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A TIME UNKNOWN

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Chapter 1

In the early morning when the sky is still gray and the sun is not quite pink and not quite red and it is quiet except for the occasional barking of a faraway dog, there is a peace that exists at no other time, only in the early morning. A pleasant kind of solitude. A happy kind of loneliness. In the summer the sun is not yet unbearable, and in the winter it is not yet time to abandon the comfort of a warm bed to begin a new day. It is a time of day feared by some, a time shunned by others. There are those who cannot stand loneliness, those who cannot bear solitude, and for them the early morning is a time unknown.

There is a bar in Cavin, Illinois called FlapJacks, on a street called Wesleyan Avenue. Upon entering the bar, the darkness is at first enveloping, and for some it is contagious. They sit sadly, staring at half-empty glasses of beer, thinking about the precious past, a past further changed and distorted with the passing of each day, and their memories are of beautiful ex-lovers and long forgotten triumphs and ecstasies. It's a game, most realize, but it

is better to remember the good than the bad, and changing the only thing they have the power to change is a habit they forgive in one another.

The young come too, thirsty for a taste of life's richness, and they dance, ignoring the weary. It's not their time to be sad, to be unfulfilled, and they leave in pairs, hungry and vibrant. It is the weary, though, that one comes to know at FlapJacks, for the faces of the young are always changing, faster than the seasons, and the faces of the weary seem to forever stay the same.

At the bar there sits a man with thin brown eyes and a tanned and hollowed face. His name is Jack Stevens. In the darkness of FlapJacks the creased horizontal lines at the corners of his eyes do not show, nor do the tightly drawn edges of his mouth, but his profile is sharp and serious, and though he is only twenty, he looks much older. He wears a pair of torn and faded jeans and a loose t-shirt, and his brown hair is long and tangled.

Behind the bar there is a girl, an attractive young woman of twenty-two, and to Jack she seems to be both distant and near, both accessible and unreachable. He has seen her here many times and she has seen him. She is short, shorter than Jack, and has smooth dark skin and eyes that pierce him in a lazy, effortless way. Her hair is long and light brown. She wears a white top and black shorts--all the waitresses at FlapJacks do--and her hand is small and fragile when she hands Jack a beer. He gives her

a dollar; "Keep the change," he says, smiling, and his voice is soft and deep.

"Thanks," she says, smiling back at him, and for a moment she eyes him questionably, with desire, and then she is waiting on someone else; moving away quickly, gracefully, and smiling again--she smiles easily, and often, Jack thinks. He sips his beer. He is tired of this, of her, of wanting her and not having her; he looks up and she is looking at him, and she looks away. He doesn't even know her last name.

"Beth, how 'bout a beer down here, baby?" Jack hears, and he knows the whiny voice, and he turns to see Mel Anderson standing at the end of the bar. Mel sees him.

"Jack, where you been hiding?" he says loudly, walking toward Jack, extending his hand. He doesn't wait for an answer. "I'm having a party tomorrow night; you ought to stop by," he says, smiling at the girl, Beth, as she hands him a beer. "Thanks, babe," he adds, dropping three quarters on the bar in front of her. She looks at Jack as she leans forward to pick them up.

"It starts around eight," Mel continues, and Jack looks at him, at his eyes. They are shifty now, for Mel is off guard, but Jack knows they can be sincere, caring, even warm when Mel needs them to be, and Jack isn't sure he likes him much.

"Over at Turner Park?" he finally asks disinterestedly.

"Yeah, apartment 7-C, in the middle on the right," Mel says, and he seems suddenly bored with Jack, suddenly defensive, and his eyes search the room for other people he knows, other invitations to be made. "Gotta go, see ya tomorrow night," he says, looking at someone he has recognized across the room, and he grabs his glass and heads to a distant table.

Jesus, I hate this place, Jack says to himself, and he pretends he has said it aloud. Why do you come here then? Mel would ask, and he would throw his arms out from his sides as he always does when he asks a question. I don't know, Jack would answer, and that would be the end of it for Mel, but not for Jack.

Outside FlapJacks there is a light breeze, and it cools the July evening air, air that is fresh with the pleasant smell of summer. The street is deserted, and a bouncer with a crew cut sits on a stool on the sidewalk, playing with a hairbrush left by a disoriented drunk woman. Inside the air is stale, and the hard floor is sticky. From a distant table comes the sound of breaking glass, then of loud laughter. Jack looks to the sound, but sees only darkness, and he turns back to the bar. I gotta get out of this town, he says, but he says it to himself, not to Mel, or to Beth, who is pouring a beer for an old drunk in an oversized suit, and Jack drinks his beer and watches her move.

Chapter 2

Just outside Cavin there is a man-made lake, Angel Lake, and when there is a full moon travelers on Sycamore Road can look across the light, tumbling waves to a man-made island. From the road the island looks still and serene, but beyond the sturdy young trees and beneath the tangled green undergrowth it is alive, and it is ever growing and changing. Sycamore Road continues into town, and the beautiful man-made nature of Angel Lake gives way to other, less beautiful structures of man. There is a small shopping center--a Big Star, two liquor stores, and a cinema--and its concrete parking lot is worn and littered with potholes. Beyond this there is Turner Park, the largest apartment complex in Cavin, and the buildings are numbered erratically, as if the task of numbering was left to a maniac, and building 7 is on the right side of the drive, between buildings 15 and 32. Apartment C is the center apartment of the one story building, and though both the front and back doors are open, it is hot inside, and many of the people have spilled out onto the lawn behind it.

One of the people remaining inside is Mel Anderson, and he sits on a couch between two girls, and in his hand there is a clear plastic pitcher, heisted from a nearby Pizza Hut, and it is half full of beer. He raises the pitcher to his mouth and performs a chugging ritual for the girls. Across from him, stretched out in an easy chair, sits Jack Stevens, and he is glassy eyed. The stereo has been commandeered by headbangers, and the Grateful Dead have been replaced by Judas Priest. A friend of Mel's with long bleached hair staggers by, and Mel tells him to turn the stereo down; he looks uncomprehendingly at Mel, then continues out the door into the sticky evening.

"Asshole," Mel mutters, and he climbs to his feet, firmly planting them in the orange plush carpet. His legs wobble and his body sways, and one of the girls beside him grabs him by the belt loops and pulls him back onto the couch. "I'll do it," she says, standing up. She is tall, and her skin is very white, and her tight black dress stresses every curve of her body so that she looks like a sexy vampire.

"You're a good girl, Crystal; bring me back a beer," Mel slurs, and when he leans forward to give her the empty pitcher he slides off the couch onto his knees. Crystal takes the pitcher and rolls her eyes, and the girl remaining on the couch, a much smaller girl, struggles to pull Mel back up onto it.

"Thanks, Meredith," he says, now safely back on the couch, and he slips his arm around the girl.

Jack is watching the door, though he is doing it discreetly, so Mel won't notice, and he is beginning to think she won't come, and he is beginning to feel drunk. He stands and walks to the door, and he notices that the room is spinning a bit, and his steps are light; he looks at his feet as he walks and they seem unconnected to his body. Outside the apartment people stand in small groups, talking, catching up on each other's lives, and Jack searches the faces for a familiar one. Beth is not there, and Jack walks past the groups of people and across the back lawn of Turner Park; at the far edge of the lot the land gently steepens into a hill, and the hill drops suddenly to a ditch that, in all but the driest months, runs with water. On the other side of the ditch there is another grassy hill, and on the top of it there is a tall chain link fence. Jack sits on the first hill and looks down to the ditch; there are several small pools of standing water, and the ground around these pools is still damp, but the caking mud at the edges of the ditch attests to the severity of the ongoing summer drought. Jack spits into the ditch.

"I don't think that's gonna cut it," he hears, and looks up to see Mel standing behind him, and Mel has traded his pitcher for a nearly full bottle of Bailey's Irish Cream. Jack laughs, and Mel sits down beside him, offering him the bottle.

"No thanks, man, I think I've had enough for a while," Jack says, leaning back, his hands behind him, his weight on

his palms. He feels pressure at his elbows and slides his body back a little.

"Yeah, I'm pretty blown myself," Mel replies, setting the bottle down between them. He runs his hand over his face, over his sweating forehead, and then through his short, croppy hair. Mel is twenty-five, or twenty-six, but he looks younger--he has a youthful face; unencumbered by lines or edges it is slightly round, and, except for the subtle shadows of stubble that mark the beginning of a thin beard, it is smooth. "What are you doing out here?" he asks, tossing his arms out from his sides unenthusiastically and studying Jack's face in the moonlight; the moon is full, and the night sky is somehow bright and dark at the same time.

"Just needed some air," Jack responds. Mel looks at him for a moment, then turns away, and his eyes follow the cut of the ditch, the path of the water, until it curves out of sight and he can see only the hills. "Whatta you think of Crystal?" he asks, turning back to Jack.

"She's okay."

"She thinks you're cute."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah."

"I thought you were going out with Crystal," Jack says, shifting his weight and facing Mel.

"Crystal and I are just friends," Mel says, looking away, and to Jack the line sounds patiently practiced,

carefully rehearsed. Mel scoops up the bottle and lifts it to his mouth; he takes a long swig and, his body shuddering slightly, sets the bottle back on the ground.

"You sure?" Jack asks.

"Crystal and I have had our times, but the past is the past; besides, she thinks you're cute," Mel says, and there is a touch of sarcasm in his voice.

"You expecting any more people?" Jack asks, picking up the bottle and looking at the label.

"Like who?" Mel asks, and Jack feels him looking at him, looking into him.

"I don't know--anybody." Jack continues reading the label, and Mel grows bored with it and stands up.

"No, not really," he says, then adds, "Think I could have my bottle?" Jack hands it to him and Mel heads back to the party.

The night air is soothing, and Jack closes his eyes and tries to crawl into his head. The sharpness of his senses is lost, and he feels himself spinning, the world spinning, and he imagines that he is on a ride at an amusement park. His stomach suddenly turns and there is a throbbing in his head; he opens his eyes and lets out his breath. The ride slows down, the world realigns itself. From behind him there is a giggle, and Jack spins around quickly, almost losing his balance. It is Crystal, and in each of her hands there is a cup of beer. "What are you doing?" she asks, kneeling down beside him, her knees pressed against his thigh.

"Oh, I just needed some air," he says, taking one of the beers from her and holding it to his mouth. The beer is cold, but it is hard and bitter, and Jack winces as he drinks it. "What brings you out here?" he asks.

"You looked like you needed a beer."

"No," Jack answers, laughing, and he sets his beer down. Crystal's features are blurred, and Jack knows he's drunk, and he feels as if he is watching a movie, watching himself in a movie, and he puts one hand on her bare knee, the other around her thin waist, and kisses her. She is quiet, receptive, and she leans back and pulls Jack to her. Her mouth is soft, and warm, and Jack is thinking about Beth as Crystal runs her hand down his stomach to his waist. Inside the apartment the smaller girl, Meredith, is asleep in an easy chair, and Mel sits on the couch listening absently to a blonde girl recounting an acid trip; his eyes are tired, worn, and his bottle is not yet half finished.

Chapter 3

It is hot in Cavin in July, the sun is intense, absorbent, and by 10 a.m. it is uncomfortable anywhere outdoors. When it is very dry, as it is now, the grass is a dull brown, and the trees are a pale green. It is 10 a.m. when Jack awakens, and he is still tired. His body is stiff and he is uncomfortable, restless, instinctively aware that he is in an unfamiliar bed. He is alone. It is Mel's room, Mel's bed, and the sheets smell of perfumed detergent and fabric softener. Jack is not yet ready to sit up; the pain in his head is faint, though it throbs like a pulse, and he knows that when he sits up his head will feel as if the contents of it have shifted like candies in a dropped box, like furniture in an earthquake. The curtains are partially open, and the sun throws a thin spotlight through the window and across the floor, and Jack sees his shoes in the light, and they are not untied.

From the kitchen Jack hears a noise--it is eggs cooking, he thinks--and he hears Mel singing, though his words are indiscernible. Jack closes his eyes, ignoring his

headache, and bits and pieces of the night come to him--fragments of conversations, shades of color, sounds of laughter--and he pulls the covers over his head. The bedroom is increasingly warm--it is stuffy, almost itchy--and Jack sits up, makes a wary attempt to collect himself, and heads for the kitchen.

Mel is frying eggs, and on the radio there is a Saturday morning oldies show; he is imitating the Beatles, and his spatula is a makeshift microphone. "What are you, a masochist?; it's only ten o'clock," Jack says, and he looks to Mel's reddened eyes; for a moment he thinks he sees anger, then they are placid, friendly, and there is a smile on Mel's face.

"Don't you have to work today?" he asks, and he carefully dumps his eggs onto a plate and walks to an old and battered dining table. Jack sits down across from him.

"Not until twelve," he answers. "Where's Crystal?"

"You didn't think she'd still be here!" Mel says, sneering. He laughs quietly to himself for a moment, then becomes serious. "She had to be home by six--before her parents got up. You fuck her?"

"Yeah, I was pretty drunk though; I probably wasn't worth a shit. Mel, I hope you meant what you said about just being friends with her; I mean, I hope I didn't intrude." Jack looks into Mel's eyes, but they betray nothing, and Mel busily salts his eggs, ignoring Jack.

"Don't worry, Crystal's just friends with everybody. I

was just checking to see if you got as far as I did my first night with her," Mel says, and he smiles fakely; Jack stares at a cereal box on the table, trying to read the label, pretending to try to read the label.

"Don't you want to know?" Mel asks, enjoying the upper hand, and his eyes have grown confident, and his smile is no longer forced. He is shoveling down the eggs.

"Sure," Jack says, his voice quiet, his hand drumming a spoon against the wood of the table.

"The first night I was with her she wouldn't let me do it; 'anything but that,' she said. But she was seventeen then; now she's eighteen and I guess she's getting easier."

Jack stops drumming and stares at Mel's half empty plate; the radio still plays.

"You like her, don't you?" Mel asks, and his eyes no longer hide his contempt. Jack is silent, tensed; Mel looks him over then puts his fork down. "Forget it," he says, "Crystal's into one night stands; I wouldn't have let her sleep with you if I thought it would amount to anything."

"What the hell do you mean 'let her sleep with you;' you think you could have done anything about it?" Jack asks angrily, and he slides his chair back and waits for Mel to make a move. Mel doesn't.

"Yeah, I could have told her not to. She wouldn't have either--that's just the way it is." Mel leans back in his chair and pats his stomach. "Jack, you don't know Crystal, and you never will, so you ought to do yourself a favor and

forget about her," he says, and he is savoring his advantage, and his eyes are laughing.

"She's just a cunt, Mel; and you're just a bastard," Jack says, and his hands tightly grip the table, trembling, and he stands to leave. At the door he turns around; "Thanks for the bed--and the fuck." The door slams behind him and Mel's eyes are empty, emotionless, as he turns back to the table to his plate of eggs.

On Wesleyan Avenue, across the street and two buildings down from FlapJacks, there is a pizza place called The Last Stand, and Jack is still angry, still confused, as he slides his key into the deadbolt lock and opens the tinted glass door. As he turns to relock it behind him he glances at FlapJacks, and at noon it seems almost a peaceful place. The restaurant is hot, and Jack goes first to the air conditioners and turns them on. He checks the refrigerators for dough, and though there is close to a full batch in them, he decides to make another batch anyway, if only to give him something to do.

It will be slow today, he thinks as he crumbles a cake of yeast into the Hobart mixing bowl. Cavin is a ghost town in the summer, a town abandoned by the majority of its residents--more than half the students of Mitchell University are gone--and during the summer places like FlapJacks and The Last Stand struggle to survive. Jack cracks six eggs into the mixing bowl and throws in a cup of sugar. In late August Cavin once more swells with people,

the economy revives itself, and the businesses on Wesleyan Avenue buy Porsches and trips to Tahiti for faceless owners; for assistant managers like Jack, however, late August brings only headaches.

He throws a half cup each of oregano and sweet basil into the bowl, then adds three quarts of hot water. Each spring he hates to see the students go--he dreads the long, boring days alone at the restaurant--and each fall he hates to see them return, for by late August he is comfortable with boredom, happy with loneliness. But they come anyway. Jack covers the bowl with the lid of a huge flour bucket, and as he leans to open the restaurant's heavy steel safe his stomach turns, and he is reminded once more of the party, of the night. He blocks it out and tries to remember the combination.

