



FICTION

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—T. CORAGHESAN BOYLE

# The Green Suit

D w i g h t A l l e n

# The Green Suit

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BY  
Dwight Allen

ALGONQUIN BOOKS OF CHAPEL HILL  
2000

*For Nancy and George, and in memory of my father*

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What can this capricious skin be but a blessing?

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—John Cheever, *Journals*

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# Deferment

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IN THE SUMMER OF 1970, I spent a lot of time trying to get a girl named Lizzie Burford to sleep with me. I had the idea that we would do it at the Goshen Motor Court, out on U.S. 42, near the county line. We'd lie in each other's arms and shiver as the air conditioner blew and the sweat on our skin dried. I was nineteen, a year older than Lizzie, and I thought about motels the way I later thought about churches: as places you could disappear into and lose yourself. I thought of the Goshen in particular because we sometimes drove past it on our way to or from doing nothing. Once when we stopped at the filling station across the highway from the Goshen, I saw a woman smoking in a lawn chair in the grassy oval where the motel owner had planted zinnias around an old water pump. I asked Lizzie what she thought the woman was thinking about, and Lizzie said, "She's thinking she made a mistake. Or why is she sitting outdoors watching the traffic go by and he's in the room eating beer nuts or something?"

"Maybe she got cold in the air-conditioning," I said.

"Maybe she wanted to hear the insects sing," Lizzie said, reaching for the can of beer between my legs. "And now she's thinking about walking across the highway so she can talk to *him*." She indicated the skinny boy washing bug spatters from the windshield.

"I like sleeping in motels," I said. This was more a statement of fact than a proposition.

"You're so romantic, Peter," Lizzie said, replacing the can of beer.

As I waited for the pump jockey to bring me my change, I saw the woman crossing the highway. She was barefooted. I wondered if the warmth of the pavement surprised her. Lizzie said, "Think of all the wrong boys you could end up with with breasts like hers."

I took Lizzie home and kissed her softly on the mouth and then drove to the Frankfort Avenue White Castle and ate six of those silver-dollar-size burgers in about two minutes.

THE NEXT AFTERNOON, on my way to work, I stopped by Lizzie's house. As far as I knew, I was the only boy in Jefferson County knocking on her door. This was so not only because she was flat-chested and lanky, with bones that hung together in a complex, awkward way. It was so because she had a straight-A kind of brain and often carried herself in a manner that led some boys to imagine that she was standoffish or prideful or touchy or all three. And then there was the matter of her being the daughter of an Episcopal preacher and of failing to behave like the hard-drinking, hell-raising offspring of Episcopal clergymen we all knew. She stole sips of beer from me and did not smoke.

When I entered the house, Miles, the Burfords' black Lab, sniffed me all over, then retired to the library. I followed Lizzie upstairs. We passed the door to her parents' bedroom—the Reverend Burford was at St. Timothy's, Mrs. Burford was at the chiropractor's—and then we passed Lizzie's brother's room. Harry was in Vietnam. He'd been there for about two months.

Lizzie flopped down on her bed and resumed writing a letter to her brother. She wrote him almost daily, on stationery with psychedelic filigree which she'd bought at a head shop. I sat on the edge of the twin, watching her write, watching her long, bare legs move back and forth, slowly, metronomically. I was aware of a dull ticking in my head. I took off my work boots and found a place on the bed beside her. I set my mouth within inches of a vaccination mark on her right arm. She was left-handed, the only left-handed girl in the universe, to my knowledge. Her handwriting was messy, difficult to discern.

"What are you telling Harry?" My breath came back at me off her freckled, summery skin.

“Just things. About my job.” Lizzie worked in a Head Start program in the mornings. “How many times Daddy took his glasses off when he gave his sermon.”

“How many?” I aimed the tip of my tongue at the pale center of her vaccination mark.

“Seventeen. It was a short sermon.” She tucked stray hair behind her ear and then said, “You’re cramping my style.”

I withdrew my tongue and rolled over on my back. I gazed at Lizzie’s ear, the curve of it ending in that soft lobe with its tiny ring hole. I fingered the pack of Larks in the breast pocket of my shirt. Though I was nineteen, a sophomore-to-be at a college in Tennessee, I was by any definition except, perhaps, a technical one a virgin. Once, during my freshman year, I’d gotten near-blind-drunk on grape alcohol punch and found myself on top of a girl from Knoxville, who was also drunk and who kept saying, “Are you in? Are you in? I can’t feel you.”

I listened to the air conditioner rattle in the window frame. It was ninety-something outside. In an hour, I had to be at my job. I worked on the four-to-midnight shift at a lumber mill off Dixie Highway stacking boards that came off a planer. It was a summer job, the lowliest at the plant, next to sweeping sawdust. I’d chosen it over an offer to be a gofer boy for a firm of Republican lawyers.

I rolled off the bed and went over to Lizzie’s desk and picked up the photo cube that sat on a pile of books. There was a picture of Lizzie and Harry as children: Lizzie in a green, bell-shaped dress that made her look like a Christmas ornament, flashing slightly bucked teeth, and Harry in blazer and tie, his hand on his sister’s shoulder. I rotated the cube to a picture of Lizzie in last year’s prom gown, her teeth straightened, her shoulders so bare I felt I could touch them below the surface of the photo. I turned the cube again, to a snapshot of Harry in jungle pants and Army helmet, crouched by a small black dog, sandbags in the background; Harry was squinting and he looked quizzical, the way dogs do when they tilt their heads to the side.

And then I studied the picture, taken that spring, of Lizzie as Mary the Maid in *The Bald Soprano*, her senior class play. (She’d gone to a private girls’ school that employed an ambitious drama teacher.) She wore a short black skirt with a frilly apron and balanced uneasily on high heels. I thought she looked wonderful, even if she was dressed more like a cocktail waitress than a maid in a proper English home. The photograph was of the moment when she recited Mary’s poem for the Fire Chief. Her hands were clutched together at her waist, and her head was tilted upward, heavenward, as if ecstasy had descended on her and left her mouth agape. This wasn’t quite the first sign I’d had that she was capable of enrapturement, but it was the most explicit.

I opened the top drawer of Lizzie’s desk in the hope of finding I knew not what exactly. The letters I’d written her from college that spring, letters all swollen with praise (some of it borrowed) for the parts of her I’d been allowed to kiss?

“What are you doing in my desk, Mr. Nosey?”

