap in the middle of the month has been like early September in Pennsylvania—hot, and on the horse chestnuts turning and only a certain weary dryness in the air and the buzz of cicadas suggest that summer is over.

As the candy settles in his stomach a sense of doom regrows its claws around his heart: little pronouns like those that hold fast a diamond solitaire. There has been a lot of death in the newspapers lately: Max Robinson the nation's first and only black national anchorman and Roy Orbison who always wore black and black sunglasses and sang "Pretty Woman" in that voice that could go high as a woman and then before Christmas that Pan Am Flight 103 ripping open like a rotten melon five miles above Scotland and dropping all these bodies and flaming wreckage all over the golf course and the streets of this little town like Glockamorra, what was its real name, Lockerbie. Imagine sitting there in your seat being lulled by the hum of the big Rolls-Royce engines and the stewardesses bringing the clinking drinks caddy and the feeling of having caught the plane and nothing to do now but relax and then with a roar and giant ripping noise and scattered screams this whole cozy world dropping away and nothing under you but black space and your chest squeezed by the terrible unbreathable cold, that cold you can

scarcely believe is there but that you sometimes actually feel still packed into the suitcases, stored in the unpressurized hold, when you unpack your clothes, the dirty underwear and beach towels with the merciless chill of death from outer space still in them. Just yesterday some jet flying from Rochester to Atlanta tore open at thirty-one thousand feet, a fourteen-inch hole the newspaper said, and was lucky to land in West Virginia. Everything falling apart, airplanes, bridges, eight years under Reagan of nobody minding the store, making money out of nothing, running up debt, trusting in God.

Harry has flown in his life to dealers' conferences here and there and that great time nine years ago with two other couples to the Caribbean, but to Florida he and Janice always drive, so they have the car there. Nelson will probably bitch because there's only one, though it's a Camry station wagon that takes six comfortably; Nelson likes to do his own thing, going off on mysterious errands that take hours. Nelson. A real sore spot. Harry's tongue begins to sting, so he stops working at a jagged bit of corn-syrup sweetness stuck behind an eye tooth.

And also in the Fort Myers *News-Press* this morning an item about a pregnant woman over in Fort Lauderdale shot in an attempted robbery yesterday. Must have been black but the paper didn't say so they don't now. She died but they saved the baby by Caesarean section. And then there was also on the front page this interview with a guy convicted of picking up a twelve-year-old girl and getting her on smoke dope and raping her and then burning her alive somehow and now complaining about the cockroaches and rats in the cell on death row and telling the reporter, "I've always tried to do the best I can, but I'm no angel. And I'm no killer either." His saying this made Harry laugh, it rang a kind of bell with him. No angel yet no killer either. Not like this guy Bundy who murdered dozens of women in dozens of states and has been stalling his execution for ten years in Tallahassee down here. And Hirohito too is taking his time. Harry can remember when Hirohito was right up there with Hitler and Mussolini in the war propaganda.

And he has never forgot how, thirty years ago it will be this June, his baby daughter Rebecca just drowned and when he went back to the apartment alone there was still this tubful of tepid gray water that had killed her. God hadn't pulled the plug. It would have been so easy for Him, Who set the stars in place. To have it unhappen. Or to delete from the universe whatever it was that exploded that Pan Am 747 over Scotland. Those bodies with hearts pumping tumbling down in the dark. How much do they know as they fell, through air dense like tepid water, tepid gray like this terminal where people blow through like dust in an air duct, to the airline we're all just numbers on the computer, one more or less, who cares? A blip on the screen, then no blip on the screen. Those bodies tumbling down like wet melon seeds.

A star has appeared in the daytime sky, in the blue beneath the streaks of stratocirrus, an airplane glinting, lowering, heading straight toward them. This glint, he thinks, holds his near and dear: Nelson his son, his left-handed daughter-in-law called Pru though she was christened Teresa, Judy his eight-year-old granddaughter, and Roy his four-year-old grandson, born the same fall Harry and Janice began to spend half the year in Florida. The baby actually was named after both fathers, Harold Roy but everybody calls him Roy, something Harry could resent since Roy Lubell is a sorehead laid-off Akron steamfitter who didn't even come to the wedding and never did shit for his seven hungry kids. Pru still seems hungry and in that she reminds Harry of himself. The star grows, has become a saucer shape glinting in a number of points, a winged aluminum machine agliding and enlarging above the sulky flat scrubland and horizon thready with palms. He imagines the plane exploding as it touches down, ignited by one of its glints, in a ball of red flame shadowed in black like you see on TV all the time, and he is shocked to find within himself, imagining this, not much emotion, just a cold thrill



being a witness, a kind of bleak wonder at the fury of chemicals, and relief that he hadn't been on the plane himself but was instead safe on this side of the glass, with his faint pronged sense of doom.

Janice is at his side again. She is breathless, excited. "Harry, *hurry*," she says. "They're *here*, ten minutes early, there must have been a tail wind from Newark. I came out of the Ladies and went down to the gate and couldn't find you, you weren't *there*. Where *were* you?"

"Nowhere. Just standing here by the window." That plane he had mentally exploded hadn't been their plane at all.

Heart thumping, his breath annoyingly short, he strides after his little wife down the wide gray carpeting. Her pleated tennis skirt flicks at the brown backs of her thighs and her multilayered white Nikes look absurdly big at the end of her skinny legs, like Minnie Mouse in her roomy shoes, but Janice's getup is no more absurd than many in this crowd of greeters: men with bankers' trim white haircuts and bankers' long grave withholding faces wearing Day-Glo yellow-green tank tops stencilled with "CORAL POINT OF CAPTIVA ISLAND" and tomato-red bicycle shorts and Bermudas patterned with like fried eggs and their permed and thick-middled women in these ridiculous one-piece exercise outfits like long flannel underwear in pink or blue, baby colors on Kewpie-doll shapes, their costumes advertising the eternal youth they have found like those skiers and tennis players and golfers now who appear on television laden with logos like walking billboards. The hunchbacked little Jewish guy in such a hurry has already met his loved one, a tall grinning woman, a Rachel or Esther with frizzed-out hair and a big pale profile, carrying over one arm her parka from Newark, her plump dumpy mother on the other side of her, Grace was her name, while the old man with angry choppy gestures is giving the woman the latest version of his spiel, they listening with half an ear each to this newest little thing he feels very strongly about. Rabbit is curious to see that this grown daughter, a head taller than her parents, appears to have no mate. A tall black man, slick-looking in a three-piece gray suit, but nothing of a dude, carrying himself with a businesslike Waspy indifference to his appearance and lugging one of those floppy big bags that smart travellers use and that hog all the overhead rack space, is trailing unnaturally close behind. But he can't be a relation, he must be just trying to pass, like that black chick in the red Camaro coming in off 75. Everybody tailgating, that's the way we move along now.

