

## SISSY BLOWS THE WHISTLE

I was always nice to mother. I had to be – even though I didn't like her much. I thought she was stupid for stayin' with the old man – too dumb to know how to get rid of 'im. One a my earliest memories is of him swattin' me on the back a the head and sayin', "Now look wha'chew done – ya made yer mother cry."

It was true – I did – an' she was crying. I'd been playin' with a towel, sittin' between the two of 'em, an' I swung the towel an' hit mother in the eye.

SWAT! The old man clubs me. Maybe I wasn't playin' – maybe I was imitatin' him. Even earlier on – I usta lay in bed, in the dark – and I'd hear the old man yellin', "I'm gonna knock yer block off." Then there's a crash – a clunk really – an' it got quiet. I remember the dark bein' sorta soothing.

It may a been the next day or another time or many other times but I remember mother's eye was black'n blue an' her cheek was swollen. I felt sorry for her an' ashamed a myself for doin' such a thing to her. So – from that day on I tried to be a good kid. A nice boy. But that didn't stop the old man from bangin' me on the head or pinchin' my skinny little arms – an' it didn't stop him from snatchin' my hot-dog if I didn't gulp it down quick enough. I still remember that disgusting look on his face with his cheeks full of my hot dog. He'd mumble, "The pagan babies'd just love ta have this hot-dog. Poor suckers." He'd run his tongue 'tween 'is lips an' teeth an' wash it down with milk. My milk.

Mother never hit me – never laid a hand on me – but I can't remember her ever holdin' me either. She'd never feel my forehead when I was pale or feelin' low. All she'd say is, "C'mere", an' I'd see her headin' for the thermometer. "Drop yer drawers," she'd say an' I'd fumble with my belt buckle. "Hurry up – bend over." An' I'd hear this sucking noise when she pulled it outta the Vaseline. It didn't hurt none and she didn't touch me

though I usta wish she would. It was all so – what? I don't know – it just felt awful and I was ashamed of somethin'. Afraid I'd done somethin' wrong again. So I tried not to get sick. But I was sickly for so long – seems like always. I still feel sick.

I learned early on to question the smallest thing there was to do. If my bike had a flat, I'd ask myself if the old man would get madder if I used his tools to fix it myself or if he'd blow his stack if I asked him to fix it. What I'd usually do is nothing. I'd leave the flat and maybe hide the bike so he wouldn't see it. Then he'd say, "Hows come you never ride that bicycle? I paid good money for that."

Well – he hadn't paid anything for it but I guess he convinced himself that he had. The bike was from my Aunt. When my cousin left home, she rode it over to our house herself, patted me on the head, told me what a nice boy I was and said, "Here – this is for you." I s'pose That was supposed to make me feel good. But it felt like somethin' else. It was part fear, part suspicion, an unwanted complication. I suspected the old man had never had a bike. I mean – how could he? I heard a million times how he had to work ten hours a day for fifty cents and how he didn't have time to run around. I went to bed many a night with that refrain echoing in my head and tryin' to figure what it was supposed to mean.

Anyway I took the bike because I was a nice boy and never said no. Not to a grownup. And at that time everybody except Sister was a grownup. I was Sissy and she was Sister. Other people called us by our names but never the old man or Mother. I guess they figured they gave us the names once an' that was enough. Mother called me Junior once in a while but I came to prefer Sissy. I know it sounds strange an' I don't know when it started but we always called him Fred or nothing an' he never said to call him Dad or Father or Pops. I don't think the word Father – I mean I don't think I could have said the word. It wouldn't have made any sense. So Sister and I always called him Fred to his face and his rules we called Fred's Laws. In private we called him the old man or just him. Her we

called Mother.

The word love was never mentioned in our house and I never saw the old man touch Mother except to slap her or slam her into the wall. Once I saw my Uncle kiss my Aunt an' the old man blushed an' left the room. They liked to smooch but I took the old man's cue and left the room too. "They're at it again," the old man said to Mother.

Sister's two years younger'n me an' she got all the looks in the family. I mean if you look at me you can still see the old man an' he's no Clark Gable – except for his big ears. And Mother, I s'pose she might a been pretty once. There are pictures of her holdin' me when I's a baby an' she doesn't look like she does now. Anyway, I don't look anything like her – 'cept for bein' frail. But Sister she's a looker. Always been real cute. When she's little we'd be sittin' on the back steps tryin' to be quiet while the old man was nappin' an' Sister'd slip her hand into mine an' grab my finger an' not let go. I'd look over at her and she's so pretty it liked to broke my heart. She'd look up at me so's to make me feel grownup. Hell – I's only six myself an' it scared me to think that if I was gettin' old then soon I'd be gettin' mean. And then how's I gonna help Sister be a good kid. Truth is she never needed much help. Alls I had to do was keep her away from the old man's cookie jar. That was somethin'.

The old man had chocolate wafers or malomars in his jar but all Sister an' I ever got was graham crackers. And never when we asked for one. "It'll ruin your appetite." It was always when they were takin' off for the night. A graham cracker and a glass a milk was a sure sign that we were alone for the night. That was fine by us. We wouldn't have minded at all except no lights were allowed after nine and the TV was in the old man's den an' that door was locked. We could only watch TV when he was there and didn't wanna watch anything. And then, only the shows he approved of. Anyway, Sister or I – usually Sister she'd say, "Please Fred, can we watch Father Knows Best?" And usually he'd agree we could if we were quiet. Sometimes he'd even let us stay in the room while he watched

Hogan's Heros or The Honeymooners. Ralph really killed him but we had Hell to pay if we laughed too loud an' made him miss a favorite line. He had 'em all memorized. "That Ralph – he really kills me," he'd say and laugh until he started coughin' and gaggin'.

So – Sister'n I spent many a night alone. He'd turn off the main gas valve as Mother gave us our treat. Sometimes if there were no grahams, it would be soda crackers floating in milk. And that was where I made one mistake I never made again. When they were gone – this one night – I took one a the old man's chocolates, broke it in half and gave Sister her part and ate mine. Don't tell them about this, I warned Sister and she didn't. Didn't have to. Didn't have time to. It still blows my mind. There musta been a couple a dozen cookies in his jar but I didn't bother to count. I couldn't conceive of being caught. I didn't even think – only knew I wanted one. Well – the old man woke me up late that night. First I heard him shoutin', then he's stompin' and stumblin' up the stairs. I huddled into the dark at the foot of my bed and tried to pretend I was asleep. Next thing I know I'm upside down in the air. He's got me by one leg and my pajamas are pulled down. He starts swattin' my ass – eight, ten, fifteen – who knows how many times. I lose track after twenty. I thought maybe he'd quit at an even number. Then I was fallin'. I landed on my head and caught a glimpse of the old man staggerin' out the door. "Little bastard hasta learn what's mine is mine," he said to Mother. She was peeking in the door as I crawled to bed. The room was spinning for the longest time but I did learn. I wouldn't eat a cookie after that even if he handed me one. And he never did.

