

# I Got You Babe

By Ralph Bland

In the summer of 1988 I went against my grain and better judgment and decided to attend my high school class' twentieth reunion. I knew I'd be reliving old feelings of angst and frustration and general ineptitude, but my curiosity was such I either had to go or else spend the remainder of my days on this earth wondering what I'd missed by staying away.

"I'm glad there's something here in your hometown you find the least bit interesting," my mother said on the night I was going out the door. She was sitting at the kitchen table playing Canasta with my father and two of their friends from church, Betty and Tommy Matlock. "I've never seen you come home once in the last ten years unless you absolutely had to. This must be an important event."

"You couldn't pay me to go to a reunion of mine," my father said, looking over his cards like he expected to see something special.

"Everybody you graduated with is either dead or in the old folks' home anyway," Mother said. My father was four years older than her and she never let him forget it. "It wouldn't be much of a party," she added.

"Maybe you'll be the only man there who's still got all his hair," my father told me. "You'll be a popular guy with all the gals."

The Matlocks and my parents had been playing Canasta or some such card game on Saturday nights for about as long as I could remember. I'm fairly sure the four of them were sitting there in our same kitchen twenty years before on the Saturday night I started out the door on the way to my senior prom, dressed in my tuxedo and trying to make a clean getaway without my mother making me pose in the living room with a fake smile cemented on my face and taking about a roll of snapshots where perhaps three might actually come back from the photo shop without a double exposure in my eyes making me look like I was possessed or kin to Linda Blair, which, as I consider it now, I very well could have been. Probably the four of them were sitting there drinking iced tea listening to the Grand Ole Opry and examining me the same way they did these twenty years later. That was one of the things about Nashville that always drove me nuts. You could go away for centuries at a time, but when you came back, everything still remained the same.

"Stop smiling like that," my mother would say, looking into the camera trying to focus me there. "Your eyes squint up and you look like a waiter in a Chinese restaurant."

She was right about that. I can look through old photo albums now and see myself through various stages of my life- elementary school, Little League, high school annual pictures- and there I am smiling my Chinese smile, looking like I ought to be whipping up a batch of fortune cookies for the photographer any minute. I always wondered if there was a wonton in the woodpile in my heritage somewhere nobody ever told me about.

The reunion, too, was more of the same and not too much different than what I'd previously imagined, even though there was a part of me that had hoped things were somehow going to be changed. I created not much of a stir when I walked into the Opryland Hotel banquet room. It wasn't like I was totally ignored- I do recall several ex-classmates waving at me from across the room- but there was never that defining moment when some now-disenchanted housewife slash former cheerleader spied me at the bar or heard the hired deejay play some sixties classic that brought my dashing image into her mind and prompted her to seek me out, to have a wild impulse to once more gaze into my promised me she would this very night make up for any injustice eyes, to even press a room key into the palm of my hand with the sort of look that she may have caused me back in the turbulent long-ago days of high school. Mainly what happened was I got a plate of finger food and a beer and was drawn like gravity to a table of medium former losers like myself who'd treaded the social waters of the past back then and were still doing it in their late thirties, kicking their legs and flailing their arms and keeping their heads just dry enough to semi-convince themselves that everything was okay, that their lives were not being wasted, that there was still a lot of promise left in store for them even after this golden night was history.

I knew eventually I would have to migrate to the portion of the room where Liz and Ronnie Perry were holding court. I waited until I'd downed two beers and was advancing on my third before I left the safety of my underachieving table and meandered toward the fringes of the dance floor, where the more vigorous and ectomorphic of my peers gyrated to "Land of 1000 Dances" and draped themselves around each other to "Ain't No Mountain High Enough". At the mouth of this river sat Liz, greeting those who ventured her way with a voice so phony it was charming and stressing how glad she was to see whoever it was who'd slunk into her presence, blue eyes that lit up and compelled the rest of her to smile and laugh and rise from her chair to embrace the approaching target, to prove by all this body language that she was still the great white light around whom all other galactic bodies revolved. Her hair was amazingly still that color of blonde it had always been, there was still a light in her eyes one could read a book by late at night, and her voice still retained the ability to distinguish itself from the music and the clamor and all the other

voices that were vying to demand attention and emerge as the single one everybody heard and remembered.

Of course I knew that wasn't really Liz. I'd known her for almost as long as I'd known Ronnie, and, as it was with him, it was the same with her- what you saw wasn't necessarily the outright gospel. You had to look long and hard and do a lot of study to get to know the real Liz Perry. And that was okay with her if there was a select few who knew who she really was- she wasn't that much of a fake- but you didn't want to broadcast it around or let anyone in the uninformed categories know what you knew in your exalted enlightened state.

"It's about time you got here," she said, getting right to the brink of an argument we'd been having since I first caught sight of her in the fourth grade. "I was beginning to think you'd started believing you were too good to hang around with your old friends, that you just stayed in your little Norman Rockwell town feeling superior and were going to snub all of us for eternity." She looked at me with sparkles hopping in her eyes, ready to slam back into my psyche any verbal lob I shot across the net at her.

"I never thought of Birmingham as a place Rockwell would consider worthy of being on the cover of a Saturday Evening Post," I said. "It's more like the kind of place you'd raise a family if you wanted a couple of them to get gunned down."

"Well, then I guess I don't have to worry too much about any of your family getting shot at, do I? You haven't hatched any kids or picked up a wife since the last time we talked, have you? I recall you being engaged at our last reunion, but I never heard a word about you following through and tying the knot. So, is there a Mrs. Reed I don't know about or not?"

That's pretty much the way it always was with Liz. I could go years between seeing her and then when we ran into each other she would start right in with her basic third degree and try to get me analyzed and categorized at breakneck speed. She had to have all my loose ends tucked in, all my pasts and presents out in the light, everything right there where she could see it clearly, where she would still be the one woman in the world who knew everything there was to know about Charles Michael Reed. I didn't mind it much. It was always a nice ride while it lasted.

And I mean it when I use the word always. That's how long it seemed I'd known Elizabeth Bradshaw Perry. She'd first shown up at the beginning of fourth grade, and like every other boy in Mrs. Thompson's class I was immediately crazy about her. I wrote her name in my notebook and on the side of my desk where no one could see it but me. Not that I was ashamed for anyone to see it etched there, but I was still wise enough in my passion not to be swept totally away by Liz like all the other guys were and do foolish

stupid stuff that everybody could see and wind up getting chastised about it and in trouble over it on all kinds of fronts. I was maybe the only guy who didn't go completely off the deep end for Liz, and I think it was because of that reticence she developed a certain fascination for me, an abiding interest in figuring out what exactly it was that made me tick.

I'd even dated Liz once, way back when.

Somehow or another, probably because I was so young and had no inkling of the damage a pretty girl could do to a psyche, I got it into my head to ask Liz to the Sweetheart Banquet at my church. We were in the fifth grade at the time, so this affair constituted as technically the first date for both of us, and it was not only the first and last time we went out on a date together but it was also the first time either of us went out with anyone of the opposite sex. Even with Liz's ensuing popularity over the coming years I could always claim this honor. I had a lot of self-satisfaction inside me knowing I'd started out at the top of the game. Like the song said, they couldn't take that away from me.

"There's no Mrs. Reed yet," I said. I didn't bother to elaborate on what had transpired with the first possible Mrs. Reed all those years ago. It wasn't the sort of breakup that inspired sad songs or great literature. It was more like both parties mutually lost interest during the courtship process and were wise enough to do something about it.

