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“Wicked Cool”

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts

by

James Jennewein

March 2013

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Love and kisses to my wife, Allison, and my son, Jake.

Chapter 8

By the weekend of the party three weeks later, Bicks had dropped acid twice. The first time it was with Cash at the mall that Saturday, a trip that began around two in the afternoon and lasted nearly to midnight. They had been selling joints out behind the jeans store and Cash had casually mentioned that he was feeling bored and thought it would be fun if they both did acid together. “C’mon, we’ll each do a hit of blotter and go hit a movie—*The Wild Bunch* is at the Webster again—then just go party somewhere, maybe at this girl’s house I know.”

Bicks hesitated. Was it really something he should be doing? Something safe? Smart? Fuck, yeah! Doing LSD was the ultimate, the sign you were one with your pals. Because to go tripping with someone meant you were really friends. It meant they trusted you to take care of them if something went wrong, if they weirded out. Plus, the Beatles gobbled it like candy so it had to be cool, right? As it happened, that morning he’d told his mom he would be out late anyway, so he was free to come home whenever he pleased, no problem.

Cash unfolded a small flat piece of foil and brought out two tiny squares of whitish paper, each with a shaded circle in the middle, the circle being the spot where the

lysergic acid had been dropped on in the lab. Cash instructed Bicks on how to put it under his tongue so the drug would be absorbed more quickly into his bloodstream.

He did as he was told. And waited.

It took a good hour before he began to feel anything. At first just a lift in energy, the urge to smile a lot. Then bigger rushes and brighter colors, his heart pounding, parked cars bulging in and out as if they were breathing. Whatever he looked at seemed to be wearing a bright coat of vibrating sunshine and each person he passed on the sidewalk looked weirder and more wonderful than the last. The dull pink flesh of their faces appeared to be made of Silly Putty, like he could just reach out and pinch and push their cheeks and nose around and rearrange a person's features however he wished. A fat lady in a pink dress waddled by and to Bicks she seemed to be a walking tube of Braunschweiger sandwich meat. Everything—babies, kids, bikes, dogs, orange Popsicles, the painted yellow lines on the black asphalt of the parking lot, every surface of every object—seemed as if he were laying eyes on it for the very first time. Every glint and sparkle of light like a sprinkling of fairy dust. Mostly, it was just fun, Cash and Bicks laughing over the littlest things, either because it was funny or because it simply felt good to their bodies to laugh.

They made it to the theater right before the show started. But when Bicks brought out his wallet and moved toward the ticket window, Cash said, “Don't be a douche,” and took him around to the side door. If you waited until the movie started, Cash said, you could slip in the side door and grab seats right away and nobody'd be the wiser. “Why

pay,” Cash said, “if you don’t have to?” Said as if it were the most obvious thing in the world and that Bicks was dumb for not having known it.

So they slipped into the darkened theater and took seats right up front, just in time to see an epic shoot-out, dusty old geezers with a shit-ton of pistols and shotguns blasting each other. The blood spurting like tomato juice in a slow-motion ballet of bodies, guns thundering, Bicks loving the scary thrill of it. But then shouts from the audience cheering for more blood—the jungle animal vibe—upset him more than the violence onscreen, and for the first time in his life, he felt unsafe in a movie theater.

After the movie, they drove around in Cash’s Torino, trying to find another place to go. It had begun to rain, and as the wipers *flick-flicked* back and forth, the windshield became its own kind of rain-blurred movie screen. Objects formed and flashed there, seeming to Bicks they were dancing right there on the road ahead and Cash was going to crash right into them. But then they’d quickly dissolve into blobby drops of rainwater and get wiped away, and all he’d see was headlights shining on empty black road.

Flick, flick. It was really messing with his head.

It freaked Bicks more to see how Cash was acting. The blotter had driven him deeper into his obsession over Sally MacKenzie and no matter where Bicks tried to steer their conversation, Cash was on a one-track speed-rap. All he could talk about was the joy in her smile. The heat in her kisses. How she sounded on the phone. How she looked in a black bikini when she came out of her backyard pool dripping wet in the sunlight. “She’s a goddess, Booksie, damned demon goddess is what she is, made of moonlight and magic and pure goddamn sex. Fucking beautiful, man, my mind just turns to jelly

when I'm with her and I'm not even high. And when she laughs—like if I say something knowing it's funny and she thinks it's funny too and she laughs—that freedom she has when she's ha-ha-ing, her hair thrown back, god, what it does to me. Her mother likes me, I know she does, always calling me 'Cash, dear,' and 'our little darling Cash,' and sometimes it's almost like she likes me too much, you know. Like some kinda Mrs. Robinson thing is going on. She's hot, too, her mom is, so it stands to reason Sally's so smokin'. And her daddy, Mr. Collin Mackenzie, big lawyer, 'Big Mack,' they call him. He calls me 'Cashola,' you believe that? 'Cashola, what do you say we sit and watch the game together, huh, son?' And, 'I'm a Michelob man myself—what kind of man are you, Cashola?' Offering me beers and I'm drinking 'em down. If I could just get him to like me like the old lady does, you know, liking me enough to get Sally more serious about me, I might actually be able to *marry* the girl."

Flick, flick.

"You believe that?" Cash said with a sheepish look. "Me and her married? But that's what I think about, man. Like, all the time. Sally in my arms, in the bath tub, in my bed. Me and her married and living in some college town somewhere, both going to school and being together, helping each other with our homework and stuff. Babies, maybe, I don't know. It's just I want her so bad, and I know she wants me, she just can't always show it like she wants to show it but she feels it just like I do, maybe even more than I do, and that just makes me love her all the more."

Flick, flick.

Without thinking, Bicks said, "You always love the ones that get away."

Cash whipped his head around and glared at Bicks. “Get *away*?”

Bicks instantly found it hard to breathe, knowing he’d said the wrong thing. “I just meant,” Bicks said, “that the good ones, you know, the ones that really get to you—the ones you go crazy for—are a lot harder to hold onto than the ones guys like me and Tweezy get.” He cursed himself for being so stupid.

Cash clicked the radio off. “You said ‘get away.’ Like I lost her or something. I haven’t lost her, man.”

“I didn’t say you did.”

But Cash’s face was flushed and clearly angry.

Flick, flick.

“You said, ‘You always love the ones who get away.’ You think she’s gonna get away from me? Did she tell you something?”

“No, man—can you slow down? You’re going kinda fast—”

“What’d she say?”

“She didn’t say anything.”

“What do you mean, then?”

“I didn’t mean anything—”

“Why’d you say it if you didn’t mean it? What made you say that?”

Bicks gulped air, trying to quiet the scream in his head. *Flick, flick.* The rain was coming down harder now, and Cash’s anger was making him drive faster and this and the pictures in the windshield were making Bicks lose it.

“I’m sorry, man,” Bicks said, fumbling for a way to quiet Cash. Then he remembered: “It—it’s just what my dad used to say.”

“Your dad?”

“Yeah. Back when he would actually talk to me. Just out of the blue. Like, we’d be driving to a ball game or the bowling alley or something, and he’d be telling me a story about when he was a kid, the old neighborhood. He’d suddenly go quiet and get this funny look, like he was thinking way back, and say, ‘You always love the ones that get away.’ And I’d think, ‘Oh, okay, dad, whatever.’ That’s all it was, man, no biggie.”

The light was turning red ahead, Bicks hoping Cash saw it.

Bicks said, “I don’t know what the fuck I’m talking about. I’m tripping my brains out here, man, it was in my head and I just said it, okay?”

Cash hit the brakes and the Torino came to a stop at the light.

Flick, flick.

“Don’t just say shit, okay? Not when we’re on acid.”

“Okay. I’m sorry, Cash, I really am.” The tail light glow of passing cars shone like droplets of blood in the shining wet street.

Cash said, “My father, he’s a trip too. I’m in grade school, I think it was sixth grade, and he gets this bug up his ass, comes home saying he signed me up for little league. ‘You have to play sports,’ he says. ‘Sports’ll make you a man.’ I get excited, get a new glove, try out for the team and they put me at second base. Everything’s cool, right? First game, I get a hit. Actually get on base. Second game, I’m at the plate with two men on and I hit one just over the first baseman’s head. Two runs score. I’m on top of the

world. Next week, I get another big hit and another one the week after that. I'm fielding grounders, making outs, hot shit stuff. I'm not a star, but I'm good, you know? I'm playing the game. I'm not an embarrassment. The other kids like me and the coach knows my name. But the more games we play the worse I feel. Because he wasn't there. My dad. Didn't come to one damned game. Not one. Saturday comes around and he's always at the office or out of town on business. Too busy, too tired, too not home."

Flick, flick.

"And my mom, she's the one having to make excuses, you know? 'Your father's working himself to the bone, son. He'd be there if he could.' All that. But it's okay, because I got back at him."

"How'd you do that?"

"They put in a pool that summer. Workmen coming and going everyday, using our bathroom. Guys I know my dad doesn't trust. One day I leave the sliding glass door wide open. When no one's looking, I slip in and steal two-hundred bucks from the wallet my dad has out on his dresser bureau. My father finds it gone and blames it on the pool guys, of course. He's yelling. Calls the cops, fires the construction crew, the whole bit. I'm upstairs in my room, laughing my ass off. I'm at the window and I can see him down in the backyard. He and the construction guy having words. He pushes the construction guy, you know, in the chest, showing what a man he is, and the construction guy, he's not taking any shit, he fucking pushes my dad right into the ditch they dug for the pool. He's trying to climb out, his pants all muddy. That's when the cops came, my father having to cool it in front of them. He was so pissed. Still fun to think about."

But Cash was frowning. His jaw was set and the cords in Cash's neck were working, and to Bicks it seemed his friend looked anything but amused.

When Cash pulled up in front of Big Mike's house a few minutes later, Bicks saw a light on in the living room. But that's not where they walked to when they got out of the car. Instead, Bicks followed Cash around the side of the house, back to a detached one-car garage. "Let's see how the big boy's doing," said Cash.

He could hear the southern rock of Black Oak Arkansas coming from inside. At the side door, Cash knocked twice and entered. Bicks followed him in. The lights were off and there was Big Mike splayed out on a ratty old purple couch with a blanket over him. He had two electric heaters going, and he was watching a toaster-sized TV on top of an old kitchen chair. Playing on the TV was *Don Kirchner's Rock Concert*. The car was gone and the place had a musty, motor oil smell. There were garden tools hung from the walls, an old Toro lawn mower in the corner and paint cans on a workbench. It took a moment for Big Mike to notice they were there. He slowly looked up and said, "Hey."

"Hey," Bicks said.

"Old man still won't let you in the house, huh?" Cash said.

"Nah," Big Mike said. "But mom was nice enough to bring in this sofa for me. Got it at Goodwill."

"Got tired of sleeping in the car?" Cash said.

"Janie's always wanting to use it, plus I kinda burned the upholstery with the electric heater, pissed off mom big time."

Cash flipped the light on and Big Mike sat up now on the couch, rubbing his eyes.

“Real cozy set-up you got here, bro,” Cash said sarcastically. “But not a bad place to ball chicks. That is, if you *had* any chicks.”

“If I had any I wouldn’t be bringing them here, I tell you that,” Big Mike said.

“No, you’d be at my pool house and asking to use my water bed.” Cash opened the door to a beat-up refrigerator in the corner and took out a Budweiser tallboy. “Hey, lookey here,” he said, and threw the beer to Bicks. “Go on, drink up, smooth out.”

Bicks caught the can of cold beer and hungrily popped the top and took a long drink. Cash was right; it was just the thing he needed to mellow out a bit. Cash sat down next to Big Mike on the couch and Bicks took a seat on the creaky lawn chair across from them.

“Are you guys tripping?” Big Mike said with the start of a smile.

Cash grinned. “Booksie’s first time.”

“Awright, Books,” Big Mike said. “Make a man out of you.”

“I’m seeing some weird-ass stuff, all right,” Bicks said. “The Black Oak isn’t helping.”

“Hey, don’t down the Oak, man,” Big Mike said, “they’re like family.”

Bicks took another long drink from the can, the cold beer going down smooth indeed, and decided to keep his personal feelings about Black Oak Arkansas to himself.

“You wanna do a hit?” Cash asked him.

Big Mike shook his head and mumbled something about having to get up early.

“Naw, got work in the morning.”

Cash said, “We were thinking of rolling by Theresa Murdoch’s place, see if she wants to party. Her parents are supposed to be out of town.”

Big Mike said, “Isn’t she the one who gave you the clap last year?”

“No, man,” Cash said, “that was Nellie Millhauser, that skank from Kirkwood High. And it wasn’t clap, it was the crabs.”

“You got the crabs?” Bicks asked, intrigued.

“Last time I ball a public school broad, tell you that.”

“What’s it feel like?” asked Bicks.

“Balling a public school girl?”

“Having the crabs.”

“What do you *think* it feels like, man? I was itching like a bitch down there.”

Bicks said, “How do you get rid of crabs?”

“Don’t ask,” Cash said.

“No, really, man,” Big Mike said, “how *did* you get rid of them? We might need to know someday.”

“How’d I get rid of them? Well, first I asked real polite: ‘Hey, you little guys! I know you’re having a ball down there, crawling all over my balls, but it’s time to leave, party’s over.’ But that didn’t work. So I had to go to the doctor’s office, get this special cream to smear all over my cock and balls and up my butt crack.”

Mike snickered. “Your butt crack?”

This gave Bicks a particularly nasty visual.

“Yeah,” Cash said, “the little bastards were crawling all over my crotch, biting me everywhere. Whole army of squirmy little fuckers. Even had to shave my pubes off and burn my best pair of bell bottoms, ones I was wearing when I balled her. You know those ones with the kick-ass fringe down the side?”

“So what’d the doctor say?” Big Mike said.

“Doctor said, ‘Vermin have invaded your privates, Mr. Anderson, and we must declare war on them.’ Then he handed me the cream.”

“He didn’t ride your ass about having VD?”

“Nope. Just said, ‘I was you, I’d be careful where I put my penis from now on, son.’ I said, ‘You got that right, doc,’ and I boogied on out of there so I could get home and start the devastation on my infestation.”

Cash could get pretty funny when he wanted to, and Bicks and Big Mike were laughing out loud now, really letting loose. So they didn’t notice Big Mike’s father had entered the room until they heard him say, “What are you shitheads laughing at now?”

Bicks saw a squat, balding man with bad teeth and a crew cut standing in the open doorway behind them. There was a grin on his face, but not the kind you could trust. The man wore stained gray sweatpants and a short T-shirt that showed a dark tangle of hair on his white bulging belly. Staring from behind his black horn rim glasses, the man again gave them the grin, giving off an air of haughty cheerfulness.

“Dad,” said Big Mike, “my friends Cash and Books.”

“Hey, Mr. Skolski,” Cash said.

Bicks said hello.

“So, what do you think of my son’s new digs, boys? Pretty fancy, huh? Living real high off the hog, this kid.” Clearly he was enjoying his son’s banishment and clearly he was a little tipsy too. The man opened the door to the fridge and got a can of beer, clearly not his first of the evening. “It ain’t the Ritz, but what the hell, he ain’t exactly the King of Norway.” Mr. Skolski noticed something in the refrigerator and turned back to face his son. “You been at my beer again.”

“Dad, I had one. One beer.”

“I had ten Budweiser tallboys in here, Mikey, now there’s only six. They sprout wings and fly away?”

Bicks’s stomach went tight in panic. *Oh, shit! I have one of his beers!*

“Go ask Janie, I didn’t touch ‘em.”

“You didn’t touch ‘em.” Again, the beery grin. “You just *said* you took one! So either you’re lying or you got memory loss from all that pot you smoke—”

“I don’t smoke that much pot!”

“—either way you’re screwed, ‘cause now you owe me two six-packs.”

Big Mike threw up his hands in defeat and said, “You won’t let me in the house, you won’t let me have a beer, you won’t—”

“I won’t let you in the house because you’re a jackass who lost his privilege to be a member of this family. Your asinine behavior bringing shame on your mother and me, crashing a car into someone’s house, for crissakes. That’s why you’re doing time out here, in the dog house. ‘Case your buddies here weren’t clear on things.”

The whole time, the man hadn’t stopped smiling.

Bicks stole a glance at the beer he'd set on the floor beside his chair, relieved to see that it sat just inside a long rectangular shadow from the TV. Mr. Skolski wouldn't see it, as long as he stayed on that side of the room.

"You won't be happy," Big Mike said, "'til I'm getting A's at Harvard."

"Harvard? That's a laugh. Be lucky if you get through high school. And talk about happy—I'll be happy when you stop being such a king-size fuck-up." Big Mike went on complaining, but his dad dismissed him with a wave. He popped the top on the tallboy and put it to his mouth, grinning down at Bicks and Cash over the top of the can as he drank.

"You higher than a kite, too?"

"No, sir," Cash said.

"Lotta malarkey. All you's is on dope. I know druggies when I see 'em. Look at you. Couple of pill poppers, probably. Hop heads. What are you on? Uppers? Downers? Zinkers? Zonkers? Who the hell knows with you kids?"

"Dad—"

"You're all on something. I come home the other day find this one smoking some kinda pipe out here, eyes all funny. Your sister's no better. Little whore is what she is, out all night who knows where with who knows who. What am I suppose to do with you kids? When you gonna straighten up and fly right, that's what I want to know? When am I gonna look at you and think, 'That's my boy,' and be proud instead of thinking, 'That's the deviate kid who's made my life a living hell and'll probably wind up in jail or worse?'"

There wasn't much you could say in response to that, so Bicks and Cash and Big Mike just sat and said nothing. Mr. Skolski stood there scratching his belly and shaking his head. His grin was gone. He took another slug of beer, turned and walked out. Big Mike waited until he heard the door to the main house bang shut.

"Well, guys," said Big Mike, forcing a laugh, "that was my dad."

* * *

They were back in Cash's Torino, driving down Brookfern Avenue a few minutes later, when Cash slowed down. "There it is," he said, gesturing to a house on his left. "The place Big Mike drove into. Pretty sweet, eh?"

It looked like all the other lower-middle-class houses here, except for the ugly sheets of plywood plastered over the part where the front picture window used to be. There was plywood over part of the front entryway, too, and Bicks could see twin tire tracks where the car had careened across the grass and tore a hole through a row of rose bushes.

"Really did a number, didn't he?" Cash said and continued down the street.

"Gotta keep him off the Schnapps," Bicks said, and it made Cash chuckle. Bicks didn't even know what Schnapps tasted like and had no idea where that comment had come from, but he was pleased to have been able to make Cash laugh.

It was half past eleven, Bicks saw on the dashboard clock, and although he was well past peaking he still had a buzz on and couldn't stop thinking how weird and funny

and sad it was to be living in a garage and having your father say you were a fuck-up. To *think* it was one thing, normal even; but to say it out loud in front of your son's own friends, that was crossing over into downright meanness, wasn't it? Okay, so maybe Big Mike *had* screwed up pretty big by driving a stolen car into someone's living room. And the fact that the whole family—mother, father, two teenage girls—had been right there in the room watching 'Barnaby Jones' at the time, and could have all been killed, well, yeah, that made it worse. Big time major league fuck-up worse. But even so, you don't disown your own son, do you?

For a moment Bicks felt lucky his own father was dead. Relieved he wouldn't be around to get all pissed off and punish Bicks when he got caught doing the stuff he was doing. Glad dad was dead? How messed up was that? A stab of guilt came and went, replaced by the chilling notion that perhaps his father *could* see him; if there were an afterlife, his father might this very moment be watching him with extreme disapproval, frowning down at him from some purgatorial dimension, shaking his fist and spewing unkind epithets even harsher than the ones Big Mike's father had used.

The acid was making this vision a little too vivid and Bicks drove the thought from his head by watching the way the headlights raked across the trees when Cash swung the wheel at a bend in the road or turned onto a new street. The growl of the motor and the steady rasp of the car heater like the sounds of some demonic beast loping along in the dark, breathing in and out, hunting its prey. Bicks closed his eyes and let the images run past, surrendering to the last gasp of the drug churning away inside him.

What was worse? Having a father who was dead or one who thought you were a

fool? He wasn't sure, but he felt sorry for Big Mike having to sleep on that ratty purple couch with nothing but electric heaters to keep warm. Cash had said something about the upside of living like Big Mike was he could pretty much come and go as he pleased, sneak out any time of night to go see this girl who "gave him his goodies." From what Bicks had gathered from snippets of their conversation this girl was older, might even be married and lived in a trailer park somewhere off Highway 141.

He got home around midnight and lay awhile in bed, letting the last of the ride run through him. Feeling fine the next morning, and, relieved to realize he had survived his first acid trip, he ate the biggest breakfast his mother ever put before him.

"Well, aren't you the hungry one this morning," his mother said, pleased to see him gobbling up her fried eggs and bacon, patting his head with motherly affection as she poured him more OJ.

"Did you have fun with your friends last night?"

Bicks knew there was only one answer.

"Sure did. We went to the movies and then we went over to Tweezy's house and played Monopoly all night. I went broke pretty early, but Cash lent me two grand and that got me back in the game. He had hotels on Boardwalk and Park Place so he ended up winning, but I did alright."

"That Cash sure seems like a nice boy."

"Yeah," Bicks said, his mouth full of toast, "he is."

"I'm glad you have friends you like, honey."

"Me, too, Mom."

The orange juice tang, the buttery toast, that bacony goodness—it all tasted so fantastically fresh and wonderful. Bicks felt the textures on his tongue, the smooth feel of the spoon in his hand. Nothing was different yet everything had changed. He took another bite of buttered toast. It dented his pride to know he felt so little guilt about his mother thinking he was her goody-goody golden boy who did no wrong when he knew the truth was he was turning into a druggie liar almost as bad as Cash and the guys.

He had more OJ and another strip of bacon and soon the feeling passed.

Chapter 9

The party had been going on for hours when Bicks discovered he couldn't stand up. He was parked on a couch beside a brunette in a pink tanktop, holding a white ceramic hash pipe in his hand and watching the crush of kids stream past, their faces flashing in the strobe lights, and the only thought in his head was, *I can't move*. Someone had handed him the hash pipe—the girl? his friend Grady? He couldn't remember. He'd

automatically put it to his lips and taken a few hits, liking the resinous taste on his tongue and the oily tickle of smoke as it rose up his nose. Then, exhaling after his second or third toke, he had felt it in his lungs. A potent numbness that began in the center of his chest and slowly spread throughout his body, his limbs soon feeling as if they were filled with wet concrete. But his head was on another planet by then and he gave it little thought.

The hash had sent him into a “waste warp,” the name the guys had for the ultra-stoned zone you reached when you got so wasted you couldn’t feel your body anymore. This wasn’t a floating-above-it-all sensation. It was an otherworldly journey, a fall through the rabbit hole, a rollercoaster ride down into the depths of his psyche. With eyes closed, a kaleidoscopic collage of images screamed past him, ornate landscapes, explosions of color and light, elaborate patterns and designs whirling by. It was like watching the magic marker of his imagination drawing doodles, all of it glowing and pulsating with color and energy, alive with meaning. And people. He saw Cash, Sally, Sheryl, Tweezy and Big Mike, flipping by like face cards out of some disturbing Disney cartoon. Then the ominous Mr. Filer puffing that ever-present cigarette. Curls of smoke collected above him and darkened into storm clouds. Mr. Filer’s lips parted and, one by one, his teeth turned black and began to fall out, lightning struck his hair and set it on fire.

Bicks had seen enough.

He opened his eyes. Slowly, he returned to his body, retuning into things around him. How long had he been there? A minute? An hour? He couldn’t move, either. He was aware of the music again, some smokin’ hot blues by the Allman Brothers blasting from

speakers across the room, the crashing cymbals giving his ears a spanking. There were girls everywhere it seemed, some standing in groups, tapping the ashes off their cigarettes, chattering away like screeching birds, others sitting next to guys and making out. To his immediate left a kid with bad acne and a stringy blond moustache was sprawled out in a bean bag chair huffing on a bamboo bong, nodding up and down to the music.

Out through the sliding glass doors he saw longhairs standing on the deck, laughing, passing joints. A kid with a mullet had his arm around a chunky girl in a letter sweater. He kept trying to cup her breast with his hand and each time she removed it and just went on talking to a girl next to her. Behind them throbbed a violet sky.

Again he tried to move. An unseen centrifugal force had him pinned to the couch. It felt like being on that fairground ride where you stood with your back against the inside wall of a giant spinning wheel, and the faster it spun the harder it was to move. Then a flash of paranoia: was he paralyzed for real? Stuck here forever? *Whoa, relax, bro, take it easy.* Why was he feeling so totally gone? He'd only drunk two or three beers and—oh, yeah, now it came to him: he was tripping on mescaline. He'd forgotten all about that! His first time on mescaline—pink mescaline, it was, so Cash called it “getting pinked”—and slowly Bicks began to piece it all together.

He'd started in the late afternoon, drinking beers with Cash and the guys when they'd first arrived at the house, sitting on the back deck that gave them a panoramic view of the lake. A rickety wooden walkway jutted away from the house and down to a boat dock on the water. Through the tangle of bare trees Bicks could just make out a

white-bottomed skiff afloat there. The maple trees that rimmed the lake were just beginning to bud, and he spotted other cabin-style homes along the water's edge.