I learned to ask permission for everything. Life was one long game of Captain May I. I'd ask permission to go to the bathroom. And usually it was okey after I told her whether it was number one or number two. I was getting confused. If I said number two, there had better be some evidence or Mother would get out the old rubber hose and grease it up. So I always waited until I's damn sure – waited until the cramps began. Either that or

I'd say number one, then open the window to get rid of the aroma while I dropped a load and quickly flushed away the evidence. It's amazing how the bathroom became a scene to be avoided. For about two years, summer and winter, I used to go out behind the garage to do my duty. Funny thing is – Mother never noticed and the hose stayed coiled. They did send me to a Psych once about that time. I musta done somethin' I don't remember because a social worker was called in an' she sent me to the Psych. I musta been six'er seven. The old man went to court to try'n stop 'em but it didn't work. I s'pose I's a pretty strange kid. I don't know. He was okey – the guy at the hospital. I wanted to like Murray. He wasn't a full fledged head-shrinker. Just one a those PHDs an' I let him do all the talkin'. I didn't – couldn't say a word at that time. Maybe that's why they sent me. Anyway Murray told me lots a stuff, mostly about grownups. Stuff that I knew had to be true. He was warning me – sorta letting me know there was a whole lot more to come and how I was s'pose to trust him. He could stop this – this – shit – if I'd only open up and let it out. But – as I said – I couldn't speak. I didn't speak to anyone except Sister for over a year. And of course I spoke to the old man and Mother when I had to.

Anyway, since I couldn't speak to Murray, I wanted to let him know I liked him. So the last time I had an appointment with him, he finished sayin' whatever an' I walked out of his office. I waited in the waiting room while a skin'n'bones girl about my age knocked on his door. When she went in, I checked the halls and they were empty so I – I still can't believe I did this – but I dropped my pants and quickly left a load in front of his door.

The last time I ever saw Murray it was at the grocery store a few months later. I was with Mother to help carry the bags and Murray was next in line. Mother didn't notice him and he spoke to me so she couldn't hear. He knelt down to my level, as if he's tyin' his shoe, an' whispered. "I got your gift – thank you." He was smiling and made me feel like maybe he really did know. It was only then I realized how odd it had been. What seemed perfectly normal at the time now made me blush with shame. I

wanted to go back and explain but no one ever made me – or let me go back to see him. I s'pose there was nothing he could have done. I don't think I ever trusted anyone again. And just as Murray said, all kinds of shit started coming down.

When Sister got to be about eight, the bathroom became a real circus. The old man always told Sister to leave the door unlocked. God forbid you should accidentally open the door on him – now all of a sudden he doesn't want Sister to lock herself in. He didn't care about me but I never saw a time when Sister could go to the can or take a bath without the old man having to get in there for a minute. He'd knock – polite as hell – then jerk the door open and walk right in. "Excuse me Princess," he'd say, just like he's Robert Young. "I need something." Then he'd pull the door shut and I'd hear Sister giggling. That was in the beginning. Then a few months later, you'd hear Sister squealin' an' hollarin', "Fred don't!"

Shit! That bastard used to tickle her little thing when he changed her diapers. I 'member him tellin' Mother, "You did Sissy – I'll do Sister. It's only fair." One time, after a few months of this circus, I heard Sister crying. I was twelve and hadn't had any lumps on my head for – hell, maybe a couple months. I must not a been thinking too good. I heard Sister say, "Fred – don't – please." I said, Shit! and opened the door. Oh – excuse me, I said as if it was an accident. I thought he'd maybe leave her alone long enough to chase me. And he did. He looked so goddamned silly with his half-stiff little wiener. He didn't have much of one. Truth be told, by that time, mine was already bigger'n his. Well, I's right. The bastard chased me and caught me and beat hell outta me. It was one a those times when I's so sore when he got done that I just hadda lay there where he left me. I saw Sister sneakin' outta the bathroom before I passed out. I asked her a few times what he was doin' to her but Sister wouldn't or couldn't tell me. All she'd say was, "Don't tell Mother." That's when I noticed the old man only did such things when Mother was gone. I told Sister to never use the bathroom unless Mother was in the house. That worked for awhile

an' we both relaxed a bit. Then one day the old man grabbed Sister by the arm as she passed his chair. "Sister," he sniffed, "you're smellin' like an alley cat. Go take a bath, right now Pussy." Sister turned to me – lookin' sick. Mother wasn't home and there was nothin' I could do. Sister went into her room to undress but when she came out she had her swimsuit over her shoulder. She slipped out the door sayin', "I'll go swimmin' instead." And she was gone. Safe that time. Kid's gettin' smart, I remember thinkin'.

"What're you lookin' at?" the old man said to me, red faced, lookin' 'bout to bust. I said nothing.

"Nothing," I said. I's lookin' him straight in the eye and almost laughed in his face – cause it was true. He was less than nothing. But stupid, he didn't get it and I slipped out the back door before he caught on.

When Sister came back from swimming, she crept around the garage an' found me playing mumbly-peg. "Where'd you get the knife?" she said. Traded for it, I said. Gotta mow Skeeter's lawn three times for it. "Can I help?" Sister said. "We could share it." I told her no, she didn't need one. "Where is he," she said. He's watchin' old Norton, workin' on his fourth beer. It might be a good time to slip into your room. Mother's here, I said and Sister looked relieved. From then on, I never left her alone in the house with him but that didn't stop him. If Mother was goin' out, I told Sister, go with her whenever you can. Well – Mother resisted at first, then for reasons I only learned about later, she began to invite Sister along and at odd hours too. She'd tell the old man she was goin' to gossip with a girlfriend. The old man would 'harrumph' but let her go. When they got to the girlfriend's apartment, Sister told me, Mother made her wait in the car. She'd tell Sister she'd only be a few minutes, then be gone for hours.

Sister – all this time – would amuse herself with puzzles until she fell asleep. She liked those little puzzles with fifteen numbers and sixteen spaces. The ones you jumble up an' then try to put back in order. Sister liked those a lot and had already mastered consecutive numbers an' was workin' on reverse and odds'n evens. That was what she did while Mother

was fuckin' this gimpy nerd who worked the same place as the old man. I found out later that the old man knew about it all along. And then I figured out why he put up with it. It gave him time to be alone with Sister. Now – I guess – he hadn't quite figured out how to handle this new twist.

