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THE NORTHERN LINE  
by

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Part I

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Jake and I were in the front yard at Newberry throwing a football.

Dad had been buried that morning.

We were laughing very loud, and the sound the leather made when it struck my hands comforted me. I clutched the foot ball.

"It's a bullet," I said and threw the ball hard enough so my arm pulled uncomfortably at my shoulder. Jake caught it above his head. He was wearing his suit and tie and made ridiculous moves in his wing tips. He slammed the ball hard against the ground.

"Touchdown, Detroit!"

He ran the ball down and picked it up. "A long one," he yelled and fired it over the edge of the porch roof. I was

laughing too hard, and I scrambled after the ball. I reached as I neared the sidewalk and hauled in the ball from my fingertips, narrowly avoiding a collision between my head and a hardwood tree. I landed on the cement and felt the skin tear from my knee as the cloth of my dress pants ripped open.

"Jake," my mother said from the railing of the front porch. "People are watching you boys today. It's not good for you to be acting like this."

Jake nodded.

I tossed the football up and caught it. I stood on the sidewalk and felt the sting of the scrape on my knee. I tossed the football and caught it.

"Let's go in," Jake said.



## Chapter One

Ben O'Brian felt the rungs of the ladder pressing against his ribs and thighs. He held it tightly. His eyes were closed. He was pretending he was home, in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, at Newberry. He was just climbing a short ladder, just painting the house for his mother in daylight.

But that wasn't true. He pressed close to the cold iron rungs.

"What ya tryin' to do, O.B., fuck the ladder? C'mon!"

Mak. Jack Kivimaki. His "friend". The dirty son of a bitch. It was Mak's fault he was up here. He wouldn't forget that. He'd punch the bastard right in the face when he was walking on ground again.

Mak was responsible for his being hundreds of feet in the air. Climbing a water tower. Mak was responsible for designing this prank so that they could get back at the Gammas for four years of general arrogance and snobbery. A Goddamned prank. He was risking his life for a prank.

"C'mon, O.B. Don't be a chicken shit! Think of the Gammas! Those jerks are laughing at you now. They're laughing at you. They're laughing at a yooper. A chicken shit yooper. We got a reputation!"

"Just a fucking minute!" He had to pretend. It was a short ladder. But he opened his eyes and it wasn't. He could see the lights below in the darkness. He could smell his own sweat. This wasn't the U.P. This was a land of farmers' fields and grain elevators, not cliffs and bear and expanses of water. This was not his country, nor his father's. This was 300 miles from home, straight south. This was the lower peninsula, home of farmers and cities and fraternity jerks.

He was hundreds of feet in the air. But the S.O.B. at the top of the ladder was right. They had to get the frats. It was a matter of pride. They had to.

Mak's plan was good. When O'Brian finally got up there, they would paint "Gamma" on the tower and maybe a few incriminating names in bold letters. And as an afterthought

they had decided to write a couple of truly profane epithets to accompany the frat members' names.

The town council would be pissed. The dean would be appalled. The college board would be outraged. Nobody would believe the Gammas were innocent and Mak and he would be 300 miles to the north in a few days, never to be seen again.

But before they left, they would catch glimpses of Gammas gathered in serious little groups at the college center and the frat house porch discussing what they should do. And the real challenge for him and Mak, once they got down from here, would be to keep from laughing.

"I'm coming, Mak!"

He started up the metal rungs again, one at a time. What would his father have thought of this? Would he have laughed? Would he have sympathized? O'Brian couldn't remember. He would never know because his Dad was dead. His father had died nine years before in the same sterilized way they died in Detroit and Lansing and Flint. He had not died quickly in the woods tracking a deer or sitting in a duck blind. His father had not collapsed in a boat and floated out to sea on Lake Superior, the way a Yooper should die. No. It had been a slow cancerous agony, just like executives in the city. His father's life had ended nine years ago.

But he wouldn't think that way now. Not now. This was time for wildness and climbing the tower and drinking beer and maybe pissing over the rail if he had the guts. And they would paint all those lovely abscentities and names; then laugh loud defiant laughs.

He wouldn't think of Dad. O'Brian wouldn't think of the fact that he couldn't even remember clearly what his father looked like or how he had laughed.

He climbed. A few more rungs and he would be there. He moved vertically in the night. A few more rungs and a few more.

He watched through the grated floor of the catwalk as Mak pulled himself up at the top of the ladder. He could vaguely see Mak remove his small backpack and take out five objects. O'Brian could taste the beer when he heard the top of the can open.

A droplet of sweat bounced from his forehead as he looked back down at the rungs of the ladder. The droplet deflected from his chin away from his body and all the way down.

"There's a beer up here for you too, O.B., even a couple!"

O'Brian reached the spot where the ladder ended and



began to pull himself up on the catwalk. His stomach tumbled for that precarious second when only his hands clinging to the catwalk kept him from plummeting down the ladder tube to the ground. Mak's hand came out and grabbed O'Brian's arm. Now they were standing side by side on the catwalk. O'Brian was breathing slowly, his back against the wall of the tower. Occasionally he pulled the can up and gulped beer.

"Why did I let you talk me into this, Mak?"

Mak waved him off. "Grab a brush."

O'Brian continued to lean against the wall and tasted the salt of sweat that dropped steadily from his forehead. He tipped back the can and finished it. The smell of cow manure was thick from the farms below. Looking out from the tower, he could see the lights of the small college town and a cluster of lights from the next town down the road. He tried to ignore the feeling that he was floating in the void between neighboring galaxies.

This was not his country or his father's. Here the dirt lay rich and furrowed. Between the furrows, the black earth clustered like the raw materials of creation.

The trees here were hardwoods and sparse. They didn't grow thick like up north, and there were no endless stands of pines.

The winters here saw no six foot swirling drifts and the mosquitoes didn't attack with the ferocity of those above the Mackinac Bridge when the hot weather came. Hot weather? It was nearly nonexistent in the north, and the nights were almost always cool.

He remembered the stories about the woods in the U.P. He remembered his father telling him about boyhood hunting with a beagle bitch and her two puppies. He remembered some of his father's stories. But he didn't remember his father. He couldn't place him. Maybe he had never known him. Maybe he had simply been too young. But he remembered his father dying, skeletal in a hospital bed.

"O.B., you gonna hold up the tower all night? C'mon get a brush!"

Mak was holding a paint brush and grinning in the dark, his small thick frame crouched like an ape. He had already managed one "Gamma". He was now writing down a couple of frat members' names.

O'Brian laughed. He grabbed a brush and began slopping paint on the tower. He kept close to the wall. Within a few moments the side of the tower facing campus was covered with "Gammas", Greek letters, and frat members' names.

O'Brian, still crouching close to the wall, looked up at Mak and laughed. Mak let out a whoop; then yelled,

"Fuckin' ay!"

"Easy, Mak, Christ somebody might hear us," O'Brian looked cautiously back toward campus.

"What if they do?"

"We might get caught."

"Let's crack a couple more beers."

"Okay," O'Brian said cautiously; then looking again at their work, he felt caution fade. "Okay!"

They cracked two more and sat side by side below the lettering. They toasted, tapping the beers together.

"When we finish here, we'll go back to the room for a couple more," O'Brian said.

"You know, there's gonna be an early call down at the Gamma House tomorrow!"

"I wish I could see their faces!"

"I wish I could see the dean's face!" Mak said.

They were laughing again. After a few seconds Mak finished his beer and looked over at O'Brian who was nearly finished. He pointed toward the ladder and said, "Go ahead."

"You first."

"Chicken shit."

"Damn right."

Mak went to the ladder and started down. O'Brian



followed, gingerly finding the first rungs with his feet then leaning down to catch the top rung with his right hand. Again he hung in uncertainty at the top of the ladder, then proceeded.

By the time he was halfway down, Mak was nearing the bottom. The feeling of floating in space between galaxies was back.

Between galaxies. It was figurative and also accurate. That's where he stood now on the rungs of the ladder. In three days he would graduate with a teaching degree in English. Did he want to teach? His student teaching had not been encouraging. But that wasn't really the point. The real problem was that he didn't really want to work at all.

He wondered what Dad would have told him. Dad probably would have given him a good kick in the ass and told him to get going. But that was only a guess. O'Brian would never know for sure.

On the street below the ladder there were headlights. Shit. O'Brian looked closely at the oncoming car and identified the silhouette as a police car. The city boys.

Had somebody tipped them off? O'Brian looked down the ladder and saw Mak leap from the last few rungs. He scrambled like a gibbon into the bushes. The cop apparently

hadn't seen him.

The searchlight mounted next to the driver's window was focused on the tower. It scanned the tank, and the black letters written there glistened with moisture. It scanned the railing along the catwalk. And then it was following the line of the ladder.

Shit.

O'Brian took hurried steps down and nearly slipped. His stomach dropped out. He stopped. He was caught. No sense getting killed.

But as the light was about to reach him, O'Brian heard a shout below. A short, thick figure like an ape had come out of the bushes. Mak. He was yelling at the cop and running across the street toward the dorm.

The car door opened and the cop came out running.

They disappeared into the barren field that separated the water tower from the dorm. Mak had a good lead, and the middle-aged policeman, who walked and now was running with a distinct limp beneath an overweight body, would not catch him.

## Chapter Two

They tell me I'll wear a flat hat  
and be officially rounded  
I don't feel spherical.  
Most enlightening.  
Here  
Was the view from a water tower  
Early on Saturday.

It was the first poem he'd written since his freshman poetry class. And Ms Whitmer, the happy English prof, had been so very excited about his work then.

But he had been indifferent and calculatedly aloof from the literary world here. Enough, at least, so he hadn't had to endure Mak's, "You're going homo!" Besides, poetry was a commitment.

But this poem had come out and spilled incriminatingly in the margin of an empty sheet of notebook paper. He wondered if anyone had seen it there, words blatantly facing the world. Had comedic enemies seen it as they passed in the aisle? Would he be verbally lynched for the crime of

attempted art?

The last lines were about him and Mak on the tower. Those thoughts had stuck with him. He and the stars that were street lights hung there in the void with his dead father.

And the first part, about graduation and the paper shuffling and the ceremony that symbolized things that had happened. He had learned. But it was stupid to set a time limit. Okay, pal, you're educated. It took exactly four school years and happened exactly when your last exam ended. Now get the hell out of my face!

He was now liberally educated, having finished this exam. He wished he had a beer.

It was so stupidly easy and cliched to wonder who he was. He sat there quietly watching the others finish and leave and look at him, especially the younger kids, wondering why the exam was taking him so long.

They hadn't remembered that he'd already taken the test up after forty-five minutes of writing. They hadn't seen Dr. Holmes look up momentarily from his desk and say to him, "If you could, I'd like you to stay and talk." Then Holmes had looked down at his paper. And O'Brian had walked over to sit down and begin his vigil.

It was stupidly easy and cliched to wonder about



most things, arrogantly feeling the wisdom of Socrates descending, "All I know is that I know nothing."

But that wasn't true. He did know things. He knew how to be a pseudo-intellectual drunk. He knew how to puke out windows to relieve an alcohol gnawed stomach. He knew that his father was dead, that his mother was alive and cared about him and that somewhere on an island off the Keewenaw Peninsula hundreds of miles to the north his grandfather lived and fished and chopped wood.

No, maybe he didn't know that. He hadn't seen his grandfather since that November day when Dad had been put in the ground and Grandpa had stood there tall and cold and had left without talking and hadn't come back. No one had gone to see him since, and Grandpa had written only at Christmas and then briefly.

He knew that his brother Jake had been his idol once and still was sometimes. But he knew also that Jake was only a person and not a basketball uniform or an all state plaque, and that Jake was flawed and maddening sometimes and deeply sensitive without giving a hint of it.

He knew that his father was dead. He'd mentioned that already, but it was worth noting since he couldn't remember much else about his father besides the fact that his grave was near Newberry and he'd liked the outdoors and he'd died

a lingering death etc.

He knew some literature and how to smoke a cigar backwards and how to chug a glass of beer without using his hands and how to please a woman with his mouth, though most of these things seemed to be about on a par in the qualifications for employment category, rating zero, zero, zero, and possibly one respectively.

But all that was thinking about himself and his future. It was good advice to avoid that, since if you did, it ceased to exist. If a tree falls in the woods and no one is there to hear it...

Maybe Holmes would give him the same advice. "O'Brian, just don't think about your future. It's a waste of time and causes headaches."

Now that was advice he could live with.

Anyway it was a lot easier to think about what he and Mak would do immediately before and after graduation and about how things were just beginning to stir on the water tower incident and the worried faces he'd seen on some Gammas and the little whispers he'd heard in a classroom about the Gammas supposed indiscretion and the loud laughter about it in the dorms and about how now that he and Mak were graduating what they did in public mattered even less than usual.

But that all really had to do with who he was when examined closely. Would he and Mak have done that if they didn't come from the U.P. and feel an almost religious disrespect for all things Fraternal? It had to do with the natural differences between southern suburbanites and yoopers.

It was easy now to think about how Mak and he had looked around on their first day here and seen designer labels and crew neck sweaters and looked at each other as if to say, "Good, you're still you. Now where do we go from here?"

Fortunately neither of them had succumbed to Fraternal pressures. And considering the fact that he was the more likely of the two to be converted, the chances of such a misfortune had never been great.

That was another thing he knew. He knew he was a yooper. He couldn't help that and didn't want to. It was one thing he felt pride in. He did have a heritage. Yes, a fraternity of sorts. But how much did he really know about that heritage? And that brought him back to Dad and the future.

Now Mak wouldn't consider something like that. Mak just was what he was. He didn't worry about his future. He had decided after seeing a pamphlet on joining the army out



of college that the service was for him. O'Brian had nearly shrieked when Mak told him, but Mak was convinced by looking at one pamphlet for five minutes.

Mak never seemed to consider his heritage as the son of a hard drinking logger, either. It simply was. It was simply something he was trying to avoid inheriting.

Laying girls mattered to Mak. Having a hell of a good time was a priority, too. Those things mattered to O'Brian, but he also knew that, "Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we may die," was not the Dairy Queen slogan, but philosophy. He knew that each can of beer was a political statement and that those letters on the water tower were a sign of defiance against the college establishment.

He wished he could just enjoy the process of rebellion without understanding the concept. He hated to attach meanings or beliefs to anything because that implied caring about them. Caring meant emotional attachment and, as he'd found out, attachments can be severed at one end leaving a bridge to a void, or a dead father.

No thanks.

What he'd like to do is find a blonde and lay her about a million times, no two million, with no questions asked, no promises made. But people had feelings. The blonde would be physical and emotional flesh and blood, and no amount of

concentration on the texture of her skin or the feel of their bodies moving together, or a small droplet of sweat on her upper lip would change that.

He could hurt her in many ways and she him. The girl didn't even exist, and already he was having regrets.

He'd be going home soon. Going home would mean looking for a job. Going home would mean talking to Mom, who was tolerant and wished him well and loved him the way she loved everyone in the family.

And his brother Jake would be there, and they would both talk and think about Dad and go out to bars and talk to lumberjacks and then go back to Mom's place north of Newberry through the woods at night.

And when they got there, Jake's wife and little girl would be waiting for their husband and father. And Mom would be waiting for O'Brian along with indistinct memories of his father and speculation about an uncertain future.

But maybe this summer he would go and visit Grandpa. It would be interesting to see him. He wondered if Grandpa would want to see him. The Christmas letters had always been pleasant and had always invited the family over. But Grandpa had never come back to his son's place north of Newberry.

Seeing Grandpa was at least an idea about something he

could do this summer, something that wasn't interviewiing for jobs or being conscientious about moving on, at least.

He didn't remember Grandpa well either. Seeing him would be good. Maybe.

"I hear you're smart, but you deliberately try to hide it," Ms Whitmer, the English professor, had said to him in poetry class.

Smart? Maybe. Lazy? Definitely. Confused? Uh-huh.

"Set, Mr. O'Brian?"

Holmes was standing next to O'Brian's desk. The room was otherwise empty. Holmes was smirking. How long had he been standing there? The professor was holding his hair tightly in place by force of will and neatly holding two folders of papers and a notebook under his right arm. History was not O'Brian's major, but this had been one of his favorite classes.

He got up and began walking silently next to Holmes enroute to the professor's office.

What did Holmes want, anyway?

They were at the history office reception room. Holmes gave a quick nod to his secretary and stepped quickly ahead of O'Brian. Steping into his office, he motioned O'Brian in and proceeded, uncharacteristically cheerful, to his desk.

O'Brian walked in and sat down across from Holmes'

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desk.

Holmes drew open his bottom drawer and put away the papers. He set the notebook on a rather messy desk. He reached into the drawer again and drew out a fifth of whiskey holding it up.

For the first time, O'Brian saw that Holmes was openly grinning. "I decided, Mr. O'Brian, to talk to you on your level."

O'Brian, startled, looked back at him. "I. . . "

"You," said Holmes, are, without question, the leading enigma on campus."



### Chapter Three

In two days they would graduate. He and Mak would be done here. And still the rumors continued. The alumni had stepped in and helped mediate for the Gammas, who still had maintained to the death that they had nothing to do with the water tower painting. One alumni, thinking the old frat still had some life in it, had stepped in and had his paint contracting company handle the problem. Word was around that he had actually complimented some of the Gammas for their audacity.

One day soon, O'Brian suspected, the Gammas would begin claiming the project for themselves. Fuck 'em.

He and Mak would graduate. That really was a strange thought to think from behind a hockey mask. Both he and Mak wore them with toques and dark clothes as they hid in Cuddle Up Carrie's closet. They were giggling like pre-teens with a Playboy. They were tipping up a pint of whiskey. Mak handed

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it over and O'Brian finished it. The liquid bit deep and exploded in his stomach.

Mak had a BB gun tucked in the front of his pants. It was a military .45 replica. The same one Mak had given O'Brian for his eleventh birthday. Mak was crouching low in the closet and not laughing. Mak looked up at O'Brian, who was immediately reminded of some terrible Tarzan pictures he'd seen.

There was somebody coming down the hall.

Mak put his finger to the mouth hole in his mask. O'Brian tried to stop laughing, but couldn't. Mak slugged him in the thigh. He stopped.

The key was turning in the lock.

"Cuddle Up Carrie," whispered Mak melodramatically.

The blonde girl who had just entered her room had given the two of them a lot of vicarious pleasure over the four years. Mak swore that things had gotten much more personal one weekend when he had picked her up at a frat party.

"I nailed her," Mak would say with a Neanderthal grin.

"Sure," O'Brian would say, not knowing what to believe.

"No shit."

"Uh huh."

"And she knows we watch her."

"Oh, right, gets a big charge out of that I bet."

"Yeah. And you know what else? She wants you."

"Right, so she did it with you, naturally."

"It was nothing personal."

"You asshole."

O'Brian had always wanted to believe him. But O'Brian was not that stupid. He'd known Mak too long and fallen for too many moronic jokes. But Mak was okay. He was a good friend. Someone who would stick by you. He could be a real dumb shit, but sometimes he would surprise you.

Carrie was in the room now. The light was on outside the cheap folding closet door. Mak had his hand on O'Brian's shoulder and had been laughing.

Mak and he had watched Carrie one night, in fact many nights, from their room on the dorm's third floor. She always kept the curtain open just a little, just enough. And on that one night she'd vacuumed with her top off and panties on. God. He remembered thinking it was sick to be watching. But Mak and he just kept watching those breasts rising and falling with the push and pull of the vacuum.

"And she knows we watch her."

"Oh, right, gets a big charge out of that, I bet."

"Yeah, and you know what else?"

But O'Brian didn't believe any of it. Not really.

Sometimes though he and Mak would pass her on the street or in the hall, and she'd give Mak a look and then Mak would elbow



O'Brian hard enough so that it knocked him off stride.

"She wants you."

"Right, so she did it with you, naturally."

"It was nothing personal."

"You asshole."

It might be true. All of it. Or possibly part of it. It might just be a big lie. But Mak had him going again without saying a word there in the dark.

And they would graduate in two days.

The sliding closet door was coming open.

"Ahhhhh!" yelled Mak, leaping into the room.

O'Brian was startled, said nothing, and stood quietly in the closet.

Carrie screamed very loud.

O'Brian looked toward the open window, then quickly made two running strides and leaped out, rolling over on the lawn outside.

"Gotcha!" Mak was saying in the room.

"You bastard, Jack!" Carrie was saying. She was fully dressed. "Get out!"

"Gotcha!"

"Get out. You scared me to death. Who's the other one?"

O'Brian stuck his head in the open window, mask raised, "Yours truly."

"I wish," Carrie said.

O'Brian stood staring, "What?"

There were footsteps in the hall, moving fast.

"Later," said Mak and dived out the window. He rolled across the lawn next to O'Brian.

O'Brian went back to the window and tried to think of something to say.

Mak grabbed his arm. "Christ, O.B., c'mon!"

"Bye, Ben," Carrie said from the window.

They were moving across the lawn toward the men's side of the dorm when the girls' side door flew open.