“*Rien.*” I walked across the hall to Harry’s room. The blinds were pulled and the windows shut tight. The air felt ancient, as if it were being preserved for Harry to breathe when he came back. The trophies on the bureau—both for swimming—gleamed faintly. A knotted necktie hung from a drawer knob. On the floor were two crates of LPs, mostly jazz, mostly musicians I knew only by name. Harry was deep, though not in an academic way, judging by his failure to hold on to his student deferment. He had fallen behind at college and then had dropped out and gone to Montreal, where he’d planned to spend the war. But when his draft notice arrived, he returned home. Lizzie said he’d felt guilty.

I put a record on Harry’s portable Magnavox and sat in his wide-bottomed armchair and listened to Thelonious Monk play the piano. He played the melody in snatches and then nervously jumped away from it, like a man with a hundred worries. I closed my eyes. I thought of Harry crouching next to the

little black dog in the Mekong Delta or wherever he was in that country of which my ignorance was extensive. (Once, when Lizzie read me one of Harry's letters in which there was a description of a sunset, I thought, *There are sunsets in Vietnam?*) Wasn't dog considered to be a delicacy in Asia? The dog and Harry vanished and I saw myself lying naked on crisp white sheets at the Goshen Motor Court, waiting for a woman to come out of the bathroom, where she was washing her feet.

"Do you like it?" Lizzie had slipped into her brother's room and was now sitting on my knees, her hands pinning mine to the armrests. She meant the music.

"Yeah," I said.

"More than Buffalo Springfield? More than Joni Mitchell in her big yellow taxi?"

"Yeah."

"Liar," Lizzie said. "Pants are on fire."

In Lizzie's eyes, soft black islands encircled by blue-gray irises casting changeable light, I saw that she couldn't say to herself that she found me undesirable, even if she could say that I didn't impress her. In her mouth, in the ample fleshiness of it, I saw, or imagined I saw, her willingness to accept my devotions, at least until the end of the summer, when she went away to college. She was going to Chapel Hill on a scholarship.

I leaned forward to kiss Lizzie, but I was in an awkward position and she didn't meet me halfway and I couldn't reach that far—or that high, rather. And so I put my mouth on her more accessible breast, a small wonder beneath her ribbed jersey. I was permitted to let my mouth rest there for a moment, like a child being offered consolation, long enough that I felt her nipple rise in response. Oh, I was allowed certain liberties, to use a phrase that even then was old-fashioned, but Lizzie wasn't going to let go of her virginity easily. She had discussed me in her letters to Harry, and he had told her that you had to be careful whom you entrusted your soul to. At any rate, she wasn't prepared to surrender herself to me "just because you have a boner and I have a vagina it can go into." She laughed when she said that. Her frankness threw me and even made me blush.

When Lizzie pulled away and I lifted my head, I saw the Reverend Burford in the doorway. He was short and gray-haired. There was something molelike about his face, as if he didn't spend enough time in the sun. His forehead was marked with lines that faded out at his temples, like old trails. He looked damp and pale, not nearly as pink as the flesh-colored frames of his glasses. In fact, he had a cold.

"Lizzie, I think it would be better if you and Peter were not in your brother's room." He sniffled, tugged at his clerical collar.

Lizzie rose from my knees and brushed at herself, as if to shed the imprint of me. "We were just listening to one of Harry's jazz records before Peter left."

"It's nice seeing you again, Peter," the Reverend Burford said.

"Yessir," I said, rising from the chair, wondering if the stiffness in my jeans was as evident to him as it was to me. I stuck my hands in my pockets and looked down at my bootless feet.

"I missed seeing your father at the Humane Society meeting the other night," the Reverend Burford said, taking a handkerchief out of his coat pocket. "Please give him and your mother my regards."

"Yessir."

"HOW'D YOU GET out of the draft, man?" Red and I were pushing a cartload of hardwood from the planing room into a storage area. Or rather I was pushing and Red was guiding me across the rutted concrete floor, down an aisle, where the only light was cast by yellow bulbs in wire cages. It was eight-fifteen in the evening, fifteen minutes until dinnertime.

“Student deferment,” I said, sliding my safety glasses up my sweaty nose.

“How come you’re doing a dumb-ass job like this if you’re so smart?” Red came around to the back of the cart to help me push it the last few feet. He was grinning. The reddish-blond stubble on his chin and around his mouth, the beginnings of a goatee perhaps, looked like sawdust stuck to his face, not quite real. As he leaned into the cart, the muscles in his arms flared beneath a cutoff football jersey he’d worn just about every day I’d known him. Six days, to be exact. Today was the first time we’d had something like a conversation.

“Must be the money,” I said, hoping this would pass for a joke.

“Maybe you can buy some pencils and tablets with it,” he said. We walked back down the aisle and into the planing room with its high, girdered ceiling and doors you could drive a semi through.

I didn’t know how old Red was. His hard, narrow face suggested he was older than me by more than a year or two. But he had freckles around his eyes, some residue from a not-too-far-off boyhood. And his eyes were a mild blue. And his hair—stringy, the color of dried-out red clay—was almost long enough to make me think he might be an ally. There were fewer than a handful of workers in the mill whose hair fell over their eartops.

“How’d you get out of the draft?” I asked.

He removed his right work glove and held out his hand. “The trigger finger doesn’t look real useful, does it?” It had been severed at the middle joint. “I can hardly even pick my nose with it.” He said he’d cut it in shop class at high school.

He put his glove back on and said, “One more load before dinner.” He went down to his work station, singing “Whipping Post,” and switched on the machinery. Raw ten- and twenty-foot boards of maple and oak and walnut slid sideways down a canted conveyor and Red guided them into the planer. I grabbed them as they shot across a metal table, all hot and smooth, their grains exposed, and flipped them onto a cart. Red had taught me to use the table as a lever. “It’s like dealing cards,” he’d said. “Nothing to it.” But I still wasn’t in his league. When both he and I worked at my end of the table—sometimes a man named Boyd fed the planer—Red did the twice the volume I did. Sometimes Red did a little monkey dance while loading his cart and half of mine.

Red pushed boards toward me at a rate I couldn’t keep up with, and in a minute I was buried. I waved at him to stop, but he didn’t acknowledge me. He was singing to himself. I started shouting, even though I knew he couldn’t hear me through the noise of the planer, which was like ten lawn mowers going at once. I watched a batch of black walnut slide off the table onto the floor. Then the machine stopped.

From behind me came a voice. “Son, if you make any more messes like this, you’re going to have to find another line of work.”

The speaker was Mr. Root, the foreman, who was known as Adolph, because he bore a passing resemblance to Adolph Rupp, the University of Kentucky’s gruff, jowly basketball coach. Mr. Root was sitting in his foreman’s motorized cart, sipping coffee, his head hidden under a cap.

“Yessir,” I said.

“I’ll get him to quit playing with his pecker, don’t you worry, Mr. Root,” Red said. He was helping me pick up the boards.