All this time I was gettin' stronger. It seemed as his interest in Sister increased, his hostility to me declined. My head was clearin' up, I's seldom dizzy anymore an' I hardly had any fresh bruises on my arms. And I was gettin bigger. I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror one day – saw I'd soon surpass the old man in meat if not in mean. It was one of them – whatty ya call 'em? An epistomy? No – an ah – anyway. The old man's gettin' older an' the young boy will soon be a young man. Soon, soon, soon. Soon, soon, soon. I kept saying soon to myself until it sorta began to sooth me. Meanwhile, Sister was takin' most a the abuse. She didn't have any bruises outside but inside she's as bad off as I was. One day I heard Mother yellin' at Sister. "Hows come yer panties are always soiled like this? You better start wipin' yerself young lady. I got better things to do than scrub these filthy things." Later, I took a look at the laundry. All of Sisters underpants had brown stains but they were spots not smears. I went to Sister's room an' she was still cryin'. "I do wipe myself," she said as if I's gonna jump on her too. Well – what's the excuse then? I said. Sister wouldn't say. Then she looked away. "Some times I'm." Sister stopped, then started cryin' more. I told her to shush. What? I said. "Sometimes there's blood down there." Blood, I said. We'd better tell Mother. "No!" Sister screamed. She looked terrified. So I told her to take it easy and next time she should go to the nurse at school. Well – Sister was only 'bout nine at the time but the nurse told her a story 'bout how all little girls begin to bleed when they grow up an' how it's nothin' to worry about. She gave Sister a box of Tampax, told her to read the directions an' sent her on her way. People! I swear to Christ!

When I started to notice girls I didn't think of 'em the way the old man seemed to. I was too shy. I noticed that girls always ran in packs of

two or more – like nuns. And me – loner that I was, am – I'm barely able to talk to one girl at a time. I couldn't possibly hang around with a group of 'em. So mostly I played with myself. Exploring, takin' hikes, that kinda crap. Then I discovered my own little friend. No one showed me. It just came to me. Then I got embarrassed about it and for a few days I couldn't – wouldn't even look at it. Even when it began to get big all by itself, I wouldn't touch it. A week or so later, I played with it again, twice, three, four times a day. And then the next day an' the day after that. And again and again for about a year. Then I quit all together. It was the only fun I had in my life and it was too depressing. It always made me real sad after I's done. I couldn't take the going up an' then the coming down. I needed some balance. Not Boom! one minute an' gloom the next.

I had another friend once, for a few days. His name was Tommy and we hung out at the sandpit, smoked a few, fished a little and jerked off together a few times. We'd see who could do it first. Then one day Tommy came by the house an' the old man said, "Yer the butcher's kid – ain'tcha?" Tommy admitted he was. "Tell yer old man, Fred says he better not try runnin' his thumb on mah ol' ladies scale again." Tommy said, "Sure," then rode away on his bike. I tried to speak to him a few times after that but he's always inna hurry to get someplace. Then one day I stopped in the Corner Cafe to buy some Sen-Sen for my smoke breath. Tommy's inna back booth, smokin' with some other kids. I looked over an' gave 'im a little wave, hopin' he'd invite me to join 'em. Instead, I heard Tommy whisper, "Old man's weird." One of his friends said, "Gimme butts," an' Tommy passed him the stub of his Viceroy. I walked out with my Sen-Sen, feelin' like one a those tiny black pellets. Then I heard Tommy say, "So long, Bags."

Some a the kids at school called me Bags but I never asked why. I figured it's because I've always had these dark circles under my eyes. I don't sleep much – three four hours at a time – then I get hungry. When I get hungry I can't sleep. For awhile I usta sneak downstairs to raid the fridge. Hah! Some raid. Most there'd be is a half jar a pickles or maybe a

dish a leftover tuna casserole. I'd take a sharp knife, in the dark, with only the light a the moon hittin' the counter, an' slice off a sliver from five'er six quartered pickles. I'd down them quick then sponge up the juice on the sideboard so's I wouldn't get caught. Or maybe I'd pick through the elbows in the casserole an' find a piece a tuna. I'd eat each piece slowly an' imagine I's havin' a heaping dish full. That was Mother's best dish. A can a tuna dumped into a pound of boiled macaroni with a can a Campbell's cream a mushroom soup mixed in. Sometimes she'd add a can a peas for variety. Then she'd sprinkle the top with potata chips an' bake it for awhile. It was either good or I couldn't tell. I never really tasted food much. I's always too hungry. Alls I ever noticed was my hunger goin' away for a little while.

Mother was still fuckin' the nerd a coupla years after I first found out. Who knows how long before. I found her diary once an' I was nervous as hell but I read it. I'd read a page an' then practice how fast I could slip it back in the hamper where I found it if she came back home. Then I'd read another page. It was mostly about the nerd. She called him Roman for Christsake! Sometimes Romy. "Roman penetrated my womanhood, again and again." His name, for the record, was Clifford Klippstein. Some folks called him Clip-Clop. His gimp, I hear tell, was from a missing toe, supposedly from a farm accident that kept him outta the war. She wrote, "I wanted it to never end. Roman seemed like an endless hose and I a delicate vessel yearning to be filled." Even at my age, I knew pus when I saw it and Mother was a pimple yearning to be popped. "Roman treats me like a woman. F--- (she'd never spell out Fred's name) is not even a man. How I implore the Lord to set it all straight. It is His world after all is said and done. What am I, an empty vase, supposed to do?"

That line was better than anything I've read since. I didn't know the answer then and didn't realize until later that the answer was RUN! But I couldn't then and she couldn't either, though I doubt it was for the same reason. I couldn't run because of Sister – couldn't leave her alone with

him. I had to find a way to take Sister with me, though I had no idea where I'd go. I didn't know from one day to the next what I was gonna do. I see now, I should have left them – empty vessel and dry hose – to themselves and or Roman. Old Clip-Clop came up to me on the street one day, said, "Hydee there," meanin' to be friends. "I know you. I work with yer daddy down at the Sewer." I said, oh yeah? and pedaled away. I didn't wanna get into that mess. You never knew which way the shit might fly.

I don't know where Sister developed her hatred for Mother. I only know that she did and I never tried to talk her out of it. Neither one of us had anything to compare our life to. Other families might have seemed different but I never got close enough to find out why. And Sister only had me for an example. Me and the old man and Mother. I hadn't discovered books yet. The library had been sittin' there on the corner all my life. But, aside from a place to hide behind, smokin' in the bushes, it was just a building. Kids hung out there at night on the steps but I never set foot in the place until I was in Junior High. I was s'posed to write a paper about the United Nations, so I looked it up in the school library. There wasn't anything listed, so I asked the librarian. "Well," she said, "it's pretty new. Maybe they have something on it downtown at the Carnegie." The Carnegie? I said. "The Public Library?" Oh yeah. "Just go down and ask them for a card," she said. I musta looked confused cause she said, "A library card. So you can check out a book." Oh, I said. Bring a book back to the house? Fat chance! Let Mother inspect it? The old man reject it? Nah! No way. I said, okey, thanks. "They have a wonderful collection of poetry," she said as I walked away. "Look up Whitman. Walt Whitman."

Who? Wah-wah, I said to myself as I walked downtown. Wah-wah Walt. Wah-wah Whitman. It was a – whatty ya call it? Y'know – a way of remembering stuff. I can't remember – anyway – there were more and more things that I was trying to remember so's I could figure them out. It was comin' on pretty late. My grades were never too good an I had a lot a catchin' up to do. There was a good chance I wouldn't pass into High

School if I didn't.