The safe opens on the first try, and Jack grabs a metal box and a register drawer out of it. The money smells worn and dirty, and Jack counts it slowly and deliberately; the box contains \$300, the drawer \$100. He slides the drawer into the ancient register and it closes with the sound of a bell. Jack moves to a large oven and turns the thermostat to 450°, then flips a switch to start the gas. He pulls a slip of paper from his pocket--it is Crystal's phone number--and he looks at it for a moment, frowning, wondering why he has it, then he puts it back into his pocket, back out of his mind.

On Saturdays The Last Stand opens at two--when the

dough is made, when the large gas oven is heated to 450° --and at 2:15 Crayton Stark wanders in to comment about the weather and order a quart of dark beer. This he has done virtually every Saturday at 2:15 for the last two years, and while it may originally have been the prices that brought him in--a quart of dark beer for \$1.50--it is familiarity that brings him back. Jack sees him coming and has the quart half drawn before Crayton even reaches the cash register.

"Shew, it's hot out there," Crayton says, his face red, his hand moving to the back pocket of his overalls for a blue handkerchief with which to wipe it. He then reaches into a front pocket and produces a small green change purse. From this he removes six quarters and slides them carefully across the counter. His fingers are fat and stubby, as is his entire body, and they are dark and worn at the knuckles. He wraps both hands around the plastic cup of beer and walks to a table. There are as yet no other customers, and Jack follows Crayton and sits down at a table next to his, a table from which Jack can watch the front door.

"Well, a couple of weeks and I'll be all set to pack it up and head for Florida," Crayton says, and Jack sees confidence and hope in his reddened, bearded face; for two years Crayton has said this, has spoken of moving to Florida in "a couple of weeks," and he still speaks of it as if it could happen.

"Oh yeah?" Jack asks brightly. Crayton drinks more

than he should--more than any man should--but he is happy here, and he is a familiarity in a town of constant change, and Jack is glad to see him.

"Yep, couple of weeks," Crayton says, and he nods his head vigorously. He then turns quickly to Jack, and his eyes are bright and agile, as if he has just remembered something very important. "The Cubs playing today?" he asks.

"Yeah; let me see if I can get it on the T.V. for you," Jack says, and he walks back to the counter and switches through the stations until he hears the voice of Harry Caray. Crayton turns to him and nods his approval, then turns back to the television screen, and Jack stares for a moment at the back of his head. Crayton must be thirty-five, maybe forty; his black hair is becoming silver, his beard too, but Jack doesn't ask him about his age. Crayton turns back to him. "You sittin' down?"

"Yeah," Jack says, and he pours himself a small glass of beer and sits down again. The beer is cold and smooth, but when it reaches his stomach it brings back last night, and the night before that. Crayton has finished half his beer and his face glows redder than before.

"Yeah, Florida's really beautiful this time of year," he says, nodding seriously, refusing to smile. It takes two to three quarts of beer to make him smile, more if he is particularly down, but today he seems almost content, almost pleased.

"Sure is; I was down there a couple of years ago. July, just like now. Daytona Beach," Jack says, and he is uncomfortable discussing Florida, discussing the future, and he is thinking about the smooth and solid sand, and the deep, comforting blue of the sky in the early evening, and the ominous endlessness of the ocean. Florida really is beautiful this time of year, he thinks, and he looks at Crayton, but Crayton is now absorbed in the game, and Jack sees that he has almost finished his beer. "Want another one?" he asks, gesturing to the plastic cup.

"Yeah," Crayton says, emptying the cup, and both men stand and walk to the counter, and Jack continues on around it and pours the beer. They both stare at the cup as the dark beer slowly fills it, and it soon becomes heavy in Jack's hand. Crayton pulls out his change purse and struggles to find six quarters, and he doesn't, and he finally settles for four quarters and five dimes, pushing the lot of them across the counter to Jack. "Thank you, sir," Crayton says, and he says it with as much dignity as any man could, and he wraps both hands around the cup and walks back to his table.

Jack pours himself another beer and rejoins him. Crayton is pulling the cellophane wrapping off a cheap cigar, and he stops wrestling with the wrapper and glances nervously at Jack's beer. "You're drinking pretty hard for a man trying to make a livin'," he says, and his round face becomes serious. "Something wrong, Jack?"

"No," Jack says with faked enthusiasm, and he knows Crayton is unconvinced. "I mean it's only my second beer, Crayton."

"You never have your second beer til I'm done with my cigar," Crayton says, and he is right, and Jack sets the beer down and stares at it, his fingers caressing the rim of the cup.

"Just a rough night," he says, and Crayton is silent, and Jack knows he is waiting, he is not yet satisfied. "You ever have one of those nights when you're drunk and you do something and then you wish you hadn't?" Jack says, and his voice is quiet.

"I have a lot of those nights," Crayton says, and he turns back to the game. Jack watches him shift his frame uncomfortably, and he is sorry he brought it up. Crayton drinks long on his beer, spilling a bit on his thick, stubby arm, then turns back to Jack. "What'd you do?"

"Oh, it was just this girl," Jack says, undecided as to whether or not he should go into the details. He finishes his beer in a gulp, then stands to get another one.

"Jesus, I think I fall in love every time I get laid," he says when he returns, and having not eaten all day he feels the beer going to his head, but he shrugs to himself and turns to Crayton. "I'm such an idiot sometimes."

"Jack," Crayton says, and he shakes his head sadly, and his eyes suddenly look old and unfulfilled. "Why do you do these things to yourself? There ain't a woman worth a damn in this town; not at the fucking bars, not at the

fucking parties. That's why I'm getting out of here, going to Florida where things are different," he says, and his voice is angry and strained, and he takes a deep breath and looks away from Jack, away from the television set, and he holds his breath and says no more.

"It's hard to be alone," Jack says, and he is looking at his hands around his cup of beer. Crayton says nothing, and Jack hears him slowly letting out his breath. Jack turns to him.

"You really ever going to Florida, Crayton?"

"Sure," Crayton says, avoiding Jack's eyes.

"Sometimes I wanna leave; I don't know where I'd go though."

"It's not so easy to leave Cavin; it's a mean town, and it stays with you, in your mind, like last night'll stay with you, and it hurts but it doesn't go away," Crayton says, and his speech is slow and his words are deliberate. "Florida's not really a place, it's not somewhere you can just get up and go to; it's kinda like something in your head. I could leave tomorrow and I'd still be in Cavin. Just a couple of weeks, that's all I need. Just gotta get everything straight in my head. I tell you, Jack, it's mean the way this town sucks you in with promises, then leaves you being somebody you hate."

"Yeah," Jack says thoughtfully, "But I think someday I'll leave here."

"Yeah, me too," Crayton says, and on the television set

an Atlanta Brave hits a three-run homer and Crayton laughs quietly. "Damn Cubs, couldn't win if they had to," he says, and he sticks his cigar into his mouth and lights it, and the smoke is heavy and stale. He pulls it from between stained teeth and smiles at Jack. "Don't worry, Jack; you're young, you haven't got it so bad."

"No, I guess not," Jack says, and when he stands to walk to the kitchen he feels the beer, but it is a feeling he welcomes, and his body is loose, and he is relaxed and comfortable. In the kitchen he picks up an empty bucket and carries it to the ice machine; with a stainless steel scooper he loads the bucket, and his motion is smooth and rhythmic, and the muscles in his back are no longer stiff. He carries the ice to the front and dumps it into the soda bin, and when he looks up there is a couple at the counter, and Jack's heart seems to stop beating for a moment, then it pounds furiously and he feels his breath leave him. The man he has not seen before--he is tall, and looks strong, and his hair is short and neatly trimmed, and his face is pleasant. The woman is short, shorter than Jack, and she wears a strange smile of surprise and curiosity, and she has smooth dark skin and piercing brown eyes.

"Can I help you?" Jack asks, and he is surprised and confused, like a fighter reeling under an unforeseen blow, like a Buck startled into motion by the discharge of a distant rifle. He looks at Beth and she is pretending to study the menu on the wall behind him, but he feels the

periphery of her vision, and he turns to the menu himself, as if he has just noticed it, and with his back to them he tries to compose himself, tries to clutch the ropes. The man, oblivious to this unseen communication, orders a small sausage pizza and a pitcher of Coke, and Jack sees his hand shaking as he dips the pitcher into the freshly refilled ice bin. With one hand he holds the pitcher under the soda dispenser, with the other he works the cash register. "That'll be \$8.19," he says, and he places the pitcher and two styrofoam cups on the counter. "We'll call this number when your pizza's ready," he adds, and he hands the man a number and steals a look at Beth, and she is looking into him, and while the smile on her face is subtle, the one in her eyes is bold and unmistakable.

Jack walks to a refrigerator and pulls a small pizza from it, then turns to a prep table, and his hands are still shaking. The sausage is in a ten pound chunk, and Jack grabs a handful of it and separates it into small pieces. It is a routine he knows well; a small pizza has four slices--each slice gets nine pieces of sausage--and as Jack slips into the routine he becomes less anxious, less disturbed. Beth and the man, whoever the hell he is, seem more remote, and the pizza is just another order, and things seem to be more the way they should be. Jack slides the pizza into the oven and gets himself another beer.

Chapter 4

It is five o'clock when Jack gets off work, and the sun is stifling, and the air cuts his lungs viciously. Crayton and he part company at the door, and Crayton goes to a home that Jack has never seen, but Jack supposes it is a lonely place, and he is glad he has not been there. A man's home can be a terrible thing for someone to see, Jack thinks, particularly if he is a man like Crayton. A home just can't hide things the way a person can. Jack watches Crayton cross the street and disappear behind a beer truck.

Walking home Jack feels suddenly tired, his body drained by heat and alcohol, and when he enters his apartment the rooms are hot and stuffy, and the stagnant air looms gloomy and lifeless. He enters his bedroom and walks to the air conditioner, and he flips a switch, and the monstrous motor roars to life. Jack stands in front of it, breathing deeply the pleasant air. It is a small apartment, and it is sparsely furnished, but the paint on the walls is bright with hope, and the thick brown carpet is delightful to bare feet. Sometimes, when Jack has just returned after

being gone for several days, the apartment takes on a romantic elegance, reminding him of a plush hotel he stayed in once when he was thirteen. It was there that his mother met the man she would marry four years later, the man who would become Jack's stepfather. Bill Hogan was his name; Bill Hogan who, three days before Jack's eighteenth birthday, took Jack aside and told him that he was taking Jack's mother to Chicago for four days, and that when he returned he wanted Jack out of the house.

Jack was drunk when the man approached him, and all he could think of as Hogan told him this was how buzzed he was and how animatedly Hogan's eyebrows moved when he was mad. Jack watched them as they loped up and down Hogan's forehead, and he found himself struggling not to laugh. His stepfather ignored him and continued his speech.

"I had a hell of a time convincing your mother to go, but I finally did, so don't you go trying to talk her out of it," he said, stepping closer to Jack, his large hand tightly squeezing Jack's shoulder. "She finally sees the truth, she finally realizes that you're nothing but a pitiful carbon copy of your father. For two years now you've been coming home drunk every other night, fuckin' your grades up in school, and treating your mother and me like shit. I've had it with you, kid, and now your mother's finally had it, too," he continued, and he pushed Jack away, and Jack slid into a chair, and still he watched Hogan's eyebrows. The man's anger seemed only to increase with

Jack's apathy, and he moved closer to Jack, and he shook his finger in Jack's face.

"You probably think this is real fuckin' funny; I see your eyes, you're smashed out of you're mind right now. Well, we'll see how funny it is when you're out on the street, or in some gutter like that worthless father of yours probably is," Hogan said, and he leaned back and crossed his arms in front of his chest, and his eyebrows suddenly stopped moving, and Jack began at last to hear his words. He climbed slowly out of his chair, and the room spun, and as he moved closer to his stepfather he felt as if he was moving in a dream.

"You leave my father the fuck out of this," he slurred, tossing a finger into Hogan's face, and Hogan grabbed Jack's shoulder and shoved him back into his chair. Jack jumped back up, bringing his arms up in front of him, and he felt his head spin and his arms felt heavy. He dropped them back to his sides and stared at Hogan, and the other man taunted him.

"Come on, you little son of a bitch, why don't you take a shot at me? Too drunk?" he said, and Jack saw that his eyebrows were again moving furiously. Hogan began bobbing back and forth, his hands lightly striking the air in front of him. "You know, I've been wanting to beat the crap out of you since you were about sixteen, so come on and try to hit me, kid," he continued, and Jack slid around him and backed away, and when he reached the front door he flung it

open and walked out. Hogan followed him, standing in the open doorway, watching Jack cross the front yard. When Jack reached the gravel road he turned back, and he saw Hogan smiling and waving to him, and he wondered for a moment how accurate he could be, in his present state of mind, with a piece of gravel. Probably not too accurate, he thought, and he stared at the gravel road and wondered where he would go, what he would do. I knew he'd do this, Jack thought, I knew he would. When Jack looked back up he saw that Hogan was gone, that the front door was closed, and he turned away from the house and looked down Dalton Street. "Fine," he whispered, glancing up and down the empty street. "I don't need this anyway. Go fuck yourself," he said, and he turned and headed down the street.

Jack moves away from the air conditioner, and when he reaches his bed he unties his shoes and drops them gently to the floor. He peels his work shirt from his body and turns it over in his hands; it is a gold shirt, with black printing, and across the front there is an inscription--The Last Stand, it reads--and below this there is a man resembling the misfortunate Custer, and he is riding a horse, and the horse's mane is blown straight back, and his legs bend desperately, as if he is galloping hard to escape an unseen terror. Yeah, go fuck yourself, Jack thinks, and he tosses the shirt across the room into a laundry basket, then leans back in the bed; his eyelids feel uncomfortable

as he closes them, they are hard and dry, and his head is light as he waits for the air conditioner to cool the room.

He is sweating when he awakens, and his head aches again, and he looks around for a moment, still thinking of a dream he has just had, unsure if he has left it, and he glances at his clock; it is 7:15. He sits up and tries to remember the dream, and he sees himself with Crystal, and Mel standing just outside the room, listening, and Mel bursting into the room, and then turning into Beth, and Jack trying to explain himself to Beth. Jack shakes his head and looks again at the clock. It is three minutes later than before. His stomach turns and an unpleasant growl vibrates deeply within it, echoing ominously, and Jack realizes he still hasn't eaten all day. His stomach feels empty and desirous of food, yet it also feels forbiddingly full, and he isn't sure he can eat. He leans back in the bed and closes his eyes.

He is thinking of his father, and of the day before his eighteenth birthday. Jack was sitting on the floor of his bedroom, stuffing books and magazines into a cardboard box, when the doorbell rang. He thought it was probably someone looking for his mother, or worse, someone looking for Bill Hogan, and he let it ring twice more before he answered it. When he opened the door he instantly recognized the man, though he hadn't seen him in ten years, and he couldn't decide whether to hug him or slam the door in his face. God, he looks just like me, Jack thought, standing back and examining the man.

"It's your birthday, today's your birthday," the other man said, and to Jack the man sounded as if he thought he had been gone only for ten minutes, not ten years. He shuffled past Jack and into the living room, and Jack turned and watched him, and he slowly became aware of the tired, musty odor that followed his father into the house. He looked at the tattered backpack his father carried and wondered if perhaps it contained a dead animal.

"The house still looks good," the man said, and when he turned back to Jack, Jack stared at his eyes. There was something lovable in them, Jack thought, despite the redness, despite the hollowness, and Jack shivered at the suddenness of his father's appearance, at the reality of it. He looked away from the man's eyes, concentrating instead on the small, fragile arms that protruded from the man's soiled sport shirt. Each looked to Jack to be nothing more than a twisted mass of vein and bone, covered by a shallow layer of tightly stretched skin. Jack stared at the arms and shook his head.

"You're wrong," he said, and he thought his voice sounded shaky, queasy. "Today's not my birthday. Tomorrow, tomorrow's my birthday."

