

5-1989

High Class

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RICHARD ROY:

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Chapter 1

Summer. 1979. A summer twilight after high school graduation, Hector Morgan stood at the door of the house which still inspired awe within him. Two storied and graceful, the house dwarfed his mental images of home. His home was short and cluttered and chaotic. This house had steps and a porch with a swing. His home had concrete blocks and slabs with the same names. He trembled slightly, nerves, as he lifted the gargoyle knocker to announce his arrival as a stranger to the house. Catrina lived here, with her mother and her sister and her brother. Catrina was the youngest of the house and the most beautiful girl Hector had known in his eighteen years. He imagined her beauty with chestnut hair and matching eyes resting on a fine carved wooden figure set on a pedestal in the brightest corner of his mind. Friday night in June on a narrow street in Kingston, Illinois, Hector stood on the threshold for a date. He let the twisted face of the open mouthed and silent gargoyle fall.

Catrina's mother, Norma, came to the door. She had a cigarello in an ivory holder in hand as she opened the door. Her usual attire, a quiet purple dressing gown that may have been made of silk, embroidered with rose floral designs. Her hair gray, short, and pinned up. She took a drag off the cigarello.

"Is that Hector, Mom?" he heard Catrina call from upstairs.

"Yes," her mother called back, not smiling, still looking at Hector.

Hector squirmed in his leather jacket, satisfied with the squeaks it made.

"Tell him I'll be down in a minute."

Her mother didn't answer. "Come on in." She waved him inside, and he followed her through the vestibule.

"Thank you." He stepped in, glanced back at the stairs, hoping Catrina would be down soon. He always felt awkward around her mother, and he wasn't looking forward to a discussion. He didn't know what to talk about with her.

"Have a seat. She'll be down in a minute." She pulled a chair out for him at the long table that filled the room. She took a drag, exhaling slowly. Hector's heart sank as she sat down, too. Hector could hear a TV playing in the kitchen. It sounded like a religious show. He was afraid they would have to talk.

"So, Hector. Have you decide what college you'll be going to this fall?" she asked, not looking at him but at her own smoke.

He hesitated. "Not yet."

"But you are going?"

"I want to." Squirming.

Norma reached for an ashtray. "Now is the time," she pronounced slowly, tipping ashes in the tray. "We're looking for Catrina a school. Would you like a cup of coffee or something while you're waiting?" She said coffee like "cawfee".

"No, thank you." Hector looked around the room, trying to make himself comfortable. It was easy to tell that these people were not natives of the locality. Pop and not soda. "Dawg" and not dog. But it went beyond words. Attitudes and beliefs. They were from upstate, Chicago. They'd moved down a year or so ago, after the father had died. Catrina said it was to get away from the Peurto Ricans, but Hector knew better. It was to get away from a windy city of memories and ghosts and theives. Bookcases lined the walls of the dining robm. Books of all kinds with their musty smell of age. Books ranging from Aristotle to James Michener. Lots of the classics, Roman and Greek. Histories and philosophy. Hector read books, but not the likes of these. His books breathed fantasy and adventure and war. These shelves towered over him.

He remembered himself a little boy in sitting in a tall cardboard box, pretending to drive a truck, watching his mother wash dishes at the sink. The radio was turned down, the Beatles playing "I Want to Hold Your Hand." That kitchen opened up into a living room and the little boy could see his father on the couch, drinking beer, watching TV.

"That goddamned Johnson," said the father. "Nigger loving sonofabitch." The little boy's older brother was at his father's feet, playing with a toy fire engine. Their father rapped lightly on the boy's head with his knuckles. "Owen," he said. "Go in there and get me another beer." Owen jumped up and ran to the kitchen, jumping over the toys and trash scattered over the floor. He ran to the refrigerator and pulled out a beer from the shelves stinking of different foods, leftovers, most of which never would be eaten. Owen kicked Hector's box as he ran past. Hector grabbed at him but missed.

Hector scooted his box along the floor closer to his mother. She hummed along with the radio. Hector made car sounds, without a muffler, trying to get her attention. She looked down from what she was doing and smiled.

"Mom," he said, "what do you think I should be when I grow up?"

Mom dried her hands on her skirt. "Oh, I don't know. I suppose you can be whatever you want."

Hector thought a minute. "I think I want to be a doctor."

She laughed. "I'm sure you could be if you wanted. Except, you know, you pass out at the sight of blood," she said, going back to the stack of dishes still in the sink.

"Oh," said Hector. "Oh, yeah." He dug around the bottom of the box until he found a comic book with the cover torn off and the pages ragged.

"You could be a lawyer," suggested his mother.

"What's a lawyer do?"

She thought for a minute, holding still the soapy rag over a tomato sauce stained dish. "They give speeches."

"Like the guy on TV?"

"Yes," she said, washing again.

"I don't think I'd like that." he said, studying his book.

"What do you want to be then?"

Father walked into the room. He looked down at the boy in the box. "What the hell you doing in there?" he asked, not harshly.

"Sitting. Reading," said Hector.

"It's a nice day. Why don't you go out to play?"

"Would you read this to me?" he asked his father, holding out the comic, a super hero book.

"Have your mother read it to you," he said. He turned to mother. "When's supper going to be ready?"

Mother shrugged her shoulders and looked tired.

"Pretty soon."

Father grumbled something and went back in the ither room.

Hector looked at the brightly colored panels, with the word balloons, as he tried to decipher the words for himself, for he knew it would be a while before his mother would have time to read to him again.

"Mom, I think I want to be a rich man when I grow up. I want to have lots of money and cars and an airplane and a maid and I'd buy you a big house and a maid for you, too, so you'll never have to work again. And neither will I," said Hector, holding his comic, watching his mother closely.

She smiled, as if far away. "That's sweet of you, honey. I'm sure you will someday, if you only work hard."

Hector liked to see his mother smile. It wasn't something she did often. He went back to the pulp, trying harder with the pictures to make sense of the words.

Norma sighed as if bored. Hector cleared his throat, tapping the table top. Norma lit another cigarello.

The table of wide, fine walnut had room enough for eight matching chairs. Music drifted from the corner where the stereo behind glass with shelves of records underneath played what Hector considered most appropriate for elevators. He'd been through the albums one night with Catrina. Beatles. Beethoven. Mozart. The Doors. Rolling

Stones. Pavorotti. Operas with names he'd never heard of and couldn't remember. They'd been together for a year and were celebrating. She played some of the White Album for him. *Rocky Raccoon* was one of her favorites. She sang it to him. Later they played a tape he'd put together on the cassette deck. All love songs. *Waiting for a Girl Like You, Hot Stuff, You Light Up My Life*. The room was dark, lit only by a candle, and very warm. They danced close and slow, squeezing, delightful shudders, grinding, popping with an electricity that made the hair on their arms stand up and tingle. Norma had even let them have a little wine for the occasion.

"What is it again you're wanting to do?" she asked.

Hector jumped, having nearly forgotten her there.

"Pardon?"

She tapped the gold cased lighter on the table. "To study?"

"I was thinking. . . I was thinking law enforcement."

Norma snickered. "Law enforcement?!" She looked at him and openly laughed.

Hector felt his face changing colors. "What's so funny about that?"