The house belonged to the parents of a chubby kid named Sweeney; Cash knew him because both their fathers were lawyers who played handball together each week or something. Bicks had been too busy being impressed by the seven-bedroom vacation home and helping himself to the beer Sweeney had on ice to hear much of how it was they had come to know each other. All Bicks cared was that he was here. He was at the place where the party of the year was going to be, and he was with the guys who were going to make it be great. There were going to be girls from six different high schools, Sweeney promised, all "primed for action." And with his parents out of town, he said, they could make as much noise as they wanted and let the party go on all night.

"Who knows," Sweeney had said, "we might all get laid."

"Yeah," said Degs, "seven bedrooms, no waiting."

This got Bicks excited. Sheryl had called to say she might make it to the party, if she could get off early from work, and all he'd been able to think about was getting her alone in one of the bedrooms.

"Well, boys," Cash had said, "I think it's time we expanded our horizons." This was Cash's code word for getting high – having your horizons expanded – so his saying this got a rise from the guys.

From a baggie, Cash had shaken out little pink pills into his palm and offered them to the guys. Degs, Tweezy, Big Mike, Grady and Sweeney all gobbled them down. Bicks hesitated, then swallowed his, too. Then, bowing in mock prayer, Cash had said, "Lord,

we beseech thee to give us a righteous drug experience.” Everyone had said, “Amen,” and then popped the pills and busted a gut laughing. An hour later, Bicks and Cash and the guys were down at the boat dock, glued to the blaze of the setting sun, Bicks swearing that pink dabs of sunlight dancing on water was the most riveting sight ever. Grady said he felt the top of his head coming off and the guys had laughed, but Grady said, “No, really, it’s like I can feel the sunshine hit my brain.” Tweezy said he felt it too and Degs said, “Impossible—you’re just saying it ‘cause he said it, you stupid druggie idiot.” But then Bicks said, “It’s not the actual heat of the sun, more like the pure energy of it,” and Big Mike and Cash both chimed in, saying they agreed, and Degs said, well, they might be right but he still didn’t feel it. A little while later, someone pushed Tweezy off the pier and into the water and when Degs went over to help pull him out, Tweezy gripped his hand and pulled Degs down in too and soon the two were out of control, thrashing about and trying to push each other under. Cash ordered them up out of the water and they had obeyed.

Once back at the house, Grady put the speakers out on the deck and blasted some Zeppelin while more joints were fired up. When kids began arriving, Sweeney put Bicks in charge of the barbecue, and flying on the mescaline, he took to it with a maniacal focus. He soaked a big bed of charcoals with lighter fluid, got a big-ass fire going and became a barbecuing machine, pumping out hot dogs with hyper systematic precision. It was while he was grilling that Sally MacKenzie herself had shown up and joined him at the BBQ, sweetly kissing him on the cheek and asking if he needed an official Grill Girl. Cash hadn’t seemed to mind so Bicks had said, “Yes, yes, of course, you’re my grill girl,

you're my grill girl," and together they had been the perfect team. Bicks worked the fire, fine-tuning his quarter-turn tongs technique, and Sally handled the dogs as they came off the grill, putting them in buns she had toasted just right and serving them to the stoned-hungry kids who crowded around. Struck by her beauty and unaware her boyfriend was just ten feet away, some guys made the usual crude comments that guys think are clever and might get them laid. Lame stuff like, "Nice buns," and "You really know how to handle a wiener," and "I'd like to serve *you* a sausage sometime."

When she offered a hotdog to one particularly cocky football jock, he gave her a suggestive look and said, "You look good with my meat in your hand." Sally had just handed him the hotdog, smiling, and after he started eating it, she said, "And I see you like putting them in your *mouth*." This brought laughs from his friends and a flash of anger from the jock. It seemed he might hit her. But all he did was give Bicks a sneering look that said, *Loser—I insult her right in front of you and you're too afraid to do anything about it*. Realizing that the jock thought Sally was *his* girl, Bicks had wanted to lash out in defense of her, or in defense of himself. Say something witty and withering of his own. But it was too late, the jock had turned his back on them and wandered off. Sally had tousled his hair and told him not to worry and soon after Cash had come up and asked how his girl was doing and she said, Fine, just fine, now why don't you kiss me? And Cash had kissed her long and hard, and she'd melted in his arms and moaned things Bicks wished he hadn't heard and he just kept on grilling the hotdogs until Cash pulled Sally away through the crowd and into the house, to find a bedroom no doubt. Or so Bicks had imagined at the time. And one by one, Grady and Big Mike and Tweezy, too,

had paired off with a girl, and Bicks had just stood there alone at the grill long after the last hotdog had been eaten, watching the fire fade out and feeling painfully alone.

Now, still anchored to the couch, a great spinning emptiness opened up inside him. The jock had made him feel small and insignificant, and the high times with Sally were long gone, their fleeting fun now just a grim reminder that he'd never get a girl like her. Never in a bazillion years. Sure she liked him, but only "as a friend." He hated when girls said that. And Sheryl—where was she? Had that chubby little tramp rejected him too? Or maybe she *was* at the party but had found someone else to be with. That was more his speed. Bicks felt like he was about to be swallowed up in some great yawning abyss and he desperately wanted to leave. But first he'd have to stand up.

He set down the hash pipe on the arm of the sofa to his left, put his hands on his knees and pushed his way up to a standing position. He swayed there a moment, the air pressing in around him as if it were a solid mass of some kind, like an invisible block of Jell-O. He felt lightheaded. His skull pounded. Some freckled guy with corkscrew hair and a tie-dyed shirt shoved a plastic cup of beer in his hand and he took it and drank some and began to inch his way forward through the crowd of grinning idiots. Who were all these happy smiling stupid people? Certainly no friends of his. He hated them all. A girl bumped her breast into his hand and the beer went spilling down the back of the legs of another girl right in front of him. She gave him a dirty look, as did the guy she was talking to, but Bicks pushed on past them, getting claustrophobic and wanting some air.

The place was packed; there had to be two, three hundred kids here, easy, he thought, and more still pouring in the front door. If he could just make it to the kitchen.

Kids were pressed so tightly together, he could barely squeeze through and he was having trouble breathing. Worse, he spied the jock just a few yards ahead with his big jock arms draped over the shoulders of not one but two worshipful girls. *Fuck*. Bicks plunged ahead anyway, threading his way through the mad crush, trying to go behind the jock without being seen. But the tide of bodies shifted and Bicks was thrown right into the jock and his two admirers. Bicks caught a flashing glare from the jock – Steve; his name was Steve -- and managed to mumble a “Sorry.” And then, as he pushed his way past them, he heard the jock derisively mutter, “Little fag.” The words hurt, but on he went, choking down the humiliation.

Reaching the kitchen at last, he grabbed a beer from the table and passed a preppie kid bent double puking into a trash can. The kid’s pals were laughing at him, betting he couldn’t do it again. The preppie put his head in the trash can and forced himself to throw up again, coming up smiling, his lips dripping vomit. The preppie kid put out his palm in a “pay me” gesture, and his pals reached into their pockets for cash. Bicks turned his attention to a group of nice-looking girls lined up at the counter, doing tequila shots,.

He tried making conversation with two of the tequila girls, but they gave him the brush and that brought him even lower. He thought of leaving the party, but he’d driven there with Cash and didn’t have a ride.

And then Menke emerged from the crowd, the last person he had expected to see here.

“Hey,” Menke said.

“Hey, Menk,” said Bicks. “What are *you* doing here?”

Menke gave him a look. “What? I’m not cool enough to be here?”

“Sorry, that’s not what I meant, Menk, I just—”

“It’s exactly what you meant. You think you’re hot shit, you and your new friends.”

Bicks saw the hurt in Menke’s eyes and something sunk inside him. It was true.

“You’re right, Menk,” said Bicks. “I was a dick, I’m sorry. The hash and the mescaline—I’m pretty wasted.”

At the mention of mescaline, Menke softened, wanting to know how it felt. Bicks said “getting pinked” had been fun at first, but now he wasn’t so sure. He felt as if needles were pricking his skin, his stomach was in knots, and carrying on a simple conversation wasn’t easy. Then a pretty thing in pigtails came up and said “hi” to Menke, a girl from his after-school chess club, it turned out, and soon he and she walked off together, leaving Bicks alone again, hating the party and everyone at it.

He looked down into the glue-sniffer’s glazed unfocused eyes, and saw that the guy now was babbling to himself, uttering nonsense words that sounded like some Bulgarian nursery rhyme, and Bicks had the sudden scary thought that this was how *he* would end up if he wasn’t careful, a pathetic burnout one step from the gutter. Menke had been right; he’d so badly wanted to feel better about himself he had put himself above Ol’ Four Eyes on the Highschool Food Chain. And then, from the hallway off the kitchen behind him, he heard the familiar voice of Degs calling for him above the music.

“Bicks! Bicksie boy!”

Relieved to be reuniting with a friend, he robot-walked down to the end of the dark hallway. A small group of guys stood in a line outside a closed door. Degs and Big Mike were at the front of the line, guarding the door like club bouncers, their eyes lit with excitement.

“Bicksie!” said Degs. “This is your chance!”

“Huh?”

“Your chance to get laid!”

Big Mike said, “This chick in there – she’s pulling a train!”

It still didn’t register. “What?” Bicks said.

“A *train*, man!” said the first guy in line. “She’s done two guys already. She’s on her third now and I’m next.” It was Mullet Boy, the kid he’d seen out on the deck.

Big Mike put a whiskey bottle to his lips and sucked down the last of it. “Yeah, he’s got her totally naked and she’s loving it, moaning, ‘More, more.’” He chuckled, wiping his mouth with his sleeve. “She’s some kind of nympho or something.”

“I like nymphos,” said the next guy in line with a big donkeylike grin.

“Yeah, the world needs more nymphos,” said Mullet Boy.

Then Degs said, “She said she wants to do everyone at the party, you believe that? I heard her say it, I did.”

“Who is she?” Bicks asked.

“Who cares? As long as she shares,” said the grinning donkey kid.

Degs grabbed Bicks and pulled him to the door. “Check it out.” He cracked open the door and pushed Bicks’ head inside. Bicks was too zonked to see much. He heard

sounds. Then the dimmest of light from a window showed two bodies thrashing around on a bed in the corner, their heads hidden in shadow. The one on the bottom was naked, or she mostly was, and he could see the bare ass of the boy on top of her grinding away between her fatty bare thighs. The boy gave out a low grunting sound, and from the girl there came an aching moan. The sound a very hungry girl might make if she were being fed a delicious piece of cake. The raw heat of her cries, the open animal lust—Bicks was overtaken by it and went reeling forward, trying to push his way into the room. Degs yanked him back into the hall and shut the door.

“Whoa, whoa, big boy, wait your turn, wait your turn.”

“Yeah, I’m before you,” said donkey boy.

“We were here first,” said Mullet Boy, “back of the line, buddy.”

Mullet Boy gave Bicks a hard shove and Bicks stumbled back against the opposite wall. Big Mike stepped in and shoved his forearm against the Mullet Boy’s neck, pinning him back to the wall. Mullet Boy started choking. In a thick, threatening voice, Big Mike said, “I decide who’s next, fuck face. *Got* that?” The kid quickly nodded, gurgling words that sounded like, “I got it, I got it.”

“If I want my boy Booksie to be next, he’s next, okay?”

Mullet Boy gave out a squeak. Big Mike released him with a shove, then grabbed Bicks and made him first in line. The sullen looks from Mullet Boy and the others in line made Bicks uneasy about butting up. But then through the door he heard the girl’s rising cries, and it made him excited. It made him want her. It made him want to do things. The

door flew open and out came a guy zipping up his pants and Degs pushed Bicks inside and shut the door behind him.

Bicks stood swaying in the center of the small room, waiting for his eyes to adjust to the dark. The muted thump of the music outside the walls had the feel of blood pumping, and for a moment it seemed he was inside the chamber of his very own heart. The faint smell of liquor and lipstick hung in the air. He moved toward the quivering shape on the bed, and heard her before he could see her.

“I’m drunk, wha’s yer ‘scuse,” came the slurred voice.

Bicks said nothing, too dizzy to respond. *I’m pretty wasted too*, he said. Or had he only thought it? He couldn’t tell. He needed time to think. *Think? Don’t think, man—just jump on her! You know you want it!* And then, from somewhere else, a rush of shame and panic swept over him. Is this how he was going to finally get his kicks? By balling some drunk girl? Was this really the right thing to do? For a moment he fought the urge to flee.

“Well c’mon lessgo, guy. Tayoff your pans and lessfuck.”

The hard challenge in the girl’s voice took him by surprise. He came forward and sat on the edge of the bed just beside her knee, the nearness of her making his heart pound. “My name’s Tom,” he said, taking his eyes from the floor and turning to her. The girl sat up on her elbows and her face became dimly visible. Her eyes were glassy and swollen, and the dark circles of tear-smearred mascara around her eyes gave her the look of a mad raccoon. One strap of her tank-top had slid off her shoulder and she didn’t bother to pull it back up. Bicks looked away. A pair of jeans and panties lay twisted on the floor.

“Whass wrong? Dontja like me?” she asked.

“Sure, sure,” he said, “I like you fine, but...” He lay his hand on her thigh just above the knee. She was cold to the touch, and the soft tiny hairs on her leg rose up as he gently stroked her skin. “I don’t even know your name.”

“This yer luggy night,” she said, and with jarring suddenness she grabbed him around the neck and pulled him down on top of her, her whiskeyed breath harsh in his face. He could feel her breasts pressing against his chest, her hips grinding against him. Then her mouth was on his, her tongue like a mad snake as it squirmed and darted with urgent desire, and for a moment his own desires rose to meet hers. *In*. He wanted *in*. He thought he should pull down his pants but he couldn’t find his hands. He was mashed against her and having trouble breathing. With his nose mashed against her cheek, all he could see were her mad tear-soaked eyes, and they scared him. There was nothing womanly there, just the blind stare of a barely conscious beast, a beast that had been whipped and ridden into submission, and now its one impulse was to stay in a drugged stupor so as not to feel its own pain. Her desperate hunger for more intercourse its own kind of drug, he sensed, a way to be dead without dying, to stop feeling anything. But weren’t you *supposed* to have feelings during sex? Nice, warm, intimate feelings? It wasn’t supposed to be this way, going at it like two wild animals.

His insides went cold. He pulled himself free of her and got to his feet, the room spinning, his heart knocking in his chest.

“Whassa matter? You don’ wan’ me?” She sat up on her knees in the bed, trying to keep her head from slumping to her chest but failing. “Whass wrong? Arn’ I pretty

enough for you? Arn' I nice 'nough? You Catholic boys're all same – think you're better'n everyone else.”

Bicks' ears were hot, his fingers numb. He felt a great weight pressing down on him. He tried to tell her he didn't think he was better than anyone else. Not really. Then, flashing on Menke's owl-like face, he realized he probably thought he was better than a lot of people, even her, if he was really honest, and this made him feel worse.

“I'm a good girl,” she slurred. “I am. I juswanna be wanted, ya know . . . so I gave 'em all a good fuck's what I did . . . spread 'em an' let 'em have me . . . all 'cept you -- you th'only one di'n't want me...”

And then he watched her puke. Right in mid-sentence, she bent to her left over the side of the bed and blew chunks into a little pink trash can and all down the side of the bedspread. It was pathetic, the sight of her barfing, the smell of it, and Bicks looked away, moving his eyes to the window. Strange how watching the girl vomit felt more intimate, more a violation of her privacy, than the almost-sex he'd just had with her.

She stopped spitting. Now what was he supposed to do? He stood there, tottering in confusion, thinking it time to leave, when he became dimly aware of something new on the periphery of his consciousness. A shift in energy. Somehow, everything had changed but he couldn't tell what it was. The music, that's what. The music had stopped. He heard voices, loud ones. And then the door flew open.

“Bicks! Hey! The cops are here! C'mon!” It was Big Mike telling him this, the note of fear in his voice a sound Bicks had never heard in him before. It took a moment to register. Cops *here*? Now? Oh, shit. He stumbled to the door and cracked it open. Degs

and Big Mike were gone. A stream of kids were running back and forth in the hallway, girls screaming, looking frightened. And down at the end of the hall, in the kitchen, he glimpsed two figures in blue, men in uniform waving flashlights, and more streaming in behind them.

Bicks turned around to see the girl was already halfway out the window. She was in her jeans again, and had one leg over the window ledge and was stuck trying to hold up the bottom part of the sliding window. He came to her, holding up the window while she climbed through, the cold air in his face helping to clear his head enough for him to climb through too, fear racing through him.

He fell into the brush beside the house, felt pine needles sticking his palms and parts of his face. The girl crawled ahead of him, drunkenly moaning, “I can’t get arrested, I just can’t.” He shushed her, telling her to stop and wait. She was crawling toward an open area and he knew it was safer to stay behind the tall shrubs. He reached her and put his arm around her and gently coaxed her back behind a row of bushes. He put a finger to her lips, and tipped up her chin to look her right in the eyes.

“Stay with me, and be quiet,” he said. “I’ll take care of you.”

But smashed and panic-stricken, the girl couldn’t stop talking. Bicks had to shake her by the arms. “Be quiet—you’ll be all right,” he said. Flashing police lights from in front of the house were turning the tops of the maple trees above him an eerie red and blue. From the deck just above and to the right of them, there were shrieks from girls crying out for their boyfriends, loud male voices ordering people out of the house. Kids came crashing through the trees to his left and went off in the other direction, two cops

with flashlights following moments later, trying to run them down. More kids ran by, disappearing into the night. He heard the static of a police radio.

“Whass your plan?” the drunk girl asked. Plan? He had no plan. His only plan was to not get caught. The girl was shivering and so he took off his jacket and had her wear it, and then she began to hiccup, issuing short little coughs like a cat choking on a hairball.

He shushed her again, a rush of panic taking hold of him. Any second he feared they’d be caught.

A voice came to him from the dark about a dozen yards away to his right.

“Bicks! Over here!”

Bicks was surprised to see it was Sally, frantically motioning to him from the shadowed darkness underneath the deck. For a moment he considered abandoning the drunk girl, just leaving her to fend for herself. But he quickly thought better of it. Someone needed to be nice to her tonight, someone owed her that. And that someone would have to be him, even if helping her got him arrested. It took a little doing but soon he had the girl by the arm and was pulling her forward through the piney boughs. They reached the space under the deck and he let the girl scramble underneath first and then he went in after her.

“Isn’t this fun,” said Sally in a hushed voice, “our first police raid.”

“Where’s Cash?” Bicks said.

“I don’t know. I think he may have punched a cop.”

“Wha’ we do?” muttered the drunk girl. “I don’t wanna get ‘rrested.”

“We’re gonna get out of here, don’t you worry,” Sally said, and then, putting her hand on the girl’s arm, she said, “My name’s Sally.”

“I’m Joanie,” said the girl a little too loudly, and then she hiccupped, and said, “Always get hiccups when I drink.” She hiccupped again.

Sally whispered for the girl – Joanie – to keep her voice down and she told her not to worry, that we’d all get home if she could just keep quiet.

Joanie, in a slightly lower voice, said, “Wha’ we gonna do? How’m I gonna get home? Mom’ll kill me she fines out what I did.” She stifled another hiccup.

“So what *are* we gonna do, Bicks?” Sally asked him.

“We could hide here and hope no one finds us.” But as soon as he’d said it he knew it was no good, and his mind reeled about how he was going to get these two girls out of this spot and home safe with no car and no money.

Then Sally said, “We’re having an adventure, me and you.” She gave his arm a playful squeeze and with her lips so close to his, he felt the urge to lean over and kiss her. Joanie hiccupped again.

There were voices now above them on the deck, the crackle of a police radio.

“Fan out into the woods.... I want to find as many of these damn kids as we can...” Even as high as he was, Bicks knew what that meant. More cops combing the woods; soon they’d be found for sure. He caught a scared rabbit look from Joanie. Sally too was looking to him to make some kind of decision.

“I say we take our chances and make a run for it,” Sally said.

“No,” Bicks said. “The boat. They can’t follow us in that.” As crazy as it sounded, both girls agreed to it, much to his surprise, and once he’d made sure no police were watching from the deck and there were no flashlights coming through the trees, they made a run for it, Bicks taking the drunk girl’s hand and Sally running on her own. The drunk girl was surprisingly nimble, Bicks thought, as they hurried across the uneven ground, having to jump an old tree stump here and there, and duck under tree limbs. Soon after emerging from the trees, they hit the planks of the pier and ran to the skiff.

But as they reached the boat, lights from behind them scraped the water’s edge. Voices hollered “Stop!” and Bicks said they had to hurry. He sat Joanie down in front, then steadied the boat for Sally to step aboard. With Sally seated safe beside Joanie in the bow, Bicks pushed off and sat across from them, quickly taking up the oars and starting to row away. It was hard going at first but soon he got the hang of it and began to put some distance between the skiff and the pier, putting all he had into his paddlework.

Voices carried on the water. With his back to shore, he heard the cries of the policeman in the woods behind him. Twice dim flashlight beams swept over him, brightening the girls’ faces, and their scared looks made him row faster.

All went dark and quiet around them, but Bicks kept at the oars, staring at a silver shimmer on the water just beyond the girls’ heads as he rowed, not realizing until he stopped to rest far out in the middle of the lake that this was the light of the moon. A ghostly, fog-shrouded three-quarter moon shining its beacon light, casting its creepy spell, just like in some werewolf movie. Wisps of gray fog now hung over the water,

Bicks shivering from the cold. Joanie was passed out asleep, her head in Sally's lap.

Sally met his eyes with a smile.

"You saved us, Bicks."

Too out of breath to speak, Bicks managed a lopsided grin.

"So who's the girl?"

Bicks shrugged. He didn't want to say too much. When she woke up in the morning, Joanie probably would want as few people to know as possible.

"We messed around a little, I guess," he said. "Right before the cops came."

"Uh huh," Sally said with a knowing smile, as if his reputed sexual prowess was so legendary, no girl could resist him, not even Sally. It excited him to see her like this even though he knew it was an act. What would she think if he blurted out the truth? That he'd been part of a full-blown gang bang. That the poor girl had been drugged—with Quaaludes, most likely—then balled by four different guys, one right after the other. That they'd waited in *line*, for god's sakes—as if she were nothing more than a carnival attraction—and that Bicks would have been next had he not chickened out or grown a conscience. He still wasn't sure which it was.

They sat in the boat, listening to the distant night sounds coming over the water. The *plash-plash* of fish surfacing to feed on night flies. The faint yip of a barking dog from one of the lakeside homes. The dull drone of an airplane overhead. Bicks lifted his eyes, hoping to see the plane, but the night sky was grayed-over with clouds and not a star could be seen. They were all alone.

“This is kind of romantic,” Sally said. “You and me all alone in the middle of the lake at midnight. Under an umbrella of stars.”

“No stars tonight,” Bicks said. “Too cloudy.”

“Bicks,” she chided, “you’re ruining it.”

“And we’re not really alone. Got her to deal with.”

“And what *is* her deal, anyway? With you, I mean.”

“I told you, I just met her. Never knew her name ‘til you asked her. She got really drunk and . . . and I thought somebody ought to help her.”

“So . . . you have no interest in her at all?”

“Not really.”

“I’m cold,” said Sally, rubbing her arms.

Bicks said, “I’d give you my jacket, but . . .” He nodded at the sleeping Joanie.

Sally smirked a smile. “Well, aren’t you the gallant one.”

“Real gallant. Giving my coat to a total blitzoid who won’t remember a thing.”

“Not all guys would’ve done that,” she said.

“Just those wanting to get laid.”

This brought another crooked smile from her. She slid out from underneath Joanie, carefully laying the girl’s head down on the wooden seat. Then she came and sat beside Bicks on the center seat, taking his right arm and wrapping it around her waist in a move to keep warm. Her sudden closeness thrilled him. The touch of her warm bare skin, the familiarity of her fingers as they dug into his side, the faint lemony scent of her perfume—Bicks shut his eyes to block it all out. What was he thinking? Breathe, breathe.

The warmth of her body began to spread through his, the panic subsiding. There was a long moment of silence, the two holding each other, waiting for the other to speak.

Sally said, "It's nice, having someone to hold onto."

"Yeah."

The moon shone cold and hungry. More sounds came over the water. The tinkle of music. The rumble of a car motor. Bicks thinking how weird it was to be alone with a girl as beautiful as Sally, their bodies intimately touching, so soon after his decidedly less romantic encounter with Joanie. Who knew life was so full of surprises? He looked at Joanie asleep in the bow, her moon-silvered hair making her appear angelic, like some sainted Madonna in repose, a far different girl from the one he'd seen before. He knew he should pick up the oars and start to row again, that they were only halfway across the lake. But he didn't want the moment with Sally to end, and so did nothing.

She laid her head on his shoulder, her soft hair tickling his ear.

She said, "Do you ever wonder why people fall in love? I mean, what makes you attracted to one person and not to another?"

"Some kind of chemistry, I guess. That's what the books say."

"And what makes us stop loving? You know. Fall *out* of love."

"I don't know," said Bicks, groping for an answer. "People grow apart. Or you find out they're not the person you thought they were."