"What? Oh, hell," the man said, and he looked to the floor, and he frowned and slowly shook his head. When he looked up again his eyes were redder, and Jack wondered if he was going to cry. "I'm sorry. God, I was sure it was today. Sometimes the days, they get away from me."

"What are you doing here? Where'd you come from?"

"I've been around. Out West mostly. I just wanted to see you, tell you happy birthday, maybe talk to your mom a little," the man said, and his right hand went to the pocket of his shirt, and he produced a crumpled sheet of paper, and he unfolded it and cleared his throat. "Made a few notes of things I'd like to say to her, and to you, too," he said, looking up, smiling nervously. He turned back to his list, nodding as he scanned the items, moving his lips as he read them to himself. When he looked back up his eyes widened, and his left hand suddenly went to his stomach. He took a deep breath, sucking the air in through his mouth, then he shook his head and leaned forward.

Jack watched him carefully, and he felt his own stomach tensing, his heart racing. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, oh yeah," the man answered without looking up, and Jack shifted his weight nervously, and his head spun with questions, questions he knew he would not ask.

"Mom's not here. She's remarried now; her new husband took her to Chicago for a few days."

"On your birthday?"

"Yeah, well, he doesn't like me much."

"Yeah, but it's your birthday, your eighteenth birthday, for Christ's sake," the man said, and he stared at Jack, and Jack looked to the floor and shrugged. The man shifted his weight and scratched his face. "This kinda thing doesn't happen often, does it?"

"I don't know," Jack said, and he shrugged again, and still he stared at the floor.

"Oh my god, Jack. I left here all those years ago because I was sure that if I stayed I'd ruin your life the same way I was ruining your mother's. And now, Jesus," the man said, and he shook his head, and he ran a thin hand through his hair, and Jack looked up at him.

"Really? I mean, you really left because you thought it was best for me?" he asked, and he wondered if he should tell his father the truth, and he decided not to. He'd just feel worse, Jack thought, Hell, he couldn't do anything about it now anyway.

"Well sure. I mean I didn't leave to hurt you, Jack. See, you gotta understand, I can't help the drinking, I just can't. I've tried quitting, but it just makes me mad, just makes me hate. Your mom, she never understood me, Jack, she never did," the man said, and he looked around the room again, and his eyes settled on an easy chair, and then he looked to Jack.

"Go ahead, sit down," Jack said, and he saw his father's eyes brighten, his smile widen.

"I didn't know if you'd even talk to me," the man said, wriggling himself into the seat, still smiling widely. Jack shrugged and took a seat next to him.

"I never really thought about it; mom said you'd never be back."

"Jack, it's like I said. I wouldn't have made much of a dad; I just didn't want to mess up your life," the man started, and he leaned closer to Jack, and Jack again looked

at his eyes. "But I got to thinking, thinking about when I was your age. See, that's when I really started the drinking, 'cause I didn't understand anything, nothing about myself, nothing about other people. I still don't understand it, but I've been thinking that now that your that age, well, maybe we could talk. Whatta you say, Jack? Will you have a drink with me?"

"There's nothing to drink here," Jack said, tossing his hands into the air. "Mom's husband took it all so I wouldn't drink it while they were gone."

"Oh yeah?" his father asked, and his eyes brightened with pride, and he nodded approvingly, and then he jabbed a shaky forefinger into the air. "Well, knowin' your mother like I do, I figured there wouldn't be any liquor around here, so I planned ahead a little," the man said, and he dug into his backpack, and he rummaged through it for a moment before producing a bottle of Jack Daniels.

Jack rolled his eyes and let a small smile slip onto his lips. "Still drinking that stuff, huh?"

"You remember that?"

"Yeah, used to be empty bottles all over the house. When you left that last time, mom took all the emptys she could find and broke 'em up against the side of the house. She was really freaked out; she cried all that night."

"Jack, I never wanted to hurt your mother. She just didn't understand me. That hurts a man, makes him feel like his feelings aren't real," his father said, and he opened

the bottle and stared at it, then took a small drink. He closed his eyes for a moment and a smile appeared on his face, and then he leaned forward and handed the bottle to Jack. "You know, you're named after that bottle."

"Oh, get outta here."

"No, you are!"

"I thought I was named after mom's Uncle Jack," Jack said, and he took a drink and smiled. He felt the tension leaving his body, and he leaned closer to his father, and he tried to remember if the man had ever joked with him when he was younger. The man smiled back at Jack and shook his head.

"Nah, you're mom thinks that, too, but that's not why I suggested the name. I never liked that son of a bitch Uncle Jack; he was always telling your mother that I drank too much. See, he was an abstainer. Anyway, it was my way of getting back at him. A private little joke. 'Course your mom would never have understood that, either," Jack's father said, and he took the bottle back, and he looked from the bottle to Jack, and then back again. "Pretty good swig there, son. Yeah, damn good swig."

When Jack awoke the next morning his father was gone. He vaguely remembered locking his bedroom door so that his father wouldn't come in and see the boxes, and he wondered if his father had tried to awaken him, or had simply slipped away as he had ten years before. Jack had let his father sleep in Hogan and his mother's bed--his idea of a private

little joke--and when he checked the room in the morning all that remained was the empty bottle and a trace of his father's musty odor on the sheets. Jack thought about washing them, and he decided not to, and when he had moved the last of his things out of the house, he left the bottle on the kitchen table.

It was almost a year before his father died, drunk and broke, somewhere on the west coast. The policeman who called Jack told him of his father crawling on his knees, begging for help from passersby. "Guess none of them had time for a dying drunk," the officer said, and Jack remembered his father's eyes, his father's words. He must have tried to wake me up, he must have, Jack thought, and he silently began to cry. "Damn shame when that happens to a man," the policeman concluded, and for some reason Jack thought he really meant it.

It was another week before Jack went to the house, and he went early one Tuesday evening, when he thought Hogan would probably be gone. He had not been back there since moving out, and as soon as he turned onto Dalton Street he sensed that something was wrong. The house had been painted; it was now red, and on the front lawn there sat a matching red picnic table, and at the table there sat a young family. Jack slowed the car long enough to see that he did not know any of the people, then he continued down the street, thinking that he really should be feeling upset, or at least surprised, and he wondered why he wasn't.

The air conditioner clicks off, the motor hums to a halt, and Jack, rudely awakened to the present, slides off his bed and walks to the bathroom. His skin feels sticky and his hair is matted, but in the shower the hot water massages his tired muscles, and the sweet fragrance of soap replenishes his soul. When he returns to his bedroom the air conditioner is running again, and Jack stands in front of it, and his long, wet hair is cool against his back, and he feels clean and uplifted.

Chapter 5

FlapJacks is unusually empty for a Saturday night, even a summer one, and the air is almost clean, almost pure. Jack sits again at the bar, and he is gazing at the bottles on the shelf behind it when the bartender approaches him. It is not Beth, it is a younger girl, a taller girl, and Jack wonders if she'll card him.

"A Bud Light," he says, nodding in the direction of the taps. He is scrutinizing his wallet, separating the wrinkled dollar bills from the crisp ones, counting them as he does so. When he pulls a crisp one out and looks up the waitress has disappeared, and then she is back, and she places the glass of beer in front of him.

"Seventy-five cents," she says, looking away from him, scanning the bar. She smiles at someone and waves, and Jack turns to see Mel approaching.

"Jack!" Mel says, and he walks behind Jack and places his hands lightly on Jack's shoulders. He looks at Jack's drink, then to the waitress.

"Gimme one of those too, Tricia; I'm buying," he says,

and he drops a five dollar bill on the bar and sits down beside Jack. Jack crumples his dollar and stuffs it into his front pocket. They sit in silence until the waitress returns with another beer, then Mel pays her and takes a long drink of his.

"So how was work today?" he asks.

"Boring," Jack says between sips, and he is looking again at the bottles behind the bar. Mel frowns and looks into the glass in front of him.

"You're too sentimental, Jack; I mean, you're right, Crystal is a cunt, and sometimes I'm a bastard, but you don't have to get so pissed off about it. I didn't know you were gonna fall in love with her."

"Just forget it, man."

"Hey, I'll forget it if you will; I don't need to worry about that shit now. I'm supposed to meet a couple of girls here tonight. You know that cute little thing that works here--Beth--her and her roommate."

"What for?" Jack asks, turning in his seat.

"What do you mean, 'what for?' What do you think?" Mel says and laughs, shaking his head at Jack. Jack turns back to the bar.

"Two more Bud Lights," he says loudly, and the waitress is busy pouring a pitcher, and she wrinkles her nose and eyebrows and scowls at him. He pulls the dollar bill back out of his pocket and gets another one from his wallet; Mel watches him.

"How many of these critters you had?" Mel asks, glancing at his drink, his smile an overly baffled one.

"Why?"

"I've never seen you yell at a waitress before, that's all."

"I didn't yell at her; I'm just trying to get us a beer."

"Fine," Mel says, and he leans back on his stool, distancing himself from Jack.

"How long you known this girl, Beth?" Jack asks, leaning back himself.

"Couple of months. Her roommate is really hot and Beth said she'd introduce me to her."

"Oh."

"Yeah, she was gonna do it this afternoon but her old boyfriend came down from Chicago and they went out," Mel says, and Tricia, the waitress, sets the beers down and looks at him, and he smiles and points to Jack; her smile fades as she turns to Jack, and he gives her the ones and tells her to keep the change. Pacified, she smiles weakly and walks away.

"Yeah, they came into The Last Stand today," Jack says, picking up his beer and taking a drink.

"Big guy, short hair?" Mel asks, and Jack nods silently, and Mel continues. "The guy's a real asshole. He's in the Army or something and he had to be in St. Louis tonight so he stopped in to see Beth. I don't know why she

went out with him, she says she hates him." Jack shrugs and looks away, and he stares at the bottles behind the bar and tunes out Mel's droning voice.

"Yeah, normally I'd be in no hurry to meet the girl," Mel is saying, "but, see, Beth is graduating at the end of the summer, and I figure she's my only inside track to her roommate. Shit, if I don't watch it I'll be graduating at the end of the fall myself; I guess I better change my major again or something. Can't have the old man stop sending money," Mel finishes, and he throws his head back and laughs, and when he leans forward again he looks at Jack, and he frowns and shakes Jack's arm.

"Jack, buddy, wake up," he says, and Jack looks over to him, and Mel smiles. "You didn't hear a word I said, did you?"

"Sure I did," Jack lies, and he finishes his beer and reaches for his wallet.

"Yeah right, Jack, then why are you buying when it's not your turn?"

"Hey, if you wanna buy, that's great with me," Jack says, and he stands and pats Mel on the back. "I gotta take a piss anyway."

When Jack returns from the bathroom he sees that Mel has left his stool and is walking to the door.

"Beth, how's it going?" Jack hears Mel say, and he watches Mel walk to Beth and hug her, his eyes never leaving Beth's companion. "Who's your friend?" Mel asks loudly.

Beth answers him, but Jack can't hear her from the bar, and as the three of them approach him he grips his glass tightly, and he sets it on the bar to avoid drinking it too quickly.

"Jack, this is Beth and Lynda," Mel says, and he looks at his stool but doesn't sit back down.

"Hi," Jack says and smiles, wrapping his hand around his glass again. He glances at Beth; she is wearing a tight black skirt and a black and white half shirt, and her tan stomach looks smooth and solid below it. Lynda is about the same height as Beth--they probably wear each other's clothes all the time, Jack thinks--and her hair is a dark black, and her small eyes are a mixture of tired red and steely green. Jack looks at Beth's eyes, then back to Lynda's, and he wonders if they have already been drinking somewhere else.

"Why don't you guys get a booth while I get everybody drinks," Mel says, and he leans over the bar and calls to Tricia, whining mockingly. Jack slides off his stool and looks to the two women, and they are looking at him, waiting for him. He clears his throat and scoops his beer off the bar. There are several unfilled booths, and Jack picks one in the back, far from the stage and below a burned out light. Beth and Lynda sit opposite one another, and Jack slides in next to Beth. Mel appears with four Long Island Iced Teas and distributes them, and he glances quickly around the room before sitting down by Lynda.

"You work at The Last Stand, don't you," Beth asks

Jack, and she sips her drink through a thin red straw. Jack plucks the straw from his drink and tosses it across the booth into an ashtray; Mel glances at him and frowns.

"Yeah," Jack says, ignoring Mel, glancing around the bar.

"You guys have good pizza," Beth says, and Jack thinks her words sound slurred, and he wonders if it is just him or if she is really drunk, and he stops scanning the room and looks at her.

"Thanks. You guys have good drinks," he says, and Beth smiles and giggles, and Mel rolls his eyes and turns to Lynda.

"You wanna dance?" he asks, cocking his head to the dance floor.

"Sure," Lynda says, and Mel stands up and reaches across the booth for her hand, his face suddenly gracious and serious. Beth and Jack watch them walk away.

"You come here a lot, don't you?" Beth asks when they have gone, and she is tapping her straw against the bottom of her glass, and Jack sees her eyes are again questioning, again curious.

"I guess," he says, and he feels the drink settling in his empty stomach, and feels it in his head, and he shifts his weight slightly, moving closer to Beth.

"So are you a student here?" he asks, sipping the drink, looking at Beth over the glass.

"Yeah, are you?"

"No."

"Oh, so let me guess, you're gonna work at The Last Stand for the rest of your life, right?" she asks with a smile, and her dark eyes are examining his face, exploring his features.

"Well, no; I'm sure something better'll come along. I'm just working there till I decide what I want to do."

"How long have you worked there?"

"Two years."

"Two years! Jesus, you really ought to go to school or something," Beth says, and a waitress walks by and Jack orders four more drinks.

"You're not even finished with that one," Beth laughs, and she touches Jack's glass and slides her small hand over his.

"You're not either," Jack says, and he bends to her and kisses her; she begins to pull away, but he slides his arm around her waist and pulls her to him, and she moves closer, and her hands go to his stomach.

"Why'd you do that?" she asks, and she slides her body away from him, but her hands remain on his stomach. Jack shrugs and pulls her to him again.

"Not here," she says, and the waitress appears with the drinks. Jack pulls a wrinkled five from his wallet and gives it to her, and he feels Beth watching him. He hands her a drink and slides the other two across the booth. Jack stirs the ice in his drink with the thin straw, then tosses it into the ashtray.

He feels distracted, mesmerized, and somehow distant from the conversation he is engaged in. He is thinking about the beaches of Florida, and the sky, and the waves of the Atlantic Ocean. The music stops for a moment and Jack feels pressure on his arm, and he sees Beth's hand on it. She is leaning close to him and saying something.

"...we get out of here," he hears, and he looks up to see Mel and Lynda approaching, Mel's arm wrapped comfortably around Lynda's shoulder.

"Sure," he says, and he stands up and waits for Beth. His legs are a bit unsteady, and when Beth stands he slings his arm over her shoulder and waves goodbye to Mel. "See ya later," he calls, and Mel looks at him and half smiles, and the pulsating music begins again, and Mel grabs Lynda's arm and leads her back to the dance floor. Outside the street is empty, and the bouncer with the crew cut says hi to Beth when she and Jack walk out, and his eyes follow them down the street until they disappear into the darkness.

Chapter 6

Why not, Jack feels like asking. He is thinking about his father again, and that line of thought invariably leads him to that question, and that question is as haunting to him now as it was two years ago. He didn't ask it then, perhaps because he didn't really want to know then, or perhaps because he knew his father could never answer such a question. Why can't you help it? Huh, dad? And what about me, Jack thinks, and he blocks out the next thought that enters his mind. He looks at Beth sleeping next to him, and he runs his hand over the skin of her smooth, dark back. At her shoulders, under her arms, the skin is pale and wrinkled, and Jack wonders if some day the rest of it will look that way. He wonders if he'll ever know, if he really wants to be with her that long.

Why can't Crayton help it? Or Mel for that matter? Whose idea was this alcohol shit, anyway? Jack feels himself tensing and leans back in the bed. His head is still spinning and for the first time in hours he feels drunk. Beth moves beside him, and Jack slides his hand

under the sheet and onto her warm thigh. She protests sleepily, and Jack hears an imperceptible name that he is certain is not his own, but he ignores it and pulls her to him.

"Don't you ever sleep," she mumbles.