Well I found Whitman and when I did it was kinda scary. I didn't always know what he was sayin' but I loved the way the words were stacked on the pages – sorta like in the Bible. And the guy who was speakin' has such a soft voice it reminded me of Murray. I guess Whitman was my first real friend. It was the first book I tried to read without bein' forced. I wondered what it was – what sort of power it was that he had. And old Walt seemed to want to help me. And Sister. Sister was never far from my mind. She was the only one who needed me. Before I knew what I was doin', I was rushin' back to the house to drag Sister to the library. I didn't dare take such a book into that house. Sister, of course, couldn't make heads or tails outta Whitman. She just smiled and looked hopeful. So, every day after school, I'd rush downtown to read a few more pages. Then I remembered about the United Nations – the paper was due at mid-term and I hadn't even started it. I looked it up in the card catalog but there was only one card. See: League of Nations, it said. I looked that up and found another note. See: United Nations. I felt trapped in a circle so I skipped ahead in the catalog and came to another card. Leonardo daVinci – Notebooks. That made me remember a picture he drew in the Bible of The Last Supper, so I decided to look it up. I found the book and it was full of drawings and lettering that I couldn't read. It was Greek to me and it looked like it was printed backwards. But the drawings were somethin' else. Naked people, babies in the womb, bodies cut up like hunks a beef. There was drawings of submarines and airplanes and forts and crossbows. All sorts a stuff. I wondered who the hell this guy was. I was very confused but for the first time I didn't mind being muddled. It was a different kind of dizziness. For those few hours I spent at the Carnegie, I was not Sissy. I was whoever – or whatever I stumbled across in the stacks. Back at the house, things were the same as before. The old man and Mother were still sittin' there like two pimples – ready to pop.

One night, Mother was feelin' sick, so I knew she'd be stayin' home. I

thought Sister'd be safe, so I slipped out while the old man was watchin' TV and headed for the Library. When I got about a block away I could see the place was dark. There was a note on the door.

Sorry, we cannot be open Tonight. Your librarian is  
ill. Zenobia.

I was disappointed and sat on the steps and smoked a few right out in plain sight – feelin' tough. I watched the blinking neon sign at the PlaMor across the street. It took a small burst of guts but I got up and walked over and into the place. I'd never been in there before. I always shot pool at Massa's down the street where they didn't sell booze. I didn't even know if they'd let me in. The place smelled of piss and Pine-Sol. There were rum-soaked Crooks soaking in slimy spittoons and rancid beer was in the air. The pool hall was empty except for one man shootin' Snooker by himself. He yelled, "Hey! Wanna play? It's on me." I said I'd never played Snooker and it was true. Straight pool and Billiards were my games but I'd never played against anyone before. He said, "Sure," thinking I was hustling him. "That's okey." He racked the balls and spotted the numbered ones. "Is this the right order?" he asked. Beats me, I said as I picked out a stick. What are the rules?

"Oh – I see," he says, "you're gonna hustle me all the way. Okey. You make a solid red then you can shoot any numbered ball. Six is wild, you can shoot it anytime but if you miss you lose six. Fair enough?" Fair enough, I said. I was feelin' heady from those few quick cigs and the man – he looked like a salesman – slipped me a smile. It was sorta sleazy and I couldn't quite figure it. He broke the rack and shit in a solid. Then he shot an easy seven and missed. My turn. I copied his bridge and sank an easy solid then aimed for the six and dropped it. He spotted the six and it was lined up with the side pocket. I dropped it again, then ran a string of six more. I could see his smile sorta slide off his face. He was convinced I's hustling him but it was just beginners luck. I beat him in the end but not with real

skill. He was lousy and I at least knew what I was doin'. All of a sudden, I sorta understood about geometry. Mr. Collopy had been trying for months to drum it into us and now I knew. Ed – the salesman – asked me, "How much you wanna play the next one for." And I said, whatever you say. I had two bucks in my pocket. Then, I thought, maybe he was hustling me. That's when I got a little nervous. "

Ten for the game," he said. "Twenty extra if you can run that six again, six times." I was nuts but I said that sounds good. For some reason I was fearless. Then Ed took a quick lead an' I began to sweat a little. My stroke got sloppy and that made me even more nervous. Then – as quickly as my shakes came – they went away. I ran that old six ball, eight times and whipped his ass. Ha! Felt good. He handed me a wad of money and I didn't even bother to count it. It was more than I'd ever seen in one lump. I thought maybe I had enough to run. Then he offered to buy me a beer and I laughed and said sure. It surprised hell outta me when no one questioned my age. We sat down in the booth an' Ed plugged the little jukebox – told me to pick a few tunes. I played a couple I thought he'd like. Born to Lose and Hit the Road Jack by Ray Charles. The bartender was giving us some funny looks but didn't say anything. Probably thought Ed was my old man. Then Ed touched my hand and said, "I got somethin' a lil harder up'n mah room. Wanna come up fer awhile." Well – it was about eleven by then and I either had to scam right then or wait a couple hours till the old man passed out. The beer was making me dizzy, so I said, sure – why not? I felt like I's on some kinda roll and didn't know where I'd stop. I thought maybe Ed – this salesman – was my way out. Though I couldn't imagine how. I was like a Snooker ball bouncing around, hopin' to drop into a nice safe quiet pocket.

Well – I wasn't prepared for the sleaziness of his hotel room, though the smell of the carpet in the lobby should have tipped me off. Ed's room was on the second floor and it was stuffy. The air smelled of farts and Old Spice, hair oil and Pine-Sol again. I started to turn around but Ed took my

elbow and led me into the room. The door slammed from the breeze and Ed turned the key in the lock. "Here's mah bood-wah," he said. "Le's see 'bout some 'freshments." I asked him what's the deal with the locked door but he didn't answer – just poured some Four Roses into a couple of dirty glasses, added ice and popped open a Seven-Up. "Tell me when," he said, but I was still plotting my get away. He handed me my drink and I slugged it down. It tasted like bad Seven-Up but I smiled an' thanked him. Then he put his hand on my shoulder and said, "Good lookin' kid who can shoot a stick like that. You gonna go places." He moved even closer and I could smell his bad breath. I knew what was comin' next. I shoulda known before that. I said, Shit! Backed away and said, No-no. And Ed goes, "What? You shy too? Hell – I let ya take thirty bucks a mah money – just thought it might be fun." Fun? I said. Ed puckered his lips and made this sad little squeaking sound. You Asshole, I said as I unlocked the door. I thought he might try an' stop me but he didn't. Just followed me out and down the stairs. Halfway down, he said, "I'll be back next week if ya wanna play again." I just kept movin'.