"What the hell..." said the wrestler who was head resident of the men's side. The women's head resident was next to him dressed in a yellow bathrobe with fluffy pink slippers. She had a skinny red face and glasses. High above them and across the street, moonlight glanced off the water tower.

Mak turned and faced the head residents. O'Brian stopped for a second and looked over his shoulder.

Mak pulled the BB gun out of his pants. "One move and you're dead," he said without a hint of laughter in his voice.

"Shit!" O'Brian was running for the men's side. He ran to the men's door. He looked back, when he reached it, to see the girls' head resident clutching the wrestler's arm. The wrestler had a look of frozen shock on his face. "Shit," O'Brian said more quietly. He pulled off the hockey mask and threw it down in

the hall. He threw the toque down with it.

He ran to the stairwell at the center of the building and threw off his jean jacket as he started up the stairs. He was down to a black sleeveless sweatshirt and jeans.

His breath caught up to him, and he felt pain in his lungs. But he kept running.

In the third floor hallway he passed a girl who was carrying an opened book. She stared at him.

He started to say, "hello" in a hysterical shriek, but never slowed down. He reached his doorway and was relieved to see it half expecting that somehow in the bizarre turn of events that found him running down a hall, throwing off his clothes, the door would have suddenly disappeared or lead into an open space which would drop him off the building to a spot immediately in front of the wrestler and the girls' head resident. The door was ajar and he was in the room slamming the door behind him, then wondering if that was a smart thing to do.

He ran into the bathroom, closed the door and shut off the light. He sat down on the closed toilet. His breathing was loud and he tried to stifle it. He should lock the door. He stood up, then remembered that it didn't lock. He and Mak had broken it wrestling one night. Shit.

Mak. Mak might get caught. He might be caught already.

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Would Mak squeal? No, never. Mak would even have come back if the roles were reversed. Mak would have saved O'Brian's ass, just like with the water tower. Then, again, O'Brian would never have pulled that BB gun and gotten himself in that position. Bullshit. That was an obvious rationalization. He should go back for Mak.

Fuck it. He wasn't going back.

He heard exaggerated footsteps in the hall.

"Shit..."

The door of his room was opening. Mak? The light in the room was still off. He heard fumbling in the dark; then there was a faint light under the door.

Suddenly the bathroom door flew open. A bright light was in O'Brian's eyes.

O'Brian yelled involuntarily.

"What are you doing?" said an abnormally low voice.

"Um. . .just sitting."

There was a stifled laugh; then it came out in a long rich cackle. Mak.

"You asshole," O'Brian looked toward the floor where the flashlight beam now played. "You asshole," he said again and started to laugh.



#### Chapter IV

If Mak knew O'Brian wrote in a "diary", he'd go wild. "Homo!" would come screaming from his lips followed by other accusations of citizenship in fairyland.

There would be no way to explain it either. "Well, see, Mak, it helps me deal with..."

He would never get to the point of explaining about the death of his father and its resultant shockwaves that left him at times the personification of quivering anxiety.

Fuck it.

He'd started writing in a journal only recently when the return to reality after four years had presented itself.

Well, reality was here, with only a few more minutes on Pebble Beach remaining.

He threw the hard covered journal in his duffle bag, zipped the bag shut, and threw it out the open window. He went to the

window, leaned out feet first and positioned himself like a spider with his fingers gripping the window sill. He let go and dropped one story to Pebble Beach.

Without looking up Mak offered him a beer from the cooler.

He and Mak were graduates. They had the pieces of paper. They had been in the ceremony. Soon they would head back north. O'Brian opened the can and inhaled half the liquid therein. He leaned against the tarred rocks of Pebble Beach or more exactly the roof of the dorm's rec room.

They'd go north.

Mak wouldn't stay there long. He would stay only long enough to party for two weeks and join the army.

O'Brian had told him often that going in the army was a waste of a perfectly good youth on a lot of saluting and cowering.

"But I'll be going in as an officer," was his only reply. Then he would say quietly each time they had the conversation, "I wonder what the old man will think of that?"

O'Brian crawled up from the rocks and took a place next to Mak on the mattress they had thrown out here after stealing it from the dorm's storage room.

O'Brian picked up the old fedora he'd left on the mattress and pulled it down over his eyes. He peaked out from under the brim.

"Half Finn, half Indian, I'm Finndian," Mak said thoughtfully as he usually did when he had nothing else to say.

"Yeah, fuck you." O'Brian said for no particular reason.

Mak took a drink, and O'Brian noticed that the Finndian's scrotum was sticking prominently out the leg of his shorts.

"That's comedy," O'Brain said.

"What?"

"Fuck you."

"Sexually." Mak took another drink.

Their clothes were packed in Mak's truck except for the duffle bag. The truck was in view in the parking lot. They'd jump off the rec room roof and go. A fitting end.

They had been in the ceremony yesterday and stuck around for the party at the lake. At the party they had seen everything O'Brian had seen too much of in four years. Tradition, fraternities and sororities. Everything he hated. In truth O'Brian was having more fun now.

They'd never fit in here. O'Brian didn't care and probably Mak didn't notice. Fuck the tradition; fuck the societies; fuck their suburban mothers and fathers, especially their suburban mothers (and possibly older and younger sisters).

"Fuck 'em."

"Sexually."

Jake had come here and been a football player. That had



been eight years ago now. O'Brian had come here because he'd been here before, and because he had thought at the time that any place Jake had been must be cool. There was no other reason.

O'Brian had enjoyed the English program and had done well. That had been enjoyable, satisfying.

But his biggest source of satisfaction here had come just the other day at graduation. Mom had been there. Jake had been tied up that weekend coaching track, but Mom was there. She had seemed older than he remembered. That was disorienting. It was as though he had awakened from a four year dream haunted by beer and heavy breathing to a sobering reality. His mother was older, but looked good there among the suburbanites.

She was shorthaired and short. She was graying and lined and his mother. She had yelled and comforted and worried, and they had lived with all that. He loved her.

And all that ceremony was over now, and Mak and he could head north. Whenever.

But going north, going home, meant looking for a job. O'Brian wouldn't think that far. He would think only that at first it meant a trip home. Then it meant saying goodbye to Mak, but he wouldn't think that far. It meant having a look around, at the cabin north of Newberry where Mom spent her summers. And it meant looking up some old girl friends, if any were around. He could think that far. Maybe even concentrate on it.

But after all that it would mean looking for a job. A teaching job? He'd trained for it, but did he really want to be responsible for a bunch of kids? Could he even find a job teaching?

He had liked English, but only for the literature. The reading was fun, and the professors had liked what he'd written. Easy enough. He'd always thought that maybe he'd write some day. But you didn't just do that, did you? You didn't just write. You had to be a reporter or a college professor or a ditch digger or something to get by. Besides, all that he wrote was in the diary, and it all had to do with death. Maybe he could write obituaries, hang out in funeral homes and wait until something dead came in, then run hurriedly to the news office with the release. He'd be a journalistic specialist; he'd meet all the deadlines.

But you didn't just write. You worked somehow, and he'd never worked.

"Fuck that."

"Sexually."

What would Dad have said to him now? Would he have simply told him to get to work? Would he have presented O'Brian with a chain saw and pointed north into the forests and said, "Get a job, you bum!"? Probably not, but it was hard to know. And he would never know for sure.

If Mak hadn't come to college on the football scholarship, he'd have four years working in the woods completed by now. And Mak would have hated every second of it.

Mak's old man, by even completely unbiased standards, was a prick. Half the reason Mak had come to college was to get away from the "old man". That's what he always said. The other half was to get away from working in the woods with the old man.

Mak had routinely skipped out on working the woods when they were in high school. He'd always shown up at the O'Brian house. Once when O'Brian and Mak had been sitting in Dad's old truck, getting ready to go out on a Sunday afternoon and drink some "roadbeers", Mak's old man had shown up in the O'Brian's driveway in a semi-truck cab.

Mak's old man was big, fair skinned, and gray haired, the Finnish half. His face had been bright red. He'd come to the passenger window and said quietly, "Get out."

Mak had gotten out, and his father had roughly grabbed him by the back of his collar, tossing Mak like a doll toward the truck.

And sometimes Mak would show up at O'Brian's house with bruises around his eyes. When he was a little boy, he would say, "I fell down." And O'Brian remembered seeing the look of concern in his own mother's eyes. A look that wasn't there when he had fallen down. And he remembered the quiet conversations his

mother and father would have in the living room behind the glass doors when Mak would come over with those bruises.

By the time Mak was a teenager, he would tell O'Brian, "The old man had an accident with his fist on my face."

Mak had been a good football player in high school. He'd been a hard nosed little fullback. He was too small to play for a major college, but had started here during his senior year. Football helped pay his way through; he wasn't really wild about it. O'Brian wasn't sure but he thought that Mom had helped Mak with paying for books and some other needs. But no one was talking.

Mak's father hadn't come for graduation, none of his family had. It was hard to tell if that mattered to Mak.

O'Brian looked over at Mak lying on the mattress, a dark skinned, well built little bastard drinking a beer with his scrotum showing.

O'Brian finished his beer and threw the empty at Mak's head. Mak looked over. A grin spread across his dark, wide face.

"I guess I'll just have to kick the shit out of you."



## Chapter Five

O'Brian watched the plane take off. It was thin and small with propellers. It would hold about twenty passengers. There weren't near that many in the plane now.

It lifted off the ground and coursed the air like a car going slightly up hill. He could see Mak waving for a while and then flipping him the finger.

O'Brian smiled. The plane was small now on the horizon and disappearing. He looked through the window of the waiting room at the flat emptiness of the runway. What would he do now?

He should go somewhere. He should do something.

If he went straight home now, he'd find himself at another

starting point with all of his future ahead of him, as people said. Was that supposed to be a comforting thought?

He sat down on a couch facing the window and watched the invisible plane headed toward Detroit. From there Mak would head to Alabama and "go in as an officer".

"Good luck, Mak," he said under his breath. At least Mak knew what he wanted.

On the way over O'Brian had asked Mak for the last time why he was going into the army.

"Why not?" Mak had said, grinning wide and stupid.

Not so stupid. Mak was probably well suited to that kind of life. It was a steady career. He would be several steps up the ladder with a college degree. And if it was what Mak really wanted, it would impress his old man.

"The old man told me, 'Go ahead, get your ass blown off!'" Mak had said on the way over. "I told him there ain't gonna be a war, and he just said I was stupid. But you know, I think it really gets him that I got a degree and I'm gonna be an officer."

"Your old man is a real charmer, Mak," O'Brian had said.

"He's a real prick," Mak said quietly without a hint of laughter.

He would miss Mak.

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He should go somewhere, do something. He was alone in the little airport terminal. He was alone.

O'Brian and Mak had been quiet when they pulled into the airport. Then later when they waited in the terminal, they had just joked.

"Will you write me?" O'Brian had said joking.

"You homo," Mak had said. "I'll call ya some night when I'm drunk."

"You'll be too tired to drink. Besides you'll be too busy pulling the drill instructor's foot out of your ass."

"Shit. You really fucked up, O.B. You should have gone in with me. What the hell you gonna do anyway?"

"I dunno. Jack off, read, collect unemployment."

"No, really."

"I don't know, but at least I won't be geting shot at."

"Fuck, the only shots I'm going to be close to are Jack Daniels and Southern Comfort. Four years of drinking and having poor bastards salute me."

"Oh, you'll be big stuff, Captain Asshole."

"Fuck you."

"Sexually."

The call came over the loudspeaker.

"Well, that's it. Don't cry too many tears over me, you homo," Mak said. He stuck out his hand.

O'Brian took it and scratched Mak's palm with his middle finger.

"Gay fucker."

"See ya', Mak."

"Bye, Ben."

But what now?

Get a job, asshole. Did he want to teach? Did anybody? Yes. A bunch of kids listening to what he had to say, most of which he didn't believe himself. Strange. But somebody must like it. Somebody must feel like they were worth listening to. Or somebody had more guts than he did. Most people had more guts than he did.

Maybe he'd just get some other kind of job. Sure, some guy would walk up to him on the street with a big trench coat on and whisper, "Hey...psssst...kid. Want some other kind of job?"

Maybe he'd be an unemployed bum. He could handle it, and the hours were great.

He looked at the window, and he wished it was another one. It could be the one that he and Mak looked through at Cuddle Up Carrie. Oh, to watch her vacuum. Or it could be an even better window. One where he could just watch himself and Mak have all of their best times over and over. The girls and the beers and the wild times flying down highways in the night, invulnerable, irresponsible and free.



Invulnerability was gone now. It had always been an illusion, but once it had been so much easier to believe. Reality and responsibility were taking over now. And freedom now only meant the freedom to choose which employment path to take, or not to take one and all.

If there were a girl, a woman, it would be different. Not a post teenage sex maniac like the ones Mak and he had searched so diligently for in college, and often found, no, a woman. A woman with intelligence, with a special feeling for him, a woman he could care about and make love to, that would make a difference. You could go a long way with someone who cared about you. That was the myth, anyway; he'd never known the reality.

To hell with it.

He wished the window were a kind of time machine where he could look and find all the things he'd forgotten about his father. He wished he could just remember, in particular, one of the many times he'd fished with his father as a little boy or the way his father sounded when he told stories.

But he couldn't remember.

He should do something. Go somewhere. To a bar? That would be depressing, alone. He could head down the Lake Michigan shoreline and take the back way home. Or maybe he'd get in his mother's car and just keep driving.

He looked out the window into reality. The plane was gone.

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Part II

May 8, 1980

The casket lay at the bottom of the hole. After we left, an earth mover would fill it.

The priest was speaking of something holy. I probably knew it by heart from days as an altar boy, but I wasn't paying any attention. I was numb.

I wasn't crying. My mother wasn't either. We'd cried before. The tears were gone.

The service finished. The priest made the sign of the cross. I followed his lead. But I didn't understand anything.

Jake was crying. He hadn't been there in the night when the phone call finally came.

I put one comforting hand on his back. I was fourteen, a man. He smiled minutely. Then we walked toward the car.

## Chapter Six

It was like being a kid in Catholic school. Some of that feeling came back each time he went to church. If he closed his eyes, he could see those rafters at the church in Newberry. The arches were pure, precise. They were smooth and rounded. Begotten, not made.

He remembered looking up into those arches at Christmas and singing, "Angels We Have Heard on High". The "Glorias" he and the others had sung were lost and echoing in those rafters still. Somewhere he believed that. Somewhere he thought heaven was like those rafters, light brown and varnished, comforting and homely, with the spirit contained in the wood's grain. Sometimes during church he still believed that, and it felt good. But reality was always an interloper. He'd seen its face in a coffin.



This church was small. It had just six pews and just a few old retirees for parishioners. They had become his mother's friends soon after she'd moved to the cabin north of Newberry six years earlier.

The old house in Newberry held too many thoughts. That was what he suspected, anyway. His mother had said only, "It's too big for me." She left the macabre thoughts for her youngest son and got on with things.

St. Joseph's Catholic, or "Pinestump Catholic" as the locals called it, had its own appeal, though. It had its own simple intimacy. The roof had none of those ethereal rafters, just a low ceiling. The tiny cupola at the top of the church reminded him of a bird house.

There had been a succession of young priests here. It seemed to O'Brian that there was a new one each time he came.

"Amen", O'Brian mumbled along with the others.

Jake was next to him. Jake was an athlete. He had a clean-cut look, with a well trimmed beard, describing a narrow line.

Athlete. Jock. Coach. In the best sense of the word. Intelligent, idealistic. He dealt with things. O'Brian had rarely seen him upset. Except once.

"Our Father. . ."

Jake's wife Bonnie was there, too. Bonnie was pretty and funny. She was blonde and snappy with a good sense of humor. She was short, too, and it was fun teasing her. She was all business in public. She taught science.

And Marge with Grandma's arm around her. You couldn't call her Margie. She was a shrunken adult. Usually. She was very smart and had already asked O'Brian probing questions to which he had invented jovial and, no doubt, frustrating answers. That was the uncle's job. Keep 'em laughing. Soon Marge would realize what the world was really like. Marge was whispering in Grandma's ear. His mother was a grandmother. That was startling. He wondered how it affected his mother.

He wondered about his mother. She didn't talk often about her life. But what it had taught her was never in doubt. Her disagreements with people were punctuated with quick cocker-spaniel truth. Often he agreed with her. Often he didn't. But you always knew where you stood. He remembered how she had looked in the crowd at graduation, quiet pride and silent tears.

He loved her. That was a start. Now where did Dad fit in?

They were kneeling.

"Lord, I am not worthy to receive you, but only say the word and I shall be healed."

The priest raised the host.

Was this God the Almighty? This God who came through the hands of a twenty-eight year old priest. This kid on the altar was the living representative of all space and time? The same God who giveth much and sanctimoniously taketh away arbitrarily? He who haveth many strange rules about life which falleth under the general mystery category?

He who killeth Dad for no goddamned good reason?

He began singing.

Soon he was walking up the aisle to receive communion.

"The Body of Christ."

"Amen."

He crossed himself. "Yo, thanks for the bread, man," he thought to himself and nearly laughed. It would be a great response, "The Body of Christ."

It would be easy to find the right pew here. Marge was sitting in it, disgruntled because she wasn't old enough to go to communion. He still harbored a childish fear of not being able to find the right pew and finding himself seated with another family.

But at this little church it was easy to find the O'Brian pew and he had a place in it for a while yet. But time was running out.

Mom was getting noiselessly frustrated at his inactivity.

He could tell each morning as in her usual flurry of breakfast activity, she paused occasionally to say something, then didn't.

A girl passed the pew. She was tall and well built with her hair pulled back. But the pony tail had a little green plastic ball with a strap of elastic. He thought he recognized her, and she eyed him over. She was someone's younger sister, probably. Much younger. Sixteen, tops.

He looked down the pew line. The O'Brians were here together. The others had all made lives. It was his turn. Marge seemed better equipped to deal with the world than he was.

It would be time for him to go, soon.



## Chapter Seven

He couldn't hear a damn thing. You never could when someone used a chain saw.

The saw was spewing wood dust from a fallen beech tree. Jake was holding the saw steady and squinting with the kleenex sticking out of his ears.

O'Brian was standing farther back from the saw than he needed. He wore a Detroit Tigers baseball cap and overalls. He had the kleenex in his ears too. It was so damned loud. The air was cold, another U.P. May.

The saw suddenly roared even louder, then returned to an idle as the fallen tree came apart.

Shutting down the saw, Jake looked up and turned his hat around from its backward position on his head. "That oughta do

her. . ."

O'Brian pulled the kleenex out of his ears and enjoyed the absence of the saw's roaring and the subtle sounds of this hardwood stand. After a minute, and a suspicious look from Jake who was already loading wood on the truck, O'Brian joined his brother.

"It's hard work," Jake said tossing a log into the pickup truck, "but it saves me a lot of money."

O'Brian never remembered questioning his brother on the merits of heating with wood, but he always got a lecture anyway. For some reason his brother and anybody else who heated with wood always felt compelled to justify their fixation with fuel economy. Sometimes you got the impression that they were trying to convince themselves that it was worth the effort. There was something about heating with wood though, he had to admit that. There was something about taking the fallen trees and converting them with your own hands into a form that could keep off winter's chill. There was something about holding an ax in your hands and splitting the logs, one by one.

"I got a friend over in Detour who says I'd be better off heating with fuel oil," Jake said looking up for a response. There wasn't one, so he added, "It isn't true, you know."

O'Brian nodded his head and tossed some more wood in the truck.

"If I come out here once a weekend this summer," Jake said, "I can pretty well heat the house this winter."

"What's on the agenda tonight?" O'Brian said.

"I don't know," Jake was grinning. "Mom's got dinner. She's always got dinner."

"She makes it tough to be at home that way. You have to eat all that good food," O'Brian said.

"Life's a bitch. . .shit I missed." A log careened off the truck and landed in the woods on the other side of the road.

"Get that will ya', Ben? Then we'll go."

O'Brian circled behind the blue Ford pickup as Jake got in and coaxed it to ignition. He picked up the wood and tossed it in back, then opened the door and slid into the front seat.

"You picked a fine time to leave me, Lucille. . ." Kenny Rogers was blaring from the dashboard eight track player. It had been installed by Jake when he was still in high school. It had never worked quite right. And you were never sure if both speakers were on.

"Don't you have any other tapes?" O'Brian asked, knowing the answer.

"What for?"

"Never mind."

"How about a cigar?"

"Sure."

Jake pointed toward the glove compartment, turned the truck into the woods, backed up, and headed toward home.

O'Brian found a twisted box of cigars beneath a flashlight in the glove compartment.

"How old are these?"

"Ancient."

O'Brian stuck one in his mouth. Fat, unflavored and disgusting. Perfect. He pushed in the cigarette lighter and passed a cigar to Jake.

"I kind of like the kind with the little plastic tits on them better," Jake said taking the cigar. "I was thinking about you when I got these."