Harry and Janice reach Gate A5. People get off of airplanes in clots, one self-important fussy spot with three bags or some doddering old dame with a cane bunching those behind them. You wonder if you haven't gone overboard in catering to cripples. "There they are," Janice pronounces at last, adding under her breath to Harry quickly, "Nelson looks exhausted."

Not so much exhausted, Rabbit thinks, as shifty. His son is carrying his own son on his left arm, and Nelson's right eye squints, the lid seeming to quiver, as if a blow might come from that unprotected side. Roy must have fallen asleep on the flight, for his head leans against his father's neck seeking a pillow there, his eyes open with that liquid childish darkness but his plump mouth mute, gleaming with saliva, in shock. Harry goes forward as soon as the ropes allow to lift the burden from his son, but Nelson seems reluctant to let go, as if the child's own grandfather is a kidnapper; Roy, too, clings. With a shrug of exasperation Harry gives up and leans in close and kisses Roy's velvety cheek, finer than velvet, still feverish with sleep, and shakes his own son's small and clammy hand. In recent years Nelson has grown a mustache, a tufty brown smudge not much wider than his nose. His delicate lips underneath it never seem to smile. Harry looks in vain into this fearful brown-eyed face for a trace of his blue-eyed own. Nelson has inherited Janice's tense neatness of feature, with her blur of evasion and confusion in the eyes; the puzzled look sits better on a woman than a man. Worse, Janice's high forehead and skimpy fine hair have become in Nelson a distinctly growing baldness. His receding

temples have between them a transparent triangle of remaining hair soon to become an island, a patch and at the back of his head, when he turns to kiss his mother, a swath of skin is expanding. He has chosen to wear a worn blue denim jacket down on the plane, over a crisp dressy shirt, though, pink stripes with white collar and cuffs, so he seems half cocked, like a married rock star or a weekend gangster. One earlobe bears a tiny gold earring.

“Mmmm-wah!” Janice says to cap her hello kiss; she has learned to make such noises down here among the overexpressive Jewish women.

Harry carefully greets Judith and Pru. Going to be nine in less than a month, the skinny girl is a sketch of a woman, less than life-size and not filled in. A redhead like her mother. Lovely complexion, cheeks rosy under the freckles, and the details of her face—lashes, eyebrows, ears, nostril-wings, lips, quick to lift up on her teeth—frighteningly perfect, as if too easy to smash. When he bends to kiss her, he sees in front of her ear the sheen of childhood’s invisible down. She has Pru’s clear green eyes and carrot-colored hair but nothing as yet in her frail straight frame and longish calm face of the twist that her life at some point gave Pru, making her beauty even when she was twenty-four slightly awkward, limping as it were, a look that has become more wry and cumbersome with the nine years of marriage to Nelson. She likes Harry and he likes her though they have never found a way around all these other things to express it. “What a pair of beauties,” he says now, of the mother and daughter.

Little Judy wrinkles her nose and says, “Grandpa’s been eating candy again, for shame on him. I could smell it, something with peanuts in it, I can tell. He even has some little pieces stuck between his teeth. For shame.”

He had to laugh at this attack, at the accuracy of it, and the Pennsylvania-Dutch way the little girl said, “for shame.” Local accents are dying out, but slowly, children so precisely imitate their elders. Judy must have overheard in her house Nelson and Pru and maybe Janice talking about his weight problem and rotten diet. If they were talking, his health problems might be worse than he knows. He must look bad.

“Shit,” he says, in some embarrassment. “I can’t get away with anything any more. Pru, how’s the world treating you?”

His daughter-in-law surprises him by, as he bends dutifully forward to kiss her cheek, kissing him on the flush on the mouth. Her lips have a wry regretful shy downward twist but are warm, warm and soft and as big as cushions in the kiss’s aftermath within him. Since he first met her in the shadows of Mr. Springer’s house that long-ago summer—a slender slouching shape thrust into the midst of their lives—Nelson’s pregnant Roman Catholic girlfriend from Ohio, a Kent State University secretary named Teresa Lubell, suddenly become the carrier of Harry’s genes into eternity—Pru has broadened without growing heavy in that suety Pennsylvania way. As if invisible pry bars have slightly spread her bones and new calcium been wedged in and the flesh gently stretched to fit, she now presents more front. Her face, once narrow like Judy’s, at moments looks like a flattened mask. Always tall, she has in the years of becoming a hardened wife and matron allowed her long straight hair to be cut and teased out into bushy wings a little like the hairdo of the Sphinx. Her hips and shoulders too have widened beneath the busy pattern—brown and white and black squares and diamond-shapes arranged to look three-dimensional—of the checked suit she put on for the airplane, a lightweight suit wrinkled by the three hours of sitting and babysitting. A stuffed blue shoulder bag is slung across one shoulder and her arms and hands clutch a gray wool topcoat, two children’s jackets, several slippery children’s books based on morning television shows, a Cabbage Patch doll with its bunched beige face, and an inflated

plastic dinosaur. She has big hands, with pink, cracked knuckles. Harry's mother had hands like that from washing clothes and dishes. How did Pru get them, in this age of appliances? He stands gazing at her in a half-second's post-kiss daze. Having a wife and children soon palled for him, but he never fails to be excited by having, in the flesh, a daughter-in-law.

She says, slangily, to mask the initial awkwardness when they meet, "You're lookin' good, Harry. The sunny South agrees with you."

What did that frontal kiss mean? Its slight urgency. Some sad message there. She and Nelson never did quite fit.

"Nobody else thinks so," he says, and grabs at her shoulder bag. "Lemme help you carry some of this stuff, I'll take the bag." He begins to pull it off.

Pru shifts the coat and toys to extend her arm to let him take it but at the same time asks him, "Should you?"

Harry asks, "Why does everybody treat me like some Goddamn kind of invalid?" but he is asking into the air; Pru and Janice are hugging with brisk false enthusiasm and Nelson is plodding ahead down the long gray corridor with Roy back to sleep on his shoulder. Harry is irritated to see that though Nelson has a careful haircut that looks only a few days old the barber left one of those tails, like a rat's tail, uncut and hanging down over the boy's collar, under the spreading bald spot. How old does he think Nelson is, seventeen? Little Judy trails her father but Nelson is not waiting or looking back. The girl is just old enough to sense that in her nice proper airplane outfit she should not sacrifice all dignity and run to catch up. She wears a navy-blue winter coat over a pink summer dress; its pink hem shows below the coat, and then her bare legs, which look long, longer than when he saw her last in early November. But it is the back of her head that kills him, her shiny carrot-colored hair braided into a pigtail caught into a showy stiff white ribbon. Something of her mother's Catholic upbringing in that ribbon, decking out the Virgin or the baby Jesus or Whoever to go on parade, to go on a ride in the sky. The sleek back of Judy's head, the pigtail bouncing as she tries not to run, so docilely, so unthinkingly wears the showy ribbon her mother put there that Harry smiles. Hurrying his stride, he catches up and reaches down and says, "Hey there, good-lookin'," and takes the hand she with a child's reflex lifts to be taken. Her hand is as surprisingly moist as her mother's lips were warm. Her head with its bone-white parting is higher than his waist. She complains to her mother, Harry has heard from Janice, about being the tallest girl in her section of the third grade. The mean boys tease her.