"You. . .you just hardly seem the type." Still laughing. "Do you need college for that?"

He wanted to tell her he wasn't sure he needed college at all. "I'm not sure I need college at all." His own voice surprised him.

The smile was gone. "I'm sure it couldn't hurt." She looked directly at him.

Hector didn't want to look at her, or to argue. In the opposite corner was a globe, waist - high large. He wanted to walk over and give it a spin. He started to get up, but he caught his reflection in the glass door of the bookcase looking back at him. He froze. He heard footsteps on the stairs. Catrina slipped in around the corner.

He took in a deep breath, relieved, at the same time inhaling the scent of her. She was fresh and ready. She smelled like a flower, dressed in a knit dress that clung in the right places, smoothing out the already well rounded curves. The dress was pink and it made her face brighter he thought. They looked at one another, like always the first time. Then he stood up and they kissed, with their tongues only touching playfully. He felt glad her mother was watching. Her kiss still tasted like toothpaste. She broke the kiss with little parting smacks, embarrassed in front of her mother.. She held a finger to his lips to make him stop. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Norma get up and go into the kitchen.

"We'll have time later," she whispered in his ear.

"Promise?" He whispered back, licking his lips, tasting her cherry lip gloss.

"Promise. Are you ready to go?"

More than ready, he thought. "Yeah."

"Where we going tonight?" She opened her purse, found a compact, and checked her make-up.

"Before or after?" He said softly, smiling a twisted grin.

She blushed the color of green house tomatoes. "I don't know about that," she whispered.

"Could have fooled me."

She put her compact away, looking suddenly serious.

He didn't know how to read her look. "Sure," he said, sounding uncertain. "You know I love you."

She smiled. "I know." He looked at her deep brown eyes, how they glistened. "I have to tell mother we're leaving. What time we'll be back. She'll want to know."

"Do you think she'll wait up for us?" He was remembering the times they'd come in at two and three in the morning after a date. Her mother would be there, in the kitchen, always awake, waiting. She wouldn't say much while he was there. But she didn't have to, her tight lipped expressions said more than enough.

"More than likely," said Catrina. "What time?"

"How about 10:00 tomorrow night?"

"Be serious."

"Tell her whatever you think sounds good," he said with a shrug.

"What if she asks what we're going to do?"

"We're going to eat, then we're going to a late movie and then we're going to eat. Sound good?" The wicked smile returned.

"You're so nasty" she said. "Come with me and say good-bye to Mother."

"We barely said hello."

"Manners, mind you. Manners."

They would tell her the same things as usual. It was always a movie and dinner. Living in a small town, there were few other options. A couple of times they went to St. Louis to concerts, an even amount of times to Carbondale for the same purpose. Both were hour drives, one west and the other south. But those occasions were as rare as they were memorable. It felt good to get away from the small town life every once in a while. He felt bad about having to tell her mother lies, but the truth would hardly suit her better. He wondered how much her mother knew about the things they watched and the meals they ate.

Her mother was sitting on a stool at the small kitchen table. She was watching a small portable set up on the counter across from her. She had a knife in her hand, cutting from a chunk of cheese. The knife made a crack as it hit the cutting board slicing through the cheddar. She had a wine glass half filled on the table. A bottle in a bucket of ice, too. Norma didn't look at him and he tried to keep his eyes on the television.

"Oh, so you're going out?" her mother said, as if it were a surprise, but pleasantly enough.

"Yes," said Catrina. "We thought we'd go have dinner and see a movie."

Oral Roberts was on the screen. He was crying about some poor people in Africa. Talking about the city he was building. Asking for money. Crying some more. Calling for his son to help him off the stage. He was very sad, it was plain to see.

"I just love these shows," said her mother. "They're so entertaining. Better than soap operas." Her voice was rough, like she'd smoked too much.

"Yeah," said Catrina. "My favorite is Ernest Angley. You know, the guy that knocks people over when he heals them."

"Oh, yes. 'In the name of Jay-sus! Come out Evil Spirit!' That one." Her mother sipped her red wine. "What movie are you going to see?"

Hector hadn't thought about that. "We haven't decided yet."

Her mother looked at him. "Well," she said. "where are you going for dinner?"

Hector hadn't thought much about that either. "Bonanza," he looked at Catrina to see what she thought.

Catrina shrugged. "Sure. Why not?"

"You could stay and have dinner here," her mother volunteered.

"Uh, that's a good idea. I suppose we could some time. But tonight , really, we"

"Well. Think about it sometime," she said, locking on Hector. "Would you? I do like to see my daughter once in a while, to talk and have dinner with."

"Sure," he said quickly. "Sure we will."

Silence. They all looked at the television. It startled them when they heard the door open. Catrina looked to see who it was.

"It's Warner." Warner was her brother. He wasn't quite right in the head. He had to take medicine to keep him on an even keel. Lithium. Catrina said he got his condition back in the sixties, when he was in college. He gave Hector the creeps.

"Warner's buying himself a guitar today," said her mother. "He used to be in a band and he's wanted to start playing again."

"That's great," said Catrina. "He needs something to do."

"Yes," said her mother, "and you know he was really quite good."

They thought Warner was going to come into the room but they soon heard him thudding up the stairs.

"Well, Catrina," said Hector, "do you suppose we should be going?"

"What time will you be bringing her back tonight?" her mother asked Hector.

"Well, if we go to a late show, it'll probably be out at 11:00 or so. Say 12:00?"

"Midnight?"

"11:30?"

"Have a nice time," she said to Catrina. "And do be careful."

"Yes, Mother. We will."

The sun was glowing orange and red, sinking lower. It would be dark soon. He opened the door for her. The almost new creme colored Nova needed a washing. He bought the car when he started working, his senior year. The interior was maroon, vinyl, and he was thinking of how bare skin felt against the seats as he shut the door. He walked over to the driver's side and got in behind the wheel. He reached over wanting to draw her closer to him. They kissed again, longer and deeper now that they were alone. Hector looked out the window as he started the car. Warner looked down at them from an upper window, through the curtain, his heavy outline unmistakable. Warner watched, as he often did. Watching but perhaps not seeing. Hector wondered what Warner could be thinking.

Catrina moved some towards the passenger door. "Let's got to the park, for a walk."

"Sure," he said. The serious look was back on her face. "What's the matter?"

They pulled away from the curb. Her hand rested on his thigh. "Do you love me?" she asked.

He stopped at the stop sign. A car behind them honked as he kissed her quickly on the lips. "More than anything," he said.

She grabbed his hand and squeezed it hard, harder than usual. "Good."

Lots of Friday night traffic. All the kids who didn't have anything else to do drove back and forth looking for someplace to go or someone to party with. Hector wondered where they got the money to cruise. Gas cost a dollar thirty a gallon and didn't look as if it were going to get any cheaper. Hector worked forty hours a week now at the mall, a glorified janitor. Four dollars an hour didn't go very far. He wanted to move away from home, but he didn't think he could afford it. He wanted to be independent.