When I got back to the house, the old man's TV was still on an' I couldn't tell if he's asleep so I sat on the glider out back smokin' the pack a Camels I'd lifted off of Ed's dresser. Then I went in to bed. As I's dozin' off, Sister came into my room cryin'. "He's at it again," she said. "Now he don't even care if Mother's around. I pretended I's asleep but Sister knew I wasn't. "What're we gonna do?" she asked. She was asking but I could tell she didn't really think I had the answers anymore. I could hear a trace of somethin' that told me she felt alone – like me. Sister – poor kid – she was beginning to understand there was nothin' I could do. She could finally see me as not much older'n her an' that's when she started cryin' these real bad tears. The kind where you don't even care if someone hears you but you know that no one will. I reached out and took her hand. She climbed into bed with me and we both cried until we fell asleep. When I woke up three hours later, Sister was gone. I thought maybe I'd dreamed it. I got

up, washed my face and brushed my teeth. I could still taste the Four Roses an' Seven Up. When I stumbled into the kitchen, Sister was starin' into her bowl of cereal. "What're we gonna do," she repeated. Don't hit me with that, first thing, I said. I've got a plan, I said but I didn't. "What is it?" Sister said and a slight smile broke across her lower lip. Her eyes said she didn't believe me anymore but her lips still wanted to. I told her I'd let her know. "It better be soon," she said. The fear in her eyes was like an echo. It kept bangin' around in my brain for days.

So – I's sittin' there and lookin' above Sister's head, down the hall. The morning light was bouncing off the old man's gun rack – reflecting the brass NRA plaque onto the ceiling. The old man was a member but he never went hunting, never shot skeet. Never fired a shot as far as I know. The guns had been hangin' there as long as I could remember. The 30.06 over/under 12 gauge was the same one his old man used to blow his own head off when he was dyin' a brain cancer. I made a quick wish that the disease was hereditary then I canceled it cause if it was maybe it wouldn't stop with him. Maybe it's get me too and Sister. There was a single shot .410 and a few pistols. There was a Magnum and a 38 police special and a 45 automatic. The 45 he brought back from the service. The old man was quarter master right after World War Two and just before Korea so I don't s'pose he shot anything much then either. He kept shells for all these guns in the locked cabinet below. The rack was like some kinda altar and the closet was like the tabernacle where y'keep the – you know.

One a the things that always puzzled me was why he left all those guns right out in the open without a lock on 'em. I mean a burglar coulda made a haul. I'm sure he knew I wouldn't touch 'em. The episode with the cookies taught me that a long time ago. I was certain he could have just walked past the gun rack and smelled my fingerprints on the barrels – so I kept my hands off them. But I did wanna learn how to use 'em and before I's through I knew each gun inside out. Thing was I'd go into the hardware store day after day and look at guns. One day a nice old man came up to

me. He's wearin' an Issac Walton League pin. He seen me starin' – never touchin' – day after day. I guess he just thought I's a kid who wanted his first gun. I's lookin' at the 30.06. "Here," he said, "give it a heft. It's a lil' big for a kid. How 'bout a .410." I said, Nah, I got a .410. I'm savin' up for that over/under. Almost got enough. It was true. I was savin' but not for a gun. I was savin' for me'n Sister to make a getaway. I planned to let Mother come along at the last minute but I couldn't tell her beforehand. I couldn't trust her not to tell the old man. Well – after a few months – I'd gotten the man at the hardware store to show me all the shotguns, how to break 'em down, what kinda ammo they'd take. I can't really say I knew what I's doing. I think it was just that the gun rack always scared me a little an' I wanted to conquer the fear – if I could. I'm tryin' to make sense of all this but I don't think what I say now is what I's thinking then. I can't say for sure that I ever thought about anything until I read Whitman. And even that – at the time – I didn't know what I was doing. I just always tried to avoid things before I had to react to some new shit.

There were days, sometimes weeks, once or twice a whole month would pass without the old man hittin' me. At those times, it was as if I didn't even exist. He wouldn't speak to me. He'd walk by with a glazed kinda look in his eye. That was even scarier than gettin' hit. I never knew when it'd come again. It was always possible. He could seem to ignore me but I could never ignore him. I swear, for five or six years, I really believed I was an evil kid. More than once I found myself starin' at a box a bug powder in the garage or countin' the aspirin, benzedrine and nasal drops in the medicine chest, tryin' to decide if I concocted it all if there'd be enough to do me in. Anything I's told not to touch in the medicine chest I assumed was poison and thus became part of my witch's brew. From the time I's five – when I began to know what life was all about – until I's thirteen and saw what death was like, I seriously considered killing myself at least once a week.

The first time I saw anything actually die it was almost like a

demonstration. I was smokin' out under Beaver Creek bridge when a red winged blackbird landed a few feet away. It looked my way then hopped a few times, staggered and fell over. It picked itself up, flew a few more feet, then fell to the ground. Dumb bird got up an' walked a couple feet then fell over right next to me. I leaned over and saw its eyes go shut. I nudged it and its eyes popped open, then closed for good. I picked it up. It was hot at first – ten, twenty degrees hotter'n my hand. But when I put it down awhile later the bird was cold and it made me shiver. Death was quiet and peaceful. Seemed like it should be. I heaved the bird into the creek and watched it float away. After that I never – at least not often – thought about killing myself again.

Summer coming on was always a little scary. Boring. When everyone else was looking forward to swimming, fishing or summer jobs, I was dreading the empty hours by myself or watching out for Sister. Mother wouldn't let me get a job though the old man got pretty pissed about it. He thought I ought to be bringin' in a little money but Mother said it'd cost her more for a sitter and that was that. The old man couldn't argue. Sister didn't like summer either. She liked school. Even if it was boring, at least school was busy and busy was better than hours and days alone waiting for the old man to explode or wondering when he was going to disappear. Twice a year the old man would take off by himself. One week every summer he'd be gone. I don't know where he went and he just told Mother it wasn't “none of her goddam business.” Then again, the week from Christmas to New Years he'd take another vacation. Those two weeks were probably the best and worst two weeks of the year. I'd just begin to get an idea of what it's be like if he didn't come back – it was too much to hope for – then there he'd be pulling into the driveway. And – crazy as it sounds – I'd realize I was even lonelier while he was gone. I'd start to run to meet him, then catch myself. He'd say, "Hey Sissy – bring mah bag in boy." Then he'd go in the house an' I'd hear Mother squealin'. I'd take Sister and make ourselves scarce. A couple hours later they'd be hollarin'

again and we'd slip in the back door and go to our rooms.

That week at Christmas we'd go to Granny's house and stay over. She'd have a tree and presents for Sister and me. Mostly mittens or socks stuffed with hard candy – that stuff that all tastes the same. We probably got other things but I don't remember ever gettin' anything I really wanted. I s'pose Granny assumed we had enough toys and junk at home. How could she know? The old man never let her come to visit. "I didn't marry yer old lady," he'd yell at Mother whenever she'd bring up the subject. Anyway – Sister and I'd eat up all our candy during the week 'cause we knew if we didn't the old man would take it when he got back. If he came back, and he always did, so far. I'd make up lists of things to tell the kids at school when they started tellin' me 'bout their electric trains an' erector sets an' chocolate covered cherries and Schwinn bicycles and Roy Rogers outfits and games like Monopoly or Chinese Checkers, Parchesi or Go Fish. It wasn't as bad not getting toys as it was awful to hear what everybody else got. It wasn't as if the old man couldn't afford such things. I heard once how much money he made and it sounded like a fortune to me. It probably wasn't all that much but there shoulda been enough to buy Sister a Barbie doll. Her old Raggedy Ann that Granny gave her when she was three or four was gettin' raggedier and raggedier. And each year I'd have to re-stuff it and sew it up. Cowboy boots were big one year. At least five or six kids got 'em for Christmas so – of course – I was damn jealous. One day I's mopin' along some back alley and saw one black boot stickin' outta some trash. It was about my size an' almost worn out but I snatched it up and went through the trash looking for the other one. It wasn't there and a man came by, said it was his trash and chased me away. Next day I came back lookin' again and the next day and the next. No left boot but I kept the right one anyway. I'd put it on an' hobble around my room pretendin' I's the Durango Kid. Then one day I saw the boot sittin' on top a the trash in the driveway. I snatched it up and put it up in the rafters with my cigar box bank. I knew better than to keep it in my room again. The old

man was back. His car in the garage was grimy and covered with salt.