"How's school going?" he asks.

"I hate it," Judy tells him. "There are all these kids think they're big shots. The girls are the absolute worst."

"Do you ever think *you're* a big shot?"

She ponders this. "Some boys are always getting after me but I tell them to fuck off."

He clucks his tongue. "That's pretty rough language for the third grade."

"Not really," she says. "Even the teacher says 'damn' sometimes when we get her going."

"How do you get her going?"

Judy smiles upward, her mother's quick wide-mouthed smile without the crimp. "Sometimes we all hum so she can't see our mouths move. A couple weeks ago when she tried to make us all sing Christmas carols one of these big-shot boys I told you about said it was against his parents' religion and his father was a lawyer and would sue everybody."

“He sounds like a pain in the ass,” Rabbit says.

“Grandpa. Don’t talk dirty.”

“That’s not dirty, that’s just saying where it hurts. If you say somebody’s a pain in the bottom sounds dirtier. Hey. Here’s the place I bought that peanut candy you smelled. Want some?”

“You better ask Mom first.”

Harry turns and lets the two mothers, walking hip to hip and heads bowed in consultation, catch up. “Pru,” he says, “will it rot any teeth if I buy Judy a candy bar?”

She looks up, distracted, but remembers to smile at him. “I guess it won’t kill her this once, though Nelson and I try to discourage junk in their diet.”

“Whatever you get her, Harry,” Janice adds, “you ought to get Roy.”

“But Roy’s asleep and half her size.”

“He’ll know, though,” Pru says, “if you play favorites. He’s just now coming out from under her shadow.”

Little Judy, casting a shadow? Did he cast a shadow over Mim? Mim certainly got far enough away from Diamond County, if that was a statement. Got into the fast lane in Las Vegas and stayed.

“Don’t be forever,” Janice tells Harry. “Or else give me the keys so we can get into the car. They have two more bags they made them check in Newark. Nelson’s probably down there already.”

“Yeah, what’s his idea, rushing on ahead like that? Who’s he sore at?”

“Probably me,” Pru says. “I’ve given up trying to figure out why.”

Harry digs into one pocket of his plaid golf slacks, comes up with only a few tees and a plastic ball marker with two blue Vs on it, for Valhalla Village, and then into the other to find the knobbed notched bunch of keys on the ring. Saying “Heads up,” he tosses them toward Janice. Her hands jump together in a womanly panic and the keys sail past them and hit her in the stomach. Just this little effort, the search and the toss, leaves him weary, as if the arm he lifted was soggy wash. The spontaneity and fun have been taken out of buying his granddaughter a treat. She chooses not Planter’s Peanut Bar as he had envisioned but a Sky Bar, which he thinks might be truly bad for her teeth, those five different gooey fillings in the five humped segments of pure chocolate. He digs in the hip pocket of his pants, so old their plaid is sun-faded and the hem of each pocket is darkened by the sweat off his hands over the years, and pulls out his wallet and hangs for a while over the candy rack, uncertain whether or not to get himself another sugary rectangle of stuck-together nut wondering if this time he would be lucky enough to get one not broken in the wrapper, deciding against it because he eats too much, too much junk as Pru said, Pru and his doctor down here, old Dr. Morris, and then at the last possible split-second, with the black woman at the counter within the octagonal shop already counting out his change from a dollar for the Sky Bar, deciding to buy the peanut brittle after all. It is not so much the swallowing and ingesting he loves as the gritty-edged feeling of the first corner in his mouth, the first right-angled fragment, slowly dissolving. To his surprise and indignation not only does he now receive no change from the dollar but owes the black woman—a severe matte undiluted color you rarely see in the U.S., dull as slate, must be a Haitian Dominican, Florida is full of these boat people—a nickel more, for the state tax. Airport prices, the nail you where there’s no competition. Without competition, you get socialism and everybody free loading and economies like they have in Cuba and Haiti. He pauses to glance at the magazines on the rack. The top row holds the skin mags, sealed in plastic, pieces of printed paper hiding details of the

open-mouthed girls, open-mouthed as if perpetually astonished by their own tangible assets, *Hustler*, *Gallery*, *Club*, *Penthouse*, *Oui*, *Live*, *Fox*. He imagines himself buying one, braving the Haitian woman's disapproval—all these Caribbean types are evangelical fundamentalists, tin-roofed churches where they shout for the world to end now—and sneaking the magazine home and while Janice is asleep or cooking or out with one of her groups studying to satiety the spread shots and pink labia and boosted tits and buttocks tipped up from behind so the shaved cunt shows, with its sad little anatomy like some oyster, and sadly foreseeing that he will not be enough aroused, boredom will become his main feeling, and embarrassment at the expenditure. Four dollars twenty-five they are asking the days, promising *Sexy Sirens in the Sauna* and *Cara Lott Gets Hot* and *Oral Sex: A Gourmet's Guide*. How disgusting we are, when you think about it—disposable meat, but hell-bent on gratification.

“Come on, Grandpa—what's taking so long?”

They hurry after the others, who have vanished. Judy's shiny beribboned head makes him nervous, popping up first on one side of him and then the other, like the car keys he was a little slow to find. Janice calls him doddering when she can't even catch, the clumsy mutt. If their granddaughter gets kidnapped from his side she'll really call him doddering. “Easy does it,” he tells Judy at the top of the escalator, “pick a step and stay on it. Don't get on a crack,” and at the bottom, “O.K., step off, but not too soon, don't panic, it'll happen, O.K., good.”

“I go on escalators all the time at the malls,” she tells him, making up at him a little pinched, rebuking mouth with beads of melted chocolate at the corners.

“Where the hell is everybody?” he asks her, for amid all the tan loud presences that throng the lower, higher-ceilinged floor of the Southwest Florida Regional Airport, less ductlike and cryptlike but still echoing with a muffled steely doom that worries at his stomach, there is nobody he knows, strangers as total as if he has descended into Hell.

“Are we lost, Grandpa?”

“We can't be,” he tells her.

In their sudden small plight he is newly aware of her preciousness, the jewel-cut of her eyes and eyelashes, the downy glaze in front of her ears and the gleam of each filament of her luxuriant hair pulled taut into a thick pigtail adorned with an unreal stiff white ribbon. For the first time he sees she is also wearing symmetrical white barrettes, shaped like butterflies. Judy looks up toward his face and fights crying at the vagueness she sees there. “This coat is too hot,” she complains.