They turned by Kentucky Fried Chicken at the stoplight. The road was bumpy. They didn't repair it often, giving the excuse it kept the traffic slow. Once upon a time when the way was smooth, a little girl crossed an intersection when a car came speeding through. The impact knocked her head clean off. They pulled into a lot for the swimming pool. It was crowded, pool hours being long in the summer. They couldn't find a spot there, so they drove around to a different spot. They found a place by the municipal building. That lot was crowded too. Senior Swing and Square Dance night. But the lot was larger.

He put the car in park. "Are you sure you wouldn't rather find a country road? I know just the place."

"Let's get out and walk," she answered. There was a road that ran through the park, but for a while now it had been restricted to foot and bicycle traffic. Catrina left the road, taking a dirt path straight to the lake. She was down by the water now, stopped and was waiting. Her eyes focused on the water. She kept them there as Hector approached. "Listen," she said.

A couple joggers came by, running their dogs. Across the lake there were tennis and basketball courts. They could the pluck of the tennis balls as they hit the rackets. Some black guys were playing basketball. Polka music was coming from the municipal building. Even on this side of the park, you could still hear the splashing and kids screaming in the pool. Closer ,and all around, the insects sang. Some frogs hollered in the lake that reflected the lights. Picture perfect images danced on the smooth surface of the water that calm and gentle night.

"What you thinking?" Hector asked.

"I'm just trying to get a picture of this night in my mind so I can remember it."

"What's so special about tonight?"

"Maybe something. Maybe nothing."

Hector fished in his pocket for some coins. He pulled out a handful. "Care to make a wish?" He showed her his handful of change.

She picked out a quarter. "Sure." She put the coin in her pocket.

"Hey," he said. "That's not how it works."

"We don't have to throw our money away to make our dreams come true," she said. "Besides, now I can buy a pack of gum. Let's walk." They started down the well beaten path around the lake.

Somewhere near, a lawn mower roared. Eight thirty and already getting dark. Some people never rested. "So what's the mystery?" Hector asked.

"No mystery," she shivered, crossing her arms as they walked. "What are we going to do when we grow up?"

"Remember Giant City?"

"Yeah," she said dreamily

Giant City, a state park, a secret place in the woods. Turn a corner and there it is, a natural wonder.

Two months ago.

"So what do you want to be when you grow up?" Hector sat on the edge of a giant sandstone, Giant City State Park. A place where only giants of imagination ever walked. Glaciars had cut these sheer walls and narrow strrets and erosion did the rest. Perfect corners, right angles. Natural steps leading up, to and through. People came here now. The walls were scratched and painted with graffitti. Hector perched with Catrina on top of a wall, looking downa narrow street where children ran and played, getting ahead

of the adults who had brought them there in long yellow buses. A light breeze whistled through the trees on the hilltop. The stone where they sat was warm from the sun, yet still cool. It looked too perfect to be natural, Hector remembered thinking. But it was. A solid stone city of sand. Hector and Catrina held their legs over the edge, swinging. Her legs smooth and tanned and perfect. His clothed in jeans.

"Tell me," he said again, "what do you want to do with your life?"

"I don't know," she said, looking out but trying not to look down. "I guess I haven't thought about it all that much." She thought for a second, swinging her legs faster. "I guess I'd like to be an Indian princess on some tropical island in the Pacific. Or maybe a space explorer in the far flung future. How about you?"

Hector moved closer to her. "I'd like to be as rich as Sam Walton. I want to be my own boss. I want to do something exciting. Like going to war, but there ain't no wars. Like being a cop on a police show, except they aren't real. Cops don't make money." He moved even closer, forcing her back down on the ground, his mouth smothering hers.

Some kids down below, he knew were looking up at them. He could hear them laugh. He could hear them. Let them laugh.

"It's time. You have to decide now if you're going to college on that scholarship, or if you're going to keep working, or whatever. You can't keep putting it off."

"I'm not putting it off," he said and even he didn't believe it. He was sick of being told what to do. He'd heard college was different, but somehow he didn't believe it. "How about you?" he asked. "What are you going to do?"

"Don't try and change the subject," she said. "Right now, we're talking about you."

They walked in silence for a bit. They came to a parking spot. There was a car parked there, a young couple like themselves. The windows had a dark tint, but Hector could make out a couple all wrapped up in each other's arms. Hector thought perhaps they could find a better place.

"Catrina, I'm not sure I want to go to school anymore," he said. He looked at her to see if she would be disappointed in him. He face didn't give anything away.

"Well, if you don't, then what are you going to do?"

"I need to find a better job. You can't hardly get by on what I'm making. Hell, you don't have to go to college, though, to make a decent living." He looked at her again, to see if she would agree with him. But she wasn't answering. So he went on.

"My folks don't have a college education and they've made it all right. We never went hungry. I think if you

got love then that's all you really need." They stopped for a second. They were at a bridge. The bridge covered the gap in the levy for the overflow. "I love you, Katrina." He leaned against the concrete wall of the bridge, and he pulled her there beside him. "All I know for sure is I'm getting away from here. Soon." He paused. "I want to take you with me." At the moment, the future was more an ocean than a lake. He started to kiss her again when she broke away and ran. In full stride, she kicked off her heels. Hector took off after her, grabbing her shoes along the way. They ran past the batting practice field, past the tennis courts, the sweating men playing basketball, past a church, to the road that wound through the park. Katrina ran to the swing sets and tackled a seat, with Hector close behind her.

"You'll ruin your pantyhose," he warned, catching up to her.

"Tonight," she started, pushing the swing back as far as she could, "tonight I don't care."

"Want a push?" he offered.

"Yeah. Push me high. I want to go high."

"How high?"

"To the top," she said. He pushed her hard as he could. She was doing pretty good, he thought, on her own now.

"I think I'll join you," he said, taking the swing beside her. He pulled back and let go. They contested to

see who could go the highest. Catrina said she had touched the moon. She skidded to a stop.

Hector kept going. He thought he might try something to impress her. He waited until the swing had slowed a bit and then when it was on the upswing, he jumped off. His feet off the ground, he flew. High and free, swimming in the thick night air. Catrina was half screaming, laughing. Hector came down, fast like the bottom fell out. He hit the ground hard, landing on his ass in the grass. It hurt and he wished he hadn't of done it, but he laughed with her. Some kids on the monkey bars had been watching and they were laughing, too. Their mothers came off the park bench to take the children away.

"Must have scared them," said Hector.

Catrina held out her hand to help him up. "Thanks," he said. He took her hand and pulled her down on top of him.

"Stop it," she said. "You crazy fool, you'll ruin my dress."

"I thought you said you weren't worried tonight."

She grabbed a hand full of grass and threw it in his face. "I'm not," she said, jumping up, grabbing her shoes, and running.

Hector spit out some dirt and got up, too. "I'll get you for that."

He caught her by the lake, by the water, in the light. Did he catch her or did she stop, to wait for him? He

touched her shoulder and she turned around. Catrina looked him full in the face, glowing. "There's something I have to tell you ," she said, pulling at the buttons on his shirt, straightening his collar.

"What?" he asked.

"I'm pregnant."

"What?" he asked. He stopped breathing. His mind raced. The possibility was always there, he knew, but they had tried to use birth control. Whenever the suppositories had time to work. Whenever they'd thought to bring them along. Whenever the rubber didn't get a hole in it, or get on all the way, or fall off. The thought of a baby was not unpleasant. It just had never occurred to him in a real way.