"I guess you're still just holding out for me," Liz said. She patted me on the cheek and smiled into my eyes. She was hard to ignore up close. I did a lot better ignoring her when I was back home in Birmingham.

"I figure you'll wise up one of these days," I said. I was searching around her face for signs of wear and tear, checking her out up and down without making it too obvious to see if the accumulating years, like snow, were cooling her down and icing her down and turning her into an old bag yet. So far she was holding up pretty damned good.

"I started not to come," I told her. I looked around the big banquet room as if to verify the statement, to let her know I was still a whole lot different from all the others here, that I really wasn't in league with this sort of function.

"You're a snob," she said. "You always have been. You and Ronnie have always been just alike. He thinks he's too good for everybody and everything too. Maybe you two should just run off and get married and go live on an island somewhere."

"He's not my type," I said.

"You're twins," she said, shaking her head. "You're both the same."

I looked over at the bar and saw Ronnie, armed with a Miller Lite, talking to some old men I quickly recognized as my peers. This was exactly what I had against settees like this- you started wondering right from the outset if you looked as bad as everyone else. Liz followed my eyes and shook her head again, clucking her tongue as she took a look at her former suitors.

“Everybody’s starting to lose their hair,” she said. “That’s so sad. Soon we’ll have an entire male alumnus of Yul Brynner look-alikes.”

“Yeah, that’s true,” I said, “and you’ll be right there to point it out when it happens. It’ll make your day.” The dress she had on took a deep plunge from her neck, offering me and everybody else quite a view. It would have taken an act of Congress and the National Guard to keep me from looking, and old Liz knew it. Liz always knew exactly what I was thinking when my mind headed for the gutter. “Go on over there and get drunk with Ronnie,” she said. “I know he’s going to, and since you two are just alike I know you will too. You guys can discuss how the world’s on a downward spiral these days, how things just aren’t like they used to be.” She shook her head once more and flashed me her Liz smile. “After all, isn’t that what old geezers do on nights like this? Stand around and complain and wish everything was the way it used to be in the good old days?”

“Try and stay sober, will you? I may need you to drive me home.”

“It wouldn’t be the first time, Charlie, old friend.”

“That’s the first true thing you’ve said tonight.”

I walked over to the bar and touched Ronnie on the shoulder, finished off my third Budweiser and waded into my fourth, fully aware I was heading into territory where I wouldn’t necessarily be as careful as I should be. The hired deejay was playing Diana Ross and the Supremes super-loud. Someday, Diana said, we’ll be together.

“What’s going on?” Ronnie looked me over for signs of deterioration.

“Nothing. I wouldn’t tell an asshole like you if I knew.”

“I hear you’re spending the weekend at your folks’. That must be a lot of fun.” I listened to Ronnie’s voice, and, like in the days of our lost boyhood, I expected him to any minute tell me what time the guys from the neighborhood were going to meet for the afternoon baseball game.

“I work for the Birmingham school system. I can’t afford a hotel room.”

“You should have called. We’d have let you camp out in the back yard or something. We might even have put you up in the house.”

"I'd have felt bad making you sleep on the couch in your own place. You know Liz would be dragging me off to the bedroom the second I showed up."

"Yeah, I know how you are. You read a damn poem to a bunch of teenagers and suddenly you think you're Lord Byron or somebody, like every woman wants to have sex with you. Me, I just tell the kids to choose up sides and start throwing balls at each other. It's a hell of a lot more simple."

I didn't tell Ronnie how I wasn't teaching English anymore. Budget restraints had forced me into History now along with one sad class of Freshman Algebra. Seeing how Ronnie was the guy who'd helped me through a jillion math classes on the road to graduation, I didn't want him to know how pathetic the school system that had hired me truly was.

"Who have you seen since you came in?" Ronnie asked. He lifted his eyes and motioned toward the back of the room. "You didn't get a load of Linda Stevens, did you? She's like fine wine. She's improved with age." "I'm not sure I could stand it. She made me crazy enough twenty years ago." I took in Ronnie and his suit and thought how if I'd ever tried imagining him dressed like this a quarter of a century before I wouldn't have been able to pull it off. I fingered the joint inside my sport coat I'd brought along for inspirational purposes-I'd taken my life in my hands and gone out on a limb and bought a small bag of grass from a holdover freak outside the Vulcan back in Birmingham- and wondered if I should have smoked it before I came inside to all this or if I should invite Ronnie now to come outside with me for a quick sample or if I should just save it and smoke it on the trip home to help me reflect upon what I'd seen and compartmentalize this entire experience of my aging hometown, my aging friends, my aging parents, myself getting long in the tooth, the inevitable future downward spiral of Liz Bradshaw Perry, and place all of it into some file of my brain I could deal with when it happened to manifest itself later instead of going through the jumping and gasping and having my own thinning hair stand on end whenever this particular Pandora's Box got accidentally opened. Like most decisions in my life, I decided I would wait until I was better informed at a later date.

"I heard you were getting married," Ronnie said.

"You heard wrong."

"I didn't think it was true," he said. "I can't see you doing the Hi-honey-I'm-home thing. I can maybe picture you going out the back door when the husband arrives home unexpectedly, or maybe having a kid or two who don't know who Daddy is, or maybe I could see you joining the Peace Corps to leave the country and escape some undesirable situation you've got yourself into, but I can't see you cutting the front yard at some little shack out in Suburbia."

“I actually have a little house out in the suburbs. I mow the lawn every Saturday morning. You’ll have to come visit me sometime.”

“You sure you cut it every week?”

Ronnie and I had a lawn service together back in junior high. We would cut yards in the neighborhood and split the profits. I don’t know which one of us was the first to conceive of illicit business practices, but when someone went out of town for the summer and we were supposed to keep their lawns trimmed on a regular basis we were certainly not above tacking on a few extra cuts that never occurred to their final bill. I don’t know if the people ever got wise to the practice or not, but we got away with it then. It was our first foray into crime as a team.

It rankled me some that Ronnie still didn’t feel I was stable enough to enter into some semblance of emotional maturity, but on closer thought I wondered if he was actually giving me an offhand compliment by insinuating that I wasn’t like the rest of this group gathered here and couldn’t be classified in the same mundane manner. I couldn’t help but feel that small inner glow within me, the one I could remember having growing up whenever I said or did something that seemed to hold some esteem and worth in Ronnie Perry’s way of thinking. Now exactly why I held Ronnie’s stamp of approval to be so important then and now was still a mystery. It wasn’t like he was an influential pillar of the community or his opinion had ever stopped the presses or opened closed doors. He was just my old best friend, that’s all. I had to check in with him from time to time to see if I was full of shit or not.

“Well, I don’t know about you,” Ronnie told me conspiratorially, “but I’m going to relax and get good and lit tonight. I’m going to get loose as a goose and enjoy the show.”

“Sounds like a plan to me,” I said. I ordered another beer and stood there momentarily wondering how I’d come to be in this place, how each of us had come to be who we were.

I was sitting at the kitchen table where fifteen hours ago my parents and the Matlocks played Canasta, where I now sat with a cup of hot tea listening to the sound of a vacuum cleaner ferreting out dust from the living room. I didn’t know what was the biggest waste of time, Jessie vacuuming a room that was always closed off, where the sofa and the chairs were permanently encased in plastic, or Jessie herself still coming by the house once a week to clean rooms that had hardly seen traffic since the week before.