“I'll carry it,” he says. He folds its cloth weight over his arm and she is like a butterfly herself now in her pink dress. Her green eyes have gone wide in this gray airport's bustling limbo, under reddish-brown eyebrows one of which near the flat bulge of her little freckled nose has a little cowlick fanning the hairs the wrong way; Nelson has that cowlick, and inherited it from Harry, who used to lick his middle finger and try to slick it down in the high-school boys' lavatory mirror. Amazing, that a thing so tiny could pass on. Maybe the only immortality we get, a little genetic quirk going on and on like a computerized number in your monthly bank statement. Ghostly empty shapes, people he doesn't know, push and stream past the two of them. They are an island surrounded by jokes and noisy news and embraces; people tanned that deep settled mahogany that comes only from months and months in Florida embrace newcomers the color of wallpaper paste. Harry says, so Judy will hear her grandfather say something and not just stand there numbly, “They must be over at the baggage.”

He looks up and sees above their heads the sign saying *BAGGAGE* and takes her moist little hand and tugs her toward the crowd around the baggage belt, which is already moving. But neither Pru n

Janice nor Nelson nor Roy is there, as far as they can see. Face after face refuses to cohere into a known face. His eyes, always good, trouble him now in artificially lit places. The blue shoulder bag Pru let him carry for her is heavier than he would have thought; she must have packed bricks. His shoulder and eyes burn.

"I guess," he ventures, though it seems unlikely, "they're already at the car." He taps his pocket for the lump of keys, doesn't feel it, begins to panic, then remembers how he tossed them to Janice. Of course. Confidently now he approaches the brown glass exit doors, but the wrong one pops its seal and slides open when his body trips the electric eye. The wrong one as far as he is concerned; Judy was pulling him in the right direction, where a slice of hot outdoor air swiftly widens. Sun has broken through the milky stratocirrus. It bounces off the waxy leaves of the nameless tropical plant flourishing near his knees. It winks blindingly from a mass of moving cars, a brutal river of the rushing along the access strip just beyond the curb. He holds Judy's hand tighter, in case she decides to jump off the curb, we're all full of crazy impulses. They cross to a lake of shimmering cars, the lake where he parked. Where, exactly? He finds he's forgotten. He is utterly empty of the car's location.

A Camry Deluxe wagon, pearl-gray metallic, with the more potent 24-valve 2.5-liter V-6 engine. He was still so sore at being tailgated by that red Camaro and at Janice criticizing his driving that he wasn't paying any attention to where they parked. He remembers the zebra crosswalk, and the little landscaped mound of center strip where some sun-starved college kid had propped his knapsack and pillowed his head on it to soak up a few rays, and the fussy old guy who thought he was in charge, gesturing at you which way the exit and the booth where you pay was, putting too much into it like that husband at the airport gabbing at his wife, Grace, as if she had no sense, meeting that frizzy-haired long-toothed smiling Jewish princess taller than either of them, but he doesn't remember which of these rows he parked the car in. He parked it in the patch of dead blank brain cells like all of our brains will be when we're dead unless the universe has cooked up some truly elaborate surprise. *The National Enquirer* which Janice sometimes brings home from the Winn Dixie keeps reporting people's near-death experiences, but for Harry they're too close to the little green men in the UFO. Even if they're true it's not much comfort. Judy's hand has slipped out of his as he stands puzzling on the strip of grass on the edge of the parking lot, that broad-bladed grass that grows everywhere down here, watered by sprinklers, they call it St. Augustine. It doesn't feel like real grass to him, too matte and broad, kind of crunchy underfoot. His chest begins to hurt. A sly broad pain, a kind of band under the skin, tightly sewn there.

Judy's voice floats up to him like a thin lifeline. "What color is the car, Grandpa?"

"Oh, you know," he says, keeping his sentences short, so as not to stir up his pain. "Pale gray. Metallic finish. The same color as about half the cars in the world. Don't you panic. It'll come to me where I left it."

The poor kid is losing it, in her fight not to cry. "Daddy'll drive off!" she blurts out.

"Leaving you and me? Why would he do that? He won't do that, Judy."

"He gets real mad sometimes, for no real reason."

"He probably has some reason he doesn't tell you. How about you? You ever get mad?"

"Not like Daddy. Mom says he should see a doctor."

"I guess we all should, now and then." Rabbit's sense of doom is trickling like cold water through his stomach. Doctors. His own doctor is bringing his son into the practice, so if he drops dead the kid

will take right over, won't miss a Medicare form. You fill a slot for a time and then move out; that's the decent thing to do: make room. He scans the ranks of glinting metal in their slots for a strip of gray that will ring a bell, and wonders if he is misremembering the color—he has owned so many cars in his life, and sold so many more. He announces, “I think I left it over on the left. In about the third row. What happened, Judy, was there was this old guy kind of directing things, waving which way everybody should go, and the bastard distracted me. Don't you hate bossy people like that, who know everything better than you do?”

The little girl's glossy red head mutely nods at his side, too worried for words.

Rabbit rattles on, to chase their clouds away, “Whenever somebody tells me to do something my instinct's always to do the opposite. It's got me into a lot of trouble, but I've had a lot of fun. The bossy old guy was pointing one direction so I went the other and found a space.” And for a second, in a kind of window between two tightenings of the band across his chest, he *sees* the space: next to the cream-colored van, a Ford Bivouac with those watery-blue Minnesota plates, parked sloppily over the white line, another cause for irritation. He had to ease in carefully so as to leave Janice room enough to open her door on the right and not rub fenders with the maroon Galaxy on the left. And now he sees from far off in the shimmering Florida heat a strip of cream risen above the other metallic rooftops. Third row, about a wedge shot in. He says in triumph, “Judy, I *see* it. Let's *go*,” and takes her hand again, lest her small perfection be crushed by one of the automobiles cruising the rows looking for a spot. In some of these big white Caddys and Oldses the tiny old driver can hardly see over the hood out the windshield, just clinging to the wheel, body all shrunk and bent by osteoporosis; it hasn't gotten to him yet, he's still six feet three as far as he knows, at least his pants don't drag on the floor, but he hears Janice talk about it, it's been on TV a fair amount, that commercial with the two women on the train, it affects women more than men, their smaller bones, she takes calcium pills along with all the other vitamin pills next to her orange juice at breakfast. God, is she healthy. She'll live forever just to spite him.

He and little Judith arrive across the hazardous hot asphalt at the pearl-gray Camry, which is his, he knows, from Janice's tennis racket and cover on the back seat, flung in there separately—the dumb mutt, what's the use of a cover if you don't put the racket in it? But nobody is here and the car is locked and Harry threw away the keys. The little girl begins to cry. Luckily he has a handkerchief in the hip pocket of his faded plaid golf pants. He lowers Pru's blue bag with its load of bricks to the asphalt and puts the little winter coat he has been carrying on top of the car roof, as if to stake a claim, and kneels down and wipes the bits of melted Sky Bar from Judy's lips and then the tears from her cheeks. He too wouldn't mind having a cry, squatting here next to the car's sunstruck metallic flank, his knees complaining on top of everything else, and the small girl's hot panicked breath adding to the heat. In her distress her freckled nose has begun to run and her mouth taken on a hardness, a stiffness in the upper lip he associates with Nelson when the boy is frightened or angry.