She was watching his face closely, trying to see what he was thinking, as if his face were a book. "I haven't told anyone else yet. I wanted you to be the first to know."

"Wow," he said smiling, trying to hide the uncertainty.

"What do you think?" she asked.

He pulled her into his arms, mashing his lips into hers. It was as passionate a kiss as he'd ever delivered. They broke the kiss. "I don't know."

First Times

Chapter 2

Hector remembered the first time he saw Catrina. It was through a store-front, plate glass window on a hot day. She was working in an ice cream shop, behind the counter scooping out homemade hard ice cream into crispy brown sugar cones. He stopped there on the sidewalk, looking in. She was beautiful, behind glass, and his mouth started to water. Her hair was strawberry glaze, her skin a shade paler than French vanilla. He wondered about her eyes, seeing them in his mind chocolate chip. Her breasts were twin cones under a dark apron for a wrapper, her body stacked like well rounded scoops. Past her hips below the skirt, two well molded straws. He searched his jean's pocket for change, and found a handful. He went in.

He looked at all the different colored ice creams displayed in their cardboard tubs, names as different as marmalade, hoy fudge, butter pecan. Then he looked at her. He walked up to the glass counter. She smiled. Her head and chest were all he could see unless he looked down and through the case. The image froze in his mind.

"What can I do for you?" she asked. Hector smiled.

For months later, Hector had a ravenous hunger for ice cream. You might say it was an obsession. At night, he dreamed dream after dream about ice cream. He kept going back. He ate a lot of ice cream, always eating the bottoms out of the cones first. Catrina asked him one time, after he'd gone there awhile regularly, why he did that. He told her he always had since he was a kid. She shrugged and said that was messy. He said it tasted better that way. He got to know, by tasting, every flavor in that case, all the time warming himself up to the girl behind the counter.

One day, with double chocolate fudge dripping down his chin, before he went to work, he found the courage to ask her if she had a boyfriend.

"Yeah," she said.

"Oh," he said, feeling suddenly awkward. "Can I ask you what's his name."

She was scooping chocolate chip from the bottom of one carton, onto a full one fresh from the freezer. "Hank," she said without looking up.

"What's Hank do?" he asked, sitting on a stool at the counter, between bites on a sugar cone.

"He works, gets drunk, tells fart jokes, goes fishing or hunting, and he goes back to work." She looked at him and smiled, putting the scoop down and finding a cloth and a bottle of Windex.

"No," said Hector, "I mean really?"

"He works in the oilfields," she said, wiping the glass clean. "Why?"

"Bet he's gone a lot," said Hector, fishing.

"Yeah."

"Do you miss him when he's gone?"

"Sometimes. I hate sitting at home alone on the weekend," she said, squirting more cleaner on the counter.

"I'm not dating anyone now," he said. She looked at him strangely and walked back for more ice cream, in the freezer.

Hank drove a truck. Hector saw him one time, from a distance, going into the shop where she worked. He waited until Hank was out and in the truck. He walked past, catching a glimpse of his rival. His hair was long, a stringy blonde. His face was weather tanned, and he sat tall in the seat, high in the cab. Hector could see for muscle he was no match. The truck pulled away. Hector went to a flower shop and bought a dozen carnations. He had them delivered to the shop.

Days later, a dozen carnations more.

"Isn't he a lot older than you?" Hector had asked around and he knew the guy was around thirty. He figured that was how he seduced Catrina. She was young and she didn't have a father; he'd died when she was still a baby. She'd been looking for someone to take his place when this Hank guy happened along.

"Yeah, but so what?" she asked, a bit on edge.

"Nothing," said Hector, thinking he'd better back off a bit. "Is he out in the oilfields now?" Hector hoped he didn't sound overly hopeful.

"He's been gone for a week. He called last night and said he might be out there a couple more." She put down the rag and the bottle and came out from behind the counter, taking a stool next to Hector. "You sure ask a lot of questions."

"Anything wrong with that?"

She perched her chin on the palm of her hand and thought for a moment. "No. I suppose not."

"I probably shouldn't say this, but you know that guy is going nowhere. I may not have a lot now, but by God I'm going somewhere. He'll be here the rest of his life." Hector's ice cream was starting to melt. He felt nervous when she was beside him. Doubly so, waiting for her response.

She stared down at the counter.

"How would you like to go see a movie this Friday?" he asked, breaking the growing silence.

Catrina looked up and smiled.

Hector went to work the following Saturday feeling on top of the world. He'd wanted to kiss her when he dropped her off after the date. She looked at him like she wanted it, too. But he didn't. He didn't want to ruin this

relationship by rushing things. Her remembered his first date, when he took Tammy Schneider to the movies and he tried feeling her up the whole time. They never went out again. this time he knew things were different, real.

Hector found a spot in the crowded Wal-Mart lot. It was ten till three. He parked and walked with a quick, light step through the lot and into the store. Gingerly, he snaked his way through the weekend crowds to the stockroom and the lounge where the timeclock was. Pete was sitting next to Carol from Jewelry. Real close. Pete's wife worked in Jewlry, too, but it was her day off. Pete was laid off from General Radiator, a Chromalloy factory. The Wal-Mart job was supposed to be temporary, but the plant ended up closing. Pete was free in his advice on sexual matters. Hector thought his virginity must hang like a sign on his back saying "kick me" because Pete was always trying to "help."

Hector found his card and punched the clock at five till. He was started out the door before Pete caught up with him.

"Hey, little buddy," said Pete, grabbing Hector by the arm. "Looks like you must have got some last night, what with that shit eating grin you're wearing."

"Nope," said Hector, pulling free.

"Well you did go out with that chick you was telling me about, didn't you?"

"Yeah," said Hector, afraid Pete would soon be having him give all the details, as Pete had a way of doing.

"Well, come on. Tell your Uncle Pete. How was it?" Pete started laughing, if that's what you'd call it. He sounded like a mule with emphysema. "Did you take her out to Pumphouse Road, like I told you to?"

Hector started to walk away, to find a two wheeler and get to work. "Nope," he said over his shoulder.

Pete ran around in front of him, blocking Hector's path. "Well, what did you do?" Pete leaned closer. "Did you get your hand down her pants? Play stinky pinky? You know what I mean?" He punched Hector on the shoulder. Pete held his fingers up to his nose "Shooo-ie! I love it."

"Goddamn you, Pete," said Hector. "I'm starting to get pissed at that foul mouth of yours."

"Hey, hey little guy. Don't get your underwear stuck up the crack of your ass. Just trying to help you out. I didn't mean nothing." He had his hand on Hector's shoulder again.

Hector pulled Pete's hand away.

Pete put it back. "You ought to take her out there, I'm telling you. I know just the place. I'll take you out there one day and show you. It's what you need and it'll do you some good. Ain't right for a boy your age to still be cherry."

Hector shrugged him off and grabbed a two wheeler. "I got work to do, Pete."

"Sure you do. Say, weren't you telling me that gal had her a boyfriend?" Pete said, walking in front of the double doors.

Hector stopped. "Yeah. Why?" Hector had only seen Hank that once from a distance, and he'd looked pretty big even from there.

