STEPHEN KING

HEARTS IN ATLANTIS

Stephen King

1966: Man, we just couldn’t stop laughing.

1

When I came to the University of Maine in 1966, there was still a Goldwater sticker, tattered and faded but perfectly readable (AuH2O-4-USA), on the old station wagon I inherited from my brother. When I left the University in 1970, I had no car. What I did have was a beard, hair down to my shoulders, and a backpack with a sticker on it reading RICHARD NIXON IS A WAR CRIMINAL. The button on the collar of my denim jacket read I AIN’T NO FORTUNATE SON. College is always a time of change, I guess, the last major convulsion of childhood, but I doubt there were ever changes of such magnitude as those faced by the students who came to their campuses in the late sixties.

Most of us don’t say much about those years now, not because we don’t remember them but because the language which we spoke back then has been lost. When I try to talk about the sixties—when I even try to think about them—I am overcome by horror and hilarity. I see bell-bottom pants and Earth Shoes. I smell pot and patchouli, incense and peppermints. And I hear Donovan Leitch singing his sweet and stupid song about the continent of Atlantis, lyrics that still seem profound to me in the watches of the night, when I can’t sleep. The older I get, the harder it is to let go of that song’s stupidity and hold onto its sweetness. I have to remind myself that we were smaller then, small enough to live our brightly hued lives under the mushrooms, all the time believing them to be trees, shelter from the sheltering sky. I know that doesn’t make any real sense, but it’s the best I can do: hail Atlantis.

2

I finished my senior year living off-campus in LSD Acres, the rotting cabins down by the Stillwater River, but when I came to U of M in 1966 I lived in Chamberlain Hall, which was part of a three-dorm complex: Chamberlain (men), King (men), and Franklin (women). There was also a dining hall, Holyoke Commons, which stood a little apart from the dorms—not far, perhaps only an eighth of a mile, but it seemed far on winter nights when the wind was strong and the temperature dipped below zero. Far enough so that Holyoke was known as the Palace on the Plains.

I learned a lot in college, the very least of it in the classrooms. I learned how to kiss a girl and put on a rubber at the same time (a necessary but often overlooked skill), how to chug a sixteen-ounce can of beer without throwing up, how to make extra cash in my spare time (writing term papers for kids with more money than I, which was most of them), how not to be a Republican even though I had sprung from a long line of them, how to go into the streets with a sign held up over my head, chanting One two three four we won't fight your fucking war and Hey hey LBJ how many kids did you kill today. I learned that you should try to get downwind of teargas and breathe slowly through a handkerchief or a bandanna if you couldn't do that. I learned that when the nightsticks come out, you want to fall on your side, draw your knees up to your chest, and cover the back of your head with your hands. In Chicago, in 1968, I learned that cops can beat the shit out of you no matter how well you cover up.

But before I learned any of those things, I learned about the pleasures and dangers of Hearts. There were sixteen rooms holding thirty-two boys on the third floor of Chamberlain Hall in the fall of 1966; by January of 1967, nineteen of those boys had either moved or flunked out, victims of Hearts. It swept through us that fall like a virulent strain of influenza. Only three of the young men on Three were completely immune, I think. One was my roommate, Nathan Hoppenstand. One was David "Dearie" Dearborn, the floor-proctor.

The third was Stokely Jones III, soon to be known to the citizenry of Chamberlain Hall as Rip-Rip. Sometimes I think it's Rip-Rip I want to tell you about; sometimes I think it's Skip Kirk (later known as Captain Kirk, of course), who was my best friend during those years; sometimes I think it's Carol. Often I believe it's the sixties themselves I want to talk about, impossible as that has always seemed to me. But before I talk about any of those things, I better tell you about Hearts.

Skip once said that Whist is Bridge for dopes and Hearts is Bridge for real dopes. You'll get no argument from me, although that kind of misses the point. Hearts is fun, that's the point, and when you play it for money—a nickel a point was the going rate on Chamberlain Three—it quickly becomes compulsive. The ideal number of players is four. All the cards are dealt out and then played in tricks. Each hand amounts to twenty-six total points: thirteen hearts at a point each, and the queen of spades (which we called The Bitch), worth thirteen points all by herself. The game ends when one of the four players tops a hundred points. The winner is the player with the lowest score.

In our marathons, each of the other three players would cough up based on the difference between his score and the winner's score. If, for example, the difference between my score and Skip's was twenty points at the end of the game, I had to pay him a dollar at the going rate of a nickel a point. Chump-change, you'd say now, but this was 1966, and a dollar wasn't just change to the work-study chumps who lived on Chamberlain Three.

3

I recall quite clearly when the Hearts epidemic started: the first weekend in October. I remember because the semester's initial round of prelims had just ended and I had survived. Survival was an actual issue for most of the boys on Chamberlain Three; we were at college thanks to a variety of scholarships, loans (most, including my own, courtesy of the National Education Defense Act), and work-study jobs. It was like riding in a Soapbox Derby car which had been put together with paste instead of nails, and while our arrangements varied—mostly according to how crafty we were when it came to filling out forms and how diligently our high-school guidance counselors had worked for us—there was one hard fact of life. It was summed up by a sampler which hung in the third-floor lounge, where our marathon Hearts tournaments were played. Tony DeLucca's mother made it, told him to hang it someplace where he'd see it every day, and sent him off to college with it. As the fall of 1966 wore out and winter replaced it, Mrs. DeLucca's sampler seemed to glare bigger and brighter with each passing hand, each fall of The Bitch, each night I rolled into bed with my textbooks unopened, my notes unstudied, my papers unwritten. Once or twice I even dreamed about it:

2.5.

That's what the sampler said, in big red crocheted numerals. Mrs. DeLucca understood what it meant, and so did we. If you lived in one of the ordinary dorms—Jacklin or Dunn or Pease or Chadbourne—you could keep your place in the Class of 1970 with a 1.6 average … if, that was, Daddy and Mummy continued to pay the bills. This was the state land-grant college, remember; we are not talking about Harvard or Wellesley. For students trying to stagger through on scholarship-and-loan packages, however, 2.5 was the line drawn in the dust. Score below a 2.5—drop from a C average to a C-minus, in other words—and your little soapbox racer was almost certain to fall apart. "Be in touch, baby, seeya," as Skip Kirk used to say.

I did okay on that first round of prelims, especially for a boy who was almost ill with homesickness (I had never been away from home in my life except for a single week at basketball camp, from which I returned with a sprained wrist and an odd fungal growth between my toes and under my testes). I was carrying five subjects and got B's in everything except Freshman English. On that one I got an A. My instructor, who would later divorce his wife and wind up busking in Sproul Plaza on the Berkeley campus, wrote "Your example of onomatopoeia is actually quite brilliant" beside one of my answers. I sent that test back home to my mother and father. My mother returned a postcard with one word—"Bravo!"—scrawled fervently across the back. Remembering that causes an unexpected pang, something actually close to physical pain. It was, I suppose, the last time I dragged home a school paper with a gold star pasted in the corner.

After that first round of prelims I complacently calculated my GPA-in-progress and came out with a 3.3. It never got near that again, and by late December I realized that the choices had become very simple: quit playing cards and maybe survive to the next semester with my fragile financial-aid package intact, or continue Bitch-hunting beneath Mrs. DeLucca's sampler in the third-floor lounge until Christmas and then head back to Gates Falls for good.

I'd be able to get a job at Gates Falls Mills and Weaving; my father had been there for twenty years, right up until the accident that cost him his sight, and he'd get me in. My mother would hate it, but she wouldn't stand in the way if I told her it was what I wanted. At the end of the day she was always the realist of the family. Even when her hopes and disappointments ran her half-mad, she was a realist. For awhile she'd be grief-stricken at my failure to make a go of it at the University, and for awhile I'd be guilt-ridden, but we'd both get over it. I wanted to be a writer, after all, not a damned English teacher, and I had an idea that only pompous writers needed college to do what they did.

Yet I didn’t want to flunk out, either. It seemed the wrong way to start my life as a grownup. It smelled like failure, and all my Whitmanesque ruminations about how a writer should do his work among the people smelled like a rationalization for that failure. And still the third-floor lounge called to me—the snap of the cards, someone asking if this hand was pass left or pass right, someone else asking who had The Douche (a hand of Hearts begins by playing the two of clubs, a card known to us third-floor addicts as The Douche). I had dreams in which Ronnie Malenfant, the first true bred-in-the-bone asshole I had met since escaping the bullies of junior high, began to play spades one after another, screaming “Time to go Bitch-huntin! We chasin The Cunt!” in his high-pitched, reedy voice. We almost always see where our best interest lies, I think, but sometimes what we see means very little compared to what we feel. Tough but true.

4

My roommate didn't play Hearts. My roommate didn't have any use for the undeclared war in Vietnam. My roommate wrote home to his girlfriend, a senior at Wisdom Consolidated High School, every day. Put a glass of water next to Nate Hoppenstand and it was the water that looked vivacious.

He and I lived in Room 302, next to the stairwell, across from the Proctor's Suite (lair of the hideous Dearie) and all the way down the hall from the lounge with its card-tables, stand-up ashtrays, and its view of the Palace on the Plains. Our pairing suggested—to me, at least—that everyone's most macabre musings about the University Housing Office might well be true. On the questionnaire which I had returned to Housing in April of '66 (when my biggest concern was deciding where I should take Annmarie Soucie to eat after the Senior Prom), I had said that I was A. a smoker; B. a Young Republican; C. an aspiring folk guitarist; D. a night owl. In its dubious wisdom, the Housing Office paired me with Nate, a non-smoking dentist-in-progress whose folks were Aroostook County Democrats (the fact that Lyndon Johnson was a Democrat made Nate feel no better about U.S. soldiers running around South Vietnam). I had a poster of Humphrey Bogart above my bed; above his, Nate hung photos of his dog and his girl. The girl was a sallow creature dressed in a Wisdom High majorette's uniform and clutching a baton like a cudgel. She was Cindy. The dog was Rinty. Both the girl and the dog were sporting identical grins. It was fucking surreal.

Nate's worst failing, as far as Skip and I were concerned, was the collection of record albums he kept carefully shelved in alphabetical order below Cindy and Rinty and just above his nifty little RCA Swingline phonograph. He had three Mitch Miller records (Sing Along with Mitch, More Sing Along with Mitch, Mitch and the Gang Sing John Henry and Other American Folk Favorites), Meet Trini Lopez, a Dean Martin LP (Dino Swings Vegas!), a Gerry and the Pacemakers LP, the first Dave Clark Five album—perhaps the

noisiest bad rock record ever made—and many others of the same ilk. I can't remember them all. It's probably a good thing.

"Nate, no," Skip said one evening. "Oh please, no." This was shortly before the onset of Hearts mania—perhaps only days.

"Oh please no what?" Nate asked without looking up from what he was doing at his desk. He seemed to spend all his waking hours either in class or at that desk. Sometimes I would catch him picking his nose and surreptitiously wiping the gleanings (after careful and thorough inspections) under the middle drawer. It was his only vice … if you excepted his horrible taste in music, that was.

Skip had been inspecting Nate's albums, something he did with absolutely no self-consciousness in every kid's room he visited. Now he was holding one up. He had the look of a doctor studying a bad X-ray … one that shows a juicy (and almost certainly malignant) tumor. He was standing between Nate's bed and mine, wearing his high-school letter jacket and a Dexter High School baseball cap. Never in college and rarely since have I met a man I thought so American Pie handsome as the Captain. Skip seemed unaware of his good looks, but he couldn't have been, not entirely, or he wouldn't have gotten laid as often as he did. It was a time when almost anybody could get laid, of course, but even by the standards of the time Skip was busy. None of that had started in the fall of '66, though; in the fall of '66 Skip's heart, like mine, would belong to Hearts.

"This is bad, little buddy," Skip said in a gentle, chiding voice. "Sorry, but this bites."

I was sitting at my own desk, smoking a Pall Mall and looking for my meal ticket. I was always losing the fucking thing.

"What bites? Why are you looking at my records?" Nate's botany text was open in front of him. He was drawing a leaf on a piece of graph paper. His blue freshman beanie was cocked back on his head. Nate Hoppenstand was, I believe, the only member of the freshman class

who actually wore that stupid blue dishrag until Maine's hapless football team finally scored a touchdown … a week or so before Thanksgiving, that was.

Skip went on studying the record album. "This sucks the rigid cock of Satan. It really does."

"I hate it when you talk that way!" Nate exclaimed, but still too stubborn to actually look up. Skip knew Nate hated him to talk that way, which was why he did it. "What are you talking about, anyway?"

"I'm sorry my language offends you, but I don't withdraw the comment. I can't. 'Cause this is bad. It hurts me, little buddy. It fuckin hurts me."

"What?" Nate finally looked up, irritated away from his leaf, which was marked as carefully as a map in a Rand McNally road atlas. "WHAT?"

"This."

On the album cover Skip was holding, a girl with a perky face and perky little breasts poking out the front of a middy blouse appeared to be dancing on the deck of a PT boat. One hand was raised, palm out, in a perky little wave. Cocked on her head was a perky little sailor's hat.

"I bet you're the only college student in America that brought Diane Renay Sings Navy Blue to school with him," Skip said. "It's wrong, Nate. This belongs back in your attic, along with the wiener pants I bet you wore to all the high-school pep rallies and church socials."

If wiener pants meant polyester Sansabelt slacks with that weird and purposeless little buckle in the back, I suspected Nate had brought most of his collection with him … was, in fact, wearing a pair at that very moment. I said nothing, though. I picked up a framed picture of my own girlfriend and spied my meal ticket behind it. I grabbed it and stuffed it in the pocket of my Levi's.

“That’s a good record,” Nate said with dignity. “That’s a very good record. It … swings.”

“Swings, does it?” Skip asked, tossing it back onto Nate’s bed. (He refused to reshelve Nate’s records because he knew it drove Nate bugfuck.) ” ‘My steady boy said ship ahoy and joined the Nay-yay-vee’? If that fits your definition of good, remind me never to let you give me a fuckin physical.”

“I’m going to be a dentist, not a doctor,” Nate said, clipping off each word. Cords were beginning to stand out on his neck. So far as I know, Skip Kirk was the only person in Chamberlain Hall, maybe on the whole campus, who could get under my roomie’s thick Yankee skin. “I’m in pre-dent, do you know what the dent in pre-dent means? It means teeth, Skip! It means—”

“Remind me to never let you fill one of my fuckin cavities.”

“Why do you have to say that all the time?”

“What?” Skip asked, knowing but wanting Nate to say it. Nate eventually would, and his face always turned bright red when he finally did. This fascinated Skip. Everything about Nate fascinated Skip; the Captain once told me he was pretty sure Nate was an alien, beamed down from the planet Good Boy.

“Fuck,” Nate Hoppenstand said, and immediately his cheeks became rosy. In a few moments he looked like a Dickens character, some earnest young man sketched by Boz. “That.”

“I had bad role models,” Skip said. “I dread to think about your future, Nate. What if Paul Anka makes a fuckin comeback?”

“You’ve never heard this record,” Nate said, snatching up Diane Renay Sings Navy Blue from the bed and putting it back between Mitch Miller and Stella Stevens Is in Love!

“Never fuckin want to, either,” Skip said. “Come on, Pete, let’s eat. I’m fuckin starving.”

I picked up my geology text—there was a quiz coming up the following Tuesday. Skip took it out of my hand and slung it back onto the desk, knocking over the picture of my girlfriend, who wouldn’t fuck but who would give a slow, excruciatingly pleasant handjob when she was in the mood. Nobody gives a handjob like a Catholic girl. I’ve changed my mind about a lot of things in the course of my life, but never about that.

“What did you do that for?” I asked.

“You don’t read at the fuckin table,” he said. “Not even when you’re eating Commons slop. What kind of barn were you born in?”

“Actually, Skip, I was born into a family where people do read at the table. I know it’s hard for you to believe there could be any way of doing things except for the Kirk way of doing them, but there is.”

He looked unexpectedly grave. He took me by the forearms, looked into my eyes, and said, “At least don’t study when you eat. Okay?”

“Okay.” Mentally reserving the right to study whenever I fucking well pleased, or felt I needed to.

“Get into all that ram-drive behavior and you’ll get ulcers. Ulcers are what killed my old man. He just couldn’t stop ramming and driving.”

“Oh,” I said. “Sorry.”

“Don’t worry, it was a long time ago. Now come on. Before all the fucking tuna surprise is gone. Coming, Natebo?”

“I have to finish this leaf.”

“Fuck the leaf.”

If anyone else had said this to him, Nate would have looked at him as at something uncovered beneath a rotted log, and turned silently back to his work. In this case, Nate considered for a moment, then got up and took his jacket carefully off the back of the door, where he always hung it. He put it on. He adjusted the beanie on his head. Not even Skip dared to say much about Nate's stubborn refusal to stop wearing his freshman beanie. (When I asked Skip where his own had disappeared to—this was our third day at UM, and the day after I met him—he said, "Wiped my ass with it and threw the fucker up a tree." This was probably not the truth, but I never completely ruled it out, either.)

We clattered down the three flights of stairs and went out into the mild October dusk. From all three dorms students were headed toward Holyoke Commons, where I worked nine meals a week. I was a dishline boy, recently promoted from silverware boy; if I kept my nose clean, I'd be a stackboy before the Thanksgiving break. Chamberlain, King, and Franklin Halls were on high ground. So was the Palace on the Plains. To reach it, students took asphalt paths that dipped into a hollow like a long trough, then joined into one broad brick way and climbed again. Holyoke was the biggest of the four buildings, shining in the gloom like a cruise-ship on the ocean.

The dip where the asphalt paths met was known as Bennett's Run—if I ever knew why I have long since forgotten. Boys from King and Chamberlain came along two of these paths, girls from Franklin along the other. Where the paths joined, boys and girls did likewise, talking and laughing and exchanging looks both frank and shy. From there they moved together up the wide brick path known as Bennett's Walk to the Commons building.

Coming the other way, cutting back through the crowd with his head down and the usual closed-off expression on his pale, harsh face, was Stokely Jones III. He was tall, but you hardly realized it because he was always hunched over his crutches. His hair, a perfect glossy black with not so much as a single observable strand of anything

lighter, spilled over his forehead in spikes, hid his ears, inked a few stray strands diagonally across his pale cheeks.

This was the heyday of the Beatle haircut, which for most boys consisted of no more than combing carefully down instead of carefully up, thus hiding the forehead (and a good crop of pimples, more often than not). Stoke Jones was capped off by nothing so prissy. His medium-length hair just went where it wanted to. His back was hunched in a way that would soon be permanent, if it wasn't already. His eyes were usually cast down, seeming to trace the arcs of his crutches. If those eyes happened to rise and meet your own, you were apt to be startled by their wild intelligence. He was a New England Heathcliff, only wasted away to a bare scrawn from the hips down. His legs, which were usually encased in huge metal braces when he went to class, could move, but only feebly, like the tentacles of a dying squid. His upper body was brawny by comparison. The combination was bizarre. Stoke Jones was a Charles Atlas ad in which BEFORE and AFTER had somehow been melted into the same body. He ate every meal as soon as Holyoke opened, and even three weeks into our first semester we all knew he did it not because he was one of the handicaps but because he wanted, like Greta Garbo, to be alone.

"Fuck him," Ronnie Malenfant said while we were on our way to breakfast one day—he'd just said hello to Jones and Jones had simply crutched his way past without even a nod. He'd been muttering under his breath, though; we all heard it. "Crippled-up hopping asshole." That was Ronnie, always sympathetic. I guess it was growing up amid the puke-in-the-corner beerjoints on lower Lisbon Street in Lewiston that gave him his grace and charm and joie de vivre.

"Stoke, what's up?" Skip asked on this particular evening as Jones plunged toward us on his crutches. Stoke went everywhere at that same controlled plunge, always with his Bluto Blutarsky upper half leaning forward so that he looked like a ship's figurehead, Stoke continually saying fuck you to whatever it was that had creamed his

lower half, Stoke continually giving it the finger, Stoke looking at you with his smart wild eyes and saying fuck you too, stick it up your ass, sit on it and spin, eat me raw through a Flavr Straw.

He didn't respond but did raise his head for a moment and locked eyes with Skip. Then he dropped his chin and hurried on past us. Sweat was running out of his crazed hair and down the sides of his face. Under his breath he was muttering "Rip-rip, rip-rip, rip-rip," as if keeping time … or articulating what he'd like to do to the whole walking bunch of us … or maybe both. You could smell him: the sour acrid tang of sweat, there was always that because he wouldn't go slow, it seemed to offend him to go slow, but there was something else, too. The sweat was pungent but not offensive. The undersmell was a lot less pleasant. I ran track in high school (forced as a college freshman to choose between Pall Malls and the four-forty, I chose the coffin-nails) and had smelled that particular combination before, usually when some kid with the flu or the grippe or a strep throat forced himself to run anyway. The only smell like it is an electric-train transformer that's been run too hard for too long.

Then he was past us. Stoke Jones, soon to be dubbed Rip-Rip by Ronnie Malenfant, free of his huge leg-braces for the evening and on his way back to the dorm.

"Hey, what's that?" Nate asked. He had stopped and was looking over his shoulder. Skip and I also stopped and looked back. I started to ask Nate what he meant, then saw. Jones was wearing a jeans jacket. On the back of it, drawn in what looked like black Magic Marker and just visible in the declining light of that early autumn evening, was a shape in a circle.

"Dunno," Skip said. "It looks like a sparrow-track."

The boy on the crutches merged into the crowds on their way to another Commons dinner on another Thursday night in another October. Most of the boys were clean-shaven; most of the girls wore skirts and Ship 'n' Shore blouses with Peter Pan collars. The moon was rising almost full, casting orange light on them. The full-blown

Age of Freaks was still two years away, and none of the three of us realized we had seen the peace sign for the first time.

5

Saturday-morning breakfast was one of my meals to work the dishline in Holyoke. It was a good meal to have because the Commons was never busy on Saturday mornings. Carol Gerber, the silverware girl, stood at the head of the conveyor belt. I was next; my job was to grab the plates as the trays came down the belt, rinse them, and stack them on the trolley beside me. If traffic on the conveyor belt was busy, as it was at most weekday evening meals, I just stacked the plates up, shit and all, and rinsed them later on when things slowed down. Next in line to me was the glassboy or -girl, who grabbed the glasses and cups and popped them into special dishwasher grids. Holyoke wasn't a bad place to work. Every now and then some wit of the Ronnie Malenfant sensibility would return an uneaten kielbasa or breakfast sausage with a Trojan fitted over the end or the oatmeal would come back with I GO TO FUCK U written in carefully torn-up strips of napkin (once, pasted on the surface of a soup-bowl filled with congealing meatloaf gravy, was the message HELP I AM BEING HELD PRISONER IN A COW COLLEGE), and you wouldn't believe what pigs some kids can be—plates filled with ketchup, milk-glasses filled with mashed potatoes, splattered vegetables—but it really wasn't such a bad job, especially on Saturday mornings.

I looked out once past Carol (who was looking extraordinarily pretty for so early in the morning) and saw Stoke Jones. His back was to the pass-through window, but you couldn't miss the crutches leaning next to his place, or that peculiar shape drawn on the back of his jacket. Skip had been right; it looked like a sparrow-track (it was almost a year later when I first heard some guy on TV refer to it as "the track of the great American chicken").

"Do you know what that is?" I asked Carol, pointing.

She looked for a long time, then shook her head. "Nope. Must be some kind of in-joke."

“Stoke doesn’t joke.”

“Oh my, you’re a poet and you don’t know it.”

“Quit it, Carol, you’re killing me.”

When our shift was over, I walked her back to her dorm (telling myself I was just being nice, that walking Carol Gerber back to Franklin Hall in no way made me unfaithful to Annmarie Soucie back in Gates Falls), then ambled toward Chamberlain, wondering who might know what that sparrow-track was. It occurs to me only at this late date that I never thought of asking Jones himself. And when I reached my floor, I saw something that changed the direction of my thoughts entirely. Since I’d gone out at six-thirty A.M. with one eye open to take my place behind Carol on the dishline, someone had shaving-creamed David Dearborn’s door—all around the sides, on the doorknob, and with an extra-thick line along the bottom. In this lower deposit was a bare foot-track that made me smile. Dearie opens his door, clad only in a towel, on his way to the shower, and poosh!, howaya.

Still smiling, I went into 302. Nate was writing at his desk. Observing the way he kept one arm curled protectively around his notebook, I deduced it was that day’s letter to Cindy.

“Someone shaving-creamed Dearie’s door,” I said, crossing to my shelves and grabbing my geology book. My plan was to head down to the third-floor lounge and do a little studying for the quiz on Tuesday.

Nate tried to look serious and disapproving, but couldn’t help smiling himself. He was always trying for self-righteousness in those days and always falling just a little bit short. I suppose he’s gotten better at it over the years, more’s the pity.

“You should have heard him yell,” Nate said. He snorted laughter, then put one small fist up to his mouth to stifle any further

impropriety. “And swear—for a minute there he was in Skip’s league.”

“When it comes to swearing, I don’t think anyone’s in Skip’s league.”

Nate was looking at me with a worried furrow between his eyes. “You didn’t do it, did you? Because I know you were up early—”

“If I was going to decorate Dearie’s door, I would have used toilet paper,” I said. “All my shaving cream goes on my own face. I’m a low-budget student, just like you. Remember?”

The worry-furrow smoothed out and Nate once more looked like a choirboy. For the first time I realized he was sitting there in nothing but his Jockey shorts and that stupid blue beanie. “That’s good,” he said, “because David was yelling that he’d get whoever did it and see that the guy was put on disciplinary pro.”

“D.P. for creaming his fucking door? I doubt it, Nate.”

“It’s weird but I think he meant it,” Nate said. “Sometimes David Dearborn reminds me of that movie about the crazy ship-captain. Humphrey Bogart was in it. Do you know the one I mean?”

“Yeah, The Caine Mutiny.”

“Uh-huh. And David … well, let’s just say that for him, handing out D.P. is what being floor-proctor is all about.”

In the University’s code of rules and behavior, expulsion was the big gun, reserved for offenses like theft, assault, and possession/use of drugs. Disciplinary probation was a step below that, punishment for such offenses as having a girl in your room (having one in your room after Women’s Curfew could tilt the penalty toward expulsion, hard as that is to believe now), having alcohol in your room, cheating on exams, plagiarism. Any of these latter offenses could theoretically result in expulsion, and in cheating cases often did (especially if the cases involved mid-term or final exams), but mostly it was

disciplinary pro, which you carried with you for an entire semester. I didn't like to believe a dorm proctor would try to get a D.P. from Dean of Men Garretsen for a few harmless bursts of shaving cream … but this was Dearie, a prig who had so far insisted on weekly room inspections and carried a little stool with him so he could check the top shelves of the thirty-two closets which he seemed to feel were a part of his responsibility. This was probably an idea he got in ROTC, a program he loved as fervently as Nate loved Cindy and Rinty. Also he had gigged kids—this practice was still an official part of school policy, although it had been largely forgotten outside the ROTC program—who didn't keep up with their housework. Enough gigs and you landed on D.P. You could in theory flunk out of school, lose your deferment, get drafted, and wind up dodging bullets in Vietnam because you repeatedly forgot to empty the trash or sweep under the bed.

David Dearborn was a loan-and-scholarship boy himself, and his proctor's job was—also in theory—no different from my dishline job. That wasn't Dearie's theory, though. Dearie considered himself A Cut Above the Rest, one of the few, the proud, the brave. His family came from the coast, you see; from Falmouth, where in 1966 there were still over fifty Blue Laws inherited from the Puritans on the books. Something had happened to his family, had Brought Them Low like a family in an old stage melodrama, but Dearie still dressed like a Falmouth Prep School graduate, wearing a blazer to classes and a suit on Sundays. No one could have been more different from Ronnie Malenfant, with his gutter mouth, his prejudices, and his brilliance with numbers. When they passed in the hall you could almost see Dearie shrinking from Ronnie, whose red hair kinked over a face that seemed to run away from itself, bulging brow to almost nonexistent chin. In between were Ronnie's perpetually gum-caked eyes and perpetually dripping nose … not to mention lips so red he always seemed to be wearing something cheap and garish from the five-and-dime.

Dearie didn't like Ronnie, but Ronnie didn't have to face this disapproval alone; Dearie didn't seem to like any of the boys he was

proctoring. We didn't like him, either, and Ronnie outright hated him. Skip Kirk's dislike was edged with contempt. He was in ROTC with Dearie (at least until November, when Skip dropped the course), and he said Dearie was bad at everything except kissing ass. Skip, who had narrowly missed being named to the All-State baseball team as a high-school senior, had one specific bitch about our floor-proctor—Dearie, Skip said, didn't put out. To Skip it was the worst sin. You had to put out. Even if you were just slopping the hogs, you had to fuckin put out.

I disliked Dearie as much as anyone. I can put up with a great many human failings, but I loathe a prig. Yet I harbored a bit of sympathy for him, as well. He had no sense of humor, for one thing, and I believe that is as much a crippling defect as whatever had gone wrong with Stoke Jones's bottom half. For another, I don't think Dearie liked himself much.

"D.P. won't be an issue if he never finds the culprit," I told Nate. "Even if he does, I doubt like hell if Dean Garretsen would agree to slap it on someone for creaming the proctor's door." Still, Dearie could be persuasive. He might have been Brought Low, but he had that something which said he was still upper crust. That was, of course, just one more thing the rest of us had to dislike about him. "Trotboy" was what Skip called him, because he wouldn't really run laps on the football field during ROTC workouts, but only go at a rapid jog.

"Just as long as you didn't do it," Nate said, and I almost laughed. Nate Hoppenstand sitting there in his underpants and beanie, his child's chest narrow, hairless, and dusted with freckles. Nate looking at me earnestly over his prominent case of slender ribs. Nate playing Dad.

Lowering his voice, he said: "Do you think Skip did it?"

"No. If I had to guess who on this floor would think shave-creaming the proctor's door was a real hoot, I'd say—"

“Ronnie Malenfant.”

“Right.” I pointed my finger at Nate like a gun and winked.

“I saw you walking back to Franklin with the blond girl,” he said. “Carol. She’s pretty.”

“Just keeping her company,” I said.

Nate sat there in his underpants and his beanie, smiling as if he knew better. Perhaps he did. I liked her, all right, although I didn’t know much about her—only that she was from Connecticut. Not many work-study kids came from out of state.

I headed down the hall to the lounge, my geology book under my arm. Ronnie was there, wearing his beanie with the front pinned up so it looked sort of like a newspaper reporter’s fedora. Sitting with him were two other guys from our floor, Hugh Brennan and Ashley Rice. None of them looked as if they were having the world’s most exciting Saturday morning, but when Ronnie saw me, his eyes brightened.

“Pete Riley!” he said. “Just the man I was looking for! Do you know how to play Hearts?”

“Yes. Lucky for me, I also know how to study.” I raised my geology book, already thinking that I’d probably end up in the second-floor lounge … if, that was, I really meant to get anything done. Because Ronnie never shut up. Was apparently incapable of shutting up. Ronnie Malenfant was the original motor-mouth.

“Come on, just one game to a hundred,” he wheedled. “We’re playing nickel a point, and these two guys play Hearts like old people fuck.”

Hugh and Ashley grinned foolishly, as if they had just been complimented. Ronnie’s insults were so raw and out front, so bulging with vitriol, that most guys took them as jokes, perhaps even as

veiled compliments. They were neither. Ronnie meant every unkind word he ever said.

“Ronnie, I got a quiz Tuesday, and I don’t really understand this geosyncline stuff.”

“Shit on the geosyncline,” Ronnie said, and Ashley Rice tittered. “You’ve still got the rest of today, all of tomorrow, and all of Monday for the geo-fuckin-syncline.”

“I have classes Monday and tomorrow Skip and I were going to go up to Oldtown. They’re having an open hoot at the Methodist church and we—”

“Stop it, quit it, spare my achin scrote and don’t talk to me about that folkie shit. Michael can row his fuckin boat right up my ass, okay? Listen, Pete—”

“Ronnie, I really—”

“You two dimbulbs stay right the fuck there.” Ronnie gave Ashley and Hugh a baleful look. Neither argued with him about it. They were probably eighteen like the rest of us, but anyone who’s ever been to college will tell you that some very young eighteen-year-olds show up each September, especially in the rural states. It was the young ones with whom Ronnie succeeded. They were in awe of him. He borrowed their meal tickets, snapped them with towels in the shower, accused them of supporting the goals of the Reverend Martin Luther Coon (who, Ronnie would tell you, drove to protest rallies in his Jiguar), borrowed their money, and would respond to any request for a match with “My ass and your face, monkeymeat.” They loved Ronnie in spite of it all … because of it all. They loved him because he was just so … college.