The fact that my mother still required a maid in 1988 with only my father and her living in the house had a lot to do with why our household had ever required having a maid- the same maid, Jessie- for twenty-five years to begin with. I always believed it had a lot to do with the fact that beneath my mother’s

manners and her love for the Literary Guild and her life-long affection for the Democratic Party she was really a Southern white woman at the core and was, therefore, an unconfessed bigot. I think Jessie got hired in the mid-sixties merely because she happened to be black. I can say this because, even in her prime back in those days, old Jessie was never much at the art of Domestic Science. She didn't iron shirts worth a crap, you were better off getting a meal at the Krystal than eating her cooking, and she never thoroughly cleaned anything. If you spotted dirt anywhere in a corner you might as well get it up yourself or else get accustomed to seeing it, because Jessie wasn't about to make it a point of getting to it in this lifetime.

"Your mama's going to have to hire somebody to clean those curtains," Jessie told me, coming back into the kitchen and looking into my teacup over my shoulder as if I'd appropriated hers while she was working and it was high time I gave it back. "I've run the vacuum over them 'bout as much as I need to, but they're just brown from hanging there too long. What she needs to do is have them sent out somewhere."

I guessed Jessie had to content herself these days with harping on the curtains once a week or so, instead of daily like she once had. Myself, I couldn't tell if the curtains were dirty or not. They were brown, for Christ's sake, my mother's favorite color. And were they curtains technically or drapes? How did one go about determining such things?

"You got yourself a little hangover, don't you?" Jessie asked.

"I believe that's what it's called," I said. "I prefer to call it 'Prelude to Death'. It starts from my big toe and runs up the wall to the ceiling just above your head."

Jessie was checking out the freezer door to see if there was any ice cream inside. Strawberry was her favorite and always had been. It was sort of a nice trade-off when you examined it. Mother got to have a black maid to stroke her Southern gentility and Jessie got to get paid for doing very little work and eating a half gallon of ice cream once a week. My role was to do nothing but mess with Jessie when I visited, to prick and poke at her and keep her sufficiently riled up, just like I'd always done.

"You'll be all right, Mr. Bwana," Jessie said, scooping two big lumps of Breyer's into a bowl. "You just keep on drinking that tea."

I was Mr. Bwana to Jessie because when she came to work for my mother those twenty-odd years before I'd come home from school that first day and found her there. I was a junior in high school, a real smart ass. When she asked me my name I told her Bwana, and she'd believed me. When Mother came home from work later Jessie told her how she had spent a lot of the day cleaning Bwana's room. Who? my mother asked. Jessie never forgave me for that, but then she never had to worry about having a serious

conversation with me in the future either. From that day I became what I would always be to her- a silly white boy.

“So when are you going to retire?” I asked her. “Surely you don’t need to keep on working these days. Your kids are gone and I know Mother couldn’t be paying you that much.”

“I still got a husband likes to eat,” Jessie said. “Social Security and Medicare goes just so far. Anyway, coming over here one day a week gets me out of the house and gives me and him a break from each other.”

“Ya’ll could always have sex.”

“All he wants to do is watch that derved television. He don’t care nothing about having sex no more.”

“If these Excedrins don’t hurry up and kick in I’m never going to have to worry about having sex anymore either, because I’m going to die and then they’ll bury me and I won’t be able to do anything.”

“You ought to know by now you can’t drink,” Jessie said. “You ain’t ever been able to. Your mama used to worry about you being sickly, and all it was was you going out and drinking beer and wine and whatever else you could get your hands on. You might have fooled her, but you never fooled me. I knew what you were doing. Your daddy knew too. He just never said anything.”

“I was smoking pot too. Don’t forget that when you’re making out your list.”

“That don’t surprise me none either. About the only vice you were short on was women, and that wasn’t for lack of trying. You was as horny then as you are now- that’s why you did so much of the other things, cause you couldn’t find no girl who’d have you. I don’t guess too much has changed.”

“I’m glad you got it all figured out,” I said. “I’ve been wondering what was wrong with me for a long time.” I reached out and turned on the small TV my mother kept on the breakfast table. They didn’t have cable yet, and I had to content myself with watching one of the local station’s mid-morning show. A woman was making a main dish out of some animal part- a cow? a pig? a chicken? I switched the channel real quick before I had to throw up. On a May afternoon in 1962, a year after Liz went to the Riverside Baptist Sweetheart Banquet with me, Ronnie and I and at least twelve other boys gathered in a vacant lot to play baseball and practice cursing, spitting, and just generally honing being piss ants together. We were in the sixth grade by then, we were patrol boys, and, in between the spitting and the cursing and the pitching and the catching and the hitting, we were all deeply in love with Liz Bradshaw, the girl from the sticks of Georgia who’d arrived in our world and taught us everything we knew about first love and misery.

“I feel a lot of hits in this bat today,” Ronnie said. He swung his two-toned Louisville Slugger back and forth viciously, gripping the electrical tape he’d wrapped on the handle tightly with his batting gloves. The

gloves had the New York Yankees emblem on the patch below the fingers, and Ronnie liked pulling them off and on so everybody could see them. I hated the Yankees- my team was Willie Mays and the Giants- but I sure did like those batting gloves. I didn't know where to go to get gloves like those.

"You can't hit my curve," I told him. "It breaks straight down like it's falling off a cliff." That was a lie. The truth was I didn't even know how to throw a curve. I just threw the ball and it did whatever it wanted.

The chatter began. There really weren't any set rules or teams or organization on those afternoons. Most of the time we played different positions and had different guys on our side, and the most important thing was to have a high batting average- which you computed in your head- and to manage on a consistent basis to poke a ball over the stolen sawhorses in the distant outfield so you could trot around the bases with an automatic home run. These home runs were the most important of all stats and were kept up with by everyone. Everybody knew just exactly how many homers the other guy had, and everybody wanted to lead our league in long distance clouts.

On those afternoons Ronnie was the best hitter out there on our field, and I was doing well as a pitcher if I simply got the ball over the plate, yet, miraculously, I had two strikes on Ronnie and all I needed was one more. It was a matter of pride now, a test of who was the champion on this day. I looked in from the mound and saw the same look of determination on Ronnie's face that was there before a test, during a race, the look that appeared the day he found out I was taking Liz to the Sweetheart Banquet. It was a look that said the jig was now up and the best man was going to win. I may have had the highest grade once, I may have won one race, I may even have been the first guy to go out with Liz Bradshaw, but all of that was over now.

"Hit this one for Liz," I heard someone say. I guessed this was supposed to spur Ronnie on to greater heights.

Maybe the mention of her name, the idea of her, pumped Ronnie up too much. Maybe it was a portent of how it would be for all of us in the years to come. We, Ronnie, wanted to hit the ball over the sawhorse in deep centerfield, a shot that would make us a Mickey Mantle, a Willie Mays, a Rocky Colavito in everyone's way of thinking.

I threw the ball, my usual drab overhand that generally traveled fast in the opposite direction.

Ronnie swung and missed. The look on his face was disbelief, shock that he could possibly fail, fail against me, fail in front of his friends, fail and fall short in the sacred name of Liz. This was something not to be tolerated. He swung the bat back and forth viciously trying to call forth another redemptive pitch, two times, three, four, wondering how this moment was possible. He swung the bat a final time and

agonizingly let it go. I watched the stick travel through the air down the third base line and bounce sickeningly off the face of Dennis Gentry, who had watched the flight of the bat just like the rest of us but couldn't fathom it was headed directly for him. He fell, holding his face, and all we could see for the next instant was blood. It turned out to be Dennis' front tooth wrenched free from his gum, but for all of us, there for a heartbeat, it was easy to think the entire world had just been ripped from its orbit.