"No," Jack says, kissing her forehead, and she turns away from him, and he leans back and listens to the muffled drawl of a cricket through the closed window.

I don't have to be like him, Jack thinks, Maybe all I need is a good woman, someone to be there. He frowns and looks at Beth. The air conditioner clicks on and Jack waits for the coolness to reach the bed. Don't let yourself fall in love, he thinks, and his stomach feels hard and empty. He debates getting up and getting something to eat, and decides not to, and he slides his arm around Beth's waist and closes his eyes.

When Jack again awakens he is alone, and he listens for sounds from the rest of the apartment, and he hears nothing. He stares at the ceiling for a moment before sitting up, and his stomach growls wearily, and his head aches. He rubs his temples with his hands, but the pain does not subside, and his face feels increasingly warm, increasingly flushed. He stands and walks to the air conditioner, and he flips the fan switch from "auto" to "on". He slips into his jeans and walks to the living room, then the kitchen, and Beth is not in either of these rooms. Damn, he thinks, this is getting to be a regular thing.

Jack returns to his bedroom and scoops his shirt off the floor, and he see two gold earrings half buried in the deep brown carpet. He kneels down to examine them, and his head feels light, and he leans against the bed for support. He plucks the earrings from the floor, and he turns them over in his hand before stuffing them into his pocket. He climbs back into the bed and tries to remember if Beth said anything about getting up early, and he finds he can't remember much of anything she said, much of anything that happened. She did say she had to work tonight, Jack thinks, and he digs the earrings out of his pocket and looks at them for a moment. They are small and round, and Jack wonders why she even bothered to take them out. He drops them onto a dresser beside his bed, then leans back and tries to go to sleep.

By early evening the temperature has dropped to below ninety, and the sun has slipped quietly onto the horizon, and the Cavin streets are beginning to cool, and the air is easier to breathe. Jack leaves his apartment and walks to his car, shifting the beer he is drinking from his left hand to his right, digging with his left hand into his pocket for his car keys. When he climbs into the car he is assaulted by a wave of thick, warm air, and he climbs back out and decides to walk. He finishes his beer and tosses it into a dumpster.

FlapJacks is nearly empty, and Jack sees Beth standing behind the bar, and she is slicing a lime with a short stainless steel knife.

"Hi," he says, sliding onto a stool in front of her. She stops slicing and looks up, and to Jack she looks surprised, embarrassed.

"Oh, hi."

"Where'd you disappear to this morning?" he asks, watching as she gathers together the pieces of lime and drops them into a white jar. She pulls another lime out from behind the bar, and halves it, then quarters it.

"I don't know, I had things to do. Some homework."

"You could've waken me up. I mean, I would have given you a ride home."

"Well actually, I did sort of try to get you up. You were pretty dead to the world," Beth says, and she watches the knife, and Jack watches it, too. He waits for her to offer him a beer, and she doesn't, and he pulls the earrings out of his pocket.

"You left these at my apartment," he says, holding his hand out to her. She looks up from her slicing and her eyes brighten, and she smiles at the earrings.

"Oh, I was wondering where I lost those," she says, and she takes them from Jack's hand and walks to a small shelf below a row of gin bottles. She grabs a black purse and drops the earrings into it. "Thanks."

"Sure. You know, I can't believe I didn't wake up when you left," Jack continues, shifting his weight nervously. His stool spins a bit, and it squeaks as it does. "What time did you leave?"

"I don't know; eight or nine," Beth says, and she goes back to her slicing. Jack watches her small hands as she works, and he tries to think of something more to say, and he can't, and his glance shifts to the beer taps.

"Could I get a Bud Light?" he asks, pulling out his wallet, nodding in the direction of the taps.

"I thought you'd get around to asking for one of those," Beth says, and Jack looks at her, and her eyes are as empty as the tone of her voice. She wipes the blade of the knife on a towel and sets it down. "Seventy-five cents," she says, scooping up a glass and filling it with beer.

"Is something wrong?" Jack asks, handing her a dollar, and she takes it and drops it into a cash register behind her.

"No, nothing's wrong; it's just I do have work to do."

"Well, when do you get off work?"

"Late. Look, Jack, last night was fun, but I think it might have been a mistake. I was really drunk, and I wasn't thinking real straight. When I saw you yesterday, at The Last Stand, well, that guy I was with was my old boyfriend. We sorta got into a big fight later and he said some pretty mean things. Last night I was just hurt, just lonely."

"Oh," Jack says, and he stares at his glass. "I wish you'd told me that last night." Beth stops slicing and frowns at him.

"Look, if I had thought you wanted anything more than a

one night thing I probably would have told you. But I mean I see you here all the time, and you're always looking at me. I never thought you'd want anything serious, though. You just don't look like that kind of person."

"Oh, thanks," Jack says, and he shakes his head and takes a drink of his beer.

"Well look at yourself, Jack. You come here every night, you get drunk every night."

"That's not true," Jack says, and he stares at his beer for a moment, then drains it.

"You want another beer, Jack?" Beth asks, and Jack looks up, and he sees that her eyes are laughing.

"I could quit drinking, you know," he says, still watching her, and her smile fades and she looks back to the lime she is slicing. She shakes her head and rolls her eyes, then gathers together the pieces of lime and drops them into the white jar. She flips the lid closed and places the jar behind the bar.

"I could," Jack says.

"Then do it," she answers with a shrug, and she wipes the knife with a towel and slides it into a drawer under the cash register. "I've gotta go set up the popcorn machine. Thanks for bringing the earrings," she says, and she starts to walk away.

"Beth, wait. What if I quit drinking; would you go out with me then?"

"I don't know, Jack; maybe. Look, I've gotta work,

maybe we can talk about this some other time," she says, and she walks around the bar and disappears into a back room. Jack stares at his empty glass for a moment, then looks around FlapJacks. At the end of the bar there sits a middle aged man, and he is shaking his head and holding a conversation with a half empty glass of beer. He sees Jack looking at him, and he stops shaking his head, and his lips draw together tightly. Jack looks away. He sees that the other man and he are the only customers, and he looks at the empty tables, and the hard wood of the dance floor, and he realizes that he has never seen FlapJacks this empty before. Yeah, I could stop, he thinks, and he heads out the door into the Cavin early evening.

Chapter 7

It is noon on the following Saturday, and the Cavin air is itchy and dry, and the sun is bold and intrusive. As Jack slides his key into the tinted glass door of The Last Stand, a bulky shadow darkens it, and Jack turns to see Crayton standing behind him.

"Jesus, Crayton, don't sneak up on me," Jack says, leaning into the door, and he sees that Crayton's face is pale, and despite the heat he looks cold and his body seems to tremble. "Are you early or am I late?"

"I'm sorry, Jack, but I really need a beer. Think I could get a beer?" Crayton asks, and his voice is tense, and his hands caress each other nervously.

"Sure man, come on in." Jack enters the restaurant and opens the fuse box, and as he flips the switches his olfactory lobes are assaulted by the smell of pizza sauce and cheese, spices and dust. He slides past Crayton and relocks the door. Crayton moves to the counter and Jack walks around it. He pulls forward on the tap marked "Michelob Classic Dark," and lets it run for several seconds before placing a large cup under it.

"I played four nights last week," Crayton says, and his hands shake as he rummages through his change purse. Jack sets the beer down and pours a Bud Light for himself.

"Yeah, you look pretty beat."

"Well, last night I sat in with Tumble Jigger's Jazz Band over at Shadows. The show went great, but I woke up about twenty minutes ago just feeling scared. Just scared," Crayton says, shaking his head. "I don't know what's wrong with me, man, I just get this fear every now and again. Don't know what I'm scared of, I just am."

"You gonna be okay?"

"Yeah, I just need to have a beer and relax a little. I don't have to play again till Tuesday night," Crayton says, handing Jack a dollar bill and two quarters. Jack places the money on top of the cash register.

"You make good money doin' that?" he asks.

"Fifty bucks a night, and I can always say no," Crayton says, and his face is redder now, and his eyes are calmer.

"Damn, maybe I ought to take up the saxophone."

"Yeah, but you see, Jack, you gotta know a lot of people to be a good pickup sax player. I've had a couple of bands want me to play with them regularly, but I always tell 'em I don't like commitments. I just play when I need the money, you know."

"Sounds like a pretty good deal."

"It's a living. I bet I'll be able to get 75 bucks a night down in Florida," Crayton says, nodding his head seriously.

"Yeah. Well look, I got a lot of work to do so why don't you bring your beer back here into the kitchen where I can work while we talk," Jack says, and he walks to the oven and turns the thermostat to 450°.

"You sure it's alright?"

"Yeah, we're the only ones here, aren't we?"

"Well yeah, but you know, I don't want to get you in trouble."

"It's okay," Jack says, and Crayton wanders into the kitchen and leans against a stainless steel sink. Jack takes a cake of yeast from a refrigerator and crumbles it into the Hobart mixing bowl.

"You makin' the dough?" Crayton asks, leaning forward and peering into the bowl.

"Yeah," Jack says, and he grabs a carton of eggs from the refrigerator and cracks six of them onto the yeast.

"Crayton, you ever think of quitting drinking? You know, maybe just trying life sober for a while?"

Crayton's eyelids raise and he shifts his weight thoughtfully, and the sink on which he leans creaks as he moves.

"No."

"Really?" Jack walks to a second sink and turns on the hot water, and he dumps oregano, sweet basil, and sugar into the dough mixture as he waits for the water to heat.

"Yeah, really," Crayton nods.

"I don't know. I met this girl last weekend and she

wants me to quit drinking," Jack says, testing the water with his hand.

"You serious about her?"

"I don't know. We've only been together once. It's just sometimes I think she's what I've been looking for, what I need to really get my life together."

"I don't know, you better watch it, Jack. Seems everybody I know is hooked on something. If you quit drinking for her then you'll just get yourself hooked on her."

"I don't know, maybe I already am." Jack dumps three quarts of water into the bowl and covers it with the lid of the flour bucket.

"Jack, I've told you before about the women in this town. You're just gonna get yourself hurt."

"Do you really think it's any different in Florida?"

"Yeah," Crayton says, setting his empty cup in the sink. "It's like I told you, it's getting to Florida that makes the difference. Getting there in your own head. I've been in this town too long, and I guess maybe you have, too. You got to find it in yourself, Jack. Not in a woman and not in booze. The kind of peace, the kind of happiness you're talking about has to come from inside you." Crayton scoops his cup up and turns it in his hands. "Look, this conversation isn't doing anything to make me feel better, so it better be helping you. Mind if I get another beer?"

"No, help yourself; I gotta count the money."

Crayton pours himself a beer and watches quietly as Jack first counts the drawer, then the bank. Jack sticks the drawer into the register and rings up \$1.50, retrieving the money from the top of the register. He drops the two quarters into a bin and slides the dollar bill in with a dozen others. Crayton clears his throat.

"You want me to pay for this one, Jack?"

Jack shakes his head. "I'm just glad to have someone to talk to," he says, and he walks back to the mixing bowl and lifts the lid off it. Crayton follows him.

"Shit, that yeast really puffs up," Crayton says, again peering into the bowl. "Looks like a fuckin' mushroom cloud."

Jack laughs and begins dumping flour into the bowl. After dropping in ten pounds he hooks on the mixing arm and starts the machine. Crayton and he watch as the liquid mixture consumes the flour, solidifying itself as it does so. Soon a large tan ball is rolling around the bowl, and Jack stops the machine and prods the dough with his hand.

"Still a bit sticky," he says, and Crayton pokes a chubby finger into the ball and nods his head. Jack sifts more flour in and restarts the machine. He watches the tan devour the white, and adds more flour. Soon it too has disappeared, and he stops the machine and wraps both arms around the huge ball of dough. He slams it into another bucket and slides a lid over it.

"Gotta let it rise for twenty minutes," he says, and

Crayton nods and sips his beer. Jack walks to the counter and pours himself another one.

"I don't know, Crayton. This girl, Beth, there's something about her; she seems different than all the other girls I know. I keep telling myself not to fall in love with her, but I don't know, she's getting inside of me. Sometimes I really think I'd stop drinking if I knew I'd always have her."

"But you don't know that, you can't know that. She could get hit by a train tomorrow. I remember my best friend from high school, Richard Johnson, and he married his girlfriend as soon as we all graduated. The guy was so in love with her, I mean she's all he ever talked about. Then that girl, she got sick all of a sudden. They said it was leukemia; she died before she was twenty. Richard's like a zombie now; I mean that was twenty years ago and the guy's never been the same. At least with booze you know what to expect, you know it won't just disappear on you."

"Yeah, but Jesus, Crayton," Jack says, shaking his head, staring at the hard tile floor. "Is that any way to live?" Crayton's eyebrows dance across his forehead.

"It's not so easy to get to Florida, you know. If you think you can quit drinking, then quit," he says, looking back to his beer.

"Hey, I can quit, damn it," Jack says, and his words are sharp and weighty, and Crayton looks up quickly. "I mean my dad might have been an alcoholic, but I'm not. I'm not like that, I can control what I do, god damn it."

"Alright, alright, calm down. Jesus," Crayton says, and he watches Jack carefully. "I didn't mean to strike a nerve."

"Fuck," Jack says, and he sips his beer, and while it is cold it is also flavorless, sterile, like purified water, and he takes another drink and swishes it around in his mouth. "I'm sorry, Crayton, it's just I'm not like him. See, I can stop," he adds, and he nods his head as he speaks, and Crayton, watching him, also nods.

"All I'm saying, Jack, is quit if you want; if you don't want to, then don't do it. It doesn't do any good to quit unless you do it for yourself anyway."

"I don't know, maybe I'm like that dough sitting in the bucket rising; maybe I just need a little time to think about it," Jack says, and he turns his cup back and forth in his hands, watching small waves of beer fall against the sides.

At two--when the dough is made, when the oven is heated--Jack unlocks the front door and Crayton and he sit at their respective tables, drinking and watching T.V. The Expos are pounding the Cubs. Harry Caray comments on the heat at Wrigley Field, and Jack leans back and stares at a ceiling fan.

"God, I'm not used to being drunk this early," he says. The fan blades seem to be moving in slow motion.

"Beats the hell outta being scared and wondering why," Crayton says, and Jack hears him peeling cellophane from a

cigar. Jack leans forward and looks at the T.V. An Expo is practicing his swing. He shrugs his shoulders and takes the bat in both hands. The camera cuts to a shot of the left field bleachers, then returns to the Expo hitter. He bends backward at the waist, turns his head and spits, then steps into the batter's box.

"I've never been scared that way," Jack says. The Cub pitcher throws a fastball, high and outside.

"What scares you then?" Crayton is holding a match to his cigar, puffing rhythmically. Jack watches as the Expo batter chases a bad pitch, swinging wildly, losing his balance for a moment. The camera follows his eyes, and they briefly betray desperation, then the man regains his composure and spits, and Jack thinks of his father.

"Nothin' really scares me," Jack lies. The Expo swings at another bad ball, this time getting a piece of it. The ball flies straight up and the catcher rips off his mask and jockeys himself into position to make the catch.

"You can call not being scared one of two things," Crayton says, watching the smoke of his cigar as it floats to the ceiling. "Youth or stupidity."

"Call it youth," Jack says, turning to Crayton, and he hears the applause of the Wrigley Field crowd, and turns to see the Cub catcher tossing the ball back to the pitcher. Jack hears the front door creak open, and when he stands the room spins and bounces.

"Shit," he says, letting his breath out slowly, and he walks to the counter and sees Crystal there smiling at him.

"Hi," he says, his breath once again slipping out of his lungs, and as he passes her he moves close to the wall, and he scrapes it with his shoulder. He isn't sure she has seen this, and he continues along the counter, then into the kitchen. "What can I get for you?"

"Nothin'," Crystal says, and Jack watches her small breasts rise and fall. She leans into the counter. "Just wanted to see what you were up to. You never called me."

"I didn't think it mattered to you whether I called or not," Jack says, and he tries to take his eyes off her body. Damn, I'm drunk, he thinks, and he looks to Crayton's table. Crayton is watching the game.

"I gave you my number, didn't I?"

Jack changes the subject. "You seen Mel lately?"