Ronnie grabbed me around the neck and tried to yank me out into the hall so he could talk to me in private. I, not at all in awe of him and a bit repelled by the jungle aroma drifting out of his armpits,

clamped down on his fingers, bent them back, and removed his hand. “Don’t do that, Ronnie.”

“Ow, yow, ow, okay, okay, okay! Just come out here a minute, wouldja? And quit that, it hurts! Besides, it’s the hand I jerk off with! Jesus! Fuck!”

I let go of his hand (wondering if he’d washed it since the last time he jerked off) but let him pull me out into the hall. Here he took hold of me by the arms, speaking to me earnestly, his gummy eyes wide.

“These guys can’t play,” he said in a breathless, confidential whisper. “They’re a couple of afterbirths, Petesky, but they love the game. Fuckin love the game, you know? I don’t love it, but unlike them, I can play it. Also I’m broke and there’s a couple of Bogart movies tonight at Hauck. If I can squeeze em for two bucks—”

“Bogart movies? Is one of them The Caine Mutiny?”

“That’s right, The Caine Mutiny and The Maltese Falcon, Bogie at his fuckin finest, here’s lookin at you, shweetheart. If I can squeeze those two afterbirths for two bucks, I can go. Squeeze em for four, I call some scagola from Franklin, take her with me, maybe get a blowjob later.” That was Ronnie, always the gosh-darned romantic. I had an image of him as Sam Spade in The Maltese Falcon, telling Mary Astor to drop and gobble. The idea was enough to make my sinuses swell shut.

“But there’s a big problem, Pete. Three-handed Hearts is risky. Who dares shoot the moon when you got that one fucking leftover card to worry about?”

“How are you playing? Game over at a hundred, all losers pay the winner?”

“Yeah. And if you come in, I’ll kick back half what I win. Plus I give back what you lose.” He sunned me with a saintlike smile.

“Suppose I beat you?”

Ronnie looked momentarily startled, then smiled wider than ever. “Not in this life, shweetheart. I’m a scientist at cards.”

I glanced at my watch, then in at Ashley and Hugh. They really didn’t look much like real competition, God love them. “Tell you what,” I said. “One game straight up to a hundred. Nickel a point. Nobody kicks back anything. We play, then I study, and everyone has a nice weekend.”

“You’re on.” As we went back into the lounge he added: “I like you, Pete, but business is business—your homo boyfriends back in high school never gave you a fucking like I’m going to give you this morning.”

“I didn’t have any homo boyfriends in high school,” I said. “I spent most of my weekends hitching up to Lewiston to ass-bang your sister.”

Ronnie smiled widely, sat down, picked up the deck of cards, began to shuffle. “I broke her in pretty good, didn’t I?”

You couldn’t get lower than Mrs. Malenfant’s little boy, that was the thing. Many tried, but to the best of my knowledge no one ever actually succeeded.

6

Ronnie was a bigot with a foul mouth, a cringing personality, and that constant monkey-fungus stink, but he could play cards, I give him that. He wasn't the genius he claimed to be, at least not in Hearts, where luck is a big part of the game, but he was good. When he was concentrating full on he could remember almost every card that had been played … which was why, I suppose, he didn't like three-handed Hearts, with that extra card. With the kicker card gone, Ronnie was tough.

Still, I did all right that first morning. When Hugh Brennan went over a hundred in the first game we played, I had thirty-three points to Ronnie's twenty-eight. It had been two or three years since I'd played Hearts, it was the first time in my life I'd played it for money, and I thought two bits a small price to pay for such unexpected entertainment. That round cost Ashley two dollars and fifty cents; the unfortunate Hugh had to cough up three-sixty. It seemed Ronnie had won the price of a date after all, although I thought the girl would have to be a real Bogart fan to give him a blowjob. Or even a kiss goodnight, for that matter.

Ronnie puffed up like a crow guarding a fresh piece of roadkill. "I got it," he said. "I'm sorry for guys like you who don't, but I got it, Riley. It's like it says in the song, the men don't know but the little girls understand."

"You're ill, Ronnie," I said.

"I wanna go again," Hugh said. I think P. T. Barnum was right, there really is one like Hugh born every minute. "I wanna get my money back."

"Well," Ronnie said, revealing his dingy teeth in a big smile, "I'm willing to at least give you a chance." He looked my way. "What do you say, sporty?"

My geology text lay forgotten on the sofa behind me. I wanted my quarter back, and a few more to jingle beside it. What I wanted even more was to school Ronnie Malenfant. “Run em,” I said, and then, for the first of at least a thousand times I’d speak the same words in the troubled weeks ahead: “Is this a pass left or pass right?”

“New game, pass right. What a dorkus.” Ronnie cackled, stretched, and watched happily as the cards spun out of the deck. “God, I love this game!”

7

That second game was the one that really hooked me. This time it was Ashley instead of Hugh who went skyrocketing toward one hundred points, enthusiastically helped along by Ronnie, who dumped The Bitch on Ash's hapless head at every opportunity. I was dealt the queen only twice that game. The first time I held it for four consecutive tricks when I could have bombed Ashley with it. Finally, just as I was starting to think I'd end up eating it myself, Ashley lost the lead to Hugh Brennan, who promptly led a diamond. He should have known I was void in that suit, had been since the start of the hand, but the Hughs of the world know little. That is, I suppose, why the Ronnies of the world so love to play cards with them. I topped the trick with The Bitch, held my nose, and honked at Hugh. That was how we said "Booya!" in the quaint old days of the sixties.

Ronnie scowled. "Why'd you do that? You could have put that dicksnacker out!" He nodded at Ashley, who was looking at us rather vacantly.

"Yeah, but I'm not quite that stupid." I tapped the score sheet. Ronnie had taken thirty points as of then; I had taken thirty-four. The other two were far beyond that. The question wasn't which of Ronnie's marks would lose, but which of the two who knew how to play the game would win. "I wouldn't mind seeing those Bogie movies myself, you know. Shweetheart."

Ronnie showed his questionable teeth in a grin. He was playing to a gallery by then; we had attracted about half a dozen spectators. Skip and Nate were among them. "Want to play it that way, do you? Okay. Spread your cheeks, moron; you're about to be cornholed."

Two hands later, I cornholed him. Ashley, who started that last hand with ninety-eight points, went over the top in a hurry. The spectators were dead quiet, waiting to see whether I could actually hit Ronnie

with six—the number of hearts he'd need to take for me to beat him by one.

Ronnie looked good at first, playing under everything that was led, staying away from the lead himself. When you have good low cards in Hearts, you're practically bulletproof. "Riley's cooked!" he informed the audience. "I mean fucking toasty!"

I thought so, too, but at least I had the queen of spades in my hand. If I could drop it on him, I'd still win. I wouldn't make much from Ronnie, but the other two would be coughing up blood: over five bucks between them. And I'd get to see Ronnie's face change. That's what I wanted most, to see the gloat go out and the goat come in. I wanted to shut him up.

It came down to the last three tricks. Ashley played the six of hearts. Hugh played the five. I played the three. I saw Ronnie's smile fade as he played the nine and took the trick. It dropped his edge to a mere three points. Better still, he finally had the lead. I had the jack of clubs and the queen of spades left in my hand. If Ronnie had a low club and played it, I was going to eat The Bitch and have to endure his crowing, which would be caustic. If, on the other hand …

He played the five of diamonds. Hugh played the two of diamonds, getting under, and Ashley, smiling in a puzzled way that suggested he didn't know just what the fuck he was doing, played void.

Dead silence in the room.

Then, smiling, I completed the trick—Ronnie's trick—by dropping the queen of spades on top of the other three cards. There was a soft sigh from around the card-table, and when I looked up I saw that the half-dozen spectators had become nearly a full dozen. David Dearborn leaned in the doorway, arms folded, frowning at us. Behind him, in the hall, was someone else. Someone leaning on a pair of crutches.

I suppose Dearie had already checked his well-thumbed book of rules—Dormitory Regulations at the University of Maine, 1966-1967 Edition—and had been disappointed to find there was none against playing cards, even when there was a stake involved. But you must believe me when I say his disappointment was nothing compared to Ronnie's.

There are good losers in this world, there are sore losers, sulky losers, defiant losers, weepy losers … and then there are your down-and-out fuckhead losers. Ronnie was of the down-and-out fuckhead type. His cheeks flushed pink on the skin and almost purple around his blemishes. His mouth thinned to a shadow, and I could see his jaws working as he chewed his lips.

"Oh gosh," Skip said. "Look who got hit with the shit."

"Why'd you do that?" Ronnie burst out, ignoring Skip—ignoring everyone in the room but me. "Why'd you do that, you numb fuck?"

I was bemused by the question and—let me admit this—absolutely delighted by his rage. "Well," I said, "according to Vince Lombardi, winning isn't everything, it's the only thing. Pay up, Ronnie."

"You're queer," he said. "You're a fucking homo majordomo. Who dealt that?"

"Ashley," I said. "And if you want to call me a cheater, say it right out loud. Then I'm going to come around this table, grab you before you can run, and beat the snot out of you."

"No one's beating the snot out of anyone on my floor!" Dearie said sharply from the doorway, but everyone ignored him. They were watching Ronnie and me.

"I didn't call you a cheater, I just asked who dealt," Ronnie said. I could almost see him making the effort to pull himself together, to swallow the lump I'd fed him and smile as he did it, but there were tears of rage standing in his eyes (big and bright green, those eyes

were Ronnie's one redeeming feature), and beneath his earlobes the points of his jaw went on bulging and relaxing. It was like watching twin hearts beat in the sides of his face. "Who gives a shit, you beat me by ten points. That's fifty cents, big fucking deal."

I wasn't a big jock in high school like Skip Kirk—debate and track had been my only extracurricular activities—and I'd never told anyone in my life that I'd beat the snot out of them. Ronnie seemed like a good place to start, though, and God knows I meant it. I think everyone else knew it, too. There was a huge wallop of adolescent adrenaline in the room; you could smell it, almost taste it. Part of me —a big part—wanted him to give me some more grief. Part of me wanted to stick it to him, wanted to stick it right up his ass.

Money appeared on the table. Dearie took a step closer, frowning more ponderously than ever, but he said nothing … at least not about that. Instead he asked if anyone in the room had shaving-creamed his door, or knew who had. We all turned to look at him, and saw that Stoke Jones had moved into the doorway when Dearie stepped into the room. Stoke hung on his crutches, watching us all with his bright eyes.

There was a moment of silence and then Skip said, "You sure you didn't maybe go walking in your sleep and do it yourself, David?" A burst of laughter greeted this, and it was Dearie's turn to flush. The color started at his neck and worked its way up his cheeks and forehead to the roots of his flattop—no faggy Beatle haircut for Dearie, thank you very much.

"Pass the word that it better not happen again," Dearie said. Doing his own little Bogie imitation without realizing it. "I'm not going to have my authority mocked."

"Oh blow it out," Ronnie muttered. He had picked up the cards and was disconsolately shuffling them.

Dearie took three large steps into the room, grabbed Ronnie by the shoulders of his Ivy League shirt, and pulled him. Ronnie got up on

his own so the shirt would not be torn. He didn't have a lot of good shirts; none of us did.

"What did you say to me, Malenfant?"

Ronnie looked around and saw what I imagine he'd been seeing for most of his life: no help, no sympathy. As usual, he was on his own. And he had no idea why.

"I didn't say anything. Don't be so fuckin paranoid, Dearborn."

"Apologize."

Ronnie wriggled in his grasp. "I didn't say nothing, why should I apologize for nothing?"

"Apologize anyway. And I want to hear true regret."

"Oh quit it," Stoke Jones said. "All of you. You should see yourselves. Stupidity to the nth power."

Dearie looked at him, surprised. We were all surprised, I think. Maybe Stoke was surprised himself.

"David, you're just pissed off that someone creamed your door," Skip said.

"You're right. I'm pissed off. And I want an apology from you, Malenfant."

"Let it go," Skip said. "Ronnie just got a little hot under the collar because he lost a close one. He didn't shaving-cream your fucking door."

I looked at Ronnie to see how he was taking the rare experience of having someone stand up for him and saw a telltale shift in his green eyes—almost a flinch. In that moment I was almost positive Ronnie had shaving-creamed Dearie's door. Who among my acquaintances was more likely?

If Dearie had noticed that guilty little blink, I believe he would have reached the same conclusion. But he was looking at Skip. Skip looked back at him calmly, and after a few more seconds to make it seem (to himself if not to the rest of us) like his own idea, Dearie let go of Ronnie's shirt. Ronnie shook himself, brushed at the wrinkles on his shoulders, then began digging in his pockets for small change to pay me with.

"I'm sorry," Ronnie said. "Whatever has got your panties in a bunch, I'm sorry. I'm sorry as hell, sorry as shit, I'm so sorry my ass hurts. Okay?"

Dearie took a step back. I had been able to feel the adrenaline; I suspected Dearie could feel the waves of dislike rolling in his direction just as clearly. Even Ashley Rice, who looked like a roly-poly bear in a kids' cartoon, was looking at Dearie in a flat-eyed, unfriendly way. It was a case of what the poet Gary Snyder might have called bad-karma baseball. Dearie was the proctor—strike one. He tried to run our floor as though it were an adjunct to his beloved ROTC program—strike two. And he was a jerkwad sophomore at a time when sophomores still believed that harassing freshmen was part of their bounden duty. Strike three, Dearie, you're out.

"Spread the word that I'm not going to put up with a lot of high-school crap on my floor," Dearie said (his floor, if you could dig it). He stood ramrod-straight in his U of M sweatshirt and khaki pants—pressed khaki pants, although it was Saturday. "This is not high school, gentlemen; this is Chamberlain Hall at the University of Maine. Your bra-snapping days are over. The time has come for you to behave like college men."

I guess there was a reason I was voted Class Clown in the '66 Gates Falls yearbook. I clicked my heels together and snapped off a pretty fair British-style salute, the kind with the palm turned mostly outward. "Yes sir!" I cried. There was nervous laughter from the gallery, a dirty guffaw from Ronnie, a grin from Skip. Skip gave Dearie a shrug, eyebrows lifted, hands up to the sky. See what you get? it said. Act

like an asshole and that's how people treat you. Perfect eloquence is, I think, almost always mute.

Dearie looked at Skip, also mute. Then he looked at me. His face was expressionless, almost dead, but I wished I had for once forgone the smartass impulse. The trouble is, for the born smartass, the impulse has nine times out of ten been acted upon before the brain can even engage first gear. I bet that in days of old when knights were bold, more than one court jester was hung upside down by his balls. You don't read about it in the Morte D'Arthur, but I think it must be true—laugh this one off, ya motley motherfucker. In any case, I knew I had just made an enemy.

Dearie spun in a nearly perfect about-face and went marching out of the lounge. Ronnie's mouth drew down in a grimace that made his ugly face even uglier; the leer of the villain in a stage melodrama. He made a jacking-off gesture at Dearie's stiff retreating back. Hugh Brennan giggled a little, but no one really laughed. Stoke Jones had disappeared, apparently disgusted with the lot of us.

Ronnie looked around, eyes bright. "So," he said. "I'm still up for it. Nickel a point, who wants to play?"

"I will," Skip said.

"I will, too," I said, never once glancing in the direction of my geology book.

"Hearts?" Kirby McClendon asked. He was the tallest boy on the floor, maybe one of the tallest boys at school—six-seven at least, and possessed of a long, mournful bloodhound's face. "Sure. Good choice."

"What about us?" Ashley squeaked.

"Yeah!" Hugh said. Talk about your gluttons for punishment.

“You’re outclassed at this table,” Ronnie said, speaking with what was for him almost kindness. “Why don’t you start up your own?”

Ashley and Hugh did just that. By four o’clock all of the lounge tables were occupied by quartets of third-floor freshmen, ragtag scholarship boys who had to buy their texts in the Used section of the bookstore playing Hearts at a nickel a point. In our dorm, the mad season had begun.

8

Saturday night was another of my meals on the Holyoke dishline. In spite of my awakening interest in Carol Gerber, I tried to get Brad Witherspoon to switch with me—Brad had Sunday breakfast and he hated to get up early almost as badly as Skip did—but Brad refused. By then he was playing, too, and two bucks out of pocket. He was crazy to catch up. He just shook his head at me and led a spade out of his hand. “Let’s go Bitch-huntin!” he cried, sounding eerily like Ronnie Malenfant. The most insidious thing about Ronnie was that weak minds found him worth imitating.

I left my seat at the original table, where I had spent the balance of the day, and my place was immediately taken by a young man named Kenny Auster. I was nearly nine dollars ahead (mostly because Ronnie had moved to another table so I wouldn’t cut into his profits) and should have been feeling good, but I wasn’t. It wasn’t the money, it was the game. I wanted to keep on playing.

I walked disconsolately down the hall, checked the room, and asked Nate if he wanted to eat early with the kitchen crew. He simply shook his head and waved me on without looking up from his history book. When people talk about student activism in the sixties, I have to remind myself that the majority of kids went through that mad season the way Nate did. They kept their heads down and their eyes on their history books while history happened all around them. Not that Nate was completely unaware, or completely dedicated to the study carrels on the sidelines, for that matter. You shall hear.

I walked toward the Palace on the Plains, zipping my jacket against the air, which had turned frosty. It was quarter past four. The Commons didn’t officially open until five, so the paths which met in Bennett’s Run were almost deserted. Stoke Jones was there, though, hunched over his crutches and brooding down at something on the path. I wasn’t surprised to see him; if you had some sort of physical disability, you could chow an hour earlier than the rest of the

students. As far as I remember, that was about the only special treatment the handicapped got. If you were physically fucked up, you got to eat with the kitchen help. That sparrow-track on the back of his coat was very clear and very black in the late light.

As I got closer to him I saw what he was looking down at—Introduction to Sociology. He had dropped it on the faded red bricks of Bennett's Walk and was trying to figure a way he could pick it up again without landing on his face. He kept poking at the book with the tip of one crutch. Stoke had two, maybe even three different pairs of crutches; these were the ones that fitted over his forearms in a series of ascending steel collars. I could hear him muttering "Rip-rip, rip-rip" under his breath as he prodded the book uselessly from place to place. When he was plunging along on his crutches, "Rip-rip" had a determined sound. In this situation it sounded frustrated. At the time I knew Stoke (I will not call him Rip-Rip, although many Ronnie-imitators had taken to doing so by the end of the semester), I was fascinated by how many different nuances there could be to any given "Rip-rip." That was before I found out the Navajos have forty different ways of saying their word for cloud. That was before I found out a lot of things, actually.

He heard me coming and snapped his head around so fast he almost fell over anyway. I reached out to steady him. He jerked back, seeming to swim in the old army duffle coat he was wearing.

"Get away from me!" As if he expected me to give him a shove. I raised my hands to show him I was harmless and bent over. "And get your hands off my book!"

This I didn't dignify, only picked up the text and stuffed it under his arm like a newspaper.

"I don't need your help!"

I was about to reply sharply, but I noticed again how white his cheeks were around the patches of red in their centers, and how his hair was damp with perspiration. Once again I could smell him—that

overworked-transformer aroma—and realized I could also hear him: his breathing had a raspy, snotty sound. If Stoke Jones hadn't found out where the infirmary was yet, I had an idea he would before long.

"I didn't offer you a piggyback, for God's sake." I tried to paste a smile on my puss and managed something or other. Hell, why shouldn't I smile? Didn't I have nine bucks in my pocket that I hadn't started the day with? By the standards of Chamberlain Three, I was rich.

Jones looked at me with those dark eyes of his. His lips thinned, but after a moment he nodded. "Okay. Point taken. Thanks." Then he resumed his breakneck pace up the hill. At first he was well ahead of me, but then the grade began to work on him and he slowed down. His snotty-sounding breathing got louder and quicker. I heard it clearly as I caught up to him.

"Why don't you take it easy?" I asked.

He gave me an impatient are-you-still-here glance. "Why don't you eat me?"

I pointed to his soash book. "That's sliding again."

He stopped, adjusted it under his arm, then fixed himself on his crutches again, hunched like a bad-tempered heron, glaring at me through his black tumbles of hair. "Go on," he said. "I don't need a minder."

I shrugged. "I wasn't babysitting you, just wanted some company."

"I don't."

I started on my way, nettled in spite of my nine bucks. Us class clowns aren't wild about making friends—two or three are apt to do us for a lifetime—but we don't react very well to the bum's rush, either. Our goal is vast numbers of acquaintances whom we can leave laughing.

“Riley,” he said from behind me.

I turned. He’d decided to thaw a little after all, I thought. How wrong I was.

“There are gestures and gestures,” he said. “Putting shaving cream on the proctor’s door is about one step above wiping snot on the seat of Little Susie’s desk because you can’t think of another way to say you love her.”

“I didn’t shaving-cream Dearie’s door,” I said, more nettled than ever.

“Yeah, but you’re playing cards with the asshole who did. Lending him credibility.” I think it was the first time I heard that word, which went on to have an incredibly sleazy career in the seventies and coke-soaked eighties. Mostly in politics. I think credibility died of shame around 1986, just as all those sixties war protesters and fearless battlers for racial equality were discovering junk bonds, Martha Stewart Living, and the StairMaster. “Why do you waste your time?”

That was direct enough to rattle me, and I said what seems to me now, looking back, an incredibly stupid thing. “I’ve got plenty of time to waste.”

Jones nodded as if he had expected no more and no better. He got going again and passed me at his accustomed plunge, head down, back humped, sweaty hair swinging, soash book clamped tight under his arm. I waited, expecting it to squirt free again. This time when it did, I’d leave him to poke it with his crutch.

But it didn’t get away from him, and after I’d seen him reach the door of Holyoke, grapple with it, and finally lurch inside, I went on my own way. When I’d filled my tray I sat with Carol Gerber and the rest of the kids on the dishline crew. That was about as far from Stoke Jones as it was possible to get, which suited me fine. He also sat apart from the other handicapped kids, I remember. Stoke Jones sat apart from everybody. Clint Eastwood on crutches.

9

The regular diners began to show up at five o'clock. By quarter past, the dishline crew was in full swing and stayed that way for an hour. Lots of dorm kids went home for the weekend, but those who stayed all showed up on Saturday night, which was beans and franks and cornbread. Dessert was Jell-O. At the Palace on the Plains, dessert was almost always Jell-O. If Cook was feeling frisky, you might get Jell-O with little pieces of fruit suspended in it.

Carol was doing silverware, and just as the rush began to subside, she wheeled away from the pass-through, shaking with laughter. Her cheeks were bright crimson. What came rolling along the belt was Skip's work. He admitted it later that night, but I knew right away. Although he was in the College of Education and probably destined to teach history and coach baseball at good old Dexter High until he dropped dead of a booze-fueled heart attack at the age of fifty-nine or so, Skip by rights should have been in fine arts … probably would have been if he hadn't come from five generations of farmers who said ayuh and coss 'twill and sh'd smile n kiss a pig. He was only the second or third in his sprawling family (their religion, Skip once said, was Irish Alcoholic) to ever go to college. Clan Kirk could visualize a teacher in the family—barely—but not a painter or a sculptor. And at eighteen, Skip could see no further than they could. He only knew he didn't quite fit the hole he was trying to slide into, and it made him restless. It made him wander into rooms other than his own, check the LPs, and criticize almost everyone's taste in music.

By 1969 he had a better idea of who and what he was. That was the year he constructed a papier-mache Vietnamese family tableau that was set on fire at the end of a peace rally in front of the Fogler Library while The Youngbloods played "Get Together" from a borrowed set of amps and part-time hippies worked out to the beat like tribal warriors after a hunt. You see how jumbled it all is in my mind? It was Atlantis, that's all I know for sure, way down below the ocean. The paper family burned, the hippie protesters chanted

“Napalm! Napalm! Scum from the skies!” as they danced, and after awhile the jocks and the frat boys began to throw stuff. Eggs at first. Then stones.

It was no papier-mache family that sent Carol laughing and reeling away from the dishline that night in the fall of 1966; it was a horny hotdog man standing atop a Matterhorn of Holyoke Commons baked beans. A pipe-cleaner wiener jutted jauntily from the appropriate spot. In his hand was a little University of Maine pennant, on his head a scrap of blue hanky folded to look like a freshman beanie. Along the front of the tray, carefully spelled out in crumbled cornbread, was the message EAT MORE MAINE BEANS!

A good deal of edible artwork came along the conveyor belt during my time on the Palace dishline, but I think that one was the all-time champ. Stoke Jones would no doubt have called it a waste of time, but I think in that case he would have been wrong. Anything with the power to make you laugh over thirty years later isn’t a waste of time. I think something like that is very close to immortality.

10

I punched out at six-thirty, walked down the ramp behind the kitchen with one last bag of garbage, and dropped it into one of the four Dumpsters lined up behind the Commons like snubby steel boxcars.

When I turned around, I saw Carol Gerber and a couple of other kids standing by the corner of the building, smoking and watching the moon rise. The other two started away just as I walked over, pulling my Pall Malls out of my jacket pocket.

“Hey, Pete, eat more Maine beans,” Carol said, and laughed.

“Yeah.” I lit my cigarette. Then, without thinking about it much one way or the other, I said: “There’s a couple of Bogart movies playing at Hauck tonight. They start at seven. We’ve got time to walk over. Want to go?”

She smoked, not answering me for a moment, but she was still smiling and I knew she was going to say yes. Earlier, all I’d wanted was to get back to the third-floor lounge and play Hearts. Now that I was away from the game, however, the game seemed a lot less important. Had I been hot enough to say something about beating the snot out of Ronnie Malenfant? It seemed I had—the memory was clear enough—but standing out here in the cool air with Carol, it was hard for me to understand why.

“I’ve got a boyfriend back home,” she said at last.

“Is that a no?”

She shook her head, still with the little smile. The smoke from her cigarette drifted across her face. Her hair, free of the net the girls had to wear on the dishline, blew lightly across her brow. “That’s information. Remember that show The Prisoner? ‘Number Six, we want … information.’ “

“I’ve got a girlfriend back home,” I said. “More information.”

“I’ve got another job, tutoring math. I promised to spend an hour tonight with this girl on the second floor. Calculus. Ag. She’s hopeless and she whines, but it’s six dollars an hour.” Carol laughed. “This is getting good, we’re exchanging information like mad.”

“It doesn’t look good for Bogie, though,” I said. I wasn’t worried. I knew we were going to see Bogie. I think I also knew there was romance in our future. It gave me an oddly light feeling, a lifting-off sensation in my midsection.

“I could call Esther from Hauck and tell her calc at ten o’clock instead of nine,” Carol said. “Esther’s a sad case. She never goes out. What she does mostly is sit around with her hair in curlers and write letters home about how hard college is. We could see the first movie, at least.”

“That sounds good,” I said.

We started walking toward Hauck. Those were the days, all right; you didn’t have to hire a babysitter, put out the dog, feed the cat, or set the burglar alarm. You just went.

“Is this like a date?” she asked after a little bit.

“Well,” I said, “I guess it could be.” We were walking past East Annex by then, and other kids were filling up the paths, heading toward the auditorium.

“Good,” she said, “because I left my purse back in my room. I can’t go dutch.”

“Don’t worry, I’m rich. Won big playing cards today.”

“Poker?”

“Hearts. Do you know it?”

“Are you kidding? I spent three weeks at Camp Winiwinaia on Lake George the summer I was twelve. YMCA camp—poor kids’ camp, my mom called it. It rained practically every day and all we did was play Hearts and hunt The Bitch.” Her eyes had gone far away, the way people’s eyes do when they trip over some memory like a shoe in the dark. “Find the lady in black. Cherchez la femme noire.”

“That’s the game, all right,” I said, knowing that for a moment I wasn’t there for her at all. Then she came back, gave me a grin, and took her cigarettes out of her jeans pocket. We smoked a lot back then. All of us. Back then you could smoke in hospital waiting rooms. I told my daughter that and at first she didn’t believe me.

I took out my own cigarettes and lit us both. It was a good moment, the two of us looking at each other in the Zippo’s flame. Not as sweet as a kiss, but nice. I felt that lightness inside me again, that sense of lifting off. Sometimes your view widens and grows hopeful. Sometimes you think you can see around corners, and maybe you can. Those are good moments. I snapped my lighter shut and we walked on, smoking, the backs of our hands close but not quite brushing.

“How much money are we talking about?” she asked. “Enough to run away to California on, or maybe not quite that much?”

“Nine dollars.”

She laughed and took my hand. “It’s a date, all right,” she said. “You can buy me popcorn, too.”

“All right. Do you care which movie plays first?”

She shook her head. “Bogie’s Bogie.”

“That’s true,” I said, but I hoped it would be The Maltese Falcon.

It was. Halfway through it, while Peter Lorre was doing his rather ominous gay turn and Bogie was gazing at him with polite, amused

incredulity, I looked at Carol. She was looking at me. I bent and kissed her popcorn-buttery mouth by the black-and-white moonlight of John Huston's inspired first film. Her lips were sweet and responsive. I pulled back a little. She was still looking at me. The little smile was back. Then she offered me her bag of popcorn, I reciprocated with my box of Dots, and we watched the rest of the movie.

11

Walking back to the Chamberlain-King-Franklin complex of dorms, I took her hand almost without thinking about it. She curled her fingers through mine naturally enough, but I thought I could feel a reserve now.

“Are you going to go back for The Caine Mutiny?” she asked. “You could, if you’ve still got your ticket stub. Or I could give you mine.”

“Nah, I’ve got geology to study.”

“Bet you wind up playing cards all night instead.”

“I can’t afford to,” I said. And I meant it; I meant to go back and study. I really did.

“Lonely Struggles, or A Scholarship Boy’s Life,” Carol said. “A heartbreaking novel by Charles Dickens. You’ll weep as plucky Peter Riley throws himself into the river after finding that the Financial Aid Office has revoked his grant package.”

I laughed. She was very sharp.

“I’m in the same boat, you know. If we screw up, maybe we can make it a double suicide. Into the Penobscot with us. Goodbye cruel world.”

“What’s a Connecticut girl doing at the University of Maine, anyway?” I asked.

“That’s a little complicated. And if you ever plan on asking me out again, you should know you’re robbing the cradle. I won’t actually be eighteen until November. I skipped the seventh grade. That was the year my parents got divorced, and I was miserable. It was either study all the time or turn into one of the Harwich Junior High corner

girls. They're the ones who major in French-kissing and usually wind up pregnant at sixteen. You know the kind I mean?"

"Sure." In Gates you saw them in giggling little groups outside Frank's Fountain or the Dairy Delish, waiting for the boys to come by in their dropped Fords and Plymouth hemis, fast cars with the fenderskirts and the decals saying FRAM and QUAKER STATE in the back windows. You could see those girls as women down at the other end of Main Street, ten years older and forty pounds heavier, drinking beers and shots in Chucky's Tavern.

"I turned into a study-grind. My father was in the Navy. He got out on a disability and moved here to Maine … Damariscotta, down on the coast?"

I nodded, thinking of Diane Renay's steady boy, the one who said ship ahoy and joined the Nay-yay-vee.

"I was living in Connecticut with my mother and going to Harwich High. I applied to sixteen different schools and got accepted by all but three … but …"

"But they expected you to pay your own way and you couldn't."

She nodded. "I think I missed the plum scholarships by maybe twenty SAT-points. An extracurricular activity or two probably wouldn't have hurt, either, but I was too busy grinding away at the books. And by then I was pretty hot and heavy with Sully-John …"

"The boyfriend, right?"

She nodded, but not as though this Sully-John interested her. "The only two schools offering realistic financial aid packages were Maine and UConn. I decided on Maine because by then I wasn't getting along very well with my mother. Lots of fights."

"You get along better with your father?"

“Hardly ever see him,” she said in a dry, businesslike tone. “He lives with this woman who … well, they drink a lot and fight a lot, let’s leave it at that. But he’s a resident of the state, I’m his daughter, and this is a land-grant college. I didn’t get everything I needed—UConn offered the better deal, frankly—but I’m not afraid of a little work. It’s worth it, just to get away.”