In the name of Liz Bradshaw our lives were spinning beyond our control.

Two days later, I had to come straight home from school and sit at the kitchen table and answer questions from Dennis Gentry's insurance agent. It seemed that before Dennis could go and get his front tooth capped there was the small matter of determining if this incident with the flying Louisville Slugger and the tooth had indeed been an accident and Dennis' toothless mouth was for certain covered by his policy. I saw the strange car in the driveway, and I shook the hand of a bald man with a briefcase and a tie that was too short above his belt. I had to sit there and tell the story of Ronnie and the bat and the collision with Dennis' tooth while the agent made notes and my mother listened to all the gory details.

"So Ronnie was just frustrated over striking out?" the man with the abrupt tie asked. "And that's why he threw the bat like he did?" It was like he couldn't find a category within all his claim forms to fit this information in without further clarification.

How did I explain this just out into the air to this perfect stranger and my mother? How was I supposed to say that Liz Bradshaw was behind it all, that it was her and the overwhelming thought of her that was responsible for making an afternoon pickup game as important as the seventh game of the World Series?

"Yes, sir," I said.

"And there was no other reason other than striking out for throwing the bat?"

At this point I could tell I was supposed to go into detail, that this man had already talked to some of the other guys and was attempting to sniff out the Liz factor, and now he was poised here with his ballpoint waiting to extract the rest of the truth from me. But with my mother sitting right there across from me I was damned if I was going to voluntarily blurt out that I and all my pals were under the spell of one solitary girl. It would have been less embarrassing to confess to murder. I could have explained it a whole lot easier.

"No, sir," I lied. I figured even going to my grave with the sin of dishonesty on my head was better than the scrutiny I would receive in the here and now.

“There was no mention of a girl that made Ronnie Perry go into a rage?” the agent asked. “Several of the other boys said that was the reason he threw the bat like he did.” The guy looked at me like he was Perry Mason, like he had me trapped now and there was nothing left for me to do but confess.

I saw a way to wiggle off the hook, so I took it. It wasn’t going to be me to be the one who spilled the beans, who squealed, so I took the first of what would become a lifetime of avoidance maneuvers designed to always deflect negative vibes and dire consequences elsewhere.

“It could have been,” I told him solemnly. I looked him right in the eye. He was, after all, nothing but an insurance agent. “I was way out there on the pitcher’s mound,” I said. “I couldn’t hear what was going on.”

It was hard to punish a kid for an accident- unfair too- but our parents were hard-working folks with a Puritan ethic, so not a one of them hesitated in grounding each and every one of us for our participation in the loss of Dennis Gentry’s tooth. We went several weeks coming directly home from school, doing homework, performing chores of drudgery, sitting in our rooms putting together model cars and planes and amusing ourselves alone, because we weren’t allowed to leave the yard or have a friend over until our sentence was served.

Since I had no patience whatsoever and was generally inept with my hands, model-building was totally out of the question, so I spent the majority of my afternoons laying on my bed eating popcorn and drinking Coca Colas and watching “The Big Show” on TV. “The Big Show” wasn’t actually very big at all; it was a local station’s attempt to provide programming for someone other than a kid to watch. There were two other stations at the time, one running Popeye cartoons and the other The Three Stooges, but I chose “The Big Show” because they showed a lot of black and white crime movies where the hero is unjustly convicted and sent to prison for a crime he didn’t commit and had to assume a criminal lifestyle just to survive, all because the world was cruel and cold and wanted to grind him down for no reason at all.

We weren’t supposed to talk on the phone, but every now and then our mothers would go to the store or go down in the basement to do laundry.

“What are you doing?” Ronnie would whisper.

“Watching a movie on TV. I don’t know the name of it. I don’t know who the actors are.”

“I sure wish this had never happened,” he said. “I’m getting real tired of it.”

I thought I heard something in Ronnie’s voice then, some sense of resignation, of weariness, and I didn’t know whether he meant the punishment for the bat-throwing or just the whole sorry chain of

events. I started to ask him specifically, but I knew he wouldn't tell me. Ronnie never went into detail when you wanted him to. He always left you wondering.

But this time he did offer a clue. He cleared his throat and I could sense him shaking his head on the other end.

"Damn Liz Bradshaw," he said. "If it wasn't for her we wouldn't act like this."

"We? I didn't see anybody but you throw a bat."

"You would have," he said, "if it had been you at the plate."

I heard my mother coming up the stairs so I had to hang up the phone. I sat there thinking about what Ronnie said, wondering if he was right or wrong.

It took four years for Ronnie to match me, but the day he got his driver's license was also the day he first took Liz out on an official date in a car. The two had been more or less going steady for at least a year by then, but somehow I didn't consider that fact to be worrisome or binding until Ronnie let it be known he and Liz were going to a movie on that Friday night. Until then I considered Ronnie to have a slight lead on me in the backstretch, but I'd be fine once I mounted my furious comeback. My big problem was being two months younger than Ronnie and not turning sixteen until August. All I had at the moment was a learner's permit, not exactly what you needed if you wanted to cruise the hot spots around town with a pretty girl in the front seat beside you.

I knew that Liz had left me behind years earlier and that the Sweetheart Banquet was the peak of our romantic time together, but I was fifteen and I hated to admit I was already a loser in life. I wasn't so much eaten up by jealousy as I was curious about what was going on and what Ronnie would tell me. I wondered if he was going to go parking with Liz all summer long while I had to rely on the other loser-type guys to come by and pick me up so we could ride around smoking cigarettes and acting cool, like we were tough guys, like it was okay to park at the drive-in Shoney's and eat a Big Boy and watch the dates cruise through because our demeanor said as fast as we were finished we were off to somewhere adult and exotic and exciting, and we'd soon be off to those places and leave behind these childish couplings and amateur trysts to the children and the youngsters we were merely amusing ourselves with by observing. I had a lot of questionable scenarios swirling around in my head.

"What do you want to wait around this place for?" Hoggy Winters asked. Hoggy was a guy I knew from church who went to another school across town. His real name was Danny, but everybody called him Hoggy because his head was huge like a boar and his nose was all squashed in and his eyes were black and

beady. Hoggy was a real loser for sure, but he had a car, and when you're fifteen and without wheels in the summertime you're pretty limited as to who you can choose to hang around with.

"I thought we might pick up some girls. Maybe we could get something to eat."

"I ain't got no money. I spent it all on gas." He took a pack of Winstons out and offered me one. He was so desperate for company he paid for all the gas and kept me in cigarettes. I guess I was like his substitute date.

"I'll buy you an order of fries and a coke. That's all I can afford."

"Make it lemonade and you got a deal." Hoggy was pleased. He was in heaven now. This night out with a good buddy was like the goddamned highlight of his life.

"Okay," I said, blowing smoke out the window. Hoggy was punching the button on the box to order our food, and I was keeping my eyes peeled for Liz and Ronnie to drive by. I didn't know how long we'd have to wait. I was a glutton for punishment.

I'm not certain if Ronnie and Liz ever showed up that night. It didn't really matter, because in the long run there were lots and lots of times when the two of them cruised by in cars or went to the movies or came to parties together until it was a natural way of speaking to say Ronnie and Liz and feel like you were forgetting something vital if you mentioned one name without throwing in the other. Of course there were times when arguments would ensue and jealousies would arise and the two of them would break up and make sure they were seen with other people, but everyone sensed this was a short-lived thing and that Ronnie and Liz would soon come back together again, so these temporary breakups were treated as normal too.