"Where'd you say that old boy works?"

Hector was suspicious. "Out in the oilfields."

Pete took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I don't know, boy. Them boys work out in them oilfields ain't ones to mess around with. Fucking around with someone else's old lady is pretty serious business. Like as not get you killed, you ain't careful. Know what I mean?" Pete looked at Hector like he was waiting for an answer.

"What'd you say this old boy's name is?"

"Hank."

"Hank who? I know some guys that work in the fields. I might know this guy."

"I'm not sure what his last name is. Hawkins I think."

"Hmmm." Pete smiled. "Well hell, don't let it worry you so much." He leaned close again. "Ain't never stopped me, you know what I mean?" Pete started his laugh again.

"He's always gone," said Hector.

Pete stopped smiling, looking dead serious. "Sure. Sure he is."

"Shit," said Hector. "I think I love her and I'll take my chances. This ain't just some roll in the hay. This is love."

Pete tries to stifle a giggle. "Sure. Sure it is." Then he busted out laughing.

Hector pushed off to look for something to take out to the floor. He wasn't going to stand around and listen to Pete's bullshit.

"Hey," hollered Pete. "Hey now. Come on back here." He caught up to Hector. "I didn't mean to insult you or your girlie friend, so don't be running off in a big huff." He looked sincere.

"Ok," said Hector. "You shouldn't laugh about it, though."

"You can't laugh about it, then it ain't no fun," said Pete.

Hector had to think about that one.

"Tell you what I'll do," said Pete. "Next time you have a date with this girl, you let me know plenty ahead of time. When we get off, before I go home, I'll buy you two a bottle of wine. That is, if you'll give me the money."

Hector had to stop to consider this. He had never drunk. His father was enough to keep anyone sober. But he was thinking, what the hell. One time wouldn't hurt. But what if he got blind stupid drunk and couldn't drive home? What if he wrecked his car? What if he was pulled over by

the police? What would he tell his mom and dad? How would he ever explain. Hector thought a minute. "Ok, you're on."

Pete grinned. "Hell yeah. And you just remember everything that happens so you can tell Uncle Pete all about it, you hear?"

Hector felt embarrassed, so he went back to looking for something to do.

He hauled out a couple cases of toilet paper to the floor to be put out as quickly as he could. He figured it would take the girls working the floor a while to get it on the shelves, and since he wasn't supposed to have too many boxes out there at one time, he thought he would have time to call Catrina.

He walked outside, telling Carol in Jewelry on the way out he was going to look for shopping carts on the lot. The night was warm and he could smell fish frying from the place across the highway. He walked down the sidewalk to a payphone by the closest mall entrance. He was surprised to find Pete already there. Pete saw him walking up, and he hung up.

"What you doing out here, boy?" asked Pete.

"I was just going to ask you the same thing."

Pete rubbed his eye. "Guess someone ought to be in there, huh?" he said, pointing at the store.

"Yeah," said Hector. Pete walked slowly back inside.

Hector picked up the phone. He tried the ice cream shop first, because he thought Catrina had said she was working. She was.

"Oh, hi," she said, sounding surprised,

"Hi," said Hector.

Two weeks later, Hank was still out in the field. Hector had made some cassette tapes at home for Catrina, filling both sides of ninety minute tapes with music about being true to yourself, breaking up, and true love songs. She played them and they spent time together nearly everyday, whether it was walking in the park, sitting at the ice cream shop, or seeing each other for stolen minutes on the street or in the store where he worked. Hector had kissed her and she had kissed him. Catrina hardly mentioned Hank at all anymore, except to say he was working. That made Hector happy because he finally felt like he was going to win. Like a knight jousting for a maiden, he had won.

Hector knew that Catrina was not a virgin. He tried to tell himself that it didn't matter that he was and she was not. Sometimes he believed it. Other times, he only buried it deeper. Sometimes he believed it. First times should be special, and he was looking forward to theirs. That's what mattered, he told himself. Sometimes he believed it. This would be like her first time because it was the first time with him.

"Do you think first times are important?" he asked her in the shop when no one else was there.

"What do you mean?" she said, sitting beside him, looking at him with those round, soft eyes.

"You know," he said sucking a malt through a straw.

"You know I'm not a virgin." She didn't look at him but straight ahead.

Hector wondered why they couldn't look at each other. "It doesn't matter."

"There will always be a first time for us," she said softly. "I'm breaking up with Hank."

Hector choked on the cold chocolate malt.

She told Hector she'd not been with Hank for the last month or so. The last time he'd called, she hadn't mentioned any names, but she told Hank there was someone else and she wanted to break up. Hank didn't take it very well. He demanded to know who it was, but she wouldn't tell him. She worried about Hector. Hector became nervous, always watching his back.

First times should be special, he thought, as Pete handed him the bottle of wine. Pete was wearing a sideways grin and he laughed like he was wheezing his last breath. "Have a good time with this," he said.

Hector took the bottle and put it in his trunk for the next night, for his date with Catrina and the drive to Pumphouse Road.

Saturday night. Hector picked Catrina up early in the evening.

"Well," he said when he got into the car, "what shall we do tonight?"

"Do?" she asked. "I thought you had that all planned out."

Hector smiled as he started the car. "You're right. I do." He reached over for a kiss.

She gave him a pat on the thigh. "Let's go. I think my mother's watching."

Hector drove the back streets nervously, slowly, anxiously. One time he thought someone was following him, but he knew that was crazy.

"You heard anything from Hank lately?" he asked.

"He calls every day," said Catrina with a weary expression.

"What's he say? What's he want? Doesn't the sonofabitch know when to quit?"

"I guess not," said Catrina, her face a little green from the reflections of the dash board lights. "He keeps saying the same thing over and over. 'I want to get back together. I want to get back together.' I tell him, 'But I don't want you.' He says, 'I don't understand.' I'll tell you, it's about to drive me nuts."

Hector turned a corner fast, making Catrina slide closer to him. "I can imagine," he said. "Let's talk about something else."

"Sounds good to me," she tried to smile, but she looked worried.

"I hope you like strawberry wine."

"Oh my, wine?" asked Catrina, genuinely surprised.

"A gift from Pete."

"But I thought you didn't drink?"

Hector laughed a little. "I didn't. You don't think just because I drink a little wine I'll be like my father do you?" There wasn't a trace of a smile left on his face now.

Catrina looked at him as he stopped at the intersection on the outskirts of town to Pumphouse Road. "Honey," she said, "I seriously doubt your dad has ever tasted wine. And besides, one drink on a special occassion does not an alcoholic make. Besides, this stuff is more like Kool Aid."

Hector turned. "Yeah? And this is a special occassion." He looked over at Catrina and he could tell she was blushing even in the darkness.

"You don't suppose there will be any cops patrolling out here, do you?" she asked, turning up a song on the radio. Bad Company's "Rock and Roll Fantasy."

"Pete says not," said Hector. He put his hand on her thigh and slowly let it creep up. Catrina didn't fight it. Instead, she did the same to him. "You get any higher and I'm going to have a wreck." The drove over the bridge, over the creek, and past the pumphouse from which the road got its name. Even at night, the water looked green and murky. It was getting darker, away from the lights of town.