"Mel's an asshole," she says, and Jack thinks her voice is bored, or defensive, but he isn't sure which. Her tone changes. "We had a pretty good time though, didn't we?" she asks, and she steps back and leans against the wall. Jack's eyes drink her body.

"Crystal, I gotta tell you, I'm kinda seeing someone now."

She shrugs and her lips tighten. "So don't tell her," she answers, and her hands slide down her thighs and hang at her sides.

"No, I'm really serious about her," he says, and he tears his eyes from her tight jeans, her full thighs.

"Oh, come on, Jack."

"No, I mean it. I'm not fuckin' Mel, you know. Maybe he can treat everybody in the world like shit, but I can't."

"You're not so different, Jack, at least you weren't that night at his party."

"I was drunk," Jack says, and he taps his fingers on the side of the cash register.

"That's no excuse. Besides, you didn't seem that drunk to me," she says, and her eyes flash.

"Look, whatta you want?" Jack asks, his voice rising, and Crayton looks up from his table. "I told you I'm seeing someone. Things are different now. Go find someone else, guys like Mel are a dime a dozen."

"So are guys like you," Crystal says, and her lips tremble, and Jack watches her anger with curious desire. What the hell is wrong with me, he thinks, and he looks away from her, and he sees that the Cubs are now batting.

"Fuck you, Jack," he hears, and he counts to four before turning to see the front door settle shut. Crayton stands and walks to the counter. His cup is nearly empty.

"Who was that?"

"A girl I knew before I met Beth."

"Oh; kinda messy, huh?"

"No, shouldn't be. I was only with her once, I think I told you about it."

Crayton shrugs and lifts his cup to his lips. "So what's the problem?"

"I don't know. Fuck, I know I'm drunk but there was

something about her, I mean she looked so damn hot. I'm tired of living like that; I just want Beth, I just want a little stability in my life."

"Well hell, Jack, nothing happened."

"I know, but I wanted her, I don't know why. Just makes me feel like shit, like I got no control."

"You're not married, Jack."

"Yeah, but I don't want to want other women. I mean it's like I said before, Beth's what I've been looking for, what I've never been able to find. She's a chance to do something right for a change."

Crayton leans into the counter and empties his beer. "Jack, you can give your heart to a woman, but don't you ever give her your soul. Somebody takes that from you and they take your identity, and you're nothin' but empty. Empty and alone, and that'll kill you, Jack. It'll kill you; empty and alone and can't find meaning in any damn thing. Don't look at me like that, Jack, and don't ask me how I know. Someday I'll tell you, but not today; I don't think I could take it today."

Chapter 8

A week and a day later it is August 1st, traditionally a strange day in Cavin, the only day the ordinarily collegiate atmosphere gives way to a family one. August 1st is William Dale Mitchell Day in Cavin, and in honor of the founder of Mitchell University the Cavin Fire Department on that day hosts the largest fireworks display in southern Illinois. Most of the bars are closed, those open are sparsely populated, and the streets are invaded by families in station wagons searching for Stevenson Park.

It is ten till noon, and Jack is walking to work, and he is silently cursing the owner of The Last Stand for deciding to stay open. As he crosses Wesleyan Avenue, he sees Mel approaching, and Mel is carrying a case of beer and a small brown sack. Jack thinks about turning around, or ducking behind a parked car, but he sees that Mel has already spotted him.

"Jack, how's it going," Mel calls, and he stops outside The Last Stand and sets the beer down on the sidewalk. He extends his hand as Jack walks up.

"Alright. I can't believe I gotta work today," Jack says, and he looks past Mel to the door of the restaurant.

"You guys are open today?" Mel asks.

"Yeah. I tried to tell him we'd be dead."

"Well, maybe you'll get some of the family business. You know, the out-of-towners who've never had your pizza before," Mel says, and he wipes sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand.

"Thanks, Mel," Jack says, and he sorts through his keys for the one to the front door.

"Hey, I heard Crystal came to see you the other day," Mel says, changing the subject, and he pulls a bottle of cheap red wine from his sack and twists the top off it. He examines the label for a moment, then takes a drink.

"How'd you know that?" Jack asks, and he sees that Mel is smiling behind his bottle. Mel pulls the bottle away from his lips, and they are a darker red, and he swallows deeply.

"Oh, I just figured she would. See, I told her you'd been with Beth."

"Wait a minute, how'd you know about that?" Jack asks, and he takes a step back, and he studies Mel's eyes.

"Well, when Beth didn't come home that Saturday night I just figured she was with you. See, I got with Lynda that night," Mel says, and he smiles and nods his head suggestively.

"So why the hell'd you tell Crystal about it?"

"Now just relax, buddy, I know what I'm doing. See, Crystal's a jealous little thing, and once she hears you've been with someone else, she decides she wants you again. That's how I keep getting her. Hell, Jack, I did you a favor. Crystal's hard to get more than once."

"Yeah, well maybe I don't want her," Jack says, and he stares at Mel's bottle, and Mel, watching him, offers the bottle. Jack shakes his head and looks away. Mel frowns and takes a drink.

"So what are you saying, Jack? Jesus, don't tell me you're in love with Beth now! She's fuckin' worse than Crystal for jumpin' in the sack with people."

"Mel, if you really wanna do me a favor why don't you stay the hell out of my sex life," Jack says, and he steps forward and shakes his hand at Mel, and his keys crash together and jangle and click. Mel shakes his head and smiles.

"God, Jack, you get so uptight sometimes. Here, have a drink," he says, again offering the bottle. Jack again refuses.

"I'm not drinking anymore," he says.

"Since when?" Mel asks incredulously, and his eyes widen, and his smile widens.

"I don't know, about a week," Jack shrugs, and he stares at the sidewalk.

"This doesn't have anything to do with Beth, does it?" Mel asks, cocking his head, still smiling. Jack looks up.

"You tell me, you seem to know everything about my love life."

"Alright, lighten up, Jack," Mel says, laughing and patting Jack on the shoulder. "I tell you what, me and Lynda and Beth are going to the fireworks thing at Stevenson Park tonight. If you wanna see Beth, that's the place to be. But I'm telling you, you're wasting your time with that girl. She's not serious; she'll fuck you till she's not amused anymore, and then she'll be gone," Mel says, and he bends down and lifts his case of beer off the sidewalk. "Take my word for it, buddy," he says, and he turns and heads back down Wesleyan Avenue. Without turning around he calls back to Jack. "See ya tonight." Jack watches him for a moment, then turns and unlocks the door to The Last Stand.

At dusk the air is cool, and Jack parks his car in the gravel at Stevenson Park, and he shivers, and he wishes he had thought to bring a jacket. He walks to the edge of the crowd, and he scans the faces for Mel, or Lynda, or Beth. He stops next to two firemen, and he listens to them talk as he searches for Beth's dark skin, her long brown hair.

"It's not gonna rain, it hasn't rained all god damn summer," one of the firemen says, and he spits as if to emphasize his point.

"Say what you like, Pete, it's a gonna rain," the other one answers, and he rubs his face with his hand and smiles at the dry grass surrounding his black polished shoes. Jack

catches sight of a head of dark black hair, and he thinks it is Lynda, and when he draws closer he sees Mel, Lynda, and Beth stretched out on a blanket, and they are laughing and drinking.

"Hey Beth," Jack says when he reaches them, and Beth looks up quickly, and Jack wonders what Mel might have told her.

"Oh, hi Jack," she says, and she giggles, and Jack sees that her eyes are red, her movements uncoordinated. "What's up?"

"Not much. I was wondering if I could talk to you alone," he says.

"I guess," Beth answers, and she stands up, and she wobbles a bit. "Wait, I'm taking my wine coolers with me. Last time Mel was over at the house he drank everything he could find," she says, and she laughs, and Mel and Lynda laugh too. Jack shifts his weight nervously. Beth kneels down by a large paper bag, and she rummages through it for a moment before pulling out a four-pack of wine coolers.

"Okay, I'm ready."

Jack takes her arm and leads her through the crowd, and he sees an open area by an old oak tree. There is a young family sitting on one side of it, and Jack flashes them a quick smile and continues to the other side. Beth and he sit in the cool grass, and Jack again shivers, and he looks to the sky. Shit, it's gonna rain, he thinks, and from a distance he hears an amplified voice welcoming him to the

Fourteenth Annual Cavin Fire Department William Dale Mitchell Day Fireworks Extravaganza. He feels pressure on his arm and turns to see Beth pushing a wine cooler at him.

"Here, Jack."

"No, I don't want one. I quit drinking, I haven't drank in a week."

"Really?" Beth asks, and she shrugs and opens the cooler for herself. "Yeah, I guess it has been a while since I've seen you at FlapJacks."

"Yeah," Jack says, and he rolls his eyes and looks away. Damn, this isn't exactly what I had in mind, he thinks, and he watches as an excited young boy and girl who could be his twin skip by, hand in hand. Jack watches as they weave themselves into the crowd, and he tries to think of something more to say to Beth, and he can't. Through the air comes a shrill whistling sound, and the sky is streaked with red. Another sound follows, and a bright blue ball expands, and then separates, and blue and green lines of light crisscross the sky and fall away into the darkness. Oohs and ahhs tumble from the crowd. Jack looks around the tree to the family on the other side, and the two young children, a boy and a girl, sit captivated by the display, and their eyes widen and bulge with fascination and fear. The young boy sees Jack looking at him and moves closer to his father. There is a loud boom and the sky rains red, white, and blue, and the crowd cheers, and the young boy smiles and hums a tune only he knows.

Jack again feels pressure on his arm, and he looks down and see Beth tapping it, and when she speaks her words are a bit slurred. "What did you want to talk to me about, 'cause if we're just gonna sit here we could be sitting with Mel and Lynda."

"I don't know, Beth; I thought you wanted me to quit drinking, I thought maybe if I did we could start going out. You know, be a little more serious," Jack says, and he stares at the grass, and he stares at the dusty ground beneath it.

"Jack," Beth says, and she takes his hand and studies his fingers, and she pokes them drunkenly with her other hand. "Can't you see that I don't want the same things you want? It would never work with us. Why does everything have to be so serious, anyway? Why can't you just enjoy yourself?" she asks, and she moves closer to him, and she drops his hand onto her thigh.

Jack shrugs and looks to the sky, and the air he breathes feels loose and restless in his lungs, and he smells the coming rain and shivers. He looks around at the crowd, and he thinks of his father, and he wonders what he would have done in a situation like this. How should I know what he would have done, Jack thinks, and he takes Beth's hand, and he caresses the back of it with his thumb. A single blaze of orange light moves across the sky like a note of music, and it breaks, and dribbling chords strum the night and then fade, and they are replaced by a brilliant

note of fiery red. Jack turns to Beth and she is looking at him. He leans to her and kisses her, and her mouth tastes sweet, and her breath smells of wine. She moves closer to him and her hands caress his cheeks, and he pulls away and leans into the tree.

"What do you want from me?" he asks quietly, and he glances for a moment at the sky, and it is a smokey neon blue.

"Nothing, Jack. I don't want anything from you," she says, and Jack looks back to the sky, and it is momentarily dark, then it erupts into passionate hues, first blue, then green, then red, then finally orange. The appreciative crowd claps and shouts, and a thick layer of smoke pauses for a bow, then breaks apart and drifts away.

"You wanna know what I want from you?" Jack asks.

"No," Beth says, and she stares at the empty wine cooler in her hand.

"I just wanna be with you; tonight and forever."

"Why can't you just settle for tonight?" Beth asks, and she tosses her empty cooler into the grass and pulls another one out of the pack. Jack turns away from her, and he feels a light sprinkle of cool rain, and the tiny drops tickle his skin, and he frowns at the purple sky.

"Don't you want somebody? Don't you want a husband, don't you want a family?" Jack asks, and Beth frowns and buries her face in her hands.

"No, I don't know. Not now. I'm young, I just wanna

live, I just wanna have fun. Just leave me alone, Jack," she says, looking up, and she leans into him and rests her head on his shoulder. Jack slides his arm around her waist, and he caresses her thigh, and he kisses her forehead.

The rain falls more heavily now, more steadily, and the crowd thins as people begin sprinting to cars. The hearty wrap themselves in jackets and pull their necks tightly down into their shoulders, and the fireworks continue. Jack and Beth move closer to the tree, and they huddle together.

"I guess we better go, huh?" Beth asks, and to Jack her reddened eyes look soft and innocent, and he watches as the family from the other side of the tree hurry by, jogging in the direction of a maroon station wagon.

"What about Mel and Lynda?" Jack asks.

"Lynda drove, she can take care of Mel," Beth says, and she runs her finger along the rim of her wine cooler, and she lifts it to her mouth and takes a drink. Jack nods and stands up, and he offers his hand to Beth and helps her to her feet. She grabs the remainder of her four-pack, and Jack and she look at one another and then sprint to the gravel parking lot. The fireworks have stopped and the p.a. crackles with the appreciation of the Cavin Fire Department for all those who braved the rain to see the finale. A fireman in black polished shoes stands under an umbrella and smiles to himself, and with his hand he rubs his face. From under the cover of a nearby tree, another fireman spits into the rain and scowls at him.

"God, I'm soaked," Beth says once Jack and she have reached the car.

"I've got a towel at my place," Jack says, and he turns the ignition key and the engine jumps to life, and he taps the accelerator. Beth looks at him and nods, and he shifts the car into reverse and pulls out of the park. They drive in silence, each watching the rain as it sweeps away the drought worn soil. Colonies of raindrops settle on the windshield, and some merge, and others race each other down the glass, and then the wipers scatter them and new colonies develop. Jack watches the drops that land just beyond the reach of the wipers, and they linger on the windshield like weary travelers or worn out dreamers. So tell me, dad, am I making a mistake or what, Jack thinks, and he feels a sudden chill, and he shivers, and he wonders if fall could be approaching this early. He reassures himself that it could not.

He parks the car in front of his building and switches off the wipers. Beth and he dash to his door, while on the windshield of his car the colonies multiply, and they scamper about and fight for space, and they smother one another. Inside the apartment, Jack slips off his shoes, and he sits on the bed and watches Beth dry her hair with a fluffy red towel. He scoots closer to her and takes the towel from her, and she leans back in the bed and pulls him on top of her. He kisses her and tosses the towel to the floor. **H e a g a i n f e e l s a c h i l l**, and he reaches back and

pulls a blanket up to his shoulders, and he covers Beth with it.

"This doesn't mean anything, Jack," she whispers, and Jack nods and kisses her neck. "Not a thing," she continues, and Jack kisses her warm mouth, and her breasts, and his hands caress her body. His chill disappears and he feels only heat, and he listens as Beth's breathing speeds up, and when he enters her they move together, and he pretends for a moment that they are not two, but one. Outside the rain beats steadily down, singing its sweet, even tune to the twisted, broken ground, and all over Cavin the streets echo with the soft rhythm of the summer shower.

Chapter 9

Late that night the rain slacks off, then disappears, and the ground, having tasted life, having touched hope, grows only thirstier. But the days pass and the rain does not return. Monday it is hot, and the small puddles, the only remnants of Sunday's storm, start to shrink away. Tuesday at dawn the sun again scales the horizon, and the ground again begins to harden, and by Wednesday the telltale cracks of drought once more scar the soil. The green that fleetingly touched the grass and trees vanishes, and the deep, dark blue that pumped life into the sky and land is now a tired, shallow turquoise. All the colors have been drained of spirit, of vibrance, and they now flow together into one drab color, and it is the edgeless hue of dying.

It is Thursday evening, and Jack sits in his apartment, on the edge of his bed, and he stares at his telephone. He leans back in the bed and his head spins, and he tries to remember how many beers he had at work today, and he can not. It's been four days, he thinks, why the hell hasn't she called. Why do I always have to call? Jack sits up

quickly, and he leans forward to the phone, and he feels blood rushing to his head. He straightens himself and closes his eyes, then leans slowly forward and grabs the receiver. He dials, and the phone rings twice, and he hears a vaguely familiar voice.

"Is Beth there?" he asks, and Lynda is silent, and Jack hears the faint humming of the telephone line.

"Well, no, she's gone. She left right after graduation. Who is this?" Lynda asks, her voice soft and cautious.

"Whatta you mean gone? Where'd she go?"

"To Chicago. Is this Jack?"