"Or," Sally said, exhaling a sigh, "you meet someone else."

Bicks' throat tightened. Did she mean Filer? What was she telling him? Bicks's head was spinning.

She lifted her head from his shoulder and looked up at the moon.

“I mean how do you know when love is right, Bicks? When you’re with the right person?”

Bicks had no idea what to say to this so he just said the first thing that came to his mind. The truth. “I wouldn’t know, I’ve never really had a girl friend.”

This turned her head. “Never had a *girl* friend?”

“No. I mean, not like a real one, with dates and proms and stuff.”

Her lips parted in surprise and a sly look came over her. “So you never . . . ? Oh, you poor thing. . . .” Her hand came up to rest on his shoulder and she drew her finger along his cheek, the tip of her tongue wetting her lips.

The kiss came quickly, her lips like velvet on his cheek. He froze, unsure of what to do. Again, her lips brushed his cheek. He moved into her, putting his mouth on hers, and she kissed back. A tender melting kiss, somewhere between innocence and passion. Electrified, Bicks pressed forward, but she backed away, gently putting a finger to his lips—and as fast as it had started, it was over.

They sat beside one another in silence, as if they hadn’t touched at all, Sally sitting on her hands, looking up at the misted-over moon, Bicks desperate to find something to say that didn’t sound too dorky.

Sally said, “You’ll get a girl friend someday, I know you will, Bicks.” She pressed out the pleats of her dress. “You’re too nice a guy not to.”

Bicks took up the oars then, and began to row, happy to have something to do with his hands. On the inside, he was screaming, *I kissed Sally MacKenzie! I kissed Sally*

MacKenzie! But on the outside, he was calm and in control, focusing only on the job at hand, trying now to get them to shore as soon as possible and figure out a way to get home. He wanted away from them, away from the whole messy business. Here he was out in a boat with Cash's girl friend—making *out* with her, for shit sakes—and what was Cash going to say when he found out? Would she tell him? He sure hoped not. God, how did he get into this mess? It was true what Grady said. Girls were nothing but trouble. Even the moon, it seemed, was laughing at him.

He bent into his work, his head clearing in the cold night air, a sour muddy smell from the lake filling his nose. The oar blades bit the water, thrusting the boat forward with strong, even strokes. Joanie awoke and looked around. Disoriented and far from sober, she sat up and rubbed her eyes, trying to get a grip on where she was. “Whass goin’ on?” she sputtered, and scared by the surrounding darkness, she abruptly – and stupidly -- tried to stand up. But the oar-thrust made her lose her balance and she collapsed against the bow, almost falling into the water. The boat shook. Bicks scrambled to his feet to help her and, joined by Sally, the boat wobbling back and forth, they managed to keep her in the boat and seat her back down safely in the bow. But when Bicks turned and sat back in the center seat and tried to take up the oars again, he was startled to find he had only one oar in its oarlock. The other oar had fallen into the water. Great.

“Oh, heck,” said Bicks. “We lost one of the oars.”

“You *what?* Bicks!”

“Hey, I didn’t do it on purpose! It must have fell in while we were helping her.”

“But Bicks!” Sally barked. “Now we’re gonna be out here, like, forever!” And shooting Bicks a laser look she plopped down beside Joanie in the bow of the boat and set to work calming the drunk girl.

“I’ll handle it, okay?” Bicks said somewhat lamely.

Bicks sat down again in the rower’s position and did the only thing he could. He began rowing with one oar. He dug it first in the water to port, then to starboard, then to port, then back and forth and back and forth, the boat rocking from left to right, each painful pull of the oar pushing them a little bit closer to the tiny blue light on a boat dock on the far shore. With the chill penetrating his skin and the drunk girl going on about how coming home so late was going to make her mother mad—“mad as Godzilla on malt liquor”—Bicks had the feeling it was going to be a very long night.

By the time they reached the main road it was well after two in the morning, and Bicks was too weary for words. After reaching the shore and ditching the boat, they had scrambled up a hillside past several dark silent homes. They had soon hit the asphalt road that wound its way around the lake and now they were walking along it, Bicks slightly ahead of the two girls, hoping to find a telephone booth somewhere. Sally said she could call a friend that she knew had a car and would probably come and pick them up, even this late at night. She couldn’t call her parents, none of them could. And she couldn’t call Cash; he was probably in jail. Since none of them had cars of their own, it was either call a friend or hitchhike, and Bicks knew that hitching at this late hour with two underage girls was not the safest idea. He’d heard stories. Rapes, disappearances. People held

captive and forced to do unspeakable things. But having to listen to Joanie's nonstop babbling was making him crazy and he found himself starting to wish that if she somehow got separated from them, or was to get abducted by a pervert, it wouldn't be such a bad thing. It struck him strange that the same girl he'd been so hot for just hours before was so unspeakably loathsome to him now. The very sound of her voice made him sick, and the farther down the Lake Road they went, the more he wished some drunk driver would come roaring by and mow her down. He knew it was wrong to think this way, but he was so worn out by the oaring and the drink and the drugs and the flight from the cops, his exhaustion made him incapable of feeling. He just wanted to lie down and go to sleep.

Earlier, while passing through the yard of an empty-looking A-frame, Sally had raised the idea of breaking in and spending the night right there. Get a good night sleep, then get a ride home in the morning. At first Bicks had liked the idea, something in the way she had said it making him think she'd be interested in taking their kiss further. But, no, he had insisted, let's keep walking. With all the cops around tonight breaking and entering probably wasn't such a good idea. And so they had made it to the main road and begun to walk, Bicks knowing that eventually they would reach the main highway where he knew they'd find a gas station that would have a phone booth.

Rounding a bend, they spotted a gas station. An old one-pump Sinclair station with a tow truck parked out front. The light in the sign was out but a small light was on in the office, and Sally was the first to see the phone booth on the far side of the building near a mound of used tires. She squealed and ran into the spill of light from a flickering

overhead lamp. She lifted the receiver, was about to put in a dime, then stopped. She turned to Bicks. “Bicks, the friend I’m going to call is actually someone you know. But it’s not someone that Cash knows I know.”

“Okay,” said Bicks, not getting what she meant, but not really caring.

“So you just have to trust me.”

“I trust you.”

“I mean you have to keep this a secret. From Cash and everyone we know.”

Another secret? Damn. This was getting way harder than he thought it should be.

“Sure, whatever, just make the call, okay?”

“I mean it. A *secret*.”

Bicks nodded, sat down on the tires and watched as Sally shut herself in the booth, turned her back, put in the dime and dialed. She waited, tapping her fingernails on the black metal phone box. The phone seemed to ring for the longest time, her “friend” either being out or not up for answering this late at night, and Bicks began to think of what to do next. Maybe they’d have to break into one of the empty homes and spend the night there after all. And maybe it wouldn’t be a bad idea, maybe this was how it was supposed to happen. It was all starting to feel preordained, as if fate had decreed that something was supposed to happen between he and Sally, the crazy idea for that one split second seeming like the most natural thing in the world, until Sally began speaking to someone on the other end and Bicks’ balloon popped. With the door shut behind her Bicks couldn’t hear much of what she was saying but from her body language he could tell she was speaking to a man. Her voice rose and he heard her say, “Please? There’s really no

one else I can call. You're the only friend who can help me." There was a pause, and then, "Just my friend Bicks and another girl. Yes, Bicks. He's totally cool, don't worry. I'll talk to him, there's nothing to worry about." A moment later Sally drew open the door.

"Bicks, he needs directions. Where exactly are we?"

"Tell him to take 141 west to Junction 29, then south to the Old Lake Road and bear right. We're at a Sinclair station." She repeated it back to him until she had it right, and then went back in the booth to tell her friend, only this time she forgot to close the door behind her. After relaying the directions, her voice got all cutesy and she said, "Thanks, honey. You *know* how much I appreciate you doing this, and I'm sure I'll think of some way to repay you. . . uh-huh. . . Okay, see you soon." She ended the call and came out of the booth. She gave Bicks what he could only read as a guilty look, then she too sat on the tires. Joanie had again curled up and fallen asleep in the grass nearby, and for awhile he and Sally didn't speak.

Then Sally said, "This person picking us up—my friend—like I told you, he's someone you know. Someone you'll be surprised that *I* know. So all I ask is that you don't ask any questions. Don't ask me how I know him or why we're friends. Just know that that's all we are. Friends. There's nothing going on between us, okay?"

Bicks said, "I won't rat."

She thanked him and said, "You're the best, Bicks. I'm lucky to have *you* as a friend." She bent over and kissed his cheek, just as tenderly as she had before on the boat, and it was all Bicks could do not to push her away and shout, "What is *wrong* with you?"

But Bicks said nothing. He lay his head against a tire and closed his eyes, thinking about how crazy the boy-girl thing could be.

He opened his eyes to a blinding glare. The headlights of a car, what looked to be a blue Chevy Impala, parked with its engine idling. He was here. Sally had the rear door open on the driver's side, and was putting Joanie into the back seat, telling her to "hop on in." Then Sally jumped in and sat right behind the driver. "C'mon, Bicks!" she called from inside, "our ride's here!" With both girls in back, he got to his feet and walked around to the open passenger seat in front. He got in, and shut the door.

"Bicks," Filer said, giving Bicks a brief appraising look.

"Mr. Filer," Bicks said, "thanks for coming to pick us up like this. Real nice of you."

"Happy to do it, happy to do it. Under the circumstances." He backed out onto the main road, shifted into drive and gave it the gas, tearing off into the night, a something of anger beneath his smile permeating the car. The car smelled heavily of tobacco, and its pungent scent reminded Bicks he'd been in this same seat before. That he was once again in enemy territory, the very act of entering the car a kind of betrayal, to Mr. Filer and to himself, in a way. He sat stiffly, aware of his hands and not knowing what to do with them. Not wanting to face Mr. Filer, he fixed his gaze on the car radio, but the aluminum knobs triggered a memory of that skunky night not so long ago and he looked away, deciding to keep his eyes on the dark road ahead.

They drove for awhile in silence, Bicks happy to have the breeze in his face.

“Well, kiddies,” said Filer, “anyone want to explain how we got ourselves into this mess?”

Sally spoke up, all nice and polite, talking to Mr. Filer as if she had just met the man. But it didn't fool Bicks. Her very first words betrayed what he'd already known: that she and Filer were far more than “just friends.” She said they'd gone to a party and gotten stranded in the middle of the lake without oars, leaving out the part about the police, of course, trying to put the evening in the best possible light. She innocently explained that by the time they had made it back to shore it was so late everyone at the party had left and they had no one to give them a ride.

“Sounds like some party,” said Mr. Filer, glancing in the rear view mirror.

“Fuckin' A,” Joanie blurted out, taking the bait. “Hundreds of people, everyone ripped. These football players had me downing Southern Comforts, must'a had seven, eight of those suckers, tasted so sweet. Pills too, I think, can't really remember, they were all over me—”

Sally tried to cut her off. “Joanie, really now—”

“Guy with a crewcut jamming 'em in my mouth, saying, ‘It's just like candy, baby, take your medicine, it's good for you, it's good for you,’ and then it was like the ceiling was spinning and I was on another planet. Gonzo Zonko Land or something. Goodtime Joanie. That's what they started calling me. So, yeah, it was some party—”

Again Sally tried to talk over her, to stop her from saying anything more damaging, she and Bicks both fearing Mr. Filer finding out any more than he needed to, asking questions. But it was no use; now that she was awake again and feeling the need to blow

off steam, there was nothing stopping her. And to Bicks' relief, Mr. Filer seemed more amused than concerned. The more she talked, the more Filer would chuckle and egg her on to tell more. Then he'd shoot Bicks a wink, as if to say, *Boy, some talker, ain't she?*

"The party was a little wild," said Sally now, downplaying Joanie's story, "but not *that* out of control. There's always a few bad apples, right? The jockoids, especially. Fanatucci and that crowd. But mostly we behaved ourselves, kids doing a little drinking and dancing, needing to make a little noise, cut loose."

"A little doobing up, too, I bet," Mr. Filer said, glancing at Bicks.

"Well, yeah," Bicks said, compelled to answer, "there was some of that."

Then Mr. Filer eyed Sally in the mirror and, in a voice loaded with innuendo, said, "And what about *you*, Miss MacKenzie? Did you 'cut loose?'"

"Oh, you know me, Mr. Filer," Sally said with a submissive giggle, trying to shrug off the probing question. *He does know you*, Bicks thought. "I'm no Sister Mary Sunshine. I like fun as much as the next girl, but there's a difference between 'cutting loose' and 'being loose.' If you know what I mean."

"I do indeed," Mr. Filer said, and Bicks, noticing the sly grin he flashed in the mirror, got a cold feeling in his gut again.

"Talk about loose," Joanie said without being asked. "I set the fucking record tonight, I tell you. My mother'd kill me she knew what happened, those guys had six pairs of hands, I swear—oh!" The abrupt gasp the result of a sharp dig in the ribs from Sally, Bicks guessed, but the ploy worked and for a long time no one spoke as the car flew down the highway. Mr. Filer brought up the subject of who lived where, and after a

brief discussion, it was determined that Joanie would be dropped off first, Sally second and Bicks last. But as Filer made a turn and neared her neighborhood, Joanie started up again.

“Now I’m thinking,” said Joanie, “I’m not sure you should drop me at house at all. Maybe I oughta sleep over my friend’s house, at Tina’s, because my mom, when she sees me at the door—if she even *opens* the door—she’s gonna gimme that face and say, ‘I don’t let whores in this house,’ that’s what she’s gonna say. Calling me ‘little hussy’ or ‘tramp’ or ‘slut’ or ‘jezebel’—she called me that once, believe that? ‘Well, look what just crawled in,’ she said, ‘if it ain’t our li’l jezebel.’ And I said—”

“Uh, Joanie—”

“I said, ‘I’m your daughter, that’s who I am, let me in.’ And she said, ‘No daughter of mine goes jezebeling around, coming home at one a.m. with liquor on her breath and her dress undone! Anyone can see you been giving out your goodies and that makes you a hussy?’ That’s what she said to me, I’m out on the porch shivering, wishing she’d shut up and let me in so I can go to sleep—”

“So where should I drop you?” Filer cut in.

“Grounded for a whole month, that time. ‘Cept I snuck out a few times to go over to Jimmy Turlock’s to doob up and stuff. What *is* a jezebel, anyway? I told her, ‘You can take that jezebel crap and shove it up your ass, lady,’ and she goes and slaps me. I get her fingernail in my eye, it gets swole up and next day she’s all concerned, wanting to play nursemaid and put ice on it and shit and I tell her, ‘Don’t touch me.’ She says, ‘You ungrateful little bitch,’ and slaps me again and my sister had to come in and break it up.”

Filer came to a sudden stop at the curb. He put the car in park and issued an irritated sigh, staring out the front windshield for a very long and uncomfortable moment.

“What’d I say?” said Joanie.

Filer turned around in his seat and, in a tone approaching grave, said, “Look, kids, I’m too fucking tired to drive all over hell and back to take you who knows where. So here’s what’s going to happen. I’m dropping you at your house, not your friend’s, then I’m taking Sally home, and then you, Bicks. And I don’t want anyone to talk and I don’t want anyone ever speaking of this night again. To me or to anyone else. Is that clear?”

“Yes, sir,” Sally said.

“Good.” Filer put the car in gear again and lurched away.

Minutes later, when Joanie pointed out which house was hers, Filer was careful not to stop right in front. He stopped a couple houses past hers, let her out, said goodnight and then sped away, not even watching whether she got in okay or not. After a block or so, Filer said, “Poor girl’s got some stuff to figure out, doesn’t she?”

There was more small talk as they drove, Filer joking about the poor performance of the school basketball team and whether Father Tinker’s ear hair was longer than Father Barnes’ moustache, and next Bicks knew Filer was turning into the entrance to Cherry Lane Estates, his headlights brushing past the gated driveways, stately elms and grand Tudor homes you’d see in magazines. Moments later Filer slowed to a stop in front of a sleek driveway that lead up to a house set so far back from the road Bicks couldn’t even see it. A nearby street lamp shone onto the spot where the sweeping lawn met the road.

“Well, this is where I get out,” said Sally. “Thanks again, Mr. Filer.”

“My pleasure,” Filer said.

There was a pause, and in the pause a thought struck: he'd known where to stop without her telling him. *Filer knew the house. He'd been here before.* Sally got out and shut the door. She made her way around the front of the car, turning to toss a little wave and flash a smile, mostly at Filer, before heading up the drive with a hint of swing in her hips. And in that one naked moment—in the sparkling perfection of her smile, in the piercing confidence of her stare—Bicks saw all. For it was every bit the act of a woman who knew, and reveled in, the power she had over men; it was the look of a woman who took pleasure in the certainty that Filer was hers. That his cock, indeed the complete man, was under her control. And that, held spellbound under her bewitchment, he could be made to do anything. This heady power so potent that, despite her best efforts to keep it in check the whole drive home, it had revealed itself nonetheless. It had leapt forth, demanding to be seen. And to witness this—the power of her look, and Filer's own smooth smile in return—both embarrassed and infuriated Bicks. But all he could do was watch her make her graceful exit up the driveway and out of sight, the catch who could never be caught.

Then from nowhere—*bam!*—a fist came slamming down on the windshield in front of Filer. Bicks jumped. A figure threw himself on top of the hood, yelling and attacking the car in fury with his fists. Shocked by the sudden attack, his heart pounding, Bicks's first reaction was to lock his door. But then he saw that it was Cash, wild-ass drunk and meaning to hurt someone, and a new fear swept over Bicks.

Cash stumbled back in the street, lurching in the lamplight, shouting, “Stay away, you hear me? Stay away from her!”

Filer muttered, “Son of a bitch,” and Bicks felt his stomach tighten.

Cash yelled, “You are nothing but a piece of shit! You hear me?”

Then another figure emerged from the darkness. It was Tweezy trying to coax Cash back to a car parked half a block away, but Tweezy was no match for their liquored-up friend. Tweezy pleaded, trying to pull him by the arm, but Cash wrenched away so violently, it made Tweezy fall hard to his butt on the pavement. Tweezy then got to his feet and stayed a safe distance away, letting Cash have his way. Clearly, Cash had been waiting all this time for Sally to come home, his jealous fantasies of what she was doing and who she was doing it with overtaking all his good sense.

Then Cash recognized the driver. “Filer! What the fuck—?” And a split-second later he was pummeling the driver’s side window with his fists, bashing it with his boot heel, then putting his face to the window, yelling, “Are you doing her? Are you balling my girl? She’s mine, you hear me, Filer! Mine! You so much as touch her I’ll fuck you up!”

“Fuck me up? Fuck *me*?” Filer yelled back in impotent fury. “You don’t know who you’re dealing with, kid!” Bicks saw Filer was torn. The man in him wanted to tear Cash apart, but the teacher in him knew it would be safer to drive away and avoid conflict altogether. Filer revved the engine. He rolled his window down a crack and yelled, “You are so done, son! *Through*, you hear? I know it was you who broke into my car!”

Cash came at the window again. “You don’t know shit, Filer! You pussy!” He lifted his boot to bash the window again when Sally’s voice stopped him.

“Cash! Go home! Don’t be stupid!”

Bicks turned to see that Sally now stood at the base of the driveway on the right side of the car, talking over the car to Cash in the street. “You’ll wake the neighbors!”

“What—are you with *him* now?” Cash bellowed. “Is he the one you’re calling all the time?”

“No! Nothing happened!” Sally said. “Don’t be ridiculous! He just gave us a ride home.”

Through the open window Filer said, “Touch my car again, you’re in deep shit.”

“Oooo, I’m in *trouble*,” he said to Filer, swaying in the street. Then to Sally: “I’ve been waiting all *night* for you! Where you been—with *this* douche bag?”

“Cash, c’mon, let’s go,” Tweezy coaxed.

“Sal, he’s so—*beneath* you,” Cash said, throwing a grin at Filer.

Inside the car, Filer was steaming, his chest heaving in anger. With Sally here now, no way was Filer going to look weak by backing down.

“Cash, you’re drunk!” Sally said. “Go home before someone calls the police! You had one run-in tonight—you don’t want another one on your record!”

Cash came around the front of the car, stumbling towards her. She held out her hands in a “stop” gesture, holding her ground, trying to talk sense into him, clearly not afraid he would hurt her. “Will you *please* listen to me please and go home?” Sally urged. “This is *not* the time.”

Filer was out of the car in a flash and yelling over the hood of the car. “You get away from her! Lay a hand on her and I’ll put you down, mister—”

“Sam! Stay in the car!” Sally said.

“I mean it—”

Cash whirled to face him. “Put me down? You’ll put *me* down? Ha! Tweeze, you hear that? He’s gonna put me down.” Then he leveled a chilling look at Filer. “Here. Now. I put *you* down.” Bicks’ guts were in a knot. Should he open his door and try to talk sense into Cash? Someone had to stop this.

“Cash, *listen* to me!” Sally said, moving toward the front of the car, trying to put herself between Filer and Cash. “We got stuck out on the lake—me and Bicks—and had to call someone to come pick us up. That’s *all* it was.”

Cash said nothing, continued staring at Filer across the hood of the car.

“Sam, please get back in the car,” Sally said. “See, Cash? Bicks is right there.”

As if obeying Sally, Bicks rolled down his window. Then, for the first time noticing there was someone else in the car, Cash swung a look into the passenger seat. His eyes came to rest on Bicks. There was a small smile of recognition that then twisted into a reproachful sneer. Bicks’ belly went cold.

Cash said, “Bicks,” as if it were a curse word.

Down the street, a house light blinked on. Then from the darkness at the top of the drive, a woman’s voice: “Sally? Is that you?”

“Yes, mother! Go back in the house!”

“Is everything all right?”

“Yes, everything’s fine, just go back inside, I’ll be up in a minute!”

Cash turned to look past Sally up the driveway.

Then a man’s voice. “Sally! What’s all the racket?”

“Dad, everything is fine! I’m just with my friends!”

“Don’t make me come down there.”

That was all Bicks heard. Filer was back in the car, putting it in gear, and seconds later they were roaring away from the scene, pulling away from Cash and Sally at the curb, shooting past Tweezy and into the sweet darkness of the streets beyond, Filer screeching around corners, trying to separate himself as fast as possible from the nightmare they’d just escaped. Bicks sunk back in his seat, trying to remain invisible, relieved to have gotten away without anyone getting hurt. He realized he’d been most concerned about Sally, not wanting to see her get hurt. But as soon as he thought that, his next thought was, *No way Cash would ever hurt her, no possible way.* And thinking back on it as they drove, all of it fresh in his mind, it occurred to him then that Sally hadn’t looked afraid of Cash at all. Not for a second. It was her parents that gave her the worried look he’d seen on her face.

When at last they reached the main thoroughfare and came to a stop at a red light, Filer, having no outlet for his fury, slammed his hands on the steering wheel, cursing loudly, and banging on the dashboard. This went on for an uncomfortably long time, and then he turned on Bicks, pointing an accusing finger.

“You—you—” he sputtered, at a loss for what to say next. “You should never have let her call me!”

“Me?” Bicks said. “But I didn’t know—”

“That’s exactly right. You *don’t* know. You don’t know anything. You don’t know anything about anything. This never happened. None of it, you understand? I never picked you up. I was never with any of you. You got me? I became friendly with a girl when—when she needed a friend, that’s all. That’s all it was. I was stupid to go there tonight and pick her up. It could be very misconstrued, let’s put it that way. Very misconstrued. That’s why this goes no further than this car. Okay? You with me? You *with* me, Bicks?”

“Yes, sir, absolutely, I completely understand. Tonight was just one of those weird, weird nights that happen to people sometimes, but we’re okay now, sir. No one got hurt. I’m sure Sally won’t tell her parents anything, definitely not about you. So, we’re good.”

“But your friend,” Filer said. “Mr. Anderson. He’s going to need consoling. He’s going to need convincing that there’s nothing between Sally and me, you understand? Nothing at all. You were with her tonight. You know nothing happened.” And then he got a funny look. “Unless something happened between Sally and *you*.”

“What? No!” said Bicks, a little too forcefully. “How could you think that?”

Filer got a wolfish grin. “Bicks, Bicks, say it ain’t so. Hitting on your best friend’s girl? Wouldn’t want *that* getting around, now would we? You two, out on the lake all alone.”

“But we *weren’t* alone.”

“Of course you weren’t. I know that. But that’s how these things get started, man. Rumors going around and such. People talk.” Filer let him think about this for a moment,

and then said, “How’s this? How ‘bout we don’t talk. *I* won’t say anything if *you* don’t say anything. We both keep quiet about each other and nobody gets hurt. Our friendship continues. Deal?”

“Absolutely,” Bicks said. “This never happened.” And he shook hands with Filer. They drove awhile. Filer lit a cigarette and seemed to relax a bit. Then Filer said, “You know what they say, Bicks. Someday we’ll look back on this and laugh. Laugh at how we made our great escape.” Bicks nodded and gave a chuckle and this seemed to put Filer even more at ease. But inside, Bicks felt a growing uneasiness. Escape? There was no escape, and he knew it.