O'Brian looked at the cigar's dried paper, "When was that, last year?"

"So Mak's going in the army."

"Yup."

"How come?"

"I don't know. Guess he figured it was a good way for him to go. Maybe he's right."

"When I was in college we were all looking for ways to stay out of the army."

"I know. The idea of a war coming didn't even occur to him."

"There won't be a war. Not yet anyway," Jake said.



"No, probably not."

"It's probably a good thing for Mak. He's done pretty well, all things considered."

O'Brian took out the lighter and held it to the cigar. He puffed and smoke began twisting and circling in the air. He quickly handed the lighter to Jake.

Jake lit up and bit down on the end of the cigar. He grinned through the smoke, rolled down the window and spat. Smoke poured out the open window.

As the truck moved along quickly down the two track road, the chilled air rushed in. Spring was always late here and early summer left you bloodless and scratching a thousand black fly bites. All in all, he'd rather have the cold.

"So what's up tonight?" O'Brian said. "Where we going?"

"You mean out and about? Down a few?"

"Sure."

"I don't know."

"What do ya mean?"

"Bonnie," Jake said. "I am married, you know. And then, there's Marge. You know, Marge, your niece? But hell maybe we could take them both along and they could watch us fall off the bar stools."

"You'll go."

"Yeah, probably. But I want you to remember that I got

responsibility," Jake said; he smirked around the cigar.

"Fuck you."

They both laughed.

"That must be scary sometimes," O'Brian said.

"What?"

"You know, marriage, responsibility. Not being able to fall off bar stools and puke on your shoes without guilt."

"Interesting way of putting it. I wonder if that will be in your wedding vows?"

"Yeah, I can see it now: I promise to love you and honor you and never puke on my shoes."

Jake coughed and pulled out his cigar. Tears ran from his eyes. Finally he laughed. "You're trying to kill me, right?" he said.

"Sure. Really, though, it must be scary sometimes."

"What?"

"Marriage, kids."

"Yeah. It can be. When Marge was sick. There's no feeling like that. I don't want it again."

"I can imagine. . ." He thought of Dad and watching him sick.

"Well. . .maybe. But it's different, a lot different."

"Where would we go tonight?" O'Brian said breaking the thought.

"I don't know. I guess we could go to Birch Camp," Jake said resuming his cigar puffing.

"Classy place."

It was a logging bar near the lake. The drunks would be there. The old loggers who knew Dad. Dad got drunk. In places like Birch Camp, just like Jake and him. Dad had talked to these old guys. Drunk with them. He could almost see it. But he couldn't see Dad.

What would Dad have been like drunk? But no, no, it was hard to imagine, uncomfortable. It reminded O'Brian too much of the drugs and the accidental overdoses of chemotherapy. The rage of the week. The doctors, "Gee, maybe this will work; it's worked on rats." And Dad rolling on the brown carpet in a seizure, his jaw moving up and down rhythmically like a typewriter key.

O'Brian spat furiously on the floor.

Jake looked over, then looked back at the road and puffed.

O'Brian looked out through the passenger window at a gap in the trees. He could see the lake and the sun shining in the open sky above it. When he saw the bird, he couldn't look away. You never could.

It circled over the water.

He grabbed Jake's arm and pointed..

Jake started to protest, but then seeing the bird, pulled

the truck to a stop.

"Eagle," O'Brian said.

The bird adjusted a wing and dropped its circle lower; the sun showed on his white head.

Jake moved over to look more closely.

"Haven't see him in a while," Jake said.

O'Brian had seen him years before with Dad. They were in the boat on the west shore of the lake. The bird had been big and standing on a dead tree. And Dad had said, "Look, son. Look how cocky he is." And Dad had been holding his arm, clasping him at the wrist. It was important that he see this. It was special.

"I saw him with Dad," O'Brian said out loud.

"What?"

"With Dad. We were fishing the last time."

"Oh."

The bird was moving straight at them now and gaining altitude. The wings were shaggy and defined in feathers. The head jerked quickly to the left.

It was good to see him again.



## Chapter Eight

Drinking with Jake was different. Drinking with Mak was drinking and raising hell and being friends and competing for women. But this wasn't like that.

There was an air of stupid eloquence here. The warmth of family and the important things that he felt and never said to his brother. Things that were "by God okay" to say when you were drunk. Truly eloquent things like, "You're my brother, don't forget that." Things that seemed really stupid when the sun came up and that he would pretend not to remember in the daylight.

It was knowing the words that his brother would say, the stories he would tell and listening anyway. Listening and silently repeating the words, like the Sunday morning mumbling of the Nicean Creed.

It was sharing in a silent language of glances and grins

formed of a lifetime of shared perceptions.

It was a shared sense of humor, too. It must have been Dad's sense of a joke, of a kind of muted nastiness. Of putting the screws to your pal, knowing you'd both laugh about it later. Getting somebody going, then sitting back and watching the results, hiding chuckles in a beer glass.

But he couldn't see his father laughing. He could only see him in the boat.

"Look at how cocky he is, son . . ."

And he couldn't see his father laughing.

He and Jake were leaning over the juke box and staring at their choices. They were country and dated.

"The Unicorn Song," he said. "We sang that at school."

"In the choir?" Jake was grinning.

"In the bar."

"Whatever," Jake said. Jake was looking at his brother with his cap tilted a little to one side. He scratched at his neat beard that was red in the right light. Jake tipped back his glass of beer that had been resting on the glass of the juke box.

O'Brian pushed in the numbers.

"And this one," Jake said leaning in forcefully and pushing the buttons. Jake laughed then. It was an echo of laughter from down a dim hallway, distorted by time. The tune was "Wasted Days

and Wasted Nights".

O'Brian laughed too and he wondered what his laugh sounded like and thought of how his mother said that he and Jake were identical on the phone and he wondered if their laughter echoed to Mom, too. And he wondered if the whole idea was just fucking weird.

They had played "Wasted Days and Wasted Nights" before in this same bar. They had played it nine times and left after the first play, and he wondered if anyone in here remembered that now. Probably not, their antics were likely tame by comparison to some of the regulars.

"Let's play it just one time," O'Brian said to his brother. "I'd like to stay for a while."

O'Brian punched in two more songs, and they turned away from the juke box. Jake was six years older and looked different because of the beard. But the face beneath was an O'Brian.

People always knew both of them immediately as O'Brians, but despite the beard, they were never sure which was which. They said it was the eyes that gave them away and the mannerisms. "So much like your Dad," they would say and O'Brian would wonder what that meant.

The O'Brian brothers stood looking at the bar. There was a small woman, mostly unkempt, thin and bent. She was rubbing down the bar with a green rag dirtied from use. She was careful with

the wood, as though stroking the back of a sturdy, but dear animal.

At the right end of the bar a stocky man with shoulders pulled up tight to his neck sat. His back was to Jake and Ben, but his neck was thick and dark under his cowboy hat. There was an empty shot glass to his right. It had been empty since they came in. The man sat squat and patient, as though waiting for something. As though he were trying to keep steady, just for a while.

Seated near the bar and often conversing with the bartender were a bald man in a windbreaker and an apparent wife with a modified beehive hairstyle, horn rimmed glasses, and eyes that squinted because she'd bought the glasses in a store.

The married couple's conversation was loud. The man's talk was forced and clean, like a wink to his old bar pals. After all, the wife was here tonight.

Behind the bar were the typical bottles and a long mirror rounded at the top. At the right of the bar was a small grocery shelf. Supplies were there for the odd camper who stopped in and to supplement the diets of those who usually drank their dinners.

The O'Brians moved with a pitcher of beer to a table. They tipped up their glasses and downed the contents. Ben O'Brian refilled the glasses and handed one to Jake.

"Some cigars," Jake said in control and moving toward the



bar. Jake never waited for his brother to agree. Ben O'Brian never expected it.

O'Brian watched Jake go to the bar and place the order. The barmaid turned after seeing him in the mirror above the sink. She was arthritic. She handed Jake two R.G. Dunns in a knobby hand. She was looking at him.

"You're Doc O'Brian's boy," she said. "Didn't notice when ya first come in."

"Yeah, Jake." Jake turned and pointed toward his brother. "That's Ben, my little brother."

"I don't know you," she said shortly toward Ben O'Brian.

Jake grinned and looked at her. He put one of the cigars in his mouth without removing the plastic.

"Doc used to come over to the house," she said, waiting to be challenged.

Jake watched her a moment, his smile straightening.

"My old man did some work for him. He cut brush and cleared for your place on the lake there," she continued.

"Yeah, Bill Skones," Jake was nodding with the plastic coated cigar still sticking out and bobbing.

"That's him," she smiled.

"Yeah," Jake said. "I remember watching him in the bulldozer out there. I didn't help though. I was too young."

"How is he?"

"Dead."

"Oh. . . He's dead; your dad's dead."

Jake's cigar bobbed quickly, quickly like a whisk broom in motion.

"We liked Doc. Did lots of work on Bill. Didn't ask no questions, just pulled them teeth out." She made a jerk with a thin forearm. Then she grinned severely. "He did these, too."

Ben O'Brian listened. A lot of these loggers knew Dad. He must have been out here to drink, too. Deer season. But Dad drunk was one step from Dad dead, pine box, flowers, bloodless. .

"Look at how cocky he is, son," remember.

Ben O'Brian looked toward the barmaid and his brother and concentrated. They were suddenly interrupted.

The sound of a car door slamming was heard, and attention focused on the door to the left of the bar. It opened. A young dog, a boxer, darted in purposefully from the opening. A cool wind blew in. The night temperature had dropped to the high forties.

A man in his fifties came in behind the dog. Ben O'Brian recognized him as the owner. The man nodded toward Jake, after a second's hesitation. The fat man walked past the barmaid enroute to his living quarters, through the door behind the bar. O'Brian remembered previously catching glimpses of an old color TV, the

man's wife at the sink and several religious prints and statues.

"Bang," the man said grinning over his shoulder.

The boxer, who was standing in front of the bar, now immediately hit the floor. Only the large eyes in her homely face moved. The man disappeared through the door laughing a slightly theatrical laugh.

"Lady Jane," said the barmaid.

The boxer sprang up and jumped to the barstool. Her eyes were alert now and the stub tail brushed rapidly against the seat. As if remembering, she looked behind her toward the floor.

The barmaid took a dish from under the bar and said, "Poor thing fell off a couple of days ago."

Jake looked at his brother and motioned him over. He was grinning as though he had a joke to tell. O'Brian moved over next to his brother.

"Watch," Jake said.

The boxer's eyes were intense, the ears alert as the barmaid filled the dish from a Pabst tapper. Th barmaid set the dish on the bar, and the boxer checked over her shoulder before leaning over and lapping it up. The stub wagged.

The barmaid's dentures grinned and slipped. She closed her mouth. "That dog likes beer."

The man with the cowboy hat at the far end of the bar

mumbled a laugh as he slapped down his empty shot glass. He was Indian O'Brian could see now. His face was well lined and pointed at the cheek bones. His mouth hung loose and wide.

The man stood up resolutely and headed for the far corner, mumbling to himself. He picked up a cheap looking guitar. He came back and sat down at his stool, facing toward the O' Brians and the older couple.

Jake wore the same jovial look of anticipation. The older couple was silent and drinking. The barmaid turned toward the mirror as the dog finished her bowl.

"Lig ta stard ov with an old Hank Williams tune," said the stout Indian man.

The O'Brians didn't recognize the man. He definitely wasn't paid for this. He began singing something that sounded remotely like "Your Cheatin' Heart".

"It just doesn't get any better," said Jake quoting a beer commercial.

Ben O'Brian felt a sudden sense of isolation moving in around him. He tried to think of New York or Los Angeles, though he had never been near either. Detroit then. But there was an endless series of roads and towns and turns leading from those cities to this place. And this was real life. And Dad had liked places like this. He was sure that Dad had been more like Jake than like these people. But he remembered so little. It occurred



to him that Mom was quite far removed from this life. Had glimpsed it, but didn't likely understand. She met these people every day. The lake, after all, was just down the road. But when they met with her, they had on formal faces. She was someone who mattered like Doc O'Brian had been.

Doc had been an employer and a general benefactor. Someone they loved and needed to love. It occurred to him that they probably knew Dad better than he had. He threw back a beer and decided he would just be glad these people would take care of Mom.

She didn't really need the care, but it must be good to accept it.

"Y'know old Charlie there," said the man in the windbreaker suddenly from behind the O'Brians. "Old Charlie there, he used to be real good."

"They used to pay him to sing!" said the barmaid, turning from the sink with her dentures smiling.

Ben sipped at a beer and looked half grinning toward Jake who was apparently happy.

"All around here he used to play," said Windbreaker. "I knew him then. I knew him real good."

Ben turned and eyed the boxer who had finished her beer and was looking longingly at the barmaid who was watching Charlie at

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the end of the bar.

Jake sat down next to the man in the windbreaker and listened; he was still grinning.

Ben O'Brian moved quickly and retrieved the pitcher from the table, bringing it over to Jake and the windbreaker and the lady in the blue horned rims, who was Windbreaker's wife, probably.

"You knew Charlie like that when you were young. That was before you went down to Detroit and dragged me up here," Horned Rim said fiercely, staring with a squint and her beehive tilting forward.

"He used to play Sault, Canada," said the Windbreaker, not looking at his wife, but looking for a challenge to that statement from the O'Brians. He sipped his drink and continued not looking at his wife.

Charlie was finished and was incomprehensibly introducing his next song to an audience that wasn't there.

Jake had thrown back another beer and was now puffing on his cigar. Ben O'Brian picked his drink up then put it back down and looked toward Charlie.

"Ya er ma sunshi, my ony sunshi. . ."

There was a dignity in this man. A pride in his staggering stance at having once played for people. A look of remembering, a pretense in the slurred singing that the crowds still cheered.

Windbreaker joined in the song and Horned Rim joined in

deciding, perhaps, that for the moment there was more fun in partying than in criticizing.

Jake threw back his beer and began to sing. Ben leaned close to him and joined in.

"You'll never know, dear, how much I love you."

The owner came back through the door and added a crusty deep voice to the singing. Soon he brought rounds for the house. Charlie sang his songs emotionally in a continuous slur. They bought his shots which he downed between songs. Later he poured the whiskey down slowly like glasses of very cold water on a hot day. His singing got worse.

Charlie moved over to the table where they were all sitting.

After a time Ben O'Brian forgot about Charlie and smiled with the perfect enjoyment of a drunken idiot. Jake was listening to the stories. Taking it in. Charlie delivered incomprehensible clever lines from his old act, then laughed. The others laughed too around the lines.

And soon Jake had the guitar. His hat was on a little crooked. "Almost heaven, West Virginia..." He couldn't sing, but he was handsome and he could play very poor guitar.

The woman in the blue horned rims leaned her beehive across the table toward him.

Charlie was missing; Ben O'Brian noticed it. He was just conscious enough to notice. But he forgot soon. He watched his

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brother playing bad guitar and laughed when Jake moved his hat completely sideways and said, "Sorry, just tuning." It was very funny and, of course, made no sense.

The boxer eyed them continually, still sitting on the stool. She watched them, then looked toward her bowl, the people, the bowl.

The owner and Windbreaker and Horned Rim were all laughing and singing and telling jokes whose punch lines came about the middle.

"Hey, Charlie," said the barmaid interrupting with a very unpleasant look on her face. "You was just in the bathroom."

Charlie looked up from his new seat slumped at the bar, "Yuup."

There was laughter all around and Jake winked toward Ben.

The barmaid was still scowling. "Well, I ain't cleaning the shit up." Her eyes were hard and set on him.

Windbreaker and Horned Rim looked at Charlie.

Charlie looked around. Jake looked toward the juke box and puffed his cigar. Ben O'Brian kept a drunken gaze on Charlie and didn't notice when the musician aimed a pleading look his way.

Charlie's hard worn face went slack. He began an incoherent disclaimer.

"Y'know," said Windbreaker, "you can't ride home with us if yer gonna shit in the car." He was not smiling.



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Charlie looked toward Jake, then Ben. His mouth sloped downward. His eyes squinted like a beaten dog's.

Horned Rim seized the opportunity. "What the hell kind of place did you bring me up to? Up here with nothing to do. People shittin' on the floor."

The barmaid turned disgustedly from the table. The owner had disappeared. The dog was gone now, too.

"Goddamned cold winters. Fucking North Pole."

Ben O'Brian felt Jake pulling at his elbow. They moved back to the juke box. The couple at the table didn't notice.

"Goddamned nice in Detroit right now. It's May, and it's still cold as hell out there. You know that?"

Windbreaker sipped his drink.

Charlie's head had dropped. He stared into the mirror behind the bar.

"Goddamn it, woman," Windbreaker was saying now. "You'll make my breakfast tomorrow and like it."

Leaning against the juke box, Ben O'Brian looked beyond his brother, who was standing holding a drink.

One of Charlie's arms had dropped straight down. His other arm and his head rested on the bar beneath the cowboy hat. The guitar sat alone at the far end of the partying table.

## Chapter Nine

He couldn't stay here.

There wasn't work here.

In Newberry there were only jobs that younger boys had a lock on. Jobs that he would have been perfect for a year or two ago. Jobs that paid minimum wage.

He was too old for that now. He needed a real job. A career.

He had no job, and he hadn't looked for one. He'd sent out a total of six unstudied resumes. Resumes that might have the wrong address written on them. Resumes that might have several typos. Resumes he didn't care about. Resumes that worried him, because he didn't care about them. Resumes that he would never follow with a call.

Apathetic resumes. Worthless resumes.

How would he come across in a job interview?

"Do you want this job?"

"It might be nice."

"What qualifies you for this job?"

"I'm unemployed."

"Why do you want to teach?"

"Um..."

"Well?"

"It would pass time between now and death."

But what else would he do?

He could travel. But if he was going to do that, he should get under way. Just do it. Take the \$500 he had saved and do it.

O'Brian was looking into a bowl of oatmeal and listening to his mother in the kitchen.

He took a spoonful of breakfast and drank some milk. His mother came up from the basement carrying wood. That always made him feel guilty. But she did it all the time when he wasn't here, so why should it? She walked into the living room to deposit her load in the bin. She too could give you a good argument for burning wood, but that didn't appear to be her aim today. She went into the kitchen.

She came back around the kitchen counter with a glass of

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orange juice and placed it next to her coffee. She sat down and looked at him.

He responded by admiring the complexities of the breakfast in his bowl. He could see her face without looking. It was easy to know. She was worried because he was idle. She wanted him to have a job. It was a kind of thoughtful expression. Her eyebrows were raised as though she wanted to say something, but her mouth was closed.

The race was on. He had to talk first or she would say it. And suddenly he was exploding loudly into something that had accidentally been released, tapped from the stream of subconscious. The surprising thoughts that dreams are made of.

"When Dad died, what was it like for you?" he said and looked down at the oatmeal wishing he could have shut off the tap.

She looked at him unstartled, as though this was a common conversation between them. They had never discussed it before.

"Honestly, I can't remember that now. It's been...nine years. It's hard to remember." She paused. "How did you take it?"

"I don't know that I ever have. At first I think I was numb. Those days it sort of...makes me dizzy."

"I just try to remember what it was like before that," she said forcing a smile. "I try to avoid the thoughts of the last



couple of days he lived. But I can't really. They come back sometimes."

"Do you remember what he looked like?"

This startled her. "Well, of..."

"No, I mean exactly. His exact features."

"Yes, I think so. Yes. But I knew him so long."

O'Brian looked back at his oatmeal and felt his stomach churn. "I can't remember, Mom," he said quietly surprising himself. "I wish I could remember. I only think of things I hope were true. I won't ask you. There's a lot that's not clear. It's like an illusion. So much dreaming."

His mother's brow creased. "It's hard, Ben. It's always hard."

"It's been nine years, though."

"It's still hard."

"The only thing I remember is kind of stupid. Dad and I sitting in a boat, looking at an eagle. Out there on the north shore. I think I was eight or nine."

"I've heard of that. I think your Dad told me that."

"It's real then?"

"I think so."

"That's good. That at least is good."

"Ben, you should be looking for a job."

"I know. I will."

"Good."

They were quiet and unsure.

"I should have looked sooner..."

She said nothing.

"But it was easy here."

"Ben, I love having you, but..."

"I know. There aren't any jobs here. I've got to leave."

"You don't have to. You could use this as a base. Go out and really look."

"I should leave."

"And go where?"

"Marquette, I think." This was a new plan. He'd never thought of this before.

"Ben, if you want to stay..."

"No," he said looking at her.

"Something will come up for you."

"You think so?"

"Something will."

Would he really do that, go to Marquette? And another thought, "How about if I take the old truck, just for the summer? Just until I get a job." Or until it broke down on the way to parts unknown? No, he wouldn't do that. Not really.

"I'm not sure it runs," she said looking uncertain.

"Jake and I drove it."

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"Of course you can use it," she said more resolutely.

"Maybe I'll go to see Grandpa," O'Brian was saying, forming another plan.