“You be sure you do, Cloverly.” That was the first time I heard Red’s last name; I never did find out his Christian name, unless Red was it.

Mr. Root departed. “Sorry,” I said to Red.

“Some guy I know died in Vietnam because some fuckup in his platoon didn’t do his job right.” Red

glared at me.

“Sorry,” I said, though I didn’t see the parallel between the jungles of Vietnam and a wood mill in Kentucky.

“Don’t worry about it, Joe,” Red said, slapping me on the back. Joe, I later figured out, was short for Joe College. “Just keep your pecker clear of whirling blades.”

He grinned and I grinned back.

“WHERE ARE YOU AND LIZZIE going tonight, Peter?” Mrs. Burford was tearing up lettuce, dropping the pieces into a wooden bowl on the kitchen table. Some of the pieces were as small as confetti. She was on her second Scotch—second that I’d seen, anyway.

“The movies,” I said. “Lizzie wants to see this one by Truffaut that Harry told her about. It’s at the Crescent.” I glanced out the window above the kitchen sink. Lizzie was playing with Miles while the Reverend Burford tended the barbecue grill. She was wearing a sundress, her arms and legs covered by nothing more than smoky light. Watching her throw a ball to Miles quickened my desire for her. The fact that she threw awkwardly, as if her left arm operated independently of her brain, made her only more desirable.

“Harry took me to some Swedish movie at the Crescent just before he went off to boot camp,” Mrs. Burford said. “It was all pain and desolation. With subtitles I couldn’t make out half the time.” Mrs. Burford stopped tearing lettuce and picked up her drink. The bracelets on her wrist slid and jangled. She was a tall, thin woman, nearly a head taller than her husband. She wore her graying hair in a permanent wave, possibly in the hope that it might divert attention from the signs of disintegration in her face. There was darkness under her eyes, which were like glimmers far out to sea.

I picked at the label on my beer bottle. “Do you like musicals?”

“Musicals?” she said, tilting her head, as if there were something hidden in my question and she were trying to shake it loose. In fact, it was a mindless question, though I did see how it might lead her away from the subject of Harry, who was all but present. There were pictures of him on the refrigerator, though none showed him in military dress. In one taken a couple days before he’d been inducted, he had his arms around Lizzie and a friend of hers named Evie. Their faces were squeezed together like fruit in a bin. Harry’s hair was long and it fell into his eyes, but it didn’t hide his fear.

“Musicals?” she said again, opening the refrigerator and leaning in. “I prefer them to Swedish dramas, if that’s what you mean.” She turned around and handed me a large red onion that had slipped out of its skin. “Why don’t you cut this up while I go put something on the hi-fi.”

She left the kitchen with her drink in hand. Was I supposed to slice the onion into rings or dice it? Was it for the salad or the hamburgers?

I heard the hi-fi needle land on a record and slide across an acre of grooves before settling on a man crooning darkly about an ill wind. I looked out the window for Lizzie. She was standing next to her father, holding her hair off her neck.

Mrs. Burford re-entered the kitchen, the liquid in her glass a late-afternoon color. The music, the solemn voice of the singer and the lush sound of the orchestra, seemed to have made her smaller, overwhelmed her. Then I noticed she’d taken off her shoes.

“I don’t suppose you and Lizzie listen to Frank Sinatra much.” She took the knife from me and began to dice the two onion rings I’d sliced.

“I hear him on the radio sometimes.” With strings swelling behind him, Sinatra sang of having no one to scratch his back.

“I heard him at the Armory in 1941 with the Dorsey band. The place was full of all these young me

without dates. Stags, we called them. It was so hot and crowded I could hardly breathe.” She looked up from the onions, into, I imagined, the mists of the forties. “Sinatra was just a tough little skinny kid then, a beautiful singer. When he got older, his voice became less beautiful and more interesting. He made this record in 1955, after Ava Gardner left him.”

I swallowed the last of my beer. When Mrs. Burford had offered me the beer, she’d said, “If you’re old enough to be drafted, you’re old enough to drink.” I gripped my empty bottle and listened to the record, trying to hear what Mrs. Burford heard. I was a little bit high, which made me receptive. Then I saw Mrs. Burford lift her head from her onion chopping. She was crying, whether from the onions or the music or something else, I wasn’t sure.

Mrs. Burford wiped her cheeks with the back of her hand. Then she asked me to take the salad out to the table on the side porch. There was nothing in the bowl besides the shredded lettuce.

I stood under the slowly spinning ceiling fan on the porch and watched Miles run out of the yard in a hurry, as if he’d just caught the scent of something juicier than the Reverend Burford’s hamburgers. Frank Sinatra was singing about a man alone in bed. The music seemed gravely wrought, if not overwrought, and I wanted to escape it and go have a cigarette.

When I came back into the kitchen, Mrs. Burford said, “What do you plan on doing if you’re drafted?” She was standing at the sink, washing a head of broccoli. I couldn’t see her face.

A year before, in the weeks before my eighteenth birthday, I’d had some notion that I might file for conscientious objector status, though I’d barely cracked the books about pacifism I’d gotten from the library and I knew in my heart I wasn’t going to cut it as a C.O. And when the time came to make an appearance at the Selective Service Office, I’d gone downtown and said, in effect, “You can have me when you need me.” The clerk, a woman with a Rhine-maidenish tower of hair, had smiled at me through coils of cigarette smoke. A few months later, after I’d gone off to college, I’d received my card and my deferment. I was 2-S.

“I guess I’d go,” I said. “Probably.” I sat down at the table.

“You don’t sound very sure of yourself.” Her back was still turned to me. Her blouse had come untucked.

I touched the glass that held her Scotch, then glanced at the pictures of Harry on the refrigerator door. Would I have submitted to the government’s call and come home from Montreal? Probably.

Mrs. Burford turned around, the head of wet broccoli in her hands, glistening, dripping on the floor. “I didn’t hear what you said.” She’d dried her eyes, but her face was clouded and dark, as if there were more bad weather on the way.

“I’m hoping I don’t lose my deferment,” I said. “My lottery number is kind of low.” My number was 43.

“You shouldn’t do what your heart tells you not to do.” She turned back to the sink. “Harry went because he said some poor kid would have to go if he didn’t. He was trying to be noble.”

If I went to Vietnam, would Lizzie sleep with me as a parting gift? I thought not. She was a girl with principles.

“Maybe you could take the ketchup out to the porch,” Mrs. Burford said. “It’s in the fridge. And the horseradish. My husband won’t eat a hamburger without it.”