"Yeah. When's she coming back?"

"Well, she's not. I mean, she graduated. You did know she was graduating, didn't you?"

"She's not coming back?"

"Well no, would you?" Lynda asks, and Jack drops the phone and stares at his bedroom wall. He grabs a phone book and begins searching for Crayton's number, and he finds it, and he remembers that Crayton is playing tonight. Shit, he thinks, dropping the phone book to the floor. He stands and walks to the refrigerator, and he grabs two Bud Lights, opening one and wrapping his fist around the other. He scoops his keys off the kitchen table and heads out the door.

Ten minutes later he is walking through Turner Park, and he sees small groups of people outside each apartment

building, and some are playing frisbee, and some are cooking out. Jack has not eaten all day, only drank, and the heavy aroma of cooking beef fills the smoke that seeps into his nostrils and lungs, and the crackling of grease sputters in his ears.

As he approaches building 7, he sees a large crowd has gathered on the lawn behind it, and he sees people sifting in and out of apartment C. Those entering the apartment carry empty plastic cups, and their faces are filled with impatience and thirst; those coming out tote cups full of beer, and they walk slowly to avoid spilling them. Jack works his way through the crowd and enters the apartment, and he sees a group of people with empty cups, and they stand huddled around an aluminum keg, watching a man with long, bleached hair fill a stolen Pizza Hut pitcher with beer.

"Two bucks, man," Jack hears, and he turns to see a man he has never seen before standing in front of him. The man holds a wad of bills and a stack of plastic cups.

"Two bucks? Damn. Say, Where's Mel?"

"He went to see about getting another keg. He ought to be back before too long."

"Left you in charge, did he?"

"Yeah. My name's Bill, man."

"Jack."

"Good to meet ya, dude," Bill says, and he balances his stack of cups on his arm and extends his hand. Jack shakes it.

"Two bucks is kinda high, isn't Bill? I mean, for a summer party and all."

"Summer's almost over, dude," Bill says, and he shrugs.

Jack shifts his weight and shakes his head. "Yeah, but two bucks."

Bill looks at him carefully for a moment, then his eyes narrow and his smile widens. "You're a friend of Mel's, right?"

"Yeah, you could say that."

"Alright, man, I'll let you have one for a dollar."

"Hey thanks, Bill," Jack says, and he pats him on the shoulder and pulls a wrinkled bill from his wallet. He takes a cup off the top of the stack and glances around the crowded room. As his eyes sweep across the couch, he sees Crystal and Meredith, and when his eyes meet Crystal's, she turns away. The man with long, bleached hair is now filling each of their cups with beer, and Jack looks at the crowd around the keg and wanders over to the couch.

"Well, look who's here," Crystal says, and she slides her arm around the man pouring beer. He looks up, and Jack nods to him and holds out his cup. The man fills it.

"Roger, this is Jack," Crystal says, and Roger nods a greeting, then turns to fill the cup of a girl behind him. He empties the pitcher and turns back to Crystal.

"I'm going for more beer," he says, and he kisses her on the cheek, then moves toward the keg.

"That your new squeeze?" Jack asks, and he wonders a second later why he did.

"Whatta you care?" Crystal asks, and she looks to the floor.

"Just ignore me, I'm sorta bombed," he says, and he looks through the crowd for an acquaintance to escape to. He sees two men pushing their way through the throngs of people, and they are carrying a keg, and Mel is walking behind them. His eyes are sprinkled with red lines, and his face is flushed and sweaty.

"Jack, buddy, how's it going?" Mel slurs, and he drops his arm over Jack's shoulder and leans on it for support.

"Jesus, Mel, maybe you better sit down," Jack says, and he helps Mel onto the couch, and he sees that Crystal and Meredith have disappeared into the crowd.

"Glad you could make it to the party. Who told you about it anyway?" Mel asks, and he wrinkles his eyebrows, and he tosses his arms out from his sides.

"I don't know; lucky guess. I just came over to see if you wanted to get a beer."

"Just came over to see if I wanted to get a beer," Mel says, and he throws his head back and laughs, and his laugh continues until it becomes a cough, and he coughs for half a minute before leaning forward and taking a deep breath. His face is serious for a moment, then he looks at Jack and smiles.

"Crystal's here."

"So?"

"So, now's your chance, buddy."

"Look, Mel, I told you once, I don't want Crystal," Jack says, and he feels the room spinning, and he leans on the edge of the couch for support. Mel stares at him and frowns.

"God, you really did like Beth, didn't you?" he asks, and Jack shrugs and stares at his beer. "Look, Jack, Beth's a babe and all that, but she's nothin' to get all depressed and strung out about. She's just a girl, she's not fuckin' Mrs. Right."

"Shit, Mel, you don't know anything about Beth," Jack says, and he takes a drink of his beer, and Mel looks at him and laughs.

"I know she's a good fuck," he says, leaning back on the couch, taking a sip of his drink.

"You never fucked her," Jack says, his voice rising, and he moves closer to Mel, and he shoves his finger into Mel's chest.

Mel pushes Jack's hand away and leans forward, trying to pull himself off the couch. "Don't be a dick, Jack. It's not like I'm the only other guy in the world who fucked her."

"You're lying," Jack shouts, and he shoves Mel back onto the couch, and Mel shakes his head and laughs.

"I don't lie about getting laid, Jack. You think I'm making this up? Ask her what happened the last time she drank a half pint of Evan Williams."

"You son of a bitch," Jack screams, and he grabs Mel

and pulls him off the couch, and he steps into someone behind him and loses his balance. Mel and he tumble to the floor, and Jack rolls out from under him, and they face each other on all fours. The people around them push each other back to make room for them. Jack thrusts an open hand onto Mel's face, and with his other hand he throws a punch. It lands on Mel's mouth, and he feels Mel's teeth tear the skin from his hand, and he sees Mel's lip split against one of the teeth. The lip is dry and open for a moment, then blood pours from it like water from a faucet. Mel's head rests on the floor, and his legs and arms grope about for something to cling to. Jack leans back to the couch and pulls himself to his feet, and he looks at his hand, and it, too, is bleeding. Mel gets to his knees and tries to stand, and he can't, and he supports himself with one arm and points at Jack with the other.

"Get out of here, you son of a bitch," he cries. "Get the hell out."

Jack leans against the couch and looks at his bleeding hand, and his head spins. He staggers in the direction of the door, and he passes Crystal and Roger and Meredith, and they step back and make way for him. Outside the air is much cooler, and Jack covers his wounded hand with his other and walks past the groups of people and across the back lawn of Turner Park. He comes to the edge of the lot, where the land steepens to a hill, where the hill drops to a ditch. He sits on the hill and looks to the ditch, and to him it looks exactly the same as it did the last time he was here.

"The whole fuckin' world looks the same," he says aloud, and his voice startles him; it is shaky and anxious. Behind him, Jack hears light steps, and he turns to see Crystal approaching. She sits down beside him.

"You like it here, don't you?" she says, and he is quiet, and she looks away. Jack tries to stand, and he realizes his legs are not yet ready to support him, and he sits back down. Crystal watches him.

"Are you okay?" she asks.

"I don't know. I think my hand hurts worse than his fuckin' face."

"Serves you right."

"Oh, thanks."

"No, really. I mean, Mel's an asshole, but you shouldn't have hit him. You've been being a real bastard lately."

Jack starts to speak, then doesn't, and he feels a chilling wind and shivers. He watches a distant tree shake off the breeze.

"It's getting chilly," he says.

"Yeah, summer's almost over," Crystal says.

"You know, I think the chill of early August is worse than the cold of winter. It gets inside of you in a different kind of way; into your bones, into your soul."

"Jack, you're strange," Crystal says with a giggle.

"Yeah," he says, and he turns away from her, and his eyes follow the cut of the ditch, the path of the water.

"Crystal, you ever feel like you need somebody. Not to sleep with, but just to hold. To hold you and tell you everything's alright. You ever feel like that?"

Crystal shrugs. "I don't know."

Jack looks down at his hand, and he presses it against his jeans to stop the bleeding. "Maybe you should get back to Roger; he'll be wondering about you."

"He can wait; he's probably putting the moves on Meredith right about now, anyway."

"Well, if you're gonna sit here you might have to listen to some weird shit, 'cause I'm pretty all around fucked up tonight."

Crystal giggles again. "I like weird shit."

Jack pulls his hand away from his jeans, and they are stained with small spots of blood, and the hand still bleeds. "Great," he says, looking at the hand, and he slides it under his thigh and leans on it.

"You ever feel like you got no control, Crystal?"

"Jack, you're just drunk. When you wake up tomorrow you'll be fine."

"No, that's not what I mean. I'm talking about the big picture. Like having control over what you do, over what other people do to you, over whether or not you take a god damn drink."

"I don't know. I never really think about things like that. They just don't bother me," Crystal says, and she shrugs.

"You're lucky, then. They fuckin' bother me," Jack says, and he shivers again. He looks at his good hand, and it trembles. Crystal looks away from him and changes the subject.

"So whatever happened to that 'wonderful' girl you were goin' out with?"

"Beth? She graduated, she left."

"Is that what you mean by havin' no control?"

"Yeah."

"Well, maybe you can't control what she does, but you can control how you feel about it."

"No I can't. God, I wish I could, but I can't. I've tried. I've tried to shut it out, but it doesn't go away."

"Give it time. Look Jack, I know you think I'm a whore, or a slut, or something like that, but don't think I've never been hurt before. Don't think I've never been in love before. I don't ever wanna get hurt again, so I don't let myself care about people. I just turn off my feelings when they get too deep. Everything I do to people, I do so I won't get hurt."

"Well, I can't do that. I can't turn my feelings off, I don't fuckin' wanna turn my feelings off. If you don't have real feelings, if you don't have real emotions on the inside, then what the hell do you got?" Jack says, his voice rising steadily.

"God, calm down. You certainly do have feelings, don't you?" Crystal says teasingly. Jack pulls his hand out from

under his thigh and licks the wound, and though it has stopped bleeding, it still stings.

"Lots of feelings, no control," he says quietly. "See, Crystal, I can't stop drinking. People have been telling me that forever, and I fuckin' couldn't even see it. Didn't wanna see it. My dad, he was an alcoholic, and it killed him. And you know what else? I hated him, I god damn hated him, 'cause he didn't have any control either. I always said I wouldn't be that way, wouldn't treat people the way he did. And you know what's really fucked up? I loved him, too. Loved the shit out of him, and hated his guts, all at the god damn same time. I always wanted to tell him that everything would be alright if only he'd stop drinking. I never did, though, and now I don't even fuckin' believe it myself."

"Jack, maybe you ought to get some help."

"I don't think anybody can help me. It's something I have to do for myself."

"There are people out there to help people like you," Crystal says, and she tries to take Jack's hand, but he pulls it away. She looks at him and he shakes his head.

"I need to get home," he says.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, just fine. I'll go home and have a beer or two, and then I'll go to bed. Perfectly fine," he says, and he stands, and his legs still feel uncertain. He leaves the hill and walks back past the groups of people, and he hears

loud music pumping out of the apartment. As he distances himself from the building the music fades, and other sounds fill his ears, and other sights fill his eyes.

Chapter 9

Monday is the ninth day of August, and Jack is working the night shift at The Last Stand, and he is drinking, has been drinking since Thursday. He sits at a table and stares at a 9:30 sports update. He sees that the Cubs lost today, and he thinks of Crayton, and he wonders why Crayton didn't come in on Saturday. I was pretty drunk that day; maybe I just didn't notice him, he thinks, and he laughs, and then he realizes it isn't funny at all. Jack tries to remember the last time Crayton didn't show up on a Saturday, and it seems like about a year ago, but he isn't sure. He stands and walks to the kitchen, and there he digs up a phone book. Stapleton, Stapley, Stark, he reads, and he runs his finger from Crayton's name to his phone number. He dials, and as it rings he stretches the cord of the phone so that it reaches the beer taps, and he pours himself another Bud Light.

"Hello."

"Hey, Crayton, it's Jack. Where you been, man? I got worried when you didn't come in on Saturday."

The line is silent, and Jack shifts his weight nervously. "Crayton, you there?"

"Yeah. Things have been kinda rough lately. I haven't been going out much."

"Well look, why don't you come down here and we can talk about it."

"I don't know. Things have just been kinda rough."

"Well it's no good for you to just sit there by yourself."

"I don't wanna bother you with it, Jack."

"Fuck, you're not gonna bother me, Crayton. You never do. Look, things have been pretty damn rough with me, too. I just wanna talk, you know."

"Well, okay. I'll be down in a while," Crayton says, and the line goes dead. Jack hangs up the phone, and he looks at his bruised hand, and while it is still purple and black, it looks much better than it did Friday morning. He slides open the top to the ice bin, and scoops small cubes of ice over the wounded hand. When the cold becomes unbearable he pulls it out, and he finishes his beer and returns to his table.

At ten, Crayton walks in, and he is wearing white bib overalls and dark glasses. He stops at the taps and pulls the glasses off, and his eyes are red and swollen at the edges. Jack pours them each a beer and they both sit down.

"So what's up?" Crayton asks.

"I don't know, I can't even think straight. I've been drunk since fuckin' Thursday afternoon."

"I've been drunk since last Tuesday," Crayton says, and he rubs his eyes with his hand and takes a drink. He pulls a cigar from his overalls and wrestles the cellophane off of it.

"Hell, it's Beth," Jack finally says.

"Jack, I warned you," Crayton says, and he shakes his head and searches his pockets for matches.

"I know, damn it. But I thought she was different, I thought she really cared. She fuckin' graduated and left town and didn't even tell me. And that's after she spent the night with me last Sunday night. God, how could I be so stupid?"

"Jack, you're young. Mistakes, they happen," Crayton says, and he holds an unlit match to his cigar. "You okay?"

"I don't know, I just don't know," Jack answers, and Crayton strikes the match and puffs the cigar. He catches sight of Jack's hand.

"Christ, what the hell happened to your hand?"

"I got in a fight."

"'Cause of Beth, right?"

"Yeah, pretty much."

"Damn, Jack. If I hadn't been there a thousand times myself I'd tell you you were a fool. But I know what you're feeling, I know it hurts."

"Yeah, my hand doesn't feel too damn hot, either," Jack says, and they both laugh.

Crayton sighs heavily and stares at the table. He

takes a long drag on his cigar, and he blows the smoke to the ceiling, then turns to Jack. "Did I ever tell you I used to be married?"

"No, you never told me that."

"Well I did. Saturday would've been my anniversary. All that stuff about giving your soul to a woman, I didn't just pull that out of a hat, you know," Crayton says, and he stares at his beer. "I got two kids, too. Two girls, they're 16 and 17 now; they live in Chicago, you know."

"Jesus, I didn't know that. I mean you never talk about 'em."

"No," Crayton says, and his heavy frame shudders, and he leans on the table for support. Jack shifts his weight nervously. "I can't see the kids anymore. The judge, he told me I'm not their father anymore, I'm not their father, damn it," Crayton says, and he pushes his beer across the table and stares at it.

"Crayton, come on, you're still their father; that's something no judge can ever take away from you. Who the fuck does he think he is anyway? He's just a man, like you and me. The son of a bitch puts on a black robe and he thinks he's fuckin' god," Jack says, and he shakes his head.

"Yeah, maybe, but don't you see; I can't see my kids, I haven't seen 'em in three years, three god damn years."

"That's not fair, that's not right."

"Hell no it's not right, but he's got the law behind him and there isn't a damn thing I can do about it. He told me I could go to jail for a year if I try to see my kids."

"What'd you do, I mean, to make it so you couldn't see the kids and all?"

"I refused to testify, that's what I did. See my wife, Joannie, well I guess I gave her my soul. I don't know when she got it away from me, but she did. I told her if she wanted a divorce I'd give it to her without any trouble, so I refused to testify at the hearing, refused to say anything against her. Then she got it in her head that since she didn't want me around anymore I wasn't fit to be a father to my two girls," Crayton says, pulling his beer back and lifting it to his lips. "So she told the judge that I beat her and the kids and the dog, and we didn't even have a dog. I was too shocked to say anything, I mean I couldn't believe that she'd say that after fifteen years, fifteen years of being married. I thought I knew her, and I found out I didn't know her at all, and the worst part was she still had my soul, I still loved her. So I just stood there and took it, and, man, the judge fucked me pretty good. Gave her the kids and everything. He took me back in his chamber and told me I wasn't a man 'cause I was a musician. Said if I was a real man I'd have a real job instead of playing in a band," Crayton says, and his voice quivers, and his hands shake.