"There's an idea," she said, surprised. "I haven't seen him in a long while. It's a shame, too. We just don't do those things." She became enthusiastic. "It might be good for you to see him."

"I don't know," he said. "It might even help me. Maybe he could tell me something."

She hesitated. "How? What do you mean?"

"It sounds stupid. But I think it's Dad again."

Mrs. O'Brian looked at him stifling something, "Isn't it always?"

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Part IV



May 17, 1980

In bed Dad was the seeming operator of a great machine. He gripped the bed's metal rail and shook it rhythmically his body tensing in the throes of a monumental task.

He couldn't talk.

I sat near the bed and didn't speak either. His flesh was pale. His face stretched tight against the bones beneath.

My mother watched him, expressionless.

"Why does he grab the rail like that, Mom?"

"I don't know," she said, rigid in her metal chair.

"Does he think he's running a machine or something?"

"I don't know."

For a moment we were a trio of mimes, my mother and I staring blankly at the company's featured player.

"He never had to run a machine, other than his dental tools," my mother said. "He didn't work with heavy things. He liked ballfields. He was a catcher."

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"I know Mom."

She looked towards me slightly startled. Then she smiled.

"Of course you do."

## Chapter Ten

Five hundred dollars can go fast. That was his first lesson in the "real world". Learning the value of the dollar was a horribly worn cliché. It was the stuff fat men in suits told you. It was depressing that those old farts were absolutely right.

His money was gone for a deposit on a Marquette basement apartment, the first month's rent, plates, silverware, two cups, a chair, a desk from a Newberry auction and the gas to get here.

A pot and pan were courtesy of Mom as was food money for the first week. He had spent most of that in restaurants on his first day in Marquette.

Fifteen dollars remained.

It was 7 p.m. Saturday, May 30. After two days of living in motel rooms, he had found this place. It wasn't special, or even

nice. Nevertheless, it did represent his first responsible act as a non-college adult and that was something, though not much. His mother had landed him a job in a furniture store, which was run by some friends of hers. The Rauses also owned a funeral home just across the alley from the store. He sincerely hoped that his work would be confined to the store.

He had yet to apply for a teaching job. He hadn't considered it at all really. His mother seethed each time she learned that he still had made no efforts in that direction. Perhaps one reason she had politely ushered him out from home was that she was afraid one day soon she would boil over. Perhaps that was exactly what he needed. Perhaps Dad would simply have kicked his ass and told him to start looking. It was stupid to waste a college degree like he was apparently doing. Maybe he was just stupid.

The Rauses' business was across the street from the campus of Northern Michigan University and just up the street from a college dance bar.

He had pictured Marquette as a place where he could ease into real life. It would be a place where he could do something academic or at least pseudo-academic, like working in a library. Of course, you had to apply to get a job at the library or anywhere else, for that matter. Since he already had the Rause job, after going through the formality of an interview, it seemed



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easier just to take it and settle in.

Mr. Rause, Ralph, looked the part of an undertaker, tall and thin. He was jovial enough, however, and hadn't the rouge smile of the cliched undertaker so that working at the furniture store seemed like it might be all right. There had been no mention of the funeral home.

The only problem was that he didn't want to work. Maybe he just needed a year to digest everything. Then maybe he would be fired up to find that teaching job. Maybe he just needed some time to think about all of the things that had happened to him so far in life. Though he had managed to avoid that to a great extent so far. It occurred to him that most of his life before Dad's death was like a shattered mirror scattered on a hardwood floor. It was fragments, shards of memory and half memory. There were abbreviated memories of things he had probably seen on TV and placed himself in. It was like when he dreamed of famous people and half way through became them.

His memory went back about nine years clearly, though the year after Dad's death was somewhat cloudy. Then there was Dad's death, which was less a memory than a continuing pain and a nondescript sometimes paralyzing fear. Before that and during that time he had only the shards. Separating illusion and reality among those scattered pieces was something he wasn't

ready for. That he knew for sure.

It was almost funny to think that if he were to die and his life passed before him, he might not be sure it was his. For all he knew, when the time came, his mind might run reruns of *Leave It To Beaver* and *Star Trek*. Did everyone feel that way?

Starting again. It was like his freshman year in college, though here in the U.P. he knew what people would be like. However, he still didn't know anyone. True, he had met the young couple upstairs, and the landlord with the western U.P. accent and the Finnish name he couldn't currently remember, as well as Mr. Rause, Ralph. But he didn't really know anyone. The second floor tenant, he hadn't met at all. In fact he didn't know if it was a him, a her or a they.

The thing to do, the adult thing to do, would be to stay in Marquette for a while and check out jobs at his own pace. Check them out and then when he had free time go for interviews. That would be the smart thing. He wondered if he would do it. The shirt and tie and suit were hung in the closet. Mom had pressed them. How long would they hang there?

Had four years of raising as much hell as possible and ignoring the outside world really prepared him to be a daily example for adolescents?

There might be a good career at Rauses. Hell, he might be promoted to head bed tester. Not bad duty if you didn't do it

alone.

Right now he didn't think he would be going out tonight. If he went out he'd probably just spend the rest of his money and come home alone to throw up. He needed something to do. From his vantage point on the rolled up mattress that served as his couch, he objectively viewed his apartment. Cobwebs seemed to be the main design feature. To his right was the bedroom with just enough room for a bed. Behind him was the bathroom with barely enough room for an undisinfected bathtub and sink. The main feature of these items was also spider work so it occurred to him that perhaps no one had lived here for a while. He wondered what reason, other than the early arachnid design, there was for that. Straight ahead was the kitchen with no food and a pot and a pan.

There. The grand tour. He was bored and depressed and feeling very sorry for himself. Bored and depressed.

Bored and Depressed, that new comedy team! Good clean fun and razor blades for cutting. One suicide to a customer please.

He was not in full control of his faculties. That was something else he was sure of. He decided to go out the door up the steps to the outside and sit. He'd watch the cars on the street and hope he didn't see himself driving by.

Outside on the bottom step of the stairway that led up to the second floor, he watched the cars go by. He hadn't seen himself driving one yet.



There were many foreign cars. Those belonged to college professors. There were many older cars and new American trucks. Those belonged to the miners, unemployed natives and college students.

Growing up in the U.P., Marquette had been the place to go. It was the place Mom took them Christmas shopping where they peeked at the packages in the back seat without her knowing.

It was the place where he and Jake had come when they were just under and over ten and spent hours, eons, waiting for Mom to pick out a pattern in the sewing center. That place, he and Jake had decided, was the seat of male boredom on the planet.

It had never occurred to him before that the town's setting was beautiful. It was. The community was spread out on the shore of Lake Superior and hugged closely by many hills, which made winter driving interesting. He had never really noticed that any of the U.P. was beautiful, until he had left it. You had to come back to see it. The dunes at Grand Marais and the cliffs at Munising and the lakes and rivers and the bears running the back roads had never seemed unusual, until he came back.

And now that he was back north, what in hell was he going to do here?

His Dad could have told him. But his Dad was dead. His Dad had loved this country. His Dad had known how and lived it. But he was dead.



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Down the road from his apartment there were a lot of good looking young women walking around and sun bathing on the lawn of an apartment complex. He had seen most of them as he had walked while trying to think of something clever to say to one of them and as usual remaining silent and stupid.

Maybe on some crazed night soon he would walk down there in his underwear and cry like a puppy while scratching at the first door that smelled like perfume. But you couldn't do that in real life. Not without seeing the inside of the county jail, anyway.

Dad had not been like this. He had gone right from college to dental school and then had married Mom in the service during WWII.

Maybe he'd go to dental school. So what if he had absolutely no apptitude for it and probably could never get in. He could just hang around the campus for years and pretend like he was trying to get in. At least he'd have a purpose.

There was noise on the stairway behind him.

He turned around. There was a laundry basket piled high and coming toward him. Its means of locomotion were two legs in faded jeans. Nice legs.

"Excuse me," said the disembodied female voice buried somewhere in the feminine laundry.

"Sure," said O'Brian as the woman with a nice behind and long red hair passed. He couldn't see her face.

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"I'm Ben O'Brian," he said, feeling like he was at his first day of kindergarten.

The woman showed no signs of turning around but instead headed for an old white Volkswagen bus and said over her shoulder, "Hello, I'm your neighbor from upstairs. You don't know me and I don't know you. The only thing we have in common is that we pay rent to the same landlord. Let's keep it that way."

Looking toward the bus as it started with a four unmuffled cylinder roar, he saw her. She was considerably older than he. Her face was angular and attractive. She wore no makeup. She was angry. As she began to drive away, he thought he saw her begin to cry.

He sat silently for a moment as she disappeared down the alley. He felt very alone.

He believed it was about 7:15 P.M. He had several options. He could go inside and think about his dead father. He could think about the nice looking woman from upstairs who he certainly would never know and round off the evening by making a mess of the shower or mattress. Or he could go directly to bed, curl up in the fetal position and try to regress to the point where his father and mother were planning on having a second baby. Or he could go to a bar and drink enough to forget about everything including his name and anybody else's he could think of.

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His best option was clear.

## Chapter Eleven

Two shots had numbed him. He was now the observer, the o-so-sophisticated watcher of life. He looked down the bar at the guys in matching baseball caps. They were talking, yelling really, and drinking heavily while spilling popcorn and smoking stagnant cigars.

The bartenders were keeping their distance from these guys with "Bonzai" emblazoned on their caps. Staying away was probably the best way to deal with them, not to mention the safest. If you engaged these types of guys in conversation, especially if you were a woman, they would make lewd comments about your breast size. If you were a man, they would make loud, lewd comments about the small size of your penis. They were, of course, disgusting, lowly slime devoid of all maturity and unfit for the human race. Just a few months ago he and Mak had been very much like them. Worse yet, he felt a deep sense of envy.



Possibly it would be fun to get lost with these idiots in their disgusting excesses and once more become one of the Vikings, just off the boat for a night of raping and pillaging. Instead, he was trying not to think of his stone dead father and his future options and ending up feeling very sorry for himself, a new pastime of his. Maybe a step backwards, just for one night, wouldn't hurt. Maybe doing something stupid just once more was a good idea. Still, even when he was still at school, he had noticed his immunity running low. With each new escapade with Mak things seemed to get more dangerous. Somehow between the ages of 18 and 22 the two of them had never considered the possibility of getting in real trouble. It was just fun. Apparently the older he got, the more costly that kind of fun would get. Still, what was just one more night?

"Fuckin' ay!" screamed the Bonzai Boys from the other end of the bar and downed four shots.

"Fuckin' Bee!" O'Brian suddenly said on an impulse he instantly regretted and downed the last shot he could afford. In those earlier days where had all their money come from? There had always seemed to be some.

Suddenly the bartender was bringing him another shot.

"What's this? I didn't order this," O'Brian said, concerned. "Listen, I don't have any..."

"No problem," the bartender said. "They bought it for you."

"Oh."

"You may live to regret this," the bartender, who was in his thirties, whispered. He wore glasses and had his hair cut short.

"They're that bad?" O'Brian asked.

"Worse," the bartender said, walking away.

The bartender immediately began pouring another shot and walked back toward O'Brian with it, setting it down next to him. O'Brian looked to his left and suddenly realized someone was sitting there. It was one of the Bonzai boys. The kid possessed a pitiful blonde mustache and a large smirk. Suddenly he slapped a business card down in front of O'Brian. It was void of lettering except for two words at the very center, "Fuckin' ay!"

O'Brian laughed.

"Rick Patrick, house painter, lawn mower, pseudo intellectual, alcoholic."

"Oh, a college student." O'Brian laughed again. It felt good.

"Anything wrong with that?" Rick said a little aggressively.

O'Brian picked up his drink. "Nothing, I'm just done with being one myself."

"What's your hurry?" Rick was asking. "There's always another class to take."

"Yeah, that's true, but there's not always enough money," O'Brian said. "By the way, thanks for the drink."

It was time to be careful. He felt a real longing to keep drinking and do something crazy with these guys. But he had the distinct impression that if he did he'd wind up in trouble somehow. After all, they still had their immunity; he didn't. He didn't need to make a call home from the jail house.

Rick picked up his shot. "Bonzai!"

They tipped back the drinks. O'Brian knew when he felt the brief hot spell and the surging liquid in his stomach, that he was now entering trouble. He had failed to reduce his speed.

O'Brian set his empty glass down, "Nagasaki!" he said in a raspy voice.

Maybe he'd made enough progress toward adulthood in the last couple of days. Maybe it was time for a little regression. Besides it was what he did best.

He suddenly found he was surrounded by Bonsai Boys. A bowl of popcorn had slid in front of him, and the predictable din of group intoxication was being raised around him amidst chugging and spilling.

"What's your name?" Rick was now shouting over the shouting.

"Jack Kivimaki," O'Brian said, deciding there was no use taking chances. Besides Mak would have loved this.

"Jack, I think you are about to enjoy yourself."

A few minutes or hours later the Bonsai Boys and O'Brian,

too, were raising lewd choruses of "Carolina in the Morning", reciting the infamous "Walking Through the Jungle", and singing "Wasn't That a Party".

O'Brian felt perfectly at home, with his immediate problems kept at bay by an outpouring of alcohol of flood proportions, and his head whirling like a carnival ride. He was in his element. A couple of Bonsai groupies stepped over to see their heroes and O'Brian was introduced to a girl who at first glance looked approximately like the prom queen from a psycho ward, but seemed to improve in beauty as the night proceeded. At about 1 A.M. the Bonsai Boys with O'Brian invaded the dance floor, some with female partners, some without. By that time, O'Brian had acquired a Bonsai hat and the near inability to speak. He danced with the prom queen from a psycho ward and nearly fell down several times. The D.J. was playing John Belushi singing "Louie, Louie". As O'Brian stumbled around and bumped against the big blonde prom queen, it occurred to him that he never seemed to leave this state of mind aside from a few forays into the world of reality that seemed like dreams now.

Soon the dance floor emptied of everyone but the boys and the groupies and O'Brian. A big kid named Randy, or "Rags" his official club name, was standing on the D.J.'s speaker screaming in a U.P. accent, "Wasn't dat a party! Bon-fucking-sai!" He began dancing wildly and suddenly leaped from the speaker into



the middle of the dance floor in an attempt to complete the modified splits, but instead lost his balance upon landing, colliding with two other Bonsai Boys, O'Brian, the prom queen and a table full of service men from a nearby airbase.

O'Brian was in the middle of the melee. He found himself under a table with legs flailing and bodies rolling. At that point it was hard for him to conceive of thinking, but the one thought that entered his mind had been his last sober thought. The adult caution that had told him just before that shot of whiskey, "Entering trouble, reduce speed!" There he was with his immunity expired.

How had he gotten there? Had he been punched? He believed he had. It was something like that anyway. This kind of thing had happened often with Mak. Yes, and he'd always wound up like this, too, drunk and wondering what the hell was going on.

A hand was gripping his wrist. "Jack." said a voice from above the table. Wait a minute. Was Mak here? Who was talking to him? Had he said Jack? No, somebody had his wrist. Oh, he was Jack. Use Jack's name.

"Jack!"

"What?"

"They're calling the cops. C'mon. I'm going out the back way."

O'Brian climbed out from under the table. The air force men and Bonsai Boys were still rolling about the dance floor. Rick and O'Brian headed out a back door in the dark. Someone was following them closely. O'Brian suddenly recognized that someone as the prom queen, who was looking even prettier in the darkened alley. Rick stuck his head back in through the door of the bar and screamed, "Bonsai!"

Rick turned from the door and began running. O'Brian followed him with the prom queen still in pursuit. "Hey, you guys!" she said. She yelled that over and over. Rick and O'Brian had a two yard lead on her. O'Brian looked farther back over his shoulder at the back door of the bar and saw six or seven Bonsai Boys and one airman following them too.

Rick turned a corner into a parking lot where he quickly leaped over the door of an ancient white Cadillac convertible with rust holes and started it up, the unmuffled sound roaring. O'Brian leaped into the car after him, falling over the door and landing with his face on the floor mat. The prom queen, who apparently was sober, quietly opened the door and got in next to him.

The car was moving, but Bonsai Boys and airmen were still leaping in. Apparently the common police enemy had made everyone friends.

Rick made a quick right at the parking lot exit and proceeded down a steep incline into a roadside park at the base of a hill on the Lake Superior shoreline. He shut off the lights and cut the engine as the sound of a police siren got louder in the distance.

"Okay," Rick said. "Scatter!"

Bonsai Bosy and airmen began running in all directions. Rick grabbed O'Brian by the wrist and whispered, "Let 'em run. And get rid of that hat."

He took the Bonsai cap from O'Brian and tossed it in the car.

As the siren got nearer, O'Brian and Rick began to walk on the beach back towards the lights of Marquette. O'Brian suddenly realized there was someone next to him, the prom queen.

"Let those assholes run. They'll get caught. We're just out for a walk on the beach," Rick said.

"But," O'Brian's thoughts were whirling. "What about the car? They can trace it. They can trace it to you."

Rick laughed, "Hell, who said it was my car?"

The sirens wailed away from them, chasing someone down Lakeshore Drive. Soon they stopped, and O'Brian could see a circular red light spinning stationary to the northwest.

He felt an urge to run. He felt scared. He kept walking. His immunity was gone. He was borrowing Rick's. He was getting

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too old for this.



## Chapter Twelve

Wham, wham, wham, spoke the hammer from the sadist's apartment upstairs. Wham, wham, wham

"Jesus Fucking Christ," said O'Brian, waking up.

Wham, wham, wham spoke the hammer again.

O'Brian leaned back hard against the rolled up mattress. He was home. If you wanted to call it that. He recognized the smell of the place and the smell of himself after a bad night out. No, he wouldn't think about his adventures with the prom queen from a psycho ward. He wouldn't think about how he'd been doing it with the prom queen propped up against the refrigerator for lack of other space at Rick's Communal house of the No Doors. He wouldn't think about how Rick had walked in, completely naked to get a snack for himself and for the girl who

had been waiting there for Rick when they arrived. He wouldn't think about the fact that because there were no doors in the place, due to excessive horse play on the part of Bonsai Boys, you could hear every word anywhere in that house.

"Don't you fuck me, Rick," he'd heard from the next room.  
"don't you fuck me...Riiick."

Rick had walked out to the sensuous refrigerator moments later and commented when he saw O'Brian and the prom queen in full action, "Hey, you guys mind moving a little? I gotta get some milk for my Fruit Loops."

He wouldn't think about any of that.

Wham, wham, wham, spoke the hammer.

"What did that red haired woman upstairs have about threes anyway? Wham, wham, wham.

"Eight o'clock," O'Brian said closing his eyes after looking at the alarm clock next to the mattress. Apparently he'd never need it in this torture chamber.

The hammer kept pounding home the previous night; how he had stumbled home from Rick's Communal House of the No Doors, after passing out with the prom queen against the refrigerator, how he had made it here at 2:30 A.M. and immediately collapsed on the mattress, how one half hour after he'd awakened with a need to empty his stomach of all its contents. His stomach twisted involuntarily at the thought of it.

Wham, wham, wham.

He would piss now. He would have to.

Wham, wham, wham, spoke the hammer again as he stood over the toilet, steadying himself against the wall with his right hand. Wham, wham, wham, wham, wham, wham.

Threes were bad enough, but sixes were just too damned much. He wobbled to the window and opened it. He stuck his head out without really thinking and yelled hoarsely, "I know I don't know you and you don't know me, but for Christ's sake, could you cut out that Goddamned hammering?"

That, he knew immediately, had been stupid. He was about to pull his head back inside and hide under his mattress like a turtle in its shell in some secluded corner of his cobwebbed apartment when a pleasant face and a lot of red hair were suddenly sticking out from the window above.

"I'm sorry," said the nice looking woman who had yesterday been the vengeful red haired lady with the laundry. She pulled back her hair, retracting Repunzel's invitation. O'Brian, stunned, said nothing. He supposed he looked, at this moment, not unlike the prom king of a psycho ward.

"Hi," he said sheepishly.

"Sorry...about yesterday...and the hammering, too," she said. "I forgot I had a new neighbor. And yesterday...my

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ex-husband had just called and he's, well, he's a son of a bitch." Her face suddenly flushed, and O'Brian noticed she had freckles across her nose.

"Uh, I'm sorry, like I said," she said.

O'Brian was still silent. He was trying to get some handle on thoughts which were traveling in several directions.

"Oh, my name's G.J.," she said. "G.J. Sherlock, er Sherlock-Martin, er," she flushed a little again. "G.J."

"Nice to meet you," said O'Brian. He winced at the incongruity of it.

"You look like," she laughed a low laugh, "you may have tied one on last night."

O'Brian rubbed his hair. "I guess that's pretty possible."

"Sorry about waking you. I'm making a table. It's got a street grating on the top and these legs out of cherry. I found..., well, I'd have to show it to you. Would you like some coffee?"

"Yeah, sure I would," said O'Brian, talking more to himself than to anyone else.