She took a deep breath of the night air and let it out, faintly white. We were almost back to Franklin. Inside the lobby I could see guys sitting in the hard plastic contour chairs, waiting for their girls to come down from upstairs. It looked like quite a rogues’ gallery. Worth it just to get away, she had said. Did that mean the mother, the town, and the high school, or was the boyfriend included?

When we got to the wide double doors at the front of her dorm, I put my arms around her and bent to kiss her again. She put her hands on my chest, stopping me. Not pulling back, just stopping me. She looked up into my face, smiling that little smile of hers. I could get to love that smile, I thought—it was the kind of smile you might wake up thinking of in the middle of the night. The blue eyes and the blond hair too, but mostly the smile. The lips only curved a little, but the corners of the mouth deepened to dimples all the same.

“My boyfriend’s real name is John Sullivan,” she said. “Like the fighter. Now tell me the name of your girlfriend.”

“Annmarie,” I said, not much caring for the sound of it as it came out of my mouth. “Annmarie Soucie. She’s a senior at Gates Falls High this year.” I let Carol go. When I did, she took her hands off my chest and grabbed mine.

“This is information,” she said. “Information, that’s all. Still want to kiss me?”

I nodded. I wanted to more than ever.

“Okay.” She tilted her face up, closed her eyes, opened her lips a little. She looked like a kid waiting at the foot of the stairs for her

goodnight kiss from Papa. It was so cute I almost laughed. Instead I bent and kissed her. She kissed back with pleasure and enthusiasm. There were no tongues touching, but it was a thorough, searching kiss just the same. When she drew back, her cheeks were flushed and her eyes were bright. “Goodnight. Thanks for the movie.”

“Want to do it again?”

“I have to think about that,” she said. She was smiling but her eyes were serious. I suppose her boyfriend was on her mind; I know that Annmarie was on mine. “Maybe you better, too. I’ll see you on the dishline Monday. What do you have?”

“Lunch and dinner.”

“I have breakfast and lunch. So I’ll see you at lunch.”

“Eat more Maine beans,” I said. That made her laugh. She went inside. I watched her go, standing outside with my collar turned up and my hands in my pockets and a cigarette between my lips, feeling like Bogie. I watched her say something to the girl on the reception desk and then hurry upstairs, still laughing.

I walked back to Chamberlain in the moonlight, determined to get serious about the geosyncline.

12

I only went into the third-floor lounge to get my geology book; I swear it's true. When I got there, every table—plus one or two which must have been hijacked from other floors—was occupied by a quartet of Hearts-playing fools. There was even a group in the corner, sitting cross-legged on the floor and staring intently at their cards. They looked like half-assed yogis. "We chasin The Cunt!" Ronnie Malenfant yelled to the room at large. "We gonna bust that bitch out, boys!"

I picked up my geology text from the sofa where it had lain all day and night (someone had sat on it, pushing it most of the way down between two cushions, but that baby was too big to hide entirely), and looked at it the way you might look at some artifact of unknown purpose. In Hauck Auditorium, sitting beside Carol Gerber, this crazy card-party had seemed like a dream. Now it was Carol who seemed dreamlike—Carol with her dimples and her boyfriend with the boxer's name. I still had six bucks in my pocket and it was absurd to feel disappointed just because there was no place for me in any of the games currently going on.

Study, that was what I had to do. Make friends with the geosyncline. I'd camp out in the second-floor lounge or maybe find a quiet corner in the basement rec.

Just as I was leaving with Historical Geology under my arm, Kirby McClendon tossed down his cards and cried, "Fuck this! I'm tapped! All because I keep getting hit with that fucking queen of spades! I'll give you guys IOUs, but I am honest-to-God tapped out." He went out past me without looking back, ducking his head as he went through the door—I've always thought that being that tall must be a kind of curse. A month later Kirby would be tapped out in a much larger sense, withdrawn from the University by his frightened parents after a mental breakdown and a half-assed suicide attempt. Not the first victim of Hearts-mania that fall, nor the last, but the only one to

try and off himself by eating two bottles of orange-flavored baby aspirin.

Lennie Doria didn't even bother looking after him. He looked over at me instead. "You want to sit in, Riley?"

A brief but perfectly genuine struggle for my soul went on. I needed to study. I had planned on studying, and for a financial-aid boy like me, that was a good plan, certainly more sensible than sitting here in this smoky room and adding the effluent from my own Pall Malls to the general fug.

So I said "Yeah, why not?" and sat down and played Hearts until almost one in the morning. When I finally shambled back to my room, Nate was lying on his bed reading his Bible. That was the last thing he did every night before going to sleep. This was his third trip through what he always called The Word of God, he'd told me. He had reached the Book of Nehemiah. He looked up at me with an expression of calm enquiry—a look that never changed much. Now that I think about it, Nate never changed much. He was in pre-dent, and he stayed with it; tucked into his last Christmas card to me was a photo of his new office in Houlton. In the photo there are three Magi standing around a straw-filled cradle on the snowy office lawn. Behind Mary and Joseph you can read the sign on the door: NATHANIEL HOPPENSTAND, D.D.S. He married Cindy. They are still married, and their three children are mostly grown up. I imagine Rinty died and got replaced.

"Did you win?" Nate asked. He spoke in almost the same tone of voice my wife would use some years later, when I came home half-drunk after a Thursday-night poker game.

"Actually I did." I had gravitated to a table where Ronnie was playing and had lost three of my remaining six dollars, then drifted to another one where I won them back, and a couple of more besides. But I had never gotten around to the geosyncline or the mysteries of tectonic plates.

Nate was wearing red-and-white-striped pajamas. He was, I think, the only person I ever shared a room with in college, male or female, who wore pajamas. Of course he was also the only one who owned Diane Renay Sings Navy Blue. As I began undressing, Nate slipped between the covers of his bed and reached behind him to turn off the study lamp on his desk.

“Get your geology all studied up?” he asked as the shadows swallowed his half of the room.

“I’m in good shape with it,” I said. Years later, when I came in from those late poker games and my wife would ask me how drunk I was, I’d say “I only had a couple” in that same chipper tone of voice.

I swung into my own bed, turned off my own light, and was asleep almost immediately. I dreamed I was playing Hearts. Ronnie Malenfant was dealing; Stoke Jones stood in the lounge doorway, hunched over his crutches and eyeing me—eyeing all of us—with the dour disapproval of a Massachusetts Bay Colony Puritan. In my dream there was an enormous amount of money lying on the table, hundreds of dollars in crumpled fives and ones, money orders, even a personal check or two. I looked at this, then back at the doorway. Carol Gerber was now standing on one side of Stokely. Nate, dressed in his candy-cane pajamas, was on the other side.

“We want information,” Carol said.

“You won’t get it,” I replied—in the TV show, that was always Patrick McGoohan’s reply to Number Two.

Nate said, “You left your window open, Pete. The room’s cold and your papers blew everywhere.”

I couldn’t think of an adequate reply to this, so I picked up the hand I’d been dealt and fanned it open. Thirteen cards, and every one was the queen of spades. Every one was la femme noire. Every one was The Bitch.

13

In Vietnam the war was going well—Lyndon Johnson, on a swing through the South Pacific, said so. There were a few minor setbacks, however. The Viet Cong shot down three American Hueys practically in Saigon's back yard; a little farther out from Big S, an estimated one thousand Viet Cong soldiers kicked the shit out of at least twice that number of South Vietnamese regulars. In the Mekong Delta, U.S. gunships sank a hundred and twenty Viet Cong river patrol boats which turned out to contain—whoops—large numbers of refugee children. America lost its four hundredth plane of the war that October, an F-105 Thunderchief. The pilot parachuted to safety. In Manila, South Vietnam's Prime Minister, Nguyen Cao Ky, insisted that he was not a crook. Neither were the members of his cabinet, he said, and the fact that a dozen or so cabinet members resigned while Ky was in the Philippines was just coincidence.

In San Diego, Bob Hope did a show for Army boys headed in-country. "I wanted to call Bing and send him along with you," Bob said, "but that pipe-smoking son of a gun has unlisted his number." The Army boys roared with laughter.

? and the Mysterians ruled the radio. Their song, "96 Tears," was a monster hit. They never had another one.

In Honolulu hula-hula girls greeted President Johnson.

At the U.N., Secretary General U Thant was pleading with American representative Arthur Goldberg to stop, at least temporarily, the bombing of North Vietnam. Arthur Goldberg got in touch with the Great White Father in Hawaii to relay Thant's request. The Great White Father, perhaps still wearing his lei, said no way, we'd stop when the Viet Cong stopped, but in the meantime they were going to cry 96 tears. At least 96. (Johnson did a brief, clumsy shimmy with the hula-hula girls; I remember watching that on The Huntley-

Brinkley Report and thinking he danced like every other white guy I knew … which was, incidentally, all the guys I knew.)

In Greenwich Village a peace march was broken up by the police. The marchers had no permit, the police said. In San Francisco war protesters carrying plastic skulls on sticks and wearing whiteface like a troupe of mimes were dispersed by teargas. In Denver police tore down thousands of posters advertising an antiwar rally at Chautauqua Park in Boulder. The police had discovered a statute forbidding the posting of such bills. The statute did not, the Denver Chief said, forbid posted bills which advertised movies, old clothes drives, VFW dances, or rewards for information leading to the recovery of lost pets. Those posters, the chief explained, were not political.

On our own little patch, there was a sit-in at East Annex, where Coleman Chemicals was holding job interviews. Coleman, like Dow, made napalm. Coleman also made Agent Orange, botulin compound, and anthrax, it turned out, although no one knew that until the company went bankrupt in 1980. In the Maine Campus there was a small picture of the protesters being led away. A larger photo showed one protester being pulled out of the East Annex doorway by a campus cop while another cop stood by, holding the protester's crutches—said protester was Stoke Jones, of course, wearing his duffle coat with the sparrow-track on the back. The cops were treating him kindly enough, I'm sure—at that point war protesters were still more novelty than nuisance—but the combination of the big cop and the staggering boy made the picture creepy, somehow. I thought of it many times between 1968 and 1971, years when, in the words of Bob Dylan, "the game got rough." The largest photo in that issue, the only one above the fold, showed ROTC guys in uniform marching on the sunny football field while large crowds watched. MANEUVERS DRAW RECORD CROWD, read the headline.

Closer to home still, one Peter Riley got a D on his Geology quiz and a D-plus on a Sociology quiz two days later. On Friday I got back a

one-page “essay of opinion” I had scribbled just before Intro English (Writing) on Monday morning. The subject was Ties (Should/Should Not) Be Required for Men in Restaurants. I had chosen Should Not. This little expository exercise had been marked with a big red C, the first C I’d gotten in English since arriving at U of M with my straight A’s in high-school English and my 740 score on the SAT Verbals. That red hook shocked me in a way the quiz D’s hadn’t, and angered me as well. Across the top Mr. Babcock had written, “Your usual clarity is present, but in this case serves only to show what a meatless meal this is. Your humor, although facile, falls far short of wit. The C is actually something of a gift. Sloppy work.”

I thought of approaching him after class, then rejected the idea. Mr. Babcock, who wore bowties and big hornrimmed glasses, had made it clear in just four weeks that he considered grade-grubbers the lowest form of academic life. Also, it was noon. If I grabbed a quick bite at the Palace on the Plains, I could be back on Chamberlain Three by one. All the tables in the lounge (and all four corners of the room) would be filled by three o’clock that afternoon, but at one I’d still be able to find a seat. I was almost twenty dollars to the good by then, and planned to spend a profitable late-October weekend lining my pockets. I was also planning on the Saturday-night dance in Lengyll Gym. Carol had agreed to go with me. The Cumberlands, a popular campus group, were playing. At some point (more likely at several points) they would do their version of “96 Tears.”

The voice of conscience, already speaking in the tones of Nate Hoppenstand, suggested I’d do well to spend at least part of the weekend hitting the books. I had two chapters of geology to read, two chapters of sociology, forty pages of history (the Middle Ages at a gulp), plus a set of questions to answer concerning trade routes.

I’ll get to it, don’t worry, I’ll get to it, I told that voice. Sunday’s my day to study. You can count on it, you can take it to the bank. And for awhile on Sunday I actually did read about in-groups, out-groups, and group sanctions. Between hands of cards I read about them. Then things got interesting and my soash book ended up on the floor

under the couch. Going to bed on Sunday night—late Sunday night—it occurred to me that not only had my winnings shrunk instead of grown (Ronnie now seemed actually to be seeking me out), but I hadn't really gotten very far with my studying. Also, I hadn't made a certain phone-call.

If you really want to put your hand there, Carol said, and she had been smiling that funny little smile when she said it, that smile which was mostly dimples and a look in the eyes. If you really want to put your hand there.

About halfway through the Saturday-night dance, she and I had gone out for a smoke. It was a mild night, and along Lengyll's brick north side maybe twenty couples were hugging and kissing by the light of the moon rising over Chadbourne Hall. Carol and I joined them. Before long I had my hand inside her sweater. I rubbed my thumb over the smooth cotton of her bra-cup, feeling the stiff little rise of her nipple. My temperature was also rising. I could feel hers rising, as well. She looked into my face with her arms still locked around my neck and said, "If you really want to put your hand there, I think you owe somebody a phone-call, don't you?"

There's time, I told myself as I drifted toward sleep. There's plenty of time for studying, plenty of time for phone-calls. Plenty of time.

14

Skip Kirk blew an Anthropology quiz—ended up guessing at half of the answers and getting a fifty-eight. He got a C-minus on an Advanced Calc quiz, and only did that well because his last math course in high school had covered some of the same concepts. We were in the same Sociology course and he got a D-minus on the quiz, scoring a bare seventy.

We weren't the only ones with problems. Ronnie was a winner at Hearts, better than fifty bucks up in ten days of play, if you believed him (no one completely did, although we knew he was winning), but a loser in his classes. He flunked a French quiz, blew off the little English paper in the class we shared ("Who gives a fuck about ties, I eat at McDonald's" he said), and scraped through a quiz in some other history division by scanning an admirer's notes just before class.

Kirby McClendon had quit shaving and began gnawing his fingernails between deals. He also began cutting significant numbers of classes. Jack Frady convinced his advisor to let him drop Statistics I even though add-drop was officially over. "I cried a little," he told me matter-of-factly one night in the lounge as we Bitch-hunted our way toward the wee hours. "It's something I learned to do in Dramatics Club." Lennie Doria tapped on my door a couple of nights later while I was cramming (Nate had been in the rack for an hour or more, sleeping the sleep of the just and the caught-up) and asked me if I had any interest in writing a paper about Crispus Atticus. He had heard I could do such things. He'd pay a fair price, Lennie said; he was currently ten bucks up in the game. I said I was sorry but I couldn't help him. I was behind a couple of papers myself. Lennie nodded and slipped out.

Ashley Rice broke out in horrible oozing acne all over his face, Mark St. Pierre had a sleepwalking interlude after losing almost twenty bucks in one catastrophic night, and Brad Witherspoon got into a

fight with a guy on the first floor. The guy made some innocuous little crack—later on Brad himself admitted it had been innocuous—but Brad, who'd just been hit with The Bitch three times in four hands and only wanted a Coke out of the first-floor machine to soothe his butt-parched throat, wasn't in an innocuous mood. He turned, dropped his unopened soda into the sandwell of a nearby cigarette urn, and started punching. Broke the kid's glasses, loosened one of his teeth. So Brad Witherspoon, ordinarily about as dangerous as a library mimeograph, was the first of us to go on disciplinary pro.

I thought about calling Annmarie and telling her I had met someone and was dating, but it seemed like a lot of work—a lot of psychic effort—on top of everything else. I settled for hoping that she'd write me a letter saying she thought it was time we started seeing other people. Instead I got one saying how much she missed me and that she was making me "something special" for Christmas. Which probably meant a sweater, one with reindeer on it. Reindeer sweaters were an Annmarie specialty (those slow, stroking handjobs were another). She enclosed a picture of herself in a short skirt. Looking at it made me feel not horny but tired and guilty and put-upon. Carol also made me feel put-upon. I had wanted to cop a feel, that was all, not change my whole fucking life. Or hers, for that matter. But I liked her, that was true. A lot. That smile of hers, and her sharp wit. This is getting good, she had said, we're exchanging information like mad.

A week or so later I returned from Holyoke, where I'd worked lunch with her on the dishline, and saw Frank Stuart walking slowly down the third-floor hallway with his trunk hung from his hands. Frank was from western Maine, one of those little unincorporated townships that are practically all trees, and had a Yankee accent so thick you could slice it. He was just a so-so Hearts player, usually ducking in second or a close third when someone else went over the hundred-point mark, but a hell of a nice guy. He always had a smile on his face … at least until the afternoon I came upon him headed for the stairwell with his trunk.

“You moving rooms, Frank?” I asked, but even then I thought I knew better—it was in the look on his face, serious and pale and downcast.

He shook his head. “Goin back home. Got a letter from my ma. She says they need a caretaker at one of the big lake resorts we got over our way. I said sure. I’m just wastin my time here.”

“You are not!” I said, a little shocked. “Christ, Frankie, you’re getting a college education!”

“I ain’t, though, that’s the thing.” The hall was gloomy and choked with shadows; it was raining outside. Still, I think I saw color come flushing into Frank’s cheeks. I think he was ashamed. I think that was why he’d arranged to leave in the middle of a weekday, when the dorm was at its emptiest. “I ain’t doin nothin but playin cards. Not very well, either. Also, I’m behind in all my classes.”

“You can’t be that far behind! It’s only October twenty-fifth!”

Frank nodded. “I know. But I ain’t quick like some. Wasn’t quick in high school, either. I got to set my feet and bore in, like with an ice-auger. I ain’t been doin it, and if you ain’t got a hole in the ice you can’t catch any perch. I’m goin, Pete. Gonna quit before they fire me in January.”

He went on, plodding down the first of the three flights with his trunk held in front of him by the handles. His white tee-shirt floated in the gloom; when he passed a window running with rain his crewcut glimmered like gold.

As he reached the second-floor landing and his footfalls began to take on an echoey beat, I rushed to the stairwell and looked down. “Frankie! Hey, Frank!”

The footfalls stopped. In the shadows I could see his round face looking up at me and the dim held shape of his trunk.

“Frank, what about the draft? If you drop out of school the draft’ll get you!”

A long pause, as if he was thinking how to answer. He never did, not with his mouth. He answered with his feet. Their echoey sound resumed. I never saw Frank again.

I remember standing by the stairwell, scared, thinking That could happen to me … maybe is happening to me, then pushing the thought away.

Seeing Frank with his trunk was a warning, I decided, and I would heed it. I would do better. I had been coasting, and it was time to turn on the jets again. But from down the hall I could hear Ronnie yelling gleefully that he was Bitch-hunting, that he meant to have that whore out of hiding, and I decided I would do better starting tonight. Tonight would be time enough to re-light those fabled jets. This afternoon I’d play my farewell game of Hearts. Or two. Or forty.

15

It was years before I isolated the key part of my final conversation with Frank Stuart. I had told him he couldn't be so far behind so soon, and he had replied that it happened because he wasn't a quick study. We were both wrong. It was possible to fall catastrophically behind in a short period of time, and it happened to the quick studies like me and Skip and Mark St. Pierre as well as to the plodders. In the backs of our minds we must have been holding onto the idea that we'd be able to loaf and then spurt, loaf and then spurt, which was the way most of us had gone through our dozy hometown high schools. But as Dearie Dearborn had pointed out, this wasn't high school.

I told you that of the thirty-two students who began the fall semester on our floor of Chamberlain (thirty-three, if you also count Dearie … but he was immune to the charms of Hearts), only fifteen remained to start the spring semester. That doesn't mean the nineteen who left were all dopes, though; not by any means. In fact, the smartest fellows on Chamberlain Three in the fall of 1966 were probably the ones who transferred before flunking out became a real possibility. Steve Ogg and Jack Frady, who had the room just up the hall from Nate and me, went to Chadbourne the first week in November, citing "distractions" on their joint application. When the Housing Officer asked what sort of distractions, they said it was the usual—all-night bull sessions, toothpaste ambushes in the head, abrasive relations with a couple of the guys. As an afterthought, both added they were probably playing cards in the lounge a little too much. They'd heard Chad was a quieter environment, one of the campus's two or three "brain dorms."

The Housing Officer's question had been anticipated, the answer as carefully rehearsed as an oral presentation in a speech class. Neither Steve nor Jack wanted the nearly endless Hearts game shut down; that might cause them all sorts of grief from people who believed folks should mind their own business. All they wanted was

to get the fuck off Chamberlain Three while there was still time to salvage their scholarships.

16

The bad quizzes and unsuccessful little papers were nothing but unpleasant skirmishes. For Skip and me and too many of our cardplaying buddies, our second round of prelims was a full-fledged disaster. I got an A-minus on my in-class English theme and a D in European History, but flunked the Sociology multiple-choicer and the Geology multiple-choicer—soash by a little and geo by a lot. Skip flunked his Anthropology prelim, his Colonial History prelim, and the soash prelim. He got a C on the Calculus test (but the ice was getting pretty thin there, too, he told me) and a B on his in-class essay. We agreed that life would be much simpler if it were all a matter of in-class essays, writing assignments which necessarily took place far from the third-floor lounge. We were wishing for high school, in other words, without even knowing it.

“Okay, that’s enough,” Skip said to me that Friday night. “I’m buckling down, Peter. I don’t give a shit about being a college man or having a diploma to hang over the mantel in my rumpus room, but I’ll be fucked if I want to go back to Dexter and hang around fuckin Bowlarama with the rest of the retards until Uncle Sam calls me.”

He was sitting on Nate’s bed. Nate was across the way at the Palace on the Plains, chowing down on Friday-night fish. It was nice to know somebody on Chamberlain Three had an appetite. This was a conversation we couldn’t have around Nate in any case; my country-mouse roommate thought he’d done pretty well on the latest round of prelims, all C’s and B’s. He wouldn’t have said anything if he’d heard us talking, but would have looked at us in a way that said we lacked gumption. That, although it might not be our fault, we were morally weak.

“I’m with you,” I said, and then, from down the hall, came an agonized cry (“Ohhhhhh … . FUCK ME!”) that we recognized instantly: someone had just taken The Bitch. Our eyes met. I can’t say about Skip, not for sure (even though he was my best friend in

college), but I was still thinking that there was time … and why wouldn't I think that? For me there always had been.

Skip began to grin. I began to grin. Skip began to giggle. I began to giggle right along with him.

"What the fuck," he said.

"Just tonight," I said. "We'll go over to the library together tomorrow."

"Hit the books."

"All day. But right now …"

He stood up. "Let's go Bitch-hunting."

We did. And we weren't the only ones. That's no explanation, I know; it's only what happened.

At breakfast the next morning, as we worked side by side on the dishline, Carol said: "I'm hearing there's some kind of big card-game going on in your dorm. Is that true?"

"I guess it is," I said.

She looked at me over her shoulder, giving me that smile—the one I always thought about when I thought about Carol. The one I think about still. "Hearts? Hunting The Bitch?"

"Hearts," I agreed. "Hunting The Bitch."

"I heard that some of the guys are getting in over their heads. Getting in grades trouble."

"I guess that might be," I said. Nothing was coming down the conveyor belt, not so much as a single tray. There's never a rush when you need one, I've noticed.

“How are your grades?” she asked. “I know it’s none of my business, but I want—”

“Information, yeah, I know. I’m doing okay. Besides, I’m getting out of the game.”

She just gave me the smile, and sure I still think about it sometimes; you would, too. The dimples, the slightly curved lower lip that knew so many nice things about kissing, the dancing blue eyes. Those were days when no girl saw further into a boys’ dorm than the lobby … and vice-versa, of course. Still, I have an idea that for a little while in October and November of 1966 Carol saw plenty, more than I did. But of course, she wasn’t insane—at least not then. The war in Vietnam became her insanity. Mine as well. And Skip’s. And Nate’s. Hearts were nothing, really, only a few tremors in the earth, the kind that flap the screen door on its hinges and rattle the glasses on the shelves. The killer earthquake, the apocalyptic continent-drowner, was still on its way.

17

Barry Margeaux and Brad Witherspoon both got the Derry News delivered to their rooms, and the two copies had usually made the rounds of the third floor by the end of the day—we'd find the remnants in the lounge when we took our seats for the evening session of Hearts, the pages torn and out of order, the crossword filled in by three or four different hands. There would be mustaches inked on the photodot faces of Lyndon Johnson and Ramsey Clark and Martin Luther King (someone, I never found out who, would invariably put large smoking horns on Vice President Humphrey and print HUBERT THE DEVIL underneath in tiny anal capital letters). The News was hawkish on the war, putting the most positive spin on each day's military events and relegating any protest news to the depths … usually beneath the Community Calendar.

Yet more and more we found ourselves discussing not movies or dates or classes as the cards were shuffled and dealt; more and more it was Vietnam. No matter how good the news or how high the Cong body count, there always seemed to be at least one picture of agonized U.S. soldiers after an ambush or crying Vietnamese children watching their village go up in smoke. There was always some unsettling detail tucked away near the bottom of what Skip called "the daily kill-column," like the thing about the kids who got wasted when we hit the Cong PT boats in the Delta.

Nate, of course, didn't play cards. He wouldn't debate the pros and cons of the war, either—I doubt if he knew, any more than I did, that Vietnam had once been under the French, or what had happened to the monsieurs unlucky enough to have been in the fortress city of Dien Bien Phu in 1954, let alone who might've decided it was time for President Diem to go to that big rice-paddy in the sky so Nguyen Cao Ky and the generals could take over. Nate only knew that he had no quarrel with those Congs, that they weren't going to be in Mars Hill or Presque Isle in the immediate future.

“Haven’t you ever heard about the domino theory, shitbird?” a banty little freshman named Nicholas Prouty asked Nate one afternoon. My roommate rarely came down to the third-floor lounge now, preferring the quieter one on Two, but that day he had dropped in for a few moments.

Nate looked at Nick Prouty, a lobsterman’s son who had become a devout disciple of Ronnie Malenfant, and sighed. “When the dominoes come out, I leave the room. I think it’s a boring game. That’s my domino theory.” He shot me a glance. I got my eyes away as fast as I could, but not quite in time to avoid the message: what in hell’s wrong with you? Then he left, scuffing back down to Room 302 in his fuzzy slippers to do some more studying—to resume his charted course from pre-dent to dent, in other words.

“Riley, your roommate’s fucked, you know that?” Ronnie said. He had a cigarette tucked in the corner of his mouth. Now he scratched a match one-handed, a specialty of his—college guys too ugly and abrasive to get girls have all sorts of specialties—and lit up.

No, man, I thought, Nate’s doing fine. We’re the ones who are fucked up. For a second I felt real despair. In that second I realized I was in a terrible jam and had no idea at all of how to extricate myself. I was aware of Skip looking at me, and it occurred to me that if I snatched up the cards, sprayed them in Ronnie’s face, and walked out of the room, Skip would join me. Likely with relief. Then the feeling passed. It passed as rapidly as it had come.

“Nate’s okay,” I said. “He’s got some funny ideas, that’s all.”

“Some funny communist ideas is what he’s got,” Hugh Brennan said. His older brother was in the Navy and was most recently heard from in the South China Sea. Hugh had no use for peaceniks. As a Goldwater Republican I should have felt the same, but Nate had started getting to me. I had all sorts of canned knowledge, but no real arguments in favor of the war … nor time to work any up. I was too busy to study my sociology, let alone to bone up on U.S. foreign policy.

I’m pretty sure that was the night I almost called Annmarie Soucie. The phone-booth across from the lounge was empty, I had a pocketful of change from my latest victory in the Hearts wars, and I suddenly decided The Time Had Come. I dialed her number from memory (although I had to think for a moment about the last four digits—were they 8146 or 8164?) and plugged in three quarters when the operator asked for them. I let the phone ring a single time, then racked the receiver with a bang and retrieved my quarters when I heard them rattle into the return.

18

A day or two later—shortly before Halloween—Nate got an album by a guy I'd only vaguely heard of: Phil Ochs. A folkie, but not the blunk-blunk banjo kind who used to show up on Hootenanny. The album cover, which showed a rumpled troubadour sitting on a curb in New York City, went oddly with the covers of Nate's other records—Dean Martin looking tipsy in a tux, Mitch Miller with his sing-along smile, Diane Renay in her middy blouse and perky sailor cap. The Ochs record was called I Ain't Marchin' Anymore, and Nate played it a lot as the days shortened and turned chilly. I took to playing it myself, and Nate didn't seem to mind.

There was a kind of baffled anger in Ochs's voice. I suppose I liked it because most of the time I felt pretty baffled myself. He was like Dylan, but less complicated in his expression and clearer in his rage. The best song on the album—also the most troubling—was the title song. In that song Ochs didn't just suggest but came right out and said that war wasn't worth it, war was never worth it. Even when it was worth it, it wasn't worth it. This idea, coupled with the image of young men just walking away from Lyndon and his Vietnam obsession by the thousands and tens of thousands, excited my imagination in a way that had nothing to do with history or policy or rational thought. I must have killed a million men and now they want me back again but I ain't marchin anymore, Phil Ochs sang through the speaker of Nate's nifty little Swingline phono. Just quit it, in other words. Quit doing what they say, quit doing what they want, quit playing their game. It's an old game, and in this one The Bitch is hunting you.

And maybe to show you mean it, you start wearing a symbol of your resistance—something others will first wonder about and then perhaps rally to. It was a couple of days after Halloween that Nate Hoppenstand showed us what the symbol was going to be. Finding out started with one of those crumpled leftover newspapers in the third-floor lounge.

19

“Son of a bitch, look at this,” Billy Marchant said.

Harvey Twiller was shuffling the cards at Billy’s table, Lennie Doria was adding up the current score, and Billy was taking the opportunity to do a quick scan-through of the News’s Local section. Kirby McClendon—unshaven, tall n twitchy, well on his way to his date with all those baby aspirins—leaned in to take a look.

Billy drew back from him, fluttering a hand in front of his face. “Jesus, Kirb, when did you take your last shower? Columbus Day? Fourth of July?”

“Let me see,” Kirby said, ignoring him. He snatched the paper away. “Fuck, that’s Rip-Rip!”

Ronnie Malenfant got up so fast his chair fell over, entranced by the idea that Stoke had made the paper. When college kids showed up in the Derry News (except on the sports page, of course) it was always because they were in trouble. Others gathered around Kirby, Skip and me among them. It was Stokely Jones III, all right, and not just him. Standing in the background, their faces almost but not quite lost in the clusters of dots …

“Christ,” Skip said, “I think that’s Nate.” He sounded amused and astonished.

“And that’s Carol Gerber just up ahead of him,” I said in a funny, shocked voice. I knew the jacket with HARWICH HIGH SCHOOL on the back; knew the blond hair hanging over the jacket’s collar in a ponytail; knew the faded jeans. And I knew the face. Even half-turned away and shadowed by a sign reading U.S. OUT OF VIETNAM NOW!, I knew the face. “That’s my girlfriend.” It was the first time the word girlfriend had come out of my mouth tied to Carol’s name, although I had been thinking of her that way for a couple of weeks at least.

POLICE BREAK UP DRAFT PROTEST, the photo caption read. No names were given. According to the accompanying story, a dozen or so protesters from the University of Maine had gathered in front of the Federal Building in downtown Derry. They had carried signs and marched around the entrance to the Selective Service office for about an hour, singing songs and “chanting slogans, some obscene.” Police had been called and had at first only stood by, intending to allow the demonstration to run its course, but then an opposing group of demonstrators had turned up—mostly construction workers on their lunch break. They had begun chanting their own slogans, and although the News didn’t mention if they were obscene or not, I could guess there had been invitations to go back to Russia, suggestions as to where the demonstrators could store their signs while not in use, and directions to the nearest barber shop.

When the protesters began to shout back at the construction workers and the construction workers began firing pieces of fruit from their dinner-buckets at the protesters, the police had stepped in. Citing the protesters’ lack of a permit (the Derry cops had apparently never heard about the right of Americans to assemble peaceably), they rounded up the kids and took them to the police substation on Witcham Street. There they were simply released. “We only wanted to get them out of a bad atmosphere,” one cop was quoted as saying. “If they go back down there, they’re even dumber than they look.”