“We can either stay here and let the others find us,” Harry explains to his granddaughter, “or we can go back and look for them. Maybe we're too tired and hot to do anything but stay here. We could play a game seeing how many different states' license plates we can find.”

This breaks her sniffing into a wet little laugh. “Then we'd get lost again.” Her eyelids are reddened by the friction of tears and tiny flakes of light shine in her green irises like the microscopic facets that give metallic paint its tinselly quality.

“Look,” he tells her. “Here's Minnesota, with its little clump of pine trees. Ten Thousand Lakes,

says. Score one for Grandpa.”

Judy merely smiles this time, not granting him a laugh, she knows he’s trying to get her to forgive his mistake in losing the others.

“It’s not us who are lost, we know where we are,” he says. “It’s *them*.” He stops crouching beside her, the hoity-toity little snip, and stands up, to uncreak his knees, and also to ease the crowded feeling in his chest.

He sees them. Just this side of the zebra crossing, coming this way, struggling with suitcases. He first sees Nelson, carrying Roy on his shoulders like a two-headed monster, and then Pru’s head of red hair puffed out like the Sphinx, and Janice’s white tennis dress. Harry, up to his chest in car roof, waves his arm back and forth like a man on a desert island. Janice waves back, a quick toss of her hand as if he’s far from what they’re talking about.

But when they’re all reunited Nelson is furious. His face is pale and his upper lip stiff and bristling. “Jesus Christ, Dad, where did you disappear to? We went all the way back upstairs to that stupid candy store when you didn’t show up in the baggage area.”

“We were there, weren’t we, Judy?” Harry says, marvelling at his son’s growing baldness, exposed mercilessly by the Florida sunlight beating down through the thinned strands, and at his mustache, mouse-colored stray blur like those fuzzballs that collect under furniture. He has noticed the developments before in recent years but they still have the power to astonish him, along with the crow’s feet and bitter cheek lines time has etched in his child’s face, sharp in the sunlight. “We didn’t take more than a minute in the candy store and came right down the escalator to the baggage place. Rabbit says, pleased to be remembering so exactly, exactly visualizing the two candy bars, the extra nickel he had to fish up for the black counter woman’s upturned silver-polish-colored palm, the skin magazines with the girls’ open mouths, the interleaved teeth of the escalator steps he was afraid Judy might catch her foot on. “We must have slipped by each other in the crowd,” he adds, trying to be helpful and innocuous. His son frightens him.

Janice unlocks the Camry. The baking heat of its interior, released like a ghost, brushes past their faces. They put the suitcases in the way-back. Pru lifts the groggy boy off Nelson’s shoulders and arranges him in the shadows of the back seat; Roy’s thumb is stuck in his mouth and his dark eyes open for an unseeing second. Nelson, his hands at last freed, slaps the top of the Camry and cries in his agony of irritation, “God *damn* it, Dad, we’ve been *frantic*, because of you! We thought you might have *lost* her!” There is a look Nelson gets when he’s angry or frightened that Harry has always thought of as “white around the gills”—a tension draining color from the child’s face and pulling his eyes back into his head. He gets the look from his mother, and Janice got it from hers, dark plump of Bessie, who was a hot-tempered Koerner, she liked to tell them.

“We stuck right together,” Rabbit says calmly. “And don’t dent my fucking car. You’ve damaged enough cars in your life.”

“Yeah, and you’ve damaged enough lives in yours. Now you’re kidnapping my goddamn daughter!”

“I can’t believe this,” Harry begins. A cold arrow of pain suddenly heads down his left arm, through the armpit. He blinks. “My own granddaughter” is all he can organize himself to say.

Janice, looking at his face, asks, “What’s the matter, Harry?”

“Nothing,” he tells her sharply. “Just this crazy kid. Something’s bugging him and I can’t believe it’s me.” A curious gaseous weight, enveloping his head and chest, has descended in the wake of the



sudden arrow. He slumps down behind the wheel, feeling faintly disoriented but determined to drive. When you're retired, you get into your routines and other people, even so-called loved ones, become a strain. This entire other family loads itself into place behind him. Pru swings her nice wide ass in her three-dimensional checked suit into the back seat next to sleeping Roy, and Nelson climbs in on the other side, right behind Harry, so he can feel the kid's breath on the back of his neck. He turns his head as far as he can and says to Nelson, in the corner of his eye, "I resent the word 'kidnap.'"

"Resent it, then. That's what it felt like. Suddenly we looked around and you weren't there."

Like Pan Am 103 on the radar screen. "We knew where we were, didn't we, Judy?" Harry calls backward. The girl has slithered over her parents and brother into the way-back with the luggage. Harry can see the silhouette of her head with its pigtail and angular ribbon in the rearview mirror.

"I didn't know where I was but I knew you did," she answers loyally, casting forward the thin thread of her voice.

Nelson tries to apologize. "I didn't mean to get so pissed," he says, "but if you knew what a hassle it is to have *two* children, the hassle of travelling all day, and then to have your own father steal one of them —"

"I didn't *steal* her, for Chrissake," Harry says. "I bought her a *Sky Bar*." He can feel his heart racing a kind of gallop with an extra kick in one of the legs. He starts up the Camry and puts it in drive and then brakes when the car jerks forward and puts it into reverse, trying not to make contact, as he eases out, with the side of the Minnesota Bivouac, its protruding side mirror and its racing stripe in three tones of brown.

"Harry, would you like me to drive?" Janice asks.

"No," he says. "Why would I?"

She hesitates; without looking, he can see, in the hesitation, her little pointed tongue poke out of her mouth and touch her upper lip in that way she has when she tries to think, he knows her so well. He knows her so well that making conversation with her is like having a struggle with himself. "You just had a look on your face a minute ago," she says. "You looked —"

"White around the gills," he supplies.

"Something like that."

The old guy who thinks he's directing the show directs them down the arrows painted on the asphalt toward the tollbooth. The car ahead of theirs in line, a tan Honda Accord with New Jersey plates GARDEN STATE, has backs of the head in it that look familiar: it's that jumpy little guy who hopped through the chairs back in the waiting room, good old Grace up beside him, and in the back seat the frizzy-headed daughter and another passenger, a head even taller and the frizz even tighter—the black guy in the Waspy business suit Harry had assumed had nothing to do with them. The old guy is gabbing and gesturing and the black guy is nodding just like Harry used to do with Fred Springer. It's bad enough even when your father-in-law is the same color. Harry is so interested he nearly coasts into the back of the Honda. "Honey, *brake*," Janice says, and out of the blur of her white tennis dress in the corner of his eye she holds out to him fifty cents for the parking-lot charge. An Oriental kid with stone-deaf inside his Walkman earmuffs takes the two quarters with a hand jumping along with some beat only he can hear, and the striped bar goes up, and they are free, free to go home.