I found the bottles and carried them through the living room, where Sinatra was singing to the blue sofa where Lizzie and I sometimes sat, me with my boner, Lizzie with a Coke she sipped endlessly, and Miles at her feet. I set the bottles on the porch table and when I looked up, I saw a car stopped in the street, a pale blue Falcon sedan like my grandmother drove, with a woman in a golf skirt and visor

standing beside it. She'd hit Miles. I could see his black shape a few yards from her fender. I looked dumbly at Miles sprawled there, in the end-of-the-day haze, and then Lizzie ran by the porch, shouting, and I noticed the way her body moved inside her sundress.

MILES WAS STILL BREATHING. The Reverend Burford wrapped him in a sheet and lifted him into the back of his wood-paneled station wagon, which he'd bought at a discount from a parishioner. Lizzie was weeping, tearing at herself because Miles was her responsibility while Harry was away, and she insisted on going with her father to the vet's. There was blood on her hand, where she'd stroked Miles and on her cheek, where she'd wiped her hand in despair. Mrs. Burford and I stayed behind. She had another Scotch and then she excused herself and went upstairs to her bedroom and didn't come back down. I helped myself to another beer and drank it on the blue sofa as the light leaked out of the day and I felt my desire for Lizzie wane.

"YOU NEED TO pick up the pace, boy," Red said, "or you're going to get your ass canned." We were on a smoke break, sitting on a bench outside the planing shed, below a huge pile of shavings and other mill refuse. Boyd, who was feeding the planer that night, was sitting apart from us on an overturned bucket, not smoking. It was dark, between ten and eleven.

I was tired and, not for the first time, on the verge of quitting. It gave me pleasure to imagine lying on my bed, listening to Thelonious Monk play the piano, my hand lolling next to a vent that cool air poured through. I could almost hear the air flowing through the duct and Monk doing his odd sprung-rhythm thing. I'd persuaded Lizzie to let me borrow a couple of Harry's LPs.

Red dragged on his cigarette. "You getting laid enough?"

I exhaled smoke and produced a noise like an assent.

"Maybe he's a fairy," Boyd said. Boyd poured the last of a pint carton of chocolate milk down his throat and then let the carton fall to the dirt. According to Red, Boyd was a drifter. He didn't spend any time mixing with others. At dinnertime, he went out to his car with his vending-machine sandwich and chocolate milk and ate there.

"Fairies get laid, I hear," Red said. "They just go at it different."

"You know that from experience, Red?" Boyd pushed down on the carton with his work boot.

"I know that from seeing you and Adolph get it on in the back of that shit-for-wheels Fury of yours. I asked myself: why can't they go to a darned motel if they want to do them things? Wasn't I telling you about that, Joe?" Red jabbed me in the shoulder with the stub of his trigger finger.

I nodded in a way that I hoped might be imperceptible to Boyd and then saw him slowly rise from his seat. Boyd was tall and bony, with an Adam's apple that jutted like a crag. His hair receded from wispy widow's peak high on his forehead. I estimated his age at between thirty and fifty.

Boyd walked past without glancing our way and went into the planing shed and switched on the conveyor and planer.

"Fucking drifting alky trash," Red said. "Don't pay any attention to him."

A couple nights later, the night we got paid, I drove Red to a twenty-four-hour gas station after work. The tires on his Camaro had been slashed. He punched the ceiling of my VW and swore, telling me what he planned to do to Boyd when he caught him. (Boyd was long gone; he'd disappeared at the six o'clock smoke break, after the paychecks had come around.) The station wouldn't cash Red's check, so I let him use my credit card, and then drove him back to the mill and watched him put the new tires on.

As he tightened the bolts on the last tire, he said, "I know this girl Virgie who has a sister I could f

you up with. I owe you, so don't say no."

I didn't.

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I WENT OUT with Lizzie the next night, as planned. She was in a cheerful mood. She'd gotten a letter from Harry, who said that he was doing fine, "just sitting here on my cot, drinking warm beer, and listening to Johnny Cash on the radio in between choppers flying over." He added, "I wish it was Billie Holiday instead of Johnny, but you can't have everything (ha ha)." Lizzie wrote back to say that Miles was doing OK after the accident. The vet had amputated a leg that was crushed beyond repair, but Miles was now able to hobble around and find his way to the pork-chop bones in the kitchen trash.

Lizzie and I went to see *Jules and Jim* at the Crescent and then we drove to a wayside on River Road and sat on the damp ground under a buzzing street lamp and watched the river flow by. We talked about the movie, about how the Jeanne Moreau character was too much for either of the men to handle by himself. I said I couldn't see sharing a lover with somebody else.

"You can't have everything," Lizzie said, laughing. Then she asked me to give her my wallet.

"My wallet?" But I did as she requested.

She went through the contents—a photo of her, the combination to my athletic locker at school, my Standard Oil credit card—until she found what she wanted. She held it up to the light and read my Selective Service number and my Random Sequence number and my classification. Then she folded the card into quarters and put it in her mouth. She let it rest against her cheek for a moment, like a plug of tobacco, before she began chewing.

I watched in silence. I was opposed to the war—or, anyway, opposed to having to participate in it myself—but I'd done little to declare my opposition, aside from taking part in a candlelight march at school. There was a whole army of us, upper-middle-class white boys with draft cards in our back pockets, hoping the war would end before our deferments expired.

"What does it taste like?"

"Like paper with typing on it, except for your signature, which is kind of inky. You want a bite?" She stuck her tongue out; in the juices of her mouth, the card had been reduced to something larger than a spitball.

"No, thanks."

She resumed chewing; she chewed noisily, like a child making a show of her eating.

"You can do time for 'knowingly' mutilating a card," I said. I'd read the fine print on the back.

"Here," she said, leaning toward me. "Be a good boy and swallow." She shoved the sodden wad into my mouth and then kissed me hard. She pushed at the card with her tongue, trying to steer it down my throat, until she started laughing.

I took the lump out of my mouth and put it in my pocket. "I'll tell the draft board my girlfriend ate it," I said.

"Be brave," she said. "Tell them you don't want to fight in their shitty war."

"Would you sleep with me then—before I went to jail, I mean?"

"I'd write you letters in jail." She put her arm around me. "It doesn't matter. I'm not going to get drafted anyway."

I ARRIVED LATE for Harry's funeral and found a seat in the rearmost pew, next to the man who'd taught Latin to Harry and (later) me in high school. Mr. Becker had also coached the swimming team of which Harry had been captain in his senior year. He shared a hymnal with me and sang

enthusiastically, in his emphatic Latin taskmaster's baritone. My eyes strayed from the book to look for Lizzie, but I couldn't see far enough forward through all the dark suits and saucer-shaped hats. I'd not seen her since the night she ate my draft card. I'd been going out with Cheryl, Virgie's sister, the girl Red had set me up with.