Lightening bugs made blinking, yellow dots wherever Hector looked. He tried to imagine they were signs, and if they were, what they were saying. Yellow. Caution. Danger? It made him shudder. Catrina felt it.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

"Nothing. A chill," he said, hoping he didn't sound worried. "I love you."

She smiled. She hadn't told him yet that she loved him. "I know," she said.

He pulled off the road, down a narrow wheel rutted, double tracked dirt off road. It hadn't rained hardly at all during the last month, so Hector wasn't worrying about gettin stuck. He drove slowly, avoiding the biggest holes, doing his best to keep from bottoming out. He drove down as close to the water as possible, near the bridge, and parked. They leaned towards one another and kissed and let their hands wander over each other more freely than they ever had before. Her skin was so soft, he touched her like she would break. She was gentle, firm and demanding. Her hand were squeezing and stroking. They stopped a second. A car pssed on the bridge, and through the rolled down window it sounded like a tank.

"Do you want to drink a little wine?" asked Hector.

"Sure. Why not?"

"Do you think it'll make me crazy?"

She laughed. "I hope so."

He kissed her and got out of the car. The summer breeze was warm. Hell, it was down right hot, and even muggier than usual down by the water. A mosquito bit him in the neck as he was getting the wine and glasses out of the trunk. He swatted it, then samashed it between his fingers. Goddamned things were thick around this slow running water. He took a deep breath. It smelled like something had died. He looked around, and near the trees he could see the rotting carcass of a dead possum. Hector felt another chill. He shrugged it off.

Catrina poked her head out the driver's side window. "What's taking so long?"

"I'm coming," he said. He kicked a beer bottle walking back. He picked it up and threw it into the brush so he wouldn't run over it later. The crickets were hollering, and somewhere there were frogs. He felt vaguely as if someone was watching. He handed Katrina the wine through the window. He took off his shirt. She looked at him. "It's hot," he offered.

"Did you bring the corkscrew?"

He opened the door. "Screw top." He took the bottle and twisted the cap off. They poured a toast.

"To us!" They said together. Hector poured the stuff down his throat, and gagged. It tasted awful, he thought. Katrina laughed and poured him another one.

"It's an acquired taste," she assured him.

Nearly an hour later, their clothes were a mixed pile scattered across the floorboard of the car. The key was turned back to accessory and a tape Hector had made played, turned down low. He was still lying there on top of her naked and warm and soft body when Catrina saw the lights coming down the embankment. First one set, headlights, then another.

"Hector!"

"What?" Alarmed.

"Sit up. Fast. Get your clothes on. There's someone coming."

"What?"

"Someone's coming." Catrina started grabbing for clothes, trying to cover herself.

A car door slammed. And then another. And then another. Hector heard voices. Laughter. He frantically searched for his underwear. He wouldn't want to be caught without his underwear. The voices, steps, laughter were getting closer.

"Hector. . ." Catrina had tears in her eyes. She pulled her underwear on. "I'm scared."

Hector looked out. One car was blocking the way. ZHe searched for something, anything, to pick up--a weapon. He had the bottle. He rolled the window up one side and locked it. Catrina did the other.

Pounding on the glass. A voice. "What you doing in there? Fucking?" Someone else laughed.

"Hector. . . ." Catrina stared, wide eyed at him.

"Is it good?" said another voice.

"Come on out of there," said the first, pounding on the hood now.

"You don't get out of that fucking car right now, I'm going to bust the sonofabitch open." A third voice, the harshest of the three.

"That's Hank!" Catrina said, grabbing Hector's arm, digging in her claws. "Don't go out there. He'll kill you."

Hector started shaking. Hell, he was scared. He couldn't ever remember being this scared. "I've got to get out. "

"Don't."

Glass shattered, the side window gone. All over the floor, glass. A baseball bat. A hand reached in.

"Get your fucking ass out here, you slimely little bastard. You hear me!?" Hank.

Hector opened the door. Someone yanked it the rest the way open. Hank grabbed him by the neck and slammed hiis face against the car. "Drop that fucking bottle!" he screeched. "You going to use that on me, you scum sucking pig!" Someone was laughing. Hector felt the first punch, tasted blood, his mouth full. He wanted to raise his hand., make a fist, but Hank let loose another and another. they hurt. Hector couldn't think.

There was Catrina. "Hank. . .don't. Stop it. Stop it Stop it!" She was crying, half naked. What was she doing. She shouldn't be here. Fighting.

"You goddamned slut. Fucking some faggot." He slapped her.

"Bastard!" she screamed.

Hector felt her hands, on his face on his chest, covering him. Could see her, though one eye was swelling.

"Is that all you're going to do to him, Hank?" asked one.

"Ought to cut his fucking balls off."

"Ought to cut his fucking guts out," said Hank, but he kept walking.

Hector heard a laugh like a mule with emphysema somewhere out there, by the cars.

"Fucking and fighting all in one night. Sure as hell can't beat that." Pete.

Hector slumped down against the wheel of his car, holding his face. Catrina was whimpering softly, holding him, telling him it was going to be all right. He tried to talk. His lips didn't want to move. He thought he said, "I love you."

Catrina cried harder, "I love you, too."

Hog Market Futures

Chapter 3

Hector slammed the car door shut, locking it. He stopped to kick some broken brown glass from the grass ridden lot before he passed through the narrow space between apartment houses to the front porch. He skipped the paint cracked wooden stairs, walking past old Mr.Gardner on the porch swing. Gray haired Mr.Gardner didn't look up as Hector went by. Rocking gently, he held a pipe clenched tightly between his yellowed teeth, staring vacantly across the street at the cars lined up at The Chicken Palace. . Hector tried talking to him when he and Catrina had first move in, after the wedding. He quickly tired of shouting.

He flipped the black metal lid of the mailbox up in the hallway, checking, like always. Waiting for that important letter or card that could change his life. Bills, phone bill, credit bills, advertisement, advertisement, advertisement.

"Is that you?" An old cracked voice from the apartment there across from the boxes. Hector cringed at the thought of a long conversation with the old lady. Hector debated,

whether he should answer the call. Maybe if he stood quietly, she would think he was gone. He held his breath. The hall was quiet. A baby started to cry, the other apartment downstairs. A young couple lived there. The husband wasn't much older than Hector and already they had two children. The crying got louder. Hector felt his face start to turn blue.

"Young man, is that you?" came the voice from hell once more. He was caught. Mail in hand, he walked through her door, which was always open during the day. She lay in bed, in her housecoat.

"Oh, it is you," she croaked, then started coughing. More like hacking. The cough came from down deep, and she coughed some phlegm up in her hand. Hector tried not to look at what she did with it. On the wall there were pictures, black and white tin types, ancient like the woman. The room smelled old, like a nursing home, like death.

"How you feeling today, Mrs. Spencer?" he asked, not realizing what he was asking, trying just to make conversation.

She coughed some more, wiping her mouth with her dressing coat sleeve. "Not well, not well. Think I might have a touch of pneumonia. My daughter called today and said it was something going round. That daughter of mine, I'll tell you, I think she's losing all her morals. . ."
Coughing.

"Marbles you say?" asked Hector, shifting feet, anxious to be away, as if afraid what ever she had might be catching.