"Well," Harry says, back on the weird brief highway, "it's a helluva thing, to have your own son accuse you of *kidnapping*. And as to the big deal of having two children, it can't be that much worse."

than having one. Either way, your freedom's gone."

Actually Nelson has, unwittingly or not, touched a sore point, for Harry and Janice did have two children. Their dead child lives on with them as a silent glue of guilt and shame, an inextinguishable sourness at the bottom of things. And Rabbit suspects himself of having an illegitimate daughter, three years younger than Nelson, by a woman called Ruth, who wouldn't admit it the last time Harry saw her.

Nelson goes on, helpless in the grip of his hardened resentments, "You go run off with Judy a palsy-walsy and haven't said boo to little Roy."

"Say boo?—I'd wake him up, saying boo, he's been asleep all the time, it's like he's drugged. And how much longer you gonna let him suck his thumb? Shouldn't he be outgrowing it by now?"

"What does it matter to you if he sucks his thumb? How is it hurting you?"

"He'll get buck teeth."

"Dad, that's an old wives' tale. Pru asked our pediatrician and he said you don't suck your thumb with your teeth."

Pru says quietly, "He did say he should outgrow it soon."

"What makes you so *down* on everything, Dad?" Nelson whines, unable it seems to find another pitch. The kid is itching and his voice can't stop scratching. "You used to be a pretty laid-back hombre; now everything you say is kind of negative."

Rabbit wants to lead the boy on, to see how bad he can make him look in front of the woman. "Rigid," he smilingly agrees. "The older you get, the more you get set in your ways. Nobody in Valhalla Village sucks their thumb. There may even be a rule against it, like swimming in the pool without a bathing cap. Like swimming with an earring on. Tell me something. What's the significance of an earring when you're married with two children?"

Nelson ignores the question in dignified silence, making his father look bad.

They are breezing along, between shoulders of unreal grass, the palms clicking by like telephone poles. Pru says from the back seat, to change the subject, "I can never get over how flat Florida is."

"It gets a little rolling," Harry tells her, "away from the coasts. Ranch and orange-grove country. Rednecks and a lot of Mexicans. We could all go for a drive inland some day. See the real Florida."

"Judy and Roy are dying to see Disney World," Nelson says, trying to become reasonable.

"Too far," his father swiftly tells him. "It'd be like driving to Pittsburgh from Brewer. This is a big state. You need reservations to stay overnight and this time of year there aren't any. Absolutely impossible."

This flat statement renders them all wordless. Through the rushing noise of the air-conditioning fan and the humming of the tires Harry hears from the way-back that for a second time in this first half hour he has made his granddaughter cry. Pru turns and murmurs to her. Harry shouts back, "There's lots else to do. We can go to that circus museum in Sarasota again."

"I *hate* the circus museum," he hears Judy's small voice say.

"We've never been to the Edison house in Fort Myers," he announces, speaking now as patriarch, to the entire earful. "The people at the condo say it's fascinating, he even invented television it turns out."

“And the beach, baby,” Pru softly adds. “You know how you love the beach at the Shore.” In a less maternal voice she tells Janice and Harry, “She’s a lovely swimmer now.”

“Driving to the Jersey Shore used to be absolutely the most boring thing we did,” Nelson tells his parents, trying to get down out of his dark cloud into a family mode, willing now in recollection to be a child again.

“Driving is boring,” Rabbit pontificates, “but it’s what we do. Most of American life is driving somewhere and then driving back wondering why the hell you went.”

“Harry,” Janice says. “You’re going too fast again. Do you want to take 75, or push on to Route 41?”

\* \* \*

Of all the roads Harry has seen in his life, Route 41, the old Tamiami Trail, is the most steady and depressing. It is wider than commercial-use, unlimited-access highways tend to be up north, and somehow the competitive roadside enterprise looks worse in constant sunlight, as if like plastic garbage bags it will never rot away. WINN DIXIE. PUBLIX. Eckerd Drugs. K Mart. Wal-Mart. TACO BELL. ARK PLAZA. Joy Food Store. Starvin' Marvin Discount Food Wine and Beer. Among the repeating franchises selling gasoline and groceries and liquor and drugs all mixed together in that peculiar lawless way they have down here, low pale buildings cater especially to illness and age. Arthritis Rehabilitation Center. Nursefinder, Inc. Cardiac Rehabilitation Center. Chiropractix. Legal Offices Medicare and Malpractice Cases a Speciality. Hearing Aids and Contact Lenses. West Coast Knee Center. Universal Prosthetics. National Cremation Society. On the telephone wires, instead of the sparrows and starlings you see in Pennsylvania, lone hawks and buzzards sit. Banks, stylish brick structures in smoked glass, rise higher than the wires with their glossy self-advertisements. First Federal. Southeast. Barnett Bank with its Superteller. C & S proclaiming All Services, servicing the millions and billions in money people bring down here along with their decrepit bodies, the loot of a those lifetimes flooding the sandy low land, floating these big smoked-glass superliners.

Alongside 41, between the banks and stores and pet suppliers and sprinkler installers, miles of low homes are roofed with fat white cooling tile. A block or two back from the highway in the carbon monoxide haze tall pink condos like Spanish castles or Chinese pagodas spread sideways like banyan trees. Banyan trees fascinate Harry down here, the way they spread by dropping down vines that take root; they look to him like enormous chewing gum on your shoe. Easy Drugs. NU-VIEW. Ameri-Life and Health. Starlite Motel. JESUS CHRIST IS LORD. His earful of family grows silent and dazed as he drives the miles, stopping now and then at the overhead lights that signal an intersecting road, a secondary road heading west to beaches and what mangrove swamps survive and east to the scruffy prairie being skinned in great square tracts for yet more development. Development! We're being developed to death. Each turning off of Route 41 takes some people home, to their little niche in the maze, their own parking spot and hard-bought place in the sun. The sun is low enough over the Gulf now to tint everything pink, the red of the stoplights almost invisible. At the Angstroms' own turnoff, two more miles of streets unfold, some straight and some curving, through blocks of single-family houses with half-dead little front yards ornamented by plumes of pampas grass and flowering bushes on vacation from flowering in this dry butt-end of the year. Janice and Harry at first thought they might purchase one of these pale one-story houses lurking behind their tropical bushes and orange trees, caves of coolness and dark, with their secret pools out back behind the garages with their automatic doors, but such houses reminded them unhappily of the house they had in Penn Villas that saw so much marital misery and strangeness before it burned down, half of it, so they settled for a two-bedroom condominium up high in the air, on the fourth floor, overlooking a golf course from a narrow balcony screened by the top branches of Norfolk pines. Of all the addresses where Harry has lived in his life—303 Jackson Road; Btry A, 66th FA Bn, Fort Larson, Texas; 447 Wilbur Street, Apt. #5; whatever the number on Summer Street was where he parked himself with Ruth Leonard that spring long ago; 2 Vista Crescent; 89 Joseph Street for ten years, courtesy of Ma Springer; 14½ Franklin Drive—this is the highest number by far: 59600 Pindo Palm Boulevard, Building B, #413. He hadn't been crazy about the thirteen, in fact he thought builders didn't put that number in things, but maybe people are less superstitious than they used to be. When he was a kid there was all sorts of worry, not altogether playful, about black cats and spilled salt and opening umbrellas in the house and kicking buckets and walking under ladders. The air was thought then to have eyes and ears and to need placating.