"Damn it, that's not right. That's just not right," Jack says, shaking his head slowly, tapping the bottom of his cup against the table. He wonders now if his father ever felt this way, if perhaps a judge somewhere kept him from seeing Jack, from having any contact with him.

"It's like with the counseling," Crayton continues, "I tried to get Joannie to go to counseling with me, but the god damn mental health workers told me I had to dry out first. Twelve god damn weeks. I told 'em I couldn't go to some de-tox hospital for twelve weeks; I had a family to support. Hell, drinking wasn't the problem anyway. Drinking's what got me through. I never drank like this till Joannie stopped talking to me. I told those counselors that if they could just get Joannie to talk to me I'd quit drinking so much. But they said unless I dried out I couldn't have counseling from them."

"I don't know, Crayton, maybe you should stop drinking," Jack says, standing up and getting himself another beer.

"Gimme one of those, too," Crayton says, reaching for his change purse. Jack looks at the purse and shakes his head.

"This one's on me, Crayton." He fills the beers and carries them back to the table. His hands shake.

"See, Jack, you're like the rest of them. You don't seem to understand that the drinking's not the problem. It's what keeps me alive, it's what keeps me from going off the deep end. You know what happens when I stop drinking?"

Jack shakes his head slowly. He slides his cup along his forehead, and the cool beer soothes his temples.

"I get this physical pain that you wouldn't believe. I mean, god, it just tears me up. It's like there's something

stuck in my body that's trying to force its way out. I start sweating and shaking and getting scared as hell. And all it takes is one little thing, one little reminder, to set me to crying like a damn baby. My family, they own my soul, Jack; they own my soul. One day I was sobering up and feeling pretty damn good about it, and then I saw a commercial on T.V. for laundry detergent and the kids in it, two sisters, were fighting over who spilled ketchup on their dad's shirt, and they looked just like my..." Crayton covers his face with his hands and snorts loudly, and Jack moves over in the booth and puts his arm on Crayton's shoulder.

"It's all right, man, it's okay," Jack says, and he looks around the restaurant, and his head spins.

"I cried, I cried the whole rest of the day. Then I got drunk as hell and forgot about it. Can't you see? Can't you understand why I can't quit? Why I gotta do it? Did you know that before I started drinking heavy I carried a god damn gun? My wife wouldn't talk to me, and I was mad at the whole god damn world, ready to blow somebody's brains out. Then one morning I woke up and I, I must have dreamed I killed my kids, but see, I thought I really did it. Well, I figured I was losin' it, so I did a couple of shots of Tequila and threw that gun in the damn trash. Since then I drink, 'cause it makes things easy. I don't have to think about Joannie not talking to me, I don't have to wonder what happened to make her stop caring. And I don't have to fuckin' think about what my kids must think of me by now."

"Shit, Crayton," Jack says, and he leans back in the booth, and he feels his throat swelling. "What's wrong with us? What's wrong with the whole god damn world?" he asks, and he fights the sick feeling in his stomach. "It's so screwed up, everything's so screwed up; how are we supposed to find any sort of peace in a world like this?"

"I don't know, Jack. Something went wrong somewhere. Something went off track. I don't know any answers, but I do know that the judges don't care, and the damn social workers don't care, and they're the ones running the show. They think it's all so god damn simple; 'he's gotta stop drinking,' they say. But see, they don't know, they don't know how it feels on the inside, how it feels when you've lost your mind, and you're soul, and everything in the world that was ever yours."

Jack wipes his eyes with the back of his hand. "Maybe they could help you, Crayton, and maybe me, too."

"No. They could put me in de-tox. They could take me away from what little I have left in this world. And when I totally lost it, they could put me in some institution and feed me drugs and say 'at least he's not drinking,' but they can't give me my family back, and that's all I want, that's all I need. If I had Joannie and the kids back I'd stop drinking all by myself. Hell, I guess it's like I said, if you aren't hooked on one thing then you're hooked on another. It's like that till you find some kind of peace in yourself. But nobody wants to help you find that peace."

Those social workers say 'do it on our terms or fuck you.' Like they know so god damn much about the world," Crayton says, and he finishes his beer. He slides his hand into his back pocket and pulls out his blue handkerchief. He wipes sweat and tears from his reddened face and sighs wearily.

"God that pisses me off," Jack says, slamming his good hand down on the table. "People don't understand, they don't even try to understand. They just read their textbooks and give everybody who's different than they are a damn label."

"Jack, I know you're young and all, but you can't change the world. Too many bastards out there with black robes on. Just don't give anybody your soul, Jack. You do that and you're fucked in a big way."

"Yeah, but what about you, Crayton? What about your life?"

"Jack, it's too late. I've had my chances; I let them get away. There's nothing you can do for me."

"Like hell. There's one thing I can do. Come on," Jack says, standing up and motioning for Crayton to do the same.

"What are you doing, Jack. You've got to work here," Crayton says, standing up uneasily.

"Bullshit. I'm closing. We haven't had a customer in a fucking hour anyway. Look, it's 11:30. That's just a half hour early."

"Yeah, but you'll get fired."

"He won't even know. Hell, he wouldn't fire me anyway. He knows there aren't many people who'd do as much shit as I do around here for \$3.45 an hour."

"You only make \$3.45 an hour?"

"Yeah, now let's go, we're getting outta here."

"Jack, you can't do this."

"Crayton, there's no one on this god damn planet who's gonna tell me what I can or can't do, not tonight anyway," Jack says, rummaging through his keys for the one to the front door.

"Alright, Jack, but I need a beer for the road. Where the hell we going anyway?"

"Everywhere," Jack says, moving to a refrigerator behind the ice machine and pulling out a twelve pack of beer.

"Now don't be stealing shit, Jack," Crayton says unconvincingly.

"Fuck him. I'm worth more than \$3.45 an hour any day of the god damn week," Jack says, and he walks to the oven and shuts it off, then to the fuse box where he flips ten or twelve switches. The two men walk out of the restaurant, Crayton carrying the twelve pack, and Jack turns and locks the tinted glass door. He takes a deep breath, then glances at FlapJacks across the street. Outside a drunk man is arguing with two bouncers, one of whom has a small lead pipe in his hand. Jack feels drunk, and suddenly nauseated, and he takes another deep breath and turns to Crayton.

"Let's get the hell out of here," he says, and the two men disappear into the night.

Chapter 11

They walk three blocks to Crayton's house and, once there, Crayton steers them toward a rusty white pickup truck. Jack is glad they aren't going inside, and he stands at the passenger door of the truck and tugs on it impatiently.

"It's locked, Jack, just hold your horses," Crayton says, placing the twelve pack on the hood of the truck and looking through a set of keys for the small round one that opens the door. "Where the hell are we goin' anyway?"

"I don't know; we'll figure it out on the way," Jack answers, leaning across the hood and pulling the beer to his side. "I think it's time to show the judges, and the social workers, and the owners of the places like the fuckin' Last Stand that we're not taking their shit anymore."

"Fine," Crayton says, unlocking the door and climbing into the truck. He unlocks the passenger door and Jack tosses the beer onto the torn vinyl seat and runs his finger along a thin crack in the windshield. Crayton cranks the motor and rolls down his window, and they back out of the

driveway and turn down Campbell Lane. They ride in silence as the houses become nicer, the yards larger.

"I got a great idea! Let's find that judge's house and firebomb it!" Jack says as Crayton maneuvers the truck onto Carson Avenue. He opens a beer and passes it to Crayton, then gets one for himself.

"Firebomb it! Are you crazy? He's probably got a piece and I'd wager there's nothing he'd like better than to blow away some long haired kid trying to firebomb his house," Crayton says, pausing to sip his beer.

"Well, let's at least piss in his yard."

"Jack, I don't know where the guy lives; I can barely remember his fuckin' name--Eastman, Eastwick, some shit like that."

"Crayton, you just drive. I'll find the fucker's house. He probably lives in one of these rich houses," Jack says, scanning the upper middle class homes of Carson Avenue. "Oh, stop man, there's a Century 21 sign; I've always wanted a Century 21 sign," Jack says, opening his door as Crayton halts the truck.

"Jack, wait, what are you doing?" Crayton asks, but Jack has already climbed out of the truck. Crayton glances around for other cars. "Hurry up, Jack," he calls nervously.

Jack runs to the sturdy wood realty sign and lays into it with a body block. The foundation quivers and leans, and Jack bounces off it and rolls on the ground. "Jesus

Christ," he says, lying flat for a moment, searching the sky for stars, searching his nerves for wounds. He sits up and yells to Crayton.

"Man, come give me a hand with this!"

"What?" Crayton asks, stepping from the truck and standing in the street. His white overalls glow in the moonlight. Jack glances around at the neatly trimmed hedges and yards, and to him Crayton looks sadly lost, sadly out of place, and Jack is suddenly tired, suddenly angry.

"Whatta you want me to do, Jack?"

"Just knock the damn thing down; pretend it's Easterbonnet or whatever his name was."

Crayton sighs and charges the sign, and when his large frame hits it there is a loud crashing sound, and as the sign overturns its base throws dirt and grass into the air like a shovel. Crayton straddles it for a moment like a victorious gladiator, then turns to Jack. "I'm getting too old for this shit," he says, and he smiles broadly and lifts his prize off the ground. He carries the sign to the truck and dumps it into the back, placing a dirty green army blanket over it. Jack tosses his empty beer can into the hole left by the sign, and Crayton finishes his beer and tosses the can into a yard across the street. Back in the truck, Jack grabs two more beers, and Crayton throws the transmission into gear and screeches down the street.

"You know what I've always wanted to do?" Crayton asks, and he turns sheepishly to Jack, and his face looks as if it has shed ten years.

"What?" Jack asks, and he smiles at Crayton's youthfulness.

"I've always wanted to take somebody's mailbox and switch it with someone's down the street or something."

"Really?" Jack laughs, leaning back in his seat, bumping his head against the glass behind him. "Ow, hey isn't that like a federal crime; you know, tampering with mailboxes or something like that?"

"Probably," Crayton says, his red face smiling and mischievous. "So what the hell we waiting for?"

"Well okay, but let's do it on a different street. We should spread our crime wave out a bit; make the cops think we're some serious vandals," Jack says.

"How 'bout Jefferson Lane. Lots of stupid looking mailboxes on that street anyway. People probably won't notice for a week or so."

"Sounds good," Jack says, and he sips his beer. They ride in silence, and Jack sticks his head out his window, and the chilly night air blows his hair across his face. He turns to face Crayton and the air caresses the back of his neck.

"I wonder what Beth would think if she could see me now."

"Jack, she's gone," Crayton sighs. "I'm sorry, man, but she's just not coming back. Don't tear yourself up thinking about her. At least you're young, at least you'll have other women."

"I don't know, Crayton. I wanted her so long, and then I had her and I couldn't keep her. I can't keep anything, I can't make anything work."

"Have another beer."

"It doesn't go away, Crayton, it just doesn't go away. Forgetting things doesn't change 'em."

"Yeah, and what does?" Crayton asks, and he is suddenly serious again, and his voice sounds strained and tired.

"Fuck, I don't know. Tearing up mailboxes, I guess," Jack says, and both men smile. Crayton turns the truck onto Jefferson Lane and shifts down to second gear.

"Oh, check that one out. 'The Edmontons,' woah, hoah, hoah," Crayton says, pointing to a black mailbox with a horse and carriage figurine attached to the top of it. He cuts the lights and pulls in next to it, and Jack quietly slides out of the truck and begins tugging at the base of the mailbox.

"Rock it," Crayton whispers loudly from the truck.

"What have you done this before?" Jack asks, leaning on the mailbox.

"Just rock it," Crayton says, gulping his beer. Jack begins rocking the box and he sees it moving in the gravel. "This thing's got a concrete foundation," he says, and Crayton climbs out of the truck and moves to inspect the box. He rocks it violently, then begins digging at the gravel and asphalt around it. The box doesn't move.

"Fuck it," he says, and begins kicking the base furiously, and soon the concrete foundation is separated from its packing. "Grab the top," Crayton instructs, and Jack and he carry the box to the truck.

"Who should we switch it with?" Jack asks, wiping his hands on his jeans.

"I don't know. Let's scout around a little. Just try to remember this place so we can bring the other one back for the Edmontons," Crayton says, and the two men hop back into the truck.

Jack feels his head spinning, and he stretches himself out in the vinyl seat so that his head rests on both the seat and the door. He wipes sweat from his forehead and realizes he is feverish. "Shit," he sighs, turning to look out the window. A faded black mailbox with pasted on reflective letters catches his eye.

"There you go, Crayton," he says, pointing to it. "I don't think the Edmontons could stand that one."

Crayton laughs and his face twists back into a youthful smile. "I guess they'll just have to adjust," he says, stopping the truck and leaping out. Jack follows him unsteadily. Crayton studies the sign for a moment, then begins rocking it; slowly at first, then more quickly. After several minutes of this he stops and leans on the box.

"This is a workout," he says, wiping his face with his handkerchief. Jack kicks the base of the sign

ineffectively. "You know, Jack, I'm having a lot of fun tonight. I haven't had fun in a long time," he adds, sticking his hand out to Jack. Jack smiles and shakes it, patting Crayton on the shoulder with his other hand.

"I mean it, Jack, you've really done a lot for me. Sometimes forgetting things does make 'em better."

"Well, Crayton, I'll tell you something, and I mean this. I never had a father, not one to watch and to learn from, but I like to think of you as one. I guess that sounds dumb, but everybody needs somebody to be like a dad to 'em, to teach 'em stuff. Somebody just to listen sometimes," Jack says, and he feels his breath coming more quickly, and he turns away from Crayton.

"Thanks, Jack," Crayton says, and his voice sounds weak and shaky. Jack turns to face him, but Crayton has turned away. "I mean, I really am a father, you know, but I don't feel like one. When I think of myself as a father now days I feel empty and useless. I just, I guess I just feel like I don't deserve to be one."

"Damn it, Crayton, you're a hell of a father. Fuck that judge, fuck that judge," Jack says loudly, and he kicks the mailbox, and it shudders and the sound echoes down the street. Crayton turns to the box, and he grabs it and lifts, freeing it from the ground. He lets go of it and it falls over with a thud. Jack and he lift it into the truck and dump it beside the other box. From down the street they see bright headlights, and they both freeze for a moment,

then Jack hurries to the cab. Crayton unfurls two more army blankets and covers the mailboxes, then races to the driver's seat.

"I bet that's a cop, man," Jack says, turning in his seat and staring at the quickly approaching car.

"Hang on," Crayton bellows, and he shifts the truck into drive and pulls back onto the street. Jack studies the car as it draws nearer, and he can see the outline of lights on top of it, and he can see there is only the driver in the car. He turns to Crayton.

"It's a cop, all right," he says. "He's alone, too."

"Just let me do the talking, Jack. If he asks you for an I.D. just tell him you left it at home. You look twenty-five, tell him you're twenty-five." Jack turns back around and sees the car is right behind them. He watches the cop lean over, and a moment later the night air is filled with flashing blue. "Oh, fuck," Jack whispers.

"Just don't say anything, Jack. If he doesn't look under the blankets we're okay," Crayton says, and he flips on his turn signal and pulls off the road. He shifts the truck into park and climbs out, waiting by the door for the cop.

"Shit," Jack mutters, eyeing the car through the back window. The officer has turned on a light inside his car, and he sits with a microphone held close to his mouth, and to Jack he looks vaguely familiar. He is short and chubby, and his hair is thin and brown. His red moustache is thick

and bushy, and Jack wonders if it's a fake. The man holds the microphone away from his mouth for a moment, then drops it on the seat. He steps from the patrol car and slides a long black nightstick into his gunbelt as he approaches the truck.