The coffee was good and was served by G.J., who was dressed in a jogging suit, spoke kindly and had a sense of humor. For someone this cheerful to have acted like she had yesterday, her ex-husband had to be a son of the queen of all bitches.

O'Brian sat at G.J.'s kitchen table and was comfortable,



though quiet. G.J. had been steadily in motion since he had come in, moving from small gas stove, over to where her new table was now in the process of completion, just outside the kitchen door. She talked quickly and used a lot of gestures. She was nervous for some reason.

She was a good eight or nine years older than he, but in her manner and her optimism, she seemed younger. Maybe he was just old early.

"So what do you do?" G.J. said finally sitting down across the table from him.

O'Brian's mind set off. What did he do? Well, he thought about his dead father and got drunk a lot.

"I work at a furniture store."

"Oh," said G.J., "are you a student, too?"

"Ex-student. I'm sort of floating right now, to be honest. I'd like to be a teacher, I think."

"That's good, as long you stay afloat. You're looking higher than the furniture store, then."

O'Brian grinned, "Yeah, I'm hoping to sell discount water beds some day."

"You're funny," she said with a familiarity that took him by surprise. "I guess, in a way, I'm floating, too. I'm trying to get a writing career going. I've been published a few times, but

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no regular money yet. I'm waitressing, too. I put my husband through school waitressing and then he dumped me."

She looked at O'Brian suddenly startled, as though she had been talking to herself.

"Oh."

"I'm sorry. You don't want to hear about all that."

"Really it's okay. I've been thinking too much about myself lately," O'Brian said feeling as though he were making sense for the first time in a millenium, "It's good to hear about someone else."

"It's easy to get pretty self-involved living alone, isn't it? You're really the first person I've talked to since I've been here other than 'hello' or 'hey, baby!'."

Her face got slightly more serious and she drank some coffee.

O'Brian smiled, sipped his coffee and wondered what to say next.

Wham.

Something had hit the window over the stove.

"It's a bird," G.J. said, getting up from her chair.

"That used to happen all the time at our cabin," O'Brian said. "Let's see if we can find him."

Outside, the bird lay dead behind the apartment near the

landlords' vegetable garden. It was a good day. A typical chilly U.P. morning. A slow north wind off Lake Superior had cooled and cleaned the air. There was a garden shovel leaning against the back wall of the apartments. It would have another use today.

The bird was a wren. He was very small and brown. It would have taken a lot less than hitting the window to kill him. O'Brian picked him up as G.J. watched. He could feel the small hollow bones of the bird. In death the bird's small eye was yellow and open.

"They're very little," O'Brian said. He looked up to see a birdfeeder in the yard across the alley. "You wonder why they hit the window like that."

"It just happens," G.J. said and smiled a little.

"At our house, when I was little, we used to put up crucifixes made of popsicle sticks for them," O'Brian said. "But, our dog would dig them up sometimes."

"I don't have a dog, so you can bury him here."

O'Brian grabbed the shovel and upturned a small piece of soil. G.J., still smiling slightly, said, "I don't have any popsicle sticks."

"I doubt if the birds ever noticed anyway."

He lay the wren gently in the opened earth.

### Chapter Thirteen

O'Brian laughed and trotted across the parking lot. He laughed a lot these days, mostly for one reason. He always hurried home from Rause's Furniture now. Especially on nights like tonight when G.J. had worked the day shift. He walked across the street and glanced at the bar where miners and state employees drank their dailies. Without G.J. he would no doubt have made that a regular stop. He wouldn't have been at the dance bar next door, though. Even without G.J. he had progressed beyond that. The miners wouldn't have been bad; it was just that he had better things to occupy his time now. He could,



for instance, talk with G.J. and love her and go places with her.

It was great being in love. Even if G.J. had never said that to him, she would soon. It had to be hard to say it again after what she'd been through.

He turned the corner left and started up the hill past the campus. At the campus theater G.J. and he had seen the third Star Trek movie on the cheap. The movie had featured, as he had suddenly realized, a kid he had known at Newberry in a minor role, as a Klingon.

"Shhh!" G.J. had said when he had burst out about his friend who had made good in Hollywood.

"But I know this guy!" he'd said, even louder for effect.

"Does anyone know this man next to me?" G.J. had asked just as loudly.

That had brought a chorus of "shut ups!" and more shushing.

He had laughed with her then, realizing like he was now, how much he loved her.

It was true that his job wasn't much and that he still hadn't strengthened his resolve to become a teacher, but one thing at a time. He had found a very nice girl...woman to share his time. G.J. was full of the enthusiasm for life he'd never before known, always having been a silent watcher or an unwitting participant. She made things happen and she was teaching him how.

There were two strong women close to him now. A middle aged one who had survived for nine years without the husband she had built a life around and a divorced woman, who when faced with the end of domestic life as she knew it, had said simply, "to hell with it. I'll go north and write."

The U.P. had no significance for G.J. She had no contact here. She simply had never been north before and figured it was about time. You could write anywhere she had reasoned correctly and odd jobs could be found.

Was life really composed of random decisions like that? Was all that mattered making the decision and then adapting to the circumstances? If so, he was happy for this random choice. If not, he was thankful to God or Fate or her ex-husband, the idiot. She was making him happier than he had ever been. She was loving and gifted and witty and beautiful, and he thought disgustingly good things about her.

He continued up the hill towards home. It was here as a child that he had discovered the force of gravity. It had been downtown on the other side of Marquette's hill and they had been ascending from the other direction. His legs had tired then as he held his mother's hand on a shopping trip. His legs were tiring and he began to wonder why he didn't drive the four blocks to work. Still, you didn't want to push that old truck too far.

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"Ow," he said and swatted a bloody mosquito on his arm. He was the knight doing his tasks to find the damsel. The quest to climb the mountain and slay the dragon-- fly.

At the top of the hill he turned left and proceeded into the residential section and across the lawn of his apartment. From the front door, near where the landlord had his work shop O'Brian heard a voice.

"Nice day, ay?"

He looked up to see the old man's face, Mr. Toivola.

"Sure is."

"Everything going okay in the apartments?"

"Oh...yeah, fine."

"Been so busy in ta workshop. Not much time. But I'll help if ya need it."

"No need." O'Brian stopped for a second. He was being invited to ask questions. "What are you working on?"

"Oh, well come on in. You know much about woodworking?"

"Not really, I guess."

"Big U.P. boy like you? That's a shame, ay? A shame."

O'Brian walked in behind Toivola. Lining the walls were wooden figurines of lumberjacks and animals and paintings of loggers and lumber camps and animals. They lined the room like a studio audience of woodworking fans.

"Ya, everything I do with wood."

"Did you work in the lumber camps, Mr. Toivola?"

"Did I..." his face wrinkled up in an emotion that was a cross between disgust with ignorance and delight with a story about to be told. "Well, sure! I run ta lumber camps, son!"

He reached over and grabbed a particular figure off a shelf. It was made from the trunk of a small tree and was a bust of a lumberjack. "See this? Tose old timers were someting!" The dark bark of the tree had been left to represent the beard and hair of the lumberjack and the fold of his toque. The top of the hat and the face had been carved out of the bark. A fat cigar with a carved end had been added. Toivola handed the figure to O'Brian.

"Yeah, I never could keep up with ta work tose old timers could do. Of the drinking, ay?" He slapped O'Brian's back and laughed loudly.

O'Brian laughed too.

"Now you keep ta head. Tat's yours."

"Well, thanks."

"House warming gift."

"Thanks."

"Besides, if you can't make the rent some month, you sell it." Toivola began laughing again. Then he showed O'Brian more carvings and other art work. There was a pen and ink drawing on the wall of what seemed to be a logging settlement, with each



building labeled.

"It's my home. Best as I remember. It was a nice little place with nice people. I had to start working young at Dad's camp. Tat's where I met some of those types." He pointed to the lumberjack head.

"You've seen a lot of changes."

"Changes? You bet. Not like it was, not at all now." He grinned a mad grin. "But I like it all, you know? The wife and I, we've had ta good life."

O'Brian nodded.

Toivola began shaking a finger at him. "Now you ton't lose tat girl of yours! She's a good one."

O'Brian was embarrassed, but happy. "I know."

"You guys are taking a lot for granted, aren't you?"

G.J. was standing in the doorway. She was smiling wide and her red hair was tied back in a pony tail. She was wearing a work shirt, blue jean shorts, and sandals.

Toivola laughed. "Now tat's a woman for you, always around when she's getting compliments."

G.J. was blushing now too. "Never miss one."

O'Brian stuttered, "Thanks for the carving."

Toivola waved him off. "Let me know when you'll be needing any wood work done. Anytime! Or when I can make ta wedding present, ay?"

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O'Brian wanted to remember this. Toivola being silly, he and G.J. standing around embarrassed, the cool morning and the clean smell of the wood in his hands and in the shop.

"Maybe I'll take you up on a Christmas present," G.J. said. "We'll see about your other idea."

Outside, O'Brian asked her, "You always hanging around for compliments?"

"Nope, jut heard you old timers yacking and I thought I'd stop down and join in. Forgot to put in my tobacco first, though."

"Was it more than you bargained for?"

G.J. grabbed his arm and stopped him. She looked serious. "No, it was just what I wanted to hear."

O'Brian leaned forward and kissed her. "I guess, if Toivola's watching, he's happy."

#### Chapter Fourteen

O'Brian had never been at his best right after lunch. He'd seen a documentary on gorillas which had shown how those primates took a long nap after gorging themselves around midday. It was a hard instinct to fight. He was fighting it now as he sat just off the center aisle at Rause's Furniture. He was sitting in a big armchair that swallowed him whole. He was a bull gorilla slowly fading away on a stomachful of bananas...in a furniture store. He had learned sign language at that experimental primate center out west. He could sign "need juice", "want sex", or "armchairs half price". The chair was so soft...

He jerked up in his seat with the sound of the door bells. Someone was here. Somebody wanted to buy beds or a table or

lampshade cleaner. Nope. It was Mr. Rause, Ralph, back from lunch.

"Hello, Ben, you gotta watch those arm chairs. They'll get you everytime."

"Yeah," he said. "They're really comfortable."

"Hey, of course! We're selling them, aren't we?"

"Well, not too many while you were gone."

"That's okay. It's been slow. Really slow."

They were quiet for a second. Ralph continued smiling, apparently thinking of something. O'Brian was still drowsy. He thought of G.J. About now she'd be stopping for lunch after the noon rush.

"I've got a project for you, Ben. Davey's waiting over at the funeral home. I'll take over here."

"Okay," O'Brian turned and headed for the back door. So, the time had come. In the interview Ralph hadn't mentioned working at the Rause Funeral Home too. He'd only talked about furniture. Of course, Ralph hadn't warned him about the dangers of refilling a bean bag chair either. O'Brian had learned that the hard way earlier the past week, scattering the little foam plastic beans all over the store. It would be months before all those beans could all be cleared up. They stuck to everything.

Somehow he'd known that there was a hidden agenda here, though. He'd known that sometime he'd be called on to work at



the funeral home. That time was now. Well, what would the job be? He hesitated to consider it. Davey was there waiting for him. Wait, if Davey was there, it couldn't be a body. Surely Ralph wouldn't have his thirteen year old son carry bodies. It must be something else.

O'Brian walked across the alley behind the store and parking lot to the front door of the funeral home where Davey sat on the steps waiting. He liked Davey. He was a smart little kid and friendly. He wasn't the stereotyped boss's son at all. If Davey had been older, O'Brian thought, Davey and he might have been drinking buddies.

"Hi, Ben."

"What's up, Davey?"

"Not much." Davey tossed a rock then adjusted his glasses and smiled at O'Brian. The Rause's aging beagle Nick came around the corner of the building and greeted O'Brian.

"Hiya, Nick Buddy." O'Brian scratched the dog behind his ears and the old tail wagged slowly. His whitened face hung happily and he attempted to lick O'Brian's face.

"So what's your Dad got for us, Davey?"

"Some caskets. He wants us to bring them down from the show room to the storeroom in the basement."

"Show room?"

"Yeah," Davey said.

"What do you mean?"

"Um, well, it's where all the new caskets are so people can come and look."

Davey got up and unlocked the old ornate door. Nick rushed inside ahead. O'Brian and Davey followed the old dog. The sterile smell inside brought memories. To the left of the front door was a narrow carpeted stairwell.

To the right was the front room. O'Brian could see a face protruding upwards from an open casket. It was funny; he hadn't thought of Dad's death much since meeting G.J. Not much. But being here with this lifeless smell, he couldn't help it. He didn't really remember that time in the funeral home at Newberry well. He remembered sitting in a chair in the room adjacent to the parlor where Dad was lying. He remembered crying and Jake coming in and patting his knee saying, "It's all right. We're gonna be all right." But the words' meaning wasn't in Jake's voice. He remembered thinking that Jake sounded scared. Jake was never scared.

He followed Davey upstairs.

Davey hadn't been lying about the show room. There were many caskets complete with lighting which showed the latest models to their best advantage, he supposed. There were also price tags. It was a strange world. Mom must have had to come in and pick out a model. Or somebody must have anyway. But...

"What difference does it make?"

"What?" Davey said.

"Nothing. Do you know which ones he wants us to bring to the basement?"

"Yeah, they're all over here."

Davey grabbed a silver cart about as high as a gerney. Its wheels rolled in any direction like a shopping cart. Davey rolled the cart over next to a classic gray model casket and waited. It occurred to O'Brian that the difference between this cart and a gerney was that with this cart you were never in a hurry.

O'Brian walked over. They each grabbed both handles and lifted the casket to the cart. It must have been much heavier full than empty. Yeah, full of dead weight.

"Wait a minute, Davey. How are we going to get this thing downstairs?"

"Oh, well there's an elevator."

They pushed the casket out into the hall and Davey opened a door that had looked like a hall closet. Inside were the platform ropes and chains of an old-fashioned elevator, surrounded by the cement walls of the shaft.

They got in and Nick trotted in with them. O'Brian thought briefly about Dante's descent into hell, but didn't remember anything about an elevator, a casket and a dog. And Davey was no

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Virgil, either, so he was probably safe.

"Okay, Captain, let her rip."

Davey smiled and released the metal handbrake. O'Brian felt the floor dropping beneath him. Davey was taking real pride in this.

"How'd you learn to operate this thing?"

"Oh, it's easy," he said, grinning. "You just let off the brake and give her a pull and away you go."

"How do you stop?"

"You just touch the brake like this." Davey pushed the brake lever down. Nothing happened. He tried again. Nothing.

"Um," Davey said. O'Brian suddenly noticed that Davey's face was white.

"What's wrong?"

"The brake; it doesn't work!"

Davey began frantically compressing the brake lever.

The elevator was picking up speed as they passed the second floor. "Oh shit, let me try, Davey."

O'Brian edged around the casket and grabbed the brake. Nothing. He thought about grabbing the rope. He attempted it for just an instant and got rope burns on both hands for his trouble. He cried out.

Davey was quiet and wide eyed. The elevator was still picking up speed.



"Shit!" O'Brian said.

As they passed the first floor, Nick looked at both of them, then jumped through the open doorway to safety. He stood, ears hanging, watching them falling from the safety of the first floor. So much for human intelligence.

It suddenly occurred to O'Brian that if the fall killed him, his family wouldn't have to go for a casket. Just lift him up and toss him in.

The elevator hit bottom, hard. The jolt popped the casket lid open, but for all the drama, didn't even manage to knock them off their feet. They stood staring at each other. Suddenly a huge chain crashed between them and bounced off the casket landing harmlessly just a few feet away. The brake assembly.

There was silence for a moment, but suddenly O'Brian was laughing. Davey stared at him, but then began laughing too.

"You all right, Davey?"

"I think so."

O'Brian looked at the casket. The lid gaped wide and threatening like some toothless carnivore.

"Next time, we'll take the stairs!" O'Brian said then laughed right into the jaws.

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Part IV

July 6, 1980

I was in my room. I heard the stumbling in the hall. The bathroom door opened, but didn't close.

I looked up from the comic book, Spider-man. I knew my Dad was in the bathroom down the hall. He and all that he was now. I was scared of my father. Frightened of the disease. He was the disease. He could be sick or start to cry or yell at any time. He could yell at me the way he'd yelled at Jake, threatening to disown his son because he had damaged the lawn by carelessly fertilizing it.

I was scared of my father.

But what if he was dying right now? What if he was dying and I didn't help him? There was enough guilt to overcome the fear. I had to go and see.

I walked down the hall. Slowly I looked around the corner into the bathroom. He was there in front of the toilet on his knees.

He looked up and what he saw must have been like a scene from a situation comedy. I was peeking around the doorjamb, only my head was showing. I was acting like a small boy, not like someone who was almost fourteen. I felt tiny, helpless.

He didn't laugh at the picture I made. Nothing make him laugh in those days. There was no humor in him.

"Get your mother," he said looking through me. He looked back into the toilet.

I ran downstairs to where Mom was in the kitchen laying out homemade peanut brittle on wax paper. "Christmas is coming," I thought as the smell of the hot carmel hit me.

"Mom, Dad's on the floor in the bathroom. He's calling for you."

She looked up with an expression that said, "Must you be so melodramatic?"

There had been a lot of melodrama. We had become cliches. "The Dying Man's Family".

She brushed past me, and I followed her as far as the base of the stairs. I clasped the solid oak bannister in my right hand and put my left foot on the bottom stair. I locked in that position.

I heard my father retch.

"God, it's blood," I heard my mother say.

"If you don't like it, get the hell out," he said.



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*"I was only...let me help."*

*They didn't talk anymore.*

## Chapter Fifteen

At the top of the hill the expanse of Munising Bay stretched blue and boatless. To the north it was bordered by the green of Grand Island's trees and to the south by a narrow strip of flat land at the base of a high wooded ridge. This was Munising. A residential area, downtown and factories clustered into four blocks of former company houses and sandstone store fronts. It was like a frontier fort walled on three sides by the ridge and on the fourth by the world's largest body of fresh-water.

The windows were rolled up tight as the old truck passed around the corner at the top of the hill. The ancient heater worked hard, but failed to fully warm the cab.

"You're sure about this camping? I mean, we could just get a motel room," O'Brian looked over and raised his eyebrows ala Groucho.

"It's more fun in the outdoors," G.J. grinned and looked out at the view.

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"Me Tarzan, you Jane, huh?"

"No, me Jane, you Cheetah."

"You are a truly strange woman."

"You love it."

"I suppose. Say, nature girl, am I condemned to a weekend of canteen water and freeze-dried toadsstools or can we stop for a burger and fries?"

"Well, I suppose all condemned men are entitled to a last meal, even if it is ground cow flesh and starch."

"Sounds yummy!"

"Sure does. Where do we stop?"

They both laughed.

"Hey, Nanette of the North, is this tent of yours insulated?"

"State of the art, chum."

"Built in heaters, then?"

"You'll be my heater, son. And I'll be yours."

"Oh, we're in heat then?"

"During the first month of a romantic relationship, both parties are always in heat. It's a scientific fact."

"Where do I buy this science book?"

"Any party store!"

They laughed again.

At the base of the hill the big lake disappeared behind rows

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of houses lining the street. At a corner with the inevitable bank time and temperature clock, O'Brian spotted a restaurant with a view of the city dock, Munising Bay and Grand Island. The island nearly filled the view from shore. Except for a channel to its east, dividing the island from the northeastern line of the Pictured Rocks, a sightseer could be looking at an inland lake. But at the narrowing of the channel, Lake Superior's infinite north cleared any misconceptions.

O'Brian pulled the truck over next to the restaurant.

At the north end of the city dock a bulky figure turned from fishing and began packing gear. O'Brian watched as the fisherman finished and began a steady gait up the dock, then up the hill towards town.

"Ding dong, time for dinner," G.J. was grinning when O'Brian looked over.

"Okeydoke. Mmmm, ground cow and starch."

"Pressed fish with goo an a bun."

"Gee, those freeze-dried toadstools are starting to sound good."

"C'mon, clown, we've still got to set camp tonight."

They walked into the restaurant and took a booth in front of a picture window facing the lake. The place had been recently remodeled with a maritime theme.



The fisherman was closer now through the picture window. A long white beard protruded from inside a weather beaten winter hat with flaps. All his clothes were a drab green color, probably from years of wear. He wore a backpack. On the right side of the pack a length of fishing pole stuck out, red, white and black. On the left side a huge fish tail stuck out, and as O'Brian watched, the tail began to flap. The fisherman was undisturbed by the movement. His face was lined. His expression, a smile without flourish. He continued up the street and out of their sight.

"Did you see him, G.J.?"

She had been watching too. "Yes."

"That's a happy man."

"Yeah."

O'Brian looked back at the dock and at the line of infinity in the channel to the north.