VALHALLA VILLAGE: a big grouted sign, the two words curved around a gold ring of actual brass, inlaid and epoxied-over to discourage vandalous thieves. You turn in at the security booth, get recognized by the guard there, park in one of two spaces with your condo number stencilled right on the asphalt, use your key on the outer door of Building B, punch out the code number to open the inner door, take the elevator, and walk to your left. The corridor is floored in peach-colored carpet and smells of a peach freshener, to mask the mildew that creeps into every closed space in Florida. A crew comes through three times a week vacuuming and the rug gets lathered and the walls worked once a month, and there are plastic bouquets in little things like basketball hoops next to every numbered door and a mirror across from the elevator plus a big runny-colored green and golden vase on a table shaped like a marble half-moon, but it is still not a space in which you want to linger.

With their suitcases bumping the walls of silver and peach and Janice and Pru still gamely gabbing and little Roy being made to walk on his own two feet now that he's awake for once and crying about it at every step, Harry feels they are disturbing a mortuary calm, though in fact most everybody behind these doors has contrived something to do in the afternoon, golf or tennis or a beauty-parlor appointment or a bus trip to the Everglades. You live life here as if your condo is just home base, a sort of air-conditioned anteroom to the sunny mansion of all outdoors. Stay inside, you might start getting mildew. Around five-thirty, an eerie silence of many simultaneous naps descends, but at four o'clock it's too early for that.

The door to 413 has a double lock operated with two keys, one of which also opens the outer door downstairs. With the impatient mass of his entire family and its baggage pressing behind him, Harry fumbles a bit, his hand jumping the way it does when he's feeling crowded in the chest, his notched key scratching at the wiggly small slot, but then it fits and turns and clicks and the door swings open and he is home. This place could belong to one of millions of part-time Floridians but in fact is his and Janice's. You enter in a kind of foyer, a closet door to the left and on the right see-through shelves of stained wood Janice has loaded with birds and flowers she made out of shells in a class she took that first year down here, when she was still enthusiastic about shells. Enthusiasm about shells doesn't last, nor does taking Spanish lessons so you can talk to the help. It's a phase the greenhorns and the fresh snowbirds, must go through. Baby scallops make feathers and petals, augurs do as bird beaks, slipper shells are like little boats. The shelves, which also hold a few of Ma Springer's knickknacks including a big green glass egg with a bubble inside it, separate the foyer from the kitchen, with the dining room beyond it; straight ahead lies the living-room area, where they have the TV and the comfortable wicker chairs and a low round glass table they often eat dinner from, if a show they care about is on. To the left, a square-armed blond sofa can be folded out for a bed and a hollow door leads to the master bedroom, which has a bathroom and a storage area where Janice keeps an ironing board she never uses and an exercise bicycle she rides when she thinks she's getting overweight, to Nelson's old tapes of the Bee Gees that he outgrew long ago. The guest bedroom is entered off the living room to the right, and has its own bathroom that backs up to the kitchen plumbing. The arrangement other years has been that Nelson and Pru take this room with a cot for the baby and Judith sleeps on the foldout sofa, but Harry is not sure this arrangement is still proper. The little ones have grown: Roy perhaps is too big and observant to share a bedroom with his parents and the girl is getting to be old enough of a lady to deserve a little privacy.

He explains his plan: "This year I thought we might put the cot in the storage room for Judy, she can use our bathroom and then shut the door, and give Roy the living-room sofa."

The small boy gazes upward at his grandfather while his thumb sneaks toward his mouth. He has

flubby sort of mouth that Rabbit associates with the Lubells; neither the Angstroms nor the Springers have bunched-up fat lips like that, like a row of plump berries run together, but Teresa's father, in the one time Harry met him, visiting Akron because he went to Cleveland for a dealer conference anyway, did, if you could see around the two days' beard and the cigarette always in the guy's fat mouth. It's as if Pru's worthless creep of a father has been disguised as a child and sent to spy on them all. The kid takes in everything and says nothing. Harry speaks down to him roughly: "Yeah, what's the matter with that?"

The thumb roots in deeper and the child's eyes, darker even than Nelson's and Janice's, shine with distrust. Judy offers to explain: "He's scared to be alone in this room all by himself, the baby."

Pru tries to help. "Sweetie, Mommy and Daddy would be right in that other room, where you used to sleep before you became so grown up."

Nelson says, "You might have discussed it first with us, Dad, before you switched everything around."

"Discuss it, when is there a chance to discuss anything with you? Every time I call the lot you're not there, or the line is busy. I used to get Jake or Rudy at least, now all I get is some fruity-voiced pal of yours you've hired."

"Yeah, Lyle tells me how you grill him about everything."

"I don't grill him, I'm just trying to act interested. I still have an interest up there, even if you don't think you're running it half the year."

"*Half* the year! *All* the year, from what Mom says."

Janice intervenes: "What Mom says is her legs hurt after all that sitting in the car and she's thinking of moving the cocktail hour ahead if this is how we're all going to talk for five days. Nelson, your father was trying to be considerate about the sleeping arrangements. He and I discussed it. Judy, which would you rather, the sofa or the ironing room?"

"I didn't mind the old way," she says.

Little Roy is trying to follow the drift of this discussion and removes his thumb enough for his flubby lips to mouth something Rabbit does not understand. Whatever he's saying, it makes Roy's eyes water to think of it. "Eeeeeee" is all Harry hears, at the end of the sentence.

Pru translates: "He says she gets to watch TV."

"What a disgusting baby tattletale," says Judy, and quick as a dragonfly darting over water she skims across the carpet and with an open hand whacks her little brother on the side of his spherical head. Pru cuts his hair in a kind of inverted bowl-shape. As when a faucet gasps emptily for a second after being turned on, his outrage silences him a moment, though his mouth is open. His yell when it comes arrives at full volume; against its sonic background Judy explains to them all, with a certain condescending air, "Just Johnny Carson sometimes when everybody else was asleep, and *Saturday Night Live* once that I can remember."