When the congregation sat for the reading of the lesson, I saw the back of Lizzie's head. It seemed more remote than I had ever imagined it might become. I listened to the lesson: "Behold, I show you mystery; we shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, and the last trump." I read, responsively, the even-numbered verses of Psalm 121, and then I went outside and took off my jacket and got into my car.

I lit a cigarette. I looked at the white doors of St. Timothy's, the little flourish of a steeple poking at the pale sky, the hearse driver sitting on a fold-up stool in the courtyard next to the sanctuary. I watched cars go down the street—traffic from another world, it seemed. I remembered that when I heard about Harry's death—he stepped on a mine—I was in the bathroom brushing my teeth, getting ready to go see Cheryl. I listened as the bearer of the news, my mother, talked to me through the door. When she left, I finished brushing my teeth and worried a pimple and then wrote Lizzie a note, which despite its brevity, I flattered myself to imagine was heartfelt. I dropped the note in the Burfords' mailbox on my way out to Shively, where Red and Cheryl and her sister lived. This was my second date with Cheryl, who sold popcorn at the new Movieland on Dixie Highway. On our first, we'd drive around with Red and Virgie, stopping at an all-night auto-parts store, where Red wanted to look at tachometers, and ending up at a party halfway to Fort Knox. Cheryl had a boyfriend, I found out, who was in Vietnam, and it came as a surprise to me when she took my hand and studied my palm and said "Don't worry. He won't kill you if we make it."

I saw the funeral parlor driver get up from his stool and a couple minutes later the church's white doors opened and six men hauled Harry's coffin into the sunlight. I saw the Reverend Burford without his vestments—he hadn't officiated—and then I saw Lizzie. She was holding on to her mother's arm, moving unsurely, as if caught off guard by the brightness of the day. She didn't wear sunglasses or a hat, as her mother did. The sun was pouring down on her head, cooking her to her roots, and she leaned against her mother for protection.

I hadn't been the kind of person, I thought, whom Lizzie cared to lean into. What had I had to offer after all, aside from my worshipful dick, which, like some meddlesome, boorish third party, was always ready to interpose itself? And so, about a week before I would learn of Harry's death, I'd gone out to Shively for the first time. The next day, I'd left Lizzie a note—I was big on leaving notes—telling her I was "seeing" someone else. I didn't expect her to answer, but she did. On legal-pad paper she wrote, in her jumbly left-handed script, "Happiness is a warm gun, *n'est-ce pas?*—"

People got into their cars, and then the hearse, like a great gleaming boat, pulled out into the street and the procession to the cemetery began. I got in line behind the last car, a VW containing Evie and another of Lizzie's friends, but when it turned left, I turned right, toward Shively.

"DON'T YOU KNOW any girls, man?" We were in Red's Camaro, parked across the street from a package store, drinking short boys. Virgie and Red had had a fight, and he was in a dark mood. Cheryl was working at the movie theater. It was barely seven, the package store neon buzzing in the lingering daylight. When I suggested we pick Cheryl up when she got off work, Red said, "Maybe she can sit in the crack"—he indicated the space between the bucket seats—"and jerk us both off." He smirked at me through the bristly fringe of his goatee. "I don't know, Joe. I don't think you ought to get too excited about Cheryl. She'd screw pretty much anything with two legs, which is why I set you up with her in the first place. I could see you were in need."

I remembered Cheryl saying, after we'd made it for the second time, "You're so quick." And then she'd kissed me, as if my being quick hadn't mattered too much. This was two weeks ago, the afternoon of Harry's funeral. We'd driven from Shively to the Goshen Motor Court, and afterward had lain on the stained sheets, watching a game show on a TV whose picture wouldn't stop rolling. The air conditioner produced only warm air, and at some point Cheryl had taken a shower and then had left the room to look for something to eat. When she came back, with barbecue chips and a Moon Pie and two Orange Crushes, I was overcome by hunger for her. "Whoa," she said, but she was under me before she could take a bite of anything.

I looked out the windshield. A man as skinny as a snake came weaving down the sidewalk. He was wearing an unbuttoned, puffy-sleeved paisley shirt and bell-bottoms that were slipping down his hips and a sashlike belt that fell to his knees. I thought he might weave himself right on to the hood of Red's car, but he slid by.

"Thought that was Boyd for a second," Red said. "Dressed up like a dipshit." He pushed in the lighter and reached for his Raleighs, which were wedged between the sun visor and the roof. "So you aren't going to introduce me to any of your high-class girlfriends?"

I'd tried to keep from Red—and Cheryl—the fact that I lived in a wealthy East End neighborhood, considerable distance from the mill and working-class Shively, as well as from the package store outside of which we were now twiddling our thumbs. I'd always driven out to Shively or, as on this evening, met Red in-between. My economic status had become clear to Red when he'd phoned me, and Willie, the maid, had answered.

"OK," I said. "That way." I pointed in the direction of Lizzie's house.

WE SWUNG BY my house first. My parents had gone out, and I invited Red in, but he declined: "Wouldn't want to dirty the carpet." I got the two Monk LPs that Lizzie had let me borrow and grabbed an unopened quart of Scotch from a kitchen cabinet. When I presented Red with the bottle, he studied the two Scottie dogs on the label and said, "Woof! Woof!" Then he said, "Now show me where the long-legged women are hiding."

We drove out of my thickly wooded neighborhood, across U.S. 42 and over to Lizzie's, where the trees were younger and there was less space between houses. I told Red about Lizzie's brother. I said I didn't know if she'd be in the mood to ride around with us.

"Go ring the doorbell, man," Red said. "I'll cheer her up."

I went up the Burfords' brick walk with the albums. In my note to Lizzie about Harry, I'd said she could call me whenever she wanted. In my arrogance, I'd imagined she might come running to me in her grief. I liked Cheryl, I liked the way she held on to me for those brief moments I was inside her, one hand on my neck, the other at the base of my spine, as if she were guiding me through some country waltz. I liked the frank but uncritical way she gazed at me and the way she said, when a certain C&W singer came on the radio, "Oh, God, I love that man almost as much as my daddy." But I was prepared to give her up in the event Lizzie sought me out—not that Cheryl, if Red was to be believed, would have minded too much. When Harry had died, I'd actually imagined that his hold on Lizzie might weaken somehow, that she might see the usefulness of entrusting herself to me, if only temporarily. It wasn't easy admitting defeat. I liked Cheryl's soft, sweet breasts, breasts between which Moon Pie crumbs could get lost, but I'd set my heart on Lizzie's small, firm ones.

I rang the doorbell and peered through the screen door into the unlighted front hall. I saw Miles lying at the end of the hall, near the kitchen door. He didn't get up. Then I saw Lizzie, halfway up the stairs, gazing at me. Her stillness, the way she sat with her elbow on her thigh and her finger to her lips, startled me. The whole house seemed sunk in stillness, the way a house is when you come back

it from a vacation.