Chapter 10

Bicks’ father, while alive, had been the kind of man who had trouble facing trouble. Whenever things got difficult—a bad patch with the wife, a thorny problem at work—he would turn to alcohol. Bicks knew this because his mother would often tell him so. Now that Bicks was older and his old man many years dead, whenever he thought of his father, what first sprang to mind was his father’s favorite phrase: “Trust me, this will all blow over.” Countless times he had heard him say it. His father had said it in the hospital after

Bicks had his tonsils out. He said it when Bicks got chicken pox. He said it during the Civil Rights riots. He said it during the anti-war protests. He said it when a storm had ripped a piece of the roof off their garage. After he lost his job, he said it. If the other team got bases loaded, he said it. And the night when Bicks found his mom throwing dishes on the kitchen floor and cursing their bad marriage, even then he tousled Bicks' hair and said it.

“Trust me, kid, this will all blow over.”

The phrase had stuck, his father's mantra becoming his son's way of wishing problems away too. And driving home with Filer that night, it came to Bicks again, the same voice telling him it would all blow over.

Things did not blow over. Things got worse.

After their little “run-in,” Cash had trouble sitting still in Filer's English class, and Filer had trouble seeing him sitting there. But sit he did. And Filer kept on teaching and Cash kept on sitting and Bicks sat there day after day, amazed a fistfight never broke out. Luckily, for everyone, Sally's parents never learned who had been making the “racket” that night, but they super-double-grounded her for coming home at four in the morning. That meant no contact whatsoever with boys. No dates, no telephone calls, no slipping away to a friend's house. It drove Cash crazy not to see or even speak to her, and the sudden shut-down gave rise to what came to be fondly called Cash's Schnapps Period.

It began the day after the lake incident, a Sunday. After ringing her house several times and being repeatedly informed rather coldly that Sally was *incommunicado* and would remain so for some time—first by Mrs. MacKenzie and then by the ‘Big Mac’

himself—Cash telephoned Big Mike. A short time later, around four, Big Mike showed up at Bick’s house, pounding on the front door and demanding that he and Bicks “take a ride.”

Bicks did as he was told and got in Big Mike’s car, a powder blue VW. Actually, he was driving his sister’s car because he’d destroyed his old Plymouth Fury when he’d run it into the neighbor’s living room window. Bicks knew this was still a touchy subject with Big Mike so he took care not to bring it up in conversation. Bicks knew where they were going, but to make conversation he asked anyway.

“So where we going?” Bicks asked.

“The pool house.”

Bicks said, “How is he?”

“Not good.”

Bicks said, “You heard what happened last night, huh?”

“Yeah. And you got some things to answer for.”

This made Bicks’ stomach start to churn, and it kept churning all the way to Cash’s house, Bicks all the while telling himself, *He’s my friend, he’s my friend, nothing bad can happen, Cash is my friend.*

When Big Mike pulled open the sliding glass door and Bicks went past him into the pool house, the first thing he noticed, other than the Duane Allman solo blaring from the Harman-Kardon stereo, was how shaky Cash’s hands were as he stood pouring a drink from a quart of Jolly Apple schnapps. Bicks said “hi” over the music and tried to smile as Cash took his drink and plopped into the bean bag chair beside his bed. Cash’s hand

shook as he took a slug of his drink and studied Bicks darkly for a long moment, his left leg pumping up and down in constant motion. Bicks wasn't going to tell him but Cash looked awful. His eyes were puffy and face so blotchy red he had to be on something stronger than schnapps, most likely speed, and realizing this made Bicks feel less confident about how things might go.

Finally Cash said, "So what the fuck happened last night?"

"What do you mean?" Bicks thinking speed now.

"What do I *mean*? You know what I mean. Jesus flipping Christ, man!"

"You disappeared on us, man," Big Mike said.

"I disappeared?" Bicks started to stammer. "Well, when—when the police came I had to get out of there—"

"You disappear with *my* girl? Then show up, like, six hours later—with fuckhead Filer driving you home?" After a nod from Cash, Big Mike reached out and turned down the volume on the stereo.

"Nothing happened, Cash," Bicks said.

"Nothing *happened*? Are you fucking nuts? Everything happened, man. A lot of things happened. A lot of fucked *up* things. I'm there looking for my lady with cops beating on me, I almost got arrested because of you."

"Me?"

"Yeah, you!"

"I didn't *do* anything! I was with this drunk chick when the cops came and—"

"And that shit you were doing with Sally before? At the barbecue?"

“What?”

“You and her all nicey-nice, getting cozy, making hotdogs together. What was *that* about?”

“She was just helping me, man, c’mon. You know her—she was being nice. You’re getting paranoid, all that happened—”

“Oh, I’m paranoid now? Is *that* what I am? I’m *crazy*? Imagining things? I just *imagined* I saw her kiss you at the barbecue? And I just *imagined* that she disappeared with you? And then I just *imagined* you were in the car with her when you drove up six fucking hours later?”

“I can explain, if you just—”

“Oh, you can explain? Okay, then fucking explain to me what Filer was doing with you two in that car? What possible reason did she have to be with *him*? Huh? I’d really like you to explain *that!*”

Bicks trying to breathe now, the rush of panic so acute he thought he might puke. “Like I was saying, I was with this girl, the girl that was doing everybody.” He turned to Big Mike. “Remember, Mikey? You did me a solid. You were going to get me laid. I was in the room, on top of her, I had my dick out and everything and then the cops came. You opened the door and said, ‘Bicks! We gotta book!’”

“I did?” Then, lifting his glass to Cash, he said, “Stuff is smooth.”

“Yeah, saved my ass, and then me and the chick, seeing cops in the kitchen, we went out the back window, crawling in the weeds, trying to hide and then Sally waved to us.”

“She waved to you?”

“She was under the deck—by herself—and we crawled over and decided the best way out was the boat.”

“What boat?”

“We ran to the pier and got in that skiff that was there, the one we saw in the afternoon, when Tweezy fell in the water, remember? And I rowed out on the lake, the three of us in the boat, and that’s how we escaped the cops.”

Cash said, “What’re you, Cap’n Ahab now?” And then to Big Mike, “Fucking guy, making his escape on the high seas!” Big Mike muttered out a laugh, more to please Cash than anything else.

“You can laugh, but that’s what we did.”

“But Filer? Where the hell he come from?” Cash’s stare was like acid in Bick’s face, and he couldn’t meet his eyes. Feeling backed against the wall, Bicks said it before he even thought it.

“It was the girl. She called him.”

“What girl?”

“The girl I almost balled, man. The one pulling a train. Mike knows, he was in line with me too. Like I said, it was three of us in the boat. Me, Sally and the other chick, so shit-faced she tried to stand up in the boat and I lost one of the oars trying to get her to sit down and that’s why it took so long. To get to the other side. Fuck, man. I only had one oar to row with. It totally sucked.” This made Cash start to smile and the sight of it pissed Bicks off. “It’s the truth, man. While you were off doing whatever you were doing, I was

oaring my ass off. We didn't get to the other side 'til two or three in the morning. I was tired as shit and we had to walk another couple miles 'til we found a phone and that's when the girl called Filer."

"The girl called Filer? Why would she do that?"

"That's what I'm trying to tell you, man, it was fucked up. We called the pool house but you weren't there. We couldn't none of us call our parents. The drunk girl said she knew someone she could call who might come, some friend of hers. Sally said maybe we should just hitchhike, but I said, 'No fucking way.' Not with the kind of creeps out that late on the roads. Me with two women, it just wasn't safe."

"*You* decided?"

"I was being responsible!" Bicks's anger came pouring out now, like lava. "I was saving *your* girl friend from getting clipped – get her home safe – and here you are accusing me of—what *are* you accusing me of, anyway? I save *your* ass? And here you are giving *me* shit? What the fuck is that?"

"Bicks, Bicks, easy, man, easy," Big Mike said.

"Well, back off then," Bicks said hotly. "I got a wicked hangover on only four hours of sleep, I'm fried, man!"

"Ease the fuck down, man," Cash said, "we're *all* hung over, okay?"

Cash shut his eyes and grimaced, dropping back into the beanbag chair and running his hands through his hair. Big Mike went to the bar and poured a drink. "Hair of the dog, man," he said, and handed it to Bicks.

Bicks took a long slug. Feeling bolder, he said to Cash, “Friends protect friends, isn’t that what you said? Well, where were you? She couldn’t find you—you were off fighting the cops or something, so I stepped in. It’s no big deal. Wasn’t for me, she’d still be out on that lake, man, and you’d have her parents all over you—”

“Okay, okay, I get it, you’re some big macho hero dude who saved the day,” Cash said, looking amused. “*Thank* you, sir! You want a parade? Your picture in the paper? You want me to get down and kiss your ass?”

“That would be nice,” Bicks said with a grin.

“Mikey, get this man a drink.”

“I gave him a drink!”

“Well, get him another drink.”

Bicks said to Mike, “You almost got me laid last night, too.”

“Yeah?” Big Mike said, scratching his belly.

“Like I said, I appreciated how you put me in the front of the line.”

“Getting Bicksie boy laid,” Big Mike said, clinking glasses with Bicks, now all chummy again.

“We were just about to get it on, dropped trou and everything, when the cops blew in. Hadn’t been for you telling me to book, they’d’a booked me for sure—with my pants around my ankles!” Bicks did a penguin walk to illustrate his point, and this got them laughing even louder. “I’d’a been calling you from jail saying, ‘I got fucked tonight, boys, but not by a girl!’”

Cash burst out laughing, and the sight of his eyes sparkling, his teeth gleaming as he grinned, made Bicks begin to relax. The storm, it seemed, had passed.

They sat there into the evening, smoking up the last of Cash's *sensimilla* and downing the rest of the cheap apple schnapps, Cash speed-rapping about Sally and Filer and his near-arrest the night before. He'd been happily getting high with Tweezy and some others in an upstairs bedroom, Cash said, when all at once a huge pair of hands had him in a chokehold and he could barely breathe. "A pig in a buzzcut" had him by the throat. More cops came streaming in, crushing Tweezy's bong to bits with their boots and roughing them up, saying they were all under arrest. "I can't fucking breathe!" Cash had mentioned, but, taking offense to his foul language, the cop had dragged Cash out of the room by his hair. Further misunderstandings had developed. While coming down the stairs, Cash had struggled to remove the cop's hand from his throat without asking permission. This had resulted in Cash getting ushered outside by two officers of the law—a bearded Narc stepped in to aid Crewcut—by way of their nightsticks. But just as he was being shoved into the back of the patrol car, two girls came running naked and screaming out of the house. Well, half-naked. One had on a bra and panties, the other was nude save for a pair of denim cut-offs, and she tried cupping her boobs with her hands as she ran but they kept bobbing free. This caught the policemen's attention. Without asking his partner, the Narc let go of Cash and went chasing after his new prey, leaving Crewcut confused long enough for Cash to slip free of his grasp and scamper off in the other direction, quickly losing the cop as he disappeared into the brush.

Now in the poolhouse, Cash stood and cupped his hands on his chest, running in circles and girlishly squealing, “Look, Mr. Policeman, look! A naked teenager! With real teenage titties! Look how they bounce! Help me, Mr. Big Strong Policeman!” Bicks and Big Mike were on the floor, busting a gut, and it felt good. Real good.

Bicks, after a few hits, lay sprawled on the carpet, unable to speak, and he just listened to Cash and Big Mike trading gibes and putting on their favorite records. Halfway through Grand Funk Railroad’s “I’m Your Captain” Cash announced that he’d made a big discovery: a shot of schnapps taken directly after a prodigious bong hit, he said, produced a pleasantly sweet sensation on the tongue and a “bodaciously righteous little buzz.” Later, Big Mike and the guys would talk about this moment as being the official start of Cash’s Schnapps Period, but this wouldn’t be for some months to come, after the shitstorm of the stuff at the track meet was to blow over.

Around ten o’clock the schnapps ran out and Cash suggested the three go for a walk. Cash said he needed some air, but Bicks knew what he really wanted. To go peeping. It had become quite a habit with Cash, peeping in neighbors’ windows at night, looking in on their lives, hoping to catch them in awkward or revealing moments, see people in their bedrooms undressing, having sex. Doing other pervy things. The two times Bicks had gone with Cash they hadn’t seen much. Just a bald fat man in boxer shorts bitching at his wife about the tuna casserole she’d made for dinner, and the next time an old lady in curlers, sitting in bed with a book. It had been fun to watch the man follow his wife from room to room carping about her excessive use of cheese, but spying on the old lady had been creepy. He and Cash had been wedged between a bush and a

maple tree, hidden in perfect darkness just outside her bedroom window, and they had quietly watched her brush her hair in the mirror and then ready herself for bed. She removed a bathrobe and when she had leaned over the bed to draw back her comforter—

yikes!—he'd seen way more of her sagging breasts than he'd ever wanted to and began to feel sick to his stomach. *It's just an old lady*, he had whispered. *Let's go*. But Cash had shushed him and kept watching, Bicks vibing that Cash was getting off as much on Bicks' nervousness as he was on watching an old lady half-naked. And the fact that he'd sensed himself getting excited too—the whole thing had given him the wig. And now here he was again, moving in the darkness between the houses, feeling that same disgust with himself, even as he felt the thrill of anticipation rising.

They were going to see The Divorcee, Cash now telling them. Hot number with a nice rack who liked sleeping in the nude.

“How you know that?” Big Mike said.

Cash said, “I've seen her, dipshit,” then gestured for quiet. He brought them to a wire-mesh fence and pointed to the house that stood beyond it. A plain one-story job, the whole place blanketed in darkness except for a tiny amber glow from inside the kitchen. The backyard dark and still, the birdbath barely visible beside a stunted fruit tree. No dog to bark at them, no porch lights from any nearby houses. Cash gestured to a clump of tall shrubs on the near side of the house and then vaulted the fence and crouched there, waiting for Bicks and Big Mike to make it over. The three then crab-walked across the lawn into the fitzer bushes at the rear corner of the house, the sharp needles scraping Bicks' face, reminding him of the evergreen smell of the bush at his house. Memories of

playing football on the side yard with neighborhood kids, digging into the bushes to retrieve a wayward pass, his beer-happied dad looking on from the porch.

They crawled through the thick shrubbery to an open space near a dimly lit first-floor window, similar to the places he'd been before with Cash. A pitch-black hiding place shielded from the street, but far enough away from the window for the light not to spill out and reveal them if someone was to turn it on while they were looking in. Bicks amazed Cash could find such perfectly dark places to hide, then getting, *It's because he needs it so much.*

Peering in the window, he caught sight of the body on the bed and felt a thud in his chest. She was nude, all right, sprawled there in nothing but panties, looking all creamy and delicious like some kind of tantalizing French dessert.

Big Mike gasped, "Holy fuck—" but that was all he could get out. Cash had quickly shoved a hand over his mouth and was harshly whispering in his ear, *Shut the fuck up or I'll kick the living shit out of you.*

Mike briskly nodded that he understood. But as soon as Cash removed his hand, Mike half-whispered, *I'm totally gonna be quiet, but that chick, man, she's butt-ass—!* Cash shot him a "now-I'm-really-going-to-fuck-you-up" look, and Mike put his *own* hand over his mouth to show Cash that he was cool and they all three turned back to the darkened room. The nude woman lay illuminated in the silvery glow of an old TV at the foot of the bed. They stood, squeezed together, staring in awed silence at the forbidden fruit, Bicks feeling the rise of excitement slowly erasing all of his fears. Positioned a bit too far to the right, the window frame blocked her head from view, but from the

shoulders down she was all there. The curve of her calves and hips shone in the throbbing TV light. The tips of her breasts gleamed in the flashing glow, making her look to the stoned-out Bicks like an actress in a movie he was watching, the rectangle of the window the movie screen itself. And he imagined that she lay there in sweet anticipation, waiting on her lover. Him. Bicks. The eager young cocksman who came whenever she called. Women did that sometimes, he knew, in movies. Like in *Summer of '42* and *The Graduate*, older women aching for a younger man. Bicks now thinking Dustin Hoffman the luckiest guy in the world getting to ball Mrs. Robinson, not understanding why he wanted to run away from her at all. The mom, Anne Bancroft, was way sexier than the daughter. What was her name—Katherine Roth? Ross? He couldn't remember. But wait—if he thought Mrs. Robinson was more ballable than Katherine Ross, did that mean he was weird? A perv for getting horny over women old enough to be his mom and for peeping in divorcee's windows? Something else was eating at him, too, he realized. Guilt. He was actually feeling guilty that he was getting hard over a woman other than Sally. *What?* How could that be? He'd only kissed her once—and she was so *not* his girl friend! Barely even his *friend*, for godsakes! How could he—Mr. Dweebnik—be feeling *guilty*? It made no sense. Here he was, peeping in on some older-woman pussy with the guy who was the boy friend of the girl he was *really* fantasizing about—a girl who barely knew he existed much less loved him back—and he was feeling *bad* about it? Somehow disloyal? Talk about crazy stupid. His temples began to pound. His left leg was going numb from all the standing. What did it all mean? Had he really allowed himself to believe on some level he had a *chance* with Sally Mackenzie? Was he really that fucked-

up-delusional? Or was this just the normal way of things, the animal nature of the male sex drive raising its insistent head? At that moment he became aware that some part of Big Mike's body was digging into the side of his left butt cheek, Bicks pretty sure but not positive it wasn't his belt buckle and *that* made him weird out even more. If his own dick was hard, it meant the other guys probably were too.

Bicks felt Big Mike's breath on his neck, caught the smell of schnapps. He heard a moan escape from Big Mike, and then from Cash an urgent, "*Look, look.*"

He looked.

She had her hand in her panties and was fingering herself, her hips rising and falling in rhythmic gyration. Oh, mama. Talk about the jackpot. Bicks felt his heartbeat thundering. They stood outside the bedroom window of a nude and masturbating divorcee. He wanted to pinch himself, but he was too aware of the steel-hard object poking into his leg.

"Buncha perverts," said Tweezy as he reached for the salt. "Violating the old lady's privacy."

"Oh, like you're Mr. Goody-Goody?" Big Mike said.

"Yeah," Cash said, "the guy who spooges in his sister's panties—"

"That's a lie!" Tweezy said, indignant. "I never did that!" Then he couldn't stop the smile that broke over his face. "It was my *mother's* panties."

Everyone bust up. They were in the lunchroom sitting at their usual table by the door two days later, Bicks chowing down on some mac and cheese and grinning at Cash, Big Mike and Degs as they harshed Tweezy.

“If you’d been with us, man, you’d be spooging, all right,” Big Mike said.

“All over *himself*,” Cash said.

“Yeah, you’re just jealous, Tweeze,” Bicks put in.

“I ain’t jealous,” Tweezy said. “I see plenty of naked women.”

“Yeah, in that *Playboy* you keep under your bed.” Cash rolling his brows.

“The one with the pages all stuck together.”

There was more silly talk, with Tweezy defending himself rather lamely and Cash and the guys continuing to ride and ridicule him and Tweezy laughing as loudly at the insults as anyone else and it made Bicks realize that this was why he liked Tweezy so much. Tweezy was just as amused by his own stupidities as anyone else was, it seemed, and could take enjoyment in them because the pleasure he took in laughter surpassed any pleasure he got in looking good to his friends or pretending to be someone he wasn’t. Some believed Tweezy just a basic garden-variety stoner who played the fool because he *was* a fool, but Books knew different. Finally the talk came back to the weekend’s peeping episode.

“And she wasn’t that old—the divorcee—was she, Cash?” Big Mike said, popping a Twinkie in his mouth.

“About thirty, thirty-five tops,” Cash said. “Nice titty pies, too.”

“Major headlights,” said Bicks.

Cash chuckled. “Listen to this guy. ‘Major headlights.’ Talking like Mikey now. So we finally corrupted you, huh, Books? Was wondering how long it’d take.”

Mutters of agreement among the guys and then Bicks said, “You got it all wrong. It’s me that’s corrupting *you* guys, Cash. I actually saw Big Mike carrying a *book* around the other day.” Food flew out of Tweezy’s mouth he laughed so hard. Cash flashed a big grin too and Big Mike himself let out a good-natured guffaw, punching Bicks in the arm. And the pain shooting through his shoulder didn’t faze Bicks at all because he knew it meant he’d moved up a notch in Mike’s eyes, and probably everybody else’s. And this realization—that he’d earned the right to actually bust Big Mike’s balls even the teensiest little bit—made him suddenly so happy he tried hard not to speak another word for fear he’d say something stupid to piss Big Mike off and lose what little he’d just gained. The Wrath of Skolski being something he knew he never wanted to see unleashed on himself.

“Whoa, Mike with a *book*?” Cash said. “What was it? *War and Peace*?”

More chuckles.

“*How to Score a Piece* is more his speed,” Degs said. He wiggled a hotdog in Big Mike’s face and Big Mike batted it away.

“He’d *need* a self-help book to get laid,” Tweezy said.

“But first he’d have to learn to read,” Cash said.

“Fuck you guys. I’ve been laid more’n all you put together.”

“Yeah, right.”

“With sheep, maybe,” Cash said.

Big Mike cursed again and slammed his lunch tray loudly on the table. He jumped up and with an animal roar lifted the tray over his head and made pretend he was going to bash Cash in the face with it. Everyone at the table in stitches, knowing it was just an act, but the lunchroom monitor, the tiny Father Flanagan, ran over in alarm, his cheeks aflame, thinking it a real fracas in progress.

“Mr. Skolski!” he shouted. “Put down that tray this instant!” Mike did. As crazy-violent as he could be to other kids, he was very respectful of the priests. He and Cash tried to explain that it was all just a joke but Flanagan would have none of it. He took one look at the smiles on everyone’s faces, especially the big shit-eater on Big Mike, and mistaking their grins for gross disrespect, flew into a snit. “It’s detention for you, young man! Follow me. I’m sure Principal Palmer will wipe that smile off your face.” Stifling a laugh, Big Mike shrugged to the guys and followed the priest out of the lunchroom. The lumbering largeness of Big Mike right behind the elfin figure of Father Flanagan reminded Bicks of something he’d seen in a comedy movie or read in a book, the little beside the large always a funny sight to behold. And no one was really concerned that Big Mike was going to the principal’s office, least of all Big Mike. He’d been there so many times he practically had his own desk, with his own secretary and everything.

“Well,” Cash said, “so much for teacher-student communication.” And with this as punctuation, the conversation was over, and one by one the guys got up to leave, Tweezy going to gym class, Degrass to Trig, and a couple other guys who’d gathered to watch dispersing to study hall. A minute later it was just Cash and Bicks at the table, Bicks waiting for Cash to finish off his fries before asking, “So you talked to her yet?”

Cash stopped chewing and looked down at his food. “Every time I call they say she’s ‘indisposed,’” he said with his eyes on his fries. “Last night her dad told me I ever call again he’s calling the cops.” Cash raised his chin to look at Bicks. “Fuckin’ believe that guy? Month ago he was feeding me beers out by his pool, calling me pal. What a douche.” Bicks felt a sudden sadness for Cash, and saw in his friend’s eyes the desperation he was trying to cover up with the speed he seemed to be gobbling.

“I’m sorry, man,” Bicks said. “A week, a month from now, trust me, this will all blow over.”

“Blow *over*?” Cash flared. Bicks affected a nonchalant shrug, but inside was thinking, *Did I really just say that?* “It blows, all right,” Cash continued. “Can’t sleep, drinking schnapps day and night.” Bicks thinking, *Yeah, and doing so many pills you’re turning into Janis fucking Joplin.*

Cash said, “I knew she was bad news from the start. I knew that falling in love with a chick like her was gonna fuck me up bigtime. And you! You told me to do it. To go for it!”

“Me? You said you were in love. You came to my house all moony and shit. You’re my friend, I want you to be happy, what am I supposed to say? ‘No, don’t do it? She’s just a rich bitch? It’ll never last?’ We all want to believe in love, Cash. ‘Specially guys like me who’ve never had it before. So, you want to blame me, go ahead. Yeah, I said what I said, but I said it for the right reasons.’”

There was a long silence. The lunchroom was emptying out, with others hurrying off to class as well. Then Cash said, "I guess so. I just wish I knew who the other guy was."

"What other guy?" said Bicks, his stomach compacting.

"The guy she's obviously with now. There's got to be someone else, otherwise she'd get word to me somehow. But she's not. No phone calls, no notes, nothing."

"You're paranoid. How could there be another guy? Her parents won't let her out of the house." Cash got a strange look in his eye, the one Bicks had seen the night they went to the drive-in to sell joints. The mad dog look. Bicks busied himself by finishing off his chocolate milk and pushing his paper napkin down into the empty carton. Cash glanced up at the clock on the wall, abruptly stood and said he had to go. Bicks said to take it easy. Cash turned to leave, then remembered something. "Hey, do me a solid, will you, bro? Forgot to give this to Tweezy." He dropped a book on the table. Introduction To Biology. "You have Bio next period with him, right?"

Bicks said he did. "Sure, no problem, man." And then Cash was gone and Bicks was alone at the table, putting the book in his book bag and finding himself for the first time wondering if Cash was right. *Should* he have advised him differently? Should he have pooh-poohed the girl instead? Was this whole thing Bicks' fault? Why had he opened his big mouth in the first place? Why hadn't he just lent a friendly ear instead of trying to impress Cash with his bookish erudition about love and shit. After all, what did *he* know about the subject. Absolutely nothing. Less than nothing. And that was just his problem. Everything he knew he knew from books, from knowledge gained by others.