## Chapter Sixteen

Dad was chopping wood. One by one he was splitting pieces with single blows. And perfect halves fell away. Grandpa was there, too, picking them up, tossing them away and setting up another log. Another perfect blow and the halves would fall away. It was always one stroke, one at a time. O'Brian was watching them. It was steady and not like a dream. There was another perfect blow. And another. And another. Dad's muscles rippled as he raised the ax. And another. And another. Grandpa was methodical. Setting them in place, picking them up. They were talking in a measured question and answer just before the ax fell. They laughed and they smiled, but the timing was there, always constant. Just the way it had always been. A perfect blow. And another. And another.

The ax sounded again.

He was lying on his back in a tent. A blue tent. G.J.'s tent. The "state of the art" tent. It was simple and the poles went together easily, connected by elastic bands.

The ax sounded again.

He was dreaming. Someone was cutting wood. Who else? G.J.

She would probably want him to make breakfast. He knew it was fair, but something macho in him smiled a little. Despite his attempts to be a feminist, which were probably not all that concentrated, it did seem strange. How would Dad have reacted? Or Grandpa?

The ax again. He slid out of the sleeping bag and unzipped the tent. He pushed his way out in his blue jeans and sweater. He pulled out his shoes and began putting them on.

G.J. was wiping her brow and holding an ax in her hand. She'd been chopping up narrow branches from a fallen tree. She was wearing green fatigue shorts and a flannel shirt. It was cold for shorts and he got gooseflesh for her. Her red hair was tied back. Many strands fell forward and bothered her eyes.

O'Brian grinned and rubbed at his teeth. They felt gritty.

G.J. looked up. "Where's my breakfast?"

O'Brian laughed, "I knew it."

"Well, get going on it."

"Okay, Gloria Steinem."

G.J. laughed.

"I've gotta take care of some business first."

"Men's room is the second tree on the left."

O'Brian looked out to where a tall sand bank fell off into a beach on Lake Superior. Chapel Beach. He'd lived in the U.P. his whole life and never been to the Pictured Rocks. It was

better to be here the first time with G.J. He had seen the rocks from the boat trip out of Munising and been to the sand dunes on the Grand Marais end with Mak for high school beer parties, but he'd never been out here to camp. In fact, with one exception, he'd never been camping. That one exception was the night he and Mak supposedly camped out in the back yard at the old house in town. Actually they had run all over town and driven the state police crazy by turning off the street lights using a flashlight on the light sensor. There'd been a thrill in that as the town went dark and the red lights began to flash. It was a thrill--more terror for him and he suspected more adventure for Mak.

Dad had hunted and spent many of his best hours in the woods. But sleeping on the ground did not appeal to him. In fact his idea of camping had been the Holiday Inn in Marquette.

O'Brian headed away from the shoreline back among the birches. He urinated next to a tree and zipped up. He wondered what the bears would think of his marking. He walked back to the tent, then over to the backpack G.J. had taken down from the tree. Bears would destroy packs left on the ground.

Once when he was about ten, Dad and he had walked into a bear and deer feeding station in the woods north of Newberry. He hadn't thought of it in a long time, but now he remembered. The station had been in the back of a guy's house and he charged a buck a head to get in and look at animals through a picture



window. They were wild animals that came in to be fed at the back of the house.

When they got inside, there had been a father and his son, tourists, standing at the screen door next to the window. The kid was eating potato chips in front of the door. On the other side was a salivating 400 pound black bear. The father was unconcerned.

"Sir," O'Brian's father had said in his calmest voice. "That's a wild bear. If I were you, I'd get the boy away from the door."

"That's not wild," the father said without turning. "It's just a gimmick."

"Okay," Dad had said to the man. "We're heading back to town. I'll notify the emergency room when I get there."

Outside Dad had walked quickly towards the car and said absently, "Damn fool." Then O'Brian remembered his Dad's hand tousling his hair. "You know enough not to go fooling with a bear, don't you, son?"

"You bet."

"Good."

That was his Dad. That was the way his Dad was, but not completely. There were other parts too. There were times O'Brian only half remembered during Dad's illness. Blood on the floor next to the toilet and the dazed look in the eyes. And

walking Dad around the block with Mom. Walking him like a dog.

O'Brian hadn't thought that much about the bad things lately. His own life was taking over now. He was moving out of neutral. It was good to have other things to think of, other things to do. He felt a sudden urge to swim.

"Hey, Faulette Bunyan?"

G.J. turned from her work. "Yeah?" She was beautiful.

"How about a swim?"

"How about breakfast?"

"How about a swim, then breakfast."

"Okay."

Quickly G.J. stood and began unbuttoning her shirt. Her breasts came loose from it and she looked at him with raised eyebrows. She pulled off her boots and dropped her shorts and panties. She picked up her clothes and began running. She was taking a chance. Hikers could happen along and there was one tent up here. But it was exciting.

He followed her down to the sand bank, stripping off his clothes. She dove in ahead of him, her short thin legs swallowed last by the unusually calm waters.

"Wow!" Her head was back above the water. "Cold."

He stood on the beach and watched her. "Aw, I don't think I'll go in after all."

"What?" G.J. leaped up from the water and splashed him.

"C'mon, chicken."

"Well, okay." He ran into the water. He felt at the rocks with his feet, then dove. He swam along alone in the silent blurred world. It was so cold, but it felt good.

It was good. Maybe this was all fantasy. But for now, it was all true. Today was what mattered. Today was tangible. Today was as true as the blood in his veins and the line north in the lake where the world ended. Tomorrow might be different, but today, the rocks, the water, this woman were eternity.

He raised his head above water. The water dripped from his hair and he looked towards the big lake's northern line.

"Hey, did you drown?"

He turned and saw her swimming behind him. He went to her in the waters beyond the dropoff. He pulled her close. The currents undulated as they kicked their legs. He felt their skins sliding over each other. He looked into her green eyes and kissed her.

"I love you," he said.

"Don't start again," she said and her face straightened.

"I'm not worried about it. I just do."

"That's not love," she said smiling. "It's lust."

"It ain't bad."

He pulled her close and the water surged. Their legs entangled. Their flesh pressed together. The calm waters of

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the big lake rippled with their motion. The motion carried in towards the shoreline and out towards the northern line at the end of the world.



## Chapter Seventeen

The letter was in the mailbox when they got home. The weekend had been one of the best in O'Brian's memory. It had been better than any of the boozed up adventures he and Mak had in college because there would be no hangover and loneliness now. He had G.J. She had him.

G.J. had gone back upstairs to her apartment. He took the letter out of the box. It was from his mother and dated Friday. But she had sent him a letter Thursday. Why would she write again so soon? Not that much happened north of Newberry.

Standing at the base of G.J.'s stairway, he opened it. It was a single sheet with Mom's familiar handwriting in a few paragraphs.

Dear Ben,

There is no good way to say this. Your friend Mak is dead. He was out with some friends at a bar Thursday. He had an aneurysm and died at the bar. It happened very suddenly. It could have happened anywhere. Mrs. Kivimaki said it was something he was born with. Jack's father has

been missing for several days. I heard about it all this morning and tried to call you at home and at work, but you had taken the day off and I couldn't reach you. I'll keep trying.

The services will be held here Monday. I'm so sorry. Please call me, Ben, that's what I'm here for.

I love you.

Mom

For a moment he stood frozen just below the stairs. His mind focused first on the cool of the afternoon. For a millisecond he considered the fact that he'd have to take another day off from work. But that was foolish and wrong to think about. For a moment more he thought of that view of Lake Superior and how, miles out, it became just a line, the end of the world. The northern line of the universe.

Gradually he considered the letter. Scratchings of a liquid from the end of a stick on a piece of paper. Mak was dead. The reality was that Mak was dead. There was no Mak in front of him slamming beers with his new friends, then suddenly complaining of a strange feeling, then slumping from the bar stool, dead. There were no ambulance lights and sirens screaming up to the bar entrance and taking Mak away under a sheet on a gurney. But it must have been that way.

This couldn't be a sick practical joke. One like Mak might play. He looked at the letter. No, this was Mom's writing. It

was her signature. No, this wasn't Mak laughing after he'd sat on your face bareassed while you slept. This wasn't Mak making some gross comment about a nice looking girl. This wasn't Mak passing off a beating he'd taken from his father as a joke, or knocking the living hell out of some guy who had just pased you, or attracting the cop's attention so you wouldn't get caught on the water tower. Mak was dead.

"God."

He began lurching up the stairs.

In her apartment he could hear G.J. at work in the room that looked out on the street. She called it her study, and O'Brian had learned earlier that it had an imaginary door. He could hear her typewriter keys translating some thought process on to paper. She never wasted a moment. They'd only been home five minutes. He knocked on the doorway.

G.J. turned around looking irritated for the moment. She looked at him and her expression changed.

"What?" she said quietly, sympathetically.

O'Brian leaned forward a little, "Mak..."

"Your friend..." G.J. said, confused when he didn't continue.

"He's dead."

"God. You've known him all your life."

O'Brian said nothing. A numbness had swallowed him whole.

"I'll take you somewhere," G.J. said. "I wish you could have heard this while we were still camping. We could have dealt with it there. Walking. We'll go walking. It'll help. I know the place."

O'Brian wasn't listening, couldn't listen. He had gone to the window and was looking down the street. He could see a yellow blinker flashing like a jaundiced eye. He felt blank.

"Sugar Loaf. We'll go there," G.J. said, resolutely. "We'll go up there and talk. Talking will be good. Sugar Loaf is nice. It's a place for thinking, too."

"You talk. I'm not that clear," he said turning from the window. "I need you to talk."

"Okay. I'm talking. I won't stop."

She didn't. G.J. talked as they walked down the stairway. She talked as they got into her Volkswagen bus. Occasionally O'Brian paid attention and realized she was saying nothing important, and he was grateful that she was keeping it all going for him.

He listened to the talk. The sound was cheerful. That now seemed alien to him. An emotion engulfed him that wasn't sadness or anger. It made him hollow. It made him feel like a brittle stick in a high wind. But the sound of G.J.'s voice was nice. It was a light imploring sound with inflection both serious and humorous.



G.J.'s voice continued. It was like the talk of his mother when she was helping him through one of his daily routines as a kid. The sound was feminine but solid, leading him from one transition to another. But he was losing track of it.

He could see Mak. He could see the dark face and body hunched over the bar giving sidelong glances to new friends, telling jokes. And now he would see that compact sturdy body giving and sliding limp off the stool like a bag of some soft substance. He could see the head collide with the bar and rebound to accompany the rest of the body in a lifeless slip to the floor. The bag of death would lie there for a few moments while Mak's new friends laughed, thinking he was either faking or had passed out. Then they would grab him and realize and possibly cry out.

And now Mak's face turned towards him as one of the new friends cradled it, and it was not Mak's face. It was Dad's. For the first time in many years, he could remember his father's face. But it was not his living face. It was the painted face of death. The dark hair hung lifeless and the heavy beard was neatly trimmed as it never was in life. And now the body lay at the bottom of a hole, at the bottom of a grave with no casket to mask the spectacle for the living. And next to it was another body: Mak's. O'Brian was standing at the edge of the hole and looking in and now there was a push. There was a solid, hard

push, and he flew out into the air over the bodies and he was falling down...

O'Brian felt a great tightness in his throat. He could feel it all choking him. He tried to focus on the voice. The voice had to be talking.

He was falling. He fell to the bottom of the tomb and then the bottom gave way, and he was falling with the bodies and occasionally colliding with them, becoming entangled with lifeless arms and legs, in a great empty space. Down, down. And a hot liquid was on him spilling from the bodies. Blood. And now the blood turned cold and chilled him to the marrow as he saw the faces. The eyes were open and plaintive, but the faces were still tightlipped masks of death. His father and Mak still fell with him down the abyss.

"We're here, Ben. We're at Sugar Loaf. I'll show you the view. You'll like it. It's almost as good as the Pictured Rocks. C'mon, Ben."

She opened his door and took his hand. And slowly, numbly he slipped from the seat and felt the earth under him and began to walk. He walked directly behind G.J., who was looking back and attempting to smile.

The air was clear at the top of Sugar Loaf, cold and biting. G.J. was still talking and watching him. He knew that. But most of him was looking down towards the beckoning trees below as he

stood at the edge of the cliff.

"Ben?"

To his right was Marquette. He could clearly see the smoke stacks, the lighthouse and the power plant. Only the back part of downtown was visible. The rest was obscured by the hill. But he could see the other side and the hills beyond where the ski area was located. Straight ahead of him was Lake Superior. He could see rock islands and very far in the distance he could see a shoreline that must be the Pictured Rocks east of Munising. And to the north the line on the lake where the world ended was still there, unchanged.

"Ben, I'm here."

He felt cold. He felt very cold. His mind was blank focusing only on the landscape and that horrible indifferent line in the north. He tried to focus on details of life. Preparations he would need to make. Things he would have to do. But nothing seemed important. Not packing clothes, not attending the funeral, not the voice that must still be talking. He felt nothing. And it felt better than the fantasy about Mak and Dad. It at least felt like nothing. But in its own way it was more frightening. It was blank. Nothing mattered. Not even his father or Mak. Not his mother or Jake or anyone he had ever known. Not G.J. He was cold and indifferent. Like the northern line.



He felt a hand on his face, G.J.'s. "Don't," she was saying.

He looked at her. "Don't what?" his voice was sarcastic.

G.J.'s face furrowed. She was older than he. She suddenly looked it. He wondered if he really loved her, or anyone. He couldn't feel it now. He couldn't feel that he was crying. He had felt this way before, years ago now.

"So I'm crying?" he said.

"Yes."

"Oh." He began to laugh. He laughed very loudly until it echoed on the hill. He laughed until he couldn't hear the waves pounding on the shore and he laughed until the city laughed back at him and he laughed until the sound of it was false, then menacing. And he laughed until he could see a twisted bloody face laughing back, and then he stopped very suddenly, gasping.

G.J. wasn't talking now. She was watching. She reached to try to hold him. He moved away and stared down again from the edge of the cliff, looking at those trees.

"Ben," her voice was calm.

"Yes," he said emotionless and sapped of life like a mounted fish.

"It will be all right."

"Oh yeah?" There was an edge of anger in his voice.

"You should go home, be there."

"Sure, of course. I'm great at looking into holes with



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boxes in them. Hell, death's my best friend."

"I don't know the answers, Ben. It just happens."

"Oh, hey, there's the answer. There it is! How simple! You're so smart, so fucking smart. 'It just happens.' Jesus where are the angels? It's a fucking revelation!"

"I'm only trying to help."

"What do you want to help for? Don't you know better? Didn't your divorce teach you anything? How do you know I won't use you? He turned to her. "Go ahead, leave!"

G.J. watched him with patient, motherly eyes. He needed those eyes and hated them. A wind blew in her hair. He moved towards her feeling like a small child. Her hair flew freely now, almost wildly in the wind. But she was unmoved. Now she held him, but he didn't cry. The coldness had him, still.

"Damn," he said and turned from her, looking out towards the lake.

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Part V

July 10, 1980

"I'm sorry, Lee. So sorry."

Dad said that over and over to my mother who held one arm. I held his other as we moved around the block in the snow. It was night. I wondered who dreaded these walks most, Mom, Dad, or me.

"Am I doing this right?" he said.

It was part of the therapy. We had to get Dad out and get him walking. Forced marches through the snow, like the Germans and their march to Moscow. Pushing him through layers of anxiety. Upwards towards sanity, through a world he had abandoned.

"It's a nice night," my mother would say, oblivious. She had to be. "It's a pretty winter night. Look at the Christmas lights."

"I'm sorry I'm this way, Lee, so sorry."

"The lights are pretty, aren't they, Ben?" It was my cue.

"They're real nice."

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And they were red and white and green, and the snow was piled high and falling. I held my father's arm. And he never struggled, just followed along.

"I'm sorry, Lee."



## Chapter Eighteen

"Christ, Mak." He had voiced it that way upon seeing his friend at the funeral home earlier, and now at the cemetery the words kept coming back.

Mak was in a gray box at the bottom of a hole. The priest from the Newberry parish was saying something. O'Brian still felt cold and had since that one moment at the funeral home when those words had come out. It had been true emotion, but its mortal stab had faded until it had no longer made him take in a breath or wince in pain. All that was left him now were the two words, "Christ, Mak." Their meaning had faded.

Emotion was gone. The time of motion had arrived. They were the same motions of his father's funeral: standing, kneeling, listening, and hand shaking. They would take on significance only in retrospect. Only with time.

Mak, his friend, was in a gray box at the bottom of a hole. Mak's father stood across the grave from O'Brian. He was a big man and graying. He was wide across the chest and crying steadily. The tears were genuine. At least seemed to be. So he had cared about Mak. Possibly he had even been proud of him.

Now Mr. Kivimaki's eyes looked suddenly old. His mouth opened noiselessly steadily, like gills seeking air. He groaned for a moment and stifled it bending slightly over. His tears fell in silent streams, watering the soil in vain. Mak's old man, doubtless it seemed now, had cared. O'Brian was struck by this undeniable realization. It seemed strange. It didn't match the pattern O'Brian's mind had set for the man. Patterns perceived, it suddenly seemed, seldom matched the reality within. But there were patterns, somewhere below surfaces where our conscious minds can't intervene. Subconscious patterns, unconfused by conscious thought. Fathers feel like fathers if only in some inner life. Now O'Brian felt emotion again.

Mak's old man looked very silly there crying in his suit. It was too small for him and too loud. Mak's mother was next to him holding Mak's little sister Mary close. Mary must be about six. Mary was crying too, but probably didn't fully understand yet that death means permanence. Never coming back, at all. There were others there too by the graveside. The little kids in the Kivimaki family and other relatives. The oldest boy Bob was

not there. The family hadn't seen him in years.

Kivimaki translated means rockhill or stonehill. He had heard some of the relatives telling someone at the funeral home. He at last understood why so many Finnish people had the "American" name, Hill. Or those few he had known with an Indian sounding name like Rockhill.

Mak, though, was a different story. Mak had been solid. A solid friend, a constant in his life. Mak was someone to depend on.

"Christ, Mak."

Mak was in a gray box now at the bottom of a hole. Mak who downed whiskey without blinking. Mak, who drove ninety and was immortal, was dead. Mak, who when he was 100 would have kicked death square in the balls and laughed like a seventh grader, was dead. Still he couldn't feel it. He could only hear the words coming back. Echoes of a momentary emotion. Mak was in the box. An aneurysm. A weak blood vessel. And in a moment it had been over. Sitting on a bar stool likely knocking back a few and telling lies and suddenly, death. If it hadn't interfered, later that evening, Mak would have created some new adventure to call O'Brian drunk about. A new exaggeration of something wild that really happened, no shit!

But, no. It had happened in a moment and there would be no more happy lies for Jack Kivimaki now. No more adventures. His

friend was dead for no particular reason. Suddenly O'Brian could see that line on the water in the north.

"Are you all right, Ben?". His mother was next to him, watching. The ceremony was over now, and the Kivimakis were heading back to their cars. O'Brian's mother and he began walking that way, too. And his brother Jake was there, too, without his family. G.J. wasn't. He had told her he had to be alone with this. And this wasn't a good time to introduce her to the family, anyway. He longed to be in her arms, but even with that longing, knew that something must happen in him for that embrace to be as it was again. He was cold in the heavy summer wind. It was sixty degrees, but didn't feel that warm.

He looked down at the three-piece suit he wore. It was corduroy and worn seldom. Jake's suit was brown and slick, worn more often.

He looked at his mother and asked without thinking about the words, "What would Dad have said?"

"I don't know, Ben."

"He would have said, 'son-of-a-bitch'." That was Jake talking.

"Yes," his mother said. "Maybe."

"It's not fair."

"No," his mother said. Jake nodded.

"No," Ben O'Brian echoed.



"We'll never understand, Ben," his mother was saying. "But I feel so sorry for the Kivimakis. His father loved Jack, you know. And his mother. Well, it breaks your heart."

The wind was blowing; it was about sixty degrees out. The O'Brians began to walk away from the hole toward the cars. The other cars were heading out on the little dirt roads between the headstones. Out to the highway. Back to the world.

"You've got to get on with it," his mother said. "It's hard. It hurts. But you've got to keep going."

Ben O'Brian stopped next to the old family truck and looked out toward the highway where cars occasionally passed in toward Newberry and out toward Dollarville. They tore the fabric of the wind with their passing, made ways in the world. Did he have to keep going? Where?

"Would Dad have said that, Mom?" He turned to look toward his mother.

She was small and graying, but solid. The wind blew in her hair. She smelled of a perfume she had always worn. Her dress was brown and green.

"Would he have said what?"

"You've got to keep going."

"No, probably not." Her look was distant, but her feet were planted firmly in the wind. "No, I was the one who always said that. Your dad would have thought about it a lot. Like you, I

guess. Then he'd say philosophical things. And when he and I were alone, he would have cried..." For a moment she choked on the phrase and looked down. Then she looked back up directly at Ben O'Brian. "You're a lot like him."

They maintained a look for a second while Jake stood by shuffling his feet and looking off through the headstones.

"I'm going, Mom," Ben O'Brian said finally.