I said through the screen, "I should've come to see you before now."

"Why should you have? What difference would it have made?" She spoke so softly I could barely hear her.

"I brought the Monk records back." Miles was twitching in his sleep, dreaming of chasing a cat on four good legs.

"You can keep them," she said.

I ran my finger around the doorknob. "Where are your parents?"

"Daddy went on some church retreat thing in the Smokies. Mom's upstairs."

I heard a radio—Eric Burdon singing "Spill the Wine." I turned around and saw Red standing beside the car, drumming on the roof. When I turned back and saw Lizzie on the stairs, like a child suspended in some purgatory, her face cradled in her hands, I thought of delivering the apology I'd prepared, or a brief version of it: "Forgive me, Lizzie, for having offered you next to nothing when your brother died." But I was stubborn enough not to, as stubborn as Lizzie had been in her resistance of my charmless attempts to possess her.

"We could go get stoned," I said. "With my friend Red." I nodded toward the street.

"A few nights after Harry died I went out with Evie and got drunk and puked right where you're standing." The recollection of puking where I was standing didn't please her enough that she smiled.

I picked at the mesh on the screen.

"How come you're not out with your girlfriend?"

"She's not really my girlfriend," I said.

"Easy come, easy go, right, pardner?" Red had crept through the dusk to stand alongside me. He'd tucked his football jersey into his jeans.

"This is Red," I said, and Red said, "Hey!" Miles awoke from his dream and scrambled to his three feet and hopped down the hall to sniff us through the screen. Mrs. Burford called from upstairs to find out who was there, and Lizzie said it was just Peter and his friend. Red told Lizzie that he was sorry to hear about her brother, and that he'd had a friend the gooks had killed.

"I played football with this guy," Red said. "We went swimming together all the time at a quarry. Once he bet me that he could stand in this field where grasshoppers were flying around and open his mouth and catch five in two minutes. He won, but he cheated. He had a fucking huge mouth."

Lizzie smiled a little. Eventually she went upstairs to tell her mother that she was going out. She wore tennis shoes and a sundress and rode in the front seat.

RED DECIDED THAT we should go sit on the Big Four railroad bridge and watch the sun go down. The bridge, which was no longer used, wasn't easily accessible from the Kentucky side of the Ohio River, so we had to cross via a downtown bridge and then drive back up the Indiana shore. Even though Red drove as if our lives hung in the balance, there wasn't much left of the sunset by the time we parked—just a few reddish-purple carcinogenic streaks at the bottom of the sky.

"We can watch the stars come out," Lizzie said, almost cheerfully. She'd drunk half a short boy on the way over. Red and I had passed the Scotch back and forth.

"Sounds romantic," I said. A blaze warmed my skull, but it didn't ease my regret for bringing Red and Lizzie together.

"He misses Cheryl," Red said. "The fastest girl in the West." We were walking on the rail bed out the bridge itself, with its immense steel spans held up by old stone piers. Red was on point, Lizzie was

in the middle, and I brought up the rear.

“Cheryl,” Lizzie said, turning around to look at me. I glanced downward, at the ties and the gaps between them. I could see the glimmer of the river below. Heights frightened me; in this case, the fear took the top off my buzz and left me grim.

“We went to the Goshen,” I said. I didn’t say that I’d registered under the names Harry and Lizzie Burford.

“Motel love,” Lizzie said.

We walked to the center of the bridge. The evening was mild, and there was a breeze, which seemed more pronounced up there among all the cables and struts and arcing steel. It licked at Lizzie’s dress and hair.

Red sang the refrain from that Eric Burdon song and did a spastic boogaloo. He turned to Lizzie and said, “You want to climb up?”

“Sure,” she said, as if climbing bridges were as simple as breathing.

“You’ll have a much better view of Indiana from up there,” I said, struggling to light a cigarette, cupping a match against the wind.

“You can wait for us while we go up,” Red said. “Play with yourself or something.”

All but the last glow of the day had been sucked from the sky. The lights of downtown Louisville were on, and there was a sprinkling of lights along the Indiana shore. In the growing dark, the bridge seemed to lose its firmness, to become tracery in the sky.

Red and Lizzie went over to the downriver side of the bridge and began to climb a ladder attached to the middle span. Red first, Lizzie second.

I flicked my cigarette away and followed. The ladder rungs were more like hand-holds than steps—narrow U-shaped bars riveted into the beam. I gripped the rungs, flattened my body against the available steel. Lizzie went up slowly. I stayed close, close enough that the crease behind her knee was within reach. I didn’t look any farther up her dress. I didn’t want to disturb my equilibrium. Fear was a chastening force. Nor, of course, did I look to either side of her.

“Lizzie,” I said. I didn’t know what I was going to say, but I wanted to hear her voice instead of the wind, the sound of a boat pattering up the river, Red singing the refrain.

She didn’t answer.

“Lizzie,” I said, louder. “What are you doing?”

“Climbing a bridge. Saying to myself that poem the Maid says in honor of the Fire Chief.” She stopped climbing. We were perhaps halfway to the top. My mouth was at the level of her tennis shoe. She seemed to be quivering, unless it was me—or the bridge—that was moving.

“‘The men caught fire, the women caught fire, the birds caught fire, the fish caught fire,’” I recited. “‘The fire caught fire, everything caught fire.’” I didn’t know I knew the poem until I’d said it.

“You skipped some lines,” she said. “‘The water caught fire, the sky caught fire, the ashes caught fire.’ It’s a progression.”

“Fucking A,” Red exclaimed. He’d reached the top of the bridge.

I noticed that the right rear edge of Lizzie’s right sneaker was worn down, a fact of no importance and yet one that struck me as poignant: she was a girl who wouldn’t go through life on the balls of her feet.

“Lizzie,” I said. “What could I’ve done to get you to sleep with me?” The wind didn’t carry away the self-pity in my voice. “You could’ve doped me up and raped me.” “That would’ve pleased you?”

“I would’ve been oblivious, but you would’ve accomplished your goal.”

She continued climbing. When she reached the top, she crawled along the beam to where Red was sitting and smoking, his feet dangling over the side. He held her arm as she unwound her long legs and settled herself next to him. He brushed something from her knee—bridge grit, I supposed.

“This is scary,” she said. I admired her for her honesty.

“Hold on to me,” Red said.

She asked him about his severed index finger and he told her how he’d lost it. “It made me 4-F,” he said. “Saved my ass from getting shot off in some jungle.”

“Good for you,” she said. Her tone wasn’t bitter, but she let go of him, folded her hands in her lap.