"Morals, morals," she said, shaking her wrinkled gray head. The loose skin of her jowls shook. She tried sitting up, falling back, and then up. Hector reached to help her, but she knocked his hand away. "I can make it," she said. Her yellowed white night gown was snaking the way up, her shriveled thighs exposed.

Hector definitely didn't want to see that. "Is there something I can help you with?" He shuffled through his mail, flipping through the shiny colored newsprint with screaming low prices. The baby still cried. Shouting, too, from back there, made Hector vaguely nervous.

"That daughter of mine. She up and moved in with some no good sonofabitch. I told her, any man that will hit you is not worth now and won't be worth a damn, not ever. Isn't that so?" She started again before Hector could answer. "She done lived with him once before you know. I told her that time she was making a mistake. Sure enough, the first time she got her a black eye, who does she come running home to?"

There was a card there, mixed with the adds, he hadn't noticed before. From Job Service, where he'd registered months ago, right after he married. Manico, the tire plant, was hiring. He was scheduled for an interview. All he had to do was come in an fill out an application. His heart

missed a beat when he saw starting wage. Eight dollars an hour. Eight dollars an hour! What could he do with eight dollars an hour? What couldn't he do with eight dollars an hour? And that was just starting pay. . . .

"Isn't that so?" came now the cracked voice.

He looked down at her and she was looking up at him, expectation painted on her face. Her head shook with the effort, trying to be steady. One eye was almost white, glazed over with a cataract, the other black and sure. At least she had her skirt pulled down. "Oh yeah," he said with conviction.

"Well that's what I told her," she said, firmly self righteous, not moving.

Hector nodded vigorously. He had to get out of here. He had to tell Catrina. She was going to flip, to absolutely die. "Was there something you needed, Mrs. Spencer?"

She coughed some more, this time a real fit.

"That's a bad cough you got there," he said, regretting as the words left his mouth.

"Yes," Cough. "Yes." Shaking her head, cough. Her face turned red, and for a minute Hector panicked because she looked like she'd stopped breathing. Cough. She was all right.

"Really, I have to be going. My wife is expecting me upstairs. . . ."

"Would you hand me my cane, right there," she said pointing to a corner stacked with newspapers and magazines. *Cosmopolitan, True Romance, People.*

He handed her the cane. A nice one, hand carved wood, like a witch's, he thought.

"That's a pretty young thing you're married to. You're a lucky young man to have such a wonderful wife. Why, the other day, I was down in the back. . . You know I had an operation there here a while back, a slipped disk, you know. never been the same since. Ugh. . . " She put her weight on the cane; straining to stand up. Hector held his hand out to help. She slapped it away. "I'll manage." She made it, but not without coughing. "A very pretty girl you have. You're very lucky."

"Yes," said Hector. "I know. I really have to go now. . . ."

"Just a minute. Could you spare just a minute. I dropped a letter and it fell behind the stove. I can't reach down there and get it, with my bad back and all you know. I was wondering. . . ."

Hector was already in the kitchen behind the stove, searching through spilled macaroni and grease and mouse turds, for a letter. He found it.

She was sitting in the kitchen, spread legged on a chair. Hector didn't want to look at her. Old witch, too old to be modest anymore. He handed her the letter, wiping his hand on his pants. A sudden urge, and he bent down and

kissed her a smack on her gnarly old noggin. "Have a great day, Mrs. Spencer." He could hear her as he was leaving, "Thank you, young man. Thank you." Even her cough was better.

Hector was in the hallway, about to assault the staircase when the door to the other apartment opened. The baby's cries were louder, in the open.

"Jesus Christ, can't you shut that kid up?" The door slammed. Mark Potter came to the door. He saw Hector on the stairs. "I thought I heard someone out here," he said, his tone very different now, friendly.

"How's it going?" Hector asked, climbing a step higher.

"Oh, you know how it is. Kid screaming, wife bitching. Had to get out of there. Fucking drive you nuts. I love my wife and I love my kids, but Christ, you know, they can drive you up a wall sometimes. All cramped up in that shitty little apartment. You know how it is. You're married, aren't you?" Mark Potter ran his hand through his greasy brown hair, squinting.

"Yeah," said Hector, climbing a step higher, wanting to get away.

"You know what my boy did, my oldest you know. Know what he did the other day? He's three, wait a minute, four now, and the little shit, he knocked the goddamned deodorant in the goddamned toilet. Then he flushes it. *Flushes it!* Fucking toilet's still plugged up. The little shit. I

could have killed him when I found out. Of course he didn't say anything about it. No. You know how I found out?"

Hector looked at this man, with shiny green, threadbare polyester pants and shook his head, inching up another stair.

"The old lady, my wife you know. . .she's not really old, I just call her that. The old lady comes in this morning, asks me what I did with the deodorant. I told her I ain't had no deodorant. She sniffs, all dainty like, and says, 'Yeah, I should know.' So she gets me out of bed, making me help look for it. Can't find it nowhere. So we ask the kids. I ask Mikey, that's my boy you know, I ask him. He looks all guilty like. I know something's wrong. I'll tell you what makes it even worse. I ate a bunch of cucumbers last night. I love cucumbers, but you know what they can do to a guy, don't you?"

Hector didn't want to stand there and listen. he didn't want to hear. But he nodded slightly.

Mark Potter wasn't satisfied with a nod of the head. He laughed. "You know what I mean? Ain't bad enough you have the toilet plugged but you get the runs. Know what I mean?"

"Yeah," Hector agreed, ready to say anything so this story would end and he could leave.

"So I go take a shit, like I do every morning anyway, you know. What do you suppose happens?"

"I don't know," said Hector, not really wanting to know either.

"I'll tell you what happened. Goddamned thing overflows. All over the place. What a mess. I call the boy in and ask him if he knows anything about this. He starts bawling, you know, and says he accidentally-- *accidentally*-- knocked something in there. I can tell you, I felt like knuckling the little shit. But did I? No. You know anything about toilets?"

"No. All I know is how to use them. Maybe you need to call a plumber. Or the landlord."

Mark Potter scratched his unshaved face. "Yeah. A plumber maybe. Not the landlord. Christ, he'd have a fit now, wouldn't he?"

"Yeah, I guess he would. Listen, good luck with the toilet. I really have to go now." Hector turned to leave.

"Hey!" shouted Mark Potter.

Hector stopped, turned around. Mark Potter took an ink pen and a palm-size spiral pad from his shirt pocket. "You wouldn't know a plumber, would you?" He asked, ready to write.

"Nope. Sorry." Hector ran away up the stairs, not waiting for a response. He thought he'd made it home this time when another door opened and his neighbor stepped out. One-Eyed Jack.

"Hey," said Jack.

"Hey," said Hector, reaching for his door.

"You a. . ." said Jack, turning his head so he could look all around with his one good eye. "You smoke?" The good eye focused on Hector. The glass one looked nowhere, wide open.

"Yeah. Want a cigarette?" Hector reached into his jacket pocket, wanting to get this over with quickly.

Jack squeaked in his leather jacket, reaching down to tie his boot lace. Still bent down, he asked, "No, I mean, you got any papers?"

"Papers?" Hector felt like he was talking to Jack's ass.