Harry asks her, "So you'd rather stay in here with the lousy TV than have a little cozy room of your own?"

"It doesn't have any windows," she points out shyly, not wanting to hurt his feelings.

"Fine, *fine*," Harry says. "I don't give a fuck where anybody sleeps," and in demonstration of his indifference strides into his own bedroom, past the king-size bed they bought down here, with i

padding headboard covered in quilted satin and a matching jade-green coverlet that is as hard to fold up as the ones in hotels, into the little windowless room and picks up the folding cot, with its sheets and baby-blue Orion blanket on it, and lugs it through the doorways, banging the frames and one of the wicker armchairs in the living room, into the guest bedroom. He is embarrassed: he overestimated how fast Judy was growing, he had wanted to embower her as his princess, he doesn't know little girls, his one daughter died and his other is not his.

Janice says, "Harry, you mustn't overexert yourself, the doctor said."

"The doctor said," he mocks. "All he ever sees is people over seventy-five and he says to me just what he says to them."

But he is breathing hard, and Pru hastens after him to spare him the effort of straightening the folding leg, a U-shape of metal tubing, that has come unclicked and folded underneath, and pulls taut the sheets and blanket. Back in the living room, Harry says to Nelson, who is holding little Roy in his arms again, "Now are you and the brat happy?"

For answer Nelson turns to Janice and says, "Jesus, Mom, I don't know as I can stand five days of this."

But then when they all get settled—the suitcases unpacked into bureaus, Judy and Roy fed milk and cookies and changed into bathing suits and taken to the heated Valhalla Village pool by their mother and Janice, who has to sign them in—Harry and Nelson sit each with a beer at the round glass table and try to be friends. "So," Harry says, "how's the car business?"

"You know as well as I do," Nelson says. "You see the stat sheets every month." He has developed a nervous irritable habit of grimacing and hunching his shoulders, as though somebody behind him might be about to knock him on the head. He smokes a cigarette as if he's feeding himself something through a tube, constantly fiddling with the shape of the ash on the edge of a white clamshell he has borrowed from Janice's collection.

"How do you like the '89s?" Harry asks, determined not to put it off, now that he and the boy are alone. "I haven't seen the actual cars yet, just the brochures. Beautiful brochures. How many million do you think those ad agencies get for making up those brochures? I was looking at the Corolla one trying to figure out if they really *had* driven that sedan and that wagon up into the mountains or were just faking it, and I had to laugh. The cars were posed on snow but there were no tracks showing how they got there! Look at it sometime."

Nelson is not much amused. He shapes his ash into a perfect cone and then suddenly stabs it out, twisting the butt vehemently. His hands shake more than a young man's should. He sips his beer, leaving shreds of foam on his tufty mustache, and, looking level at his father, says, "You asked me what I thought of the '89s. The same thing I thought about the '88s. Dull, Dad. Boxy. They're still giving us cars that look like gas-misers when there's been a gas glut for ten years. Americans want to go back to fins and convertibles and the limo look and these Japs are still trying to sell these tidy little boxes. And not cheap, either. That's what hurts. The lousy dollar against the yen. Why should people pay seventeen grand for a GTS when in the same range you can get a Mustang or Beretta GT or Mazda MX-6?"

"A Celica doesn't cost seventeen grand," Harry says. "Mine back home listed at less than fifteen."

"Get a few options and it does."

"Don't push the options at people—you get a name in the county for loading. People come

determined to have a stripped model, you should sell 'em one without making 'em feel they're being cheapskates.”

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“Tell it to California,” Nelson says. “Practically all they want to part with are loaded models. The automatic notchbacks, the All-Trac Turbos. You want a basic ST or GT, it takes months for the order to come through. Luxury is where the bigger profit is, all the way up the line back to Tokyo. You have to try to sell what they send us—the one machine they make that’s really moving, the Camry, you can’t wheedle enough out of the bastards. They treat us like dirt, Dad. They see us as soft. Soft like Americans, over the hill. Ten more years, they’ll have bought the whole country. Some television show I was watching, they already own all of Hawaii and half of L.A. and Nevada. They’re buying up thousands of acres of desert in Nevada! What’re they going to do with it? Set off Japanese atomic bombs?”

“Don’t get down on the Japanese like that, Nelson. We’ve done fine riding along with the Japanese.”

“Riding along, you said it. Like riding along in the back seat of a Tercel. You always talk of them with such awe, like they’re supermen. They’re not. Some of their design, you get away from the little safe dependable cheapie family car, is a disaster. The Land Cruiser is a dog, it doesn’t begin to compete with the Cherokee, and neither does the 4-Runner, it was so underpowered they had to come with a V-6 engine that turns out to be a guzzler—fourteen miles to the gallon, I was reading *Consumer Reports*. And that van! It’s ridiculous. Where the engine is, up between the front seats, the only way to get to the front from the back is get all the way out and climb back in. In the winter in Pennsylvania, people don’t like to do that. So many customers have been complaining, I drove one myself the other day just to see, and even though I’m no giant, boy, did I feel squeezed in—no foot room to speak of, and no place to put your elbow. And zilch acceleration: pull into a fast-moving highway you’ll get rear-ended. The wind pushed me all over 422, the damn thing is so tall—I could hardly step up into it.”

*That’s right*, Harry is thinking, *you’re no giant*. Nelson seems to him strangely precise and indignant and agitated, like a nicely made watch with one tooth off a cogwheel or a gummy spot in the lubrication. The kid keeps sniffing, and lights another cigarette, after not enjoying the one he just snuffed out. He keeps touching his nose, as if his mustache hurts. “Well,” Harry says, taking a relaxed tone to try to relax his son, “vans were never the bread and butter, and Toyota knows they have lemon. They’re getting a total revamp out by ’91. How do you like the new Cressida?”

“It stinks, in my humble. There’s nothing new about it. Oh, it’s bigger, a bit, and the engine is up from two point eight to three point oh, and twenty-four valves instead of twelve, so you get more oomph, but for a basic twenty-one K you *expect* a little oomph—my *God*. The dashboard is a disaster. The climate-control panel slides out like a drawer and won’t budge unless the ignition’s on, which is ridiculous, number one, and two, they kept from last year’s model their crazy idea of two sets of audio controls so you have all these extra buttons when already there’s enough for an airplane cockpit. It costs luxury, Dad, and it drives luxury you could say, but it looks cheap inside and pseudo-Audi outside. Toyota, let’s face it, has about the styling imagination of a gerbil. Their cars don’t *express* anything. Good cars, classic cars—the Thirties Packards, the little Jags with the long hood and spoke wheels, the Fifties finned jobbies, even the VW bug—*expressed* something, made a statement. Toyotas don’t express anything but playing it safe and stealing other people’s ideas. Look at the pickup. The pickup used to be hot, but now they’ve let Ford and GM right back into the market. Look at the MR-2. It doesn’t sell for shit now.”



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