“Shit,” Red said. “Sorry.”

I gripped a stanchion and looked outward rather than down. The dark was almost complete. I saw a drive-in movie screen a mile or so beyond the Indiana shore. The figures on the screen were indecipherable, like bug remains on a headlight. Was the sound I’d make when I hit the Ohio River two hundred feet below like *whap?* *Whump?* But I wasn’t going to fall. I was going to crawl back down, slowly, not failing to place my foot where there was a rung.

# Fishing with Alex

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WHEN MY SISTER was a sophomore in college, in Philadelphia, she fell in love with a sallow-skinned, lank-haired boy whose chief interest in life was the effects of hallucinogens on the neurochemistry of white rats. This was in 1973. Ed was two years older than Alex, and when he dropped her, she came unglued. She left school and returned home to Kentucky. One morning in March, after eating half a grapefruit and casting a cold eye on the saucer of vitamin pills my mother had set before her, she went back upstairs, swallowed most of a bottle of barbiturates, and sat down in the reading chair in my bedroom. By the time my mother found her, Alex was in a stupor; her head lolled, her hands were clammy, her blood was pooling, not moving. My mother, who had been on her way to church to tag items for a bazaar, called an ambulance and got Alex to the hospital, where her stomach was pumped. Later, the doctor put her in Queen of Peace, a columned and porticoed institution that sat on a hill about a mile from the new county zoo. Because the windows to the rooms were sealed shut, it was unlikely that a patient would hear an elephant trumpet or a peacock shriek or a lion roar. But Alex said there was a man in her morning group therapy class who complained that the animals kept him awake every night. As for Alex herself, she heard nothing at night, just a whispering in her head, like a breeze passing through fir trees.

A few days after my sister entered Queen of Peace, I took the bus home from college. My father picked me up at the depot downtown. I asked how Alex was, and he said, "Your mother thinks she might be hypoglycemic." I looked puzzled, and he said, "Something about a low level of sugar in the blood." He didn't tell me what he thought. Three stoplights later, we fell silent. Eventually, he turned on the radio. The car filled with opera—it was a Saturday—and then he dialed around until he got a basketball game. "Now here's something in English," he said.

My father led me into the hospital and up a broad, curving staircase, which I pictured women in long dresses descending, on their way to meet men who wouldn't have resembled me or my father in his raincoat that looked as if he'd slept in it. At the top, Dad remembered that my mother had sent along a sack of vitamins for my sister. He left me at Alex's door and went back to the car to fetch the sack.

My sister was sitting up in bed. Next to her, on the nightstand, was a fish bowl, and above her, on the white wall, was a small plaster crucifix; the bony Jesus, his head downcast, looked as if he'd given his last cry. Alex wore a black shawl over a white blouse that was buttoned to the throat. I'd never seen the shawl. It made her look dramatic, in a formal kind of way, like someone in a painting from another century and another country. Alex had always liked to dress up, and I thought it was a good sign that she hadn't stopped. I didn't know if it was a good sign that she'd tied her hair back, leaving her brow so exposed.

"Don't worry, Peter," she said gamely. "I'm just having a run-of-the-mill nervous breakdown. Isn't that right, fishy?" She tapped on the bowl. The goldfish, the only truly bright spot of color in the room, streaked away. It was a gift from Bobby Tarr, a guy Alex had dated in high school.

"Mom thinks I'm chemically unbalanced," Alex said. "And spiritually at sea. And that I go out with the wrong boys." She looked out the window. It was an erratic mid-March afternoon, full of clouds one moment and bursts of sunlight the next.

"What do you think?" I touched the too-small black beret on my head. I'd bought it at a thrift shop. I'd hoped it would make me look worldly.

"I don't know," she said. "I guess some of my boyfriends haven't turned out too hot." She glanced

toward the doorway, as if love might be there, waiting.

I saw a wimpled nun walk past, then another. I expected to see a third—didn't nuns travel in threes—but she didn't materialize.

I said, "You've had some OK boyfriends. What about Bobby?" Bobby was three years older than Alex; he'd dropped out of college by the time she met him. At the moment, he was the leader of a band called the Tarrydy Boys and clerking in a store on Bardstown Road where you could buy incense and peasant shirts and Tarot cards, among other things.

"Bobby can be nice," Alex said. "But I'm just one of his chicks."

"And Mac?" Mac, whose actual name was Eldon McRae, was my age. Alex had first gone out with him when she was a sophomore in high school and he was a senior. Mac was shy and awkward, except on the basketball court, where he became someone who could make fallaway jumpers with his eyes half-closed. Alex found Mac's shyness appealing—that and his soft, blond, almost feminine looks. Mac felt flummoxed by his shyness, and as a result, he drank more than was normal in our group. When he drank, he sometimes did stupid, shy-boy sorts of things. Once, he tried to pole-vault into Alex's second-story bedroom, using a long metal rod he'd stolen from a construction site. He'd risen briefly into the air, like a pioneer of flight, and then had fallen on his shoulder, dislocating it. Like me, Mac had been a solid B-minus student, and we'd ended up at the same college, a boys-only institution on a mountain in Tennessee.

"Mac got so bombed sometimes," Alex said, "he missed my face completely when he tried to kiss me." I saw her watching Mac's face float by again.

"Well, anyway," I said, "Mac said to say 'Hi.'"

"'Hi' back." Alex gazed at her fingers, which a flare-up of eczema had reddened, and made a church out of them, loosing silence upon the room. She was burrowing into herself, her nose leading the way. She had the Sackrider family nose. The sharp tip suggested that it would be worth your while to tell her a joke or a story.

"How are the nuns?" I asked.

"*Les zeros?*" She roughened the *r* expertly; she used to practice her French in the shower, bouncing accents *argus* off the tiles. "They're watchful."

My father appeared in the doorway, the sack of vitamins in one hand and a tweed motoring cap in the other. The cap was a Christmas present from my mother, something to make him look more sporty. He was a judge, and as a rule he dressed like one, though he sometimes failed to notice that his dark suit coat didn't match his dark suit trousers. After all, there were motions and petitions to be pondered, precedents to be considered.

Dad told me he was going to wait outside in the car. "I don't want to intrude on your discussion," I said, stooping to kiss Alex on the forehead. "We love you, Moony Tooth." My father had a whole hatful of names for my sister: Izzy Woo, Alexosaurus, Babes, Miss Graham Cracker. The last was derived from Alex's full name, Alexandra Bell Sackrider.

After my father left the room, Alex said, "Dad told me a story about how some East Coast girl had snubbed him when he was in college and how he'd been down in the dumps for days. Then he came back home for Christmas, and he saw Mom at a party, standing under mistletoe."