The photo really wasn’t much different from the one taken at East Annex during the Coleman Chemicals protest. It showed the cops leading the protesters away while construction workers (a year or so later they would all be sporting small American flags on their hardhats) jeered and grinned and shook their fists. One cop was frozen in the act of reaching out toward Carol’s arm; Nate, standing behind her, had not attracted their attention, it seemed. Two more cops were escorting Stoke Jones, who was back to the camera but unmistakable on his crutches. If any further aid to identification was needed, there was that hand-drawn sparrow-track on his jacket.

“Look at that dumb fuck!” Ronnie crowed. (Ronnie, who had flunked two of four on the last round of prelims, had a nerve calling anyone a dumb fuck.) “Like he didn’t have anything better to do!”

Skip ignored him. So did I. For us Ronnie’s bluster was already fading into insignificance no matter what the subject. We were fascinated by the sight of Carol … and of Nate Hoppenstand behind her, watching as the demonstrators were led away. Nate as neat as ever in an Ivy League shirt and jeans with cuffs and creases, Nate standing near the jeering, fist-shaking construction workers but totally ignored by them. Ignored by the cops, too. Neither group knew my roommate had lately become a fan of the subversive Mr. Phil Ochs.

I slipped out to the telephone booth and called Franklin Hall, second floor. Someone from the lounge answered and when I asked for Carol, the girl said Carol wasn’t there, she’d gone over to the library to study with Libby Sexton. “Is this Pete?”

“Yeah,” I said.

“There’s a note here for you. She left it on the glass.” This was common practice in the dorms at that time. “It says she’ll call you later.”

“Okay. Thanks.”

Skip was outside the telephone booth, motioning impatiently for me to come. We walked down the hall to see Nate, even though we knew we’d both lose our places at the tables where we’d been playing. In this case, curiosity outweighed obsession.

Nate’s face didn’t change much when we showed him the paper and asked him about the demonstration the day before, but his face never changed much. All the same, I sensed that he was unhappy, perhaps even miserable. I couldn’t understand why that would be—everything had ended well, after all; no one had gone to jail or even been named in the paper.

I'd just about decided I was reading too much into his usual quietness when Skip said, "What's eating you?"

There was a kind of rough concern in his voice. Nate's lower lip trembled and then firmed at the sound of it. He leaned over the neat surface of his desk (my own was already covered in about nineteen layers of junk) and snagged a Kleenex from the box he kept by his record-player. He blew his nose long and hard. When he was finished he was under control again, but I could see the baffled unhappiness in his eyes. Part of me—a mean part—was glad to see it. Glad to know that you didn't have to turn into a Hearts junkie to have problems. Human nature can be so shitty sometimes.

"I rode up with Stoke and Harry Swidrowski and a few other guys," Nate said.

"Was Carol with you?" I asked.

Nate shook his head. "I think she was with George Gilman's bunch. There were five carloads of us in all." I didn't know George Gilman from Adam, but that did not prevent me from directing a dart of fairly sick jealousy at him. "Harry and Stoke are on the Committee of Resistance. Gilman, too. Anyway, we—"

"Committee of Resistance?" Skip asked. "What's that?"

"A club," Nate said, and sighed. "They think it's something more—especially Harry and George, they're real firebrands—but it's just another club, really, like the Maine Masque or the pep squad."

Nate said he himself had gone along because it was a Tuesday and he didn't have any classes on Tuesday afternoons. No one gave orders; no one passed around loyalty oaths or even sign-up sheets; there was no real pressure to march and none of the paramilitary beret-wearing fervor that crept into the antiwar movement later on. Carol and the kids with her had been laughing and bopping each other with their signs when they left the gym parking lot, according to

Nate. (Laughing. Laughing with George Gilman. I threw another one of those germ-laden jealousy-darts.)

When they got to the Federal Building, some people demonstrated, marching around in circles in front of the Selective Service office door, and some people didn't. Nate was one of those who didn't. As he told us that, his usually smooth face tightened in another brief cramp of something that might have been real misery in a less settled boy.

"I meant to march with them," he said. "All the way up I expected to march with them. It was exciting, six of us crammed into Harry Swidrowski's Saab. A real trip. Hunter McPhail … do you guys know him?"

Skip and I shook our heads. I think both of us were a little awestruck to discover the owner of Meet Trini Lopez and Diane Renay Sings Navy Blue had what amounted to a secret life, including connections to the sort of people who attracted both cops and newspaper coverage.

"He and George Gilman started the Committee. Anyway, Hunter was holding Stoke's crutches out the window of the Saab because we couldn't fit them inside and we sang 'I Ain't Marchin' Anymore' and talked about how maybe we could really stop the war if enough of us got together—that is, all of us talked about stuff like that except Stoke. He keeps pretty quiet."

So, I thought. Even with them he keeps quiet … except, presumably, when he decides a little credibility lecture is in order. But Nate wasn't thinking about Stoke; Nate was thinking about Nate. Brooding over his feet's inexplicable refusal to carry his heart where it had clearly wanted to go.

"All the way up I'm thinking, 'I'll march with them, I'll march with them because it's right … at least I think it's right … and if someone takes a swing at me I'll be nonviolent, just like the guys in the lunchroom

sit-ins. Those guys won, maybe we can win, too.' " He looked at us. "I mean, it was never a question in my mind. You know?"

"Yeah," Skip said. "I know."

"But when we got there, I couldn't do it. I helped hand out signs saying STOP THE WAR and U.S. OUT OF VIETNAM NOW and BRING THE BOYS HOME … Carol and I helped Stoke fix his so he could march with it and still use his crutches … but I couldn't take one myself. I stood on the sidewalk with Bill Shadwick and Kerry Morin and a girl named Lorlie McGinnis … she's my partner in Botany Lab …" He took the sheet of newspaper out of Skip's hand and studied it, as if to confirm again that yes, it had all really happened; the master of Rinty and the boyfriend of Cindy had actually gone to an antiwar demonstration. He sighed and then let the piece of newspaper drift to the floor. This was so unlike him it kind of hurt my head.

"I thought I would march with them. I mean, why else did I come? All the way down from Orono it was never, you know, a question in my mind."

He looked at me, kind of pleading. I nodded as if I understood.

"But then I didn't. I don't know why."

Skip sat down next to him on his bed. I found the Phil Ochs album and put it on the turntable. Nate looked at Skip, then looked away. Nate's hands were as small and neat as the rest of him, except for the nails. The nails were ragged, bitten right down to the quick.

"Okay," he said as if Skip had asked out loud. "I do know why. I was afraid they'd get arrested and I'd get arrested with them. That my picture would be in the paper getting arrested and my folks would see it." There was a long pause. Poor old Nate was trying to say the rest. I held the needle over the first groove of the spinning record, waiting to see if he could. At last he did. "That my mother would see it."

“It’s okay, Nate,” Skip said.

“I don’t think so,” Nate replied in a trembling voice. “I really don’t.” He wouldn’t meet Skip’s eyes, only sat there on his bed with his prominent chicken-ribs and bare white Yankee skin between his pajama bottoms and his freshman beanie, looking down at his gnawed cuticles. “I don’t like to argue about the war. Harry does … and Lorlie … George Gilman, gosh, you can’t get George to shut up about it, and most of the others on the Committee are the same. But when it comes to talking, I’m more like Stoke than them.”

“No one’s like Stoke,” I said. I remembered the day I met him on Bennett’s Walk. Why don’t you take it easy? I’d asked. Why don’t you eat me? Mr. Credibility had replied.

Nate was still studying his cuticles. “What I think is that Johnson is sending American boys over there to die for no reason. It isn’t imperialism or colonialism, like Harry Swidrowski believes, it’s not any ism at all. Johnson’s got it all mixed up in his mind with Davy Crockett and Daniel Boone and the New York Yankees, that’s all. And if I think that, I ought to say that. I ought to try to stop it. That’s what I learned in church, in school, even in the darned Boy Scouts of America. You’re supposed to stand up. If you see something happening that’s wrong, like a big guy beating up a little guy, you’re supposed to stand up and at least try to stop it. But I was afraid my mother’d see a picture of me getting arrested and cry.”

Nate raised his head and we saw he was crying himself. Just a little; wet lids and lashes, no more than that. For him that was a big deal, though.

“I found out one thing,” he said. “What that is on the back of Stoke Jones’s jacket.”

“What?” Skip asked.

“A combination of two British Navy semaphore letters. Look.” Nate stood up with his bare heels together. He lifted his left arm straight

up toward the ceiling and dropped his right down to the floor, making a straight line. “That’s N.” Next he held his arms out at forty-five-degree angles to his body. I could see how the two shapes, when superimposed, would make the shape Stoke had inked on the back of his old duffle coat. “This one’s D.”

“N-D,” Skip said. “So?”

“The letters stand for nuclear disarmament. Bertrand Russell invented the symbol in the fifties.” He drew it on the back of his notebook: “He called it a peace sign.”

“Cool,” Skip said.

Nate smiled and wiped under his eyes with his fingers. “That’s what I thought,” he agreed. “It’s a groove thing.”

I dropped the needle on the record and we listened to Phil Ochs sing. Grooved to it, as we Atlanteans used to say.

20

The lounge in the middle of Chamberlain Three had become my Jupiter—a scary planet with a huge gravitational pull. Still, I resisted it that night, slipping back into the phone-booth instead and calling Franklin again. This time I got Carol.

“I’m all right,” she said, laughing a little. “I’m fine. One of the cops even called me little lady. Sheesh, Pete, such concern.”

How much concern did this guy Gilman show you? I felt like asking, but even at eighteen I knew that wasn’t the way to go.

“You should have given me a call,” I said. “Maybe I would have gone with you. We could have taken my car.”

Carol began to giggle, a sweet sound but puzzling.

“What?”

“I was thinking about riding to an antiwar demonstration in a station wagon with a Goldwater sticker on the bumper.”

I guessed that was sort of funny.

“Besides,” she said, “I imagine you had other things to do.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” As if I didn’t know. Through the glass of the phone-booth and that of the lounge, I could see most of my floor-mates playing cards in a fume of cigarette smoke. And even in here with the door closed I could hear Ronnie Malenfant’s high-pitched cackle. We’re chasing The Bitch, boys, we are cherchez-ing la cunt noire, and we’re going to have her out of the bushes.

“Studying or Hearts,” she said. “Studying, I hope. One of the girls on my floor goes out with Lennie Doria—or did, when he still had the

time to go out. She calls it the card-game from hell. Am I being a nag yet?”

“No,” I said, not knowing if she was or not. Maybe I needed to be nagged. “Carol, are you okay?”

There was a long pause. “Yeah,” she said at last. “Sure I am.”

“The construction workers who showed up—”

“Mostly mouth,” she said. “Don’t worry. Really.”

But she didn’t sound right to me, not quite right … and there was George Gilman to worry about. I worried about him in a way I didn’t about Sully, the boyfriend back home.

“Are you on this Committee Nate told me about?” I asked her. “This Committee of Resistance whatsit?”

“No,” she said. “Not yet, at least. George has asked me to join. He’s this guy from my Polysci course. George Gilman. Do you know him?”

“Heard of him,” I said. I was clutching the phone too tightly and couldn’t seem to loosen up.

“He was the one who told me about the demonstration. I rode up with him and some others. I …” She broke off for a moment, then said with honest curiosity: “You’re not jealous of him, are you?”

“Well,” I said carefully, “he got to spend an afternoon with you. I’m jealous of that, I guess.”

“Don’t be. He’s got brains, plenty of them, but he’s also got a wiffle haircut and great big shifty eyes. He shaves, but it seems like he always misses a big patch. He’s not the attraction, believe me.”

“Then what is?”

“Can I see you? I want to show you something. It won’t take long. But it might help if I could just explain …” Her voice wavered on the word and I realized she was close to tears.

“What’s wrong?”

“You mean other than that my father probably won’t let me back into his house once he’s seen me in the News? He’ll have the locks changed by this weekend, I bet. That’s if he hasn’t changed them already.”

I thought of Nate saying he was afraid his mother would see a picture of him getting arrested. Mommy’s good little pre-dent pinched down in Derry for parading in front of the Federal Building without a permit. Ah, the shame, the shame. And Carol’s dad? Not quite the same deal, but close. Carol’s dad was a steady boy who said ship ahoy and joined the Nay-yay-vee, after all.

“He may not see the story,” I said. “Even if he does, the paper didn’t use any names.”

“The picture.” She spoke patiently, as if to someone who can’t help being dense. “Didn’t you see the picture?”

I started to say that her face was mostly turned away from the camera and what you could see was in shadow. Then I remembered her high-school jacket with HARWICH HIGH SCHOOL blaring across the back. Also, he was her father, for Christ’s sake. Even half-turned away from the camera, her father would know her.

“He may not see the picture, either,” I said lamely. “Damariscotta’s at the far edge of the News’s area.”

“Is that how you want to live your life, Pete?” She still sounded patient, but now it was patience with an edge. “Doing stuff and then hoping people won’t find out?”

“No,” I said. And could I get mad at her for saying that, considering that Annmarie Soucie still didn’t have the slightest idea that Carol Gerber was alive? I didn’t think so. Carol and I weren’t married or anything, but marriage wasn’t the issue. “No, I don’t. But Carol … you don’t have to shove the damned newspaper under his nose for him, do you?”

She laughed. The sound had none of the brightness I had heard in her earlier giggle, but I thought even a rueful laugh was better than none at all. “I won’t have to. He’ll find it. That’s just the way he is. But I had to go, Pete. And I’ll probably join the Committee of Resistance even though George Gilman always looks like a little kid who just got caught eating boogers and Harry Swidrowski has the world’s worst breath. Because it’s … the thing of it is … you see …” She blew a frustrated I-can’t-explain sigh into my ear. “Listen, you know where we go out for smoke-breaks?”

“At Holyoke? By the Dumpsters, sure.”

“Meet me there,” Carol said. “In fifteen minutes. Can you?”

“Yes.”

“I have a lot more studying to do so I can’t stay long, but I … I just …”

“I’ll be there.”

I hung up the phone and stepped out of the booth. Ashley Rice was standing in the doorway of the lounge, smoking and doing a little shuffle-step. I deduced that he was between games. His face was too pale, the black stubble on his cheeks standing out like pencil-marks, and his shirt had gone beyond simply soiled; it looked lived-in. He had a wide-eyed Danger High Voltage look that I later came to associate with heavy cocaine users. And that’s what the game really was; a kind of drug. Not the kind that mellowed you out, either.

“What do you say, Pete?” he asked. “Want to play a few hands?”

“Maybe later,” I said, and started down the hall. Stoke Jones was thumping back from the bathroom in a frayed old robe. His crutches left round wet tracks on the dark red linoleum. His long, crazy hair was wet. I wondered how he did in the shower; certainly there were none of the railings and grab-handles that later became standard in public washing facilities. He didn’t look as though he would much enjoy discussing the subject, however. That or any other subject.

“How you doing, Stoke?” I asked.

He went by without answering, head down, dripping hair plastered to his cheeks, soap and towel clamped under one arm, muttering “Rip-rip, rip-rip” under his breath. He never even looked up at me. Say whatever you wanted about Stoke Jones, you could depend on him to put a little fuck-you into your day.

21

Carol was already at Holyoke when I got there. She had brought a couple of milk-boxes from the area where the Dumpsters were lined up and was sitting on one of them, legs crossed, smoking a cigarette. I sat down on the other one, put my arm around her, and kissed her. She put her head on my shoulder for a moment, not saying anything. This wasn't much like her, but it was nice. I kept my arm around her and looked up at the stars. The night was mild for so late in the season, and lots of people—couples, mostly—were out walking, taking advantage of the weather. I could hear their murmured conversations. From above us, in the Commons dining room, a radio was playing "Hang On, Sloopy." One of the janitors, I suppose.

Carol raised her head at last and moved away from me a little—just enough to let me know I could take my arm back. That was more like her, actually. "Thanks," she said. "I needed a hug."

"My pleasure."

"I'm a little scared about facing my dad. Not real scared, but a little."

"It'll be all right." Not saying it because I really thought it would be—I couldn't know a thing like that—but because it's what you say, isn't it? Just what you say.

"My dad's not the reason I went with Harry and George and the rest. It's no big Freudian rebellion, or anything like that."

She flicked her cigarette away and we watched it fountain sparks when it struck the bricks of Bennett's Walk. Then she took her little clutch purse out of her lap, opened it, found her wallet, opened that, and thumbed through a selection of snapshots stuck in those small celluloid windows. She stopped, slipped one out, and handed it to me. I leaned forward so I could see it by the light falling through the

dining-hall windows, where the janitors were probably doing the floors.

The picture showed three kids of eleven or twelve, a girl and two boys. They were all wearing blue tee-shirts with the words STERLING HOUSE on them in red block letters. They were standing in a parking lot somewhere and had their arms around each other—an easy pals-forever pose that was sort of beautiful. The girl was in the middle. The girl was Carol, of course.

“Which one is Sully-John?” I asked. She looked at me, a little surprised … but with the smile. In any case, I thought I already knew. Sully-John would be the one with the broad shoulders, the wide grin, and the tumbled black hair. It reminded me of Stoke’s hair, although the boy had obviously run a comb through his thatch. I tapped him. “This one, right?”

“That’s Sully,” she agreed, then touched the face of the other boy with her fingernail. He had a sunburn rather than a tan. His face was narrower, the eyes a little closer together, the hair a carroty red and mowed in a crewcut that made him look like a kid on a Norman Rockwell Saturday Evening Post cover. There was a faint frown-line on his brow. Sully’s arms were already muscular for a kid’s; this other boy had thin arms, thin stick arms. They were probably still thin stick arms. On the hand not slung around Carol’s shoulders he was wearing a big brown baseball glove.

“This one’s Bobby,” she said. Her voice had changed, somehow. There was something in it I’d never heard before. Sorrow? But she was still smiling. If it was sorrow she felt, why was she smiling? “Bobby Garfield. He was my first boyfriend. My first love, I guess you could say. He and Sully and I were best friends back then. Not so long ago, 1960, but it seems long ago.”

“What happened to him?” I was somehow sure she was going to tell me he had died, this boy with the narrow face and the crewcut carrot-top.

“He and his mom moved away. We wrote back and forth for awhile, and then we lost touch. You know how kids are.”

“Nice baseball glove.”

Carol still with the smile. I could see the tears that had come into her eyes as we sat looking down at the snapshot, but still with the smile. In the white light of the fluorescents from the dining hall, her tears looked silver—the tears of a princess in a fairy-tale.

“That was Bobby’s favorite thing. There’s a baseball player named Alvin Dark, right?”

“There was.”

“That’s what kind of a glove Bobby had. An Alvin Dark model.”

“Mine was a Ted Williams. I think my mom rummage-saled it a couple of years ago.”

“Bobby’s got stolen,” Carol said. I’m not sure she knew I was there anymore. She kept touching that narrow, slightly frowning face with her fingertip. It was as if she had regressed into her own past. I’ve heard that hypnotists can do that with good subjects. “Willie took it.”

“Willie?”

“Willie Shearman. I saw him playing ball with it a year later, down at Sterling House. I was so mad. My mom and dad were always fighting then, working up to the divorce, I guess, and I was mad all the time. Mad at them, mad at my math teacher, mad at the whole world. I was still scared of Willie, but mostly I was mad at him … and besides, I wasn’t by myself, not that day. So I marched right up to him and said I knew that was Bobby’s glove and he ought to give it to me. I said I had Bobby’s address in Massachusetts and I’d send it to him. Willie said I was crazy, it was his glove, and he showed me his name on the side. He’d erased Bobby’s—best as he could,

anyway—and printed his own over where it had been. But I could still see the bby, from Bobby."

A creepy sort of indignation had crept into her voice. It made her sound younger. And look younger. I suppose my memory could be wrong about that, but I don't think it is. Sitting there on the edge of the white light from the dining hall, I think she looked about twelve. Thirteen at the most.

"He couldn't erase the Alvin Dark signature in the pocket, though, or write over it … and he blushed. Dark red. Red as roses. Then—do you know what?—he apologized for what he and his two friends did to me. He was the only one who ever did, and I think he meant it. But he lied about the glove. I don't think he wanted it, it was old and the webbing was all broken out and it looked all wrong on his hand, but he lied so he could keep it. I don't understand why. I never have."

"I'm not following this," I said.

"Why should you? It's all jumbled up in my mind and I was there. My mother told me once that happens to people who are in accidents or fights. I remember some of it pretty well—mostly the parts with Bobby in them—but almost everything else comes from what people told me later on.

"I was in the park down the street from my house, and these three boys came along—Harry Doolin, Willie Shearman, and another one. I can't remember the other one's name. It doesn't matter, anyway. They beat me up. I was only eleven but that didn't stop them. Harry Doolin hit me with a baseball bat. Willie and the other one held me so I couldn't run away."

"A baseball bat? Are you shitting me?"

She shook her head. "At first they were joking, I think, and then … they weren't. My arm got dislocated. I screamed and I guess they ran away. I sat there, holding my arm, too hurt and too … too shocked I guess … to know what to do. Or maybe I tried to get up

and get help for myself and couldn't. Then Bobby came along. He walked me out of the park and then he picked me up and carried me back to his apartment. All the way up Broad Street Hill on one of the hottest days of the year. He carried me in his arms."

I took the snapshot from her, held it in the light, and bent over it, looking at the boy with the crewcut. Looking at his thin stick arms, then looking at the girl. She was an inch or two taller than he was, and broader in the shoulders. I looked at the other boy, Sully. He of the tumbled black hair and the All-American grin. Stoke Jones's hair; Skip Kirk's grin. I could see Sully carrying her in his arms, yeah, but the other kid—

"I know," she said. "He doesn't look big enough, does he? But he carried me. I started to faint and he carried me." She took the picture back.

"And while he was doing that, this kid Willie who helped beat you up came back and stole his glove?"

She nodded. "Bobby took me to his apartment. There was this old guy who lived in a room upstairs, Ted, who seemed to know a little bit about everything. He popped my arm back into its socket. I remember he gave me his belt to bite on when he did it. Or maybe it was Bobby's belt. He said I could catch the pain, and I did. After that … after that, something bad happened."

"Worse than getting lumped up with a baseball bat?"

"In a way. I don't want to talk about it." She wiped her tears away with one hand, first one side and then the other, still looking at the snapshot. "Later on, before he and his mother left Harwich, Bobby beat up the boy who actually used the bat. Harry Doolin."

Carol put her photograph back in its little compartment.

"What I remember best about that day—the only thing about it worth remembering—is that Bobby Garfield stood up for me. Sully was

bigger, and Sully might have stood up for me if he'd been there, but he wasn't. Bobby was there, and he carried me all the way up the hill. He did what was right. It's the best thing, the most important thing, anyone has ever done for me in my life. Do you see that, Pete?"

"Yeah. I do."

I saw something else, too: she was saying almost exactly what Nate had said not an hour before … only she had marched. Had taken one of the signs and marched with it. Of course Nate Hoppenstand had never been beaten up by three boys who started out joking and then decided they were serious. And maybe that was the difference.

"He carried me up that hill," she said. "I always wanted to tell him how much I loved him for that, and how much I loved him for showing Harry Doolin that there's a price to pay for hurting people, especially people who are smaller than you and don't mean you any harm."

"So you marched."

"I marched. I wanted to tell someone why. I wanted to tell someone who'd understand. My father won't and my mother can't. Her friend Rionda called me and said …" She didn't finish, only sat there on the milk-box, fidgeting with her little bag.

"Said what?"

"Nothing." She sounded exhausted, forlorn. I wanted to kiss her, at least put my arm around her, but I was afraid doing either would spoil what had just happened. Because something had happened. There was magic in her story. Not in the middle, but somewhere out around the edges. I felt it.

"I marched, and I guess I'll join the Committee of Resistance. My roommate says I'm crazy, I'll never get a job if a commie student group's part of my college records, but I think I'm going to do it."

“And your father? What about him?”

“Fuck him.”

There was a semi-shocked moment when we considered what she had just said, and then Carol giggled. “Now that’s Freudian.” She stood up. “I have to go back and study. Thanks for coming out, Pete. I haven’t ever shown that picture to anyone. I haven’t looked at it myself in who knows how long. I feel better. Lots.”

“Good.” I got up myself. “Before you go in, will you help me do something?”

“Sure, what?”

“I’ll show you. It won’t take long.”

I walked her down the side of Holyoke and then we started up the hill behind it. About two hundred yards away was the Steam Plant parking lot, where undergrads ineligible for parking stickers (freshmen, sophomores, and most juniors) had to keep their cars. It was the prime makeout spot on campus once it got cold, but making out in my car wasn’t on my mind that night.

“Did you ever tell Bobby about who got his baseball glove?” I asked. “You said you wrote to him.”

“I didn’t see the point.”

We walked in silence for a little while. Then I said: “I’m going to call it off with Annmarie over Thanksgiving. I started to phone her, then didn’t. If I’m going to do it, I guess I better find the guts to do it face to face.” I hadn’t been aware of coming to any such decision, not consciously, but it seemed I had. Certainly it wasn’t something I was saying just to please Carol.

She nodded, scuffing through the leaves in her sneakers, holding her little bag in one hand, not looking at me. “I had to use the phone.

Called S-J and told him I was seeing a guy."

I stopped. "When?"

"Last week." Now she looked up at me. Dimples; slightly curved lower lip; the smile.

"Last week? And you didn't tell me?"

"It was my business," she said. "Mine and Sully's. I mean, it isn't like he's going to come after you with a …" She paused long enough for both of us to think with a baseball bat and then went on, "That he's going to come after you, or anything. Come on, Pete. If we're going to do something, let's do it. I'm not going riding with you, though. I really have to study."

"No rides."

We got walking again. The Steam Plant lot seemed huge to me in those days—hundreds of cars parked in dozens of moonlit rows. I could hardly ever remember where I left my brother's old Ford wagon. The last time I was back at UM, the lot was three, maybe even four times as big, with space for a thousand cars or more. Time passes and everything gets bigger except us.

"Hey Pete?" Walking. Looking down at her sneakers again even though we were on the asphalt now and there were no more leaves to scuff.

"Uh-huh."

"I don't want you to go breaking up with Annmarie because of me. Because I have an idea we're … temporary. All right?"

"Yeah." What she said made me unhappy—it was what the citizens of Atlantis referred to as a bummer—but it didn't really surprise me. "I guess it'll have to be."

“I like you, and I like being with you now, but it’s just liking you, that’s all it is, and it’s best to be honest. So if you want to keep your mouth shut when you go home for the holiday—”

“Kind of keep her around at home? Sort of like a spare tire in case we get a flat here at school?”

She looked startled, then laughed. “Touche,” she said.

“Touche for what?”

“I don’t even know, Pete … but I do like you.”

She stopped, turned to me, slipped her arms around my neck. We kissed for a little while between two rows of cars, kissed until I got a pretty decent bone on, one I’m sure she could feel. Then she gave me a final peck on the lips and we started walking again.

“What did Sully say when you told him? I don’t know if I’m supposed to ask, but—”

“—but you want information,” she said in a brusque Number Two voice. Then she laughed. It was the rueful one. “I was expecting he’d be angry, or that he might even cry. Sully’s big and he scares the devil out of the football players he matches up against, but his feelings are always close to the skin. What I didn’t expect was relief.”

“Relief?”

“Relief. He’s been seeing this girl in Bridgeport for a month or more … except my mom’s friend Rionda told me she’s actually a woman, maybe twenty-four or -five.”

“Sounds like a recipe for disaster,” I said, hoping I sounded measured and thoughtful. I was actually delighted. Of course I was. And if pore ole gosh-darned tender-hearted John Sullivan stumbled into the plot of a country-western Merle Haggard song, well, four

hundred million Red Chinese wouldn't give a shit, and that went double for me.

We had almost arrived at my car. It was just one more old heap among all the others, but, courtesy of my brother, it was mine. "He's got more on his mind than his new love interest," Carol said. "He's going into the Army when he finishes high school next June. He's already talked to the recruiter and got it arranged. He can't wait to get over there in Vietnam and start making the world safe for democracy."

"Did you have a fight with him about the war?"

"Nope. What would be the use? For that matter, what would I tell him? That for me it's all about Bobby Garfield? That all the stuff Harry Swidrowski and George Gilman and Hunter McPhail say seems like smoke and mirrors compared to Bobby carrying me up Broad Street Hill? Sully would think I was crazy. Or say it's because I'm too smart. Sully feels sorry for people who are too smart. He says being too smart is a disease. And maybe he's right. I kind of love him, you know. He's sweet. He's also the kind of guy who needs someone to take care of him."

And I hope he finds someone, I thought. Just as long as it's not you.

She looked judiciously at my car. "Okay," she said. "It's ugly, it desperately needs a wash, but it's transportation. The question is, what're we doing here when I should be reading a Flannery O'Connor story?"

I took out my pocket-knife and opened it. "Got a nail-file in your bag?"

"As a matter of fact, I do. Are we going to fight? Number Two and Number Six go at it in the Steam Plant parking lot?"

"Don't be a smartass. Just get it out and follow me."

By the time we got around to the back of the station wagon, she was laughing—not the rueful laugh but the full-out guffaw I'd first heard when Skip's horny hotdog man came down the dishline conveyor belt. She finally understood why we were here.

Carol took one side of the bumper sticker; I took the other; we met in the middle. Then we watched the shreds blow away across the macadam. Au revoir, AuH2O-4-USA. Bye-bye, Barry. And we laughed. Man, we just couldn't stop laughing.

22

A couple of days later my friend Skip, who'd come to college with the political awareness of a mollusk, put up a poster on his side of the room he shared with Brad Witherspoon. It showed a smiling businessman in a three-piece suit. One hand was extended to shake. The other was hidden behind his back, but something clutched in it was dripping blood between his shoes. WAR IS GOOD BUSINESS, the poster said. INVEST YOUR SON.

Dearie was horrified.

"So you're against Vietnam now?" he asked when he saw it. Below his chin-out truculence I think our beloved floor-proctor was badly shocked by that poster. Skip, after all, had been a first-class high-school baseball player. Was expected to play college ball, too. Had been courted by both Delta Tau Delta and Phi Gam, the jock frats. Skip was no sickly cripple like Stoke Jones (Dearie Dearborn had also taken to calling Stoke Rip-Rip), no frog-eyed weirdo like George Gilman.

"Hey, all this poster means is that a lot of people are making money out of a big bloody mess," Skip said. "McDonnell-Douglas. Boeing. GE. Dow Chemical and Coleman Chemicals. Pepsi Fuckin Cola. Lots more."

Dearie's gimlet gaze conveyed (or tried to) the idea that he had thought about such issues more deeply than Skip Kirk ever could. "Let me ask you something—do you think we should just stand back and let Uncle Ho take over down there?"

"I don't know what I think," Skip said, "not yet. I only started getting interested in the subject a couple of weeks ago. I'm still playing catch-up."

This was at seven-thirty in the morning, and a little group outbound for eight o'clock classes had gathered around Skip's door. I saw

Ronnie (plus Nick Prouty; by this point the two of them had become inseparable), Ashley Rice, Lennie Doria, Billy Marchant, maybe four or five others. Nate was leaning in the doorway of 302, wearing a tee-shirt and his pj bottoms. In the stairwell, Stoke Jones leaned on his crutches. He had apparently been on his way out and had turned back to monitor the discussion.

Dearie said, “When the Viet Cong come into a South Viet ‘ville, the first thing they look for are people wearing crucifixes, St. Christopher medals, Mary medals, anything of that nature. Catholics are killed. People who believe in God are killed. Do you think we should stand back while the commies kill people who believe in God?”

“Why not?” Stoke said from the stairwell. “We stood back and let the Nazis kill the Jews for six years. Jews believe in God, or so I’m told.”

“Fucking Rip-Rip!” Ronnie shouted. “Who the fuck asked you to play the piano?”

But by then Stoke Jones, aka Rip-Rip, was making his way down the stairs. The echoey sound of his crutches made me think of the recently departed Frank Stuart.

Dearie turned back to Skip. His hands were fisted on his hips. Lying against the front of his white tee-shirt was a set of dogtags. His father had worn them in France and Germany, he told us; had been wearing them as he lay behind a tree, hiding from the machine-gun fire that had killed two men in his company and wounded four more. What this had to do with the Vietnam conflict none of us quite knew, but it was clearly a big deal to Dearie, so none of us asked. Even Ronnie had sense enough to keep his trap shut.