At first I did my best to keep my distance from Ronnie and Liz, but when you're best friends and you go way back to baseball cards and first cigarettes, and the girl who is always going to be the first girl you ever liked and there's nothing you can do to change that is with him, and though you've moved on past the hurt and you've had other friends and gone steady with other girls and had your heart broken and you've broken a heart or two yourself, and even though you made the Honor Roll and the basketball team and had a lot of other things happen in your life, still it was always Ronnie and Liz and Liz and Ronnie, and that's the way I knew it would always be.

So.

Lots of times we double-dated, Ronnie and Liz and me and the girlfriend of the month, sometimes in the backseat where I looked at the back of their heads, sometimes with me driving and examining their

faces in the rearview mirror. There they would be, together, and there I was, somehow, with them and along for the ride. We'd pass a joint from front seat to back, and soon the two of them would begin to sing what I guess had to be classified as their song, "I Got You Babe." Ronnie was Sonny and Liz was Cher, and I would sing along too, even if I didn't know who in the hell I was supposed to be, even if I knew Sonny was with Cher and Cher was with Sonny and really and truly in the long run no backup was ever going to be required.

I figured the long run was going to eventually take care of itself.

Ronnie and Liz went to the University of Tennessee in Knoxville together, while I stayed at home and worked a year before I went east to join them. By that time they weren't speaking to each other again; Liz had about a hundred guys dying to get in the sack with her, and Ronnie was taking every drug he could come across on his way to making the world a better place by acquiring a degree in Business Administration. It was hard for me to figure out exactly what company was going to depend on him to further their profits, but I suppose I should have been asking the same kind of questions of myself. It didn't take long to determine that neither of us could ever do, so we'd teach. Ronnie was going into P.E. and roll out volleyballs to crazed middle-schoolers, and I was going to make sure Edna St. Vincent Millay would live in their brains forever.

Since I was a year late arriving, Ronnie already had a slew of new friends in place, so it's safe to say that was the beginning of the end of our close and private friendship. We did hang out together from time to time and kept up pretenses as much as possible through joints and beers and mutual parties. Everything was fine as long as we were not in our right minds together. Ripped, drunk, or a combination of the two, we were fine at not discussing whatever it was that had come between us. We were okay if we stayed in the distant past, pre-flying bat, before the Sweetheart Banquet and driver's licenses.

Before Liz.

The two of them, quite naturally, came together again right before they graduated. I sat in the audience and watched them receive their diplomas. I shook their hands afterward and said hello to their parents. Liz's folks were glad to see me. It had been a long time since I had escorted their daughter out on her first date.

I was getting ready to go- I had a late date- when Ronnie said to me, "Hey, do you remember Dennis Gentry?"

"Sure."

“I heard he died. Car wreck.”

“I guess he won’t have to go to the orthodontist anymore,” I said.

We both laughed.

Liz made certain I wouldn’t go back to Birmingham without paying more homage to her. The reunion was over, but since it was Memorial Day weekend she and Ronnie scheduled a small backyard cookout for a “select few”, as she called it. It had been a while since I’d visited Liz and Ronnie on their home court, and at this point of this expedition into the past I didn’t have any idea what to expect. The last time I’d been their guest was at least ten years before, probably fifteen, and at that time they were entrenched in East Nashville in our old neighborhood, so I didn’t feel like such a stranger when I stood on their porch ringing their doorbell. These years later their address and zip code had changed to an area unfamiliar to me. I perceived this new residence to be symbolic of all the years that had passed, the miles we had traveled apart. I had no notion of what their lives were like these decades later; it seemed only natural that the answer to these questions should be somewhere off in an undiscovered country in the foggy realm of a foreign place.

Their house was barely still a part of the state, off I-65 on the way to Kentucky. Back when I was in school this area was all farmland and undeveloped fields, but in the time I’d been away everything had changed from being a place where you took a girl for sex inside a car to a neighborhood with video stores and schools and Pizza Huts every fifty yards or so. It appeared people were proud of their garages here; every dwelling seemed dominated by cavernous two and three car structures where autos and vans and boats and two-wheelers and riding mowers might fit. The family of today, it appeared, had more business outside in the sunshine than inside the walls of their actual house.

Not that the house was anything to sneeze at. The front door was open, and through the storm glass I could see a good-sized living room with Victorian furniture and a grandfather clock that could have been old but was probably new. Liz came down a hallway with an apron on, wiping her hands on the front. She had on shorts that came down to her knees and a bright orange Tennessee tee shirt, but I was looking through her garb and taking note once again how her body was holding up just fine. She’d had two boys who were now teenagers, and, if anything, the experience seemed to have improved her. It was for damned sure it hadn’t hurt.

“I was beginning to think you were going to stand us up,” she said. Whatever was on her hands she had managed to wipe off on the apron, and she touched me on the arm.

"I got lost once or twice. I went straight when I should have turned off."

"You've never followed directions."

"I cast my fate to the wind. Life's easier when you don't have to waste time making decisions." I looked at a big yellow cat lying on a sofa, fat and fluffy and entirely relaxed. I remembered how Ronnie used to despise even looking at a cat. He liked to spook them- rocks, fireworks, you name it. Now he had a poster child for 9 Lives lounging in his living room.

"That's Sigmund," Liz said. "You can call him Siggy."

"I'll call the Humane Association and tell them you're not feeding him enough."

"He's about like Ronnie. Both of them do nothing but eat and sleep. Ronnie does go to work, but it's not like he actually does anything. It doesn't take a lot of energy to blow a whistle every thirty minutes or so."

She smiled and beckoned me to follow her, having updated me on the marital situation via a game of fill-in-the-blanks. We walked through a den where a gangly teen stretched out on a recliner watching the world's strongest men lift boulders from a pile and hoist them up on a wall. Liz didn't stop to introduce me, an action for which I felt, on one hand, a trifle hurt over because she didn't deem me important enough for even a small hello, and, on the other, relief, because I really didn't want to have to take in this finished product of a night of passion between Ronnie and Liz, a night that probably occurred when I was by myself in some place in Birmingham or any of the other makeshift lodgings I'd settled in a half-hearted effort to make a living or leave my mark on society- whichever came first.

"Where is everybody?" I asked.

"They're outside," she said, "throwing frisbees or something intelligent like that. I can't get anybody to help me get the food ready."

"You don't want me helping, that's for sure. Not unless you never want to eat. Food preparation and I don't get along."

I walked out on the deck and saw Ronnie and the others down the hill in the backyard. A Labrador Retriever ran wildly back and forth between a number of people, whom I recognized as my former classmates I'd been shocked at the sight of the night before. Even now from a distance I marveled again at how much they had aged. I hoped I didn't look so grown up and ripe from fifty yards as they did. From a window sill a small boom box issued oldies music out into the sunshine. Chuck Berry had no particular place to go.

I almost tripped over a wicket when I stepped off the deck to go join everyone. I looked around the yard and saw it had been constructed into a croquet field. A rack of clubs and colored balls stood nearby. I guessed from the sight this was now Ronnie's game of choice.

As I walked down the hill the frisbee and the Labrador came my way. I grabbed the disk out of the air and tapped the dog on the nose with it, then sent it flying back to Jimmy Jones. Jimmy was a Metro detective these days. He investigated robberies and burglaries. Crime was obviously not a high priority in Nashville. That, or good help was damned hard to find.