And this was why he had so desperately wanted to be accepted by Cash and his friends. He knew they would lead him to the knowledge he sought, the experience he yearned for. He picked up his book bag and made his way out of the lunch room and up the hall toward his next class.

He was at his locker a minute later, pulling out a fresh notebook that he needed, when he felt a nudge to his psyche. Some vague notion seemed to be floating just out of reach, some nugget of wisdom he'd learned somewhere, from a teacher, a book, a parent, perhaps. But try as he might he couldn't latch onto it, and though it seemed at the moment to be important, he shut his locker and walked on. It was minutes later while sitting in Trig class, having trouble paying attention, that it came to him. A tiny utterance from some deep internal realm, the same voice he had learned not to listen to of late, and now it spoke the very phrase he had been trying to remember. Ever so faintly, the voice said, *Be careful what you wish for, you just might get it.* And upon taking it in, Bicks instantly wished he hadn't heard it at all.

Chapter 11

At the sight of Tweezy jumping around in his blue track shorts and matching gray jersey, Bicks and Grady burst into laughter, applauding wildly from their seats in the stands and chanting his name.

“Ee-ZEE! Twee-ZEE! Ee-ZEE! Twee-ZEE!”

Tweezy spun around to see who in the sparse crowd was giving him a hard time and then, glancing to see if the coach was looking, grinned and gave them the finger. This brought more hoots of derision and off-color cheers, as well as a few stares from the scattered pairs of parents seated nearby. But Bicks and Grady were oblivious. Having doobed up on the ride over, they were goofing on just about everything they looked at, from the sky-blue color of the sky to the ass crack on the chubster seated in front of them to the glorious sight of the cheerleaders’ breasts fuh-lumping up and down as they rah-rahed the other team.

Go, go, Wolverines

We run fast because we’re teens

Run, run, Wolverines

The fastest times you’ve ever seen

Jump, jump, Wolverines

Yes we know what winning means

Gooooo—Wolverines!

Or this was what Bicks *thought* they were saying. Who could tell when you were stoned and hypnotized by bouncing breasts? Going to an all-boys prep school, this was one of the few things he liked about going to his school’s sporting events – the visiting

teams often had co-ed cheerleaders. And that meant girls in tight sweaters and shorty-skirts and long bare legs, all perky and eager to please in glossy ponytails and gleaming smiles, their faces bright with hope. It was enough to actually get a guy hard, if he had half an imagination, and Bicks had that and more.

Tweezy had made up a cheer once for their own team. Bicks tried to remember it.

Boniface was a bonafide saint

He was kind but we sure ain't

With blocks and tackles and the forward pass

We come here to kick your ass

Yay, Bone-a-face!

There were more verses that were dirtier but this was the only one he could recall. “Bone A Face.” That’s what Big Mike and the guys called it. As in, “I’d like to bone her face.” Saint Bone A Face. *Go bearcats! Go, team, go!* It all seemed pretty silly to Bicks, the rah-rah team spirit thing. What was the point?

And mascots. That was another thing Bicks didn’t get. Why did every school mascot have to be named after a vicious beast or some tribal subculture known for its violence. The Mighty Vikings (St. Vincent Mid-City). The Grizzlies (Newman Central). The Fighting Chieftains (Chaminade). The Tomahawks (Jesuit South). One school (Holy Cross) actually nicknamed their teams “The Warring Warriors.” Why not The Wingnuts? The DoucheBags? The Stupid Stuck-Up Jocks? Or the Fighting Dust Mites? And what could be lamer than *his* school’s mascot, The St. Boniface Bearcats? What the hell was a *bearcat*? Some cross between a bear and a cat? No one knew. Not even the teachers could

tell them. The team logo bore a cartoony face of a creature that looked like a crazed mole baring its claws. Bicks and his pals made jokes about it, some calling them the “bearclaws” like the Danish pastry.

Back on the field, the track meet had begun. St. Bone-A-Face had won the first event, the long jump, and now Bicks’s eyes went to Tweezy, who was about to compete in the mile event. He was doing warm-up stretches along with the other athletes on the apron of the football field, readying for the race. A light wind blew right to left, the smell of grilled hotdogs in the air. The dewy grass gleamed in the sun. Bicks glanced around the stands, hoping he’d see Sally Mackenzie’s cute friend, Josilee. He’d had his eye on her ever since the party at the lake and had heard she might show up because her brother ran track on the Boniface team. Two other attractive girls caught his eye and smiled back at him. Hmm, not bad. The air was brisk, the sun was shining, he had a good buzz on— *and* he had a baggie of joints inside his jacket that he hoped to sell. The day was looking up.

A voice from the public address system echoed over the field. “Next up, the mile event... running for the Wolverines...” And the announcer droned out the names of the four visiting team runners, raising more hoopla and heaving bosoms from the Wolverine pep squad. Then came the reading of the home team runners. “For the Bearcats...” Bicks and Grady issued a few unruly yelps when they heard the name “Terence McElroy, number 23...”

“Hey, you’re Bicks, right?” said a voice. Bicks turned to see two nervous looking freshmen standing in the aisle nearby, the shorter of the two, a redhead with bell bottoms and pink-tinted granny glasses, saying, “Can we talk to you?”

One look and he knew what they wanted. And it felt good.

“Sure,” he said, trying to remain cool. He told Grady he’d be back soon and down the steps he went, the freshmen trailing. Circling underneath the stands, Bicks gestured them over to a spot beside the trash dumpster and the side of the gymnasium where they would be hidden from view.

“So what are you guys looking for?”

“Uh, some jays, man,” the redhead said.

“Heard you had some righteous stuff,” said the other kid.

“Yeah? Where’d you hear that?”

“Around.”

“Yeah, you’re the man.”

Hearing this was like a hit of good hash oil to Bicks. He could actually feel his chest expand, feel his feet almost leave the ground in elation. *The man*. This was almost as good as getting laid. The high of knowing you were known. Looked up to. Respected. It was everything he had wanted and it was happening, *had* happened, and Bicks couldn’t get enough of it. Sure, he had dealt drugs before, but always for Cash. With Cash. This was different. This was his own stuff he was selling, from a brick he had bought himself from his share of the profits of all the deals he had helped Cash with. He’d been careful, though, asking Cash if it was okay if he started selling loose joints here and there, and

Cash hadn't cared. He'd been too busy guzzling his schnapps and boo-hoing over Sally MacKenzie to care about much of anything. Now here Bicks was, his pockets stuffed with bills and his head so overstuffed with pride it was threatening to burst.

The freshmen were asking what he had to sell. Bicks was about to answer, but then had the good sense to first make sure they were truly the dopers they claimed to be and not narcs.

“So who else you been buying from?”

They named a few known dealers around school, Foggy Baines, Jimmy Lumler and the like, complaining about the poor quality of stuff going around, too many stems and seeds for their liking, none of the great Thai stick that had been going around last summer. He told them he was selling Maui Wowie joints, two bucks a piece. Their eyes went wide, out came their cash and soon Bicks was walking away ten dollars richer, the ease at which they'd so eagerly paid all the more pleasing. And the fact they'd paid top-dollar for jays that weren't pure Hawaiian? Even sweeter.

Bicks was walking away when another raggedy pair of long hairs approached. “You got any white cross, bro? Any ‘Ludes?” He waved them over behind the dumpster and began to do business, pulling out his baggie of finely rolled merchandise to display his wares. Two joints apiece, they wanted, and before he could finish the buy, two seniors in letter sweaters smelling of cologne came up behind them, wanting in on what he was selling. Then a chunky girl with frizzed out hair and a boy with bad teeth and another kid behind them, and soon he had a whole clutch of customers crowding around, pushing and shoving and barking out their orders like they were at a deli counter, Bicks saying, “Pure

Hawaiian and I ain't lyin, ” his heart beginning to race, anxious now that he'd be seen, but all the while filling the orders, careful to have the cash in hand before he handed over any product, Cash having taught him well.

“Where you been, dude?” said Grady as Bicks sat down beside him in the stands. “You almost missed Tweezy’s big event.”

“Did a little business,” Bicks said, not wanting to seem too excited. He'd sold all his stash and was doing the mental arithmetic, trying to determine how much money he'd just made. How many joints had he started with, anyway? He couldn't remember. Twenty? Twenty-five? Jesus, he'd just made another fifty bucks. That plus the money he'd made selling Qualludes the day before meant he probably had over eighty dollars on him. Maybe ninety. Ninety fucking dollars! This was the most money he'd ever had on him at one time! And it was so easy. No work involved, no—

Bang! The crack of the starter's pistol silenced his mind and he looked up to see the race had begun. The mile. Four laps around the track. And there was their boy Tweezy springing from his starting position and sprinting right past them, fifth in a field of eight, Bicks close enough to see his shoes kicking up bits of grit from the track. Then, at the first turn, a burst of speed propelled him past a runner in red trunks, moving him into fourth place along the inside lane, and a cheer went up. Bicks and Grady gave rowdy whoops, their voices drowned by other animal yells from the stands.

On the field the four-girl pep squad gave a cheer—

Go, go, Wolverines

We run fast because we're teens

Bicks watched Tweezy move into the back stretch, halfway through his first lap now and still looking strong, as if shot from a cannon, Bicks wishing *he* could run that fast. Or pole vault. Or long jump. Do *something* athletic. His mind drifting back to freshman year when he'd tried out for B-team Track, the running he had done, two miles, three miles, day after day, lap after lap, his lungs exploding in pain, killing himself trying to win a spot on the squad. Coming in last most every race and hating himself until the assistant coach took him aside and suggested he try the high jump. He was happy to try it, and happily surprised to find he was good enough to actually make the team. Ecstatic to be out there on the field for the first official track meet, wearing his school's jersey, braving the icy March winds, only to fail, lamely, three jumps in a row, the last fall particularly embarrassing, the bar crashing right into his crotch as he landed. The boos of the fans turning to laughter at the sight of Bicks limping around, bent over and holding his balls, but the real stab to his heart coming when he heard the coach mutter, "Bicks, our *low* jumper!" and his teammates snickering. The nickname stuck, everybody calling him "Mr. Low Jump" and "King of the Low Jump" and "The Lowly Tom Bicks" and the like. Any phrase with the word "low" in it, they used it. After the second meet, he had stopped coming to practices and after the third he called it quits altogether, feeling quite the loser and relieved to be putting an early end to his highschool athletic career.

Cheers brought him back to the field. The eight runners were halfway through their third lap now, spread out in a long line along the back stretch, Tweezy now in third place, a good fifty yards off the pace, his balled fists held tight to his chest, his hair flopping back and forth across his shoulders as he raced rabbitlike into the far turn.

“He losing power?” Grady asked.

“I don’t know,” said Bicks. “Hard to tell from here.” He studied Tweezy as he rounded the far turn, trying to read the signals. The sag of his head, the lurch in his gait, the pistoning motion of his knees. Could his speed hold? His endurance? How much gas did their friend have left? He’d seen him race before but it was never easy to know how much energy a man had left. “A mile is the ultimate test of manhood,” Tweezy had often said. Then Bicks was drifting again. He spied the coach standing near the pole vaulting pit penciling something on his clipboard and it all came back. *Low jumper. Low man on the team. Lowest of the low.* It swallowed him. He gazed with contempt at the man they called Coach. Coach Dale Schrommek. The balding man with the bushy brows and watermelon paunch. Pushing fifty. Part sadist, part frustrated athlete, part guy who was only good enough to become a highschool coach. Filer was Einstein compared to Schrommek, a mile ahead in smarts and in toughness, Bicks decided. Schrommek fed on the power he had in a way that Filer never would, although Filer, in his own way, was a far greater foe, and just thinking about Filer threatened to foul his mood.

He felt Grady’s elbow ram into his ribs and his eyes returned to the track. They were on the last lap already, Tweezy barreling along. As he hit the midway mark of the back stretch a new burst of power thrust him past the man in front of him, pushing him into second place, and this brought the crowd to its feet.

“He’s making his move!” Grady cried. “Go Tweezy!”

They jumped up to watch the finale. The runner in first place looked to be flagging. Tweezy was gaining. Holy shit. Did he actually have a chance? Hearing girls cheering,

Bicks felt a flutter of jealousy. Fucking Tweeze. If he actually pulled it out of his ass to win this race he'd have a chance to score with babes Bicks could never dream of getting. Like the glossy haired ones sitting a few rows in front of Bicks or even cheerleaders, for godsakes. Not quite in Sally Mackenzie's class, but close. This was how it had worked for centuries, Bicks thought. Men earned a better class of woman through heroic deeds. Nature's way. Deeds he doubted he'd ever do.

“Twee-ZEE! Twee-ZEE!” Bicks cried. The runners were rounding the last turn, the crowd going nuts. Tweezy had surged to within ten yards of the leader, a lean Wolverine in red and white, and still their boy was sprinting hard, showing no sign of letting up. Legs pumping, fists at his chest, his strides quickening, the strain on his face visible now as he entered the home stretch footsteps off the lead. The cheering grew more raucous as a last spurt of energy drove Tweezy nearly even, the runners looking to Bicks like twin bullets racing each other out the barrel of a gun. Fifty yards to the finish line, forty, thirty, Tweezy dropping back, then drawing even, then—the runner in red and white flew past the finish line, breaking the tape. Tweezy had fallen and lay collapsed face-down on the track several yards behind. The rowdy cheers morphed into one mass murmur of sudden concern for the fallen runner. The Wolverine pep squad went silent mid-cheer, no doubt feeling that to celebrate victory in the face of the opponent's unfortunate injury would show poor sportsmanship.

Grady said, “What happened? I can't see.”

“Tweezy fell.

“What? A pulled muscle?”

“I don’t know.”

Grady cursed. “He came so *close!*”

Coach Schrommek and others were crouched beside Tweezy, checking on him, the coach frantically gesturing to someone out of view. Bicks flashing back on the fall—a sideways stutter step, his upper torso seeming to come to an abrupt halt, as if God had hit the brakes. Collapsing to his knees, outstretched fingers at his throat, his top half fell forward, the right side of his face slamming down on the track, the force of it blowing up a tiny cloud of grit, like a puff of smoke, and then he lay still, his mop of hair trembling in the wind, his right elbow jutting out at a hard right angle. Chasing away the fear that swept over him, Bicks was then surprised to be feeling envious, for now that Tweezy was injured, he could go around on crutches, gaining sympathy and even more attention from the girls, taking unfair advantage. Bicks was making money, but Tweezy would be getting laid. Then again he was seized by a terrible uneasiness, a rising tide he felt might overwhelm him.

“Is he okay?” Grady asked.

Bicks didn’t answer. Not aloud. Because to say what he thought at that moment, to actually speak the words, announce them to the world, would be to enter the nightmare itself, to become one with it, to touch and embrace it, instead of keeping it at bay, keeping himself a safe distance away. He tried to stay blind to it, block it out, escape. But a queer kind of queasiness had crawled down his spine and into his belly, and he knew it was too late. He forced himself to look again. Down on the track several members of the coaching staff had surrounded the boy, some standing, others crouching, and it was hard

to make out what was going on. But through the tangle of arms and legs Bicks caught sight of Tweezy's head on the rust red track. It wasn't moving. His head wasn't moving. His arms weren't moving. No part of Tweezy was moving.

Chapter 12

Monday classes were cancelled and when students returned to school on Tuesday they saw the American flag out front lowered to half mast. Tuesday was deemed an official day of mourning and the Principal held a mid-morning assembly in the gymnasium where the whole school gathered and teachers and students gave speeches in honor of their fallen classmate. There were students crying openly in the gymnasium. Teachers, too. The lunchroom ladies, seated together down front, were sniffing into handkerchiefs. Bicks and his friends, Big Mike, Grady, Cash and Degs, sat together. They barely spoke to one another and none of them chose to get up on stage to address the school about their friend. Walking to the assembly, Big Mike and Degs had mentioned to Bicks that of all of them, he should be the one to go up and say something. He was the smart one, the writer, the one who read books and stuff, and he should get up there and speak for them all, as it were. But Bicks's insides were so twisted up, he could

barely give answer much less go up on stage and make a speech, and his friends could tell he was upset and they let the subject drop.

Once all six-hundred-some students were seated, a priest started things off by saying a prayer, asking God to rest the soul of the departed. Then Principal Palmer spoke, repeating some of what the priest had said about Tweezy having passed on to a more peaceful place and that it was all a part of God's plan. We should accept that it was His will and somehow find comfort in knowing that our classmate was now in eternal slumber. Palmer also mentioned some of Tweezy's academic achievements, such as they were, and that he had been a member of the camera club two years in a row and that he had proven himself a valuable and well liked member of the St. Boniface track and field team. Bicks then looked to where Coach Schrommek was seated on stage, expecting that he would stand to say a few words. But the coach remained in his seat, arms crossed and eyes on the floor.

The class president, Curt Fleming, one of those rah-rah-school-spirit kind of jerks who always wore his button-down letter sweater, came to the microphone next and gave a surprisingly stirring speech about how death should remind us to live. He then announced that the student government committee had voted that morning to form a Terence McElroy Scholarship Fund and that donations could be sent to the school's main office and this drew a long burst of applause. After Curt sat down, another priest, the diminutive Father Flanagan, came up and spoke briefly on the subject of grief. He said that it was appropriate at a time like this to give in to one's emotions and cry if we needed to in order to cleanse ourselves of the acute pain we were feeling. He said that the

human heart was a sturdy instrument, and that it was in no way weak or unmanly to show one's emotions in public, and Bicks noted he didn't mention God once.

Another student, the captain of the track team, Zack Fontaine, stood up and said that Terence McElroy was a great guy, a great runner, and that he would most definitely be missed. It felt funny to Bicks that in all the speeches he heard that morning, no one had used the name Tweezy once, and at times it felt as if they were talking of someone else beside his friend.

Lastly, Mr. Filer walked to the microphone. Bicks heard Cash mutter, "Oh, now we hear from the big prick himself." Filer pulled a piece of paper from inside his jacket, unfolded it and said, "I had Terry, or Tweezy as some of you called him, in two of my English comp classes, freshman and sophomore year. He was a fine young man, one of the finest at this school. And although I never knew him personally, since he rarely raised his hand in class—" Here Filer paused and gave a little cough, drawing a few laughs from the students, Bicks and his friends especially. "—I did get to know him quite well from the essays he wrote for my various homework assignments. And I don't think he'd mind if I read from one of these now, to give us something else to remember him by." Filer put on his bifocals. "This is from an essay he wrote on a book we read in class, 'Robinson Crusoe.' Terry wrote: 'Being shipwrecked and all was really hard on Crusoe because he was all alone on a strange island in the middle of nowhere and didn't have any food and was always hungry and had to build his own house so he wouldn't get rained on. The worst thing of all was he had nobody to talk to except a stupid parrot that probably just repeated everything he said like most parrots do...' Filer paused for the

laughter, and then continued. "... and so when he found Friday that was my favorite part, because Robinson wasn't lonely anymore. I think everyone gets lonely sometimes and I think the theme of the book is people need people so they won't get lonely. It made me feel how I would feel if I was ever trapped on a desert island, and if I was ever on an island and could only bring one thing I would bring my friends."

Thundering applause filled the gymnasium as Mr. Filer turned away from the microphone and took his seat. Bicks was shaken by a sudden surge of emotion. He felt his eyes watering, and the harder he tried to hold it inside the more the tears came. He wiped his eyes with the sleeve of his shirt without looking at his friends, pretty sure they were tearing up too.

Wednesday morning he went to the funeral at a church nearby, and there were so many kids in attendance it was standing room only. He saw a few fellows he knew from school but stood in the back of the church by himself wishing now he could stand up and say something, tell people what he thought of Tweezy and how much he had made him laugh. Later in the church parking lot, he met up with Degs and Grady and they said they were going to cut school altogether, go get high or something, that people at school would cut them a break seeing as how it was the day of Tweezy's funeral. But Bicks said he just didn't feel like it and hitched a ride back to school with another kid in his English class. In class, Mr. Filer mentioned something about it, that anyone who wanted to talk about the recent death at school could make an appointment with one of the school counselors, meaning him, and he then gave Bicks a sympathetic look, knowing he was one of Tweezy's best friends and probably needed to talk more than anyone else, but

Bicks just looked away. The rest of that day was a fog, teachers at chalkboards droning on about stuff Bicks couldn't get himself to care about, nobody talking about Tweezy's death in class, probably because they just wanted to forget about it and get on with their lives.

Bicks couldn't forget. That night he called Grady and they talked. Grady then called Big Mike and later Big Mike drove over to Bicks' house, Cash and Grady already in the car, and they all went driving, Big Mike again driving his sister's pink VW Beetle, the guys ribbing him about the color of the car, suggesting that it was the perfect color for a pussy like Big Mike to drive.

The guys didn't say much else, though. A joint was passed around. They stopped at a Steak N Shake for cheeseburgers and fries and sat in the parking lot and ate in the car. Big Mike said it sucked Tweezy was dead. Grady said Tweezy was the best. Cash agreed.

"It just doesn't seem real," Cash said. "I mean he's here, and then... all these funerals and shit..."

"Yeah," said Big Mike, not knowing what else to say.

"So you guys saw it, right?" Cash said to Grady and Bicks. "What happened?"

"He was running and he just fell," Grady said.

"Right at the finish line," Bicks said.

"Just—wham! He went down. We thought he pulled a muscle, but..."

Bicks finished his mouthful of fries and said, "I keep seeing it in my head, you know? I was stoned, we both were, me and Grady, and I can still see it, the picture of him

falling and shit, and I just want to let go of it but I can't. It's like if I keep seeing it I can keep him with me somehow, but I know..."

There was a long silence, the guys just eating, not talking. Bicks torn up inside, trying to hold everything in.

Cash said, "It's hard for all of us, man. It's okay."

Talk drifted to other things. Girls. School. But soon, they ran out of other things to say and Cash said maybe they should call it a night. After they dropped him off, Bicks watched a little TV with his mom and then said he was going to bed. But he couldn't sleep and just lay there listening to the muted sounds of canned laughter coming from the TV in the other room, Mary Tyler Moore boo-hooing in front of Mr. Grant.

^ ^ ^

Arriving at school Thursday morning, Bicks's throat tightened at the sight of two police cars parked outside the front entrance. Through the lobby window he saw two uniformed patrolmen. They were standing directly beneath the bronze crucifix of the suffering Christ that hung on the wall above the main office, conferring with Principal Palmer, the tallest of the cops smoking, tapping ashes on the floor. Hurrying down the hall to class he passed two other patrolmen chatting with a trio of teachers, their sober looks telling him something serious was going down.

In first period history class, Dega whispered from across the aisle, "What's going on, Bicks? I heard the cops are here, interviewing people."

“You mean interrogating,” said Big Mike, seated in front of Degs. “They’re interrogating us. Like the Nazis did.”

“Nazis didn’t have to interrogate anyone,” said a third kid with a crewcut. “They just put ‘em in ovens.”

“You’re a douche bag, you know that?” Big Mike said to the third kid, and then to Bicks said, “It’s about Tweezy. It’s got to be.”

A fourth kid chimed in. “I saw them checking lockers.”

“Lockers?” said Bicks, struck with panic now. He had drugs in his locker, and Big Mike knew he had drugs in his locker.

“Better get to it quick, Bicks,” Big Mike said, “who knows what these fuckers’ll do.” Bicks’s stomach felt squeezed up into his ribcage, expecting any second to be taken away in handcuffs.

“You really think they’re coming for us?” asked Degs, his lower lip quivering.

“You bet your ass they’re coming. A kid died, and they’re not stopping ‘til they find out how. And you know what *I’m* saying when those Nazi fucks come to interrogate me.”

“No, what?” asked Degs. “What are you saying?”

“Fuck you and your tin badge too, that’s what I’m saying,” Big Mike said.

“Which means I ain’t saying shit, and neither should you.”

When the bell rang Bicks went straight to his locker, grabbed the bag of weed he had there and flushed it down the men’s room toilet. Then, in second period French, they came for Cash, just like Big Mike said they would. A face at the door, a few whispered words, and the teacher told Cash he was wanted in Principal Palmer’s office, Cash

flashing one of those you-can't-catch-me smiles as he blew out the door, Bicks realizing this was some deep shit they were in.

In third period it got even deeper. Mrs. Briggs came in and whispered to Father Hobart, the priest with a hearing aid. "Who?" he said. "*Who* do you want?"

Mrs. Briggs waved him off in irritation and, spotting Bicks, said, "You. Bicks. You're wanted in the office. Now." And out he went with her.

When the door of the principal's office closed behind him and he was told to take a chair, Bicks sat in the same chair he had sat in before. Across the desk sat Principal Palmer. Standing over him was the tall policeman he had seen outside. The man had a tiny pencil moustache above big thick brown lips and a day's growth of beard that made him look more beastly than he probably wanted to look. The man was still smoking, a menthol Kool, Bicks noticed, and the cop leaned over the desk to tap his ash and then lifted his left buttocks up onto the corner of the principal's desk and sat there staring down at Bicks for a long moment, his eyes like the eyes of a snake.

"I'm Sergeant Hufflin," said the policeman, eyeing a clipboard, "and your name is Bicks, is that right?"