The old man was an Inspector for the Sewer Department and mosta the guys who worked under him were like Norton or Ralph. Y'know? Basically dumb bumbling fools but decent, even lovable in a pitiful way. They probably do their stupid little jobs, get paid a little bit and don't ever have too much fun. All they have is a smartass woman who hasn't left them yet. And of course the old man felt superior to all these jerks and even though they all did their jobs good enough, he had to chew them out from time to time. Set something straight that wasn't crooked, so's he could imagine he's doin' his job. And so on – up the ladder or down into the sewer. The gimp, Clip-Clop, Roman, worked in the main office so the old man never had to spend any time with him. Mostly, he was out inspectin' the shit and how it flowed. When he got off work, he'd leave his galoshes in the garage but the stink – after twenty years – couldn't be gotten rid of so easy. It was part of his natural aroma like the sickening French pomade he wore on his hair. I still can't stand the smell of that stuff. The old man had a queer streak about his hair. He'd have his cut in a flat top at least once a week and sent me to the barber every second Saturday. When I's little he'd come with me, see me seated on the board they put across the arms of the chair an' listen to the barber rave 'bout how I's the spittin' image of him. How proud he ought to be. "Man can't always tell who his kids are – like a woman can – but they sure ain't no doubt in this case," the barber insisted. And the old man smiled like he was proud. Me? I'd already begun to hate the fact. I used to dream, or wish, that he wasn't really my old man. But one look in the mirror and I knew the barber was right. "Cut his hair just like mine," the old man said. Then as I got older, I went to the barber by myself. By that time most a the kids in town were wearing their hair longer, some even wore ducktails, one kid – crazy bastard – gave himself a Mohawk an' got kicked outta school 'til it grew back. All of which made me feel even more like an outsider. One week there was a substitute barber and he asked me how I wanted my hair cut. Just normal, I said,

meaning like I always had it cut. He misunderstood, gave me a little trim and parted my hair on one side. "How's that look?" he said. I took one look and said, great. It was. I didn't look so much like the old man anymore. I almost looked like one a the other kids. Mother seemed not to notice my new hair style but when the old man saw me, all hell broke loose. "Who'n the hell you think you are? Look like one a them faggot hipsters." He grabbed me by the hair, yanked me to my feet and dragged me into the kitchen. My heels left black marks on the linoleum. "Bring me the scissors," he yelled to Mother. When he was finished, I was nearly bald. Looked like a mangy squirrel and my scalp was bleeding in a few places. "Now clean up that mess an' scrub those heel marks off the floor," he said and slammed me in the back of the head. He went for a beer and I took a look in the mirror. I liked what I saw. At least I didn't have that silly flat top. But when I thought about having to go to school the next day, I knew how embarrassing it'd be. I knew everybody'd laugh at me. Either that or they'd assume I had lice or ringworm and pity me. They'd shun me even more than usual. And that's just what happened. Some of the girls only giggled but a few of the bigger guys laughed right out loud and slapped their butts'n called me skinhead. One kid who's about my size – maybe a little bigger – he did the same and I just blew up. I charged him, head down smack into his belly, so fast I caught him off guard. I knew once I started that I had to get him fast or he'd get me good. I had him on the ground by the ears, pounding his head into the hard packed dirt. Take it back, I said. Take it back. The kid was crying and he finally took it back. I walked away feelin' pretty good – knowin' I was bad. I'd won my first fight – the first fight I ever had. Then as I walked away feelin' taller and taller, I began to shrink inside. I knew the old man would hear I'd been fightin' and I was certain to get a whippin'. Sure enough, the old man heard but I's wrong about the rest. All he said was, "Might have t'give you a new moniker – Bucko." But he didn't. Next day it was Sissy once again. And when my hair grew back the old man saw to it that I got another flat-top. I picked a few

more fights after that, or fought back when I had to, sometimes I even smarted off to guys who were bigger'n me. But the first time I got whupped good – I gave it up. Tried to be a nice kid again.

One time I's tryin' to get Sister to tell me what the old man was doin' to her but alls she could say was, "Can't tell – can't tell. Said he'd go to jail if I told." Well that got me thinkin' an' after I screwed up my nerve – I went to see the Sheriff. Took Sister with me. I told him 'bout the old man – what he did to me all the time – and sorta hinted 'bout what he's doin' to Sister, since I wasn't sure myself. He seemed pretty nice, patted Sister on the head, said he'd look into it. Then I got scared and said maybe he'd better not. "You tellin' the truth boy?" he said. I just nodded and looked at the ground. "Don't worry," he said. "He won't have to know. I'll make it a secret investigation."

Some secret. He stopped by one night when the old man was just hittin' his third beer. I's in the hall, hidin' but listenin', ready to run. The old man gets real mellow, even jokes a little after three beers. Somewhere between five and six he starts shootin' straight shots and it all changes. Well, the Sheriff, as I say, caught the old man after three. The two a them got to chattin' and the Sheriff drank a beer. They sounded like old buddies. Remember this? Remember that? Mother called the Sheriff, Arnie, and asked him if he played any sports anymore. Said how she never missed one a his games when they's in High School. Then Arnie laughed, said, "See ya 'round Fred," and left. And that's the last I ever heard about that from him. Mother, however, had to pay some for her teenage dreams.

It started when the old man said, "So – you had a crush on old Arnie while you's datin' me – huh?" Mother said, "Not really." I could hear her voice crack. She knew she'd made a bad mistake. Then I heard a bottle breaking against the wall and her yellin' how he'd almost hit her. "Oh I'll hit'cha bitch," he yelled. "Don'chew worry 'bout that." He was laughin'. Sister came out to see and I took her back to her room, told her to stay in there even if it gets quiet. Especially if it gets quiet. Then I went to my

room. The shouting and the crashing went on for ten – fifteen more minutes and then I heard Mother moaning. It didn't sound like crying at all – sounded like that other stuff. And that sounded worse so I covered my head with my pillow and tried to sleep. Tried to pray. I'd been tryin' to learn how to pray for awhile. Didn't seem to wanna work for me though.