"Let me see your license," he barks, and he walks past Crayton and leans into the truck; Jack backs farther against his door. "Step out of the truck, sir," the policeman says, and he scoops the remainder of the twelve pack off the seat and sets it on the rusty white hood. Crayton hands him his license. The officer turns to Jack, who is crossing the front of the truck. "Just stay right there. You got a license, too?"

"No, um, not with me."

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-three."

"Bullshit. What's your name?"

"Hey," Crayton interrupts, "This has got nothing to do with him. You haven't even told me what you stopped me for."

"You were swerving all over the road," the officer says, then glances at Crayton's license. "Mr. Stark," he finishes, and his voice is demeaning and challenging.

"I wasn't swerving anywhere," Crayton says.

"Oh, well in that case maybe you'd like to go down to the station and take a breath test. We'll take your buddy here with us and find out who he is," the officer says, tossing a hand in the direction of Jack.

"Now look, I've had it with you fuckin' cops. You don't know this guy. He's a fuckin' great guy. I'm tired of being treated like a second class citizen just 'cause my name doesn't ring a bell with you," Crayton says, and his voice is angry and edgy, and he takes a deep breath and looks to the ground.

"Come on, Crayton, calm down," Jack says, and he watches Crayton carefully. Don't lose it, man, he thinks, and he tries to move closer to him.

"All right sir, what's your name?" the officer demands, halting Jack's progress with an extended finger.

"I told you to leave him the fuck out of this," Crayton explodes, and he clenches his fists, and shifts his weight uneasily, and to Jack he looks like an angry bull. The officer moves a hand to his nightstick.

"Listen Mr. Stark, if you don't cool it right now, and I mean right now, I'll add obstructing justice and assault to your probable drunken driving and definite illegal transportation of alcohol charges."

"Fuck you," Crayton screams, and Jack watches as Crayton's jaw begins to twitch and his hands begin to shake uncontrollably. Oh shit, Jack thinks, and he leans on the truck. His stomach turns and his legs wobble. A sudden movement catches his eye, and he watches as the officer pulls his nightstick out, and he raises it and brings it down again in a single chopping motion. Jack hears a loud cracking sound as Crayton catches the stick with his left

hand, and Jack tries to speak but can't. Crayton yanks the stick away and tosses it into the street. The other man reaches for his gun, but Crayton grabs him and slams him into the truck, then holds him there and brings a fist back.

"Oh shit no, Crayton," Jack says, and he lunges forward, but he is too slow and too drunk. Crayton's blow bounces off the side of the officer's head, just below the temple, and the man's legs give out and he staggers into Jack, and Jack loses his balance. Both men tumble to the ground, and Jack breaks their fall. "Shit," he says, and he looks at the policeman in his lap, then slides out from under him as quickly as his body will allow. Crayton leans against the truck and covers his face with his hands.

"Crayton, we gotta get out of here before this son of a bitch gets up," Jack yells, and he guides Crayton to the driver's seat.

"No, Jack, you drive," Crayton says, and his eyes look desperate and wild, and his face is pale and streaming with sweat.

"Okay, okay, just hurry the fuck up," Jack says, and his hands shake and he feels his heart racing and his head spinning. Crayton crosses the front of the truck, stopping to move the crumpled policeman out of the way, then he grabs the beer off the hood and pulls himself into the passenger seat. Jack has driven ten feet before Crayton can close his door.

"Shit," Jack says, and the contents of his stomach feel

dangerously close to his mouth. "What are we doing, Crayton? What the hell are we doing?"

"Oh god," Crayton says, and he opens a beer and passes it to Jack.

"Get that thing the fuck away from me," Jack says, and he turns the truck onto Sycamore Road. Crayton stares at the beer for a moment, then takes a drink of it.

"We fucked up, Crayton," Jack says, shaking his head and staring at the road ahead of him.

"No, I fucked up. They don't even know your name."

"Yeah, but they'll look for me, they'll look for you," Jack says, and he looks out his window at the scenery of Sycamore Road. He sees a small shopping center; a Big Star, a cinema, and two liquor stores, and he stares at the pothole ridden parking lot.

"Fuck 'em, they won't find me."

"They've got your driver's license," Jack says, and he scans the rearview mirror for Turner Park, and he sees it's still there.

"But they don't have me. I'm going to Florida, I'm going," Crayton says, and Jack looks into his eyes, and Crayton stares back strongly. Nothing changes and everything changes, and all at the fuckin' same time, Jack thinks, and he turns back to the road. The traffic thins, and the lights of Cavin give way to the darkness of the southern Illinois countryside. They drive past Angel Lake, and both men look across the motionless water to the small island beyond it.

"It's time, Jack," Crayton says. "I've been waiting and now it's time. See, I've been doing a lot of thinking these past couple of days. I want my soul back, and the only way I can get it is to get the hell out of here. Get out of here and find myself, find my peace of mind. I gotta go, and now I've got a reason. I can't put it off anymore."

"What about your stuff?"

"I don't want it."

"Oh come on, Crayton, you want your stuff."

"No. It's like I told you, when you go, you go. It's an all or nothin' thing."

Jack nods and takes a deep breath of the early August air. The nights are getting colder, he thinks. Soon they'll be back, thousand of 'em. Most down from Chicago. Most of 'em bastards or cunts. He shakes his head and looks at Crayton.

"Yeah, I'm really going," Crayton is saying quietly, and he is holding his hands out in front of him and watching them tremble. "I'm really going. I mean, I am really going." He looks up and sees Jack staring at him. "You could come to," he says, and Jack sees that his face has changed, that he looks almost content, almost happy. Jack feels a chill run through his body and he looks for a place to pull the truck over.

"No, I can't go."

"Sure you could," Crayton coaxes. "You'd be a lot happier there. You could forget Beth a lot easier." Jack

sees a gravel road leading to a boat dock, and he pulls onto it and cuts the truck's lights.

"No. I'd like to think I could, but I can't. Not yet. Maybe...in a while."

"Jack, she's not coming back."

"I know," Jack says, and he stares out the window at the quiet night. The faint chirping of a distant cricket reaches the truck, and seems to hang just outside of it. Jack runs his hurt hand across his forehead and wipes it on his jeans. His head throbs and spins. "I just can't help it," he says, and he winces at the words. "God, sometimes I hate the way I feel inside."

"Don't stay here too long, Jack. This town, it'll kill you. You don't wanna end up like me, do you?" Crayton says, and he chuckles and slams an open hand against the dashboard, and the sound echoes through the truck. Jack's body twitches nervously.

"I guess I'll spend the night out here and hitchhike back to town in the morning," Jack says.

"Sounds like a good idea. Probably couldn't get a ride this late, and you sure as hell better not walk. We're in Gardner County now so the cops shouldn't bother you. Better be careful in town the next few days. Stay out of sight, if you can. Tonight just find you a good spot in these woods and try not to worry about nothin'."

"Yeah," Jack nods. "You got enough money to get to Florida?"

Crayton pulls out his wallet and counts out thirty-two dollars. He slides out his change purse and jangles it. "It'll have to do. I don't have a bank account or anything."

"I guess next time someone around here needs a pick-up sax player they're screwed," Jack says, and he tries to smile, and halfway succeeds. Crayton chuckles again. Jack pulls out his wallet and shakes two crumpled five dollar bills out of it. "Here you go, for the road," he says.

"Thank you sir," Crayton says, and he smiles and places his hand on Jack's shoulder. "You remember what you said before, about me being like a dad to you and all?"

"Yeah."

"Did you mean it; I mean, it wasn't just the booze talkin' was it?"

"I meant it," Jack says, and Crayton is silent for a moment, then he takes a deep breath.

"I'm not a bad man, Jack; that judge, well, he just didn't understand me. Fifteen years is a long time. Maybe once or twice I got mad, but I never meant to hurt her; I loved her so much, her and my kids. You know what I mean, Jack?"

"Yeah," Jack says, and he turns and listens to the cricket, and it sounds farther away now.

Jack half smiles again and puts his arm on Crayton's shoulder. "You better get goin' man; don't get stopped."

"I won't," Crayton says, and he turns and hugs Jack's

arm, and Jack feels his stomach turn again. He opens his door and slides out, and Crayton moves over in the seat. "You're a good man, Jack. A good man," Crayton says, and he starts the engine and flips on the headlights.

"If you decide you want you're stuff, call me and I'll send it to you," Jack says, stepping away from the truck and jamming his hands into his pockets.

"Okay," Crayton nods, and he sticks a hand out the window to Jack. Jack takes it and he feels the pressure of Crayton's grip. Crayton smiles again, then drops the truck into reverse and backs out onto Sycamore Road. Jack watches the headlights as they play in the trees, and when he sees them focus on the road and hears the truck shift into drive, he waves again to Crayton, then sits down in a small patch of grass just off the gravel road. He buries his head in his hands and his face feels hot to the touch, and his skin feels loose and sticky. He takes a deep breath and leans back on his elbows, searching the August sky for stars, searching his body for some feeling other than exhaustion.

Chapter 12

The days of early August pass, and they give way to the days of mid August, then late August, and Jack waits for Crayton to return, and he does not, and Jack waits for Beth to return, and she does not either. Summer fades and the days become more bearable; the sun sets earlier, the coolness that was once reserved for the evening now sneaks into the air by late afternoon, but still it does not rain, and still the land and vegetation of the area are thirsty and beaten. The brown of the dying grass becomes a lighter brown, a sadder brown, and the cracked soil breaks into chunks, and the chunks crumble easily to dust.

And the town, too, changes in late August; for Mitchell University an old cycle ends and a new one begins, or perhaps it is the same cycle rolling blindly along, and only the people are different. Either way Cavin changes. An army of new faces, faces bright and eager and young, flood the town, flood FlapJacks, and the young once again outnumber the weary. And as the air becomes cooler and the streets become crowded, Cavin becomes a much lonelier place.

Jack stands on Wesleyan Avenue, just outside FlapJacks and across from The Last Stand, and he watches the faces and the cars and the bodies and the movement; he is drunk, and tired, and he is thinking of his father, and of Crayton, and of Beth. Where does it end, he thinks. When does it ever stop?

Two teenage girls lead another one out of FlapJacks, and the third girl is drunk, and she is crying, and the other two are laughing and assuring her that tomorrow she'll be fine. I gotta get out of this town, Jack thinks, and he looks to the sky, to the stars, and he sees no answers, and his head swims with questions and alcohol. He hears a short shriek and looks to see that the drunk girl is throwing up by the street, and the other girls are glancing about nervously.

Meaning? What the hell is meaning, he thinks. Peace? What the hell is peace? He feels his body sway involuntarily, and he leans on a parking meter for support. I could stop, he thinks to himself, and he laughs aloud, and he slides down the meter and sits on the curb. A group of young men walk by and enter FlapJacks, and they are laughing and talking about the drunk girl down the street who is puking all over herself. Yeah, I could stop, Jack thinks, but then tomorrow would hurt worse than today does. Can't have that, he thinks, and he grabs the meter and pulls himself to his feet, and he wipes his hands on his jeans and walks into FlapJacks.

The bar is hot and crowded, and the bouncer who during the summer sat outside on a stool has moved inside, and he stands with two other bouncers and checks I.D.s. Jack digs out his driver's license and hands it to the man, and he takes Jack's right hand and stamps "under" on it.

"Don't try to drink, and don't wash this off," the man says strictly, coldly, and he hands Jack back his license. Jack nods and moves toward the bar. He licks the three middle fingers on his left hand and rubs them over the stamp, and the ink smears and fades. He licks his hand again and the stamp is no longer visible. He wades through the throngs of people, and he bumps into a girl, and she spills beer on his shirt.

"Hey," she snaps, and Jack glares at her and she frowns and walks away.

A thick cloud of smoke hangs near the ceiling of the bar like a fog, and the floor is sticky, and the band on the stage is screaming about gonorrhoea at 80 decibels. Jack inches up to the bar, standing between two occupied stools, and he sees the tall bartender, Tricia, busily filling glasses of beer.

"Can I get a Bud Light?" he asks loudly, and Tricia looks him over carefully for a moment, then seems to recognize him, and she nods and pours him a beer.

"Eighty-five cents," she says.

"Eighty-five?"

"Yeah, new prices," she explains impatiently.

Jack gives her a dollar. "Keep the change," he says, and he grabs his drink and works his way away from the bar. He stands at the edge of the dance floor and watches the people. A week ago half these people didn't even know this place existed, he thinks, and he sees an old drunk in an oversized suit standing across the dance floor, and the man is holding a small flashlight, and he is spinning it around like a strobe light. Jack gulps his beer and turns to the bar, and he sees it's mobbed. A waitress walks by and Jack flags her down.

"A Bud Light," he says. The girl takes his glass and hurries off, a look of worry pasted on her sweating face, and Jack thinks she must be new here. Don't hurry yourself, Jack feels like saying, If there's one thing people will wait for around here it's a drink. He turns back to the dance floor, and he sees a fat bouncer, also probably new, harassing the old drunk about his flashlight. The old man nods and drops the light into his pants pocket, then pulls a yo-yo out of his coat. The bouncer rolls his eyes and stalks off. Jack feels a light tapping on his shoulder and turns to see the waitress, and he gives her a dollar and lifts a beer off her tray. She hurries away without bothering to check his stamp.

Jack leans against a wall and sips his drink, and he feels tired and old, older than the man with the yo-yo, and he looks instinctively to the bar for Beth. He sees an empty stool and wanders over to it. The band finish their

tirade about venereal disease, and they jump into a punk version of "Burning Love." Jack takes a long drink on his beer, and it is cold and refreshing, and his head throbs and the room spins. A short waitress with light brown hair and dark skin walks by, and Jack catches her elbow and stops her.

"Beth," he says, spinning her around, and her tray sways and a glass of beer shakes itself loose and falls, and it crashes to the floor.

"Hey, watch it, mister," the girl shouts, and Jack sees she is a girl he has never seen before.

"I'm sorry, I thought you were somebody else," Jack says, and a tall bouncer walks up quickly and stands close to him.

"What's the problem here?"

"This guy grabbed me," the waitress snarls. "He knocked a beer over."

"Look, I'm sorry, I thought she was someone else. I tried to tell her that," Jack says, and he leans back in his seat. The bouncer moves back on his feet.

"Who's gonna pay for that beer?" he asks.

"I'll pay for it," Jack says, and he rummages through his wallet and pulls out a wrinkled dollar. The waitress takes it and hurries off, and the bouncer eyes Jack for a moment, then walks away. Jack spins in his stool and scans the bar, and none of the faces are familiar, and he realizes that even the people working here now are strangers to him.

He turns back to the bar and glances at the bottles behind it, and they seem somehow friendly. Yeah, I gotta get out of this town, he thinks, and he buries his face in his hands. The band finish "Burning Love," and they go straight into an original tune called "No Safe Sex At 3 A.M."

Jack listens to the heavy drum beat, and he tries to follow the lyrics, and he catches something about all the drug stores being closed, but his mind wanders back to Beth, and to Crayton, and to his father. He thinks also of Mel, and of Crystal, and he misses them, misses everybody he knew during the summer. He feels a light pressure lifting his arm from the bar, and he looks up to see the tall bouncer standing over him.

"Come on, buddy. You gotta go home before you get sick all over and I gotta clean it up."

Jack slides off the stool and his legs wobble, and he grabs the bouncer's arm for support. "I never get sick. Been comin' here since I was eighteen; coming here and starin' at this cute little waitress, but she's gone, everybody's gone. Everything's gone...just gone," Jack says, and the bouncer helps him through the crowd and out the door.

Outside Jack feels disoriented, and he looks around for a moment before stumbling to the curb and sitting down. He stares at The Last Stand and tries to clear his head. He watches the traffic on the street, then again buries his head in his hands, and he feels the world reel around him.

Beth, how could you do this, he thinks. And dad, why couldn't you understand, why'd you have to go and die before you could tell me? Jack grabs a parking meter and pulls himself to his feet, and he feels his stomach turn and he thinks for a moment that he may get sick.

The feeling passes, and Jack stands and begins to walk down Wesleyan Avenue. He passes the bars, and the liquor stores, and then the shops, and the houses, and the trees. The air becomes clearer, and the lights and noises fade, and soon he is surrounded only by darkness. He walks on, and behind him Cavin fades into that darkness, and the sounds of the night that now fill his ears are sharp and new, and somehow refreshing.