"Howdy," I said.

"Did you get you a beer?" Ronnie asked. His nose was red from the sun and his eyes looked like he'd had one of my beers and one of everyone else's too. A few more and I really would have to be the one to grill the burgers.

"I can't believe how goddamned hot it is," he said. He fished out a Marlboro from his shirt and lit it while poking at the dog with his sneaker. The dog was lying on his side at Ronnie's feet, exhausted, like everyone else. "If we had any sense we'd move this party inside."

"If we had any sense we'd be inside under the air sipping a cold one instead of out here roasting to death," Frank Brown said, glad, it appeared, for this break in the action so he could light up a cigarette too.

"You're still as wimpy as you used to be," Ronnie told him.

Soon everyone was smoking, standing in a little pocket in the yard with their hangovers from the night before and their wonder at how time had flown by and brought about the changes they had seen—everyone but me, that is. I hadn't smoked a cigarette since college, and I'd learned a long time ago to not pay attention to time and circumstance.

"We stay out here too long and we'll end up like David Ellis," Jimmy said.

"Yeah," Ronnie said. "We'll keel over as a group and they'll have to list us all in the next reunion program as those who can't be with us."

"Did you see that list?" Frank asked. "I knew we had a few folks bite the dust down through the years, but you could field a damn football team from the names they had listed."

"David, Dennis, Barry Wilson, Tommy King, Sam Knox," Ronnie recited. "Every single one of those guys used to play baseball with us after school. You blink one good time and suddenly they're gone. People you used to call on the phone aren't listed in the white pages anymore."

This was about as much as I could stand. Even out here in the open with the bright sunshine and the wispy budding summer wind I still didn't want to hear Ronnie's theories on why certain guys couldn't take

infield with us. I started to point out that every single corpse on the list had also once been in love with Liz, that maybe we were all doomed cosmically too, like the Curse of the Mummy's Tomb or something, but there were wives standing there too, and I didn't think resurrecting old passions was the best idea for this sort of gathering. All I really wanted to do was go inside and see if Liz had a Coke in the refrigerator, if I could sit on a stool in the cool kitchen and watch her make the salad, if I could just check her out from head to toe without being interrupted and see if I thought she'd been worth pining over for the last couple of centuries.

"I guess you thought before everybody croaks you'd get us all out here for a hot game of croquet," I said.

Ronnie grinned.

"Ain't no way I'm going to my grave until I beat your ass at this game. You think I was good at baseball? You ain't ever seen anybody swing a meaner mallet than me."

"I've seen how you swing a baseball bat. Maybe I need to go buy a catcher's mask before we start."

This got a laugh from everybody, which I instantly regretted. I knew it pissed Ronnie off when he got laughed at, and I hadn't really meant it that way. I'd never been in a fight with Ronnie. I'd thought about the possibilities of such a thing happening from time to time, but there had always been something standing in the way to prevent it. There were people I absolutely detested, for example. They seemed much more worthy of receiving a punch than Ronnie, who, by all practical measures, was supposed to be my best friend. I figured the only reason I might want to punch his lights out was Liz, but I'd decided long ago I shouldn't waste a lot of time blaming Ronnie for that. If anything, I probably should have challenged Liz herself to a duel- pistols at sunrise, maybe- for it was really all her fault I was the one standing on the outside looking in these days. But maybe Ronnie deserved a fat lip too, if for nothing else having the damned unmitigated gall to throw a bat in old Liz's name and cause a lot of grief for everyone. He could have remained like me, silent, anonymous, a faceless forgotten loser at the Great Game of Love, and then everything would have been all right. We could have been jointly rejected and abandoned and forsaken and suffered in stereo together. We could have bonded even more.

Ronnie insisted on going last at croquet, which meant he wanted to be the one to end the game with a flourish. I had seen this tactic before.

We had to keep spotting our balls because each time we hit one the damned dog would run over and try to retrieve it with his mouth. Obviously Billy the Labrador Retriever couldn't tell the difference between this game and Frisbee, much like Ronnie, who acted like croquet was worthy of all reverence and

seriousness, like it was of the utmost importance to be the winner in the end. This attitude must have been infectious, for suddenly it became a high priority for me to beat old Ronnie like a drum.

“So who else is dead I don’t know about?” I knocked the hell out of Ronnie’s ball and watched it skitter off to the base of the chain link fence. The act gave me a great dose of satisfaction.

“Nobody else that I know of, but by the way you look you could be next.”

“I’m in the prime of my life.”

I was on a hot streak and was moving around the course in a rush. I did my best to let my mind go blank. I was always better at stuff when I didn’t think about it too much. I probably could have solved the problem of Liz and Ronnie and my goofy life a long time ago if I’d just stopped thinking about it, if I’d have just kept on playing the game and quit obsessing about it.

I finally missed and lost my turn, but I was way ahead of everybody. “Ya’ll want to go on and forfeit and go inside? It’s burning up out here.”

“Let’s keep playing,” Ronnie said. “You haven’t won yet.”

Liz was finished with all she had to do in the kitchen, so she sat outside at a table under an umbrella drinking what appeared to be iced tea. Her tanned leg rested on the chair next to her, outstretched, and her toes were painted pink. “It’s about time,” she’d said when we all trooped back up the hill. She was smoking a cigarette. When she exhaled what wind there was caught the smoke and sent it back toward the croquet field.

“You get to do the cooking,” she told Ronnie. “Don’t drink so much beer that you don’t know what you’re doing.”

“I never know what I’m doing anyway,” Ronnie told me sincerely.

Liz patted the chair beside her, a signal for me to sit. She wanted me to tell her funny stories about teaching high school in Birmingham. “I want to know how a fool like you can teach anybody anything,” she said, laughing like she’d said something really charming.

“For one thing,” I said, “education in the great state of Alabama doesn’t rank up there in importance with football. It’s about on a level like here in Tennessee, so I felt comfortable immediately. I just had to be careful about letting on where I graduated from though. You know, Roll Tide, Go Big Orange- all that crap.”

“It’s not crap,” said Ronnie. “I hate the fucking Tide.”

“Anyway, I felt right at home. I knew I was in the right place on the first day of school. I was as incompetent as everybody else. So now I’m considered Tennessee’s gift to the Alabama educational system.”

“The burgers are already patted out and ready to go,” Liz called to Ronnie. “They’re in the refrigerator waiting for you. Try and not burn them beyond recognition.”

Jimmy the detective started telling me about the auctions Metro held for seized and unclaimed property. It seemed that most of everything he owned came from the misfortunes of criminals and their victims. He had a regulation pool table, several televisions, even a Harley Davidson motorcycle that he obtained for practically a song. He’d had a lot of beer too. I was sure he was still cruising from last night’s festivities.

“What are you rebelling against?” I said. “What have you got?” I mumbled. I was imitating Brando from ‘The Wild One.’ Nobody got my motorcycle connection. I’ve been imitating people all my life and nobody’s ever got it.

I knew better than to drink a lot of beer. Somewhere along the line the consumption of alcohol had become a chore for me, somewhere between the wild days after U.T. and my recent descent into the state of joint maturity and senility. Actually, I don’t know what it was, but it seemed to me that getting inebriated more than once during this trip home was an admission of surrender, that I couldn’t handle the blunt seascape of my past and the sad portrait of the reality of the present I was facing. A boatload of beer and a joint in my pocket wasn’t going to make anything appear much better. No one else on the patio, it appeared, was harboring any similar thoughts.