The old man and Mother never went to church as far as I know 'cept for when my Aunt died and they went to the funeral. That didn't keep 'em from sendin' me and Sister when we got old enough. Mother'd give me a quarter and say, "Go to Saint Vincent's and sit right up front." So we did, a few times, but it was all in Latin. Then for awhile we went to the Baptist church catty-corner from Saint Vincent's. That was even duller, what with the long sermons and the choir was like a bunch a squawkin' parrots or something. Then we tried the Methodist church down the block, then the Congregational and the Presbyterian and they were all pretty much the same. So we worked our way through the First Reformed, the Christian Reformed and the Bethel Reformed till there was none left. All pretty dreary places, mostly full a farmers, 'cept the girls at the Bethel Reformed would always be lookin' over at me and smilin'. And one time one a the girls came up to me after services and said, "How's come I never see you at evenin' services? You should oughta come – it's more fun. We get to play in the basement while the folks argue 'bout money." Well – I's so shy I couldn't answer the girl but as we walked home Sister said, "That girl liked you." I said, nah – didn't either – but I knew she did and I wanted to go back that night. So – when I's gettin' ready – combin' my hair, the old man said, "Whatty you primpin' for?" I thought I'd go to church tonight, I said. Mother said, "Saint Vincent's doesn't have services on Sunday nights." The old man swatted me on the head, "You think yer goin' tomcattin' – don'cha?" What? I said. "You ain't goin' nowhere Bucko," the old man said. And that was that.

I didn't go back to the Bethel Reformed or to any other church. I'd take Sister and we'd go 'cross the tracks to NoTown and sit out behind the

Pentecostal Baptist Church and listen to the choir for an hour or two. We would have gone in 'cept the first time we went alls we saw was Nigros goin' in an' I knew somehow that was wrong. So, we'd sit outside an' listen to the preachin' and the stompin' and when the choir started singin' we'd be hooked. Sister liked it even better'n me. But we had to stop goin' to the Pentecostal. I found out it was too dangerous.

One day I's down town and this Nigro kid come runnin' outta the 7-11. Almost knocked me down. The clerk came runnin' right behind him yellin', "Stop that Nigger!" Well – Arnie, the Sheriff happened to be just across the street and he started blowin' on his whistle, then he went runnin' after the kid. He dropped his whistle when he passed me, then stopped and pointed his pistol an' yelled, "Halt Nigger!" The kid stopped and put his hands up and started to turn around. Then Arnie fired anyway. The kid looked like he'd been pole-axed – feet went flyin' out'n front a him. Right away folks came runnin' over. Before the kid even hit the pavement. I picked up Arnie's whistle and followed behind him to where the kid was layin' in the gutter. His head was right next to a Baby Ruth wrapper and a styrofoam box from McDonald's. If you ever see red blood on a black face – I tell ya – it almost looks natural. I told Arnie I found his whistle but alls he said was, "Get'cher ass outta here kid!" He didn't seem to remember me so I kept the whistle. I ran it under the hot water as long as I could – until Mother yelled at me to stop wasting water. I put the whistle in my cigar box up'n the rafters in the garage. Later, when the old man came in, alls he said was, "That's one down." Mother nodded. "The day they make me hire niggers – that's the day the war begins." Mother nodded and handed him a beer. I could tell he'd already had more than four. "Well," he belched and said, "at least we got him."

Y' know, the old man had a way of takin' other people's doin's and stories as if they were his own. If a drinkin' pal of his stopped by to show him his new car one day, the next day you'd hear the old man say, "Yeah – me'n Bill went shoppin' for new cars. Bill, he liked the Pontiac but I didn't

see anything I liked. I tried to talk'im outta it, but you know Bill. He always knows best – a real know-it-all." Or, if I went fishin' an' caught a mess a Crappies, brought 'em back and cleaned 'em, he'd take 'em in and say, "Look Mother – I got us some fish. Fry 'em up." One time Sister won the spellin' bee in the fourth grade. To hear the old man tell it, he'd coached her day'n night. Hell yeah – he coached her. He'd say, "Sister do yer homework or yer not gettin' any supper." Sister always did her homework. Me? I'd look at my books and say, what for? What's the square root of shit when the angle of descent is straight down and the velocity is zero? Answer: The old Man. Fred.

The old man went to the can three, four times a day – morning, night and when ever Sister went. Mornings were his best time if you stayed out of his way and didn't make any noise – he'd leave you alone. You couldn't count on that at night. I used to think that everybody had someone like him – somebody who was torturing you – and I wondered who his was. I wanted to meet him, or her. I was sure it would be someone I'd like and was hoping he'd like me enough, so's I could ask him to please stop so maybe the old man would let up on us. But I never heard the old man rant'n rave about anyone in particular. It was always 'they'. "They think I'm gonna put up with that – they got another think a comin'." And Mother seemed to know who 'they' were. I asked her once but she just said, "They're nobody. They're everybody. Go on out'n play."

I had – by that time – struck the best balance I could between bein' gone and bein' gone too long or too often. So, it was always a relief to be told to go. It meant I had two or three hours. When I'd get back, Mother or the old man would always wanna know where I'd been. And it had better be someplace normal. I'd stopped saying the library because the old man seemed to have something against my going any one place too often. He could hang out at the Bloody Bucket, sit at the same damn barstool for ten years like it was a throne, that was okey. But the third time I said I'd been to the library, he said, "I ain't gonna pay for no library fines." Well – I'd

never asked him to. As I said, I never even checked out any books. So the next time I's at the library and he asked me where I'd been, I said, playin' baseball. "Who with," he said, "I ain't never seen you with any decent kids." Shit! He never saw me with any kids. Only place he'd ever go was to work or the Bloody Bucket an' there's little for a kid to do in the sewers. Besides, I still didn't have any real friends. I used to hang out in the park and watch Babe Ruth League practice but I didn't have the nerve to join. I thought maybe one day only eight kids would show up an' the coach might call me over. No such luck. They always had a couple dozen, so I knew he wasn't gonna ask me to come sit on the bench. I'd a been happy to do it.

The closest I came to having a friend, I s'pose, was Josie an' he's the town idiot or near abouts. No one else would ever talk to Josie much. Alls he'd ever talk about was how every cute girl in town was always callin' him up wantin' him to do naughty. He was such a liar that nobody bothered to call him on it. Just laugh and keep walkin' – maybe he'd get lost. It seemed clear that his Twilight Zone was real as could be. Josie was so ugly, so stupid, it almost made it funny. Josie was angelic in some ways, harmless. He'd tell me – after he'd just confessed rebuffing one of the cheerleaders – a new way he'd invented to jerk off. I didn't know whether to believe him or not – I only knew I was not about to try it. It sounded like trying to start a fire – survival style. He said, "You take a coupla sticks an' you never touch it. You just rub your thing between the sticks." Josie always called it 'your thing' or 'my thing'. He was prudish. He didn't swear and if he heard someone else cussing, he'd blush and make the sign of the cross. I don't think Josie ever noticed that I didn't chase him away like everyone else, don't think he was capable of noticing such things. I'm sure he thought everybody was his best friend. Maybe that's why I sorta liked him. He was the opposite of me. I couldn't imagine anyone wanting me for a friend. Except Sister. There wasn't anything I had to tell her about myself that she didn't already know. I envied Josie. I used to wish myself to sleep – wish I'd wake up stupid and harmless. Deep down I still

felt evil. I couldn't shake the feeling that I was doing everything wrong and no one was trying to convince me otherwise. I couldn't figure out why but I knew when I did the answer would most likely be some simple little thing I'd been missing. Something my brain was just not able to understand.