"Yeah. Papers--you know." Jack stood up, looked around some more. Jack stepped closer. Hector stepped back. Finally, Hector was backed against the wall. Jack put his hand there, between Hector and the door, close enough now Hector could smell his breath. Onions. Hector hated onions. "You ain't no nark, are you?"

Solemnly, "No." Hector shook his head.

Jack kept his good eye on him. The other eye was directed at him, too. Hector felt a chill and shivered. The glass eye looked right through him. He didn't want to look at it, but he couldn't keep himself from it. He found he was staring. The longer he looked, he could see himself, a reflection in the glass. Another chill.

"I guess your all right," Jack pronounced like a death sentence. He bent over again. This time his face was

crotch level. Hector squirmed, flat against the wall. What the hell was Jack trying to do?

Jack reached into his sock, pulled out a bag with greenish brown stuff inside, and stood straight with a crooked grin on his face. "Killer. Lamb's Bread."

Hector put on a stupid smile.

Jack unrolled the bag and opened it. He looked around one more time and put the bag to his nose, inhaling deeply. "Mmmm mmm. Smells good." He grinned. Before Hector knew what was happening, the bag was in his face under his nose and he was breathing it. "Take a whiff."

Hector choked on the scent, sweet like pine.

"Good, huh?"

Hector coughed.

"Want to buy some? I'll give you a good deal. And I swear: this shit will fuck you up. What do you think?"

"Umm." Hector didn't want to tell him he didn't smoke the shit. Wouldn't be right, wouldn't be cool. He wanted to be cool. "Umm. I'm trying to quit, man," he said. He pointed to his apartment door. "The wife, you know, she doesn't like it."

"Oh," Jack seemed to shrink an inch. "Well, that's too bad. Maybe we'll get high sometime, huh?"

Hector shrugged. "Um, yeah. Sure. Sometime."

Jack took a last smell and started rolling the bag up. he licked the end to keep it down. "You know," he said. "I been thinking. . ." He put his head down, did something

with his hands to his face. When he looked up, the glass eye was gone and Hector stared into an empty socket, all red and raw looking, veins running everywhere, dark. Hector's stomach knotted. He wanted to turn away, but for a reason he couldn't name, he kept looking.

Jack went on, like nothing had changed, so casual. "If I ever think I'm going to get busted, I'm going to stash it here." He laughed. Hector tried to. "Having one eye ain't all that bad, huh?" He nudged Hector with his elbow.

"Yeah. . .well, I got to go in now. Things to do, you know."

Jack threw his arms up. "Right. Stay cool." He put his hands in his pockets, walked down the creaking, wooden steps, not looking back. He called. "Say hi for me to that strange looking dude in your apartment with your old lady, would you?"

Hector stood there, mouth open, staring down the stairs. Who could it be now? Hank come back for a visit? That fucking snake Pete. He'd not seen Pete since that night. Rumor surfaced he'd got on at the oilfields. What a coincidence. Hector wanted to see Pete. Hector wanted a club in his hand. He wanted to beat Pete, hear him laugh then.

He opened the door. The windows open, cool spring breeze, orders filtered through from the loud speaker at the fast food joint across the street. The kitchen. . .

"Get your head in here. Come on. Right now."

Catrina. Didn't sound like she was in the throws of passion. Come on, she's pregnant. Six months big. Six months huge. He walked through the bedroom into the kitchen. There she was, bent over, trying to pull someone back in from the window. He recognized that "strange dude's" wide behind. Warner. Jack wasn't that far off the mark after all.

"Hey there! Hi there! Ho there!" Warner shouted out the window.

"Honey, I'm home."

Catrina jumped, startled. "Hector!" She looked flushed, frustrated, nodding towards her broother. "Could you give me a hand. He's been doing this the last ten minutes."

He gave her a hug, having to stretch to get all the way around her. They kissed. Someone cheered outside. Hector looked out. Warner was trying to spit into a cup someone had set up on the gas station lot. There was five or six innocent by standers watching the performance, along with the Marathon station attendants. When Warner made one, the crowd went wild. Hector pulled him in after that last basket.

"Hey, Warner."

Warner smiled. Warner always smiled. Despite his condition, maybe because of it, he was always happy. "Hey," answered Warner, smiling. Warner smelled a bit bad, like

month old body odor. His hair was slick black, no doubt natural oil. Dull brown eyes to match his now dull brain. But Hector genuinely liked Warner. Relatively harmless and strong as a bull, great for moving furniture.

"Thanks," said Catrina, sitting down in one of their two one hundred percent plasric not matching kitchen chairs. "What would I do without you?"

Warner laughed. "Jesus, you wouldn't have a brother."

Hector looked at him, looked at Catrina, laughed.

Catrina joined in.

"Warner brought his guitar."

"Yeah?" said Hector.

Warner nodded his head emphatically. "Yeah.

Electric."

"Great. You going to play us a tune?"

"Yeah, Warn," said Catrina. "Sheow him how you can play."

They'd lost his attention. Warner was chasing something under the refrigerator. He smashed it, a cock roach, with his fingers. He held it to his nose, then his mouth, touching it to his tongue.

"*Warner!*" cried Catrina. "Put that down, right now!"

Hector watched, intrigued. "I wonder if this is what it's like having a baby."

"I hope not," she muttered. She clicked on the clock radio on the table. Newscaster giving hog market futures.

"Sow bellies selling for. . ."

She clicked it off.

Warner went to the living room, Catruina and Hector in tow. He dragged the guitar from the corner. "Left the amp at home," he said, rather shyly.

"Oh," said Hector.

"Sounds better with it," said Warner, blushing. He tuned it up and abruptly began singing. Hector and Catrina strained to hear the guitar as Warner sang, very well, "Yesterday." They clapped as he finished. Warner did three encores.

He stopped and they were all quiet.

"Need a ride home?" Hector offered.

On the way home, Hector remembered the card, the interview, the job. He told Catrina. That night they ate steak, prime rib. They danced at the Ramada t until late.

Mr. Gardner sat on the porch in his rocking chair, rocking, as they walked up the steps. They nodded, he rocked, looking out at the lights of the V.F.W. down the street a block where country music played loudly.

"I'm going to carry you across th threshold," Hector announced at the head of the stairs..

"Let me down, you fool..," she laughed as he grunted, trying to pick her up.

"Damn, I'm going to have to put you on a diet." He grunted some more, barely lifting her.

"Don't you drop us. What ever you do, don't you drop us."

"I'm going to drop you--right on the bed."

"Oh, Hector. I can't believe it. Eight dollars an hour."

He dropped her on the bed.

"Eight dollars an hour, starting pay," she said dreamily. "Now we can buy the baby some clothes and some toys and some furniture and. . ."

"And I can buy some new clothes, and . . and --I don't know--just whatever you want. We can get a new car, or a stereo, a colored TV. . ."

She grabbed him by the shirt and pulled him down close to her. "You know what I want right now?"

"Me?" he asked.

She laughed. "Besides that."

"What?"

"I want to get the hell out of this place."

He kissed her. "Me, too."

They made love, as the traffic lights bathed them in colors, green, yellow, red. Slow gentle, until they heard the crash, crunching metal and breaking glass in the street.