“I’m putting the burgers on,” Ronnie said. “If anybody wants theirs any particular way you’d better speak up now.”

I asked Jimmy, who was around cops every day and probably had a handle on such information, who else we mutually knew of was dead and who was just merely removed from their positions in society and doing hard time in the slammer. Obviously, Jimmy took me seriously, because he proceeded to provide me with details of convictions for domestic abuse, theft, drugs, even one acquittal of second-degree murder against a fellow classmate I barely remembered.

“He never graduated, though,” Jimmy informed me. “He dropped out when we were sophomores.”

“It just goes to show you,” I said. “Second degree murder. If he’d only have stayed in school he could have got that first degree charge with no trouble at all.”

Through the glass doors, inside the house, I saw Liz and Ronnie's son amble down the hallway, off for either a nap or a quick shower. Was this the oldest or the youngest son? He was at least six-three, two-twenty. Ronnie and I were never that big. Nobody in real life got that large.

I studied Liz again, trying to determine if this girl who had become a middle-aged woman had also been the mother of Ronnie's sons. I wasn't really in denial about it- it was just difficult to imagine her in that role. After all, I had never seen her pregnant. I'd never seen her gain weight or throw up in the morning or placed my hand on her belly to feel the baby move. I'd been far away and into my own existence when all that went down. It was one of those things that made me glad for my own life. I didn't have drama like that from where I was.

Liz got pregnant shortly after she and Ronnie tied the knot, but she lost that baby sometime later. I always wondered which came first- the pregnancy or the nuptials. I was so bummed out by the thought of them eternally together that I'd slunk back into the den of my life to lick my wounds, to glower out the entrance at strangers while I put all the slings and arrows of times past behind me, all ties to the good old days gone. I continued to stay in touch by phone, but through most of the calls I wasn't listening. I was making what were like polite nods on my end, watching a sitcom with the sound down and responding only when I thought it was necessary. Sometimes I let the phone ring when I thought it was Ronnie or Liz calling. With the invention of Caller I.D. I hardly spoke to them at all. Two or three times a year was about all the conversation I could take.

Liz kicked at my ankle like I was another cat who was in her way.

"So there's no future Mrs. Reed in the works, huh?" she asked. "Does this mean you've decided to be a lonely old man forever?"

"I never said I was lonely." I gave her what I hoped was my most endearing smile. "I've got a parakeet who is quite the conversationalist."

"You need kids or something. Sometimes you just don't seem real to me." She lit another Virginia Slim and watched her smoke join with the smoke Ronnie was eliciting from the grill. Then she looked at me. "I just think sometimes you're letting life pass you by, and in the end you're not going to have anything to show for it."

"You act like I'm in prison or something," I said, "or like I've got some terminal disease."

"That's what I mean," she said. She took a thoughtful draw and looked out at her long wide yard. The sun from too many days on the deck had dried her skin some. Maybe she'd had a little too much time out here. "It's like you're somewhere far away now. I don't quite know what to say to you anymore."

“Christ, Liz, since when did you ever? It isn’t like you and I have ever had that many lengthy conversations.”

“That’s funny,” she said. “I remember when we used to talk all the time.”

Well, I told myself not to drink too much, but you know how it is sometimes. Back in my prime it would have taken a lot more of the hops to get me looped, but I’d been off the circuit for a while, so after three or four trips to the cooler my senses were swamped sufficiently enough to make the oldies music an invitation to sing along and the conversations all major issues that had to be solved. After a while I started believing I actually belonged at this place where I was.

“There are plenty more burgers out there, partner,” Ronnie told me.

“I think I’ve had more than my share,” I said.

“There’s plenty of beer left too.”

“Thanks.” I grabbed another bottle and opened the glass doors that led to the patio. There were people in the den, in the breakfast room, and sitting around in the heat at the outside table with the big umbrella. Used paper plates lay irregularly everywhere, empty bottles and napkins littered the view, and I had the insane desire to go around with a garbage bag collecting all the refuse. After all, Ronnie wasn’t going to do it. Liz wasn’t the cleanup kind either. They’d let this crap lay around forever, until somebody they paid came over and did it for them or the upcoming summer wind blew it away or the elements of nature disintegrated everything and turned it into indiscriminate dust.

Not only was I buzzed but I also felt the urgent need to piss. It was not the sort of piss which could be successfully fulfilled by walking back in the house and heading down the hallway to the small guest bathroom that smelled like scented Kleenex and Renuzet. Nor was it the kind of release that could be negotiated in an appreciable manner by strolling through the master bedroom where Ronnie and Liz slept every night until the next morning- all those mornings- and use the bathroom the two of them had used since they’d had this house built especially for themselves. No, I knew what kind of piss a moment like this required.

Back in Birmingham, when the great sweep of life threatened to overwhelm me, the way I chose to remedy the situation was to unlock the back door and go out into my own private backyard. I didn’t have an expensive house or a lot of acreage, but there was enough sod in the back for me to walk by and around the garage and take in the lights of the neighborhood and meditate beneath the sun by day and the moon by night while the rest of the world worked and slept. Small as the yard was it was still like the

great frontier to me, a place where I was not a number and not controlled by the world around. I could step out onto my property and be one within myself.

That's the feeling that flashed through me, and I knew there wasn't much use fighting it. Back home when this urge to strike a blow for freedom came along I just simply stepped out behind the garage and cut loose with an unbridled prairie stream of horsy urine that sometimes gave off smoke in the cold and hung in the air with the sourest of smells on the hot sultry nights of summer when I could stand the pull of the planet no more. Somehow those moments of pissing outdoors were a part of the repertoire that kept me from ranting and raving, from flying off the hook, from questioning out loud why it was this life was not the one I'd wanted or planned, that this time I'd had my fill, that now I was desperate and disgusted enough to go ahead and do something bizarre and stupid to try and change it all.

Of course I knew I couldn't just amble out in front of Liz and Ronnie and everybody present and enter the backyard in the newfound summer sunset and cut loose in front of God and country, but I was just tanked enough to think that I might be devious and smart enough to fulfill my desires without anyone in attendance being one whit the wiser. It was a game and a challenge; it was the stuff of life I'd always pursued. It was lost and confused and made not a bit of difference or an ounce of sense to anyone.

It was right down my alley.

There was a fence around the yard, but it wasn't like it was one of those high impenetrable structures built to keep the villagers out and King Kong in. It was one of those four foot jobs that stretched from the back of the house all around the extended garage in a big square, but as far as I could see there were only two entrances and exits. You could walk in from the patio at the back of the house or you could enter through a gate out by the garage. I couldn't truly expect to get away with an undetected piss by approaching my projected target either way, so stealth was going to have to come into play.

I don't even think Siggy the cat saw me when I went out the front door. I walked off to the left side of the yard, opposite where all the cars were parked in the driveway. It was just getting dark enough to where if I didn't pay attention I was likely to trip over a sprinkler or some other form of suburban yard implement, so I ordered the beer in my head to slow down and get me to my destination in one unmaimed piece. I could hear The Four Tops on the boom box- "I Can't Help Myself"- and an insane giggle threatened to take me over. I peeked through the windows and saw where life went on for Ronnie and Liz's family. There was one son's room with a bed and a TV and a Nintendo game sitting on a desk. At the back was the master bedroom, where I wondered what went on on a regular basis and what didn't. I was getting a little tired of thinking about it. I wondered whether I should get a running start and try to vault the fence, but

premonitions of a broken neck and a paraplegic future made me take my time scaling the structure and concentrate on not dying right there at the side of the house. I didn't have a last will and testament. I didn't want my stereo system going to my mother. She'd already thrown away my baseball cards. I was pretty sure she'd give all my Beatles albums to Goodwill.