“If we let them take South Vietnam, they’ll take Cambodia.” Dearie’s eyes moved from Skip to me to Ronnie … to all of us. “Then Laos. Then the Philippines. One after the other.”

“If they can do that, maybe they deserve to win,” I said.

Dearie looked at me, shocked. I was sort of shocked myself, but I didn’t take it back.

23

There was one more round of prelims before the Thanksgiving break, and for the young scholars of Chamberlain Three, it was a disaster. By then most of us understood that we were a disaster, that we were committing a kind of group suicide. Kirby McClendon did his freak-out thing and disappeared like a rabbit in a magic trick. Kenny Auster, who usually sat in the corner during the marathon games and picked his nose when he couldn't decide what card to play next, simply bugged out one day. He left a queen of spades with the words "I quit" written across it on his pillow. George Lessard joined Steve Ogg and Jack Frady in Chad, the brain dorm.

Six down, thirteen to go.

It should have been enough. Hell, just what happened to poor old Kirby should have been enough; in the last three or four days before he freaked, his hands were trembling so badly he had trouble picking up his cards and he jumped in his seat if someone slammed a door in the hall. Kirby should have been enough but he wasn't. Nor was my time with Carol the answer. When I was actually with her, yes, I was fine. When I was with her all I wanted was information (and maybe to ball her socks off). When I was in the dorm, though, especially in that goddamned third-floor lounge, I became another version of Peter Riley. In the third-floor lounge I was a stranger to myself.

As Thanksgiving approached, a kind of blind fatalism set in. None of us talked about it, though. We talked about the movies, or sex ("I get more ass than a merry-go-round pony!" Ronnie used to crow, usually with no warning or conversational lead-in of any kind), but mostly we talked about Vietnam … and Hearts. Our Hearts discussions were about who was ahead, who was behind, and who couldn't seem to master the few simple strategic ploys of the game: void yourself in at least one suit; pass midrange hearts to someone who likes to shoot the moon; if you have to take a trick, always take it high.

Our only real response to the looming third round of prelims was to organize the game into a kind of endless, revolving tournament. We were still playing nickel-a-point, but we were now also playing for "match points." The system for awarding match points was quite complex, but Randy Echolls and Hugh Brennan worked out a good formula in two feverish late-night sessions. Both of them, incidentally, were flunking their introductory math courses; neither was invited back at the conclusion of the fall semester.

Thirty-three years have passed since that pre-Thanksgiving round of exams, and the man that boy became still winces at the memory of them. I flunked everything but Sociology and Intro English. I didn't have to see the grades to know it, either. Skip said he'd flagged the board except for Calc, and there he barely squeaked by. I was taking Carol out to a movie that night, our one pre-break date (and our last, although I didn't know that then), and saw Ronnie Malenfant on my way to get my car. I asked him how he thought he'd done on his tests; Ronnie smiled and winked and said, "Aced everything, champ. Just like on fuckin College Bowl. I'm not worried." But in the light of the parking lot I could see his smile wavering minutely at the corners. His skin was too pale, and his acne, bad when we started school in September, was worse than ever. "How 'bout you?"

"They're going to make me Dean of Arts and Sciences," I said. "That tell you anything?"

Ronnie burst out laughing. "You fuckin pisspot!" He clapped me on the shoulder. The cocky look in his eyes had been replaced by fright that made him look younger. "Goin out?"

"Yeah."

"Carol?"

"Yeah."

"Good for you. She's a great-lookin chick." For Ronnie, this was nearly heartrending sincerity. "And if I don't see you in the lounge

later on, have a great turkey-day."

"You too, Ronnie."

"Yeah. Sure." Looking at me from the corners of his eyes rather than straight on. Trying to hold the smile. "One way or another, I guess we're both gonna eat the bird, wouldn't you say?"

"Yeah. I guess that pretty well sums it up."

24

It was hot, even with the engine off and the heater off it was hot, we had warmed up the whole inside of the car with our bodies, the windows steamed so that the light from the parking lot came in all diffused, like light through a pebbled-glass bathroom window, and the radio was on, Mighty John Marshall making with the oldies, The Humble Yet Nonetheless Mighty playing The Four Seasons and The Dovells and Jack Scott and Little Richard and Freddie “Boom Boom” Cannon, all those oldies, and her sweater was open and her bra was draped over the seat with one strap hanging down, a thick white strap, bra-technology in those days hadn’t yet taken that next great leap forward, and oh man her skin was warm, her nipple rough in my mouth, and she still had her panties on but only sort of, they were all pushed and bunched to one side and I had first one finger in her and then two fingers, Chuck Berry singing “Johnny B. Goode” and The Royal Teens singing “Short Shorts,” and her hand was inside my fly, fingers pulling at the elastic of my own short-shorts, and I could smell her, the perfume on her neck and the sweat on her temples just below where her hair started, and I could hear her, hear the live pulse of her breath, wordless whispers in my mouth as we kissed, all of this with the front seat of my car pushed back as far as it would go, me not thinking of flunked prelims or the war in Vietnam or LBJ wearing a lei or Hearts or anything, only wanting her, wanting her right here and right now, and then suddenly she was straightening up and straightening me up, both hands planted on my chest, splayed fingers pushing me back toward the steering wheel. I moved toward her again, slipping one of my own hands up her thigh, and she said “Pete, no!” in a sharp voice and closed her legs, the knees coming together loud enough so I could hear the sound they made, that locking sound that means you’re done making out, like it or not. I didn’t like it but I stopped.

I leaned my head back against the fogged-up window on the driver’s side, breathing hard. My cock was an iron bar stuffed down the front of my underwear, so hard it hurt. That would go away soon enough

—no hardon lasts forever, I think Benjamin Disraeli said that—but even after the erection's gone, the blue balls linger on. It's just a fact of guy life.

We had left the movie—some really terrible good-ole-boy thang with Burt Reynolds in it—early and had come back to the Steam Plant parking lot with the same thing on our minds … or so I'd hoped. I guess it was the same thing, except I had been hoping for a little more of it than I'd gotten.

Carol had pulled the sides of her sweater together but her bra still hung over the back of the seat and she looked madly desirable with her breasts trying to tumble out through the gap and half an areola visible in the dim light. She had her purse open and was fumbling her cigarettes out with shaky hands.

"Whooo," she said. Her voice was as shaky as her hands. "I mean holy cow."

"You look like Brigitte Bardot with your sweater open like that," I told her.

She looked up, surprised and—I thought—pleased. "Do you really think so? Or is it just the blond hair?"

"The hair? Shit, no. Mostly it's …" I gestured toward her front. She looked down at herself and laughed. She didn't do the buttons, though, or try to pull the sides any more closely together. I'm not sure she could have, anyway—as I remember, that sweater was a wonderfully tight fit.

"There was a theater up the street from us when I was a kid, the Asher Empire. It's torn down now, but when we were kids—Bobby and Sully-John and me—it seemed they were always showing her pictures. I think that one of them, And God Created Woman, must have played there for about a thousand years."

I burst out laughing and took my own cigarettes off the dashboard. “That was always the third feature at the Gates Falls Drive-In on Friday and Saturday nights.”

“Did you ever see it?”

“Are you kidding? I wasn’t even allowed to go to the drive-in unless it was a Disney double feature. I think I must have seen Tonka with Sal Mineo at least seven times. But I remember the previews. Brigitte in her towel.”

“I’m not coming back to school,” she said, and lit her cigarette. She spoke so calmly that at first I thought we were still talking about old movies, or midnight in Calcutta, or whatever it took to persuade our bodies that it was time to go back to sleep, the action was over. Then it clicked in my head.

“You … did you say … ?”

“I said I’m not coming back after break. And it’s not going to be much of a Thanksgiving at home, as far as that goes, but what the hell.”

“Your father?”

She shook her head, drawing on her cigarette. In the light of its coal her face was all orange highlights and crescents of gray shadow. She looked older. Still beautiful, but older. On the radio Paul Anka was singing “Diana.” I snapped it off.

“My father’s got nothing to do with it. I’m going back to Harwich. Do you remember me mentioning my mother’s friend Rionda?”

I sort of did, so I nodded.

“Rionda took the picture I showed you, the one of me with Bobby and S-J. She says …” Carol looked down at her skirt, which was still hiked most of the way to her waist, and began plucking at it. You can never tell what’s going to embarrass people; sometimes it’s toilet

functions, sometimes it's the sexual hijinks of relatives, sometimes it's show-off behavior. And sometimes, of course, it's drink.

"Let's put it this way, my dad's not the only one in the Gerber family with a booze problem. He taught my mother how to tip her elbow, and she was a good student. For a long time she laid off—she went to AA meetings, I think—but Rionda says she's started again. So I'm going home. I don't know if I can take care of her or not, but I'm going to try. For my brother as much as my mother. Rionda says Ian doesn't know if he's coming or going. Of course he never did." She smiled.

"Carol, that's maybe not such a good idea. To shoot your education that way—"

She looked up angrily. "You want to talk about shooting my education? You know what I'm hearing about that fucking Hearts game on Chamberlain Three these days? That everyone on the floor is going to flunk out by Christmas, including you. Penny Lang says that by the start of spring semester there won't be anyone left up there but that shithead proctor of yours."

"Nah," I said, "that's an exaggeration. Nate'll be left. Stokely Jones, too, if he doesn't break his neck going downstairs some night."

"You act as though it's funny," she said.

"It's not funny," I said. No, it wasn't funny.

"Then why don't you quit it?"

Now I was the one starting to feel angry. She had pushed me away and clapped her knees shut, had told me she was going away just when I was starting to not only want her around but need her around, she had left me with what was soon going to be a world-class case of blue balls … and now it was all about me. Now it was all about cards.

“I don’t know why I don’t quit it,” I said. “Why don’t you find someone else to take care of your mother? Why doesn’t this friend of hers, Rawanda—”

“Ri-on-da.”

“—take care of her? I mean, is it your fault your mother’s a lush?”

“My mother is not a lush! Don’t you call her that!”

“Well, she’s sure something, if you’re going to drop out of college on her account. If it’s that serious, Carol, it’s sure something.”

“Rionda has a job and a mother of her own to worry about,” Carol said. The anger had gone out of her. She sounded deflated, dispirited. I could remember the laughing girl who had stood beside me, watching the shreds of Goldwater bumper sticker blow away across the macadam, but this didn’t seem like the same one. “My mother is my mother. There’s only Ian and me to take care of her, and Ian’s barely making it in high school. Besides, there’s always UConn.”

“You want some information?” I asked her. My voice was trembling, thickening. “I’ll give you some whether you want it or not. Okay? You’re breaking my heart here. That’s the information. You’re breaking my goddam heart.”

“I’m not, though,” she said. “Hearts are tough, Pete. Most times they don’t break. Most times they only bend.”

Yeah, yeah, and Confucius say woman who fly upside down have crackup. I began to cry. Not a lot, but they were tears, all right. Mostly I think it was being caught so utterly unprepared. And okay, maybe I was crying for myself, as well. Because I was scared. I was now flunking or in danger of flunking all but a single subject, one of my friends was planning to push the EJECT button, and I couldn’t seem to stop playing cards. Nothing was going the way I had expected it would once I got to college, and I was terrified.

“I don’t want you to go,” I said. “I love you.” Then I tried to smile. “Just a little more information, okay?”

She looked at me with an expression I couldn’t read, then cranked down her window and tossed out her cigarette. She rolled the window back up and held out her arms to me. “Come here.”

I put out my own cigarette in the overflowing ashtray and slipped across to her side of the seat. Into her arms. She kissed me, then looked into my eyes. “Maybe you love me and maybe you don’t. I’d never try to talk anyone out of loving me, I can tell you that much, because there’s never enough loving to go around. But you’re confused, Pete. About school, about Hearts, about Annmarie, and about me, too.”

I started to say I wasn’t, but of course I was.

“I can go to UConn,” she said. “If my mother shapes up, I will go to UConn. If that doesn’t work out, I can take courses part-time at Pennington in Bridgeport, or even CED courses at night in Stratford or Harwich. I can do those things, I have the luxury of doing those things, because I’m a girl. This is a good time to be a girl, believe me. Lyndon Johnson has seen to that.”

“Carol—”

She put her hand gently against my mouth. “If you flunk out this December, you’re apt to be in the jungle next December. You need to think about that, Pete. It’s one thing for Sully. He thinks it’s right and he wants to go. You don’t know what you want or what you think, and you won’t as long as you keep running those cards.”

“Hey, I took the Goldwater sticker off my car, didn’t I?” It sounded foolish to my own ears.

She said nothing.

“When are you going?”

“Tomorrow afternoon. I have a ticket on the four o’clock Trailways bus to New York. The Harwich stop isn’t more than three blocks from my front door.”

“Are you leaving from Derry?”

“Yes.”

“Can I drive you to the depot? I could pick you up at your dorm around three.”

She considered it, then nodded … but I saw a shaded look in her eyes. It was hard to miss, because those eyes were usually so wide and guileless. “That would be good,” she said. “Thank you. And I didn’t lie to you, did I? I told you we might be temporary.”

I sighed. “Yeah.” Only this was a lot more temporary than I had been expecting.

“Now, Number Six: We want … information.”

“You won’t get it.” It was hard to sound as tough as Patrick McGoohan in The Prisoner when you still felt like crying, but I did my best.

“Even if I ask pretty please?” She took my hand, slipped it inside her sweater, placed it on her left breast. The part of me which had begun to swoon snapped immediately back to attention.

“Well …”

“Have you ever done it before? I mean, all the way? That’s the information I want.”

I hesitated. It’s a question most boys find difficult, I imagine, and one most lie about. I didn’t want to lie to Carol. “No,” I said.

She slipped daintily out of her panties, tossed them over into the back seat, and laced her fingers together behind my neck. “I have.

Twice. With Sully. I don't think he was very good at it … but he'd never been to college. You have."

My mouth felt very dry, but that must have been an illusion, because when I kissed her our mouths were wet; they slipped all around, tongues and lips and nipping teeth. When I could talk I said, "I'll do my best to share my college education."

"Put on the radio," she said, unbuckling my belt and unsnapping my jeans. "Put on the radio, Pete, I like the oldies."

So I put on the radio and I kissed her and there was a spot, a certain spot, her fingers guided me to it and there was a moment when I was the same old same old and then there was a new place to be. She was very warm in there. Very warm and very tight. She whispered in my ear, her lips tickling against the skin: "Slow. Eat every one of your vegetables and maybe you'll get dessert."

Jackie Wilson sang "Lonely Teardrops" and I went slow. Roy Orbison sang "Only the Lonely" and I went slow. Wanda Jackson sang "Let's Have a Party" and I went slow. Mighty John did an ad for Brannigan's, Derry's hottest bottle club, and I went slow. Then she began to moan and it wasn't her fingers on my neck but her nails digging into it, and when she began to move her hips up against me in short hard thrusts I couldn't go slow and then The Platters were on the radio, The Platters were singing "Twilight Time" and she began to moan that she hadn't known, hadn't had a clue, oh gee, oh Pete, oh gee, oh Jesus, Jesus Christ, Pete, and her lips were all over my mouth and my chin and my jaw, she was frantic with kisses. I could hear the seat creaking, I could smell cigarette smoke and the pine air-freshener hanging from the rearview mirror, and by then I was moaning, too, I don't know what, The Platters were singing "Each day I pray for evening just to be with you," and then it started to happen. The pump turns on in ecstasy. I closed my eyes, I held her with my eyes closed and went into her that way, that way you do, shaking all over, hearing the heel of my shoe drumming against the driver's-side door in a spastic tattoo, thinking that I could do this even if I was dying, even if I was dying, even if I was dying; thinking

also that it was information. The pump turns on in ecstasy, the cards fall where they fall, the world never misses a beat, the queen hides, the queen is found, and it was all information.

25

The next morning I had a brief meeting with my Geology instructor, who told me I was “edging into a grave situation.” That is not exactly new information, Number Six, I thought of telling him, but didn’t. The world looked different this morning—both better and worse.

When I got back to Chamberlain I found Nate getting ready to leave for home. He had his suitcase in one hand. There was a sticker on it that said I CLIMBED MT. WASHINGTON. Slung over his shoulder was a duffel full of dirty clothes. Like everything else, Nate looked different now.

“Have a good Thanksgiving, Nate,” I said, opening my closet and starting to yank out pants and shirts at random. “Eat lots of stuffing. You’re too fuckin skinny.”

“I will. Cranberry dressing, too. When I was at my most homesick that first week, my mom’s dressing was practically all I could think about.”

I filled my own suitcase, thinking that I could take Carol to the bus depot in Derry and then just keep on going. If the traffic on Route 136 wasn’t too heavy, I could be home before dark. Maybe even stop in Frank’s Fountain for a mug of rootbeer before heading up Sabbatus Road to the house. Suddenly being out of this place—away from Chamberlain Hall and Holyoke Commons, away from the whole damned University—was my number-one priority. You’re confused, Pete, Carol had said in the car last night. You don’t know what you want or what you think, and you won’t as long as you keep running those cards.

Well, this was my chance to get away from the cards. It hurt to know Carol was leaving, but I’d be lying if I said that was foremost in my mind right then. At that moment, getting away from the third-floor lounge was. Getting away from The Bitch. If you flunk out this

December, you're apt to be in the jungle next December. Be in touch, baby, seeya, as Skip Kirk usually put it.

When I latched the suitcase shut and looked around, Nate was still standing in the doorway. I jumped and let out a little squeak of surprise. It was like being visited by Banquo's fucking ghost.

"Hey, go on, bug out," I said. "Time and tide wait for no man, not even one in pre-dent."

Nate only stood there, looking at me. "You're going to flunk out," he said.

Again I thought of how weirdly alike Nate and Carol were, almost male and female sides of the same coin. I tried to smile, but Nate didn't smile back. His face was small and white and pinched. The perfect Yankee face. You see a skinny guy who always burns instead of tanning, whose idea of dressing up includes a string tie and a liberal application of Vitalis, a guy who looks like he hasn't had a decent shit in three years, and that guy was most likely born and raised north of White River, New Hampshire. And on his deathbed his last words are apt to be "Cranberry dressing."

"Nah," I said. "Don't sweat it, Natie. All's cool."

"You're going to flunk out," he repeated. Dull, bricky color was rising in his cheeks. "You and Skip are the best guys I know, there wasn't anybody in high school like you guys, not in my high school at least, and you're going to flunk out and it's so stupid."

"I'm not going to flunk out," I said … but since last night I had found myself accepting the idea that I could. I wasn't just edging into a grave situation; man, I was there. "Skip, either. It's under control."

"The world's falling down and you two are flunking out of school over Hearts! Over a stupid fuckin card-game!"

Before I could say anything else he was gone, headed back up the county for turkey and his mom's stuffing. Maybe even a through-the-pants handjob from Cindy. Hey, why not? It was Thanksgiving.

26

I don’t read my horoscope, have rarely watched The X-Files, have never called the Psychic Friends Hotline, but I nevertheless believe that we all get glimpses of the future from time to time. I got one that afternoon, when I pulled up in front of Franklin Hall in my brother’s old station wagon: she was already gone.

I went inside. The lobby, where there were usually eight or nine gentlemen callers sitting in the plastic chairs, looked oddly empty. A housekeeper in a blue uniform was vacuuming the industrial-strength rug. The girl behind the counter was reading a copy of McCall’s and listening to the radio. ? and The Mysterians, as a matter of fact. Cry cry cry, baby, 96 tears.

“Pete Riley for Carol Gerber,” I said. “Can you buzz her?”

She looked up, put her magazine aside, and gave me a sweet, sympathetic look. It was the look of a doctor who has to tell you gee, sorry, the tumor’s inoperable. Bad luck, man, better make friends with Jesus. “Carol said she had to leave early. She took the Black Bear Shuttle to Derry. But she told me you’d be by and asked me to give you this.”

She handed me an envelope with my name written across the front. I thanked her and left Franklin with it in my hand. I went down the walk and stood for a moment by my car, looking across toward Holyoke Commons, fabled Palace on the Plains and home of the horny hotdog man. Below it, in Bennett’s Run, leaves flew before the wind in rattling drifts. The bright colors had gone out of them; only November’s dark brown was left. It was the day before Thanksgiving, the doorstep of winter in New England. The world was all wind and cold sunshine. I had started crying again. I could tell by the warmth on my cheeks. 96 tears, baby; cry cry cry.

I got into the car where I had lost my virginity the night before and opened the envelope. There was a single sheet of paper inside.

Brevity is the soul of wit, according to Shakespeare. If it's true, then Carol's letter was witty as hell.

Dear Pete,

I think we ought to let last night be our goodbye—how could we do any better? I may write to you at school or I may not, right now I'm so confused I just don't know (hey, I may even change my mind and come back!). But please let me be the one to get in touch, okay? You said you loved me. If you do, let me be the one to get in touch. I will, I promise.

P.S. Last night was the sweetest thing that's ever happened to me. If it gets any better than that, I don't see how people can live thru it.

P.P.S. Get out of that stupid card-game.

She said it was the sweetest thing that had ever happened to her, but she hadn't put "love" at the bottom of the note, only her signature. Still … If it gets any better than that, I don't see how people can live thru it. I knew what she meant. I reached over and touched the side of the seat where she had lain. Where we had lain together.

Put on the radio, Pete, I like the oldies.

I looked at my watch. I had gotten to the dorm early (that half-conscious premonition at work, maybe), and it had just gone three now. I could easily get to the Trailways depot before she left for Connecticut … but I wasn't going to do it. She was right, we had said a brilliant goodbye in my old station wagon; anything more would be a step down. At best we would find ourselves going over the same ground; at worst, we'd splash mud over last night with an argument.

We want information.

Yes. And we had gotten it. God knew we had.

I folded her letter, stuck it into the back pocket of my jeans, and drove home to Gates Falls. At first my eyes kept blurring and I had to keep wiping at them. Then I turned on the radio and the music made things a little better. The music always does. I’m past fifty now, and the music still makes things better; it’s the fabled automatic.

27

I got back to Gates around five-thirty, slowed as I drove past Frank's, then kept on going. By then I wanted to get home a lot more than I wanted a draft Hires and a gossip with Frank Parmeleau. Mom's way of saying welcome home was to tell me I was too skinny, my hair was too long, and I hadn't been "standing close enough to the razor." Then she sat in her rocking chair and had a little weep over the return of the prodigal son. My dad put a kiss on my cheek, hugged me with one arm, and then shuffled to the fridge for a glass of Mom's red tea, his head poking forward out of the neck of his old brown sweater like the head of a curious turtle.

We—my mom and me, that is—thought he had twenty per cent of his eyesight left, maybe a bit more. It was hard to tell, because he so rarely talked. It was a bagging-room accident that did for him, a terrible two-story fall. He had scars on the left side of his face and his neck; there was a dented-in patch of skull where the hair never grew back. The accident pretty much blacked out his vision, and it did something to his mind, as well. But he was not a "total ijit," as I once heard some asshole down at Gendron's Barber Shop say, nor was he mute, as some people seemed to think. He was in a coma for nineteen days. After he woke up he became mostly silent, that much is true, and he was often terribly confused in his mind, but sometimes he was still there, all present and accounted for. He was there enough when I came home to give me a kiss and that strong one-armed hug, his way of hugging for as long as I could remember. I loved my old man a lot … and after a semester of playing cards with Ronnie Malenfant, I had learned that talking is a wildly overrated skill.

I sat with them for awhile, telling them some of my college stories (not about chasing The Bitch, though), then went outside. I raked fallen leaves in the twilight—the frosty air on my cheeks felt like a blessing—waved at the passing neighbors, and ate three of my mom's hamburgers for supper. After, she told me she was going

down to the church, where the Ladies' Aid was preparing Thanksgiving meals for shut-ins. She didn't think I'd want to spend my first evening home with a bunch of old hens, but I was welcome to attend the cluckfest if I wanted. I thanked her and said I thought I'd give Annmarie a call instead.

"Now why doesn't that surprise me?" she said, and went out. I heard the car start and then, with no great joy, I dragged myself to the telephone and called Annmarie Soucie. An hour later she drove over in her father's pickup, smiling, her hair down on her shoulders, mouth radiant with lipstick. The smile didn't last long, as I guess you can probably figure out for yourself, and fifteen minutes after she came in, Annmarie was out of the house and out of my life. Be in touch, baby, seeya. Right around the time of Woodstock, she married an insurance agent from Lewiston and became Annmarie Jalbert. They had three kids, and they're still married. I guess that's good, isn't it? Even if it isn't, you have to admit it's pretty goddam American.

I stood at the window over the kitchen sink, watching the taillights of Mr. Soucie's truck disappear down the road. I felt ashamed of myself—Christ, the way her eyes had widened, the way her smile had faded and begun to tremble—but I also felt shittily happy, disgustingly relieved; light enough to dance up the walls and across the ceiling like Fred Astaire.

There were shuffling steps from behind me. I turned and there was my dad, doing his slow turtle-walk across the linoleum in his slippers. He went with one hand held out before him. The skin on it was beginning to look like a big loose glove.

"Did I just hear a young lady call a young gentleman a fucking jerk?" he asked in a mild just-passing-the-time voice.

"Well … yeah." I shuffled my feet. "I guess maybe you did."

He opened the fridge, groped, and brought out the jug of red tea. He drank it without sugar. I have taken it that same way on occasion,

and can tell you it tastes like almost nothing at all. My theory is that my dad always went for the red tea because it was the brightest thing in the icebox, and he always knew what it was.

“Soucie girl, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah, Dad. Annmarie.”

“All them Soucies have the distemper, Pete. Slammed the door, didn’t she?”

I was smiling. I couldn’t help it. It was a wonder the glass was still in that poor old door. “I guess she did.”

“You trade her in for a newer model up there t’the college, did you?”

That was a fairly complicated question. The simple answer—and maybe the truest, in the end—was no I hadn’t. That was the answer I gave.

He nodded, set out the biggest glass in the cabinet next to the fridge, and then looked like he was getting ready to pour the tea all over the counter and his own feet, anyway.

“Let me do that for you,” I said. “Okay?”

He made no reply but stood back and let me pour the tea. I put the three-quarters-full glass into his hands and the jug back in the fridge.

“Is it good, Dad?”

Nothing. He only stood there with the glass in both hands, the way a child holds a glass, drinking in little sips. I waited, decided he wasn’t going to reply, and fetched my suitcase out of the corner. I’d thrown my textbooks in on top of my clothes and now took them out.

“Studying on the first night of break,” Dad said, startling me—I’d almost forgotten he was there. “Gorry.”

“Well, I’m a little behind in a couple of classes. The teachers move a lot faster than the ones in high school.”

“College,” he said. A long pause. “You’re in college.”

It seemed almost to be a question, so I said, “That’s right, Dad.”

He stood there awhile longer, seeming to watch me as I stacked my books and notebooks. Maybe he was watching. Or maybe he was just standing there. You couldn’t tell, not for sure. At last he began to shuffle toward the door, neck stretched out, that defensive hand slightly raised, his other hand—the one with the glass of red tea in it—now curled against his chest. At the door he stopped. Without looking around, he said: “You’re well shut of that Soucie girl. All Soucies has got bad tempers. You can dress em up but you can’t take em out. You can do better.”

He went out, holding his glass of tea curled to his chest.

28

Until my brother and his wife showed up from New Gloucester, I actually did study, half caught up on my sociology, and slogged through forty pages of geology, all in three brain-busting hours. By the time I stopped to make coffee, I'd begun to feel faint stirrings of hope. I was behind, disastrously behind, but maybe not quite fatally behind. I felt like an outfielder who has tracked a ball back and back to the left-field wall; he stands there looking up but not giving up, knowing that the ball's going to carry over but also knowing that if he times his leap just right, he can catch it as it does. I could do that.

If, that was, I could stay out of the third-floor lounge in the future.

At quarter of ten my brother, who arrives nowhere while the sun is still up if he can help it, drove in. His wife of eight months, glamorous in a coat with a real mink collar, was carrying a bread pudding; Dave had a bowl of butter-beans. Only my brother of all people on earth would think of transporting butter-beans across county lines for Thanksgiving purposes. He's a good guy, Dave, my elder by six years and in 1966 an accountant for a small hamburger chain with half a dozen "shoppes" in Maine and New Hampshire. By 1996 there were eighty "shoppes" and my brother, along with three partners, owned the company. He's worth three million dollars—on paper, at least—and has had a triple bypass. One bypass for each million, I guess you could say.

Hard on Dave and Katie's heels came Mom from the Ladies' Aid, dusted with flour, exhilarated from good works, and overjoyed to have both of her sons in the house. There was a lot of cheerful babble. Our dad sat in the corner listening to it without adding anything … but he was smiling, his odd, big-pupiled eyes going from Dave's face to mine and then back to Dave's. It was actually our voices his eyes were responding to, I suppose. Dave wanted to know where Annmarie was. I said Annmarie and I had decided to cool it for awhile. Dave started to ask if that meant we were—

Before he could finish the question, both his mother and his wife gave him those sharp little female pokes that mean not now, buddy, not now. Looking at Mom's wide eyes, I guessed she would have her own questions for me later on. Probably quite a few of them. Mom wanted information. Moms always do.

Other than being called a fucking jerk by Annmarie and wondering from time to time how Carol Gerber was doing (mostly if she had changed her mind about coming back to school and if she was sharing her Thanksgiving with old Army-bound Sully-John), that was a pretty great holiday. The whole family showed up at one time or another on Thursday or Friday, it seemed, wandering through the house and gnawing on turkey-legs, watching football games on TV and roaring at the big plays, chopping wood for the kitchen stove (by Sunday night Mom had enough stovelengths to heat the house all winter with just the Franklin, if she'd wanted). After supper we ate pie and played Scrabble. Most entertaining of all, Dave and Katie had a huge fight over the house they were planning to buy, and Katie hucked a Tupperware dish of leftovers at my brother. I had taken a few lumps at Dave's hands over the years, and I liked watching that plastic container of squash bounce off the side of his head. Man, that was fun.

But underneath all the good stuff, the ordinary joy you feel when your whole family's there, was my fear of what was going to happen when I went back to school. I found an hour to study late Thursday night, after the fridge had been stuffed full of leftovers and everyone else had gone to bed, and two more hours on Friday afternoon, when there was a lull in the flow of relatives and Dave and Katie, their differences temporarily resolved, retired for what I thought was an extremely noisy "nap."

I still felt I could catch up—knew it, actually—but I also knew I couldn't do it alone, or with Nate. I had to buddy up with someone who understood the suicidal pull of that third-floor lounge, and how the blood surged when someone started playing spades in an effort

to force The Bitch. Someone who understood the primitive joy of managing to sock Ronnie with la femme noire.

It would have to be Skip, I thought. Even if Carol were to come back, she would never be able to understand in the same way. It had to be Skip and me, swimming out of deep water and in toward the shore. I thought if we stuck together, we could both pull through. Not that I cared so much about him. Admitting that feels scuzzy, but it's the truth. By Saturday of Thanksgiving break I'd done lots of soul-searching and understood I was mostly concerned about myself, mostly looking out for Number Six. If Skip wanted to use me, that was fine. Because I sure wanted to use him.

By noon Saturday I'd read enough geology to know I needed help on some of the concepts, and fast. There were only two more big test-periods in the semester: a set of prelims and then final exams. I would have to do really well on both to keep my scholarships.

Dave and Katie left at around seven on Saturday night, still bickering (but more good-naturedly) about the house they planned to buy in Pownal. I settled down at the kitchen table and started reading about out-group sanctions in my soash book. What it seemed to amount to was that even nerds have to have someone to shit on. A depressing concept.

At some point I became aware I wasn't alone. I looked up and saw my mother standing there in her old pink housecoat, her face ghostly with Pond's Cold Cream. I wasn't surprised that I hadn't heard her; after twenty-five years in the same little house, she knew where all the creaks and groans were. I thought she had finally gotten around to her questions about Annmarie, but it turned out that my love-life was the last thing on her mind.

"How much trouble are you in, Peter?" she asked.

I thought of about a hundred different answers, then settled for the truth. "I don't really know."

“Is it any one thing in particular?”

This time I didn’t tell the truth, and looking back on it I realize how telling that lie was: some part of me, alien to my best interests but very powerful, still reserved the right to frog-march me to the cliff … and over the edge.