"Oh, well, all right," his mother said, now coming out of it. "But couldn't you stay at least until tomorrow?"

"Yeah, c'mon, Ben," Jake said. "Marge wants to horse around with her uncle some more."

"I've got to keep going," Ben O'Brian said and looked toward his mother laughing. His mother laughed, too.

"Well, I guess that's what I get. When will you be coming over again?"

"A week or so. I don't know. I'm going to see Grandpa." But he was only realizing this as he spoke.

His mother looked close at him. "Oh, well, he'll be glad to see you. But I'll have to call ahead to the store. He doesn't have a telephone out on the island. They'll have to radio him."

"Was it Dad that made him like that? Isolated him?"

"Well, partly, I think," his mother said. "But he was always like that. Now there's a man who believes in getting on with things."

Jake got into their mother's car on the passenger side. Ben O'Brian could see that his brother's mind was moving from this scene to the one at home with his wife and daughter. Responsibilities and life moving on.

"See ya, Ben," he said opening the driver's side door for their mother. "Don't forget hunting season. Don't get going so far you can't come back."

His mother got in to drive. It was her car, after all. Ben O'Brian looked in through the open window.

"Grandpa's not like Dad, then?"

"Oh," she said, "it's been so long. Since your father's funeral, I guess. Yes, he's different."

He looked out toward the highway, then back toward his mother. He leaned down and kissed her.

"Bye, Mom."

"Take care, Ben. Come back soon."

"See ya, Ben," Jake said. The car started and drove away down the little dirt road between the stones.

O'Brian watched it move out to the highway and disappear behind the hedges that lined the corners of the cemetery.

Now only the truck was sitting there. There was only his grandfather to see. He had just today and tomorrow to do it in. That would stretch Ralph Rause's patience. But for right now he

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wouldn't think about getting on with it. He'd just get in and drive.



## Chapter Nineteen

The old truck was moving past the Marquette McDonald's and down the hill out of town. It rolled out toward the shopping centers and the rocks that encased Negaunee and Ishpeming. Those rocks enfolded the citizens and provided livelihood for the miners who tunneled into them

The truck was very old and light blue. There was a small rust hole in the floorboard beneath O'Brian where the road rushed by at distracting speeds. The box of the truck was also rusted and its floor was covered with wood chips from various hauls through the woods north of Newberry. It had been a long time since it had been a street vehicle.

For a moment O'Brian easily pictured G.J.'s face. He hadn't stopped to see her. He couldn't have stopped now for anyone, except Grandpa. For some reason he had to see him.

Presently he tried to picture the faces of other girls he

had known, but couldn't. G.J. was important. G.J. who had tried to hold him in the wind at the top of Sugar Loaf. He could see her calm expression crossed occasionally by wincing of pain as she listened to him, her hair blowing wildly. The other women he had known were only girls, as he was a boy. G.J. had grit. He wondered if he could be as tough as she. No, at least not yet.

Beyond Grandpa plans stopped. He was definite about that, though. Seeing Grandpa was a plan.

He hadn't stopped to see G.J. on the way through Marquette, but he had driven through town to see if he would. He hadn't told his mother about her or brought her to the funeral. The funeral. He avoided thoughts of Mak at all costs. He avoided thinking of G.J. now, too. He avoided thinking of the future, ignored it all as it hung like an unfinished bridge.

O'Brian steered the old truck; it roared through the traffic in the hills away from the big lake. Before he reached Grandpa, he would have to turn back to the water and follow the Keewenaw Peninsula to the north until he came to the shore. There on some secluded turn off he would come into sight of Grandpa's island in the big lake. Hand written directions his mother had given him at the beginning of the summer lay open on the seat. Now he headed west.

The island had been in the O'Brian family for years. It had

been the summer place of ancestors who had been in the mining business. Grandpa had worked for the mines, then later for the Department of Natural Resources when the mines went bad. He knew that much. The island was a certainty, too. He had no idea what it would be like, only a vague notion his mother had given him. She had told him that he had been there several times when he was very young. But he couldn't remember. In later years Grandpa had come to visit them quite often.

There had never been a grandmother in O'Brian's memory. He knew only that she had died in childbirth. She had died giving birth to his father Jim O'Brian. Mom had always suspected that was what had turned Grandpa inward originally. It had made him quiet, reserved. The opposite of his son Jim.

But O'Brian's memories of another time before his father's death, of those visits by Grandpa and trips to the island were only shadows. Why was he betting so much on a man he hadn't seen in years and hardly knew? Long odds were better than none. The chance that Grandpa might have something to say, something important, was worth the risk that he would not.

He had last seen Grandpa at Dad's funeral. An old man, standing tall next to the grave, carrying an old man's hat. He remembered that. But he couldn't remember a face. Step right up, the O'Brian men, Frank and Jim, faceless wonders!



Before the funeral he had only wisps of memory of Grandpa. He remembered only things that might also be imagination. Woodchopping. He remembered the sound of it. His Grandpa in a T-shirt with Dad chopping wood and piling it. Had it been at the cabin? Was it real? He could remember the sound of their laughter as they worked. He had dreamed of it recently. He wished he had watched closer if this had really happened. He hoped it wasn't just imagination. He wished he remembered seeing the woodpile grow as it must have. He wished he remembered exactly his father's face as he split the wood with clean strokes. He wished he could remember seeing the piles of wood they stacked, straight and long beside the house, the way Jake piled them now. Mom said Grandpa kept to himself mostly. she didn't know what he had talked to Dad about when they talked. She didn't know the old man much better than O'Brian did, she had admitted. After his son's death, Grandpa had moved permanently out to the cottage on the island. He had written about it the following Christmas. He had gone to the island and out of their lives, becoming only handwriting on a card once annually.

He was driving past Negaunee now. He was nine miles out of Marquette with well over 100 miles to go. To his right was a lake with high rock faces edged by evergreens and a Burger King on the left for contrast. Yes, it was all coming here. All the chain stores, all the burger joints, would show their plastic



colors eventually. But it was happening slowly. And it might never happen completely in the small towns here. That seemed good.

Grandpa's island. He had never heard it called anything else. It must have a name. But perhaps that name served it best. It was O'Brian's destination. Suddenly he was apprehensive. He clutched at the wheel with both hands. What if, for some reason, Grandpa wouldn't talk? O'Brian would be no worse off. The real problem wouldn't be solved, regardless.

His future, he couldn't think about it now. Maybe the way was to just settle. Maybe you just found something that looked pretty good and you didn't complain. Maybe you just collected your pay check for work you didn't completely despise and lived. Could that be right? He couldn't let that be right. He'd be a bum and at least be left to wonder what he could have been had he put his mind to it. There, the future was all planned. How simple.

Ahead the highway sliced like a roofless mineshaft through rock faces. He felt like a miner riding the underground rails

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hell bent for total darkness. Grandpa had ridden those cars in the early days. Maybe he'd ride with Grandpa into silence and find Mak alone in blackness. Maybe he'd reach out and say, "Hey, I'm here. It's us again, pal, just us." He'd send Grandpa back to the surface, and he would stay with Mak. Together they could fade into nothing and it wouldn't hurt so bad. It wouldn't hurt so much to be nothing as to carry nothing deep in your stomach, to bear the maiming gouge of nothing in your soul.

Thirty miles out of Marquette was Champion. The tiny place at the base of a wooded ridge could not have a traffic jam. But today it did. Ahead of him was a turn-off into the "downtown" area. The road wound back to a gas station, then into the trees. Car after car was waiting to turn. There were vans and trucks, too.

There was a new blue pickup just ahead. In back were young men, sitting in lawn chairs, wearing glasses. Each held a guitar or a banjo on his lap. One woman with glasses cradled a fiddle next to her cheek. She was pretty, earthy. A man, dressed in denim from top to bottom, stood and alternated between strumming a bass fiddle and tipping back a bottle of red wine. He wore an engineer cap and he grinned when he played.

O'Brian rolled down the window. The music was happy. The banjos giggled metalically; the guitars provided a natural

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middle range mix. The bass provided a deep booming background that you had to listen for. It was a heavy strum undulating rhythmically beneath everything: a constant, a given.

The truck turned right into Champion. At the edge of the road was a sign, "Folk Festival", and an arrow pointed back down the road. Someday, perhaps, he wouldn't feel so urgent. Maybe he'd come here then with G.J. and sit in the grass with the musicians. He'd drink wine, hold G.J. near him and listen to the music.

Suddenly he stepped harder on the gas and moved up the road toward Grandpa.

From Champion to L'Anse, through fifty miles of woods, he didn't think much. He was at the base of the Keewenaw now and getting ready for the final turn north. Moving at the truck's top speed of about seventy, he had passed the nameless forests. He had passed roadside parks. But the sun was shining in now and he couldn't continue to be no one. But earlier it had been easy. He had passed all those unnamed people in cars heading east. They had expressions on their faces you never quite caught. They were engaged in conversations you never heard, dreaming silent dreams you couldn't fathom. He had been a faceless no one, consumed by the concerns of speed, racing before his thoughts down an endless highway.

Beyond L'Anse was a rock face where a giant bronze statue



of Bishop Baraga, the snowshoe priest, looked out over the bay. O'Brian came full into the sun beneath that gaze. Now he was someone. He couldn't hide that he was Ben O'Brian, driving his father's truck toward Baraga. He was a young man going to see his grandfather. And somewhere it was written that he was the grandson of Frank O'Brian, whose son had been Jim. Jim, who died and left a practical wife and two sons. One of these sons loved and excelled at sports and coached and taught young people. One son wasn't sure what he loved: Ben O'Brian.

All this was known. All this could be proven with papers. Birth certificates, sports trophies, job applications, marriage licenses, and diplomas. And he knew all this. He could deny it, of course. He could pretend to be someone else. But even then you had to be someone. Even then he would know the truth.

When O'Brian saw the road sign for Copper Harbor, he pulled out the handmade map his mother had given him before he left home the first time for Marquette. It was his mother. Evidence of her existence, neat and well marked. It showed a general store and a road and a turn-off to the left. The back road that led down to the shore would be marked with the family name. It was just a short way to the beach where you rang the bell and waited for Grandpa to come in from the island in the boat.

His mother had told him that Grandpa would probably take him fishing on a small lake on the interior of the little



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island. The lake had been stocked years ago by his grandfather. Grandpa had taken his son Jim, Ben's father, fishing there often. Mom had gone with the two of them once. She said Jake and he had gone that time too. O'Brian couldn't remember it.

At Houghton and Hancock twenty-seven miles further toward Grandpa, he observed only enough to catch the right road and head across the bridge on Portage Lake. The lake divided the hills of Houghton and Hancock and separated Houghton from the northern Keewenaw Peninsula.

He moved up the hill and into the heart of the Copper Country not stopping above Hancock to look back on a view that stretched out long miles south, east, and west.

Frustration and an aching confusion took him as he moved further north into the once booming mining towns of Calumet and Laurium. He felt a need to stop. How much further? Flashes of anger rose as he saw signs for "Boston" and "Phoenix", sub-villages that mocked city names and gave him the impression that Grandpa could be anywhere, anywhere. Looking for his Grandfather began to seem like a ride on a sprite down a whirling vortex.

Now that he was someone, now that he had emerged from behind the rolled stone, he had to find the link to his identity. He needed to find his Grandfather.

Still moving north, he passed the rustic buildings of the

Keewenaw Mountain Lodge. Soon he saw the sign for Copper Harbor, took the correct turn beyond the general store and headed west along the big lake again. The lake was hidden by thick growths of pine. Soon he spotted the sign, simple but comforting: O'Brian's Landing. He turned to the right and saw an old lighthouse bell mounted high on two posts on the shore ahead. He saw the island, too, as he approached. It was thick with green and rocky around its edges. It sat steady in a stirring fresh-water sea. He pulled to a stop at the end of the road next to the bell. He could make out, in the fading light, the outlines of a small cabin in the trees on the eastern shore. He got out of the truck and looked in at the suit he had worn to the funeral which lay crumpled on the passenger side. He grabbed a jean jacket which had been next to him on the seat. He pulled it on and buttoned it tight against the rising wind. He ran a hand through his blond hair and looked out at the island again, then toward the sun which would fall in a few hours. Beneath the sun lay the northern line, unaltered by the rough seas.

He walked to the bell and grabbed the chain which hung low. He pulled the chain back and forth listening to the hinges squeak. Then he heard it sound loud and clear like a call for help. The bell shouted for him in resonant tones toward an old man he knew only vaguely, an old man who shed his blood and his

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history.

Soon he saw a lone figure moving slowly from the cabin toward the southern shore.

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Part VI



July 16, 1980

My mother wasn't home, but Jake was now. He had come home unexpectedly. It had surprised me.

"What the hell are you doing here?" I'd said, smiling with the emphasis on the swear word. I had wanted to show what a man I had become at fourteen.

"Don't swear, Ben."

"Oh, okay, Mr. High-and-Mighty."

"Want some dinner?"

"You gonna cook it? No way!"

Jake wasn't laughing. "I'll make you some dinner."

We ate dinner and at eight o'clock I began to wonder about Mom. I knew Dad wasn't coming home because he was having his gall bladder or kidney or something out. He'd be fine.

"Where's Mom?" I asked Jake a little anxiously at nine.

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"She's at the hospital."

"Is something wrong?"

"Wait for Mom to come home."

"Why?"

"Because I said."

"What's going on?"

"Nothing."

When Mom came home, I knew for certain Jake was lying. Her face was white, and she pulled herself into a chair at the kitchen table.

"Mom, what's wrong?"

Jake walked over. He started to say something but Mom waved him off. She looked at me still wearing her brown jacket. He face was gray and blank. "Ben, we are going to lose him."

"No."

"He's going to die, Ben."

"Don't tell me that. No, don't tell me that."

She pulled me to her and I cried. I knew then I wasn't old enough to swear.

Chapter Twenty

His grandfather had run the wide wooden boat onto shore. The sound of it landing had been solid. O'Brian stood for a moment at the bow looking at the old man in the back. His grandfather wore a sandy brown hat and a hooded green parka. His face was in shadow, but it seemed twisted with discomfort like the expression of someone with a tiny bone fragment wedged tightly between two molars. The look seemed suddenly to disappear, but the old green eyes sparked ambiguously.

"Hello," O'Brian said looking into a face he barely recognized.

"Yeah."

"It's good to see you."

His grandfather nodded quickly, uncomfortably once, picked up an army coat and tossed it at O'Brian. It fell well short draping over the front seat of the boat. The irritation was back on the old man's face. He made a motion as though to pick up the coat, but settled back.

"Well, get it can't you? There it is! It's not waterproof, but it should keep the water off. Bad night to make this cross. Couldn't you have waited another day? Christ it's..."

O'Brian felt an urge to bolt for the truck. Maybe he could just go back. Maybe back to C.J.'s arms or his mother's. No, no he had to move ahead, didn't he? But Mom had been so right about his grandfather. O'Brian felt a blush of embarrassment and angry, resigned sadness cross his face. He clenched his teeth tightly and squeezed the fingers of his right hand in a fist over and over. Tears were welling, but he held them and hardened his expression.

His grandfather had stopped talking suddenly after looking into O'Brian's face. The old man was looking now at his own feet minutely, shaking his head once for an instant.

"Won't you push me off?" He spoke without looking and there was disgust in his voice. Its target unclear.

O'Brian found the wooden boat heavy, but managed to push it out into the water. One foot got wet as he hoisted his body over the bow too late. He picked up the long army coat and put it on over his jean jacket.

His grandfather lowered the ancient twenty-five horse motor and pulled it to life. It roared like an aging bear. The old man apparently kept his equipment up. He backed the boat up, then turned it toward the island. Immediately they began crashing through waves and O'Brian saw that the old coat was useless.

His grandfather was screaming something behind him. O'Brian turned. "What?"



"Don't ya...don't ya know enough...Turn toward me or you'll get soaked!" His expression was incredulous.

They crossed in the waves. The old man watched the water with his old, scowling, alert face. It was a face that seemed only slightly familiar. It was the expression that bothered O'Brian. Dad hadn't scowled like that. At least not that he could remember. And Dad's face hadn't been so serious either, nor so concerned with detail. Not nearly so intent.

O'Brian's grandfather was silent for a moment watching the waves. His concentration on the water seemed to snap suddenly and his eyes darted about eyeing the blank space immediately before him. Suddenly he looked down. Then he spat over the side disgustedly.

O'Brian looked away, focusing back on the bell on shore. He felt a sudden contempt for the implications of help and hospitality. He peeked over his shoulder and got a faceful.

There was laughter from the back of the boat. Familiar, friendly laughter, "Gotta watch those waves, Jimmy!"

O'Brian looked at the old man, but his grandfather was oblivious to the error. He was smiling a familiar smile for just a moment, but seeing O'Brian's expression, the old man looked away at the lake.

O'Brian looked back at the shore of the mainland again and saw the family truck standing alone at the end of the road he had traveled. He looked back over his shoulder and saw the island

getting closer until it nearly filled his view. He could see a long "L" shaped dock jutting out south from the island. They were heading directly for it.

"I'll have to stoke the fire," the old man said barely audibly. Then he continued more loudly, "Fire's important when it's like this. Important any time of year in this country. It can always get cold." He looked again out toward the water. Squinted, said no more.

"Nasty wind," O'Brian shouted back quickly.

His grandfather was irritated again. He attempted his smile, but suddenly looked away, "Ya."

O'Brian could clearly see the wide low log cabin in the trees on the island. The logs were stained dark by the years. He noticed now that a yellow dog had come out on the dock. Its tail was wagging. It was a yellow labrador. O'Brian's father had hunted for years with Rusty, a labrador of the same shade, who had died a few years before his master. O'Brian had always liked dogs.

"That dog always gets in the boat," the old man said cutting the motor's speed. "Most of the time I can't get her out. Tonight I kicked her out though. Gets too excited and runs all over the Gaddamned...young yet, though. She'll learn."

"What's her name?"

The old man said simply, seriously, "Betty."

O'Brian nodded He felt an urge to laugh at his grandfather's

seriousness and his close scrutiny for the reaction to the dog's name, but he stifled the feeling.

The old man brought the boat around the dock, pulling it in sideways. It bumped the half tires that served as padding on the wooden dock. He shut the motor off. Grandpa reached out and attached a series of elongated clamps to the boat's side. O'Brian followed suit, clamping the boat near the bow. Betty was leaning over the boat, kissing O'Brian's face with a wet tongue. Then she looked at him eagerly. He reached out to pet her and the dog accepted the attention, then sped wildly up the dock toward the cabin. O'Brian got out on the dock then turned back looking toward his grandfather. Slowly, pensively, he offered his hand. The old man was scowling again and waved him off. "Don't need it. Don't need it." The old man hunched over the dock and laboriously pulled himself up. He stood tall like a young man on the dock for a moment, his head turned away from O'Brian; his shoulder heaved slightly.

"Gotta get the fire stoked up," he said curtly. His expression eased with an obvious effort, "We've got to get it warm inside."

O'Brian smiled nervously at his grandfather. He looked up and saw a thick column of smoke rising from the chimney at the west end of the cabin. The cabin was at the top of a substantial hill. Steps of wood blocks had been laid on the hill. There was a door at the center of the cabin and small multi-paned windows



on either side. The roof ws covered with wood shingles. It looked old.

"When...when did you build this place?"

The old man wore a happier, more familiar expression now. He examined the house as though he were looking at an old friend's face. "I was young. It was around 1925..." His brow furrowed for a moment, "1926. Couple years after Patty...let's see to that fire."

They walked up the dock and Betty stood at its end greeting them, a small block of wood at her feet and an expectant look on her face. O'Brian picked up the block quickly and tossed it up hill. Betty took off, a projectile of ridiculous canine energy. She caught the wood block before it bounced a second time.

"Don't!" the old man said as O'Brian threw the wood. "Don't do that!"

"I'm sorry. I just thought..."

The old man started ahead up the hill. He turned back suddenly, excitedly, "See, now, now, if she gets used to somebody else. Well, it's not good, boy. Don't you see? I've got to hunt with that dog." He turned and continued up the hill.

Betty came back and laid the wood at O'Brian's feet again. O'Brian reached down and petted her, then looked up quickly. Had his grandfather seen it?

"You like fishing?" The old man was looking suddenly back down the steps, an evaluative squint on his face.



"Sure," though frankly O'Brian had always been rather indifferent to it.

"Good then," his grandfather said and continued up the steps. "You coming up?" he said without looking back.

"Sure."

O'Brian noticed his grandfather's walk as he started up the homely steps to the cabin. The old man labored at walking. His shoulders rolled, his back bent, but he stubbornly continued. How old was his grandfather? He must be in his eighties. High eighties. His grandfather stopped on the steps. When he did, his full height returned, and he appeared a healthy, younger man. He turned and looked suspiciously at O'Brian. "I said, are you coming?"

"Yes."

O'Brian moved quickly up the steps behind his grandfather. There was a heap of firewood on the east side of the house next to a large orderly woodpile.