"Yes, sir," said Bicks. "Thomas Bicks. I'm a sophomore."

"A sophomore, is it? So you knew Terry McElroy. The deceased."

"Yes. He was my friend."

"And you're aware that Terry died on Saturday, while running track right out back on St. Boniface Field?"

"Yes, sir. I saw it, sir."

“You saw it?”

“Yes, I saw him fall, I mean.”

“You witnessed his death.”

“I guess so.”

“You *guess* so?”

“Well, I didn’t know at the time that he was dead. I just thought—”

“You just thought what?”

“I just thought he was hurt, at first. And then, when I saw the ambulance... I knew it was more serious.”

“More serious.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Well, you got that right. It couldn’t *be* more serious. And you know why?”

Bicks didn’t know what to say. “No, sir.”

“Bicks, do you how you’re friend Terry died?”

Bicks shrugged.

“Doctors at Saint Vincent’s hospital pronounced him dead on the scene, calling his death a heart attack. Now, don’t you think that’s strange? A seventeen-year-old dying that way?”

“Well, he was running real fast, sir, and—”

“And *what?*” When Bicks didn’t answer, the cop continued his diatribe. “A kid runs fast and dies of a *heart attack*? Buddy, I been a cop going on fifteen years now and you know how many times I seen a highschool athlete get a heart attack playing sports? Not a

once. Zee-ro.” The cop crushed out his cigarette in the ash tray, breathing the smoke out his nose. “So, yeah, it’s strange. Mighty damn strange. That’s why we ran a few more tests on your good buddy and guess what we found. Toxicology report shows he died of a drug overdose. An O.D.”

Bicks felt kicked in the guts. An O.D.? But how could that be?

“And,” the cop continued, “do you know what he o.d.’d *on*?”

Bicks shook his head.

“Oh, come, come, Mr. Bicks, don’t act all innocent.”

“Sir, I swear to you—”

“Speed, son. Amphetamine. The Devil’s drug. It was the drugs that gave him that heart attack, Mr. Bicks. And *I’m* here to find out who *gave* him those drugs.” The sergeant lifted his hindquarters off the desk and stood, lighting another Kool and glancing at Principal Palmer.

Palmer said, “Bicks, we know you were his friend, and we know you and Tweezy were thick as thieves with Cash and Skolski and that whole gang of idiots he runs with. What I want—what the officer is here for—is your cooperation. Tell us and tell us now. A boy *died* here. Your *friend*. Can’t you see that the fun and games are over?”

Bicks nodded, trying to look responsible. Like he really understood the gravity of the situation.

“The truth is I don’t know anything about amphetamines, sir. I’m shocked to hear that Tweezy—Terry was taking them. I had no idea.”

“That’s not the answer I was looking for, Bicks,” said the sergeant.

“But that’s the truth, sir. Honest to God.”

“The sooner you tell us, the easier it will be,” Principal Palmer said. “On all of us.”

Easier for you, you mean, thought Bicks. *My friend’s the one who’s dead*. Bicks could see how things stood. A death. An O.D. Drugs involved. Someone had to pay. He was getting that swallowed-up feeling again and he did the only thing he *could* do. He cried. Ashamed at first, he put his head in his hands and let the tears come, hot and wet and dripping down his arms, they were.

“Okay, son,” said the cop, “it’s all right now. Tell us all about it.”

“Sir,” Bicks said between his sobs, “all I can tell you is—my friend is dead—and I miss him—and he didn’t deserve to die—not like that—that’s the truth—the truest thing I can say—and I wish he was still alive because—because I really really liked him.”

The tears stopped. He wiped his eyes on a Kleenex the principal handed him.

The sergeant gave him a sad look and said, “I’m sorry too, son, really, I am. But I have a job to do. People are going to get hurt. And I just hope you’re not one of them.”

Chapter 13

News of the “drug-related death” caused a storm of protest. Parents flooded Palmer’s office with demands for a full inquiry into “the track star’s tragic end,” as the local newspaper put it, and a school-wide investigation into drug use on campus. Bicks and his classmates endured a week of news reporters and TV crews poking around, sticking microphones in their faces as they walked into school in the morning. Once, they

were accosted out on the field during calisthenics in P.E. class and asked if they took drugs. Coach Schrommek chased them off the field, threatening to break their camera, and Bicks found himself liking the coach more after that. Even Cash, in Filer's English class, complained about the ruckus, saying that it was "making it hard to concentrate on my studies." Filer gave him a major you-suck look and chose not to comment.

Tweezy's father was quoted in the paper as saying drugs were a menace to society, that they were a sign of the "decadence and decay of the moral fabric." Bicks read it one morning at the kitchen table as he ate his cornflakes, and he couldn't help thinking that the quote was redundant and probably what Filer would call a mixed metaphor. He didn't blame Tweezy's father, of course—the man was grieving, for crissakes—but the English major in him noted the error. What bothered him most was the reference to morality. What did recreational drug use have to do with bad morals? Murder. Kidnap. Rape. Robbery. *That* was immoral. But drugs? Drugs were what kids did to stay sane. Adults had their alcohol, kids had their pot. What was so hard to understand about that? Okay, so maybe pills, speed, especially, was a little more dangerous. A lot more dangerous, in Tweezy's case. But still. It might be stupid, but why immoral?

Bicks's mom wanted Bicks to go over to Tweezy's parent's house and deliver his condolences in person. "You were his friend," his mother insisted, "his good friend. You go over there and tell his mother and father how you felt and how much you liked their son. It will mean so much to them." Though sickened by the thought, in his heart Bicks knew she was right. He also knew that *he* knew the guys who probably had given him those drugs, and so, prodded by his guilt, he sent a card instead.

He was bothered by his avoidance of Tweezy's parents, people he'd met many times at their house. He'd eaten his mother's cherry pies, her tuna casseroles. He'd smiled at their jokes. He'd even jacked off once in their bathroom with the door locked, after seeing Tweezy's buxom older sister Gail sunbathing on the lawn in a pink two-piece bathing suit. It had gotten him hot and he'd gotten his rocks off while Tweezy's mom was right in the next room frying hamburgers. It hadn't felt all that weird at the time, but now, given recent events, the thought of it bothered him and he confessed it to Grady on the phone a few days after Tweezy's death.

"I guess it's just, I feel guilty," Bicks said.

"Why? Because you pounded your meat in their bathroom?"

"Because we *know*."

"Know what?"

"Where he got the drugs." Bicks hesitated. He could hear Grady exhale into the phone. "And that makes us, I don't know—responsible in a way."

"Responsible? But *we* didn't know he was going to be that stupid. Cranking before a race? I mean, c'mon."

"I know, but still," Bicks said. As they kept talking he could hear the fear in Grady's voice, and wished he hadn't said a thing. Quickly he told Grady not to tell anyone what he'd said, he wasn't himself these days, and Grady said he felt the same.

As part of the principal's crackdown on drugs, Palmer instituted a new zero tolerance policy, and he announced it one morning over the school p.a. system during Bicks' English class. "Starting today, any student caught using or selling illegal drugs of

any kind—even as little as one marijuana cigarette—will be in violation of the law and subject to immediate expulsion.”

“What about any *teachers* caught using illegal drugs?” Cash said with a cocked brow, daring to stare right at Filer as he said it, getting a reaction from the room.

“I think, Mr. Anderson,” Filer said mildly, “all you need worry about is yourself.”

All expulsions, Palmer continued, would be swift and final. And if expelled, a student would have no recourse to appeal the decision or plea for leniency to the EGC, the executive governing council. Principal Palmer signed off with his usual, “Good day, gentlemen,” and then there was a moment of sober silence.

“It seems,” Mr. Filer said from his chair, “that the proverbial chickens have come home to roost. I strongly suggest that you all take Principal Palmer at his word. The fun and games are over.”

^^^

That afternoon, Bicks was attacked. Out in the parking lot after school, he was sauntering to Grady’s car, lost in thought, when two greaser dudes came from behind and shoved him to the pavement between two parked cars. With Bicks largely hidden from view, the guys started kicking him in the ribs and legs, their hard boots stabbing him in pain. “Narc bastard!” one guy yelled.

“Stinking rat motherfucker!”

“I’m not a narc!” Bicks cried, fending off the blows with his forearms.

“Shit head!”

“Suckass!”

As the cursing and kicking continued—*wham!*—an ankle bone collided with his chin, his head lighting up like a pinball machine. He curled up and tucked in his head, covering it with his hands to protect himself as best he could.

“Foggy says fuck you!”

“Dead meat!”

Then, abruptly, the kicking stopped. Bicks heard a voice bellowing, “Punk piece a shit—” There was scuffling and cursing, then Bicks uncovered his head to see Big Mike slam one guy’s forehead into a car window and the guy crumple. The other longhair, turning to run, tripped backward over Bicks’ legs and sprawled to the pavement. It was Randy Flecker, one of Foggy’s greaser pals. He lay there wild-eyed and dazed, blood dribbling from his nose. In a flash Bicks was on top of him, pounding Randy’s face with his fists, a fury springing forth in Bicks he was powerless to stop. Seconds later, Mike had him by the shoulders and was dragging him away, he and Bicks yelling epithets at the two glowering punks who rubbed their bloody faces and returned dagger stares.

As Grady’s Pinto tore away, Bicks lay slumped in the back seat, fighting back tears. His whole body throbbed in pain. His head pounded. He could feel his muscles spasm and twitch in the places he’d been kicked and he took in gulps of air to keep from crying. He was amazed at how quickly the fight—or ambush, really—had started and then how fast it had been over, and he made sure to mix his moans with plenty of curses so as not to sound like a whining little pussy.

“Lucky I saw you,” Big Mike said from the passenger seat. “Pricks coulda worked you over pretty good.”

“My hands, man,” Bicks said.

“Hurting, huh?” Big Mike said. “It ain’t like in the movies, is it? Now you know what it’s like to really hit a guy. You should’ve seen him, Grade. Wailing on Flecker like Smokin’ Joe Frazier!” Big Mike laughing, thinking Smokin’ Joe the epitome of cool.

“You okay, Booksie?” Degs said over his shoulder as he drove.

“I guess.”

“He’ll live,” said Big Mike, “but those other fucks won’t.”

Still shaking, Bicks sat up straight and lay his forehead against the car window. His right hand throbbing in his lap, he rubbed the knuckles, feeling a filmy wetness. There was blood on his hands. Randy Flecker’s blood, he thought, still warm, in fact. Then, his nose dripping, he wiped it with the back of his hand, and now the rusty-wet smears of Randy’s blood were mixed in with his own. He felt the urge to puke but fought it down.

In the front seat, Big Mike bragged to Degs about how badly he’d hurt Foggy’s boys—“slammed ‘em good”—and Bicks drifted away, flashing on the attack again, the horror of having felt so helpless, and he felt a flood of anger well up and wash away the pain. He tried to recall his last fight. He couldn’t. Was it eighth grade? Against Artie Winkler after school? He’d been given a pounding even then, and had avoided physical confrontations ever since. But the way he’d pounced on Flecker, jeeze, like a jungle animal out for blood. Least he wasn’t the animal Big Mike was, getting in drunken fights with his own father, the two rolling around on their shag-carpeted living room floor,

wrestling and punching and putting each other in headlocks until one guy gave up or threw up or both. Bicks embarrassed the first time he'd seen them go at it, not thinking much of a father who so childishly fought with his son. But then they'd merrily laughed it off and gotten up and gone back to drinking beer, watching TV and being best pals. It had seemed to bring them closer in some weird way, and it had made Bicks wish that his own father had cared enough to do things as wild and impulsive as that when he'd been alive. Strange, the way things that seemed stupid at first sometimes could become a lot less stupid when you got to thinking about them.

"Foggy's boys hit Bicks pretty bad," Big Mike said as he and Degs walked Bicks into the pool house and sat him down on the water bed. "They thought he was a narc," Degs said. Cash, slumped in his beanbag chair with a bottle of schnapps in his lap, lifted his head, looking pretty trashed.

"Who's a narc?" Cash asked.

"They thought Bicks—"

"I'm not a narc," said Bicks. "*Jesus*, c'mon. They fucking jumped me, man."

"Foggy's weasels, Flecker and that other douche bag, what's his name."

"Adams."

"Yeah. Fuckface Adams. Jumped him after school," Big Mike explained, "and lucky I seen 'em and stepped in." Cash took another long pull on the schnapps, tried to stand and couldn't.

"You got an aspirin or something," Bicks moaned, "I'm hurting here, man."

“Got better than that.” Cash drew himself up with some effort and moved to his stash drawer. He dropped to his knees and, once in a lotus position, drew out the drawer and began sorting through his various bags and bottles as he spoke. “The shit’s hitting big,” he said. “Cops got Foggy, Lumler. That sophomore with the queer glasses.”

“Who? Frolander?”

“Yeah. Paid me a visit too. They were in my living room talking to my mom when I came home. Same badges we saw at school. Cop says, ‘Mr. Anderson, we have reason to believe you sell drugs on campus.’ I said, ‘Oh, really, who told you that?’ They said, ‘A little bird.’ I said, ‘I got a bird for you,’ and I gave ‘em one of these.” Cash flashed his middle finger in angry pride, getting a rise from the guys. “Guy goes for me, has me up against the wall, his arm under my chin, my mom’s beating on him, screaming, ‘Let him go, let him go!’ Whole thing pretty funny, actually.”

Cash shut the drawer and came over to Bicks on the water bed, holding out his palm. “Here, bud,” said Cash. “Good for what ails you.” Bicks looked at the pills. Two dark purple capsules with red bands around the middle. They weren’t aspirin, Bicks knew that, and Bicks hesitated.

“Go on,” Cash said. “They’re just Nembies, bro.”

“Nembutal.”

“Yeah. What—you afraid to take it?” Cash asked in irritation. “Tweezy drops dead, now everyone’s drug-free? What the fuck?”

“I didn’t say that,” Bicks said, pushing away the image of Tweezy’s happy smile that filled his mind.

“Well take your fucking medicine, then.”

Cash dropped the pills into Bicks’ hand and shoved him the bottle of schnapps. Ever since the break-up with Sally he’d been hitting the schnapps pretty heavy, downing a quart of the stuff every couple days, the guys joking around, saying it was the beginning of Cash’s “Schnapps Period.” Keeping one pill in his hand, Bicks put the other on his tongue and took a swig of the schnapps, gagging on the fruity burn. The pill felt stuck halfway down his throat so he took another hit of the stuff, trying not to cough it back up. Bicks sat for a moment, so many parts of him throbbing in pain there were too many to count.

Cash fell into talking with Degs and Big Mike about Foggy Baines and how lame it was for Foggy to have his pals do his dirty work and what a squirrely little pussy he was and when Big Mike asked Cash who he thought had ratted out Foggy and Jimmy Lumler Cash said that they’d probably ratted out each other. That *he* hadn’t given the cops any names, he knew that. Then Cash glanced over at Bicks, and Bicks looked away, slipping the extra Nembie in his pocket.

“Well,” Big Mike said, “maybe it’s none of you guys who snitched.”

“None of who?” Cash said.

“You and Foggy and Lumler.”

“Yeah?”

“Maybe you and Foggy and Lumler didn’t tell the cops a thing. Maybe it was someone else.”

“Like who? Books here?”

“Fuck you,” Bicks said.

“Like anybody,” said Big Mike. “Let’s face it. Pretty much everyone knows the three top dealers in school, that ain’t no secret. They could name you, Lumler and Foggy, even if they’d never bought from you.” Then, thinking he’s paying Cash a compliment, “I mean, c’mon, you’re a big deal, Cash, the biggest in school.”

“So what are you saying?” Cash asked, his voice tightening.

“I’m saying the fink could be anyone. Any goody-goody dweebster could easily go to Palmer’s office and volunteer the names. Anyone who just bought one joint off you could narc you out too.”

Bicks felt his scalp tighten. *The kids he’d sold to could talk. He was in just as deep of shit as Cash was.*

“Yeah, but coming from a nerd like Gilfenbain, say, or that guy with the goofy glasses, what’s his name.”

“Menke,” Bicks put in.

“Menke,” said Cash. “Cops don’t care what those guys say, not really. I mean they might believe them, so what. But getting a *stoner* to rat, that’s—that’s gold, man.”

“Nerd, druggie,” Big Mike said. “What’s the dif?”

“The dif,” Cash said, “is a stoner can *testify*.” The word seemed to slice the room in half, Cash’s emphasis on it like the hiss of a knife. “Stoners are eye witnesses, boys. They’ve seen things first hand, so it’s not hearsay. They’ve seen you buy, seen you sell. Seen money change hands. They can talk possession. They can put you at the scene. They know what you sell and how you sell it and where and when it all goes down and the

others who buy from you and they know the secret place you keep your stash. And if stoners get caught with their *own* drugs, the cops put the squeeze on, get ‘em to squeal, and when that happens they’ll turn in their best friends to save their own ass.”

Bicks feeling a tingle across the top of his head as Cash drank off the rest of the schnapps. “Well, that ain’t happening with us, man,” Big Mike was quick to say. “No squealers here.” He gave Cash a wide grin.

Cash ignored it and said, “Which is why one of you’s taking my stash home with you and hiding it for me.”

No one spoke, the guys hoping Cash was trashed enough to forget what he’d said if they waited long enough. Memories of Tweezy haunting Bicks, the thought of him being dead, O.D.’d on speed probably scored from Cash, punching through his haze of pain. Realizing, *If I talk I’m no friend to Cash, if I don’t talk I’m no friend to Tweezy. Who was more important? The living or the dead?* He hoped Cash wasn’t right; he hoped they’d never have to say a thing against each other and could stay friends forever.

“So who’s up for it?” asked Cash. “C’mon—all the freebies I’ve given you and you can’t do me a favor when I need one?”

“Sure, sure, man,” Big Mike said, “but I can’t hide it in my garage, all the people coming and going. My basement, maybe. Like under my dad’s workbench, I don’t know, or behind all the washer dryer stuff.” Then, passing the buck, he glanced at Bicks and then over to Degras. “Degras?”

“Man, I don’t know, man,” Degras said, scratching his chin like he always did when nervous. “My dad’s kind of a snoop, going through my stuff all the time when I’m not

home. He found that hash pipe I used to have, asking what kind of dope was I doing.

That's what he called me. 'Dope fiend.' Had to tell him I was just keeping it for a friend."

"Sure, you were," said Cash sarcastically.

"Even found my stack of Playboys I had, underneath a bunch of National Geographics in my closet. I come home he throws them down on the kitchen table, right in front of my mom. 'What kind of pervert keeps filth like this?' he says. 'In our own *home?*'"

"A perv like Degs," Big Mike snickered.

"He had my mom crying, saying I'd have to see the priest, go to confession every day for a year or some shit. That I was a sex fiend only God could cure. Then he starts paging through the magazines right there, acting all disgusted showing me the foldouts."

"No way," said Bicks, trying to contribute.

"Yeah, he's flipping through the pages, pulling out the centerfolds, pushing 'em right in my face. 'Look at this, *look!*' he said 'You know what you are? You're a—'" Degs couldn't remember the word and he swung a look to Big Mike. "What'd he call me? A venerable...?"

"An inveterate masturbator," Big Mike said.

"Yeah, an inventive masturbator."

"In-*vet*-erate," said Big Mike. "Means you can't stop doing it."

Degs' mouth popped open. "That's *so* not true, I can stop."

"Sure you could," Big Mike said with a grinning snort.

"If I wanted to, I could stop."

“But you don’t want to,” Big Mike said.

“Right.”

“Hard to stop,” Big Mike smirked to Cash, “when it’s the only sex he’s getting.”

Cash muttered a laugh, Degs made a face and Bicks could tell from the expression on Cash’s face he hadn’t forgotten the need to hide his stash.

Then Big Mike said, “And you told your dad that? Right in front of your mom?”

“No! I said I didn’t know what he was talking about! Denied the whole deal. Told him I just kept ‘em for the articles.”

“The articles.”

“I may have said I looked at the girls a couple times, just out of curiosity. I think I said, ‘Out of natural curiosity.’ And I said I liked the interviews.”

“And you thought he’d *buy* that?”

“Well, I had to say something, give some excuse. What would you have said?”

“I’d have said, ‘Yeah, so what? So I jerk off a little, dad, what’s the big deal? Everyone does it. You should try it sometime, make you less of an uptight asshole.’”

“Yeah, right. No way you would’ve said that.”

“Yeah,” said Big Mike, in condescension, “‘cause I never would’ve got caught in the first place. You don’t leave skin mags laying around just anywhere. Hiding porn’s an art, man.”

“I *had* them hidden, I told you.”

There was a pause as everyone in the room watched Big Mike pull out a joint and flick open his Zippo to fire it up. He drew in a deep hit, and holding the smoke in his

lungs, said, “So, what’d your dad do then? Rip ‘em to shreds? Burn ‘em in the fireplace?” He exhaled a blue halo of smoke and casually passed the jay to Cash.

“I guess so,” said Degs. “They grounded me and I went to my room. I never saw the magazines again, I figured he threw them in the trash.”

“The trash, huh? Don’t be so sure, man. Mighty tempting, a stash like yours. Even for a holy roller like your dad.”

“*Especially* for a holy roller like your dad,” said Cash.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Meaning he probably kept ‘em for himself,” Cash said.

“My dad?” Degs said in disbelief. “Are you kidding? He *hates* pornography.”

“So he says,” said Cash, raising a brow.

Big Mike stirring it up further, saying, “C’mon, Degs. Centerfolds like the ones you had? That Miss April? With those huge bazoombas? You don’t think your dad’s got ‘em in the basement somewhere, stashed away for a rainy day?”

“Or even a cloudy day,” Cash said.

“You’re crazy. He canceled our subscription to *Time* when they put Cher on the cover in that flimsy negligee thing.”

“That you jacked off to.”

“That we *all* jacked off to,” said Degs.

“I’m telling you, man, the holy ones are the horniest of all,” said Big Mike with a new air of authority. “Nuns, priests, having to go their whole lives without sex? C’mon. They’re so horny you know they gotta be doing *something* in those rectories.”

“Men of God whacking off?” Degs said in disgust. “You’re sick.”

“*I’m* sick? What about that creep, Father Cloudering. Coming in our locker room after P.E. every week, passing out his graded Religion tests while we’re coming out of the showers buck naked? I seen him looking at our cocks, checking us out, that weird little smile on his face.”

“That *is* kinda queer.”

“Kinda? He’s a full-on fag, man! You catch Cloudering watching your weenie, you better watch out. Don’t go to him for confession, either. Pat Flynn said Cloudering was hearing his confession once and Pat started talking about how he had balled some chick and Cloudering started asking all kinds of questions about what he did and how he did it and how it made him feel and at the end of it all Flynn said he wouldn’t absolve him. Said he had to take special counseling in Cloudering’s private chambers. You believe that?”

“Did he go?”

“Hell no he didn’t go!”

“Fucking queer ass priests,” said Cash, and the way he said it put a kind of punctuation mark on the conversation and there was a long stretch of silence as Cash took another hit off the joint and the guys were alone with their thoughts. Even with his throbbing pain Bicks remembered how weird it felt when, week after week, the priest Cloudering stood there looking at their privates as they stepped out of the steaming hot showers, the heavy flakes of dandruff on the shoulders of his black cassock like little sprinkles of snow, and the man’s eyes cagy and covetous. When he’d worked up the

nerve to tell his mom about it she'd gotten angry—at *him*—for suggesting that the priest—any priest—was anything but pure, and it had been another reminder that parents had no clue about highschool.

A dreamy feeling oozed over him, his pain growing distant, and he realized it must be the Nembutal kicking in. And with the dissipation of his physical pain came a new awareness: the drug did nothing to quell his anxiety, and back it came in full force, the crippling fear that had been building in him since Tweezy's untimely death. The O.D., the crackdown at school, cops, narcs—it had all been like a constricting noose around his neck, each day growing tighter, threatening to suffocate him. And sitting on the edge of the water bed, with the barbiturates taking hold of him, the worry arose like a cold sea inside him. And any thoughts of the speed that killed Tweezy having been sold to him by Cash rarely lasted more than a moment or two before they were shooed away by an awful awareness that Tweezy himself was to blame. Tweezy had been the one stupid enough to think the white cross could help him win a race. Tweezy himself had made the decision to do drugs before the race, no one had forced him into it. *Why, Tweeze? Why'd you do it, dude? Stupid dumbshit.* And the only thing that quelled the anger he felt at his friend was knowing that, for now, he still had *these* friends. Cash. Big Mike, Degs. Grady. Guys he belonged to. Could hang and get high with. But as close as he felt to them, as safe as he knew he was—or *had* been—a seed of doubt had begun to grow. Maybe things had changed. Maybe because of what had happened to Tweezy, things between them would never be the same. Maybe the very friends he trusted most were the ones that could do him the most harm. He batted each of these thoughts away as they came at him, trying to

push them off the stage of his mind, prevent them from getting to the microphone and making their voices even louder. But each time he pushed one off into the shadows, another was there to take its place, and in a moment of panic he opened his mouth, wanting to say to Cash and the others, *We're friends, guys, why would we ever say anything to hurt each other.*

But then Degs spoke up first and said, "You really think my dad jerks off?"