Yeah, Mom, the third-floor lounge is the problem, cards are the problem—just a few hands is what I tell myself every time, and when I look up at the clock it’s quarter of midnight and I’m too tired to study. Hell, too wired to study. Other than play Hearts, all I’ve really managed to do this fall is lose my virginity.

If I could have said at least the first part of that, I think it would have been like guessing Rumpelstiltskin’s name and then speaking it out loud. But I didn’t say any of it. I told her it was just the pace of college; I had to redefine what studying meant, learn some new habits. But I could do it. I was sure I could.

She stood there a moment longer, her arms crossed and her hands deep in her housecoat sleeves—she looked sort of like a Chinese Mandarin when she stood that way—and then she said, “I’ll always love you, Pete. Your father, too. He doesn’t say it, but he feels it. We both do. You know that.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I know that.” I got up and hugged her. Pancreatic cancer was what got her. That one’s quick, at least, but it wasn’t quick enough. I guess none of them are when it’s someone you love.

“But you have to work hard at your studies. Boys who don’t work hard at them have been dying.” She smiled. There wasn’t much humor in it. “Probably you knew that.”

“I heard a rumor.”

“You’re still growing,” she said, tilting her head up.

“I don’t think so.”

“Yes. At least an inch since summer. And your hair! Why don’t you cut your hair?”

“I like it the way it is.”

“It’s as long as a girl’s. Take my advice, Pete, cut your hair. Look decent. You’re not one of those Rolling Stones or a Herman’s Hermit, after all.”

I burst out laughing. I couldn’t help it. “I’ll think about it, Mom, okay?”

“You do that.” She gave me another hard hug, then let me go. She looked tired, but I thought she also looked rather beautiful. “They’re killing boys across the sea,” she said. “At first I thought there was a good reason for it, but your father says it’s crazy and I’m not so sure he isn’t right. You study hard. If you need a little extra for books—or a tutor—we’ll scrape it up.”

“Thanks, Mom. You’re a peach.”

“Nope,” she said. “Just an old mare with tired feet. I’m going to bed.”

I studied another hour, then all the words started to double and triple in front of my eyes. I went to bed myself but couldn’t sleep. Every time I started to drift I saw myself picking up a Hearts hand and beginning to arrange it in suits. Finally I let my eyes roll open and just stared up at the ceiling. Boys who don’t work hard at their studies have been dying, my mother had said. And Carol telling me that this was a good time to be a girl, Lyndon Johnson had seen to that.

We chasin The Bitch!

Pass left or right?

Jesus Christ, fuckin Riley’s shootin the moon!

Voices in my head. Voices seeming to seep out of the very air.

Quitting the game was the only sane solution to my problems, but even with the third-floor lounge a hundred and thirty miles north of where I was lying, it had a hold on me, one which had little to do with sanity or rationality. I'd amassed twelve points in the uber tourney; only Ronnie, with fifteen, was now ahead of me. I didn't see how I could give those twelve points up, just walk away and leave that windbag Malenfant with a clear field. Carol had helped me keep Ronnie in some sort of perspective, allowed me to see him for the creepy, small-minded, bad-complexioned gnome that he was. Now that she was gone—

Ronnie's also going to be gone before long, the voice of reason interposed. If he lasts to the end of the semester it'll be a blue-eyed miracle. You know that.

True. And in the meantime, Ronnie had nothing else but Hearts, did he? He was clumsy, potbellied, and thin-armed, an old man waiting to happen. He wore a chip on his shoulder to at least partially hide his massive feelings of inferiority. His boasting about girls was ludicrous. Also, he wasn't really smart, like some of the kids currently in danger of flunking out (Skip Kirk, for instance). Hearts and empty brag were the only things Ronnie was good at, so far as I'd been able to tell, so why not just stand back and let him run the cards and run his mouth while he still could?

Because I didn't want to, that was why. Because I wanted to wipe the smirk off his hollow, pimply face and silence his grating blare of a laugh. It was mean but it was true. I liked Ronnie best when he was sulking, when he was glowering at me with his greasy hair tumbled down over his forehead and his lower lip pushed out.

Also, there was the game itself. I loved playing. I couldn't even stop thinking about it here, in my childhood bed, so how was I supposed to stay away from the lounge when I got back? How was I supposed to ignore Mark St. Pierre yelling at me to hurry up, there was a seat empty, everyone stood at zero on the scorepad and the game was about to commence? Christ!

I was still awake when the cuckoo clock in the parlor below me sang two o'clock. I got up, threw on my old tartan robe over my skivvies, and went downstairs. I got myself a glass of milk and sat at the kitchen table to drink it. There were no lights on except for the fluorescent bar over the stove, no sounds except for the sough of the furnace through the floor-grates and my father's soft snores from the back bedroom. I felt a little nutso, as if the combination of turkey and cramming had set off a minor earthquake in my head. And as if I might next fall asleep around, oh, say St. Patrick's Day.

I happened to glance into the entry. There, hung on one of the hooks above the woodbox, was my high-school jacket, the one with the big white GF entwined on the breast. Nothing else but the initials; I hadn't been much of a jock. When Skip asked me, shortly after we met at the University, if I'd lettered in anything, I'd told him I had the big M for masturbation—first team, the short overhand stroke my specialty. Skip had laughed until he cried, and maybe that was when we'd started being friends. Actually, I guess I could have gotten a D for debate or dramatics, but they don't give letters in those things, do they? Not then and not now.

High school seemed far in the past to me on that night, almost in another planetary system … but there was the jacket, a birthday present from my folks the year I turned sixteen. I crossed to the entry and took it off the hook. I put it up to my face and smelled it and thought of Period 5 study-hall with Mr. Mezensik—the bitter aroma of pencil-shavings, the girls whispering and giggling under their breath, faint shouts from outside as the phys ed kids played what the jocks called Remedial Volleyball. I saw that the place where the jacket had hung on the hook continued to stick up in a kind of dimple; the damned thing probably hadn't been worn, even by my mother to go out to grab the mail in her nightgown, since the previous April or May.

I thought of seeing Carol frozen in newsprint dots, her face shadowed by a sign reading U.S. OUT OF VIETNAM NOW!, her

ponytail lying against the collar of her own high-school jacket … and I had an idea.

Our telephone, a Bakelite dinosaur with a rotary dial, was on a table in the front hall. In the drawer beneath it was the Gates Falls phonebook, my mom's address book, and a litter of writing implements. One was a black laundry-marker. I took it back to the kitchen table and sat down again. I spread my high-school jacket over my knees, then used the marker to make a large sparrow-track on the back. As I worked I felt the nervous tension draining out of my muscles. It occurred to me that I could award myself my own letter if I wanted, and that was sort of what I was doing.

When I was done I held the jacket up and took a look. In the faint white light of the fluorescent bar, what I'd drawn looked harsh and declamatory and somehow childish:

But I liked it. I liked that motherfucker. I wasn't sure what I thought about the war even then, but I liked that sparrow-track quite a lot. And I felt as if I could finally go to sleep; drawing it had done that much for me, anyway. I rinsed out my milk-glass and went upstairs with my jacket under my arm. I stuck it in the closet and then lay down. I thought of Carol putting my hand inside her sweater and the taste of her breath in my mouth. I thought of how we had been only ourselves behind the fogged-up windows of my old station wagon, maybe our best selves. And I thought of how we had laughed as we stood watching the tatters of my Goldwater sticker blow away across the Steam Plant parking lot. I was thinking about that when I fell asleep.

I took my modified high-school jacket back to school on Sunday packed into my suitcase—despite her freshly voiced doubts about Mr. Johnson's and Mr. McNamara's war, my mom would have had lots of questions about the sparrow-track, and I didn't have answers to give, not yet.

I felt equipped to wear the jacket, though, and I did. I spilled beer and cigarette ashes on it, puked on it, bled on it, got teargassed in

Chicago while wearing it and screaming “The whole world is watching!” at the top of my lungs. Girls cried on the entwined GF on the left breast (by my senior year those letters were dingy gray instead of white), and one girl lay on it while we made love. We did it with no protection, so probably there’s a trace of semen on the quilted lining, too. By the time I packed up and left LSD Acres in 1970, the peace sign I drew on the back in my mother’s kitchen was only a shadow. But the shadow remained. Others might not see it, but I always knew what it was.

29

We came back to school on the Sunday after Thanksgiving in this order: Skip at five (he lived in Dexter, the closest of the three of us), me at seven, Nate at around nine.

I called Franklin Hall even before I unpacked my suitcase. No, the girl on the desk said, Carol Gerber wasn't back. She was plainly reluctant to say more, but I badgered her. There were two pink LEFT SCHOOL cards on the desk, she said. One of them had Carol's name and room number on it.

I thanked her and hung up. I stood there a minute, fogging up the booth with my cigarette smoke, then turned around. Across the hall I could see Skip sitting at one of the card-tables, just picking up a spilled trick.

I sometimes wonder if things might have been different if Carol had come back, or even if I'd beaten Skip back, had a chance to get to him before the third-floor lounge got to him. I didn't, though.

I stood there in the phone-booth, smoking a Pall Mall and feeling sorry for myself. Then, from across the way, someone screamed: "Oh shit no! I don't fuckin BELIEVE IT!"

To which Ronnie Malenfant (from where I stood in the phone-booth he was out of my view, but his voice was as unmistakable as the sound of a saw ripping through a knot in a pine-branch) hollered gleefully back: "Whoa, look at this—Randy Echolls takes the first Bitch of the post-Thanksgiving era!"

Don't go in there, I told myself. You are absolutely fucked if you do, fucked once and for all.

But of course I did. The tables were all taken, but there were three other guys—Billy Marchant, Tony DeLucca, and Hugh Brennan—standing around. We could snag a corner, if we so chose.

Skip looked up from his hand and shot me a high five in the smoky air. “Welcome back to the loonybin, Pete.”

“Hey!” Ronnie said, looking around. “Look who’s here! The only asshole in the place who can almost play the game! Where you been, Chuckles?”

“Lewiston,” I said, “fucking your grandmother.”

Ronnie cackled, his pimply cheeks turning red.

Skip was looking at me seriously, and maybe there was something in his eyes. I can’t say for sure. Time goes by, Atlantis sinks deeper and deeper into the ocean, and you have a tendency to romanticize. To mythologize. Maybe I saw that he had given up, that he intended to stay here and play cards and then go on to whatever was next; maybe he was giving me permission to go in my own direction. But I was eighteen, and more like Nate in many ways than I liked to admit. I had also never had a friend like Skip. Skip was fearless, Skip said fuck every other word, when Skip was eating at the Palace the girls couldn’t keep their eyes off him. He was the kind of babe magnet Ronnie could be only in his dampest dreams. But Skip also had something adrift inside of him, something like a bit of bone which may, after years of harmless wandering, pierce the heart or clog the brain. He knew it, too. Even then, with high school still sticking all over him like afterbirth, even then when he still thought he’d somehow wind up teaching school and coaching baseball, he knew it. And I loved him. The look of him, the smile of him, the walk and talk of him. I loved him and I would not leave him.

“So,” I said to Billy, Tony, and Hugh. “You guys want a lesson?”

“Nickel a point!” Hugh said, laughing like a loon. Shit, he was a loon. “Let’s go! Wheel em and deal em!”

Pretty soon we were in the corner, all four of us smoking furiously and the cards flying. I remembered the desperate cramming I’d done over the holiday weekend; remembered my mother saying that boys

who didn't work hard in school were dying these days. I remembered those things, but they seemed as distant as making love to Carol in my car while The Platters sang "Twilight Time."

I looked up once and saw Stoke Jones in the doorway, leaning on his crutches and looking at us with his usual distant contempt. His black hair was thicker than ever, the corkscrews crazier over his ears and heavier against the collar of his sweatshirt. He sniffed steadily, his nose dripped and his eyes were running, but otherwise he didn't seem any sicker than before the break.

"Stoke!" I said. "How are you doing?"

"Oh well, who knows," he said. "Better than you, maybe."

"Come on in, Rip-Rip, drag up a milking-stool," Ronnie said. "We'll teach you the game."

"You know nothing I want to learn," Stoke said, and went thumping away. We listened to his receding crutches and a brief coughing fit.

"That crippled-up queer loves me," Ronnie said. "He just can't show it."

"I'll show you something if you don't deal some fuckin cards," Skip said.

"I'm bewwy, bewwy scared," Ronnie said in an Elmer Fudd voice which only he found amusing. He laid his head on Mark St. Pierre's arm to show how terrified he was.

Mark lifted the arm, hard. "The fuck off me. This is a new shirt, Malenfant, I don't want your pimple-pus all over it."

Before Ronnie's face lit with amusement and he cawed laughter, I saw a moment of desperate hurt there. It left me unmoved. Ronnie's problems might be genuine, but they didn't make him any easier to like. To me he was just a blowhard who could play cards.

“Come on,” I said to Billy Marchant. “Hurry up and deal. I want to get some studying done later.” But of course there was no studying done by any of us that night. Instead of burning out over the holiday, the fever was stronger and hotter than ever.

I went down the hall around quarter of ten to get a fresh pack of smokes and knew Nate was back while I was still six doors away. “Love Grows Where My Rosemary Goes” was coming from the room Nick Prouty shared with Barry Margeaux, but from farther down I could hear Phil Ochs singing “The Draft Dodger Rag.”

Nate was deep in his closet, hanging up his clothes. Not only was he the only person I ever knew in college who wore pajamas, he was the only one who ever used the hangers. The only thing I myself had hung up was my high-school jacket. Now I took it out and began to rummage in the pockets for my cigarettes.

“Hey, Nate, how you doing? Get enough of that cranberry dressing to hold you?”

“I’m—” he began, then saw what was on the back of my jacket and burst out laughing.

“What?” I asked. “Is it that funny?”

“In a way,” he said, and leaned deeper into his closet. “Look.” He reappeared with an old Navy pea coat in his hands. He turned it around so I could see the back. On it, much neater than my freehand work, was the sparrow-track. Nate had rendered his in bright silver duct tape. This time we both laughed.

“Ike and Mike, they think alike,” I said.

“Nonsense. Great minds run in the same channel.”

“Is that what it is?”

“Well … what I like to think, anyway. Does this mean you’ve changed your mind about the war, Pete?”

“What mind?” I asked.

30

Andy White and Ashley Rice never came back to college at all—eight down, now. For the rest of us, there was an obvious change for the worse in the three days before that winter's first storm. Obvious, that was, to anyone else. If you were inside the thing, burning with the fever, it all seemed just a step or two north of normal.

Before Thanksgiving break, the card quartets in the lounge had a tendency to break up and re-form during the school-week; sometimes they died out altogether for awhile as kids went off to classes. Now the groups became almost static, the only changes occurring when someone staggered off to bed or table-hopped to escape Ronnie's skills and constant abrasive chatter. This settling occurred because most of the third-floor players hadn't returned to continue furthering their educations; Barry, Nick, Mark, Harvey, and I don't know how many others had pretty much given up on the education part. They had returned in order to resume the quest for totally valueless "match points." Many of the boys on Chamberlain Three were in fact now majoring in Hearts. Skip Kirk and I, sad to say, were among them. I made a couple of classes on Monday, then said fuck it and cut the rest. I cut everything on Tuesday, played Hearts in my dreams on Tuesday night (in one fragment I remember dropping The Bitch and seeing that her face was Carol's), then spent all day Wednesday playing it for real. Geology, sociology, history … all concepts without meaning.

In Vietnam, a fleet of B-52s hit a Viet Cong staging area outside Dong Ha. They also managed to hit a company of U.S. Marines, killing twelve and wounding forty—whoops, shit. And the forecast for Thursday was heavy snow turning to rain and freezing rain in the afternoon. Very few of us took note of this; certainly I had no reason to think that storm would change the course of my life.

I went to bed at midnight on Wednesday and slept heavily. If I had dreams of Hearts or Carol Gerber, I don't remember them. When I

woke up at eight o’clock on Thursday morning, it was snowing so heavily I could barely see the lights of Franklin Hall across the way. I showered, then padded down the hall to see if the game had started yet. There was one table going—Lennie Doria, Randy Echolls, Billy Marchant, and Skip. They looked pale and stubbly and tired, as if they had been there all night. Probably had been. I leaned in the doorway, watching the game. Outside in the snow, something quite a bit more interesting than cards was going on, but none of us knew it until later.

31

Tom Huckabee lived in King, the other boys' dorm in our complex. Becka Aubert lived in Franklin. They had become quite cozy in the last three or four weeks, and that included taking their meals together. They were coming back from breakfast on that snowy late-November morning when they saw something printed on the north side of Chamberlain Hall. That was the side which faced the rest of the campus … which faced East Annex in particular, where the big corporations held their job interviews.

They walked closer, stepping off the path and into the new snow—by then about four inches had fallen.

"Look," Becka said, pointing down at the snow. There were queer tracks there—not footprints but drag-marks, almost, and deep punched holes running in lines outside them. Tom Huckabee said they reminded him of tracks made by a person wearing skis and wielding ski-poles. Neither of them thought that someone using crutches might have made such tracks. Not then.

They drew closer to the side of the dorm. The letters there were big and black, but by then the snow was so heavy that they had to get within ten feet of the wall before they could read the words, which had been posted by someone with a can of spray-paint … and in a state of total piss-off, from the jagged look of the message. (Again, neither of them considered that someone trying to spray-paint a message while at the same time maintaining his balance on a set of crutches might not be able to manage much in the way of neatness.)

The message read:

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I've read that some criminals—perhaps a great many criminals—actually want to be caught. I think that was the case with Stoke Jones. Whatever he had come to the University of Maine looking for, he wasn't finding it. I believe he'd decided it was time to leave … and if he was going, he would make the grandest gesture a guy on crutches could manage before he did.

Tom Huckabee told dozens of kids about what was spray-painted on our dorm; so did Becka Aubert. One of the people she told was Franklin's second-floor proctor, a skinny self-righteous girl named Marjorie Stuttenheimer. Marjorie became quite a figure on campus by 1969, as founder and president of Christians for College America. The CCA supported the war in Vietnam and at their booth in the Memorial Union sold the little lapel flag-pins which Richard Nixon made so popular.

I was scheduled to work Thursday lunch at the Palace on the Plains, and while I might cut classes, it never crossed my mind to cut my job—I wasn't made that way. I gave my seat in the lounge to Tony DeLucca and started over to Holyoke at about eleven o'clock to do my dishly duty. I saw a fairly large group of students gathered in the snow, looking at something on the north side of my dorm. I walked over, read the message, and knew at once who'd put it there.

On Bennett Road, a blue University of Maine sedan and one of the University's two police cars were drawn up by the path leading to Chamberlain's side door. Margie Stuttenheimer was there, part of a little group that consisted of four campus cops, the Dean of Men, and Charles Ebersole, the University's Disciplinary Officer.

There were perhaps fifty people in the crowd when I joined it at the rear; in the five minutes I stood there rubbernecking, it swelled to seventy-five. By the time I finished wipedown-shutdown at one-fifteen and headed back to Chamberlain, there were probably two

hundred people gawping in little clusters. I suppose it's hard to believe now that any graffiti could have such a draw, especially on a shitty day like that one, but we are talking about a far different world, one where no magazine in America (except, very occasionally, Popular Photography) would show a nude so nude that the subject's pubic hair was on view, where no newspaper would dare so much as a whisper about any political figure's sex-life. This was before Atlantis sank; this was long ago and far away in a world where at least one comedian was jailed for uttering "fuck" in public and another observed that on The Ed Sullivan Show you could prick your finger but not finger your prick. It was a world where some words were still shocking.

Yes, we knew fuck. Of course we did. We said fuck all the time: fuck you, fuck your dog, go take a flying fuck at a rolling doughnut, fuck a duck, hey, go fuck your sister, the rest of us did. But there, written in black letters five feet high, were the words FUCK JOHNSON. Fuck the President of the United States! And KILLER PRESIDENT! Someone had called the President of the United States of America a murderer! We couldn't believe it.

When I came back from Holyoke, the other campus police car had arrived, and there were six campus cops—almost the whole damned force, I calculated—trying to put up a big rectangle of yellow canvas over the message. The crowd muttered, then started booing. The cops looked at them, annoyed. One shouted for them to break it up, go on, they all had places to go. That might have been true, but apparently most of them liked it right there, because the crowd didn't thin out much.

The cop holding the far left end of the canvas drop-cloth slipped in the snow and nearly fell. A few onlookers applauded. The cop who had slipped looked toward the sound with an expression of blackest hate momentarily congesting his face, and for me that's when things really started to change, when the generations really started to gap.

The cop who'd slipped turned away and began to struggle with the piece of canvas again. In the end they settled for covering the first

peace sign and the FUCK of FUCK JOHNSON! And once the Really Bad Word was hidden, the crowd did begin to break up. The snow was changing to sleet and standing around had become uncomfortable.

“Better not let the cops see the back of your jacket,” Skip said, and I looked around. He was standing beside me in a hooded sweatshirt, his hands plunged deep into the pouch in front. His breath came out of his mouth in frozen plumes; his eyes never left the campus cops and the part of the message which still remained: JOHNSON! KILLER PRESIDENT! U.S. OUT OF VIETNAM NOW! “They’ll think you did it. Or me.”

Smiling a little, Skip turned around. On the back of his sweatshirt, drawn in bright red ink, was another of those sparrow-tracks.

“Jesus,” I said. “When did you do that?”

“This morning,” he said. “I saw Nate’s.” He shrugged. “It was too cool not to copy.”

“They won’t think it was us. Not for a minute.”

“No, I suppose not.”

The only question was why they weren’t questioning Stoke already … not that they’d have to ask many questions to get the truth out of him. But if Ebersole, the Disciplinary Officer, and Garretsen, the Dean of Men, weren’t talking to him, it was only because they hadn’t yet talked to—

“Where’s Dearie?” I asked. “Do you know?” The sleet was falling hard now, rattling through the trees and pinging every inch of exposed skin.

“The young and heroic Mr. Dearborn is out sanding sidewalks and paths with a dozen or so of his ROTC buddies,” Skip said. “We saw them from the lounge. They’re driving around in a real army truck.

Malenfant said their pricks are probably so hard they won't be able to sleep on their stomachs for a week. I thought that was pretty good, for Ronnie."

"When Dearie comes back—"

"Yeah, when he comes back." Skip shrugged, as if to say all that was beyond our control. "Meantime, let's get out of this slop and play some cards, what do you say?"

I wanted to say a lot of stuff about a lot of things … but then again I didn't. We went back inside, and by mid-afternoon the game was in full swing once more. There were five four-handed "sub-games" going on, the room was blue with smoke, and someone had dragged in a phonograph so we could listen to the Beatles and the Stones. Someone else produced a scratched-up Cameo forty-five of "96 Tears" and that spun for at least an hour non-stop: cry cry cry. The windows gave a good view on Bennett's Run and Bennett's Walk, and I kept looking out there, expecting to see David Dearborn and some of his khaki buddies staring at the north side of the dorm, perhaps discussing if they should go after Stoke Jones with their carbines or just chase him with their bayonets. Of course they wouldn't do anything of the sort. They might chant "Kill Cong! Go U.S.!" while drilling on the football field, but Stoke was a cripple. They would happily settle for seeing his commie-loving ass busted out of the University of Maine.

I didn't want that to happen, but I didn't see any way it wouldn't. Stoke had had a sparrow-track on the back of his coat since the beginning of school, long before the rest of us were hip to what it meant, and Dearie knew it. Plus, Stoke would admit it. He'd deal with the Dean and the Disciplinary Officer's questions the same way he dealt with his crutches—at a full-out plunge.

And anyway, the whole thing began to seem distant, okay? The way classes did. The way Carol did, now that I understood she was really gone. The way the concept of being drafted and sent away to die in the jungle did. What seemed real and immediate was hunting out

that bad Bitch, or shooting the moon and hitting everyone else at your table with twenty-six points at a whack. What seemed real was Hearts.

But then something happened.

33

Around four o'clock the sleet changed to rain, and by four-thirty, when it began to get dark, we could see that Bennett's Run was under three or four inches of water. Most of the Walk looked like a canal. Below the water was an icy, melting slush Jell-O.

The pace of the games slowed as we watched those unfortunates who were working the dishline cross from the dorms to the Palace on the Plains. Some of them—the wiser ones—cut across the slope of the hillside, making their way through the rapidly melting snow. The others came down the paths, slipping and sliding on their treacherous, icy surfaces. A thick mist had begun to rise from the wet ground, making it even harder for people to see where they were going. One guy from King met a girl from Franklin at the place where the paths converged. When they started up Bennett's Walk together the guy slipped and grabbed the girl. They almost went down together, but managed to keep their combined balance. We all applauded.

At my table we began a hold hand. Ronnie's weaselly little friend Nick dealt me an incredible thirteen cards, maybe the best pat hand I'd ever gotten. It was a shoot-the-moon opportunity if ever I had one: six high hearts and no really low ones, the king and queen of spades, plus court-cards in the other two suits, as well. I had the seven of hearts, a borderline card, but you can catch people napping in a hold hand; no one expects you to shoot the moon in a situation where you can't improve your original draw.

Lennie Doria played The Douche to start us off. Ronnie immediately played void, ridding himself of the ace of spades. He thought that was great. So did I; my two court spades were now both winners. The queen was thirteen points, but if I got all the hearts, I wouldn't eat those points; Ronnie, Nick, and Lennie would.

I let Nick take the trick. We spilled three more tricks uneventfully—first Nick and then Lennie mined for diamonds—and then I took the ten of hearts mixed into a club trick.

“Hearts have been broken and Riley eats the first one!” Ronnie bugled gleefully. “You’re goin down, country boy!”

“Maybe,” I said. And maybe, I thought, Ronnie Malenfant would soon be smiling on the other side of his face. With a successful shoot, I could put the idiotic Nick Prouty over a hundred and cost Ronnie a game he’d been on his way to winning.

Three tricks later what I was doing became almost obvious. As I’d hoped, Ronnie’s smirk became the expression I most enjoyed seeing on his face—the disgruntled pout.

“You can’t,” he said. “I don’t believe it. Not in a hold hand. You ain’t got the fuckin horses.” Yet he knew it was possible. It was in his voice.

“Well, let’s see,” I said, and played the ace of hearts. I was running in the open now, but why not? If the hearts were spread evenly, I could win the game right here. “Let’s just see what we—”

“Look!” Skip called from the table nearest the window. His voice held disbelief and a kind of awe. “Jesus Christ, it’s fuckin Stokely!”

Play stopped. We all swivelled in our chairs to look out the window at the darkening, dripping world below us. The quartet of boys in the corner stood up to see. The old wrought-iron lamps on Bennett’s Walk cast weak electric beams through the groundmist, making me think of London and Tyne Street and Jack the Ripper. From its place on the hill, Holyoke Commons looked more like an ocean liner than ever. Its shape wavered as rain streamed down the lounge windows.

“Fuckin Rip-Rip, out in this crap—I don’t believe it,” Ronnie breathed.

Stoke came rapidly down the path which led from the north entrance of Chamberlain to the place where all the asphalt paths joined in the lowest part of Bennett's Run. He was wearing his old duffle coat, and it was clear he hadn't just come from the dorm; the coat was soaked through. Even through the streaming glass we could see the peace sign on his back, as black as the words which were now partly covered by a rectangle of yellow canvas (if it was still up). His wild hair was soaked into submission.

Stoke never looked toward his KILLER PRESIDENT graffiti, just thumped on toward Bennett's Walk. He was going faster than I'd ever seen him, paying no heed to the driving rain, the rising mist, or the slop under his crutches. Did he want to fall? Was he daring the slushy crap to take him down? I don't know. Maybe he was just too deep in his own thoughts to have any idea of how fast he was moving or how bad the conditions were. Either way, he wasn't going to get far if he didn't cool it.

Ronnie began to giggle, and the sound spread the way a little flame spreads through dry tinder. I didn't want to join in but was helpless to stop. So, I saw, was Skip. Partly because giggling is contagious, but also because it really was funny. I know how unkind that sounds, of course I do, but I've come too far not to tell the truth about that day … and this day, almost half a lifetime later. Because it still seems funny to me, I still smile when I think back to how he looked, a frantic clockwork toy in a duffle coat thudding along through the pouring rain, his crutches splashing up water as he went. You knew what was going to happen, you just knew it, and that was the funniest part of all—the question of just how far he could make it before the inevitable wipeout.

Lennie was roaring with one hand clutched to his face, staring out between his splayed fingers, his eyes streaming. Hugh Brennan was holding his not inconsiderable gut and braying like a donkey stuck in a mudhole. Mark St. Pierre was howling uncontrollably and saying he was gonna piss himself, he'd drunk too many Cokes and he was gonna spray his fuckin jeans. I was laughing so hard I couldn't hold

my cards; the nerves in my right hand went dead, my fingers relaxed, and those last few winning tricks fluttered into my lap. My head was pounding and my sinuses were full.

Stoke made the bottom of the dip, where the Walk started. There he paused and for some reason did a crazed three-sixty spin, seeming to balance on one crutch. The other crutch he held out like a machine-gun, as if in his mind he was spraying the whole campus—Kill Cong! Slaughter proctors! Bayonet those upperclassmen!

“Annnd … the Olympic judges give him … ALL TENS!” Tony DeLucca called in a perfect sports announcer’s voice. It was the final touch; the place turned into bedlam on the spot. Cards flew everywhere. Ashtrays spilled, and one of the glass ones (most were just those little aluminum Table Talk pie-dishes) broke. Someone fell out of his chair and began to roll around, bellowing and kicking his legs. Man, we just couldn’t stop laughing.

“That’s it!” Mark was howling. “I just drowned my Jockeys! I couldn’t help it!” Behind him Nick Prouty was crawling toward the window on his knees with tears coursing down his burning face and his hands held out, the wordless begging gesture of a man who wants to say make it stop, make it stop before I burst a fuckin blood-vessel in the middle of my brain and die right here.

Skip got up, overturning his chair. I got up. Laughing our brains out, we groped for one another and staggered toward the window with our arms slung around each other’s back. Below, unaware that he was being watched and laughed at by two dozen or so freaked-out cardplayers, Stoke Jones was still, amazingly, on his feet.

“Go Rip-Rip!” Ronnie began to chant. “Go Rip-Rip!” Nick joined in. He had reached the window and was leaning his forehead against it, still laughing.

“Go, Rip-Rip!”

“Go, baby!”

“Go!”

“On, Rip-Rip! Mush those huskies!”

“Work those crutches, big boy!”

“Go you fuckin Rip-Rip!”

It was like the last play of a close football game, except everyone was chanting Go Rip-Rip instead of Hold that line or Block that kick. Almost everyone; I wasn’t chanting, and I don’t think Skip was, either, but we were laughing. We were laughing just as hard as the rest.

Suddenly I thought of the night Carol and I had sat on the milk-boxes beside Holyoke, the night she had shown me the snapshot of herself and her childhood friends … and then told me the story of what those other boys had done to her. What they had done with a baseball bat. At first they were joking, I think, Carol had said. And had they been laughing? Probably, yeah. Because that’s what you did when you were joking around, having a good time, you laughed.

Stoke stood where he was for a moment, hanging from his crutches with his head down … and then he attacked the hill like the Marines going ashore at Tarawa. He went tearing up Bennett’s Walk, spraying water everywhere with his flying crutches; it was like watching a duck with rabies.

The chant became deafening: “GO RIP-RIP! GO RIP-RIP! GO RIP-RIP!”

At first they were joking, she had said as we sat there on the milk-boxes, smoking our cigarettes. By then she was crying, her tears silver in the white light from the dining hall above us. At first they were joking and then … they weren’t.

That thought ended the joke of Stoke for me—I swear to you that it did. And still I couldn’t stop laughing.

Stokely made it about a third of the way up the hill toward Holyoke, almost back to the visible bricks, before the slippery-slop finally got him. He planted his crutches far in advance of his body—too far for even dry conditions—and when he swung forward, both sticks flew out from under him. His legs flipped up like the legs of a gymnast doing some fabulous trick on the balance beam, and he went down on his back with a tremendous splash. We could hear it even from the third-floor lounge. It was the final perfect touch.

The lounge looked like a lunatic asylum where the inmates had all come down with food-poisoning at the same time. We staggered aimlessly about, laughing and clutching at our throats, our eyes spouting tears. I was hanging onto Skip because my legs would no longer support me; my knees felt like noodles. I was laughing harder than I ever had in my life, harder than I ever have since, I think, and still I kept thinking about Carol sitting there on the milk-box beside me, legs crossed, cigarette in one hand, snapshot in the other, Carol saying Harry Doolin hit me … Willie and the other one held me so I couldn't run away … at first they were joking, I think, and then … they weren't.