"I need to split those," the old man said quietly. He looked wistfully toward the heap. Then his expression hardened. "You can never have enough wood."

## Chapter Twenty-one

Impossible. It was all impossible. He was in a boat and there was a home movie screen in the bow. Darkness was around him except for a white flickering light on the screen. He was sitting on the floor of the boat. He was moving through rough seas.

Most impossible of all, there was a doorway behind him. Now how the hell could that be? He could see people there in silhouette. He wasn't even looking that way, so how could he see the doorway? He couldn't move his eyes from the movie screen. The home movie started. It was a film he'd seen before, but had forgotten. It was a movie with O'Brian in it. O'Brian, the little boy. In the movie the tiny child O'Brian was on the floor sitting next to...Dad. Dad was wearing a white T-shirt and lying

stretched out. Dad was holding a horrifying fright mask up to his face, then letting it down and laughing. Playing peek-a-boo. The mutilated, bloody mask wasn't scaring the little boy O'Brian at all. At one point in the film the little boy laughed and made Dad put the mask back on his face. O'Brian had been a little blonde kid laughing. His father had been a young handsome man laughing with his little boy. He could see his father's face now. He was dark haired and handsome. His beard was rough. His eyes were brown and his eyebrows were dark. He smiled a lot. When Dad smiled, it made O'Brian warm. He hugged his Dad. His father held him close, so close. He would never let go. The movie and the boat, the boy and man O'Brian were all one. He was hugging his father and looking back to the doorway. They came forward: Mak, Jake, his mother, G.J.- his grandfather, too. O'Brian hugged his father closer, and he could feel them all around. He could feel his father's hand on his shoulder. Dad was telling him in that kind gritty voice to wake up.

"Son, wake up. Jimmy, wake up."

"Dad. I'm Benny. I love you, Dad. I love you."

"Benny. Son, wake up."

He was awake. But where? On a cot in front of a fire. It was night, very dark. Someone was standing over him, gently shaking him.

"Ben, wake up."

"Grandpa?"

The old man paused for a moment and held out a shot glass. Whiskey. "Yes. Here, drink up. You always talk in your sleep?"

O'Brian could smell the thickness of whiskey on his grandfather's breath. The old man was drunk. The old man was smiling.

"What time is it?"

His grandfather hesitated, "Plenty late. Does it matter?"

O'Brian sat up. "No, it doesn't."

His grandfather was sitting on the hearth. He couldn't make out much of the big main room from the firelight except the shadowy lines of the long walls. The wind was howling outside.

"Drink up."

O'Brian took the glass and tipped it back. It was warm going down. Smooth. It wasn't the kind of whiskey he usually drank.

"Easy there, son." The look on his grandfather's face was pleasant. Finally he was very familiar. Like Dad, but thinner and older.

O'Brian leaned over and felt tears welling as he stared into the empty glass.

"Strong for you?" Grandpa filled the glass again.

"Nah."

"It's a wild night," the old man paused. He looked into the fire which crackled and wavered in nebulous forms like the ghost of something. The old man sat listening to the storm outside



then looked from the fire into O'Brian's face. Shadows moved across the old man's face obscuring the lines of age. "This kinda weather keeps me interested though. Hard to sleep when it's like this. Course I don't sleep much anymore anyway." He stopped a moment, started to speak, then took a drink from the glass. He held the liquor in his mouth momentarily then swallowed. His face was in shadow, but when he turned his profile to the firelight, his age was obvious. Effort showed in the lines around his eyes. "I wanted...to talk."

O'Brian nodded. The old man's attempts to communicate would have been funny if he weren't trying so hard. Grandpa began to speak rapidly, "I want to get this out of the way. Your mother and I... we never hit it off."

"She..."

Grandpa raised his hand, agitated, "I never gave her much of a reason to like me." The irritation in the old man's voice was like that of a lecturer interrupted by a persistent young student. It was almost an incantation which the old man had likely recited in his long sleepless hours for years. "Some people would say I'm an old son of a bitch. Maybe they're right. Most times I wouldn't give a damn." He quit, startled for a moment, as though he had inadvertently strayed from the script. He suddenly completed the unscheduled thought. "Right now, well, I guess I'm getting old." He looked away from O'Brian back into the fire. His head was bowed over his drink. His posture

reminded O'Brian of sinless scarfed old Catholic women after confession.

O'Brien felt a need to help: to say something. He started to open his mouth, but his grandfather took the young man's intake of breath as a cue to launch quickly back into his personal penance. "Your mother's a good woman. She was good for Jimmy. She should know that.

"Okay."

"I'm glad ...you're here. The words had seemed strained. But now he said easily, "It's good to see you. Your mother got word to me about your friend." He faced O'Brian momentarily, then turned back. "It's too bad, son, really it is." His gaze gradually wandered back to the fire. "It's hard to lose somebody somebody like that so suddenly." The wind howled outside and the fire popped suddenly, O'Brian started. Grandpa turned back again and said, "I have an idea of how you feel."

"Thanks."

There was a long silence. A good one. A familiar one. The wind rose and O'Brian looked off into the shadows. He could feel his grandfather near him. It wasn't necessary to talk, like Jake and him...at the bar. He breathed the feeling in for several minutes. But then he knew he would need to know more before he slept.

"Grandpa..." The old man turned to him; he was smiling comfortably. "Mom says you were quite a pitcher..."

The old man's eyebrows rose. A look of true astonishment crossed his face.

O'Brian added quickly, "See, I've never heard the stories."

"Well, yes. I pitched all right," he seemed slightly angry, then grinned, drifting off. He came back suddenly. "Those were good days, boy. Good ones. Me and the O'Shea boys and some of ball, too."

He reached on to the hearth for the bottle and poured himself another drink refilling O'Brian's glass as well. The old man held up his glass to salute, "That's where I learned how to drink." He tossed back the contents, "We tossed back a lot after the games." He chuckled. "Too much sometimes." He was quiet for a moment listening. The wind was still strong. The shadows played ambiguously at his face again, "I met Patty...hell, she'd be your grandma. I met her in those days, too. She was a beauty."

O'Brian heard a breath drawn in and looked down Beety was awake somewhat reluctantly. She had laid her velvet head on Grandpa's knee. Her eyes pleaded for sleep. Grandpa stroked her ears absently.

Like my old father used to say, 'She's a fine lass!'" He drank. "There aren't many like Patty." He drank again. "And there never were."

Grandpa turned back to the fire again. But O'Brian needed still more. "You pitched some great games, I bet."



"Why, hell, yes! Pitched a couple of no hit no run games in '24. You're damned right, boy! Now '24 was the year we won it. The league. It wasn't any small potatoes then. Big time. We'd play to a couple thousand people sometimes."

"Your Daddy..." The old man stopped in mid-sentence again startled by what he had said. "... was born that year." His animation left him. The rest came out in an emotionless, studied monotone. "He was born in the back seat of a model T. Out in the damned... cold." He winced, then stood up slowly and walked to the woodpile to the right of the hearth and deliberately picked out a log. He place it carefully on the dimming fire and said almost inaudibly. "Got to keep it going."

He stood looking into the flames for a moment. Then he walked back slowly and resumed his place. There was dampness below his eyes smudged with soot from the fire.

"You knew that I lost Patty then. Childbirth."

O'Brian nodded and met Grandpa's gaze. He suddenly looked away. "More or less."

The pause was there again. More uncomfortable at first. But then relief swept back in. He knew. He had been told. This was the way it had been for certain. He turned back to his grandfather.

"I...I think I understand, too."

Grandpa's look sharpened, "No!" There was a vague resentment on his face. It softened. "No, son. You really



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don't. At least not about Patty." He looked back at the flames.

## Chapter Twenty-two

The ax connected, but didn't drive through. O'Brian looked down at it. He slammed the ax and log against the ground. Stuck. He leaned back for a second. He slammed the log against the ground again. Stuck. Then, frenzied, he slammed it continuously until finally it broke, fell in pieces, strips of wood gouged from its center.

O'Brian looked at the open cabin door. He had felt someone watching, but no one was there. He looked out at the big lake in the west and north. Only the line in the north watched. His eyes suddenly filled, and he slumped over the ax.

"Mak," he said softly.

He moved another log into place. The ax fell and stuck again. He slammed it once and it came apart. He set up another and drove the ax clean through. Then another. And another. He was splitting with single crisp blows. The sound of the ax echoed in the stillness.

"You're getting it," Grandpa said from the doorway. Betty

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stood next to him, wagging and eager. Grandpa began his steady walk over and picked up a log. He placed it on the ground in front of Ben O'Brian.

"Go to it."

The ax fell, and Grandpa put another log in place.

There was a haze in the room. Mostly cigarette, some cigar. And on the bandstand was a lone figure. The smokey haze engulfed him and the lights made it yellow, the surreality of a dingy bar room. His eyes were blue, though this could not be seen. His beard was thick, close-cropped, and the same color as his dark hair, which hung nearly to his shoulders. He struck a low string on the guitar and his face was in pain. He was tall and slim in the light, dark, with a leather vest and jeans. He was playing his own instrumental, a hard rock number that was good, damned good, if only it were another time. In these days it couldn't go over big with the crowd, but then what could he expect? The kind of crowds he needed no longer existed. There was a barrier of ten years between those crowds and tonight. But he could play for himself, and he did.

He had watched most of this crowd come in as he and the rest of the band had been setting up. How long had he been coming here? And how long had he known Jimmy the bartender? The better part of ten years, ten years... But he had watched them come in. The farmers sitting over by the juke box, the tall one with the Jacques Seeds hat on who, with his bushy sideburned and hard-eyed face, had stared him down as he tested a microphone. And the farmers friends who had nudged each other in anticipation of a patriotic war against the long-hairs in the band that might come after a few more drinks. There were the old fellows, the regulars, perched on their personal stools to the left, talking to Jimmy behind the bar. There were the too--youngsters who sat at three tables over to the right and way back near the door in case they suddenly had to retreat when their age was realized. Of course in this bar the dollar was the only ID needed. And so it was.

And it had been that way in different bars all over the tri-state tour circuit for ten years. In '70 he had been with "The Rebels" and



he had been the lead guitarist and singer they had played the acid tunes, and it had been good. And in '72 he had been with "Shock" a band he thought was going somewhere and he had done back up. And then in '73 he'd been with "The Star Children" and he'd seen that as a dead end from the first. And over and over again he had thought of trying to get on with a studio, of going to California, and hadn't. He'd done the circuit with three more bands, "Sonic" in '74 and '75. "Lazerus" in '76 and '77. "Derringer" in '78, and now "Main Street". This was the first time it had been his own since "The Rebels". But it was far from the same.

There had been girls over the years, but nobody steady since the Rebels and Valerie, the back-up singer. He could see her. Her blonde hair shimmering in the psychedelic light, the bells of the tamberine, her body, supple, young, alluring. But with the end of the Rebels came the end of that too.

There had been groupies and hookers since then, how many? Who could tell? It was always fast, furious, and over. There hadn't been one in awhile. Always he dreamed of it, the way it was then. The Rebels, and a different world.

Oh, but now. Now the kids wanted, "something you can dance too", something with a beat. Fuck the message. And the businessmen were just here for a good piece of young tail so it didn't matter to them what you played. And the olders, the regulars, couldn't tell disco from acid, so how could you win? And now he was playing and he was living his music and the guitar was speaking to an audience that couldn't understand. And still he played, the sweat glistening in the light, his body writhing with the guitars' wailing messages. And still he played, as he had been playing for ten years, and as he knew he couldn't do much longer. And he played. The band was on break, and it was his, all his, oh but even they didn't understand him; they were so young.

Over the years there had been hours and days and months of practice.

And with each band he lost more of his friends who dropped out (Jeff was selling insurance: suit, hair cut, everything). And the band members got younger each time on tour. And this time the lead girl was seventeen. But really it was no different; they were the same age...

And still he was playing these bars that were all really the Dew-Drop-Inn. And there was some pleasure in it, but only when you pretended the audience wasn't bored, only when you could see the thousands of screaming kids that should have been yours, should have been living for your music.

1. The yellow light was right, a dream, fantasy.

He hit the cutting, screeching notes and his face twisted once again, like a cat's snarl. It was a tortured message of disillusioned youth that no longer existed. And he held that note, the guitar gyrating in his hands as it pierced the night. And back to the original, the notes that had started the song, now ironic: "Bullshit!" they screamed, "Bullshit!" And it was over, And the applause was scattered. But in the front there was enthusiasm. A clap of one set of hands, standing out. As he stepped out of the yellow light, he saw her. Blonde, her hair hanging long and straight. She looked so much like the girls, Jesus, like Valerie had. No, it wasn't her, but she could have been. Her eyes were green he could see now. Like a flower child. Like those he had played to when he was nineteen and then twenty. Like Valerie, who had loved him, ten years ago, She was smiling at him. She was alone.

"That was great." She said as he nearly passed.

He looked at her again. "I wish there were more around who thought so."

"Why don't you sit down?"

"Okay. I don't get many compliments on that any more. Mostly



they want to hear disco, or new wave, whatever the hell that is. He smiled at her.

She returned it. "How long will you be in town?"

"We've got one more night here. Then we go over to the east side to, um, Wally's, yeah that's it."

She nodded.

"I try to play as much music as I can. After all, it's my band. "

"Well it's good, the kind of stuff I like too."

"Oh good. Well, at least somebody besides me likes it."

She reached out and touched his hand, her eyes looking directly into his.

"Say, um, what's your name?"

"Jennie." She had yet to stop looking; her lips were curling a very pleasant smile just on the ends.

"I'm Mick Chandler. I guess it's stupid to say 'hi' when you've already been talking but, 'hi!'"

"Hi."

"Can I buy you a drink?"

"Sure, a seven and seven."

He looked at her one more time. Was it true? She sat smiling at him. Yeah, Jesus Christ, yeah. "Seven and seven, okay." He stood up and walked sideways between two tables loaded down with businessmen and he caught the feeling too of that farmer staring him down again, from behind the table where Jennie was sitting. He hoped there wouldn't be a fight over the girl. At the tables he was passing, some of the most outrageous pick-up lines he'd ever heard and some he'd heard a million times were being employed. That was the way with these places, these small cities and their night life.

He walked to the bar. Jimmy, the aging bartender, turned his skinny frame around and pushed back his glasses. "Yeah, what would you like?"

"Two seven and sevens and a shot of straight whickey, no rocks."

He'd had a joint and three or four shots back at his room to gear up for the show. He always stayed in a different place from the rest of the band. He could take their parties or leave them as he liked. His head was spinning some; he looked back in Jennie's direction. The edge of the yellow light from the spot on stage was lighting only her face and it was so familiar. She was looking up on stage. And now her head turned slowly, slowly to the left and she was looking over the crowd at him, smiling. Jesus, Jesus, Jesus.

Jimmy was finished mixing the drinks.

Mick was still looking, his back leaning against the bar. Jimmy tapped him on the shoulder. "Here, the drinks."

"Oh, yeah. Hey, Jimmy, do you know that girl right in front of the stage?"

"The blonde?"

"Yeah."

The bartender squinted through thick glasses, leaning forward over the bar. "Nope, she's new."

Jennie was looking away now. Mick turned his back to her and downed the shot of whiskey. He set down the glass and picked up the mixed drinks.

"Good luck." It was Jimmy as he turned away.

"Um, thanks."

He made his way back through the crowd and noticed the farmer and his friends were gone. This was going to be a good night. This girl, where had she come from? Oh, it was so much like old times, Valerie and the Rebels. Maybe he would finally find it, just what he had always wanted. He looked and saw her eyes on him once more as he approached the table. That's what he had always wanted, right there, in her eyes. His eyes were watering some from the smoke stinging them, yeah, the smoke.

He sat down putting her drink in front of her.



"Thank you."

"Are you from around here?"

"Now I am, but I move a lot."

"I know the feeling."

"I guess you would."

He took a long pull on the straw of the seven and seven and then took it out of the drink and set it in the ash tray.

The rest of the band was coming out of the little room behind the stage.

Jennie looked at him smiling. "I guess you have to work now."

He swiveled around. "Yeah, I guess so. . . Hey, I've got a couple of doobies out in my car, want to light them up after this last set?"

"Sure."

He stood to go, downing the rest of his seven and seven.

"Okay, see ya."

He turned and walked back into the light, catching one last glimpse of her over his shoulder. It was uncanny, almost like she was made for him. Like after all these years, she was there. The answer to what he'd always wanted.

The young blonde guitar player with his short blown back hair was fiddling with his guitar. Now he had it, and he nodded to Mick.

The drummer, his dark hair always in place was ready. The young girl singer stepped to the microphone; her dark eyes signaled Mick.

And he was back at work playing the boogie oogie oogie and all the disco tunes that made him a Malox addict. And later they were playing the synthesized new wave tunes that made him think of plastic and bank accounts. And still she smiled at him; when the lights flashed blue and less intense he could see her. In the first row she smiled, enduring these tunes for his sake. She waited for something good, it seemed, something she knew. Just the way he did. And at last it came, and his

voice was crusty and the guitar was true as he strummed and picked his way through "Me and Bobbie McGee". And the words were the way the world had been then.

"Feelin' good was easy lord when Bobbie sand the blues..."

Oh, the Rebels and Valerie, and it was back; he had it again and God, God, let it stay.

"Feelin' good was good enough for me." Building, building, and now, "Good enough for me and my Bobbie McGee." And he sand right to her as the lights flashed blue.

And it was the best it had been in ten years. And she smiled and she felt it with him, every word, every line were both his and hers. God, it had to be true. And now he was to the instrumental end and he was picking feverishly, the Rebels, the Rebels' lead singer Mick Chandler on state, tonight! He played it for her. Not for the beer guzzling red necks, or for the disco-crazed minors who if this was another bar, wouldn't be here. He played it for her and he had an audience. God, it was great not to pretend; it was back. Even if the guitar player with the feathered disco cut was bored and the teenage girl backing him up would rather be singing Donna Summer. He sang for the girl in the front row, for his Jennie, and it was the last song. And the lights died, and the crowd began to leave, closing time, and still she smiled.

One more night here, no clean up; he could leave any time. He stepped off the stage, set down his guitar and walked to her table.

"Are you ready?"

"Yes."

"What did you think of Bobbie McGee?"

"You know." She smiled

"I thought so."

"Mick, let's go."

"Okay."



She picked up her leather purse and hung it over her shoulder.

The guitar player shouted from the bandstand, "Hey, oldtimer! We're havin' a party later. Why don't you and your date. . ."

"No, man, I'm busy."

The boy looked at him puzzled, pushing a hand back through his blonde hair.

These guys just didn't understand. This wasn't some pickup; this was special.

He caught Jimmy the bartender giving him the ok sign from behind the bar.

Nope, they didn't understand.

They had reached the door and as he opened it she took his hand and kissed his cheek in the shadowy light. He looked out at the emptying parking lot.

A trip, a definite trip.

They got into his beaten up Nova. He reached for the glove box and the bagged joints inside.

She looked at him with eyes that smiled like a memory and said, "Let's wait until we get to your motel room."

He nodded. They headed out and he talked about the way Hendrix had played and the way Joplin had played, and how it had been then, but not of Valerie, not of Valerie. And she smiled. And he told her of years of these wanderings across the tour and of hoping to be discovered and of going to California. And she smiled. He glanced over at her in the darkness as they neared the motel and he said, "I know you'll think this is bullshit, but I haven't met anybody like you in a long time." And she smiled.

The motel was just ahead. They pulled into a parking space and walked to the door of his room. Even the neon sign, that flashed Petry's

Motel and Vacancy, seemed somehow a memory. A good one. He put his key into the door and turned on the interior lights when it was open. She was kissing him and he took her in his arms and it lasted and he had a feeling of home, of arrival. She was so real, like Valerie was in those psychedelic lights of ten years ago, her hair flying wildly, her lips open seductively.

They pulled apart and he looked at her. An in the light she shocked him. And his eyes focused in the light. She was painted, heavily. Her eyes were bagged underneath. She was a flower child, had been, ten years ago.

She looked at him seriously. With the most serious face she had yet shown him, "Only twenty bucks for you, okay?"

He stared at her. "Huh?"

"Twenty bucks."

She was holding out her hand. She was old. He stood looking out at the highway for a minute, thinking of a bad joke, an old one. He thought he heard the sound of an ambulance. The cars passed. A low roar was in his ears from the speakers at the bar. His stomach was aching. It was cold in the air of the open door. He focused on the marquee a long way away across the open land around the highway.

"We just didn't understand each other." He shut the door behind him with the girl following him back toward the car.

"C'mon baby, I'll pay you half. Let's go back to the bar."

"Fuck, it's too late for me to pick up anybody else!"

He looked at her angered. He pulled out his wallet. "Here, here's twenty-five dollars. Get out of my fuckin' sight." He slapped the money down in her hand. He watched her turn and go, a fat, near-middle-aged whore in a peasant dress. She walked across the highway and out of sight in the darkness.