"Mom under mistletoe? Wasn't she a member of a Trotskyite cell back then?"

"Allegedly," Alex said. "Anyway, Dad kissed her. 'I took the liberty,' was how he put it, 'and I started living again.'"

"Didn't it take Dad about seven years to persuade Mom to marry him?"

“He left that part out,” Alex said. The goldfish darted around the bowl, filling the room with its agitation. “I guess he was trying to tell me to hang in there.” She pulled her shawl more tightly around her shoulders.

Ten minutes later, when I left Alex’s room, it was snowing. It shouldn’t have been snowing in Kentucky in mid-March, when green was surging through everything, but there the flakes were, all fat and wet. They fell on my face, like kisses from somebody—an aunt, say—who hadn’t seen me in an age.

I found my father in his gray three-on-the-tree Chevrolet Biscayne, a car as unstylish as his old raincoat. He was leaning his forehead against the steering wheel.

When I got in, Dad sat up straight and adjusted his cap. The steering wheel had left a mark on his brow. “I was thinking of that fish Alex caught in Lake Cumberland. Fall of sixty-two. You remember that?”

I remembered our fishing guide, a narrow, dilapidated man named Bristow who rolled his own cigarettes. He was so quiet that he’d essentially finished talking for the day after he’d said “Morning to you.

“Alex was the happiest girl in the state when she caught that fish,” my father said. “A little old crappie. And now she’s inconsolable because of this fellow Ned.”

“Ed.” I watched the snow fall, as thick as a plague of moths. “But I doubt it’s just him.”

“What else do you think it is?” He pushed his glasses up his nose. Maybe my father loved the world too much to imagine that someone’s sorrow could lead her to want to vanish, to forgo the chance to drop a line in the water once more.

I said, “Sometimes you lose your grip and you start sliding down the slope and you can’t stop.”

“Yes,” my father said. “You need something to hang on to when it gets rough.” He fired up the Biscayne, turned on the windshield wipers. “Isn’t it peculiar, this snow?”

SEVERAL WEEKS LATER, when every dogwood in Jefferson County was in bloom, Alex sat at the table in my parents’ kitchen, smoking one of Willie’s Salems. Willie, who had worked for our family since before I was born, sat across from Alex, snapping the ends off green beans. There was sunlight in the room, a springtime flood of it. It washed over the cut-glass sugar bowl and the three china monkeys (See No Evil, etc.) on the lazy Susan, over the faint hairs on Alex’s wrist, and over the cast-iron pot Willie dropped the beans into.

“Last night I dreamed I was on a Greyhound,” Alex said, “and this soldier kept falling asleep on my shoulder. And when I’d wake him, he’d scratch his head and say, ‘Excuse me, ma’am, is this the Silver Dog to Bozeman?’”

I thought it was a good sign that Alex was having travel dreams. Since coming home from Queen of Peace, she’d rarely ventured out of the house, except to see her therapist. Once she’d driven to Frisch’s Big Boy and ordered a cheeseburger and a shake, but had left before the curb girl could deliver the food. On another afternoon she’d gone with Bobby Tarr and his friend Pipe Cleaner Man to see a show at the planetarium.

“Don’t talk to no soldiers on Greyhounds is my advice to you,” Willie said. Willie handed out advice without much prompting. She snapped the stem off a bean. “You getting ready to leave us, Alex?”

“I’m just telling you my dream,” Alex said. Cigarette smoke hung around her like a cloud, then slid out the window. She looked pale and a bit undernourished, but not without resources. I watched her trying to work out things behind her large brown eyes. A thought sped by; she touched her temple.

Another thought, a longer one, it seemed, unfurled itself and lingered near the corner of her mouth, which curled downward.

“What do you think I should do, Willie?” Alex asked.

“Well,” Willie said, “if I was you, I wouldn’t be sitting here in my bedclothes at three in the afternoon with the sun shining. That’s first. And second, I don’t know that I’d be fooling with that boy Bobby and his friend, the one that looks like a Halloween skeleton.”

“Pipe Cleaner Man,” I said.

“He has a good heart,” said Alex, who was drawn to socially marginal boys, boys whose brows were unclear, boys who liked to sleep in their labs with their rats and gels. “He can’t help how he looks.”

“All that reefer don’t improve him any,” Willie said. “And you neither.” Her eyes, bloodshot from too much work or too many cigarettes, aimed daggers at me.

“I wonder what Bozeman is like,” Alex said, giving the lazy Susan a push. The three monkeys glided by, two of them clearly grinning.

“Never heard of it,” Willie said.

“Cowboys, rednecks,” I said. “What would you be thinking of Montana for?”

“Bobby’s sister lives there,” Alex said. “She’s a weaver.”

“Cowboys, rednecks, and a weaver,” I said, reaching for one of Willie’s Salems.

“You can leave your money on the table,” Willie said to me, carrying the pot of beans over to the stove. She was short and wide, a formidable squarish shape, like something not easily knocked over, though she walked on the sides of her feet and her white shoes were split at the seams.

“What about New York?” I said to Alex. I was thinking of moving there when I graduated from college, later that spring. “We could go together, find an apartment.”

“I hear they got rats as big as suitcases in New York,” Willie said. “Rats that eat children.” She took an onion out of a bowl on the counter and slipped off its brown jacket.

“New York’s too close to Philadelphia,” Alex said, looking out the window. Our mother was kneeling at the edge of the garden, her trowel flashing in the sunlight. Hugo, our old dachshund, lay nearby.

“Where would you go, Willie,” Alex asked, “if you were trying to think of someplace to go?”

“Walter took me to Chicago once,” Willie said, “but I didn’t think much of it.” Walter was Willie’s husband; he worked in a mattress factory and shot more pool than Willie believed was good for him. “When I was a girl, I used to like to visit my Great-aunt Alberta down in Hardin County. She had a horse and some Seckel pear trees. Sometimes she’d wrap the pears in newspaper and stick them in a drawer to let them ripen.” Willie pushed chopped onion off the cutting board into the pot of beans. “But Hardin County might be a little slow for you.”

Alex rubbed her temple with an index finger; a thought had lodged there, apparently. “Maybe I should be a nun.”

“You’re just talking,” Willie said. “Anyhow, you ain’t Catholic.”

“The Episcopal Church has nuns,” Alex said. We were Medium High Church Episcopalians, except for my mother, who practiced Episcopalianism but kept her ears open to the teachings of Baptist fundamentalists and Catholic mystics who lived on nuts and berries.

“You got to stay in the nunhouse on Saturday night if you’re one of them,” Willie said.

“Mac asked after you,” I said, blowing a smoke ring that wobbled over the lazy Susan before collapsing.

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