Out on Bennett's Walk, Stoke tried to sit up. He got his upper body partway out of the water … and then lay back, full length, as if that icy, slushy water were a bed. He lifted both arms skyward in a gesture which was almost invocatory, then let them fall again. It was every surrender ever given summed up in three motions: the lying back, the lifting of the arms, the double splash as they fell back wide to either side. It was the ultimate fuck it, do what you want, I quit.

"Come on," Skip said. He was still laughing but he was also completely serious. I could hear the seriousness in his laughing voice and see it in his hysterically contorted face. I was glad it was there, God I was glad. "Come on, before the stupid motherfuck drowns."

Skip and I crammed through the doorway of the lounge shoulder to shoulder and sprinted down the third-floor hall, bouncing off each other like pinballs, reeling, almost as out of control as Stoke had

been on the path. Most of the others followed us. The only one I know for sure who didn't was Mark; he went down to his room to change out of his soaked jeans.

We met Nate on the second-floor landing—damned near ran him down. He was standing there with an armload of books in a plastic sack, looking at us with some alarm.

"Good grief," he said. That was Nate at his strongest, good grief. "What's wrong with you?"

"Come on," Skip said. His throat was so choked the words came out in a growl. If I hadn't been with him earlier, I'd have thought he'd just finished a fit of weeping. "It's not us, it's fuckin Jones. He fell down. He needs—" Skip broke off as laughter—great big belly-gusts of it—overtook him and shook him once again. He fell back against the wall, rolling his eyes in a kind of hilarious exhaustion. He shook his head as if to deny it, but of course you can't deny laughter; when it comes, it plops down in your favorite chair and stays as long as it wants. Above us, the stairs began to thunder with descending third-floor cardplayers. "He needs help," Skip finished, wiping his eyes.

Nate looked at me in growing bewilderment. "If he needs help, why are you guys laughing?"

I couldn't explain it to him. Hell, I couldn't explain it to myself. I grabbed Skip by the arm and yanked. We started down the steps to the first floor. Nate followed us. So did the rest.

34

The first thing I saw when we banged out through the north door was that rectangle of yellow canvas. It was lying on the ground, full of water and floating lumps of slush. Then the water on the path started pouring in through my sneakers and I forgot all about sightseeing. It was freezing. The rain drove down on my exposed skin in needles that were not quite ice.

In Bennett's Run the water was ankle-deep, and my feet went from cold to numb. Skip slipped and I grabbed his arm. Nate steadied us both from behind and kept us from tumbling over backward. Ahead of us I could hear a nasty sound that was half coughing and half choking. Stoke lay in the water like a sodden log, his duffle coat floating around his body and those masses of black hair floating around his face. The cough was deep and bronchial. Fine droplets sprayed from his lips with each gagging, choking outburst. One of his crutches lay next to him, caught between his arm and his side. The other was floating away in the direction of Bennett Hall.

Water slopped over Stoke's pale face. His coughing took on a strangled, gargling quality. His eyes stared straight up into the rain and fog. He gave no sign that he heard us coming, but when I knelt on one side of him and Skip on the other, he tried to beat us away with his hands. Water ran into his mouth and he began to thrash. He was drowning in front of us. I no longer felt like laughing, but I might still have been doing it. At first they were joking, Carol said. At first they were joking. Put on the radio, Pete, I like the oldies.

"Pick him up," Skip said, and grabbed one of Stoke's shoulders. Stoke slapped at him weakly with one wax-dummy hand. Skip ignored this, might not even have felt it. "Hurry, for Christ's sake."

I grabbed Stoke's other shoulder. He splashed water in my face as though we were fucking around in someone's backyard pool. I had

thought he'd be as cold as I was, but there was a sickish heat coming off his skin. I looked across his waterlogged body to Skip.

Skip nodded back at me. "Ready … set … now."

We heaved. Stoke came partly out of the water—from the waist up—but that was all. I was astounded by the weight of him. His shirt had come untucked from his pants and floated around his middle like a ballerina's tutu. Below it I could see his white skin and the black bullethole of his navel. There were scars there, too, healed scars wavering every whichway like snarls of knotted string.

"Help out, Natie!" Skip grunted. "Prop him up, for fuck's sake!"

Nate dropped to his knees, splashing all three of us, and grabbed Stoke in a kind of backwards hug. We struggled to get him all the way up and out of the soup, but the slush on the bricks kept us off-balance, made it impossible for us to work together. And Stoke, although still coughing and half-drowned, was also working against us, struggling as best he could to be free of us. Stoke wanted to go back in the water.

The others arrived, Ronnie in the lead. "Fucking Rip-Rip," he breathed. He was still giggling, but he looked slightly awestruck. "You screwed up big this time, Rip. No doubt."

"Don't just stand there, you numb tool!" Skip cried. "Help us!"

Ronnie paused a moment longer, not angry, just assessing how this might best be done, then turned to see who else was there. He slipped on the slush and Tony DeLucca—also still giggling—grabbed him and steadied him. They were crowded together on the drowned Walk, all my cardplaying buddies from the third-floor lounge, and most of them still couldn't stop laughing. They looked like something, but I didn't know what. I might never have known, if not for Carol's Christmas present … but of course that came later.

"You, Tony," Ronnie said. "Brad, Lennie, Barry. Let's get his legs."

“What about me, Ronnie?” Nick asked. “What about me?”

“You’re too small to help lift him,” Ronnie said, “but it might cheer him up to get his dick sucked.”

Nick stood back.

Ronnie, Tony, Brad, Lennie, and Barry Margeaux slipped past us on either side. Ronnie and Tony got Stoke by the calves.

“Christ Jesus!” Tony cried, disgusted and still half-laughing. “Nothing to him! Legs like on a scarecrow!”

” ‘Legs like on a scarecrow, legs like on a scarecrow!’ ” Ronnie cried, viciously mimicking. “Pick him the fuck up, you wop nimrod, this isn’t art appreciation! Lennie and Barry, get under his deprived ass when they do. Then you come up—”

“—when the rest of you guys lift him,” Lennie finished. “Got it. And don’t call my paisan a wop.”

“Leave me alone,” Stoke coughed. “Stop it, get away from me … fucking losers …” The coughing overtook him again. He began to make gruesome retching sounds. In the lamplight his lips looked gray and slick.

“Look who’s talkin about being a loser,” Ronnie said. “Fuckin half-drowned crippled-up Jerry’s Kid homo.” He looked at Skip, water running out of his wavy hair and over his pimply face. “Count us off, Kirk.”

“One … two … three … now!”

We lifted. Stoke Jones came out of the water like a salvaged ship. We staggered back and forth with him. One of his arms flopped in front of me; it hung there for a moment and then the hand attached to the end of it arced up and slapped me hard across the face. Whacko! I started laughing again.

“Put me down! Motherfuckers, put me DOWN!”

We staggered, dancing on the slush, water pouring off him, water pouring off us. “Echolls!” Ronnie bawled. “Marchant! Brennan! Jesus Christ, little help here you fuckin brain-dead ringmeats, what do you say?”

Randy and Billy splashed forward. Others—three or four drawn by the shouts and splashing, most still from the third-floor Hearts group—took hold of Stoke as well. We turned him awkwardly, probably looking like the world’s most spastic cheerleading squad, for some reason out practicing in the downpour. Stoke had quit struggling. He lay in our grip, arms hanging out to either side, palms up and filling with little cups of rain. Diminishing waterfalls ran out of his sodden jacket and from the seat of his pants. He picked me up and carried me, Carol had said. Talking about the boy with the crewcut, the boy who had been her first love. All the way up Broad Street on one of the hottest days of the year. He carried me in his arms. I couldn’t get her voice out of my head. In a way I never have.

“The dorm?” Ronnie asked Skip. “We takin him into the dorm?”

“Jeepers, no,” Nate said. “The infirmary.”

Since we’d managed to get him out of the water—that was the hardest part and it was behind us—the infirmary made sense. It was a small brick building just beyond Bennett Hall, no more than three or four hundred yards away. Once we got off the path and onto the road, the footing would be good.

So we carried him to the infirmary—bore him up at shoulder height like a slain hero being ceremonially removed from the field of battle. Some of us were still laughing in little snorts and giggles. I was one of them. Once I saw Nate looking at me as if I was a thing almost below contempt, and I tried to stop the sounds that were coming out of me. I’d do okay for a little while, then I’d think of him spinning on the pivot of his crutch (“The Olympic judges give him … ALL TENS!”) and I’d start in again.

Stoke only spoke once as we carried him up the walk to the infirmary door. “Let me die,” he said. “For once in your stupid greedy-me-me lives do something worthwhile. Put me down and let me die.”

35

The waiting room was empty, the television in the corner showing an old episode of Bonanza to no one at all. In those days they hadn't really found the handle on color TV yet, and Pa Cartwright's face was the color of a fresh avocado. We must have sounded like a herd of hippopotami just out of the watering-hole, and the duty-nurse came on the run. Following her was a candystriper (probably a work-study kid like me) and a little guy in a white coat. He had a stethoscope hung around his neck and a cigarette poked in the corner of his mouth. In Atlantis even the doctors smoked.

"What's the trouble with him?" The doc asked Ronnie, either because Ronnie had an in-charge look or because he was the closest at hand.

"Took a header in Bennett's Run while he was on his way to Holyoke," Ronnie said. "Damned near drowned himself." He paused, then added: "He's a cripple."

As if to underline this point, Billy Marchant waved one of Stoke's crutches. Apparently no one had bothered to salvage the other one.

"Put that thing down, you want to fuckin bonk my brains out?" Nick Prouty asked waspishly, ducking.

"What brains?" Brad responded, and we all laughed so hard we nearly dropped Stoke.

"Suck me sideways, ass-breath," Nick said, but he was laughing, too.

The doctor was frowning. "Bring him in here, and save that language for your bull sessions." Stoke began coughing again, a deep, ratcheting sound. You expected to see blood and filaments of tissue come popping out of his mouth, that cough was so heavy.

We carried Stoke down the infirmary hallway in a conga-line, but we couldn't get him through the door that way. "Let me," Skip said.

"You'll drop him," Nate said.

"No," Skip said. "I won't. Just let me get a good hold."

He stepped up beside Stoke, then nodded first to me on his right, then to Ronnie on his left.

"Lower him down," Ronnie said. We did. Skip grunted once as he took Stoke's weight, and I saw the veins pop out in his neck. Then we stood back and Skip carried Stoke into the room and laid him on the exam table. The thin sheet of paper covering the leather was immediately soaked. Skip stepped back. Stoke was staring up at him, his face dead pale except for two red patches high on his cheekbones—red as rouge, those patches were. Water ran out of his hair in rivulets.

"Sorry, man," Skip said.

Stoke turned his head away and closed his eyes.

"Out," the doctor told Skip. He had ditched the cigarette somewhere. He looked around at us, a gaggle of perhaps a dozen boys, most still grinning, all dripping on the hall's tile floor. "Does anyone know the nature of his disability? It can make a difference in how we treat him."

I thought of the scars I'd seen, those tangles of knotted string, but said nothing. I didn't really know anything. And now that the uncontrollable urge to laugh had passed, I felt too ashamed of myself to speak up.

"It's just one of those cripple things, isn't it?" Ronnie asked. Actually faced with an adult, he had lost his shrill cockiness. He sounded unsure, perhaps even uneasy. "Muscular palsy or cerebral dystrophy?"

“You clown,” Lennie said. “It’s muscular dystrophy and cerebral—”

“He was in a car accident,” Nate said. We all looked around at him. Nate still looked neat and totally put together in spite of the soaking he’d taken. This afternoon he was wearing a Fort Kent High School ski-hat. The Maine football team had finally scored a touchdown and freed Nate from his beanie; go you Black Bears. “Four years ago. His father, mother, and older sister were killed. He was the only family survivor.”

There was silence. I looked between Skip and Tony’s shoulders and into the examination room. Stoke still lay streaming on the table, his head turned to the side, his eyes shut. The nurse was taking his blood pressure. His pants clung to his legs and I thought of the Fourth of July parade they used to have back home in Gates Falls when I was just a little kid. Uncle Sam would come striding along between the school band and the Anah Temple Shrine guys on their midget motorcycles, looking at least ten feet tall in his starry blue hat, but when the wind blew his pants against his legs you could see the trick. That’s what Stoke Jones’s legs looked like inside his wet pants: a trick, a bad joke, sawed-off stilts with sneakers poked onto the ends of them.

“How do you know that?” Skip asked. “Did he tell you, Natie?”

“No.” Nate looked ashamed. “He told Harry Swidrowski, after a Committee of Resistance meeting. They—we—were in the Bear’s Den. Harry asked him right out what happened to his legs and Stoke told him.”

I thought I understood the look on Nate’s face. After the meeting, he had said. After. Nate didn’t know what had been said at the meeting, because Nate hadn’t been there. Nate wasn’t a member of the Committee of Resistance; Nate was strictly a sidelines boy. He might agree with the C.R.‘s goals and tactics … but he had his mother to think about. And his future as a dentist.

“Spinal injury?” the doctor asked. Brisker than ever.

“I think so, yeah,” Nate said.

“All right.” Doc began to make shooing gestures with his hands as if we were a flock of geese. “Go on back to your dorms. We’ll take good care of him.”

We began to back up toward the reception area.

“Why were you boys laughing when you brought him in?” the nurse asked suddenly. She stood by the doctor with the blood-pressure cuff in her hands. “Why are you grinning now?” She sounded angry. Hell, she sounded furious. “What was so funny about this boy’s misfortune that it made you laugh?”

I didn’t think anyone would answer. We’d just stand there and look down at our shuffling feet, realizing that we were still a lot closer to the fourth grade than we had perhaps thought. But someone did answer. Skip answered. He even managed to look at her as he did.

“His misfortune, ma’am,” he said. “That was what it was, you’re right. It was his misfortune that was funny.”

“How terrible,” she said. There were tears of rage standing in the corners of her eyes. “How terrible you are.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Skip said. “I guess you’re right about that, too.” He turned away from her.

We followed him back to the reception area in a wet and beaten little group. I can’t say that being called terrible was the low point of my college career (“If you can remember much of the sixties, you weren’t there,” the hippie known as Wavy Gravy once said), but it may have been. The waiting room was still empty. Little Joe Cartwright was on the tube now, and just as green as his dad. Pancreatic cancer was what got Michael Landon, too—he and my mother had that in common.

Skip stopped. Ronnie, head down, pushed past him toward the door, followed by Nick, Billy, Lennie, and the rest.

“Hold it,” Skip said, and they turned. “I want to talk to you guys about something.”

We gathered around him. Skip glanced once toward the door leading back to the exam area, verified that we were alone, then began to talk.

36

Ten minutes later Skip and I walked back to the dorm by ourselves. The others had gone ahead. Nate hung with us for a little bit, then must have picked up a vibe that I wanted to talk privately to Skip. Nate was always good at picking up the vibe. I bet he's a good dentist, that the children in particular like him.

"I'm done playing Hearts," I said.

Skip said nothing.

"I don't know if it's too late to pull up my grades enough to keep my scholarship or not, but I'm going to try. And I don't care much, one way or the other. The fucking scholarship's not the point."

"No. They're the point, right? Ronnie and the rest of them."

"I think they're only part of it." It was so cold out there as that day turned to dark—cold and damp and evil. It seemed that it would never be summer again. "Man, I miss Carol. Why'd she have to go?"

"I don't know."

"When he fell over it sounded like a nuthouse up there," I said. "Not a college dorm, a fucking nuthouse."

"You laughed too, Pete. So did I."

"I know," I said. I might not have if I'd been alone, and Skip and I might not have if it had just been the two of us, but how could you tell? You were stuck with the way things played out. I kept thinking of Carol and those boys with their baseball bat. And I thought of the way Nate had looked at me, as if I were a thing below contempt. "I know."

We walked in silence for awhile.

“I can live with laughing at him, I guess,” I said, “but I don’t want to wake up forty with my kids asking me what college was like and not be able to remember anything but Ronnie Malenfant telling Polish jokes and that poor fucked-up asshole McClendon trying to kill himself with baby aspirin.” I thought about Stoke Jones twirling on his crutch and felt like laughing; thought of him lying beached on the exam table in the infirmary and felt like crying. And you know what? It was, as far as I could tell, exactly the same feeling. “I just feel bad about it. I feel like shit.”

“So do I,” Skip said. The rain poured down around us, soaking and cold. The lights of Chamberlain Hall were bright but not particularly comforting. I could see the yellow canvas the cops had put up lying on the grass, and above it the dim shapes of the spray-painted letters. They were running in the rain; by the following day they would be all but unreadable.

“When I was a little kid, I always pretended I was the hero,” Skip said.

“Fuck yeah, me too. What little kid ever pretended to be part of the lynch-mob?”

Skip looked down at his soaked shoes, then up at me. “Could I study with you for the next couple of weeks?”

“Any time you want.”

“You really don’t mind?”

“Why would I fuckin mind?” I made myself sound irritated because I didn’t want him to hear how relieved I was, how almost thrilled I was. Because it might work. I paused, then said, “This other … do you think we can pull it off?”

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

We had almost reached the north entrance, and I pointed to the running letters just before we went in. “Maybe Dean Garretsen and that guy Ebersole will let the whole thing drop. The paint Stoke used didn’t get a chance to set. It’ll be gone by morning.”

Skip shook his head. “They won’t let it drop.”

“Why not? How can you be so sure?”

“Because Dearie won’t let them.”

And of course he was right.

37

For the first time in weeks the third-floor lounge was empty for awhile as drenched cardplayers dried themselves off and put on fresh clothes. Many of them also took care of some stuff Skip Kirk had suggested in the infirmary waiting room. When Nate and Skip and I came back from dinner, however, it was business as usual in the lounge—three tables were up and going.

“Hey, Riley,” Ronnie said. “Twiller here says he’s got a study date. If you want his seat, I’ll teach you how to play the game.”

“Not tonight,” I said. “Got studying to do myself.”

“Yeah,” Randy Echolls said. “The Art of Self-Abuse.”

“That’s right, honey, a couple more weeks of hard work and I’ll be able to switch hands without missing a stroke, just like you.”

As I started away, Ronnie said, “I had you stopped, Riley.”

I turned around. Ronnie was leaning back in his chair, smiling that unpleasant smile of his. For a short period of time, out there in the rain, I had glimpsed a different Ronnie, but that young man had gone back into hiding.

“No,” I said, “you didn’t. It was a done deal.”

“No one shoots the moon on a hold hand,” Ronnie said, leaning back farther than ever. He scratched one cheek, busting the heads off a couple of pimples. They oozed tendrils of yellow-white cream. “Not at my table they don’t. I had you stopped in clubs.”

“You were void in clubs, unless you reneged on the first trick. You played the ace of spades when Lennie played The Douche. And in hearts I had the whole court.”

Ronnie’s smile faltered for just a moment, then came back strong. He waved a hand at the floor, from which all the spilled cards had been picked up (the butty remains of the overturned ashtrays still remained; most of us had been raised in homes where moms cleaned up such messes). “All the high hearts, huh? Too bad we can’t check and see.”

“Yeah. Too bad.” I started away again.

“You’re going to fall behind on match points!” he called after me. “You know that, don’t you?”

“You can have mine, Ronnie. I don’t want them anymore.”

I never played another hand of Hearts in college. Many years later I taught my kids the game, and they took to it like ducks to water. We have a tournament at the summer cottage every August. There are no match points, but there’s a trophy from Atlantic Awards—a loving cup. I won it one year, and kept it on my desk where I could see it. I shot the moon twice in the championship round, but neither was a hold hand. Like my old school buddy Ronnie Malenfant once said, no one shoots the moon on a hold hand. You might as well expect Atlantis to rise from the ocean, palm trees waving.

38

At eight o’clock that night, Skip Kirk was at my desk and deep in his anthro text. His hands were plunged into his hair, as if he had a bad headache. Nate was at his desk, doing a botany paper. I was sprawled on my bed, struggling with my old friend geology. On the stereo Bob Dylan sang: “She was the funniest woman I ever seen, the great-grandmother of Mr. Clean.”

There was a hard double rap on the door: pow-pow. So must the Gestapo have rapped on the doors of Jews in 1938 and 1939. “Floor meeting!” Dearie called. “Floor meeting in the rec at nine o’clock! Attendance mandatory!”

“Oh Christ,” I said. “Burn the secret papers and eat the radio.”

Nate turned down Dylan, and we heard Dearie going on up the hall, rapping that pow-pow on every door and yelling about the floor meeting in the rec. Most of the rooms he was hailing were probably empty, but no problem; he’d find the occupants down in the lounge, chasing The Bitch.

Skip was looking at me. “Told you,” he said.

39

Each dorm in our complex had been built at the same time, and each had a big common area in the basement as well as the lounges in the center of each floor. There was a TV alcove which filled up mostly for weekend sports events and a vampire soap opera called Dark Shadows during the week; a canteen corner with half a dozen vending machines; a Ping-Pong table and a number of chess-and checkerboards. There was also a meeting area with a podium standing before several rows of folding wooden chairs. We'd had a floor-meeting there at the beginning of the year, at which Dearie had explained the dorm rules and the dire consequences of unsatisfactory room inspections. I'd have to say that room inspections were Dearie's big thing. That and ROTC, of course.

He stood behind the little wooden podium, upon which he had laid a thin file-folder. I supposed it contained his notes. He was still dressed in his damp and muddy ROTC fatigues. He looked exhausted from his day of shovelling and sanding, but he also looked excited … "turned on" is how we'd put it a year or two later.

Dearie had been on his own at the first floor-meeting; this time he had backup. Sitting against the green cinderblock wall, hands folded in his lap and knees primly together, was Sven Garretsen, the Dean of Men. He said almost nothing during that meeting, and looked benign even when the air grew stormy. Standing beside Dearie, wearing a black topcoat over a charcoal-gray suit and looking very can-do, was Ebersole, the Disciplinary Officer.

After we had settled in the chairs and those of us who smoked had lit up, Dearie looked first over his shoulder at Garretsen, then at Ebersole. Ebersole gave him a little smile. "Go ahead, David. Please. They're your boys."

I felt a rankle of irritation. I might be a lot of things, including a creep who laughed at cripples when they fell down in the pouring rain, but I

was not Dearie Dearborn's boy.

Dearie gripped the podium and looked at us solemnly, perhaps thinking (far back in the part of his mind reserved expressly for dreamy dreams) that a day would come when he would address his staff officers this way, setting some great tide of Hanoi-bound troops into motion.

"Jones is missing," he said finally. It came out sounding portentous and corny, like a line in a Charles Bronson movie.

"He's in the infirmary," I said, and enjoyed the surprise on Dearie's face. Ebersole looked surprised, too. Garretsen just went on gazing benignly into the middle distance, like a man on a three-pipe high.

"What happened to him?" Dearie asked. This wasn't in the script—either the one he had worked out or the one he and Ebersole had prepared together—and Dearie began to frown. He was also gripping the podium more tightly, as if afraid it might fly away.

"Faw down go boom," Ronnie said, and puffed up when the people around him laughed. "Also, I think he's got pneumonia or double bronchitis or something like that." He caught Skip's eye and I thought Skip nodded slightly. This was Skip's show, not Dearie's, but if we were lucky—if Stoke was lucky—the three at the front of the room would never know it.

"Tell me this from the beginning," Dearie said. The frown was becoming a glower. It was the way he'd looked after discovering his door had been shaving-creamed.

Skip told Dearie and Dearie's new friends how we'd seen Stoke heading toward the Palace on the Plains from the third-floor lounge windows, how he'd fallen into the water, how we'd rescued him and taken him to the infirmary, how the doctor had said Stoke was one sick puppy. The doc hadn't said any such thing, but he didn't need to. Those of us who had touched Stoke's skin knew that he was running a fever, and all of us had heard that horrible deep cough.

Skip said nothing about how fast Stoke had been moving, as if he wanted to kill the whole world and then die himself, and he said nothing about how we'd laughed, Mark St. Pierre so hard he'd wet his pants.

When Skip finished, Dearie glanced uncertainly at Ebersole. Ebersole looked back blandly. Behind them, Dean Garretsen continued to smile his little Buddha smile. The implication was clear. It was Dearie's show. He'd better have a show to put on.

Dearie took a deep breath and looked back at us. "We believe Stokely Jones was responsible for the act of vandalism and public obscenity which was perpetrated on the north end of Chamberlain Hall at a time we don't know when this morning."

I'm telling you exactly what he said, not making a single word of it up. Other than "It became necessary to destroy the village in order to save it," that was perhaps the most sublime example of honchospeak I ever heard in my life.

I believe Dearie expected us to ooh and aah like the extras in a Perry Mason courtroom finale, where the revelations start coming thick and fast. Instead we were silent. Skip watched closely, and when he saw Dearie draw in another deep breath for the next pronouncement, he said: "What makes you think it was him, Dearie?"

Although I'm not completely sure—I never asked him—I believe Skip used the nickname purposely, to throw Dearie even further off his stride. In any case it worked. Dearie started to go off, looked at Ebersole, and recalculated his options. A red line was rising out of his collar. I watched it climb, fascinated. It was a little like watching a Disney cartoon where Donald Duck is trying to control his temper. You know he can't possibly do it; the suspense comes from not knowing how long he can maintain even a semblance of reason.

"I think you know the answer to that, Skip," Dearie finally said. "Stokely Jones wears a coat with a very particular symbol on the

back.” He picked up the folder he had carried in, removed a sheet of paper, looked at it, then turned it around so we could look at it, too. None of us was very surprised by what was there. “This symbol. It was invented by the Communist Party shortly after the end of the Second World War. It means ‘victory through infiltration’ and is commonly called the Broken Cross by subversives. It has also become popular with such inner-city radical groups as the Black Muslims and the Black Panthers. Since this symbol was visible on Stoke Jones’s coat long before it appeared on the side of our dorm, I hardly think it takes a rocket scientist to—”

“David, that is such bullshit!” Nate said, standing up. He was pale and trembling, but with anger rather than fear. Had I ever heard him say the word bullshit in public before? I don’t think so.

Garretsen smiled his benign smile at my roommate. Ebersole raised his eyebrows, expressing polite interest. Dearie looked stunned. I suppose the last person he expected trouble from was Nate Hoppenstand.

“That symbol is based on British semaphore and stands for nuclear disarmament. It was invented by a famous British philosopher. I think he might even be a knight. To say the Russians made it up! Goodness’ sake! Is that what they teach you in ROTC? Bullshit like that?”

Nate was staring at Dearie angrily, his hands planted on his hips. Dearie gaped at him, now completely knocked off his stride. Yes, they had taught him that in ROTC, and he had swallowed it hook, line, and sinker. It made you wonder what else the ROTC kids were swallowing.

“I’m sure these facts about the Broken Cross are very interesting,” Ebersole cut in smoothly, “and it’s certainly information worth having —if it’s true, of course—”

“It’s true,” Skip said. “Bert Russell, not Joe Stalin. British kids were wearing it five years ago when they marched to protest U.S. nuclear

subs operating out of ports in the British Isles."

"Fuckin A!" Ronnie cried, and pumped his fist in the air. A year or so later the Panthers—who never had much use for Bertrand Russell's peace sign, so far as I know—were doing that same thing at their rallies. And, of course, twenty years or so further on down the line, all us cleaned-up sixties babies were doing it at rock concerts. Broooo-ooooce! Broooo-ooooce!

"Go, baby!" Hugh Brennan chimed in, laughing. "Go, Skip! Go, big Nate!"

"Watch your language while the Dean's here!" Dearie shouted at Ronnie.

Ebersole ignored the profanity and the cross-talk from the peanut gallery. He kept his interested, skeptical gaze trained on my roommate and on Skip.

"Even if all that's true," he said, "we still have a problem, don't we? I think so. We have an act of vandalism and public obscenity. This comes at a time when the tax-paying public is looking at University youth with an ever more critical eye. And this institution depends upon the tax-paying public, gentlemen. I think it behooves us all—"

"To think about this!" Dearie suddenly shouted. His cheeks were now almost purple; his forehead swarmed with weird red spots like brands, and right between his eyes a big vein was pulsing rapidly.

Before Dearie could say more—and he clearly had a lot to say—Ebersole put a hand out to his chest, shushing him. Dearie seemed to deflate. He'd had his chance and fluffed it. Later he'd perhaps tell himself it was because he was tired; while we'd spent the day in the nice warm lounge, playing cards and shooting holes in our future, Dearie had been outside shovelling snow and sanding walks so brittle old psychology professors wouldn't fall down and break their hips. He was tired, a little slow on the draw, and in any case, that prick Ebersole hadn't given him a fair chance to prove himself. All of

which probably didn't help much with what was happening right then: he had been set aside. The grownup was back in charge. Poppa would fix.

"I think it behooves us all to identify the fellow who did this and see he's punished with some severity," Ebersole continued. Mostly it was Nate he was looking at; amazing as it seemed to me at the time, he had identified Nate Hoppenstand as the center of the resistance he felt in the room.

Nate, God bless his molars and wisdom teeth, was more than up to the likes of Ebersole. He remained standing with his hands on his hips and his eyes never wavered, let alone dropped from Ebersole's. "How do you propose doing that?" Nate asked.

"What is your name, young man? Please."

"Nathan Hoppenstand."

"Well, Nathan, I think the perpetrator has already been singled out, don't you?" Ebersole spoke in a patient, teacherly way. "Or rather singled himself out. I'm told this unfortunate fellow Stokely Jones has been a walking billboard for the Broken Cross symbol since—"

"Quit calling it that!" Skip said, and I jumped a little at the raw anger in his voice. "It's not a broken anything! It's a damn peace sign!"

"What is your name, sir?"

"Stanley Kirk. Skip to my friends. You can call me Stanley." There was a tense little titter at this, which Ebersole seemed not to hear.

"Well, Mr. Kirk, your semantic quibble is noted, but it doesn't change the fact that Stokely Jones—and Stokely Jones alone—has been displaying that particular symbol all over campus since the first day of the semester. Mr. Dearborn tells me—"

Nate said, " 'Mr. Dearborn' doesn't even know what the peace sign is or where it came from, so I think you'd be sort of unwise to trust what he tells you very far. It just so happens I've got a peace sign on the back of my own jacket, Mr. Ebersole. So how do you know I wasn't the one with the spray-paint?"

Ebersole's mouth dropped open. Not much, but enough to spoil his sympathetic smile and magazine-ad good looks. And Dean Garretsen frowned, as if presented with some concept he couldn't understand. One very rarely sees a good politician or college administrator caught completely by surprise. They are moments to treasure. I treasured that one then, and find I still do today.

"That's a lie!" Dearie said. He sounded more wounded than angry. "Why would you lie that way, Nate? You're the last person on Three I'd expect to—"

"It's not a lie," Nate said. "Go on up to my room and pull the pea coat out of my closet if you don't believe me. Check."

"Yeah, and check mine while you're at it," I said, standing up next to Nate. "My old high-school jacket. You can't miss it. It's the one with the peace sign on the back."

Ebersole studied us through slightly narrowed eyes. Then he asked, "Exactly when did you put this so-called peace sign on the backs of your jackets, young fellows?"

This time Nate did lie. I knew him well enough by then to know it must have hurt … but he did it like a champ. "September."

That was it for Dearie. He went nuclear is how my own kids might express it, only that wouldn't be accurate. Dearie went Donald Duck. He didn't quite jump up and down, flapping his arms and going wak-wak-waugh-wak like Donald does when he's mad, but he did give a howl of outrage and smacked his mottled forehead with the heels of his palms. Ebersole stilled him again, this time by gripping his arm.

“Who are you?” Ebersole asked me. More curt than courteous by now.

“Pete Riley. I put a peace sign on the back of my jacket because I liked the look of Stoke’s. Also to show I’ve got some big questions about what we’re doing over there in Vietnam.”

Dearie pulled away from Ebersole. His chin was thrust out, his lips pulled back enough to show a complete set of teeth. “Helping our allies is what we’re doing, you doofus!” he shouted. “If you’re too stupid to see that on your own, I suggest you take Colonel Anderson’s Intro Military History Class! Or maybe you’re just another chickenguts who won’t—”

“Hush, Mr. Dearborn,” Dean Garretsen said. His quiet was somehow louder than Dearie’s shouting. “This is not the place for a foreign policy debate, nor is it the time for personal aspersions. Quite the contrary.”