Cash fell out of his beanbag chair, he was laughing so hard, Big Mike's belly laughs echoing off the walls as he told Degs that any man married to Degs' mom, no matter how holy, had to be pounding the porksword pretty hard given how dumpy his mom looked. Degs got mad, saying how dare they call his mom a dog. Big Mike said he never called her a dog, and Cash said she was more like a heifer, and when Degs said he didn't know what a heifer was Cash said it was a kind of cow and then Degs got even madder and Big Mike couldn't stop laughing for the longest time and when things had finally settled down and the laughing was over, Bicks looked down at a spot on the floor and said, "I'll do it."

Bicks felt the energy in the room shift. He heard the squinch of Cash's body shifting in the bean bag chair. He turned to see Cash looking right at him, and Bicks said, "I'll hide your stuff for you." A gleam came into Cash's glassy eyes and he gave Bicks a grateful smile.

"Booksie, you do me proud, man, you really do my proud."

Though Bicks couldn't be sure, he thought the expression on Cash's face might be something approaching love.

Chapter 14

“A girl on the phone for you!” his mother called again. “A Sally Mackenzie?”

Bicks sat up in bed. Sally? Calling *him*? Bicks felt his stomach go fluttery and his heart beginning to pound as he got to his feet and threw on his pants, in a sudden panic that his mom would actually *talk* to the girl and make him look dumb somehow. Moms had a way of doing that even when they were just trying to be nice.

But as he came into the kitchen he saw his mother quietly cutting carrots, smiling wanly, as if at some private joke she'd never share, the receiver lying on its side on the counter beneath the wall phone. They only had one phone, an old-style rotary model stuck to the wall in the kitchen, but luckily it had a long cord. So he picked up the receiver and went midway down the basement steps, shutting the kitchen door on the coiled cord so he'd have privacy. He put the phone to his ear and said hello.

“Are you alright?” Sally said, her voice flushed with concern.

“Huh?”

“I heard you got in a fight. Everyone's talking about it. You okay?”

“Yeah,” he said, trying to keep the thrill from his voice.

“What happened?”

“Nothing, really. Just a scuffle at school.”

“A scuffle? I heard it was a lot worse than that.”

“Well, yeah, Foggy’s boys roughed me up some. Thinking I snitched, but I didn’t.”

A silence. Bicks’s heart about to explode. Sally was calling *him*.

“Terrible about Tweezy,” she said. “All the cops and stuff. They had a prayer vigil at school. Girls cried. I cried. Oh, Bicks, it’s so awful isn’t it?”

Bicks so excited to have Sally on the phone—calling *him*—he couldn’t speak for a moment. The very sound of her breathing a kind of suggested intimacy. He heard sounds in the background, the clink of ice cubes in a glass. She covered the phone to speak to someone and then came back on.

“I’m here,” she said, and then gave a soft little giggle.

Bicks asked, “Where are you?”

“At a friend’s.”

“I thought your folks wouldn’t let you out?”

“I have my ways. Told my mom I have choir practice at school. So every Tuesday night I can stay out ‘til ten or eleven.”

“I didn’t know you were in choir.”

“I’m not, *silly*, but *they* don’t know that. They don’t know a *lot* of things, so maybe some Tuesday I can come and see *you*.” Loosened by drink, the easy breeze of her voice was ripe with invitation, and soft as the silkiest strands of her hair that brushed his cheek the night they had kissed on the boat. There in the dark of the basement steps, the sound of her sultry breathing in his ear made him feel like he was already lying beside her in

some dark secret place only they shared, she wanting him to want her, to touch her in ways only he could. And though dimly aware that this was what girls did, especially girls like Sally—cocktease, as Cash would put it—that they *had* to do it to feel good about themselves, he let the fantasy flower, thinking he could have her, completely, and that that's why she was calling him.

And then she filled the awkward silence with, "I miss you."

"You do?" Bicks asked, his voice filling with elation. *Was she for real?*

"Well, of course I do. Don't you miss me?"

"Yes, yes, you know I do," Bicks answered. "I just thought—I don't know."

"I miss the moonlight. Remember the moonlight?"

"Yeah. It was nice."

"I don't miss the drunk girl, though. What was her name?"

"Joanie."

"Joanie, right. Poor thing."

Silence. Again, someone in the background. Then a click and Bicks heard a man's voice come over the extension, "Sally, you still on the phone? Who you talking to? I need to make a call." The voice was thick with liquor and Bicks recognized it instantly.

"Be off in a sec," Sally sweetly said, waiting for him to hang up. Bicks keeping his mouth shut until they heard the extension phone go dead. A long uncomfortable moment, and then Sally said, "I guess I gotta get off."

The words flew out of him. "You're at *his* house? *Filer's*?" Bicks said, unable to hide the scorn in his voice, his fantasy blown. "Do you really think that's a good idea?"

He's what? Ten years older than you? I mean, he's taking *advantage* of you." Coming across all *I'm a friend, I'm concerned*, when what he really felt was jealous. Envious Filer could score with her and he couldn't, and resenting her for giving in to him, the enemy. Angry he had so little power over his own life, over girls, himself. So it was over between her and Cash, he didn't care. He could feel it now, the fire of desire, fueling his anger. And though he felt completely stupid for feeling it, he wanted Sally for himself.

"Oh, Bicks," Sally said, her voice falling to a whisper. "It's just—it's complicated."

"Can he hear me?"

A pause, and then she said, "No. He's pouring another drink. I'm in the bedroom. I know it's wrong, but..."

"But what?"

She sighed a throaty girl sigh that turned into a giggle. "But I can't stop. There's something about him, how we are together, Bicks..." And with a dreamy sigh she added, "Something a woman can't describe."

The mysteries conjured by these words seeming so delicious, yet making Bicks feel more a boy than ever and envious of the secrets she possessed. Filer was a man; Bicks was not. Unknowing, he was thus unworthy.

"I just don't want you to get hurt, Sally—"

He heard Filer's voice again entering the room and Sally's voice went soft, telling him she was getting off and into the phone she said, "I gotta go, Jennifer. Talk later." The line went dead.

When Bicks came up the stairs and back into the kitchen his mother turned to him as he hung up the receiver.

“She sounded like a nice girl, that Sally.”

“Yeah, she’s nice,” he said absently.

His mother wanted to keep talking, asking questions about who Sally was and how he had met her and what school she went to but all Bicks wanted to do was escape. He endured a few more moments of empty conversation and then excused himself to go to his room.

A few minutes later he was out in the garage, rooting around in the stash box that a day earlier he had taken home from Cash’s house and put behind a dusty cardboard container of old paint cans there under his dad’s seldom used workbench. On his knees in the half-light of the garage, picking through the bags of premium-grade marijuana and the appealing arrays of pills and the powders, he felt a small prick of guilt. Wasn’t this wrong? Should he be doing this? Helping himself so freely to Cash’s stash? Well, why not? He was the one that offered to hide it. If he was taking the risk, shouldn’t he have some reward? This is what he told himself as he lifted a whole baggie of primo California gold and pocketed it, telling himself that he deserved it, that it would help ease the pain he still felt from the fight and that Cash wouldn’t miss it anyway, given his own compromised condition. And why was it always *him* doing for others? Being so loyal and shit? Where had that gotten him? Beaten up, that’s where. And pining for girls he’d never get. Cash, Sally, Filer—they could all go fuck themselves. He was tired of being the nice guy helping everyone else with their problems. He helped himself to a small handful of

Qualludes then, thinking these could for sure come in handy sometime, and he took a couple of Thai sticks, too. Then, lifting some sheets of blotter, he spied a large baggie fat with round white tablets. Had to be three hundred hits there at least, the snow-white color of the pills making them look as innocent as candy. But it wasn't candy. He knew that. It was white cross speed. The stuff that had killed Tweezy. And Bicks knew at that moment that the pills his friend had taken had come from this very bag. A creepy chill stole into his belly. Wanting nothing more to do with the stash box and its contents, he reinserted the lid and pushed the box back under the workbench as far as it would go. He slid the cardboard container of paint cans back into position in front of that to hide it all and sat there a moment. The sick feeling had grown worse, a squeeze in the pit of his stomach, the reek of turpentine in his nose only making it worse. The drugs that had killed Tweezy were now in his house and he couldn't very easily give them back. Not now. Not after making such a big impression on Cash and the guys with his offer to be the one to hide them. No, he was stuck with them, all right. Stuck with the whole goddamn situation. And all he could hope for, at least for now, was that no one found out what he had, least of all the cops.

He got to his feet and when he turned toward the door he was surprised to see his mother standing in the doorway, studying him curiously.

“Oh, hi, mom.”

“What are you doing out *here*, for goodness sakes?” As if he were somewhere so remote he may as well be on the moon.

“Oh. Just looking for my old model planes. Did you throw ‘em out? I was thinking I might want to mess around with them tonight.”

She said she didn’t know, that she’d always left the garage to his father and hadn’t been out there in years.

“I had some nice times out here with dad,” Bicks said as wistfully as he could muster in the suddenness of the moment. “When I was little. Gluing on the parts, putting on the decals, the silver paint. Remember?” It was barely true but he knew his mother wanted to believe it.

She smiled. “Yes, I remember,” she said. “I remember the smell of the glue, that’s what I remember. You two sniffing that stuff, surprised the both of you didn’t get high on it.” She gave a little laugh and then said she was going to the store and did he want anything. Did he *want* anything? Yeah, he wanted something. He wanted a life without homework and a girl who would sleep with him and friends that didn’t die. He wanted freedom from the mess he’d gotten into. Yeah, he wanted stuff.

“No, mom, thanks,” he said. And then they both went back into the house, Bicks flicking off the garage light as he shut the door.

“Cash is gone, man. Kicked out of school. Expelled.”

“What?” Bicks said.

“They booted him,” Big Mike said. “He just called me, pissed as hell. Said Palmer met with his parents and everything. Said he’s been expelled. He *and* Jimmy Lumler. Can’t fucking believe it. They can’t do this, not to Cash.”

It was early Saturday morning, around eleven, and Bicks was still woozy from just having woken up. Big Mike paused, and Bicks could hear the electric kitchen clock ticking loudly overhead.

“Did you hear me, man? Cash is out. They cleaned out his locker and everything.”

“Well, he’s been suspended before, right? And his dad convinced them—”

“No, no, this time it’s permanent. Like, for real permanent.”

“Why? What happened?”

“They found something. A book in Tweezy’s locker. It had the white cross he’d taken in it. And it had fingerprints.”

For a moment Bicks couldn’t breathe.

Big Mike told him how it all went down.

At first, the police hadn’t found any drugs in Tweezy’s locker at all. But then at the behest of his parents they had gone through everything again—everything in his locker, in his room at home, in his desk in home room, in his gym locker. And what they’d found was something they had easily overlooked.

A geometry textbook, with eight hits of white cross hidden inside, scotch-taped across page 113. There had been ten hits, but two had been torn out, presumably the two

that Tweezy had taken before the race. And, as one of the police officers had told Cash's parents, nothing captures fingerprints like Scotch tape. There were two sets of prints on the tape: one was Tweezy's and one was Cash's. They had come to his house and had him ink his prints on an official police blotter and everything. Big Mike went on breathlessly telling Bicks that Cash said someone at school was talking to the cops about him, some eye witness saying that they *saw* him selling drugs, not just once but lots of times, and that he thinks it's Filer. All the while Big Mike talking and all Bicks could think about was the book, the geometry textbook. The same book he now realized that Cash had him deliver to Tweezy that afternoon after lunch. He remembered it so clearly now, the image crystallizing in his head. He had handed the book to Tweezy and Tweezy put it on the upper shelf of his locker. The two had stood there in front of his open locker, Bicks asking about a certain party he knew was happening Friday night and Tweezy saying, no, he couldn't go, he had a track meet early Saturday morning. He got a flash of Tweezy's lopsided smile, that goofy little grin he was in the habit of using, more of a smile to himself than to any other person.

“Bicks, you listening? You hear me? I said Cash is expelled, man.”

Bicks came back to the conversation. “I heard you, man. Cash is kicked out. So what do we do? What the fuck do we do now?” Bicks fixated on the book. A little surprised and guilty that he was worried more about his own ass than Cash's or anyone else's and wondering if he should get rid of the stash in the garage. Expecting cops would come crashing in his front door any minute and take him away in handcuffs, thinking he was next, that he might be following Cash down the same rat hole. Had he told any of his

pals where he had hidden Cash's stuff? Degs? Big Mike? Could they get him in trouble if they were forced to? Bicks had a blizzard of half-thoughts tearing through his head, fighting off a heart-pounding panic, thinking he should go right now and dump the drugs in the trash. But *fuck*. He didn't want to get *rid* of the drugs; he wanted to *take* the drugs. He'd gotten used to having them around, having stuff to sell or stuff to take whenever he wanted. There hadn't been a day since Tweezy's death that Bicks hadn't been high on something. Pot. Pills. Acid. Schnapps. Sometimes, all four at once. He'd even been high in Filer's class a couple times and no one had seemed to notice. What should he do? He was just as afraid of losing the drugs as he was of getting caught with them. And the book, the goddamn *book*? What was he going to do about that?

"Cash is feeling pretty low, man," he heard Big Mike saying. "We should all go over, cheer him up a little. Maybe bring some chicks over or something."

"Yeah."

"You still seeing that Sheryl babe?"

"Yeah," Bicks said. "I mean I think so."

"You *think* so?" Big Mike said, laughing through his smoker's cough. "Well, that sure is pretty damn definite."

Bicks tried to explain his remark away, saying he hadn't seen her in awhile but, yeah, they were still, you know, going out and stuff, and Big Mike laughed and said, yeah, sure, man, whatever, and they said they might see each other later and they hung up.

Later, laying in bed, listening to the rain rage against his window, Bicks was still in the grip of worry. A spring thunderstorm was in full fury, sheets of rain flooding the streets, and each shock of thunder shook the windowpanes and made them rattle in their casings. Bicks felt very small. He had tried to finish a science fiction paperback Grady had given him, hoping that the adventures of a time-traveling robot would take his mind off his problems, but his thoughts were jumping all over the place and he'd had to put it down. Now he lay staring at the rain-blurred window, watching it light up with every flash of lightning, enthralled by the intensity of it. The geometry book. That was all he could see when he closed his eyes and tried to slip off to sleep. But then the storm had come and kept him awake and raged for so long he had finally decided it was a sign. The gods were clearly telling him: you fucked up, pal. Get rid of the stuff and come clean. Come and be washed clean in the rain. He knew that sleep would be impossible until it was gone. Out of the house for good. He threw off his blankets and sat on the edge of the bed for a moment, telling himself he was doing the right thing. For the right reasons. But if he were really honest with himself he wasn't sure what the right reasons were anymore.

Not bothering to put on a robe, he crept quietly in socks and pajamas down the hallway, through the kitchen and into the garage. Once in the garage, he could feel the hair on his legs bristle from the sudden cold air, and he stood for a moment in the dark, listening to the clatter of rain on the pavement of the driveway just outside the garage door, wondering what to say if his mother were to wake up and ask what he was doing. If the tables were turned and they had to cover for him, *would* they? Would they agree to hide something of his if he were in trouble? Fuck, no.

He flicked on the light and quickly crouched down and hurried to pull out the paint container, then reached back to drag out the stash box. He pushed the paint container back into place, then lifted the stash box and walked it to the trash cans in the far corner. He lifted the lid and looked in. Hard as it was, he knew he was doing the right thing. The safe thing. If Cash wanted it back, tough shit. The game had changed. And chances were, thought Bicks, that with Cash feeling the heat now he wouldn't care what happened to his merchandise.

Bicks pushed the stash box deep into the grimy mess of tin cans and leftovers, then carefully covered it up, reset the lid and hurried back to turn out the light. He stopped. Something wasn't right. Technically, it was still *in* the house. On the property. If the cops were to come first thing in the morning, the trash would be the first place they might look.

It was no good. He had to find another place to hide it.

Back at the trash can he dug down into the coffee grinds and orange peels and chicken bones to pull out the stash box, smearing the rotting slime off the box with the side of his palm. Seized with a sudden need to be free of the box and all its incriminating contents, he pushed open the back door and ran out into the rain in search of a new hiding place. He had expected the rain to be cleansing; it wasn't. He felt the pelting droplets wetting his face, dripping into his scalp. In just footsteps his socks were soaked through, icy rain running in rivulets down his neck and under his pajama top. A gust of wind blew a curtain of rain splashing onto the back of his head and neck. Damn, it was cold. Windy, too.

He sought shelter on the side of the house, and there, momentarily shielded from the wind and rain, collected his thoughts, suddenly aware that he might look rather suspicious running around outside in the rain in his pajamas at one AM in the morning. He felt wet and cold and stupid, and knew he had to find a place and find one quick.

Bicks froze as a car passed by in the street, its headlights illuminating the mouth of the sewer swallowing up rainwater. The sewer, yes, he'd dump it down there. Gone forever. But then, just as quickly, he realized, no, the box was too big. He might get out in the street and find out the box wouldn't fit through the sewer and he'd be kneeling there out in the open and if another car came by... No, that was no good. So where, then?

The wind shifted, now blowing right in his face, driving rain into his eyes. He heard a clatter and saw, just a dozen yards away, the neighbor's trash cans bumping against the house, the wind whipping so strongly it was banging the metal cans up against the aluminum siding. In a blink he was out in the rain again, splooshing across the soggy grass, moving quickly to the cans, having decided this was where he'd hide the stuff. He dumped it in, not bothering to hide the box underneath any of the other trash in the garbage can, on went the lid and back ran Bicks around the side of his house and into the garage, feeling a rush of relief as soon he had closed the door behind him. Every inch of him sopping wet, but happy he was free.

He wiped dry his feet with a crusted rag that hung on a nail over the workbench and then tip-toed back through the house to his room. He peeled off his pajamas and shoved them under a pile of other dirty clothes in his closet, threw on some shorts and a t-shirt and slipped back under the covers, waiting for his body warmth to spread under the

covers. His window was just a dark rectangle now, the flashes of lightning gone from the sky, but he heard the spooky creak of tree branches and the crying of the wind and though he was relieved to be free of the evidence, it still took him quite a long time to find sleep.

^ ^ ^ ^

Something seemed wrong the first moment he spotted her coming down the escalator. Something in the stiffness of her pose, arms crossed in front of her, an agitated look about her as she descended to the floor of the mall and began to walk toward him. Even from six stores away, he could tell, sitting on the bench in front of Ronnie's Records, that she was disturbed about something. He waved, hoping a show of enthusiasm might lighten her mood. In answer to his wave he got a forced smile that collapsed even before it started. Uh, oh, what's the matter now, Bicks thought. Another fight with her parents? Anger at him not calling enough? *Handle with care*, Cash had warned him. That's what you had to do with girls. And Bicks still had a lot to learn in that department. But, shit, he was feeling too good to have his mood ruined by some girl on the rag; whatever it was she was feeling it wasn't anything that smoking a joint couldn't fix.

He'd slept in late that morning, awaking at quarter past twelve when his mother had poked her head in and announced that a girl named Sheryl had phoned to say she wanted to meet him at the mall that day. Excited by the possibility of an extended make-out session, maybe more if he was lucky, he'd pulled himself out of bed, thrown on some

jeans and a shirt and driven out to Maplewood Mall, anxious to see what the day could do for him. Washed clean by the rains from the night before, the sky was clear and bright and full of promise. Arriving early, he had stood in his usual spot behind the record store, selling loose joints to the long hairs who gathered there to smoke cigarettes and talk music. He'd made some quick pocket money, more than enough to gas up the car and go grab a movie or dinner or do whatever Sheryl wanted. Then he'd gone inside and waited on the bench.

It scared him to see the distraught look on her face as she drew nearer. But then it hit him: Tweezy. That had to be it. She had just heard about Tweezy's death and was upset. Yes, of course. And this boosted his mouth into a smile and he stood to give her a big warm hug as she pushed into his arms and put her face in his chest.

"Oh, Bicks," she sighed.

She sat down on the bench, shoving her hands deep into the pockets of her black and gold puffy ski parka, and he took a seat beside her, waiting for her to speak. She stared mutely at the floor, unable to meet his gaze.

"What? What is it, Sheryl?" he said. "What's wrong?"

She sniffed a derisive little laugh.

"Listen, I totally understand why you're upset," Bicks began, "and I want you to know I'm here for you if you want to talk about it. Believe me, it was hard on all of us—so out of nowhere like that. And I actually *saw* it—I was there when it happened—so it hasn't been easy for me, either."

Her eyes narrowed in confusion.

“There?” Sheryl asked. “Of course you were there. What are you talking about?”

“What?”

“What hasn’t been easy?”

“Uh, Tweezy,” Bicks said. “Him dying and all.”

“Tweezy? Who’s Tweezy?”

“My friend.”

“Your friend died?”

“Uh huh.”

“Oh. I’m sorry. I didn’t know.”

Now Bicks was confused. “You didn’t—well, why are you upset, then? You mad I haven’t called? There’s just a lot going on—since my friend O.D’d there’s narcs at school now, plus Cash, my other friend, you know Cash, he got expelled on account of they think he gave Tweezy the drugs.” He stopped and look at her. She hadn’t heard a thing he’d said, or at least it didn’t seem that way from the way she was looking, the expression on her face.

“Shit’s fucked up, Bicks.”

“Okay.”

She drew in a long breath and held it, her cheeks puffed out like softballs.

“I’m late,” she said.

Bicks said, “What do you mean? You said two o’clock. You’re not—”

“I mean *late* late.” She stared at him, expectantly, waiting for him to puzzle it out.

“My period is late.”

Bicks felt hairs stiffen on the back of his neck. “You mean...”

“I might be pregnant.”

The word went off like a bomb inside him. He felt a rapid pounding in his chest that he realized was his heart beating wildly and his first response was denial. *It's a mistake, it's not me, not mine, no way, it can't be, she's wrong.* Then, strangely, his mind flooded with images of his father's funeral. Standing graveside in the rain, holding an umbrella over his mother, the rain dripping down the front of his cheap suit, the smell of his Uncle's cigar smoke wafting on the breeze.

“And, no,” he then heard her say, “I haven't had sex with anyone else, Bicks, so yes, it's yours.” His eyes met hers. “Ours.” The girl he saw before him seemed prettier than he remembered, the complexion of her skin the color of roses. Her lips began to tremble and then she burst into tears, a whimper that soon turned into loud, heaving sobs that drew stares from passing shoppers, making Bicks feel both angry and sad. Bicks automatically put his arm around her, caressing her hair with his palm, and fighting his own full-blown panic by trying to comfort her, babbling forth a fountain of words.

“You said, ‘Might be,’ right? You *might* be, but you're not sure. Periods are sometimes late, aren't they? It's normal to be late, right? That's what other girls have said. Not that I know a lot about this stuff, I don't, I really don't. I'm just saying, let's not panic yet, let's not get all scared and shit until we really know what we're dealing with here. What the facts are. And right now, we don't really have any facts, do we? Nothing definite. Like, for real definite, right? I mean, you haven't gone to the doctor yet and gotten tested, have you?” Sheryl finished a snuffle and shook her head no. “See? We

don't really know if it's really real yet, if what you said is right. It could just be a false alarm. You said late. How late?"

"Three weeks? That's pretty late."

What he heard in his head was, *That's pretty fucking late!* But what came out of his mouth was, "That's not late, Sher. It could still be nothing." A smile came to her face, but inside Bicks the hopeful scenario he'd talked himself into believing in began to evaporate into nothing. Bicks watched Sheryl wipe her eyes with the handkerchief he'd given her, feeling a wall rise up between them. It was strange. The girl he had many times French-kissed and fondled and dreamed about and twice had actual intercourse with now seemed to be someone he never wanted to see again. Sure, he liked her all right, he guessed, had loved fucking her, but now, with this new information on the table, this sudden complication, he felt himself wanting to get as far away from her as possible, on the other side of the world. And his awareness of this desire to abandon her made him feel guilty enough to know he was supposed to take care of her now, to show that he cared, or at least *pretend* he did, and so he asked if she wanted to go for a drive and she said yes, yes she did.

As soon as he got her into the car he fired up a jay and they passed it back and forth as he drove, Bicks dying to get high and get away from the horror of what was happening to him. But the more he drove with her seated there right beside him, the more he was haunted with the idea that he'd *never* be rid of her. That this, this right here—the two of them sitting side by side and him wishing they weren't—was going to be his life for the rest of his life.

And then she uttered the question he had been dreading.

“What if it *is* a baby?” she said. “What do you think we should do?”

“What do you want to do? I mean, we only have two choices, right? Either, we have the baby. Or we... you know.”

“Get rid of it.”

“Right.” Bicks couldn’t say the words but he could visualize it all too clearly.

Neither said a word as they drove past the cemeteries on St. Francis Avenue, past the grassy rolling hills studded with tombstones, past the seminary that stood atop a hill, its gothic turrets and ivied graystone walls reminding Bicks of the medieval adventure stories he’d read, of King Arthur and the Knights of the Roundtable, of sword play and damsels in distress, locked in dungeons, held captive by ogres and dragons. He got lost in the pictures that flew by in his head, happy by the Hawaiian they’d smoked and wondering how long he would have to be with her that night before he could politely drop her off and escape.