I didn't know what to call it at first. It was only a quick glimpse y'know – like one of those summer clouds passing over an open field – a feeling that things might change. Now, I think it was the beginning of some kinda faith. I'd already worn out hope and charity was the part of me that cared about Sister. Sister's all that ever kept me from runnin' away. Well – no – that's not totally true. It was also a fact that I couldn't think of where to go – who to go to. There wasn't enough of myself to imagine. It always came down to – who else? At least there in that god awful house I had Sister who looked up to me the way some folks look up to God.

God! He must be a mean mother-fucker not to come when they call. I don't know when I began to think about God. After I quit going to church, I s'pose I was what they call an agnostic – I didn't care about God. Then I turned into a hard-assed little atheist. All – y'know – without even knowing about such things. Those were not words that I even knew – much less used. Simple nouns were more my speed.

I felt sometimes – most of the time – like I was the old man's mangy old dog. He'd feed me scraps, cuss me then kick me. That was my pay. Then I found a puppy of my own once. It was about the time of Mother's birthday and I thought about giving it to her but I canceled that idea as soon as it crossed my mind. I knew better than to do something like that. But stupidly, I did bring the mutt back to the house. Even thought about naming him. I stole a quart of milk off the neighbors porch an' fed him from an old hubcap. I knew I couldn't keep him so as soon as he finished his milk, I kicked him once and went in the house to hide. When the old man came in the pup was still hanging around the back porch. "You been feedin' that mongrel – ain'tcha?" he yelled up the stairs. Not me, I said. What

mongrel? When I got downstairs he slapped me upside the head and said, "You getcher ass out there an' git rid of him. I ain't feedin' no mutts." I didn't know how but knew better than to backsass. I went to the garage and grabbed a gunny sack. I felt dizzy from that last blow and staggered once or twice. The pup came running up and licked my hand. The little bastard looked me straight in the eye, then pranced kinda sideways. I held the sack open. He looked me in the eye again and walked right into the sack. Stupid mutt. I tied a loose knot in the sack and carried it out past Beaver Creek. On the way I felt like I was gonna upchuck. I loosened the knot a little more, then ran like hell back to my room. Ten minutes behind me, the pup was scratchin' at the back door and the old man was really gittin' pissed. I played the game all over again and so did the pup. This time I felt worse. I left the bag in the same spot and left the knot tied and walked away. I went back a few days later and the bag was still there. It was torn open and blood stained and the carcass of the pup was a few feet away. That's the last thing I really remember thinking about. It was like a single photograph projected in my mind. I'd shake it off and it would slowly fade – then bam – there it was back, bright as ever.

Time was passing, I was moving from here to there, but I wasn't really seeing anything. I can recall doing certain things or figure that I must have but something had snapped. Even Sister could tell, she said I had a scary look when I got back. I remember feeling light headed, and I thought for a minute that I was happy – really happy. It was Mother's birthday and she was insisting that the old man was going to take her out for a fancy dinner. "Someplace where they got real waiters." Sometimes she had a way of making him do such things. They were all dressed to leave when I got back to the house. The first thing the old man said was, "I'm not through with you yet." I couldn't even remember what it was that he wasn't through with. Then he smacked me across the face and tossed down a straight shot. "You better be here when I get back," he said. "And clean up that mess in the garage."

After they left, I went into the garage but don't recall seeing any mess. All I could see was that bloody gunny sack in my mind. I musta climbed up the rafters but I don't remember it. Next thing I remember is his headlights hitting the window and the shape of light crossing the walls. I's sitting on the cold concrete floor with the old man's over/under cradled in my arms. As he pulled up the garage door, the springs squeaked and there I was, a perfect target in his headlights. I blew the whistle – load as I could – to give myself courage and make him see me. Then I blew him away. The first slug got him in the right shoulder only I could feel the pain too. I don't remember the shotgun kicking but I remember my shoulder hurtin' like hell. I could see his arm sag five or six inches – barely hangin' on. He jerked back like a puppet and I think he even smiled at me. "You got my gun," he said, as if that was what I'd catch hell for. I almost handed it over to him. I tried to swallow but my mouth felt like sandpaper. I blew the whistle again, saw Mother getting out and running for cover, then I blew him away again. I don't remember anything after I saw him sprawled across the hood of the car. They said I shot him six times but it was the second one that got him and that's the last one I remember firing.

I never heard the old man spout cliches when he was whuppin' on me. Never heard him swear how it was gonna hurt him more'n it hurt me. But when I blew him away – it was not painless. I don't mean just my sore shoulder. The pain was sharp and quick – almost as if I was shootin' myself. I guess I was. I knew I was dead as far as I knew myself. No loss there. I couldn't be that kid anymore. Couldn't be Sissy for even one more day – one more minute. They said it was premeditated and I s'pose it was. I'd thought of killing him ever since he started messin' with Sister. But I always lost my nerve. I thought – get this – if I kill him he's really gonna be pissed. Isn't that crazy? I thought he'd raise himself out of his grave like it was only his smelly old stratolounger and come after me. I was sure he'd whittle me down to a sliver and use me to clean his teeth. I can't say I'm sorry. I s'pose that means I'll never get to heaven. Good thing I don't

believe in that shit anyway. They say you're s'posed to ask forgiveness but I can't. Even if I could – I wouldn't. I'd do it again. Only this time I'd do it sooner.

Sister had nothing to do with it. I know she said she was in on it but she wasn't. I didn't even know I was gonna do it – so how could she. She claimed that when I told her what I was gonna do, she said, "Do mother too." But she didn't say anything of the sort. I hear they found her huddled in a corner hugging the .410. Hell – she didn't know one end from the other. Test her if you don't believe me. Make her shoot the fucking thing. I bet she doesn't even know how to load it. No one ever even said the gun was loaded and here they are tryin' to pin something on her. If it was true and if I blacked out, why didn't she blow Mother to kingdom come? You saw her at the trial. Poor kid couldn't even speak. That's what kills me. If Sister doesn't come out of this – then – then I don't know if I solved anything. I'm dead. I'll pay for my sins but Sister didn't commit any. The old man's dead and I hope he's rotting in his grave. Mother was gonna have him cremated but I begged her to let him rot. Mother seems okey. But poor little Sister. You know where she is? She's in limbo. You know where that is? Josie lives in limbo. Neither here nor there. I'd rather go to Hell if it wasn't for the thought of meeting the old man there. He still scares me.

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