Dearie dropped his burning face, studied the floor, and began to gnaw at his own lips.

“And when, Mr. Riley, did you put the peace sign symbol on your jacket?” Ebersole asked. His voice remained courteous, but there was an ugly look in his eyes. He knew by then, I think, that Stoke was going to squiggle away, and Ebersole was very unhappy about that. Dearie was small change next to this guy, who was in 1966 a new type on the college campuses of America. Times call the men, Lao-tzu said, and the late sixties called Charles Ebersole. He wasn’t an educator; he was an enforcer minoring in public relations.

Don’t lie to me, his eyes said. Don’t lie to me, Riley. Because if you do and I find out, I’ll turn you into salad.

But what the hell. I’d probably be gone come January 15th, anyway; by Christmas of 1967 I might be in Phu Bai, keeping the place warm for Dearie.

“October,” I said. “Put it on my jacket right around Columbus Day.”

“I’ve got it on my jacket and some sweatshirts,” Skip said. “All that stuff’s in my room. I’ll show it to you, if you want.”

Dearie, still looking down at the floor and red to the roots of his hair, was shaking his head monotonously back and forth.

“I’ve got it on a couple of my sweatshirts, too,” Ronnie said. “I’m no peacenik, but it’s a cool sign. I like it.”

Tony DeLucca said he also had one on the back of a sweatshirt.

Lennie Doria told Ebersole and Garretsen he had doodled it on the endpapers of several different textbooks; it was on the front of his general assignments notebook as well. He’d show them, if they wanted to see.

Billy Marchant had it on his jacket.

Brad Witherspoon had inked it on his freshman beanie. The beanie was in the back of his closet somewhere, probably beneath the underwear he’d forgotten to take home for his mom to wash.

Nick Prouty said he’d drawn peace signs on his favorite record albums: Meet the Beatles and Wayne Fontana and the Mindbenders. “You ain’t got any mind to bend, dinkleballs,” Ronnie muttered, and there was laughter from behind cupped hands.

Several others reported having the peace sign on books or items of clothing. All claimed to have done this long before the discovery of the graffiti on the north end of Chamberlain Hall. In a final surreal touch, Hugh stood up, stepped into the aisle, and hiked the legs of his jeans so we could see the yellowing athletic socks climbing his hairy shins. A peace sign had been drawn on both with the laundry-marker Mrs. Brennan had sent to school with her baby boy—it was probably the first time the fuckin thing had been used all semester.

“So you see,” Skip said when show-and-tell was over, “it could have been any of us.”

Dearie slowly raised his head. All that remained of his flush was a single red patch over his left eye. It looked like a blister.

“Why are you lying for him?” he asked. He waited, but no one answered. “Not one of you had a peace sign on a single thing before Thanksgiving break, I’d swear to it, and I bet most of you never had one on anything before tonight. Why are you lying for him?”

No one answered. The silence spun out. In it there grew a sense of power, an unmistakable force we all felt. But who did it belong to? Them or us? There was no way of saying. All these years later there’s still no real way of saying.

Then Dean Garretsen stepped to the podium. Dearie moved aside without even seeming to see him. The Dean looked at us with a small and cheerful smile. “This is foolishness,” he said. “What Mr. Jones wrote on the wall was foolishness, and this lying is more foolishness. Tell the truth, men. ‘Fess up.”

No one said anything.

“We’ll be speaking to Mr. Jones in the morning,” Ebersole said. “Perhaps after we do, some of you fellows may want to change your stories a bit.”

“Oh man, I wouldn’t put too much trust in anything Stoke might tell you,” Skip said.

“Right, old Rip-Rip’s crazy as a shithouse rat,” Ronnie said.

There was strangely affectionate laughter at this. “Shithouse rat!” Nick cried, eyes shining. He was as joyful as a poet who has finally found le mot juste. “Shithouse rat, yeah, that’s Old Rip!” And, in what was probably that day’s final triumph of lunacy over rational discourse, Nick Prouty fell into an eerily perfect Foghorn Leghorn

imitation: “Ah say, Ah say the boy’s craizy! Missin a wheel off his baiby-carriage! Lost two-three cahds out’n his deck! Fella’s a beer shote of a six-pack! He’s …”

Nick gradually realized that Ebersole and Garretsen were looking at him, Ebersole with contempt, Garretsen almost with interest, as at a new bacterium glimpsed through the lens of a microscope.

” … you know, a little sick in the head,” Nick finished, losing the imitation as self-consciousness, that bane of all great artists, set in. He quickly sat down.

“That’s not the kind of sick I meant, exactly,” Skip said. “I’m not talking about him being a cripple, either. He’s been sneezing, coughing, and running at the nose ever since he got here. Even you must have noticed that, Dearie.”

Dearie didn’t reply, didn’t even react to the use of the nickname this time. He must have been pretty tired, all right.

“All I’m saying is that he might claim a whole lot of stuff,” Skip said. “He might even believe some of it. But he’s out of it.”

Ebersole’s smile had resurfaced, no humor in it now. “I believe I grasp the thrust of your argument, Mr. Kirk. You want us to believe that Mr. Jones was not responsible for the writing on the wall, but if he does confess to having done it, we should not credit his statement.”

Skip also smiled—the thousand-watt smile that made the girls’ hearts go giddyup. “That’s it,” he said, “that’s the thrust of my argument, all right.”

There was a moment’s silence, and then Dean Garretsen spoke what could have been the epitaph of our brief age. “You fellows have disappointed me,” he said. “Come on, Charles, we have no further business here.” Garretsen hoisted his briefcase, turned on his heel, and headed for the door.

Ebersole looked surprised but hurried after him. Which left Dearie and his third-floor charges to stare at each other with mingled expressions of distrust and reproach.

“Thanks, guys.” David was almost crying. “Thanks a fucking pantload.” He stalked out with his head down and his folder clutched in one hand. The following semester he left Chamberlain and joined a frat. All things considered, that was probably for the best. As Stoke might have said, Dearie had lost his credibility.

40

“So you stole that, too,” Stoke Jones said from his bed in the infirmary when he could finally talk. I had just told him that almost everyone in Chamberlain Hall was now wearing the sparrow-track on at least one article of clothing, thinking this news would cheer him up. I had been wrong.

“Settle down, man,” Skip said, patting his shoulder. “Don’t have a hemorrhage.”

Stoke never so much as glanced at him. His black, accusing eyes remained on me. “You took the credit, then you took the peace sign. Did any of you check my wallet? I think there were nine or ten dollars in there. You could have had that, too. Made it a clean sweep.” He turned his head aside and began to cough weakly. On that cold day in early December of ‘66 he looked one fuck of a lot older than eighteen.

This was four days after Stoke went swimming in Bennett’s Run. The doctor—Carbury, his name was—seemed by the second of those days to accept that most of us were Stoke’s friends no matter how oddly we’d acted when we brought him in, because we kept stopping by to ask after him. Carbury had been at the college infirmary, prescribing for strep throats and splinting wrists dislocated in softball games, for donkey’s years and probably knew there was no accounting for the behavior of young men and women homing in on their majority; they might look like adults, but most retained plenty of their childhood weirdnesses, as well. Nick Prouty auditioning Foghorn Leghorn for the Dean of Men, for instance—I rest my case.

Carbury never told us how bad things had been with Stoke. One of the candystripers (half in love with Skip by the second time she saw him, I believe) gave us a clearer picture, not that we really needed one. The fact that Carbury stuck him in a private room instead of on Men’s Side told us something; the fact that we weren’t allowed to so

much as peek in on him for the first forty-eight hours of his stay told us more; the fact that he hadn't been moved to Eastern Maine, which was only ten miles up the road, told us most of all. Carbury hadn't dared move him, not even in the University ambulance. Stoke Jones had been in bad straits indeed. According to the candystriper, he had pneumonia, incipient hypothermia from his dunk, and a temperature which crested at a hundred and five degrees. She'd overheard Carbury talking with someone on the phone and saying that if Jones's lung capacity had been any further reduced by his disability —or if he'd been in his thirties or forties instead of his late teens—he almost certainly would have died.

Skip and I were the first visitors he was allowed. Any other kid in the dorm probably would have been visited by at least one parent, but that wasn't going to happen in Stoke's case, we knew that now. And if there were other relatives, they hadn't bothered to put in an appearance.

We told him everything that had happened that night, with one exception: the laughin which had begun in the lounge when we saw him spraying his way through Bennett's Run and continued until we delivered him, semi-conscious, to the infirmary. He listened silently as I told him about Skip's idea to put peace signs on our books and clothes so Stoke couldn't be hung out all by himself. Even Ronnie Malenfant had gone along, I said, and without a single quibble. We told him so he could jibe his story with ours; we also told him so he'd understand that by trying to take the blame/credit for the graffiti now, he'd get us in trouble as well as himself. And we told him without ever coming right out and telling him. We didn't need to. His legs didn't work, but the stuff between his ears was just fine.

"Get your hand off me, Kirk." Stoke hunched as far away from us as his narrow bed would allow, then began to cough again. I remember thinking he looked like he had about four months to live, but I was wrong about that; Atlantis sank but Stoke Jones is still in the swim, practicing law in San Francisco. His black hair has gone silver and is prettier than ever. He's got a red wheelchair. It looks great on CNN.

Skip sat back and folded his arms. “I didn’t expect wild gratitude, but this is too much,” he said. “You’ve outdone yourself this time, Rip-Rip.”

His eyes flashed. “Don’t call me that!”

“Then don’t call us thieves just because we tried to save your scrawny ass. Hell, we did save your scrawny ass!”

“No one asked you to.”

“No,” I said. “You don’t ask anyone for anything, do you? I think you’re going to need bigger crutches to haul around the chip on your shoulder before long.”

“That chip’s what I’ve got, shithead. What have you got?”

A lot of catching-up to do, that’s what I had. But I didn’t tell Stoke that. Somehow I didn’t think he’d exactly melt with sympathy. “How much of that day do you remember?” I asked him.

“I remember putting the FUCK JOHNSON thing on the dorm—I’d been planning that for a couple of weeks—and I remember going to my one o’clock class. I spent most of it thinking about what I was going to say in the Dean’s office when he called me in. What kind of a statement I was going to make. After that, everything fades into little fragments.” He uttered a sardonic laugh and rolled his eyes in their bruised-looking sockets. He’d been in bed for the best part of a week and still looked unutterably tired. “I think I remember telling you guys I wanted to die. Did I say that?”

I didn’t answer. He gave me all the time in the world, but I stood on my right to remain silent.

At last Stoke shrugged, the kind of shrug that says okay, let’s drop it. It pulled the johnny he was wearing off one bony shoulder. He tugged it back into place, using his hand carefully—there was an I.V. drip in it. “So you guys discovered the peace sign, huh? Great. You

can wear it when you go to see Neil Diamond or fucking Petula Clark at Winter Carnival. Me, I'm out of here. This is over for me."

"If you go to school on the other side of the country, do you think you'll be able to throw the crutches away?" Skip asked. "Maybe run track?"

I was a little shocked, but Stoke smiled. It was a real smile, too, sunny and unaffected. "The crutches aren't relevant," he said. "Time's too short to waste, that's relevant. People around here don't know what's happening, and they don't care. They're gray people. Just-getting-by people. In Orono, Maine, buying a Rolling Stones record passes for a revolutionary act."

"Some people know more than they did," I said … but I was troubled by thoughts of Nate, who had been worried his mother might see a picture of him getting arrested and had stayed on the curb in consequence. A face in the background, the face of a gray boy on the road to dentistry in the twentieth century.

Dr. Carbury stuck his head in the door. "Time you were on your way, men. Mr. Jones has a lot of rest to catch up on."

We stood. "When Dean Garretsen comes to talk to you," I said, "or that guy Ebersole …"

"As far as they'll ever know, that whole day is a blank," Stoke said. "Carbury can tell them I had bronchitis since October and pneumonia since Thanksgiving, so they'll have to accept it. I'll say I could have done anything that day. Except, you know, drop the old crutches and run the four-forty."

"We really didn't steal your sign, you know," Skip said. "We just borrowed it."

Stoke appeared to think this over, then sighed. "It's not my sign," he said.

“No,” I agreed. “Not anymore. So long, Stoke. We’ll come back and see you.”

“Don’t make it a priority,” he said, and I guess we took him at his word, because we never did. I saw him back at the dorm a few times, but only a few, and I was in class when he moved out without bothering to finish the semester. The next time I saw him was on the TV news almost twenty years later, speaking at a Greenpeace rally just after the French blew up the Rainbow Warrior, 1984 or ‘85, that would’ve been. Since then I’ve seen him on the tube quite a lot. He raises money for environmental causes, speaks on college campuses from that snazzy red wheelchair, defends the eco-activists in court when they need defending. I’ve heard him called a tree-hugger, and I bet he sort of enjoys that. He’s still carrying the chip. I’m glad. Like he said, it’s what he’s got.

As we reached the door he called, “Hey?”

We looked back at a narrow white face on a white pillow above a white sheet, the only real color about him those masses of black hair. The shapes of his legs under the sheet again made me think of Uncle Sam in the Fourth of July parade back home. And again I thought that he looked like a kid with about four months to live. But add some white teeth to the picture, as well, because Stoke was smiling.

“Hey what?” Skip said.

“You two were so concerned with what I was going to say to Garretsen and Ebersole … maybe I’ve got an inferiority complex or something, but I have trouble believing all that concern is for me. Have you two decided to actually try going to school for a change?”

“If we did, do you think we’d make it?” Skip asked.

“You might,” Stoke said. “There is one thing I remember about that night. Pretty clearly, too.”

I thought he'd say he remembered us laughing at him—Skip thought so, too, he told me later—but that wasn't it.

"You carried me through the doorway of the exam room by yourself," he said to Skip. "Didn't drop me, either."

"No chance of that. You don't weigh much."

"Still … dying's one thing, but no one likes the idea of being dropped on the floor. It's undignified. Because you didn't, I'll give you some good advice. Get out of the sports programs, Kirk. Unless, that is, you've got some kind of athletic scholarship you can't do without."

"Why?"

"Because they'll turn you into someone else. It may take a little longer than it took ROTC to turn David Dearborn into Dearie, but they'll get you there in the end."

"What do you know about sports?" Skip asked gently. "What do you know about being on a team?"

"I know it's a bad time for boys in uniforms," Stoke said, then lay back on his pillow and closed his eyes. But a good time to be a girl, Carol had said. 1966 was a good time to be a girl.

We returned to the dorm and went to my room to study. Down the hall Ronnie and Nick and Lennie and most of the others were chasing The Bitch. After awhile Skip shut the door to block the sound of them out, and when that didn't entirely work I turned on Nate's little RCA Swingline and we listened to Phil Ochs. Ochs is dead now—as dead as my mother and Michael Landon. He hanged himself with his belt. The suicide rate among surviving Atlanteans has been pretty high. No surprise there, I guess; when your continent sinks right out from under your feet, it does a number on your head.

41

A day or two after that visit to Stoke in the infirmary, I called my mother and said that if she could really afford to send a little extra cash my way, I'd like to take her up on her idea about getting a tutor. She didn't ask many questions and didn't scold—you knew you were in serious trouble with my mom when she didn't scold—but three days later I had a money order for three hundred dollars. To this I added my Hearts winnings—I was astonished to find they came to almost eighty bucks. That's a lot of nickels.

I never told my mom, but I actually hired two tutors with her three hundred, one a grad student who helped me with the mysteries of tectonic plates and continental drift, the other a pot-smoking senior from King Hall who helped Skip with his anthropology (and might have written a paper or two for him, although I don't know that for sure). This second fellow's name was Harvey Brundage, and he was the first person to ever say "Wow, man, bummer!" in my presence.

Together Skip and I went to the Dean of Arts and Sciences—there was no way we were going to go to Garretsen, not after that November meeting in the Chamberlain rec—and laid out the problems we were facing. Technically neither of us belonged to A and S; as freshmen we weren't yet eligible to declare majors, but Dean Randle listened to us. He recommended that we go around to each of our instructors and explain the problem … more or less throw ourselves on their mercy.

We did it, loathing every minute of the process; one of the factors that made us powerful friends in those years was being raised with the same Yankee ideas, one of which was that you didn't ask for help unless you absolutely had to, and maybe not even then. The only thing that got us through that embarrassing round of calls was the buddy system. When Skip was in with his teachers I waited for him out in the hall, smoking one cigarette after another. When it was my turn, he waited for me.

As a group, the instructors were a lot more sympathetic than I ever would have guessed; most bent over backwards to help us not only pass, but pass high enough to hold onto our scholarships. Only Skip's calculus teacher was completely unreceptive, and Skip was doing well enough there to skate by without any special help. Years later I realized that for many of the instructors it was a moral issue rather than an academic one: they didn't want to read their ex-students' names in a casualty list and have to wonder if they had been partially responsible; that the difference between a D and a C-minus had also been the difference between a kid who could see and hear and one sitting senseless in a V.A. hospital somewhere.

42

After one of these meetings, and with the end-of-semester exams looming, Skip went to the Bear's Den to meet his Anthro tutor for a coffee-fueled cram session. I had dishline at Holyoke. When the conveyor finally shut down for the afternoon, I went back to the dorm to resume my own studies. I stopped in the lobby to check my mailbox, and there was a pink package-slip in it.

The package was brown paper and string, but livened up with some stick-on Christmas bells and holly. The return address hit me in the stomach like an unexpected sucker-punch: Carol Gerber, 172 Broad Street, Harwich, Connecticut.

I hadn't tried to call her, and not just because I was busy trying to save my ass. I don't think I realized the real reason until I saw her name on that package. I'd been convinced she'd gone back to Sully-John. That the night we'd made love in my car while the oldies played was ancient history to her now. That I was ancient history.

Phil Ochs was playing on Nate's record-player, but Nate himself was snoozing on his bed with a copy of Newsweek lying open on his face. General William Westmoreland was on the cover. I sat down at my desk, put the package in front of me, reached for the string, then paused. My fingers were trembling. Hearts are tough, she had said. Most times they don't break. Most times they only bend. She was right, of course … but mine hurt as I sat there looking at the Christmas package she had sent me; it hurt plenty. Phil Ochs was on the record-player, but in my mind I was hearing older, sweeter music. In my mind I was hearing The Platters.

I snapped the string, tore the tape, removed the brown paper, and eventually liberated a small white department-store box. Inside was a gift wrapped in shiny red paper and white satin ribbon. There was also a square envelope with my name written on it in her familiar hand. I opened the envelope and pulled out a Hallmark card—when

you care enough to send the very best, and all that. There were foil snowflakes and foil angels blowing foil trumpets. When I opened the card, a newspaper clipping fell out onto the present she'd sent me. It was from a newspaper called the Harwich Journal. In the top margin, above the headline, Carol had written: This time I made it—Purple Heart! Don't worry, 5 stitches at the Emerg. Room & I was home for supper.

The story's headline read: 6 INJURED, 14 ARRESTED AS DRAFT OFFICE PROTEST TURNS INTO MELEE. The photo was in stark contrast to the one in the Derry News where everyone, even the cops and the construction workers who had started their own impromptu counter-protest, looked sort of relaxed. In the Harwich Journal photo, folks looked raw-nerved, confused, and about two thousand light-years from relaxed. There were hardhat types with tattoos on their bulging arms and hateful grimaces on their faces; there were long-haired kids staring back at them with angry defiance. One of the latter was holding his arms out to a jeering trio of men as if to say Come on, you want a piece of me? There were cops between the two groups, looking strained and tense.

To the left (Carol had drawn an arrow to this part of the photo, as if I might have missed it otherwise) was a familiar jacket with HARWICH HIGH SCHOOL printed on the back. Once more her head was turned, but this time toward the camera instead of away from it. I could see the blood running down her cheek much more clearly than I wanted to. She could draw joke arrows and write all the breezy comments she wanted to in the margin; I was not amused. That was not chocolate syrup on her face. A cop had her by one arm. The girl in the news photo didn't seem to mind either that or the fact that her head was bleeding (if she even knew her head was bleeding at that point). The girl in the news photo was smiling. In one of her hands was a sign reading STOP THE MURDER. The other was held out toward the camera, the first two fingers making a V. V-for-victory, I thought then, but of course it wasn't. By 1969, that V went with the sparrow-track the way ham went with eggs.

I scanned the text of the clipping, but there was nothing there of any particular interest. Protest … counter-protest … epithets … thrown rocks … a few fistfights … police arrive on the scene. The story's tone was lofty and disgusted and patronizing all at the same time; it reminded me of how Ebersole and Garretsen had looked that night in the rec. You fellows have disappointed me. All but three of the protesters who had been arrested were released later that day and none were named, so presumably they were all under twenty-one.

Blood on her face. And yet she was smiling … triumphant, in fact. I became aware Phil Ochs was still singing—I must have killed a million men and now they want me back again—and a shake of gooseflesh went up my back.

I turned to the card. It bore the typical rhymed sentiments; they always come to about the same, don't they? Merry Christmas, sure hope you don't die in the New Year. I barely read them. On the blank side facing the verse, she had written me a note. It was long enough to use up most of the white space.

Dear Number Six,

I just wanted to wish you the merriest of merry Christmases, and to tell you I'm okay. I'm not back in school, although I have been associating with certain school types (see enclosed clipping) and expect I will return eventually, probably fall semester next year. My mom is not doing too well, but she is trying, and my brother is getting his act back together. Rionda helps, too. I've seen Sully a couple of times, but it's not the same. He came over to watch TV one night and we are like strangers … or maybe what I really mean is that we're like old acquaintances on trains going in different directions.

I miss you, Pete. I think our trains are going in different directions, too, but I'll never forget the time we spent together. It was the sweetest and the best (especially the last night). You can write me if you want, but I sort of wish you wouldn't. It might not be good for either of us. This doesn't mean I don't care or remember but that I do.

Remember the night I showed you that picture and told you about how I got beaten up? How my friend Bobby took care of me? He had a book that summer. The man upstairs gave it to him. Bobby said it was the best book he ever read. Not saying much when you're just eleven, I know, but I saw it again in the high-school library when I was a senior and read it, just to see what it was like. And I thought it was pretty great. Not the best book I ever read, but pretty great. I thought you might like a copy. Although it was written twelve years ago, I sort of think it's about Vietnam. Even if it's not, it's full of information.

I love you, Pete. Merry Christmas.

P.S. Get out of that stupid card-game.

I read it twice, then folded the clipping carefully and put it back in the card, my hands still shaking. Somewhere I think I still have that card … as I'm sure that somewhere "Red Carol" Gerber has still got her little snapshot of her childhood friends. If she's still alive, that is. Not exactly a sure thing; a lot of her last-known bunch of friends are not.

I opened the package. Inside it—and in jarring contrast to the cheery Christmas paper and white satin ribbon—was a paperback copy of Lord of the Flies, by William Golding. I had somehow missed it in high school, opting for A Separate Peace in Senior Lit instead because Peace looked a little shorter.

I opened it, thinking there might be an inscription. There was, but not the sort I had expected, not at all. This was what I found in the white space on the title page:

My eyes filled with sudden unexpected tears. I put my hands over my mouth to hold in the sob that wanted to come out. I didn't want to wake Nate up, didn't want him to see me crying. But I cried, all right. I sat there at my desk and cried for her, for me, for both of us, for all of us. I can't remember hurting any more ever in my life than I did then. Hearts are tough, she said, most times hearts don't break, and

I’m sure that’s right … but what about then? What about who we were then? What about hearts in Atlantis?

43

In any case, Skip and I survived. We did the makeup work, squeaked through the finals, and returned to Chamberlain Hall in mid-January. Skip told me he'd written a letter to John Winkin, the baseball coach, over the holiday, saying he'd changed his mind about coming out for the team.

Nate was back on Chamberlain Three. So, amazingly, was Lennie Doria—on academic pro but there. His paisan Tony DeLucca was gone, though. So were Mark St. Pierre, Barry Margeaux, Nick Prouty, Brad Witherspoon, Harvey Twiller, Randy Echolls … and Ronnie, of course. We got a card from him in March. It was postmarked Lewiston and simply addressed to The Yo-Yo's Of Chamberlain Three. We taped it up in the lounge, over the chair where Ronnie had most often sat during the games. On the front was Alfred E. Neuman, the Mad magazine cover-boy. On the back Ronnie had written: "Uncle Sam calls and I gotta go. Palm trees in my future and who gives a f—k. What me worry. I finished with 21 match points. That makes me the winner." It was signed "RON." Skip and I had a laugh at that. As far as we were concerned, Mrs. Malenfant's foul-mouthed little boy was going to be a Ronnie until the day he died.

Stoke Jones, aka Rip-Rip, was also gone. I didn't think of him much for awhile, but his face and memory came back to me with startling (if brief) vividness a year and a half later. I was in jail at the time, in Chicago. I don't know how many of us the cops swept up outside the convention center on the night Hubert Humphrey was nominated, but there were a lot, and a lot of us were hurt—a blue-ribbon commission would a year later designate the event a "police riot" in its report.

I ended up in a holding cell meant for fifteen prisoners—twenty, max—with about sixty gassed-out, punched-out, drugged-out, beat-up, messed-up, worked-over, fucked-over, blood-all-over hippies, some

smoking joints, some crying, some puking, some singing protest songs (from far over in the corner, issuing from some guy I never even saw, came a stoned-out version of “I’m Not Marchin’ Anymore”). It was like some weird penal version of telephone-booth cramming.

I was jammed up against the bars, trying to protect my shirt pocket (Pall Malls), and my hip pocket (the copy of Lord of the Flies Carol had given me, now very battered, missing half its front cover, and falling out of its binding), when all at once Stoke’s face flashed into my mind as bright and complete as a high-resolution photograph. It came from nowhere, it seemed, perhaps the product of a dormant memory circuit which had gone momentarily hot, joggled by either a nightstick to the head or a revivifying whiff of teargas. And a question came with it.

“What the fuck was a cripple doing on the third floor?” I asked out loud.

A little guy with a huge mass of golden hair—a kind of Peter Frampton dwarf, if you could dig that—looked around. His face was pale and pimply. Blood was drying beneath his nose and on one cheek. “What, man?” he asked.

“What the fuck was a cripple doing on the third floor of a college dorm? One with no elevator? Wouldn’t they have put him on the first floor?” Then I remembered Stoke plunging toward Holyoke with his head down and his hair hanging in his eyes, Stoke muttering “Rip-rip, rip-rip, rip-rip” under his breath. Stoke going everywhere as if everything was his enemy; give him a quarter and he’d try to shoot down the whole world.

“Man, I’m not following you. What—”

“Unless he asked them to,” I said. “Unless he maybe right out demanded it.”

“Bingo,” said the little guy with the Peter Frampton hair. “Got a joint, man? I want to get high. This place sucks. I want to go to Hobbiton.”

44

Skip became an artist, and he's famous in his own way. Not like Norman Rockwell, and you'll never see a reproduction of one of Skip's sculptures on a plate offered by the Franklin Mint, but he's had plenty of shows—London, Rome, New York, last year in Paris—and he's reviewed regularly. There are plenty of critics who call him jejune, the flavor of the month (some have been calling him the flavor of the month for twenty-five years), a trite mind communicating via low imagery with other trite minds. Other critics have praised him for his honesty and energy. I tend in this direction, but I suppose I would; I knew him back in the day, we escaped the great sinking continent together, and he has remained my friend; in a distant way he has remained my paisan.

There are also critics who have commented on the rage his work so often expresses, the rage I first saw clearly in the papier-mache Vietnamese family tableau he set afire in front of the school library to the amplified pulse of The Youngbloods back in 1969. And yeah. Yeah, there's something to that. Some of Skip's stuff is funny and some of it's sad and some of it's bizarre, but most of it looks angry, most of his stiff-shouldered plaster and paper and clay people seem to whisper Light me, oh light me and listen to me scream, it's really still 1969, it's still the Mekong and always will be. "It is Stanley Kirk's anger which makes his work worthy," a critic wrote during an exhibition in Boston, and I suppose it was that same anger which contributed to his heart attack two months ago.

His wife called and said Skip wanted to see me. The doctors believed it hadn't been a serious cardiac event, but the Captain begged to disagree. My old paisan Captain Kirk thought he was dying.

I flew down to Palm Beach, and when I saw him—white face below mostly white hair on a white pillow—it called up a memory I could not at first pin down.

“You’re thinking of Jones,” he said in a husky voice, and of course he was right. I grinned, and at the same moment a cold chill traced a finger down the middle of my back. Sometimes things come back to you, that’s all. Sometimes they come back.

I came in and sat down beside him. “Not bad, O swami.”

“Not hard, either,” he said. “It’s that day at the infirmary all over again, except that Carbury’s probably dead and this time I’m the one with a tube in the back of my hand.” He raised one of his talented hands, showed me the tube, then lowered it again. “I don’t think I’m going to die anymore. At least not yet.”

“Good.”

“You still smoking?”

“I’ve retired. As of last year.”

He nodded. “My wife says she’ll divorce me if I don’t do the same … so I guess I better try.”

“It’s the worst habit.”

“Actually, I think living’s the worst habit.”

“Save the phrase-making shit for the Reader’s Digest, Cap.”

He laughed, then asked if I’d heard from Natie.

“A Christmas card, like always. With a photo.”

“Fuckin Nate!” Skip was delighted. “Was it his office?”

“Yeah. He’s got a Nativity scene out front this year. The Magi all look like they need dental work.”

We looked at each other and began to giggle. Before Skip could really get going, he began to cough. It was eerily like Stoke—for a

moment he even looked like Stoke—and I felt that shiver slide down my back again. If Stoke had been dead I'd have thought he was haunting us, but he wasn't. And in his own way Stoke Jones was as much of a sellout as every retired hippie who progressed from selling cocaine to selling junk bonds over the phone. He loves his TV coverage, does Stoke; when O.J. Simpson was on trial you could catch Stoke somewhere on the dial every night, just another vulture circling the carrion.

Carol was the one who didn't sell out, I guess. Carol and her friends, and what about the chem students they killed with their bomb? It was a mistake, I believe that with all my heart—the Carol Gerber I knew would have no patience with the idea that all power comes out of the barrel of a gun. The Carol I knew would have understood that was just another fucked-up way of saying we had to destroy the village in order to save it. But do you think the relatives of those kids care that it was a mistake, the bomb didn't go off when it was supposed to, sorry? Do you think questions of who sold out and who didn't matter to the mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, lovers, friends? Do you think it matters to the people who have to pick up the pieces and somehow go on? Hearts can break. Yes. Hearts can break. Sometimes I think it would be better if we died when they did, but we don't.

Skip worked on getting his breath back. The monitor beside his bed was beeping in a worried way. A nurse looked in and Skip waved her off. The beeps were settling back to their previous rhythm, so she went. When she was gone, Skip said: "Why did we laugh so hard when he fell down that day? That question has never entirely left me."

"No," I said. "Me either."

"So what's the answer? Why did we laugh?"

"Because we're human. For awhile, I think it was between Woodstock and Kent State, we thought we were something else, but we weren't."

“We thought we were stardust,” Skip said. Almost with a straight face.

“We thought we were golden,” I agreed, laughing. “And we’ve got to get ourselves back to the garden.”

“Lean over, hippie-boy,” Skip said, and I did. I saw that my old friend, who had outfoxed Dearie and Ebersole and the Dean of Men, who had gone around and begged his teachers to help him, who had taught me to drink beer by the pitcher and say fuck in a dozen different intonations, was crying a little bit. He reached up his arms to me. They had gotten thin over the years, and now the muscles hung rather than bunched. I bent down and hugged him.

“We tried,” he said in my ear. “Don’t you ever forget that, Pete. We tried.”

I suppose we did. In her way, Carol tried harder than any of us and paid the highest price … except, that is, for the ones who died. And although we’ve forgotten the language we spoke in those years—it is as lost as the bell-bottom jeans, home-tie-dyed shirts, Nehru jackets, and signs that said KILLING FOR PEACE IS LIKE FUCKING FOR CHASTITY—sometimes a word or two comes back. Information, you know. Information. And sometimes, in my dreams and memories (the older I get the more they seem to be the same), I smell the place where I spoke that language with such easy authority: a whiff of earth, a scent of oranges, and the fading smell of flowers.