He drove her over the river and they stopped for awhile at Steak ‘N Shake. He bought her fries and a Coke and watched the dainty way she ate them, dipping each French fry into her ketchup as if she were the Queen of England dipping her pen in a bottle of ink. To steer clear of what neither of them wanted to think about, he talked about Tweezy and how much he missed him and how he still had nightmares about the day he died. He told her about the geometry book the cops had found and how worried he was that it would lead to him, and when he said he’d dumped Cash’s drugs in the neighbor’s trash Sheryl said he’d done the right thing. When her favorite song came on

the radio as they were crossing the bridge back over the river, he turned up the volume and sang right along with her, the river a dark churning mass beneath them. At stoplights he held her hand and when he slowed to a stop outside her house he leaned over and gave her a kiss, a long tender one that said, *I'm here. I'm here for you.* But he wasn't and he knew it and the first thing he wanted to do as he drove away from the curb was to get as wasted as possible.

Air, Bicks needed air. He couldn't breathe. The world was spinning and he thought he was blacking out. He was teetering on the edge of a great abyss, it seemed, soon to be swallowed in darkness, sucked into a black hole inside his head. And on the outermost boundaries of consciousness he was dimly aware that he was in a car—yes, Grady's car, that's whose it was—speeding somewhere important. But the car and all the people in it were spinning so fast it made him feel *he* was the one speeding down the street and the car was just standing still, riding him, and he was sure if he didn't get air soon he would puke or pass out or die or do all three.

Even with his eyes closed the images flying at him had him in a panic. Fumbling blindly for the car door's crank handle, he soon managed to roll down the rear window a notch and in blew a cool rush of wind on his face. Ah, oxygen! It hit him like a drug, a sense of calm slowly beginning to spread through him. In seconds he could breathe again, could feel the air inflating his chest, but still he had to keep his eyes shut to stop his head from spinning. He could feel his hair whipping in the wind. And if he did have to puke,

he realized he wouldn't have to force the guys to stop the car, he could just push his face a little further out the window and barf all he wanted. Just as long as he leaned his head out far enough to make sure the vomit wouldn't fly back in through the window, he had to make damn sure of that. He'd seen it happen once before, Grady trying to puke out the window of Big Mike's VW but the wind blowing it all back in, spattering his shirt and pants and bits of it hitting the faces of the guys sitting in back. Not pretty.

He continued to breathe, listening to the laughter and the voices. Cash cursing over the burning roach he'd dropped in his lap, Big Mike busting Grady's balls for listening to the bubble gum on AM radio and not switching over to the hard rock FM station.

After leaving Sheryl, he'd gone over to Big Mike's and doobed up out in his garage, Bicks scared someone might walk in on them getting high. Big Mike had said it was his dad's bowling night and his mom's bridge club and that they'd both come home late and likely both be drunk. Such was life in the Skolski family, he said with a smile. Bicks had asked him when he thought he'd be let back in the house and Big Mike hadn't answered. Bicks so needy to spill his guts about Sheryl he'd been about to burst. But he'd kept his mouth shut, opening it only to suck in more smoke, and the longer he held his breath with each hit, the less he felt the need to speak, and by the time Grady arrived, Bicks had gone affably mute and halfway up his own stairway to heaven. After sharing another jay they had three all gotten into Grady's Plymouth Duster and gone over to pick up Cash, and the first thing Cash had said when he got in the back seat and saw Bicks there beside him was, "You bring my drugs?" Bicks had kept his cool and said no he hadn't. Cash, already drunk, had snapped and pushed him hard in the chest, knocking Bicks back against the

car door, bitching him out and accusing him of selling his drugs and stealing the profits.

“I trusted you! There was a good three, four grand of stuff there! You owe me!”

Bicks had pushed him back, insisting he hadn't sold a thing, but Cash was too ripped to hear a thing Bicks was saying and smacked him in the face with his hand, and from the passenger seat Big Mike had reached back and shoved Cash away from Bicks.

“He still has the drugs, Cash, okay? He just didn't *bring* them. Right, Bicks?”

“Right,” Bicks had been forced to answer.

Cash had calmed a bit, and then smiled a patient smile and said, “Okay, so let's go get them, then.”

And that's when Bicks thought, *Oh, shit*.

The ten minutes it took for them to drive to his house were the longest minutes of his life. What if the stash box had been found or the garbage men had hauled it away? *Then* where would he be? Reminding himself that the trash truck didn't come until Monday and this was only Sunday, he tried to remain calm, but his busted lip reminded him of what Cash was capable of doing after a few drinks and assorted snorts.

When Grady stopped the car in front of his house, Bicks had gotten out and, instead of going behind the car to the garage side of the house, he jogged around the north side of it, hoping to keep their eyes focused there and not the garage side behind them. Once he disappeared from view, he ran through the back yard to the south side. It was after ten, so it was plenty dark. Still, Bicks didn't want anyone in the car seeing him rooting through a neighbor's trash can. How would he explain that? As he rounded the rear corner of the house and moved across the grass toward the neighbor's house, a new surprise sprang up.

The trash cans were gone. His panic rising, he glanced about and quickly noticed them down at the end of the neighbor's driveway, set out to be picked up by the trashmen the next morning. Of course! Damned tidy neighbors, always putting their trash out the night before! His heart racing, Bicks checked to see if any cars were coming, but the street was dark save for the red glow of Grady's brake lights. Hunching low, he hurried down the drive to the trash cans. He checked the first one. Nothing. He lifted the lid of the second trash can, greatly relieved to find the stash box hidden just where he'd left it. But as he pulled the box out of the trash can and lay back the lid, he realized the thing reeked of garbage. He wiped it off as best he could with the sleeve of his coat, polishing the outside of the box, and then ran back to the car, preparing what he would say if Cash or anyone else would ask why he had been rooting around in the trash or why the box smelled. No one had said a thing. Grady had sped away from the curb and Cash had opened his box with great delight and begun to open bottles and bags, filling his pockets with all sorts of goodies and passing out freebies to his pals.

Bicks had taken whatever Cash had handed him without even asking what they were, a half a tab of mescaline, he thought, and maybe some microdot, he couldn't really remember. And now, an hour later, here he was in the back of Grady's Duster, music blasting on the radio and Big Mike right in front of him in the passenger seat crowing about the chicks in some Pinto they'd just passed, Cash in the back seat to his left harping on a pipe of some kind, Bicks trying hard to get a hold of what was happening and stop the world from twisting out of control.

Cash passed the pipe to him and Bicks pushed it away. Hash. It was Cash's goddamn hash that had done this to him. That's what was making his head do 360's. Cash passed the pipe up into the front seat, mumbling something about Bicks being a pussy, and Bicks turned back to the open window, gulping in the cool air and closing his eyes again, the spinning inside him beginning to slow.

This was the first time he'd seen Cash since he'd been kicked out of school and it scared Bicks to see the difference in him. There was an air of desperation about him now, an agitation he'd never had before, and he'd put on some weight as well. Cash had thickened around the middle and his face had grown puffy, his eyelids looking especially enlarged, and this narrowing of his eyes had the effect of making his gaze seem somewhat judgmental, as if he were always scrutinizing you instead of merely looking at you. There was an abruptness in his manner, a quickness to anger that felt more pronounced to Bicks than ever before, and he seemed to talk louder too, as if he felt he had to raise his voice to get people to listen to him. But what had worried Bicks most was the scratching. Cash's fingers seemed to be in constant motion, scratching at his arms and neck and the insides of his palms, and Bicks assumed this was the side effects of drugs he was on, probably cocaine.

He felt the car bump as Grady slowed and turned into Burger & Bun, one of their favorite hamburger joints. And then he heard Cash say, "There he is! Punk ass prick! I don't believe it—stop the car!"

"What?" Grady said.

“You just passed him. That was Foggy back there,” Cash said. “Flecker, too, I think. Stop, *stop*.”

An electric charge went through the car as Grady hit the brakes and pulled into an open parking spot about seven cars away. Bicks shot a look through the rear window. It was them, all right. Foggy Baines in his long Navy pea coat, his shaggy blond hair spilling down over the collar, tossed about in the wind. He stood with Randy Flecker and two other long hairs behind a blue Mustang hardtop, Foggy with a cigarette on his lip and a boot propped up on the rear bumper, Flecker puffing on some kind of cigar and a beer in his hand.

“Fucking pussies,” Cash said. “Guy has the balls to narc on me? After all the dope *he’s* sold? He’d dead fucking meat.”

“And what he did to Bicks,” said Grady.

“Yeah.”

“I say we take ‘em from both sides at once,” Big Mike said. “Two of us go walking right up to them, get their attention, then the other two come at ‘em through the cars, the other direction. Put the squeeze on.”

“Yeah, good,” Cash said.

“Who are the other two?” Grady said.

“Just a couple of dopers they hang with,” Cash said. “Suck-ups. Not the fighting type.”

Not the fighting type? Bicks thought. Didn’t that describe *him*? His fear triggering a flood of adrenaline, awaking him to the impending danger.

Big Mike reached under the front seat and brought out a tire iron, waving it, saying, “Well, *I’m* the fighting type, so let’s go.”

With a crazy grin Cash turned to him and said, “Well, Bicks, you ready?”

Bicks realizing they expected *him* to go and fight too, and now he was awake enough to be scared.

“Cash, I’m—I’m wasted, man. I can’t even stand.”

Cash and Big Mike harshed him out, saying this was his big chance to get revenge on the guys who jumped him and don’t be a wussy.

“C’mon, grow some nuts, man,” Cash told him, grabbed the collar of his coat and yanked him across the seat and out the door into the brisk night air. Moments later Cash had Bicks up against the side of the car and was nose to nose with him, grinning and gently patting his cheek, saying, “Wakey, wake. Time to rumble, Bicksie boy, time to get your balls on and your bad ass in gear.” Then Cash told Grady and Big Mike to go around the far side of the building and come running on his signal. Bicks wondered what that was, the signal, and watched the tail of Grady’s brown corduroy coat flapping in the wind as he followed Big Mike away through the parked cars, Big Mike holding the tire iron hidden inside his bomber jacket.

“You gonna do this?” Cash asked.

Bicks managed an irritated nod, inhaling deeply to clear his head. *Do this?* Of course he was going to do this. ‘Cause if he didn’t, Cash *himself* would kick his ass, so what choice did he have? Amused by this wicked irony, it further occurred to him that it might not be so bad going into a fight as blitzed as he was because even if he did get the

shit knocked out of him he wouldn't feel a thing. After all, he'd been jumped once, what was one more pounding?

Cash's face blurred into view again, so near to him Bicks could feel Cash's breath on his face, could see the reflection of the Burger & Bun sign in Cash's eyes, the yellow neon a tiny slash in the black of each iris. Cash peered intently at his prey over the roof of the car. His jaw line hardened. Bicks felt a spring tighten inside him.

"Now," Cash whispered, and they came around the rear of the car and began to walk, crossing the open stretch of pavement at a casual pace, Cash a step ahead to Bicks's left. "Slow and easy," Cash murmured, "like friends coming to talk." Bicks relieved to find his legs working okay, but his vision still a problem, the outlines of objects moving and blurring and going double on him. To stay anchored he kept his eyes focused on their feet—zeroing in on Foggy's black boot on the bumper—and he heard Cash say, "Easy, easy," as they came closer. Bicks studied the boot, noticing the dull shine of neon on the grain of the dusty leather, forgetting for a moment that it was even connected to a body. Bicks saw the boot heel shift a bit, then the whole boot pull away from the bumper and plant itself on the pavement. Flecker's sneakers made an abrupt turn towards them and his cigarette hit the ground, its tip firing red as the ash fell away. Ten feet away and closing, Bicks lifted his head to see the frown on Flecker's face harden into a grimace and Foggy set his beer can down onto the hood of the Mustang.

All four turned to face them, their backs to the street.

“Fogs, how’s it hanging,” Bicks heard Cash say in the bright cheery voice he used when he wanted people to like him, still ambling toward the Mustang, hands in his pockets. Flecker tensed and backed away.

“Anderson,” Foggy said, standing his ground, giving Cash an unfriendly smile. “Heard you got kicked out.”

The wary eyes of all four on Cash now, not on Bicks, waiting for his reaction.

“Yeah,” Cash said, “Palmer didn’t like the way I dotted my ‘I’s’.”

Foggy flicked away his cigarette, only half-smoked. “Too bad,” he said.

Cash said, “I’m thinking somebody ratted me out. Maybe Jimmy Lumler.”

“Yeah, could be, could be,” Foggy said. “Lot a rats now since the heat’s on.”

“Yeah,” said Cash. “Lotta rats.”

Foggy looked at Flecker and Flecker looked at the ground. Bicks’s eyes moved to the other two, the suck-ups, their scared faces giving him a surge of confidence. He could do this, he thought, he could take Flecker easy. Knock him back across the car hood and bash his face in, the cocksucker, Bicks feeling the rush of fear sharpening him up, lifted by the adrenaline clarity, Flecker afraid to look him in the eye.

A semi-truck rumbled by. A moment later a carload of girls went past, their sudden squeals out the window causing Foggy and the others to turn their heads to look. And that’s when Cash struck. He was on Foggy in a flash, fists flying, growling, “Rat bastard!” Bicks lunged at Flecker, hitting him square in the chest with his right shoulder, his momentum knocking Randy backward onto the hood of the car. Bicks raised a fist to strike him, but Flecker batted it away and landed a blow to the side of Bicks’s neck.

Grabbing Bicks by the collar, Flecker yanked him sideways and rolled on top of him, the back of Bicks's head banging on the hard steel of the hood. Bicks saw an explosion of light, and then only the blurred fury of Randy's face as a quick flurry of punches pounded his cheek, his chin, Bicks frantic to escape the blows. Then a primal burst of anger took possession of him, and he wrenched himself aside as Randy's fist flew past his head and slammed into the hood instead. Randy's scream sent flecks of spit into Bicks's face, and Bicks rammed his knee up into Randy's groin. Feeling Randy's grip give way, Bicks scrambled away, sliding off the hood, his knees and elbows hitting pavement.

Then a *thunk*, a quick scuffle, followed by a pained cry from Randy, and he knew Big Mike had arrived. Bicks stayed on all fours for a moment, staring at his reflection in the chrome bumper, hearing the chaos of crunching bodies and cries and curses, grit from the asphalt pressing into his palms and knees. He heard Big Mike between the parked cars to his right, pummeling Flecker with punishing blows. "Okay, okay, you win," Randy groaned, but the blows continued. The sound of a girl's scream came from somewhere behind him. To his left he saw Cash and Foggy rolling on the pavement, legs entangled, fists hammering at each other, Foggy bleating curses from a bloody mouth. One of the long hairs tried to pull Cash off but Grady was there, grabbing the guy by the shoulders. Grady said, "Get the fuck off!" and wrenched the kid to the ground. He kicked him in the shins, the kneecaps, until the guy scrambled away with an anguished cry, jumped to his feet and ran off.

Foggy kicked free of Cash then, and managed to roll away and stagger to his feet. But Cash came at him again, fists raised, saying, "You punk ass prick." Foggy backed

away, spitting blood, muttering, “This ain’t over, Anderson.” And then, with a defeated frown, he was gone, disappearing between the parked cars. “That’s right, pussy, run!” Cash yelled, thrusting his left fist in the air and giving a loud war whoop. Bicks caught a grin from Cash and tried to stand to join in the celebration. But then, with no advance warning, his insides seized up and he puked onto the pavement, his stomach jerking in spasms as it erupted out of him as if shot from a hose. Still on his hands and knees, Bicks could feel the wet vomit pooling around his hands, warming his fingers, could see it dripping off the bumper, blurring the reflection of his stupid face. There was laughter and a sour beery smell, Big Mike’s voice congratulating Cash. A pair of hands lifted him to his feet as the Duster squealed up, Grady at the wheel. The back door flung open and, from behind, Bicks was shoved into the car. Big Mike’s shoulder knocked against him, doors slammed and the car careened out onto Allenwood Avenue and sped off into the night. Forced backward by the car’s sudden acceleration, Bicks just lay back and gave in to it, shutting his eyes and letting it all run through him—the wind in his hair, the laughter of his friends, the druggy dizziness, the wild beating of his heart, and topping it all a whole new thrill. The headrush of being alive.

Chapter 16

Instead of cooling out and making the best of his new situation, Cash kept making it worse. Twice he vandalized St. Boniface school property, one night throwing a brick through one of the front classroom windows, and it had to be boarded up until Principal Palmer could have the windowpane replaced. A week later, walking into school one Monday morning, Bicks found Marco the school janitor on his hands and knees with a wire brush outside the main entrance trying to scrub away words that had been spray painted in black letters two feet high on the concrete sidewalk. The graffiti words were:

FILER

BLOWS

GOATS

The wire brush didn't work too well, and by noon everyone in school had seen it, teachers, kids, even a pair of visiting parents, and in the lunchroom it was all anyone could talk about. *Did you see...? Can you believe..? Well, of course he did...* In the hallways and the locker room before gym, "baaa" was all Bicks heard.

On their way to third period History, Bicks and Grady had seen Principal Palmer hopping mad out on the sidewalk, yelling something at Marco, stabbing his finger at the graffiti in a kind of impotent fury, and Marco, still on his knees, nodding vigorously, keeping his eyes on his work and continuing to brush and scrape in vain. It gave Bicks a secret thrill to see an authority figure, the very principal of the school, reduced to such powerless frustration, and he couldn't wait to see what Filer would have to say about it in English class. A part of Bicks gave a silent cheer for Cash's ballsy act of rebellion, and yet another, perhaps wiser, part of him felt disappointed in his friend for being so

impulsive, and he worried how the police might respond. Would this just exacerbate the situation and stir up the hornet's nest? Cause cops to come and interrogate everyone again or put someone under arrest? That was Bicks's worst fear, to be grilled by the police and asked about the book. Damn it, Cash, Bicks thought. Everyone just wants the wound of Tweezy's death to heal and go away, but you—you can't stop picking the scab! And what of Filer? Without Cash at the school anymore, who did he have to penalize but the guys he knew were Cash's friends? No, people would not go unpunished, that was for sure, and once the initial thrill had worn off, Bicks felt nothing but dread going to Filer's class, thinking he might even pretend to have the flu and go home sick.

But to Bicks's surprise, Filer played it beautifully. At the start of class his teacher stood with his back to the windows, giving them his usual barely patient smile until the students had quieted down. When he had their full attention, he began to lecture on the homework topic, as if there were nothing special about this day at all, and, turning to go up the aisle, he happened to glance out the window. He put his hand to his mouth and drew back in mock horror, as if seeing the abomination for the first time, then gave an exaggerated stagger and fell against the window, pretending to be momentarily rocked by the sight of it. The tension broke immediately, of course. The room exploded in laughter. Filer made a show of trying to regain his composure, smoothing his hair and straightening his tie, and then, gesturing outside, said, "Well, it seems I now engage in unnatural acts with farm animals." Up went his eyebrows, drawing more laughter and hoots of approval, everyone relieved to see he actually had a sense of humor about it and was feeling anything but vengeful. Then with a hint of embarrassment that suggested it

might actually be true, Filer made a face and said, “I suppose people know me better than I thought they did.” This brought down the house, kids hooting and hollering, banging on desks and adding off-color comments of their own. Big Mike himself cupped his hands and made bleating goat sounds above the din, drawing a tolerant smile from Filer.

He had won them over, and Bicks just sat there, enjoying the laughter and the relief, amazed at Filer’s charm, trying not to be taken in by it. Filer was still the enemy, he had to remember, and could never be fully trusted.

At the afternoon bell, Bicks grabbed his book bag and headed for the entrance, eager to see the graffiti once more before he left. There was talk that guys from the student newspaper were going to try and photograph it. He was crestfallen. The whole section of sidewalk had been covered over in black paint, and Marco the janitor had just finished staking it off with a red warning ribbon. Bicks saw he had taped signs that read CAREFULL WET PAINT on either end of the walkway to keep kids from traipsing across it, misspelling the word on both signs, and as hard as he tried not to pass judgment on Marco for his ignorance, he couldn’t help it. As students streamed by, some stopped to look and others just pushed past to their cars, anxious to get to their girl friends or their pot, and a few even to their homework. As Bicks stood on the grass, staring at the black sidewalk, an ominous feeling stole over him. A wave of *déjà vu* mixed with... what? What was it that bothered him? He thought of Tweezy’s funeral, his mother too shattered to walk on her own, needing her husband and eldest daughter to keep her erect. Even the word “CAREFULL” on the hand-scrawled sign began to give him the willies. What? Was it a sign? Was *he* supposed to be careful? Of who? Cash? The cops? Filer? He then was

aware that someone was standing rather closely beside him, and he turned to see that it was Menke.

“Black Sidewalk,” said Menke, smiling. “Not a bad name for a band.”

“Yeah,” said Bicks.

“Pretty funny,” Menke said. “What he wrote.” Bicks nodded, and then Menke said, “So you had Filer for English, right? What did he say?”

“He laughed it off. Made a joke out of it.”

“Guy’s slick, that’s for sure,” Menke said. Then, nodding at the sidewalk, Menke, said, “Your boy Anderson’s pretty messed up, I hear. May go to jail.”

Bicks tried to shrug it off, pretending not to care, but Menke knew different.

“He’s bad news, man. I told you before.”

“Listen, he’s my friend, okay? I’m not going talk smack about him behind his back. You want to, fine, you always have. I’m not apologizing for what he’s done or for who he is. I just—I just don’t want to have to be defending him all the time.”

“Okay,” Menke said, “it’s cool. Just saying. Chess club’s meeting again Tuesdays after school. We miss you, man, you should come.” Menke suddenly looked up behind Bicks and said, “Afternoon, Mr. Filer.”

Bicks stiffened. “Hi, Mr. Filer.”

“Bicks, Menke,” Filer said, acknowledging them each with a friendly nod. He shot a casual glance at the sidewalk and said, “Guess my one minute of fame is over, huh, boys? Ah, so brief my light, life but a flickering flame.”

“Shakespeare, sir?” asked Menke.

“No, just fucking around,” Filer said. “Uh, Bicks, can I have a word?”

Menke was gone in a flash.

“Let me think how to put this, Bicks. It seems reasonable to assume that our mutual friend—we both know who I mean—was responsible for this... what shall we call it? This ill-conceived escapade. And I’d just like you to tell him that he is fucking with the wrong guy.”

“Sir?”

“You heard me.”

“I’m really not friends with him anymore, Mr. Filer, I—”

“Bullshit. You tell him I said this will stop and it will stop now. The vandalism, the threatening phone calls, all of it.”

“Sir, I don’t know anything about those things—”

“Yeah, whatever. All that matters is you tell the guy who *does* know, that, as of now, he will stop doing them. Are we clear?”

Bicks gave a half shrug, half nod, and said, “Whatever you say, sir.”

“He doesn’t stop, things’ll get a whole lot worse, for him and for all of you.”

Bicks looked at the black sidewalk.

Filer sighed. “That’s all,” he said. He moved to leave, then turned back. “Oh, by the way, nice job on that Dickens paper you wrote. Really well done.”

“Thank you, sir,” Bicks said.

Filer walked away, leaving Bicks alone on the grass.

“You know what this means, don’t you, Booksie? It means I’m getting to the bastard. I’m making him sweat.” This was Cash on the phone later that same night, after Bicks called to give him Filer’s message.

“It means you’re making him mad, Cash. Mad enough to give more to the cops that could send you to jail.”

“Bullshit.”

“He made it sound like he has something more on you, and isn’t afraid to use it.”

“My family lawyer says I’m in the clear. Fingerprints don’t prove intent or motive or something, I forget.”

“But whatever he’s got could get Big Mike and me in trouble too. If he knows about the book—”

“Oh, so that’s what you’re worrying about? Your own ass? What are you? Filer’s little errand boy or my friend? Pick sides, Bicks, ‘cause I’m stepping up the heat. Far as I’m concerned, Filer’s going down and you don’t want to go down with him.”

The very next night Bicks was with Cash when Grady drove them to Filer’s house at one a.m. with a gallon can of gasoline they had bought at a Shell station. From the car, Bicks and Grady watched Cash carefully pour the gasoline into the grass as he crept up and down the lawn to spell out a particularly foul four-letter word, making each letter a good eight feet long. Once he’d emptied the can, Cash bent down at the edge of the last word, flicked his Zippo and touched it to the grass. *Floosh!* Up went the flames, instantly forming the word Cash had written:

HOMO

It was trippy to see the word come alive in the night right there on his front lawn, the wild orange flames screaming the word, the crackle of the burning grass breaking the eerie silence.

“C’mon, Cash!” Grady hissed out his window, but Cash stood mesmerized, gazing in awe at his creation. Grady yelled again, urging him to come away and get back in the car. Cash didn’t. He ran *toward* the house instead, running around the “O” and going right up onto the front porch. He rang the doorbell several times, screamed the word, “Homo!” at the top of his lungs, and *then* ran to the car. Cash jumped in the back next to Bicks, cackling madly, and Grady tore away, the gas fumes coming off Cash making Bicks’s nose wrinkle. Grady made a sharp turn at the end of the street and just before they lost view of Filer’s house, through the rear window Bicks caught a glimpse of a figure out on the porch, the man’s pale pajamas glowing a faint orange from the fire.