At the top of the fence I had to decide whether to turn around and go back in the house and act civilized or go through with his act and declare my independence from all things Liz and Ronnie. I went forward. I landed softly on the grass and walked quietly around the perimeter of the yard by the fence. I guess if there were sentries posted around the property and the garage I would have been spotted immediately, but the music was playing and the conversations were in earnest and the people outside weren't looking for me or worrying about what I had done or what I was fixing to do. In a way it was just like high school. I felt just as insignificant.

At the back of the garage I cut loose on a stack of bricks someone had piled up for future use. Or maybe they'd been put there as leftovers from a room that had been redecorated. It didn't matter. Henceforth the bricks would bear the stain of my urine, a Kilroy sort of mark that said- even though I was the only one who knew it- I was here. Somehow there beneath the rising moon and the new stars that fact seemed important.

I snuck back around the yard and climbed the fence again. Wilson Pickett was singing "Mustang Sally". When I entered the living room Liz was standing there. I didn't know if I'd been caught or not, if she was standing there waiting on me or had just come in to wind the old/new grandfather clock.

"Hi, Liz. I was just taking a walk." I smiled at her like it was the most natural thing in the world, leaving a party and taking a hike.

"I thought you'd left without saying goodbye, but I saw your car out there." I was mildly flattered she'd been looking for me, that she actually noticed me absent, but she could have been lying. She had a way of telling you what you wanted to hear.

"I had to take a break. After a while all these memories start getting to me." Why did I want to go over and touch her? I didn't even like her much anymore.

"I don't think this party was such a good idea," she said. "I didn't have much fun last night and tonight's not that much better. I don't think I have a whole lot to say to anybody anymore. I'm not so sure I ever had that much to say in the first place."

I got right to the point.

"Are things okay with you and Ronnie?"

"I guess."

"I haven't seen you guys say more than a sentence or two to each other all weekend. Is it always like that?"

"If you want to know the truth, yes. Ronnie saves most of his conversation for school. He's got himself a third grade teacher for a girlfriend. He doesn't know I know about her, but I do. How important is this to you?" she asked.

"I'd just like to know what's going on before I head back home," I said. "I suppose I'm curious." Had Ronnie found something lacking in Liz? Had Liz been the first one to stray? I was more juiced than I'd thought. There was a part of me that wanted to leave, but I was afraid to drive. There was also a part that wanted to walk over to Liz and see if she felt as good as I'd always assumed she'd feel.

"Is it just your curiosity you want taken care of, or is there something else?" Like the Beatles were singing just then, I saw her standing there and my heart went boom. But she'd always been standing somewhere around or away from me, and all I'd ever done was look at her and think of her and wonder about her and never do anything tangible about it but take her to a sweetheart banquet about a million years ago before I figured out she wasn't for me. So was she for me now? Was I suddenly in her league or had she fallen to my level? I pictured myself in Birmingham again, of Liz in my house, of the two of us in those rooms together. It wouldn't stay in my head right then, the same exact way it always ran out and dissolved itself before. There wasn't much difference between the years I was around and the years I'd been gone.

"I've got to go," I said. My hand was on the doorknob. I could get back to my parents' house if I took it easy. They'd probably still be up, maybe playing Canasta. It was a holiday. I could fake sobriety. I'd done it lots of times before. I could do it again. "Thanks for inviting me," I said. I didn't tell anybody else goodbye. I just walked out the door to the yard that glowed deep green in the moonlight.

My father died right after the new year, in January of 1994. I drove home for the funeral and stayed a week to help my mother get settled. I was living in Huntsville then, married with a two-year-old daughter. I'd married the friend of another teacher at my school, a kindergarten instructor named Sandy, who'd insisted the place for us was her hometown. Thus, I lived and worked in Huntsville.

I only came back to Nashville for big events, and when I did I made sure it wasn't for long. Despite my efforts, I always seemed to run into someone I knew, somebody who was quick to tell me who was in prison or dead at an early age or something catastrophic like that.

That's how I learned about Ronnie and Liz. It wasn't like either of them bothered to come by the funeral home and pay their respects. I had to hear about their divorce from good old Jimmy Jones, who passed that tidbit along with the fact that he had only eight more months to go until he could officially retire from the police department. I guess it wasn't really either Liz's or Ronnie's fault they didn't attend the funeral- Liz was living in Chattanooga and Ronnie had earned his pension and was selling cars downtown. Probably he didn't include reading the obituaries as part of his daily routine.

I saw Mrs. Matlock a lot during the visitation. Mr. Matlock, like my dad, had suffered the Fred Sanford Big One, so it looked like she and my mother would do a lot of hanging around together, so for the most part I wouldn't have to worry about my son responsibilities too much. I wouldn't be having to drive home all the time for every little thing.

After the burial I hung around the house long enough for everyone to see me, and then I left and drove downtown to the Chevrolet/ Subaru dealership. It was closer than Chattanooga, and I thought maybe there might be something there worth salvaging now that Liz was gone. There were gleaming new cars parked along the storefront facing West End. I felt a little ashamed of my faded used Accord, so I parked in the back and walked around. I hadn't driven downtown to listen to a sales pitch.

It had been at least two years since we'd even talked on the phone, and he had never said anything about having marital problems- when I'd asked how Liz was all Ronnie had said was she was fine. I didn't ask more because I didn't want to appear too interested. And I wasn't. All I ever called for was to let them know I was getting married or had had a kid. I do know that neither of us ever had a whole lot to say during those conversations. Neither of us seemed very interested in reading between the lines of what the other wasn't saying.

Ronnie was trying to sell a car when I got there. I stood off to the side of the showroom and watched him explain the merits of a Subaru Forester to a guy with a goatee who probably was a member of the Sierra Club. I looked across West End and saw another couple looking at new Toyotas. Everybody was planning on going somewhere.

After five minutes at my post an old guy in a suit came up and asked if I needed any help. I pointed at Ronnie and said, "I'm just here to see him."

"I can sell you a car as easily as him," he grinned.

"I'm not buying. I'm just an old friend come by to say hello." It was hot and the old guy and I were both in suits. "I'm from out of town," I explained.

“He’ll be through in a minute. I can tell already the fellow he’s with isn’t going to buy anything today.”

I knew Ronnie had seen me by now, but he made no acknowledgment of my presence and kept on talking. I looked down the road and saw the line of fast food joints had multiplied. There was a Burger King and a Taco Bell to go along with the Arby’s and the Krystal and the Wendy’s. Go over that hill, I thought, and there’s Vanderbilt. Centennial Park. The Parthenon. When I was a kid a now-defunct department store used to put up a huge nativity scene at the Parthenon during Christmas. People drove from miles around to look at the wise men and the animals and Mary and Joseph and the Little Lord Jesus. At night cars would circle all around the park, driving by to take a look. Now the display’s defunct too. The camels died of thirst.

The Sierra guy left. Ronnie turned to me with his same enthusiasm, unable to turn it off. I couldn’t tell if he was glad to see his old best friend or if he thought he could put me into an Impala and still make his monthly bonus. It was getting late, towards quitting time, and I think he was wondering if he could fit me in. Maybe he had somewhere to go.

“What’s going on?” I said. I shook his hand and saw the salt and pepper in his hair.

“You tell me, bubba,” he said.

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